J. R. Clancy celebrates 125 years

DO YOU REMEMBER WHEN The Phantom of the Opera began touring, and you got the advance package for the show? Most theatres had never seen a production of this size before. The show had a set heavier than anything you had ever hung, and it required a lot of changes in your house.

That was exactly what stagehand John Clancy faced when the English melodrama Romany Rye came to Syracuse in 1882.

The Grand Opera House in Syracuse, like many others, was equipped with ordinary hardware store pulleys that simply didn’t have the capacity to “fly” the heavy scenery the show required. Rather than cancel the production, Clancy came up with a solution of his own: He designed and built high-capacity pulleys for this show.

As the tour continued around the country, word spread about the stagehand in Syracuse who was making his own sturdy rigging equipment. Orders came pouring in, and in 1885 John Clancy left the Grand Opera House and started to manufacture rigging equipment full-time. He issued the company’s first catalog in 1886, a technical catalog that explained each product in language theatre managers could understand. A shrewd entrepreneur, he solicited advertising for the catalog from scenic artists coast to coast, so when recipients opened the catalog, they saw names they recognized and respected. The message was clear: J. R. Clancy had a nationwide clientele and impact.

With a strong portfolio of products in place and a reputation as an innovator in the rigging industry, Clancy knew the key to keeping and expanding his customer base was continuous improvement. Just two years after the company’s founding, J. R. Clancy’s 1887 catalog was jammed with new products. “I have spared no expense in improving my goods and designing new styles,” he wrote in the catalog’s opening letter, “…the greatest care being exercised in the selection of materials used, and only skilled workmen being employed.”

Clancy solved many problems for his customers with his inventions. Beyond the innovations, he understood that quality and safety were every bit as important. He encouraged customers to report problems, saying “Try to write us good naturally, but if you cannot, write to us anyway.”

Never was the need for safety more apparent than in 1903, when 602 people died in the Iroquois Theatre fire in Chicago—still the deadliest single-building fire in history. Clancy immediately developed (and patented) the fire line and self-closing fire curtain—which are still the basis for fire curtains today. He worked with the fire authorities to develop codes and equipment. J. R. Clancy, Inc. continues this tradition by working with organizations like ESTA to codify safety standards for the construction and use of rigging equipment. Clancy also began an ongoing practice of providing free installation drawings.

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Clancy always thought big—in every area. He and his company introduced stage lighting equipment (both gas lights and the new electric lights) in 1891, T-guided counterweight systems in 1925, and double purchase systems in 1938. Many of the company’s products were named after the inventor on the Clancy staff—the Welch floor block is one example.

Somehow, while running the growing company and introducing major innovations to the industry, Clancy brought his love of big ideas to his community. He was very active in charitable causes including local hospitals and the Red Cross, and in 1913, he became a United States Congressman, representing the Syracuse area until 1915.

Complex contour curtains became a specialty for the company in the fifties, and the requirements for sophisticated control systems led the company to create a dedicated controls department. Soon after, the company started building the revolutionary Izenour synchronous point hoist systems and control systems to synchronize the hoists electrically, without mechanical shaft and clutch systems.

As the industry demanded more and more complex and creative rigging solutions, J. R. Clancy became known for its engineering and controls abilities for major projects. The 200-plus hoist and controls project for the Christian Broadcasting Network in the late seventies showcased the company’s pioneering solutions—particularly in motorized applications.

The last decades of the twentieth century changed the way the industry thought about building theatres. Among the many technological advances, designers employed adjustable ceiling canopies, massive acoustical structures with independently moving segments, and movable walls. J. R. Clancy took its place on the forefront of these innovations, designing and manufacturing specialized rigging solutions to bring each new concept to reality. At the same time, the company continued to develop and install custom motorized rigging for opera houses, cruise ships, and performing arts centers in the United States and overseas.

With its control system expertise firmly established, J. R. Clancy took the next logical step in 2006, using the company’s experience with the mass-produced Izenour motorized rigging systems to develop an affordable, off-the-shelf line of automated hoists. Development of the PowerLift brought the technology into the 21st century.

As J. R. Clancy celebrates its 125th anniversary, its expertise and repertoire of products allow the company to take on the big projects that require customized feats of engineering—from the largest concert halls to the world’s most advanced performing arts centers. Huge moving acoustical ceilings, stage lifts, and high-capacity winches and hoists are all part of a day’s work at J.R. Clancy.

A custom chandelier engineered, manufactured, and installed in the Winspear Opera House in Dallas, TX.

Hoist with dual air brakes on a 30” disk, to lift a glass ceiling at the Palladium in Carmel, IN.
Most recently, the company rose to the challenge of engineering the new chandelier in the Winspear Opera House, in Dallas’ AT&T Performing Arts Center. The one-of-a-kind chandelier required 44 custom-designed winches to control 318 cast acrylic rods, each of which vanish independently into the ceiling as the house lights dim. At the same time, the J. R. Clancy team understood the implications of moving so much weight over the heads of the audience. Achieving safety in motion is a concept that’s central to every project J. R. Clancy undertakes, whether it’s a unique project like the Winspear chandelier, hoists in a high school auditorium, or a system of acoustical banners and panels in a major house of worship.

Key to the company’s success is its commitment to the ISO 9001 Quality Management System which impacts every aspect of the business. (See the Spring 2009 issue of Protocol to learn more about J. R. Clancy’s ISO experiences.) With metrics in place to measure everything, the company still believes in treating its partners the way everyone likes to be treated. Recognizing that its partners are in business to make money, J. R. Clancy has made it the corporate mission to do what it takes to make every project successful. The company’s unique Extraordinary Guarantee™—printed on every invoice—ensures this success.

The company’s leaders think that John Clancy would have done it this way. His principles guide J. R. Clancy’s work, its relationships with customers, and the way the company does business, 125 years after he set the initial standard for excellence.

Tom Young is J. R. Clancy, Inc.’s vice president of marketing.