



THE NEW MINNESOTA CENTENNIAL SHOWBOAT

Something Old, Something New, Something Borrowed and Something Red, White and Blue

by C. Lance Brockman

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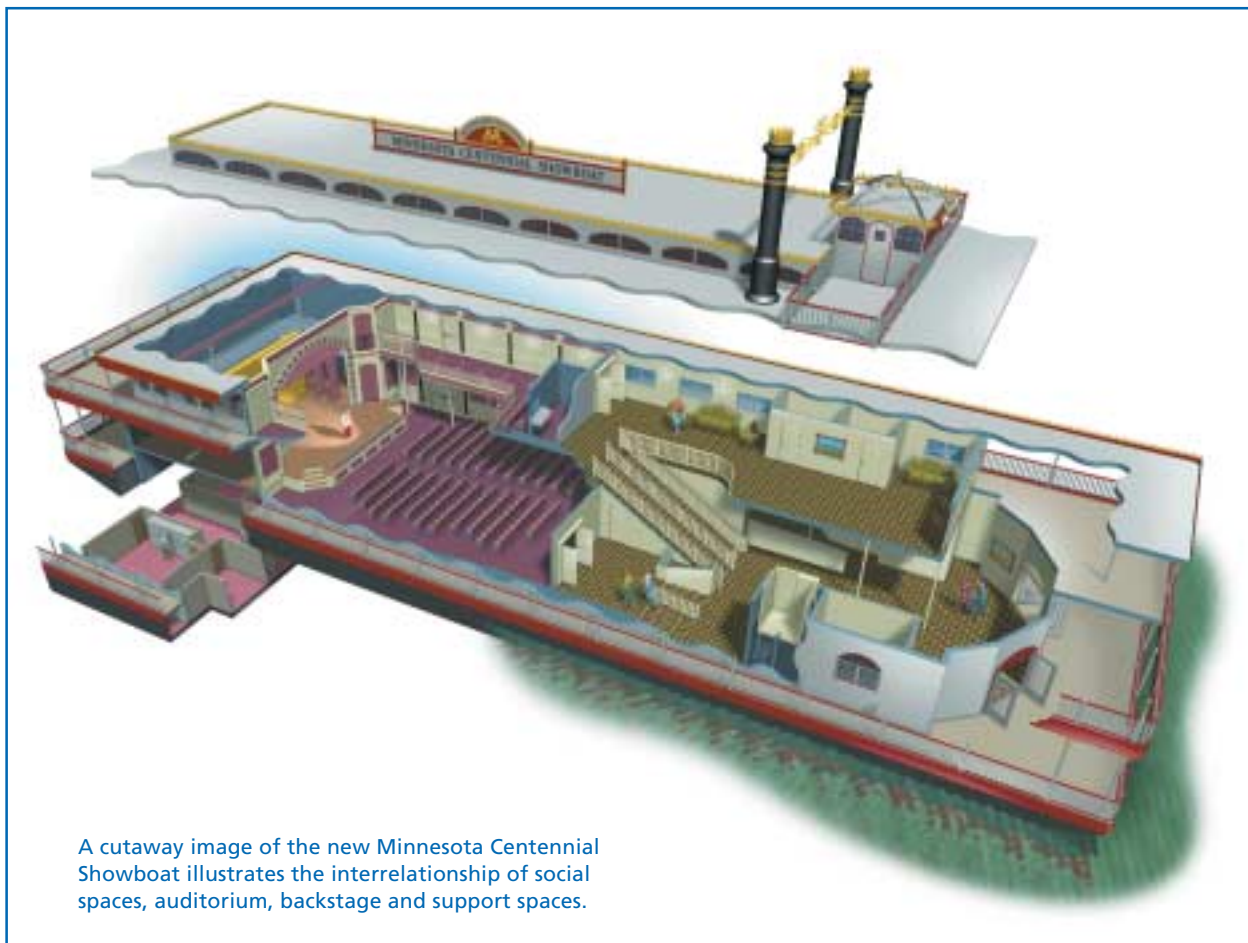
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tel: 800-93-USITT (800-938-7488)
tel: 315-463-6463
fax: 315-463-6525
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T H E N E W

MINNESOTA CENTENNIAL SHOWBOAT

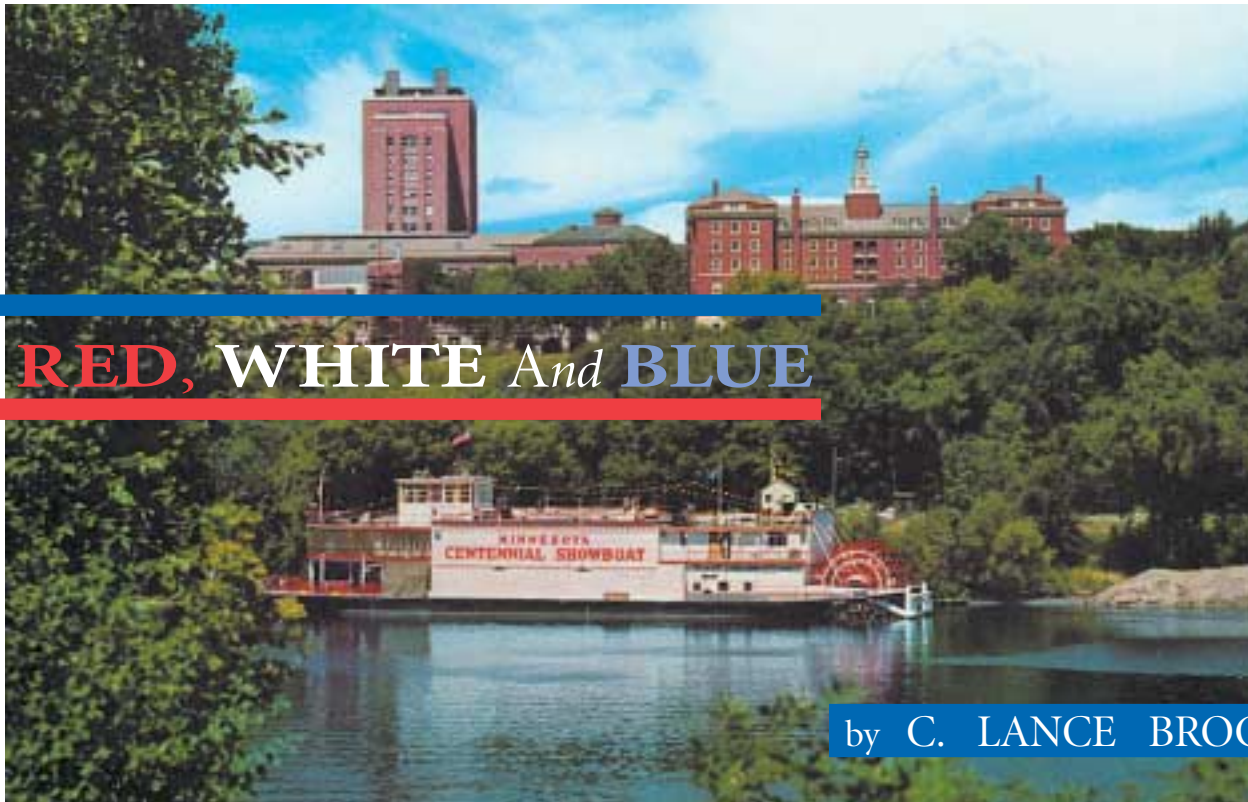
Something Old, Something New, Something Borrowed and Something



A cutaway image of the new Minnesota Centennial Showboat illustrates the interrelationship of social spaces, auditorium, backstage and support spaces.

DIGITAL IMAGE CREATED BY BILLY STEVE CLAYTON – COURTESY THE MINNEAPOLIS STAR/TRIBUNE

Shown here in 1958 docked below the Minneapolis campus of the University of Minnesota, the old Minnesota Centennial Showboat was built on top of the Army Corps of Engineers' sternwheeler, the General John Newton. The showboat's center section was new construction containing the auditorium and stage. The fore and aft sections retained many of the characteristics of the original boat built by the Iowa Iron Builders in 1899.



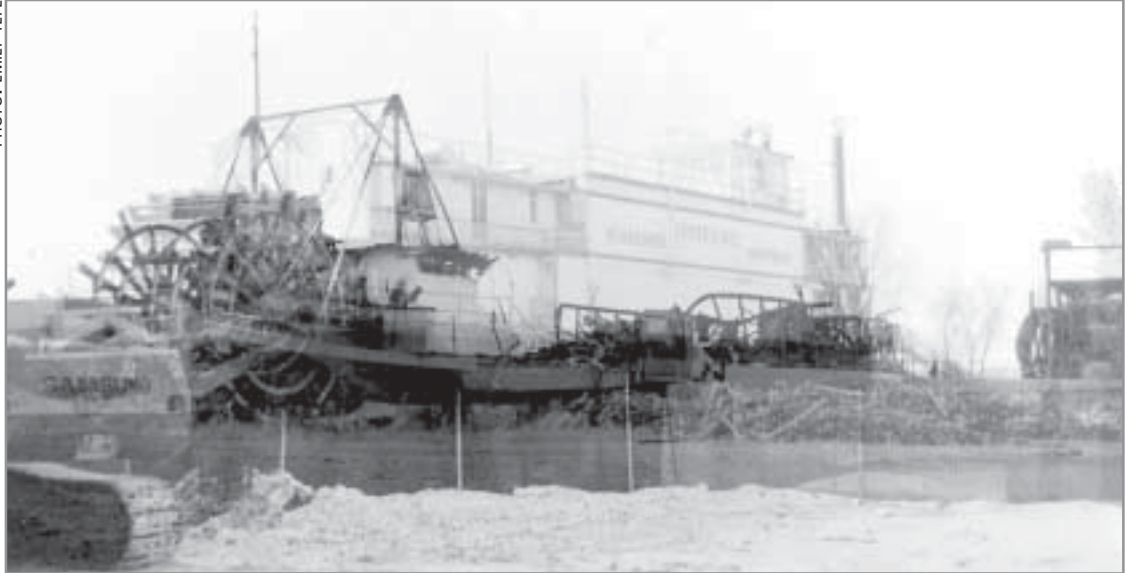
RED, WHITE And BLUE

by C. LANCE BROCKMAN

For the first half of the nineteenth century, Americans in the eastern third of the country, were knotted along the great waterways—the rivers that were conduits of commerce and travel. In 1831, the first showboat, the Floating Theatre, was launched with the purpose of bringing popular-culture entertainment and serious drama to the hinterlands.

William Chapman, Sr., a noted actor of the English and American stages, established the first “showboat family” when he recruited selected family members to be actors and crew aboard the Floating Theatre. This first foray into riverboat theater proved so popular that it was quickly emulated by many others possessing both a frontier and an entrepreneurial spirit (Graham 9). Even though there are less than a handful of functioning showboats left today, there were as many as fifty successfully launched during the twentieth century.

Much of what we know about this cultural curiosity has been shaped by *Show Boat*, the 1927 musical produced by Florenz Ziegfeld with songs by Oscar Hammerstein II and unforgettable music by Jerome Kern, loosely based on the highly popular novel by Edna Ferber written in 1926 (Graham 194). One impression we can correctly get from the musical is that showboats had well-equipped theatres including much of the late-Victorian theatrical accoutrements and paraphernalia like horseshoe balconies, stock wing-and-drop scenery and footlights. Contrary to the images we get from the musical,



This ghostly composite photo superimposes an image taken when the Newton was in dry dock for renovation with a photograph, taken from the same angle, of the remains of the showboat on the morning after the fire, January 27, 2000.

showboats were, for the most part, not modified paddle-wheelers. Most were simply commercial barges that provided a floating foundation for a hastily built wooden opera house. In fact, the first showboats meandered downstream on the current of the Ohio River and her tributaries. As the popularity and demand for this type of entertainment grew, many continued the journey joining the Mississippi at the confluence in Cairo, Illinois, eventually ending their river odyssey around New Orleans. On arrival, these river thespians debarked, removed the costumes and properties, sold the old boat/barge, traveled by various conveniences to their upstream port and prepared for the next season on a “New and Improved” showboat.

The first use of a floating theater as a training ground for actors and technicians was in 1938 by the University of Washington under the leadership of the legendary Drama Director, Glenn Hughes. (Exactly why and how the idea of a floating theatre began to permeate the plans of emerging university theatre programs is somewhat obscure and beyond the scope of this writer.) Although originally envisioned as a functioning vessel that could travel to various venues in Puget Sound, it never traveled anywhere. Instead, it was erected on wooden pilings with a false hull built to cover the physical structure that supported the floor of the auditorium. The novelty of a “floating” theatre brought an immediate and strong response from the local theatergoers and, “Through the mid-Fifties the [University of Washington] Showboat stood prominent among Seattle’s theatres and opening nights were black-tie affairs.” (*Backpage Tour* 14)

However, time and neglect eventually took their toll on the wooden structure and by the 1960s the future of Seattle’s showboat was a year-to-year proposition. Even a valiant effort to raise the money to refurbish and continuing this tradition for Seattle’s audiences came to naught. In 1994 time ran out and the boat was demolished. A plaque commemorating the unique contribution of the University of Washington Showboat is currently on display in the restored Penthouse Theatre.

The next university-sponsored showboat project to emerge resulted from a joint venture by Hiram (OH) College

and Kent State University. These two institutions joined forces and contracted with Captain Thomas Jefferson Reynolds for the use of his *Majestic* built as a floating showboat in 1923. From 1948 to 1951 the *Showboat Majestic*, which was pushed from river town to river town by the towboat *ATTA BOY*, was the summer home for Hiram/Kent State student thespians. However in 1951, students from the College of Wooster (OH) and various colleges in North Carolina, as well as Kent State, leased the *Majestic* and expanded the itinerary to the Cumberland River ending with a final showing in Nashville. (*SHOWBOAT CENTENNIAL*, March 1994)

In 1959, the *Showboat Majestic* was sold to the University of Indiana where it became home for summer performances in river towns in Indiana, Ohio, Kentucky and Pennsylvania. In 1966, the wooden hull was deemed unsafe by the Coast Guard and the final two years of performances were from a dock at Jeffersonville, Indiana. As in Seattle, the Indiana community tried to preserve this valuable asset with a valiant fund-raising drive, and even created new plans for the *MAJESTIC II*. However, these efforts fell short and the vessel was sold to the City of Cincinnati. After plating the hull in steel, the *MAJESTIC* opened in May of 1968 and was home for summer stock companies from the University of Cincinnati. After twenty years of service, ownership was transferred to the Cincinnati Recreation Commission where it still serves today as an operating and producing theatre.

Something Old

Dr. Frank M Whiting, venerable director at the University of Minnesota and incurable romantic, is credited with forging much of the department’s identity during the halcyon days after World War II. Exactly how “Doc” came up with the idea to bring showboating to students and audiences alike is somewhat veiled, but, by 1957 it seems his intentions were firmly established. Fortunately, the Minneapolis campus of the university is situated on a bucolic stretch of the Mississippi River so the only obstacles for Doc were to find a suitable boat and then to secure the resources to convert it into a working theatre. During the judging of a beauty pageant, fate stepped in,



PHOTO: C. LANCE BROCKMAN

In 2002, the new Minnesota Centennial Showboat, already docked on Harriet Island, undergoes final construction prior to its grand opening on the Fourth of July. The city skyline of St. Paul can be seen on the other side of the Mississippi River.



PHOTO: DAN SASSENBERG

View from the stage to the horseshoe balcony. Seating capacity for the new Showboat is 209.



PHOTO: DAN SASSENBERG

A view of the grand staircase and the Hearing Room—named after the “courtroom” on the old Newton where river-related cases were heard by the Army Corps of Engineers.

pairing Whiting with Tom Swain, the newly appointed Executive Director of the Minnesota Statehood Centennial Commission. Tom and Frank immediately struck up a friendship that became the catalyst for an amazing showboat project.

As documented in the first Minnesota Centennial Showboat Program, locating a showboat to serve the needs of the university theatre program and also the Centennial celebrations was almost as melodramatic as what was envisioned for the stage.

“There started a long and diligent effort to secure an old sternwheeler river packet—a traveling theatre to play Minnesota river towns during the Centennial year [1958]. Inquiry followed inquiry. Letters and telegrams were dispatched to Illinois, Kentucky, Florida, Missouri, wherever a riverboat was reported available. All replies were unfavorable; ‘price prohibitive’... ‘transportation impossible’... ‘boat already sold.’”



PHOTO: DAN SASSENBERG

The decorative proscenium and drop curtain of the new Centennial Showboat.

Production credits for *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, including the period olios: scenery by Dahl Delu, costumes by Matt LeFebvre, lighting by Jean A. Montgomery, sound by Martin Gwinup; the production was directed by Mike Harvey with olios directed by Vern Sutton, Anne-Charlotte Harvey was dramaturg and olio consultant; the “Centennial Showboat” drop curtain was designed and painted by C. Lance Brockman and his students.



PRODUCTION PHOTOS: BROOKE NELSON

A scene from the period melodrama, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, story by Robert Louis Stevenson, dramatized by Thomas R. Sullivan.



The final scene in *Dr. Jekyll's* laboratory. “Henry Jekyll has found peace at last. See there is a smile upon his face—a smile like that of a little child.”

Two ardent supporters of the project, Walter Freeman, a noted authority on the Mississippi River, and Senator Edward J. Thye discovered—“in the nick of time”—that a United States Army Corps of Engineers sternwheeler—The General John Newton—was available in New Orleans. And more importantly, they learned that it “was not to be sold but rather to be given to a charitable institution.” (*Minnesota Centennial Showboat 2*) With this important part of the puzzle in place, efforts immediately shifted to putting a financial package together that would support moving the boat the length of the Mississippi and converting it for the theatre department’s programmatic needs. To provide an immediate infusion of cash necessary for relocation and renovation, the department put up \$25,000 from its “new” building fund and the Statehood Centennial Commission immediately matched this sum.

In early March of 1958, the General John Newton was towed up the Mississippi in a barge pack, ceremoniously arriving the first week of April just as the ice was off of the upper river. The Newton had served the Corps of Engineers as a floating courtroom, traveling up and down the river hearing judicial cases about right of way and depth of channels. In anticipation of the remodeling, a team from the theatre department and the university’s physical plant went to New Orleans to inspect the mothballed Newton. Measurements were taken and some important preliminary decisions about the stage configuration were made so that no time would be wasted between the boat’s arrival in Minneapolis and the opening date. Although the allotted construction time was relatively short, the necessary modifications to the Newton were extensive. Immediately on arrival, carpentry and plumbing crews from the university’s physical plant department began work, in double shifts. Before the auditorium, balcony and stage could be erected, the center section of the boat had to be demolished down to the deck. On the front, or fore, of the boat, the original Hearing Room was saved for its historical value, and on the aft, the engine room was modified to provide storage space for costumes, properties and set pieces.



Pale Hands, one of the period olios or musical entertainments performed between scenes or as an afterpiece.



Three of the chorus girls from the Showboat company, sporting "electrified" bustles, sing the popular olio number, "Glow Worm."

PHOTO: DAN SASSENBERG



The stage of the new Centennial Showboat with a scene from its inaugural production, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*.

On June 26, 1958, just three short months after arriving in the Twin Cities, the re-christened Minnesota Centennial Showboat opened its first production, a traditional melodrama, *Under the Gaslight* by Augustin Daly. During its first decade of operation, performances were given at various ports along Minnesota river-ways including Red Wing, St. Paul, Stillwater, Hastings, Lake City and Wabasha. Later, bowing to increased Coast Guard restrictions and escalating costs of towing, the Minnesota Showboat was permanently moored near the Minneapolis campus of the University of Minnesota.

Being moored did not detract from the popularity of this cultural fixture and sold-out performances were the rule at the Minnesota Centennial Showboat. Audiences enjoyed historic productions of nineteenth-century melodrama that, on occasion, alternated with Shakespeare, Molière and even Agatha Christie. One necessary ingredient, independent of the play choice was the popular musical olios or variety acts. Although the audiences could hardly remember the titles of the plays from one year to the next, they all agreed that the olios represented the true spirit of a showboat experience.

This tradition continued until the early 1990s when the

ravages of age and neglect, along with code restrictions imposed by the Americans with Disabilities Act, brought the Minnesota Centennial Showboat to the brink of closure. In 1993, while the showboat continued to operate on a year-to-year basis, the Save Our Showboat capital campaign was launched. Even though the economy was strong, raising money for a seasonal theatre proved to be a real challenge. Eventually the old Newton was closed until the much needed renovation financing could be resolved. The Showboat Players continued to perform during this period, 1994 to 1996, in a variety of venues but audiences faded, as did memories of those days on the river.

In the fall of 1999, three attempts to match financial resources with escalating costs finally resulted in a green light from the university for a \$2.5 million renovation. A contractor immediately started to strip all of the old and flammable interior surfaces and to begin the laborious task of removing the lead-base paints from the Hearing Room. With the renovation moving forward, the theatre department turned its energy to mounting an inaugural production—*Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, complete with period olios. Everyone anticipated completion of the project, finally, with a gala opening on the Fourth of July.

On January 27, 2000 the unthinkable happened. The General John Newton, along with the hopes and aspirations of everyone associated with this tremendous effort, went up in a spectacular blaze. Undetected sparks from a welding rig had smoldered in the cavity between the original deck of the Newton and the raked auditorium floor installed in 1958. Only forty minutes after the construction crews left for the day, the boat was fully engulfed in fire. The next day, the only thing remaining besides the Newton's hull and paddlewheel was the obvious question, "What are we going to do next?"

Something New

Stories in the local media about the devastating fire and pictures of the burnt remains of the old showboat captivated citizens in the Twin Cities and in communities across the state. There was an immediate and sustained outpouring of concerns that we not let this accident deter us from bringing back this cherished institution. This reaction, more than anything

else, answered the question of what needed to be done next. The theatre department immediately began considering viable plans to resurrect the showboat tradition. One plan was to rebuild on the old hull; another option that seemed like the obvious solution was to buy and convert one of the many casino showboats then on the market. Unfortunately, these schemes to resolve a difficult problem far exceeded our dwindling resources.

In the earliest phase of renovating the Newton, the department had negotiated with both the cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul for a permanent and accessible mooring site. St. Paul, it was discovered, was developing an ambitious plan to revitalize a family-friendly riverfront. A renovated Minnesota Centennial Showboat beautifully fit their needs, and a partnership between the university and St. Paul resulted in plans for a new dock that would weather the vagaries of the river. In addition to accessible docking facilities, the city also agreed to construct a pavilion with shore amenities for the audiences along with a suitable ticket booth. All of these were completed when the fire broke out.

As in a melodrama, a hero emerged just in time to save us from both the buzz saw and failure. The Padelford Packet Boat Company runs a fleet of excursion boats just upstream from the docking space built for the new Showboat and they were anticipating that nearby theatre audiences would increase their summer tourist business. Eight months after the fire, Captains Bill and Steve Bowell approached the theatre department offering to build and maintain a showboat to our specifications. They argued that with their experience and influence they could most likely hold down construction costs better than the university could. In trade, they wanted to be able to use the facility for rental events (weddings, business meetings, etc.) when the theatre was dark. This was an offer we could not refuse. Finally, after a decade of trials and tribulations, we felt close to the end of “the longest-running melodrama ever staged.”

Something Borrowed

The new Minnesota Centennial Showboat was designed around the existing plans developed for the old Newton. Consistent with historical precedent, the vessel was built on a new barge measuring 175 feet long by 50 feet wide. One advantage to new construction was that it was no longer necessary to accommodate the Newton’s paddle wheel, boilers and connecting pipes. In a new boat, that valuable space was delegated to critical social spaces. We traded the quaintness of the Newton for a vessel that was more comfortable and audience-friendly. Building a new boat also made compliance to the ADA mandatory necessitating larger aisles, handicap-accessible bathrooms and an elevator—none of which would have been possible on the restricted footprint of a renovated Newton.

Construction on the new Minnesota Centennial Showboat commenced in February of 2001 at Mississippi Marine in Greenville, Mississippi. By being located in a large ship and barge construction corridor, Mississippi Marine was able to use local and specialized manufacturers to generate detailed

ornamentation such as the 1500 linear feet of decorative railings, the over 500 feet of gingerbread, as well as the 100 brackets on the structural columns—all water-cut from 3/16-inch plate steel. Needless to say, the specialized labor force and manufacturers in Mississippi, coupled with the careful management by the Padelford Co., allowed us to achieve our artistic goals without exceeding the reduced funds left in our budget.

As the earliest hints of spring filled the air, the Showboat began its journey upriver to her new home in St. Paul. The arrival was glorious as the press and public ceremoniously welcomed the new Minnesota Centennial Showboat to its permanent dock at Showboat Landing on Harriet Island. To most, the project appeared to be complete; for the department and staff of the Padelford, the work was just beginning. Although the exterior was complete, the interior was basically a shell: only the drywall, plumbing and electrical rough-in were completed.

The theatre department—students, staff and alumni volunteers—undertook the interior decorating and equipping of the new Showboat’s theatre and social spaces. Consistent with the design work found in turn-of-the-century opera houses, the auditorium decoration was a judicious blend of period painting from stencils intermixed with three-dimensional moldings. To achieve the look of nineteenth-century plaster relief, polyurethane moldings from Balmer Studios of Canada were used.

One “memory” or artifact from the old Showboat that seemed critical to save was the original seating. It still existed as the seats had been removed for reupholstering before the fire. After consulting with several vendors, it was determined that retrofitting old seats to today’s codes would be prohibitively expensive. Fortunately, Irwin Seating, a long-time USITT member, had historic molds that approximately matched the original “Fox” end standards used in the old showboat. We were delighted to be able to retain the old look in brand new and larger seats—the best of both worlds.

Simultaneously with finishing the decoration and seating, the mechanical elements—plumbing, electrical, HVAC and security—were completed by Padelford’s skilled staff and various local subcontractors. In addition, the theatre department’s technical staff supervised installation of the lighting, sound and rigging necessary for making the Showboat a working theatre. Alums Tom and Loleta Scott—founders of Norcostco—provided the lighting equipment and control system. Many others, too numerous to mention, provided donations of furniture, paint and expertise.

Something RED, WHITE and BLUE

As originally planned, the gala opening of the new Minnesota Centennial Showboat took place on the Fourth of July. The melodrama, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, with period olios, gave regular showboat audiences a trip down memory lane. However, for new audiences it was a wonderful discovery of a style and form of theatre that is seldom seen today on the American stage. Consistent with the old Newton, the new showboat was

an immediate hit with the Twin Cities audiences. Fifty-five performances were sold out before the opening night. Many complaints were heard that patrons had waited too long and could not get tickets to the inaugural event. We should all have such problems!

As part of the gala opening, the new Minnesota Centennial Showboat was christened the Captain Frank M Whiting in honor of the originator of the first showboat.

Finally, for the theatre department and the community, the odyssey was finished. The future promises many seasons of good, family-centered entertainment coupled with a unique training opportunity for our students both on and behind the stage. Unfortunately space does not permit this author to acknowledge all of the generous contributions that finally brought this project to fruition. After all of the travails and difficulties, the villain was finally foiled leaving only an incredible number of heroes. ❖

C. Lance Brockman is a professor of Theatre Arts and Dance at the University of Minnesota. He was the project manager for the new Minnesota Centennial Showboat.

Note: All elements of the *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* production were created by alumni of the department and showboat including direction by Mike Harvey with assistance from Anne-Charlotte Harvey both currently on the faculty of San Diego State University. The traditional wing-and-drop settings was designed by Dahl Delu—freelance designer from Los Angeles. Costumes created by Matt LeFebvre and lighting design by Jean A. Montgomery—both on the faculty of the University of Minnesota. Although not an alum of the department, Vern Sutton, olio director, is a member of the Music Faculty at the university and is a nationally renowned expert on turn-of-the-century music.

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Internet Resources

- General information on steamboats: www.steamboats.com/museum.html
- History and information on the Showboat Majestic: www.steamboats.com/museum8.html
- Photographs of the development of the new Minnesota Centennial Showboat are available on the University of Minnesota Web site: www.facm.umn.edu/facm/Complete/Showboat/photos.htm
- Information about upcoming productions on the Minnesota Centennial Showboat is available at: cla.umn.edu/theatre/showboat.html
- Information on the polyurethane decorative moldings used on the new Minnesota Centennial Showboat is available on the Balmer Studios Web site: www.BalmerStudios.com