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BACKSTAGE MAGICIANS

BEHIND THE SCENES, THEY CAN TRANSFORM BLANK SPACES INTO ELABORATE FANTASIES March 2, 2008

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KAREN D'SOUZA, Mercury News

Memo: Theater review

Illustration: Photos (5), Drawings (2)

Caption: PHOTO: DAVID M. ALLEN;

Costume designer Thomas G. Marquez, above,

PHOTO: JANA MARCUS -- AMERICAN MUSICAL THEATRE OF SAN JOSE and his creations, at top, in American Musical Theatre of San Jose's production of "Cabaret." Backstage artists, designers and technicians have become so adept at adding spectacle to plays that theater fans have come to demand it.

PHOTO: DAVID CALICA -- SAN JOSE REPERTORY THEATRE

In San Jose Repertory Theatre's production of "Tranced," technicians devised an elaborate water wall as a backdrop.

PHOTO: DAVID CALICA -- SAN JOSE REPERTORY THEATRE

"The actual running of water was used to underscore the 'trancing,' the flow of thought, the flow of ideas in the play," San Jose Rep associate artistic director Kirsten Brandt says.

PHOTO: DAVID ALLEN

Singer-songwriter Tracy Chapman wrote the score for American Conservatory Theater's "Blood Knot" (with Steven Anthony Jones, left, and Jack Willis). "Her haunting voice brings the play squarely into our own moment," says Carey Perloff, ACT's artistic director.

DRAWING: THOMAS G. MARQUEZ ILLUSTRATIONS

Costume design sketches for American Musical Theatre's production of "Cabaret" include "Kit Kat Girl," above,

DRAWING: THOMAS G. MARQUEZ ILLUSTRATIONS

and "Emcee," below.

Long ago, staggering technical firepower was strictly the province of Broadway, where falling chandeliers ("Phantom of the Opera") and flying helicopters ("Miss Saigon") became icons of hits on the Great White Way.

Then came Julie Taymor's visual fantasies ("The Lion King") and Cirque du Soleil's phantasmagorias ("O") that raised the bar on the eye-popping genre for good.

Now we live in a society that not only craves spectacle but outright demands it. We expect to be blown away by backstage magic. As the culture becomes magnetized by eye candy, from huge plasma screens to mini iPod videos, the visual aesthetics of set design, costumes and lights have stolen much of the spotlight. As more and more theaters break out the big bucks for yowza special effects, the stagecraft of the theater has taken center stage.

Consider the hypnotic rain effect in "Tranced," which just closed at San Jose Repertory Theatre. Kris Stone's liquid set design echoed one of the key themes of the play, the fluidity of identity, with a windowpane snaked by ever-flowing rivulets of water. Transparency was the motif.

"The rain effect came from many of the repeated references to water in the play," says Kirsten Brandt, San Jose Rep's associate artistic director. "The actual running of water was used to underscore the 'trancing,' the flow of thought, the flow of ideas in the play."

Crafting such a lovely image means hammering out the mundane details of running water onstage (how do you muffle the sound? how to keep the water from growing algae?) Just getting the acoustics of the effect right is a science of its own. All these details must be just so to turn a 12-foot-tall roll of plastic into a magic portal of light and shadow.

As technical director at the Rep, Erik Sunderman engineers the nuts and bolts behind such pageantry: "This was such a large water wall that we didn't how we were going to make it work, but we did."

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Costume changes

Or take the decadent Weimar-era costumes that dot the American Musical Theatre's upcoming revival of Kander and Ebb's dark masterpiece "Cabaret." The Bard tells us clothes make the man, so it's the costume designer who unlocks the identity of a character in our mind's eye.

Forget the dissipated heroin chic of Sam Mendes' hot Broadway revival; AMT's high-glam production celebrates the timelessness of bling. Metallic accents of silver and gold take the spotlight here instead of the usual stark black lingerie look. For uber-diva Sally Bowles, glitz and green nail polish are must-have accessories.

"She's a bohemian," says AMT costume designer Thomas G. **Marquez**. "She can wear a fur coat over pajamas and go shopping. With a little bit of lipstick, you can get away with anything."

Of course, not all stagecraft lives in the eye of the beholder. Tracy Chapman's score for "Blood Knot" definitely deserves star billing. The musical composition has a huge impact on the flow of this American Conservatory Theater revival. While Chapman's honeyed sound sometimes upstages the ensemble, the score also forces us to listen to Athol Fugard's breakthrough play, which first debuted in 1961, with fresh ears.

"Tracy's score for 'Blood Knot,' " says Carey Perloff, artistic director of ACT, "is beautifully true to the source, yet her haunting voice brings the play squarely into our own moment. So it is both honest historically but vividly immediate."

Protecting the script

Still, there's a fine line between enhancing the aesthetic of the text, the music of the language itself, and eclipsing it entirely.

"There is certainly a danger of a sound score overwhelming or altering the intention of a play," notes Perloff, "but Tracy is such a consummate artist that she made sure she got deep inside the play and didn't get in its way."

Some theater artists certainly fear that the magic of special effects can lead to an addiction to gimmicks. The impulse to throw money at the stage, instead of letting the text speak for itself, can diminish the integrity of the art form.

For Kit Wilder, associate artistic director at San Jose's scrappy little City Lights, where big-ticket effects are off the table, high-tech razzle-dazzle can steal attention from the spoken word.

"In my mind, unless the production is purely a showcase for the technical aspects of presentation, then the technical exists to augment, enhance, and highlight for the audience what is (or must) be there already -- in the text, as interpreted and delivered by directors, actors, and the like -- and must in no way obscure the story."

Marquez couldn't agree more. He may be a fashionista at heart but he despises sequins for sequins sake.

"Sometimes less is more," says the costume designer. "You can put too much on someone and fuss it up like a Barbie Doll and just distract the audience."

There is also the risk of spoon-feeding the audience, of telegraphing the message of the play, or the key to a character's psyche, so loudly that there is nothing left for theatergoers to discover on their own.

"After all, we are all storytellers. Technical theatre becomes increasingly seductive every day, but it must never be allowed to seduce us away from the 'committed relationship' that we do, and must, have with story, story, story,"

Wilder says. "This allows the audience to do their part: to engage their imaginations and truly bring the stage story to life in their own minds."

'Cabaret'

Book by Joe Masteroff, music by John Kander, lyrics by Fred Ebb; presented by American Musical Theatre of San Jose

Where: Center for the Performing Arts, 255 Almaden Blvd., San Jose

When: 8 p.m. Thursdays through Saturdays; 2 p.m. Saturdays; 1 and 6:30 p.m.

Sundays. Tuesday through March 16

Tickets: \$14.75-\$74

Information: (408) 453-7108, www.amtsj.org

'Blood Knot'

Written by Athol Fugard, music composed and recorded by Tracy Chapman

Where: American Conservatory Theater, 415 Geary Blvd., San Francisco

When: 8 p.m. Tuesdays through Saturdays, 2 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays

Through: March 9

Tickets: \$14-\$82

Information: (415) 749-2228 or www.act-sf.org

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