

# Ford Theatre's Extreme Makeover

Geelong Performing Arts Centre's big bang for a few bucks has something for everyone – including a new name.

Text: Mandy Jones  
Images: Trevor Mein

**THE VALUE OF A REGIONAL** performing arts centre to its community cannot be overstated. The successful ones showcase the best of local talent through school productions, dance concerts and musical performances, and attract touring productions and big name entertainers to give the locals a taste of the big city. Geelong Performing Arts Centre is one of those centres that has perfected the balance and in doing so has created a loyal following. After 30 years of operation in its original form, GPAC's Ford Theatre recently underwent an extreme makeover thanks to a \$3 million grant from Arts Victoria, and the work of a committed team of designers, consultants, suppliers and staff. The Ford Theatre re-opened three months later as The Playhouse, a 797-seat, architecturally striking and operationally superior venue.

Jamie Stahl, Venue Operations Manager for GPAC and Craig Gamble, renowned consultant with Marshall Day

Entertech (Cultural Facility Consultants) recently took me on a tour of the newly refurbished Playhouse.

With limited funds and time to deliver a redevelopment that would have maximum impact, determining the project scope was paramount. For the GPAC team, the goal was technical, aesthetic, operational and accessibility improvements.

"We had a set amount of money so we had to clearly define the areas we were going to spend it in. The scope of work was pretty much from the setting line (where the curtain falls) through to the control room, and within the auditorium from sound lock to sound lock," Gamble explained.

#### THE BANISHMENT OF MISSION BROWN

Standing on stage, the most obvious changes to the venue are aesthetic. Gone is the dull, tired-looking auditorium with its mission brown walls and rows of dreary seats. The redesign of the

auditorium by Studio 101 Architects is a triumph – a combination of pale green upholstered seats with walnut timber frames, padded rear auditorium walls that accentuate the green of the seats and reference the red of the new house curtain, all gently lit by a new LED house and aisle light system. The addition of walnut cladding to the balcony boxes has made them an architectural feature, and walnut cladding to the underside of the balcony and masking the lighting bridges has created a beautiful flow to the space.

One of the benefits of having theatre consultants such as Marshall Day Entertech on a project like this is their connections. The Playhouse has ended up with premium quality seats due to a choosy designer on a project in Texas.

"The seat design is very similar to the seats that have just gone into Winspear Opera House in Texas, however when the walnut arms and backs arrived on that project there they were considered

too pale for use, so we were able to procure them and thus get a much higher quality chair than we initially could afford for this project. Studio 101 was very excited about that, and that opportunity drove the selection of the timber in the rest of space. It's dark enough that it disappears in a blackout, and being timber it's hard and gives us some nice acoustic reflections," Gamble explained.

While the seats were imported from South America, Gamble revealed the decision was made to source a local fabric supplier to upholster them, so in the interests of supporting the local economy Geelong Textiles was selected to provide the seat fabric.

#### IMPROVED ACCESSIBILITY

The new seating system went a long way in addressing the access issues identified by staff, users and access consultants Bernie Clifford from Morris Godings, and Marshall Day. Mobility-impaired

positions have been added by way of a variation to the standard seat which features a transfer arm – a swing out arm rest enabling an audience member to transfer easily from wheelchair to seat. The venue operates with a seat out policy, meaning that a number of removable seats are always left out to accommodate patrons in wheelchairs. However the versatility of the redesigned seating means that a greater number of wheelchairs can be accommodated and there is more flexibility around positioning of companion seats.

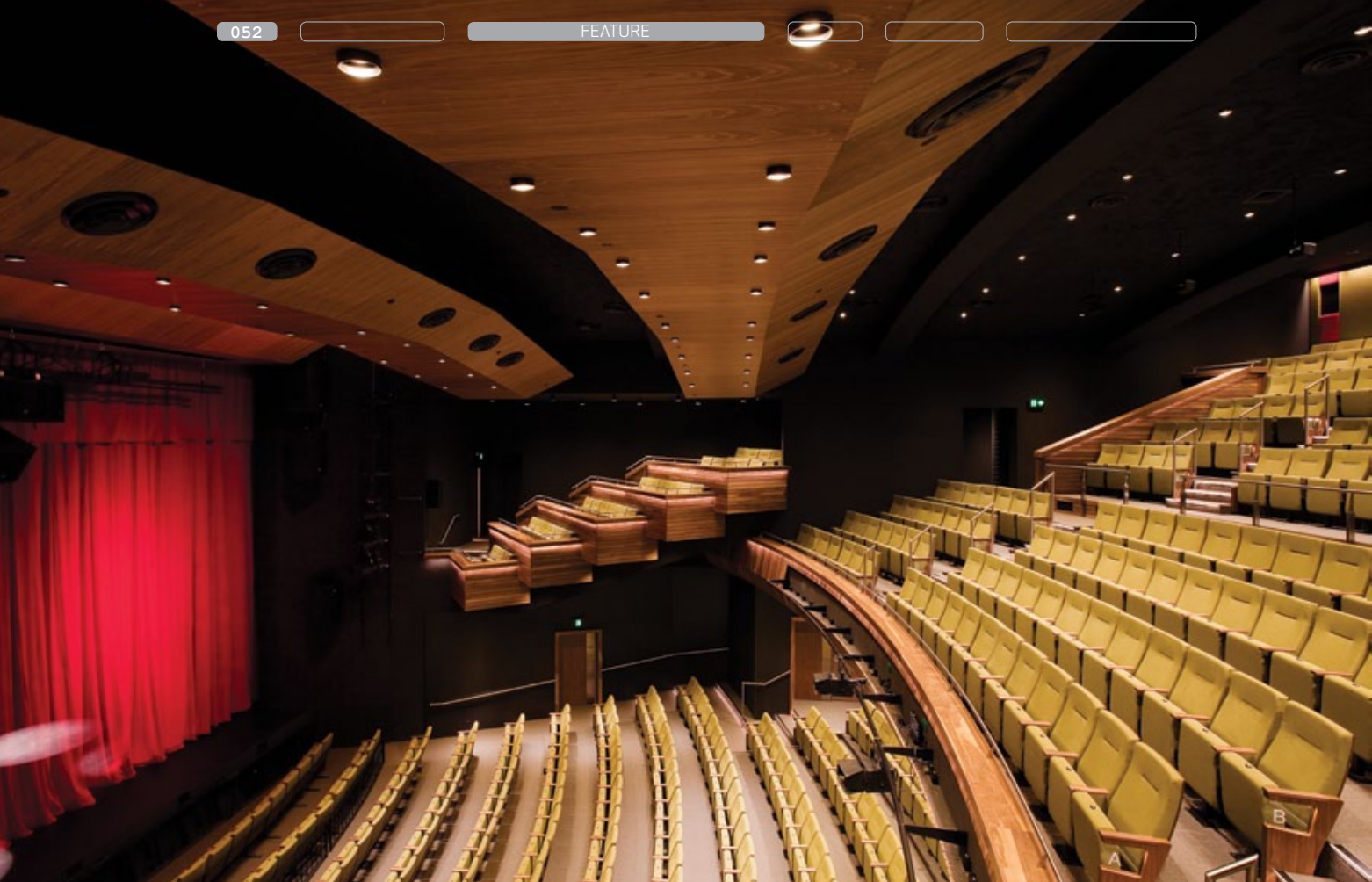
The existing hearing loop was recommissioned and a new radio frequency hearing assist system by Listentech was specified to assist patrons with cochlear implants, those without hearing aids and non T-switch enabled hearing aids.

"The RF system also gives GPAC an opportunity to offer other services using that same equipment, such as live descriptions for visually impaired

patrons, or translations in to other languages. Or even director's notes sessions which other facilities are doing with the same technology," detailed Gamble.

Gamble went on to explain they were also interested in making the venue more accessible in a broader context, not just in terms of universal access. Small changes like additional handrails and new grab rails in the balcony aisles have made access much easier for audiences. But by far the biggest improvement to access was the reconfiguring of the seating and side aisles in the stalls to enable access from one end of the auditorium to the other at stalls level. Previously the stalls had been separated into two sections due to the seating, causing confusion for audience members who could only enter via a specific door.

"Opening of the side aisles within the auditorium, while increasing the size of the doors from single to double doors meant that they could staff the



Electrolight supplied a complete LED lighting solution for the house lights, aisle lights, stair nosing and strip lighting on the end panels of the seating, all controlled via Dyalite. The new circle-front lighting position and aisle grab rails are simple but highly-effective improvements.

auditorium more easily and get audiences in and out with less confusion,” Gamble explained.

“It’s really simplified access for our patrons and our staff, and by widening those doors, it has also improved universal accessibility,” Stahl added.

#### THE TECHS GET A SHARE TOO

In terms of technical improvements, the balcony lighting rail was extended, and new dimmers and a patch bay were installed in the auditorium lighting bridges. Reveal Productions realigned the stage lift, added an orchestra lighting bar in the proscenium area and installed a new house curtain with track and motor. The existing left and right speaker clusters were co-combined on hand winches from one location to reduce climbing requirements for crews. In addition to this, cabling runs and removable seats were installed to enable designated centre stalls, rear stalls and balcony mix positions for audio operators.

The Playhouse has the honour of being the first major auditorium in Australia to be 100% lit with LED lighting. Stahl said he has been greatly impressed with the LED systems designed by Electrolight which provided solutions for house light fittings, aisle lights, stair nosing and strip lighting on the end panels of the seating, and even emergency lights.

The functional house lights are an LED fixture by Queensland-based Digilin, and are specified in narrow, medium and wide beam angles, custom black housings and surface mounted cans. The 11000 lumen fixtures above and under the balcony are a replacement of existing 50-watt dichroic fixtures, so achieving adequate and even light levels was relatively straight forward. However the areas over the stalls were harder to predict. Electrolight undertook extensive modelling to ensure the design could achieve a bright enough result from the varying ceiling heights. Tridonic Atco fixtures were specified to highlight the timber surface of the box balconies, while remaining discrete enough to be concealed into the cladding.

In addition to the aesthetic improvement the LED systems have added to the space, Stahl said the energy savings and low-maintenance requirements are a great outcome. And because the entire system is controlled via Dyalite, control over each of the system elements is fully integrated and extremely user friendly.

#### THE RETURN OF BASIC BLACK

Other improvements to the auditorium included improved directionality of air delivery from the air-conditioning system, new carpet and, of course, a good coat of black paint on those formerly ‘mission brown’ walls.

A long-standing acoustic issue - a flutter in the rear stalls under the balcony as sound bounced between the two side walls - was resolved with a clever architectural product provided by Aktar products specified by Marshall Day Acoustics.

“We wanted to solve the issue with something that was sympathetic to the architectural intent and the milled plywood product that the architect chose comes in two forms – the acoustic version which has acoustic perforations with felt behind it, and the solid architectural version, and from an appearance point of view it’s the same product, so it works seamlessly,” explained Gamble.

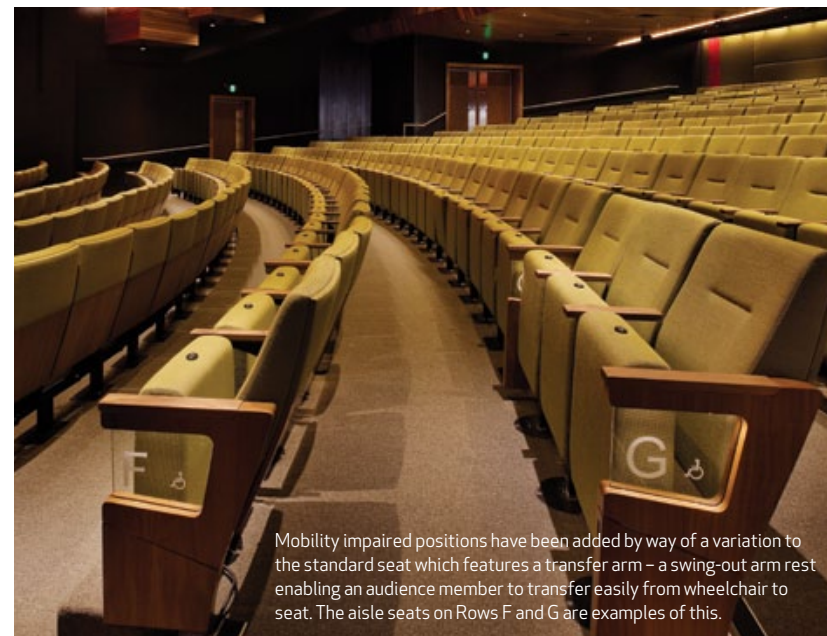
The Playhouse has been in operation since May and Stahl says the feedback from hirers and audiences has been overwhelmingly positive.

For Gamble, the success of redevelopments like this comes down to the client and the project team: “Projects like this are so much easier when you’ve got an informed client. Because it’s a working venue and it’s working so well, the team knew what they needed. There was something for everyone in this project: for the audience it looks clean, new and sparkly, and each technical area got something. We were there to make that happen. And the fact it was delivered on time and under budget shows it had the correct scope and the right people working on it.”



Image courtesy of GPAC

Before: The Ford Theatre. Brown was clearly the new black of the '80s.



Mobility impaired positions have been added by way of a variation to the standard seat which features a transfer arm – a swing-out arm rest enabling an audience member to transfer easily from wheelchair to seat. The aisle seats on Rows F and G are examples of this.

#### Dramatis Personae:

Geelong Performing Arts Centre:  
[www.gpac.org.au](http://www.gpac.org.au)

Studio 101 Architects:  
[www.studio101.com.au](http://www.studio101.com.au)

Marshall Day Entertech (theatre consultancy):  
[www.marshallday.com/entertech](http://www.marshallday.com/entertech)

Marshall Day Acoustics (Acoustics):  
[www.marshallday.com/acoustics](http://www.marshallday.com/acoustics)

Morris Goding and Associates (disability and access design):  
[www.mgac.com.au](http://www.mgac.com.au)

Umow Lai (services engineering):  
[www.umowlai.com.au](http://www.umowlai.com.au)

Hadleys/Series (seating):  
[www.hadleyaustralia.com.au](http://www.hadleyaustralia.com.au)

Arup (structural engineering):  
[www.arup.com](http://www.arup.com)

Electrolight (LED lighting design):  
[www.electrolight.com.au](http://www.electrolight.com.au)

Lightmoves (LED lighting systems, Dyalite):  
[www.lightmoves.com.au](http://www.lightmoves.com.au)

MultiTek Solutions (theatre equipment, audiovisual cabling, Listentech RF hearing assist system):  
[www.multitekolutions.com.au](http://www.multitekolutions.com.au)

Reveal Productions (staging systems and house curtain):  
[www.revealproductions.com.au](http://www.revealproductions.com.au)

Music Workshop (theatre equipment):  
[www.musicworkshop.com.au](http://www.musicworkshop.com.au)

Kane Constructions (construction):  
[www.kaneconstructions.com.au](http://www.kaneconstructions.com.au)

Arts Victoria (funding):  
[www.arts.vic.gov.au](http://www.arts.vic.gov.au)

GHD (project management):  
[www.ghd.com/global/locations/australia](http://www.ghd.com/global/locations/australia)