

When B.B. Calls...

Flexible sound for black repertory theatre

By Linda Seid Frembes

The Providence Black Repertory Company (PBRC) is in a select circle, one of less than a dozen black theatres in the U.S. annually offering a full season of productions, including educational programs, live music events and professional theatrical performances.

Founded in 1996, PBRC recently celebrated a move into a newly inaugurated facility in Providence, Rhode Island, complete with a professional-caliber house audio system implemented by Central Communications Systems (CCSI) of Shrewsbury, Massachusetts. While a student majoring in African-American Studies at Brown University in Providence, Donald W. King discovered the vision to found and lead a cultural institution dedicated to the creation and presentation of black theatre, which came to fruition as the PBRC.

“Our focus is to celebrate and acknowledge the contributions that African-Americans have made in this

country, but not at the expense of what makes us all American,” explains King, who also serves as the company’s artistic director. “And with that, we wanted to create a physical space that acknowledges an African heritage - in the furniture selection, décor and color scheme. People should come here and feel warm, relaxed and at home.”

SOONER THAN EXPECTED

Prior to this year, the PBRC operated out of a cramped loft space when a hodge-podge sound system borrowed from various sources. Two years ago, King, who is no relation to B.B. purchased a modest, two-story commercial location in downtown Providence with a goal to eventually create a space that would match the organization’s vision. “Eventually” ended up coming sooner than expected.

“Construction was not complete with B.B. King agreed to play at the grand opening. We had about 30 days in which to make this new location come together for the grand opening in January (2004),” notes King. “At the time he called, we had no flooring, no paint on the



Inside the PBRC, where a new sound system was inaugurated with a performance by the legendary B.B. King.



Partners in development: Donald King (above) and David Dalzell.

walls, no lighting and no sound system. But when B.B. calls, you don't try to negotiate another date."

With the confined deadline looming, King and his production team fast-tracked the final development of a professional space that would reflect the goals and activities of the organization. Kyla Coburn, who designed the space, retained much of the building's infrastructure, including a mezzanine seating area, and infused design ele-

ments that impart a cozy, comforting feel without inducing claustrophobia.

Meanwhile, CCSI Executive Vice President (and PBRC Board Member) David Dalzell worked closely with project manager Sean Webster to complete the design and installation of the dual-tiered house system. Besides the time constraint, King also dealt with learning the requirements of professional sound reinforcement.

"In retrospect, the conversations

that we had about the system in would be very different. We had thought that people would take the sound system for granted, but it's proven quite the opposite," he says. "When Dave requested that the system have its own dedicated power circuits, and that certain considerations be made with respect to architectural acoustics, it added new cost items that we had not planned for. But how could we invest in a system like this and not have it done properly?"

The new room's rectangular space, which formerly housed a gym and a clothing store, is visually cleaved by the placement of a bar and lounge area in the forefront. Behind the bar is the performance area with booth and table seating and a modestly sized stage.

The theater's programming is quite diverse. On a typical Saturday, programs range from storytelling for children in the morning to a jazz workshop for budding musicians in the afternoon to an evening theatrical per-

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Back Story

formance, capped by a late evening D.J. who turns the lounge into more of an upbeat nightspot.

In order to provide adequate sound coverage and meet the versatile needs of the PBRC, Dalzell designed the sound system that could serve as both a performance and a lounge/club system.

PRIMARY PERFORMANCE

The house system is headed by recently introduced Electro-Voice (EV) Plasma P1 powered two-way loudspeakers, each loaded with an EVX155 15-inch low-frequency transducer as well as an ND6 compression driver with a 3-inch diaphragm and 1.4-inch-exit, driven by a Class-H amplifier.

The two Plasma P1 loudspeakers covering the primary performance area are mounted to the walls at stage left and right, each accompanied by Plasma P2 subwoofers (loaded with single EVX180B direct-radiating 18-inch woofers), located on the deck beneath. Two additional P1 loudspeakers provide full-range fill coverage to the mezzanine level surrounding the main floor. Both are placed as "foot monitors" to blend in with this region's couch seating.



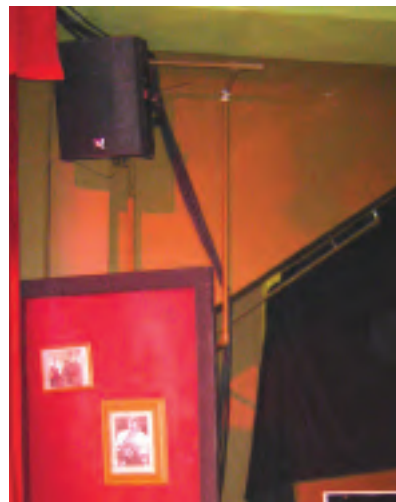
The racks and speakers for the lounge system.

The lounge system is comprised of several EV EVID 6.2 compact loudspeakers (run in passive mode), surface-mounted and driven by EV CP 1800 power amplifiers. This system supplies both discrete ambient music and supports the main system, when desired. Mounted in a Middle Atlantic rack with the amplifiers backstage, two Ashly GQX-1502 stereo 15-band equalizers are applied for house and subsidiary EQ duties.

Both house and lounge systems are controlled from the house mix position in the central mezzanine, which is anchored by a compact Midas Venice 240 mixing console. Each EVID is on its own console channel, while a direct feed is supplied to the main system's Plasma loudspeakers.

"I auditioned dozens of products for this system, with the selection criteria including sound quality, versatility over a range of programming, predicted reliability, and economy," says Dalzell, who performed final system tuning using (SIA) SMAART analysis and hours of critical listening. "The powered loudspeakers proved a great choice. It's an economical approach, and in listening tests, these speakers proved to be very neutral, and adaptable to a wide range of program material."

King and his team appreciate the flexibility of the system and the efficiency and quality of the sound. "It can go from comfortable warm sound to a big-bang performance system. The system can support all of our programming no matter how subtle or high-decibel the source."



One of the main system loudspeakers.

FUTURE LOOK

For the "Afternoon With B.B. King" grand opening, 200 PBRC supporters packed the new facility to celebrate and to hear a blues legend in action. B.B. arrived sans Lucille (his renowned guitar) and performed with the band through the house sound system for three songs. PBRC Audio Engineer Danny Baldwin served as mixer for the performance.

Always a work in progress, the PBRC has plans to expand its theater productions to the building's second floor, as well as adding a control booth next to the bar for D.J.'s to mix in the lounge area. With the warm summer weather on the way, there are also plans to extend the lounge atmosphere outside to the sidewalks with additional seating and sound.

"We're so much more than a theater company. It's always been a challenge to me to find board members that understand who and what we are as an organization, and how important it is that our presentation comes off in a professional and polished manner," concludes King. "Dave Dalzell is one of the members who understands this desire to be first-class, and his work is reflected in the positive comments I've gotten on the sound here. Musicians and theatergoers both love this system." ■

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