Significant Modern Theatres:

The Arena Stage

A true original in Washington, D.C., the iconic theatre owes its brilliance to Zelda Fichandler and Harry Weese

BY JOSHUA DACHS

Few identifiable theatre buildings are as completely original and without precedent as the Arena Stage in Washington, D.C. While the act of gathering around a performer is certainly as old as humanity, the beginnings of arena staging in contemporary western theatre can be traced to the late 19th century, and purpose-built arena format theatres are not even a century old. When the current Arena Stage opened in 1961, it was just the second purpose-built professional theatre in the United States, perhaps in the world, in an arena format. And at 800 seats, it was also the largest and most ambitious of this style by far. From where did this remarkable building spring?

TD&T discusses Washington, D.C.'s Arena Stage in this issue as part of its multi-year research collaboration with *Bühnentechnische Rundschau*, the journal of the Deutsche Theatertechnische Gesellschaft (Germany's Theatre Technical Society) and *Sightline*, the journal of the Association of British Theatre Technicians. Under the auspices of this project, noted specialists in theatrical architecture are producing an ongoing series of articles celebrating and re-examining some of the most significant theatres that opened between 1950 and 2010. The project is led by David Staples, theatre consultant. The research informed the International Theatre Engineering and Architecture Conference (ITEAC) held in London in 2018. The articles will be published in a book entitled *Modern Theatres 1950 to 2020.*

Exterior of Arena Stage at the Mead Center for American Theater from Maine Avenue. Photo by Nic Lehoux courtesy of Bing Thom Architects.

Arena Stage at the Mead Center for American Theater at night from 6th Street. Photo by Nic Lehoux courtesy of Bing Thom Architects.

Mangum and the Fichandlers

By the late 1940s, Edward Mangum (1914-2001) was operating an amateur theatre group in the Washington, D.C. area called the Mount Vernon Players and teaching at George Washington University. Zelda Fichandler (1924-2016) was working on her Master's thesis at George Washington University in 1949, got to know Magnum, and appeared in several plays he directed. Together they bemoaned the fact that there was little theatre to be seen in Washington—or anywhere else but New York—aside from amateur productions, summer stock, festivals, and touring Broadway shows.

In 1949, Mangum flew to Dallas to study the Margo Jones Theatre. Jones (1911-1955) was advocating for the development of a strong regional theatre movement outside of the commercial Broadway system. Her small theatre-in-the-round in Dallas, improvised with set designer Jo Mielziner in an existing building, was the first building in that movement. Mangum and Fichandler, inspired by Jones' efforts in Dallas, decided to start their own theatre, opting for a theatre-in-the-round format. Fichandler's husband Tom Fichandler (1916-1997), an economist then working at the U.S. Treasury Department, came on board part-time to help with business matters and fundraising, and soon left his job to serve as full time executive director, which he did until 1986.

Outgrowing its Space

The earliest iteration of Arena Stage opened in August 1950, having converted the Hippodrome Theatre, a former burlesque and movie house, into a 247-seat theatre-in-the-round. After multiple moves, the current Arena Stage, as it stands today, opened in 1961.

The first theatre was similar to the Margo Jones Theatre. Arena Stage consisted of a rectangular playing space of roughly 18 x 24 feet surrounded by up to five rows on a side. Entrances, as in Dallas, were at the corners, on the stage floor level.

Mangum would depart Washington in 1952, leaving Zelda Fichandler, then 28, in sole artistic charge of the company. She would lead it until stepping aside in 1990, in the 40th anniversary season. Arena Stage produced an astonishing 17 plays in its first season, many directed by Mangum, and some featuring Fichandler in the cast. The pair presented 55 productions before concluding that they couldn't continue with such a small theatre capacity. After a dark year searching for a solution, they relocated to a larger repurposed space in 1956: the 500-seat theatre-in-the-round in the Hospitality Hall of the Old Heurich Brewery. The space had the same physical arrangement as the Hippodrome with a larger number of rows on each side, up to eight. Playfully dubbed the "Old Vat," it sat on a riverside site that would soon be razed to build a national arts center, eventually known as the Kennedy Center.

In planning their next move, the Fichandlers realized that only a new building could address all the challenges they had discovered in their years working in the format. They also deemed it necessary to increase the capacity to roughly 800. To raise money for the new building and its ongoing operation, Arena Stage, which had formerly been a conventional

Top: The Fichandler Stage (left) and the Main Lobby as seen from the café level. Photo by Nic Lehoux courtesy of Bing Thom Architects.
Bottom: Arena Stage at the Mead Center for American Theater Main Lobby which connects the Arlene and Robert Kogod Cradle (left) and the Fichandler Stage (right). Photo by Nic Lehoux courtesy of Bing Thom Architects.

commercial corporation with a board of supportive stockholders, was reorganized with the generous assistance of the Ford Foundation into one of America's earliest not-for-profit professional theatre companies.

In a race with the wrecking ball, the theatre company worked with the city to secure a site in southwest Washington, D.C. that was then undergoing a massive urban renewal effort. In 1959, Arena Stage reviewed 50 architects before selecting 43-year-old Chicagoan Harry Weese (1915-1998), who had never designed a theatre before. Arena recorded six hours of discussions of the company's needs on audio tape, and Weese is said to have played it over and over again in developing his design.

Intentional Design

Designing a theatre-in-the-round requires a number of critical choices. Each has implications for directors, actors, technicians, designers, and the audience—and a profound impact on the architecture. Key choices include the overall geometry of the playing space, how the audience will enter, where the actors enter, how steep the rake should be, and the size of the playing area. And, of course, everything is shaped by how many seats are needed.

Prior to the Arena Stage's construction, only two purpose-built theatres-in-the-round had been built: the University of Washington's 172-seat Penthouse Theatre in Seattle and the 300-seat Playhouse in Houston, by then defunct. While in Seattle and Houston the playing space and house were elliptical or circular rather than rectangular, in other respects they mostly conformed to the earlier improvised versions in Pasadena, California, and Seattle, and resembled Arena Stage's own two improvised versions: common entrances for actors and audience at stage level, limited height over the stage, limited lighting positions, no special accommodation for hanging or rigging anything, and nothing flexible about the stage floor itself. Together, Weese and Zelda Fichandler made a series of new choices for Arena Stage, and their innovations were thoughtful.

The Stratford Festival Theatre in Ontario, Canada, had opened in 1953 with its iconic stage by Tanya Moiseiwitsch and a seating bowl under a tent. The Fichandlers visited Stratford that first season, meeting Guthrie and Alec Guinness, and it's likely that Weese did, too, sometime after he was selected by Arena Stage in 1959. By then, the Stratford building had been enclosed with proper walls and a roof. He would have seen the stadium-style vomitories, lighting positions in narrow slots in the house ceiling, and virtually no rigging accommodations over the stage (something that would be addressed in later renovations). Stratford's bold new example certainly would have been on all their minds at this time. Other seminal new theatre projects hadn't happened yet and wouldn't influence Arena Stage's design. Planning for the Chichester Festival didn't begin until 1959 and the Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis wasn't even an idea until 1960, by which time Arena Stage was already under construction. Fichandler and Weese were entering new territory.

Fichandler Stage. Photo by Nic Lehoux courtesy of Bing Thom Architects.

The decision about basic geometry was probably the easiest. Arena Stage had been working with the rectangular form for 9 years and the company was comfortable with it. The size of the stage, however, was more than doubled to 30 x 36 feet. Because one of the key advantages of the arena form is closer proximity, it was important to keep the number of rows to a minimum, and it would have been impossible to accommodate 800 people around the old stage size without significantly increasing the number of rows and the distance to the last viewers. A balance had to be found between stage size and row quantity. The design team would have recognized the trade off in compactness, but also may have viewed it as an opportunity to increase the scale of the work as well, being able to undertake plays with larger casts and more epic scope while keeping the distance to the last seats under 36 feet. At the Penthouse Theatre, the dressing rooms and support spaces all opened into the lobby, which actors had to cross to get to the stage entrances. At Arena Stage, the team chose to stick with the idea of corner entrances for actors at stage level, but instead of sharing these with the audience, Weese recognized the organizational advantage of placing actors and audience on separate levels. Instead of individual pie-wedges of seats divided by actor entrances so typical of the form so far, by entering the seating from above rather than below, all the quadrants of the room could be unified into a single seating bowl. The stage level could be given over entirely to actors and production support, with stage entrances made through stadium-style vomitories. This offered a huge technical advantage; suddenly there could be an unseen wing space for scenic elements, props, and furniture to emerge from and retreat to. This space, linking all the voms and ultimately connecting to the dressing room wing, soon became known, quite aptly, as the "walk-around." The cross aisle above, in addition to providing audience access from the lobby, could be used as an acting area along with the stepped seating aisles, so performers could still move freely through the house.

Interestingly, the team chose to build one of the four seating quadrants out of demountable parts, anticipating a production that might benefit from a three-quarter thrust arrangement. This was labor intensive and no special rigging or lighting accommodations were made over that quadrant, creating huge challenges for production. Unsurprisingly, it was done very rarely, and less and less over the years.

Another unique, and ultimately unsuccessful element, was a ring of seating boxes around the outer perimeter. Perhaps they were there to make it clear that the scrappy Arena Stage had left its raw, improvised surroundings and had grown up; it was now ready to offer luxurious accommodations along with the finest traditional theatres. Or perhaps it was to make the space feel smaller, by suggesting there

were fewer rows surrounding the stage than there actually were. A cross-aisle was placed behind the eighth row, giving access to all quadrants of the room and to the lobby. Behind this was a series of 11 raised boxes, tucked under the descending roofline. Of 786 total seats, 132 were in the boxes. By being outboard of the cross-aisle, up some narrow steps, and in small concrete alcoves, these seats always seemed disconnected from the audience and the performer. They seemed to be seats for watching an audience watching a play. In later years, they were blocked up with temporary panels and used for storage, and in 2010 they were permanently closed.

Because Arena Stage was a new building, the design team was also able to plan a trap room beneath the stage, a first for a theatre in the round, but an obvious move. In an arena, the topography and decor of the floor itself is a critical design element. The entire stage floor footprint was treated as a trap room and the stage itself was made of platforms to allow any height or configuration. Actors could even enter from below. Sadly, it was not quite eight feet below stage level, most likely for reasons of cost, something that would be alleviated somewhat in a 2010 renovation and expansion. Overhead was a sort of pop-up loft above the stage. This carried roof steel that could support rigging loads, and a grid of catwalks could be flown up and down as a unit as needed. Within this grid, certain catwalk segments were cleverly designed to slide back and forth to allow them to be located where needed. Over time, this was modified into a two-level grid of catwalks—a fixed upper level to support spotline rigging activities for flown or suspended elements, and a movable lower level for lighting. In 2010, this area was refined further.

In addition to the lighting catwalk system over the stage itself, some small slots were integrated into the sloping auditorium ceiling. They were difficult to ac-

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cess and far too limited in extent and led to a variety of improvised work-arounds until this could be better addressed in the 2010 renovation.

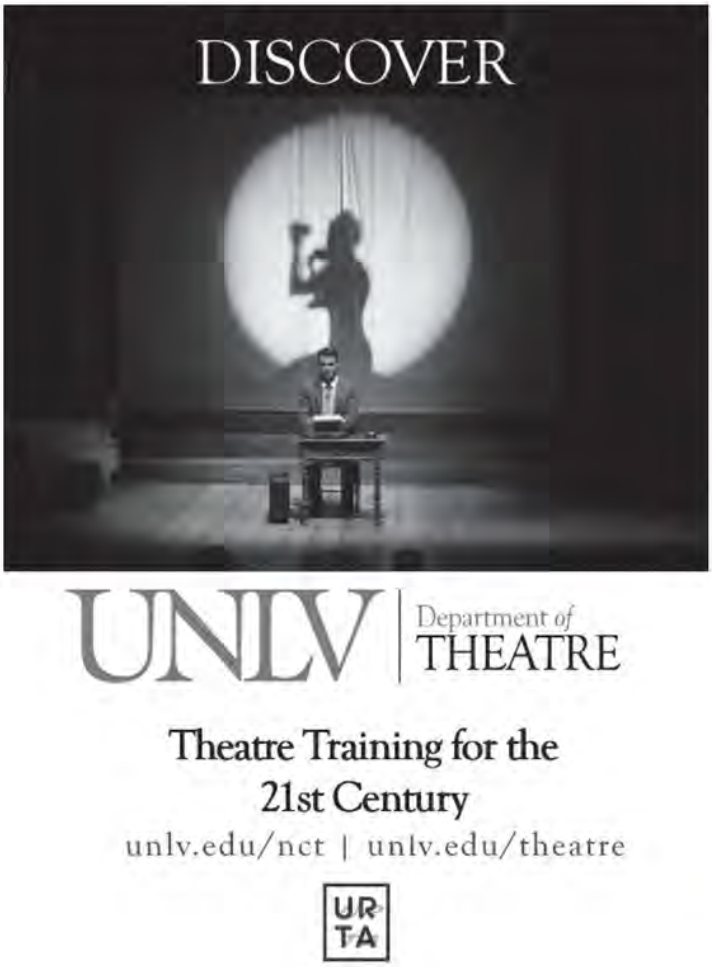
Because one of the selling points of the arena format was ostensibly that there was comparatively little need to spend much on scenery, space for construction and painting was kept to a minimum, anticipating mostly props and furniture. The scene shop was just 1,200 square feet, divided into three small workshops with a low 8-foot ceiling height, barely larger than the costume shop and laundry. Here, the design team's experience in found spaces may have led them astray; the new tall space overhead and the trap room gave designers free reign to use the vertical dimension aggressively for the first time, and this led to moats, tiers, and pools below, and branches, ceilings, and skylights above to be built, rigged, and painted. Ten years later, when a second, smaller frontal theatre was added to the building, a new, larger scene shop was built, and the old scene shop became the prop shop. These were replaced by even larger facilities in 2010.

The building was simply but beautifully detailed and proportioned. Weese, who would later design the famed Washington Metro system with it gorgeous concrete vaults and curvaceous stairs, had a way with concrete, wood, and steel. The high-quality concrete work throughout was exposed as the finished surface, and in the auditorium, wood boards were fitted between the triangular concrete ribbed vaults of the roof over the seats. A continuous thin black metal railing traced the outline of the playing area and the voms, just a foot above the toes of the first row at the edge of the stage, then rising along the edge of each vomitory, making a graceful curve at the top before coming back down the other side, adding a thin sinuous line to the room. The interior wasn't painted black; it almost glowed in a calm, warm silver grey, and does to this day.

Cultural Landmark

The new Arena Stage opened on Oct. 30, 1961, with Bertolt Brecht's *Caucasian Chalk Circle* directed by Alan Schneider. Both the production and the building were met with enthusiastic reviews. A *New York Times* article described it as understated while declaring it a new cultural landmark. One article mentioned the punch-card automated lighting control system. The boxes were even praised as "luxurious."

In 1967, Arena Stage was the first regional theatre to transfer a production to Broadway, *The Great White Hope*, with its original cast of James Earl Jones and Jane Alexander in the lead roles. In 1973, it was the first regional theatre invited by the U.S. Department of State to tour behind the Iron Curtain, which gave Fichandler an opportunity to dust off her Russian language skills. In 1976, Arena Stage became the second theatre outside New York to receive a special Tony Award for theatrical excellence. So far, 21 other Arena Stage productions have had a subsequent life on Broadway, including *Dear Evan Hansen* (winner of the 2017 Tony Award for Best Musical) and *Sweat* (winner of the 2017 Pulitzer Prize for Drama).



Arena Stage's example, and those of its predecessors, have been carried forward in several ways. Larger-scale venues with 500-plus seats, including the Royal Exchange in Manchester (1976) and Stephen Joseph Theatre (1996) in the United Kingdom, clearly drew directly on Arena Stage's example, but there have been relatively few of those. Other theatres were devised in existing, as well as new, buildings to work at smaller capacities, such as the White Theatre in the Conrad Prebys Theatre Center at San Diego's Old Globe Theatre (2009) or The Cockpit in Marylebone, London (1970). Central staging is perhaps most commonly used in spaces that are designed for flexibility—either the thousands of small studio theatres that are rearranged as needed or theatres that are normally arranged in three-quarter seating but where the fourth side is added for certain productions, as in The Octagon Theatre, Bolton (1967) in the United Kingdom, the Neuhaus Theatre at the Alley Theatre in Houston (1968) or the Circle in the Square Theatre on Broadway (1972).

Zelda Fichandler earned a well-deserved reputation as a founder of the American regional theatre movement, and was always an articulate advocate in the press, in speeches, and in testimony before Congress for the importance of supporting live theatre. Harry Weese went on to design the Washington Metro system, as well as a few more theatres, including a performing arts center in Milwaukee and the Actors Theatre of Louisville. The brilliance of their very original theatre, today called The Fichandler stage, is still evident today. It stands there, completely intact, within the enormously transformed and expanded complex now known as The Arena Stage at the Mead Center for American Theater. It is a fitting concrete legacy for two pioneers.

Fisher Dachs Associates Principal Joshua Dachs is recognized as one of the world's leading theatre planning and design consultants. Drawing on a background as a violinist, an architect, and theatrical set and lighting designer, he has led FDA's consulting practice since 1984, providing planning, programming, and design leadership for hundreds of successful projects. He has helped plan and design four opera houses, including the Mariinsky II Opera House in St. Petersburg; concert halls for major orchestras; and the newest Broadway theatre, the Stephen Sondheim. He has worked with many leading theatre companies, including the Arena Stage, Old Globe, the Guthrie Theater, Washington DC's Shakespeare Theatre Company, Theatre Clwyd in Wales, the Bolton Octagon, and Shakespeare's Globe on the extraordinary new Sam Wanamaker Theatre in London. For Lincoln Center, he is currently planning the re-imagining of David Geffen Hall, and he completed many other projects on the LC campus including the renovation of Alice Tully Hall and expansion of the Juilliard School. A graduate of the High School of Music and Art in New York City, he holds a Bachelor of Architecture degree from Cornell University. He is currently on the Board of Directors of Theatre Communications Group, and a member of the American Society of Theatre Consultants and ISPA.