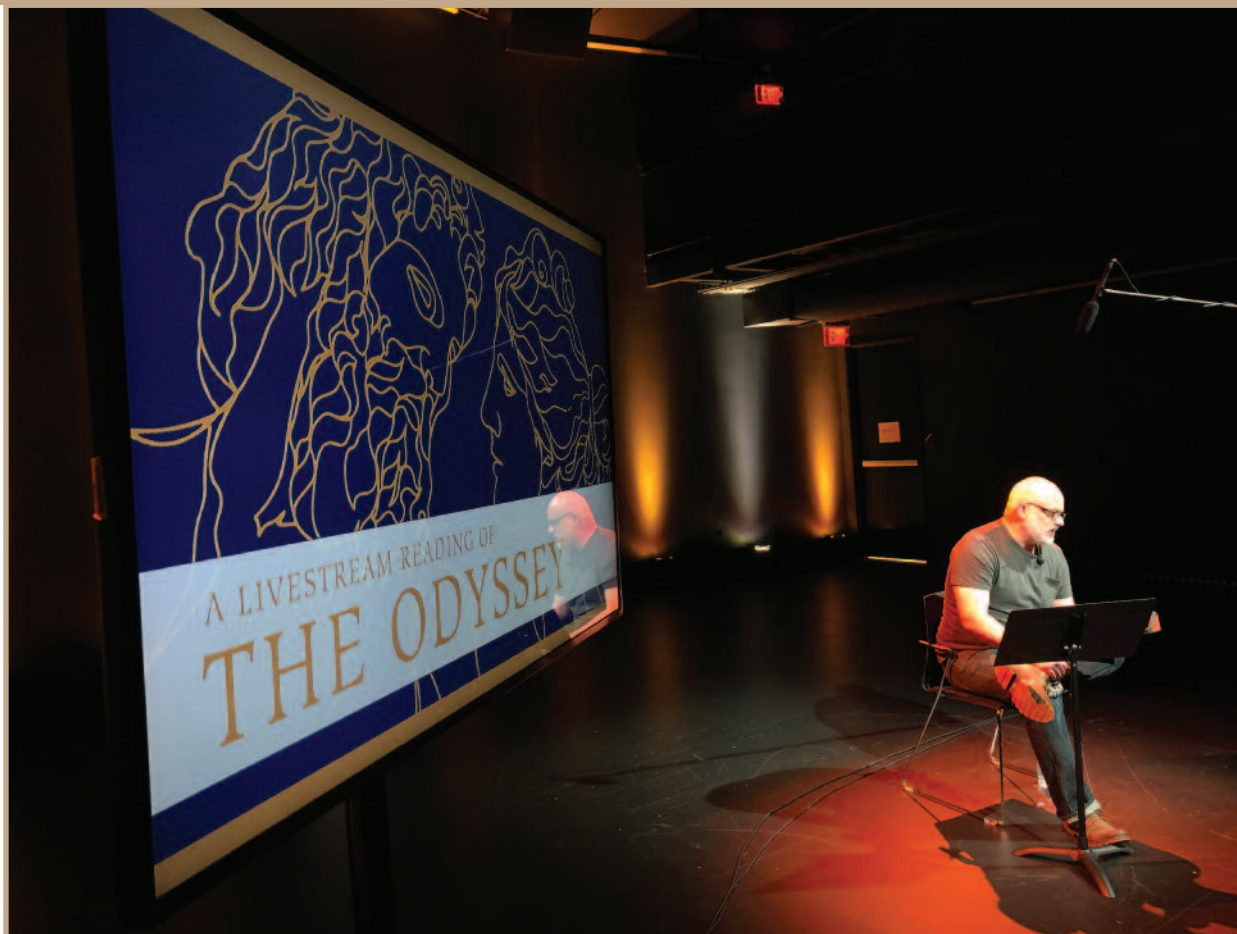


# An Oklahoma Odyssey

By: David Barbour



Half of the readings were livestreamed from the Te Ata Theatre at Oklahoma Contemporary.

## Or how to design lighting for a live event, half a continent away

When the world is going mad, what better time is there to delve into a Homeric epic that still stuns with a timeless picture of humanity at its simultaneous best and worst? That was the idea behind the livestream reading of *The Odyssey* that, in August, emanated from Oklahoma Contemporary, an arts center in Oklahoma City. Produced in partnership with the Kirkpatrick Foundation, the event fea-

tured a six-day series of Emily Wilson's translation of the classic text. (Her version was called "Homer for scalawags" by *The Los Angeles Review of Books*, adding that it is "cunning, eloquent, murderous; in sum, complicated." *The Guardian* called it "crisp and musical" and "a cultural landmark.")

Running across the last two weekends in August, the program offered four books of *The Odyssey* each night,

each book presented by a different reader. A highly eclectic crew was tapped to take part, including the indie pop singer Leslie Feist; Oklahoma City mayor David Holt; Raffi Barsoumian, from the TV series *The Code*; Lee Ranaldo, co-founder of Sonic Youth; Broadway's Bebe Neuwirth; and Wilson herself, a professor of classical studies at University of Pennsylvania and a MacArthur and Guggenheim fellow. Half of the books were read from the Te Ata Theater at Oklahoma Contemporary; the others were beamed in from remote locations.

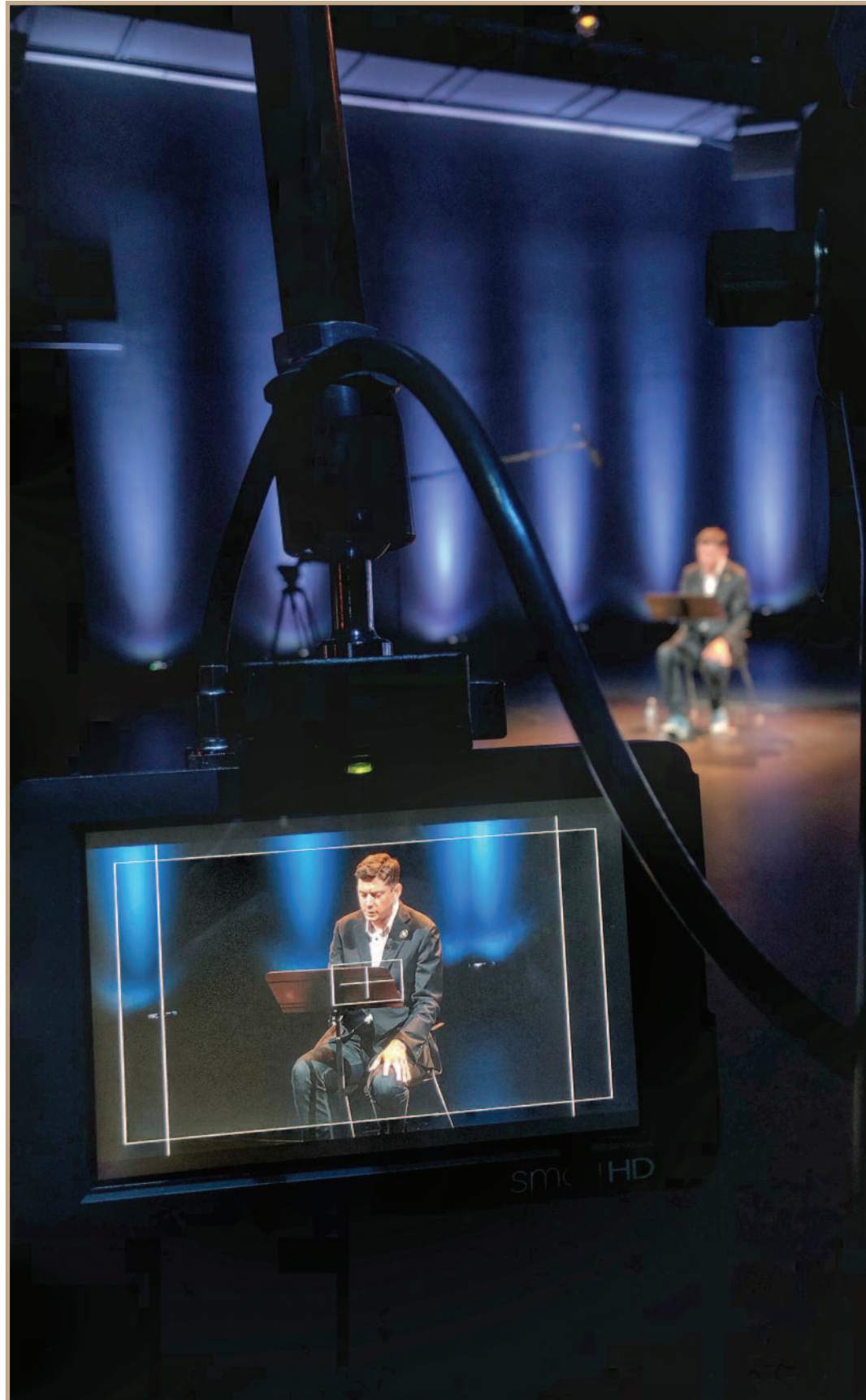
According to promotional materials

from Oklahoma Contemporary, “This marathon reading series aimed to digitally recreate the experience of listening together to a tale told thousands of times, throughout histories and across continents—to see if we can find ourselves in Odysseus’ ever-turning voyage to find home.”

One participant from the project who worked far from its home base was Portland, Oregon-based lighting designer Carl Faber, whose eclectic resume includes a variety of theatre, opera, and dance projects. Taking advantage of online technology, he designed the lighting for the Oklahoma City readings—a methodology that may prove to be a paradigm for many designers, at least for the near future.

Faber says he got involved with the project through Jeremiah Matthew Davis, Oklahoma Contemporary’s artistic director, his former colleague at the New York City-based theatre company Woodshed Collective. (Among other things, Faber designed the multilevel, multifaceted lighting for *The Tenant*, an immersive theatre experience staged on several floors of an Upper West Side church.) “They’ve been building a home for Oklahoma Contemporary for several years,” Faber says. “They had their grand opening on the day before COVID-19 shut everything down.” (The venue has since reopened, with social distancing rules in place.)

Like every other arts venue in the world, Oklahoma Contemporary found itself deprived of a mission until the idea of *The Odyssey* came up. “Jeremiah reached out to me, saying he was producing the reading,” Faber recalls. “I offered to make a light plot and send it. But the more we thought about it, the more we felt there was a way to remote it in, using a live feed setup so I could see what was happening. I’ve never tried to control an [ETC] Ion remotely. I know the standard line from ETC, which is to never put a light board on the Internet.” Still, the times demand flexible solutions



Video production was by CNS Productions.



Faber says that ETC Augment3d was especially helpful in terms of choosing effective angles in the unusually configured theatre space.

and it seemed worth a try.

Next, Faber says, “I reached out to Ben Travis.” The two know each other from the Broadway musical *The Book of Mormon*, on which Travis was associate lighting designer and Faber assistant LD. “Ben has an Ion. I asked him if we could try screen-sharing techniques. We got to work using normal Mac Screen Share and it was working quickly; we were able to get decent refresh rates. One thing after another fell into line. With this setup, I could see what was happening, live, in the theatre. My phone worked fast enough to function as a headset.”

Most important for this project, Augment3d, ETC’s new 3D visualizer, had become available in Beta form. Faber says that, in the past, he hasn’t

been especially interested in such products. “I’ve used a couple of previz programs but many of my projects are small to midsize and there’s often not enough time for preprogramming.” However, he continues, with Augment3d, it was easy to get a model built quickly. “I had a version of the Oklahoma Contemporary theatre and was able to start looking at angles. Also, Augment3d produced presentation-quality renderings. Jeremiah and the members of the video team were super-impressed by them.” Overall, he says, “Augment3d was useful in the concept development stage; I could get a show file prewritten in the 3D environment before we had our one day of tech.”

Working at home, the designer built

his light plot and prepared a show file for the theatre’s console, complete with levels and timings. In a guest post on the Oklahoma Contemporary’s website, he writes, “As I drafted my plot, I’d confirm in the virtual environment that my shots would work and we’d be able to achieve the design I’d conceived. By the time the plot was finished, I’d created a fully programmed show file that looked beautiful in 3D, ready to load into the on-site lighting console, all without ever having stepped foot in the theatre.” He also notes that because the final version of Augment3d wasn’t ready until the pandemic hit, this is one of the first productions to make use of it.

Faber, who decided on a single look for each book of *The Odyssey*,

made use of the theatre's house gear. "They have [ETC] ColorSource Spots and PARs as well as some incandescent Source Fours," he says. "It's a cool room, but it's super-challenging, an octagonal shape with no right angles and a walking grid with walkways that form a weird pattern. This is where Augment3d was really valuable." For example, the fundamentals of the design included pools for each of the readers with shapes on the floor behind them. "With the complicated grid structure, it would be difficult to know what my angles would have looked like without a 3D environment."

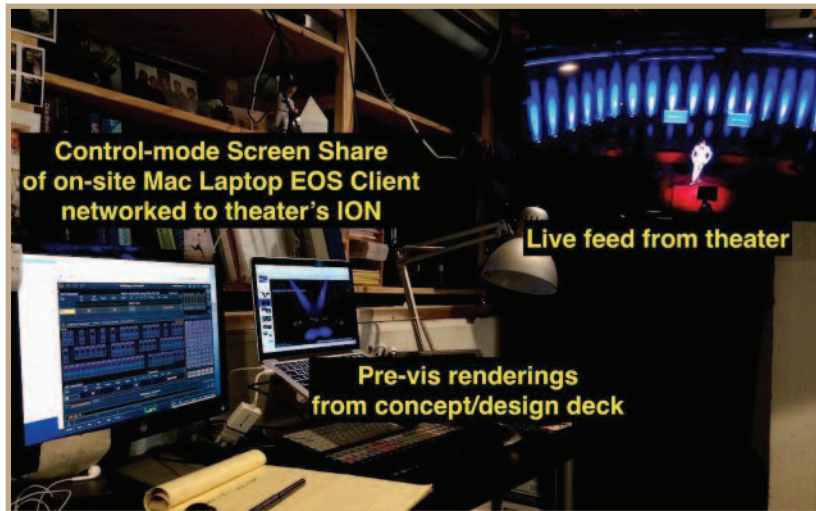
Once the rig was hung, Faber worked via video hookup using Screen Share. In the previously mentioned web post, he writes, "Prior to load-in, to allow the crew to get the lights roughly pointed in the correct position without me, I took rendering captures from Augment3d, and prepared what I called 'pre-focus charts' using Moving Light Assistant...[which is] usually used after a show has opened to archive how lights and looks appeared onstage.

"What made it work was the fact that I saw on my monitor what the audience would be seeing [via livestream]. If I was trying to light for a live audience, it would have been more difficult to get it right. In that sense, I did feel pretty connected. It was not something I would choose to do, but it was a way of working; I was impressed that it was as successful as it was. To Jeremiah's credit, they put a lot of trust in the process. They knew that if I encountered any issues, I could fix it. Still, it was super-bizarre not to be in the room, face-to-face with other people. There was a video team that I've never worked with before and it was hard not being there to respond to what they were doing. But in terms of writing the cues, Screen Share was so reliable and fast; it didn't feel noticeably slower than being in front of a console that I was controlling from the keyboard.

"All through the tech, I was on the



Faber working from his home studio in Portland.



Faber's home studio setup explained.

phone to Oklahoma," he continues. "When you run Mac Screen share, you can run an audio link, which allowed me to talk to the entire control room. During tech, Jeremiah was there with his crew. It was like I was in the room." In the website essay he adds, "During my earlier preprogramming sessions, I had set up the console's cues and submasters to be easily operated by one on-site lighting technician, Nolan Baker, who could walk around the whole theatre troubleshooting and fine-tuning adjustments, with me in his ear, talking over the phone via his AirPods...essentially, cross-continental

intercom.

"I've never worked this way before," he adds. "The more I did, the more I wanted to document it. I've known designers to use previz to save time in the theatre, or Screen Share to have a cue list while watching the show from the library, or to use a phone to call the technician. I combined them all into one project."

On the website, he writes, "Most of us who work in this business utilized some form of remote digital collaboration pre-COVID, but this is often in-person, and it's one of my favorite parts of the process. It's my belief that

## CLOSE-UP: DESIGNING FROM A DISTANCE, PART I

a multisensory experience of any object (holding it in your hand, hearing how it moves, breathing it in) commits it to a different and deeper part of our brain. That will never be possible over Zoom. Reading the full body language of a collaborator and aligning your attention fully to their thoughts and presence...it's something we're losing in physically distant interaction, and there's no doubt that it's detrimental to a remote design process. I have no work-around suggestions or brilliant ideas for mitigating that, except to say that in this instance, in my physical absence, a PDF of 3D renderings was pretty useful."

Once performances started, Faber adds, "I cut the umbilical cord. I didn't want to have that level of control. I had a remote view of the stage with Screen Share. About an hour before the livestream began, I turned it over to the board operator, who had instructions on how to make adjustments as needed. That was where the remote part stopped."

Although the project was successful, Faber admits to a certain ambivalence about it. In the website essay, he writes, "At all times I felt both technologically connected, but emotionally disconnected, and that is not a comfortable place for an artist. The discomfort might have been 'worth it' to achieve a positive result for the viewers, but, from my experience, remote design is still very much experimental, and we collectively have a long way to go to fully replicate the experience. Technically, it's also important to remember that this particular system of remote working was feasible largely because what I was seeing on my own monitors at home was the same view the livestream audience would be seeing. Designing through an RGB screen for a live audience looking at full-spectrum light would require a much more advanced setup. This was, throughout, an experiment, and while it would be fair to call it a success, it would also be fair not to draw too many conclusions from it, without a wider sample size."

Still, for the near term, many designers may find themselves working this way. Fortunately, the technology exists so at least it's possible to work with more than reasonable effectiveness. But may we all be in a theatre again soon. 📡