
The New Hampstead Theatre

By Rob Halladay

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February saw the official opening of the new Hampstead Theatre in London. Founded in 1959, the theatre company aims to be the home for new and emerging writers; in the time since it has provided a home for the early works of Mike Leigh, Pam Gems, David Hare, Harold Pinter and others as well as a launch pad for the careers of actors including Jude Law, Jane Horrocks, Alison Steadman and Rufus Sewell.



Since 1962, the company has performed in a theatre created as a temporary home intended to last ten years. Nearly forty years later, Britain's National Lottery

provided them with the chance to create a more permanent home, in a custom-designed building housing two theatres, a rehearsal room, administrative offices, dressing rooms and a light, airy foyer-and-bar area.

The main auditorium is an intimate horse-shoe shaped auditorium over two levels with a forestage lift making the seating capacity variable between 140 and 325 seats. The stage area can be raked, and is fully modular while overhead there is a counterweight flying system, with a tension-wire grid above the auditorium making rigging and focussing here easy and flexible. The second venue is a small studio called The Space.

To help equip their new home, the theatre's production manager, John Titcombe, and chief electrician, Greg Gould, with theatre consultants Techplan turned to Strand's Bill Richards to pick the most suitable products. Knowing that lighting designers would want to use the latest lighting technology, including automated lanterns and colour scrollers (the theatre's stock includes two Strand Pirouette PCs and two Vari-Lite VL1000TS units as well as Rainbow scrollers), they needed a control console that would deal with that equipment while being familiar to crew members and lighting designers, easy to use and reliable. They chose a Strand 520i console with 350 channels, adding a 510i console as a tracking backup, Gould being familiar with the console from his time at the Royal Exchange Theatre in Manchester.

Lighting data is taken to the dimmers using Strand's ShowNet network, with twin-output SN110 nodes used to convert traditional DMX data where required. The use of Ethernet allows the console to be easily moved from the rear-of-circle control room to the auditorium when required; at other times the crew use a Strand iPaq wireless Ethernet remote to control the rig from the stage. These control systems, the 300-series console used in The Space and the Strand Bambino 5kW fresnels and Coda floods in the theatre's stock, were supplied by London Strand dealer White Light.

The Hampstead team also selected Strand to provide dimming. Originally planning to use LD90s, the team eventually decided on the latest dimming technology from Strand, specifying three SLD-96 dimmer racks that control production lighting and houselights. Dimmer modules are RCD equipped, some feeding to outlets directly and some via a mains patch. The crew also have a selection of alternative modules which can be slotted into place where required - most usually using contactor modules to provide non-dim power to the moving lights. The dimmers were supplied and installed by Strand dealer Northern Light.

With all of the new technology in place in the main theatre (and with Gould currently experimenting with - and excited by - the very latest technology, in the form of fault-reporting from the dimmers to the console), the equipment stock from the old theatre is still in use in The Space. This includes a vast selection of Strand equipment from Quartets back to vintage Patt 23s and 123s still giving good service!

In the three months since the new theatre opened it, and its crew, have survived a hectic schedule of shows and all have come through unscathed! Gould remains full of enthusiasm for his new equipment, in particular praising the console for its reliability and ease-of-use. With the bedding-in complete, the theatre company looks happy in its new home and set for the next forty years...

