

Meticulous BALANCE

The sound design for *Follies* at the Kennedy Center. by Keith Clark



Scenes from the current production of *Follies* at the Kennedy Center.



»»» **The current production** of the multiple Tony Award-winning musical *Follies* at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., presents a beautiful yet haunting study of youth as seen through the eyes of age and experience. Featuring a score recognized as one of Stephen Sondheim's greatest works, *Follies* originally opened on Broadway in the spring of 1971, running for more than 500 performances in the Winter Garden Theatre.

The limited-run revival at the Kennedy Center's Eisenhower Theatre, which began in early May and continues through June 19, features a stellar cast that includes principals Bernadette Peters, Jan Maxwell, Danny Burstein, Ron Raines, and Elaine Paige. A *New York Times* review noted that the show "glitters with grandeur, lyricism and an uneasy

undercurrent of fragility. It is the sound of beauty with fracture lines, just about to crack."

It's appropriate that the review makes an allusion to sound, because the sound design for the show presents another interesting study, carefully conceived by veteran theatrical sound designer Kai Harada and mixed live by Patrick Pummill on a Stageteq Aurus console surface. A 28-piece orchestra presenting Jonathan Tunick's original orchestrations joins the vocals of the cast of veteran theatrical performers as the primary elements in a soundscape that requires meticulous balance.

"This is a classic type of show that was written before productions became too over-arranged," Harada explains. "The various sonic elements are balanced naturally, so I wanted

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A look inside the Eisenhower Theatre, equipped with a quality house system that works in tandem with Stageteq Aurus and Nexus.

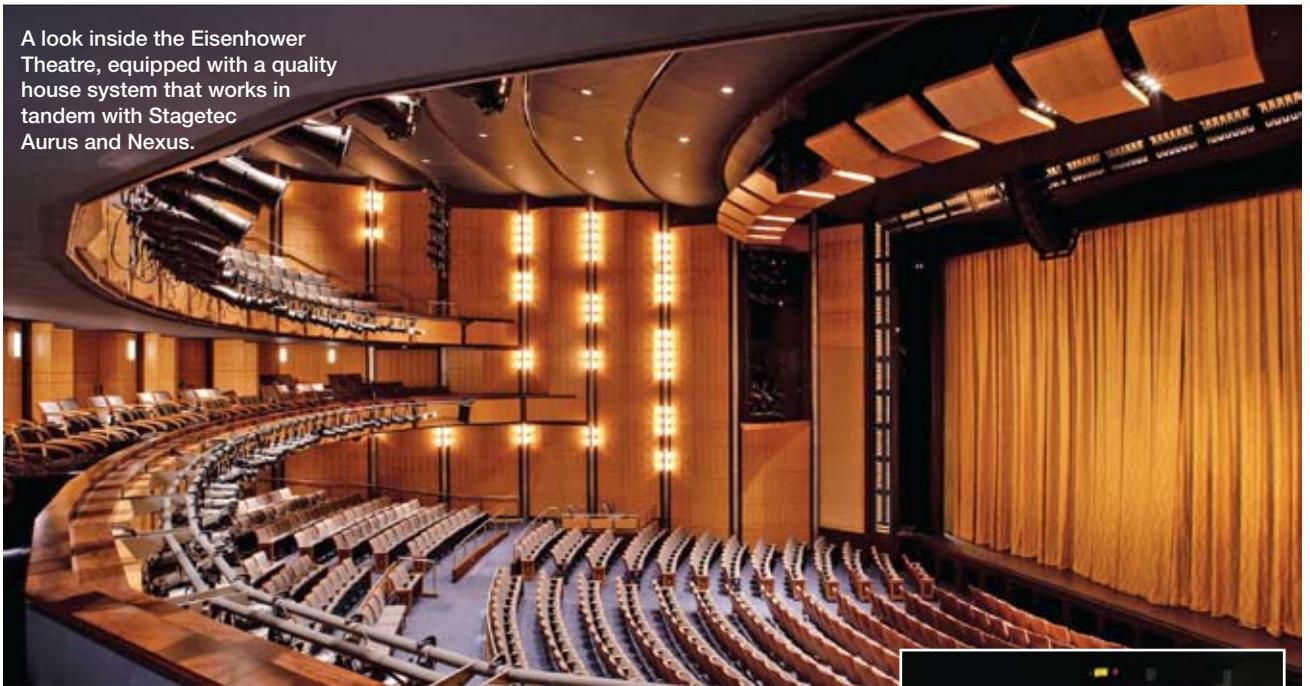


PHOTO BY ROY BLUNT

the sound system to be as transparent as possible.”

Original Sources

The Eisenhower Theater seats 1,100, and is the smallest of the theaters on the center's main level. It contains an orchestra pit for up to 40 musicians that is convertible to a forestage or additional seating space, as well as a main (“orchestra”) seating level followed by a box tier and then the balcony. The walls are of East Indian laurel wood, and the stage curtain of hand-woven wool is a gift from the people of Canada.

“The theatre is a very well designed acoustic space, which enhances the natural elements of the production,” notes Harada, who has sound design credits for several top shows such as *Million Dollar Quartet* on his resume. “It works with my primary goal, which is to present the superb original sources of the actors and the orchestra in their native state, without noticeable electronic enhancement that would detract from their innate power and beauty.”

A modern sound reinforcement system was installed in the theatre a few years ago during a renovation of the room. Comprised of premium com-

ponents, it was deemed well-suited to serve the needs of this production. Line arrays are JBL VerTec Series incorporating Drivepack (DP) electronic modules with Crown Audio amplification and dbx digital signal processing. Key elements in this set are a center cluster for the main level seating and box tiers made up of seven JBL VT4887A compact modules and five more VT4887A modules serving the balcony.

Several JBL Control 25 compact loudspeakers handle front fill and under balcony needs, and Harada specified an additional four Meyer Sound UPJunior compact self-powered loudspeakers for the orchestra. Two Meyer Sound Galileo 616 loudspeaker management systems have also been brought in and inserted in the system signal path.

The orchestra is mic'd with the venue's package of premium microphones, including models from AKG, Neumann, Sennheiser and Shure. Performers are served by 44 Sennheiser SK 5212 UHF wireless microphone bodypack transmitters with EM 1046 receivers.

Countryman B6 miniature omnidirectional lavalier mics are the choice for most of the actors, although a couple of the male actors are better served by



Sound mixer Patrick Pummill (left) and sound designer Kai Harada.

Sennheiser MKE 1 miniature lavalier mics. “I didn't want the actor microphones to be visible, and the B6s and MKE1s are the best options available,” adds Harada. (All supplemental gear with the exception of the Stageteq system was supplied by PRG.)

Versatile Package

Harada first began working with Stageteq system elements about two years ago for a traveling production of *Wicked*, where the goal was to cut the overall footprint of the system. The key was Stageteq Nexus base devices that provide all input/output, routing, mic preamps, and much more in an extremely versatile



Left to right, the sound team of Jana Hoglund, Patrick Pummill and Kai Harada at work simultaneously on the Aurus.

package that is modular, portable, and reliable. After that initial positive experience, it's now become a staple of his designs, including *Zorro* in Moscow and *Hinterm Horizont* in Berlin.

The Stagetec complement for *Follies* is extensive, with four Nexus base devices working in tandem with a 48-channel Aurus mix/control surface. The Nexus devices take 48 mic inputs from the orchestra, another 44 inputs from the actors wireless systems, as well as a variety of other digital and analog inputs, including 10 channels (via MADI) of QLab pre-programmed effects from a Macintosh computer.

Outputs of the foldback and surround systems are equalized in the Aurus realm, while outputs to the vocal and orchestra systems are directed to the two Galileo loudspeaker management systems that provide critical final tailoring capability. All inputs and outputs can easily be routed everywhere and anywhere desired via the Stagetec system interface.

"Stagetec Aurus and Nexus are such a powerful, flexible package, and each time out, I discover further ways to take advantage of that flexibility," Harada states. "There's really nothing else like

it that sounds as good and is also such a customizable solution to meet any technical or creative need that might arise."

Moving Digital

Sound mixer Patrick Pummill, a 20-plus year veteran of musical theatre work, had not been exposed to the Stagetec platform prior to this show. Up to this point, he's primarily worked with analog consoles, and has tended to favor the Cadac models that have long proven their worth in live productions. Faced with this unfamiliar format heading into *Follies*, he did some homework to get comfortable with the Aurus surface.

"It's only been recently that I've started desiring more overall control on a scene-by-scene basis, which is the primary advantage of digital systems," Pummill notes. "This opportunity to use the Stagetec system has completely changed my outlook. Simply, it's an extraordinarily powerful and configurable console that sounds fantastic. Sonically, it's invisible. You get the system programmed, and when the show is up and running, the Aurus is a joy to mix on."

This outlook is echoed by Harada, who notes that "part of the reason I

prefer this system is that it's transparent and responds very quickly, and the mic pres sound absolutely wonderful."

"One of the other great features of the Aurus is that, as a designer, I can be very hands-on with the desk," he continues. "The Aurus provides the capability to have many channel strips available outside of the central section. I can be making changes on channels on one end, and Jana (Hoglund, his associate) can be handling other channels on the other end of the console, all while Patrick is mixing. It feels like an analog console in that regard, and I find it a far more efficient system than other digital desks."

True To The Source

The additional system components for *Follies* were loaded in on a Monday and up and running by the end of that day, and then were fully integrated with the house system on Tuesday. Harada notes this ease of setup is another positive factor of the Stagetec system, as well as the skill of the technical crew of the Kennedy Center. He adds that the hands-on support of both the German and U.S. offices of Stagetec has been another big plus.

Pummill's approach to mixing *Follies* is perhaps most accurately summarized with "first, do no harm." The overall mantra is a true-to-the-source presentation.

"We've got a great orchestra and a bunch of great voices, so we really try to stay out of their way – we do not want to be reinterpreting their performances," Pummill concludes. "Every voice is different – quiet, loud, different pitches, so it's vital to be aware of each of those unique signatures. Particularly when it gets quieter, we want the added nuance that drives that compelling story being told on stage. A lot of it is feel with respect to levels. The idea is to draw the audience into the moment." ■

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