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DRAMA QUEEN

Theater owners rely on Manhattan architect Francesca Russo to dazzlingly restore and pragmatically rethink auditoriums and ancillary spaces, to give theatergoers some scenic magic even before the curtain rises.

By Eve M. Kahn

Another Jazz Age theater reopening, another celestial ceiling mural re-revealed, another ornate mezzanine and basement lounge upgraded, another curlicued carpet coordinated with fringed curtains, another show. On block after block of Manhattan's Theater District, architect Francesca Russo is collaborating with engineers, gilders and impresarios on houses where some of the world's costliest productions play. As the curtains rise, the audiences reluctantly turn their gazes away from the velvet or marble or crystal attractions that Russo has installed or unveiled, sometimes working on almost absurdly tight schedules between productions. She's been known to supervise 24-hour crews, when an owner hates to keep a house dark for long.

It's hard even to keep up with the walking pace and rapid-fire, no-nonsense speech of Russo, age 52. "I'm good at the panic stages of the projects," she says. "I'm good at always making sure it all gets done."

A few other architecture firms handle New York theaters (including H³ Hardy Collaboration Architecture, which recently face-lifted the Brooklyn Academy of Music, see project profile on page 28). But no one else specializes, and no one else has tens of thousands of seats on their resume so far. In the four-person, midtown office of Francesca Russo Architect, theatrically long and colorful samples of tassels,

fringes, passementerie, drapery fabrics and seat upholstery are spilling out of the files.

"Our clients know we're a small practice, obsessive about detail, and that we don't leave until it's over," she says. "We design the architecture, we pick the furniture, we integrate the theater systems, we make sure that no noise from the bar will bother the patrons at the back. Everybody here does everything, down to making the coffee. I try not to take on too much, but it's been mad, crazy busy lately."

The staff (including Francesca's sister Kathleen, the longtime part-time bookkeeper) is now finishing punchlists or pitching proposals for a half-dozen theaters, ranging from 80 to 100 years old. They've taken on clients as far afield as Pennsylvania, Massachusetts and central New Jersey, on budgets from \$2 million to \$10 million. (Meanwhile they reserve 15% of their time for other commercial projects, including a Tiffany-designed library at an upstate New York town hall, and the occasional apartment renovation.) Russo's teams scrutinize old news clippings and photos, seeking clues about original ornament and paint schemes. Though Russo has become willing in the 21st century to use some CAD for drawings, she still hand paints sumptuous proposed colors between the computer-generated lines. "If there's a software program that's supposed to do that yet," she says, "I don't even want to know about it."

"She's worked on all five theaters we own," says Jennifer Hershey, director of operations for Jujamcyn Theaters. "She's



Francesca Russo, favorite architect of theatrical impresarios on the Great White Way



Built as a column-free horse salesroom in 1885 and turned into an Adamesque theater in 1923, the Winter Garden had been reduced to a simulated junkyard for "Cats" before Russo's 2001 restoration. Photo: Whitney Cox



Russo expanded an upstairs lounge at the Winter Garden, restoring 3-ft.-wide crystal chandeliers and covering walls with faux-damask vinyl. Photo: Whitney Cox

unique and very gifted: she's very sensitive to making a viable modern theater, while restoring its historical integrity. If we owned more theaters, she'd be working on them, too."

What makes Russo's practice an especially impressive feat is that she lives about 225 miles from the Great White Way, and stays in hotels when in New York. While plotting the uncovering of blocked proscenium or streamlining restroom layouts, she often works on trains to and from a 1780s fisherman's cottage on Cape Cod, which she shares with her restoration-carpenter husband Eugene Siniscalchi. "It's a good place to recharge my batteries," she says. "It's a stark contrast, a yin to New York's yang."

After graduation, while serving as the first or the only female staffer at a series of Buffalo firms, she worked on pioneering adaptive reuse projects: an 1850s Italianate school becoming condos, a 1930s resort bathhouse becoming a state-of-the-art spa. "But Buffalo was in a state of decline then, and it didn't have big ideas," she recalls. "The last straw was when my office got moved from downtown to a suburb."

In the early 1990s she formed a New York City partnership with a fellow architect-refugee from Buffalo, Barbara Campagna. In 1994, Jujamcyn asked the firm to suggest paint colors for the Eugene O'Neill Theatre, a 1923 Adamesque extravaganza. "They actually needed so much more than paint colors," Russo says. "The boxes were falling apart, the columns had been

Footlights

Her childhood home in Buffalo — she's the second of nine children — was always the backdrop for a high drama or comedy or two. "When I was growing up I didn't know that normal people didn't always sing and dance all around the house, and have exceptional voices," she says. Her father, a vaudeville performer turned Air Force cook turned bakery salesman, sang operatically as he drove his sales truck around Buffalo. Few customers could resist his lilting calls of "I knead the dough" and "I've got the bread."

Russo showed interest in architecture as far back as elementary school, but when she built a model of an S-shaped house during an art class in sixth grade, the boy sitting next to her informed her, "Girls can't be architects." Petite, wiry and ebullient, she also considered becoming a professional dancer, but suffered too many setbacks early on from minor injuries. At the State University College of New York at Buffalo, she studied design with an emphasis on textiles, and then majored in architecture at SUNY Buffalo.



Above: A 1999 restoration of the 1929 St. James Theater involved slightly reducing the boxes' width to make room for theatrical equipment, and restoring original column finishes, ceiling murals and sculpted cresting. Photo: Andy French

Right: Partially whitewashed before the restoration, the St. James' Beaux Arts interior has been holding up well during the long run of "The Producers." Photo: Andy French





Above: The lobby of the 1921 Music Box Theater was restored in 1999 using carpet based on Robert Adam motifs. It once again resembles a stage set for a 1920s drawing-room comedy. *Photo: Andy French*

Far left: Under the boxes' restored half-dome murals of Classical scenery at the Music Box, Russo hung red-on-gold fringed drapes based on original curtains' flowery patterns. Gold-on-gold flowery fabrics behind the railings preserve the box occupants' privacy. *Photo: Andy French*

Left: The interior of the Music Box, in Georgian style with Palladian and Adam highlights, is landmarked down to its gray-green-and-sienna palette. Bulky, obsolete light boxes blocked the mezzanine murals before Russo's restoration. *Photo: Andy French*

stripped to pipes, and all the seating, carpeting and lighting were inappropriate and nondescript." Of the ensuing \$2 million project, she adds, "the most fun part was uncovering a fragment of original capping fabric on the balcony railing. We'd known from some of the historical accounts that it was blue-violet and gold, but we'd had something of a hard time selling that scheme to the client, because purple and gold sounded like cheerleader colors. When we found a little piece of the original during demolition, it matched what we'd been suggesting almost exactly."

Russo and Campagna experienced similar eureka moments the following year, while re-creating the largely destroyed 1925 Florentine Renaissance interior of the Virginia Theatre. Loosely modeled after the 14th-century Palazzo Davanzati, and lined in beams, brackets and arches, the room had been reduced to a stripped black box. With a 24-hour crew and a six-month deadline, the architects produced a thrifty rendition of the original décor: they replicated not every element but only the highest profile pieces, such as the front-house half of the ceiling coffers. Russo and Campagna also drew up some quatrefoil lobby stencils and carpet fleurs-de-lis based on archival shots. When crews stripped the lobby paint, the new quatrefoils matched their ancestors almost inch for inch, and a stunning likeness of the fleurs-de-lis turned up when Russo saw the original fire curtain unfurled for its first debut in decades.

Ensemble Efforts

In solo practice since 1996, Russo has explored just about every style applied to pre-1930s theaters. "Except I haven't really done any Deco yet," she says wistfully. Elizabethan, Beaux Arts, Byzantine and Moorish rooms with city landmark status are all well represented in her portfolio. She's restored infrastructure details down to stained-glass exit signs, and she's learned to crisscross curtain drapes in imitation of Shakespearean stage designs.

Often in collaboration with New York City-based EverGreene Painting Studios, she's had whitewash picked off allegorical murals and bas-reliefs of

Right: In 2003, Russo peeled whitewash layers from the Barrymore Theatre's 1928 Elizabethan extravaganza. Gilt-trimmed disks on the ceiling grilles conceal air vents. *Photo: Andy French*

Far right: For the Barrymore's box curtains, Russo based intertwining swags on Elizabethan precedents. *Photo: Andy French*



dancing goddesses. She's based carpet patterns (usually woven by Bloomsburg Carpet's Pennsylvania mill) on perhaps a small section of grillework or plaster strapwork or proscenium foliage. When she finished overhauling the delicate Music Box Theatre, a 1921 Adamesque house, where the gray-green palette itself is officially landmarked, Russo received a letter from a daughter of Irving Berlin (whose estate co-owns the house with the Shubert Organization). Berlin, the daughter wrote, would have loved Russo's achievements.

"Each theater speaks to you," the architect says. "Each one has such a strong personality, and you have to do what it says – not by exactly copying the past, but staying in tune with what it's saying."

Yet she's not an extreme historicist, since long-running hits like "The Producers" and "Mamma Mia!" won't fly in museums. "We don't put back the footlights no one uses anymore," she says. "We don't use the pale colors that were needed when light bulbs were lower wattage than ours, now the light would bounce off those colors distractingly during a show." Much of Russo's work, in fact, is sleight of hand.

What seems original off-white marble in a lobby has some telltale low sills on the payphones and a ticket window – indicating that Russo has tailored the new stonework to ADA standards. What looks like fragile original gilding or flocked damask in auditorium wall-coverings usually turns out to be low-maintenance vinyl from Wolf Gordon, "which you can practically hose down."

Metal end standards on seat rows bear cartouches, cameos, angels, dragons; they're customized reproductions of antique castings (usually from Irwin Seating), with plush ergonomic upholstery. Heart- or hourglass-shaped backs give the seats a period look, while slightly curved profiles keep the theatergoers relaxed yet supported. Russo also sometimes installs more seats for theater owners to sell. Upon removing old-fashioned light boxes that have marred the fronts of mezzanines and balconies, she's been able to sneak in a few new rows of seats, all without perturbing any landmarks commissioners.

When Russo visits her finished houses before or during performances, she sometimes winces to see, say, a follow-spot booth hanging from a gilt dome or a musical's huge set encroaching upon some arched boxes' fluted pilasters and faux-brocade drapes. Fortunately, she says, "the crews are required to restore anything that gets damaged during the run." She loves showtime, she adds, but it's not quite her favorite time on-site: "For every project, the most exciting moment for me is always when it's halfway through, when the scaffolding is up and everybody's running around with that sense of purpose. Once it's done, it's like having already sent your kid off to college." ♦



A plaster strapwork element in the ceiling cove at the rear of the orchestra inspired carpet scrolls at the Barrymore. Photo: Andy French



Computer renderings show how Studio 54 – a 1927 Renaissance house, now owned by the Roundabout Theatre Company – could look post-restoration. Russo has already stabilized the roof and interior plaster, and installed stain-resistant, Krypton-upholstered seats with harp-playing angels on the end standards. Rendering: Alessandro Carcopado, B+B Group



Far left: Russo has mocked up one restored section at the in-progress 1926 Count Basie Theater in Red Bank, NJ, picking out its dragons and flora in gold. Photo: Numa Saisselin

Left: The Count Basie Theatre had suffered from assorted equipment jammed onto ornate Renaissance ornament. Photo: Numa Saisselin