



The Next Rig Thing: Earl Turner Theatre

By Mark A. Newman

When a traditional hotel ballroom makes the transition into a Las Vegas-style showroom, a new lighting plot is among many must-haves. The Earl Turner Theatre opened at the Harrah's Casino in New Orleans in May and revealed a lighting package that included the most up-to-date lighting technology on the market, such as 100 ETC Source Four® Ellipsoidals and 60 ETC Source Four® PARs, 24 High End Systems ColorMerges™, 18 HES Studio Spot® 250s, eight HES Studio Color® 250s, four HES Cyberlights®, 19 HES Dataflash® AF1000s™, Tomcat trussing, and a Flying Pig Systems WholeHog® III with an expander wing console that controls the whole thing.

LD Debbie Fowler was brought in to design and program the new rig at the request of the theatre's namesake, Earl Turner. Fowler had designed Turner's show at Harrah's in Laughlin, NV, after he had seen her work on a Righteous Brothers show. Architectural lighting designer John Levy specified, and Fowler was brought in at the last minute to design specifically for Turner's show. "By the time I became involved, all the fixtures were already picked out," she says, "so...I had the crew come in and move everything around, and we spent 212 hours programming the show."

According to Fowler, one of the biggest challenges in programming the show was Turner's style of music. "Earl's shows are very exciting, so they are very cue-intensive. One song has 85 cues!" she says. "I told Earl, 'I can program your show generically, and you can change it around if you want, or I can nail it.' He said, 'Nail it,' so that's why it took so long. Normally, it only takes 50 to 100 hours to program a show."

Another problem occurred when there was not enough power for the Cyberlights. Fowler had originally placed the fixtures on the lighting rig, but when she arrived, they were in the front of house. "The Cyberlights were going to be the workhorses of the system, and it was important to me to get those moved onto the stage, but they had no power," she says. "Plus, there are two huge columns in the middle of the room to work around, which is another reason I wanted the Cybers on stage; I wasn't going to get much use out of them out front."

The power problem was rectified after Harrah's brought in a team of electricians who fixed the problem in a few days, but another daunting aspect of the design dealt with the room itself — the low ceiling height only allowed for two levels of lighting, truss level and floor level. Since Fowler likes to have a variety of levels, this was a problem. Four ladders were built and equipped with ColorMerges and Studio Spots, giving Fowler "a whole new dimension." She put Cyberlights and ColorMerges at different heights on the floor booms, so Fowler was able to light on a multitude of levels.

"Lighting position, to me, is one of the most important things in lighting a show," Fowler explains. "I don't typically use a lot of front light in my designs, and the original design [in the showroom] was very front light heavy, so we moved a lot of those fixtures on stage. I feel like you can get a lot more depth lighting that type of show from the side, back, and overhead."

After Fowler spent three weeks programming, she hit the road with Sheena Easton and then moved on to tour with Dionne Warwick throughout the summer. Before she left New Orleans, however, she made sure that Harrah's in-house lighting director Joel Burkhart knew the ins and outs because she wanted to make doubly sure that Earl Turner would look fabulous in his eponymous new showroom.