



Expanding The Den

Storefront Theatre on a Grand Scale



November 2014

In late 2010, a theatre review in *Around the Town Chicago* described the latest addition to the storefront theatre scene...

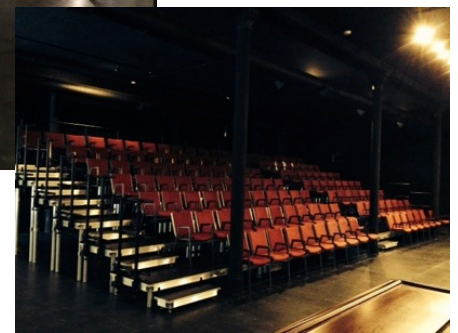
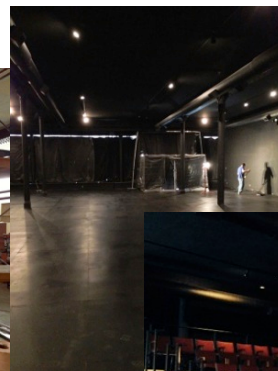
Another new theater has opened in Chicago. This one, named The Den, is not an actual Storefront, but more of a “loft theater”, located on a second floor (not handicap accessible, yet) in the Wicker Park neighborhood. Going up the long staircase, we had no idea what we might see upon our arrival. What a wonderful surprise — a lobby area that was homey and comfortable and then when the “doors opened” (there is in fact a curtain, not doors, but the term still works) we found a marvelous place to see a play. Comfortable seats with great sight-lines and a stage area that had a little more depth than normal but worked just fine for this new theater company’s first ever production, William Inge’s “Bus Stop”.



Like that original upstairs theatre, The Den’s first floor mainstage design emphasizes comfort and congeniality, but adds capacity for larger productions, a completely reconfigurable performance space, up to 200 audience seats, accessibility for people with disabilities, more restrooms, and enhanced theatrical lighting, controls, power, air conditioning, and sound insulation. The ultimate goal is to bring The Den’s storefront aesthetic to a much larger audience while maintaining its intimacy, versatility, and creativity.

Next to the new mainstage, a spacious bar, lounge, and box office will open in early 2015. This additional space will include an entrance from Milwaukee Avenue, easy access to the mainstage theatre, and a stairway to the upstairs lobby. (Space is also available for installation of an elevator to the upstairs theatre area, pending funding.)

From conception to opening night, the transformation of a nineteenth-century department store into a twenty-first-century theatre space required a year and a half, plus a lucky confluence of people, talents, resources, and opportunity.



Vital Statistics

First floor mainstage, known as “The Den Theatre’s Heath Mainstage”



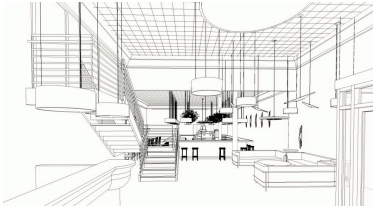
Total area (entrance, performance space, restrooms, etc.): 6,000 sq. ft.

Size of performance space: approximately 60 ft. by 70 ft.

Seating capacity: up to 200

Address: 1329 N. Milwaukee Avenue, in Wicker Park

Inaugural production: *The Hypocrites All Our Tragic*, adapted and directed by Sean Graney, Aug.-Oct. 2014



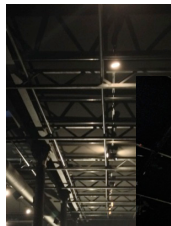
First floor lobby, bar, and box office

Total area: 3,000 sq. ft

Opening in early 2015

The Den’s upstairs bar and five smaller performance spaces continue to operate on the second and third floors of the building.

With the addition of the first floor theatre and adjacent lobby, bar, and box office, The Den will occupy the entire building, originally constructed in 1898 as a department store. Backstage facilities for the first floor mainstage (dressing rooms, laundry, actors’ restroom, costume and prop storage, etc.) are located in the basement.

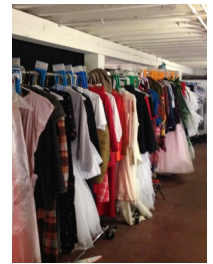
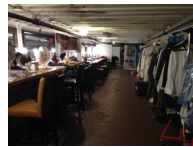
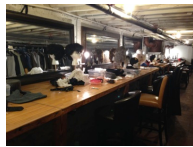


Theatrical facilities

The mainstage’s lighting grid extends over the entire performance space, for unconstrained stage design and location. Stage lights are cued from a control booth (constructed above the restroom area) overlooking the stage.



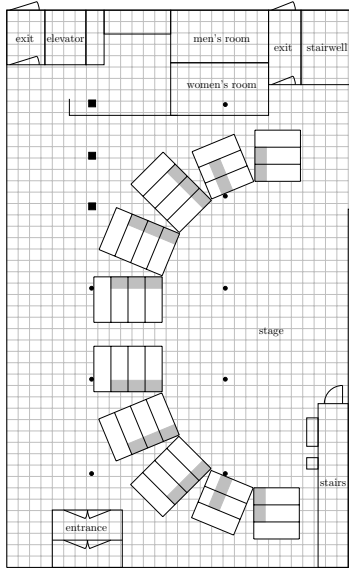
For *All Our Tragic*, the basement “backstage” area accommodated dressing tables for 23 actors, and all the costumes, wigs, and props for the 12-hour production.



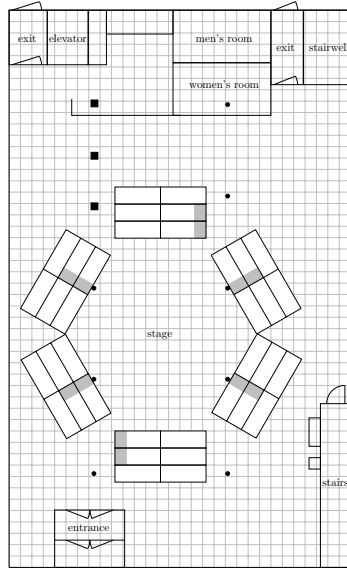
According to a Landmark Designation Report for the Milwaukee Avenue District (published by the City of Chicago in 2007), the building now occupied by The Den opened in 1898 as a three-story department store, designed by the Chicago architectural firm of Frommann and Jepsen.

Performance Space

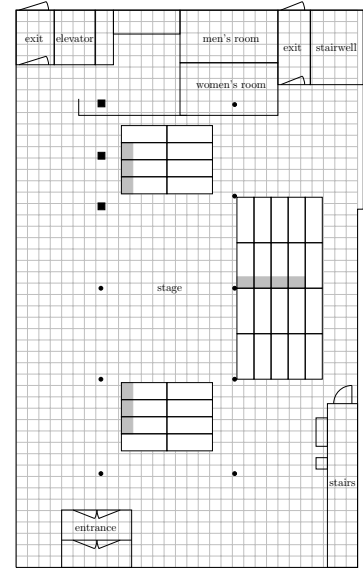
Audience and stage share an area approximately 60 feet wide by 70 feet long, infinitely configurable to allow designers to realize a variety of artistic goals.



Semi-Thrust L — 36 decks, 148 seats, 48'w × 30'd stage



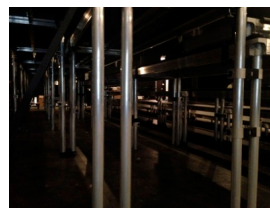
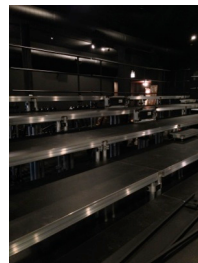
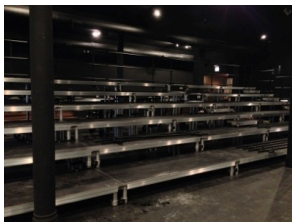
Arena F — 36 decks, 168 seats, 22' diameter stage



Thrust E — 36 decks, 163 seats, 27'w × 20'd stage

Sample performance space layouts

Audience seats are arranged on modular risers, allowing total flexibility in the configuration and location of the audience with respect to the stage. The one-foot rise between rows ensures clear sight lines for everyone.



The modular seating system, manufactured by Wenger Corporation, includes risers, decks, steps, and handrails (and carts for moving and storing the components).

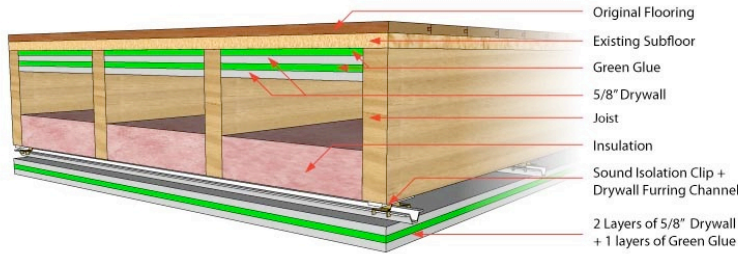


Sound Insulation

The biggest challenge in turning the first floor of an 1898 department store into a modern theatre proved to be soundproofing. To block noise from the upstairs theatres, alternating layers of drywall and Green Glue Noiseproofing Compound were placed between ceiling joists, along with soundproof insulation. Additional layers were added below the joists, affixed to tracks attached with sound-isolation clips.



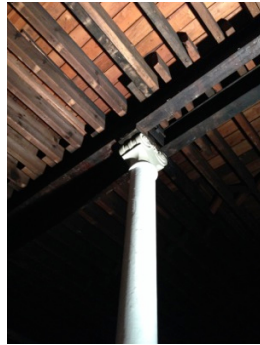
*Green Glue
Noiseproofing
Compound*



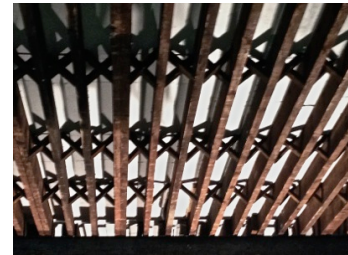
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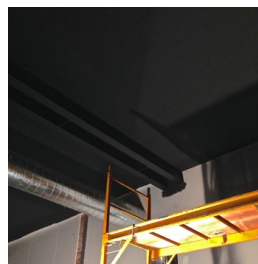
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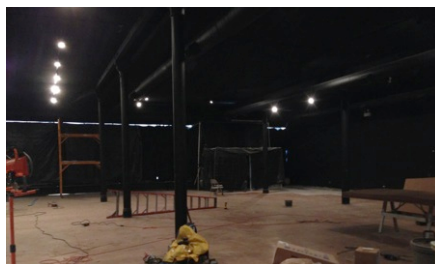
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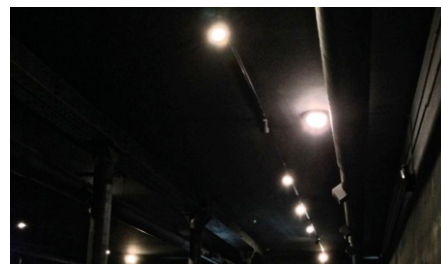
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Behind the Scenes

Actors' dressing rooms, as well as restroom and laundry facilities and other "backstage" functions, are located in the basement under the first floor mainstage. The transformation of the basement space was almost as dramatic as that of the mainstage itself.



Bowling lane flooring found in the basement was sanded, stained, and used to make dressing tables for actors.



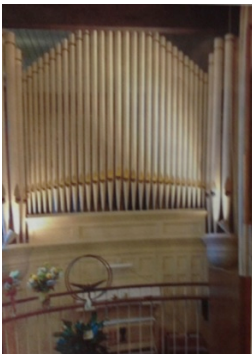
Ready for opening night of *The Hypocrites All Our Tragic*:



Front of House

A 3,000 sq. ft. space adjacent to the first-floor mainstage is being transformed into a new lobby, bar, and box office. Opening in early 2015, the space will provide a convenient and comfortable place for drinks and conversation before and after a show and during intermission.

In keeping with The Den's comfortable vintage design aesthetic, the box office will be constructed of quarter-sawn oak from a 1904 pipe organ that was in a church in Bloomington, Illinois, until early 2014 when it became cost-prohibitive to repair. The bar design will echo the shape and decorative details of the organ wood. Both the box office and the bar are being designed and built by Raywray, Inc.



The original pipe organ



*Decorative panel
from the organ case*



Organ parts before and after stripping the paint

Timeline



In early 2013, theatre devotees Michael and Mona Heath met with Megan Wildebour (Managing Director of The Hypocrites) to explore ways they might support Chicago storefront theatre. Megan suggested they contact Ryan Martin (Artistic Director of The Den), who was already envisioning ways to extend The Den's facilities. Both Ryan's vision and the fact that supporting The Den would benefit a number of itinerant theatre companies appealed to the Heaths.

Ultimately, the project to create The Den Theatre's Heath Mainstage took shape over many months, benefiting from highly collaborative partners and timely availability of suitable space and funding. Key milestones include:

- March 2013 Megan suggests Heaths talk to Ryan. Ryan and Heaths meet to talk about possibilities (the first of over 40 meetings over the next 16 months).
- May 2013 Plans for the new mainstage begin to take shape, along with early cost estimates.
- Summer 2013 Ryan investigates electrical capacity, structural requirements, and other construction issues. Ryan and Heaths write a business plan to evaluate risks, assess long-term financial stability, and delineate project steps and timeframe.
- September 2013 Ryan, Heaths, members of The Hypocrites, and others meet for a brainstorming session on "what makes a great theatre," which would have substantial impact on the ultimate mainstage plans.
- Winter 2013-2014 Finances and construction plans for renovating the first floor of the existing Den location are finalized. In January, Ryan, Heaths, Megan, and Halena Kays (The Hypocrites Artistic Director) discuss plans for The Hypocrites to be the anchor tenant of the new Den mainstage. Halena shares the exciting news that Sean Graney's *All Our Tragic* will be their first production in the new space.
- Early March 2014 Renovation of first-floor space begins.
- April 2014 Ryan finalizes arrangements to lease the former Boring Store when it becomes available in late summer 2014. The unanticipated availability of this 3,000 sq. ft. area adjacent to the 6,000-sq.-ft. mainstage will provide a significantly larger bar and lounge space, without infringing on the performance area. This additional space will also augment the number of available restrooms and enable convenient access to the upstairs Den theatres.



May-June 2014

The mainstage takes shape, along with soundproofing, upgrades to air conditioning, new restrooms, and improvements in the basement.



July 2014

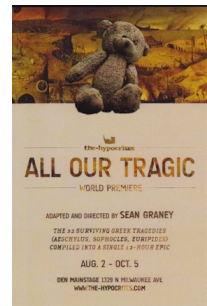
Risers and decks for portable and reconfigurable seating are installed. Work on the basement, building facade, and theatre entrance continues.



Actors' dressing rooms, as well as restroom and laundry facilities and other backstage functions, are constructed in the basement under the mainstage. Bowling lane flooring found in the basement is sanded, stained, and used to make dressing tables for actors.

August 2014

The Hypocrites production of *All Our Tragic*, adapted and directed by Sean Graney, opens in The Den Theatre's Heath Mainstage.



Early 2015

The renovated 3,000 sq. ft. space next to the first floor mainstage is slated to open, providing an expansive lobby, bar, and box office, plus convenient access to the Den's second and third floor theatres.

Welcome to The Den Theatre's Heath Mainstage

