



THE COLD WAR GAMBIT

The much-maligned musical *Chess* is a blockbuster in a sleek, high-powered new production

By: David Barbour

IN

the subcategory of also-ran musicals that never go away, *Chess* is in a class by itself. A musical melodrama populated by a cast of grandmasters and spymasters set against a backdrop of Cold War intrigue, it was a long-running hit in London in 1986, thanks to the compelling score by Benny Andersson, Tim Rice, and Björn Ulvaeus. Still, any future productions were clouded by the show's murky, hard-to-follow plot, which was called out by critics and audiences. (The production was conceived by Michael Bennett; following his death, Trevor Nunn took over, but was reportedly unhappy with Robin Wagner's set design, a giant, hydraulic chessboard.) For the show's 1988 Broadway transfer, also directed by Nunn, Richard Nelson contributed a new book which added new dialogue scenes, rearranged the action and song list, and added a prologue set during the Hungarian Revolution of 1956. (Wagner took an entirely new scenic approach, using periaktoi.) This time, the result was even worse; the production was widely dismissed and closed after 68 performances.

That should have been that, but the score for *Chess* persisted, with more than two dozen revivals, both full productions and concert stagings, happening across the English-speaking world. Over three-and-a-half decades, the book has been repeatedly tweaked. In 2017, screenwriter Danny Strong debuted an entirely new version for a production at the Kennedy Center; this script, much-revised, is the basis of the revival at Broadway's Imperial Theatre. Reviews have been mixed, but audiences have flocked: The latest take on *Chess* is a bona fide blockbuster.

In all versions, *Chess* centers on the rivalry of two unhappy geniuses: the sulky, bad-boy American Freddie Trumper and the rigid, icy Anatoly Sergievsky, from the Soviet Union. Both, groomed from childhood, are emotionally damaged; bouncing between them is Florence Vassy, who, at different times, is each man's lover and strategist. World media is captivated by this East-versus-West chessboard warfare; behind the scenes, however, both are being manipulated by their respective countries' agents bent on preserving the Cold War balance of power. Caught in the crossfire is Florence, whose father, a Hungarian dissident, may or may not be alive behind the Iron Curtain, and Svetlana, Anatoly's estranged wife, who isn't above a little emotional blackmail if it will bring her husband home. Strong's book ups the competitive stakes to new levels, especially in a climax that embroils Anatoly in a chess

match that could lead to nuclear disaster.

Michael Mayer's production is notable for its clean lines and emphasis on the score, which includes such ever-greens as "Nobody's Side," "Someone Else's Story," and "I Know Him So Well," as well as the chart-busting "One Night in Bangkok." Those interviewed for this story call it a concert staging, although it is much more elaborate than such a term would indicate. Still, David Rockwell's set design relies on a single strong statement, amplified by Peter Nigrini's projections, which set each scene, track the action on the chessboard, and keep tabs on the presence of potentially world-annihilating nuclear missiles. Kevin Adams' lighting floods the stage with saturated color, adding pace and pulse to the musical numbers. This is *Chess*, decluttered, clarified, and designed to provide breathing room for its ever-popular score.

Scenery

Rockwell's set accommodates the onstage orchestra, provides a gallery level for the actors (especially the narrator figure, the Arbiter, a role built up for this production), and frames the action in towering vertical arrangements of chess pieces. Upstage is a large video screen with accommodation made for a smaller screen to fly in. Certain scenes are dominated by furnishings such as an elaborate bed for Florence and Anatoly. But the emphasis is on rapid scenic transitions and leaving room for Lorin Latarro's choreography.

Interestingly, Rockwell notes that between his first show in the Imperial Theatre, the musical *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels* (2005), and *Chess*, the stage has acquired extra depth, including a "much deeper" elevator at center stage, improvements made for the British hit *Billy Elliot* (2008), giving this production more room to maneuver.

In many ways, the design is about making space for multiple elements. "I love working with Michael Mayer, who is an artist with a clear vision, but who doesn't dictate what he wants things to look like," Rockwell says. "Given that the orchestra would be onstage, the idea was to make the music as powerful an element as possible. Because the script calls for specific information, we knew that video would likely be a part of it. And we knew from the beginning that we didn't want to be anchored to people sitting around a board playing chess." The score also provided the designer with clues: "We wanted to create something that was 1980s-modern, with a bit of a Constructivist touch. And Michael learned from the DC production that he wanted the cast onstage the whole time, participating

through Lorin's amazing choreography."

Rockwell adds that the set "is a kind of arena, surrounded by nine levels. The orchestra is on several tiers, with continuous stairs and a halo piece overhead that mimics a square on the floor." The layout was designed with video in mind. "Creating a walkway around the stage allowed an entrance at center stage, with that guillotine LED screen." The latter, he says, "allows the upstage LED screen to be largely environmental." The smaller screen flies in to deliver specific graphic information, and the live capture video is a big part of Nigrini's design,

Rockwell's minimal approach to furnishings came from the DC production. "We looked at putting these upholstered benches on both sides of the stage; there are four, and they can be present at all times. Also, we have three sets of legs with the chess pieces that are sort of the chess version of Louise Nevelson's sculptures; they're built with lots of negative space between, which allows Kevin to light them individually." He adds, "We tried to create as many surfaces as possible that Kevin could animate; this included embedding LEDs into every level of the platforms."

To make sure the projections fit seamlessly into the design, Rockwell says, "We built a big half-inch model and also built a 3D model in the computer, which Peter did as well. We went back and forth about the placement of the screen, how much we'd see under the bandstand, and how to give Michael and Lorin as much flexibility as possible." The screen doubles as scenery: "We use it to reveal actors, and Lorin uses it as a wipe to take people out."

The close collaboration between Rockwell, Adams, and Nigrini is most evident in "One Night in Bangkok," the Act II opener, delivered by Freddie, who, having essentially thrown a match against Anatoly by walking out, has become a chess commentator. The number, which establishes the city as a supermarket of corruption, is dominated by a series of illuminated bar signs in English and Thai. "We decided it would be a mix of actual and digital signs," Rockwell says. "There are seven physical signs," with the rest consisting of projections. (More about the scene's unusual control system in a moment.) The signs are mostly lightboxes; one, bearing the show's title, Rockwell adds, "has three layers. The back layer is a polished-edge Plexiglass, which picks up the light."





Opposite: "Michael learned from the DC production that he wanted the cast onstage the whole time, participating through Lorin's amazing choreography," says Rockwell, explaining the set's notably clean lines. "Most of the rig out front has [Martin] MAC Ultras," Adams says. "Onstage, we have MAC Viper XIPs and a huge number of MAC Ones. That's what lights the actors. There's not a piece of gel in the show other than two followspots with gel in them. It's a 100% silent exposed rig, and I'm lighting the humans with that lime green chip."

The overhead halo "was very challenging," Rockwell says. "It's hung from four rigging points, a square that comes in for [the climactic number] 'Endgame,' with the principals inside it. It's a complicated piece to control because it can pivot up to 60°. It starts out flat but, during chess matches, it comes down about 8' to define the arena in white light." During the first act number "Quartet (A Model of Decorum and Tranquility)," he adds, "It goes vertical and turns a blue shade. And, during 'Endgame,' it comes right down to the deck, pivoting so the upstage edge is lower than the downstage edge. We made a dummy version of it that didn't illuminate, bringing it to the theatre, making sure it would articulate correctly."

Indeed, the key to the set may be its verticality. "We really embraced the architecture of the theatre," Rockwell says, adding that the chess towers and expansive, LED-lined portals lend a sense of excitement to the action. The scenery was built, painted, electrified, and automated by Milford, Connecticut-based ShowMotion, Inc., with additional scenery by Empire Technical Fabrication.

Video

Nigrini's video design fulfills many functions. It establishes two very different locations: steamy, neon-lit Bangkok and the immaculate, snowy Tyrol village of Merano. We also see collages of television news reports, documentary footage

of Hungary in 1956, and maps revealing the game of global domination in which the characters participate. And, as previously mentioned, live capture is featured in many scenes. Still, Nigrini says, "If you read the script and look at that set, there could have been much more imagery. The challenge was for us to do less."

As an example, Nigrini cites the number "Pity the Child," in which Freddie bares the details of his abused childhood. "He sings it in front of a black square, on a black background with a white edge. That's true of many numbers. Lia Michele's first big number ["Nobody's Side"] is staged in front of a gray cyc that becomes slightly less gray, then blue-gray. The pitfall, really, was illustrating too much; the challenge was to keep it in the vernacular of a concert, with the singers standing downstage center and delivering the songs; then we select the exceptions to that rule. And, when we go to Merano, we can do a crazy, abstracted version of a mountain. Because we don't do them consistently, those images with disparate styles come across as interjections, or exciting departures; we don't have to keep up that stylistic energy throughout."

Each of these "interjections" thus makes a big impression while avoiding visual clutter, he notes. "We don't have to figure out how images of Merano sit directly next to, say, the global maps because we clear the palate between them with something quite neutral. It doesn't become one



Speaking about his relatively restrained approach, Nigrini says, “The pitfall, really, was illustrating too much; the challenge was to keep it in the vernacular of a concert, with the singers standing downstage center and delivering the songs; then we select the exceptions to that rule.”

crazy thing after another; that can become visually and intellectually fatiguing.”

Interestingly, this restraint extends to dealing with the chess matches at the heart of the plot. “Our references to them are quite limited,” Nigrini notes. “There’s never a chessboard onstage. Originally, we were quite nervous about that. Early on, we toyed with a grid of squares, threw it out, brought it back, and threw it out again. We’ve even discussed whether the amount of chess onstage now is too much, and, really, there’s not that much. The design is built around squares, and there’s a black-and-white grid now and then, but that’s about the extent of it. The only time you see anything that overtly references a chessboard is during ‘The Arbiter’s Song,’ which seemed like the right opportunity. But that was Michael’s approach: What’s important about the chess matches is the psychological events affecting the players. The show is about the love triangle and the Cold War, neither of which is elucidated by exploring the minutiae of chess.”

Speaking about collaborating with Rockwell, Nigrini

notes, that, as previously mentioned, “One Night in Bangkok” features a seamless mix of dimensional and digital scenery, an effect aided by Adams’ lighting: “We built a fun tool that integrates with lighting in the number made from single 3D scene broken into something like 70 or so layers; Kevin controls the color intensity of every virtual neon sign as well as the light cast by that sign on the surrounding virtual architecture. I wrote one cue for the whole number, then turned it over to Kevin.”

This is a good example, Nigrini adds, of something, “we’re doing more and more. We build virtual landscapes, which we break into many parts, giving lighting control of it all. We did a simpler version of this in *Beetlejuice* [with scenery by David Korins and lighting by Kenneth Posner]. If one of us is responsible for cueing, it will be easier to unify the color palettes.” For example, noting that many of the signs blink during the number, he says, “Lighting desks are good at that; media servers aren’t. A media server is the wrong interface to build cue structures like that.” He notes that this approach is the inverse of the currently running



Nigrini notes that the live capture sequences are treated by Notch blocks, which provide color treatments and other effects. The screens are INFILED DB Series 2.3mm panels.

Hell's Kitchen; in that project, he and lighting designer Natasha Katz chose the media server to control the design's plentiful LED tape. "She and her associates specified all the set electric components, but in the end, it was a system completely driven by video." The imagery is driven by a Disguise VX 3 media server, with processing by a Brompton Tessera SX40. Video gear was supplied by PRG. Video system design and support was by Disco Pixel Productions.

Nigrini notes that the live capture sequences are treated by Notch blocks, which provide color treatments and other effects. The screens are INFILED DB Series 2.3mm panels. Previously a user of ROE Visual and Absen products, the designer notes that he took a flyer in INFILED for the Hamburg production of the musical *MJ* and, finding it satisfactory, opted to use it again for *Chess*. Like other manufacturers in this sector, he says that INFILED "has started paying greater attention to their lower-output products. Across the board, they originally repurposed products designed for rock concerts or outdoor signage, and they were all too bright. Now they're getting them to behave

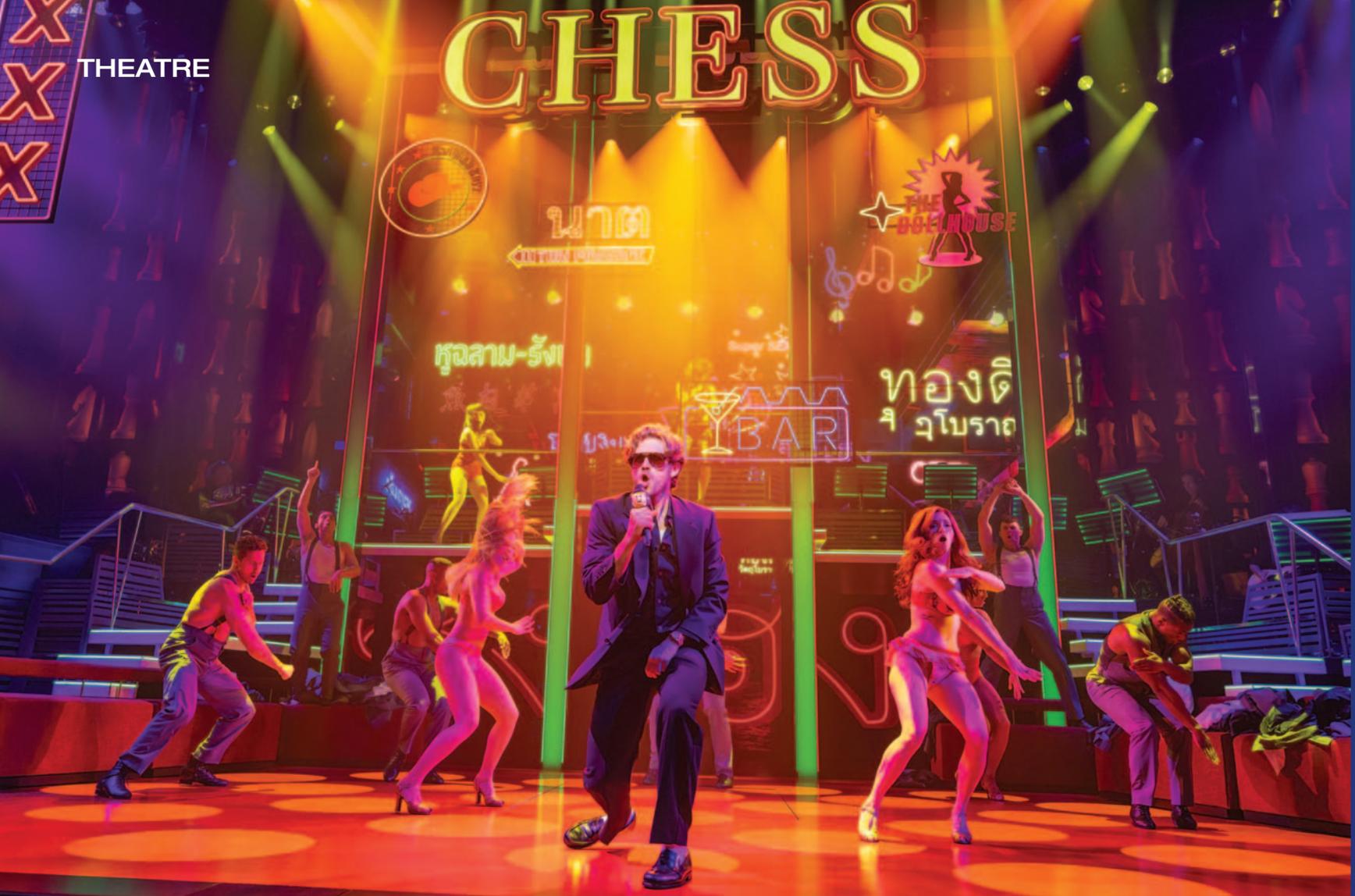
beautifully in a much lower lighting environment. It's about how they behave as they get closer to black."

The designer adds that, in many ways, the great challenge of *Chess* was integrating bigger, showier images with relatively neutral backgrounds that let the actors shine. When video is omnipresent in a project, "how to be present when there is nothing to say? We just need a scene to happen, and we want to keep the focus downstage. There's always some compositional work in each stage picture, but you can forget about it." Too much imagery, he adds, "would have been the death of it. We created an aesthetic language that could recede for a good part of the time."

Lighting

Adams' lighting adds to the productions in many ways, whether accentuating the furious downbeats in Florence's solo "Nobody's Side," using color to highlight the lurid atmosphere of "One Night in Bangkok," lending a noirish tinge to "Pity the Child," and framing Anatoly with notable

CHESS



“One Night in Bangkok,” the Act II opener, features a mix of physical and digital signs, an approach that required close collaboration from Rockwell, Nigrini, and Adams.

dignity in “Anthem,” a love letter to his homeland sung on the eve of his defection. Adding to the production’s overt theatricality, the lighting rig is largely left open to the audience’s view. “I’ve worked with David Rockwell a few times,” he says, “and our other shows together have had masking, legs, and borders. I asked if the rig could be completely exposed for this.” Among other things, he notes, “It allowed me to do longer diagonal backlight.”

Even so, the set design demanded Adams make judicious choices. For example, he says, “We have some ladders that come in, but overall, there’s very little low sidelight because the orchestra blocks those positions.” A system of deck units comes in handy, especially during “Endgame,” when the halo flies into the stage level. “It is lit from below by six [Martin] MAC Ones on the deck.” Otherwise, he adds, “There’s a huge number of lights overhead. This is the only show I’ve ever done where we put in the shop order and didn’t have to cut anything; that’s a once-in-a-lifetime experience.” The gear was supplied by Christie Lites.

Interestingly, Adams notes, the rig “is almost all Martin lights.” Interestingly, Adams notes, the rig “is almost all

Martin lights.” He says that he and Tim Reed, his associate designer, chose Martin gear for the musical *Swept Away*, which ran on Broadway last season; both were taken with the units’ silent performance. “There was no fan noise,” he says. “When the rig was turned off, there was no change in the room’s sound.” On *Chess*, he says, “Michael Mayer and [sound designer] John Shivers loved that. Tim and I prioritized two things: We wanted the rig to be fan-free and silent, and we wanted to use the new lime green chip that’s now going into moving lights. This entire rig, which is 100% LED, fan-free, and silent, is filled with Martin lime-green-chip movers.”

He adds, “Most of the rig out front has [Martin] MAC Ultras; onstage, we have MAC Viper XIPs and a huge number of MAC Ones. That’s what lights the actors. There’s not a piece of gel in the show, other than two followspots with gel in them. It’s a 100% silent exposed rig, and I’m lighting the humans with that lime green chip. It’s really cool.”

In addition to lighting the actors, Adams employed the MAC Ones’ kicky backlight effect, which employs a ring of

twenty-four 0.25W RGB LEDs. “I knew we would have a lot of LED electrics around the orchestra,” he says. “So, I asked David if I could have this proscenium light frame downstage; that truss has LED tape to frame everything, and it gave me a place to put the tiny, well-designed MAC One; we have something like 30 of them on that truss. At times, they point at the audience and make graphic LED effects. But I also use them as sidelight on the apron or downlight, both on the apron and upstage. They’re small, they’re fast, they make a really nice light, and they do those graphic effects.”

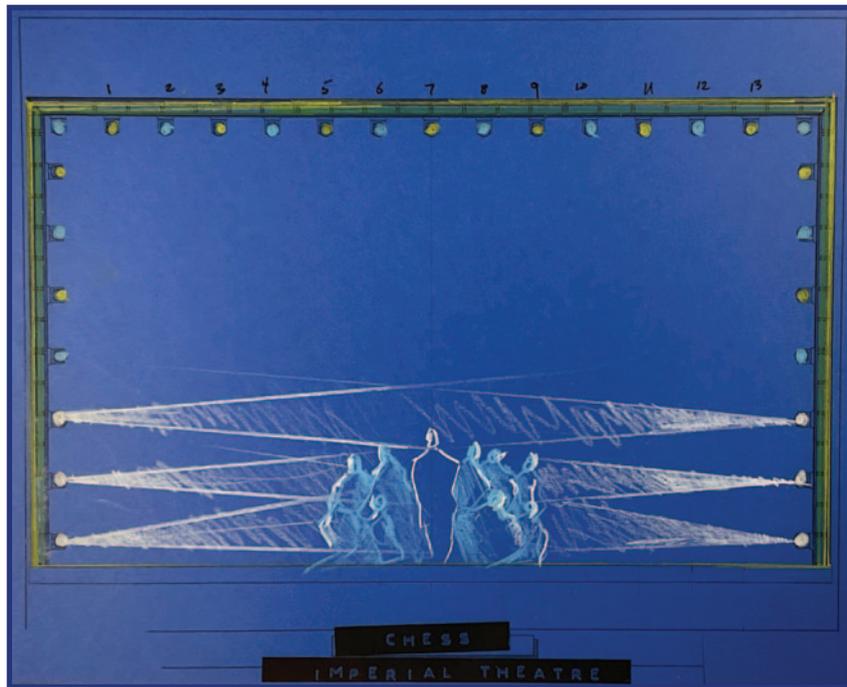
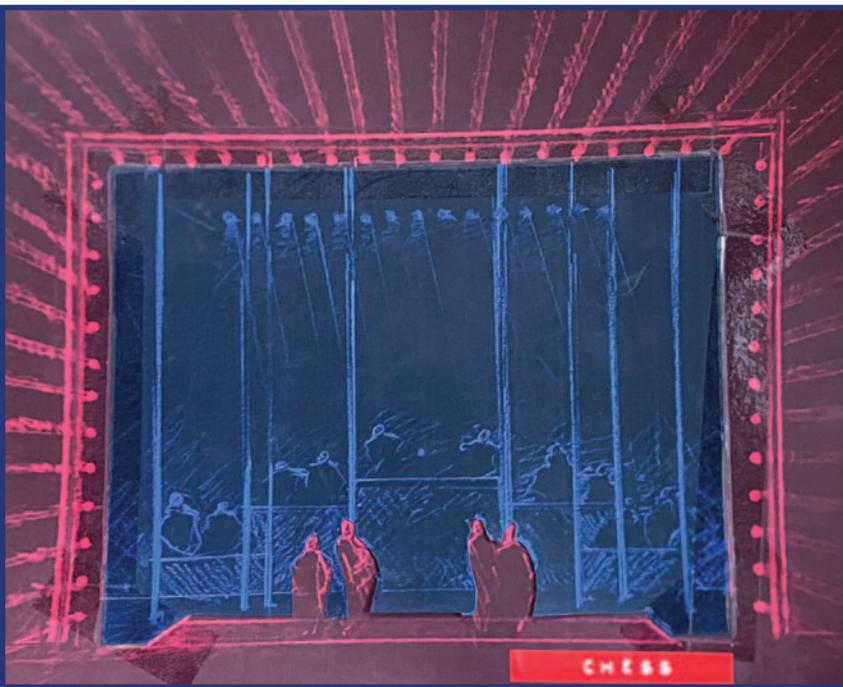
To argue for the concept of the light frame, Adams took a different approach. “David had presented some rough ideas, then I made some color paper renderings to make the case for the light frame downstage. They were quick, ten-minute sketches, copied onto color paper. (See page 31.) Then I cut out layers, taped them together, and put labels on them. I showed them to David, explaining how the light frame could work. One of them looks so much like ‘Anthem’ at the end of the first act.”

The full rig consists of 88 Martin MAC Ultras, 78 ETC Source Four LED Series 2 Lustra, 63 MAC Ones, 46 MAC Aura XBs, 30 Rosco Miro Cubs 4Cs, 18 MAC Ultras, ten GLP impression X4 Bar 20s, two impression X4 Bars 10s, and four Ayrton Diablos. Haze is provided by MDG and Look Solutions units. The set is lined with City Theatrical/Environmental Lights Performance 2835 LED strips, Eluxtra UltraSlim MaxRun LED neon, and QolorFlex

HiQ High CRI LED tape. Lighting is controlled by an ETC Apex. So large is the rig that, Adams notes, “We pushed the limits on the number of channels and of cues we could have even on that console.”

Regarding the latter products, the set’s many chess pieces are uplit using “LED pixel tape, two lines running along each cabinet,” Adams says. “We’re using [PRG] MBox software, which Paul and Tim understand. We also used it on *Swept Away*. We can light little groups or the entire thing, and it looks pretty great. Mbox gives us really flexible control. I also downlight them and front light them with templates. At times, there’s scrim behind them, so we backlight the scrim. Mostly, it’s done with pixel tape. The pixel tape that lines so many pieces of the set was custom-made by City Theatrical. I really wanted red, white, and blue to be very present. We had tape made with special dark reds and dark blues.” MBox also handles control of the digital signage in “One Night in Bangkok.”

The show’s sinister atmosphere and highly emotional action demand big gestures, Adams notes. “It’s great music; I’ve known that score since it came out in 1986. There are so many power ballads,” he says, “and also operetta. But ‘Endgame’ is like grand opera. It needs heroic lighting. I needed a lot of spectacle to point out toward the audience and to surround the performers. I did a huge amount of homework, looking at rehearsals, listening to the songs, and studying the script. I was prepared for my programmer, Paul Toben. I write everything before the



Two of Adams’ sketches suggesting possible light placements. “David had presented some rough ideas,” he says, “then I made some color paper renderings to make the case for the light frame downstage. They were quick, ten-minute sketches, copied onto color paper.”



Lighting is controlled by an ETC Apex. So large is the rig that, Adams notes, “We pushed the limits on the number of channels and of cues we could have even on that console.”

actors hit the stage, but there were a lot of accents that were needed after that. Paul and Tim [Reed] are what I call ‘the accent team,’ and they took on that task.”

Interestingly, he adds, “We have two followspot operators. One is Jeff Dodson, who was the lighting supervisor at Manhattan Theatre Club forever, and Tommy Obermaier, who was a carpenter on the original Broadway production of *Chess*. He was one of the guys moving [Robin Wagner’s] periaktoi around the stage. He brought in two beautiful notes, one from the first preview and the other from opening night, from David Carroll [the original Anatoly]. That’s what I love about Broadway.”

Other personnel includes associate scenic designers TJ Greenway and Dick Jaris; assistant scenic designer Jessica Cancino; model makers Mike Dereskewicz, Jim Waterhouse, and Eric Beauzay; studio assistants Mary Hamrick and Lorraine Glover; associate lighting designer

Timothy Reed; assistant lighting designer Emily Schmit; lighting programmer Paul Toben; associate video designer Lacey Erb; lead animator C. Andrew Bauer; animators Carolina Morales Avellaneda, Robert Figueira, and Dan Vatsky; projection programmer Dan Scully; production carpenter Erik E. Hansen; head carpenter Ryan McAlpine; house head carpenter Jordan Gable; advance flyman Andy Elman; house flyman Steve Jones; head electrician/board op Adam Cavanaugh; house head electrician Manny Diaz; lead followspot Thomas Obermaier; followspot operator Jeff Dodson; associate production video Kim Caldwell; video/deck electrician David Spirakes; production properties Ray Wetmore and JR Goodman; associate production properties Maddie Bucci; head properties Cie Martin, and house head properties Tommy Mitchell. *Chess* continues its open-ended run at the Imperial Theatre; it is likely to be well-remembered when awards season rolls around. 📡