

PHOTO BY PAUL KOLNIK

# CHARITY'S

Dogged by controversy, calamity, and a near-death

Every Broadway season needs its soap-opera saga and this year *Sweet Charity* provided a really juicy example. The second revival of the Neil Simon-Cy Coleman-Dorothy Fields musical to be produced by Barry and Fran Weissler (the last was in 1987), the production set tongues wagging as soon as television sitcom queen Christina Applegate was chosen to star as Charity Hope Valentine, a Manhattan taxi dancer (that's the 1966 word for hooker) with a heart of gold.

In addition, the production was staged by Walter Bobbie and choreographed by Wayne Cilento—meaning that, for the first time, *Charity* would be seen without its original staging by Bob Fosse (Fosse conceived *Charity*

as a vehicle for his wife, Gwen Verdon; his source material was *Nights of Cabiria*, the 1957 Federico Fellini tragicomedy about the misadventures of a Roman streetwalker.)

The plot thickened as a revised *Charity* opened in Minneapolis to mixed reviews. Changes were implemented and the production moved to Chicago. Then disaster struck: Applegate broke her foot on an on-stage lamppost. Understudy Dilys Croman took over as standby Charlotte D'Amboise was rushed into rehearsals. When a barely prepared D'Amboise opened in Boston to less-than-ecstatic notices, the Weisslers closed the show.

Then, in a plot twist out of an old Warner Bros. musical, Applegate got



# SWEET REVENGE

experience, a group of designers create a dramatically different *Sweet Charity*

Barry Weissler on the phone and refused to hang up until he agreed to reinstate the production. Additional funding was found and the production moved to New York, with D'Amboise playing the first week of previews until Applegate's doctor gave her the okay. True to her world, she opened in *Sweet Charity* at the Al Hirschfeld Theatre on May 4.

And if that opening wasn't exactly an unalloyed triumph, there was plenty of good news. The reviews were all over the place, but Applegate held her own. In the words of *Variety's* David Rooney: "*Sweet Charity* has a plucky spirit that won't be denied, and that's largely due to Christina Applegate." The production earned a Tony nomination for Best Revival, with additional nods for Applegate and

Cilento. As we go to press, box office is running above 80% of capacity and is building. Once again, *Charity* is a survivor.

#### Chic and seedy scenery

Interestingly, this is the first really new Broadway *Charity*—the 1987 revival had scenery and lighting by Robert Randolph, who did the original. Randolph's design was more stylized, with cartoonish scenery and a zipper sign announcing titles for each scene. In the current production, as *Charity* makes her picaresque way through low life and high society, set designer Scott Pask contrasts vivid splashes of abstract color and kicky displays of '60s chic with the gritty details of the rent-a-body business; the result is more Fellini than Fosse.

The Fandango girls welcome you to their ballroom in "Big Spender." Note MacDevitt's uplighting, from a trough placed downstage.

Two recurring motifs are drawn from noted visual artists. First, the show curtain is a series of overlapping color swatches in yellow, orange, and purple, colors that, says Pask, "are a reference to the work of Alexander Girard, a fabric designer of the period." The second motif is found in a series of iris-ing portals covered with dark purple dots, an idea inspired, the designer says, by the silk-screen nature of Roy Lichtenstein's Pop Art paintings. The portals are extremely functional: "Fluidity and speed were important considerations," he says, "especially as so many locations are seen only once, so I started playing with the idea of the iris" to facilitate transitions.

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(The iris drops are made of 27oz. Charisma, a synthetic velour, hand-dyed and supplied by Rose Brand; the fabric was then sent to Hudson Scenic, where the dots were applied.)

The color-splashed curtain rises on the simple Central Park setting where the show begins and ends. Next comes "Big Spender," at the Fandango Ballroom, the cut-rate sin palace where Charity plies her trade. The ballroom is really two different locations. The dancers' dressing room is placed far downstage in front of a long dressing table with a series of makeup mirrors; it functions as an in-one set. The table rolls away to reveal the ballroom itself; a dark, hellish location featuring a curved back wall—the top half of which consists of smoky, marbled mirrors, with the bottom covered by a button-tufted vinyl. Located at center stage is an enormous circular pouffe, which provides a staging area for the dancers to strike provocative poses. The setting, says

Pask, "was inspired by a layout in an old edition of Italian *Vogue*," he says. "It was a photo shoot called 'Dance Marathon.' It featured all these women in great clothing, drenched in sweat." Hanging over the deck is an electric sign spelling out the word "fandango."

Electric signs are a recurring motif in Pask's design; another one dominates the setting for Club Pompeii, the discotheque where Charity hooks up with Italian film idol Vittorio Vidal. The club is also the setting for one of the show's big dances, "Rich Man's Frug." The backdrop is a giant blue-and-purple paisley Pucci-esque print, emulating the patterns that played a defining role in '60s couture. Other design touches include all-white furniture and a narrow, white, diaphanous curtain.

Vittorio, to spite his jealous girlfriend, takes Charity back to his apartment—the last word in futuristic 60s modernism, with a purple polka-dotted backdrop, an orange painting in the style of Mark Rothko, and



PHOTO BY PAUL KOLNIK



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a red velvet sofa that spans nearly the width of the stage—the couch's long entrance gets a big laugh. According to Corky Boyd, project manager for Hudson Scenic, the company that built and automated the scenery, the couch is divided into four segments, which are preset in an upstage-to-downstage position. "The leading element is on a curved section of track and it gets knifed up to the dog," which carries it onstage. "As the couch is coming on, the other three segments get lined up and loaded onto the straight section of track," as they roll on, the effect is of one long piece of furniture.

There are other visual surprises built into the scene. Charity performs "If They Could See Me Now," complete with top hat and cane. At the song's climax, she stands in front of the Rothko painting, which is revealed to be a light-box that converts her into a silhouette.

Charity and Oscar on a Ferris Wheel (left) and in Central Park (top).

Soon after, a section of a downstage right portal moves to reveal a clothes closet where Charity hides out when Vittorio's girlfriend shows up for a romantic reunion.

It's back to gritty reality for "There's Gotta Be Something Better Than This," performed by Charity and her two Fandango colleagues on the roof of the ballroom. The set features a giant reverse view of an electric Fandango sign, with a cityscape behind. (This set, says Boyd, looks enormous but is only 12" deep. "The sign's letters are about 3" and the remaining 9" is the structure that holds the sign. It's one of the most effective uses of false perspective I've ever seen.") Then it's off to the 92nd Street Y, where Charity meets Oscar, the neurotic accountant who falls in love with her, thinking that she's a creature of purity. The first act concludes with Charity and Oscar in a stalled elevator.

The elevator is a nifty visual effect, as Applegate and Denis O'Hare, who plays



Oscar, enter the elevator at the stage-floor level and it rises high above the deck. The unit is surrounded by the Lichtenstein-dot portals; as it rises, the portal seems to unfurl beneath it. "The elevator is a roll-around unit, with the lifting device built into it," says Boyd. "The car travels up and down in a stationary frame, with a roll drop [for the portal fabric] built into it. When it's going up, the fabric unrolls beneath it; it's like a window shade in reverse."

Perhaps because the second act focuses more on the Charity-Oscar relationship, there are fewer big scenes. The lovers drop in on a so-called "jazz church" for the number "The Rhythm of Life," for which Pask supplies a stained-glass warehouse window. There's a number on the Coney Island

The "Rich Man's Frug," performed at Club Pompeii, which is dominated by Pask's paisley-patterned drop.



Ferris Wheel, with Charity and Oscar again suspended above the stage. Oscar pops the question to Charity at "Barney's Chile [sic] Hacienda," a small unit consisting of two seedy restaurant banquettes. One big moment occurs in "I'm a Brass Band," sung by Charity after Oscar proposes to her. Here, Pask takes the color-swatch look from the show curtain and explodes it all over the stage, turning the number into her Technicolor fantasy of love fulfilled.

Pask has nothing but praise for Hudson's staff, the production's stage crew, and production supervisor Arthur Siccardi. ("This design is the triumph of Artie Siccardi," he says.) He adds that Bobbie and Cilento were invaluable partners in realizing the production during a punishingly short tech period and a tumultuous tryout. "The schedule was crazy," he says, then adds, "I'm really proud of what we did."

#### Gritty and glittering lighting

"Almost everything I did was inspired by what Scott was doing." So says Brian MacDevitt, and it's true that his lighting matches the split moods of Pask's design, ranging from a riot of warm colors to cold, pitiless, directional effects. MacDevitt's first big moment comes in "Big Spender." He uses high backlight to create a seedy aura around the Fandango girls, then fills out the scene with highly directional side beams. As the number builds, he adds hot oranges and reds—then the girls come down front, where a trough of units in the lip of the stage provide sinister uplight.

It's creepy, it's effective, but one thing it's not is naturalistic. MacDevitt stresses that he and his colleagues approached the show as "a fable." Speaking of the Fandango, he adds, "We didn't want it to look like *Chicago* or *Cabaret*," naming two other musicals associated with Bob Fosse that feature

hard-as-nails chorus girls. Not that his vision is any way romantic; the ballroom is "haunting and attractive and you want to get out of there," he adds.

Because *Charity* is loaded with dances, MacDevitt used all the dance techniques at his command. "It's a classic leg-and-drop show," he says. "It works like a ballet set, so we have an electric in each wing—not on the floor, because there's no room, what with all the scenery moving in and out. There's also a bounce drop—take that big Pucci drop in the Club Pompeii; the best way to light it is not to light it, because bounce light gives it a softer feel."

The moving light rig for the production consists mostly of Vari\*Lite VL3000s, with some Martin Professional Mac 2000s added in. "I prefer the colors of the Vari-Lites on people," says MacDevitt, "but the Macs are great on scenery. They have an effects wheel, too. There are three

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PHOTO BY PAUL KOLNIK

Charity hiding out in Vittorio Vidal's closet (left) and getting engaged to Oscar at Barney's Chile Hacienda (bottom)

green tint that many arc sources generally have," says his assistant Jen Schriever. "Also, they tend to mix better with the other conventional and moving lights in the show." Control is provided by a Flying Pig Systems Wholehog II console for the moving units and an ETC Obsession III for the conventionals.

Watching the show, one sees how MacDevitt unobtrusively switches colors, angles, and intensities to build each number. "It's been a roller-coaster," he says of the experience, "but I'm really happy we got to a New York stage."

### Brass band sound

Earlier this season, Peter Hylenski designed *Little Women*, a period musical with a delicate, natural sound. From the minute one hears the first seven notes of *Sweet Charity*'s overture, the chest-pounding vamp that opens "Big Spender," it's clear that he has opted for

the more I enjoy it," he says. "Theatre is often such a mono world, so I try to create a sense of depth and space between the music and the vocals. Splitting the systems gives me a chance to do that, instead of depressing the band beneath the vocals."

The Al Hirschfeld Theatre is, Hylenski says, a reasonably good acoustic space. "The only issues come where the boxes meet the proscenium. It's a challenge to get good speaker positions—you have to go above or below the boxes, and neither is ideal. We got the speakers on-stage a bit more than usual—we didn't encumber the set, but you end up with some reflections on the side box where it cuts steeply into the proscenium."

Upstairs, he adds, "isn't too bad, but for the fact that there are a lot of hard surfaces. The structure of the walls is parallel and there's a lot of volume—it's about 80' from the proscenium to the back row of the balcony. It's easy for the vocals to wash around up there, given the amount of reflections and air. This show is brassy and you want that power coming straight

on the rail and they treat many of the set pieces, like the elevator." It's not a big rig for a Broadway show, but the designer makes the most of it. "We were hit with budget and time constraints," he says. "There are about 40 moving lights on this show. We said, 'Let's take that challenge and see how we can do this.' Sometimes, we have only one moving light in a position—a low side unit on a light ladder, or maybe three backlights on each line. But that's the way it went; we just had to make the perfect choice." The rest of the rig consists of conventional units, except for some Color Kinetics ColorBlasts built into the skylight of the rooftop set, which create a miniature mirrorball effect, suggesting the ballroom below. MacDevitt also chose Robert Juliat Cyrano followspots, for their long throws, and because the designer "prefers their look on actors' faces as opposed to the typical blue or

a more aggressive approach. There are several reasons for this; for one, he says, "Wayne Cilento is really big on percussion—nothing could ever be too loud and punchy for him. When I was putting the show together, I knew that it needed tender moments, but it also needed to bark—the 'Big Spender' theme, for example, has to have a bite to it."

And why not? Coleman's score is, in the tradition of '60s Broadway—big, bright, brassy, and bold. Don Sebesky's complex orchestrations are filled with detail—in virtually every number, there's a solo instrument playing its own line in contrast to the rest of the band. And, with 18 musicians, *Sweet Charity* has one of the larger bands on Broadway right now.

As in *Little Women*, Hylenski says he's using "a split orchestra/vocal system," in which certain loudspeakers are dedicated to the musicians and others to the voices. "The more I play with this type of system,



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at you, but, because of some direct reflections from the pit, I had to turn the band down in the front mezzanine to get the balance to work."

Downstairs, Hylenski's speakers include Meyer Sound UPA-1Ps for the vocals and MSL-2As for the orchestra. He chose Martin Audio WS2A subs, which are rarely seen on Broadway. "I was very impressed," he says. "In theatre, you never have a place to put subs and the low end gets neglected. In *Charity*, the subs are in the hallway, under the side boxes, where you find the stairs to the boxes. I was pleasantly surprised when I heard how they reacted in there."

The rest of the loudspeaker rig is filled out with d&b audiotechnik E3s for side fills and under-balconies, with more MSL-2As and UPAs for the front mezzanine. There's also a mid-house lighting truss with two Meyer M1D arrays on it for the back of the balcony. "I used the [Meyer] MAPP Online software," to work out the speaker arrangement, "and it

worked out quite accurately," he adds. Other components of the rig include EAW JF200s and JF100s for stage fold-back and two M1Ds built into the elevator unit for sound effects. "I used Camco amps on the MSL2s and the Martin subs, and they were great," the designer adds. "They not only have brute power but a high finesse as well. Their clarity is backed with power. Also, Cadac now has the M16 mic preamp—the orchestra mics pass through them and they sound fantastic." The show is controlled by a Cadac J-Type console.

In addition, there's system processing courtesy of Lake Technology Mesa and Contour units. "I love the way they sound," Hylenski says. "Their functionality is great." Again, he has set up the system for a split effect. "The proscenium is split, but for the fills and delays I use a single cabinet fed with a mix of vocal and orchestra—however, the signals are independently delayable, and you can image them separately."

Not surprisingly, Hylenski used the

tiny, barely visible DPA 4061 mics on the performers whenever possible. "There are quite a few hats in the show, and they're difficult to deal with," he says. "The chorus changes costumes so many times and they're always putting on different hats," the assistant sound engineer] spends the night trying to finesse the mics into decent positions and spearhead sweat-outs before performers reach the stage. That's going to be the title of my memoirs: *Hat Brims and Sweat*."

As for the orchestra, he says, "There are Neumann U89s on the trumpets, 87s on the trombones, and 89s on the reeds. The electric bass is a vintage chain, a Valvotronics DI into an 1176 Limiting Amplifier. I have a Schertler pickup on the acoustic bass, which is lightly compressed with a Valvotronics Gain Rider." Because, in the first scene *Charity* falls into the orchestra pit, there was no room for a percussion section (it's taken up by stagehands who drench her in water, as she has suppos-



Pask's color-swatch concept for "I'm a Brass Band" is matched by MacDevitt's colorful lighting, which paces and builds the number. Hylenski must deal with a preponderance of hats in the show; this requires constant vigilance to find decent mic positions.

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edly fallen into a lake.) “So,” he says, “the percussionist is upstairs, in a dressing room. Charlie [Descrafino, the percussionist] is terrific. We did a survey of the building to find the best location for him. We ripped out shelves in the room and tried to create a studio environment using absorbing and diffusion materials. The percussion setup is based on a stereo pair of Earthworks TC30K omnis that hang over Charlie’s head. There are also spot mics around the room to pick up other instruments—the vibes have a special and there’s a there’s a special on the bongos. He has his own feed to his headphones and various video shots.”

Other orchestra mics include two AKG 414s in overhead positions for the drums, which are in the pit, an Audio-Technica AT-2500 for the kick

drum, a Shure 57 for the snare and a Neumann KM 140 for the hi-hat, and Sennheiser 609s for the toms. The strings have Neumann M147s overhead and DPA 4061s clipped onto the instruments. The cello has a DPA 4021, with DIs on the keyboards and electric guitars.

Additional processing gear is concentrated on the drums, to give Cilento the kick he was looking for. “I put a Summit DL200 tube compressor at the desk and used the old studio trick of running a stereo buss of drums through the compressors and squashing it, then mixing it under the drums that aren’t compressed. It gives you that extra punch and fills out the sound

Charity in front of the Mark Rothko-style painting that becomes a lightbox.

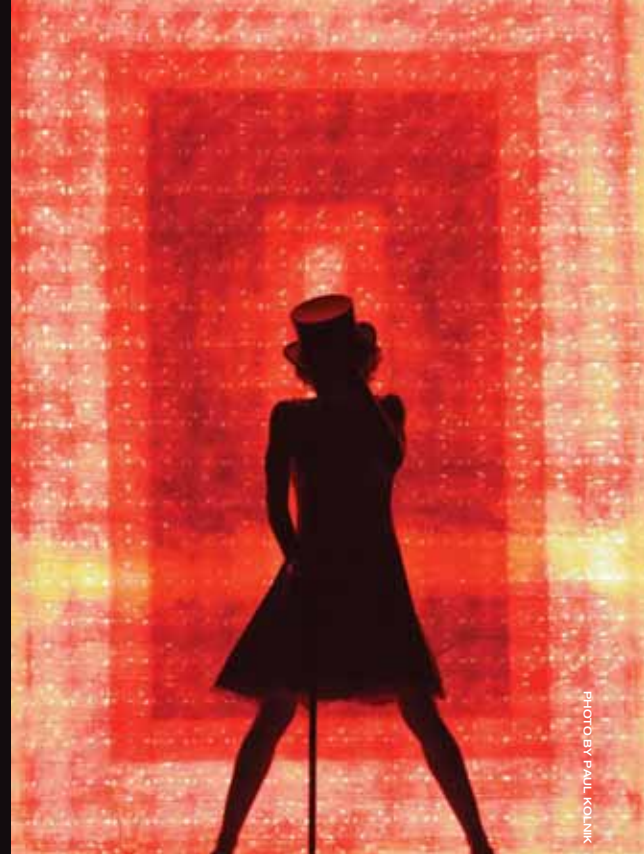


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of the instrument. I use this in many of the big dance numbers, especially ‘The Frug,’ and ‘Brass Band,’ where the choreography relies so heavily on the drums.”

In addition, he says, “There’s one box of LCS, an LX300 frame, handling all the vocal processing, so I can individually delay and EQ the radio mics—and it’s all programmable. It sits in a rack with a 12” Powerbook attached to it. And, if it fails, you can do a lot of the bussing through the Cadac.” The overall result is a sound that’s big yet intimate, brassy yet tender, jazzy yet romantic.

### The tryout and the shutdown

For everyone, the unusual three-city tryout tour was a challenge. The production toured without several key scenic pieces, which were designed to be seen in New York (leaving Pask open to charges out of town that the production was under-designed). Still, he had to deal with a lot of scenery and a short tech time. “Orit Jacoby Carroll, my associate,” he says, “took Hudson’s automation software and pre-programmed many of the scenic transitions. We went into Minneapolis with most of the moves ready to go. Of course, the

timing all ultimately changed, but it was important to have something in place that we could refine.”

He adds that the nine-day tech was especially hectic, given the show’s abundance of scenery and many production numbers. However, once it was loaded in, he concentrated more on getting the enhancement scenery—those pieces intended only for New York—finished and ready to go. “With so many transitions,” he adds, “the schedule was ambitious.”

Speaking of the short tech, MacDevitt says, “We had eight days. A show like *Wicked* has weeks. That’s a bigger show, but Broadway shows don’t get tech’d in eight days.” Still he adds, there was no way to go but forward: “We embraced the lean and mean and smart—I saw the dances and I knew exactly what I wanted to do. The choreography really spoke to me. We were lighting pieces in two or three hours that normally take a day or two.” He adds that the move from city to city kept him on his toes, even as it gave him a chance to polish his work.

For Hylenski, the three-city tryout was “maybe 10-20% useful. You get to know

the show and the performers. You get to work out little bugs.” But, he adds, “You have the problem of four completely different houses. Not much of my show is onstage—it’s focused more on the system configuration for the theatre. I started out in a 2,800-seat theatre and now we’re in a 1,200-seat theatre. At each tour stop, I changed the system design to suit the seating arrangement and architecture. We had to carry everything, from JBL VerTec 4888 arrays to extra Meyer M1Ds, to allow for almost complete reconfiguration at each stop.”

Then came the announcement that the show was closing, followed by its resuscitation a few days later, a situation that caught everyone unawares. Pask says he ran to Boston to see what he thought would be the last show. Boyd notes that the enhancement

scenery was in the shop at Hudson: “We had 15 people working on it and they suddenly stopped. We had to find something for them to do.” He adds that the scenery was put into trailers for storage and was easily retrievable.

MacDevitt says, “The tragedy of it is, the electrics in the set pieces were gutted—all the radio dimmers that had been rented from PRG were pulled out. It was a week’s worth of work ripped out in five minutes—and, 12 hours later, the show was back on.” Even more affecting, he says, was “the heartbreak of it closing when we had been working on it since early January.” Hylenski adds, “The gear was on its way to the shop. There’s a different way of loading out when it’s going to the next tour stop versus when it’s closing, so it was more dis-assembled than it should have been. Francis [Elers,

the sound engineer], Bonnie, and our advance guys went up to PRG to intercept the boxes and turn them around—they had to make sense of what was inside them after having been packed so quickly in Boston. Not to mention the fact that all the new items we needed for New York—new cabling, new yokes, anything being fabricated—was stopped when the show announced its closing, so we were days behind.”

Still, everyone managed to get back on track rapidly, allowing the show to open. (The designers praise Applegate for her pluck, her willingness to learn, and her leadership of the entire company.) Thanks to her and her colleagues, Charity Hope Valentine has had her sweet revenge on the nay-sayers who thought she would never reach Broadway again. ☺

## Sweet Charity

**Book:** Neil Simon, based on an original screenplay by Federico Fellini, Fullio Pinelli, and Ennio Flaiano.

**Music:** Cy Coleman

**Lyrics:** Dorothy Fields

**Director:** Walter Bobbie

**Choreographer:** Wayne Cilento

**Producers:** Barry and Fran Weissler, Clear Channel Entertainment

**Scenery:** Scott Pask

**Costumes:** William Ivey Long

**Lighting:** Brian MacDevitt

**Sound:** Peter Hylenski

**Hair:** Paul Huntley

**Makeup:** Angelina Avallone

**Production supervisor:**

Arthur Siccardi

**Production stage manager:**

David O’Brien

**Stage managers:** Beverly Jenkins,

Stephen R. Gruse,

**Associate scenic designer:**

Orit Jacoby Carroll

**Assistant scenic designers:** Lauren

Alvarez, Tal Goldin, Bryan Johnson

**Associate lighting designer:** Charlie Pennebaker

**Assistant lighting designers:** Rachel Eichorn, Jennifer Schriever

**Moving light programmer:**

David Arch

**Associate sound designer:**

Tony Smolenski

**Production carpenter:**

William Van De Bogart

**Automation flyman:** Gabe Harris

**Deck automation:** Scott Dixon

**Assistant carpenter:** Richard Fideli

**Production electrician:**

James Fedigan

**Head electrician:** Daniel Coey

**Followspot operator:**

Jennifer Lerner

**Assistant electrician:** Eric Norris

**Sound engineer:** Francis Elers

**Assistant sound engineer:**

Bonnie Runk

**Production prop coordinator:**

George Green, Jr.

**Production prop assistant:**

Angelo Torre

**Production prop shopper:**

Kathy Fabian

**Scenery built and painted by**  
Hudson Scenic Studios.

**Lighting equipment:** PRG Lighting.

**Sound equipment:** PRG Audio.



COURTESY OF SCOTT PASK



COURTESY OF SCOTT PASK

Top: Pask’s sketch for the Fandango was inspired by a layout in *Italian Vogue*. See how it compares with the shot on pages 48-49. Below: A sketch of the roof of the Fandango, with the sign in reverse, which Corky Boyd of Hudson Scenic calls “one of the most effective uses of false perspective I’ve ever seen.”