



An October performance of Tony Award-winning musical *Ragtime* thrilled the packed house at the grand opening for the new Elsie C. Brackett Theatre. What the audience may not have noticed were the improvements behind the scenes that brought the show to life.

All the Things You

The high-tech makeover of OU's premier performing arts space gives audiences even more ways to believe in the magic of the theatre.



Wendy Mutz

Cannot See

By LYNETTE LOBBAN



Hugh Scott

OU's beloved student theatre received a total makeover and new name this year. The Elsie C. Brackett Theatre at the Rupel Jones Performing Art Center boasts a revamped lobby, new seating, fresh paint, carpeting, wall finishes, and a crimson stage curtain.



Hugh Scott

The Brackett Theatre's new fly system is responsible for up to 300 different stage elements per show and features five motorized lines – a vast improvement over the previous 1960s rigging that relied solely on arm muscle.

For theatre-goers, there is plenty to love about the newly renovated Elsie C. Brackett Theatre in the University of Oklahoma Fine Arts District. Fresh paint, new carpeting and a luxurious grand drape give the audience a sumptuous visual experience at first glance. Regulars will notice that the cushy new seats not only feel more comfortable, they no longer squeak like the shower scene from *Psycho*. But what's most impressive to fine arts faculty and students are the improvements behind the scenes.

Sleek and modern when it opened in 1965, the former Rupel J. Jones Theatre had been relying on much of its original equipment through decades of musicals, operas, dance productions and stage performances. "Safety is a primary concern," says Tom Huston Orr, James Garner Chair and director of the Helmerich School of Drama. "We had updated the dimmers, but we were using the same wiring, the same fly system, the same hydraulics as when the theatre opened. It was all functional, but it was all 50 years old and in need of serious repair."

The original wiring in the building had been pulled and stretched for decades and sometimes even rained on from roof leaks, now repaired. The back stage communication system among technicians and directors was in a similar state, fritzing out on a regular basis. "There's a whole show going on backstage that the audience is unaware of," says Orr. "And that infrastructure had really deteriorated. I've run performances talking with our tech students on cell phones because the system's headsets no longer worked."

Theatre patrons and OU supporters Betsy Brackett and her

husband, Gregg Wadley, came to the rescue with a lead gift that not only brightened the front of the house, but also addressed the aging mechanics. Every inch of wiring has been replaced, and crews have an integrated communications system that reaches backstage, downstairs, the green room and the lighting and sound booths.

One piece of theatre equipment the audience may have noticed, but only when it went awry, was the ancient fly system used to lift scenery, lighting instruments and sometimes people, above and across the stage. The system relied on strong arms pulling heavy mechanics hand over hand through a system of ropes and pulleys.

"Every once in a while during a performance, the rigging got stuck and decided not to move," says Orr. With as many as 300 different lighting instruments literally hanging on the integrity of the stage rigging that could be a problem.

All of the pulleys, cables, battens and counterweight systems have been replaced. Five of the batten lines are mechanized, and operate with the touch of a button. Orr says the new fly system is "a wonderful blend of cutting-edge technology combined with age-tested mechanics."

From a wall panel backstage, one person can control most functions of the theatre—raise the curtain, change the stage lighting, turn on the houselights or create different moods on-stage with a host of pre-sets. "Everybody loves it," says Orr. "The actors, the stage managers, the designers—it's user-friendly."

Lighting design student Zakary Houara agrees. "OU strives to give students a world-class education," he says, "And

Hugh Scott



OU's first new theatrical lighting system in 50 years shines down on orchestra members rehearsing for a December production of *The Nutcracker*.

Hugh Scott



we are now working with state-of-the-art equipment at industry standards, which gives us a leg-up on our peers.”

A new sound board in the auditorium is the centerpiece of a dramatically redesigned acoustic system. “Running that board is like flying a plane,” Orr says. “No, it’s more like a starship. The learning curve on ‘Ragtime’ was a bit steep, but the soundscape in the space is fantastic. It’s amazing.”

The last thing the audience would ever want to see, says Orr, was the original hydraulic lift system underneath the stage. “It looked like something out of a Frankenstein movie or the bowels of a huge ship, and it failed regularly.

“My favorite part of the old system was that sometimes in the middle of a show, the lip of the stage would slowly sink about three inches, and then the hydraulic pressure would kick on and it would rise back up again. It happened all the time. Actors got used to it.”

The new lift mechanism looks like a piece of modern art and is both smooth and silent. Not only can it elevate the lip from 17 feet below to nine feet above the stage, it can also tilt, offering directors, actors and designers a greater range of experience for university theatre.

“We have put ourselves in a wonderful position for the future,” concludes Orr. “Personally speaking, we all could use a facelift after 50 years.”

ABOVE RIGHT - The Brackett Theatre’s new Serapid hydraulic system can soundlessly lower the stage lip 17 feet below or lift it an astonishing nine feet above the stage. The lift system was among the most challenging renovation projects, since it was necessary to build an aqueduct to divert a stream that runs below the theatre.



Hugh Scott

Lighting design senior Zakary Houara masters the Brackett Theatre’s new sound board for orchestra members rehearsing *The Nutcracker* in December. State-of-the art sound equipment is just one component preparing students like Houara for professional careers in technical direction, scene technology, stage management and performance.