

Thern

Case History



Theatre



Thern Fire Vent Closures Help InterAmerica Stage Design Safer Rigging For The Forest Roberts Theatre



The Forest Roberts Theatre on the campus of Northern Michigan University installed Thern winches during its renovation, making it into a state of the art facility.

Northern Michigan University's Forest Roberts Theatre Training Program is getting ready to showcase their new renovations for the upcoming theatre season. Renovations that were completed this past summer provided students and faculty with newer and safer equipment. Rigging systems, increased seating capacity and safety measures were all implemented to bring the theatre up-to-date and give theatre students more opportunities to practice with state-of-the-art equipment.

The Forest Roberts Theatre Training Program commands most of the yearly productions at the Forest Roberts Theatre, with the occasional booking from outside groups. "We present five main stage productions each year," says Dr. James A. Panowski, direc-

tor of the theatre. "Second City, Marquette Center for Dance and the Pine Mountain Music Festival are just a few of the organizations that have used our stage for special events and performances over the 29 years I've been here."

Opened in 1962, the Robert's Theatre was named after the late Forest A. Roberts, an English professor credited with establishing the theatre production program at the school. Hired in 1929 to teach in the English department, Mr. Roberts soon started developing and teaching the first theatre courses at the university. "Mr. Roberts has been one of the best-known figures in debate and drama in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan for nearly 40 years," says Dr. Panowski.





Since 1962 the theatre hadn't seen any serious renovations or updated equipment since it first opened. "We knew it was time to get things rolling," says Dr. Panowski. The project first started with an equipment inspection done by InterAmerica Stage, Inc. "Our first priority was safety," says Mark Black, Founder of InterAmerica Stage, Inc. "Our job is to find the most effective, elegant and above all, SAFE solution for our clients."

Based out of Sanford, Florida, the theatre-supply and design company has provided top-quality work for top entertainment venues in the U.S. The Jackie Gleason Theatre in Miami, California Space and Science Museum in LA, Mandalay Bay Arena in Las Vegas, Universal Studios in Orlando and Kennedy Space Center to name a few.

After completing his inspection Mr. Black's merry band of stage crafters gave their recommendations to the NMU Theatre Department staff. Once all the plans were approved the project got underway.

The Robert's Theatre project consisted of a complete renovation to their entire rigging system, replacing it with a new manual counterweight system. "The theatre's old rigging was an amalgam of equipment that didn't always run harmoniously," says Mr. Black. "Streamlined and consistent, the new system does a much better job of using space efficiently by utilizing materials and precision bearings on all rigging blocks."

When it came time to address safety issues InterAmerica Stage recommended installing Thern's Fire Vent Closures (FVC) model winches for the smoke vents. Previously, the theatre used a manual rope running from the stage to the grid where a block and fall were used to overhaul the vents, pulling them closed. "We used a hemp rope line, we

just cut the rope and doors opened," says Kim Hegmegee, Technical Director for the theatre. "Then we had to climb to the roof and manually close them. It wasn't very fun, much less safe."

"The new system does a much better job of using space efficiently"

**Mark Black,
InterAmerica Stage**

"This never worked that well as I understand it," says Mr. Black. "From what I was told, it was not uncommon to have snow blow onto the stage from the openings left by the poorly sealed vents."

The replacement rigging is a variation of the old model however it uses a pair of dedicated Thern



Thern FVC winches installed along the wall backstage.

FVC winches that are connected to multiple closure lines. The new FVC winches allow the vents to be closed and tested from the stage level. "Most theatres are required to be equipped with fire vents, however many theatres don't use test and closure equipment that is specifically designed for that purpose 'Nicely'," says Mr. Black.

"Thern's Fire Vent Closures feature a greater ability to control the fire vents in a much safer manner," says Mr. Black. The new FVC winches are mounted at stage level, and allow easy testing and resetting





without breaking the Electro Thermal Link that can be wired to automatically release the vent doors in the event of a fire or smoke alarm. The FVC winches also contain a hinged access panel that locks and closes to prevent unauthorized operation.

Besides the FVC winches, two portable construction winches were used to hoist all the new equipment to the various gallery elevations and grid iron above the stage. H&H Specialties large diameter operating pulleys were used to restore the curtain tracks along with new carriers and polyester track operating line.

With new rigging now in place, the Forest Roberts Theatre had a better all around "rigging" system that included well-marked components for accurate communication, consistent use of domestic graded hardware, better counter weight arbors and a new loading bridge.

"Operations will be very similar to the old rigging system making it easy for students to adjust," says Mr. Black. "We also installed one single dedicated

electric set, which has all the other theatrical lighting feed by multi-circuit drops. A new pin rail was added to one of the upper galleries for the belaying of ropes supporting the lighting drop boxes."

"It looks awesome," says Kim Hegmegee, technical director. "We have been hesitant of drop shows and are now looking forward to one."

"It looks awesome!"
Kim Hegmegee,
Technical Dir.

Other renovations included taking out 25 seats and replacing them with new accommodations for the handicapped and designing an in-house sound board position. The seating capacity is now at 525 with 16 rows at orchestra level.

With new rigging, additional seating accommodation and safer fire vent closures, the Forest Roberts Theatre is ready to take the stage this year with new performances, new equipment and dedicated student workmanship.



Inside the renovated theatre.

