

The Season of Projections

So many shows, so many projections—but are they really necessary? A leading designer and educator takes a look

By: Wendall K. Harrington

(Editor's note: In New York, this has been an extraordinary season for projection design. Never before have so many major theatre productions made crucial use of projections. Wendall K. Harrington, herself a noted projection designer and educator, attended some of these productions to investigate how and why projections were used. Have projections really become so necessary to the theatre? And why were they shut out of this year's awards season?)

This time last year, Tim Bird's stunning projections in *Sunday in the Park with George* caught everyone's attention and gathered a number of awards, including the first-ever Tony nomination for a projection designer. This year, there have been so many new, and potentially eligible, productions with projections that the Drama Desk and Tony Awards eliminated projection design altogether.

Huh? It sure makes you wonder—last year, there were six Drama Desk nominees in the category of Outstanding Video and Projection Design; this year, the Drama Desk, which considers both Broadway and Off Broadway shows, managed to nominate two set designers whose

sets had major projection elements, but completely ignored the contributions of the projection designers. This seems odd, especially when the Drama Desk managed to recognize and reward me for my projection work on *The Who's Tommy* 15 years ago.

Is it possible that, this year, the video work was not worthy of mention? Is it possible that the nominators lack the experience and sophistication to know where scenery ends and projection begins? Is there a conspiracy? Now

that projection designers can join the union on an equal basis with set, lighting, and costume designers, perhaps the members of the Broadway League would rather not recognize projection designers, thus saving themselves from the duty of more pension and welfare payments?

Projection designers are not going away; we're organized and multiplying like pixels. The ranks will only grow; academic theatre departments like Cal Arts and Yale will soon give projection MFAs, and, from what I read in the blogs, audiences are generally excited by projection. My first question is: Can we all decide on what to call it? There are projection designers, video designers, and imaging designers—maybe that's adding to the awards judges' confusion. Josef Svoboda, the



Above left: *This Beautiful City*. Above right: *Irena's Vow*.

godfather of us, all called it kinetic scenography. I'm not recommending that, although it is precise, and, having been there in the moment and having made a conscious decision *not* to call it multi-media, I still vote for projection design as the most encompassing term. We can take a vote on it; just remember there will be more tools coming. "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy..."

It proved impossible to see all the recent shows with substantial projection, but I did see several of them, both on and Off Broadway, (and, in one case, at a nearby resident theatre), trying to take the temperature of a medium that, in 30 years, has gone from invisible to ubiquitous. After all, cinema is the language of our age. Unlike early film audiences, who ran

exists, the LED lightbulbs exist, but the rest is digital dust—locale-giving, emotion-raising, thought-provoking, beautiful little 0s and 1s.

Projecting the time and place

(*This Beautiful City*, with a book by Steven Cosson and Jim Lewis and music and lyrics by Michael Friedman, was a project of theatre company *The Civilians*; it was presented at Off Broadway's Vineyard Theatre. Based on interviews, it's a portrait of life in Colorado Springs, Colorado, which has become the center of evangelical Christianity as well as the Ted Haggard scandal. The production, which also featured lighting by David Weiner in addition to the designers mentioned below, earned mixed to good reviews.)

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away when they saw a locomotive coming at them, we accept shadows as representative of reality. Not only do we accept them, it is our willingness to fill in the gaps that makes the dance between the stage and the audience so thrilling and so life-affirming—one must be alive and engaged to get it. Without an inherent respect for the audience's imagination, projection design can't exist. Actually, for all intents and purposes, projection doesn't exist—the screen surface

The set of *This Beautiful City*, by Neil Patel, was a vertical white wall depicting a bird's-eye view of Colorado Springs' landscape, with its rooftops rendered in relief. The audience easily accepted that handsome abstraction; later, the roofs were revealed to be light boxes, filled with LED units—and, used as individual screens, flashing news of Ted Haggard's exposure, it had a visual harmony, even though it was logically impossible. However, the use of more visually



Mary Testa in *Guys and Dolls*.

logical images—projecting the Rocky Mountains on the cyc upstage of the roof drop to indicate a sense of place—felt less satisfying, and, when the same sky was used as projected signage, I sensed an inconsistency in the design.

There is something I call commitment to surface: You invite the audience to understand the theatrical space and the way you are prepared to tell the story, so they can absorb it, forget it, and concentrate on the play and the players. When you mix it up too much—it's scenery, it's information, it's the punchline—the constant reassessing seems unnoticed, but it takes a toll. I'm not blaming Jason Thompson, the projection designer; I've done too many shows myself not to be aware of the demands from directors or producers to make things more explicit, but I think this work could have benefitted from trusting the intelligence of its audience more.

(A somewhat similar use of projections is seen in Irena's Vow, the story of Irena Gut Opdyke, a Polish Catholic woman who, during World War II, hid a dozen Jews while keeping house for a Nazi officer. Dan Gordon's play, which opened Off Broadway in the fall and transferred to Broadway's Walter Kerr Theatre in the spring, is framed as a long flashback in which Opdyke tells her story to an audience of schoolchildren. Kevin Judge's set is an architectural arrangement of

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platforms, plus a few flown-in pieces. Alex Koch's projections draw on historical material, including photos of the Nazi occupation of Poland and images of the real Opdyke. The lighting is by David Castaneda)

If *Irena's Vow* had been presented ten years ago, I have little doubt it would have been done with a drop and lights. I don't want to denigrate the contribution of the delicate, scene-shifting projections; I think they are modest in the best way, and, for the most part, perfectly appropriate. But I wonder who thought they were essential to begin with. Why do we think we have to take the audience by the hand? Have we lost faith in the ability of actors to create worlds? Do today's audiences need the stimulation? It's a question we should never get tired of asking. Would a more extensive use of sound with the historical images do as much, if not more, to evoke a sense of period and create the shifting locales?

The projections are used here to create a sense of place, except for a few documentary images that establish the time frame. This is always a difficult approach, because, as in *This Beautiful City*, there is a conflict of intention. You ask the audience to accept the projection screen as a wall, a garden, or a cellar—but then it becomes a news-delivering surface. It's easy to make the leap from wall to garden; it's the news part that feels odd. How do you frame it? Is this image inside the story or outside it? Both kinds of projections happen in one space, which can be confusing to the audience. This is another question worth asking: How do we create ideas in the viewers' minds without their awareness? Still, this is lovely work.

Moving violations

(At the same time, projections can be controversial, even if they are used with a greater unity of purpose. The Broadway revival of Guys and Dolls drew mixed to negative notices—



however, nobody could agree on what not to like. Reviewers singled out different members of the cast for praise or criticism. Similarly, Robert Brill's scenic design and Dustin O'Neill's projections were described as original and eye-filling, or agitating and overwhelming. The lighting was designed by Howell Binkley.)

Guys and Dolls is as flawless and charming a musical as has ever been written; even a high school production of it will delight. This expensive production's sets are very handsome; the LED wall is majestic and handsomely humanized by the addition of an RP screen and a bobbinette just downstage of it, removing all those ugly little pixels and allowing for a graceful fade to black. The video imagery is expertly made—but it just won't stop. It is busy being the most brilliant thing on stage to the detriment of all, including the score. It wasn't until three quarters of the way in, when Mary Testa, as a Salvation Army general, hit a note that's still on its way to Saturn, that I realized there were actual people in the show. Only Mary Testa can out-perform that level of lumens; if you put a big LED wall on stage, make sure she's available.

Projection is especially useful at performing transitions, but the video transitions in *Guys and Dolls* are so slick, so bright, and so eye-catching, that nothing else can happen; each



Top: *Distracted*. Above: *Impressionism*.

one feels shot out of a cannon. The choreographed transitions let us see the characters in action; the way they move fleshes out who they are, which is useful, since most musicals aren't exactly dense with exposition; however, if they get upstaged by the fancy video, you betray the actors, the choreography, and, ultimately, the text. Actors speak with gestures; our eyes go to the brightest thing on stage—in this case, the wall does all the talking.

Even the principals get upstaged; by the end of the show's "Havana" sequence, the unlikely romance between Sky Masterson, the gambler,

and Sarah Brown, the mission doll, is about to be solidified with the last haunting notes of “If I Were a Bell” — when, on the video wall, the sun jumps up into the sky before they are even done. There’s no time for the audience to share in their feelings, to fall in love with them falling in love. Nope, gotta go!

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The execution of these effects is flawless, but someone—like the director—should have told the designer when to stop. Remember: Trust the play, trust the actors. They were here long before digital dust and they did quite fine without us for several hundred years. That said, here’s where the canker gnaws: a Tony nomination for Robert Brill that does not acknowledge Dustin O’ Neill. Can I suggest that the voters be forced to watch the show without the projections and see what the set does by itself? Dustin, I feel your pain; if Brill wins, I hope he remembers your name.

When projections are built into the script

Dizzy, busy projections were the goal in Roundabout Theatre’s Off Broadway production of Lisa Loomer’s *Distracted*. The play is about a mother’s struggle with her son’s diagnosis of Attention Deficit Disorder. The whole set, by Mark Wendland, was more or less a projection surface with various planes; the projections, by Tal Yarden, were the first thing you saw when you entered the theatre. It was the world of media is coming at you from all directions. (Jane Cox was the lighting designer.)

News feeds, scene-setting images,

the family TV—all of them were used to make the point: Who among us *isn’t* distracted and, it would seem, looking for distraction? For an Off Broadway show, it had an impressive amount of video gear: a 16K projector out front on the big scrim, and five 6Ks buried in the set, all run off of seven channels of Dataton Watchout,

supplied by Scharff Weisberg. “A lot of what you see is written into the text,” Yarden told me. There wasn’t anything particularly surprising about the images, but they just seemed right and elegantly produced. If that seems like damning with faint praise, all I can say is I value correctness and good sense above all; a careless designer could have made a real mess.

(Projected images were also central to the concept of Impressionism, which came to Broadway with many high-profile names attached, including Joan Allen, Jeremy Irons, and the director Jack O’Brien. However, Michael Jacobs’ play was quickly

dismissed and it closed a couple of months before its limited run was scheduled to end. In the play, Allen played an art gallery owner who spars on a daily basis with Irons, her one employee. Each of the paintings in the gallery cues a flashback revealing the characters’ emotional traumas. Once they are completed, the couple can fall in love. The scenery was designed by Scott Pask; the projections were by Elaine McCarthy, with lighting by Natasha Katz.)

The projections in *Impressionism* left me feeling sad for the lost opportunity they presented. I am guessing that many were written into the script, but you can’t always believe what you read. Giant projections should carry their weight in story and character development. Even before the show began, one entered the theatre to see dim, dissolving versions of Impressionist paintings on a scrim; this seemed like a mistake. The giant scale of the priceless, yet seemingly random, works made the effect feel more like a screen saver than the work of humans. If the theme of your show hinges on the power of art, the first time you see it it should be vibrant, luscious, breathtaking, confounding, and alive.

In my classes at Yale, I am a tyrant about transitions. I teach the necessity of not losing the thread of the story



A scene from *33 Variations*.



Above left: *Rock of Ages*. Above right: *Notes from Underground*.

while the actress changes her clothes or the next scene is set up. Each choice must be about advancing the story and illuminating details of character. This is where the projection designer gets to be the writer, the director, and the actor; every detail plays a part. In *Impressionism*, a seemingly random painting sends us into a memory scene from the life of a character. None of the images used helped us fill in a bit of personal history, or deepen our relationship to that character. The choices were so vague that it was necessary to spell out, on the screen, that what we were seeing was a memory. Jeremy Irons' played a former *National Geographic* photographer, yet the images presented as his lacked personality or character. This was a missed opportunity for projection to be subtle, informative, and penetrating—especially since it was clear that no expense was spared.

(Projections played a key role in *33 Variations*. *Moisés Kaufman's* play, which he also directed, was developed in a workshop process that allowed the designers to work on the play as it was being created. It centers on *Katherine Brandt*, a *Beethoven* scholar, who is racing to unearth the secret behind one of the composer's works before she succumbs to *Lou Gehrig's* disease. In a parallel track, we see *Beethoven* obsessively struggling over the composition of the

Diabelli Variations, the work that *Katherine* will study centuries later. The production, which starred *Jane Fonda*, featured scenery by *Derek McLane*, projections, by *Jeff Sugg*, and lighting by *David Lander*. Reviews were mixed; in some cases, critics appreciated the staging and design more than the script.)

Better, perhaps, than the play it self were *Jeff Sugg's* poetic projections for *33 Variations*. Originally a student of

sadder that the Drama Desk and the Tonys singled out *Derek McLane* and ignored *Jeff Sugg*. This is the kind of invisible line between disciplines that should be celebrated; applauding one without the other creates an awkward and unnecessary tension.

There were three types of projections in *33 Variations*: the handwritten pages of *Beethoven's* manuscript, scene-setting images of specific locations, and semi-surreal images of

“Perhaps all my caveats are just about growing pains; after all, we’ve never had such tools before. After years of driving the equivalent of a hay wagon, pulling over repeatedly to re-shoe the horses, we now have Ferraris at our disposal.”

directing, *Sugg* says his presence at rehearsals allowed him to create a visual language as the spoken language evolved. It certainly paid off. As you entered the theatre, there was a series of images depicting handwritten musical notation dissolving on a dark stage. They were small, intriguing, and human—you didn't know what was coming, but there was something intimate, curious, and inviting about them.

Throughout the evening, there was a satisfying collaboration between the sets and projections, making it all the

Beethoven arriving on a horse and walking; the latter were brief, dream-like, and completely captivating even as they served as an entry into the text. Proportion was a key virtue: A subway stop in *Bonn* was indicated by a perfectly scaled station name and a small “exit” icon. It was just enough. An airplane flight to *Bonn* consisted of nothing more than the view out the window of the plane, soft clouds, a level horizon, and the sound of flying—allowing the audience to share that suspension of time and space that is air travel. The simplicity

of the work in *33 Variations* left room for the audience to have an experience that was far more successful than the fitful gyrations of other, more highly produced, events. Careful, considered thought will beat out mega-production every time.

(Then there was *Rock of Ages*, which transferred from Off Broadway. It's a jukebox musical drawing on the songs of '80s hair bands. Beowulf Borrit's set depicts the interior of a Sunset Strip nightclub; Zachary Borovay's projections fill out other locations and add a music-video spin to the musical numbers. The lighting is by Jason Lyons. The show acquired a guilty-pleasure status among reviewers, many whom have fond memories of *Poison*, *Whitesnake*, and early MTV.)

Rock of Ages will be far more enjoyable if you check some parts of your brain at the door—but enjoyable it is. The projections are frequently hilarious. It would be hard to judge this work by the usual dramaturgical standards. "Basically, I tried to make the rest of the creative team laugh," Borovay told me. "When they cracked up, I knew it was good." He jumped into the show when it was only three weeks away from its first preview Off Broadway; the set was there, with an LED wall and no one to feed it. The wall exists in all its unvarnished truth—there's no RP or voile to soften it, but it's placed far enough away from the action to not be distressing. No one stands directly in front of it, and, in the rock-'n'-roll context, it makes total sense. The collaboration between projections and the lighting is very satisfying; if anything, I wished that Borovay would have tossed aside some of his dramaturgical training and rocked out a bit more. Aside from that, and for the purposes of history, it is worth mentioning that he was able to secure the very first Broadway contract for projection design as part of USA Local 829. Being in the union doesn't mean you get a union

contract yet; it just means you can try and get one.

Broadway and way off Broadway

(Another, very different use of projections was seen in *Notes from Underground*, adapted by Robert Woodruff and Bill Camp from Dostoevsky's novella and staged at Yale Repertory Theatre. The production featured extensive use of video, including 10'-high closeups of the face of Camp, who also starred. David Zinn was the set designer and Mark Barton the lighting designer.)

Notes from Underground is the kind of projection design that, so far, Broadway rejects. Deceptively simple, its effect is layered and complex, and the specific hand of the director is apparent. With projections by Peter Nigrini, it was a mesmerizing and consistent, if disturbing, vision. Woodruff is not a director who tells you what he wants and you go do it; rather, he creates an atmosphere, a way of telling the story that is complex, layered, deep, and thorough, then leaves an artist room for genius. In this case, the projections were actual characters; although the only face we saw was Bill Camp's, relentlessly speaking into his camera, we were given the faceless bodies of those against whom he rails to great

effect. The images were beautiful, terrifying, and as repetitive as a hammer—they were perfectly suited to the text and the director's vision of. The problem with *Notes from Underground* is that the play itself relentlessly depressing. I had a wonderful time; now I just want to kill myself.

The same projection designer, Peter Nigrini, along with Peggy Eisenhauer, is credited with the "imaging" on the new musical *9 to 5*, based on the hit 1980 film. Congratulations to Scott Pask on his Drama Desk nomination for this show, but, again, I invite the voters to watch it without the "imaging," which, in this case, is a thirty-nine by twenty 24mm LED wall with a Rosco diffusion located about 6" downstage. It is the "what" that tells you where you are; it is the driving force in all the transitions. To not mention it along with the set in any nomination seems totally capricious. Once *Sunday in the Park* was nominated, can only brilliant Brits be nominated? Or are we suffering a backlash? But I digress.

In *9 to 5*, choices are made to present images on the LED wall both with and without diffusion. The diffusion makes the image less sharp, but still readable; and, I have to say, I prefer a world without pixels. The scene-setting images all feel apt and of a graphic piece with the set; it's the



The opening sequence from *9 to 5*; the lighting is by Jules Fisher and Ken Posner.

movement that sometimes made me dizzy. The animation is as good as anything you'd see on TV, and that seems to me part of the issue. The transitions, as well as certain numbers staged with the images dancing along, feel like commercials. Once we enter a world of TV commercial perfection as our standard, the theatre, as we know it, is doomed. Adolphe Appia, arguably the father of modern set design, wrote: "The two primary conditions for the artistic display of the human body are these: a light that gives it plastic value, and an arrangement of the setting that gives importance to [the human body's] attitudes and movements."

Summing up

So what did I learn from all of this? I learned that the 16K Barco video projector has replaced the 1200 ORC slide projector I used in *The Who's Tommy* for front projection on scrims. That says a lot about both audience expectation, as well as the economies

of digital projection. I learned that a downstage plastic can tame the LED wall and make it creamy and human. I learned that the European model of creating the visual design in rehearsals with the director and company pays off—more collaboration is always better; it keeps the edges blurry. Modesty and investment in the text will outshine any amount of lumens. I learned that there are any number of talented projection—or whatever you want to call it—designers who were all born after *They're Playing Our Song*, my debut show, "revolutionized" Broadway with its use of projection in 1979. And I learned what I already knew: Projection is the perfect tool for creating transitions; it just has to be used thoughtfully. And I learned what I never tire of learning: It is the humans I have come to commune with when I enter a theatre; I wish my soul to be penetrated.

Perhaps all my caveats are just about growing pains; after all, we've never had such tools before. After years of driving the equivalent of a

hay wagon, pulling over repeatedly to re-shoe the horses, we now have Ferraris at our disposal. Every idea we have is quickly and powerfully made visible, often to the delight of hungry directors. Technology is changing so rapidly that mere mastery of the tools is perhaps the challenge; the vigilance to keep these tools "of the theatre" may be yet to come. Directors most of all need to invest in understanding the power of projection in order to use it most skillfully. It's huge, it's bright, it's moving, and it's seductive—obedient where actors can be stubborn—but it has no heart of its own. A performance has to be created from it.

Oh, and by the way, I'm still wondering what's up with the Tonys and the Drama Desk. Please recognize the work of these many talented designers; don't separate them from the set designers. And, if you have any questions, Intro to Projection Design meets every Thursday in New Haven. 📶

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