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CASE STUDY

The Art House, Wyong

A NSW Central Coast performing arts venue upgrades its PA with JBL VTX.

The Art House in Wyong hasn't been around very long in the scheme of things when it comes to performing arts venues. It was first opened in 2016 and since then has hosted a steady stream of local and touring productions. Located on the NSW Central Coast, the Art House is a logical and popular stepping-stone for any shows launching north and travelling the 100km from Sydney. As such, The Art House ensures it has the best to offer in sound, lighting and AV, and just shy of its 10th anniversary replacing the main auditorium's audio system was on the to-do list. This is a 500-seat, single raked floor space with a traditional proscenium arch stage. Actually, there are also two small balcony sections close to the proscenium that cater for 40 patrons each, but these aren't exactly the best seats in the house and probably more of a headache for the house staff given the positions put a PA stack in your face. Even so, they have to be included in any grand plans.

The project had two less-than-usual factors. First, The Art House is managed by an independent not-for-profit organisation with a likewise independent board of directors. Second, Production and Operations Manager Tom Skelton has been closely involved in the AV industry from both sides of the fence. He's clipped more than his fair share of cable trays to ceiling hangs, and Tom was confident that with his experience and expertise, along with that of his crew, he could install the new PA



and without requiring any contracted integrator. That certainly makes sense, and saves a lot of money, but you can imagine it might make some audio suppliers a bit nervous and squinty-eyed when it comes to commissioning and ongoing product support. More on this later...

OUT WITH THE OLD

The original PA had its limitations as you'd expect from loudspeaker technology over a decade old. Unsurprisingly, in a space designed primarily for live, unamplified performances, reinforced sound created gremlins of dead spots and unwanted reflections. Tom was keen to achieve a smooth



and even coverage throughout the auditorium. The other serious consideration was to blend the new PA into the existing architecture. He didn't want the sightlines and aesthetics compromised by bulky, suspended arrays. There are dedicated positions for the FOH loudspeakers and Tom wanted to ensure these could be utilised again – something not necessarily guaranteed when there's a decade between the speaker science.

VTX MAKES AN IMPRESSION

Tom admits that when he was given the go-ahead to go PA shopping, his initial wish list didn't have 'JBL' scribbled anywhere. He had other brands in mind, all of them highly regarded and strong contenders for the job. Really, poke him hard enough and he confesses to having been a little prejudiced against any JBL system because he wasn't a fan of the historic voicing of JBL loudspeakers. So what changed his mind?

Wandering among the hallowed halls of Integrate 2023 with colleague Mitch Colton from CCT Productions, Tom was convinced to drop by the MadisonAV stand and just have an objective listen to a VTX rig on display. Literally, close your eyes and listen. Sure enough, all the preconceptions about JBL loudspeakers were blown away – VTX was a whole new experience. And the price tag was mighty tempting to the not-for-profit purse strings.

BACK TO THE DRAWING BOARD

With Jeff Shoesmith and Peter Kubow from MadisonAV rolling up their sleeves to help, and using the JBL Venue Synthesis software, everyone set about designing a VTX system. For a while, Tom was keen on a JBL VTX A8 configuration rather than the A6 – it's hard enough for the old salts in this business to think in terms of anything less than 12-inch drivers, let alone half that size. But that design had all three of the LCR hangs, albeit in the original





locations, dropping below the proscenium arch. Incorporating A6 boxes, and more of them, fixed that issue without compromising the audio. Added above each array of seven A6 units is a VTX B15 sub. On the floor and tucked beneath the stage apron are four VTX B18 subs, and another four A6s as a front fill. Last but not least, an A6 either side creates fill under those pesky balconies. Everything is powered by seven Crown IT-HD amplifiers. The whole install was done in three 'blocks' with the cabling and a new position for the amps and power established first, then a month later the floor-mounted subs were put in place - a job requiring breaking out the hammers and saws and some judicious redesign of the stage apron. (Architects look away now.) Finally, the arrays were hung, commissioned and tuned over a five-day period.

"The support and advice from both MadisonAV and Harman were fantastic," Tom explains. "Those guys were so good, they totally embraced our confidence that we could do the work in-house and their input reflected that. It was a tweak here, an idea there... never any suggestion we couldn't do it properly." Properly indeed, Tom was adamant about

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applying all the finishing touches, tidying up and leaving no loose ends. He didn't want to be eye-balling a hanging cable or open wall cavity in six months' time and think, "Must get around to that..."

WHAT COULD GO WYONG?

Nothing, with the combined talents of The Art House, MadisonAV and Harman. Perhaps at first glance, it might seem a tad overkill for a 500-seat venue, but it's all about plenty of headroom providing a ready-for-anything versatility that venues like Wyong need, and that all-important coverage.

"It's perfect," Tom says. "We've measured absolutely everywhere, and you never lose more than half a decibel anywhere in the auditorium. You couldn't ask for better." Has he become a total JBL convert?

"The other professional systems available are

all great, there's no question. The competition is so close. But I think our VTX system can be proof for anyone that the old JBL 'sound' of the past is gone. The VTX is brilliant, and I invite anybody to drop in for a listen and hear it for themselves. And on top of that is the bang for your buck - they're genuinely cost-effective if budget is an issue."

Peter Kubow from MadisonAV tells us, "Working with Tom and the Art house was easy. We listened to what he wanted to achieve in his theatre and what his current pain-points were, and we went through a couple of designs. After a few thinking sessions

with Tom and Venue Synthesis, and we came up with a solution that met Tom and The Art House's needs. From previous projects, I knew that if the data was close in Venue Synthesis, then it would be real world for me when I get to site. I totally trust the VS prediction software and it's something I use on a day-to-day basis for system designs. You can't go wrong." The Art House has many more decades of performances to look forward to, and it's now guaranteed, thanks to JBL VTX, Madison and Harman, that the shows will be heard perfectly from every seat in the house. Including those funny little balconies.

FEEDBACK IN THE MIX

Will Sweet of Sweetsounds Musical Engineering is a professional, full-time sound engineer who's mixed high-profile acts at The Art House both before and after the refit. "I was lucky enough to have mixed on the new VTX system at Arthouse at Wyong and love the sound and coverage of the new system, but the biggest thing for me having mixed on the old system with a 10-piece band on multiple occasions was that the low energy issues of the old system was now non-existent. The new system is way superior in headroom and energy in the theatre at all seats. In fact, the headroom of the system was also superior to a lot of theatres we have done nationwide on this run. I was very happy with the new VTX system."

Stephen Askins is a touring audio operator/production manager/tour manager based in the mid-north coast of NSW. Here's what he has to say about mixing at The Art House after the JBL VTX upgrade. "The first show was with Abbalanche, one of Australia's longest running and successful tribute shows. A few minutes into soundcheck, I noticed how natural the high end of the PA was and how wonderful the vocals sounded with no equalisation required. A few months later I was back at The Art House with Joey Fimmano's Music of the Night. For this show I require a PA that is articulate in the vocal range and the VTX again gave me the sound I needed with minimal effort on my part. It was clear the new PA is a winner, and the best sounding JBL PA system I have ever used."

