Even if you’re an avid student of Tudor history, you may not know the name Grace, or Grania O’Malley. Known as “the sea queen of Connemara,” this heiress of the Irish aristocracy lived an improbably eventful life in the 16th century, marrying twice, raising three children, doing battle with rival clans, engaging in piracy, and generally raising hell against the British government until, in a storied meeting with Elizabeth I, she made peace with the country that occupied her home.

Many books have been written about Grace, including one, Grania, She King of the Irish Seas, by Morgan Lyewellyn, which has now been turned into a sword-flashing, bodice-ripping musical yarn by Alain Boublil and Claude-Michael Schönberg, the people who brought you Les Misérables and Miss Saigon.

The Pirate Queen opened in April at New York’s Hilton Theatre, but, before arriving there, it endured rough waters in Chicago, generated by reviews that found the show’s book to be less than seaworthy. Most of them complained that the story lacked action and was sometimes confusing. Librettist-lyricist Richard Maltby, Jr., who had a hand in Miss Saigon, was brought onboard (John Dempsey also wrote many lyrics), as was musical stager Graciela Daniele, who worked with director Frank Galati to clarify and streamline the tangled narrative.

As a result, a very different Pirate Queen opened in New York, with plenty of action and a storyline that will be crystal-clear to any audience member who pays the slightest attention. Most notably, in a season of musicals that either look forward (Grey Gardens, Spring Awakening) or backward (Curtains), The Pirate Queen is a return to the grand-scale tradition of the continental pop opera—the dominant style on Broadway in the ’80s and a genre defined by big voices, big emotions, and big design ideas.

In the latter category, certainly, The Pirate Queen does not disappoint. Eugene Lee’s setting grabs the show’s nautical theme and runs with it, surrounding...
the proscenium with pieces of sailing ships and casting sail, rigging, and giant maps of Ireland across the stage. He also creates a couple of ornate court interiors for scenes featuring Elizabeth, as well as forbidding stone walls with tiny windows, a ruined church and nearby graveyard, and a tavern that provides room for some lively step dancing. Kenneth Posner’s lighting paces the production through countless transitions and also provides a constantly changing array of colorful sky looks, adding a splash of saturation to the design’s historically limited color palette. Jonathan Deans’ sound design to the design’s historically limited color sky looks, adding a splash of saturation 

much of the show’s design hinges on the contrast between scenes in Elizabethan court (left) and those in Ireland (opposite page).

one finds usually only in romance fiction. Grace is the daughter of a Dubhdara, a clan leader and seafarer who raids British ships. (One historical note: during the 16th century, the Irish aristocracy, which had been fairly autonomous, was systematically suppressed by the English) Grace wants in on the pirate game, and when her father says no, she disguises herself as a boy and distinguishes herself in battle against a manuring British vessel.

Lee, by his own admission, addicted to strict historical detail. For example, the main stem of the shipboard scenes often find Grace at

a kind of Elizabethan theatre. The stage house of the proscenium. He does it again with The Pirate Queen, redefining the proscenium of the Hilton Theatre with pieces of a period sailing ship, creating a nautical frame that leaves room onstage for big, but spare, looks; pieces of a period sailing ship, painted in the manner of the Globe, painted to look like faux-marble, these areas are also filled with rigging, barrels, lanterns, and other nautical paraphernalia. “The stage house of the Elizabethan theatre is supported by two large columns—they’re kind of like masts,” says Lee. Above the proscenium, he painted a “sky” painted blue, with gold stars (many of which look like starfish) attached to it. This overhead space, directly from the Globe, says Lee, as does the tiny houses that is place above the wooden blue sky deck. Many of stars are backlit, creating a pleasing floating effect. The scenery for The Pirate Queen was built by FAD Scene Changes in Calgary, Alberta, with scenic motion control provided by PRG’s Stage Command System. The show’s abundant soft goods, including sails and the elaborate armories in Elizabethan’s court, are from Rose Brand.

Having created the surround, Lee says, “I never get too involved in locations,” and it is true that many settings, including a shipboard that is consists of a wooden deck, a sail, and some rigging ropes, are notably spare. But the (Globe Theatre) concept also creeps into the Elizabethan scenes; one features an elaborately carved wall painted in the manner of the Globe, while another features a balcony on which Elizabeth can listen in on court intrigues. The two-level arrangement of them depicting Ireland—one from an Irish viewpoint and another depicting it

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The job of lighting was to delineate the two worlds of Queen Elizabeth and the British Empire with the world of Grace and Ireland. In Eugene’s set, you have the elements of those two worlds integrated in an abstract way. It’s the job of the lighting to separate them out.”

Posner adds that, in Lee’s design, the Elizabethan world is defined by beams and stone portals, while the Ireland scenes are dominated by ship’s rigging, a hardwood deck, and the skies. Indeed, some of the designer’s most eye-pleasing work here involves the many-colored and layered sky looks that he creates, especially his highly colored dawns and crepuscular sunsets. No two looks are alike, thanks to his inventive use of colors. Discussing the layered arrangement of scrims and translucent drops that make up the numerous backgrounds, he says, “We refer to sky portion of the set as ‘shaping scrims.’” These drops have the ability to change trims and are painted with clouds in different layers and densities. The abstract skies are lit with a variety of different angles and cloud textures. The color palette ranges from crimson suns to cloud-filled and gray Irish skies, depending on the tone of the scene and score. “The English artist J. M. W. Turner was my inspiration for the energy and emotion of the skies seen in Pirate Queen, so the color’s fairly extensive moving light package consists almost entirely of Vari-Lite units, including VL5s, VL2000s, and VL5000s. In New York, ‘we had a projection element in Chicago, which was employed primarily for a major opening sequence created by the very talented Howard Werner; coming to New York, the sequence was changed to a opening tableau featuring the two main characters, Grace O’Malley and Tiernan. With the idea for the opening changed, it was decided it would be better if the cloud and other effects were done by lighting.” Thus, a set of Martin MAC 2000 Performance units was added to the rig to generate these effects. In addition, he says, “In Chicago, it felt more like an opera. Here, it’s much more like musical theatre; that’s because we really worked at refining the transitions and musical staging, to make them part of the storytelling.”

The show’s fairly extensive lighting design project was especially complicated. For Jonathan Deans, the job of providing a sound design for The Pirate Queen was especially complicated. For one thing, the Hilton Theatre’s acoustics are tricky, to say the least. In addition, the show is through-composed, with some important plot information transmitted during large choruses. The dynamic range is enormous, going from the sound of single piano to the roar of battle, and the thunder of a dozen and a half oars being beaten on the stage deck. Most of these changes happen in a matter of seconds.

As a result, Deans made a number of highly specific gear choices. Chief among them was the Meyer Sound M’lodie line array, which makes its Broadway debut here (see Deans’ review of the M’lodie in Light in March 2007). The show’s dynamic range is enormous, going from the sound of single piano to the roar of battle, and the thunder of a dozen and a half oars being beaten on the stage deck. Most of these changes happen in a matter of seconds.

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Deans says, “This is a terribly important feature, especially on Broadway, where time and crew are at a premium. It’s especially important when you’re using multiple arrays, as we are here.”

Another important component in creating a clearly comprehended sound design was the choice of mics. Here, Deans chose a mix of Sennheiser transmitters—SK 5212s for the principals and SKM60s for the ensemble—with the DPA 4061 mics. “Also,” he says, “we asked the principals to wear RFID tags, so we could localize them easily and thus localize the sound,” a technique that makes it easy to find the principals on a large and frequently crowded stage. “This is very time-consuming,” says the designer, “because you have to do it without screwing up the placement of the orchestra and sound effects. I pushed for the RFID tags, because it’s important with this kind of epic show.”

He cites the case of the second-act number, “She Who Has It All,” in which Elizabeth and Grace, now the queen’s prisoner, compare their situations. “Elizabeth and Grace are standing on either side of the stage, with Grace upstage a little. Being able to suggest that slight difference in their locations helps the lighting to isolate them.”

The RFID tags used in the production are made by Multispectral Solutions. “They were originally made for tracking packages in warehouses,” says Deans, who notes that other such programs, designed specifically for theatre usage, are coming out this year. Speaking of the Multispectral system, he says, “It’s the size of a luggage tag, with a tiny battery in it. It’s worn by the actors and transmits to one of six receivers on stage; the information is sent to a black box with a computer, which spits out reference ID information, giving the tag number and the XYZ of the location. We had LCS [the audio console maker that is a now division of Meyer] write a handshake software. ‘Using it, you rig a signal for the tag, and it’s linked to the receiver.’”

Deans adds that the Cue Console is the LCS Cue Console, a flexible system in which modular control surfaces are plugged into mainframes that can be stored elsewhere in the theatre. The system is so flexible—you can have up to 300 inputs and 80 outputs. Deans notes—it can handle the entire cast of 44 plus the band. “We use 160 inputs, 98 outputs, and 58 auxiliary,” says the designer.

Deans notes that the Cue Console obviates the need for much outboard gear, although, he adds, the sound effects are mixed by Wills Tracks, who also run off the console. “It’s a 16-track playback system,” he notes. “You can run it as a 15-track system or do 16 separate tracks.” He does say that, in the Hilton, he upped the reverb settings for the Iceland, using a TC Electronic 8000. “The Hilton is a very dry theatre, with very little natural life to it, which is good for musicals, but I needed to really dig into the reverb. When Queen Elizabeth and Grace sing together, they go into complete different reverbs. It all changes, cue by cue. There are three different ambient reverb settings in the show.”

With sound effects, reverber, panning, and everything else, it’s quite a busy evening for the board operator, Simon Matthews. Deans, quoting his head of sound, Garth Helm, who oversees the sound show daily, says, “It’s like sitting down to a really good four-course meal as opposed to a bag of chips. I don’t think they’d have it any other way.”

Deans also notes the contributions, of Brian Hoble, the assistant sound designer, who programmed much of the show with Matthews, and of Daniel Hochstine, the RF engineer. “The mics aren’t on in the right place and worked out before the actors come in,” he says, “I don’t think they’d have it any other way.”

The backstage clan, including Matthews, Helm, and Hochstine, plus the aforementioned Arch and Rogers, many other personal and technical personnel helped bring The Pirate Queen into being. Kathleen E. Purvis (stage manager); Bob Lach (head property man), and Reginald Vessey (assistant property man). Whatever difficulties The Pirate Queen may have endured on the way to Broadway, everyone involved considers it to be a positive experience. “The casting is spectacular,” says Deans. “When they sing, as individuals or as a chorus, it really warms my heart. It’s so beautiful to hear.”