

A DIAMOND IN THE ROUGH

The newly-remodeled Elaine Wolf Theater at the Mizel Arts and Culture Center brings an emotional response from guests

By Peter Bronski • Photography by Eric Stephenson



Steve Wilson, executive artistic director of the Mizel Arts and Culture Center (MACC) at the Robert E. Loup Jewish Community Center (JCC) in Denver says: "It was utilitarian. It was like a school auditorium...generic, with no personality."

He's referring to MACC's theater, which celebrates its 40th anniversary this year. Since 1972, it's been a valued part of the community, hosting an impressive array of programming over the course of a year. "We are a truly multidisciplinary facility," Wilson says. "We change our business model every two months."

A MAJOR OVERHAUL

A major film festival. Children's theater. Dance company recitals. The Wolf Theatre Academy summer series (featuring two musicals and one Shakespeare). JAAMM Fest (Jewish arts, authors, movies, and music). Extensive youth programs. And much more.

In four decades, the offerings have grown tremendously, but the theater itself has only seen two major upgrades: a "facelift" in 1995, says Wilson, and new seating installed in 2007. The theater was otherwise bare bones. The physical performance space lagged behind the caliber of the programming. But Wilson saw a diamond in the rough. "What I always liked about the space was the pitch of the audience as it related to the stage, and the thrust of the stage," he explains. "It had an intimate feel."

Then Denver philanthropist Elaine Wolf—a long-time member of the JCC community—came forward offering to fund a major theater overhaul. It was time for the diamond to shine. MACC enlisted architect Greg Howes, owner of R3 Design Architecture in Broomfield, to lead the project. Like Wilson, he saw potential in the space. "It was a giant concrete black box with absolutely no decoration," he says. "It was very institutional." But that was all about to change. In keeping with ideas set forth by donor Wolf, Howes aimed to give the theater more style and class, akin to a New York Broadway theater experience. He wanted to give MACC's theater a more professional and impressive look and feel.

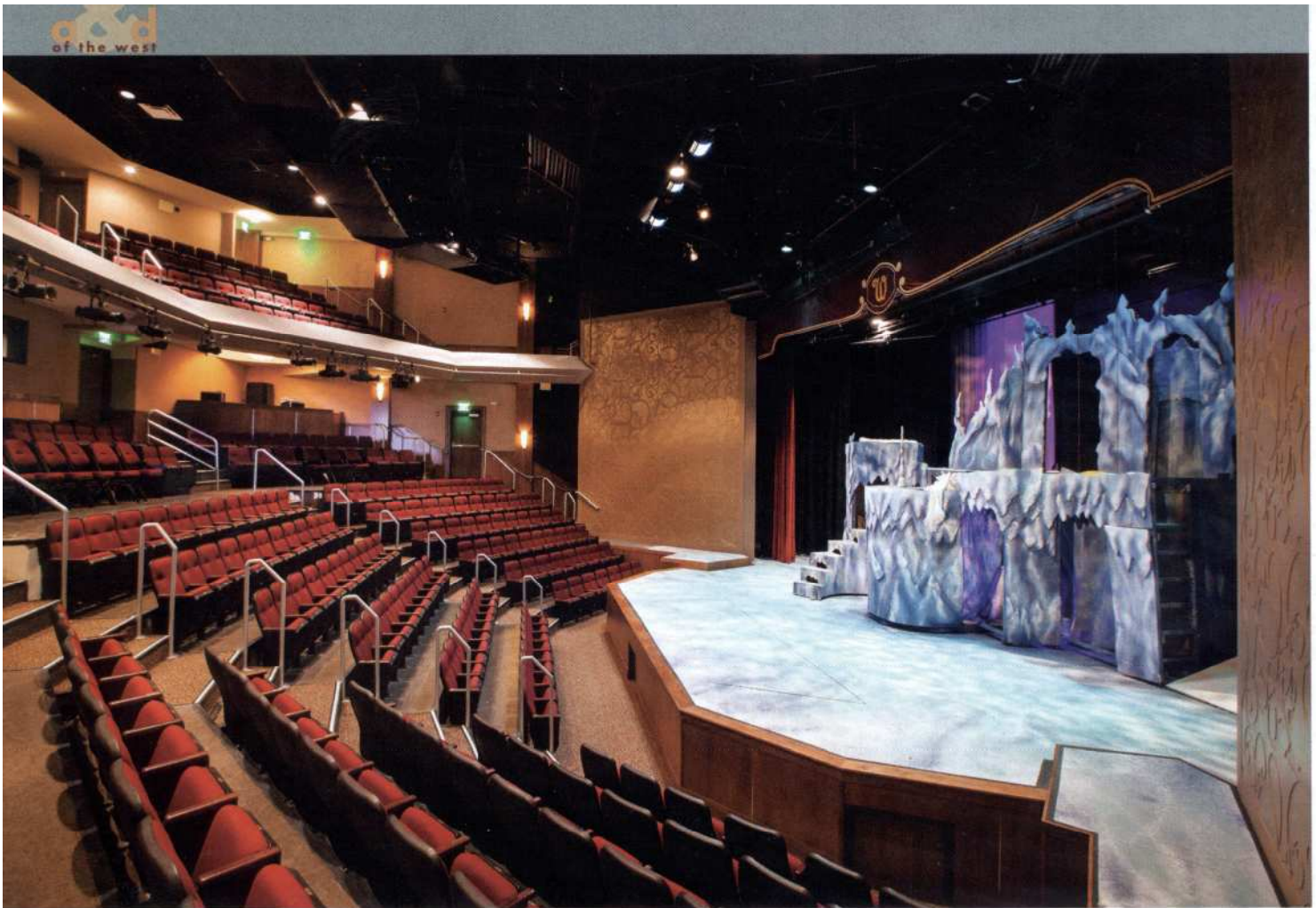
MAJOR UPGRADES

Howes achieved the effect by "using materials and components and piecing them together to create a mosaic that felt like Broadway theater," he explains. Century-old walnut paneling—found in a Denver warehouse where they'd been stored since being salvaged long ago—added warmth. An antique ticket window from New York City became the box office. The entrance added a theater blade sign

The upgraded theater brings an emotional response from visitors

Opposite page, lower right: Elaine Wolf flanked by daughters Sandy and Mikki





The remodeled theater evokes the feeling of a Broadway experience

and marquee (done with LED bulbs instead of candelabra bulbs). Artist Michael Kane painted trompe l'oeil murals. Crystal chandeliers, ceiling stencils, and lush carpeting dressed up the lobby. Some 100 additional seats were added to the theater with a new mezzanine level (which expanded the theater's capacity to about 400). There were also major upgrades to the theater's sound, lighting, and air conditioning systems. All told, the price tag for the project came in at around \$2 million.

Wolf and Wilson at times had to put their trust in Howes. "The wood paneling is a keynote piece of the lobby, but Greg [Howes] also pulled that wood and lighter tones into the theater. It's lighter than a traditional theater," says Wilson. "As an arts producer and theater guy, my job is to take your focus off the house and onto the stage. I was nervous the colors would take away from the theater, but the complete opposite has turned out to be true. The theater has a perfect balance of style and personality without being overwhelming." He also notes it has a warmer, more "earthy" feel, fitting for a theater in Colorado, he says.

The project proved to be much more than a renovation, a term that doesn't do justice to the scope and scale of the effort, which required the theater to close for eight months, from mid-August 2011 until the re-opening in early March 2012. "Metamorphosis"

might be more fitting. "People hear the word renovation and they expect little changes," Wilson says. "A lot of people are completely amazed. They come in and just stop. It's a transformation in the biggest sense of the word."

AN EMOTIONAL RESPONSE

"You get an emotional response to the theater now," he continues. "There's a kind of warmth to it." Howes adds: "Now it's an elegant theater that feels like it's been around for a long time. It feels like the Broadway experience."

Wilson recalls the first time young children visited the new theater after the re-opening. "We want them to be excited with positive anticipation for what they're going to see in the theater, and to see them come into the lobby and stop and look," he says. "It touched me deeply, because that's the greater reason behind why I work here and what we want this theater to do—to make people comfortable gathering in a place where magic is going to happen." 🎭

PETER BRONSKI IS AN AWARD-WINNING WRITER AND PAST CONTRIBUTOR TO *COLORADO EXPRESSION*. HIS WORK HAS APPEARED IN *NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC TRAVELER*, *MEN'S JOURNAL*, *BOULDER MAGAZINE*, AND MANY OTHERS. THE FATHER OF TWO DAUGHTERS, AGES 3 AND 1, HE IS ALSO AN EDITOR AT *THE VASSAR QUARTERLY*, THE ALUMNI MAGAZINE OF VASSAR COLLEGE.