

# Lighting & Sound America

\$10.00

plasa media

## *A Beautiful Noise:*

The Neil Diamond Bio  
Musical Hits Broadway

### ALSO

My Chemical Romance

*Fedora* at the  
Metropolitan Opera

MGM Music Hall  
at Fenway

Claypaky Volero  
Wave/Panify





# ROCK STAR

in the dark

Designing a bio musical  
that breaks out of the  
usual formats

By: David Barbour







**B**roadway bio musicals are nothing new, but this season's entry, *A Beautiful Noise: The Neil Diamond Musical*, offers a twist on the genre, dispensing with a straight narrative structure. Instead of a flourish, the show opens with an audience fake-out: An emcee's bombastic introduction of "the number one recording and performing artist in the world...Neil Diamond!"

Then the curtain rises on a nearly empty stage—a black void, really—with two upholstered chairs, facing each other, occupied by an older man and a middle-aged woman. It's quite a reversal of expectations. The audience will eventually experience all the glitter and melody of a Neil Diamond concert but, first, the show has other business to take care of.

In the musical's framing device, the older Diamond, at the behest of his third wife, consults a therapist about an emotional block that is sabotaging his enjoyment of life. He is a reluctant, even hostile patient, ready to vacate the office as soon as he enters. In an unorthodox attempt at reaching him, the doctor produces a book of Diamond's collected lyrics, asking him to peruse them and free-associate. This cues a series of flashbacks: Bouncing between then and now, *A Beautiful Noise* traces Diamond's unstoppable rise and the price he paid for everlasting fame.

An aspiring songwriter plagued by self-doubts, the young Diamond is taken up by Brill Building doyenne Ellie Greenwich, who oversees the production of his early hits; she also connects him with the mobbed-up label Bang Records, landing him a stifling deal from which he struggles to extricate himself. Meanwhile, Neil falls for Marcia Murphy, who works at the legendary Greenwich Village nightclub The Bitter End. Their affair, which ends his first marriage, is life-altering: Urged on by her, he discovers the thrill of performing. With a stunning new career as a touring artist, he should have it all, but the lure of the road destroys his marriage to Marcia. Now, many years later, he must confront his debilitating sadness, rooted in childhood trauma, workaholism, and the problems of aging.

As written, *A Beautiful Noise* is a tricky proposition, time-traveling across several decades and alternating intimate, introspective scenes with plenty of pop-concert pizzazz. (In a way, the show recalls *Lady in the Dark*, the Moss Hart-Kurt Weill-Ira Gershwin musical about an unhappy magazine editor working through her emotional problems in psychotherapy.) Designing this unorthodox exercise in biography was quite the balancing act. But the show's creative team, working with director Michael Mayer, know when to go big and when to show restraint.

### Scenery

Scenic designer David Rockwell says, "In our early meetings, both Michael [Mayer] and Steven [Hoggett, the production's choreographer] said the thing that cause design-





Above and opposite: Rockwell employs a large rig of practical lamps—an array of globes, lanterns, and shades in various styles and periods—that fly in during the flashback scenes. “They are, in many cases, scene-specific,” he notes, adding that in office or apartment scenes, the appropriate units fly in low to become part of the locations. Adams says “We have all the principals popped out in followspots and an ensemble that is almost always present; I put the ensemble in saturated colors so the principals will stand out.”

ers to feel a little chill of terror: ‘We don’t need much scenery.’ It’s never true! What they meant was that the book’s framing device called for a staging and design strategy that feels like it is evolving out of the older Neil’s memory.” Added to this was the challenging of quickly sketching in various time frames, demands that paved the way for an approach that is often minimal and fast-moving.

One clever solution is the large rig of practical lamps—an array of globes, lanterns, and shades in various styles and periods—that fly in during the flashback scenes. “They are, in many cases, scene-specific,” Rockwell notes, adding that in office or apartment scenes, the appropriate units fly in low to become part of the locations. “We think of it as an Austrian curtain made of lighting units,” he says. “They have 28 axes of movement and work with the choreography, moving left and right and up and downstage.” To plot it out, he adds, “We did a previz animation of every light fixture going up and down. Many of the transitions are timed to the music. I really enjoyed the chance to work

with Steven; I love his way of taking the ensemble from totally random moves to something closely synchronized. I wanted to follow that with the set.”

The lamps are part of Rockwell’s minimalist strategy: a half-dozen tables (with chairs) and a tiny stage for *The Bitter End*, a desk for Bang Records, a modest living room arrangement for Neil’s home. It’s part of what Rockwell calls “the fragmentary nature of time, space, and memory,” with the lamps providing the crowning touch. For example, when Neil, desperate to get out of indentured servitude to Bang Records, hides out in Memphis, trying to write the hit songs that will earn his contractual freedom, the scene is, Rockwell says, “the crappiest motel in the world,” and, appropriately, “The light that comes in is an Elvis sign.” The lamps were a project in themselves, Rockwell notes, adding that they “were about 70% shopped and about 30% built.”

Much of the scenery is carried on and offstage by the members of the ensemble known as “The Beautiful Noise,” who act as a de facto Greek chorus. Other aspects of the





design, which was built and automated by Norwalk, Connecticut-based ShowMotion, moves under its own power. “We have tracks in one and two,” the designer says, adding that the in-one track is for the therapist’s office chairs: Whenever the action shifts into flashback mode, the actors Mark Jacoby and Linda Powell, who play the older Neil and the doctor, roll into downstage side positions, taking in the action; they are rarely, if ever, offstage.

Filling out and framing each scene is a series of sliders, constructed as frames with taut lines that call to mind guitars or, perhaps, piano strings. “Going with the notion of fragmentary time and space in a memory piece, the spacing of the lines is somewhat random and they are many different diameters,” the designer says. “They are actually long, skinny rods.” He adds, “The sliders are constantly shifting, rearranging themselves for different scenes; they also allow us to reveal different characters.” For example, in the number “Love on the Rocks,” which signals the end of Neil’s marriage to first wife Jaye, “One slider moves, and Jaye comes in from behind it.” He adds, “I love creating primary locations, but this show had to be light on its feet.”

Adding glitter to the first act is an elevator, located at center stage, for some of the early concert-style numbers. “It references Neil’s touring shows, many of which were in-

the-round,” Rockwell says. Overall, the decision was taken to wait until Act II, much of which is centered around a typical Diamond touring show, for Rockwell to kick it up a notch with a triple-tier concert set. “Michael was very rigorous about not showing it too soon,” the designer says.

The bandstand set piece, which houses the 13-person musical ensemble, also features a lift for Neil to make star entrances. It is covered with old-fashioned scoop lights and LED units (more about them in a moment). Rockwell says, “I love what Kevin [Adams, the lighting designer] did with the scoops; they have a clear filament and the capability to do color tones.”

And, after Neil brings it home with a rousing performance of “Holly Holy,” Rockwell flies in a kind of starburst feature, also covered with lightbulbs. “It’s something that we saved for the very end,” he says. “Like an exclamation point.”

### Lighting

Interestingly, the second-act climax—the moment when the older Neil, facing his younger self, has his emotional breakthrough—takes place on a void-like stage with only a microphone. (The number is “I Am...I Said.”) It is in moments like these that the lighting becomes the dominant





The bandstand set piece, which houses the 13-person musical ensemble, also features a lift for Neil to make star entrances. It is covered with old-fashioned scoop lights and LED units.

design aspect. But Adams' task here is multipronged, lighting scenes that could come from an intimate two-hander, then switching over to full concert mode in the second act. In addition, the lighting must manage the nonstop scenic transitions.

It goes without saying that lighting and scenery work hand-in-glove here. The sliders, for example "take light very well, thanks to the tubing's silvery finish," Adams says. To light them, he adds, "I have vertical LED strips [of Chroma-Q Color Force units] in the wings that are 18' tall." With them, he says, "I can light different aspects of the sliders—the tops or bottoms, or different combinations."

If the scenes in the doctor's office are generally restrained, relying on a limited palette, the flashbacks make bold use of saturated colors. "The stage has to be constantly modified," Adams notes. "We have all the principals popped out in followspots and an ensemble that is almost always present; I put the ensemble in saturated colors, like yellow and blue, so the principals will stand out. It's a very pop look."

Perhaps more than in his other designs for Broadway

musicals, Adams makes good use of big beam looks. This is certainly true in the concert scenes, but he employs them elsewhere, too. A good example is when the two Neils face off in "I Am...I Said." "There's room for the architecture of beams to occupy that big, empty space," the designer says. To get such looks, he relies on a battery of smoke units, including MDG's ATMe hazers, Look Solutions Unique 2.1 hazers, and Martin by Harman JEM Glaciator foggers. "It's definitely a beam-and-smoke show," he adds.

And, because a concert figures so prominently in the action, Adams specified a bigish house lighting package that includes TMB Solaris Flares throughout the auditorium. The lighting sets the tone before the show begins. It is especially noticeable at the end of Act I, during "Sweet Caroline," the number that marks the emergence of Diamond's concert-star persona. After that, it's anything goes: "We go to town with lighting the theatre," the designer says. Indeed, he adds, "One blinder is not enough; we have four types on the proscenium: [Martin by Harman] RUSH PARs, 100W halogen PAR lightbulbs, an

LED that changes colors, and [GAM] StarStrobes.”

Talking about the scoops built into the concert set, Adams says, “We wanted something 1970s-looking along the façade, but we also wanted them to be a little more dynamic, so we built a little LED halo into them. It’s something we made ourselves.” This is what allows the color-changing effects described earlier by Rockwell. The rest of the set is covered in more halogen bulbs. “They give a little warm glow,” he adds. “When you turn them to full, they are super-bright.”

The automated portion of the rig is built around PRG Best Boys. “They’re pretty good for lighting people,” Adams says. “And when you use them for color, they’re so bright!”

Running the numbers, the rig includes 51 ETC Source Fours, 90 Source Four PARs, 82 Source Four Lustr 3s, 24 Martin by Harman RUSH PAR 2 CT Zooms, 47 Chroma-Q Color Forces and 16 Color Force IIs, seven Solaris Flares and two Solaris Flare Q+s, seven Chauvet Professional COLORado 1 Quads, 12 Color Kinetics Color Blast TRX units, 64 Best Boy HPs, two Martin MAC Encore Performance CLDs, 18 MAC Aura XBs, 14 GLP impression X4 Bar 20s, 20 PAR 20s, 32 StarStrobes, and three Lycian 1293 followspots. Dimming is via ETC Sensor racks and Leprecon and Doug Fleenor Design dimmer packs. Effects include six Artistry in Motion Big Shot cannons, two ATMe hazers, two Unique 2.1 hazers, and two Glaciator Dynamic hazers. Set electrics include 210 sixty-watt A15 clear bulbs, 845 MR16s, 38 custom scoops, City Theatrical

QolorFLEX NuNeon, and various lengths of LED tape. Control is via an ETC Eos Ti console. Software programs used in creating the lighting include VectorWorks, Lightwright 6, Moving Light Assistant, and Vor.

The production staged a late summer tryout in Boston before starting New York performances in November. “We spent a lot of time on the lighting in both cities,” Adams says, adding that, once again, the pandemic got in the way. “We previewed for five days out of town, then the entire company got COVID. We were 3% of all the cases in Boston! So we shut down for a long weekend. When we came to New York, I did a ton of detailing, making additional cues. Also, the first 20 minutes of Act I were rewritten, so we overhauled the lighting.

“I felt like I was in my *Hedwig* groove,” he continues, referring to *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, another musical designed by him built around a concert format. “Some numbers really rock, like ‘Crunchy Granola Suite.’ That was a pleasure to do; we have all these sweeps in the theatre. But it’s a wide range of music, everything from ‘Crunchy Granola’ to ballads like ‘You Don’t Bring Me Flowers’.”

There’s also a dance lighting aspect to Adams’ work here. Again noting that he frequently treats the ensemble in saturated tones, he adds, “They’re often dressed (by Emilio Sosa) in reflective materials, so we have a bunch of side units: A head-high, a waist-level PAR, and below them an LED wash unit. Michael kept referring to it as a dance musical.” And so it is.



For many scenes, Rockwell employs a minimalist strategy, providing little more than a desk and chairs for the office of Bang Records and a simple living room arrangement for Neil’s home (next page).



## Sound

Like Adams, sound designer Jessica Paz must navigate a show that straddles the line between book musical and pop concert. Also, she says, “It’s such iconic music, songs that everyone knows. It has to be presented as it was. The orchestrations [by Bob Gaudio, Sonny Paladino, and Brian Usifer] and arrangements [by Paladino] have to have the essence of his songs while also telling his story. It’s three plays in one. The therapy scenes are dialogue-driven. The story-within-the-story is narrated. And then there’s the concert stuff. We have to make sure that the music sounds great without making it loud all the time; we need to have somewhere to go when we get to the concert. That’s why I chose a concert-type system with big line arrays. It needs to feel like a stadium.”

The line arrays are located at left and right of the

proscenium on two levels, with one in the center, with plenty of fill units in the house plus a surround system. The designer with an all-d&b audiotechnik system, including onstage foldback speakers. The line arrays consist of the company’s V8s, Y12s, and Y8s; the rest of the rig includes E8s, E6s, E5s, E4s, Y7Ps, and E3s. The decision to go with d&b gear happened in part because the Colonial Theatre, site of the show’s Boston tryout, has a d&b rig: “It made sense to use their equipment to help keep costs down. We did well there, so it was natural to go that route when we got to New York.” She adds that the Broadhurst Theatre, the show’s New York home, “is, I think, one of the best-sounding theatres I’ve worked in on Broadway. It’s dead, but not too dead; you can manipulate it. There’s not a bad seat in the house.”

Having an onstage band, she says, “is always a con-



If Adams makes good use of saturated color in the flashback scenes (above), he turns to big-beam looks in many cases, including when Neil has his emotional breakthrough (the following two pages).



cern.” She works with one in the musical *Hadestown*, at the Walter Kerr Theatre, but there the band is scattered around with the cast on several levels. In *A Beautiful Noise*, it is hidden behind scenery during the first act. In the second act, it is on full display, to the point where it rolls downstage. Still, she says, “We got lucky,” partly because the musicians are placed on three levels. “The first level is keyboards and guitars but no amps, The middle level is strings. The third is the really loud bass, percussion, and drums. The drums are only enclosed on each side, from floor to ceiling, with acoustical treatment; a half wall of Plexiglas covers the front of the kit. The drummer is placed high enough in the air that we were able to keep bleed into actor mics to a minimum.”

Because of the highly present band, Paz went with boom mics on the cast, in this case Sennheiser MKE1s

plus EM 3732 receivers and SK 5212 transmitters. Among the practical mics used by the younger Neil, played by Will Swenson, some are real, and some are props. “The mic in the Bitter End scene when he sings ‘Solitary Man,’ is real,” Paz says. “It’s a handheld and we hide the transmitter in the base. The mic he uses at the top of Act II is real. But when we get to the concert, it’s a prop.” Shure Axient mics are used for these scenes and on the guitars.

Paz notes that she must consider the band’s relationship to the scenery and the style of each scene. “In Boston, we did the band’s soundcheck with the curtain open. It was deceiving; I was hearing too much of an acoustic sound. Overall, I don’t change the band’s sound too much; when we’re in the recording studio [when Diamond’s early hits are being cut], we change the tonal quality; there’s an effect in the mics for that.” She does





make adjustments based on the band's onstage position. "When they are fully upstage, they have time added to line up with the sound systems. When the band comes downstage, we make a change." The band uses Aviom personal monitoring mixers.

The show is controlled on a DiGiCo SD7T Quantum. "I pretty much only use DiGiCo," Paz says. "I'm so comfortable with it and I know how to manipulate it." She makes good use of reverbs to suggest the musical's different environments. "We went into a training studio to work with reverbs just before we went into tech on Broadway," she says. "The therapist and the older Neil have to sound as if they're in the same space. Moving into the memory scenes, we're taking you on a journey. I have multiple layers of reverb on Will and on the ensemble, particularly in the stadium sequences." She takes a triple-layer approach: "The first layer is very tight, with one second of decay, to enhance the voices. The second is a six-second-long decay, to make it sound like it is slapping off the back wall at Madison Square Garden; the third layer is dry with no reverb, which is fed to the surrounds with the others." She uses Apple Mainstage to host effects by SoundToys, Valhalla, and TC Electronic.

Production management for *A Beautiful Noise* is by Aurora productions. Other key personnel include Bonnie

Panson (production supervisor), Lee Micklin (stage manager), Alexander Allen (assistant stage manager), TJ Greenway and Dick Jaris (associate scenic designers), Wilburn Bonnell (associate lighting designer), Patrick Calhoun and Josh Samuels (associate sound designers), Brad Gray (moving light programmer), Kathy Fabian/PropStar (properties designer), John Estep/PropStar (associate props supervisor), Max Reed (production carpenter), Jon Wildesen (head carpenter), Ben Abelman (assistant carpenter, deck automation), Ron Schwier (production electrician), Renee Alaksa (assistant production electrician), Thomas Hague (head electrician), Matt Nieski (assistant electrician), Branden Torres (assistant scenic designer), Victoria Bain (assistant lighting designer), Mike Wojchik (production sound), Allison Ebling (head sound), Bill Grady (guitar tech), Charlie Grieco (assistant sound), Michael Critchlow (head properties), Joseph Manoy (house carpenter), Carlos Martinez (house electrician), Bobby Dowling (house props), Kevin Dyal and John Patrick Nord (house assistant props), Ron Fucarino (house fly automation), and Mark Grimshaw and Brian McGarrity (followspot operators). Showing distinct signs of being a hit, *A Beautiful Noise* continues its run at the Broadhurst Theatre. 🎭

