



# A BUILDING GROWS

After 11 years of being crammed into too-small spaces, several OSF Production departments will soon move into their new home.

By Catherine Foster

This is what life is like now for OSF's Production staff in their First Street building: To get a sofa to the loading door, Props crew members have to carry it across the building, walking on top of sets under construction, often passing close to running machinery. Because there's no accessible loading dock for very large items, when big shipments come in, the Scene Shop crew has to meet the delivery trucks up the hill on Hargadine Street, unload the materials into OSF trucks and then re-load them into the building, dodging cars and people walking down the sidewalk.

Meanwhile, half a mile away, Costume Rentals (which stores all the costume stock and rents out much of it for theatre, film and TV use) is jammed into a former warehouse that was adapted 10 years ago to meet its needs. The floors slope and it's hard to reach the 50,000 costumes, shoes and accessories. "There's no climate control, there's light contamination from skylights and dust is an issue, all of which contribute to fabric degradation," says Costume Rental Manager Emily Ehrlich Inget.

Life for both these departments, and others, will change dramatically. In October, construction will be completed on a \$7.5 million production building in the nearby town of Talent, an eight-minute drive from the OSF campus. The 65,000-square-foot building will house several Production departments as well as Costume Rentals. Construction began in February, and when

the building is finished, most of the departments will start moving in. The Scene Shop will wait until next summer, after the 2014 shows have been built. While these Production departments will be under one roof, they will have separate spaces and their own equipment, which they now have to share. Costume Rentals will have more space, a level floor and a layout designed around its needs. There will be a conference room, offices for department heads and an adequately sized break room.

Once the Production department move is complete, the current two-story First Street building will be renovated into a rehearsal center, with music rooms and sprung floors for dance and movement. But more on Phase II in a future issue of *Prologue*.

The project has been about 10 years in the works. Former Executive Director Paul Nicholson began it, and after Cynthia Rider succeeded him earlier this year, he continued, as a consultant, to manage the day-to-day operations and construction issues.

"The new building is going to strengthen and stabilize what we're able to do production-wise," Rider says. "Everything at the Festival—other than the theatre spaces themselves—has been repurposed spaces, so nothing has been built specifically for the Festival's work. We've outgrown those repurposed spaces. So we finally will have a production facility that will be able to support one of the country's great regional theatres."

## Landlocked

The Festival has adapted to its many growth spurts, ever since its inception in 1935, when rehearsals were held around founder Angus Bowmer and his wife Gertrude's kitchen table and costumes were sewn in local women's homes. Because the OSF campus is surrounded by the town, a residential neighborhood and Lithia Park, there's been little room to grow in the immediate area.

The current 22,000-square-foot production building, a former roller-skating rink that was adapted for OSF's use in 1983, houses the Scene Shop, Props, Paints and Scenic Automation. Physical Plant staff are there, too. For a long time, it was adequate for the Company's needs. But in 2002, OSF built the Thomas Theatre (then called the New Theatre).

"When we built the Thomas," recalls Nicholson, "we always anticipated that the scale of the shows in the new space would be the same as the Black Swan [OSF's former third theatre space], but we very quickly discovered that its scale was actually much more similar to the Bowmer. So that significantly increased the demands on the Scene Shop."

More workers were hired to build more and bigger sets. Now, some 34 full-time and part-time production crew members and interns work in the building.

In addition to making new props, the Props department also stores about 5,000 hand



# IN TALENT

props, including baskets, wine glasses, swords, fake food and fake blood. In another site next to Costume Rentals, they have more than 1,000 pieces of furniture, including armoires, screens, big foliage, as well as larger props, like the David Kelly manure sculpture head (don't ask).

Having an Automation department is a rather recent development; OSF rarely used to develop anything controlled by motors and computers. When it used lifts, they were operated by hydraulics.

The problems multiplied. "It became difficult to do trap work (test the trap doors and the set and prop elevators) prior to load-in," says Technical Director Bill Tiesi. "We cannot lay out an entire deck to be painted in the current shop. Also there is not enough room to store completed sets, which increases the potential for injuries because we're building the next production at the same time we're storing other scenic elements."

Over the years, everyone adjusted to the changes. Still, the space left much to be desired, including the fluctuating temperatures and the tiny, messy break room with its ratty old sofas.

These workload and space challenges started getting recognized when OSF undertook one of its periodic strategic planning processes, which involves talking with members of many departments.

Next, the Board of Directors had to be convinced of the need for a new building. "From an organizational point of view, one of the big questions is, how do you convince the decision-makers that something is

important?" Nicholson recalled. "And the ultimate decision-makers in this case were the Board of Directors. I remember clearly one time we had a Board meeting and we brought in some of the Scene Shop people and Prop Shop people to speak to the Board about how inefficient the scenery construction trail was. That was a very significant moment."

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—Cynthia Rider

As part of the strategic-planning process, Nicholson and the board determined that the Festival needed to do a space-planning study. They engaged an architect, Gene Abel, of Abel Architectural Group, to work with a planning group of leaders within the organization and they analyzed different areas that had space problems.

#### Finding a site

At first, Nicholson and the planning group looked at increasing the size of the existing building by pushing out to the property line, but found that would have yielded only about another 4,000 square feet. So they started looking at vacant land: Ten sites, both in Ashland and Talent.

"We needed between three and four acres for a 50,000 square-foot building," he says. "We looked at a couple of pieces of land within about a three- or four-minute drive of the Festival, but ultimately decided they

Architectural renderings of OSF's new Talent Production Building.

were simply too small for what we needed." Then, because it seemed wise to also include Costume Rentals in the project, the size of the projected building was increased to about 60,000 square feet. And they started looking in adjacent towns.

"Land in Ashland, as we knew, is very pricey," he says. "The permitting process and the ability for people to object and delay the building project are very high; and the likely construction costs would be higher because of Ashland's design standards."

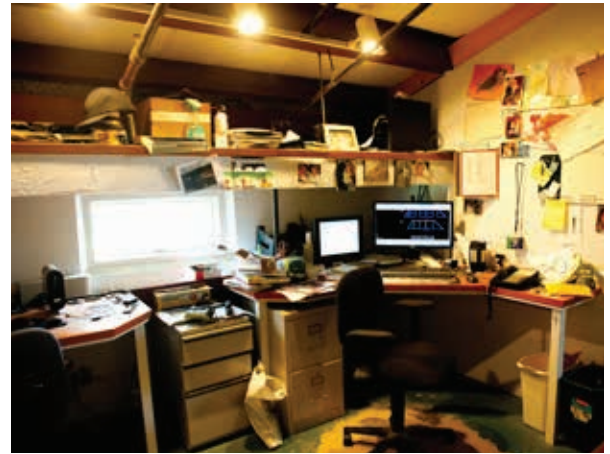
The travel time between the new building and OSF became more important than the actual distance, and they settled on an outside limit of 10 minutes. They found the current site on Talent Avenue in the spring of 2012, and in September of that year purchased the land for around \$500,000.

Funding for the \$7.5 million project came from a combination of contributions (which are still continuing), savings and financing. The facilities expansion also includes an additional \$3 million for the remodel of the First Street building into the Hay-Patton Rehearsal Center.

In June, the Meyer Memorial Trust, a private foundation, gave OSF a \$400,000 grant to support the construction of the new facility.

#### A collaborative process

Once the site was chosen, OSF could start work with the architects, ORW Group. The firm, Nicholson says, "deeply engaged the



OSF's Scene Shop in the Ashland Production building has long been straining at the seams.

individual departments, looking at their specific needs, the size, the volume, heights of the building, where the best placement was for individual offices, whether there was the need for a conference room or a lunch or break room, looked at the flow, where the loading dock would be.”

The OSF project, says David Wilkerson, the architect at ORW, “was unusual and especially rewarding for two reasons: First, the user groups were creative visual thinkers who knew what they wanted and could articulate it to the design team. Second, the challenge of recreating and combining the stage pits of all three theatres inside the Scene Shop—while also accommodating all the other functions that needed to be included—was quite unusual. The need to ‘get it right’ took on special meaning with this project, as there was literally no room for error. That sort of challenge makes our work as architects really worthwhile.”

OSF hired Adroit Construction as the design-build team. “The project itself is really extraordinary in that this will be a one-of-a-kind facility and host some very technical and industry trade-specific features, such as the Trap Room, that will really benefit the organization’s production department,” says Jason Stranberg, Adroit vice-president and project manager for the Production Building project.

“Some particular aspects of the project that have made it interesting have been designing and building the facility to accommodate the movement of very large and possibly awkward pieces of set through the various departments in their production cycle. We have internally laughed throughout the design-build process at the reality that the users of this facility face in their need to have a building that would allow them to move a 14-foot fake giraffe or a pumpkin stage coach through the doors and hallways and onto a truck!”

#### Vision of the future

“Having everything in one place will certainly increase efficiency,” says Tiesi. “We will be able to do trap work, we’ll have more storage space, state-of-the-art equipment, larger restrooms and a break room.” Flats can be laid out and painted right there, instead

of being moved to a rented paint warehouse in Phoenix.

The best thing? “Loading and unloading of props and scenery pieces will be safer and easier,” says Props Department Manager Jim Clark. “We’ll have dual loading docks, one on level ground so vehicles can drive right into the building, as well as a recessed loading dock with a self-adjusting dock height. Plus there will be a forklift, so there’s no hand unloading of heavy items.”

Costume Rentals’ new space—11,000 square feet, 3,000 feet more than they have now—will give them hundreds of linear feet of new rack space, plus more areas for accessories. “We will have the ability to customize the rack system so that the costumes will be hung in a way that makes sense and makes the warehouse easier to navigate. We will have a larger and more efficiently laid-out shipping and receiving area and a larger photo studio with professional lighting for shooting costumes for our website,” says Inget.

The first part of the move involves inventorying, packing and transporting the contents of three storage facilities containing furniture props and Costume Rentals and stored sets. Then the staggered moves begin.

Yes, the new site does mean some tradeoffs. No longer will Props have the ability to grab a couple of options for baskets for a stage manager; that will have to wait until the next day. The potential time increase in transporting scenic elements is another concern. OSF is considering running a shuttle between Talent and Ashland during peak times.

Tiesi admits that the departments moving to Talent are concerned about being detached from the organization. “One option is to make available the new conference room for meetings for the Company, which would bring different departments out to Talent,” says Tiesi. “With new technology, hopefully the communication process will increase.”

Clark adds: “The challenge is distance, but what we gain is immensely valuable. That’s the important part. And having a building that was set up to do the work will be unbelievable.”