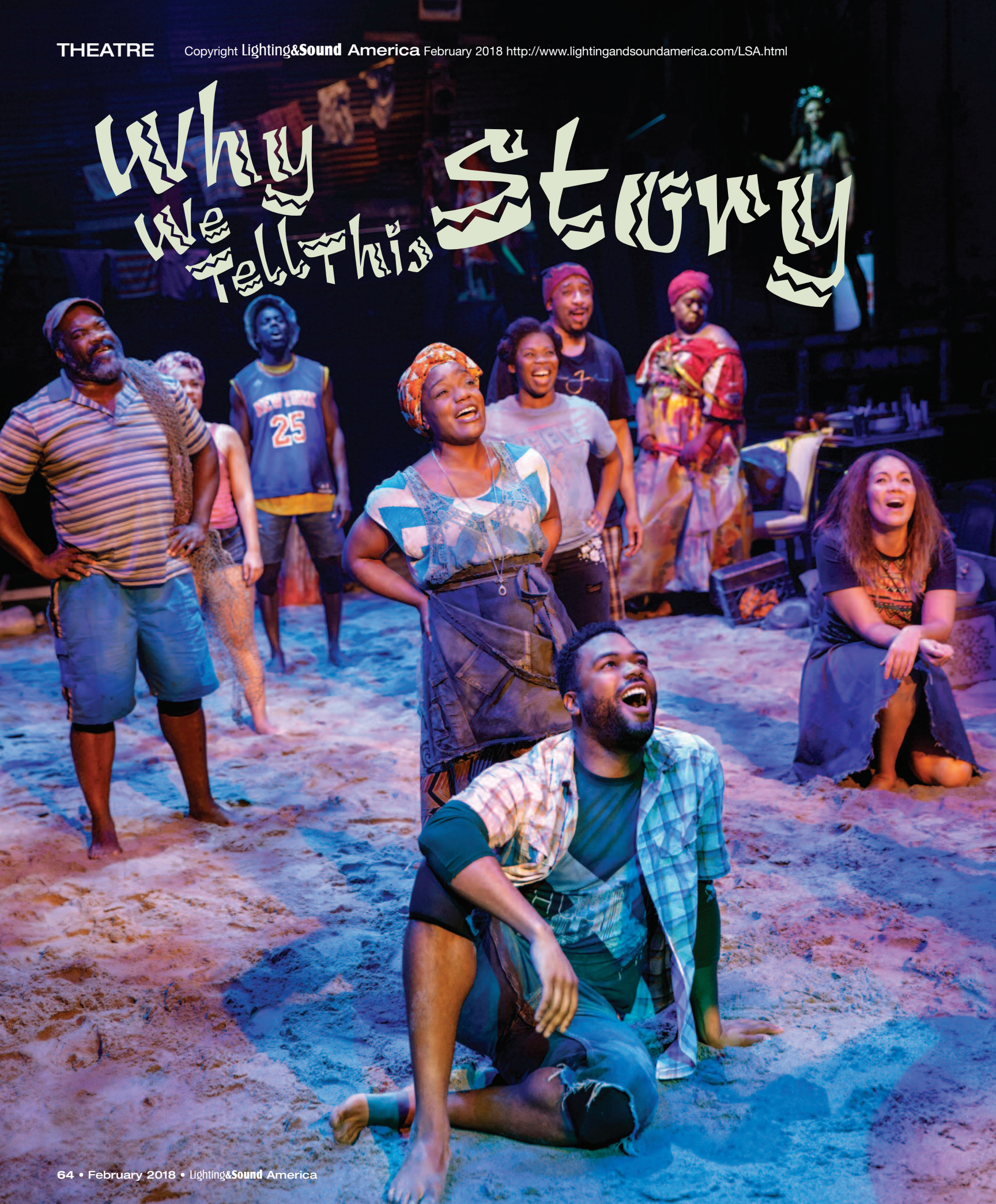
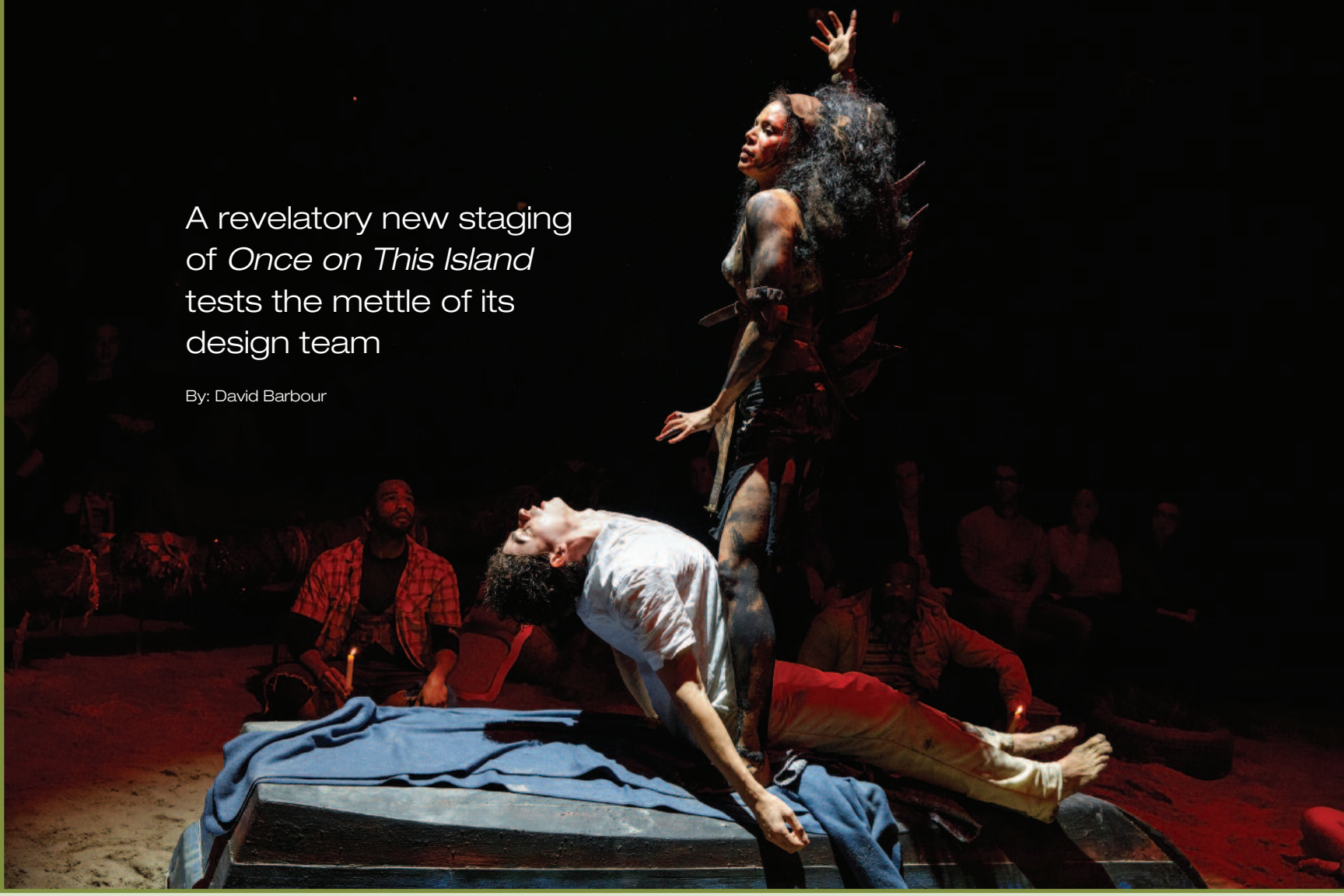


Why We Tell This Story



A revelatory new staging of *Once on This Island* tests the mettle of its design team

By: David Barbour



Left: Because so much of the show takes place outdoors, the lighting is based on a foundation of daylight. Within that framework, Fisher and Eisenhauer created looks that were suitable to each of the god characters who intervene in the action (above).

Photos: Joan Marcus

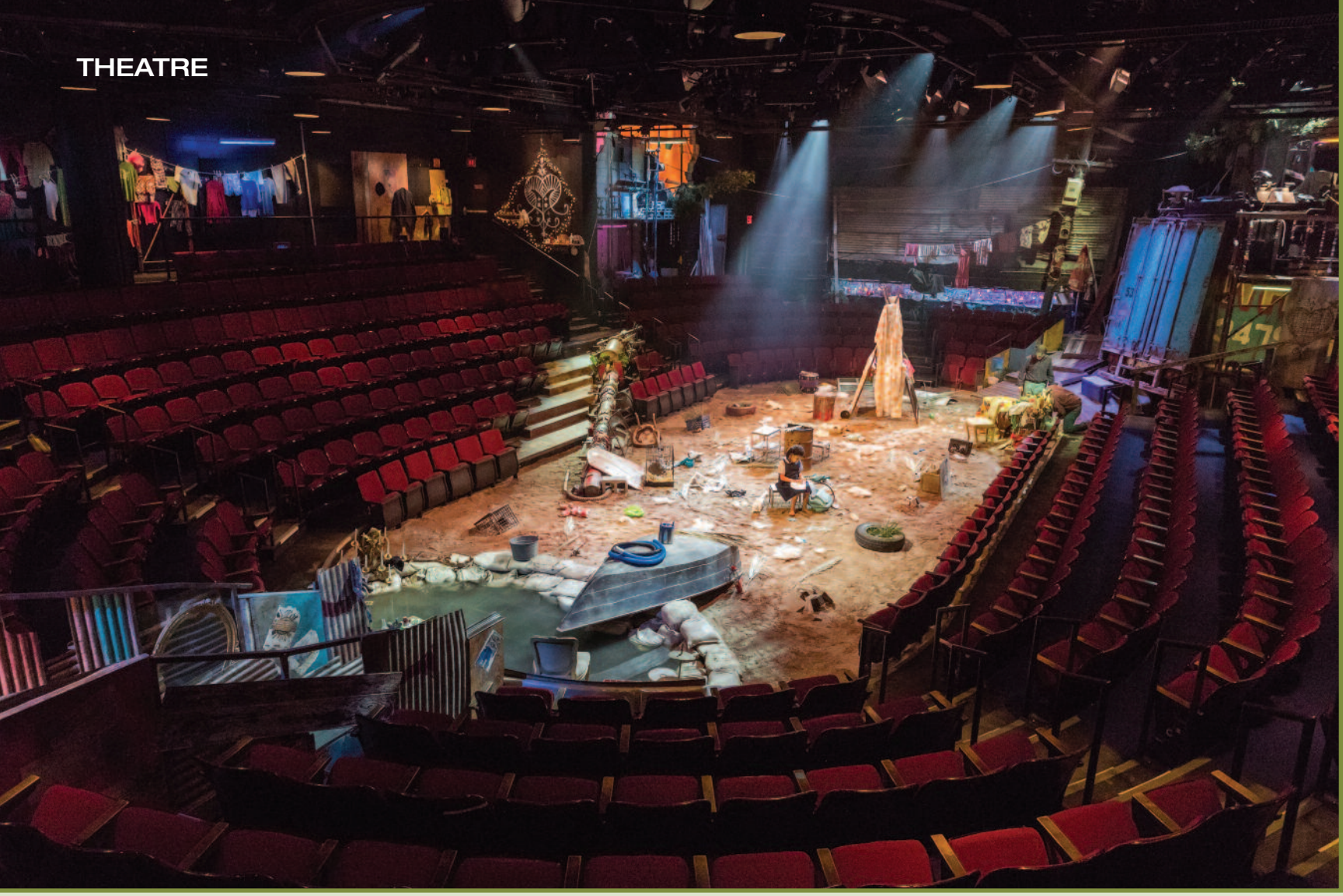
Each Broadway season has its musical revivals, but few of them are as revelatory as *Once on This Island*, now playing at the Circle in the Square Theatre. Thanks to the work of the director Michael Arden and his design team, a show that one thought one knew well seems freshly imagined and very much of the moment.

Once on This Island—book and lyrics by Lynn Ahrens, music by Stephen Flaherty—was a solid performer of the 1990-91 season, running 469 performances. Based on Rosa Guy's novel, *My Love, My Love*, it tells a magic-realist tale of love, race, and class on an unnamed island very much like Haiti. Ti Moune, an orphan discovered by a middle-aged married couple after a hurricane, grows up poor but with an unquenchable zest for life; on the verge of adulthood, she rescues a young man, Daniel, from an auto accident. Nursing him back to health, she falls for him.

However, Daniel is one of the "beauxhommes," the class of wealthy, light-skinned blacks who inhabit the capital city and who ape the manners of their French colonizers. Daniel is spirited back to the city by his family, but Ti Moune, undaunted, embarks on a hazardous journey to find him. Installed as a servant, she gets him back on his feet. He appears to return her love, but a shattering revelation awaits when she appears at a ball thrown by his family. The fallout is swift and tragic, but a reconciliation of sorts is achieved in the next generation, when Daniel's son finds love with a girl very much like Ti Moune. The divisions defining life on the island are, at long last, dissolved.

If the story of *Once on This Island* is grounded in the social striations imposed on Caribbean islands by Europeans, it also has a strong element of the fantastic. Ti Moune is watched over by four gods who sometimes intervene in the action: Agwe, god of water; Asaka, mother of the Earth; Erzulie, goddess of love, and Papa Ge, demon of death. In a key plot point, Ti Moune bargains with Papa Ge, offering her life for Daniel's.

Many productions of *Once on This Island* depict the island as a sun-splashed paradise; however, audiences entering the Circle in the Square Theatre discover an immersive set design that strikes a startlingly different tone. The sand-covered deck is loaded with debris—



In Laffrey's design, the musical's island setting is a storm-swept, hardscrabble place. Note the pond of water, overturned boat, laundry lines, felled electric pole, and various pieces of debris.

crates, tires, an overturned rowboat, a felled electrical pole—surrounded by corrugated tin walls on which laundry lines have been hung. A truck, its back door open, sits at a precarious angle. A vomitorium is flooded with water. Cast members appear, gathering around a fire in an oil drum. There is nothing idyllic about this setting; it is poor and storm-ravaged, a hardscrabble piece of rock.

The set alters one's perception of the opening number, "We Dance," which, despite is upbeat tone, establishes the island's class structure and often difficult way of life. When the company sings, "We are dancing just to stay alive," the words have never seemed more meaningful. *Once on This Island* opened on December 9, two months after Hurricane Maria; current events have given this production an immediacy that its creators could never have predicted.

Arriving at this concept and realizing a musical in-the-round in the Circle in the Square posed a series of challenges that called on the ingenuity of the creative team. Everyone interviewed for this piece uses the word "organic" to describe the quality that was their goal. It's fair to say that the goal has been achieved, with style.

On the beach

Once on This Island's set designer, Dane Laffrey, says, "I love the show, but I had never seen it. It's set in Haiti, and I felt strongly that we couldn't gloss over what that means at this moment. If we were going to present the piece in an honest way, we would have to honestly acknowledge the Haitian people and their environment. *Their* island."

As part of the pitch to the musical's writers in early 2016, Laffrey says, "I pulled together images of Haiti, and also New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, and showed them to Lynn and Stephen. From word-one, we were talking about the world of the show in terms of real disaster and survival. A year later, there was a workshop/backer's audition, which showcased the show's new sound. [The production has new orchestrations, by AnnMarie Milazzo and Michael Starobin, with additional orchestrations by Haley Bennett and Javier Diaz, and "found" instrument

Photo: Andrew Kluger

design by John Bertles and Bash the Trash.] Ken [Davenport, the lead producer] wanted a set model on display; we prepared a first version of the design, set cheekily in an unmistakable model of Circle in the Square, though. at the time, we didn't officially have that theatre.

"A real game-changer came in April, when Ken flew Michael and me to Haiti for research and auditions. It was extraordinary—a confirmation of our visual research, certainly, but there is no way, just from images, to understand what that place is about. The destruction is almost baroque. There's something awe-inspiring about how it is completely shattered on one level, but also forward-moving and dynamic. The culture of re-use and rebuilding is really inspiring. We took hundreds of photos of details that were invaluable. The first version of the design was mostly about collision and destruction; I saw that needed to change—that we needed to add a spirit of regrowth and rebuilding."

"After our trip, we reorganized the space and changed the way the seating worked to make it more democratic, with improved sight lines. We added the vocabulary of architectural walls that had been shattered but were being rebuilt. We crystallized the relationship between the space and the design: they needed to be one and the same. Both the theatre and the island needed to feel like they had been through a series of natural disasters as a united entity."

Laffrey notes that most of the objects used in the design were purchased: "For example, the truck is a real truck. The show was built at PRG-Scenic Technologies; they cut it apart, made it modular, and reinforced it to support weight on the roof. I love using real objects; each comes with a history, a resonance, and a soul. It's important for a piece like this, which has so much heart." Not every item is a found object, he adds: "The boat was built, because it had to be really light and also sturdy, as it performs a variety of roles." The props team, led by Alison Mantilla and Emiliano Pares, also played an enormous role in providing what Laffrey calls "an incredible library of stuff" used to detail the environment.

Arden, Laffrey says, "led the charge" on using the objects in key staging moments, such as Daniel's car crash (with him holding a steering wheel and careening through a fog) and the repurposing of the boat as a hut. "Basically," he adds, "I gave him a sandbox to play in."

One issue that arose was how to stage the number "The Sad Tale of the Beauxhommes," a Brechtian number that temporarily halts the action to detail the history of the class to which Daniel belongs. "We felt like we had to contextualize it," Laffrey says. "There's a lot of important exposition in the number, and we needed the right visual aids. We thought of shadow play." Thus, the number is staged behind a backlit muslin, the silhouettes of the performers adding a distinctive theatrical touch.

Laffrey and his team continued to detail the environment in a very hands-on way until moments before the show froze. "As we installed the space, it became clear almost immediately that we would never finish, exactly; we would just, at some point, have to be done. I wanted to create unique details in every nook and cranny of that room. Many are details that only a few audience members will ever see. Ideally, this approach conspires to create a space that is genuinely overwhelming. I wanted the feeling that when you walk into the theatre, you really can't take it all in."

All in all, Laffrey says, "It was a very long process, the single longest amount of time I've spent on any one project. It was two years of thinking about it all the time: Could we do it this way? Would it be wildly discordant with the piece? Are we taking it someplace that it can't go? When we finally saw it finished in the room, it felt right."

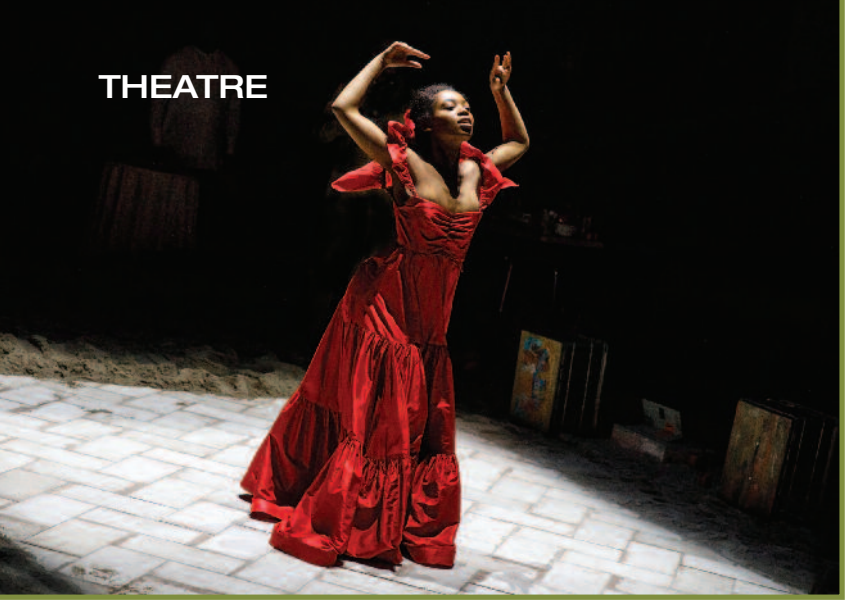
Sunshine and shadow

The lighting designers Jules Fisher and Peggy Eisenhauer note that Laffrey's set, and Arden's use of it, provided them with many intriguing challenges. "When you look at the set, you see it simultaneously close up and at a distance, focusing on details while also taking in its full breadth; it creates an incredible depth of field," Eisenhauer says. Fisher adds that the lighting plays a key role in providing "a widespread view of the all-encompassing and highly detailed set."

"We started with the idea of the set as an exterior location," Eisenhauer says. "So much of the play takes place outdoors that we wanted to create a foundation of daylight for it. Within that, we could create the interior spaces like the hut and the hotel." (The script refers to Daniel's family home as "a hotel," in the sense of the French term "hôtel particulier," meaning a grand residence.) Fisher adds that the creation of sunlight was "a tall order to design without a sky element. The theatre's overhead is so close, you can touch it." Eisenhauer notes that they chose "an array of the newer sort of LED wash lights to create the backbone of the outdoor feeling." The main units used to create the daylight foundation are TMB Solaris Flares; often used in concert touring as blinders/strobes, they can also function as a washlight/softlight, offering 1,000W of brightness and RGBW color mixing.

Creating softlight in-the-round raised other issues, Fisher says: "You look across the stage and see the audience on the other side—the audience is a perpetual background to the stage image. How do you get sunlight on the stage and not on the people sitting near it?" Also, in this configuration, he adds, "The biggest surface isn't a cyc or a drop; it's the floor," and how best to treat that became a major question. "There's no way to make it black; instead, we filled in the shadow area with contrasting light," he adds.

Both designers mention the difficulty of isolating actors, using a relatively low rig, without creating too much spillage on the sand deck or the audience. Eisenhauer



Because the cast members almost never go offstage, they are double-mic'd as a precautionary measure.

says, "Michael wanted the classic theatrical use of followspots, but we agreed that a traditional kind of angle would have put too much light in the audience's eyes. We tried an opposing pair of unusually high-angled followspot positions; they give us frontlight and backlight at all times, with 180° coverage per unit." Fisher adds that the positions "are asymmetrical. We shifted them off the centerline, which creates subconscious tension by giving the audience an altered perspective view, while allowing the fall-off edges of the spotlights an elegant and tidy area of the set to land, away from the audience seating."

In choosing a followspot, Eisenhauer says, "We used a nontraditional unit [two Martin by Harman MAC Viper Profiles, fitted with handles] for more range of movement; using a moving light meant we had control of every parameter. Normally, the operator puts in color and makes the beam bigger or smaller. Here, they can invest all of their movements in the fluid and unusually vast 180° x 120° range of motion; the pan and tilt are disabled at the computer." The Viper was also chosen because of the theatre's configuration: "We couldn't get a traditionally built followspot with the range of motion we needed; we also couldn't find the brightness we needed for short range distance." Other plus factors are the Vipers' small size, light weight, and lack of noise.

This approach proved to be the right solution to the challenges of Arden's staging, the designers note. "We use these spots as a way of having a kind of in-motion isolation," Fisher says. "It's not so much about lighting faces; it's an intimate space and doesn't require so much face light. This scheme is about keeping the action in focus." Eisenhauer says, "Because we have the same units elsewhere in the rig, they blend in very well; we put vignette gobos in them to deliver feathery edges of light, rather than hard-edge circles."

Having established the foundational daylight look and having found a method for isolating the characters, the next big challenge was to indicate the musical's varied levels of reality. There are interior scenes—in Daniel's bedroom and the hotel's ballroom, for example—as well as the backlighting shadow projection effect for "The Sad Tale of the Beauxhommes," and a distinct look for each of the gods, all of which was worked out in talks with Arden and with considerable trial and error in the theatre. "We didn't pre-plot these elements," Eisenhauer notes. "We would begin a scene, creating the sense of the time of day, and as the gods arrived, we put each of them into a kind of magical color reality. We worked it out, moment by moment. That was the joy of collaborating with Michael in

The band is located on the top of this truck, inhabiting the same space as the cast and audience.

dreal time. We might try a look for one of the gods, and he could say, 'Try the opposite,' or 'Try something like this'."

Noting that there is "so much incredible detail in the set," Eisenhauer says that she and Fisher pick out different objects at different moments, for example, highlighting the skulls hanging inside the truck; such details might not be noticed without a dedicated accent of light. At other times, to make the set less prominent, she says, "We mute it with a coating of color; it's a challenge to relax that environment, to be free of it to focus on one or two performers." Fisher says, "Each god character has a shrine area on which we would put an accent light during his or her scene." The accrual of so many details has a cumulative effect, allowing the audience to immerse itself in the world of the show.

Other notable aspects of the design include lighting for the pond, facilitated by a pump that keeps the water moving, and a stunning rainbow look for the finale, created using crushed glass gobos. Overall, Eisenhauer says, the biggest challenge was "the requirement to keep multiple lines of action happening simultaneously. It was a real

Top photo: Joan Marcus; Bottom pphoto: Andrew Kluger

process in terms of making it move fluidly, drawing the eye to the next thing the director wanted to reveal." As always, the designers worked closely with the score, to make their cueing flow easily and cinematically. Eisenhauer adds, "We were lucky; not many directors are as innately musical as Michal Arden [who has also been a musical theatre leading man]. He understands the musical aspect of lighting and made a big contribution to our work."

Lighting gear, supplied by PRG, included 20 MAC Viper Performances, 13 Mac Viper Profiles, 109 ETC Source LED Series 2 Lustrs, 97 Source Four PARs, 160 Source Four Lekos, 20 TMB Solaris Flares, 11 Martin Atomic 3000 strobes, four Mini-10s, 26 L&E ministrips, and 15 Philips Color Kinetics ColorBlaze TRX. Control is provided by an ETC Ion 6000 console.

Citing the work of programming a variety of time frames, color washes, bright sunlight washes, isolations, and chiaroscuro looks, Fisher says, "We worked on it up to the last minute. We needed the support of our producer, Ken Davenport, to get it all done. Ken afforded us the time to get everything polished. He embraced quality."

Sound in-the-round

The production's in-the-round configuration also created many puzzles for the sound designer Peter Hylenski. "It's a great space for playing a show, but it's very awkward in terms of its geometry in relation to a sound system," he says. Obviously, a standard system layout, involving speakers on the left and right of the proscenium with a center cluster overhead, wouldn't work, if for no other reason than there is no proscenium. Instead, he says, "The system ends up hanging very high; the closer you get to the performers, the more overhead the speakers become—which makes it difficult to image a voice back down to an actor. The farther back in the room you are seated, the more the speakers can fire toward you, rather than above you."

The designer adds, "The tricky nature of this production is that, if there were one specific challenge we had to overcome, we could set our sights on it. But there were so many unique challenges that required solutions. Normally, there would be a preferred playing location onstage for the cast; here, the cast performs throughout the space, sometimes within the audience seating, so the system needed to be flexible enough to accommodate this. The vocal arrangements are written such that the ensemble is always onstage and singing orchestrations together with the band. At one point in development, it was conceived as an a-capella show."

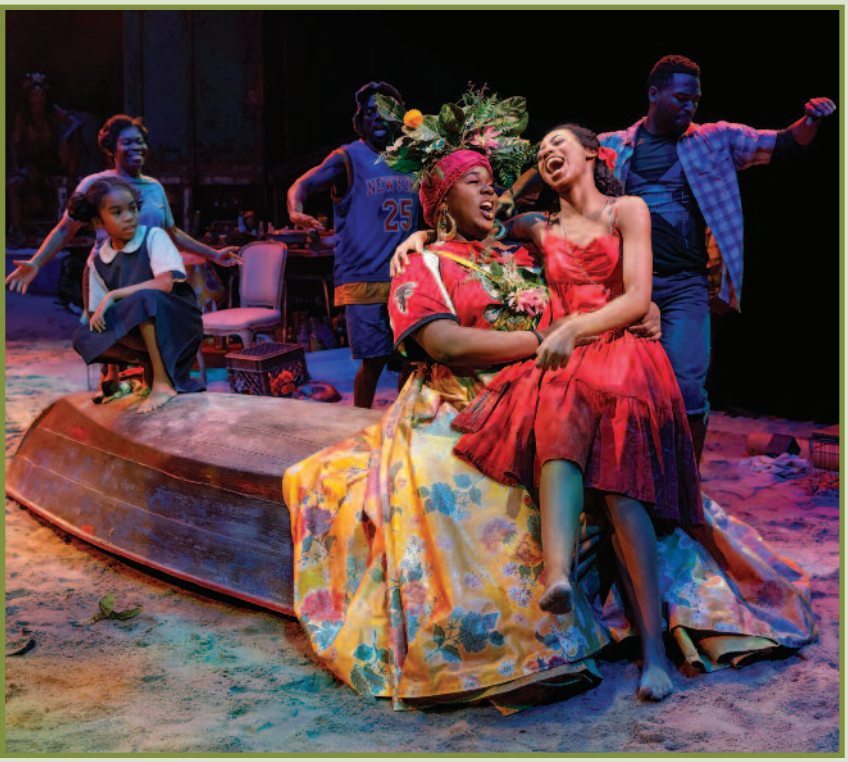
Therefore, Hylenski says, the system consists of "concentric rings of loudspeakers working from the center out. We have a front-firing system of two concentric rings and surround components of two additional concentric rings." The latter, he adds, "fills in not just surround effects, but also enhances the sound of the room, helping to bring the entire space to life. When we started tech rehearsals, I used the front-firing system more conventionally, and everything seemed smaller than I wanted. It was almost too clinical, too focused, too small. Using the surrounds in unconventional ways, I was able to add width and depth."

The front-firing portion of the rig consists of Meyer Sound UPJ-1Ps, chosen in part for their small size. The surround system consists of L-Acoustics MTD-108 passive speakers. The front system is managed using Meyer Galileo Galaxy networkable loudspeaker processors. "The Galaxies are set up as a cross-point matrix delay," Hylenski says. "We divided the stage into eight distinct playing areas. Each of the 23 listening zones are then timed to each playing area. It took a while to set up, but it helps to guide the listener to where the performers are located on stage."

The remainder of the system is controlled with a Meyer Sound D-Mitri digital audio platform. "Normally," the designer says, "I would use D-Mitri as the final output stage and matrix. But, for this project, because the cross-point matrix delay only exists in the Galaxy, I took a different approach. The control systems are overlapping in their capabilities, but the payoff is the ability to position sources in the space more accurately with a delayed matrix."

Also, he says, "The band is located on top of a truck, upstage left; it's very near to some audience members and farther from others, so we're trying to balance the volume of the orchestra to every single listener. The beauty of the-

Photo: Joan Marcus



Foldback speakers for the cast members are hidden in and around the set.

atre in-the-round is, wherever you sit, you see a slightly different show. With sound, however, people expect to hear the same show. You need to accept a certain amount of deviation in a situation like this."

He adds, "I'm eternally thankful to Dane for agreeing to hide loudspeakers for front fill and foldback in and around the set. There are milk crates, tires, and electrical boxes scattered around, with Meyer MM-4 loudspeakers hidden inside them. The front fills cover the first few rows of the audience, and they help bring the vocal image down, too."

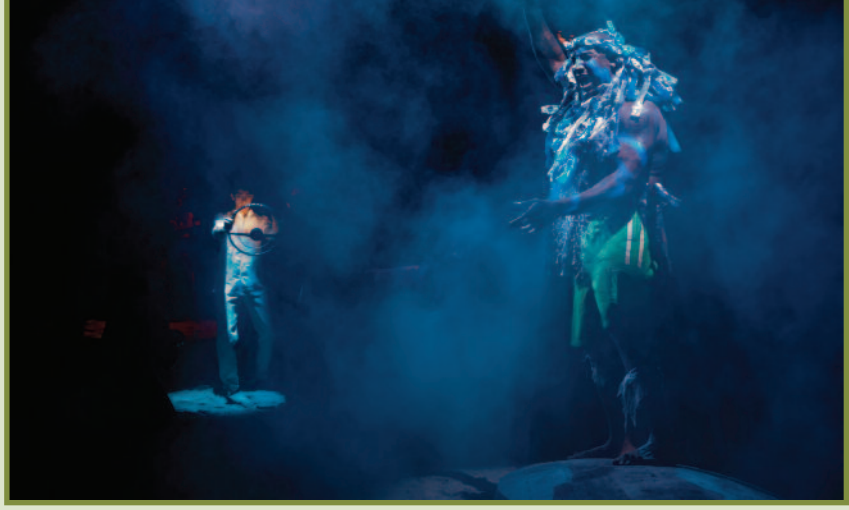
Elaborating on the foldback system, Hylenski says, "The cast needs to hear the music from the band, but there's really no separation between actors and audience, as you would have in a proscenium theatre. We had to find a way to control what the performers are hearing while not polluting the audience mix. This is especially true in underscored moments, when the cast is listening for specific cues while the house mix requires the music be pulled back. Generally, this is done either through automated console adjustments or, dynamically, with the players in the band; there's a lot of teamwork between the music and sound departments."

Maintaining proper mic positions on the cast is trickier than usual, he says. "Almost the entire company remains onstage the entire show, with only a few offstage quick changes. Performers add or remove clothing or hats throughout the performance. Because of this, nearly everyone is doubled mic'd and, in some cases, we have radio transmitters built directly into hats." The actors wear Sennheiser MKE1s, paired with Lectrosonics SSM microtransmitters. "I've been using SSMs a lot recently. They sound great and the performers love the small size. Also, we can hide them easily; with every cast member fitted with two mics, it's important that the transmitters be as small as possible."

The show is run on a DiGiCo SD10T, located, unusually, in an open booth. "Even with no glass, it's still a booth, so the engineer doesn't hear the room as much as we'd like," Hylenski says. "Jake Scudder, our engineer, had to develop a reference between the room and the booth. He has a delay system to help compensate, but it's still challenging to make this arrangement work."

The SD10T was chosen, he says, "in part because of its physical size and because the programmability of the T [for theatre] software is great. Many of the console cues in the show move the radio mics between various subgroups, based on what vocal part the actor is singing. They also deal with tracking performers in the cross-point matrix. It's a challenging, yet rewarding, show to mix."

The sound effects, including an impressive storm, are delivered using the QLab 4 playback system, which, Hylenski says, "feeds into D-Mitri for spatialization and to add specific routing to the soundscape. Usually, I build the sound effects in ProTools, then bounce them to stems which are loaded into QLab. I'll often build sound effects against a rehearsal video to better determine length and timings. Once the sound is set in ProTools, I'll deconstruct it, so it can cue with the live action onstage."



Fisher and Eisenhauer devised unusual, asymmetrical followspot positions to isolate performers without spilling light on the audience.

Photo: Joan Marcus

He adds, "Michael wanted the storm to be terrifying and immersive. I use the Space Map feature in D-Mitri to move the wind elements around; there are two Meyer 1100LFC subwoofers in the ceiling to really shake the theatre for the thunder cues. Seeing news footage of the recent hurricanes, we also talked about what you might hear in a storm—the sound of a piece of tin roof rattling in the wind or the crash of debris. I took these elements and created a hyperrealistic sonic representation of the storm. These are positioned through certain speakers around the audience to add a sense of the destruction all around them.

Other gear includes Meyer UPX-4Ps and UPQ-1Ps, EAW UB12s, Yamaha MSP5s, eight Anchor AN-1000X boxes, and four d&b audiotechnik D&B E3s. Band mics consist of a mix of units from Shure, Sennheiser, Beyerdynamic, DPA, Neumann, and AKG. Processing includes items from dbx, Digigrid, T.C Electronic, and Waves. Communication is via a Clear-Com system.

Other key personnel include Justin Scribner (production stage manager), Kenneth J. McGee and Mary Kathryn Flynt (stage managers), Tim McMath (associate scenic designer), Justin Stasiw (associate sound designer), Greg Solomon (associate lighting designer), Chad Woerner (production carpenter), Phil Lojo and Simon Matthews (production sound), Stephen Atwell (production electrician), Matt Hudson (moving light programmer), Chris Doornbos (lead spotlight operator), German Pavon III (spotlight operator), Stewart Wagner (house electrician), Duane McKee (advance audio), Megan Lang (special effects programmer), Bridget O'Connor (assistant sound engineer), Jungah Han (assistant scenic designer), and Aaron Tacy (assistant lighting designer).

Having earned strong reviews, *Once on This Island* seems to have settled in for a healthy run and it is likely to be remembered when the awards season arrives. Thanks to the work of these artists, a show that first opened a quarter of a century ago feels thoroughly, urgently brand-new.