

Storming Elsinore

The theatre of the Belle Époque
comes to life in *Bernhardt/Hamlet*

By: David Barbour





King's lighting creates alluring chiaroscuro effects in scenes featuring Bernhardt and company in *Hamlet*. Opposite: Janet McTeer.

One

of the greatest actresses alive brilliantly impersonates one of her most celebrated predecessors in

Bernhardt/Hamlet. In Theresa Rebeck's feminist high comedy, Janet McTeer essays the role of Sarah Bernhardt, queen of the Parisian theatre, with a career span that is nearly identical to that of the Belle Époque (1871 — 1914). Rebeck sticks closely to the historical record, faithfully portraying Bernhardt as a Taylor-Swift-level celebrity as well as a superb artist and willful personality who trails an array of ex-lovers and struggles with a bank balance that swells and flatlines at regular intervals. (Yes, she did sleep in a coffin, for a while, and she also kept a pet tiger.) The action focuses on Bernhardt, who, haven taken on any number of pants roles, announces her intention to play Hamlet, a decision that sets all of Paris talking, not always charitably. Moving ahead with her plan, she is the center of a whirl of co-stars, playwrights, critics, and others, including her weary, practical-minded son Maurice. In Rebeck's

conception, Bernhardt plays out in real life scenes that could have come from her many stage vehicles. An encounter with Rosamond, wife of her lover, the playwright Edmond Rostand, is right out of a drawing-room potboiler by Eugène Scribe (one of her favorite authors) and a confrontation with Maurice is a kind of parody of the closet scene in *Hamlet*.

Moritz von Stuelpnagel's stylish production, which ran at the Roundabout Theatre Company's American Airlines Theatre through mid-November, brought to life the Paris of the era as well as the peculiarly insular world inhabited by Bernhardt and her colleagues and lovers. The design team assembled for the production used a combination of classic techniques and innovative technology that proved most suitable to the occasion.

Scenery

Beowulf Boritt's set design placed on a turntable a number of locations, including the stage of Bernhardt's theatre, her



Boritt stocked the set depicting Bernhardt's dressing room with an auction house's worth of bric-a-brac, including a portrait of her lounging, based on a famous work by Georges Clairin.

bizarrely furnished dressing room, a street café, Rostand's study, and the set of the latter's drama *Cyrano de Bergerac*, in which Bernhardt played the role of Roxane. With so much to cover, the designer notes that "all of the scenery was double-sided, so we could get two or three uses out of every piece. For example, the street set is the back of the theatre set. The big question was how to do all those locations and what style to do them in."

Expanding on this point, he notes that his early drafts of the set were simpler. "I had an open cube that revolved, with bits of scenery and props pulled out of it to create each location. It came from my interest in the idea of a woman playing a man onstage, the power of that transformation. But Moritz wanted something with the flavor of the period and the excess that was Sarah Bernhardt."

As a result, each of Boritt's locations represented a different kind of theatricality. The empty theatre stage, where scenes from *Hamlet* were rehearsed, was an attractively haunted-looking space—as most theatres are—with a mass of rigging ropes at stage left and vertically stacked flats at stage right. (The production was framed in a dedi-

cated proscenium filled with gold medallions and tiny lights, for a decisive touch of period glamour.)

In contrast with the stark, unadorned stage set was Bernhardt's dressing room, crammed with an auction house's worth of bric-a-brac, flowers, musical instruments, red swagged curtains, and a portrait of the actress lounging like an odalisque in a harem. "I didn't know that much about her life before starting this project," Boritt says, "but she lived this insane lifestyle. I found pictures of her dressing room and of her apartment that were over the top with Orientalism. I kept telling Kathy Fabian [of PropStar, the production's prop master] to keep bringing more and more stuff." He notes, "It was a surprise to go from the big, empty space of the first scene to this tight, cluttered place."

Continuing, Boritt says, "I had just done [the West End production of] *Young Frankenstein* at the Garrick Theatre, which is small and not remotely square. The backstage set was sort of based on the Garrick with plenty of hidey holes to stow props. I went through some of Bernhardt's most famous shows and made a list of props that might have



A scene from *Cyrano de Bergerac*, written by Edmond Rostand, was staged in front of a forced-perspective drop, lit by footlights.

been around the theatre. It was a way of conjuring her world."

Among these, the designer says, "We had our version of her famous portrait by Georges Clairin. I took the original and photoshopped Janet McTeer's face onto it. We printed it, then hired Jenny Stancheski, a talented painter and scene painter, to give the print the richness of a real painting. On her dressing table is a copy of a skull, a gift from Victor Hugo, with a poetic inscription. Among the smaller paintings were famous images of her in a hot-air balloon; one of her first sensational publicity stunts was an untethered balloon ride over Paris. We also had the photo of her sleeping in the coffin she kept in her bedroom, and a portrait of the actress Rachel Félix [1821 — 1858], to remind her of her forbears. At an earlier point in her career, Sarah had a taxidermy vampire bat tacked over her personal vanity mirror. I thought that might be a bit much, but we had a taxidermy crocodile head among her things."

Providing another form of style altogether was the set of *Cyrano*, dominated by a richly colored forced-perspective drop depicting a tavern interior, with a view of the outdoors

through the doorway. "The *Cyrano* set was a great joy to do," Boritt says. "It was Moritz's idea that we do a full-out version of it. The scene from *Cyrano* featured in *Bernhardt/Hamlet* takes place in a theatre lobby but Moritz felt that it was too genteel a location and that the set had to feel aggressively masculine. [In Rebeck's script, Bernhardt feels betrayed that Rostand, ostensibly writing a vehicle for her, instead creates a drama centered on a male character, relegating her to secondary girlfriend role.] This set was a bit of a shock since everything before it was skeletal and sculptural. I used to resist doing backdrops, but when I started designing touring musicals I had to give in—and I fell in love with the magic you can make with them, especially when they are well-lit."

As mentioned earlier, Boritt used the space economically, converting a street café into Rostand's study simply by redressing it. Other amusing details, he notes, included "a bizarre—and very loud!—garbage cart that Kathy found for one of the street scenes. We also wanted a 'smoke machine,' circa 1897, so we hid a mini-fogger in a bee-keeper's smoker; there's an amusing version of *Hamlet*'s

ghost scene with an improbably large amount of smoke coming out of a little bee smoker. Another fun anachronism was our use of Edison lightbulbs. I don't know if her theatre would have had so many, although its façade was covered in lightbulbs. But I wasn't trying to be an archeologist. I love that we ended up with a lot of scenery, but in a style that is open and allows room for the imagination." The production was constructed by Hudson Scenic Studio.

Lighting

Bradley King's lighting design created a distinct atmosphere for each of Boritt's sets. Backlighting shoots through the rigging gear in the rehearsal scenes, adding depth and dimension to the stage picture. Some of the later Hamlet scenes benefited from gorgeous chiaroscuro looks. Bernhardt's dressing room featured a warm, lamplit atmosphere. The *Cyrano* sequence had a period style dominated by footlights. King, who says the set design was far along by the time he joined the production, discussed with Boritt about creating "a gaudy, romantic haze" for the place. "We embraced the period," he adds, noting, "not all of Paris was electrified in 1897, so we had to pick and choose how to light each scene." One fruit of his talks with the set designer was the practical units—the aforementioned Edison bulbs—built into the proscenium as well as the theatre and street sets; these contributed significantly to the romantic glow of the production.

Speaking of the rehearsal scenes, King says, "Beowulf wanted to blast light through the set." At the same time, because the walls of the set were so tall, overhead positions were at a premium. "This influenced my equipment choices," the designer says. "Overhead, I used [Martin by Harman] TW1s." This is the silent automated tungsten washlight that Martin no longer manufactures but which remains a favorite of theatre lighting designers, particularly in the UK. King is a fan, too: "There were tons of them available at the shop [PRG], and we knew we wanted a tungsten color palette. The TW1s were beautiful, giving great backlight over the space. The blues that we got out of them were very lavender-y and rich. We used them principally for backlight in the rehearsal scenes, but also any time we needed backlight. I had nine of them overhead and four on side ladders to cover the walls and highlight wooden beams on the set. In the transitions, we could pan and tilt them as the turntable moved; we also did a little bit of tracking on the actors."

In contrast, King says, the dressing room scenes were based on frontlight from the front-of-house truss, two side boxes, and additional low box positions on each side, "which we used to get a little bit of separation of the people from the set. The dressing room had a much warmer look, motivated by practicals like the chandelier and the bulbs on her makeup table." Also featured were eight



Above: Rostand's study, which, with redressing, became the Paris street scene (opposite).

Martin MAC Encores: "We used the warm version, which is great; there were five at the front of house and three overhead; they provided a little focus when needed, especially in the second dressing room scene, when Bernhardt meets Rosamond." The latter was played by Ito Aghayere, who is black, and the Encores helped give her skin tone a little extra glow, says King. He adds, "There were more cues in that scene than in the rest of the play because they moved around the set so much."

The *Cyrano* sequence took place far downstage, and, King says, "We didn't embrace the absurdity of it at first. Then we realized we needed to. I ended up using footlights and nothing else, which we hadn't done previously. Beowulf taught me the amazing trick of having Edison bulbs lighting the stage, but they were also masking birdies placed behind them. I'm stealing that from now on!" He adds that the units embedded in the proscenium were vintage Edison coils, roughly sixty in total.

The full gear list included 13 Mac TW1s, eight Mac Encores, 50 ETC Source Four Lustr 2s, six Arri 300 Fresnels, four Strand Lighting Ianiro Bambino 5K Fresnels, two R40 striplights, and ten L&E ministrips, plus the house inventory of Source Fours and Source Four PARs, all controlled by the Roundabout's in-house ETC Ion console. Also, King says, "Miles of LED tape were built into the window boxes on the set, brilliantly engineered by Dave Rosenfeld, of Hudson Scenic." Atmosphere was provided two MDG Atmosphere hazers, one Look Solutions Viper fogger, and one Look Solutions Tiny Fog 5 (for the aforementioned beekeeper's smoker). All in all, King says, "This was one of the smoothest tech rehearsal periods I've had. We all got along famously."

Audio

Fitz Patton provided the production's incidental music, which pulsed with urgency; he also designed the sound system, working with associate designers Bradlee Ward and Sun Hee Kil (known to her colleagues as Sunny). Ward notes that the American Airlines Theatre is acoustically challenging: "There are so many reflective surfaces in the space. There are two architectural domes, which cause sound focusing, and surfaces on the orchestra sides that directly reflect sound, making it seem like the sound is coming from there."

A key decision, which resulted in both better intelligibility and verisimilitude, was the decision to employ, in what may be a Broadway first, a sound system on the 7.1 surround model, with distinct sources arrayed an arrangement featuring three in front, two in back, and one on each side

of the auditorium. "A lot of sound designers want to have immersive sound effects, but I've never heard a complete 7.1 on Broadway," Sun Hee Kil says. "We really tried to achieve that, but we were a little short of the right number of loudspeakers." Still, she adds, this approach was "very different form just doing stereo," which is the Broadway norm. "In a lot of plays, you just hear music from the front. With this system, you can hear different instruments coming from different areas of the theatre." Ward notes, "Fitz is very particular about which instrument should be placed where."

Thus, the loudspeaker rig, which consisted of Meyer Sound gear, included a center cluster of eight M'elodies; two USW-1P subwoofers; a main house left-right system of two UPA1Ps plus three more placed onstage for effects; six UPM-1Ps supplying front fill plus four more in over-



The street scene featured, among other things, a period poster of Bernhardt and authentic garbage cart.



stage positions for effects and music and four additional speakers for box fills; three MM-4s for additional front fill; four UPJuniors for balcony delay fill; ten UPM-1s for underbalcony fill plus two more for upper balcony side fill.

The surround system consisted of 14 EAW JF50s, distributed on both the orchestra and balcony levels. The system was managed using Meyer's Galaxy speaker processor system. "Galaxy is amazing," says Sun Hee Kil. "Each out-



King's lighting added dimension and depth to the rehearsal stage set. The production was also highly intelligible, thanks to a sound system designed on the 7.1 model.

put can have a different delay matrix, which allows you to control every single parameter." (Audio gear was supplied by PRG.)

Speaking about the 7.1-ish system, Patton says, "One way to look at it is, Brad and Sunny designed a concert hall into which I dropped a composition; because I was able to break it out orchestral section by orchestral section, I imported each of them into different parts of the theatre. Because the system was so incredibly well-conceived and tuned so expertly, it was like sitting in the middle of an orchestra with winds and brass on one side and ostinato strings on the other. Because I was able to mix down the sections of the composition entirely on their own, each track was allowed its full dynamic range."

Discussing the loudspeaker system setup, Patton adds, "I've been working with line arrays on everything I do. In theatres with broad auditoriums like the [Bernard B.] Jacobs. I've been using two. Wireless mics in a Broadway house need an ultra-clean vocal center; you need to concentrate on keeping sound energy off the walls." The complex loudspeaker layout was, undoubtedly, a challenge for a not-for-profit theatre producing an elaborate costume drama, but, the designer says, "Brad and Sunny were so credible in their arguments that Roundabout was ready to go for it. The show was really a kind of proof of concept, and it has raised the bar for them."

Additional production personnel on *Bernhardt/Hamlet* include James FitzSimmons (production stage manager), Alexis Distler (associate scenic designer), Nick Solyom (associate lighting designer), Jay Penfield (moving light programmer), Chris Kurtz (video programmer), Jeremy Oleksa (A1), Josh Staines (A2), John Estep of PropStar (associate prop master), Glenn Merwede (head carpenter), Brian Maiuri (head electrician), Robert Dowling II (head properties), Ryan Platt (automation operator), and Jared Rutherford (assistant scenic designer).

As the above list indicates, *Bernhardt/Hamlet* included a small video component. A few years after her triumph playing the Prince of Denmark onstage, the actress reprised a bit of the role in a short silent film. (She would eventually ring down the curtain on her career with a series of films, all of them silent, depriving audiences of her single greatest asset, her voice.) It's a lovely grace note that pays tribute to an artist who challenged the theatrical verities of her time; it's also a good example of the combination of stagecraft and new technology that made the production so effective. 📶