

Art News: Curtain Rises on Renovated Spencer Theatre

Brian Justice • November 9, 2015



(Photo by Jim Barcus)

Sweeping improvements benefit actors and audiences.

Since UMKC's Spencer Theatre opened in 1979, technology has transformed lighting and sound from stagecraft to highly specialized technical arts. Over the years, though, the theater did not keep up with those advances and that left its home company, Kansas City Rep, in a disadvantaged position.

The Rep is recognized nationally as a creative powerhouse (their original work *Venice* ran at New York's Public Theater in 2013), but hometown productions have wrestled with the Spencer's outdated technology. Additionally, the lobby was aesthetically, at best, institutional, the elevator was practically in a secret location and women endured long, long lines at the restrooms.

“Our productions at the Spencer Theatre have turned the Rep into an acclaimed regional theater and Kansas City into a nationally recognized theater town,” says artistic director Eric Rosen. “It was time to create a new frame for new works.”

And so, one \$5.5 million renovation, please.

“It was hard for people in certain sections to completely hear the performers,” says Jerry Genochio, producing director of the Rep. “And there were physical barriers that affected lighting. Angles were obstructed and sometimes it was very difficult to light a show properly.”

Jay Tomlinson of Helix Architecture + Design was the lead architect of the Spencer project. Helix, a local firm that knows its way around theater renovations, created the flagship AMC Main Street Theater from the near ruins of the old Empire Theater, and expanded and restored the glorious, 1920s Beaux Arts Midland.

Tomlinson says that the trickiest part of the renovation was the acoustics. When the theater was originally built, sound design was much less understood than it is today. Acoustical panels were placed underneath the catwalks, which interfered with spreading sound throughout the space and making lighting less flexible.

“We’ve eliminated the original acoustic ‘clouds’ below the catwalks and added new acoustical panels above them,” says Tomlinson. “Now, sound distribution and diffusion is much better throughout the entire house. Every member of the audience is going to be able to understand everything that comes out of everyone’s mouth on stage, especially in musicals.”

Seeing a show at the renovated Spencer, when the space reopens in late November 2015 for A Christmas Carol, means that the audience sees better, literally.

Previously, lighting locations were limited by the existing electrical distribution in the structure itself. Now, the unobstructed catwalks and an updated and expanded electrical system allows lighting to be placed in more locations, and Genochio can direct light wherever it’s needed.

“Brighter faces and brighter bodies,” as he puts it.

Stage design and construction have improved, too. The new stage is a floating floor that incorporates a sophisticated layered system with just enough spring, like a ballet floor, and expands the physical possibilities for future Rep productions.

Although largely invisible, these changes will have a profound effect on how audiences see and hear a show. What all who enter will see, however, is an enlarged and redesigned lobby, with an elevator in plain sight.

“They will be shocked at how the interior is changed,” says Angela Gieras, the Rep’s executive director. “Instead of an educational space it will feel like a modern, chic hotel lobby, warm and bright in a way that people have never experienced in the Spencer.”

“More like a Broadway theater type of feel,” adds Tomlinson.

The Spencer Theatre renovation did much more than simply update a building. The updated facility offers “the best possible space for our audience,” Rosen says, “and the renovated Spencer will help our best regional and national artists create the best possible work.”

But what gets people really excited? More than the lights, sound, stage and lobby?

Believe it or not, says Gieras, “Restrooms.”

“Every single time I announce that the number of women’s restrooms will double people burst into applause. People get very excited about restrooms.”