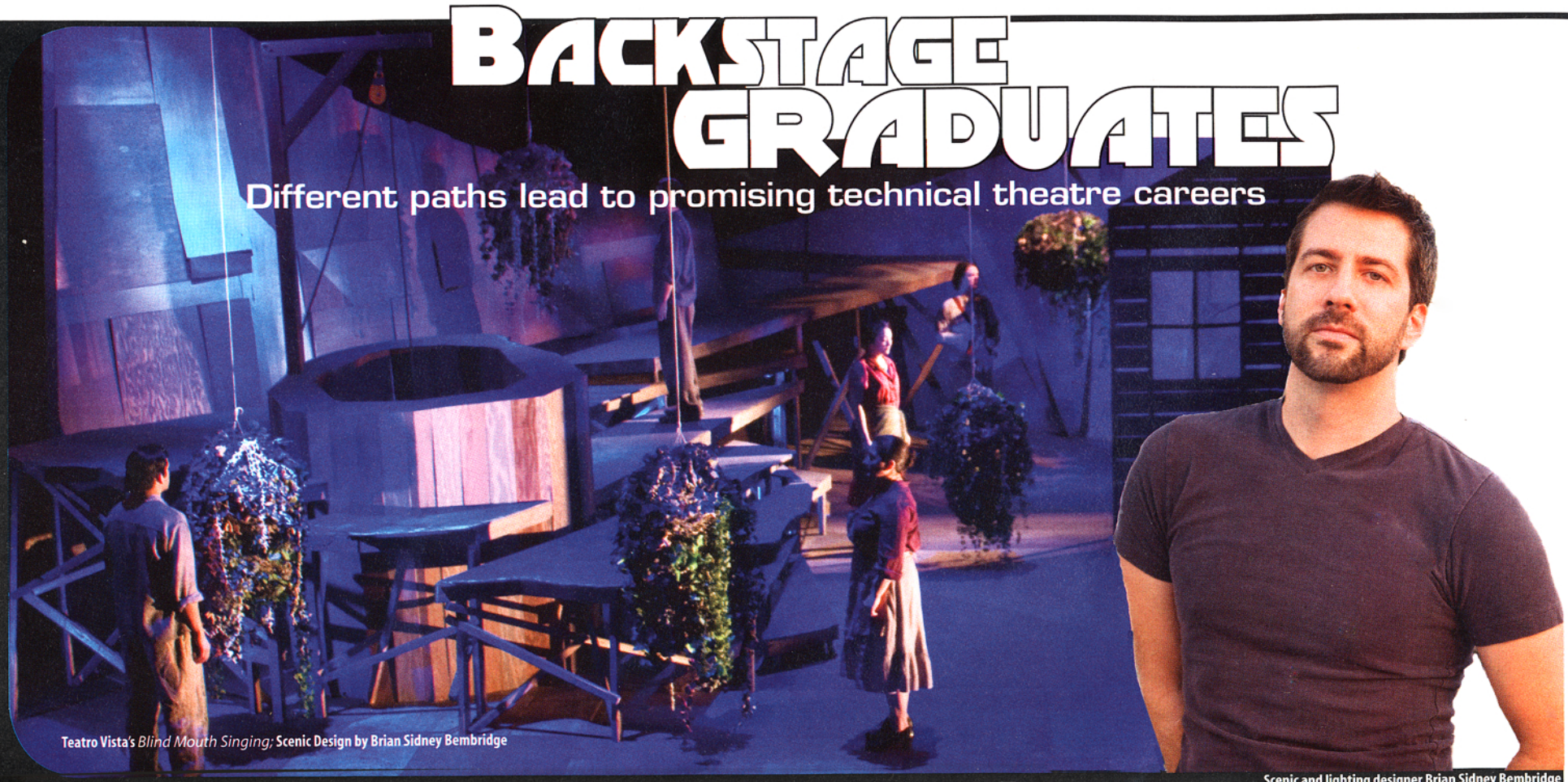
# BACKSTAGE GRADUATES

## Different paths lead to promising technical theatre careers



Teatro Vista's *Blind Mouth Singing*; Scenic Design by Brian Sidney Bembridge

Scenic and lighting designer Brian Sidney Bembridge

By Breanne**George**

In the live event production industry, many succeses are earned in the school of street smarts. You've heard the awe-inspiring story just about a million times. Well, here it is again — a million and one. A budding technical star moves to the Big Apple or Hollywood with nothing more than raw talent, a wad of cash saved from a low-wage job in "Nowheresville" and a lifelong dream to design for a large-scale, high-profile production. He or she takes a chance, hoping to become the next best thing in the world of glitzy lights.

Other aspiring talents, however, choose a different direction to reach the big time. From Hollywood to Broadway, many successful designers and technicians are also graduates of production schools. While they still have to pay their dues in the real world like everyone else, graduates consider the extra education and experience showcased on their portfolio as a leg up over the competition.

### College on a Whim

"I went to school mostly on a whim," said Brian Sidney Bembridge, a freelance scenic and lighting designer who graduated with a bachelor's degree from North Carolina School of the Arts' (NCSA), School of Design and production in 1997. "I was involved in community theatre my whole life — hung lights, designed props, but nothing on a large scale. I loved theatre, but I didn't think I was good enough to be on stage. So, I went to school to learn the technology behind it." After graduation, Bembridge moved to Chicago, where he designs sets and lights for productions there, as well asacross the country, including *Death of a Salesman* produced by Madison Repertory Theatre and *The Brothers Karamazov*, produced by Circle X Theater in Los Angeles. "I went to Chicago because I didn't want to move to New York City and assist Broadway designers," he admits. "I wanted to learn through my own experiences."

Bembridge considers the experience he gained from his involvement in the school's theatrical productions and tech courses, — the "nuts and bolts" of design — as the most valuable aspect of his education. "NCSA has a very demanding program that will kick your butt," he says. "It has a high drop-out rate during freshman year because people can't take it." Unlike the carefree existence of a typical college student whose schedule consists of sleeping until noon, a couple afternoon classes and nights of frat parties, students in the design and production school live and breathe the conservatory-style curriculum. Many weekdays, Bembridge attended classes and production work from 8 a.m. until 11 p.m. "You have hands-on experience, you crew, build scenery, design costumes," he says. "When you get into production, it takes up most of your weekend."

The curriculum encouraged experimentation and creative expression, a valuable approach Bembridge says he now incorporates into his set and lighting projects. Initially, Bembridge's design renderings focused on the technical aspects, and he remembers getting into discussions with professor Franco Colavecchia who emphasized design as an art form. "He would say 'this is art, not architecture,'" Bembridge recalls. "Franco really made me look at rendering differently — less technically, more about the art behind it."

### Experimental Collaboration

Arizona State University's Herberger College of the Arts School of Theatre and Film stresses two main points in its mission statement: collaboration at the onset of the creative process and the production of new, experimental theatre, says Jake Pinholster, assistant professor of media design who was assistant video designer for several popular productions in New York City, including *Spamalot* and *Wicked*. Instead of replicating the canons of Shakespeare and ancient Greek, Renaissance and 20th century American classics, Herberger College of the Arts encourages new forms — screenplays written in the last five years. "It helps students buy into it more when they feel that it is a part of their culture and the world they are currently a part of," Pinholster says. He acknowledged that the strength of the program also resides in the fact that students can specialize in a number of areas within design and production, including lighting, costumes, media and sound and stage management. "The curriculum is not rigidly structured, which gets directors and playwrights into the design classes and vice versa," he says. "It allows students to spread themselves across a wide variety of design disciplines in order to become a well-rounded designer."

Daniel Brodie, who graduated from the Herberger College in May 2006, took advantage of the diverse program with a specialization tailored to his interest in digital media and projection. While taking a digital media theory course his junior year, Brodie said his interest was piqued by a presentation Pinholster gave to the class about the integration of video, projection and live feeds, and how these latest trends in theatre are the future of the industry. The following year, Brodie signed up for Pinholster's digital media lab class with two components: software and hardware configuration. He learned Adobe Photoshop, Flash, Aftereffects and Avid editing software as tools to create digital media content and was exposed to all aspects of projectors: how and where to hang them, what playback systems and software to use and how to integrate media into cues.

"We learned how to set the video up so a board operator can run it without the designer being present, how to connect it to the lighting board and how to cue everything together," Brodie says. Now, as a freelance video designer based in New York City, the playback systems he designed for his most recent work, the theatrical piece *Behind the Lid* by the performance artist Lee Nagrin and puppeteer Basil Twist, are nearly identical to the ones he designed at Arizona State. "I've always been passionate about technology — specifically cutting-edge technology — and I've been involved in theatre since I was ten or so," he added. "I always wanted to figure out a way to blend these two passions, and it seemed like a very appropriate and fortunate turn of events for me."

### The Trade Tech Approach

When Susan Rose, a lighting programmer and designer for well-known concert tours such as Ringo Starr and Hank Williams Jr. with Lynyrd Skynyrd, attended Full Sail back in 1989, she had her sights set on the spotlight. But unlike most lighting techs, instead of creating the spotlight, she wanted to be in it. At the time, she was a country singer with a plan to move to Nashville and land a recording contract. But first, she needed a backup plan and decided to get trained on the technical side of the industry, specifically media and sound, because she eventually wanted to own a recording studio. "I moved to Nashville to pursue being a performer, but there was always work for techs," she says. "It turned out to be my day job because performers are a dime a dozen, but techs always have a gig." Rose credits her education at Full Sail for any success because, prior to the program, she had minimal technical experience. "They really introduced me to the computer world we were getting into, and I realized I had a knack for the technical side," she says.

After graduation, Rose worked as a sound technician at Opryland theme park. She became familiar with lighting consoles after "playing with the original Wholehog lighting console on many afternoons." In due time, Rose was the only person trained to use the console, and as a result, became a lighting programmer for the Opryland concert series. One thing led to another, and her connections through the concert series led her to other gigs, from fixing lighting in nightclubs to hitting the road as lighting designer and programmer for numerous country singers, notably Louise Mandrell in 1995.

Full Sail also helped her obtain an internship at Walt Disney World's Epcot Center after graduation, a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity where she learned all aspects of production: programming lights and sound and costume and set design. She recommends students take advantage of an internship for professional contacts and real-world experience. Today, she is in the midst of a project at Walt Disney World's MGM Studios, which she describes as "the most challenging project thus far