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The Grand Resurrection

by Larry the O ■ in Theatre Space ■ on October 05, 2015



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The Strand Theater today.

When A.C.T. revived The Strand Theater they created a theatre with large possibilities in a tiny footprint

Midway in time between the Great San Francisco Earthquake and Fire and the advent of sound in motion pictures, the Jewel Theater opened its doors on San Francisco's Market Street, part of a surge of such theatre openings in the early years of cinema. Renamed The Strand in 1928, the theatre persisted through high tide and low (closed by the city after several years of projecting pornography in 2003, a fire set by squatters in 2007). But the Strand's star rose again in 2012, when a member of the board of directors of San Francisco's American Conservatory Theater (A.C.T.) donated money for A.C.T. to purchase the building. In spring of 2015, A.C.T. completed a \$34.4 million renovation project (which A.C.T. terms a "reclamation" and architecture contractor Skidmore, Owings and Merrill call "a complete transformation") and opened the doors to the public for the first theatre production at the Strand in, quite probably, ever, the West Coast premiere of Caryl Churchill's *Love and Information*.

The main venue at the new Strand is the 283-seat Toni Rembe Theater, which can transform into a 175-seat venue with cabaret seating. The Rueff (named for long-time A.C.T. Board Chair Rusty Rueff) is a 140-seat “black-box” space originally conceived as a rehearsal and donor event venue, but, in the end, functionally expanded to encompass classes, workshops and smaller or highly experimental performances. Its three-story lobby houses a café that is open to the public for breakfast and lunch, and to ticket holders during performances.

Finally, those lobby windows are lit up by a translucent 28-foot-by-18-foot LED screen manufactured by Luxmax and assembled from 126 separate tiles. Visible from UN Plaza across Market Street, the screen displays video art and images, bringing a little “fine arts Times Square” flavor to the venue.



The Strand Theater in its early days.

From Remains to Rembe

There were numerous reasons A.C.T. decided to expand beyond its primary venue, the historic 1,040-seat Geary Theater, located only blocks from the Strand. “Carey’s always wanted a second space,” explains Production Manager Andrew Nielsen, referring to A.C.T.’s long-time artistic director, Carey Perloff. “She is passionate about new work and didn’t feel like some of it could sustain a 1000-seat venue over a five-week run, so she wanted to have a little bit more intimate house where she could feel comfortable doing a work with a new director to give him or her a shot, or trying a new work when we didn’t really know how it would play in front of an audience.” Another need for a smaller venue was to support A.C.T.’s Master of Fine Arts program.

To describe the condition of the Strand when A.C.T. bought it as “dire” would be a nearly unwarranted kindness. The place was utterly and entirely trashed from neglect and squatters. Architects from Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, led by Design Director Michael Duncan, were tasked, along with theatre consultants The Shalleck Collaborative, with taking this wreck of a building, clearly designed to be a cinema, and converting it to a serve a variety of functions for dramatic theatre. The interior was gutted and rebuilt, a process that included surprises popping up, as they always do—such as the discovery that some steel beams narrowed as they went up.



The Toni Rembe Theater

Meeting code and seismic safety requirements necessitated adding more support internally, which turned out to be not as bad as it could have been with a 1917 structure. "It is a steel moment frame building," explains Skidmore, Owings and Merrill Senior Architect Aaron Jensen, "so in spite of the fact that (the Strand) wasn't built to today's load requirements, we were able to reinforce it with concrete and shear walls, and stiffen up the frames by adding new concrete frames on top of the existing steel frames, the proverbial 'sistering the joists' method."

The original theatre seated somewhere between 700 and 800, considerably more than A.C.T. wanted to serve in that venue, and extended all the way to the building's façade on Market Street. The decision was made to remove half the existing balcony for lobby space, and convert the other half into another, smaller venue, which became The Rueff. (You can read more about the Rueff in the second part of our article, available online [here](#).)

Opportunities in Limitations

The Strand building is narrow (about 40 feet across) and historic, both of which defined limitations that put space at a premium. "The outside structure of the building was never going to go out or up, so this was the footprint we had to work with," says Design Associate Rob Hand, who served as A.C.T.'s project manager for the Strand remodel. For example, in the wings of the Rembe there is barely 5 feet from the edges of the flats to the brick walls, and putting a fly house on top of a historic building was neither structurally nor financially viable.

These limitations drove much of the design, making flexibility a primary requirement for every resource in the building; no room could serve only a single purpose. Space limitations and economic viability also imposed the requirement that the venues in the Strand be able to be operated by a very small crew to keep down operating costs. These themes recur throughout the building. "The whole package is designed around that flexibility," Hand states. "How do we get all of the infrastructure in a dead-hung venue and still make it so the space is usable by a minimum crew?"



The catwalks and (micro) balcony in the Rembe Theater

The solution involved automation and motors. In addition to the dead-hung battens for drapery and masking, Hand specified three box trusses for over the stage lighting positions. Each is rigged to two ½-ton motors which can lower them down to the stage so a minimal crew can fix a burnout or re-hang. Additionally, portions of the sound system and certain lighting pre-sets can all be triggered by the simple act of turning on a wireless microphone. When the microphone is turned on and its receiver detects signal, the receiver triggers more relays to open, powering a basic sound setup—all without necessitating bringing in a large crew. “With one technician, you could come in and have a hot mic, a video projector, and lights ready to go,” Nielsen says.

A third factor influencing system design was the recognition that theatre technology is transitioning from old systems such as color scrollers to LED lighting and Ethernet-based distribution. The decision was made to invest in the newer approaches, rather than face obsolescence and refitting in another five years or so. Choosing mostly LED lighting saved on maintenance, as well, as providing greater programmability. “We did a cost analysis and estimated it would be about a \$100-a-fixture difference for LED lighting, once you added in energy savings, lamps, labor, and all that,” points out Nielsen, “so it was worth making the jump.”

Hand specified 18 moving lights for the Rembe to reduce setup. "Everything is there, and you don't have to refocus it all," he says, "It's just down to programming time." This makes it possible for the Strand to accommodate different shows in the same day with minimal effort. "We wanted to be able to come in the morning and do a children's show, and then, without touching the light plot, do our professional subscription show at night," Nielsen explains.

Overall, there are well more than 250 fixtures in the Rembe, split between LED fixtures and various Source Four traditional fixtures. Sound is handled by Shure wireless microphone systems, a Yamaha CL3 audio mixer, and a small Meyer Sound loudspeaker system based around UPJunior self-powered loudspeakers for the main system and UP-4XP and MM-4XP miniature loudspeakers for surround and fill purposes. Speakers not permanently mounted, such as the UPM-1P cabinets in the wings when *Stage Directions* visited, are placed as needed per show.


At the back of the stage in the Rembe is an area referred to as "the shop," which has been serving variously as a storage area, props area, dressing booths and crossover. An upcoming show will build a set into the space. The audio storage room in the basement also houses an 8-foot-by-8-foot trap. Appropriate to its history, the Rembe also has a rigged movie screen that can be used for movie nights, business meetings, indie film screenings and showing trailers before performances.

At the back of the audience chamber in the Rembe is a control booth, which houses an ETC Ion lighting board, Yamaha audio mixer and a Crestron controller. A custom Dataton Watchout system controls video inputs and outputs. The stage manager can locate in the booth and watch two balcony-mounted cameras for late arrival coordination and an infrared black and white camera for stage maneuvers.

The Strand Theater is a phoenix story on a modern scale, which is to say that its rise from ruin was more efficient, compact and technological than it was grandiose. The Mid-Market district is not yet wholly remade, and the sidewalk in front of the Strand still harbors as many unfortunates and ne'er-do-wells as it does young, upscale workers from the nearby headquarters of Twitter, Dolby and others. But there is no mistaking the difference in both the feeling and appearance of Market Street with the return of the Strand from ignominy to glory.


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