

A Tony Award for Projections?

A top projection designer raises the issue—and her answer isn't what you might expect

By: Wendall K. Harrington

The decision of the Tony Awards committee to put both the set and projection designers' names on the nomination for the set design of the current revival of *Sunday in the Park with George* has caused quite a storm in the design community. By finally acknowledging the contribution of the projection designer, and admitting that, without projections, the set is unjudgable, the committee opened the door for a conversation that is long overdue.

Years ago, I was told by a member of the Tony committee that my name "fell off the nomination for Best Set

Design" the year that *The Who's Tommy* was eligible. In other words, it left the nominating committee with two names and was announced with one. That *Tommy* went on to sweep the awards, with not a single winner even mentioning my name, is a subject I'll leave to the consciences of those involved, but I think there is general agreement that it wasn't the scaffolding that made that design prize-worthy; it was the projections. The same is true now of *Sunday in the Park With George*. David Farley's set was clearly designed to support the use of projections designed by

Timothy Bird and the Knifededge Creative Network, and I applaud the sophistication of the Tony committee in seeing that—but now what? This year, there are several other shows with projections that are scenically intertwined, most notably *A Catered*

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Affair. What about them?

This year, the Tony committee added an award for sound design; is projection design next? Should it be?

There are those who think we should lobby for a separate category for projection design; I think this is a terrible idea. Of all the disciplines of the theatre, projection and scenic design are the most intertwined. Projections cannot stand alone on the stage. Think about a design category for wigs that did not include the costumes—you can't; it's a collaboration. When stage design is at its best, one shouldn't be aware of where the costumes and the lighting are separate.

For years, I've been urging that specific design categories be dropped and a prize, or prizes, awarded for Best Design. That would solve the problem that arose this year, when the committee couldn't tell the difference between the contributions of Kevin Adams (lighting) and David



Timothy Bird and the Knifededge Creative Network seamlessly integrated projections into *Sunday's* set



A *Catered Affair* features a collaboration between David Gallo (scenery) and Zak Borovay (projections).

Korins (set) in *Passing Strange*—with the result that neither one was nominated. It seems like they were punished for erasing the edges between their categories—an achievement that is the goal of the best modern design.

I am aware that a Best Design category will never fly in world where producers are convinced that large numbers of awards translate into ticket sales—and, of course, they may be right—but, nevertheless, adding a category for projection design is a bad idea. When I think about a theatre season that has five shows with enough projections to be

considered for an award, I shudder. Suddenly, shows that only need a few images will get pumped up to look bigger; projections will overwhelm the play, because someone smelled a possible nomination.

A new approach

It's a fragile craft, this projection business, and I take it as my personal responsibility to encourage it to be subtle, ephemeral, and original. So here's my humble suggestion to the Tony committee:

If you won't just bite the bullet and make an award for Best Design—thereby rewarding the collaboration

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Did Tony nominators grasp who did what on *Passing Strange*?

of the design team—then projection design should be nominated along with the set design—but only when the set is less without it. This approach eliminates the use of title slides or transition-only projections. If you can't see the value of the set, or its charms are greatly lessened without them, nominate the projection designer as well.

For set designers who are unhappy

about this, all I can say is, get over it. This approach doesn't make the set designer any less important. It simply clarifies things—and, if you need the credit, learn how to do the work. Set designers used to be costume and lighting designers, too. There is a precedent for this; there is a long and varied history of projections on Broadway, beginning with Jo Mielziner, Tony Walton, and Richard Pilbrow. In fact, it is only since the technical advancements of the '60s that a distinctly skilled designer has been used to explore the potential of this form. It takes a dedicated craftsman to translate a technology that, in most cases, was created to glorify a motor car on a dais, and rethink and refine that potential to expand the reach of a playwright's vision.

Projection designers are not in competition with set designers. We are in the theatre for the same reason as any other designer: We want to deliver the play in as imaginative and eloquent



Harrington's projections for *The Who's Tommy* weren't included in the show's set design nomination.

a manner as possible, and we need all hands pulling together to do it.

Increasingly, scenery will incorporate projections; they have too much potential to ignore, and—let's face it—cinema is the language of our time. I think I speak for the projection community at large when I respectfully request that the nominating committees notice our names and

our work, even as we labor to fold our edges into the scenic statement. But please—don't make a separate category; it is not necessary, and it will just confuse people. The best projections are felt more than seen; they don't draw attention. They are, rightly, a part of the set. 📶