

*The Pirate Queen* revives  
the spectacular look and  
sound of the pop opera

By: David Barbour

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 Llywelyn, 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

# Swash buckler

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



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the proscenium with pieces of sailing ships and casting sails, 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 provides clarity and volume under somewhat difficult circumstances; what other sound designer today is as conversant with the art of amplification for a through-composed musical?

#### Spinning the saga

The libretto of *The Pirate Queen* follows the arc of the real Grace O'Malley's life, although events are subject to considerable compression. (Grace met with Elizabeth when both women were pushing 70; here, Grace is the mother of a seven year-old when the fateful

meeting takes place.) Nevertheless, the action is filled with the kind of incidents 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 marauding British vessel,

Grace is in love with Tiernan, one of Dubhdara's men; however, her father marries her to Donal O'Flaherty, scion of another clan, to create peace between two warring families. As you might expect, Donal isn't really husband material, and the marriage goes south almost immediately, while Tiernan burns for Grace from afar. In the meantime, Elizabeth I, livid at the inroads Grace is making with her pirate raids, enlists the help of Sir Richard Bingham in putting the rebels down. Bingham, as preening a villain who ever stepped onto a Broadway stage, takes the assignment,

Much of the show's design hinges on the contrast between scenes in Elizabeth's court (left) and those in Ireland (opposite page).

seeing in it his chance to win the ultimate political prize—a place in the bed of the Virgin Queen. What happens next is a lusty round of ballads, battles, and betrayals, building to the big encounter in which the two female antagonists strike a deal that brings a real, if troubled, peace to their lands.

In truth, *The Pirate Queen* was not received with loud huzzahs from New York's opening-night press, and, for some time, Broadway observers have been convinced that audiences have moved on, preferring self-spoofing musical comedies or youth-oriented rock-outs. But for those who love this musical genre, there is story and spectacle aplenty.

#### Reimagining the Globe

In musicals like *Show Boat*, *Ragtime*, and *Wicked*, Eugene Lee has designed impressively architectural settings that all but burst through 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 that make strong impressions yet which allow for battle scenes and the show's elaborate step-dancing numbers. (The producers, Moya Doherty and John McColgan, are the people who brought you *Riverdance*.)

But, even if Lee himself describes his set for *Wicked* as “like tossing a clock down the stairs,” *The Pirate Queen* can't be simply boiled down to a few sails and masts, even if Lee himself is an ardent sailor, the owner of vessels docked in various places along the Eastern seaboard. Indeed, the creative seed for the set came in the juxtaposition of two very different ideas.

“In researching the show,” says Lee, the producers, “sent us to Clare

Island,” the real setting of much of the show's action. “On my way back, I stopped in London to do more research on ships.” While there, he dropped in on the recreation of Shakespeare's Globe Theatre, a major tourist attraction in itself and also the venue for an annual season of works by the Bard and his contemporaries. “I'm a member of the New York Yacht Club,” Lee adds, “and I noticed that the painting in the Globe seemed very

related to the painting of ships from the same period. At the NYCC, there's something like 1,400 ship models; when you look at the older ones, they're painted in the colors as the Globe. I was struck by that and by the obvious relation of theatre rigging to the ships of the period.”

Thus the proscenium of *The Pirate Queen* is a kind of Elizabethan theatre made up of pieces of sailing ships. At stage right and left are imposing masts,

painted to look like *faux-marble*; these areas are also filled with rigging, barrels, lanterns, and other seafaring 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 is a wooden “sky,” painted blue, with gold stars (many of which look like starfish) attached to it; this detail comes directly from the Globe, says Lee, as does the tiny house that is placed 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 F&D 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 draperies in Elizabeth'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 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 intrigue. The two-level arrangement comes directly from Shakespeare's theatre, says the designer.

Indeed, many of the big scenic pieces are there to provide information about the story rather than simply to sketch in a location. The show curtain is a kind of lithographic view of the ocean from the deck of a ship. There are also two map drops that fly in, both of them depicting Ireland—one from an Irish viewpoint and another depicting it as a British possession. Several different sails and flags fly in and out.

If each location is rendered with the minimum of scenic elements, neither is Lee, by his own admission, addicted to strict historical detail. For example, the shipboard scenes often find Grace at





Above: Lee's show curtain. Opposite, top: Grace's wedding. Opposite, bottom: Grace and Elizabeth I meet behind a screen.

the ship's wheel; the only thing is, Lee notes, there was no such thing at the time, "but the writers put a ship's wheel onstage, and so it's there."

That's another reason that Lee doesn't worry about excess detail; much of his work has been more about architecture than décor. In many of his favorite designs, he has reconfigured entire theatre spaces. (Most recently, he did so for New York Theatre Workshop's production of Caryl Churchill's *A Number*). He's more of a designer of environments than settings; to him, the text is the best provider of location information. Quoting his great

friend, the director Adrian Hall, "Shakespeare said, 'This is Illyria.'" He laughs, as if to say, what more do you need?

#### Lighting the horizon

*The Pirate Queen* is, says Kenneth Posner, "the largest show I've ever designed and, in that respect it was really challenging." So challenging, in fact, that he designed it twice.

That's because the rethinking of the script during the Chicago tryout was so complete that the show basically had to be lit all over again. "When we came to New York, we deleted all the Chicago cues," he says.

In both cases, notes Posner, the challenges were the same: "Whenever you embark on one of these epics

stories, one that has to be condensed into two-and-a-half hours, it becomes about how you engage the audience and keep the momentum going until the climax of the play. The job of the 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 skys 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*. Fortunately, in the Hilton Theatre, space is not an issue. Beyond the most upstage lighting positions, there's still room for a 6' crossover."

Also, Posner says, the Elizabethan scenes had a warm, candlelit look, driven by extremes of height. "Sometimes in those scenes, I suggest that light is coming from a very high window; in others, like when we're in her inner chamber, the light comes from a very low position to suggest candle or torch light." In contrast, he says, the

Irish scenes "have a purer quality to them. There are bolder angles, to accommodate where the sun should be in each scene." Speaking of the vividly colored sky looks, he says, "In Chicago, I didn't use as much color, but in New York I really decided to go for it. There's so much color in Marty Pakledinaz's costume palette; I'm just riffing off those colors. It took a lot of time to get a variety of looks." (There are star drops as well, including one that outlines the mythological characters of the Zodiac; as such, they fell under Lee's purview.)

Posner says that among the main changes between Chicago and 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 moving light package consists almost entirely of Vari-Lite units, including VL5s, VL1000s, and VL3000Qs. "The new Vari-Lites are really terrific," Posner says. One major reason for the choice of lighting units is their quietness. "Claude-Michael and Alain wanted you to be able to hear a pin drop in the theatre," he adds. One of the show's more original effects happens in a battle scene, with the appearance of a wall of flames downstage. It is, in fact, Faux-Fire, by Technifex, created out of a narrow wall of steam lit from below by Color Kinetics' Color Blast units.

The production's lighting is

controlled by a Virtuoso console, programmed by Tim Rogers in Chicago and David Arch in New York, for the moving lights, with the conventional units and special effects handled by an ETC Obsession. In spite of the work involved, Posner looks back on it as a positive experience. "I was glad to be in the room with Frank Galati, Graciela Daniele, and my design colleagues," he says. "They really inspired me."

#### A chorus of details

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 choral numbers. Finally, the show's dynamic range is enormous, going from the sound of single pipe 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'elodie line array, which makes its Broadway debut here (See Deans' review of the M'elodie in LSA's March



2007 issue). A sibling of Meyer's MILO and Mica units, the M'elodie is designed to pack a lot of aural power in a relatively small package. "M'elodie's 3" voice coil is a great thing to have in a product with that smaller footprint," Deans wrote in the review. "It helps to create a very open sound."

*The Pirate Queen* features four arrays of six M'elodies each, in upper left, lower left, upper right, and lower right positions, with two additional arrays of Meyer M1Ds in clusters at left and right. "I've dedicated one array to the balcony," says Deans, "while the mezzanine and orchestra are fed from the lower arrays. The upper array groups the individual loudspeakers together tightly to target the sound into the balcony. Downstairs, the arrays are much more open between each cabinet; we need to shape and space the loudspeakers, because we don't want a loud dynamic at the orchestra rails, for example. It's not necessarily the classic way of using a line array, but, in this case, it sounds great."

Another key aspect of the loudspeaker rig is what Deans calls "the orchestra shell." By way of explanation, he says, "Imagine how the band would sound if it was on the edge of the stage, with a wooden shell around it. We make that sound electronically. I used a set of dedicated loudspeakers—Meyer UPJs—around the proscenium to create the orchestra shell effect; in effect, I create what would be the natural reflections around the proscenium. It's a complex thing to matrix out, because a musician can't just come out of a loudspeaker; if you were listening to the music live, with speakers, you'd be getting it from different parts of the room's reflections and reverb. It's an idea that came out of my work on [the Broadway revue] *Fosse*, because most of that show was about music and the vocals came in only from time to time."

The system has been carefully worked out using Meyer's MAPP prediction software. "Using it, you rig something once and you'll probably



have to make only one adjustment," 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, easily comprehended sound design was the choice of mics. Here, Deans chose a mix of Sennheiser transmitters—SK 5212s for the principals and SK50s for the ensemble—with the DPA 4061 mics. "Also," he says, "we asked the principals to wear RFID tags, so we could locate 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

Above: Grace is revealed to the audience in silhouette. Opposite page: Another shipboard scene is staged in front of a sky drop colored by Posner's lighting.

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 Dean, 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 actor and transmits to one of six receivers onstage; 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 a division of Meyer] write a handshake for that information. So, when Stephanie Block [as Grace] crosses the stage, her voice pans with her. "

As always, Deans worked closely

with costume designer Martin Pakledinaz and wig designer Paul Huntley to disguise the presence of the microphones. He notes that mic placement was slightly easier with the Elizabethan characters, many of whom have elaborate wigs; most of the Irish characters have their hair pulled back, making the mic harder to conceal.

The 11-piece orchestra—a surprisingly small number, given the score's ample sound—contains a number of unusual instruments for Broadway, most of which are dedicated to creating a plausibly Irish folk feeling to the score. Deans uses a broad mix of mics on them, including the DPA 4021 in the Uilleann pipes, Neumann KM140 on the whistle, AKG C 747 on the reeds, Rode NT2A on the French horn, Shure SM57 on the banjo, and Sennheiser MKH40 on timpani and toms, with another KM140 on the snare. The guitars have DI boxes. Gear for the production was supplied by PRG Audio.

Controlling the sound of *The Pirate Queen* 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 up have to 500 inputs and 80 outputs, Deans notes—it can handle the entire cast of 44 plus the band mix. "We're using 160 inputs, 98 outputs, and 58 auxiliaries," says the designer.

Deans adds that the Cue Console obviates the need for much outboard gear, although, he adds, the sound effects, created by Wild Tracks, are also run off the console. "It's a 16-track playback system," he notes. "You can run it as a 16-track system or do 16 separate tracks." He does say that, in the Hilton, he upped the reverb settings for the Hilton, using a T.C. Electronic 6000 unit. "The Hilton is a very dry theatre, with very little natural life to it, which is good for musicals. But we had to really dig into the reverb. When Queen Elizabeth and Grace sing together, they go into completely

different reverbs. It all changes, cue by cue. There are hundreds of different reverb settings in the show."

With sound effects, reverb, 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 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 they think they'd have it any other way." Deans also notes the contributions, of Brian Hshieh, his assistant, who programmed much of the show with Matthews, and that of Daniel Hochstine, the RF engineer. "If the mics aren't on in the right place and worked out before the actors come in," he says, "it doesn't matter how good the sound system is."

#### The backstage clan

In addition to Matthews, Helm, and Hochstine, plus the aforementioned Arch and Rogers, many other personnel helped bring *The Pirate Queen* into her Hilton harbor. They include Peter W. Lamb (production manager); C. Randall White (production stage manager); Kathleen E. Purvis (stage manager);

Edward Pierce (associate scenic designer); Philip Rosenberg and Patricia Nichols (associate lighting designers); Nick Francone (first assistant scenic designer), Jen Price (second assistant scenic designer), Aaron Spivey (assistant lighting designer); Sandra M. Franck, Charlene Speyerer, and Michael Wilhoite (assistant stage managers); Arielle Shiff and Tristan Jeffers (scenic design studio assistants); Don S. Gilmore (production carpenter); Jim Kane (head carpenter); Eric C. Smith and Scott "Gus" Poitras (assistant carpenters), Michael S. LoBue (production electrician), Adam Biscow, Andrew J. Bynum, and Thomas Galinski, Jr. (assistant electricians), Joseph J. Harris, Jr. (production property master); Michael Bernstein (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 the inside of my heart, it's so beautiful to hear." 🎭

