

# Into the future

After more than 75 years, significant investment in an Arkansas venue has resulted in a new lease of life

**A major investment project has addressed a number of venue deficiencies, while maintaining the building's architectural integrity**

Timothy Hursley

**B**uilt in downtown Little Rock as a part of the WPA New Deal campaign, the Joseph Taylor Robinson Memorial Auditorium opened in 1939 with the vision of providing visitors, from within and outside of Arkansas, with a world-class, multipurpose performance hall.

More than 75 years later, the same vision remained in focus as Robinson Center faced extensive renovations that would carry the iconic landmark into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### In the beginning

For decades, Robinson Center served as a performance, exhibition and convention space. Designed by Eugene Stern of the architecture firm Wittenberg & Delony, the magnificent structure featured bold art deco elements of its time. The original auditorium included a top-level performance hall with a theater, stage and balcony, a bottom-level arena, as well as convention halls and committee rooms.

Season after season, audiences experienced a wide range of performances – from symphony and ballet to traveling Broadway shows, concerts and more. It's often remembered as the place where, in 1956, Elvis Presley made his first live recording of one of the bestselling singles of all time, *Hound Dog*.

Other famous stars have lit up the Robinson Center stage, such as Ella Fitzgerald, The Beach Boys, Mikhail Baryshnikov and Jerry Seinfeld. The hall has hosted Dwight D Eisenhower and Eleanor Roosevelt, plus major productions such as *Wicked*, *La bohème*, *Beauty and the Beast* and *Jersey Boys*.

Over the years, the productions have grown larger and more complex. After operating the Robinson Center for many years, the Little Rock Convention and Visitors Bureau (LRCVB) knew that to accommodate the biggest Broadway shows and concerts, facility deficiencies had to be addressed. Simple repairs wouldn't suffice. A major investment had to be made to, yet again, create a top-level, multipurpose venue.

The project started out in 2011 when a concept study was presented to the city's A&P Commission by Wittenberg Delony & Davidson Architects, Jaffe Holden Acoustics and theater planner Schuler Shook. Voters gave bond funding approval in 2013, and on July 14, 2014, Robinson Center closed for a 28-month intermission. The project cost was US\$70.5m.



## THEATER PLANNING

Robinson Center was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 2007, so it was important to preserve the original architectural integrity while transforming the building into a modern, innovative structure. The design team included Polk Stanley Wilcox Architects of Little Rock and Ennead Architects of New York; Jaffe Holden Acoustics; and Schuler Shook. The owner's representative was SCM Architects.

The LRCVB and Schuler Shook had worked together twice before. Schuler Shook designed a complete renovation of the stage rigging system 10 years earlier, prior to the concept study. As LRCVB president and CEO Gretchen Hall says, "I knew that we had a relationship with them, so to reform that relationship was great because we had comfort in their ability to provide a real, multipurpose facility."

### Moving forward

The performance hall took center stage as the design team developed concepts that increased production capabilities, enriched theater intimacy, improved sightlines and enhanced acoustical quality. One of the first major decisions was to gut the inside of the hall, then lower the stage down to the former arena level, which created more volume in the audience chamber.

"We dropped the stage roughly 36ft for several reasons," explains Jack Hagler, Schuler Shook's partner-in-charge. "The three primary reasons were to enable us to reshape the audience chamber to a more intimate scale, to increase the room's volume for improved acoustics for the Arkansas Symphony Orchestra, and to get the loading dock and stage at the same level."

The back of the hall was moved forward, 30ft closer to the stage, to help further enhance the intimate feel and create fabulous sightlines for audience members. The expanded, multipurpose stage, and the new addition of a forestage grid, now accommodates larger orchestras with chorus and the biggest Broadway shows. The improved orchestra pit and new lift enable the symphony orchestra to move further downstage onto the extended apron, providing a better acoustic coupling of the stage with the audience chamber.

The new performance hall contains 2,214 seats with two balcony levels. The seating plan has been optimized so every seat delivers a world-class experience. New boxes, all with excellent sightlines, line the side walls, their angular shape paying tribute to the building's



original art deco style. The design also ensures acoustical quality and enriches the room's intimate atmosphere.

A substantially expanded stage wing, new backstage crossover, new system of catwalks, forestage rigging grid, control positions, and followspot booth ensure the best standards of production functionality for the most complex shows. The theatrical lighting system was greatly improved, with an advanced technology infrastructure facilitating transition to full LED lighting. Adjustable acoustical drapes deliver the ability to adjust the reverberation of the room by up to 0.7 seconds.

The back-of-house now offers increased support for larger Broadway productions. The previous on-truck loading dock required a lift to haul equipment up 12ft to the original stage level. Now at the same level as the new stage, the nearby three-truck dock provides easy access to the stage and back-of-house areas for quicker loading. New performer facilities include four chorus dressing rooms, four private dressing rooms with shower facilities, and a performers' lounge that welcomes the most demanding artists.

The restored lobby delivers a stunning reinterpretation of its original art deco elements. Other renovations, such as expanded restrooms, a permanent on-site box office, increased ADA accessibility, and a built-in concession and merchandise area, provide amenities that measure up to the grandeur of the new facility.

In addition to the updated performance hall, Robinson Center now includes a two-story conference center with access to a 5,477ft<sup>2</sup> terrace, overlooking the Arkansas River and the new Broadway Street Bridge.

Renovations for the newly named Robinson Center were completed in 2016. Now a sustainable, LEED-certified building, the state-of-the-art venue is the home of the Arkansas Symphony Orchestra, Ballet Arkansas, and the Celebrity Attractions Broadway Series. It recently hosted *The Phantom of the Opera* and will host *The Lion King* next year — two of the most spectacular shows on Broadway.

"It's phenomenal the number of people that are coming to shows, and the convention groups we're booking," remarks Hall. "We promised the community, if we build it, they will come. And they really are." ■

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