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In the Cathedral's Shadow:

Lighting *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*

The Disney musical *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* has gained traction in resident theatres since playing La Jolla Playhouse in 2013. (The musical, based on the famed Disney animated film, previously had a lengthy run in Berlin.) Closely based on its source material, Victor Hugo's novel *Notre Dame de Paris*, this is the darkest of Disney shows, following fates of the deformed Quasimodo, the gypsy girl Esmeralda, and Frollo, the Archdeacon, who burns with lust for Esmeralda. Glenn Casale's production, which played at Seattle's Fifth Avenue Theatre in June, had a striking twist: Quasimodo was played by the deaf actor Joshua M. Castille, shadowed by E. J. Cardona, who provided vocals and dialogue.

The production also featured a highly effective lighting design by Jared Sayeg, who notes that it underwent a lengthy evolution. "We started two years ago, at Sacramento Music Circus," Sayeg says. "Glenn put the team together to try out the production there, in-the-round." The team included set designer Stephen Gifford and costume designer Marcy Froehlich. (Sound designer Joanna Lynne Staub came onboard in Seattle.) "It was a big hit there," he continues, "and then we took it to the La Mirada Center for the Performing Arts, in California, then Fifth Avenue Theatre picked it up.

At La Mirada, Sayeg reworked his design for a proscenium production that included Gifford's two-level unit set, depicting the iconic Parisian cathedral where much of the action plays out, which includes room for the gargoyles who provide much of the show's narration, as well as lofts for the 40-person choir specified by the script. The combination of imposing scenery and darkly melodramatic narrative pushed the designer toward a chiaroscuro approach. "We learned, as far back as Sacramento, that darkness



was our real friend," he says. "When we did move into the proscenium set, we gained levels and a series of archways that gave us so much depth to work with. The design featured shafts of light, striations, and pathways for people to enter or exist. There was also a significant side light system. Glenn was adamant about the show looking dark; if you look at the original film [made in 1923, starring Lon Chaney] the cinematography [by Robert Newhard] is brilliantly done; our approach is loosely based on it."

Indeed, so insistent was he on creating dramatic shafts and striations of light that Sayeg got his hands on ten DHA Light Curtains, a once-popular piece of gear that has all but vanished from the scene. "It took a lot of detective work, but I obtained them from PRG, the show's gear supplier," the designer says. "The hardest part was finding the 1996 Mac Book Pro laptop that converts them to a digital signal; there are only two remaining in the

world. There were a few maintenance issues with the Light Curtains, but the crew handled them. They looked terrific; they engulfed the space. We loaded them with custom scrolls with 20 colors. When the cathedral's bells flew in, the units would backlight them so effectively. There are other technologies, but we needed the punch the Light Curtains could provide."

In general, Sayeg says, he stuck with stark, cool white light for scenes set inside the cathedral, along with looks informed by candlelight and sunlight. When the action shifted to the Feast of Fools, "we were, for the first time, outside, and we shifted to a warm sepia tone. So much of the show features candlelight that the programmer and I worked hard on creating flicker effects." For a dream sequence, featuring Esmeralda as an object of lust for the male principals, Sayeg opted for saturation. Some color also appeared in systems for the church's stained-glass windows.



Apollo Design Technology created custom gobos for texturing the set.

The production, the designer adds, “was a series of vignettes and tableaux, and we determined, in the first proscenium production, that we needed to constantly carve out the principals using four followspots—two at the front of house and two onstage in custom-built towers nestled against the set.” These looks recalled the shafts and striations mentioned earlier: “When Quasimodo took the stage, he would be captured by the front spotlight and his ‘voice’ would be profiled in a side tower spotlight. They both took focus at different times, with one in full light and the other in half light.” Saturation was also used in the number “Hellfire,” featuring Frollo and some sweeping light curtain effects.

Also, Sayeg says, “In Act II, Esmeralda and Phoebus are imprisoned by Frollo. It’s a very simple scene with a beautiful song; we did it with followspots only and some backlight. There was no scenery to inform us we were in prison. The side lighting caught a simple prison grate offstage,

casting a pattern on the walls. It was exactly what it needed to be.”

The light rig included approximately 199 ETC Source Fours, 25 Source Four PARs, 50 PAR 64s, 55 ETC Four Lustr IIIs, 37 Chauvet Professional COLORado Quad Zoom IPs, 75 Chroma-Q 72s, four Altman Fresnels, eight GAM Stik-Ups, eight Mini-Tens, two Strong Gladiator III followspots, two Robert Juliat Lucy followspots, 21 Philips Vari-Lite VL3500 Spots, ten VL3500 Wash units, four GAM Film/FX units, two Pathport Connectivity Octo gateways, one MDG ATMe hazer, and one Look Solutions Power-Tiny fog generator. He adds, “Very rarely do you see the automated lights move, although, with 560 cues, they are constantly repositioning.” Providing control was a pair of ETC Eos Ti consoles.

In Sacramento, Steve Odhenal was production electrician and Brice Hilburn assistant lighting designer. At La Mirada, Rob Felix was production electrician, Bo Tindell assistant lighting designer, and David Patrick lighting programmer. In Seattle, Sean Callahan was production electrician, Chris Reay

and Emily Schmidt assistant lighting designers, Steven Graham automated lighting programmer, Mary Heffernan conventional lighting programmer, and Noel Clayton and Nate Redford key electricians.

With a deaf leading man and American Sign Language masters on hand, Sayeg says, “We had to figure out our own language for tech, to be sure that our leading actor felt supported. If the stage manager called ‘Hold’ on the god mic, he wouldn’t hear it. We hung a cyc light on the balcony rail for him; we also had a cue lighting system woven through the backstage area for entrances and exits. The ASL masters had their own specials.” In addition, “While much of demands of the design was to create a dark and threatening space, it was critical we never lost sight of the sign language taking place onstage; it was a priority to see them clearly, even at our darkest moments.” For more images of this production, see this month’s digital edition. 📶