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Brave New sustainable workshop

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Theater continues push for sustainability with new lighting, sustainable theater group

THE WEDGE — A memorable sketch from a recent Brave New Workshop production was set on a beach after an oil spill and featured actor Josh Eakright — dressed in a hilariously unflattering spandex bodysuit — as a petroleum-slicked seal.

Lauren Anderson, spoofing an environmental do-gooder, arrived to give the soiled seal a good scrubbing. Eakright's barking, googly-eyed reaction as he enjoyed the cleaning just a bit too much was a highlight of "The Brave New Workshop Saves the Planet; or, Yes We Can, but Do We Have To?"

While they poke fun on stage, the crew of the Brave New Workshop is getting serious about its behind-the-scenes environmental efforts.

The theater finished installing what may be the most energy-efficient stage lighting system in town in October. It was only the latest step in an ongoing campaign to make the theatre more environmentally sustainable.

While other Twin Cities theaters are experimenting with more energy efficient forms of lighting few, if any, use low-wattage LED (light-emitting diode) lights to the extent of Brave New Workshop, said Monkey Wrench Repair owner Seth Scott.

"It's probably the first theater I've heard of that's completely LED for wash lights," said Scott, who has a dozen years experience in theater lighting and completed the Brave New Workshop job Oct. 2.

The new lights were expected to slash the theater's total demand for electricity by nearly three-quarters and eventually save thousands on energy bills. But the Brave New Workshop isn't stopping there.

Elena Imaretska, vice president of client services in the workshop's corporate division, initiated the sustainability campaign when she arrived about two-and-a-half years ago. This summer, she organized the first meeting of Twin Cities Sustainable Theaters, a group that aims to grow a local green theater community.

"I think we are not the only theatre in town that's trying to be sustainable, that's trying to make a difference," Imaretska said. "I believe it's very important that we share best-practices, and that we know what other [theaters] are doing."

Smaller bills

Up until this fall, the lights hanging above the Brave New Workshop's small, black stage were hand-me-downs from the Children's Theatre Company. Those were installed 10 years ago.

"They just weren't suitable for our space," Imaretska said. "They were too hot. They were creating extra heat for the audience and also for the actors."

They also were gobbling up electricity. The old stage lights were the largest contributor to Brave New Workshop's more than \$4,000 annual electricity bill.

The upgrade wasn't cheap, either. The new lights cost just over \$18,000 to install, an expense Brave New Workshop was able to afford by participating in Xcel Energy's One-Stop Efficiency Shop program for small businesses.

Administered by Minneapolis-based nonprofit Center for Energy and Environment, the program offers incentives in the form of loans and rebates to small businesses looking to retrofit outdated lights.

The rebate covered just over half of Brave New Workshop's installation costs. The loan is repaid through the theater's savings on its energy bill; it will continue to pay higher rates for the next two-and-a-half years, with the difference going to Xcel.

"When [the payments are] spread out in this way we can afford it, so it was a fabulous opportunity for us," Imaretska said.

Cooler lights

Some of Brave New Workshop's lighting upgrades offer dramatic energy savings. Old 1,000-watt incandescent wash lights, which provide general lighting on stage, were replaced with 65-watt LED fixtures.

LEDs also replaced incandescent PAR lights, the familiar can-shaped fixtures that add dramatic splashes of color on stage.

Scott said LEDs most commonly are used for smaller stages, like Brave New Workshop's low-ceilinged room. LED technology that can light a big stage, or replace hot-burning spotlights, just isn't here yet — although more high-efficiency incandescent bulbs are being used in those cases, he said.

The quality of light from LEDs is also considered colder, or a little more toward the blue end of the spectrum, and can require some tinkering to get right. But when LEDs can be used in theaters, they have benefits that go beyond shrinking electricity bills.

An actor sweating on stage isn't just suffering from butterflies. Traditional stage lighting can be really, really hot.

"It's just sort of like you're working in 150-degree temperature," said Joe Bozic, a workshop actor. "Especially when you're running around and stuff like that on stage, it gets pretty rough."

LEDs throw off very little heat, by comparison — a difference Bozic noticed immediately. A skit featuring Fred Rogers required Bozic to don a cardigan, a moment he used to dread.

"The first night that the [new LED] lights were in, I put it on and I was like, 'Hey, this is pretty comfortable,'" he said.

Scott said the audience would be more comfortable, too, and predicted lower air conditioning bills for the theatre this summer.

Planning for â€˜sustainability

Imaretska described Twin Cities Sustainable Theatres — inspired by a London green theater initiative — as a way to share ideas for sustainability projects within the local theater community. The group began meeting in August, and includes members of The Children’s Theatre Company, Guthrie Theater, Pillsbury House Theatre and Hennepin Avenue’s State and Orpheum theatres.

There were plans for Scott to talk about the Brave New Workshop’s new lighting system at a future meeting, but the theater has plenty of other ideas to share. Since it began its sustainability campaign, it has begun to offer discount tickets for audience members who bike or ride the bus to shows, switched to reusable glassware at the theater’s bar and hosted “waste-free” opening night events, Imaretska said.

Bozic said the Brave New Workshop crew was on board with the changes, although they can’t resist cracking jokes about going green. There were mock complaints about having to eat the plates at the waste-free events.

“We try to live and run our business improvisationally, and part of improv is you embrace other peoples’ ideas,” Imaretska said. “... They will joke about it, of course, and make fun of me all the time, but that’s the way things work around here.”