

BY STEVEN EHRENBERG

## Restoration of the Foxwoods / Lyric Theatre stars ETCP Certified Riggers

Rigging was truly the heart and soul of restoring this theatre to its former glory.

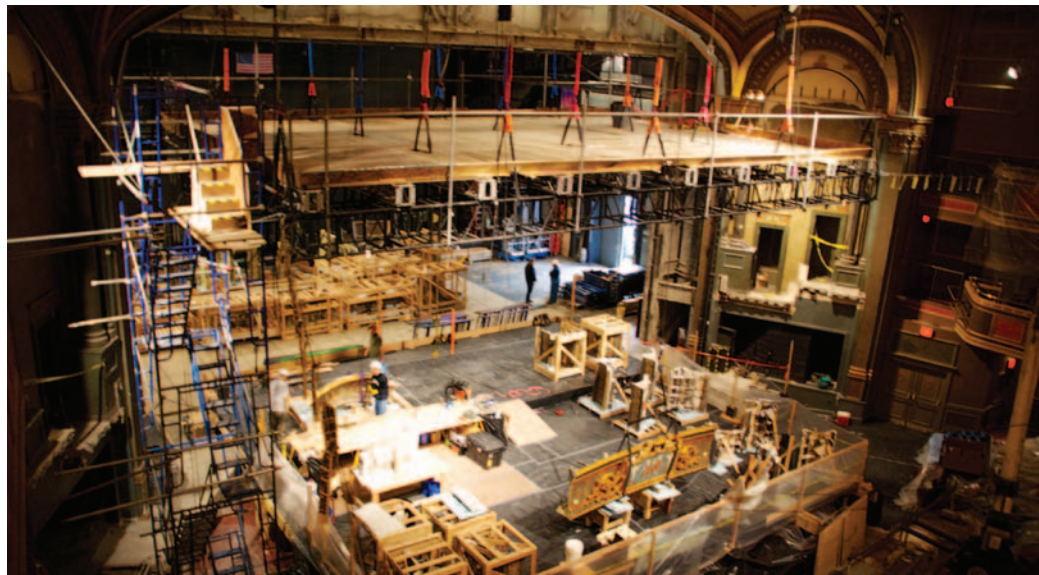
IN MARCH 2009, *Spider-Man: Turn Off the Dark* prepared to move into the then Foxwoods Theatre (now Lyric Theatre) in New York City. A large construction project was required to make major changes to the existing theatre to accommodate the technical needs of the production. These significant changes required obtaining many levels of permission from the landlords, The New 42nd Street Development Corp., and The Economic Development Corporation of New York City.

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Although the theatre, originally built as the Ford Center for the Performing Arts by Live Nation in the late 1990s, was a new structure, the theatre’s design incorporated many elements of the historic plaster from the original two theatres that were on the block: the Lyric and the Apollo. The theatres were adjacent and were decorated with historic architectural details, which were too beautiful to lose and protected under landmark status; these pieces were utilized in the new theatre’s design. Prior to the demolition of the two theatres to make one large one, the domes, the proscenium, the sail and squinch vaults, the loge boxes, and other decorative details were stored until the design was complete and then were installed in the new larger theatre.

Getting ready for this enormous production of *Spider-Man* required the removal of most of the large historical

area of the plaster ceiling downstage of the proscenium (which looks like a square rigger sail), four historical plaster loge



Full shot of barge with work stations underneath

architectural pieces. Theatre modifications included removal of the expansive concrete stage apron; demolition of the orchestra platform level in the pit, which involved digging down into bedrock to allow clearance for the stage lifts necessary for the production’s effects; installation of major structural steel elements in many places in the auditorium for flying effects; and the removal of the center portion of the front-of-house rigging grid. The removal of historical plaster elements was necessary as well, and this included the entire proscenium, a portion of the sail vault, the

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boxes (two on each side of the auditorium), and all the steel supporting these plaster elements. Modifications to the house were also essential for project completion and this included reconfiguring the rake of the auditorium floor adding new orchestra level seating. They also installed a large



Riggers put the theatre proscenium back in place



Rear view of the proscenium being raised

projection box with air conditioning on the dress circle rail and removed six of the house chandeliers.

*Spider-Man: Turn Off the Dark* closed on Broadway, Saturday, January 4, 2014, after a much-storied and press-reported run. The load-out began two days later, and the basic show elements were removed from the theatre by the middle of February. Now it was time to restore the theatre to its original state. All of the pieces that had been removed were stored for the duration of the run in a warehouse in New Jersey. Unfortunately, the

warehouse in which the pieces were housed was hit by Hurricane Sandy and received some water damage. This added to the difficulty of the restoration process because each water-damaged piece had to be repaired and sealed before it could be moved and hung into place.

The enormous project was headed up by my company, Eberg Stage Solutions, and the team was made up of the Foxwoods / Lyric Theatre stage crew, which included four ETCP Certified Riggers. A construction team was also necessary, so this part of the

project was led by the general contractor Ferrandino & Son. John Tiedemann Inc. handled the plaster restoration under the direction of Jean-François Furieri, plus Jay Cardinal from Iconoplast was hired as preservation consultant. The architecture work was furnished by Don Lasker and Helpert Architects, engineering by McLaren Engineering Group and Geiger Engineers, and the plaster support was provided by Marie Ennis of Old Structures.

There were many participants involved, but perhaps the most important aspects of



Ceiling piece with cartouche being put into place



Theatre before barge installed

the restoration involved rigging. Much of the work was beyond the normal scope of theatre work and a bit out of the realm of standard construction work as well, so it was necessary to have a solid team of experts. The reinstallation of the historic plaster, the removal of the *Spider-Man* performer flying system steel, the rigging and installation of the new demountable apron sleds, the shifting of material and tools up to and down from the work platforms, not to mention the more everyday theatrical rigging applications made rigging one of the cornerstones of the project.

Throughout the project, it was a great comfort to know that all of the rigging work was being handled by ETCP Certified Riggers. As the project manager, knowing that the riggers involved in this hybrid process of construction and theatre were knowledgeable and experienced in all the aspects of what was needed on this project, and that their expertise was certified, was a huge plus. ETCP Certified Riggers Jim Harris (head carpenter), Kris Keene, Mike Corbett, and Pat O'Connor, worked with the other members of the team in clearly directing and orchestrating the rigging needs of the project.

As the restoration planning began, it became apparent workspace was needed in addition to the scaffolding throughout the throat area of the theatre across the full proscenium and over the orchestra pit. The solution we developed was a flown aerial work platform and platforms at stage level over the front rows of seating and the orchestra pit. The fully flown platform for work on the proscenium and sail vault restoration allowed the area beneath it to become the plaster workshop for the consolidation and repair work of the 50-odd plaster pieces (weighing 300 – 400 lb each) that had been removed and stored during *Spider-Man*'s tenure in the theatre.

To accomplish all of this, a 45' x 30' suspended work platform (designed and provided by PRG and engineered by Geiger Engineers) was flown in the proscenium and downstage to gain access to the ceiling

and the proscenium areas for welders, painters, and plasterers while still allowing the project to set up a multiple work station plaster repair shop in the space beneath the platform. This solution worked much better than ground-supported scaffolding because it allowed for the maximum use of the space. Hanging the suspended work platform and flying it was the responsibility of the riggers. Knowing we had ETCP Certified Riggers on this project, this solution moved forward much more quickly and easily, with almost no concerns that the rigging of this important element would be done correctly.

Prior to the work platform being rigged in place, the removal of the performer-flying system steel structure from *Spider-Man* needed to be completed. Very large steel pieces penetrating the auditorium ceiling were rigged and removed from the ceiling and flown to the stage with a series of chain motors, landed, and dollied out the stage door. Once this was accomplished, the aerial work platform was built and flown into place and scaffolding was flown up to it and erected to allow access to all of the high overhead work areas.

The reinstallation of the historic plaster was a particularly challenging rigging project as each piece of plaster, once consolidated and prepped by the plaster team, needed to be flown up to the work platform and subsequently fitted into place and adjusted until perfectly in position for the plaster crew and welders to reattach it correctly. Extraordinarily creative rigging solutions for the plaster pieces were provided by Kris Keene (ETCP Certified) and each type of piece was a unique rigging challenge as the locations were constantly different and the issues with each piece changed from place to place.

Work platforms for the welders and plasterers needed to be created and rigged as the project required the reattachment of all the steel hangers for the plaster pieces back onto the building structure above the sail vault and behind the proscenium beams.

The four loge boxes' original I-beam

supports were reinstalled. Next, the individual plaster pieces that make up the boxes themselves needed to be rigged from those I-beams to be reinstalled. The newly designed demountable concrete apron, which consists of steel framed concrete panels, had to be rigged into place and installed, as well. Again, none of these exercises were straightforward so the expertise and creativity of the ETCP Certified Riggers was constantly on display. They were able to provide solutions for these potentially sticky, challenging issues to be handled smoothly and safely.

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Rigging was truly the heart and soul of the restoration of this theatre to its former glory. So much of the project's work required rigging solutions in different areas of the project. Having ETCP Riggers on the theatre's crew gave a great level of comfort to the project managers and theatre owners throughout the course of the work through its completion. The added benefit of certified riggers was immeasurable. There was never a question from any quarter that the rigging on this project was safely, creatively, and professionally carried out. As the project winds to a close, the newly restored Lyric Theatre is once again the beautiful house it has been in the past, thanks in great part to the work of ETCP Certified Theatre Riggers. ■



**Steven Ehrenberg** is President of Eberg Stage Solutions. He began his career while attending Columbia University in New York. Prior to launching ESS, he was Vice President of Technical Production at BASE Entertainment

and Vice President of Technical Supervision at Clear Channel/Live Nation. Steven serves on the ETCP Certification Council and on the board of the North American Theatre, Engineering, and Architecture Conference.