



ORPHEUS DESCENDING

Creating the darkly magical world of *Hadestown*

By: David Barbour



Opposite: *Hadestown* retells the story of Orpheus and Eurydice. Above: The production design allows a central position for the show's musicians.

Broadway's newest hit is also one of its most unexpected. *Hadestown* is a true original, framing one of Western culture's oldest stories in an entirely new way. The myth of Orpheus and Eurydice has been told and retold over the centuries, in operas by Monteverdi, Telemann, Offenbach, and Philip Glass, among others, not to mention films by Jean Cocteau and Marcel Camus and plays by Jean Anouilh and Sarah Ruhl. (There are countless other examples.) But *Hadestown* makes its own case for the timelessness of the Orpheus legend by cross-breeding two different sensibilities: It's the story of Orpheus and his doomed love affair with Eurydice, as told in a New Orleans juke joint.

"It's an old song/And we're gonna sing it again." So goes the opening number, but it sounds startlingly fresh thanks to Anaïs Mitchell's blues/jazz score. (She is also author of the show's book.) This tragedy of love found and lost is framed with a wink and a roll of the shoulders, a today-we-dance fatality deeply informed by a melancholy awareness of the gulf between "the world we dream about/And the one we live in now." If the story ends in heartbreak, the prevailing tone is insouciant; the death of love given a sassy, defiantly upbeat, jazz funeral.

It helps that Mitchell's score is the catchiest and the

most transporting since last season's surprise hit *The Band's Visit* and her lyrics have the richness of poetry. (If Leonard Cohen had ever written a musical, it might be something like *Hadestown*.) In addition, director Rachel Chavkin, choreographer David Neumann, and the cast render the musical's hybrid world with unusual precision and conviction. From the moment that André De Shields—as Hermes, the evening's narrator and sardonic emcee—enters, parts the jacket of his three-piece suit, and offers a vulpine smile, one surrenders to *Hadestown*'s melancholy, yet oddly lively, charms. The design team makes a key contribution, providing the right environment for this singular musical and supporting its shifting moods.

Hadestown has traveled an unusual route to Broadway, undergoing significant transformations along the way. Early versions were performed by Mitchell and her collaborators in Vermont, followed by a studio album. Its 2016 New York premiere, staged in-the-round at New York Theatre Workshop, was sufficiently well-received to cause talk of a Broadway transfer; instead, the show went to the Citadel Theatre in Edmonton, Alberta, and, later, London's National Theatre. This process was accompanied by major growing pains; indeed, according to many of those involved, there came a moment when its distinctive qualities were nearly lost.



The trio of Fates, who comment on the action, are outfitted with Shure in-ears, to facilitate their close-harmony singing.

Scenery

Hadestown is perhaps best described as a musical of sensibility. Not unfolding in a specific time and place, it is, nevertheless, informed by the music, fashions, and ambiance of mid-twentieth-century New Orleans. (This is especially clear in Michael Krass' costumes, which favor a 1940s-era silhouette.) At the same time, it has an overlay of up-to-the-minute political awareness: Orpheus is an earnest young bar worker who believes that his poems can redeem a fallen world. He meets, and falls hard for, Eurydice, a road-weary traveler, struggling to find work and food in hard times. Their romance blossoms, but Orpheus, obsessed with his writing, neglects his lover; the supremely practical Eurydice, looking for security, strikes a bargain with Hades, who is both the lord of the underworld and an industrialist who has built a wall around his kingdom. (The number "Why We Build the Wall" sounds like the versified edition of an edict from the Department of Homeland Security.) He lures Eurydice underground with the promise of a good job—but his workers are reduced to automatons whose memories of the past quickly vanish. (Chavkin's staging of these scenes brings to mind a pock-

et version of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*.) Through Persephone, Hades' part-time spouse—and a red-hot blues shouter in her own right—Orpheus travels to the underworld to rescue Eurydice before she forgets that she was ever in love; he finds her and obtains Hades' permission for them to escape. But, of course, there's a catch.

With its timeless narrative tied to themes of xenophobia, exploitation of workers, and capitalism run riot, and with musical roots in such distinctly American forms, *Hadestown* is shaped by a kind of double vision that links Classical Athens with this fraught American moment. The key to the musical's design lays in finding an environment that sustains, and capitalizes on, these influences. At New York Theatre Workshop, set designer Rachel Hauck created an amphitheater, a strategy that made for a certain intimacy that, no doubt, contributed to the production's enthusiastic reception.

Hauck, recalling the NYTW production, says, "That was the first pass at the question of how to dramatize these incredible songs. Edmonton had a radically different design. We took everything we knew from NYTW and set it aside, to explore new ideas. Now that we had space,



Hauck notes that the show's producers signed off on the removal of two rows of center seating at the Walter Kerr Theatre, facilitating a more intimate relationship with the audience.

including wings, and more resources overall, we made literal a number of elements in the text, such as grass and train tracks. The tree [from the NYTW production] was there, but in a more 2D rendering, because this time we wanted to fly it.”

This new design approach led to a sobering revelation, however. Hauck: “During the first week of tech, we ran it once, with all these new and fully fleshed-out ideas, and Rachel, correctly, said, ‘This is wrong. We’ve lost our connection to the characters.’ And we had. So, between the first and second previews, we put 75% of the first-act scenery on the dock and restaged the show, finding the base of an idea that really explored the material.”

The key, Hauck says, was, “We realized that it needed to be abstracted and poetic, and to feel intimate. We also went back to the idea that *Hadestown* is a concert first, with the band being central to it. In Edmonton, we put the band onstage, but tucked it off to the side, to accommodate the scenic turntable; we quickly learned that the musicians had to be in the middle of everything. We also started leaning into the idea of New Orleans. We love the city’s vibe; for example, Preservation Hall [the city’s storied jazz

venue] is a huge influence, with its warmth and intimacy. Anaïs Mitchell’s lyrics are beautiful; you can take them in a thousand directions, and the key was finding one that held the story and worked for us. In Edmonton, we realized that this show is poetry, not prose.”

Even with the changes made in Edmonton, the creative team’s reservations were reflected in its critical reception. A reviewer for the *Globe and Mail*, offering qualified praise, added that *Hadestown* “still feels like it needs to make another pit stop or two before it nails down a theatre on the Great White Way. Both the material and the new, proscenium staging could use serious rethinks in parts.”

Indeed, the show was being effectively tweaked, clarifying its intentions and making more concrete the specific contours of the darkly magical world where it unfolds. The terms of the current design started coming together at the National Theatre, where it became what Hauck describes as “a worn New Orleans bar/amphitheater, which becomes otherworldly as the storytelling takes over.”

“The Broadway design is close to what we did in London, but richer,” Hauck says. The show was staged in the National’s cavernous Olivier Theatre, with its fan-



The exposed circular truss is one way in which the design signals the show's concert-like nature.

shaped seating and a modified thrust stage. Any number of storied productions have been gestated there, but *Hadestown* wouldn't have been the first to be swallowed alive by the Olivier's enormous volume. "We had great advice from Rufus Norris [the National's artistic director]," Hauck adds. "Our first pass at the design was operatic in

scale. He said, 'It's too big and you're too far from the audience.' So, we shrank it and pulled it as far downstage as it could go. We also used the vastness of the space to create the scariness of *Hadestown*. Bradley King [the lighting designer], brilliantly shaped the negative space to make it feel cavernous, cold and dark."



As seen at Broadway's Walter Kerr Theatre, Hauck's multilevel set is a utilitarian space that has clearly seen a lot of use; the walls are pockmarked, peeling, and marbled with various stains; an air of three-in-the-morning dissipation prevails. Risers at left, right, and center provide room for the musicians, as well as cast members when not par-

ticipating in a scene. A curving staircase upstage center leads to a set of French shutters that, when opened, reveal Hades' office. Many lighting positions, including trees at left and right and a circle truss overhead, are left exposed.

Returning to the question of the musician's placement onstage, Hauck says, "The audio mix for *Hadestown* is different from any other mix on Broadway. The musical director [Liam Robertson] was very clear about the relationship between the musicians that he needed. We made sure that every musician has a direct line of site to each other. Obviously, we kept the rhythm section together; the drumkit is upstage center, inside a booth, to isolate and control the sound. The booth has a curved, angled glass behind the upstage bar. The wizards at Hudson [Scenic Studio, the show's scenic fabricator] worked to find the exact angle for the glass so it wouldn't reflect the lights, but the footlights hit it, causing a perfect reflection into the mezzanine; it created a Pepper's ghost effect of whatever was happening onstage. We went with an anti-glare glass and two layers of tiny bobbinette," the latter of which removes unwanted reflections. (In addition to Hudson's participation, the production features props by BrenBri Properties.)

The set's big transformation occurs when Eurydice travels to Hadestown: The center stage turntable becomes the road from one world to another; it also provides a moving tableau of workers toiling, robotically, in the near darkness. The molding on the surrounding walls moves offstage, revealing a network of four-light blinders that signals a sinister shift in the lighting design. The number "Wait for Me," in which Orpheus resolves to save Eurydice, features Orpheus standing on a drum riser in the middle of the turntable while a set of hanging lamps, pushed by members of the company, swing out beyond the proscenium.

"From the very beginning, Rachel had two very powerful visual ideas," Hauck says. "One was the swinging lights, which she had from the moment we started. The other was an idea about the story taking place under a tree, which could move in a dynamic way when we went underground. At NYTW, I couldn't find a way to do that. I tried a thousand approaches. In Canada, we had a very traditional-looking tree, but when it flew it didn't have any emotional impact." The tree was abandoned for a different approach. "In this version when the hats fly and the wagons split, you feel like you're going down a deep, deep well." With these techniques, the sense of descent into the underworld is inescapable.

Of course, moving from the enormous Olivier to the rather compact Walter Kerr Theatre means that the set "is wedged in with a shoehorn," Hauck says. "It was a challenge, technically, to translate these ideas into the much smaller space. We're lucky to be in the Kerr; it's a magical space. And the producers supported the idea of taking out

the first two rows of the center seating to break the formality of the proscenium and get closer to the audience. The theatre is already incredibly intimate and the fact that they supported that choice is extraordinary.”

Lighting

As the scenic concept evolved, so did Bradley King’s lighting, becoming more attuned to the score’s nuances and the narrative’s delicate mix of emotions. “The NYTW production was a glorified concert,” he says, noting that he came late to that production and raced to get a fully realized design in place. “It was song-heavy, without much narrative. It was staged in-the-round under this beautiful tree; the set was an amphitheater, a sacred space, a place to hear a story.” He adds that, not unlike his work on the musical *Natasha, Pierre and the Great Comet of 1812*, his work at that point focused on functioning as a kind of camera eye, directing the audience’s attention to the right performer(s) at the right time.

Speaking of the creative detour in Edmonton, he says, “We came up with this very beautiful, very cold, and disaffecting design, complete with legs, an RP, and representa-

tional scenery. Then we realized that we were putting narrative weight on the score that it was never intended to hold. We also added a lot more book material in Canada, with long recitatives. We all looked at it and realized it wasn’t right.” Using a slightly different formation regarding the post-Edmonton creative breakthrough, King says, “We went back to the idea of a room inside an industrial container. It’s like a company bar, or maybe Preservation Hall, inside an oil rig.”

Moving into the National, where *Hadestown* performed in the Olivier in repertory with *Antony and Cleopatra* (starring Ralph Fiennes and Sophie Okonedo), brought creative challenges for the lighting department. “The theatre’s rep plot is designed for shows to sit on a certain place onstage,” King notes. “We pushed the show downstage, so some positions were less useful than others.” Fortunately, the National is a theatre with great resources: “We were able to supplement the rig, and at the Olivier, there’s usually a light wherever you need it.”

At the National, King developed his many-layered approach, which combines highly directional effects, chiaroscuro looks, stark-white washes, sinister shadows,





Opposite: When the action moves to the underworld, the scenery shifts, exposing King's arrangement of four-light blinders. Above: The designer adds color with upstage wall treatments.

and colorful uplighting on the upstage walls. He notes that the gear in the Olivier's house rig, including Martin by Harman Encore CLD Performance Spots and Viper Wash DX units, informed his choices for Broadway: "I'm the biggest fan of the Encore. It is deadly quiet, and the color rendering is beautiful." Another reason for relying on the Martin units, he adds, is the fact that "we wanted as few fixture types as possible in the rig. The Broadway rig is a version of what we had at the National, but custom-tailored to the Walter Kerr. We have Encores on the proscenium and box boom," where they function as the show's workhorse units.

The overhead circular truss, which, as previously mentioned, is deliberately left exposed, was added in London. "It reinforces the concert vocabulary that we had completely lost in Edmonton." In any case, it is hugely useful: "I don't think the circular truss turns off all night; the 13 units on it are used for 90% of the show."

The four-light blinders seen when the walls move in the Hadestown sequence are TMB ProCan units. "They were the last 70 units in Christie Lites' inventory, because nobody uses them anymore," King says. "I threw a dozen into the order for the Edmonton show, thinking we'd figure a way to use them. I turned them on for the entrance to Hadestown and they became the language of that industrial underground world. At the National, with all that space upstage, we constructed ladders and trusses for them, and you saw them glowing in the distance. They turned

that deep stage space into a delicious void."

The colorful uplighting effects on the upstage walls add depth and dimension to many scenes. "In London, I began to understand the importance of getting the walls activated with light," King says. "I think we used Robert Juliat Dalis units at the National. They were great, but a little too delicate for this purpose. I needed something with a little more punch. I chose [Chroma-Q] Color Force IIs, which are incredibly bright; the colors are great, too."

One of the most effective lighting moments, in "Wait for Me," involves the hanging lamps, which aren't typical stage gear. "They ate up a lot of tech time," King says, referring to the rigging challenges involved in the making this moment precise. "They need to be locked in so when they fly, the pivot point needs to fly in with them and they don't crash into each other. Above the lighting trusses is a supertruss that is locked off and stiffened. Rigged to it are metal sleeves that fly in with the lamp cables. The sleeves remain locked to the super truss; this lowers the pivot point/fulcrum of the cable so that it swings below the lighting rig. Also, the cables are both electrical and rated, so that we only have one cable coming out of the winch."

Running the numbers, the rig, supplied by Christie Lites, includes 60 Encore CLD Performances, 16 Viper Wash DX units, four Martin MAC III Air FX units, 12 GLP impression X4 Bar 20s (to treat the set's walls and for additional blinder effects), eight Elation Professional Platinum 7 Wash units (to wash the band), two Robe



The cast members are fitted with DPA 4066 and 4061 mics, equipped with CORE technology to minimize distortion and increase clarity and openness.

BMFL Followspots, 26 ETC Lustr 2s, 44 Color Force II 12s and four ColorForce II 72s, ten Rosco Braq Cube 4Cs (for color-changing footlight effects), ten Elation SixPar 200s, 47 ETC Source Fours, 70 ProCams, ten ARRI Junior 300 Fresnels. The evocative fog effects are generated by two MDG Atmosphere hazers, three Look Solutions Viper NT foggers, and two MT-Electronic Vario 8 low fog generators, aided by two Martin AF1 fans. Control is provided by an ETC Eos Ti console; also involved are City Theatrical's Multiverse and Show DMX Neo products, along with Motion Labs power distro racks, Doug Fleenor Design DMX6REL relay packs, and the Trinculo Prospero cue light system from Ben Peoples Industries.

In many ways, the most striking thing about King's lighting here is its cueing, its effortless shifts of focus and mood glide along on Mitchell's score like a surfer riding a wave. "The cueing is driven 100% by the music," he says. "It's really just visual scoring. Anaïs' music is unique, providing an endless well of ideas."

Sound

The style of *Hadestown's* music is sufficiently singular as to pose a challenge, albeit a pleasant one, for the sound designers Nevin Steinberg and Jessica Paz. "It's unique, in my experience," Steinberg says. "I find it good as a sound designer to be confronted with different voices and approaches to music. Both Anaïs' voice and the orchestration team of Michael Charney and Todd Sickafoose brought a new sound to the arrangements and instrumentation. It's very much in front of you; what you see is what you get. There are no keyboards offstage, nor any tracks; it's a reliably live event. That's part of the project's excitement and also one of its challenges."

The duo came onboard for the Citadel production, and like the others, their work really started to bear fruit in London. "The Olivier is a very difficult space," Paz says. "But what was great about the National is the audio team, which is incredible. They made our lives so much easier. We had a great advantage because they had just purchased a new Meyer Sound system and were excited to

use it. We stuck with Meyer when we came to New York.” Steinberg adds, “The Olivier feels so much bigger than it is, and the Kerr feels the opposite.” This is good news for *Hadestown*: “There’s something about the theatre that presses everybody into the action in a very good way.”

Working out the placement of musicians onstage, in collaboration with Hauck, was part of the designers’ brief. “This part is a big collaboration even when everyone is in the orchestra pit,” Steinberg says. “Here we have to deal with the fact that they are part of the scenery. They’re featured, an explicit part of the storytelling. Part of the process, from Edmonton to London to New York, involved getting the musicians into the best possible geographical location so they felt like a band.” Paz adds, “Also, for them not to look a mess up there. They all have Aviom personal monitors, for example, and we took care to get them their tools without having a jumble of cables and equipment.”

A key part of the layout is the previously mentioned placement of the drumkit at stage center, behind a Plexiglas wall. “In the previous productions, the drumkit caused some angst in terms of keeping the show heard,” Steinberg says. “A live drumkit onstage adds so much energy, but it can do damage to the overall effect.” Speaking of the previously mentioned shield-and-bobbiette solution, he adds, “Bradley does some really cool lighting effects with it; the drummer is revealed interestingly at different times and then made to disappear. He’s definitely at the center of the action.”

Because of the mix of singers and musicians onstage, a fair number of speakers were built into the set to provide foldback. Paz says, “We collaborated with Rachel on finding the best places for them. We were able to put them in the stairs and the lower part of the risers. We have speakers by the spiral staircase, one on the circle truss, four or five in the step units.” Building speakers into the scenery, she notes, is aided by the fact that “the darker part of the filigree on these elements is transparent, like a screen.” Also, she says, “The grating in the floor and the apron trough carry front fill and monitor speakers.” A set of effects loudspeakers is placed over the stage.

Paz notes that main speaker layout consists of left-right proscenium hangs and a cluster of arrays in the mezzanine, with very little in the way of a center cluster. This is, in part, because “the show began as a concept album,” she says, and evolved as a concert piece, and a key design brief was to preserve a concert atmosphere. The stereo setup means “it’s presented like an album. All the of instruments and voices are placed in the stereo system together. Some ensemble vocals incorporate a little panning and we also make a little space at the center for the lead vocals to shine through. But, until we go mono in the underbalcony systems, the effect is very stereo.”

The loudspeaker rig includes, from Meyer Sound, LEOPARDS, UPQ-1s and UPQ-2Ps, UPJuniors, MINAs,

900-LFCs, 500-HPs, and 1100-LFCs; from d&b audiotechnik, E4s, E5s, E6s, and D20 and D6 amps; and, from Alcons Audio, VR8s, VR5s, VR12s, and Sentinel 3 amps. A Meyer Galaxy system is used for loudspeaker processing.

The cast is fitted with DPA 4066 heads and 4061 lavaliers (equipped with CORE technology to minimize distortion and increase clarity and openness) with Sennheiser SK-5212 body-pack transmitters and EM-3732 receivers. The trio of actresses who play *The Fates*, the musical’s sassy, ad-hoc Greek chorus, are equipped with Shure in-ears, because, Paz says, “They have to sing in such close vocal harmony; this was the best way to give them tools they need to sing together. They also move a lot and play instruments. At certain moments, when they need to have a click track, the in-ears are the delivery system.” The musicians are on a mix of mics from Beyerdynamic, DPA, Sennheiser, and Shure. The audio package was supplied by Masque Sound.

The show is run on a DiGiCo SD7T console. “I’ve been using DiGiCo solely for nearly seven years at this point,” Paz says. Steinberg adds, “This platform, both from the audio and front-end standpoints, is incredibly versatile, in addition to having a tremendous amount of capacity. For our purposes, having done the show on the DiGiCo system, there was very little upside to trying to reinvent the wheel.” Unlike many currently running musicals, no complicated cueing, nor hooking up of lighting and sound, was required. “In its heart of hearts, this show is more analog than digital, more incandescent than LED,” Steinberg notes.

There is a fairly large bit of vocal processing, however, what Paz describes as “a very slight tube emulation on Hermes” whenever he speaks into his prop vintage floor mic. “That effect is especially crunchy in ‘Wait for Me’,” she adds. “Also, we have a slapback effect on Hades in ‘Why We Build the Wall’ [the first-act finale], and a similar, if lesser, effect for Persephone at the top of Act II [in the number “Our Lady of the Underground”].”

Steinberg notes that at one point in the show’s evolution, Hermes’ microphone was practical. After the cable was cut in London, he adds, “That microphone and vocal style became part of the production’s iconography. Getting rid of the cable freed us to make it whatever we needed it to be at any given time. Whoever gets in front of that mic gets special treatment from the sound department; when someone stands at that mic, it means they have something to say.”

The vocal effects are realized using Apple’s Mainstage software, which, Paz says, “is the platform for plug-ins for musicians in live performance. In the theatre, it’s used for keyboards. We’re using it for all our plug-ins. We have two machines running it, one which does all vocal reverbs and processing and one doing all the band processing and Orpheus’ guitar.” Steinberg adds, “It consists of two Mac Minis connected to the desk via MADI; it’s today’s version




A set of hanging lamps flies in for the number "Wait for Me," a visual idea that, Hauck notes, director Rachel Chavkin had from the project's inception.

of outboard processing. It appears to be infinite in its routing possibilities; the number of plug-ins is really only limited by your imagination or budget. It has been a real game-changer for *Hadestown* on Broadway, and it's something that we think will carry through to other shows." One imagines it is one reason why the broad array of vocal styles that make up *Hadestown* come through with such effectiveness.

Other key personnel include Jauchem & Meeh (special effects); Beverly Jenkins (production stage manager); Paul J. Smith (stage manager); Jeremy Chernick (special effects consultant); Meredith B. Ries (associate scenic designer); John Viesta (associate lighting designer); Alex Swann (associate sound designer); Michael Wojchik (production sound supervisor); Bridget Chervenka (moving light pro-

grammer); Shaina Graboyes (automation programmer); Simon Cleveland (special effects programmer); Todd Frank (production carpenter); James Maloney (production electrician); Justin Freeman (associate production electrician); Spencer Greene (deck automation/assistant carpenter); Patrick Medlock-Turek (head electrician); Jarrett Krauss (head sound engineer) and J. Alex Huerta (deck sound); Emiliano Pares (production properties coordinator); Scott Rutkowski (head props); Jessica Bonaventure, Susannah Hyde, Ryan Howell, and Lawrence E. Moten III (assistant scenic designers); Alex Mannix (assistant lighting designer); and Connor Wang (assistant sound designer).

Having earned 14 Tony Award nominations and seven Drama Desk nominations, and now doing sellout business, *Hadestown* is set for a healthy open-ended run. 🎭



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