

Doing the Work

By: David Barbour

Prince of Broadway recreates key moments from one of Broadway's most remarkable careers



The set for the sequence from *Company* offers Boritt's take on Boris Aronson's original urban-jungle-gym design.

David Belasco, Florenz Ziegfeld, Joshua Logan, Bob Fosse, Michael Bennett: These are some of the greatest showmen in Broadway history, and none of them come close to the achievement of Harold Prince. As producer and director, Prince has consistently turned out

one landmark show after another, rewriting the rules of musical theatre along the way. Working with virtually all the signature creative talents of the last half-century—a list that begins with, but is hardly limited to, Stephen Sondheim, Leonard Bernstein, Jerome Robbins, John Kander, Fred

Ebb, Betty Comden, Adolph Green, and Boris Aronson—his shows have been known for their psychological complexity, bold design statements, and formal daring. Look around at the Broadway musical landscape of today—the sweeping political drama of *Hamilton*, the acute social observa-

tion of *Dear Evan Hansen*, the telling snapshot of history that is *Come From Away*. Could any of them exist without the innovations of Prince and company?

Such a career demands a retrospective: *Prince of Broadway*, produced by Manhattan Theatre Club at the Samuel J. Friedman Theatre, its Broadway venue, culls numbers from Prince's astonishing resume. There are songs from such beloved mid-century hits as *Damn Yankees*, *West Side Story*, and that twilight-of-the-golden-era masterpiece *Fiddler on the Roof*. Of course, such game-changers as *Cabaret*, *Company*, and *Follies* are heavily represented, as is the '80s-era blockbusters *Evita* and *Phantom of the Opera*, the latter secure in its station as Broadway's longest-running show. The program also includes excerpts from such lively also-rans as "*It's a Bird, It's a Plane, It's Superman*," a pop-art romp that never caught on, and *Parade*, a stunning tale of prejudice triumphant and justice denied in the post-bellum American South. *Prince of Broadway* is a string of musical pearls; as the finale, a new number by Jason Robert Brown, says, the Prince mantra, now and forever, is "do the work."

Linking the numbers is a running commentary written by David Thompson, with each member of the cast assuming, from time to time, the Prince persona, those famous glasses perched firmly on his or her head. The songs are not performed in chronological order, although as many as four of them may be gathered around a single title. Instead the structure is more associative, rather like listening to Prince as he ruminates on his many productions, with thoughts on one show naturally segueing to the next. Such a structure posed vexing challenges for its design team. *Prince of Broadway* doesn't try to slavishly recreate scenes from these shows. Prince, working with choreographer and co-director Susan Stroman, are concerned with presenting the



The title song from *Cabaret* features the performer Bryonha Marie Parham framed in spotlight with the rattletrap Kit Kat Club behind her, washed in saturated color.

essence of each. Exactly how does one cram a lifetime of masterpieces into a single evening of theatre?

In addition, *Prince of Broadway* had a long and complicated gestation period. Originally announced as a commercial Broadway attraction, it fell through when crucial financing became unavailable. Instead, the production opened in 2015 in Japan, where it was received with acclaim. Still, another period of uncertainty ensued until Manhattan Theatre Club opted to bring it to Broadway.

The set designer, Beowulf Boritt, says he spent five-and-a-half years working, on and off, on *Prince of Broadway*. "It's the longest stretch of time I've ever been on a show," he adds. "I was hired in March 2012, and, at that point, we thought we were opening on Broadway in September." Faced with the prospect of pulling together a large-scale Broadway musical in only a few months, he says, "I did what grad school prepared me for, by giving me more work than I knew

what to do. I was sleeping four and five hours a night, cranking out stuff, looking for the big idea. The day the bids came back from the shops was the day we pulled the plug on that production."

By the time of the Japanese engagement, Boritt says, "eighty-five percent of it was already designed. The thing that cracked it open was the idea of putting in an empty theatre." The concept wasn't such a stretch—after all, Prince had produced and directed *Follies*, set in a theatre marked for demolition, and much of his work has been marked by an exposed theatricality. "Hal has been my mentor, almost a parent figure," the designer adds. (Working with Prince, he designed *LoveMusik*, also at Manhattan Theatre Club, and *Paradise Found*, staged in London.) "He thinks of all theatre as a black box, with a few things inside it. He even describes *Phantom* that way, which sounds ridiculous until you really look at it."

But how to fill that empty black



For the “Loveland” sequence from *Follies*, Boritt designed a kind of giant Victorian valentine, with cherubs and lovers peeking out from behind the lace. Binkley’s lighting suffuses it with a pink background wash that evokes the glamour lighting of another era.

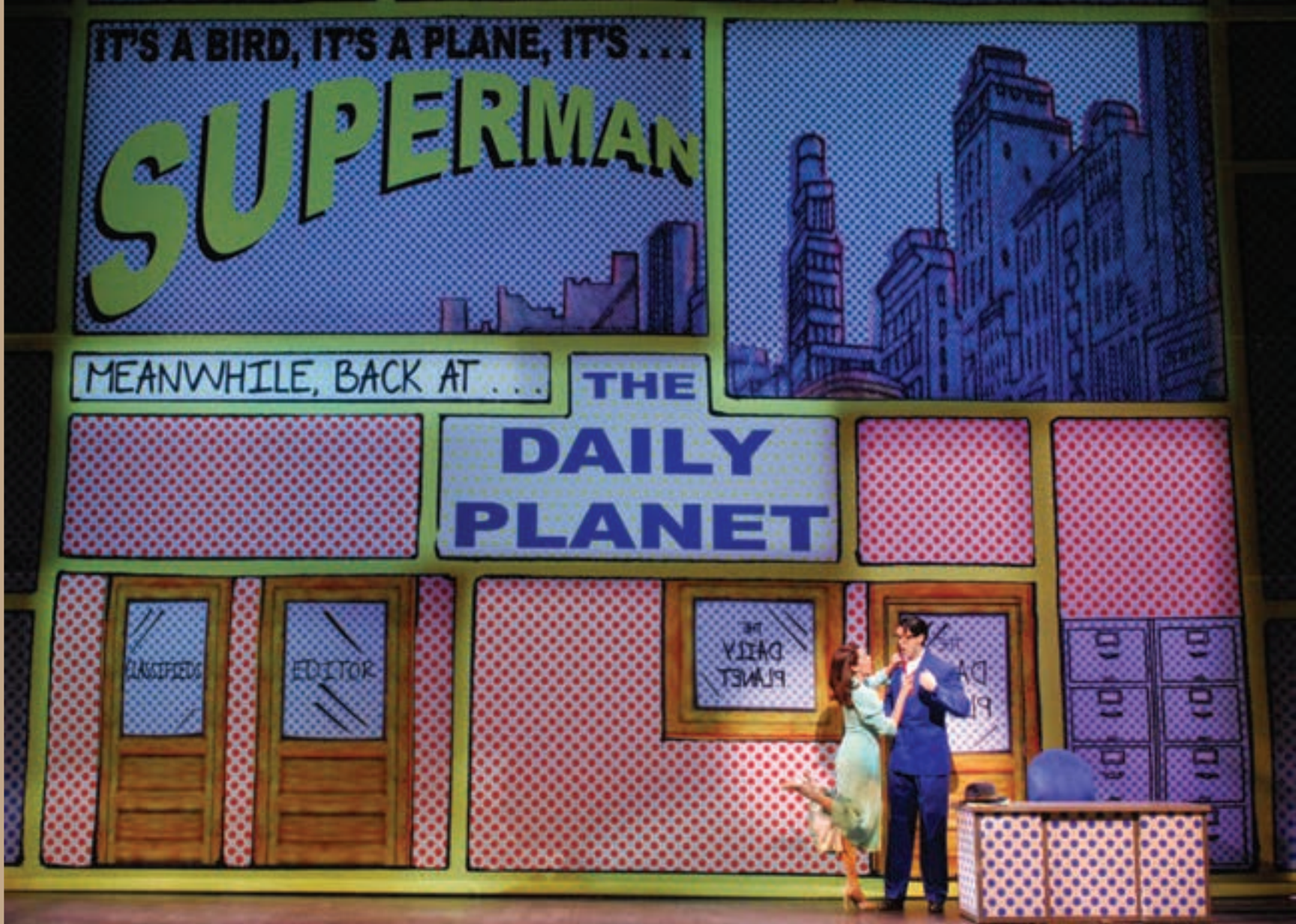
box? The shows featured in *Prince of Broadway* were originally designed by a roll call of theatre royalty, ranging from William and Jean Eckert to Maria Björnson, and their contributions couldn’t be ignored. Thus, Boritt turned to the Billy Rose Theatre Collection at New York’s Lincoln Center, that treasure trove of Broadway history. He also delved into the books *The Theatre Art of Boris Aronson*, by Frank Rich, and *The Performing Set: The Theatre Designs of William and Jean Eckert*, by Andrew B. Harris.

“The big thing for me was how to deal with all the work of these designers, without copying it,” Boritt says.

“We were looking for a snapshot, a couple of details that would evoke what they did. We wanted the thing that was iconic about each show.” He reached out to the original designers who are still living, including Tony Walton, who gave him some notes about *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* (seen in the Japanese production only). He also spoke to Lisa Aronson, widow of Boris and his longtime assistant.

Each scene in *Prince of Broadway* combines key details from the original design, filtered through Boritt’s sensibility. *West Side Story* (originally designed by Oliver Smith) conjures up New York’s urban jungle, circa 1956,

with a couple of canted tenement buildings, a stone wall, and a city skyline set against a night sky. (There is, of course, a fire escape, for the ballad “Tonight.”) The title tune of *She Loves Me* (originally designed by the Eckerts) unfolds in front of a Secession-style storefront, complete with Austrian curtains and jewel-tone stained glass windows. “You’ve Got Possibilities” (from *Superman*, a Robert Randolph design) unfolds against a blown-up page from a comic book. Old-fashioned drops come into play for “If I Were a Rich Man,” from *Fiddler on the Roof*, which features a version of Aronson’s Marc Chagall-inspired drawings, and *Show Boat* (the rare instance of a Prince-



This drop from "It's a Bird, It's a Plane, It's Superman" resembles the blown-up page of a comic book.

directed revival), which is backed by a depiction of the riverboat *The Cotton Blossom*, done in the style of a 19th-century theatre drop.

The most elaborate sequences are from *Company* and *Follies*, both of which, in their original versions, represent two of Aronson's most famous designs. ("They were so iconic, they needed to be there," the designer says.) For *Company*, Boritt created a version of Aronson's urban jungle gym design, placed against a drop of New York at night. The "Loveland" sequences of *Follies*, which unfolds in a kind of surreal *Follies* show of the mind—is staged in front of a giant Victorian valentine, with cherubs and

lovers peeking from behind a surface of lace; it makes a stunning impression before collapsing in a heap upstage.

As a special grace note, the names of the original designers are embedded in each set, rather like the "Ninas" in an Al Hirschfeld illustration. For example, Jerome Sirlin's name is found in the web that covers the stage in the title song from *Kiss of the Spider Woman*; the milk cart for *Fiddler on the Roof* features Aronson's name, translated into Cyrillic.

Fitting all of this, and more, into the Friedman wasn't easy. "I did *LoveMusik* there, but this was a much bigger jigsaw puzzle," Boritt says. "*Company* was the trickiest; the back

wall has to fly out and the set has to trundle underneath. It's very, very tight." He adds, "The back wall of the theatre set is like a piece of Swiss cheese, with many parts that pull away. The top lifts to show the *West Side Story* skyline. A big piece pulls away on the stage right side for *Sweeney Todd*. Another piece opens to reveal the big gate from *Phantom of the Opera*." He cites Francis Rapp, the Friedman Theatre's head carpenter, as playing a crucial role: "He is really a genius. The design worked on paper, but without a good carpenter it wouldn't have worked. In fact, it was one of the smoother techs I've done."

Projections also come into play.

During the overture, the titles of Prince's shows are projected onto a scrim made of Rose Brand's Nebula, treated with Screen Goo. "Buenos Aires," from *Evita*, features a montage of black-and-white film shots of that Argentine capital city, shown on the upstage wall. The suite of numbers of *A Little Night Music* has projections of birch trees to call up that show's Swedish setting. The media package, supplied by PRG, includes four Panasonic PT-DZ21KYU DLP projectors, placed in custom sound baffle boxes on the balcony rail, a Dataton WATCHOUT 6 media server, and a Lightware 12x12 switcher.

Much of the production features scenery built by Kanai Scene Shop Co. of Japan. However, Boritt notes, "Hudson Scenic Studio reworked it all. For example, the *Follies* stairs was rebuilt and the upstage wall had to be made to fit the much smaller Friedman. Also, the show wasn't automated in Japan, and it is here."

Lighting

Lighting designer Howell Binkley also has a long history with Prince. He made his Broadway debut as a designer on *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, in 1993, and since then has lit *Parade*, the play *Hollywood Arms*, *LoveMusik*, and, in London, *Paradise Found*. He was involved in *Prince of Broadway*'s workshop, but didn't travel with it to Japan. Coming onboard for Broadway, he notes that he was grateful for the workshop experience. He adds that working with Prince is a singular experience: "He trusts his designers so much, and he has such a vivid eye for the stage."

Binkley soon found that the show demanded a kind of protean approach, with unique looks for each sequence. "It sometimes felt harder than if we were doing an original piece of material," he says. "You're going from one distinctly different song to another—in another genre, another decade. This was true of everyone, especially Stro, whose style had to change dramatically to fit each scene.

We talked about it a lot."

Indeed, *Prince of Broadway* often seems to be a compendium of different lighting approaches. The *West Side Story* sequence has a moody nighttime look, with modeling on the set and spots picking out the lovers Tony and Maria. The "Loveland" sequence from *Follies* is suffused with a pink background wash, evoking the glamour lighting of another show business era. When the Loveland drop falls to the ground, the lighting turns noirish, dedicated to carving the principals out of the darkness. "Send in the Clowns," from *A Little Night Music*, finds the performer Emily Skinner surrounded by darkness, exquisitely isolated in a pool of light. The *Cabaret* sequence casts chilling spotlights on the performers, while behind them under the electrified "Cabaret" sign a rattletrap nightclub combo is washed in warm saturated colors.

Interestingly, Binkley says that one big challenge was a sequence in the second act that includes songs from *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, *Evita*, and *Parade*. Most of them are solos, and the designer says, "Sometimes I model things a little too much, but each of these was about a single actor. I had to really zone in on them. Hal doesn't want anything muddy. You have a girl in a web, a guy in a prison cell, a girl in front of a microphone." He adds, "It gave me chills to do *Spider Woman* again, after all these years."

The most crucial role that Binkley plays in this production has to do with the transitions between the songs. "It's about expressing Hal's vision, being able to thread between the songs, seamlessly. The lighting helps to keep the show seamless, to not have it stop. There are no distinctive breaks; it all flows from scene to scene."

Like Boritt, Binkley comments that fitting all the pieces into the Friedman was no small task. "We even eliminated the upstage crossover. I knew finding real estate was going to be a battle; we had to plan meticulously and it came down to inches in many cases."

The space issue is one reason why the plot contains seven Martin by Harman MAC Viper Performance units, a Binkley favorite for their small size and lack of noise. His workhorse unit, however, is the Philips Vari-Lite VL3500Q, which he uses for specials and adding texture to the scenery. Washes are provided by 14 Martin MAC 2000 Wash units.

Also in the rig are 17 Philips Color Kinetics ColorBlast 12 TRX units, seven Chroma-Q Color Force 48s and Color Force 72s, Martin RUSH 2 LED PAR Zooms, 42 ETC Source Fours, 52 Altman Lighting PAR 64s, 12 Altman Mini-10s, two MDG Atmosphere hazers, two LSG low smoke machines, two JEM AF-1 fans, and two Lycian 1290 followspots. Control is via an ETC Eos Ti console; also used are City Theatrical's SHoW DMX Neo dimmers and transmitters. Lighting gear was supplied by PRG.

Other personnel on the project include Alexis Distler (associate scenic designer), Christopher Ash (associate projection designer), Edward Pierce and Jen Price (scenic design supervisors) Joe Doran and Ryan O'Gara (associate lighting designers), and David Arch (lighting programmer). Costumes by William Ivey Long and sound by Jon Weston.

"It was such an expansive project," Boritt says. "To do it with Hal and learn how all these shows came together: The shows are intellectual, but so much of what he does comes from his gut. He doesn't think of things conceptually. I had to learn to trust my gut, too."

"It was just a privilege to be in the room," adds Binkley "seeing how Stro and Hal worked with the company. The two of them are legends. It was just amazing to be there." The production runs through October 29.

(For additional photos from Prince of Broadway, see the Web Extra editorial for this month's issue at www.lightingandsoundamerica.com.)