





The Heavenly Express

Happiness packed multiple worlds into an Off Broadway theatre

By: David Barbour

This season has seen musicals big and small, but few of them have proved as challenging to stage as *Happiness*. With a book by John Weidman, music by Scott Frankel, and lyrics by Michael Korie, it was one of the rare modern musicals not adapted from a novel, film, or play, and it featured a premise that was both simplicity itself and enormously complicated to realize. (The show closed early this month after a limited run at Lincoln Center Theatre Company.)

It begins on a typically hectic New York morning, with a cross-section of Manhattanites racing into the subway. In what appears to be a typical moment of aggravation, their car is stalled underground—but, as it turns

out, there's much more to it. Stanley, a conductor, appears and informs the passengers that they are dead. In order for them to successfully cross over to the next world, each must recall that moment in life when he or she was happiest—that perfect moment will provide the foundation for his or her version of heaven. This proves to be a simple matter for Helen, an elderly woman who conjures up a date with a serviceman in World War II, or Kevin, a doorman who recalls a day at the ballpark with his father. Things get stickier when the choices have to be made by Gina, who's a pathetic pretender to the jet set; Arlene, a Dr. Laura Schlesinger-style radio scold; and Zack, a super

Type-A lawyer. (Further complicating matters is the fact that Zack has died before his time.) Here's the catch: If you can't choose a perfect moment, you are condemned, like Stanley, to serve as a kind of transition staff person, helping others get to the happiness you can never attain yourself.

It's rather like a feature-length episode of *The Twilight Zone*, and if you're designing it, there are at least three huge challenges. First, there's the opening number, "Just Not Right Now," a lengthy sequence, set all over town, that introduces each character and sends him or her into the subway. Then there's the problem of staging long scenes in a cramped subway car with a large cast. And there's the issue of realizing everyone's perfect moment—each of which happens in a different location and time frame. Just to make it interesting, it all took place in the Mitzi Newhouse Theatre, an intimate venue with a smallish circular thrust stage.



The subway set, built by Hudson Scenic Studio, was one of the show's top challenges.



The show has been staged and choreographed by Susan Stroman, who may be the only director around who could solve so many staging problems so felicitously; then again, she may be only director who would try. She worked with a set of designers who had the skill—and the true grit—to take on such challenges, too.

Singing in the subway

“Where else would you do this musical?” laughs Thomas Lynch; “somewhere with storage space?” Lynch has designed scenery for a number of Stroman’s shows, including *Contact*, the 2000 revival of *The Music Man*, and the jazz-noir melodrama *Thou Shalt Not*. He says that, from the beginning, the big challenge was the subway car.

“Right away,” he says, “the question was, if we’re in the subway, in a no-exit situation with these people, what is it going to be? Is it a really a subway car? Is it a set of benches that can be pulled apart? It needed to be a confined space—but it’s in the middle of a three-quarter thrust stage, and the actors have to be seen. And

then there are all the other places we need to go.”

Lynch attacked each of the three problems in a different way. There are dozens of locations in the opening sequence, and, at Lincoln Center, each was defined by a single iconic piece—some large, some small. Zak’s apartment was suggested by a small table with a coffee-making machine. On the other hand, we met Helen sitting in a wheelchair in front of a life-sized newsstand. The entrance to the subway was defined by a set of turnstiles. When Stanley first appeared, he stood on a subway switching device. These pieces worked together to create a persuasive collage of urban life.

Lynch notes that, in this aspect of the design, he benefitted from the expert assistance of Kathy Fabian, the show’s props coordinator. (Fabian also played a key role in helping Michael Yeargan find the right period items for Lincoln Center’s long-running production of *South Pacific*.) “If you’re going to have all of these objects in a space like the Newhouse, they have to be perfectly specific,” says Lynch.

“Kathy understands that exactitude. She knows how to find the exact right hospital bed and the right IV, because if those details aren’t right, the audience can’t focus on the scene.”

Indeed, Fabian came up with one of the show’s more unusual effects. One of the characters, Miguel, a Hispanic bike messenger carried a bag supposedly holding a live chicken to be sacrificed in a Santeria service. To get the effect of a bird jumping, Fabian put a Tickle Me Elmo doll, which was radio-controlled, inside Miguel’s bag.

Still, there was the issue of the subway. Lynch says he knew that, if nothing else, it had to have doors, as each character made a big exit through them to his or her eternal reward. What he eventually came up with was a subway car that appeared upstage and moved down to the audience. It was a representational piece complete with walls, which, in this case, were aluminum frames covered with stretch fabric supplied by Rose Brand. During the sequence, which is set to music, dancers entered and removed the walls; we were left with the outline of the subway car for the remainder of the show.

The car, which was built by Hudson Scenic, was an amazingly fluid piece that could travel upstage,

downstage, and circle around, providing the audience with views at different angles. The piece retained the necessary feeling of confinement while still allowing the actors to be seen.

Cameron Whitehorne, an automation engineer at Hudson Scenic, says the train was an especially complex project. "It involved set electricians, the rail lights, the electronics for the doors—also, the unit rotates." The overall unit was about 8" high, with no obvious place to store mechanics.

The door-opening mechanism was "a belt-driven system on a V-groove guide," he adds. "It's run by a Mitsubishi servo-drive. It's wirelessly controlled by a custom system designed specifically for this show. It hooks up to our standard Hudson motion control system."

To get the train to rotate, Whitehorne says, "We took a standard turtle design and squished it" to fit inside the small underside of the unit. "It's a servo motor connected to a Kaydon slewing ring, or turntable bearing; it's similar to the mechanism that controls a construction crane." For linear, up-and-downstage travel, he adds, "we've used a standard winch, which is muled all the way upstage. Because of height constraints, we went with wireless control; there's a huge cable bearing in the deck that moves inside the track. The E-stop is hard-wired, but all other control is wireless; the operator, Jake Mooney, is located in the stage left vomitorium."

As Lynch began working out the design of each character's perfect moment, he had to decide which of them needed big scenic pieces and which could be achieved more economically. There were other considerations as well. The first such number is "Flibberty Jibbers and Wobbly Knees," in which Helen recalls her date at the USO. Up until this point, the designer points out, the orchestra, which was located on a

second level above the stage, remained unseen, although it had been playing almost constantly. The USO set was minimal—a few tables and some backlight, but the first-time reveal of the musicians helped to set the stage for the scene.

Next comes the number, "Best Seats in the Ballpark;" Kevin, the doorman, remembers the day his father promised to take him to Yankee Stadium with top-price tickets given to him by one of his building's wealthy residents. The deal falls through, and father and son end up in

Island. Gina is one of the script's most troubled characters, and this memory represents a significant breakthrough for her, so it was staged against a drop depicting the Coney Island skyline in the distance.

According to David Rosenfield, of Hudson Scenic, the Coney Island drop was made up of different styles of incandescent rope light in four-circuit multicolor color-chasing, four-circuit white-chasing, and clear single-circuit units. Hudson Scenic prepared a routed template of 3/8" plywood, painted black and engraved



The subway was designed to track around the Newhouse stage.

the bleachers. This scene features some of the show's most soaring music, and, Lynch felt it needed a big scenic moment, too. Therefore, a bleacher unit rolled on, and the number ended with the characters seated above the stage, enjoying a moment of unlikely triumph.

In a number of sequences, the locations were suggested by one or two furniture pieces. The next large-scale scenic effect occurred in the scene in which Gina recalls a date with a young Italian boy at Coney

Island, for the rope-light pattern. This was applied to the rear wall of the theatre; the Lincoln Center crew installed the rope light onsite to match the engraved pattern and color designations.

Lynch notes that, as the show progressed, he chose looks that were increasingly spacious, partly to avoid a sense of claustrophobia from all the subway-car scenes, and partly because the perfect-moment memory scenes became more dramatic. The penultimate moment is in the number



The subway car walls were removed by dancers, revealing the playing area; Holder built lighting units in the floor of the piece.

“Road to Nirvana,” in which Arlene recalls her happy days as an advocate of flower power, when she wasn’t above a sexual encounter with Mick Jagger in the bathroom of the Fillmore East. Here, all of the set’s panels opened up—it was also a big dance number, so the extra room was needed—allowing Joanna Gleason, who played Arlene, to turn the show’s de facto eleven o’clock number into a moment of big emotion.

Filling out many of these stage pictures were projections designed by Joshua Frankel, who provided the animations used in Stroman’s last production, *Young Frankenstein*. Frankel says he got involved in *Happiness* initially because “they wanted a liquid light show for the Fillmore East scene.” Once he was on board, however, Stroman, Lynch and Frankel began developing concepts for additional images. “Tom Lynch designed the set with such a graphic, minimalist, feel that it really opened up the opportunity

for me to paint the scenery,” he says.

Among the images Frankel added were passing clouds and tenement windows during the Polo Grounds sequence, those liquid light effects, a gradually vanishing field of stars, and a stock exchange ticker. The latter was seen in “Step Up the Ladder,” in which Stanley recalls his days as a Wall Street shark. During that same scene, when Stanley explains his own death experience, which took place on a plane, Frankel overlaid image of airplane windows on the scenic panel in front of the orchestra. Behind it, we also saw rows of airplane seats with actors in them.

One of the designer’s most intricate effects was the image of lights streaking across the “moving” subway car. To get them, he says, “I took my digital camera around the city at night and took shots of a variety of different types of lights, moving it rapidly while the shutter was open in order to create streaks in the final images. I also took shots of subway stations

and collaged it all together into an animated pattern that felt right.” He adds that during the sequence, “The subway car moves downstage and rotates 180°, so, while the car is moving, the lights wrap around the surface in ways I can’t control. This effect is quite wonderful, though there were some moments that didn’t look quite right. I created rotations within the animation to compensate where necessary.”

To create the liquid light effects for the Fillmore scene, Frankel found a documentary about Joshua White, of Joshua Light Show fame and the father of cracked-oil effects, looking for hints of his technique. “Then I got a piece of glass and some different colored dyes, swirled them together with oil and water, and shot the moving liquids in HD. I composited a few of the takes together, color-corrected them, and re-timed them to match the action on stage.”

He notes that he created his images in Maya and AfterEffects. The

images were delivered using the Isadora system from TroikaTronix, one Sanyo PLC-XF46N/E projector, and two Sanyo PLC-X57L projectors. (Everything was front-projected.) He says that the theatre's circular stage was less of a challenge than the subway car, which moved and rotated. Overall, the mixture of static and moving imagery helped provide several scenes with crucial visual information.

Lighting on many levels

With its variegated locations and different levels of reality, *Happiness* posed enormous lighting design challenges. "It's not easy to constantly give this piece shape and definition and specificity in a completely exposed space," says Donald Holder. "Also, you have flashback and fantasy sequences," not to mention all those perfect moments, playing out in different locations and time frames.

He adds, "The big thing for Susan Stroman was how to create the moments of transformation through light. What should they look like? She was very specific about the staging of the opening number, and she was very clear about the visual approach to 'Road to Nirvana,' which takes place at Fillmore East in March, 1968. As Susan, Tom, and I talked through the show, we saw where the application of projections would be really helpful."

He adds, "I felt that every scene, every moment, had to have a specific vocabulary. Tom did as much as he could with scenery, but with that thrust stage, you need lighting to help fill in the blanks. Susan felt that lighting was another character in the show, defining where we were in many places. Given the open nature of the space, and the minimalist scenic gestures, it was important to be as specific as possible."

Therefore, he adds, "Susan and I went through the opening number beat by beat, giving it its own specific vocabulary, with cinematic wipes from place to place. We chopped up the

space, violating the circular nature of the stage, creating corridors, pathways, and other geometric shapes. We also worked to define interiors and exteriors. The opening number probably has 50 or 60 cues in the first few minutes."

The next task was to create a transition into the perfect-moment scenes. "It had to be a big gesture, to say that we've moved to a fantasy world." He accomplished this with a

"pencil rays of light converge on the character and sweep him or her away."

In addition, Holder worked to give each memory its own distinctive look, adding that the USO sequence was particularly complex. "There's one 30-second sequence where the older Helen comes out of the subway car, talks to the audience and switches places with the younger Helen, who is dancing with a soldier. Then they join together and separate, then the older



Holder's challenges involved lighting the show's many flashbacks.

big circular moving light sweep that started at the center of the space and moved outward, taking in the entire theatre. In addition, each beam projected a star pattern. Holder adds that the first sweep effect occurred during the Helen sequence at the USO, with the lighting hitting a spinning mirrorball as it thrust outward: "I returned to this mirrorball idea in each of the subsequent sweep effects, because it sent swirling shards of light all over theatre for a brief moment and then disappeared." Later, when each character was exiting into the great beyond, there was a kind of opposite to this effect, in which, Holder says,

Helen has a moment of direct address. All of those storytelling beats had to be considered, for reasons of clarity."

In another example, he says, "In the baseball scene, the dad and his son are playing catch in the park, so I introduced some broken light and foliage looks. Once they arrived at the bleachers, it was important that they appeared to be floating in a mystical void: This is the only scene in the show where we're showing a fragment of architecture and not the whole thing. The rest of the sequence is especially tricky, because there's a slow-motion moment [the boy locks eyes with Willie Mays as he's catching

a game-winning fly ball] and more direct address as well.”

In many ways, the subway car was the designer’s biggest challenge. “The car, as Josh Rich [the production electrician] loved to remind me, has five universes of DMX, because of the Color Kinetics iFlex nodes embedded in the floor, and the [Philips Color Kinetics] iCove placed under the wagon to give the car a floating effect. But how do you light people in a subway car that’s moving and is sometimes completely covered? We installed adjustable MR16 and MR11 uplights [from W.A.C. Lighting] in the floor, and, by focusing them upward and bouncing the light off the ceiling, we were able to create a pretty convincing indirect [fluorescent] lighting effect.” The subway car’s lighting was controlled by onboard dimmers and three universes of SHoW DMX, from City Theatrical.

A group number, “Perfect Moments,” featured seven characters, simultaneously taking part in inner monologues while riding in the revolving subway car. Later in the Coney Island scene, the car revolved again, suggesting an amusement park carousel. “Susan felt something was missing in this scene. I suspected her principal issue was that the car wasn’t moving fast enough, so I exaggerated the sense of motion by using many spinning moving lights and gobo rotators turning in opposition to the revolving car. I also went out of my way with color, because that scene is the most romantic of all of them.”

In assembling his package, Holder was mindful of the fact that *Happiness* was an intimate musical in small theatre and noise was potentially an issue. Therefore, he says, “I went with units that had little or no fan noise. Most of the movers are [Vari*Lite] VL1000Arcs and [High End Systems] Studio Spots. Hudson Sound and Light [the gear supplier] offered me VL2500s as an alternate



“Every scene, every moment, had to have a specific vocabulary,” says Holder.

to the Studio Spots, and, normally, I would have jumped at them, but not in this case. I ultimately did use about six VL2500s, but I kept their quantity to a minimum; I’m really pleased about the lack of ambient sound in the room.”

The VL1000s, he says, “really helped me to isolate the car positions without using a ton of conventional equipment. The Studio Spots were useful because they could do double- and multiple-rotation effects, which made them perfect for the Fillmore East sequence—they have a cracked-oil look as a factory-loaded feature. We also have about five [City Theatrical] AutoYokes for specials.”

The lighting was controlled on an ETC Eos system, programmed by

Victor Seastone. “I’m really diving in on the Eos,” says Holder who, one gathers, found it easy to use because it replicates the syntax of ETC’s Obsession consoles. “Victor was there through the first three previews; after that, I was on my own for a month. John Rich, the house electrician, learned it well.”

And a good thing, too, for, as Holder notes, “The show has something between 500 and 600 cues. [It runs about an hour and 50 minutes]. I was there working on it of two months. Everyone was waiting for me to get the show lit.” Fortunately, he says, Stroman and the other collaborators appreciated the dimensions of his task. “And,” he notes, we made the first preview.”

Sounds of the city

That opening sequence also posed many challenges for Scott Lehrer, the sound designer. “That opening is wall-to-wall sound,” he says. “We spent two solid days of tech on the first ten minutes—and Susan kept tweaking it all the way through.”

At the same time, the show had the same kind of natural acoustic sound as does *South Pacific*, its co-tenant at Lincoln Center. This may not be surprising, as Lehrer designed the Rodgers and Hammerstein show as well. Speaking of the Newhouse, he says, “It’s a small space, and it doesn’t need a lot of reinforcement. In fact, I’ve used the same system for more than one show there.”

The system included, he says, a left-right arrangement of Meyer Sound CQ-1s, located just beneath the band, which handled the musicians. The Newhouse audience breaks up into five sections, and there was a single Meyer UPA for each section. “We fold a little bit of the band into that setup as well, and fold a little bit of the vocals into the CQ-1s. Also, at the back of the house are [Meyer] MM-4s acting as delays. With the MM-4s, you don’t have to hit the audience too hard from the front in order to reach the last rows. The MM-4s are very directional, and each covers only about six seats.” (For the record, the speaker lineup included seven Meyer UPA-1Ps, two CQ-1s, ten MM-4s, four Apogee P500s, ten EAW JF-60s, and two Meyer USWs.)

In addition, Lehrer says, “We have a surround system placed behind the audience, with speakers in the two vomms and upstage for effects.” These units were E0s, from d&b audiotechnik. The band made use of an Aviom personal monitor mixer system, with one or two musicians, including the drummer, using in-ear monitors. The actors were miked with DPA 4060 capsules with Sennheiser SK5212/EM3532 wireless system. Lehrer also mentions Kathy Fabian’s

contribution to the show, noting with satisfaction how she found an accurate-looking 1940s period mic for Helen’s USO moment. (Other mics included ten Sennheiser MKH40s, four Sennheiser 421s, four Neumann KM-184s, one Neumann U89, two Shure M57s, and four Radial direct boxes.)

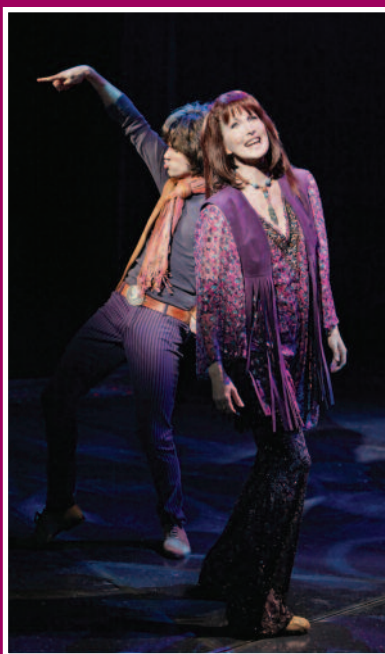
The sound was controlled by a Yamaha PM5D, “which I’m using for a lot of shows,” says Lehrer. “It’s cost-effective and it’s super-reliable.” It was combined with Yamaha’s DME64 signal processor system for the delay work and system EQ, which, the designer notes, was necessary to create a natural sound in the Newhouse. The many sound effects—which ranged from the rumble of the subway to traffic noises to the sound of that chicken in the bag—were transmitted using the QLab system, which was connected to a Yamaha DM1000 digital mixer. “Everything was run through the PM5D,” he adds. (Lehrer notes that he gathered many of his effects by roaming through the city with his Sony D5 portable recorder; they were then teched into

the show by Drew Levy, the associate sound designer.)

The opening sequence was especially difficult, as virtually everyone in the company changed costumes at a fairly furious rate—which meant that solid mic placement was extra-important. “It gets a little scary when you lose someone onstage,” Lehrer says. “At the first preview, we lost Miguel [Cervantes, who plays the bike messenger], and the stage manager didn’t want to send anyone onstage with a replacement. Now we have a spare mic built into Helen’s wheelchair, so, if anyone goes out, they can go over to the wheelchair, steal the mic, and put it on.”

Then again, for the sound department, as for everyone else involved, *Happiness* was a fast and furious evening. “The first scene is so busy, that our wireless person is running the sound effects on QLab, because there’s no way that Adam Smolenski [the sound operator] can do it all.” The show was performed without an intermission; as such, the experience was an intense for actors and crew alike.

Speaking of the crew, many others were involved in the realization of *Happiness*, including Jeff Hamlin (production manager); Rolt Smith (stage manager); Charlie Corcoran (associate set designer); Etta Lillienthal and Andrea Bush (assistant set designers); Rebecca Markus, Christopher Stokes, and Carolyn Wong (assistant lighting designers); Doug Mooney (master technician); Linda Heard (house technician); Sarah Bird (associate props coordinator); Jake Moony (automation operator); Josh Rich (light board operator); James Wilcox (deck sound). All of them have managed the task of packing a big, complex musical into a small and idiosyncratic space. The show closed on June 7, but, as a study in professionalism, *Happiness* offered some pretty perfect moments of its own. 🎧



“The Road to Nirvana” featured lighting and projections evocative of the Fillmore East in 1968.