



# LOCAL BOYS

Turning the Four Seasons' saga

By David Barbour

Shubert Alley handwringers, a small but vocal group, are once again announcing the death of musical theatre. The alleged culprit this time is the jukebox musical, an overly broad term applied to shows that make use of a pop-song catalogue instead of an original score. Never mind that shows like *Mamma Mia!*, the recently departed *Lennon*, and the upcoming Johnny Cash revue *Ring of Fire* have virtually nothing to do with each other; among the true believers, they're a blight to be avoided, at all costs.

And yet, the greatest hits of the 60s, 70s, 80s, and today continue to make their way onto Broadway stages. And, surely, execution counts for something. For example, there's *Jersey Boys*, a show so unique that it hardly counts as a jukebox musical at all. For one thing, it's a true story, the saga of Frankie Valli and the Four Seasons, drawing heavily on the group's stack of hits. Then again, it's not a standard bio-musical, like *Buddy* or *The Boy From Oz*. Librettists Marshall Brickman and Rick Elice have divided the narrative into four parts, each linked to a different season and narrated by a different member of the band, each of whom comments on and criticizes his predecessors' accounts: Tommy DeVito, the hustler who invents the group, then nearly destroys it with his gambling debts; Bob Gaudio, the latecomer whose songwriting

talent creates the group's unique sound; Nick Massi, the quiet professional who always feels on the outside of the action; and Frankie Valli, whose unearthly, high-pitched voice and well-honed survival skills ensure his stardom through the decades.

All the ingredients are there for a standard, tears-and-laughter backstage melodrama: four young men fight their way out of poverty, achieve overnight fame, and run amok; their success turns sour, they come apart, then reunite at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. However, *Jersey Boys* is a remarkably dry-eyed account of life in the jukebox jungle; the book details unsparingly the internecine battles, adulteries, addictions, broken marriages, and gangster connections that plagued the group. At the final curtain, broken friendships are not mended. At the same time, the book treats the Four Seasons saga as a social epic, following the guys from bowling alley lounges to *The Ed Sullivan Show*, revealing how they held on to their working-class fans even as the British Invasion and the Vietnam War rewrote the rules of rock and roll, and how songwriter Bob Gaudio's increasingly original compositions challenged the conventions of AM radio programming.

All of this unfolds in non-stop fashion, each scene folding into the next in cinematic style, a parade of Four Seasons

tunes (plus a handful of others, including, memorably, "My Boyfriend's Back") driving the action. The production's tempo and unity of purpose is, everyone interviewed for this article agrees, the work of director Des McAnuff, who carefully pared away any frills during last year's out-of-town engagement at La Jolla Playhouse, where he is artistic director.

Under McAnuff's influence, the show's singular blend of gritty reality and pop nostalgia is embodied in the design. Then again, if the production is so unified, it may be because the design and show were developed more or less in tandem.

## Billboards on the road to fame

"When we started designing the show, we had no script—just a very loose outline," says set designer Klara Zieglerova. "Even by the time the set model was due, we had no script. We had all read biographies of The Four Seasons and we had a structure for the show. But it was a truly collaborative experience—we were designing the show as it was being written."

One thing's for sure—Zieglerova took the show's title seriously, "From the beginning," she says, "we wanted one set that would show the New Jersey that they never really leave, even though they eventually travel all over the country." Thus, she

# MAKE GOOD

into a Broadway musical



PHOTO BY JOAN MARCUS





PHOTO BY JOAN MARCUS

The above drop, depicting the Hudson Ferry slip, is part of Zieglerova's industrial scenic environment, which underlines her point that the characters "never really leave New Jersey."

adds, "The set is grounded in the industrial feeling of New Jersey," as embodied by an onstage bridge, two sets of chain-link fencing, and a skyline view of factories and smokestacks. The latter is drawn from the work of George Tice, the Jersey-based photographer, whose treatment of urban landscapes is a major influence on Zieglerova's design. Another Tice image, of the ferry slip in Jersey City, provides a backdrop for a crucial encounter with a pair of Mafia dons, which seals the group's fate. (These are two of three digitally printed RP drops supplied by I. Weiss.) Zieglerova also notes that the onstage bridge is influenced in part by the Pulaski Bridge, which links Brooklyn and Queens.

Another 20th-century artist provides a second, alternate influence: sometime Jersey resident Roy Lichtenstein, whose comic-book influenced renderings of romantic angst are part the Pop Art movement of the 60s. Lichtenstein's style is seen in dozens of projections that appear throughout the show, announcing each

new season, offering commentary on the songs, and providing a visual counterpoint to the industrial environment. The combination of elements provides a strong visual allusion to the unique nature of the Four Seasons, a group that successfully navigated a two decades of social upheaval. "It's so important to have those visual elements there," Zieglerova says. "It's the contrast of where they came from, those tough neighborhoods, and their music, which is so vibrant."

The basic scenic environment rarely, if ever, changes; however, as Zieglerova points out, "The design is misleadingly simple. It looks like one set. In fact, there must be 50." That's because the story is in constant motion—the libretto is written more like a screenplay—with each new location marked by the appearance of, say, a sign or a few pieces of furniture. Signage is particularly important here, as a way of indicating the many clubs and lounges where the Seasons played during their apprenticeship. There's an amusing gag where a faulty neon sign, seemingly spelling out "Our Sons Lounge," is fixed, revealing the true name, "Four Seasons Lounge," thus providing the group with a

moment of crucial inspiration.

Each sparsely designed scene is simple in itself, but, when you have dozens of them, the challenges begin to multiply. In the show's first 15 minutes, the action moves from a stage in France to a nightclub named Club Strand, to a church (a stained-glass cross flies in), to another nightclub (Club Silhouette), to a police station, to a courtroom, to jail, to a pizza parlor, to another nightclub, the Seabreeze Club. And so it goes, all evening long, in and out of recording studios, apartments, living rooms, moving vehicles, offices, the set of *American Bandstand*, and elsewhere. A set of four doors becomes the Brill Building, the nerve center of pop music in the 1960s; a set of four toilets becomes a jail in Cleveland, where the group is arrested.

Interestingly, this is not the kind of show where moving scenery is part of the spectacle. Most large pieces fly in and out; many furniture pieces are carried on and offstage by the cast. (As we will see, the lighting often draws one attention away from these events.) However, there is a fairly large automation system, provided by Showmotion. There are two turtles—one moving from stage left to stage right, and one moving up- and downstage. The latter is used for a scene in a car—represented by two car seats—in which the young Frankie Valli is set up for blackmail with a staged "murder." In addition, there's an upstage lift for the drummer who appears whenever the Seasons are singing, as well as another lift downstage for, among other things, benches, a bar, and a set of floor mics.

Naturally, all this simple-seeming scenic movement requires a great deal of technology. "There's more show underneath the deck than you would be led to believe," says Zieglerova.

Overall, says Zieglerova, the design didn't change much in the transition from La Jolla to Broadway. Surprisingly, she adds, "The apron is much deeper in La Jolla than at the August Wilson Theatre, and we had to compensate for that. On the other hand, we just love the Wilson, because so much of the show is staged on the last 2' of the apron. It's very much in your face."

### Pop projections

*Jersey Boys'* non-stop parade of projections, almost all of them in the Lichtenstein manner, provides a running commentary on the action. The images are seen in threes; the first triptych features the word "spring" on the center screen, with a radio on stage right and a couple kissing on the stage-left screen. Summer is announced with an image of a couple in a car and a girl with a beach ball. "Big Girls Don't Cry" comes with images of women doing just that. "Walk Like a Man" comes with pictures of father-son

# THE FOUR SEASONS



PHOTO BY JOAN MARCUS

confrontations. The images often feature comments planted in cartoon balloons, like “Why don’t you come to my twist party?”

Interestingly, says projection designer Michael Clark, his concept for the images developed separately, yet in parallel fashion, with the ideas of Zieglerova and McAnuff. “Des and Klara met in California, while I was reviewing the script separately in New York,” he recalls. “I had the idea of using images that were something out of a romance comic book, or *Apartment 3G*,” referring to the newspaper comic strip about young career girls in the big city. “Des got the same idea after looking at Klara’s Roy Lichtenstein research.” Thus inspired, Clark says, “Des and I went through a big book of Lichtenstein’s stuff.” Zieglerova adds, “We worked with Don Hudson, a storyboard artist from Los Angeles,” who helped create the images in the Lichtenstein manner. The images provide commentary on social developments—when one of the group remarks that they appealed to a largely blue-collar audience that didn’t participate in the era’s politics, there’s an allusion to Vietnam in an image of two planes locked in battle, one of which bears the name “Sherry.” Clark notes that a couple of Tice-inspired images made their way into the projections, as well. At other times, he says, the projections consist of “pure washes of color on the screens.”

Film and live video footage are also part of the mix. When the group appears on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, it is introduced by Sullivan himself, in a piece of archival film sourced by Clark. Then onstage cameras provide a

live feed of the actors playing the Four Seasons as they perform. Intercut with this is more vintage footage of teenage girls bursting into tears. The blend of film, video, and live performance vividly suggests the excitement of a live television broadcast.

The projection system is Dataton’s Watchout, which is controlled by a Medialon media server. The latter is “used as an interface between the lighting controller and Watchout,” says Clark. Medialon, he adds, “is designed not only to be operated actively but also to be used in a subordinate role and controlled by other show-control systems. Here, we use Medialon as an interface to receive MIDI show control from the lighting board. Also, Medialon can speak to the projectors, for remote start-up and shut-down; you can actually get in and change the zoom and focus. We don’t do that during the performances but we do during maintenance calls. In *Lennon* [the recent, short-lived John Lennon bio musical], we actually changed the lens focus during the show.” In addition, there are two Folsom Screen Shaper video mapping systems used to compensate for keystones on the side screens. Also used is a MOTU 828 (billed by the company as “everything you need to turn your computer into powerful, 24-bit, 96kHz digital audio workstation”) as an audio interface.

Images are delivered via four Sanyo PLC 55 projectors, which, unusually, are 4,500-lumen units. “The standard projection unit used on Broadway is the Christie LX100, which is 10,000 lumens,” says Clark. However, he adds, the Sanyo unit has the

Many scenes in *Jersey Boys* depict the group in performance. Binkley uses precisely focused units on the four mics, which rise up from below the stage. Kennedy’s design helps to recreate the group’s distinctive sound.

advantage of being “not much bigger than a carry-on bag. Our space was extremely limited and we had a very specific footprint.” Helping to compensate for the reduced lumen output are the screens, supplied by Rose Brand, which Clark praises for their high gain. Projection gear was supplied by Sound Associates. Other key personnel on the projection side include programmer Paul Vershbow and assistant projection designer Jason Thompson.

As with the other production elements, says Clark, the color palette was carefully controlled. “The choice of colors was something that every design department worked on,” he says. “The spring sequence is more muted. Autumn has those lovely oranges and lavenders. Des was adamant that we stay on target with that. It’s true of every prop and costume, and Howell’s lighting, as well.”

## Neon dreams

Given the specifics of the characters’ lives—in the show, the band’s members are virtually always indoors and really only come alive at night—it’s not surprising that Howell Binkley’s lighting is about the thousand-and-one ways a designer can evoke the effects of artificial light. (Even when he creates the sky over the Jersey cityscape, it is tinged with orange, the effect of sunlight filtered through the industrial fumes of the Meadowlands).





Clark's projections make use of a Roy Lichtenstein/Pop-Art style to provide a running commentary on the musical numbers and the action of the show.

Just as the libretto restlessly moves from location to location, so does Binkley's lighting provide a constantly shifting palette of artificial lighting looks, from the dim allure of late-night cocktail lounges, to the acid brightness of recording studios, to the high-wattage glamour of stage and television appearances. The show's most indelible image occurs at the end of Act I, when the group, at the height of its early fame, appears at a stadium. The four performers stand with their backs facing the audience in the glare of a row of footlights and four banks of stadium lights, while dozens of strobes flash in a random pattern. The image is a striking, and more than a little ghostly; it's a brilliant shorthand message that communicates the impact—both thrilling and a little frightening—of fame.

Also, given the show's constant movement, Binkley's lighting is conceived to let the action flow rapidly and gracefully from scene to scene. Here, the design works as a kind of camera eye, rapidly reorienting one's focus; this is especially important for transitions between book scenes and moments of narration. A stage wash will fade out, as units placed inside the box-truss proscenium arch come up, causing the trussing to glow from inside—it's as if the lighting disperses to the edges of the stage at the same time that a character steps out of the action to address the audience.

Binkley's best work has traditionally been the result of strong, ongoing relationships with directors (including Harold Prince, and, more recently, Jason Moore); Des McAnuff falls into this category, as well. "Des and I have a trusting relationship," the designer says. "He challenges me with every move he makes. He's also a master of transitions. He's always very explicit about how he wants the show to move."

Indeed, says Binkley, "We had a lot of pre-production conversations, in which Des said, 'It's gotta move—especially with actors

moving the scenery.' He said, 'You can light the actors, but I don't want to notice them.' Not that Binkley ever felt that the transitions were his responsibility alone: "The underscoring is a huge blessing in helping make us pop into a scene," he says, adding, "it's all driven by the music, the productions, and the sound."

Echoing Clark's earlier statements, Binkley notes that his color palette is linked to the four-seasons concept. "Fall, of course, is warmer, while winter is much cooler." But he finds several opportunities for striking color looks, including a strong red wash in the scene when the band appears, wearing matching red jackets, on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, and in "My Boyfriend's Back," which features a variety of bright swatches of color on the backdrop.

For that matter, one key scene proves that lighting can be effective without a battery of glitzy effects. About 30 minutes into the first act, soon after Bob Gaudio's entrance, the four musicians play together for the first time; the number is "Cry For Me." It begins with Gaudio at the piano and Valli singing; gradually, Massi and DeVito join in. The performance becomes stronger and more assured every few seconds as the recognition dawns that something special is happening. A series of minute lighting bumps adds to the excitement of watching the band come to life.

Binkley's moving light package includes 38 Martin MAC 2000 Performances and 25 Mac 2000 Wash units—their brightness makes them the show's moving-light workhorse—as well as six Vari\*Lite VL2000 Wash units used for low sidelight. The rest is the usual mix of ETC Source Fours in various sizes, as well as L&E Mini-Strips, Strand Orion Cyc units, PAR 16s, PAR 36 units, and strobes (from High End Systems and TPR). Other important pieces of gear include five Color Kinetics ColorBlaze units used as truss warmers, 42 Wybron ColoRam II scrollers, and three Lycian M2 short-throw lens followspots. The show's all-important smoke and haze effects are provided by a pair of

MDG Atmosphere hazers and one MDG Max 3000, aided by two Martin JEM fans.

Overall, says Binkley, "It's not a huge rig. It all fits into five racks." However, he adds, with the fencing, projection screens, and so many signs flying in and out, "real estate is tough," so several electrics are cut up into pieces in order to accommodate scenery. Also, the designer had to be careful not to overwhelm the projections. As a result, units had to be precisely placed in order to get the right effects. This precision is something of a Binkley specialty and pays off at several big moments—for example, when four microphones, on stands, rise up on the downstage lift, each isolated by its own overhead special, as the singers step downstage to begin a number.

Binkley speaks in detail about two effects—one spectacular and one more subtle. The first is the aforementioned stadium look. "At La Jolla, we only had a row of strip-lights," he says. "Here, we have 120 PAR cans on a pipe plus the Dataflashes." The four banks of PARs are placed on an angle; in order to get the right look, of lights in reflectors, he says, "Patricia Nichols, my associate designer, designed these little donuts, with holes, in perspective," creating the illusion of large-scale lighting banks as seen from a distance.

The other is the use of sidelight as a kind of indicator of narrative transitions. "Each of them exits into sidelight, when they're done narrating," Binkley says, adding that he created a similar cue for actor J. Robert Spencer, who plays Massi, the only Four Season not alive today, for his final exit.

The lighting is controlled by an MA Lighting grandMA console for the moving lights linked to an ETC Obsession II, which controls the conventional units. Binkley notes that he generally leaves the choice of consoles up to his programmer, in this case Hilary Knox. In La Jolla, the production used a High End Systems Wholehog III; for New York, Binkley says, Knox took the show disk to Prelite, the previsualization suite, where he was able to transfer all of the show's lighting

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data to the grandMA console. Binkley also notes the key contribution of technical supervisor Peter Fulbright in transferring the production from La Jolla to New York. Lighting gear was supplied to the production by PRG.

Overall, says Binkley, the essence of working with McAnuff is “collaboration. Every department is involved in every scene.”

#### **Music is golden**

During the first number of *Jersey Boys*, one might be temporarily forgiven for thinking the sound design is rather bad—that the lyrics are unintelligible. After a second, one realizes that the lyrics are in French—“Ces Soirées-La,” or “Oh, What a Night,” which is the production’s clever way of suggesting how the Four Seasons’ songs have transcended time and culture. In truth, the sound design is crisp, clear, and remarkably faithful to the sound of the Four Seasons. This is partly due to Steve Orich’s orchestrations and Ron Melrose’s vocal arrangements; it’s also partly due to John Lloyd Young’s voice, which bears an unearthly resemblance to Valli’s.

But let’s also note the contribution of sound designer Steve Canyon Kennedy, who, as is revealed by his work on *Hairspray* (located across the street from the August Wilson Theatre), knows a thing or do about reproducing on stage the sound of early 60s pop music. Kennedy, who rejects any use of the term “jukebox musical” (“It’s a story about a group”) says that his approach is “basic stuff. I simply tried to make it sound like the recordings.”

To give the music that indelible sound, Kennedy uses an eclectic array of gear. The proscenium loudspeakers consist of the EAW KF695z Compact Virtual Array three-way system, plus L-Acoustics dV-DOSC units and Genelec 1029A boxes, the latter for front-fill. More EAW units are used for the under-balcony positions, with a set of Meyer UPA-2Cs for monitor units. It’s quite a mix of product lines, but Kennedy says that he prefers to match the unit to the task.

The performers use Sennheiser MK2 mics, a fairly standard choice for him, with a

mix of AKG and Shure units chosen for the eight-member band. Unlike some shows, where the musicians are broken up and spread all over, the *Jersey Boys* band is located in the theatre’s basement, in two rooms connected by a window. Of course, the drummer is frequently onstage, moving around on his turtle unit, but, otherwise, the musicians are a fairly unified lot; they even make a sensational entrance, when Valli sings “Can’t Take My Eyes Off of You,” with its brassy instrumental interludes.

Control for the show is provided by a Cadac J-Type console, a faintly retro choice on Broadway where digital consoles are all the rage. However, says Kennedy, with finality, “I’ll retire before I use a digital console.” Whatever his feelings about digital technology in general, he adds that, for a musical set in the totally analog pop world of 40 years ago, an analog board is the logical choice.

Interestingly, Kennedy says that he uses very little processing, the exceptions being a Lexicon 480 unit and some Drawmer gates. “The Cadac does everything I need to do,” he adds.

Along with his colleagues, Kennedy cites McAnuff as the production’s driving force. He also mentions the contributions of production sound engineer Julie Randolph and associate designer Andrew Keister, along with Ron Melrose and synthesizer programmer Deborah N. Hurwitz. “They’re all just really talented people,” he says, “and everyone works together. It’s a great environment; if something goes wrong for somebody else, you feel each other’s pain.”

However, one gets the feeling that *Jersey Boys* provides Kennedy with a great deal of pleasure. “I was in high school in 1967,” he says. “You’d get in the car and it was Frankie Valli on the radio. I’m totally a fan.” He adds, “I’ve talked to people who don’t think they know the Four Seasons. Then you play their songs for them—and they know every one.” That universality is at the heart of a musical that just may rewrite the history of the jukebox genre. 🎧

#### **JERSEY BOYS**

**Book:** Marshall Brickman, Rick Elice

**Music:** Bob Gaudio

**Lyrics:** Bob Crewe

**Director:** Des McAnuff

**Choreography:** Sergio Trujillo

**Scenery:** Klara Zieglerova

**Costumes:** Jess Goldstein

**Lighting:** Howell Binkley

**Sound:** Steve Canyon Kennedy

**Projections:** Michael Clark

**Wigs/Hair:** Charles LaPointe

**Technical supervisor:** Peter Fulbright

**Production stage manager:** Richard Hester

**Stage manager:** Michelle Bosch

**Assistant stage managers:** Michael T.

Clarkston, Michelle Reupert

**Associate scenic designers:** Nancy Thun, Todd Ivins

**Assistant scenic designers:** Sonoka Gozelski, Matthew Myhrum

**Associate lighting designer:** Patricia Nichols

**Assistant lighting designer:**

Sarah E. C. Maines

**Associate sound designer:** Andrew Keister

**Assistant projection designers:**

Jason Thompson, Chris Kateff

**Storyboard artist:** Don Hudson

**Automated lighting programmer:**

Hilary Knox

**Projection programming:** Paul Vershbow

**Set model builder:** Anne Goelz

**Production carpenter:** Michael W. Kelly

**Deck automation:** Greg Burton

**Fly automation:** Ron Fucarino

**Flyman:** Peter Wright

**Production electrician:** James Fedigan

**Head electrician:** Jon Mark Davidson

**Assistant electrician:** Brian Aman

**Followspot operator:** Sean Fedigan

**Production sound engineer:**

Julie M. Randolph

**Production props:** Emiliano Pares

**Assistant props:** Kenneth J. Harris, Jr.

**Scenery, show control, and automation by** Showmotion, Inc.

**Lighting equipment supplied by** PRG Lighting

**Sound equipment supplied by** Masque Sound

**Projection equipment by** Sound Associates