

Everything Old is New Again

Broadway's Nederlander Theatre gets a beautiful renovation as well as a technical boost

By Michael S. Eddy

ALL PHOTOGRAPHY BY SAMUEL MORGAN



The audience chamber of the Nederlander after the renovation.

When *Rent* moved into the Nederlander Theatre in 1996, the venue was in need of renovation. The producers and designers wanted the space left as it was, however, as part of the shabby aesthetic of their show. So when *Rent* closed after a 12-year run, the Nederlander was in desperate need of an overhaul. Not to mention that the economics of Broadway today dictated that the theatre be able to handle larger and technically more complex shows going forward.

Jim Boese, VP of the Nederlander Organization, the theatre's owner, hired Sachs Morgan Studio: Theatre Design Specialists, to lead a comprehensive renovation. The theatre required: roof repairs; exterior renovation (doors and marquee signage); upgraded technical systems, including a complete overhaul of the rigging system; installation of a brand new grid; design and expansion of bathrooms; a redesigned seating plan; architectural lighting; a new concessions booth; replacement of flooring, as well as carpeting; and paint and plasterwork throughout the theatre and the lobby to bring back the original 1920s feel to the space. Rather a large but straightforward undertaking except for one big challenge—the timeframe. The Nederlanders had booked *Guys and Dolls* as the next production, so they had only five months from when *Rent* loaded out and *Guys and Dolls* came in.

Sachs Morgan's Founder and Director of Design Roger Morgan, a Tony-Award winning Broadway lighting designer before becoming a theatre consultant, had handled a number of historical renovations and knew how to pull together the right team for such a demanding project, including: EverGreene Architectural Arts, Inc. for the historical paint and plaster work; Irwin Seating; PRG Scenic Technologies was the rigging fabricator/installer and handled the front of house lighting position renovations; Nolan Engineering Services analyzed the structure; SECOA provided rigging elements; Lite Makers, Inc. reconstructed the custom architectural lighting fixtures; and I Weiss manufactured the drapery.

Broadway is Bigger

The mandate was to adapt the Nederlander, a 1,200 seat theatre—

now 1,232—so it could accommodate modern musicals. Prior to the renovation it really couldn't handle today's bigger shows, especially from a technical standpoint. Further complicating things was the fact that although the Nederlander Theatre has not been granted landmark status, the owners decided to treat it as if it had been, out of respect for the original design.

Morgan explains the approach they took, "There are always limits to every theatre design, even new ones. In this space the one place we could make substantial improvement was on the grid. We decided to tear out the entire grid and replace it with one where we could do anything."

Normally the house staff heads up most technical upgrades with additional stagehands brought in as needed. Boese knew that with the tight time frame as well as the extensive grid reconstruction they would need to bring in an outside company. PRG Scenic Technologies won the contract.

"It was like working with family," says Morgan. "These guys are stagehands and they understand deadlines. PRG is terrific that way plus they have wonderful people working there. Freddie Gallo, president of PRG Scenic Technologies, is himself a terrific carpenter; he gets right in there and works with the guys. They're all there to support the project and make it work." PRG's scope included the demolition of the old grid, the installation of structural steel; installation of head blocks, rigging hardware and front of house lighting positions.

Morgan realized that with the new grid they could also put in the base for a counterweight system in the previously all hemp house, which each production installs each time it loads in a show on Broadway. "We decided we should put in a great grid, head blocks and beams, so any show could put in whatever they want, wherever they want."

One of the big problems was that there was not a clear wall to put in T-track for a counterweight system. The stage right wall was full of electrical switchgear and the stage left wall had the loading door. The decision was made to make room in the basement, move the electrical gear to the basement, rebuild a fly floor on the SR wall and put in T-track from SECOA. Now any production can put in counterweights or use a winch-assist with the counterweights.

The next step was the grid itself. "PRG came up with a clever solution," says Morgan. They built a platform that was about 15 feet wide and as deep as the stage, and then rigged it off chain hoists, like a window-washing scaffold. They could go up and down stripping out the old grid; installing the new steel beams; then put in the new

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Theatre consultant Roger Morgan, Founder and Design Director of Sachs Morgan Studio (right) discusses design changes.



The orchestra seats under the balcony post-renovation.

beams; then put in the new grid floor.

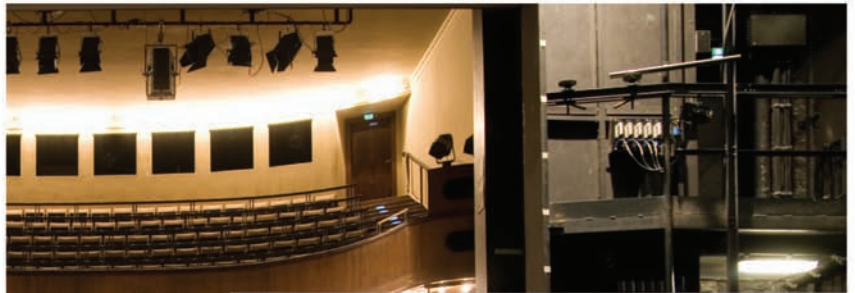
Easier said than done according to Gallo. "The head block beams were tricky to install because they had to be put in at a very high elevation and there was no way to lift them to that height. Typically head block beams are put in as the building is being built when they have a crane outside. The beams were like 70-80 pounds per foot and they were around 40-feet long. So we ended up drilling holes in the roof; put chain motor stands on the roof sitting on steel beams bridling across roof structure; and actually lifted the head block beams into position. We couldn't put them in as one piece, we had to put them in by sections and then they needed to be welded together."

Gallo worked closely with Nolan Engineering Services to solve another rather tricky challenge. "The beams that were in the building are pre-1920s steel, and the actual chemical mix of steel was different then," comments Gallo. "So that steel has less carbon in it—which for us meant the issue was it is very difficult to weld through it. So all of our connections were done with a novel approach that the structural engineer came up with, a bracket to connect all the old steel to the new grid."

Bringing Electricity

The next challenge to give modern musicals flexibility in design was up in the front of the house ceiling. "We put in a bunch of front of house points that didn't exist before," describes Gallo, "so now there are ways to hang trusses just about anywhere they want in the front of the house."

All of the lighting positions in the front of house also had to be addressed, especially the box booms and front balcony rail. The Scenic Technologies crew worked



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on installing the new rail, which is actually two parallel pipes.

"I have used this method in about 20–30 theatres," says Morgan. "I like to listen to the crew and this makes it easier for them to hang the clamp on one rail and put the cable on the other, so if they need to move a light, it saves a lot of time."

With all of the renovation of the lighting positions in the house, a new interconnect panel was installed backstage. The design team worked with Union Connector to build a patch panel that allows the show's dimmers backstage to connect to the FOH circuits.

Swiss-Cheese Orchestra

Seating is obviously important in any theatre, and so too in this renovation.

"The seats had been moved in and out so much the orchestra floor was like Swiss cheese. So we redid the floor," explains Morgan. "Joe Ferrari, the house carpenter, who is worth his weight in gold, and the property guy, Billy Wright, laid that floor in there, they did just a super job." They added two layers of ¾-inch fireproofed plywood for anchoring the new seats. "Irwin Seating provided the new seats. They are a company that will never let you down," states Morgan. The carpeting was all redone with a period flair that matched the new color scheme.

Morgan brought in EverGreene who is well known for their historical restoration work. "EverGreene is terrific, we've done a lot of work with them," says Morgan. "They have their own plaster shop and we had major plaster damage here." They handled both the plaster work and the painting of the new colors—muted greens, browns and the gilded gold. Along with the restoration of the house boxes, coupled with new drapes and the wonderful faux paint treatments, the theatre has been restored its original scale and beauty.

To ensure audiences could enjoy that beauty Sachs Morgan brought in Lite Makers, a custom architectural lighting manufacturer based in Long Island City, NY. "They did gorgeous work throughout the space," comments Morgan. They recreated many of the sconces, constructed newly designed chandeliers, and duplicated the ornate exit signs.

"It was great working on this project with the Nederlanders and Jim Boese, who is in charge of their real estate," sums up Morgan. "He is a true theatre guy and he really, really cares. In fact he is now the president of the League of Historic American Theatres. This being done right was important to him and to me. It is one of the most rewarding projects I have ever worked on." **SD**