

LIGHTING

D I M E N S I O N S

on the road with
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BRIAN SIDNEY BEMBRIDGE
THEATRE LD



ANDREW FRENCH

This year's Joseph Jefferson Awards, given to honor achievement in the Chicago theatre community, announced the arrival of a new theatre LD: Brian Sidney Bembridge, who won for his work on a stage version of Charles Dickens' *Hard Times*. Then again, a regular Chicago theatregoer would most likely be familiar with Bembridge, who has built a substantial résumé—oddy enough, as a set designer. It is, in fact, more an English model for a designer's career, but Bembridge designs both scenery and lighting, sometimes singly, and sometimes both in one production.

A native of Londonderry, NH, Bembridge was involved in community and summer stock theatre, doing a little bit of everything. He enrolled in the North Carolina School of the Arts as a lighting major, but, once there, he was

urged by his teacher, Clyde Fowler, and a mentor, Tony Fanning, to pursue set design. Bembridge made the switch, but continued to take lighting courses as well. The change in majors, he says, was the right decision for him; he says that most college lighting design students "are very technical, which I'm not. I actually draw my paperwork by hand."

How's that again? In our modern world of CAD, Lightwright, and WYSIWYG, there really exists someone younger than Tharon Musser who draws plots—in fact, all paperwork—without digital assistance? "Phoebe Daurio, my master electrician, was quite shocked," he laughs, adding, "I'm old-fashioned that way. I love putting the pencil to paper." Spoken like a true set designer. He adds, "Computers are great, but not for what I do. I work for smaller theatre compa-

nies. I never designed lights in school—I was a scenery major." In fact, he adds, his strong point as a designer is his sensitivity to cueing, not technology. "I'm naive about a lot of the tech aspects," he says.

In any event, following graduation, Bembridge moved to Chicago, where he soon began designing both scenery and lighting for productions in that city's thriving theatre scene. His first major design was the lighting for a revival of William Gibson's *A Cry of Players* for Timeline Theatre. After that, he worked here and there, serving as resident scenic and lighting designer for Luna Negra Dance Theatre and production designer for the indie film *Stray Dogs* (among others). He's often won attention for his scenery, in such productions as *The Birthday Party* at Apple Tree Theatre (Wrote Hedy Weiss

in the *Chicago Sun-Times*, "Brian Sidney Bembridge's warped-floor-and-torn-wallpaper set . . . almost smells of mildew").

But perhaps Bembridge's most fruitful relationship has been with the Lookingglass Theatre, the Chicago fixture that is perhaps best-known for one of its founding members, David Schwimmer of TV's *Friends*. Among Bembridge's productions there have been a three-person version of *Hamlet*, for which he provided scenery, lighting, and costumes, and a stage adaptation of Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, for which he received his first Jeff Award nomination. Then came his Jeff Award-winning *Hard Times*, a production that also won in the best play category. For this production, the designer worked a fairly limited color palette (no color, blues, sepias) to constantly transform the spare setting and imbue the action with a strong period feeling. Reviewing the production, Weiss praised Bembridge's "fine, shadowy lighting."

These days, Bembridge's career is moving at the speed of light. Speaking to *Lighting Dimensions* in March, he had completed scenery on five productions over a six-week period, including a new musical, *Being Beautiful*, at Bailwick Theatre; two productions (*Winesburg, Ohio*, and *Jesus Hopped the A Train*) at Steppenwolf Theatre; *Luna Mud*, a new production at Lookingglass; and scenery and lighting for the musical *No Way to Treat a Lady* at Lake Forest College. Last month, he designed scenery and lighting for *Summertime*, a new play by Charles L. Mee at Lookingglass, and this summer, he's working on three shows for Northwest University's summer theatre season, and productions for Steppenwolf, Goodman, Chicago Shakespeare Theatre, and Second City, as well as an autumn revival of *Hard Times*.

When not keeping busy in theatre, he's lit parties, styled for photo shoots, worked for an interior designer, and even designed a restaurant. "I like varied projects," he says, adding, with a laugh, "If somebody said, 'Come design my broom closet,' I'd be there in a heartbeat." For the moment, he's happy in Chicago: "I'm making a name for myself there." If the name suggests prolific and talented, then he's right.

David Barbour