

## The Multitasking Designer

The Crazy Schedule Of A Young Lighting And Set Designer

By Brian Sidney Bembridge

"Brian, I don't know how you do it. I mean, without going crazy."

—Loy Arcenas

The world premiere of *Blind Man Singing* on February 6, 2006, marked opening number 22 for me since the last week of August, 2005. I, too, am not quite sure how this happened. I guess my not saying "no" is how it happened. I work for a wide range of theatres here in Chicago and throughout the country. I have opened shows in a variety of spaces, from The Chicago Theatre that seats 3,000, to a storefront that seats less than 30 people.

August ended with my designing the set and lights for *Improv Olympics 25th Anniversary* at the Chicago Theatre. Means of Production built the set, the exterior of IO's Chicago Theatre in Wrigleyville. The challenge of this show was that, a week before the opening, they decided that they were shooting it for a DVD. We brought in someone with a light meter who works with TV lighting. He was able to make adjustments to my theatrical lighting for a perfectly even wash for the cameras without losing the theatricality. This was all happening while I was in previews for *Copenhagen* at one of my theatre homes, Timeline Theatre Company. There were many late nights, painting molding lines onto two 15'x30' curved, sanded, welding curtains (heavy-weight plastic used for protection in scene shops or factories), which was my solution for not being able to afford sanded Plexiglas. We took three welding curtains and had them heat-welded—a process to attach plastic to plastic without glue—to our specific length and covered the long horizontal seams with chair and picture rail lines, so the seams would not be seen on stage.

Shortly after, I started tech for *Hephaestus* (sets and lights) at Lookingglass Theatre Company, another of my homes. This show was in tech at the same time as *Grand Hotel* (lights) at Drury Lane Water Tower Theatre. Fortunately, the theatres are across the street from each other, a small miracle that was an enormous help. And for the first time, I hired an assistant. Luckily for me, Jesse Klug happens to be the world's best assistant and is now a colleague I work with often. We were able to preprogram *Hephaestus* before the company was ever in the space, cueing the entire show before the actors showed up.

Both shows had moving lights [High End Systems Studio Colors], another first for me. We used them for a rock-and-roll circus look that called for movement and color. Jesse and I would leapfrog between Drury Lane and Lookingglass, programming in the morning and then teching in each of the theatres in the day. I ran back and forth between breaks, and I would watch a different show each night. I started loading in the sets for *Recent Tragic Events*, Uma Productions, my third home, and *Breakfast, Lunch, and Dinner*, Teatro Vista, before we opened the two shows downtown. Fortunately for me, these two shows took over the upstairs and downstairs of The Chopin Theatre. The

other theatre company always knew where I was, so if there was a problem, I just had to take a few steps to answer any questions. Means of Production also built the set for Teatro Vista, which meant that I only had a few paint/touch up notes and propping to do on my own.

It was back to Drury Lane to load in and tech *School House Rock Live* (sets and lights), a kid's show that sat on top of the *Grand Hotel* set during the day. I brought Jesse onto this project to assist and program the board, as it was mostly lit by our six moving lights (SGM Giottos), and we teched it in one day, using the plot from *Grand Hotel*. I grabbed my sanity (and my partner Ryan) and headed to Michigan for a quick two-day breather and then back to tech Lonnie Carter's world premiere, *Wheatley* (set) at Victory Gardens and the world premiere of Curt Columbus's translation of *Three Sisters* (set) at Strawdog Theatre Company. This was a little difficult, as the theatres were across town from each other, but both theatres and directors were very understanding.

The challenge of these last five shows was that they were very hands on; I was dressing, propping, and painting in the day while teching at night. Fortunately, Jenny Fague, the properties master at Steppenwolf, was extremely giving to us, letting us borrow furniture that we could afford on this budget. I would be coming home to design upcoming projects. I was in bed by 2-3am and up at 7am most days. The Second City Toronto was installing my set for their new theatre at this time, as was The Second City ETC in Chicago.

Late October took me back to Timeline to tech and open *A Man For All Seasons* (set), a long, raked, perforated, steel deck banded in wood with a small pool in the middle and audience on both sides. Unheard of in this space, PJ Powers, artistic director, and Brian Voelker, managing director, weren't quite sure about the whole pool idea. But they gave us the green light. This overlapped with Nilo Cruz's *Hortensia And The Museum of Dreams* (set) at Victory Gardens, with *Wheatley* still running upstairs. I brought Jesse on to light the production. *Roasting Chestnuts* (set) at Noble Fool Theatricals was next, where I vomited Christmas on stage, in a good way. It was an over-the-top holiday romp—great fun!

I was off to Los Angeles before *Chestnuts* opened to paint, hang, focus, and tech *The Brothers Karamazov* (sets and lights), a three-hour, three-act play, with Circle X Theatre Company. Directed by a close friend, John Patrick Langs, this production marked our ninth collaboration in theatre and film. I met with Sebastien Grouard to assist me on a Lookingglass show in the spring before I left for LA. We hit it off so well that I asked him to assist me on *Barefoot In The Park*, *Candida*, and *Love Song* at Steppenwolf, also in the spring. The brilliant thing is that Sebastien had transferred all my hand-drafting and sketches into CAD. For the first time, I could talk to the director and shops via phone and email and make rapid changes that I



Hephaestus

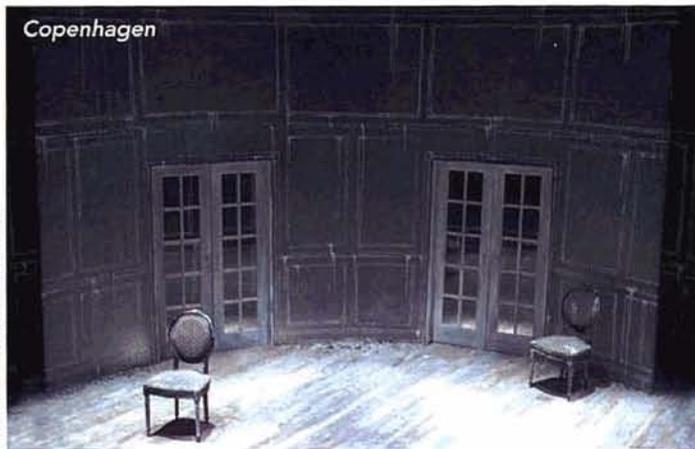
could never do before while out of town.

I was back to Chicago for a few days and meetings, then off to New York to tech *Candida* (set) at The Jean Cocteau Repertory at the Bowery Street Theatre. I was painting, propping, buying fabric for the show. I found the most amazing discount fabric store in Chinatown, Modern Décor—amazing staff.

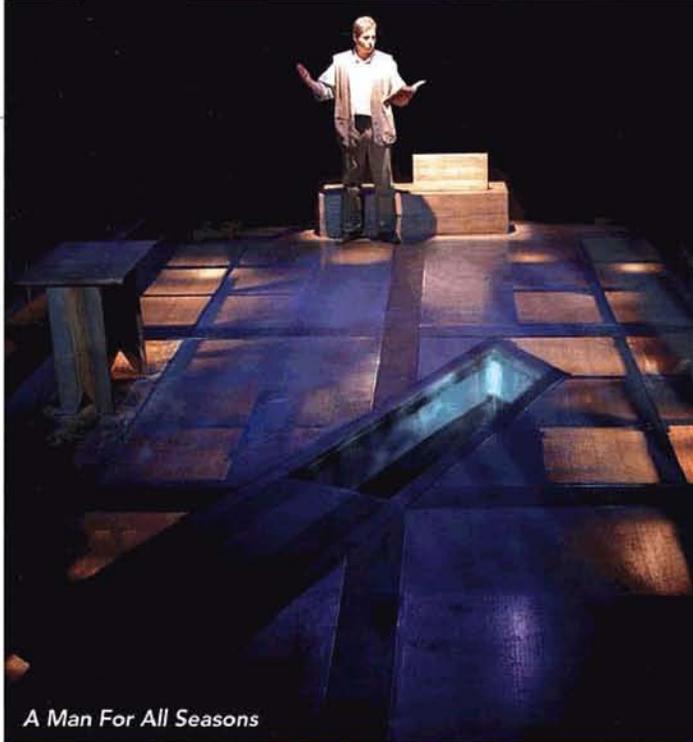
I was back to Chicago to relight *A Christmas Carol* (lights) at Writers' Theatre with Michael Halberstam, who just directed *Candida* in NYC. Then, I was back to NY, on the stage, with *Barefoot In The Park* at Drury Lane Oakbrook, where I spent most of my time dressing the set with pipes and oddities that past inhabitants might have left in the apartment. *Accomplice* (sets and lights), back at Noble Fool, was on the heels of *Barefoot*, followed by Caryl Churchill's *A Number* (set) at Next Theatre Company—a modern, sleek set that pushed the theatre's budget and space. We had another sanded Plexi challenge. BJ Jones, the director, and I wanted a sanded Plexi ceiling. The steel tube and Plexi were out of our league. Bob Groth, the same TD from *Copenhagen* at Timeline, had the idea to use commercial grade drop ceiling supports, and I thought frosted corrugated plastic panel would work just fine. It came together beautifully.

After the opening of *Blind Mouth Singing* (sets), which was directed by Broadway designer Loy Arcenas (no pressure) at the Chopin with Teatro Vista, I was ready to open *Guantanamo: Honor Bound To Defend Freedom* (set) at Timeline Theatre Company. I am not sure what to do with myself this spring; I only have six shows in three months.

To answer Loy's question, I think you have to be a little crazy to work in this business...and be grateful to the people who celebrate your insanity. I thank them all. LD



Copenhagen



A Man For All Seasons

## THE THEATRE OPENINGS OF A TRAVELING DESIGNER

### AUGUST 2005

- Saturday, August 27  
*I.O.'s 25th Anniversary Reunion Show*  
(Chicago Theatre)
- Previews August 23-26  
*Copenhagen*  
(TimeLine Theatre Company, Chicago)

### SEPTEMBER 2005

- Previews September 8-10  
*Hephaestus*  
(Lookingglass Theatre, Chicago)
- September 7-November 6  
*Grand Hotel*  
(Drury Lane Water Tower Place, Chicago)
- September 22-October 15  
*Recent Tragic Events*  
*Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner*  
(Both: Chopin Theater, Chicago)
- Previews September 24;  
Show through December 31  
*School House Rock Live* (Drury Lane)

### OCTOBER 2005

- October 6-November 13  
*Wheatley* (Victory Gardens, Chicago)
- October 6-November 19  
*Three Sisters* (Strawdog Theatre, Chicago)

### NOVEMBER 2005

- Previews November 1-4  
*A Man For All Seasons* (Timeline Theatre)
- And  
*Hortensia And The Museum of Dreams*  
(Victory Gardens)

### • Previews November 16-19

- Roasting Chestnuts*  
(Noble Fool Theatricals, Charles, IL)

### DECEMBER 2005

- December 3-January 15, 2006  
*The Brothers Karamazov*  
(INSIDE the Ford, Hollywood, CA)
- December 28-February 11, 2006  
*Candida*  
(Bouwerie Lane Theatre, New York City)
- December 21-24  
*A Christmas Carol*  
(Writers' Theatre, Glencoe, IL)
- December 30-February 26, 2006  
*Barefoot in the Park*  
(Drury Lane, Oakbrook Terrace, IL)

### JANUARY 2006

- January 22-March 18  
*Accomplice* (Noble Fool Theatricals)
- January 26-February 26  
*A Number*  
(Noyes Cultural Arts Center, Evanston, IL)

### FEBRUARY 2006

- February 6-March 5  
*Blind Mouth Singing* (Chopin Theater)
- Previews February 7-10  
*Guantanamo: Honor Bound To Defend Freedom* (Timeline Theatre Company)

### UP NEXT:

- March 30-June 4  
*Love Song* (Steppenwolf, Chicago)