

# THEATRE

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# VEGAS STRIP

## A team of Broadway pros put on a *PEEPSHOW*, with most revealing results

By: David Barbour

Las Vegas, a town that always has one eye on the future, is returning to its Sin City roots. Having morphed through various identities—family fun park, high-roller pleasure dome, Broadway West, and home base for Cirque du Soleil's World Domination Plan—the city is once again advertising itself as the go-to place for dirty martinis, dimly lit lounges, and showgirls wearing next to nothing. This summer's blockbuster comedy film *The Hangover* has solidified the image, reminding audiences that what happens in Vegas stays there.

You won't find a better illustration of the current Vegas ethos than *PEEPSHOW*, now peeling nightly at the Planet Hollywood Hotel and Casino. *Peepshow* is a musical entertainment in which every number ends with bras and panties being cast to the four winds. Its highlights include steamy pole dancing, a giant milk bath filled with topless lovelies, sexual acrobatics staged in and

above a bathtub, and a muscular, scantily clad young man who, clinging to a metal globe far above the stage, acts as a kind of human disco ball.

What separates *Peepshow* from the local competition—including *Thunder from Down Under*, *Crazy Girls*, and *Bite* ("an erotic vampire tale with dancing and music")—is the wit and invention of its staging. Working a Mother Goose theme for all it is worth, *Peepshow* offers wickedness with a wink. The overall tone is sunny, rather than seedy, and nobody ever gets totally naked. For all of its flash and technology, *Peepshow* recalls the kind of "risqué" floor show found in New York nightclubs like the Latin Quarter in the 1950s.

The show's overall slyness of tone is typical of Jerry Mitchell, one of the top choreographers and directors working on Broadway today. (His shows often blend a campy, mock-innocent sense of humor with a knack for visual surprises.) Mitchell is also the conceiver, original director, and

(now) executive producer of *Broadway Bares*, the annual theatre-industry strip show that has raised millions of dollars for Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS. In *Peepshow*, Mitchell has commercialized the *Broadway Bares* concept—for one thing, it is far more heterosexual in its sensibility than *Broadway Bares*, but we are, after all, talking about Las Vegas. In any event, he has brought along a team of Broadway designers to help create this fast-moving evening of erotic fun and games.

### Satin pumpkins and steaming hot rods

*Peepshow* isn't exactly a musical—the score is a mix of pop tunes and new material by Andrew Lipka—but it does have a kind of narrative line. At the top of the evening, the purple velvet curtain parts and a video wall appears; we see a black-and-white video prologue, featuring Bo-Peep (originally Kelly Monaco, of *General Hospital* and *Dancing with the Stars*, now Holly Madison, one of Hugh Hefner's playmates on *The Girls Next Door*). Bo-Peep appears to be your average frustrated career woman; she



Inside the pumpkin.

enters her apartment, showers, and crawls into bed with her faithful dog and a good book, the latter adorned with the image of a keyhole. As Bo-Peep falls asleep, she tumbles, *Alice-in-Wonderland* fashion, into the world of *Peepshow*.

The actress is lowered from the flies to the stage, where, standing in front of a life-size keyhole—in reality a three-dimensional lightbox—is the Peep Diva, originally played by the ex-Spice Girl Mel B. and now in the hands of Shoshanna Bean, of Broadway's *Wicked*. (*Peepshow* is conceived to feature a rotating cast of leads, thereby allowing celebrities to kick up their heels without making a long-term commitment.) The Peep Diva is Bo-Peep's guide to all things sensual.

And we are off, through a series of numbers that are meant to constitute Bo-Peep's erotic education. Red Riding Hood appears in a skimpy red ensemble—a micro-miniskirt and halter top—while kneeling atop a sleek red sports car that blows off a considerable quantity of steam. In Mitchell's version of "The Three Little Pigs," a well-muscled "wolf" in a floor-length fur coat "blows" down a house—in reality, a metal structure with a fabric façade that drops to

reveal the Peep Diva in black lace underwear. A giant pumpkin (as in "Peter Peter Pumpkin Eater") swivels around to reveal a satiny interior. A giant transparent tank of milk is brought on for the girls to cavort in its opaque white depths. And, of course, there's a giant bed where the Peep Diva auditions a trio of potential lovers, drawn from the audience.

The show's set designer, David Rockwell, is a longtime collaborator of Mitchell's. Rockwell designs everything from chic restaurants to sleek hotels to events like last year's Academy Awards ceremony. (Talk about synergy: Planet Hollywood also contains the Las Vegas outpost of the Rockwell Group-designed Strip House, the upscale steakhouse chain that serves up its meaty dishes in an atmosphere that pays tribute to the golden era of burlesque.)

Rockwell and Mitchell have been theatrical partners in crime for nearly a decade. Rockwell recalls that, in the late '90s, after a long and successful career as an architect and designer, he was eager to try his hand on Broadway. He says, with some amusement, "I was meeting with directors, looking at potential projects. [The director] Christopher Ashley asked me about doing his revival of *The Rocky Horror Show*. I was intrigued by the way Chris explained my role in the show: 'This show is all about creativity, and total invention.' Then I met Jerry [who choreographed *Rocky Horror*]: He showed me the huge bruises on his legs, from slapping himself while teaching the cast to do *The Time Warp*."

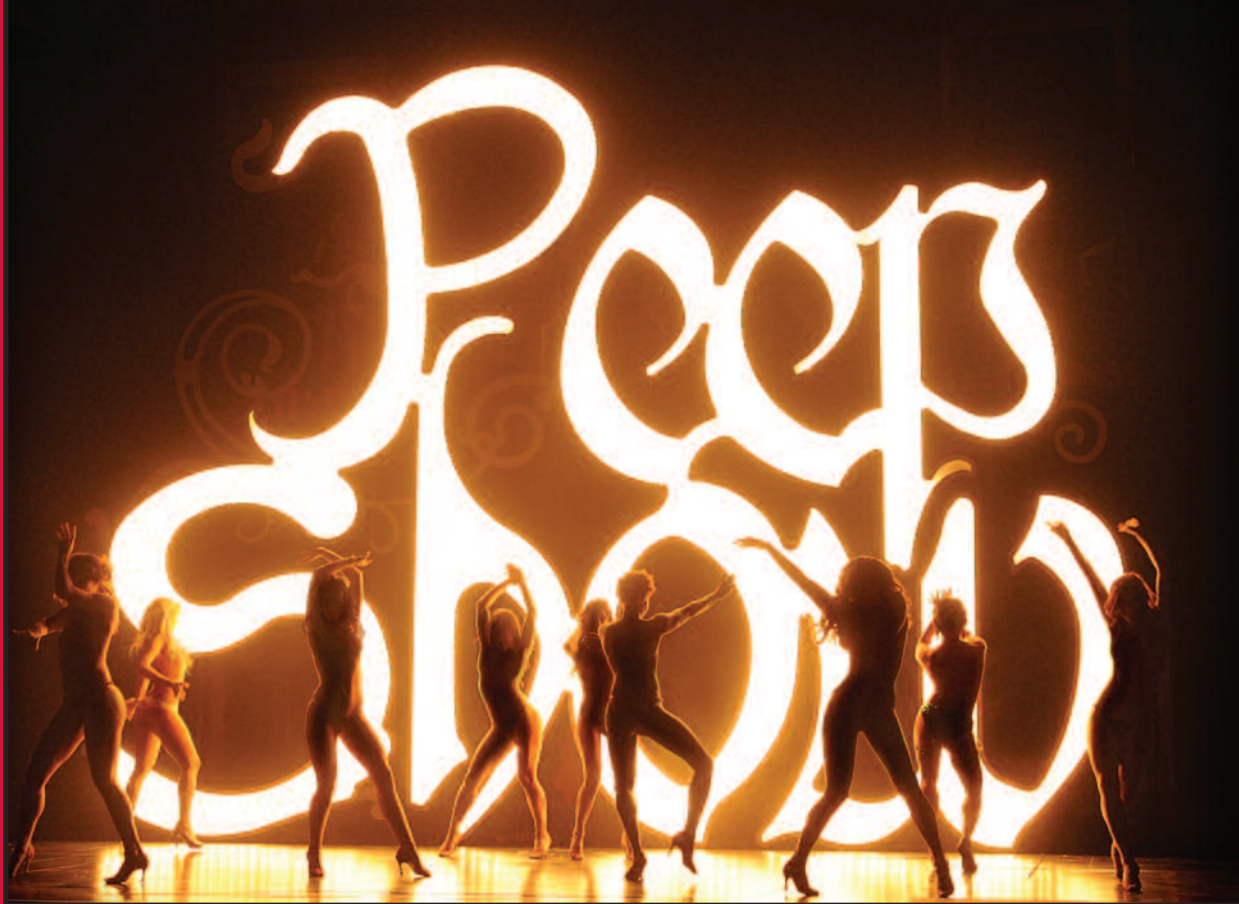
Mitchell's obvious enthusiasm—as well as his inventive nature—proved irresistible to Rockwell, and, since then, they've collaborated on *Hairspray*, *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels*, and *Legally Blonde*. (As you read this, they're in Seattle, working on the pre-Broadway engagement of *Catch Me If You Can*, staged by Jack O'Brien, another close collaborator.)

The basic stage is a multi-level affair with two elevators (one at stage left and one at stage right), two video panels that can combine to make one large screen, and, located all the way upstage, a second level for the production's band. "Part of the set's architecture is designed to show off what's unique about *Peepshow*," Rockwell says. "For example, we have live music [not always the case in Vegas], so we wanted to show the band. Once we got those details worked out, it was all about having seamless transitions—so we set up a modular stage with elevators and a cross walk. It's all there when we introduce the characters—you see the keyhole rise up and the girls are introduced on the platform, which is an extension of the band platform."

The scenery moves swiftly and confidently; each transition is aided by the two video panels, which provide a kind of sleight-of-hand element that distracts you as the next set piece rolls into place. (Automation is provided by PRG's StageCommand system.) As is typical of the direction, the action is nonstop: "Jerry always wants things to move lightning-quick; that's why there's flying and rigging happening, right over the audience,"



The video wall shows an abstract pattern.



Rockwell says his favorite piece is the title sign, made of laser-cut metal filled with filament bulbs.

adds Rockwell. Inevitably, each number ends up on one of the three catwalks that penetrate into the house.

Zak Borovay, the show's video designer, notes that *Peepshow's* video design requires content in a broad array of styles. First, there's the black-and-white opening sequence. "A couple of years ago, Jerry made a demo of what he thought it should be," says Borovay. "I worked with him and Jeff Lester, who directed and edited the opening film. It's startlingly similar to Jerry's demo." At other times, the content echoes, or fills out, the scenic look: In the "Peter Peter" sequence, for example, a performer throws pumpkin seeds onto the deck, and the screens display animated images of vines and tendrils growing as the pumpkin set piece rises up from below the stage. At other times, however, the video screens pulse with abstract shapes and color, adding pace and punch to the musical numbers.

"I worked with various concepts," says Borovay. "In the Big Bad Wolf scene, Jerry wanted a kind of Dr.

Seuss-style forest, so I showed him a bunch of looks on my computer screen, and then honed them, based on his feedback. 'Stay Loose' is a '60s/*Laugh-In* kind of number, so I made some 'mod' patterns. In [the Madonna hit] 'Hung Up,' I made a pattern out of looping lighting effects, using stock footage of out-of-focus chasing lights; we really wanted a throbbing dance-club feel there."

Whatever Borovay came up with, he adds, "We kept working on it in the theatre. You can plan all you want, but you have to see it in on the stage. With video, it's easy to be the most interesting thing. I worked to strike a balance between creating a feeling of motion and stealing focus from the performers."

Each screen is 20' high by 8' wide, and is custom-made by Panasonic. The images are delivered by a Dataton Watchout media server, linked to the show's lighting console by a Medialon Manager show-control system. (Video gear was supplied by Scharff Weisberg.) "I have a firm belief that the tools shouldn't dictate

the design," Borovay says. "I tell directors and producers not to worry about the gear we're going to use. It's part of my job to figure out how to do it. I know Watchout; I've been using it since Version 1. It really lets me do what I want to do, and I'm not limited by having a million built-in effects."

What with moving video panels and all those big moving scenic pieces, Rockwell says the design was "very challenging." He adds, "Before we moved in, the space was more of a traditional theatre with raked seating. We flattened out the orchestra floor, to get the three runways. We also had to excavate in order to make room for the elevators." The scenery was built by PRG Scenic Technologies.

Rockwell adds that his favorite piece in the show is the giant "Peepshow" sign: "It's made of laser-cut metal filled with filament bulbs. The girls appear and disappear through it—because of the sign's brightness, you don't see them coming. It has a slightly Goth quality that Jerry really liked, and it became



Left: Red Riding Hood. Right: As Chris Lee notes, much of the action takes place on the three catwalks.

part of our vocabulary. He wanted everything to be sexy, with elements of surprise.”

**The body as canvas**

Chris Lee, the lighting designer, is a *Broadway Bares* veteran, having lit ten editions of it. (He also has extensive experience in Vegas, with a list of credits that reaches back into the ‘90s and includes such acts as Tony Danza and Steve Lawrence and Eydie Gorme.) He notes that *Peepshow* “is very much in the style of the old burlesque shows, with their passaraelles and specialty acts mixed in with the girls.” The difference, he adds, is “instead of, say, an accordion player or traditional, Old-Vegas show-girls, our cast is full of terrific dancers.”

Lee’s work features sharply angular beam arrangements, floods of saturated colors, and the overt use of patterns. Everything, he says, “is about making the ladies look good, especially with runways that are configured to go into the house, giving everyone a 360° view of them. The pattern work is connected to that; I wanted it to have a kind of French burlesque feel, with a lot of projections on the bodies. It’s like the girls are traveling through the stage—they’re part of the overall composition—and you’re painting

their bodies. It allows you to think you’re seeing more than you are.”

Lee says his biggest challenge is “the venue itself, because the majority of the show happens 20’ downstage of the proscenium. We rebuilt all the existing box booms and balcony rails—we had to do some serious recalculations for weight—because, past the catwalk, there were no hanging positions.”

Steve Ehrenberg, then of the show’s producer, Base Entertainment, and now head of his own company, Eberg Stage Solutions, adds that the entire theatre was considerably reworked in the month between the departure of *Stomp* and the arrival of *Peepshow*. In addition to redoing the lobby, reconfiguring the house, and adding catwalks to the stage, he says, “The show put in a considerable amount of rigging. There was a forestage grid and a couple of catwalks that came with the theatre, but there was a hangup in figuring out what they wanted to do and what the roof could hold. It turned out that we had more carrying capacity than we originally thought—although we had to split some things up to make it work. We couldn’t put all the rigging into a centralized place.” He adds that Juniper Street Productions—another well-known Broadway

entity—provided production management for the installation, while Base Entertainment oversaw the renovations to the lobby and house

Another aspect of Lee’s design also required some engineering skill. “Jerry wanted light-up runways, but, because of fire codes [which are especially stringent in Las Vegas], you need a sprinkler system for anything that is 24” deep. To deal with that, I used [Element Labs] VersaTUBEs in the deck. We treated them as lighting units only—they don’t take video—and they’re completely run from the console. The big challenge was balancing them, so we went and profiled every single unit. PRG Lighting came in and worked out a program that was tied to the console, and which would take all the lights to white.”

There’s also a significant system of lighting gear located far upstage, partly to light the band. “Jerry wanted to see bodies come out of the darkness,” says Lee. “So there’s a cyc behind the band, and, when we fly the cyc out, there’s a set of 14 [Vari\*Lite] VL3500s. We never want the space fully lit; we want to see dancers sculpted out of the dark, and I could be very sculptural with the 3500s.” And, course, there’s plenty of side light—Lee calls it “a dance plot”—which flatters the dancers and carves

their bodies out of the darkness.

Then again, Lee notes, he put units in any position he could find. "How do you light girls on runways, knowing that you have patrons a foot away from them?" he asks. "I did a lot of high angles on the runways, with a lot of saturation—the costumes are really helpful, with their spangles and lighter fabrics." He adds, "Jerry wanted color, color, color. The opening video is monochromatic, and, when we get to the end of the show, and she has found confidence in herself, we go a blue monochromatic world. In between, it's all about color."

Summing up, he says, "It's a unit set that moves, but each number is an open stage. It's about filling a very large stage with light. That idea has its roots in *Broadway Bares*; with Jerry, it always comes back to the dancers. He wants an open stage, to let the dancers do their jobs."

Lee's automated gear package includes 20 Vari\*Lite VL3500Q Spots, 47 VL2500 Spots, and 31 VL2500 Wash units. Conventional gear includes approximately 330 ETC Source Fours, four Birdie PARs, 32 James Thomas Short Note PARs, ten Altman Lighting Mini-10s, five PixelRange PixelPar 90s, 93 Philips Color Kinetics iCove 6" and 36 iCove 12" units, 92 Wybron Coloram II scrollers, and various accessories from City Theatrical. The effects package includes four 24" mirrorballs, four MDG Atmosphere hazers, four Barco/High End Systems F-100 foggers, eight Martin AF-1 fans, one Look Solutions Tiny Fogger, four Rosco Gobo Rotators, and two Salvin Design CO2 Jets. The gear was supplied by PRG.

In general, says Lee, "The runway is directly downlit with moving units; the in-one and in-two areas are lit with a combination of movers supplemented by conventional lekos with the Coloram IIs. It's the exact plot of *Broadway Bares*, but made larger. The Vari-Lite units are fitted custom

gobos. The VL2500s are for the low trims at the front of house; their optics are just right for that." As mentioned before, the VL3500s are largely placed upstage.

One other wrinkle in the design has to do with an aspect of the house lighting. As part of the theatre's renovation for *Peepshow*, 48 cabaret tables were placed around the catwalks; these constitute the show's VIP area. Each of the tables is fitted with a lamp. According to Ron Konsur, the show's production electrician, says, "The decision was made to make these fixtures battery-powered and wireless, to save on construction costs of hard-wired conduit in the floor to each table, and also to give the house the flexibility to create different seating arrangements as needed."

system was the perfect solution, due to its size, affordability, and proven dependability."

Control is provided by a Virtuoso console, which, Lee says, is his console of choice. "I grew up on the Artisan, then switched over the Virtuoso," says Lee. "It's a designer-specific board. My programmer was Richard Tyndall; he also did the ten years of *Broadway Bares* with me. He's a fantastic programmer; there's no one better." Throughout the show, the cueing ranges from bold color washes to peppy chases and sweeps that keep time to the music.

Perhaps because of his experience with *Broadway Bares*, Lee found the job to be a relatively easy one. "David Rockwell was so right on the money with his take on the show," he says.



The basic stage set, with video walls at left and right and the band upstage.

Therefore, Konsur adds, "Each table is hardwired with an imported blown-glass lamp fixture with a 13W 12V G16.5 bulb. Each bulb was coated by Special FX Lighting to make a color match with Lee 707 Ultimate Violet. Each table is also hardwired with the RC4 Magic Series 2 DMX2dim dimmer, powered by two Powersonic PS-6100 6V 12 AHY batteries, wired in a series. These are then cued throughout the show to create the desired atmosphere in the VIP seating area." He adds, "The RC4

"Each set-up of each scene was so great, I just knew what to do with it. And Jerry is so clear. It was a pretty smooth experience."

### **The sound of stripping**

Acme Sound Partners, the well-known Broadway sound design team, has worked with Mitchell on several Broadway shows (*Dirty Rotten Scoundrels* and *Legally Blonde* among them) as well as many editions of *Broadway Bares*. Mark Menard, of Acme, notes that, from

the get-go, a big challenges on *Peepshow* was time lost, as the renovation of the theatre progressed at less than warp speed.

“They were two weeks behind, and the concrete wasn’t yet poured,” Menard says, adding that, even under these circumstances, “the rest of the creative process doesn’t want to stop.” (Ehrenberg notes that, in the end, previews were delayed four days, because of construction and installation issues.) The renovation had a plus factor, Menard adds: A set of acoustical treatments, left out of the room for *Stomp*, were added, making the space less reverberant.

The loudspeaker system largely consists of gear from Meyer Sound, with some contributions from d&b audiotechnik, and many of the models seem to be chosen in part for their compact sizes. “The main speaker system is 22 [Meyer] MICAS, 11 per side,” says Menard. “They’re pretty well-hidden behind enclosures; you can’t really tell that they’re there. We also have Meyer CQ delays and MM-4s built into the runways, so people sitting in the VIP area down front have some front fill.” The MM-4s, he adds, “were about the biggest units we could get in there, because the Versa Tubes take up 90% of the space.”

Additional gear includes d&b E3s, providing additional delay and front fill, with four Meyer 700-HP subs in the catwalks, and two 650-Ps on the floor underneath the Miccas. “We also have some ancillary side fills—more E3s and [Meyer] UPM-1Ps—to take care of the shadowing that the front-of-house lighting positions create in the room,” Menard adds.

With the band located far upstage and the performers often placed at the end of catwalks deep into the house, one might think there might be any number of time-alignment issues.



Lee’s lighting works many angles to sculpt the bodies.

However, says Menard, “We didn’t concern ourselves with the time factor. When a singer is 40’ apart from the band, all time-alignment issues go away; with that kind of distance, what time do you consider as correct? We just hung the system and let it rip.”

Only a handful of performers—Bo-Peep, the Peep Diva, and the singer Josh Strickland, among them—are heard in the show, so there is a relatively small mic complement, consisting mostly of Sennheiser SKM 5000 hand-helds with Neumann heads, plus a couple of DPA 4066 headworn boom mics. The sound out front is handled by production A1 J.J. Hillman, mixing on a Yamaha PM1D; most of the necessary effects are obtained through the console, aided and abetted by T.C. Electronic M3000 and M6000. The monitor console, a Yamaha PM5D, provides the mixes for the bandstand and performers; it’s in the hands of A2 Jacob Smith. (The gear was supplied by New York-based Masque Sound.)

Most of the show’s musical numbers include multi-track pre-recorded music to complement the live band, and thus include a click track to help

keep it all synchronized. LCS Wild Tracks is used for track playback; it also outputs time-code information in order to coordinate effects with the lighting and scenic departments. [In one of those only-in-show-business coincidences, the time code is managed by a device called a Distripulizer]. Recently, Menard returned to Vegas to re-record the score, because the band was reduced in size from five members to two; the remaining parts were recorded, to be played back on Wild Tracks. “We had to rerecord the show and put in changes in two days, so it was a bit of a rush,” says Menard. “It was like doing the whole show over—in two

days, instead of 30.” He completed the task with Nick Borisjuk, the associate sound designer.

Many other hands were involved in this project. Additional personnel in Vegas includes Marco Padilla (head electrician/board operator), Obidiah Harvey (lead followspot/frontlight), Ray Ehnot (frontlight), Sandra Fong and Graham Hill (side spots), Scott Essency (deck electrician/moving light tech), and Adam Loesch (production sound). For Rockwell Group, additional personnel included Barry Richards (principal); Todd Ivins (associate designer); Rob Bissinger, Dick Jaris, Gaetane Bertol, and T.J. Greenway (assistant designers); and Timo Kuhn (graphic design). For Borovay Design, Inc., Daniel Brodie was associate video designer, and ANIMAL NYC provided additional animation.

*Peepshow* wins over audiences with its blend of in-your-face theatricality and a relaxed sense of humor. Chris Lee says, “*Broadway Bares* has always been about breaking the fourth wall.” Here, that wall is breached—repeatedly, and with panache. 🎭