

Jagged Big Sounds

By: David Barbour



The show's chorus, acting as a kind of conscience to the main characters, performs a series of numbers that have a rock-concert feel.

Jonathan Deans on creating a theatrical context for the songs of Alanis Morissette in the new musical *Jagged Little Pill*

Of all the musicals currently circling the new Broadway season, quite possibly the buzziest is *Jagged Little Pill*. With a score taken from the mega-best-selling album by Alanis Morissette, it shattered box office records at American Repertory Theatre (ART) in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where it tried out in May, June, and early July. Encouraging reviews have added to the show's aura of success.

It's a truism that most entries in the so-called jukebox musical genre are light-minded exercises designed to showcase a greatest-hits score, but *Jagged Little Pill* takes a markedly different approach. The book, by screenwriter Diablo Cody (winner of an Oscar

and BAFTA and Golden Globe Awards for the film *Juno*), folds Morissette's numbers into a story of a deeply troubled Connecticut family. Mom Mary Jane Healy's manic pursuit of perfection masks her growing opioid addiction; at the same time, her marriage to Steve, who provides his family with the best of everything, is withering on the vine. Mary Jane and Steve have two children: Nick, their biological son, is a golden boy who excels at athletics and the cello and has earned a full ride at a top college, but he is also complicit in a hushed-up case of date rape. Adopted daughter Frankie—who is black—is plagued by feelings of alienation from her largely white-bread

environment; adding to the family tensions is the presence of her girlfriend, Jo. At the same time, she finds herself falling for Phoenix, a new boy at school. The clan's perfect—and perfectly false—surface begins to crack as everyone's secrets are forced into the light. Race, sexual identity, addiction, and the #MeToo movement are folded into the story of the Healys' painful falling apart and tentative coming back together.

The score includes all of the songs from the original album, plus half a dozen or so additional numbers. Diane Paulus' production has a sense of propulsive motion aided by the moving pieces of Riccardo Hernandez's set design and the nonstop imagery from video designer Finn Ross. Justin Townsend's lighting runs the gamut from stark to saturated, as required, supporting a wide variety of emotional states. Emily Rebholz's costumes go a long way toward indicating each character's place on the social ladder.

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For sound designer Jonathan Deans, the task included providing sensitive reinforcement for Morissette’s songs, which yoke alluring pop hooks to mordant—even slashing—words, often producing an intentionally nerve-jangling effect. (Tom Kitt’s orchestrations retain the essential qualities of Morissette’s music while making them more expansive for the theatre.) Similarly, Deans notes, the show moves between straightforward book musical scenes and numbers that have a pronounced rock-concert feel. “It was either going to be really terrible or it was going to work,” he says, wryly, understating the challenges facing the creative team. He credits Paulus’ strong leadership for guiding all involved to a unified result.

Deans, a veteran of many

Broadway musicals and Cirque du Soleil spectacles, has frequently collaborated with Paulus on several productions. Working in a house he knows well, with a simpatico director and creative team, he says ensured that he was “three-quarters of the way home.” He adds that Morissette was also on hand, noting, “she had much to say, but always in a respectful way.”

Deans is a happy user of Meyer Sound loudspeakers, and ART has an in-house rig of 88 Meyer boxes, so it was probably inevitable that the company would provide most of the rest of the sound gear. The house sound system includes a surround system, consisting of 22 Meyer HMS5s in the rear and sides and six UPJ-XP’s in upper side positions, as well as a proscenium hang of 16 LINA very compact line

array loudspeakers with bass augmented by two 900-LFC and two 750-LFC low-frequency control elements. Two additional 75-LFCs are located at the back of house for surround bass management. For additional power, the front arrays were augmented with ten LEOPARD compact line array loudspeakers and two 1100-LFCs. Deans says, “I also expanded the surround system a little, giving it a little more low end. I wanted to be able to put the music into the surround system if I wanted to.” The additional gear was needed because of the show’s wide emotional and stylistic range.

Dean notes that the Leopards are installed in towers that are part of the set design), a clever strategy: “For those moments when it’s an open stage with lighted trusses and all the video; you don’t notice that the sound has become so big and present, because it belongs to the visual performances and the scenery.” A key aspect of decent sound design, he adds, involves finding the right location for speakers—something that isn’t always able to happen.

It goes without saying that audibility of the lyrics is of prime importance here, as Morissette’s numbers are among the most famous of their decade, and her words are carefully chosen. (The show’s biggest laugh comes after the number, “Ironic,” in which a minor character, recalling the furious debate that followed the album’s release, questions whether the word has been correctly used.) To ensure the clarity of the lyrics, Deans tried something different, making use of eight Meyer Ashby 8C ceiling loudspeakers, mounted in custom enclosures, for the A-B voice system that he deploys in the book scenes. “Meyer put a little cabinet around each Ashby, and gave me rigging so I could hang them off the proscenium towers,” the designer says. “All you see is a 12”-looking disk.”

Deans adds that he felt an A-B system was necessary for maintaining a natural sound in the dialogue scenes. “We have a book that is engagingly written, brilliant, and funny. I didn’t feel



Deans took the decision to use an A-B loudspeaker system for the dialogue scenes and a more expansive system for the musical numbers.

we could have vocals coming out of the line arrays, which really create a different sound; they then could be dedicated to music. The A-B system supports the dialogue by having different speakers for the people onstage. It's a very cost-efficient way of working, as it doesn't require doubling the line arrays. When we switch to the songs, the A-B system goes away, and the concert system takes over. You are then able to step into the music to appreciate the storytelling and emotion of the songs."

This loudspeaker arrangement, he adds, allows him to get maximum flexibility out of the line arrays. "With Tom Kitt's amazing arrangements, which, at times, feature a string section, the music is very dynamic," he says. "Some numbers are gentle, beautiful, and then when we arrive at 'You Oughta Know' [delivered by Jo, when her relationship with Frankie is falling apart], it's blazing, because we are able to keep up with our character Jo's emotional journey. At this point, the audience are so attached and committed, it becomes a showstopper, with the combination of the musical



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arrangement, sound, lights, and the brilliant onstage performances by all. With this system, we can keep up and then return to a voice sound system designed to support only the dialogue."

Tying the system together is Meyer's D-Mitri digital audio platform, a complete seven-module system that is in permanent residence in the the-

atre. "With D-Mitri, regardless of what I dream of and what Paulus and Kitt ask me to do with the sound, I never have to say, 'No, I can't do that'," Deans says. "Going from D-Mitri into the Leo family loudspeakers is like looking through an extremely clean transparent window. Whatever is needed to make it work, is easily done."

The D-Mitri system is especially helpful, he adds, in terms of creating the variety of mixes needed for the numbers. "Tom Kitt wanted the production to have a sonic experience. We spoke about shows I have designed in Las Vegas for Cirque du Soleil. With this system, I can do many things, as opposed to a proscenium show with the timid use of a surround system typically used on Broadway. I did a complicated mix of vocals that wraps around the audience; you hear the dialogue from one set of speakers and the music from another set—and the surround wraps around you like a blanket, giving space and dimension to the vocals. Being able to place vocals and music in this way, I can use the entire theatre as my palette, not just the proscenium arch and stage. The job's goal is to feel like we are putting on a coat of Alanis Morissette music, and gladly wearing it."

Interestingly, he says, "At certain times, I may bend and twist the music,



Deans expanded the house sound rig in part with Meyer Sound LEOPARDS, which are built into the towers of Riccardo Hernandez's set.

for example, giving the music a slightly drug-induced quality to support the moment and actor, just to keep us slightly off-guard and uncomfortable. D-Mitri allowed me access to any speaker at any time to create the immersion.”

Unusually, the eight-member band (including musical director Bryan Perri) is located on two wagons that roll on and offstage at different times. “This layout created some complications,” Deans says. “Also, the four giant scenic panels that form the family’s house created huge barriers between the musicians and the performers down-

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stage.” To provide the necessary fold-back, a set of speakers was built into the deck. “All the stage monitors are there, pointing up,” he adds. “Whether you’re behind or in front of a panel, you hear the music in the same way. I can also turn up a particular speaker for an actor to hear himself or for a cue or sound effect.” These units are d&b audiotechnik E5s, chosen because they are non-powered. “At one point, there was a rain scene,” the designer notes, “and, besides the stage being mopped every day, the speakers had to be in the rain. When you have 20 speakers in the floor, you don’t want them to have electronics.”

Mics, effects, and control

Most of the performers wear DPA 4065 omnidirectional low-profile head units. The transmitters and receivers are Shure’s Axient digital wireless system: ADX1M micro body-pack transmitters, AD4Q receivers, and AD610 Showlink. “It’s fantastic; it sounds just like a wired mic,” Deans says. “On the performers, the sound is just pristine.”

The sound is controlled by a DiGiCo SD7T console, the “T” meaning it has been optimized for the theatre. “It came with the new John Stadius preamps,” which, he says, “are so much better and cleaner than

tions.”

Deans has nothing but praise for Brian Hsieh, his associate designer; Sam Lerner, ART’s sound supervisor; and Mike Tracey, production sound engineer, and Michelle Reiss, who took over mixing duties once the show opened. Other production staff includes Terrence Dowdye and Alison Schaefer (A2/deck sound) and Justin Vining (A2 instrument tech). Sound Associates supplied the audio gear. “When the system arrived,” Deans says, “Mike Tracey went through the Linas and Leopards and he couldn’t believe how pristine they were.” In the



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their previous preamps. We run the system at 96K, making sure that everything is the same, nothing upconverted or downconverted, which often you have to do to get channel counts or to make another device work that isn’t at 96K.”

He adds that he chose Waves plug-ins for the console. “Using Waves in the correct way, in a way not traditionally done in theatre, I was able to deal with the band moving on and offstage, and to create the right sound for this type of music. But I wanted to get the real core, basic lines of Alanis’ music, with its distinct flavors, and using Waves plug-ins exceeded my expecta-

last analysis, he adds, “Shure, Meyer, Sound Associates, DiGiCo—all of them helped us get the gear we needed to this production in this way. They also stepped up and looked after their productions in the way we wanted. These are people interested in supporting the musical theatre, in New York and in regional companies.”

Jagged Little Pill closed in Cambridge on July 15. Expectations are high that it will come to New York this season. 📶