

# The Red and the Blue

## A top design team embraces the dualities of Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*

By: David Barbour Photography: Carol Rosegg

**B**roadway, which has been awash of late with giggly, self-reflexive spoofs and minutely detailed analyses of adolescent angst, got a fresh infusion of blood and thunder in September with the opening of *A Tale of Two Cities* at the Al Hirschfeld Theatre. As the first large-scale new musical of the season, it naturally attracted a great deal of attention: Chief among its many talking points was its author, Jill Santoriello (book, music, and lyrics), a cable television executive who devoted no less than a quarter of a century to realizing her dream of musicalizing Charles Dickens' historical thriller.

Even more notable, however, is how the show represents a bold attempt at reviving the kind of musical melodrama that kept Broadway box offices busy during the 1980s. With its romantically tormented leading man, its central love triangle, and an elaborate, intrigue-filled plot paced by a series of reach-for-the-rafters ballads, *A Tale of Two Cities* puts Broadway on notice that the era of

the pop opera is far from over. It's a message that left reviewers bemused, making invidious comparisons to *Les Misérables*; however, audiences are standing nightly—proof, perhaps, of a yearning for romance and adventure not being met by other current Broadway attractions.

Indeed, Santoriello must have done something right, because there are few novels that would seem to resist theatrical adaptation as steadfastly as *A Tale of Two Cities*. The narrative takes place over a span of 17 years and features no fewer than 13 characters—and, near the end, we learn that most of them are linked by a dark incident that occurred many years in the past. In the novel, Dickens observes three of the main characters—the dissolute lawyer Sydney Carton and the vengeful husband-and-wife team the Defarges—from the outside, providing very little guidance to any dramatist who wishes to flesh out their inner lives. Above all, there is the challenge of representing two very different

locales—Georgian London, in all its bustle and prosperity, and the tinder-box of pre-revolutionary Paris—on one stage. (An earlier musical version, 1969's *Two Cities*, lasted all of 44 performances in London's West End.)

Surprisingly, Santoriello has managed to faithfully represent Dickens' story on stage, employing a minimum of compression and deletion. (Gone is a number built around the grave-robbing activities of Jerry Cruncher, a supporting character who, as a sideline, supplies medical schools with fresh corpses.) But that very faithfulness posed many challenges to the members of the show's design team, who had to find a way to render the sprawling narrative on stage. Tony Walton, the scenic designer, came up with an ingenious solution that nevertheless had implications for the work of his colleagues.

It's a design that often works by embracing the novel's many dualities; borrowing from the colors of the French and British flags, as well as our own modern political lexicon, one can



say it pits the “blue” world of London, a place of freedom and moderation, against Paris, a city that is about to run red with the blood of those deemed insufficiently dedicated to the overthrow of the French monarchy.

### The jelly mold effect

“The challenge was that [*A Tale of Two Cities*] has approximately four times as many locations as any conventional musical, only four of which repeat at all,” says Walton. “There was an enormous number of places to be delivered—a complication compounded by the fact that some are in London and some in Paris. I knew I couldn’t do conventional scene-by-scene design; there wouldn’t be any place to put it all.”

For the first production of *A Tale of Two Cities*, at the Asolo Theatre in Sarasota, Florida, the designer set out to turn these challenges to his advantage. Reasoning that there’s something Shakespearean about the

narrative, and noting that the story is set halfway between the eras of Shakespeare and Dickens, Walton says he went looking for “a square root between those two forces of energy.” In his research, he came across a computer drawing of the recreation of London’s Globe Theatre, and made a surprising discovery. “The strange thing was, it was virtually the same shape as the Bastille,” he says.

Next, Walton took a plastic jelly mold, and, he says, “by taping and wiring and forcing it into a fully oval shape”—a slight distortion of the shape of both the Bastille and the Globe—“I began to see what it might look like and how it could be broken into several elements. We made a model, approximating the form of the jelly mold in paper and cardboard, adjusting it as we went.”

What emerged from this speculative work was a two-level structure, oval in shape and skeletal in its outlines, made up of six individual set

pieces, which could be moved about the stage and formed into multiple configurations to represent different locales. (In its original concept, when it was thought the production would play the super-sized Hilton Theatre, the structure had three levels.) Two of the six pieces can be assembled to make Sydney Carton’s chambers or the home where the young French expatriate, Charles Darnay, lives with his wife, Lucie, and her father, Dr. Manette. Placed at another angle, a couple of set pieces becomes a tavern where Carton raises hell. Assembled in toto, they become the Bastille. In different combinations, the pieces become the English court where Darnay is put on trial, a prison waiting room, and the wine shop where the Defarges plot the overthrow of the Bourbon monarchy.

Indeed, it’s a very flexible plan. “The only drawback was, it frightened the hell out of everybody—our original director, the producers, and



The number “Everything Stays the Same” ends with an unsettling light-and-sound cue involving the guillotine blade.



The show's abundant atmospheric effects were designed by Gregory Meeh.

the author," says Walton, laughing. "They thought it was scary, cold, and non-representational." However, working with his assistant, Kelly Hanson, and making use of Photoshop, the designer says, "we added lighting effects and furnishings to each model photograph of every individual setting. On the model units themselves we added rooftop silhouettes, chimneys for the first-act London scenes, and a large sign that indicates when we're in Tellson's Bank," which provides a sanctuary for the English characters in Paris. The individual units are not automated; they're moved around with the help of crew members whenever the units approach, or leave, the wings.

The production's original choreographer, Thommie Walsh, who died before the production got underway in Florida, embraced the design scheme, which emboldened the author and producers so that Walton's Photoshop images, and also the model, became part of the marketing

of the show to investors. After Walsh passed away, and the original director departed, Warren Carlyle, who signed on as choreographer, and later, director, "also embraced it even more wholeheartedly," Walton notes.

The transition between the two cities appears to happen in the blink of an eye. It's a solution that was hard won: "We were desperate to find a high-speed way of going from city to city," says Walton. "The idea of projection reared its ugly head, but we wanted the approach to be low-tech and visceral." Behind the set pieces is a series of drops, the first a painted scrim depicting Paris in a murky blood-red. Behind that is a printed vinyl translucency, depicting London in a blue palette; this drop is printed back-to-front, and faces upstage with its white back resting immediately behind the Paris scrim so that front light won't bleed through the scrim and reveal the blue of London.

Indeed, the solution may be low-tech by today's standards, but it is far

from simple. If you turn off the front light on the Paris drop and illuminate the translucency in back of it from behind, London appears and Paris disappears. The third layer is an additional translucency, depicting a sky with the dwellings of the Paris poor represented at the bottom of it: "It allows us to make the Paris scrim seem a lot more vibrant and even redder, and permits us to throw shadows from behind it," says Walton. These shadows include a depiction of the Bastille's silhouette with dagger-shaped glowing windows, and also an image of rearing horses, which appears as the Marquis St. Evermonde, Charles' wicked uncle, runs over a peasant boy with his carriage.

The carriage is also a significant piece of stage engineering. It was built in Florida at the Asolo and comes complete with "horses" built by Costume Armour. "My assistant, Joanie Schlafer, made the most beautiful model, showing the horses' mechanism," says Walton. "The wheel between the back legs of the horses is on a cam," which, as it turns, makes the horses move up and down, as if they are galloping across the stage. "The movement is dependent on four of the Marquis' attendants," says Walton. "The two guys guiding the horses are cast members; the two leading the carriage are members of the crew." (There is essentially no wing space in the Hirschfeld Theatre, so the carriage is located in an upstage corner; many of the show's set pieces and furnishings are hung in the air until needed. When they descend to deck level, Walton says, it makes for something of "a maze for the cast.")

The bulk of the show's soft goods were supplied by Rose Brand; this includes a stunning new house curtain. "The actual theatre curtain hadn't been seen for quite a while," says Walton. "It was in storage backstage, in a giant baggie. It would have

been quite costly to get it back in shape, and, in any event, it didn't blend too well with our production. So we took the fabric used for the drapes in the Marquis' chateau, and that became the basis for our new house curtain." It is 32' 10" high and 47' wide, and is constructed of 300 yards of FR Venetian scroll fabric, with trim consisting of Gold Serpentine Robe, Gold Raised Circle, Gold Filigree, Gold Turkish, and Gold Design weight 18" Bullion Fringe. It definitely makes a grand gesture, inviting the audience into this distinctly 19th-century world of intrigue and adventure.

Walton's biggest coup comes at the climax of the story, after Carton has made the famous decision to switch places in prison with Darnay. Carton's final scene is played out at the foot of the guillotine, here represented by a towering staircase. As Carton climbs the stairs, the upstage Paris scrim is wiped out by a black diagonal drop that cuts across it, like a steel blade. According to Jennifer Tankleff, at I. Weiss, the company that built the drop, it's "a large full-stage serge drop, cut on a very drastic angle, and dropped in to look like an actual guillotine blade. We worked on a couple of models in our shop with [production supervisor] Christopher Smith and Tony Walton, to come up with just the right edge finishing, which was silicone tubing." The latter gives the drop the necessary weight and flatness. The effect is completed with an accompanying blackout drop, which is a fiber-optic star drop—also from I. Weiss—which provides a segue into the final scene. Walton notes that, at the same time, the lighting executes a complex crossfade: it dims on the Paris drop, while briefly illuminating the translucent sky drop behind it, then rapidly fades out as the giant 'blade' appears to extinguish it. The effect is accompanied by the exaggeratedly terrifying sound of the blade as it



Above: The set configured as Carton's offices (top) and a London court (bottom).

drops, completed by its final chop.

As mentioned before, most of the scenery was built by the Asolo Theatre scene shop; personnel there included Victor Meyrich (production manager), David Ferguson (technical director), Bert Taylor (metal fabricator), JoAnn Waters-Atkins (scenic artist), Cathryn Dashiell and Jeffrey W. Dean (prop masters), and Rick Alley (prop builder). In addition to the contributions of Costume Armour, Rose Brand, and I. Weiss, Triumph Productions provided the translucent drops and Michael Hagen, Inc. provided the tree seen in the backyard of Dr. Manette and Lucie's house, as well as the rearing horse shadow silhouette. Walton notes that when, due to a sudden illness, another scenic painter was needed, Arnold Abramson, formerly of Nolan Scenery Studios, and now living in Florida, stepped in and finished the job with his local associates. "It was a real

piece of luck," the designer notes, adding that the Asolo shop "is extraordinary; Vic Meyrich is one of the treasures of the theatre."

### The glitter of the guillotine

Arguably, Walton's most crucial collaborator on the production was the lighting designer, Richard Pilbrow; their two careers have been interlinked for decades, going back at least to the 1959 West End revue *Pieces of Eight*. Here, Pilbrow's design is notable for the way it embraces and capitalizes on Walton's scenic concept, for its sweepingly dramatic effects, and for the back-channel system that he developed, using some of the latest lighting design products, to achieve his ideas swiftly and efficiently.

The first challenge presented by Walton's set design, says Pilbrow, had to do with the fact that the actors "are playing much of the show in



Sydney Carton faces the guillotine with a friend. In a second, the drop behind them will be erased in a *coup de théâtre*.

front of or inside the moving steel structures.” He adds, laughing, “They’re like bird cages, and moving bird cages at that. My first preoccupation was, how in the hell are we going to light them?” His solution was to place a number of MR16 units in each set piece, which he uses to make sure the faces of the actors are correctly illuminated at all times. These units are controlled by City Theatrical WDS wireless systems, embedded in the deck of each of the six set components. With so many units to be controlled with wireless technology, the designer was quite justifiably worried. “I must say I anticipated having a lot of trouble with it, and we had none whatsoever,” he says. “The radio-controlled stuff was absolutely fabulous.” (Michael Gottlieb, the associate lighting designer, notes that the wireless dimming in the show employs more than 50 car batteries, which are built into the scenic wagons and are changed after every performance.)

For the bulk of the stage action, especially the large-scale musical numbers, Pilbrow needed a complement of automated units that could make big effects while tracking the action as it sweeps across the stage.

Also, given the nature of the setting and the preponderance of big chorus scenes, a bold lighting approach was needed to add dimension and drama to each stage picture. Again, there were challenges; given the set design’s dimensions, he notes, “we have very little side lighting below 22’. There’s only one boom upstage and one downstage that actually come down to the ground. We had to double up on gear, because the side lighting in one scene will be blocked in the next,” thanks to the set’s many configurations. “As a result, we have a lot of side light at a higher level than one would normally like.”

However, the designer made gear choices that allow him to capitalize on these facts. Throughout the show, he makes extensive use of Vari\*Lite VL3500Q Spot units, many of them placed in the high side positions mentioned above. “They are the most extraordinary lights,” he says, adding that they offer “such delicate colors and almost infinite positions.” He adds that these, plus VL1000TS units, VL2500 Spots, and VL5Bs do the majority of the work, coloring each scene, setting its tone and atmosphere.

Another key item on the designer’s

gear list is a dozen DHA Pitching Digital Light Curtains, which he uses to rake the stage with light, especially in the scenes of revolution and turmoil. At the end of the second act opener, “Everything Stays the Same,” a chorus member raises a guillotine blade above her head. As she does, a set of light curtains executes a sweep; the blade catches the light, making an audience blinder effect; this is accompanied by the stunning sound effect of a falling blade. Taken together, it makes for a grisly five seconds that tells you all you need to know about the savagery of the Jacobins.

Throughout, however, Pilbrow creates a number of striking looks, composed out of strongly defined arrangements of highly directional beams. For the big scenes, he works a color palette strongly influenced by the red, white, and blue of the British and French flags; for more intimate scenes, the colors are subtly tinted. In this way, he balances the show’s combination of epic scenes and small moments.

The extremely diverse gear list includes 21 Vari\*Lite VL3500Q Spots, nine VL1000TS units, two VL2500 Spots, four VL5Bs, six DHA Digital



The Bastille prison. David Zinn's costumes run the gamut from peasant rags to aristocratic fashions.

Light Curtains, 12 DHA Pitching Digital Light Curtains, about 400 ETC Source Fours in various models and degree sizes, six Arri Junior 5Ks, 156 birdies for the mobile set pieces, 16 GAM Stik-Ups, two PAR 64 MFLs, six mini-tens, five T3 ministrips, 40 additional mini-strips, 41 Philips Solid-State Lighting ColorBlast 12s, two Philips ColorBlaze 48s, six ColorBlaze 72s, two Lycian 1290XLT and two Lycian 1271s Starklite II followspots, and 26 Wybron Coloram II color scrollers.

Also included in the gear list are four Martin Atomic 3000 strobes, four Diversitronics PAR 64 strobes, three Bowens 1000 strobes, three Wildfire LT-404F UV units, seven TPR F1-150 fiber-optic illuminators, four Rosco/DHA Double Gobo Rotators, two GAM SX4 Film/FX units, 74 LEDtronics Red LED arrays, 36 LEDtronics UV LED arrays, and 36 City Theatrical Flicker Candles. Lighting gear was provided by PRG.

The show's abundant atmospheric

effects, which are used to underline the starkly dramatic qualities of Pilbrow's lighting, are provided by three LeMaitre Low Smoke Generators, four LeMaitre Silent Storm snow machines, two MDG Atmosphere hazers, four Look Solutions Viper II smoke machines, one Look Solutions Tiny Fogger, one Look Solutions Power Tiny Fogger, three Cryojets, four Jem fans, and three Bowen fans. The production's abundant special effects—including fog, haze, and simulated pyro—were designed by Gregory Meeh.

The lighting and effects are controlled by a Strand Light Palette, and thereby hangs yet another tale. With over 1,300 channels in the show, Pilbrow was eager to set up a system that would allow him to design—and modify—the lighting quickly and easily. He's not the first lighting designer to express the concern that today's rigs have become so complex and instrument-heavy that merely keeping track of them can be a small night-

mare. The solution, however, was found using the latest technology.

Working with his programmer, Robert Bell, Pilbrow made use of the Light Palette's real-world programming language to quickly create cues. The console's Universal Attribute Control function, developed by Bell, allows one to make creative choices in everyday language ("15° left, color light blue, shutters close in, and rotate 12°"), rather than naming everything with abstruse collections of numbers. At the same time, the production team took advantage of the console's network connectivity to work with other systems to provide advanced video displays and messaging. Thus, Pilbrow was hooked up to WYSIWYG, his preferred previsualization tool (he pioneered its use on Broadway in the 1997 musical *The Life*), and to Virtual Magic Sheet, the software program that provides a sophisticated, yet easily readable, overview of lighting control information. With it, every lighting channel,

its color, direction, and intensity, is on display. The VMS display can be connected to the Light Palette via Wi-Fi, allowing the designer to monitor his lighting from anywhere in the theatre. (Pilbrow notes that Eric Cornwell, who developed VMS, was a regular presence at the production table; he provided more than three dozen upgrades to the software during production.)

This approach allowed the designer to observe the stage, and, using VMS, seek out the right units to add or modify a cue, then preview the results in WYSIWYG, before communicating the change to Bell. Thanks to this system, says Pilbrow, the entire show, 350-plus cues in all, was essentially programmed in a matter of hours.

### The sound of the falling blade

Carl Casella, who co-designed the show's sound with Domic Sack, notes that the show's structure, as well as Walton's design, provided definite challenges from the get-go.

"One major issue is that the music rarely stops," Casella notes. "Even in the dialogue scenes, there's underscoring. We have a fairly large orchestra, and were concerned about it sounding like the actors were speaking through mics at every moment. Also, the set isn't masked at all. That's part of the design, and it looks great, but, from our point of view, it's a challenge. The center cluster is very high—and when you place it that high, the sound goes right over the heads of the people sitting in the first six rows of the orchestra."

The main loudspeaker system consists of Meyer Sound M'elodie line array elements—four on either side of the proscenium with a Meyer UPA box placed below. The center cluster features 11 M'elodies. (Casella notes that the compact size of the M'elodies was a real plus factor here.) Four Meyer 650 HP subs—two on the ground and two flown off the truss



Most of the cast have Sennheiser 5212 wireless systems with DPA 4061 capsules; Natalie Toro (Madame Defarge, above and top) uses a Sennheiser MKE2.

are used "to give impact to the sound effects." Providing underbalcony coverage is a set of d&b audiotechnik E3s and E0 boxes.

Still, there was that problem of providing sound to the first few rows of the orchestra—those who, it must be noted, have paid the most for their seats. As Casella points out, when the cluster is placed so high, "you're seeing the stage in front of you and the sound is going over your head. It's fatiguing to put that back together." The solution was a series of ribbon tweeters from LjudDesign Scandinavia, or LDS: "They're screwed flat onto the fascia of the stage," he says. "They bring the sound image down a lot. We have 16 tweeters; once they were in, Tony Walton asked, 'Can you put them all

the way across the front, so that they will appear to be a built-in molding on the fascia as opposed to an erratic series of speakers with variable gaps between them?' We couldn't because they're too expensive, so he had the props department make fake units, to fill out the line of speakers across the forestage. Eight or ten of them on each side are fake."

There's also a surround system, consisting of EAW JF80s on both the balcony and orchestra levels. "They're used for the thunder and storm effects especially," says Casella. [Also those shocking guillotine effects.] "They're used in the Act II scene when Carton is deciding to give up his life and he hears little Lucie [the daughter of Lucie and Charles Darnay] saying her

prayers. At that moment, he's in the front of house, and she's in the surround system." It's an approach that effectively recreates the idea of a sound of the girl's voice in Carton's mind.

The set's multiple levels made for a more-complex-than-usual monitor system as well. "We have four monitors [Meyer UPAs] on the lighting trusses upstage and downstage," says Casella, "plus two EAW JF80s above the rigging, facing straight down. Also, there are d&b E3s in the deck, plus four Meyer M1Ds on the proscenium, all of which were picked for their size. All the monitors are addressed independently, because we don't want to have them on when we don't need them." Interestingly, he notes, one unusual feature of the orchestrations is the absence of a piano, which normally would be used to key the singers. "There are times when they get their cue from a flute or a viola, which are not loud instruments onstage. That's another reason why we tailored the monitors to the needs of each scene."

The majority of the cast members are outfitted with Sennheiser 5212 wireless systems, coupled with the DPA 4061 mics. James Barbour, who plays Carton; Natalie Toro, who plays Madame Defarge; and Brandi Burkhardt, who plays Lucie, are all double-miked. Toro and one or two others have the Sennheiser MKE2. In the pit, the strings are miked with Schoeps units, except for the cello, which has a pair of Neumann TLM 49s on a stereo bridge, about 8" apart. Neumann is used for the percussion and French horn as well. The trumpets and timpani have Sennheiser MD 421s; reeds are on AKG C 391s. The keyboards are direct. The musicians use the Aviom personal monitor mixing system. (All the gear was supplied by Sound Associates.)

Making its Broadway debut is the Midas XL8 mixing console. Midas is not a brand you see on Broadway

every day, but the company's first digital console has a real fan in Casella. "It's breathtaking," he says. "Whatever we wanted to do, the board let us do. When the cast members are wearing hats, we can switch easily from one mic to the other. Madame DeFarge's big solo, 'Out of Sight, Out of Mind,' is almost a rock number, and the whole timbre of the sound has to change for it. The board allowed us to program it differently—and, the next day, there it was again. He adds, "When you sweep through the EQ on a digital board, it'll step, which can drive you crazy. On an analog desk, it's linear. Here, the EQ sounds exactly like it does on an analog desk. I don't know how Midas did it."

Wallace Flores, the show's associate sound designer, also notes that the board's "POP[ulation] and VCA groups are useful, because they bring the complete channel to me like no other digital desk. The show has a 17-piece orchestra and 35 wireless mics, and, starting with the compression on the input channels, we have four different algorithms that we can fly through and audition for particular voices or instruments in any given on-stage situation. Once assigned, the groups and individual inputs therein are accessible at the touch of a color-coded POP group button, rather than buried under layers or pages. The VCAs allow us precise control and contain the levels coming from each voice or instrument in each group. Also, a system tech or designer can use the area 'B' section to access any and all of the channels—even those being used by the mix engineer—to rebalance or alter dynamics or gates on an instrument without getting in the way of the mixer."

Casella adds that he and Sack worked closely with Kevin Stites, the musical director about managing the sound: "We had serious discussions about the show's dynamics. You don't want all the dynamics to go through the console; it makes the show sound

too canned. You can lose some of your timbre changes. In this show, the underscoring needed to be the underscoring. Also, we have 17 people playing in an open pit; it's not that soft." He adds that he is pleased with the overall mix, which, it must be said, sounds quite natural. "That's because everything was carefully timed and focused," he adds. "There are about 18 different zones in the theatre, all timed to put the sounds of the voices back onstage."

### **The best of times**

Many others were involved in the production as well. They include Christopher C. Smith (production supervisor), Heather Wolensky (associate set designer); Jeremy Chernick (associate special effects); David Towlun (props coordinator); Olgo Rogova (prop development); Rebecca Lustig (general assistant to Walton); Kathleen Dobbins, Graham Kindred, and Jay Scott (assistant lighting designers); Michael J. Ward (head electrician); Erik Hansen (head carpenter); Bob Hale (light board operator) Russ Dobson (assistant carpenter, deck automation); James W. Sturek (fly automation); Paul Ker (production spotlight); Tom Burke, Robert Miller, and John Blixt (spotlight operators); Ty Lackie (sound operator); Dawn Makay (production/head properties); and Chris Makay (assistant properties).

As we go to press, the show's future is uncertain, but all involved express a great deal of satisfaction at realizing Dickens' sprawling story on stage. Overall, the problem was one of streamlining; the show's designers have put their technology to the task of telling a complex story as simply and economically as possible. It's a design that is less about creating spectacle than serving a text. One imagines that realizing it has been an adventure equal to anything experienced by Sydney Carton and company. 📶