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Diary of a Dream

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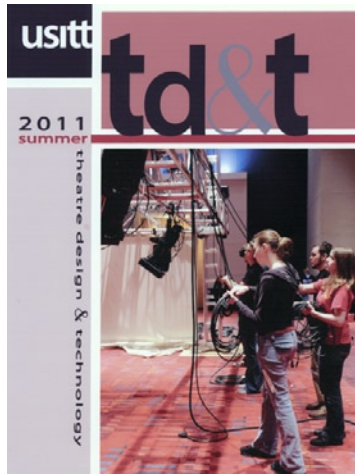
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By Donnell Walsh

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Diary of a Dream

by Donnell Walsh

Lindenwood College in St. Charles, Missouri, was founded 1827 by a U.S. Indian agent and his wife as a school to equip young women with the resources and character they would need for the great Westward Expansion. Beginning with one building on some farm property, the school grew into a strong liberal arts college by the end of the nineteenth century. It advertised itself as the Wellesley of the West and enrolled young women from all over the United States. Men were admitted in 1969, and it became Lindenwood University in 1997. Since then it has grown from about 5,000 students to some 15,000.

That growth is all the more impressive since it occurred after a fiscal crisis in 1989 that almost closed the college. A college president with a reputation for financial turnarounds, Dennis Spellman, was hired, and he embarked on a bold expansion that took the institution's endowment from \$1 million to \$50 million. Spellman's campus master plan included a new theatre as a part of the



North elevation, the J. Scheidegger Fine and Performing Arts Center.

\$36 million J. Scheidegger Fine and Performing Arts Center.

During its first forty years, the theatre program worked in Roemer Auditorium. As the program grew from a student activities model to a full-fledged academic major, the auditorium was renovated as a dedicated production space, albeit with some decided quirks, such as a welded fixed grid 18 feet above the 36-foot wide proscenium and a total vertical view of the stage from the last row of seats under the deep balcony of 9 feet 6 inches. Much of the stage equipment became archaic when digital became the norm, but students still learned solid production protocols that would serve them well in the job market. The program was more about critical thinking and less about the latest technology.

During this time, new programs in music, dance, graphic arts, and fashion design also took root. There was seldom daily interaction among them, however, as the arts were scattered around the campus.

I began at Lindenwood as the faculty technical director/designer. Now, as Dean of the School of Fine and Performing Arts, I want to share some of what we learned moving from a 350-seat converted auditorium to a state-of-the-art performance facility.

Once the green light was given in 2006, we faced a completely new learning curve. In meetings with Hastings and Chivetta Architects, McClure Engineering, and a host of new vendors, contractors, and consultants, we were briefed on unfamiliar topics like concrete pours, structural analysis, burn ratings, and HVAC codes. We began to create new “bibles” of specs and purchase orders for each aspect of the process.

Fortunately, we were given reasonably direct access to the architects and engineers to discuss change orders and to request site visits for identifying potential problems. This was especially useful when the mission of the main stage changed from academic use only to both academic theatre and professional Broadway tours and techs. This came about when Peter Bezemes, a television, film, and stage producer (and a Lindenwood graduate in business and communications), joined us in 2008 as executive director of the new center.

The capacity to accommodate touring productions was approved by Spellman’s successor as president, James Evans, as a unique opportunity for Lindenwood technical theatre students to crew their way to meaningful résumés and future contacts. We were able to make a compelling case to the administration that theatre students in work-and-learn programs usually stay in school if their deployment is in theatre production areas. We helped the administration understand how practical experience plus academic theory is the key to success in this unusual career field, especially when students can work directly with professional technicians and talent without having to be in New York or Los Angeles.

It helped to make our case that the University of Missouri at St. Louis opened the Blanche M. Touhill Performing Arts enter just twenty minutes away. Although that facility is primarily a state-supported road house operating on campus

as a non-academic entity, it threatened to be a formidable competitor for the local market of potential arts student recruits. The administration took notice and responded with an earlier approval date to proceed with the Scheidegger project.

We also argued that an enhanced fine and performing arts building would offer many new avenues to other academic and community constituencies, such as honors convocations, lecture series, film showings, the county-wide school district musical showcases, and so forth. Once finished, the building became a magnet for everyone from sports dance teams to community church groups.

With that change in the facility’s mission, the full spectrum of needs for visiting companies got attention equal to the needs of our academic program. This aspect of the process was masterfully spearheaded by an available Lindenwood graduate and nine-year veteran of IATSE road productions in all fifty states, Canada, Mexico, and Asia, who was hired as production stage manager.

Learning to Play in the Same Sandbox

Before the Scheidegger we had proprietary use of a small theatre to build in and rehearse in at will, with only the occasional dance or music concert as a distraction. Now it became apparent that the theatre department would be producing complex events besides our own shows, and our long-enjoyed uninterrupted claim on time in the theatre would be shared with other departments. The work hours and staffing required for a single dramatic production suddenly multiplied exponentially, as set-ups, runs, and restores began to fill up the season calendar with far less breathing time in between.

To meet this new challenge, the Scheidegger Center has an assigned pool of approximately fifty work-and-learn students who complete 150 hours a semester working in the box office, housekeeping, backstage, the high definition television studio, ushering, and as running crew. In addition to bringing in an experienced IATSE production stage manager, we added an assistant production stage manager to coordinate the pro tours and liaise with the TD for crews. We also hired a graduate assistant with training on the new Digico boards to be a full-time sound engineer.

We had to quickly bring crews up to speed on the equipment needs specific to new genres, such as lighting tower placement for dance and motorized orchestra shell and acoustic “cloud” rigging for music. It also became evident that the students majoring in each discipline needed to be re-trained in backstage etiquette and traffic patterns, as well as how to communicate effectively with technicians.

As tours were booked of such shows as *Movin’ Out* and *Cats*, with Equity and I.A.T.S.E. members and union requirements for load-in, rehearsal, run, and strike, it became an art in itself to mesh students into the crew calls. Lindenwood has no union contract. We work with a local production company who does have a contract when we have a special need, for example, for a high rigger. We’re non-union specifically so that students have opportunities to observe industry standards first

hand and to work as stage carpenters, props, rail, sound, and lighting assistants. We have had the occasional picket line and even a summons to appear before the State Labor Commission, which determined that the university, as a private institution with a long-standing affiliation with (but no obligation to) the Presbyterian Church, is under no legal requirement to sign a union contract. That did not keep one touring manager with Troika Entertainment from hiring one of our graduate students on the spot to take over properties for a new national tour of *Fiddler on the Roof*.

Probably the single element in the new space that needed most negotiation with faculty members was real-world rehearsal expectations. Gone were the luxury days when anyone could have the theatre for weeks prior to opening. Some took this as disenfranchising the students. It was a while before the idea of a Sunday load-in and tech, followed by three dress rehearsals before opening, was accepted as the norm for getting young artists better prepared for the rigors of the profession.

Once productions began, no amount of planning for what equipment is going to live where could be sustained. We regularly “raid” the 100 so-called dedicated lighting instruments in the small black box Emerson Theatre when they are needed for the large main stage productions. We are finding that black box shows rarely needed more than thirty to fifty instruments. It is good practice to not let any department in such a blended environment “own” anything, but rather to be prepared to share resources as needed.

We have been able to keep operations personnel lean and manageable. We have also set a high bar of expectations for respect and cooperation among all levels of students, faculty, and staff. Everyone, no matter his or her title or level of expertise, is responsible for keeping morale healthy and positive.

How to Pay for a New Theatre Facility

The financial woes at Lindenwood College in the late 1980s were caused, in part, by using endowment funds to cover operating costs, without creating new sources of revenue. When Dennis Spellman was brought in, the first thing he did was retire existing debt. That took several years. Then capital improvements began to turn older buildings into classroom spaces that could be filled with more students. At that point, even though the endowment was growing, it was not touched. Aggressive recruiting of new students was the engine to grow our revenues.

Major cuts to non-essential personnel were made. Twelve-month faculty were deployed to help out seasonally in non-traditional areas such as financial aid and registration. Faculty members took on teaching loads up to five classes per semester, up from the norm of four. The school was being run like a business and began a number of income-producing enterprises.

At one point the president, realizing there was a potential market for students in rural farm communities whose parents did not have a lot of money but did have other resources, initiated a system whereby a family with market-ready cows and



Set rendering by the author for *Dangerous Liaisons*, 2008, in the Bezemes Family Theatre.

hogs could exchange them for tuition. The meat was eventually served in the campus dining hall. The program made national and international news and even an entry in *Ripley's Believe It or Not*.

All these efforts, along with the massive recruiting campaign, allowed the university to put cash into capital improvement funds. By the time the Scheidegger Center broke ground it was ready to be paid for without loans.

As the institution's economic climate began to shift to debt-free status, alumni and corporations were solicited to contribute for naming rights for rooms, buildings, and other facilities. Donors became confident they were contributing to a model of financial stability rather than to a sinking ship. The city of St. Charles partnered with Lindenwood in moving streets and signals to accommodate the anticipated traffic increases around the new performing arts center. Lindenwood became a model of smart planning at a time when many small private schools were struggling.

A world-class venue

The 1,200-seat Bezemes Family Theatre (named for the director's mother) is a world-class venue. A double-trailer loading dock leads via a rolling steel door into a huge three-story corridor for load-ins. Stage left opens through two massive thirty-foot soundproof doors, ten inches thick. The 55-foot by 30-foot proscenium is flanked by 30-foot wings on each side. The deck extends 54 feet to the back wall. "We are officially larger than the premier remodeled Fox Theatre in downtown St. Louis," says Bezemes. The 70 line sets are interspersed with five 65-foot-long motorized electric pipes and a 40-foot by 20-foot front and rear truss framed projection screen.

The ceiling of the house contains three steel catwalks off side aisles for front-of-house (FOH) illumination, backed by an oversized follow spot booth housing three Super Troupers. In addition, three-story box booms allow crews to work from the safety of a usable room behind each level. Sound reinforcement is provided by two Renkus Heinz self-powered, self-intelligent line arrays, as well as eight Renkus Heinz double eighteen-inch portable subwoofers and a 48-channel Yamaha M7Cl control board in the sound pit at the rear of the orchestra. An ETC EOS board easily handles the 400+ conventional luminaires, as well as the 15 Vari-Lite 1000s, the 40 Chroma Cue Plus color scrollers, and



View of the auditorium in the Bezemes Family Theatre.



View of the main stage with its acoustic shell in place.

the seven Color Kinetics cyc washes. Showman Fabricators of New York provided the custom-to-site digital lift system for the permanent 4-foot by 6-foot trap located 16 feet upstage of the plaster line.

Off the terrazzo lobby, the Boyle Gallery features the latest media server systems to allow digital as well as traditional art showings. The new video production studio and editing bays are entirely high definition. The 60-foot-square black box Emerson Theatre seats up to 220 in thrust, in-the-round, and "tennis court" configurations, made possible by flexible Wenger risers and seating. The theatre features a fixed pipe grid on six-foot centers at

24 feet above the deck, with 100 dedicated circuits through an ETC ION board and a 4-foot wide steel catwalk at 18 feet off the deck from which a 360-degree sectioned black cyc is hung.

Adjacent to the main stage on two levels are a series of studios, shops, practice rooms, and labs. There are two 33-foot by 64-foot sprung-floor dance studios, both fully mirrored, with adjacent locker rooms and showers, two fashion design studios, the costume shop, two large choral and instrumental music rooms, a digital piano lab and practice rooms, two graphics studios and a printing lab, two VIP dressing rooms with separate greenroom, a greenroom with kitchen, men's and women's dressing rooms, and an assortment of "smart" classrooms.

To date we have hosted everything from the intimate settings for Liza Minnelli or Hal Holbrook performances to the full-blown *Movin' Out* and *Jesus Christ Superstar*. In the spring of 2009, we were the site for the PBS special *Marvin Hamlisch Presents: The '70s, the Way We Were*. Peter Bezemes not only negotiated for this author to design the set, but that the credits for this nationally televised show included the names of every undergraduate and graduate student who worked the production, from talent assistants to teleprompter operators, for unprecedented public exposure of the students' involvement.

Construction challenges

Any endeavor such as the Scheidegger Center, no matter how well planned, is never going to be without challenges, set-backs, and on-site revisions. Because of delays with the electrical contractors and a re-scheming of the speaker system, the opening act, Liza Minnelli with a full orchestra, was actually the first dry run for much of the center's equipment. Final Clear-Com and sound circuit deployments grew way beyond the original specs as the hybrid nature of the primary stage, with its mandate to mount both academic productions and national tours, called for extensive flexibility and sophisticated delivery. The primary two Renkus Heinz PN 121 small speakers high right and left of the proscenium were replaced with hanging arrays, and most recently a custom RH center cluster was added as well as a number of low-profile RH Iconyx IC8-R front fills. The input

capacity of the Yamaha board was succeeded by two DIGICO boards—the SD8 (60 channels) and SD7 (256 processing paths), one for onstage monitors and one for FOH.

While the foundation and stage house was being built, we had to rethink certain other specified components. The follow spot booth was moved to the rear of the house ceiling to allow students less intrusive entry and exit and to tie it in with second floor for more convenient access to restrooms. The tongue and groove maple stage deck was reconfigured to a sleeper subfloor topped with Masonite on plywood to simplify future repairs and allow easy replacement of sections. The plan for a stage deck trap opening required an additional cinder block trap room to meet fire codes. The projection screen required its own custom-built twelve-inch square aluminum truss frame to maintain proper tension on its full circumference of grommet holes. While high-side lighting from the primary electric pipes was an option, extensive dance presentations required ordering six two-part 12-foot castored steel box touring-type towers.

The summer before our opening was unusually humid which warped the original Masonite on the stage deck. Days of exposure to high speed drying fans didn't help enough, and all of it had to be replaced. Carpeting meant for the second floor was mistakenly installed in the more elegant theatre house. It had to be pulled up and reordered. In the summer of 2009 the orchestra seats underwent a complete realignment when it was discovered they had been set improperly for sightlines.

Fortunately, these mishaps and setbacks have not damaged the utility of this hands-on living laboratory for student performers and technicians. An unexpected benefit of building a new venue large enough to host national touring shows on a small university campus is the fact that the Bezemes Family Theatre turns out to be the perfect space for road-seasoned national tours to use overnight or in more extensive ten day "dry dock" visits to re-tech their shows. These technical rehearsals, though closed to the public by contract, use student crews in every capacity to share an unprecedented look inside the professional world of theatre, from designers, riggers, and sound and light board ops to company managers, often leading to future employment.

From the first concrete pour to buying the last case of gaff tape, it is an incredible privilege to witness the birth of a theatre facility. As we learned, it is vitally important to monitor the progress of each phase, knowing that your decisions will be scrutinized by others for years to come, as they try to answer the inevitable question, "Why did they do it that way?" ❖

Donnell Walsh, MFA Stanford, free-lanced in Ireland, England, on Norwegian cruise ships, public television, and films, and was the scenic designer/technical director for the Lindenwood theatre department for seventeen years before his recent appointment as Dean of Fine and Performing Arts. He continues to design at the university and professionally.

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