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Peter and the Starcatcher brings a new design sensibility to Broadway

By: David Barbour
you still subscribe to the canard that Broadway has nothing to offer but empty spectacle, consider this year’s Tony Awards. Among musicals, 
*Once*, an austere romance with a smallish cast and a distinct absence of glitz (see *LSA*’s May issue), won awards in three out of four design categories. Among straight plays, *Peter and the Starcatcher* swept all four design categories. (In addition to scenic designer Donyale Werle and lighting designer Jeff Croiter, whose work is the subject of this story, the other winners were costume designer Paloma Young and sound designer Darron L West.) An Off Broadway transfer based on the young adult novel by Dave Barry and Ridley Pearson, it has a design sensibility that is unlike anything you’ve ever seen on a Broadway stage.

First staged last season at New York Theatre Workshop—the company that also produced *Once*—*Peter and the Starcatcher* purports to tell the backstory of *Peter Pan*. Set during the high noon of Queen Victoria’s reign, it’s a wildly convoluted tale involving, among other things, a pair of seagoing ships; a brace of kidnapped orphans; a covey of pirates; a young girl named Molly and her father, who are charged by the English crown with disposing of a magical substance titled Starstuff; and the overdramatic, self-adoring, and self-sabotaging buccaneer of the seas known as Black Stache, played as a supersized serving of ham by Christian Borle in a Tony-winning performance. The characters converge on an island in the South Pacific, populated by mermaids and bellicose natives. Without giving too much away, this island will become Neverland and one of the orphan boys will be known as Peter Pan—with whom Molly’s daughter and sons have a date in the future.

As written by Rick Elice and staged by Alex Timbers and Roger Rees, *Peter and the Starcatcher* is
Roger [Rees] has a great history with English classical theatre, and it was his idea to have a beautiful proscenium. It’s like a Victorian toy theatre. With it, you almost don’t need scenery at all. This feature, which stood out in the austere confines of New York Theatre Workshop, was thoroughly rethought for the transfer, says the designer: “Because we’re now in a gorgeous Broadway theatre, we took the proscenium from the downtown production and pulled off the detail, constructing new details to imitate the Brooks Atkinson interior; we also introduced new details form the show, like the kitchen timers and the pineapple.”

Werle, an advocate of using recycled materials—she is speaking on the topic at PLASA Focus: Nashville this month—really outdid herself here. Discussing the use of found objects on the proscenium, she says, “We counted everything, and we used 3,563 corks and 817 bottle caps. These were collected by the Broadway Green Alliance, which hosted a Kid’s Night event on Broadway; the kids collected the bottle caps and also donated little plastic toys.” Many of these were assembled to make the many sea creatures that adorn the proscenium. A partial list of the objects used includes 312 forks, spoons, and knives; 56 aluminum can lids; 97 audio CDs; 51 coffee can lids; 53 Q-Tips; 51 pencils, and four mannequin arms. “I gave Showman Fabricators [which rebuilt the proscenium] drawings showing where the big objects were laid out,” says Werle. “They made them and took over the layout. I’m 50/50 with the artisans who make this stuff. The scenic charge at Showman, Nancy Orr, and her lead, Everett O’Neil, worked on it, with Eliot Bertoni, the project manager.” To fuse all these objects into a unified visual effect, the objects were treated with Jaxsan, an acrylic latex coating used in waterproofing, and sprayed with four different metallic colors. “We added a lot of red,” says the designer. “Because we wanted to match the proscenium to the theatre, we had to be almost gaudy with colors; we also used a lot of gold glitter.” Other details include cameo portraits of Peter and Wendy in the upper corners, and a large pineapple, chosen because it is a traditional symbol of hospitality. “The pineapple is made of a blue foam that we found, plus rope donated to the downtown production from Materials for the Arts and bottle caps,” says Werle. “The leaves are constructed of wire and fabric.”

Materials for the Arts, a program of New York City’s Department of Cultural Affairs, collects unneeded items from businesses and individuals, and distributes these donations free of charge to non-profit organizations with arts programming, government agencies, and public
schools across the five boroughs. Similarly, Werle sourced the set's floorboards from Build It Green, a not-for-profit program that supplies low-cost salvage surplus building materials. (“They come from old scaffolds,” she notes.) The one other major theatrical touch is a series of swagged red curtains made of fire-retardant 21oz Marvel Velour in “Claret,” supplied and sewn by Rose Brand; the curtains complete the Victorian toy theatre effect.

The first-act setting is a dark, slightly claustrophobic, interior; with its upstage rope rigging, it looks rather nautical—think of a vintage oceangoing vessel—but it also suggests the backstage of a theatre. Except for a handful of props, including a piece of rope, the only major set piece is a rolling box, which looks rather like a road case. “I researched ships, construction sites, and factories from the Industrial Revolution, looking to create a super-oppressive environment,” says Werle. “I also looked at the backstage areas of Victorian theatres and, also, flying machines, many of which have beautiful structural shapes.” She adds, however, “A lot of the design came from the rehearsal room. We were shaping a space around the cast. We really wanted a space that was very compressed, yet with enough room for them to perform their tricks.” It was, she adds, a trial-and-error process: “At a certain point, we had too much stuff, and, at other points, we had to layer in things; for example, we added a rope ladder, then another one, then a real ladder.” The effect is meant to be somewhat mysterious: “You’re not sure where you are, yet there is a feeling of Industrial Revolution oppression.”

Werle is a master scavenger, who never lets a happy accident go to waste. She describes one such example: “In the very back of the Act II set is a big, window-shaped piece that we call the ‘transom.’ Early on, we were passing a bodega near New York Theatre Workshop, which had been on fire. They were throwing some of the wood doors with Plexiglas panels on the sidewalk; we ran out and pulled them into the van, and they became the basis for the Act I upstage design. You could smell the charred wood throughout the entire downtown run.”

Also located upstage are four separate walls consisting of slats made of ¼” plywood. “They’re sandwiched together with wires and the kind of strapping that you use for mountain climbing,” says Werle. “Downtown, the four pieces rolled up; now they fly out in four different sections. Because so much of the show now flies, we had to add steel to the set’s structure.”

In contrast, the Act II setting is open, colorful, and bright, a kind of child’s illustration of a tropical island. It begins with a lusciously painted drop depicting mermaids. (While it is not a musical, Peter and the Starcatcher stops occasionally for a song, in this case with the 99% male cast gotten up as mermaids.) After that, the curtain rises on a look that Werle says was inspired by the Great Pacific Garden Patch, described by Wikipedia as “the gyre of marine litter in the central North Pacific.” The island setting is defined by a three-sided surround consisting of translucent, ragtag material that, as hung, suggests a leafy jungle or ocean waves, depending on how they are lit. Once again, Werle’s repurposing skills were brought to bear. “Disney [one of the show’s producers] has a warehouse in Rochester, New York, a huge space in which they keep all the scenery from their tours,” she says. “We got the Act II fabrics from there.”

The surround consists of plastic RP screen scavenged...
The proscenium in the Brooks Atkinson Theatre, at first glance, it appears to be part of the theatre’s gilded interior. Look more closely and you will see that it is made up of hundreds of everyday objects.

Above, left: Some of the objects that were used to decorate the proscenium. Above right: The proscenium under construction. Note the use of little plastic toys, many of which were donated by young audience members attending a Kid’s Night on Broadway event.
trying different things. A lot of ideas failed; the great challenge was making it affordable. The joy of working Off Broadway is that you really have the opportunity to craft a product, but you have to put many hours into it. Thank God I have people who are so dedicated. It became easier on Broadway, especially working with Showman Fabricators and with the great crew at the Brooks Atkinson. It’s great to have artisans and a crew that love to do this type of show.”

Still, Werle adds, both at New York Theatre Workshop and on Broadway, she was often working in terra incognita, having to make educated guesses about how the final product would look. “We’re really happy with the RP screen in Act II; it lights beautifully,” she says by way of example. “But we felt like we were working on the edge of disaster; it could have been terrible.”

**Lighting Neverland**

Croiter preceded Werle’s involvement in *Peter and the Starcatcher*, having lit the La Jolla production. He notes from Disney’s *The Little Mermaid*. (The designer notes that “a lot of the Act II set’s colors are derived from that show.”) The surround “is made of panels 4’ wide by 14’ high on the sides and 17’ upstage,” says Werle. Each panel contains a number of pockets into which have been deposited bits of fabric, which add weight and density to the design. These are the same panels that were used for the downtown production, built by the Long Island City-based art and design studio known as Paper Mache Monkey, which is co-owned by Grady Barker and Megan Buchanan. New to the Broadway production are pieces known as “jungle boarders,” built by Showman Fabricators. “They’re a combination of double-coated, painted silk, a great Nancy Orr invention,” the designer adds. “Silk was covered with a clear medium, then painted, which makes them look like plastic. Added to that was Kaos, a material that features a textured, random pattern, and Cracked Ice, both from Rose Brand. They were then sculpted individually and glued together, then covered with paint and glitter.”

“The downtown production was more challenging, because it was so experimental; we were in a donated space and the basement of New York Theater Workshop for months, trying different things. A lot of ideas failed; the great challenge was making it affordable. The joy of working Off Broadway is that you really have the opportunity to craft a product, but you have to put many hours into it.” — Werle

This production required a more than usually close collaboration between Werle and the lighting designer, Jeff Croiter. Werle’s hand-made, glued-together, found-object toy theatre needed an extra lift from Croiter to create the right storybook effect. “When you look at the set without lighting, it’s not pretty at all,” she says, “especially when there’s no light on the plastic Act II walls.” She adds that working with so many scavenged or unusual materials added an enervating note of unpredictability to the process; nobody was sure how the set would respond to light. As a result, a space was set up for Croiter to conduct tests.

“Because there was a lot of room for experimentation downtown, Jeff would come in with lighting units and test the fabrics and plastic. He had a lot of input about what we chose. We used a lot of plastic downtown, but uptown there’s more treated silk, and that takes light differently.” She adds that treating scenery for flame-retardancy was also an issue. “It’s one of my biggest concerns,” she adds.

Werle adds that, because the production started out Off Broadway, she had time and freedom to experiment with different ideas and materials. “But the downtown production was more challenging,” she says, “because it was so experimental; we were in a donated space and the basement of New York Theater Workshop for months, that it was part of La Jolla’s Page to Stage program, meant to develop new works. As a result, the production featured a minimal set—but ended up with 350 lighting cues. “It was big,” he says, adding that, by the end of the run there, “I knew the tone of the show, the textures, and the pace of the cueing—where we wanted it to start and where to end. The arc is similar to how it was in La Jolla. What has changed are the obstacles, finding a balance of working with the new scenic elements. We went from an open stage to cramming scenery into every inch of free space. And, presumably, I was asked to stay on the project because they liked the lighting of the workshop.” He adds that the La Jolla production was also helpful in terms of clarifying whether or not the show was a musical—it is not—and, on a personal level, he learned how to work with two directors. “Alex and Roger have very strong opinions about lighting and how lighting could enhance the production emotionally and theatrically. The question was, How do I take both of their ideas, and mine, and make them into a cohesive concept? For the first few days of tech we would have little lighting huddles and I would ask, ‘What are we trying to say in this moment?’ The lighting really came together after that and the language we developed solidified. Throughout this
process, people on the outside have wondered about the difficulties of working with two directors, and my answer has always been to say that everyone in the room was respectful and everyone worked toward a common goal."

One major change affected the lighting, the designer adds: “We went from having a 20’-high grid in La Jolla to 12’ at New York Theatre Workshop and on Broadway. We dropped the grid down because Alex and Roger wanted it to feel more compressed and focused, as if the audience is being forced to look into a very specific area. They especially didn’t want any air visible above in Act I, which is the dark and claustrophobic act.” As a result, he says, “We spent a lot of time at the Brooks Atkinson trying to figure out the trim height of the grid, sitting up in the high seats to see how much of the show we were blocking. For Act I, we made the Atkinson into an Off Off Broadway theatre.”

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Basically, Croiter spends most of the first act reshaping the stage space, carving actors out of the darkness, and creating textured looks using a limited color palette.

“When the actors use the rope to make a stairs or hallway, we’re creating, or supporting, those spaces with light,” he notes. In this act, there is an absence of big-wash looks. “If you light the entire set, it looks like a warehouse; the nice thing about it is I can turn on one light and there’s enough texture.” In fact, the lighting goes a long way toward achieving the compressed and claustrophobic feeling wanted by the directors. Croiter describes, the color palette as “no-color, white, and color-corrected blue,” until the arrival of Black Stache and his pirates, at which point red is added to the mix. “The first Stache appearance takes us for a moment out of the blue-and-dark-world, long enough for us to see that he is funny and it’s okay to laugh at him, before going back to the darkness.” Other diversions from the fundamental color scheme include a deep-blue underwater sequence and a yellow-tinted boxing match.

To get his looks for Act I, Croiter lights the set from a number of low and side angles. “Given the opportunity, those are my preferred angles,” says the designer, who started out lighting dance. “You get shafts of light in space that really pop the actors out; these angles give the set a ghostly look. Also, when we want the set to go away, which we do at times in Act I, I can just light the air, making the actors look alone in space.” However, he adds, given the lack of wing space in the theatre, “getting sidelight into the show isn’t easy. Actors walk off stage into giant towers of light, because there is so little room. The low booms are on wheels; at certain points in the first act they have to go away. For Act II, we keep just the in-one booms and they move offstage a few feet.” He adds that, with so many brief scenes in many locations, the cueing is fast and furious.

Adding to the backstage-at-a-theatre look is a row of striplights that, during a sequence depicting a hurricane, are hung in the air at a funny angle several feet upstage. “That was totally Alex Timbers’ idea,” says Croiter. “And it was the result of a miscommunication. Alex said to me, ‘It would be great to have a flying lighting boom for the hurricane sequence. I said, ‘Great,’ and did a vertical boom, which wasn’t what he meant. We didn’t really have the hanging space or the dimmers to do flying striplights, but we found a way. Not everybody liked the idea at first, but I fought for it, because Alex really wanted it and I thought it would look cool. And it does!”

The contrast between the looks of Acts I and II couldn’t be more pronounced, with Croiter mixing a broader color palette and a new set of angles to create the vividly illustrated look of the island. Lighting the second act posed an entirely different set of questions, as Werle notes above. “We kept testing different materials, trying to figure out where to put the lights for the maximum effect,” says Croiter. Working with the plastic RP screen, he says, they learned “it looks amazing when backlit, and not as good as when front lit.” As a result, he adds, he keeps front lighting to a minimum until the last ten minutes, when the entire cast is assembled; he uses footlights—“good old-fashioned birdies”—framed in shell-shaped housings, for the mermaid number that begins the act.

“The biggest change from Off Broadway to Broadway had to do with how we lit the plastics in Act II,” he says. “Downtown, we had striplights that sat on the deck a few feet offstage of the side drops. The actors had to literally jump over them to get on stage. For Broadway, the investment was made in LED strips, sinking them into the floor to light the plastic. We’re using [Philips Color Kinetics] ColorBlaze strips. Upstage, there are two rows of striplights to light the big upstage plastic and, on the sides, there are towers of PARs to give the color a little more punch and to help light the very top.”

Referring to the tests mentioned earlier, he says, “We hung the plastic RP screen in the scene shop to see if the ColorBlazes would light them well enough, and exactly where to place the units in the floor.” Noting that once the striplights were built into the deck they couldn’t be moved, he says, “It’s hard to make a decision that you can’t undo. Normally, I can move anything around; lighting is a fluid art
form. Making a construction decision is much harder.”

He describes the ColorBlaze units as “first generation,” adding, “There’s not a lot of new technology in the show in terms of gear. I called PRG [the lighting supplier] and said, ‘I know we’re asking for a lot and I’ll take whatever you have that doesn’t have a fan.’” Fans were not an option, as they would be too noisy for a straight play.

Croiter’s moving light complement includes Philips Vari*Lite VL1000 Arcs, City Theatrical AutoYokes, and Clay Paky Alpha Wash units. Speaking of the latter, he says, “I needed two units that rotated patterns against each other, and the VL1000 has only one wheel; Clay Paky fit the bill. I got the only three Alpha Washes that PRG had available. The VL3500Q would have been an option, but at a much higher price.” He adds, “I use many more high side and backlight positions in Act II. When we do use low sidelight, it doesn’t register as such, due to the plastic drops that run upstage and downstage.” Act II also relies more heavily on moving lights, he says. “Act I is made up of tiny little areas of light; Act II is larger and leafier, more tropical.” Also, as opposed to the lower trim of Act I, the lighting flies out an additional 5’ for Act II. Two ETC 5° Source Fours are operated as followspots from the light booths. “I chose them because I wanted the color temperature to match everything else in the show,” he says. “My original intention was to control them through the console, but the operators lobbied hard for individual control, so I agreed.”

The Act II color palette consists basically of “tropical colors,” as Croiter notes. “We knew a lot of Act II would be based in green, and we could use the red and blue to mix many other colors.” There are some striking single-color moments. When the crocodile that menaces the island makes his appearance—he is seen as a set of enormous teeth—the lighting turns blood red. “For transitions in Act II, we did a lot of work on the RP plastics, using the LED strips to create a lateral movement,” says Croiter. “If we move from one color to another, the lighting shifts in a chase across the LED strips. Act II moves very quickly, and it’s important to mirror that in the lighting.” He adds, “The design hovers in a world of heightened reality—not quite surreal, not abstract, and definitely not realistic. For example, in the jungle, the colors are green, but the look isn’t like a real tropical jungle.”

The show was programmed on an ETC Eos console and is run on an ETC Ion. If it seems like a big job for the Ion, Croiter says, “The board can handle up to 1,000 cues. There are close to 400 cues in the show; it would have been more difficult to program on the Ion, but otherwise, their softwares are identical.” He notes that the cueing “is very reliant on moving lights. We were specific about where, and what, each light hit. The actors are almost always lit independently of the scenery.”

As is the often the case with designers, when it rains, it pours; Croiter notes that he was working on Peter’s Broadway transfer more or less simultaneously with the Broadway transfer of the hit musical Newsies, a schedule that had him hopping. “I was still at Newsies when tech for Peter began,” he recalls. “For three days, I sprinted back and forth between the Nederlander [home of Newsies] and the Brooks Atkinson. My associate, Joel Silver, and programmer, Tim Rogers, loaded the cues from the New
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York Theatre Workshop production and began adapting. I would run in, give some notes and run back to Newsies. When I was at Peter full time, we had the time to pull everything apart and put it back together.” He points out that Peter’s two acts are so different that he was, in effect, lighting two different plays: “Just about every light upstage of the proscenium changes position at intermission. The booms move offstage, electrics fly out, other electrics fly in. It’s incredibly tight; there’s not an inch of extra space over the stage.” As a result, tech and preview periods were busy: “There were days where we had a significant number of notes in both acts and had to decide which act needed more attention,” he adds.

Additional personnel include Michael Carnahan (associate scenic designer); Stephen Dobay and Craig Napoliello (assistant set designers); Joel Silver (associate lighting designer); Cory Pattak and Andy Fritsch (assistant lighting designers), David Benken (technical supervisor), Patrick Evanston (production carpenter); and Jerry Marshall (production prop master).

The Tony Award triumphs of Once and Peter and the Starcatcher suggests that Broadway is undergoing one of its periodic generational changes, in which new ideas about staging and design are gaining favor. If so, this is good news; long derided for being behind the times, it is—thanks to these, and a few other productions—suddenly looking ready for the 21st century.