

South Jersey live theater companies are making use of newer technology for productions

VINCENT JACKSON Staff Writer

HAMMONTON — South Jersey’s four Equity theater companies use a mix of traditional ways and new technology to present their main stage shows.

They may not have yet adopted such cutting-edge technology as ProductionPro — a digital rehearsal notebook startup app used for such Broadway musicals as “Hamilton,” “Kinky Boots” and “An American in Paris” — but they are making upgrades when necessary.

“If I was producing and directing big musicals that had a long run, (ProductionPro) would definitely be something to have. Since high schools have a long rehearsal process, I can see why ProductionPro is good for them, too. It helps to keep everyone ‘on the same page,’” said Gayle Stahlhuth, artistic director of the East Lynne Theater Company in Cape May.

The Eagle Theatre, which is located here, is currently staging the Tony Award-winning musical “Ragtime” until Feb. 17. “Ragtime” features the largest company and creative team the theater has ever assembled, said Ted Wioncek III, theater’s producing artistic director.

ProductionPro is not being used at the Eagle Theatre, Wioncek said.

Cast members still use prompt books, which are binders that hold papers with holes punched into them. For the first two weeks of rehearsals, the actors use prompt books that carry the script and their notes, Wioncek said.

The stage manager has the ultimate version of the prompt book.

Although some traditional methods are still being used at the Eagle, additions have been made to enhance productions. Two rotating stages will be used for “Ragtime,” Wioncek said.

Last year, a lighting truss was installed over the seats in the front center of the orchestra to allow for greater visual effects, Wioncek said. Tens of thousands of dollars have been spent to upgrade the sound and lights at the theater during the last six years under its current leadership, Wioncek said.

“We have to create depth where there isn’t actually depth,” he said. “We have to create the illusion of height where there isn’t actually height.”

Steve Steiner, producing artistic director of the Surfflight Theatre in Beach Haven, said his theater does not have the need for ProductionPro. Surfflight starts its mainstage season on June 6 with the musical “Holiday Inn.”

“However, we have used sophisticated audio technology for several of our shows on Q-Lab, an Apple program for running sound cues. We also did a show last year that had both live orchestra and additional tracks, and the Q-Lab program made it relatively easy to integrate the live and recorded sounds,” Steiner said.

Since the Surflight reopened in 2017, the theater bought a new \$75,000 sound system. This includes the sound equipment in Show Place Ice Cream Parlour. They also acquired about \$20,000 in new lighting, several new computers and an iPad Pro, Steiner said.

“Many actors use tablets for scripts, and we have had stage managers run and call shows from a tablet to alleviate the need for so much paper. Younger stage managers, who are more tech savvy than long-time stage managers, have been transitioning to digital for the past several years,” Steiner said.

At Cape May Stage in Cape May, they use Q-Lab during rehearsals, so sound effects and music are present long before a traditional technical rehearsal, said Roy Steinberg, Cape May Stage’s producing artistic director.

Their first show of this year will be the play “Heisenberg,” on May 22.

“Cape May Stage is using technology to produce our cutting-edge shows much like Broadway,” said Steinberg, who added his theater is not using ProductionPro. “Through Dropbox and Google Docs, all of our designers and technicians can talk to each other at any time. We can post research photos and actual set pieces as they are being built, so there is no guesswork.”

The theater just invested in a new light board that can accommodate LED lights, projections and moving lights, Steinberg said.

At East Lynne Theater Company, Stahlhuth said their shows aren’t as complicated as big musicals, and they don’t have runs that last longer than six weeks, so they don’t need ProductionPro.

“We have remounted productions in which not every cast member can return. I double-check blocking that’s been recorded by the stage manager in his script — copy it into a clean script — and give this to the actor, so he or she can have a jump start when rehearsals begin,” Stahlhuth said.

When the East Lynne Theater Company shows have choreography, it is filmed and sent to cast members so they can view it online, Stahlhuth said. Their first show of this year will be “Sherlock Holmes: Adventure of the Speckled Band” on March 15 and 16.

“That’s about as sophisticated as we get for shows that usually don’t have more than a dozen actors,” said Stahlhuth, who added her theater specializes in American playwrights.

Cape May Stage don’t have multi-million dollar budgets, but technology is still an important element even in a small theater, Steinberg said.

“At the end of the day, great theater is still a compelling story told by passionate actors in an intimate space,” Steinberg said.