Do Androids Dream of Love?

By: David Barbour

Broadway's *Maybe Happy Ending* has an unusually acute lighting design

The new musical *Maybe Happy Ending*, now playing at the Belasco Theatre, provided the 2024-25 Broadway season with a true Cinderella moment: A wildly original piece not based on any existing IP, the show struggled at the box office last fall, even after reviewers heaped praise on it; more than once, it looked not long for this world. Thanks to word of mouth and a heavy publicity push featuring leading man Darren Criss, however, it began to find an audience; then the awards started coming in, including six Tonys, six Drama Desks, and a Theatre World Award for leading lady Helen J. Shen. Heading into the summer, it routinely sells out.

Maybe Happy Ending illustrates the risks of producing on Broadway today, an environment where a show must immediately announce itself as a hit or exit, stage left. But it needed more time in part because its premise is so unusual. Set in Seoul in 2064, it focuses on Oliver and Claire, retired "helperbots," living out their retirement in adja-

All photos: Matthew Murphy and Evan Zimmerman

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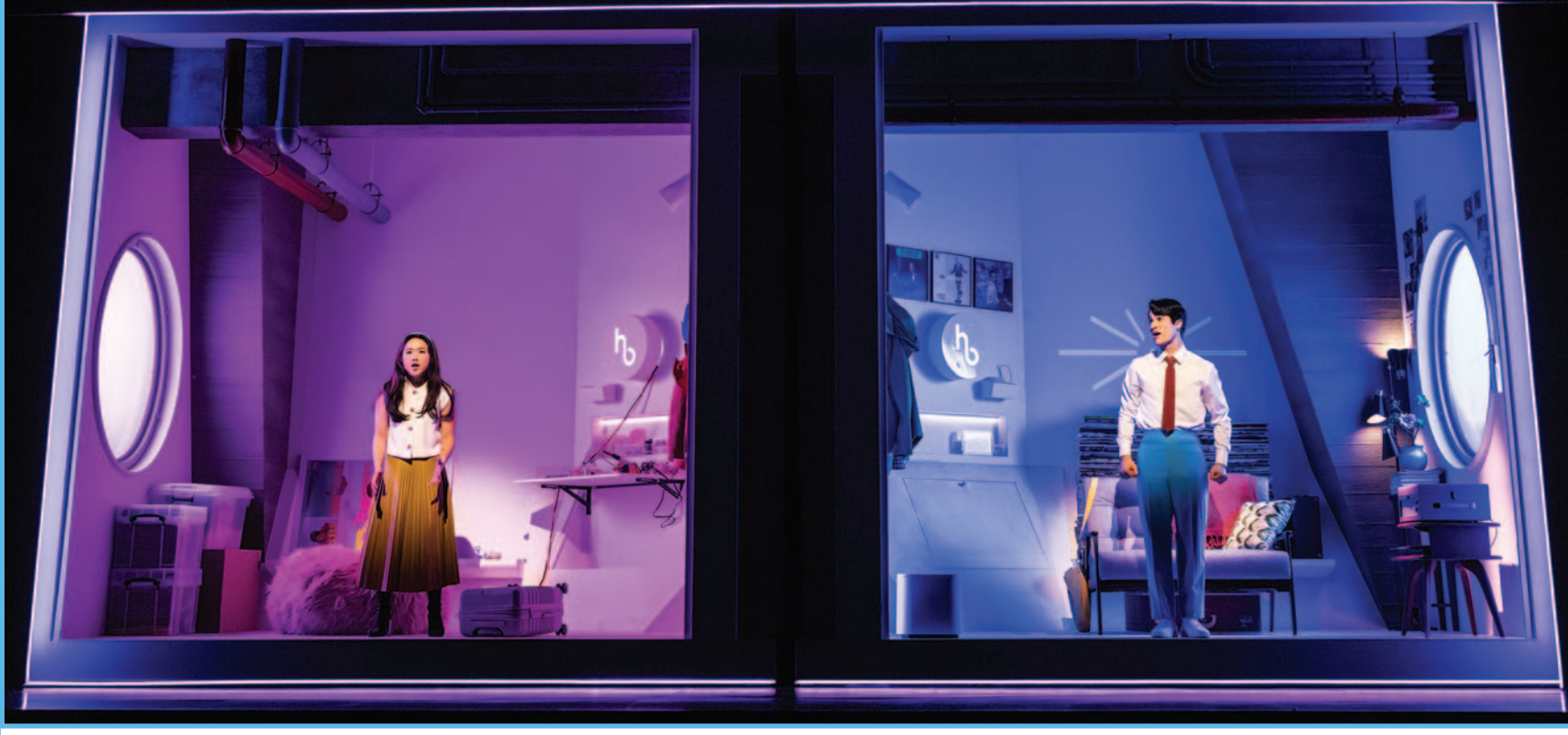


This page and opposite: The scenic concept is a complex arrangement of wagons and black irising panels lined with LED tape, creating a constantly shifting environment that ranges between intimate two-shots and spectacular full-stage looks. The lighting is constantly changing, ranging from pop-art color washes to chiaroscuro tableaux carving a single singer out of the darkness to full stage washes.

cent apartments, essentially waiting to become obsolete. (One of the ironies of Will Aronson and Hue Park's book is that these sophisticated AI creations can become almost too close to their owners, disrupting human family relations.) Oliver cheerfully undergoes a daily routine, convinced that James, his owner, will one day summon him back. Claire, who is a little more wised up, isn't so sure, but she eventually goads Oliver into taking a road trip to the remote island that is James' last known residence. It's a voyage of discovery that shakes up Oliver's place in the world while highlighting his growing affection for Claire.

This subtle, surprisingly moving story, set to a sophisticated jazz-pop score by Aronson and Park, makes the Oliver-Claire relationship into a genuine love affair; throughout, *Maybe Happy Ending* speaks directly to the isolation and displacement of a 21st century ruled by overbearing social media and disruptive technological change.

The musical has an equally original design. Dane Laffrey's scenic concept is a complex arrangement of wagons and black irising panels lined with LED tape, creating a constantly shifting environment that ranges between intimate two-shots and spectacular full-stage looks. Creeping across the scenic surfaces, seemingly at the speed of thought, are video projections by George Reeve (with additional contributions by Laffrey). One minute, the actors are in a tiny space, framed in black; a minute later, they are surrounded by a landscape filled with fireflies; the visual surprises never stop.

Holding everything together is Ben Stanton's lighting design, which earned him his fifth Tony nomination. From the get-go, the designer was aware of the technical challenges involved. "When I saw the beautiful set

rendering, I was aware that it would be something of a shapeshifter. It became clear that we would need moving lights almost exclusively." He adds, "One of the biggest challenges was figuring out where we could put lights, because there are so many video surfaces, both walls and ceilings. We had to go through every bit of scenic documentation to plan where lights would be available to us."

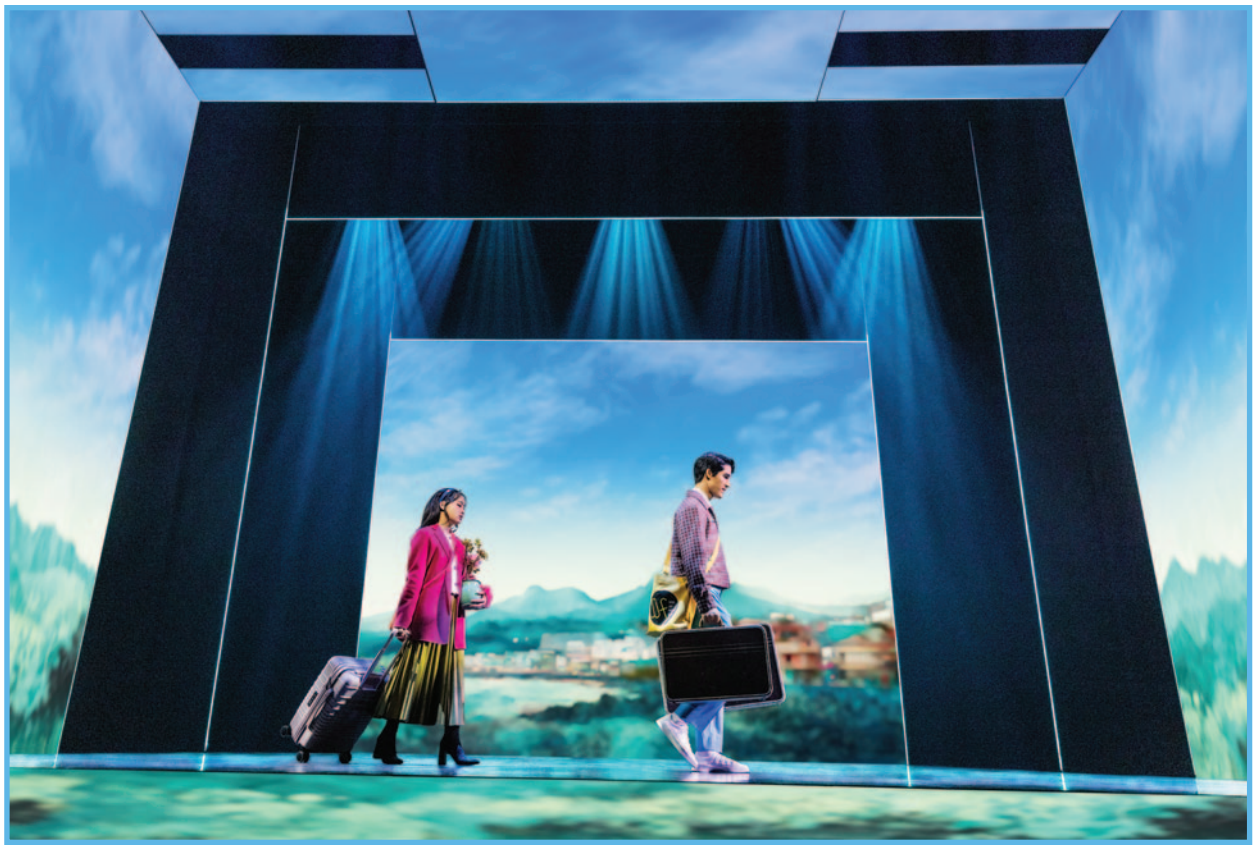
Noting that he joined the production after its early 2020 tryout at Atlanta's Alliance Theatre, Stanton says, "The design changed a lot for Broadway, but they came to me having solved some of the problems of how the set moved. Dane and his team were really accommodating, helping us to build a lot of lighting into the sets, so we weren't limited to lighting from the front of house."

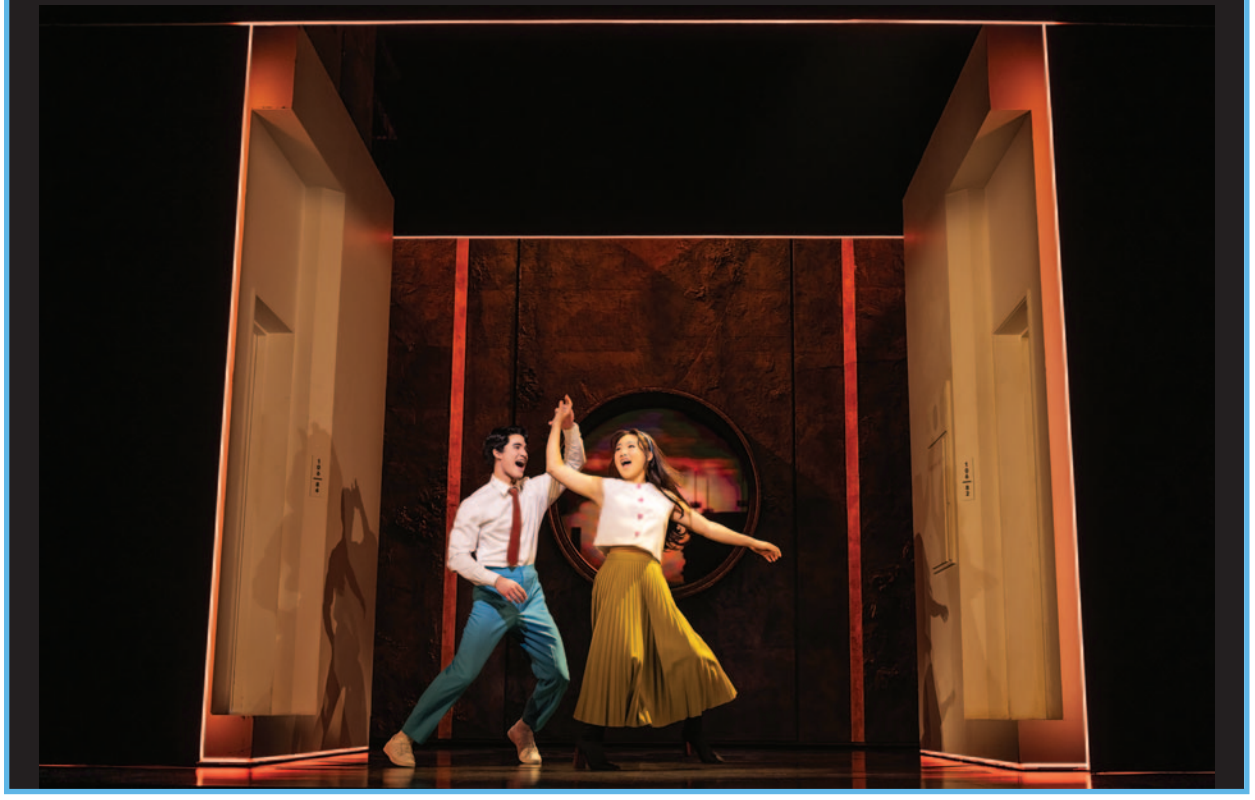
The lighting built into the set, Stanton says, "is a combination of LED tape and small moving units. We use Martin's MAC One fixture, which is a really, really small moving head. It has a Fresnel lens and is a beautiful light. We use them in Claire and Oliver's apartments, which are little white boxes." Each room, the designer notes, "has five MAC Ones in the ceiling, covered by a soffit." Speaking about the MAC Ones, he says, "I'm always interested in how LED fixtures can create CTO and color correction. These, I think, are a good step forward in that respect." These scenes are often defined by striking color washes that distinguish them from many other locations in the show.

The MAC Ones, Stanton says, "allowed us to do a little bit of downlighting in the boxes, which are also edged with LED tape, broken into sections, so we have some control. I also hid LED tape on the back of the moving portal for another linear front light position just downstage of the scenic boxes. It's very low-profile, but it helps us to create layers of color for the James Turrell-esque color saturation that we were able to achieve." (See photo, page 41).

Interestingly, he adds, "The biggest sources of light in these scenes are through the circular side windows, which are diffused. There are Ayrton Diablos and Martin MAC Ultras shooting through the window; it becomes a kind of omnidirectional key light that bounces around each box, becoming sidelight and downlight."

In the theatre itself, Stanton says, "The balcony rails are very helpful. The Belasco has no front-of-house truss, but for getting lighting into Claire and Oliver's boxes without creating shadows, that flat angle from the front is very helpful. The beautiful Belasco Theatre has two nice balcony rails [since it has a mezzanine and a balcony]. For this position, we chose the Diablo, recommended by Justin Freeman, the house electrician, because it fit so well on the rails. It's a small unit and we use it as our medium-range fixture around the theatre."





Above and opposite: Because of the constantly morphing set design, Stanton notes, “At any given time in any setup, 60% or 70% of the rig isn’t available to us.” Extensive pre-planning allowed him to retain the units needed for each scene.

Indeed, Stanton found only one location that could handle anything larger than the MAC Ones and Diablos. “There’s a video portal located in one, and the sides of it fly in and out,” he says. “We have low sidelight positions behind those portals, which are often not available to us. We have a very thin torm position between the video panel on the proscenium and the video panel in one; it’s a little ladder filled with Diablos. They come in handy for the scenes on the apron and for side-lighting scenes without walls.” He adds, “We also use the box booms very

effectively. But at least 50% of the show is closed down inside a portal, so the workhorse positions that one would normally use in a Broadway musical are often not available to us."

For example, he says, "I'm a big fan of Martin MAC Ultras. I appreciate their silence, and I like the intensity they bring. But we could only fit them upstage in certain parts of the set. They come in handy in the 'Firefly' scene [one of the most expansive moments, involving the reveal of the show's band onstage]. What's so funny is that, at any given time in any setup, 60% or 70% of the rig isn't available to us." The show's followspots are Robe FORTEs.

Running the numbers, the rig includes 54 Ayrton Diablos, 25 Martin MAC Ultra Performances, 12 MAC Ones, six MAC Aura XBs, 15 ETC Source Four Lustrs, 14 Elation SixPar 200s, and four Robe FORTE followspots. Providing atmospheric effects are two MDG ATMe haze generators, two MDG MAX 3000s, and three Martin AF-1 fans. Lighting is controlled by an ETC Apex 10.

The lighting is constantly changing, ranging from pop-art color washes to chiaroscuro tableaux, carving a single singer out of the darkness, to full-stage washes that underscore the characters' growing romantic feelings. With such an intricate scheme, "it was so helpful that they had done the production at the Alliance," Stanton says. They had very detailed scene-by-scene maps. We worked on the ground plan to figure out what was available and what wasn't. We built lights into the scenery. We also asked them to remove a few video tiles in the overhead portals. We were able to install some downlighting within the video ceiling, which was helpful because otherwise all of it would have had to come from way upstage, and it often wouldn't have been available to us. We didn't want to be caught with only the front light for a scene; that was a big concern. That's why we spent so much time in preproduction, working it out on paper."

Speaking about the unusually graceful cueing, Stanton says, "It's driven by automation. Most of our tech time was spent fine-tuning how the set moved, and we responded to that, making adjustments as we went. The neon on the edges of the moving portals is controlled from the lighting console; it was all programmed manually. We explored certain technologies that might have helped us automate, for example, the width of the neon, but we weren't able to make it smooth enough in the time we had. So, David Arch, my wonderful programmer, agreed with me that we would do it old-school and cue it. Every time the portal moves, there are probably two or three light cues, expanding and contracting the neon header; we had to match the automation with lighting timing. It was always a math problem. Because they were constantly refining

the timing, we had to keep up and make sure that our programming was accurate; that was time-consuming. My associate, Ken Elliott, spent a lot of his time mapping and keeping track of the timings."

The Apex also triggers the show's video cues. If that's not an especially unusual arrangement, it provides a clue to the production's seamlessness. "We're all essentially working with light," Stanton says, "and it needs to work together. When the scenic team was in the theatre, working with the automation, video and lighting riffed off each other, exploring a certain color palette. George was right there with me and vice versa. His content suggested a certain world, so I would try to match the movement and color. It was really fun. We didn't need to have a lot of long conversations; we both just watched the stage and responded to one another. That was a real pleasure."

All this working together paid off, delivering a thoroughly original musical drama told in a remarkably unified style. "I'm so proud of the collaboration," Stanton concludes. "We've gotten a lot of recognition, and almost everyone who speaks about it mentions its seamless quality. It's a design ballet of sorts. I was a musician in my former life; in music, you have many different players, and you're creating a holistic sound. That's always the goal with theatre, but some collaborations work better than others. For me, the biggest accomplishment [with *Maybe Happy Ending*] is that holistic quality; everyone is pulling in the same direction, firing on all cylinders, and the result feels complete. We made something fairly unique in the scheme of Broadway musicals, and it feels like there's a lot of integrity there."

Other key personnel include Kat Morrill (assistant lighting designer), Ron Schwier (production electrician), Robert Lilly (associate production electrician), Mike Sbrocchi (Apex operator), and Chloe Czinsky and Marc Grimshaw (followspot operators). Maybe Happy Ending continues its open-ended run at the Belasco.