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INDUSTRY NEWS

Spring Re-Awakening:

Reimagining a Broadway Hit

Having closed only in 2009, the musical *Spring Awakening* would hardly seem to be crying out for a Broadway revival, but any objections were tabled the minute the lights went up at the Brooks Atkinson Theatre on the reimagined production courtesy of Los Angeles-based Deaf West Theatre Company. Most of the young principals are double-cast: A deaf actor, in period costume (by Dane Laffrey) takes the lead, with a hearing actor, in contemporary wear, singing the songs. Reviewers agreed that the performers are superb across the board, and the addition of deaf actors adds something powerful to a musical, based on Frank Wedekind's 1906 play about young people who cannot communicate with their parents regarding the sexual changes that are roiling their bodies.

The production also has a distinctive new look, beginning with Laffrey's set. Stephen Collins, of the website britishtheatre.com, described it as "fantastic and fantastical. The huge stage is used from top to bottom. Great swathes of metal and gangways and ladders provide a sense of an Industrial Age, one committed to routine, strictures, and ritual." The design is in some ways a response to the production's original circumstances, says Laffrey: "The show began in a really small theatre off skid row in Los Angeles, ostensibly without a set." When the production transferred



to the Wallis Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts, in Beverly Hills, the designer says, "We went through a number of design possibilities, but the original had been successful and we didn't want to over-aestheticize it. We looked at images of a very wide range of performance spaces to help identify the right container for the piece; one image from *Chance* magazine, of a photo of an old boiler factory in Germany that had been converted into a performance space, proved particularly helpful. It had a really brutal quality, as empty theatres go."

However, Laffrey adds, "The Brooks Atkinson is a very different space, and the design went through a significant round of scale adjustments for Broadway. Now it is more vertical; the stage at the Brooks Atkinson is at least 10' less wide; the result is more compressed, almost like the bottom of a cistern, which is helpful. We also learned a lot in LA about how this very complicated piece functions and what it needs, so the Broadway design also reflects a lot of subtle, but important, refinements to the original." The new set was built by PRG Scenic Technologies.

The production makes fairly extensive use of projections by Lucy Mackinnon, combining handwritten supertitles that convey the dialogue assigned to the deaf actors with sketched renderings of forests, flowers, rain, water, and snow. Mackinnon, who came on board for the second Los Angeles production, says, "From the beginning, we knew we were going to need supertitles, but how to incorporate them—and the clearest way to use them—evolved over

Photo: John Minton

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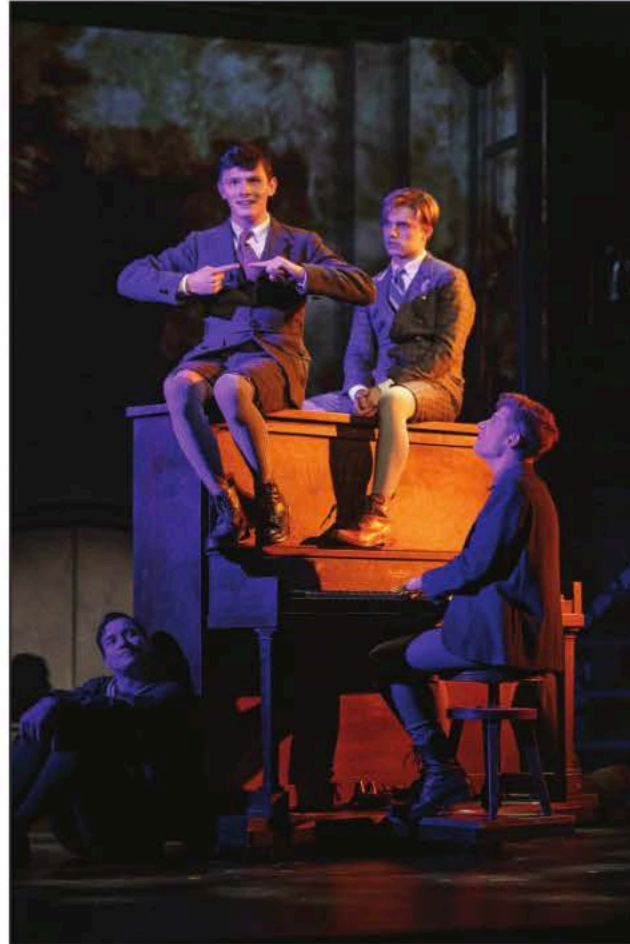
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time. For example, we learned that different handwriting styles were useful to help identify which actor was speaking, and we quickly realized that it would be helpful to place supertitles on different surfaces of the set—high on the catwalk or down low on the deck—according to where characters stood.” The designer’s use of individual writing styles often communicates psychological states—the lines attributed to the troubled, suicidal Moritz, for example, are written in a trembling, hasty-looking scrawl.

The style of the sketched imagery—which appears to be drawn in chalk—was inspired by a bit of staging in the number “Touch Me,” in which the young characters draw chalk circles around themselves on the stage deck. “The

sketches of trees and flowers were made to be stark and bold, characterized by large, pale strokes,” she says. She adds that the set works well for the play’s interior scenes, but, when the action moves outdoors, “projection provides a stronger sense of location.” Speaking of the mostly monochrome palette, she adds, “While there was a lot of saturated color in the lighting, the bareness of the projections makes them more conspicuous.”

Images are delivered using Dataton’s WATCHOUT media server to Christie M Series projectors; the chalkboard images are rear-projected from a unit mounted on stage; three additional projections, located on the balcony rail, converge onto the upstage wall of the set. Projection gear was supplied by WorldStage.

“The most important thing for us was how to tell the story visually,” Mackinnon says. “Because this is theatre for the deaf, we had to pay more attention to the stage pictures, making it clear to the deaf audience where they should be looking. The department that had to work the hardest in that respect was lighting.”

Indeed, Ben Stanton, the production’s lighting designer, responds to the show’s turbulent emotions with a broad variety of looks, ranging from stark white washes to frantic color chases. “I always start with the physical production,” he says, “and I try to put in place all the lighting ideas that are necessary for the story. In this case, we have a static physical production, focused on a beautiful, industrial, and claustrophobic space. The space is meant to feel oppressive and foreboding. The musical has many locations not addressed in the scenery and there was a learning curve in LA in terms of how to successfully portray all the other locations. Ultimately, we found that using a video gesture and directional lighting was successful, and the simpler the gesture the better. It took some trial and error to figure it out; for example, the schoolroom was very fairly easy to light, because it is native to the space that Dane has provided. But for the scenes that don’t want to be in a warehouse, we tried to embrace our environment and find a gesture that told the story simply and effectively. We learned that it didn’t take much to transport us to a forest or a graveyard.”

Stanton adds, “Another challenge was learning how to light theatre for deaf audiences, which requires an additional level of storytelling. We have doubled characters and I had to figure out how to light the ‘voices’ of the characters without taking focus away from the deaf actors. There is Wenda [the female lead] who doesn’t speak, and there is her voice.” The “voices” often appear slightly shadowed and in down light specials to differentiate them from the main characters. He also found looks for certain characters, most notably Ilse, a young lady who leads something of a gypsy existence. “Ilse has her own world on stage,” Stanton says. “We were able to flesh out a world for her using practicals.”

Interestingly, Stanton says, “I asked a good friend of

mine, a deaf lighting designer Annie Wiegand, to assist me. One of her jobs was to look at the lighting from a deaf perspective. She noted me throughout the preview period, looking for anything that would make it difficult for deaf audiences. She was hearing it with her eyes, seeing things that I didn’t see immediately. For example, I was trying to light people’s faces, but their hands are equally important.”

Stanton uses color and chases for the more intense numbers. “It’s still a rock musical and, while we were conscious of not wanting to repeat or quote anything from the original production, it felt like the teens’ inner angst had to be represented. Before I was a designer, I was a drummer, and the music in this piece is so inspiring, musically. I don’t think I could light a show like this without responding to the rhythm, dynamics, and intensity in the music.”

The designer’s rig, which was supplied by PRG, includes Philips VariLite VL3500Qs, VL3500 Washes, and VL2500 Washes, plus City Theatrical AutoYokes, along with the usual conventionals. Lighting is controlled by an ETC Eos console. The lighting was programmed by David Arch.

Everyone interviewed for this story mentions the fairly rapid turnover from Los Angeles to New York. “The speed of doing was offset by not having to remember how we did it or having to start from scratch.” Having earned favorable reviews, *Spring Awakening* continues its limited run, through January 24. ☺

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