

A Structure for Success

Scéno Plus turns 25

By: Mel Lambert

In the fickle and faddish world of entertainment spectacles, remaining at the top of your game can require a complex balancing act. New clients bring new challenges, and one must learn to use the latest technical offerings in creative ways. Founded in 1985, the Montreal-based company Scéno Plus places a strong emphasis on innovative design and original-construction solutions for performing arts and entertainment venues. Since its inception, the firm has attracted a wide range of professionals, including architects, theatre designers, interior designers, and project managers, together with specialized designers for theatrical and audiovisual equipment and multimedia. The

company operates with a core staff of 40, headed by its founder and president, Patrick Bergé.

"This unique combination of expertise has enabled us to offer our clients an expanded scope of practice for designing and equipping a wide range of buildings," Bergé says. "Those projects have ranged from circus theatres and multidisciplinary spaces to convention centers, casinos, cinemas, and nightclubs that meet the highest expectations from performing artists, facility managers, and the public."

A passion for theatres and performing arts, along with a comprehensive understanding of the issues related to the management of creative spaces, has earned Scéno Plus



The Scéno Plus team poses for an anniversary photo.

All photos: Courtesy of Scéno Plus

many international awards and industry recognition. In Quebec, its projects include Théâtre d'Aujourd'hui, Théâtre du Rideau Vert, Usine C, Cabaret-Theatre at Lac-Leamy Casino, Théâtre Hector-Charland, and the Cité de l'Énergie rotating amphitheatre. Elsewhere, it has worked on projects in Chicago (The Venue at Horseshoe Casino), Orlando (Cirque du Soleil's La Nouba Theatre), and Biloxi (Studio A at IP Casino Resort & Spa), in addition to the United Kingdom (Dream Factory, Warwick, and the wire mesh grid at the Stephen Joseph Theatre, Scarborough), New Zealand (the Herald Theatre's wire mesh grid at the Aotea Centre, Auckland). Major Las Vegas achievements include The Joint by Rogue at the Hard Rock Hotel and Casino (profiled by this writer in *LSA's* August 2009 issue); a showroom at Wynn Las Vegas; Access, a showroom at Aliante Station Casino; Caesars Palace Colosseum, which, for five years, hosted Céline Dion's production *A New Day*; the showroom, at Treasure Island, for Cirque du Soleil's *Mystère*, and the Bellagio Theatre, home of Cirque du Soleil's water show *O*. Recently, to meet the growing need for multifunctional and green structures, Scéno Plus expanded its practice to the design of sports infrastructures. In-progress assignments include a project for Atlantic City.

Industry recognitions include Outstanding Private Building Award (from *Southwest Contractor Magazine*) for The Colosseum; an Award of Technical Merit (from the Canadian Institute of Theatre Technology), The Las Vegas Showroom of the Year, and the Eddy Award (from the now-defunct *Entertainment Design Magazine*) for the Bellagio Theatre; and Best New Major Concert Venue (from *Pollstar Magazine*) for Hard Rock Hotel & Casino's The Joint by Rogue.

Getting started

Bergé recalls that, 25 years ago, Quebec lacked adequate cultural venues. "Having been brought up in a theatre environment—my mother was a costume designer—I realized very early that artists were not working in the best of conditions," he says. "I decided to go to architectural school to learn how to design more aesthetic and functional infrastructures to better serve artists, technicians, and managers that were working in cultural spaces.

"The company's first project was Théâtre d'Aujourd'hui, a 240-seat theatre located on St-Denis Street in Montreal. Originally, I had worked in this theatre as a summer job, and it became my final university project. The theatre was in a bad location and needed major renovations. I believed so much in my project that we submitted our concept to [Quebec's] Cultural Ministry; we fought to get subventions, and searched for a new location to completely redesign and rebuild this [theatre]. Finally, they believed in our firm, even though it was our first step. We are still very happy that, after 20 years at its new location, the theatre still follows its mission of producing Quebec dramaturgy—it



Céline Dion performs at the Colosseum at Caesars Palace, where, Bergé says, Scéno Plus was able to bring a sense of intimacy to a 4,000-seat house.

became a Montreal cultural icon."

Bergé says Scéno Plus differs from its competitors in a number of key aspects: "We provide five integrated services under one roof: architecture, theatre design, interior design, technology/specialized equipment, and multimedia immersion and interactivity. Rather than dealing with multiple companies specializing in limited disciplines, we guide a venue, from its inception, through design and construction; we provide a client with the convenience of having a single resource to get a successful facility. Aside from this, the most important fact is that we will always fight for the people working in the venue, rather than telling our team to design in order to get the cover of an architecture magazine.

"Our architecture department plays a pivotal role in developing concepts," he continues. "It ensures a spectacular and functional end result that meets the needs and expectations of our client. From the first phases, the architectural team acts as an integrator of all dimensions of a project." Scéno Plus' interior design team provides "patrons with a unique ambiance and experience, by developing ever more original concepts," including environment and ambiance design, in addition to research and selection of materials, colors, and finishes. "Our theatre design team has an extensive knowledge of venue logistics, including layout, sightline studies, seat design, technical infrastructures, and AV equipment."

The project management team assists and advises clients in all phases of a project until completion. "Working in close collaboration," Bergé says, "our personnel ensure that we meet their needs and expectations respecting general design, budget control, and production schedule. I probably spend around 180 days a year out of the office with clients." Project elements include logistical-needs analysis and realization strategy, in addition to planning, budget and schedule management, and construction-team coordination.

Bergé believes in the utilization of technology to sup-



Above: The O Theatre at the Bellagio represented a landmark project for Scéno Plus.



The Venue at Horseshoe Casino in Hammond, Indiana.

port a show's artistic vision. "I had the chance to do an internship in Poland during my university [years], where I witnessed first-hand a society that valued the theatrical arts and its culture. When I returned to Canada, I was determined to make a difference to the world of theatre, bringing a unique viewpoint. I was lucky, I guess, to have chosen to work on some of the most revolutionary—and evolutionary—environments of the past several decades.

"It is often said that architects are so goal-driven that they often overlook a client's requirements. We make a point of working from the inside out—to fully understand what our clients want from a production and how we can shape the building and infrastructure to honor and enable that vision. And not the other way around: to build the space and hope that it fits a production."

In terms of landmark projects, Bergé is particularly proud

of The Bellagio Theatre, designed in 1998 for Cirque du Soleil's *O*. "After the completion of our first permanent Las Vegas infrastructure for Cirque du Soleil—the Treasure Island Showroom for *Mystère*—Steve Wynn asked us to design a second one, The Bellagio Theatre, [which] we had to completely reinvent ourselves. I'm proud of the tremendous amount of technology and specialized equipment in the venue that you don't see—it is only there to help sustain the emotions coming from the show. The third one was the Colosseum at Caesars Palace [2003], also located in Las Vegas. When Céline Dion and René Angélil [Dion's manager and husband] called on us to create a home for Céline and the launch of her major production, *A New Day*, we were able to create an intimate and authentic environment, even in a 4,000-seat theatre. Also, the Salle Pierre-Mercure [1992] in Montreal is a magnificent concert hall—the acoustics are great. It was our first project as construction and project managers, and was a real success.

"Personally, I will always be a fan of immersive experiences. Modern technology gives us the opportunity to create an environment that completely changes the relationship between the stage and the audience. For example, the giant LED screen in the Colosseum wraps around the crowd and creates this unique experience that people are looking for. And for Céline's *A New Day*, we wrapped the audience around the 145' wide, sloped stage in a 180° arc with a curved LED screen behind her. The entire audience could see and hear every nuance of her exhilarating performance. For Cirque du Soleil's *O*, we spent \$25 million of the total \$50 million budget on hardware—including some very sophisticated hydraulic systems—to achieve that intimate, emotional contact between performers and the audience."

The right gear

"No facility can be complete without technologies that ensure the most efficient management of a facility's operations," says Normand-Pierre Bilodeau, Scéno Plus' director of technology and specialized equipment. In an international market where showrooms compete to attract talent, he says, "We are always striving to develop innovative technologies, including multimedia immersion and interactivity systems that create multiple thematic animated landscapes and provide a revolutionary interactive and evolving experience," with full integration of lighting, rigging, and sound systems.

"We have a different design approach from other companies," Bilodeau stresses. "With our interdisciplinary staff, we can handle everything from the front door to the rear door, including backstage areas, fixed and movable seating, water systems, flying rigging, motion control, and interior design for lobbies and entrances. We offer a full-function turnkey design involving audio, video, staging, and lighting."

For sound systems, Scéno Plus favors amplified line-array systems. "There are maybe three companies that lead the market," Bilodeau says. "We normally specify d&b audiotechnik, Meyer Sound, or L-Acoustics for the main

array and, for stage monitoring—in the U.S. at least—L-Acoustics or Clair Bros. The Joint by Rogue has a d&b system [flown left/right line arrays, stage fills, and delay loudspeakers] that provides a highly consistent sound. We heard that, from the first day of opening, all of the visiting acts have been using the house system rather than their own, which stayed on the truck.

"While we might specify JBL VerTec systems for outdoor festivals, for example, they don't normally offer the coverage and sonic fidelity we can achieve in a theatrical environment from our favored brands. The Meyer Sound MILO system, for example, offers a higher quality of coverage pattern than VerTec, which is why we often choose Meyer for theatrical installations, dependent upon the available budget.

"We faced a major challenge, for example, at The Venue [which is part of Harrah Entertainment's \$500-million expansion of the Horseshoe Casino] in Indiana, which comprised a 2,500-seat entertainment center on the fourth floor of the casino barge. Since the loading dock was 350' from the stage, we needed to specify a permanent sound system that would fulfill the needs of traveling acts and reduce set up time. So we went with Meyer, which offered the rider appeal and user familiarity that The Venue needed."

For video systems, intimacy is a key parameter for the majority of Scéno Plus' installations. "Modern-generation LED systems are brighter and consume less power than previous designs; they are also fast-changing," says Bilodeau. "For The Joint by Rogue, we specified two large-format screens either side of the stage. We wondered if the venue would use them, since most audience members are located 150' from the stage, but the screens proved very useful, especially for close-ups.

"DLP projectors offer enhanced HD resolution, but can be expensive; in the main, we usually specify Christie or Panasonic systems. While projec-

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tion systems offer image quality that is closer to the eye's response, a new trend in LEDs is slowly changing the market. LED walls do not offer a smooth image, but their brightness can be quite spectacular to the audience and enhances the contrast with the show lighting. Additionally, LED walls can be easily scattered around the room to accommodate any show or touring act."

Choices of lighting systems run through inevitable trends and fashions. "We handle a lot of special productions and experimental arts," Bilodeau continues. "For robotic lighting fixtures, we normally choose between Philips [Vari*Lite's] VL Series and Martin products. Last year, price was a major issue. We had to look for other products. Some companies adjusted their sales operations and came back with aggressive pricing for a high-quality solution."

"ETC is major supplier of lighting controllers, dimmers, and conventional lighting fixtures. To complement ETC product offerings, in some specific areas like followspots we specify Robert Juliat equipment. Lighting controllers are the link between the operator and the light. So we need to propose a unit that will fill the needs of the venue and respect the working ways of the operators. Strand, MA, ETC, and many other brands of control desk are evaluated for each project. At the moment, the grandMA is one of our favorites, but some good challengers are closing the gap. However, because many acts using multi-function venues bring their own lighting systems, we need to provide interconnects at the stage and lighting-control positions."

In terms of lighting trusses and stage rigging, Scéno Plus advises its clients where rigging points should be located, and the provision of stage lifts to handle rigging of permanent and touring systems. "For a basic system we might specify four two-ton lifts for video walls, etc," Bilodeau advises. "For some installations, we

could get more than 30 one-ton motors, which help theatre loads-ins and -outs to be carried out quickly and efficiently."

"But integration of all systems makes a big difference; every component should be the best that we can specify. The client needs to be comfortable with each element of an installation from Day One—it should be fully functional and clearly understood by the operators. Good ergonomics and operational simplicity are the keys to success for any theatrical environment."

"Designing a state-of-the-art theatre is much like buying a car. Your options depend upon your budget. But tires, engine, and seats are not options. Today's audiences expect the sound, video, and lighting to be outstanding and so memorable that they keep coming back. We are especially proud to have been part of a number of landmark projects that are admired by performers and audiences alike."

"With a truly innovative vision and a passionate approach to every project and every challenge," Bergé concludes, "Scéno Plus develops unique performance spaces that meet the highest expectations of the public, creative artists, and managers. It all adds up to a vision expressed in three key words: technology, art, and passion. Currently, we are designing transformable arenas capable of supporting different kinds of sporting events and large-capacity shows. Our expertise developed over 25 years gives us the unique opportunity to offer that kind of service." ☎

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