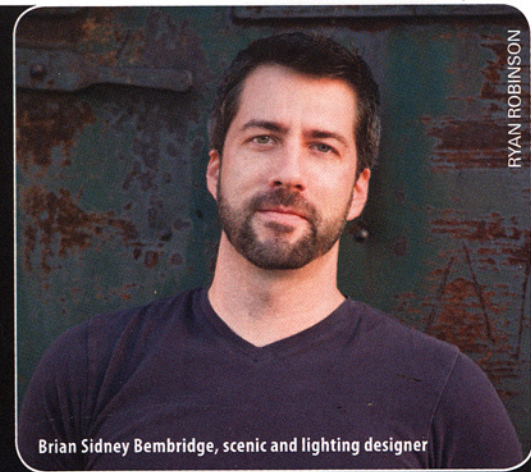


MICHAEL BROSILOW

BRIAN SIDNEY BEMBRIDGE

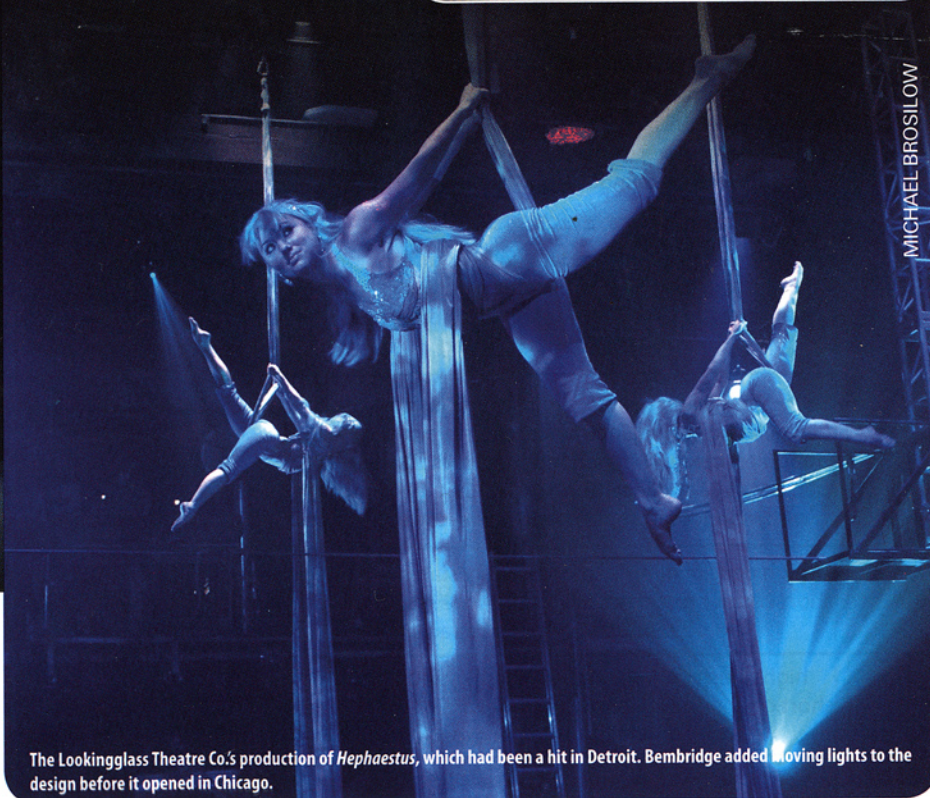


Brian Sidney Bembridge, scenic and lighting designer

RYAN ROBINSON



Bembridge's moon takes a starring role in *La Luna Muda* at Chicago's Lookingglass Theatre Company.



The Lookingglass Theatre Co.'s production of *Hephaestus*, which had been a hit in Detroit. Bembridge added moving lights to the design before it opened in Chicago.

MICHAEL BROSILOW

By Rob Ludwig

At the age of 23, Brian Sidney Bembridge moved to Chicago, the home of more than 200 small theatre companies, to try to make a name for himself as a lighting and scenic designer. After working on various small projects, he finally got his break in the local theatre community after he was invited to work on a film featuring a little green frog and his friends. He took time out of his busy schedule to talk to us about how his naivety helped him make the most important decision in his life and what he's learned since relocating to the Windy City.

PLSN: Obviously, you're heavily involved in the Chicago theatre community, but let's back up to the beginning of your career: How did you get involved in the theatrical lighting industry?

Bembridge: As a kid, I did community theatre. I was on stage but also hung the plot, circuited, ran spots and ran the board. So I was always sort of involved with it, in some capacity.

Then I toured around the world for a year (as a performer), and when I came back I wasn't sure what I was going to do. I was working in a restaurant and I remembered this brochure I had seen from the North Carolina School of the Arts that I thought looked cool, so I sent my application in. They said, "Come down and bring your portfolio." I didn't have a portfolio. [Laughs]. So I slapped some stuff together and went down for the interview to major in lighting design and was accepted at the interview. Norman Coates and Scott Templin were there at the time. It all sort of took off from there.

How old were you when you graduated and started working full time?

Twenty-three.

So you knew what it took to get to where you wanted to be, and thus you moved to Chicago, right?

I think I was naïve. I don't think I knew

what it took, but I loved theatre. I still love all aspects of theatre. I love costumes and sets, but I do mostly sets and lighting, now. I still do a costume here or there. But I love the process and I've always been involved with it. I knew I somehow wanted to stay in theatre.

Why did you feel the need to move to Chicago?

At the time, I moved to Chicago because I didn't want to go to New York and learn by assisting. I wanted to learn on my own, by my own mistakes, and figure out what my process was. At the time, I was married and my ex-wife was a dancer. We made one visit to Chicago and really liked it, and moved, not knowing anybody.

In your mind, did you think Chicago had better opportunities to offer?

There was a professor who came in my senior year, Franco Colavacchia. He taught scenic design and used to teach at DePaul. He left DePaul to come teach at North Carolina School Of The Arts. He really talked about Chicago quite a bit and said there's a ton of theatre there. Another friend of mine, from Ohio, had been there a couple of times and said I should go check it out.

I didn't quite know the level of storefronts that are here; there are over 100 storefront theatres here. Everybody knows the Steppenwolf and Goodman, the big names, but there is so much more theatre to see.

It's a great city for theatre, but I'm sure there was plenty of competition. So how did you get your break?

When I first came up here to visit the city to see what was up here, Franco said to call the Goodman and to get in touch with Max Leventhal, who at the time was the production manager, and, "tell him I sent you and show him your work."

When I came up he wasn't available, so I dropped off a resume and a few images. When I moved up here in the summer of

1997, I called him and he said to come in. He was very gracious. He said, "Your work's great. I really like your stuff but I could hire any designer in the country — why should I hire you? Go put in your time" — he gave me some people to get in touch with — "and call me in a few years."

So I called a few people, but it was still hard because a lot of the theatre companies come from Northwestern and DePaul, where they hire their designers because they went to college with them and have already formed a relationship with them.

I needed money so I started working at Anthropologie, a store owned by Urban Outfitters, and started doing some displays for them. When I left that, I did some styling work and photography. When I left that, I worked for an interior designer for a while. And then I went and did a movie in North Carolina — *Muppets From Space*. I designed some sets for that and when I came back people said, "You just worked on a multi-million dollar movie, you can do our \$500 set." And, of course, I was only a set designer on it, I wasn't the production designer, but things sort of took off.

Lookingglass Theatre Company — I'm a member of the company — really was my first break. Another small company I worked for — TimeLine Theatre Company. Their artistic director at the time, P J Powers, had worked with me at Anthropologie. He worked in the stock room and had just graduated from DePaul, and at the time, he told me he was starting a small theatre company and that they kind of had designers but that we should keep in touch. Those are really two of my home bases now, here in Chicago. David Kersnar at Lookingglass was the first person to actually hire me. And Laura Eason and Hei-

di Stillman were supporters of my work, and they were co-artistic directors and directed some pieces that I did there.

So working on a movie launched your theatre career?

It did. It always cracks me up when I look at my first resume from when I got here. [Laughs]. Nobody would hire me even though I did five shows and a party or something... a lot of people took risks hiring me.

But my career did take off after that. At Lookingglass, at first I did sets, and then sets and lights, and then a bunch of lights.

When you started working with lighting were you a tech, programmer, or designer?

I didn't do any electrician calls at the time, but I did do some carpentry calls at the Shakespeare Theatre, when I needed extra cash. It's funny — I was designing a show upstairs with Gary Griffin, who's now on Broadway of course, while I was loading out a show downstairs, right around that same time. It's kind of a humbling business — you do what you've got to do to eat.

Now you focus on scenic and lighting design?

Yes.

How has your design philosophy changed? From what I understand, you're using more moving lights now.

I am. *Hephaestus*, for instance, is sort of like a rock 'n' roll musical, and we've done four incarnations. We did it once outside of Detroit, without moving lights, in a big proscenium house as a test out, to see how

it did with an audience who knew nothing about us. It was a huge hit. That winter, we did it at Lookingglass and I think that show only had four fixtures. That was my introduction to them. I had a great assistant, Jesse Klug, who is still an associate of mine. He designs lights, and I design sets, on lots of shows when I can't do both. He really introduced me to moving lights.

Is that something you didn't learn about in college?

We really didn't. I went to school from 1993 to 1997, so we didn't even have a scroller. It's different now. I loved that Norman wanted everyone to become a good designer with the basics and without technology leading your process, but I think they finally figured out they need to keep up with technology.

So you had to teach yourself on the fly?

Totally.

That's another fine method of learning. How often do you use them now?

If I'm doing a musical, I have to use them. It's impossible to do some musicals without them.

Do you program your own console as well?

I don't do that much anymore. I still would rather have someone else (a programmer) at the board because they are much quicker.

Have you won any awards for your designs?

I recently was honored with two Gar-

land Awards and two LA Drama Critics Circle Awards for *Brothers Karamazov*, several Joseph Jefferson and After Dark Awards in Chicago, and an LA Weekly Award. And the greatest honor was receiving the LADCC Award with Robert Wilson.

And you've also done some designs for film, haven't you?

That's more set design. I've done a bunch of indies; some for friends of mine and some for people I've met. It's a radically different process.

I heard some outrageous statistic about the number of shows you've done in one year.

In my busiest season — September to June — I did 31 designs.

That's seems like a lot of design work in one season. Was that because it was hard to say no to design offers? Did you learn anything from it?

There are few small companies I still work with because they are my friends and my history with them, but my goal now is really trying to stick to fewer, larger shows. That's my goal in life.

Are you still interested in other projects — outside of theatre and film — that you might pursue even though you're trying to be more selective?

I look at every opportunity. That's why I love this business — there's always something new. **PLSN**



The set and lighting for *The Trial*, staged at DePaul University, adds to the intensity of Franz Kafka's nightmarish vision.



The set for *Love Song*, Steppenwolf Theatre Company, Chicago

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