



# Field of Dreams

*The Bridges of Madison County* is a romance of the American Midwest

By: David Barbour

You never know where inspiration for a musical will come from. When it was published in 1992, Robert James Waller's novella *The Bridges of Madison County* was dismissed by critics, who deemed it a Harlequin Romance trying to pass as serious fiction. That didn't stop it from selling 50 million copies, making it one of the best-selling novels of the 20th century. Interestingly, Clint Eastwood's film version, starring himself and Meryl Streep, was highly praised, revealing that, whatever one thought of Waller's prose, an adult drama was lurking inside of it. Now the team of Marsha Norman (libretto) and Jason Robert Brown (music and lyrics) has turned *The Bridges of Madison County* into a lushly scored and touchingly intimate musical. It opened at Broadway's Gerald Schoenfeld Theatre on February 20, and it looks to be very much in the mix when the end-of-season award nominations are announced.

To call the musical intimate is something of a misnomer because one of Norman's signal contributions has been to expand the story's scope. The book and the film focus almost entirely on Francesca (Kelli O'Hara), born in Naples and now, in 1965, living as a farm wife in Iowa, and her affair with Robert (Steven Pasquale), a photographer for *National Geographic* who appears at her door one day looking for directions. Theirs is a brief encounter; while Francesca's husband and children are away at a state fair, Francesca experiences a tumultuous, destabilizing romance that causes her, for the first time ever, to think of leaving her dull, but safe, existence behind.

Norman's libretto heightens the stakes by fleshing out the characters of Francesca's husband, Bud, and their children, Carolyn and Michael, making it clear that Francesca is the glue that holds her fractious family together. Norman has also added a company of friends and neighbors to the narrative, most notably Marge, who watches in astonishment and not a little envy as the

evidence of Francesca and Robert's fling piles up, and Marge's husband, Charlie, who cautions his wife to treat Francesca with charity.

The addition of these characters helps us appreciate the gravity of Francesca's situation. Some of Brown's most emotionally resonant numbers, such as "To Build a Home" and "Almost Real," make it clear that Francesca, who lost a lover in World War II and married Bud on the rebound, has never fully found a home in Iowa. She is of her community and not of it at the same time, and in some ways her passion for Robert is a response to the displacement that has haunted her for 20 years. However, if she chooses to run away with Robert, the consequences of that decision will ripple out to reach many lives.

The presence of the musical at the Schoenfeld is a clue to the production's style. Even with a cast of 16, it is intimately scaled, focusing for long stretches on Francesca and Robert. As such, it has the benefit of a design in which tact and suggestiveness are the key virtues; these are not often the watchwords of a major Broadway musical, but this is a show where the design team has clearly opted to support, not overwhelm, their story.

## Building bridges

Michael Yeargan, the production's scenic designer, says that, on reading the script, he quickly identified its core challenges: "The story jumps around like crazy. It never stays in one place for very long, and it often takes place in two or three places at once." There are many instances of this; for example, when Robert, at stage left, recalls his failed marriage, his ex-wife, Marian, appears at stage right to sing the soulful ballad, "Another Life." At other times, Francesca is on the phone in her kitchen, talking to Bud at the state fair, with both locations sharing the stage. Late in the second act, during the gospel number "When I'm Gone," sung by Bud and Charlie, the action fast-forwards



across several decades, stopping at various points to fill us in on the fates of the principal characters. Yeargan quickly decided that a stylized approach was needed. “We tried to go very realistic at first, but it would have meant mountains of scenery,” he says.

Other factors came into play, Yeargan says. “Bart [Sher, the director] took the view that because this affair takes place in this tiny town, the presence of the community is very important. He also wanted to see Francesca’s kitchen [where many scenes take place] from different viewpoints, which eliminated the idea of bringing it on stage via winches.” The more they contemplated how to render each location, “we just kept eliminating things,” he says.

The solution was to present each location as a skeletal arrangement of elements, almost all of which are brought on stage by members of the company, who then retreat to chairs around the perimeter of the stage. “It allowed us to move scenery without mechanizing it,” Yeargan says. Thus, the kitchen, when fully assembled, consists of a door frame, a small shelf unit with a window, a kitchen table, a refrigerator, and a sink-and-shelf unit; sometimes, only a few of these elements are used. When Francesca and Robert take a drive in search of the bridges he has been assigned to shoot, the two of them are seen in a unit depicting the front seat of a truck. Francesca’s bedroom consists of a large iron bedstead and a small table with a telephone. Marge’s home is rendered as a full-size window through which she looks out at Francesca’s place. Other locations—a front porch, a row of storefronts, a bar, a diner

banquette—are rendered with similar economy and are brought on stage by members of the cast, making *The Bridges of Madison County* one of the least automated musicals on Broadway.

The one exception to the no-automation approach consists of the certain pieces that fly in, mostly notably the depiction of one of the title bridges, which is rendered as a series of arches. “The bridge became a semi-abstract concept because we tried something more detailed and it was horrible,” says Yeargan. “It’s probably the most controversial part of the design, but I think it gave that scene a less obvious treatment. We were always trying to keep it light.” Other mechanized pieces include a couple of winched pallets that come during a scene set at a barn at the state fair and one for a country band that appears at the state fair. (For unity, the set’s plain wood proscenium is treated in a rust-red color, which also adds a pleasingly autumnal touch to a show in which the passage of time plays a central role.)

Yeargan notes that the actors had versions of nearly every piece of scenery in rehearsal, which allowed them the time needed to become comfortable with their on-stage tasks. “Lisa Ann Chernoff, the stage manager, was our liaison, and Mikiko Suzuki McAdams, one of my associates, documented the placement of every item,” he adds. He also had to consider how to store the scenery in the Schoenfeld, a theatre designed for straight plays. “Everything not used in the first act is flown; they have a big changeover at intermission.”

Interestingly, Yeargan adds, the process of working only with carefully selected architectural details proved more difficult than designing piles of naturalistic scenery: “I have never worked as hard on a show; we went through many different iterations of the design.” The big questions, he adds, were, “How many items made up a location and what were they? We were especially careful about the items that reflected Francesca’s past, such as her bedspread from Italy and her coffee pot. We tried out many coffee pots.” Indeed, when so much is stripped away, whatever items are left take on greater importance.

In order to ground these minimally rendered sets in a recognizable location, Yeargan came up with a stunning backdrop depicting a vast corn



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field; it was painted by Irina Portnyagina at Scenic Art Studios, who also painted drops for other productions designed by Yeargan, including *The Light in the Piazza*, *South Pacific*, and *Golden Boy*. (The rest of the scenery was built and automated by Yonkers, New York-based Hudson Scenic Studio.) “She is the queen of painting these translucencies,” he says. This drop, plus a large tree and a telephone pole, both located upstage, are the only constants in the set design, although they are more than enough to suggest the vast Iowa landscape in which Francesca so often feels lost. Like everything else about *The Bridges of Madison County*, it is a classic solution to theatrical storytelling. “It was very straightforward and understated,” the set designer says. “It wanted to be as simple as possible. It’s really about those two people.”

### Big sky country

Donald Holder, the production’s lighting designer, echoes Yeargan’s thoughts about the production’s look. “There’s something very lyrical about the piece, and it made us try to be invisible in a way that you don’t often find in musicals,” he says. Other factors also contributed. “The

show has a smaller orchestra and sensitive orchestrations; the rig had to be quiet, and it also had to be small and economical. These made for interesting challenges.”

Also, Holder says, “There is so much about light and the passage of time in the show, and those two ideas really drove the design.” Because of the relatively spare scenic approach, he notes, “The space was transformed primarily through lighting in a way that you might see in an opera. It’s rare that lighting is doing the heavy lifting in this way. Not that the scenery isn’t crucial, but the lighting communicates much more than it normally does. This is especially true because there are so many scenes that overlap or are layered. It was a real challenge to make lighting that is so subtle; it looks effortless, but it wasn’t.”

Holder also had to take into account that he was lighting a set dominated by an enormous drop depicting a field and sky. “The thing that struck me when I first saw that part of the country was that you see so much sky,” he says. “It can make you feel small and alone. Here on the East Coast, you never see an unending horizon like you do in the Midwest. It’s a different kind of perspective, and it can affect you emotionally. This was factored in as an essential



Holder's rig includes ETC Source Fours, Altman strips, Chroma-Q Color Force units, Philips Vari\*Lite VL3000 Washes, VL3500Q Profiles, and VL1000 AS units, City Theatrical AutoYokes, Wybron scrollers, TPR DMX-64 Illuminators, and Lycian 1293 followspots.

emotional component of the show."

Continuing on this theme, he adds, "Robert is a photographer; his sense of self-expression is through light. It provides us with a metaphor for the passage of time, which is an important storytelling element. Using the sky, tree, floor, and telephone pole, we create looks involving different kinds of sunlight and starlight." The daytime looks range from delicately rendered sunlight washes to crepuscular sunsets featuring super-saturated colors.

To get these effects, Holder says, "The cornfield and horizon detail on the translucent sky are revealed via backlight reflected off the bounce drop. In the dream sequence 'Almost Real,' when Francesca recalls her youth in Italy, the drop is frontlit, which causes the cornfields to disappear. All the color drains away, and the space dissolves into this abstract world that is supposed to reference her homeland of Italy. There's nothing real about the sky in that number. It becomes a theatrical void." This front-light is achieved using a set of Altman Lighting single-cell cyc lights. The drop's backlighting features A.C. Lighting Color Force striplights.

"I also wanted to create a greater sense of depth and

evoke the idea of a hazy sun by adding a glow of another color on the sky directly behind the tree," Holder says.

"There's a lighting position fitted with PARs and color changers squeezed in upstage of the bounce drop; they slash across the back wall of the theatre, which is painted white, reflecting the light through the bounce and the translucent drop. This seemed like the only way to create the kind of effect I was looking for given the limitations of depth, and it worked even better than I expected."

In order to keep his rig quiet, Holder's automated package consists mostly of City Theatrical AutoYokes and Philips Vari\*Lite VL1000 units, neither of which produces fan noise, along with a few VL3500Q Profiles; the "Q" is, of course, for quiet. "The big, bold, brushstroke gestures in the covered bridge scenes are made using VL3500 Washes," he says. "There are very few of them, but I chose them carefully because they are absolutely essential. I didn't want to make Jon Weston [the production's sound designer] over-amplify the sound to compensate for a noisy lighting rig." A frontlight truss makes use of ETC Source Fours plus one VL1000 and a few AutoYokes. A house truss employs Source Fours, and



the designer also makes strong use of sidelight to pull the characters away from the backdrop. Holder adds, "Bart's staging is so fluid, with multiple locations and people slipping in and out of scenes; one moment the kitchen is at stage left and the next moment it's just a small table. The level of specificity was so important that moving lights were really needed." The lighting was programmed on an ETC Eos Ti and then transferred to a standard Eos for the running of the show. "The Eos Ti has a better touch screen and ergonomics, which Marc [Polimeni, the programmer] wanted," he says. Hudson Sound and Light supplied the lighting gear.

Indeed, Holder notes, his cueing is "nonstop. The show is in a state of motion from beginning to end, shifting focus, transitioning from scene to scene, picking people out of a larger space, compressing and decompressing the space, responding to the time of day and emotional temperature of a scene. All this required lighting that was constantly changing. We worked hard at making it feel fairly invisible, but there's a lot going on, all the time." Other considerations include "the fact that the scenery is skeletal and I'm dealing with a large open space; the need for guiding the audience, directing their attention, is paramount, and also shaping the composition. I felt the responsibility to find gestures that could define a space or time of day working only with the sky, tree, deck, and telephone pole."

One challenge was the climactic sequence, "When I'm Gone." In it, Holder says, "I'm carving out a wedding, a birth, and a funeral, often with several events happening simultaneously. It depicts the life of the family, but then we slip into interior monologues; for example, Francesca's husband Bud has passed away, but he appears prominently throughout this sequence. So how do you create the appropriate level of abstraction so the audience is aware that he's in a different space while standing a few feet away from his own funeral, and all of it revealed in the middle of the floor, backed by a wide open sky?"

Holder attributes the successful integration of the production's design elements to his colleagues. "It was one of those rare shows where you look forward to coming to work every day, discovering new things to try. Bart, the other designers, and I have a real atmosphere of trust."

### The analog approach

For Jon Weston, sound designer of *The Bridges of Madison County*, the challenges began with the choice of the theatre. "The Schoenfeld was designed for non-musical plays, and even a relatively small-scale musical doesn't fit into it easily," he says. The acoustics, he adds, are tuned for the human voice, unamplified and unaccompanied, not for a musical with ten musicians in the pit. "You can't put anything where you need to," he says. "The boxes stick into the room, and the traditional proscenium



Holder points out that the lighting constantly changes to adjust to the emotional temperature of a scene.

positions don't exist. Also, when we got to the Schoenfeld, it was being renovated; there were no seats," which meant he didn't have a fully realistic sense of the room's reverberance. In this situation, he adds, "Having done the show previously [at the Williamstown Theatre Festival] was a big help."

Given these factors, Weston opted for an A-B system of the sort originally conceived by the British sound designer Martin Levan, a long-time mentor. Weston adds, "My

loudspeaker choices were old-school and almost entirely using passive crossover design. It's not a loud show; we get big at times, but on the whole, the show doesn't require a lot of volume. Working with these speakers makes it easier to blend in with the acoustics of the room."

Weston's loudspeaker choices are unusual ones for Broadway, consisting of EAW JF200is and Tannoy 3836s for the main proscenium system. "The Tannoy has no cabinet around it, just the driver you see hanging free in the air," he says. "In an A-B setup, you have to have a speaker for each system for every section of the theatre. The split is male-female. Kelli is in the Tannoys, and Steven is in the EAWs. People who play scenes with Kelli are in the B system; people who work directly with Steven are in the A system." The rest of the system includes d&b audiotechnik E12, Meyer Sound UMS, and EAW SB48 subs and JBL Control 1s for balcony delays. He calls the latter "the little speaker that could," adding that all the boxes were chosen because they were capable of melding together. Providing on-stage foldback is a set of d&b audiotechnik E8s, "which I'm in love with," he adds.

Interestingly, there is no monitor system for the musicians in the pit. "Everyone is listening to each other in the acoustic space," Weston says. "Some of the younger musicians are against this approach, but we hold our ground, and they learn to love it. It's an experience they're

not accustomed to, but it makes everything better. If you want a homogenous string sound and you only have a few of them, you have to do it."

The cast is miked with Sennheiser MKE 2 Golds plus a few MKE 1s, with Sennheiser SK 5012 transmitters and EM3532 receivers. The on-stage musicians in the state fair band feature Shure wireless mics and MKE 2 Golds.

The show's sound is controlled via a Cadac J-Type console, "an analog console for a warm, natural show," says Weston. The J-Type was once fairly ubiquitous on Broadway but is seen less often now because many designers have turned to digital consoles, Weston says, since they employ an open-platform format and must be assembled by skilled staff, making them more laborious to deal with. "Their flexibility is what I like," he says. Also, the console's sound "is smooth and transparent," he adds. QLab is used to deliver the production's sound effects.

Weston adds that his aim on *Bridges* was transparency and clarity, not volume for its own sake. "Bartlett Sher allows sound designers to do their thing. I'm okay with letting the audience get comfortable with having to listen; we're not going to deliver this show into your lap. And it works; at every performance, you can hear a pin drop in there. Kelli uses volume, especially soft volume, beautifully. She knows when the audience is with her, and she will bring them right in. You rarely hear any rude



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coughing.” He adds that Jason Robert Brown, acting as his own orchestrator, and Tom Murray, the musical director, make his job easier, too.

Other key personnel on *The Bridges of Madison County* include Michael P. Jones (associate lighting designer), Jason Strangfeld (associate sound designer/production sound engineer), Vivien Leone (assistant lighting designer), Josh Millican (assistant sound designer), Todd Frank (production carpenter), Tim Rossi (automation carpenter), Jimmy Maloney (production electrician), Justin Freeman (head electrician), Peter W. Guernsey (lead followspot), Erika Warmbrunn and Jillian Walcher (followspots), Sean Luckey (assistant sound engineer), Charlie Grieco (advance sound engineer), Heather Murphy (production props coordinator), Carrie Mossman and Cassie Dorland (associate props), and John Tutalo (assistant props).

*The Bridges of Madison County* offers clear proof that sometimes, in musical theatre, restraint and quiet detail work constitute the right approach. In this case, the



One of the few mechanized pieces of scenery includes winched pallets that come in during a scene set at a barn at the state fair.

designers have provided a frame for a subtle and adult tale of relationships and their consequences. That alone makes it a standout in this Broadway season. 🎭



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