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Things That Go Bump in the Night

By: David Barbour



Creating spooky lighting and sound for Broadway's new haunting

The Broadway thriller is back, albeit in ectoplasmic form. A theatrical genre that was once a hardy perennial—think *Dial M for Murder*, *Sleuth*, and *Deathtrap*—has faded in recent decades, a victim of changing audience tastes. Which is why the announcement of *Paranormal Activity* seemed so counterintuitive: Would audiences show up for a newly minted ghost story filled with shock effects and things that go bump in the night?

A clue could be found in the crowds at *Stranger Things: The First Shadow*, which puts demogorgons and mind flayers onstage. Now, just up the street, at the August Wilson Theatre, *Paranormal Activity* is currently doing robust business. Unlike *Stranger Things*, *Paranormal Activity* is only distantly related to its source material. The popular film series of the same name is a classic of the found-footage genre, a storytelling format that would surely be difficult, if not impossible, to replicate in the theatre. Instead, Levi Holloway's script is an original that conforms only to the general contours of the films, placing a young couple in a new home where evil lurks.

In this case, James and Lou, Chicago transplants ensconced in a suburban London home, are beginning to wonder about the flickering lights, loud noises, and a TV that sometimes takes on a life of its own. Lou has a

All photos: Matthew Murphy



Above and opposite: Watson and her colleagues spend much of the show diverting the audience's attention, especially when sinister doings are afoot.

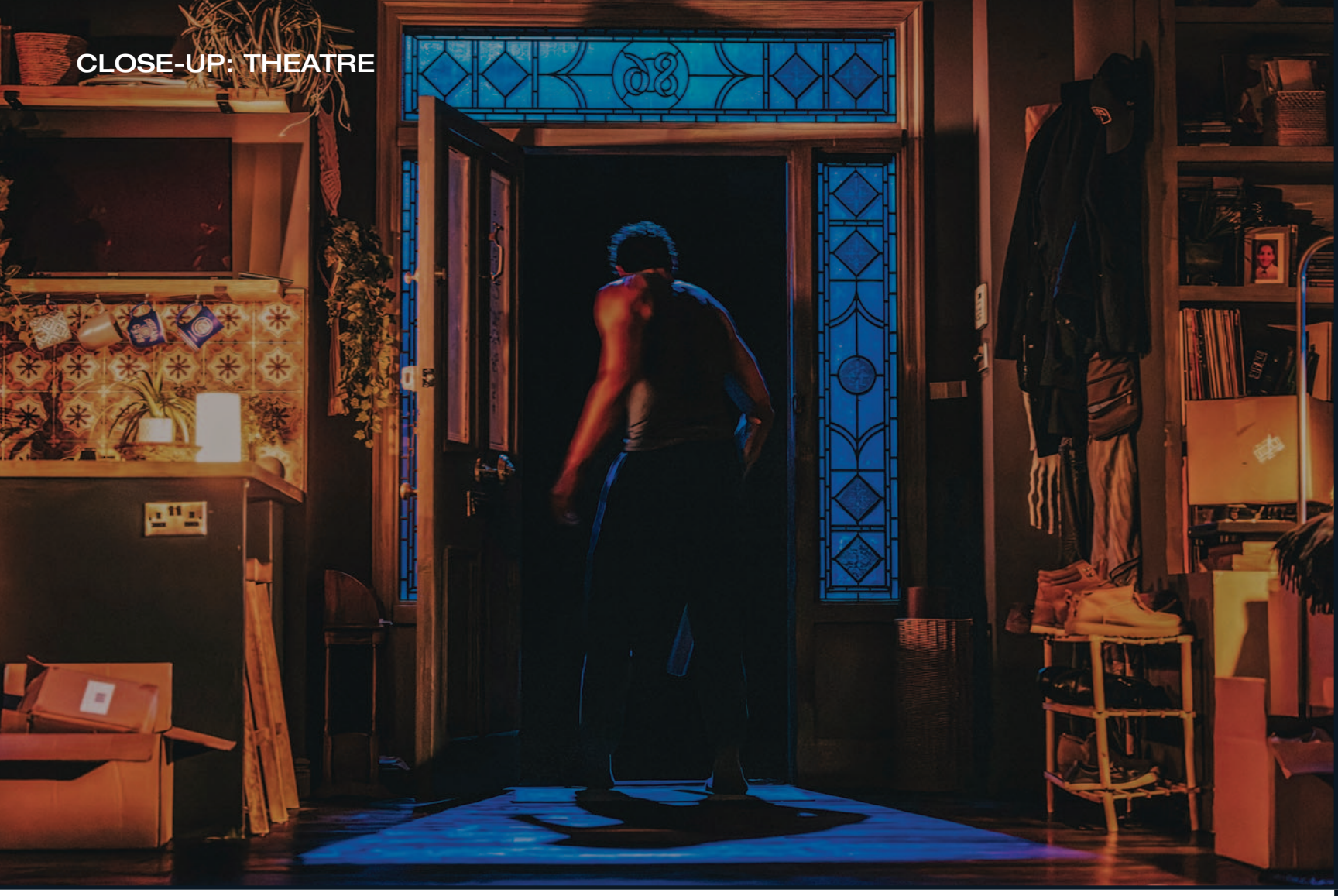
history of depression and blackouts, along with a hint of unexplained phenomena. James sees their new life in Britain, courtesy of a job promotion, as a chance to reboot their marriage and start a family. But their already shaky domestic life is further undermined by new disturbances, including bizarre experiences with doppelgängers and a séance that nearly blows the roof off the house. The already jumpy audience doesn't suspect it is being set up for a walloping twist. Our lips are sealed, but rest assured: Things are not what they seem.

With all the unexplained phenomena unfolding, *Paranormal Activity* makes unusual demands on its design team, especially Anna Watson (lighting) and Gareth Fry (sound), often in collaboration with Chris Fisher, whose illusions drive much of the production's scream factor. (With Jamie Harrison, he also worked on *Stranger Things*.) Both lighting and sound contribute heavily to the play's mounting atmosphere of dread.

Lighting

Watson, who made her Broadway debut last season with the drama *Giant*, about the controversial children's author Roald Dahl, acknowledges that one major challenge was working within Fly Davis' set, a two-level affair with an open kitchen/living room arrangement downstairs, and, upstairs, a bathroom and bedroom separated by a landing, at the back of which is another door. "Obviously, there are walls and ceilings everywhere," she notes. "The brief I gave myself was to make the lighting feel as real as possible, while making it feel as sculptural as possible. It was a beautifully collaborative experience; Fly and I spent time looking at window placements and the positioning of the set relative to the proscenium, so we could get booms in the right places. It was one of the biggest challenges, but it was met collectively."

To get into the living room, Watson says, "We use a lot of cross light," which generates "a constant fight with shadows; I was always trying to get as much of the cross light off the back wall as possible. We kind of get away with it when the shadows fall on the side walls, especially in this iteration because the August Wilson Theatre is so wide."



The practical units onstage "help me with the journey from light to darkness," Watson says. "As the characters break down, so does the set and lighting. At the end, we have just one of those little downlights."

In addition, she notes, she deploys "a lot of moving light presets" to pick out the principals. "Basically, every time somebody moves, we pick them up where they are, dipping down where they were before." She adds, laughing, "Getting them to nail down the blocking was a challenge. *Commit* to sitting on that sofa!"

Interestingly, followspots weren't an option, Watson says. "I think they would break the fourth wall, especially because for the second half of the show we use quite heavy haze. And then there's the issue of shadows on the back wall. The trickiest moment was when the actors move most upstage." To deal with these situations, she adds, "We've got some lights sneaked in behind the fridge. There's a gap there with some [Martin MAC] Auras in it, which lets us get in some nice shots. There is also some LED tape stashed in various gaps to help lift tricky areas."

In terms of color, she notes, "It's not necessarily naturalistic. But the key thing was to make it feel real and as atmospheric as possible. We played with the tone of light through the windows, which are dimly lit, and tried for a sense of rainy gloom [it is frequently raining in the play], contrasting the warmth of the internal lights and the cold bleeding in from outside. We also play with car headlights intruding into the space"—the latter effect occurring with unnerving regularity. Overall, the production is a study in various chiaroscuro looks.

Another task, involving most of the creative team, involves diverting the audience's attention, especially when sinister doings are afoot. "That's always the main job," Watson says. "You're manipulating the audience, telling them where to look and what to feel. But more so on this. We enjoyed playing with the negative space, getting the audience to question what is happening in the dark room upstairs, playing with light and darkness."

Perhaps unusually, the playwright collaborated in these diversionary techniques. "Levi was brilliant," Watson says. "Before the show was fully written, he said, 'Give me the things you need written in.' From the very early workshops, Chris Fisher and I played with sequences of misdirection." For example, certain scenes are lit almost entirely by flashlight. "Chris is obviously a genius, and he was very

clear about what he needed, lighting-wise, and I trusted that. And he was also really open to trying other things."

The set's practical units, including ceiling lights, "don't actually illuminate much," Watson says. "It would feel like a really gloomy play if they were the only things on. But they help me with the journey from light to darkness. As the characters break down, so does the set and lighting. At the end, we have just one of those little down-lights." That effect, she adds, "was their biggest gift."

The production started at Leeds Playhouse in the UK before transferring to the West End. It moved to Chicago with additional stops in LA; San Francisco; Washington, DC; and Boston before New York. Shuffling through venues of different sizes and configurations, Watson says, "The aim has been to make it feel the same. The West End production, now touring the UK, is much, much smaller. Weirdly, we designed that version at the same time we were doing the American one, which kind of fried our brains. Every version has lights in pretty much the same places, trying to do the same things."

The gear list includes Martin MAC Encore Performance CLDs and MAC Aura XBs, ETC Lustr 2s, Elation KL Fresnel 8 FCs, Gantom 7 architectural LED spotlights, and Astera Luna bulbs, supplied by Christie Lites. Watson says her workhorses are the Encores and Lustrs, noting, "We have Lustr 2s because the 3s are just too bright for what we're doing. We had them in Leeds, but we were putting them at 1%. It's the same with all our LED tape. We had to add neutral density to all of that because the bottom end is just too bright otherwise." The Martin gear, she says, "is precise and quiet. There are many really loud [bits in the play], but when it's quiet, you need it to be really quiet."

Abby May, Watson's associate on the project, notes that the Gantom units serve as footlights and the Astera product is installed in a reading lamp in the living room. Two types of LED tape are used: Moss LED RGBA pixel tape and Environmental Lights RGBwWcW LED Tape. The show was programmed on an ETC Apex 10 console by Jeff Englander. Watson adds that May "did most of the heavy lifting, lighting-wise, moving the show from Boston into the August Wilson. She really did incredible work and was an extraordinary collaborator. She has been with the production since Chicago and is an essential part of the creative team."

As you may imagine, the project leaves no room for error. "Very precise cueing is needed," Watson says. "The first 20 minutes is just people turning light switches on and off, which is agony to watch if nothing happens or the light comes on thirty seconds after they've entered the room. A lot of stuff is MIDI-triggered, so the sound and lighting marry up."



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Sound

Gareth Fry seems to hunt out unusual projects with unusual avidity. "I like the variety," he says. He has appeared in these pages discussing his work in *The Encounter*, which audiences experienced while wearing binaural headphones, and *Viola's Room*, a walk-through experience, seen in the US at New York City's The Shed, in which small groups wandered through a maze-like collection of sets, again wearing headsets.

So many are the sound effects, and so central are they to the effect of *Paranormal Activity* that Fry has almost orchestrated them into a kind of soundtrack. Interestingly, he notes, "I would say that 95% of the sound design is not in the script." Instead, he set about "underscoring the journey that this couple goes on over the course of the play. There are naturalistic effects related to the action in the house, but the majority involve creating the sense of unease in the audience, crafting the supernatural elements."

Achieving this meant getting involved early in the production process. "I was in rehearsals for a couple of weeks, then I worked with Felix [Barrett, the director] and Levi,"



One technique that Fry uses to great effect is the Shepard tone, a series of notes played an octave apart and layered so they seem to increase (or decrease) in pitch indefinitely without ever resolving. It is popularly used in films to build tension.

Fry recalls. “Each time we’ve re-tech’d, we’ve taken the opportunity to finesse it, adding more details. It’s an evolving production.”

One technique that Fry uses to great effect is the Shepard tone, a series of notes played an octave apart and layered so they seem to increase (or decrease) in pitch indefinitely without ever resolving. It is often used in films to build tension. “It’s really interesting,” Fry says. “I want to affect the audience, but I don’t want them to be aware of it. The Shepard tone is a drone that sits there at a constant level. You don’t pay attention to it because you’re following the dialogue. Then it slowly changes pitch over many minutes; you feel that shift but don’t consciously hear it. It creates a sense that something isn’t quite right without being able to put your finger on it.”

To be sure, everything Fry does is tied to the script. “Music is used diegetically, playing on the Alexa and the record player, as well as at the start and end of the show. But there’s no musical underscoring,” he says. “The soundscape is scored to the action. When they’re feeling tense, the soundscape reinforces that. When the tension releases, so does the soundscape.” He adds, “The soundscape is not made using musical sounds.” He adds, “It’s musical with a little ‘m,’ if you like.” All sound effects are delivered via QLab.

Like Watson, Fry collaborated closely with Fisher. “We worked together on *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child*,” Fry says. “He’s always very keen to work with sound and have it help accentuate and sell a moment.”

The loudspeaker rig consists of V-Series and Y-Series boxes from d&b audiotechnik. “It’s quite a chunky sound system, because there are moments of loudness that need an impact that would be difficult to achieve with a smaller system. As with the lighting, the sound system is crafted to deal with the set design. “We have an array of speakers above the proscenium header [that gets used], for example, when they go into the bedroom at stage right on the upper floor,” Fry says. “We delay and pan the voices from one side of the proscenium to the other to help it seem like the sound is coming from the actors.” Audio gear was supplied by Masque Sound.



"In terms of mixing the cast, it's quite tricky," Fry says. "There are moments when they're shouting and other moments when we're amplifying their tiniest whisper and breath, catching the fear in them. The audience wants to connect with the terror they're feeling. It's a very dynamic show."

The actors are miked with DPA 4061 units linked to Shure wireless systems. In a couple of scenes, James holds lengthy FaceTime conversations with his interfering mother in Florida. These are performed live with actress Shannon Cochran, as the mother, "in a booth offstage, in a dressing room. She has a Florida backdrop and cameras so they can both see each other. It's all done live with some feedback reduction techniques." Thus, the scene requires a sound system inside the sound system.

The show is mixed on a Yamaha CL3 console, and the operator has an unusually busy evening for a straight play. "In terms of mixing the cast, it's quite tricky," Fry says. "There are moments when they're shouting and other moments when we're amplifying their tiniest whisper and breath, catching the fear in them. The audience wants to connect with the terror they're feeling. It's a very dynamic show."

Fry adds, "Will Pickens has been associate sound designer on the show since Chicago, and has done a great job in transforming a show originally made for smaller auditoriums into the larger spaces we've found ourselves haunting in the USA."

Other key personnel include Mack Scales (assistant lighting designer), Beth Lake (assistant sound designer), Ron Schwier (production electrician), Kurt Krohne (head of video/deck electrician), Jeff Englander (moving light programmer), Dillon Cody (production sound), and Steve Dee (A1).

Noting that *Paranormal Experience* is attracting a young audience, Fry adds, "It's like going to see horror in the cinema. It's a more communal viewing experience. Everybody gets scared, then feels relieved, but they do react quite vocally. The cast really enjoys it when they can hear how they've terrified everybody." The production, which also features costumes by Davis and video by Luke Halls, runs until February 28.