



FACILITIES &  
MAINTENANCE

## Outfitting Auditoriums with Multi-Purpose and Flexible Staging

BY KIP WEIS AND RICK ROE

Today, universities and colleges across the country are facing challenges in meeting the demands placed on them to provide the best possible education as well as ensuring that their students get the most out of their education. There is also constant pressure to provide the finest amenities for incoming students.

Everyone wants to have the best system that is safe, enhances their performers' onstage presence, and allows them to perform at their best. Getting top-of-the-line equipment can be difficult for smaller schools that may have a very limited budget allocated to the performing arts. Words like "multi-purpose," "flexible," and "modular" become an important part of the planning vocabulary for those focused on meeting the needs of campus performance groups.

### Top-Level Equipment for Recruiting and Retaining Talented Students

Many professors and performing arts directors are great negotiators and top-notch fund raisers on top of their many other gifts. These fortunate ones have unlimited access to extremely wealthy donors, intensely active parents or booster

organizations or have an altruistic local company or organization that supports their every need.

For the rest of the teachers and directors, they have to work to find the extra money to support the programs. Schools that do not have the free flow of financial support must find creative ways to secure funding for top-level equipment that allows students to perform at the highest level. Finding other departments that have similar needs and are willing to find a cooperative solution may be the best in-house option.

A few ways of joint collaboration with other departments or the administration may allow planners to find additional applications for staging or risers that can help to justify the purchase. If collaboration is possible, the best place to start is to call on the other performing arts departments. The overall impact can be reduced if all stakeholders can come to a

consensus on what the bulk of the staging needed is and what is really needed for all programs involved to share.

Then specialty items would only need to be added for specific, limited purposes. A choir and band director collaboration could yield either individual drum risers, keyboard risers, or a large, raised percussion platform that can make the orchestra or band look spectacular for the winter and spring concerts. These same staging components can then be repurposed to build a 3 x 3 configuration or be deployed in the theater department for on-stage risers in the next performance.

When faced with the need for a multi-purpose option in the permanent auditorium, there are a few options besides on-stage risers to help make the space more flexible. Such options could create a more intimate space for the performers and audience as well as accommodate any programs that have outgrown the current allowed space. The easiest option in lieu of building a new facility will be to extend the stage with either a stage extension, or—if the theater has an orchestra pit, to fill it with platforms. There are several considerations to take into account before any product is

purchased. Some of the following points may help campus decision-makers make the best decision for their programs and facilities.

**Getting Started**

Multiple users occupy most performing arts facilities. Meeting with the other users of the space to determine and agree on what the primary needs are is a great first step. Working as a team to collaborate and come to agreement on what the top priority needs are is a very important first step prior to contacting a manufacturer of staging.

A few questions will immediately come up and will need to be addressed before starting the project. They can include the following concerns:

1. Should the stage extension/pit filler be just at the existing stage height, or should it also be able to be set up at audience level and orchestra level?
2. When set at stage height will a spanning or bridging design be needed to offer clear space

under the decking for the orchestra or for storage of equipment, pianos, or instruments?

3. How will the conductor view the orchestra and the performers on stage during a musical performance?
4. If a decking set at audience level is desired, will chairs be mounted in that space in order to increase seating capacity up close to the stage?
5. What other configurations or uses for the equipment are there? Some systems will allow risers to be made from the same decking but using different height supplemental supports.
6. Who will set up and take down the equipment, where will it be stored, and what weight capacity will it need to support?
7. Will there be a need for grand pianos, lifts, heavy scenery elements, or large numbers of moving performers?
8. Who is paying, what is the budget, and what is the ideal timeline for completion of the project?

Multiple meetings between the various stakeholders will be needed over a period of time before consensus can be reached regarding all these important considerations. Once the needs of the facility have been discerned, then planners should contact some professional staging manufacturers for guidance. This important step ensures that an engineered system will be developed for the application and will fit the constraints of the facility. In-house construction carries many risks and should be avoided.

**Design Process and Construction Considerations**

The design priority is that these modular units be extremely strong and safe in order to withstand the live loads and action performed on them by a large quantity of enthusiastic performers. Safety, meeting code, ease of use, versatility, quietness, and stability of the platforms, as well as how they store, are all important considerations to weigh out. Planners should be prepared to share a lot

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of information with the staging company, including the ideal scope of the project and all of the needs that the user group outlined. The staging company will need to know the exact dimensions of the space, and they should have access to as many details, drawings, and photos as possible; the more detail the better.

Once the group is ready to move forward, planners should contact several staging companies. A minimum of three different bids should be sought to make sure all aspects from budget to the projected design are met. Most staging companies can typically generate a professional design

layout, equipment list, and quote within a few days. Planners need to ask for multiple photos, specs, and support materials; references and testimonials from other customers can help with decision-making. Price should not be the only consideration, especially when taking into account that everyone involved will live with this system for many years; the best match for the identified needs should be selected if possible.

### Equipment Options

There are many options for equipment types and materials that can be used to build the system. The staging company will be able to help build a system that will function safely at the needed height and required configurations. The performance surface can be made to fit your event needs or to match your main stage to give it a permanent look. Another consideration should be that the platform is quiet for the performers and will not be distracting when they transition from the main stage to the extension. The system should be designed in a way that all of the components work together to provide a stable area for your dancers, actors, or the orchestra. Having a stage that has platforms that bridge together and supports that have cross bracing is not only an option but a must-have if your stages are higher than sixteen inches.

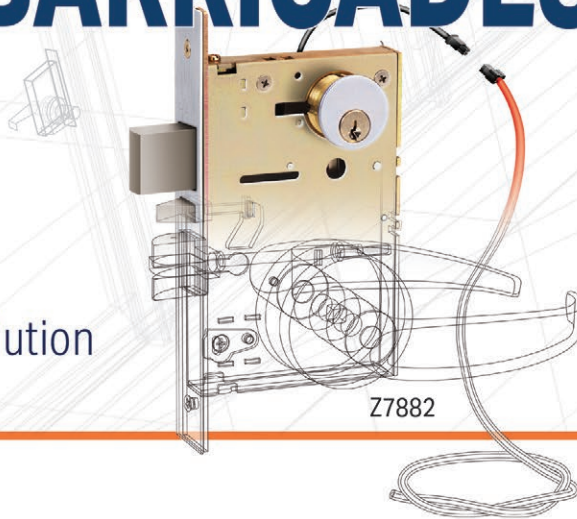
Certainly, the staging manufacturer should provide a stage that will meet the building and fire code standards as an integral part of the design and construction. The manufacturer should perform the installation and training to ensure all the components fit and function perfectly and your set up crew is trained in the proper safe use of the equipment. Once a professional staging company has been selected and the planning group has communicated all of the needs, everyone can go back to focus on upcoming shows, knowing that the staging company will deliver a worry-free system for all performances in the upcoming years.

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**ABOUT THE AUTHORS:** Rick Roe has twenty-six years of StageRight sales experience serving all divisions through the years representing the StageRight School and Church as Market Manager. Kip Weis joined the StageRight team in 2007 and is the Market Manager for the Performing Arts market. Kip brings a passion for theater and music that, combined with his product knowledge and experience, makes him a great resource for your venue's needs.

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