

# On the Road with Madam Rose

By: David Barbour



"Rose's Turn" (above) and its aftermath (opposite). Because of the set design's parameters, the designers had the challenge of extensive negative space. "We dealt with that by using lots of templates on the stage floor, filling it out," Eisenhauer says. "But we had no haze, so you don't see beams from units on the side or overhead."

## Broadway's new *Gypsy* is a picaresque portrait of Depression America

**B**roadway sees new productions of *Gypsy* with the regularity of certain comets passing

through the solar system. Since 1989, the Arthur Laurents-Jule Styne-Stephen Sondheim musical has been

revived with Tyne Daly, Bernadette Peters, Patti LuPone, and now Audra McDonald. For actresses of a certain age, the lead role of Madam Rose is the equivalent of King Lear. To be sure, each production listed above had its distinct qualities and George

C. Wolfe's staging, now at the Majestic Theatre, is no exception.

As everyone knows, *Gypsy* is a fictionalized account of the childhood shared by the stripper Gypsy Rose Lee and actress June Havoc: In the musical, their mother, Rose, drags them through one vaudeville circuit after another, featuring June in an alarmingly cutesy song-and-dance act. Rose's unstoppable ambitions drive away June, who, at 13, elopes with a chorus boy. Pushing her ignored daughter, Louise, into burlesque in a last-gasp reach for fame, Rose sees the girl blossom into Gypsy, a self-invented celebrity with little need for a mother-manager. The show climaxes with "Rose's Turn," a breakdown disguised as an eleven o'clock number, during which Rose faces some ugly truths about herself.

Under Wolfe's direction, Rose is less a Medea of the vaudeville circuit and more a Black woman trying to secure a better life for her family in Depression-ravaged America. In Santo Loquasto's set design, many locations—a fleabag hotel, a producer's glitzy office, Gypsy's overdecorated dressing room—float inside a larger, emptier backstage space, the upstage wall often featuring a tattered advertisement for some half-forgotten product or film. The lighting, by Jules Fisher + Peggy Eisenhauer, adds a faintly haunted, Edward Hopper quality to many scenes, saving its bolder colors for the onstage numbers, plus the flamboyant, hilarious "You Gotta Get a Gimmick," performed by a trio of strippers.

The lighting designers also worked on a revival in 2003, starring Bernadette Petters and directed by Sam Mendes. But, like snowflakes, no two *Gypsies* are alike and here their work focused on dealing with the cast and the unusual scenic design. "We always look at issues like period and style," Fisher notes. In the current production, he adds, "We were determined not to see any lighting units at all."

Mission accomplished: As opposed



to other musicals on Broadway right now, Fisher and Eisenhauer's design for *Gypsy* eschews big beam effects, dramatic sweeps, or any other overt moving light effects that might take one out of the story. "Nothing in the lighting could betray the period," Fisher says.

Another challenge is that three of the production's four principals (McDonald, Joy Woods, and Jordan Tyson) are Black, each with a distinct skin tone. (The fourth, Danny Burstein, is white.) Of course, highlighting each actor's face was a major priority. Fisher and Eisenhauer—who have worked with Wolfe on multiple shows—both say the director is an invaluable resource regarding his lighting of Black performers.

This is an issue because Tyson, who plays June, is almost always dressed in white. (The costumes are by Toni-Leslie James.) When Tyson and Joy Woods, who plays Louise, share the number "If Momma Was Married," it is crucial that both faces are fully highlighted. Here, as in other scenes, three followspots blast extra light on the performers' faces; in "If Momma Was Married," two spots are focused on Woods, the darker of the two. Similarly, when, during a scene set in a Chinese restaurant, Rose sings "You'll Never Get Away from Me," to Herbie, her lover and business partner, two followspots are focused on

McDonald and one on Burstein. "It has to do with brightness and coverage," Eisenhauer says. "When the actors move, the followspots must move together. We coach our operators to shift like that." Such moments involve subtle sophisticated movements in real time that are as choreographed as anything in Camille A. Brown's dance numbers.

Fisher adds, "George also influenced us to look for differences in skin colors—not just bright and dark, but tones like amber or straw. He always says, 'Make the skin look rich.' Frequently, Peggy will sit a principal down and we will go through all the possible followspot colors that fit them." In practice, during a show, he says, this means, "When the spot moves to another person, the operator may have to change out the gel color. We also try to make the moving lights match those followspot colors."

This technique is critical during the "Let Me Entertain You" sequence in which Gypsy, making an awkward debut on the burlesque stage, segues through a series of performances, becoming increasingly confident, blossoming into a full-fledged star. In addition to the followspots, Eisenhauer notes, "every light in the place" is aimed at Woods to ensure she can be seen from anywhere in the audience.

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"In 'You Gotta Get a Gimmick,' when the three strippers move down to the passarelle, we have a live tracking cue that brings them all down there," Lehrer says. "From the back of the mezzanine to the middle of the orchestra to the mid-underbalcony, you can hear the movement. It's not intrusive; it doesn't sound like an effect. And when they get to the passarelle, standing left, center, and right, they sound left, center, and right."

of extensive negative space. (See photos on pages 46-47.) "We dealt with that by using lots of templates on the stage floor, filling it out," Eisenhauer says. "But we had no haze, so you don't see beams from units on the side or overhead." In these moments, units must be precisely focused and framed to keep light out of the audience's eyes and off the theatre's side walls, Fisher adds.

The lighting rig includes such workhorses as Ayrton Dominos and Martin units. Lighting is controlled by a Vari-Lite 676 console. Gear was supplied by PRG.

### Sound

Sound designer Scott Lehrer reliably provides perfect intelligibility, an

especially important quality when Sondheim is the lyricist. Interestingly, the Majestic Theatre, newly renovated following the 35-year run of *The Phantom of the Opera*, was terra incognita even for a designer who has worked on Broadway for 35 years.

Lehrer notes that the *Phantom* creative team installed a back wall to provide acoustic isolation from the lobby and to deal with "the big dome that creates crazy reverberations for the last four or five rows of the audience." During last year's restoration, however, "the wall was torn down, and suddenly we were back to where it was in 1988. At the invited dress, I went to the producers and said, 'This is not possible. You can hear people talking in the downstairs lobby. We've got to put up

curtains and close off the mix area from the reverberation at the back of the room'." A set of curtains was tried but was found insufficient and replaced. Now, he says, "Behind the mix position, we have heavier weight drapes plus 3"-thick diffusion panels, so Carin [Ford], the mixer, can more clearly hear the front of the house balance."

Interestingly, Lehrer says, "In these old Broadway houses, the mezzanine and balcony aren't problems. You can sit in the mezzanine, with no sound system on, and if someone is onstage whispering, you can hear every word. It's in the middle of the orchestra that you're in an acoustic nowhere, getting reflections off the dome that interfere with the sound system. It gets



Dainty June performing her act. Fisher and Eisenhauer reserve most of the show's color for onstage numbers like this. 'You Gotta Get a Gimmick' is treated similarly.

worse when things get louder; luckily, I was able to keep Gypsy from being too loud, so the overall acoustics are intelligibility is pretty good."

To provide additional clarity and localization, Lehrer employs d&b audiotechnik's Soundscape spatialization tool. "We're using a cue-based approach," he says. "The actors are not wearing trackers. The amazing, wonderful Carin Ford has over 200 tracking cues. In 'You Gotta Get a Gimmick,' when the three strippers move down to the passarelle, we have a live tracking cue that brings them all down there; from the back of the mezzanine to the middle of the orchestra to the mid-underbalcony, you can hear the movement. It's not intrusive; it doesn't sound like an effect. And when

they get to the passarelle, standing left, center, and right, they sound left, center, and right."

He adds, "For me, what's important about using spatial technology is focusing the audience's attention on the place where you want them to look." He cites the case of "Little Lamb," a melancholy birthday solo for the young Louise, sitting at far stage left. "You can sit on the far left side of the house, hear her properly balanced with the orchestra, and still know she's singing from the house-right passarelle edge. This carries all over the theatre."

This technique is equally important in the book scenes, Lehrer notes. When Rose pushes Louise to fill in for an absent stripper, Lehrer says, "We have several cues. When Rose goes to

Louise at the dressing room table you don't want generalized sound reinforcement. You want to feel them together. When Rose goes to the other side of the room, choosing music for the strip, the sound image goes with her. And when she has a scene with Herbie, we pan, live-tracking where they are onstage. We can reinforce them, so everyone hears every word of dialogue. I've spent the last 20 years of my career trying to do this stuff and this new spatial technology makes it realizable."

The loudspeaker system, consisting of d&b gear, features five V10s for the orchestra and five Y10 six-box arrays for the mezzanine and balcony. (When using Soundscape, Lehrer notes, "Every speaker in your spatial array



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has a wide horizontal dispersion. If somebody is at far left, you have to have a wide enough horizontal pattern to hear it if you're sitting on the far right.") Fill and delay are provided by a collection of E4s, E5s, E6s, and E8s. Providing onstage monitoring are 16C columns. Processing is via a DS100 signal engine running Soundscape with EnScene for object-based placement of actors and musicians. Spatial cues were programmed using Atlas show control software.

Other gear includes Shure Axient wireless systems with ADX1 transmitters on the actors, who sport DPA and Point Source Audio lavalier mics. Orchestra mics include Neumann

MCM 114s for the strings, Yamahiko contact pickups on the piano, Sennheiser MKH 8040s on the reeds and percussion, Royer 121s on brass, and MKH800 area mics. Sound effects are played back on Qlab 5. Sound is controlled by a Yamaha RIVAGE PM5 console; outboard gear includes an AudioEase Altiverb 8XL convolution reverb run on Live Professor for 7.1.4. surround reverb. Gear was provided by Masque Sound.

Key personnel on the sound side includes John Frangione (A2), Jake Scudder (production audio), Will Pickens (associate designer/spatial sound programmer), and Malachy Kronberg (assistant designer). Lighting

personnel includes Mitchell Fenton (associate lighting designer), Nicholas Pollock and Jacob Zedek (assistant lighting designers), Harry Sangmeister (moving light programmer), Dan Coey (production electrician), Oliver Read (assistant production electrician), Kwame Tucker (head electrician), Pete Donovan (house electrician), Rob Lindsay (deck electrician), Frank Billings (lead followspot), and John Alban and Chris Gratton (followspots).

*Gypsy*, which earned stellar reviews and spawned speculation that McDonald may earn a seventh Tony Award, continues its open run at the Majestic. 📡