



THE EMPIRE THEATRE

BRINGING WORLD-CLASS
ENTERTAINMENT TO BELLEVILLE, ON

BY ANDREW KING

PHOTOS BY BOB HOUSE PHOTOGRAPHY

ADAMSON IS-SERIES AUDIO SYSTEM IN THE EMPIRE THEATRE

The staff at The Empire Theatre & Centre for the Performing Arts keep an informal list of the number of Rock & Roll Hall of Fame inductees to have performed on either the stage inside their stunning 700-seat auditorium or that set up in their adjacent parking lot for the annual Empire Rockfest every summer. As of now, that list is nearing three dozen, and as they continue to bring internationally-heralded acts to their Southern Ontario community of Belleville – many of whom aren't yet inducted but almost certainly will be – the big question is when that list will hit three figures.

The Empire Theatre is a privately-owned venue with an unofficial mandate of enhancing the artistic and cultural landscape in its home city and surrounding area by regularly screening arthouse-style films in addition to presenting live entertainment several times per month. Consider that, in 2019 alone, The Empire stage has already hosted international icon Gordon Lightfoot, acclaimed rock trio The Tea Party, Canadian country mainstays Doc Walker, and, yes, a Hall of Fame inductee in Deep Purple's Glenn Hughes – and that's just a small sample.

Indeed, there's no shortage of diversity – or demand – in the venue's

carefully-curated programming that, in many cases, allows residents to experience world-class entertainment in their own community that would otherwise require a drive east or west on Highway 401 to Kingston or Toronto, respectively.

In the fall of 2018, The Empire Theatre presented a special show on Sept. 13th to commemorate 15 years (to the day!) of operations. Leading up to that show and the milestone it celebrated, Empire owner Mark Rashotte and his team decided to invest in a new production package for their main auditorium – one that would improve their ability to attract and accommodate top touring acts while also giving local presenters access to premium technologies for their own productions.

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The building that now houses The Empire first opened its doors in 1938 as The McCarthy Theatre, which also hosted both feature

films and live performances for residents of Belleville and its surrounding area.

Following 24 years of business, the theatre closed its doors in 1962 and the building sat vacant for over a decade until, in 1974, it opened as Stephen Licence, a sporting goods and hobby store. While the owner of the shop, Gerry Bongard, did make some minor changes to the building and interior space to better suit the retail environment, he reportedly left most of the interior intact in hopes that it could one day be returned to its original use.

In early 2002, Rashotte – the owner and broker of record of Royal LePage ProAlliance in Belleville – purchased the McCarthy building to do just that.

"I guess where it started is, I spent 10 years on the road playing professionally from '74 to '84, doing 250 nights a year across North America," Rashotte, then a member of Canadian rock band Photograph and its earlier iterations, tells *Professional Sound*.

"When we got off the road in '84, I got into real estate, and thankfully that worked out quite well. I kept playing, of course – you can't get away from it – but then decided I wanted to get back into the business part of it."

He considered purchasing a bar where he could present live music, but that type of venue didn't particularly appeal to him.

In 2001, the McCarthy building went



MAIN ARRAY OF NINE ADAMSON IS105 BELOW ONE IS119 SUBWOOFER

on the market and Rashotte took ownership in early 2002 with the goal of returning the building to its former use – and former glory – as a state-of-the-art live performance venue and cinema.

"It's kind of funny; anyone that knows anything about finances or the music business was asking me if I was crazy," says Rashotte with a chuckle. "These kinds of venues are usually municipally-owned for a reason, but we thought, 'Eh, we can make this thing work and have some fun with it.'"

By the fall of 2002, renovations were underway to both highlight and pay tribute to some of The Empire's classic architecture and stylings while also modernizing the space with an eye to the future.

On Sept. 13th, 2003, The Empire Theatre officially (re)opened its doors and its team has been working hard to advance their shared vision of how the space could enhance the community it serves ever since.

"I didn't want it to just be a place for rentals," Rashotte emphasizes. "I wanted to bring some of the best acts out there to Belleville, and it's worked out very well. The by-product of it all is seeing all these great things happen in this community. We try to support local businesses and people when we can and host community events, but also try to bring top artists to our stage. I think we've raised the bar for Belleville in that regard."

When the venue opened in 2003, the audio system was built around an EAW MQ Series PA with left, centre, and right clusters plus deck fills and delays controlled by an analog 48-input Soundcraft MH3 console.



THE EMPIRE THEATRE ON FRONT ST. IN BELLEVILLE, ON

"It was a really nice install that was up there for theatres at the time, but if we'd opened six months later, we probably would've put a line array system in there," says Rashotte with a bit of a laugh. "That system served us very well for 15 years, and there were maybe 15 or 20 times that we brought in a bigger rig for louder shows, but I mean The Tragically Hip used it and were happy, so that's a good testament right there..."

As a musician himself, Rashotte says he didn't like the idea of asking a visiting act to keep the volume in check, and recalls a few instances where the band onstage would be trying to blow the doors off the place and he and his team would be standing around the speakers and power amps with "fingers crossed, hoping nothing would blow."

Partway into 2018, the team started planning for their 15th anniversary event later in the fall. "That ended up being the catalyst for this rebuild on the audio side of things," offers Brandon Kull, technical director at The Empire.

Kull, a Belleville native, graduated from Sheridan College's technical theatre program in 2002, earning a few awards on his way out. He took a job with a Toronto-based AV firm for a few years before returning to Belleville when a tech position opened at The Empire in 2005. A few years later, he took over the head lighting role and, in 2015, was appointed to his current post as TD.

The Empire invited several manufacturers to demo their array systems in the main auditorium. Kyle Schroeys, VP and production manager with London, ON's PA Shop Productions, teamed up with Port Per-

ry, ON-based manufacturer Adamson Systems Engineering to audition the company's install-focused IS-Series.

For the past seven years, The PA Shop has been the production supplier for Empire Rockfest, the annual summer festival that the Empire team hosts in their adjacent parking lot. In recent years, the event has presented artists including Weezer, Journey, Boston, Billy Talent, and dozens more for an annual crowd of about 3,500 patrons.

"They're one of my favourite customers," Schroeys tells *Professional Sound* about The Empire Theatre. "They have a really knowledgeable team and everyone's on the same page, working toward a common goal. It's just always vibed well with how our company works. They take really good care of us, and we want to reciprocate that."

"We knew that we wanted to be in line with today's tour riders," Kull begins about what they sought from the new system. "From there, we test drove a bunch of options, looking for something that met our needs in terms of both clarity and horsepower – to have the Gordon Lightfoots of the world in where you only want to hear the artist and no PA, to the high-impact shows where we're more of a road house, with acts like Steve Earle or The Tea Party or Theory of a Deadman that demand high-SPL, tour-calibre PAs."

When learning about Adamson, Kull says he was intrigued by the industry recognition they'd been garnering – "Not just here, but especially in Europe, which is cool considering you've got two big players in the world of high-end sound reinforcement over there in L-Acoustics and d&b [audiotechnik]."



MIDAS PRO2 CONSOLE AT FOH



THE EMPIRE THEATRE'S 700-SEAT AUDITORIUM W/ CINEMA SURROUND SYSTEM

say the words, but these days, I'm always wanting to tell engineers to go for it and try to overdrive it. You can't."

He elaborates: "Not only is it powerful, but it delivers extremely accurate and clean sound that's consistent from the front row to the very back of the theatre. Without prompting, everyone that uses it says that it's a real treat to mix on and that they love the room."

To control their new system, The Empire Theatre sourced a Midas PRO2 live audio mixing system from The PA Shop's rental inventory.

"One of the things that sold us was the warmth of that console, and how it sounded with the rest of the system," offers Kull. "You can get AES cards for any touring console out there these days, but having that Midas sound plus the ability to keep everything 100 per cent digital at 96 kHz with near-zero latency as soon as the microphone signal leaves the stage is awesome for us."

As a veteran of the road in the pre-digital days, Rashotte was also familiar with Midas and gave the PRO2 his stamp of approval.

"It's those preamps and converters – that classic Midas tone," Schroeiyens puts in. "It sounds incredible, which was the number one mandate, but also fit the price point while letting us stay at 96 kHz throughout the chain."

He jokes that his team at The PA Shop was sad to see it leave their inventory, noting: "I've almost had to call Brandon a few times to rent it back from him [laughs]."

Of course, it's McFaul whose hands are most frequently on those faders, and he has certainly been enjoying the experience. "It ranks right up there with all of the top consoles on the market," he asserts.

There was a steep learning curve, he admits, but now that he knows his way around its interface and operation, he's a big fan, saying: "I'm constantly learning just how incredible and powerful this console is."

The integration and tuning process for the new system began in early September 2018 and included the team at The Empire Theatre along with Schroeiyens and Adamson Application Engineer Jeremiah Karni. Between the hard completion deadline and busy schedules across the board, Schroeiyens says they had a small window but everything came together as required.

"I don't remember exactly when we started – maybe 10 or 11 a.m. – and we went into the early hours of the morning with tuning and everything, but still, it was all done in one day," says Schroeiyens. He credits both the install-catered rigging hardware on the IS-Series cabinets and effectiveness of Adamson's Blueprint AV design and simulation software as being key to hitting their deadline. The latter was particularly effective in addressing the room's unique 1930s movie house-style rake design.

"We also had a really good starting point," he adds. "Because it's also a cinema, the acoustics inside the theatre are really good – it's a very dampened room. You can put in the world's greatest loudspeaker,

With the traction [Adamson has] been gaining and since their design, engineering, and manufacturing hub is just an hour-and-a-half down the road, we definitely wanted them to come in and do a demo for us."

Rashotte recalls that the systems were all "varying degrees of great"; however, "When the Adamson gang came in, I'll tell ya – we all looked at each other and knew this was where we were going."

Schroeiyens says he never doubted that the IS-Series solution was the best one for the venue. "Considering all the acts they bring in, it's got to be able to go loud, but also needs to be very clear and detailed. It's all got to be there, and you're asking a lot of a PA in a situation like that. I thought there was only one manufacturer that would check all of their boxes – from quality to SPL to budget – and, obviously, that was Adamson."

He continues: "They're making world-class loudspeakers, and with the

IS-Series specifically, it's an install-focused product that's great for budgets while delivering that top-tier audio performance that's very rider-friendly."

The system now anchoring The Empire Theatre's auditorium boasts main arrays of nine Adamson IS10 two-way, full-range array enclosures beneath a single IS119 subwoofer per side. An additional six IS119s are built into the stage – two each in left, centre, and right positions – to enhance the bottom end. Three Adamson Point 8 two-way enclosures, also built into the stage above each sub pairing, handle front fill.

Driving the PA is a complement of five Lab.gruppen amplifiers with on-board Lake processing: four D 120:4Ls with a single D 200:4L pushing a total of 70,000 W.

"The Adamson out-performed everything and made our decision an easy one," says Wayne McFaul, Kull's predecessor as TD and still the lead audio engineer for the venue. "I don't openly



LAB.GRUPPEN D SERIES AMPLIFIERS



ADAMSON POINT 8 FRONT FILL ATOP TWO IS119 SUBWOOFERS BUILT INTO STAGE

but if the acoustics are bad, it's just going to be unintelligible, so we were lucky."

The first show in The Empire to employ its new audio system was Steve Earle & The Dukes commemorating the 30th anniversary of the classic *Copperhead Road* album on Sept. 11, 2018. Two days later, The Empire celebrated its own anniversary in style.

The variety-type 15th anniversary show on Sept. 13th was hosted by comedian Ron James and featured performances by artists already familiar with the Empire stage, including Randy Bachman, Tom Cochrane, Greg Keelor of Blue Rodeo, and several others. Rashotte himself even took the stage – twice, in fact, with both All You Need Is Love, his heralded Belleville-based Beatles tribute, and alongside Bruce Springsteen saxophonist Jake Clemons, with whom he often performs.

McFaul, who tours with All You Need Is Love as their FOH engineer, recalls the evening fondly. "All in all, I'm really happy with this system, and as I say, even though I feel like 'an old man in a young person's game,' I can still hold my own with this great rig."

"Adamson and The PA Shop were really great to work with," Rashotte takes over, looking back on the process. "It's a wonderful system and they did a great job tuning the room. Our kick-off night with Steve Earle was such a blast and it's been great ever since."

As mentioned, Schroeys holds this particular client in high esteem. "Mark and his team are doing this for the love of it, which is such a respectable thing in this business," he says.

Addressing the new audio package, he adds: "I think the demo spoke for itself. I told Brandon, 'I'm not a hardcore sales guy; I just want you to get the best return and make sure that people are gonna keep buying tickets because they're getting a great experience.'"

He recalls being there when McFaul first took his place at FOH and started pushing faders on the new rig. "I could tell from his smile in that first 30 seconds that it was like taking out a Ferrari and pushing it from zero to 100 for the first time; it felt

great to have played a part in that experience."

He adds that The PA Shop and Adamson consider this a showcase system to flaunt the performance and appearance of the IS-Series in similar applications. "At the end of the day," Schroeys tacks on, "we're supporting a Canadian company building world-class products in this really unique Canadian venue."

Much of that uniqueness comes from the way The Empire Theatre serves and is seen in its home city.

"There are lots of ways to spend your entertainment dollar in this area," Kull reinforces. "We need to stay mindful of that and offer things to our patrons that keep them coming back, and reassure them that they're valued and that their opinion matters in what we do."

He particularly enjoys that locals can stage their own productions or recitals in a one-of-a-kind space with a state-of-the-art production package. "I was a high-school student once upon a time, and everyone needs an opportunity to learn – where a less-experienced technician or volunteer can come in, learn their way around something bigger than your 16-channel Mackie, and then we can show them some toys and tips and tricks that we'd use in a professional setting to do certain things."

He says the whole team does as much as they can in that regard since, again, this venue and this system are here for the community of Belleville.

"It's definitely a privilege to be a part of this, and to have the opportunity to grow with The Empire and develop its role in the community," Kull says in closing. "When I tell people where I work, their faces light right up, like, 'You must see so many cool shows and meet so many cool people!' It definitely plays that role in the community, considering the artists that have performed on our stage, and I'm very humbled and honoured to be here."

Andrew King is the Editor-in-Chief of Professional Sound.

GEAR AT A GLANCE

CONSOLE

Midas PRO2 Live Audio
Mixing System
Midas DL251 I/O Interface

PA

18 x Adamson IS10 Two-Way,
Full Range Cabinets (9 per
side)
2 x Adamson IS119 Subwoof-
ers (1 per side, above IS10s)
6 x Adamson IS119 Subwoof-
ers (ground-stacked)
3 x Adamson Point 8 Two-
Way Enclosures (fills)

AMPLIFICATION

4 x Lab.gruppen D 120:4L
1 x Lab.gruppen D 200:4L

MONITORS

9 x EAW SM200iH Two-Way
Stage Monitors
6 x QSC DSP-30 Digital Signal
Processors
6 x QSC CX902 Amplifiers
2 x QSC K12 Active Loud-
speakers
1 x Yorkville Elite Excur-
sion2000 Subwoofer

MICROPHONES

3 x Audio-Technica AT4041
2 x Audio-Technica AT4050
3 x Audio-Technica ATM450
1 x MXL 606 Goldface
4 x Sennheiser e904
4 x Sennheiser e906
2 x Sennheiser MD 421
1 x Shure Beta 52
6 x Shure Beta 58
1 x Shure Beta 91A
2 x Shure KSM44
6 x Shure SM57
6 x Shure SM58
1 x Shure ULXP4 Receiver w/
HH SM58
4 x Shure ULXP4 Receivers w/
Belt Packs & Countryman
Lavs
11 x Shure ULXP4 Receivers
w/ HH Beta 87As