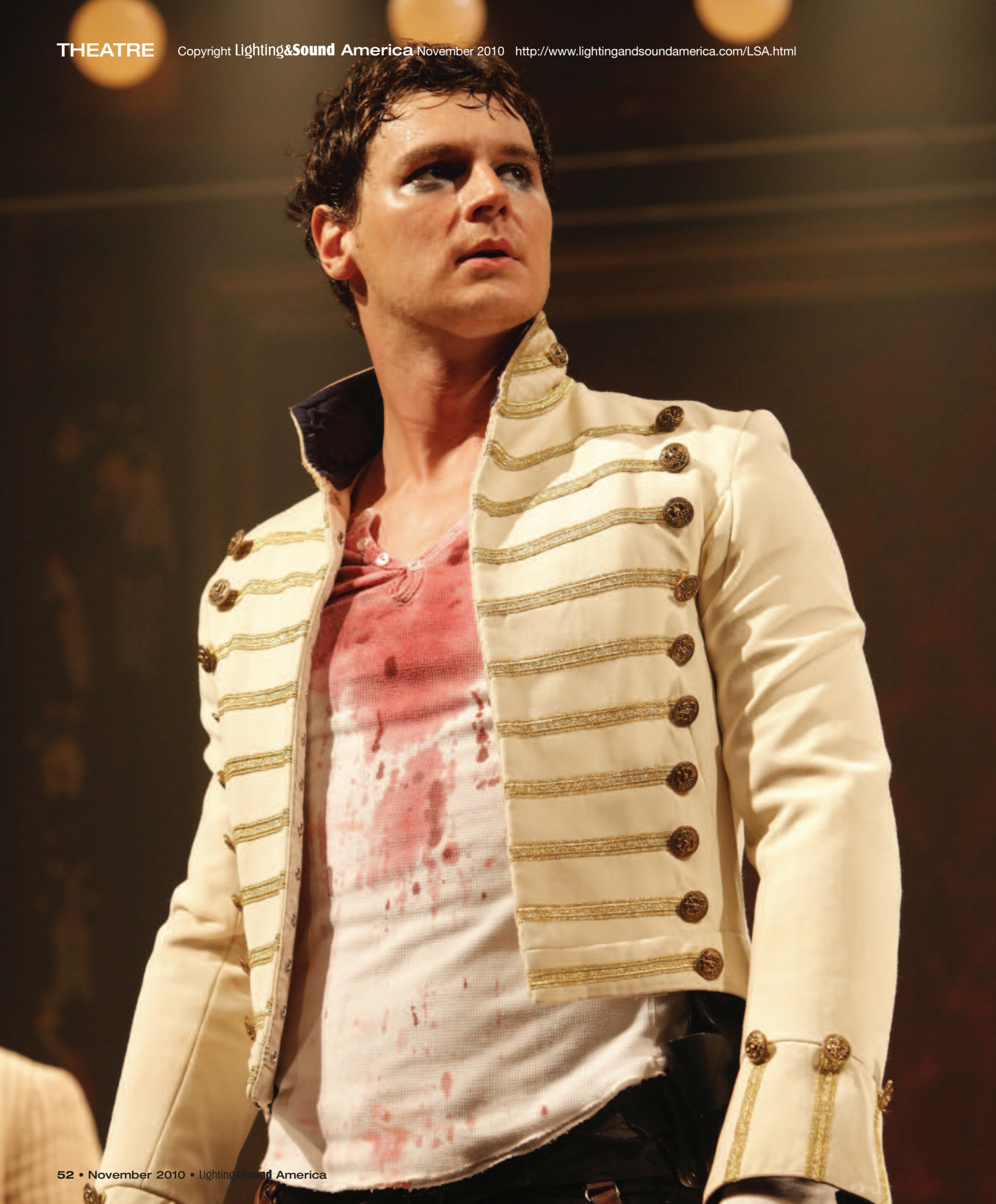

The People's Choice

Inside the mad, bad world of Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson

By: David Barbour

Step inside the Bernard B. Jacobs Theatre—one of Broadway's most tastefully designed venues—these days, and you're bound to get a surprise. It might be the pillars wrapped in beaver fur. Or the proscenium wrapped in rotting red-velvet swag. Or the red fairy lights nesting everywhere, like clouds of incandescent gnats. It might even be the lengthy LED tubes spanning the auditorium.

Then again, it might be the dead horse hanging from the front of mezzanine.

Clearly, you have not entered the theatre housing *Promises, Promises*. Instead, you are in the realm of *Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson*.

BBAJ, as its fans call it, has traveled a long and crooked road to Broadway, with stops at the Williamstown Theatre Festival, the Center Theatre Group in Los Angeles, and New York's Public Theatre, where it enjoyed a sensational run last spring after a smaller Lab Series staging. The first new musical of the Broadway season, it pretty much dispenses with all of the genre's conventions in order to mercilessly satirize the current state of American politics. Without ever directly invoking the Tea Party or the Sarah Palin-Christine O'Donnell-Sharron Angle pack of mama grizzlies, Alex Timber's book and Michael Friedman's score take deadly aim at showboating politicians who stop at nothing in their efforts to pander to an electorate of dimwits looking for "relatable" candidates. Love it or hate it—and it has earned strong opinions on both sides of the fence—it is rare to see political satire this fresh and pointed occupying real estate in the neighborhood of *The Addams Family* and *Million Dollar Quartet*.

Essentially a cross between a *Saturday Night Live* sketch and a Harvard Hasty Pudding show, *Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson* mixes sophisticated spoofing—there are jokes about Susan Sontag and Michel Foucault—with low-down gags and a score of mock-emo ballads, all of which combine to reposition our seventh president as a rock star in skin-tight jeans, possessed of dangerous mood swings and a penchant for cutting himself until he bleeds. Having driven out the French, the Spanish, and the Native Americans—"I'm pretty sure it's our land, anyway," says a member of the chorus—Jackson takes Washington by storm, upsetting the effete liberal elite and earning rave reviews from the people. ("He's the candidate I'd most like to have a beer with," says one beaming admirer.) But in politics, as in show business, it's not easy staying at the top, as President AJ learns when the time comes to make some tough decisions.

Seemingly anarchic, *BBAJ* is in fact a tightly assembled entertainment as staged by Timbers, whose company Les Frères Corbusier, is known for its deadpan approach to satire. And *BBAJ* has a most distinct look and sound, thanks to a team of new faces making their Broadway debuts. The result is a bizarre mashup of the 19th and 21st centuries, featuring a design that's more like an installation depicting the attic of American history. What comes clear in a series of interviews is that it could not have been realized without an unusually close collaboration between the scenic designer, Donyale Werle; the lighting designer, Justin Townsend, and the sound designer, Bart Fasbender.

Photo: Joan Marcus

Old Hickory's bar

In addition to the furnishings described above, Werle's design fingerprints are all over the Jacobs auditorium, from the Regency stripes painted on the back wall to the dozens of tacky vintage chandeliers hanging everywhere, the multitude of august period portraits placed in every available location, and the wild animal heads, wrapped in plastic, located on the proscenium. The underside of the mezzanine is alive with more of those red fairy lights.

"We really wanted to create a full environment," says Werle. "We started off by looking at a lot of bars. When you walk into a dive bar, you automatically know where you are—and you know the expectations." It wasn't a whimsical decision, she adds: "This show is a combination of the lowbrow and the highbrow, and we wanted to evoke that kind of lowbrow environment, to make it richly detailed and over-the-top. It's a chaotic environment, and, in a way, unfinished."

From that starting point, Werle drew on a textbook's worth of artistic influences. "I came from art school, and I tend to think in terms of art history," she says; it's an approach that proved fruitful. Of course, this is an emo musical, too, so she perused videos by the likes of The Killers and Panic! At the Disco. "There's a lot of Neo-Victorian references in them," she points out. "They have a way of taking very retro looks and making them seem modern, which, in a way, is what Alex does in this show. He takes history and slams it against pop-culture references."

Museums of different sorts also provided Werle with points of reference—art museums for the many paintings of 19th century figures ("We call them the Dead White Guys," she says, wryly) and natural history exhibits for the animal heads. "In many of those museums, everything is placed behind glass," she says. "That's why the deer heads are wrapped in plastic—also, the play is about the suffocation of history"—in this case, how Jackson, whom one might arguably call a sociopath, ended up a revered figure in the American pantheon.

And then there's the horse. "Alex and Michel are very Dada in their approach to theatre," says Werle about her most outrageous design choice, causing one instantly to think of the pianos, stuffed with dead donkeys, in the 1930 Dada film nightmare *Un Chien Andalou*, by Luis Bunuel and Salvador Dali. "I appropriated many ideas from the Dada and Fluxus movements to create different sculptures around the room." (Fluxus is an art movement, dating from the '60s, which takes in the work of Nam June Paik and Yoko Ono.) She adds that the works of Marcel Duchamp, Francis Bacon, Damien Hirst (he of the animals pickled in formaldehyde), Robert Rauschenberg, and Maurizio Catalan ("a neo-Dadaist who did a lot with animal imagery") were all poured into her intellectual blender. There's a thematic notion behind the horse as well: "Americans relate to horses in a certain way," she says. "They identify them with freedom, the animal of the West, moving across the West with a feeling of manifest destiny," the latter being a key theme of *Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson*. As it happens, it was her good luck that, a couple of seasons ago, the Public Theatre staged the Sam Shepard drama *Beating a Dead Horse*, starring Stephen Rea and a sculpture of an equine corpse. It "was built by Sean McArdle and Meghan Buchanan at the Public; we've taken it, cut it up, and refashioned it," she notes.

The result of all this detail is a set like a *Mad Magazine* cartoon; you can stare at it for hours, finding more and more details. Nevertheless, Werle says she strove for a certain kind of economy: "I work with a team of sculptors. Grady Barker is my lead sculptor. I do sketches for him—but not many full drawings of set pieces. We create them as we go. For example, last spring during a huge storm, I found a giant pile of broken umbrellas in Astor Place; they became the basis for many of the chandeliers and sculptures on the set. We can tell you every little detail about the dressing. There's not a thing there that wasn't touched by all of us."

Despite the pileup of objects, Werle adds that she is deeply interested in sustainable design. Therefore, most of the set is made of recycled or salvaged materials, with the exception of the deck and parts of the upstage wall. The fabric was donated from a tour of *The Producers*, with additional pieces provided by the Public. "Many of the chandeliers are homemade, taken from items we found in flea markets," she says. "There's one made of cat food cans in the house-left box. I collected cat food cans from every person I know in Brooklyn, as well as the actors and the producers. We had 500 cans, and we put flicker lights in them. It's a tiered piece, and it looks like a real chandelier." The many portraits, however, are not found items. "They're printed by Backdrop Productions, using low-VOH dyes," she says. "The wood we chose is sustainable. They are all portraits of real people—politicians, writers, philosophers, and military figures."

On the stage, the upstage wall is covered in red flocked wallpaper, and is decorated with all sorts of items, including dartboards and paddles. "It's more like a gentlemen's club up there," she adds, "but also a touch of the frat house. There's a portrait of John Quincy Adams with an arrow in his head, as well as one of Hugh Hefner, and another of my cat, Fluffy. The frames are made of beer caps and Mardi Gras beads." The set also contains a couple of platforms for the on-stage band; in the middle of the upstage wall a pair of doors opens, revealing another light rig for big rock numbers. The doors also feature an "AJ" logo that recalls the look of AC/DC. "That was Alex's idea," Werle

Photos: Joan Marcus

Above: In all three photos, Townsend's lighting cuts through the debris of Werle's setting.

says. She adds, laughing, "Then there's our garden of earthly delights—a pile of booze, drugs, pills and porn."

Of course, when the set designer is covering every square inch of the theatre with debris, it creates challenges for her colleagues. But Werle notes—and the others confirm—that they worked together intensively to fit all the necessary gear into the installation. "We built on top of each other," she says. "I added one layer, and they added another." Referencing the structure of Barco Versa Tubes that stretches from the back of the house to the proscenium, she says, "I added pipe into the production at the Public Lab, and Justin added the Versa Tubes on them."

Werle has worked as an associate designer on Broadway before, but this is her first time in charge. "It has been a very different process on Broadway," she says. "Downtown, you do practically everything yourself. It's harder to do this kind of installation uptown, because of the unions and shops; you have to be very clear in advance about what you want. The producers and the technical supervisors, Sam Ellis and Larry Morley, really helped us with that; we had to spend a lot of our money on labor, loading the show into the theatre."

Hudson Scenic Studio built the deck, center doors of the upstage wall, and side stage scaffolds; other parts were scavenged from the Public's production, and also from American Repertory Theatre in Cambridge, Massachusetts. (Among other details, the store-bought chandeliers and crystals were supplied by The Gallery, of Farmingdale, New Jersey, the animal heads were supplied by Mac's Taxidermy, St. Germain, Wisconsin, Center Theatre Group, NYU; and the designer David Barber. The gold frames for the house paintings were provided by JFM Enterprises, of Norcross, Georgia.) Hudson also provided much of the specialty lighting that is found almost everywhere on the set. "The biggest challenge was getting the overhead Versa Tubes all the way to the back of the mezzanine," Werle says. "There were no rigging points for that, so we had to deal with the theatre's ceiling to make them. There were definitely engineering and money issues involved." But, she says, "It was important to Alex to have it, because this is a show about populism. Because of the Versa Tubes, the people sitting up there get a completely different vantage point from those sitting on the floor level. We had to fight for it to the last possible minute, and we're really happy about it."

Rocking light cues

Justin Townsend, the production's lighting designer, confirms that he and Werle worked very closely on *Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson.* One look around the theatre and you can see why: There are lighting units tucked into every conceivable space in order to light various interior details. (For example, the horse is captured in a stark yellow beam that cuts across the room.) Strobes are everywhere, including along the mezzanine, where they are aimed at the audience sitting upstairs. There is a remarkable amount of uplighting onstage, from footlights on the downstage edge and from units built into the deck to treat scenic details on the upstage wall. And there's also the system placed behind the doors in the upstage stage.

"What's exciting about this project is that Donyale and I worked alongside each other," Townsend says. "She just packed the theatre with stuff and I needed to do the same thing." This approach caused

Photos: Courtesy of Donyale Werle


BAR

The rock star rig, hidden behind the upstage doors on the set, is revealed.

Photo: Joan Marcus

them to face some rather unusual decisions, he adds: "We chased each other around the theatre. I'd say, 'Why does this cue look wrong?'—and it would be because a crow was hanging in front of the light. Then the question was, do we move the crow or the light? In that case, it was easier for the electrician to move the light."

Overall, Townsend enjoyed the eccentric creative process. "Unlightable sets are the most exciting," he says, "because they demand a whole new vocabulary. In this case, he adds, "I really wanted the lighting to nest into the set. A lot of it is really architectural lighting." He notes that his unconventional approach extended to the on-stage rig. "We put every single light over the stage on a film stirrup—so, no matter what Donyale did, I could drop in a unit a little more, when I needed to." As with the scenic load-in, hanging the rig wasn't done in the usual way, and if the result has a slightly helter-skelter quality, well, that was part of the fun. "The electrician would say, 'Are we going to dress this cable?'" the designer recalls. "I'd say, 'Let's not worry bout buttoning this thing up.' We had 13 union stagehands running Christmas lights through the house. It was a singular process.

"Fortunately," he adds, the producers understood this. We weren't spending a ton of money on high-tech gear, like, say, a video wall, but we did put a lot of money into labor." For example, he mentions the Versa Tube rig in the mezzanine: "It's expensive to put rigging into the back of the house like that. But the thing we took from [the second Public Theatre production] was the total transformation of the space. And we felt that, if we're doing a piece that's really about the people, then you can't shortchange the people upstairs."

Townsend notes that, in the layout of his rig and the cueing of the numbers, "I really wanted to keep an old school rock-'n'-roll quality. That's why there's a lot of haze and colored backlight, for example. And that's why I didn't do any bit-mapping with the Versa Tubes. They're just big, long fingers of light, pointing at the stage." The gear was rented from PRG; however, he notes, "The show has benefitted in its many different past versions by taking whatever the supplier has on the shelf and being smart about using it." The automated gear includes three Philips Vari*Lite VL3500Q Spots (the Q is for "quiet"), two VL2500 Spots, and five VL1000T Spots. Speaking of the latter, with their tungsten bulbs, he says, "Because so much of the show is lit with incandescents, the VL1000Ts were important when I needed to fill in a scene."

Townsend adds that, adhering to his old-school aesthetic, he keeps the movers out of view as much as possible. He also uses six DHA Digital Light Curtains, a rarely seen item on

Broadway today. “I wanted them over the stage,” the designer says. “They told me, ‘Justin, they break.’ But I put them on an upstage electric for easy access, and they make this dynamic line of red light.”

The rest of the rig includes eight Martin Atomic 3000 strobes with scrollers, 190 Barco Versa Tubes, 350 ETC Source Fours in various sizes and degree numbers, six ARRI Theatre Fresnels, 30 Arri 300 Fresnels, twenty 14" scoops, 23 Thomas eight-light blinders, 102 mini-tens, 20 L&E Microfills, 40 birdies, 47 GAM Stik-Ups, eight Kino Flo ParaBeams, eight Strand Mizar Fresnel spotlights, one Lycian Starklite II followspot, 37 far cycs in various sizes, five PAR 56 striplights, 21 Altman Zipstrips, 30 L&E dimmable fluorescents, 72 Wybron Coloram II scrollers, one MDG Atmosphere hazer, two Look Solutions Unique 2 hazers, one Barco/High End F-100 fogger, and two City Theatrical Aqua Foggers.

Power is provided by ETC Sensor dimmers, with City Theatrical’s WDS system providing wireless control for certain effects. The lighting was programmed on an ETC Eos console—“It’s my first time with it, and it’s a useful console,” Townsend says—with the intention of switching over to an ETC Ion when previews were completed.

As the photos show, Townsend is fond of big color ideas. Clearly, red dominates, most of it created by Rosco R27 (Medium Red). “We tried to buy New York out of it,” he laughs. Equally strong, but used more sparingly, is yellow, mostly the result of Lee 100 (Spring Yellow). The latter has a coruscating feeling that, the designer says, is perfect for the material. “It’s an acidified version of a sepia print. It’s modern and historic, and it makes a kind of base for the book scenes.”

Speaking of the upstage-center rock-star system, he notes that the doors open to reveal micro-fluorescents on their insides. “They’re non-dim units that come up in one count. I love the punch of them. They can provide a line and energy of light.” Behind the doors, he adds, “We have Gam Stik-Ups to uplight the AJ drop and some Source Four PARs providing additional uplight. Then there’s a wall with 13 pieces of white neon and a wall of PARs. We can do a fog hit from below—and the result is pure Aerosmith.”

The abundant use of uplight on the stage is, he says, the result of “the team’s aesthetic. “We replaced a lot of birdies with Arri 300s, because the dancing upset the birdies on the deck and made them burn out. We also have 1,000W mini-tens on the front of the stage for a footlight idea. I also put mini-tens on the mezzanine rail; if we have loudspeaker fills for up there, we should have lighting fills as well.” Speaking before the opening, he says, “We’re continuing to put in new objects; we have 40-50 music stand lights going in front of the boxes, in front of the fluorescent tubes.”

“My hope is that there’s a specificity to it,” Townsend says. “There’s an arc to the event, reflecting Jackson’s journey, mixing rock numbers with old-fashioned theatre scenes. We need to jump from a dynamic rock event back into a book scene with clear, simple light. But I think we’ve invented a vocabulary to make this show work.”

Populist sound

Like Townsend, Bart Fasbender, the production’s sound designer, also had to deal with the complexities of the set design. “It was a challenge,” he says. “We staked our claims, but Donyale had so much stuff to install. It became a matter of things like, ‘Can we move that chandelier a few inches?’ or, ‘Yes, the sound will go through a rack of antlers, but it will bounce off them, too.’” It was, he adds, a process of constantly checking in to find out what had been added and where. And, of course, every change contained multiple implications: “The balcony left speaker was almost blocked by a chandelier, so we moved it—but then it was blocking Justin’s lighting, so the chandelier was moved even further off to the side.”

He notes, amused, that Werle’s acquisitive ways extended even to his gear. “We left an Anchor monitor on stage and Donyale incorporated it into the design. Not knowing, we took it away; that night, at notes, she asked, ‘Can I have it back?’” This wasn’t the first such incident, he adds: “We used a bass amp on stage [for the first Public Theatre production], and when we went to the Newman [for the second Public staging] she wanted it back. This time, we were going without amps on stage, so she went into a gear closet at the theatre and came up with old Peavey and old Fender amps that she incorporated into her design.”

In any case, Fasbender has overseen the rare design for a rock musical that achieves the twin ideals of presence and clarity without committing mass destruction of the audience’s eardrums. One major plus factor, he says, was the freedom to place loudspeakers on stage. Also, he notes, “Our front fills were nicely tucked underneath the stage, because Donyale raised it. Ordinarily, we’d have to go with smaller models for the front fill;” here, the ability to blast the audience from the front proved especially helpful.

However, Fasbender notes, not even the mundane task of hanging the proscenium rig was easy here. “We had to make hanging positions, because of the curtains draped all around it,” he says. “Also, Donyale had brought down the proscenium by about 10'. I feel fortunate about that, because we could bring the delay rings and the center cluster down as well, and, for the most part, that’s good. The only difficult part is we need to be more careful about not blowing some people away and

leaving others out."

In addition, he says, "The theatre has some acoustical challenges. When you're sitting in the middle of the orchestra, you can get a bit of wash of dialogue coming from the balcony. And, in some parts of the balcony, some sounds just shoot up from the stage. It's because of the dome in the ceiling. Fortunately, our hanging positions are below that, so we're not interacting with it too much."

The proscenium rig consists of Meyer Sound UPQ-1P wide-coverage loudspeakers, with UPA-1Ps—another Meyer wide-coverage unit—serving as balcony and orchestra fills. The center cluster consists of d&b audiotechnik T10s. One of that company's newest products, the T10 is a passive two-way loudspeaker housing two 6.5" drivers positioned in a dipolar arrangement and a 1.4" HF compression driver and a passive crossover network; it can be used as a line array or a point-source unit. "We went with them because of the very limited height between the dropped ceiling and the opening in the swag of Donyale's curtain," Fasbender says. "The question was, What would work in that space? David Sanderson, my associate and system designer, had just used the T10s on a show with [the designer] David Van Tieghem. They work very nicely." (The gear was supplied by Masque Sound.)

The underbalcony boxes and balcony fill consist of, on each level, eight L-Acoustics' MTD108As, an unpowered box here driven by the company's LA8 amplifiers, and eight Meyer UP4-XP ultra-compact boxes. The surround system consists of EAW JF60s.

"The actors are great about monitors," says Fasbender, noting it can be acoustically challenging onstage. "In one scene Martin Van Buren is talking to Jackson and there's underscoring; I went up on stage, and was standing between them and barely heard what they were saying." We did some heavy limiting on the band, so the actors feel a little bit safer. We have [Meyer] M1Ds for upstage side fills and a pair of [EAW] JF50s for the downstage. The band is on an Aviom personal monitor mixer system."

Interestingly, Fasbender's design is so subtle that it's easy to believe that the actors aren't miked during the book scenes. They're perfectly audible, but there's a noticeable bump upward in the level of reinforcement when somebody launches into a number. It's a deliberate strategy that helps to create an intimate feeling while spoofing the overwrought emo style. "Alex's aesthetic is, this is a play with songs in it," says the designer. "He wanted us to make it sound as unreinforced as possible."

Almost all cast members sport Sennheiser 5212 wireless systems with DPA 4061 capsules, except for Benjamin Walker, as Jackson, and Maria Elena Ramirez, as his wife, Rachel, both of whom get splattered with blood. They're fitted with tiny Sennheiser MKE1s; Walker also wears a DPA 4061. The latter "is capped during the bloody scene," says Fasbender. "He pulls the cap off when it is over." For big numbers, there are six Neumann KK104s on 5212 handheld transmitters.

The sound is controlled on an Avid Venue D-Show system. It's a somewhat unusual choice for Broadway, but Fasbender says it what's they had for the second Public Theatre production, and it seemed logical to continue with it, as it was already programmed. "I'm really happy with it," he notes. Also, for Broadway, he has a pair of amps tucked away in the basement—a Fender twin reverb for one guitar and a Vox AC30, fitted with a Neumann U47 mic and a Royer 150.

As this was Fasbender's first Broadway show as a lead designer, he says that Sten Severson, of the Acme Sound Design quartet, came on board as a consultant. "He's been a real help," the designer says. "Along with having a ton of experience to tap and a strong sense of what works, he's got a contagious sense of calm confidence. Add Dave Sanderson's great ear and technical brilliance and Emma Wilk's ability to keep on top of everything, and I couldn't have asked for a better team."

All the people

Other members of the production team include Arthur Gaffin (production stage manager); Jamie Greathouse (stage manager); Alaina Taylor (assistant stage manager); Michael Carnahan (associate set designer); Greg Bloxham (associate lighting designer); Emma Wilk (assistant sound designer); JJ Hillman (production sound engineer); Todd Frank (production carpenter); Richie Mortell (production electrician); Greg Husinko (production electrician); Mike Smanko (production prop supervisor); Dylan Foley (head propertyman); Neil Rosenberg (advance props); James Keane (outside prop associate); Carl Faber (assistant lighting designer); Amanda Raymond (assistant to the scenic supervisors); Jon Collins (assistant set designer); Grady Barker (lead props sculptor); Justin Couchara (assistant props sculptor); Meghan Buchanan, Joshua Hackett, and Richard DiBella (prop craft artists); and Jay Duckworth and Eric Hart (Public Theatre prop associates). Broadway Green Alliance provided green consultation.

Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson opened to the same polarizing reviews it has received before, but it earned a solid number of raves, including a to-die-for notice in *The New York Times*. Even its detractors tend to concede that it speaks directly to this moment in American history; whatever the outcome of this month's election, one doubts imagines that it will continue to do so for some time to come.