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SWAMP THING

The Creature from the Black Lagoon returns, in a new attraction at Universal Studios Hollywood

By Judith Rubin

Chip Largman's background as a theatrical lighting designer, and his position as executive producer for Universal Studios, made him a good choice to helm the adaptation of *Creature from the Black Lagoon*, the classic 1954 Universal horror film, into *Creature from The Black Lagoon—A Raging Rockin' Show*, a 25-minute musical. The attraction opened last spring at Universal Studios Hollywood, and in addition to providing park guests with an entertaining, air-conditioned, sit-down break between thrill rides, "it let us [Universal] to poke fun at ourselves, be irreverent, and raise the bar on production values," says Largman. He headed up a team of seasoned theatre professionals—several of whom, like himself, also had theme park experience—to create the show, customize the venue, and update the amphibious love story of Kay, the comely ichthyologist, and Gil, the creature of the title. (His theme song: "I've Got a Strange New Hunger in My Heart").

The Creature from the Black Lagoon was a key entry in Hollywood's mid-'50s science-fiction renaissance. It was directed by Jack Arnold, who also helmed such B classics as *It Came From Outer Space, Tarantula*, and *The Incredible Shrinking Man*. *Creature* was also one of the most successful films in the period's short-lived 3-D craze. It also spawned a sequel, *The Creature Walks Among Us.* In both films, a hideous man-fish makes passes at innocent young ingénues. The show at Universal Studios was written by the Off Broadway playwright and television writer Jonathan Tolins, with a score by Fred Barton, who is best-known for appearing in, and arranging the music for, the long-running spoof revue *Forbidden Broadway*. It has been staged by Lynne Taylor-Corbett, choreographer of the Broadway musicals *Titanic* and *Swing!* and the film *Footloose.*

The team set out to do the show as a camp spoof, with an Off-Broadway feel and original music. "We were thinking *Creature* meets *Little Shop of Horrors* meets *The Rocky Horror Show*," says Largman. During the design process, however, the style evolved into something closer to cinematic rock opera. "The park's guests wouldn't necessarily get the campy references, but they would get the rock power ballads and duets," says the set designer James Youmans, of Youmans Designs Inc. "We decided we wanted it to be like a movie onstage, so projections had to play a much bigger role, and the scenery couldn't be flat and campy—it had to be cinematic." The stage was configured to accommodate a 20'-high-by-40'-wide screen from Gerriets (with a treatment by Adirondack Studios), which operates on a custom-built roller system from Adirondack. (Images are delivered via an edge-blended rear-projection system using a Dataton Watchout media server and Christie projectors.) The main scenic element—the boat—was designed to serve up special effects, explosions, and atmospherics.

Not that the final product is overly serious. "It's kind of a cross

between science fiction, a Broadway musical, an underwater ballet, and hard rock," says Tom Ruzika, who lit the show. "From a design standpoint, it called for a lot of creativity and several different genres of lighting."

Largman reached out to Marc Routh, executive producer of Broadway Attractions International, and its affiliate, Richard Frankel Productions, in New York, to put the team together. "It was because of their experience with *Young Frankenstein* and *Little Shop of Horrors*," he says. The Broadway Attractions International team included Mike Bauder (production management technical supervisor); John Kivlen, associate producer; Youmans; Ruzika; sound designer Philip G. Allen, of PGA Sound; Adirondack Studios (scenic fabrication and special effects); Fisher Technical Services (rigging); Paul Rubin, of The Fly Guy Productions (flight choreography); and Fabio Toblini (costumes). Largman shared executive producer responsibilities with Routh. "He was more instrumental on the front end of the project in making recommendations on the production team and advancing the design; when we began putting the show in the theatre, I stepped up and became more engaged," says Largman. "Because of my affinity toward live production, I took the opportunity to executive-produce. It's in my blood."

> "It's a cross between science fiction, a Broadway musical, an underwater ballet, and hard rock." —Ruzika

Into the air and down the hatch

The show was housed in a 1,700-seat converted outdoor arena that has been modified more than once to accommodate shows based on Dracula, Conan the Barbarian, Spider-Man, *Fear Factor*, and other properties. "There are a number of challenges to staging a production



The giant Gil puppet menaces Kay. The puppet is by Michael Curry; Kay's costume is by Fabio Toblini.

Model and sketch: Courtesy of James Youmans

there," says Largman. "It has a wide view environment and low [20'] ceiling, so the sightlines are very challenging. Tom did a great job from a lighting perspective, and, from a visual perspective, we were very pleased with everyone's effort and product. Jim Youmans did a terrific job converting the theatre into a total immersive environment with the stage and set pieces. It was also a successful endeavor from a technical standpoint: the right equipment for the job."

The show's signature moment is the swim sequence, which emulates the water ballet that takes place between Kay and Gil in the original movie. The boat flies up, and the theatre transforms into an underwater environment via lighting, the cinema backdrop, and atmospheric effects; Kay pushes off and swims a lap over the heads of the audience. Gil catches up with her when she returns to the stage area, and the two swim in parallel, culminating in an ankle grab. "When the boat is out, you can reach up and touch the flying track. It is really hard to get a smooth flight when the wires are that short," notes Scott Fisher of Fisher Technical Systems, provider of the rigs.

The actors travel on two I-beam track systems: Kay's oval track that spans the theatre, and the Creature's straight track, tracing an L over the stage. The flight gear is installed in the underside of ceiling beams. Each flying machine incorporates lift, travel, and rotate mechanisms to provide the necessary degrees of freedom to execute the flight sequences; an automated control system, using Fisher's proprietary Navigator operating software, is cued by Universal's Ride Show Supervisor system. "Because of running so many shows a day, the flights had to be automated and repeatable," notes Fisher. "Traditional stage flying is often manually controlled. Automated flying is used either because it is going to repeat a lot, or because the action is outside the bounds of what humans can manually do."

"We spent a lot of time programming it, so that the operators could have a one-button operation," says aerial choreographer Paul Rubin of The Fly Guy. He and Fisher met in the early '90s when both were working for the late theatrical flying specialist Peter Foy in Las Vegas, and they have collaborated frequently since. Once Fisher had the system up and running on location, Rubin tested the unit and commenced programming. "We run the sequence with weights in it to visualize it," he says. Programming Gil and Kay's synchronized swimming was especially tricky. "We had to make sure that they did not block one another—not just for an audience member in the center seat, but for all 1,700 people."

With the sequence basically programmed, Rubin put the actors in for about six weeks of rehearsals. "First they learn how to move and dance in the harness when they're not on the wires," he explains. "Then they learn body control while in the wires—how to lay on their bellies and on their backs with a swimming motion and look fluid doing it. Then we introduce the singing part of it." Kay's harness is worn under a bathing suit with a frilly skirt—Gil's is under a bulky monster suit. The harness itself is a canvas wrap worn around torso and hips with buckles, straps, and special rotating connectors at the hips, weighing approximately 8lbs. There were five regular casts in rotation this summer, with one backup cast to keep up with the demanding daily schedule.





The above model (left) and sketch (right) show how Youmans strove to fit the show in a wide stage space with a 20' ceiling.

Rubin also choreographed the show's finale, where, in a surprise twist, Gil swallows Kay. (Having taken a hit from an human growth hormone-tipped harpoon, he balloons into an 18' giant, and Kay, losing her balance during a duet with Gil, falls into his mouth). Giant Gil is represented by a manually operated puppet designed by Michael Curry and made of carbon fiber. "It's not your typical theme park fare," says Largman.

Floating the boat

Most of the show's action takes place on or around the boat, the Rita. Fisher Technical provided the lift system for this 6,000lb multipurpose set piece using one of the company's



The show's signature moment is the underwater swim sequence.

proprietary G Series winches. It is controlled by the Navigator system, along with other moving scenic elements such as the glowing green jungle vine clumps, carved of soft foam and strung with LEDs, which travel on tracks to facilitate transitions, double as underwater seaweed, act as masking for the screen, form onstage partitions, and so forth. The boat is driven around the stage by a battery-powered cart hidden underneath, which is manually operated from a small internal cabin.

Youmans' boat design was based on the original steam launch seen in the movie. "We were really proud of the boat and the way we fit so much into such a small space," he says. "It had to move around on stage, had to fly, be attached to flying cable rigs, have room inside to hide props and actors, and fit upstage behind the screen. And it had to be small enough to go away when needed, in a very limited space. The projections and projector were positioned so you could get light on the back of the screen when the boat was not visible."

Adirondack built the boat, in addition to most of the provided scenic elements, including the stage floor covering, stone work, trees, and vines, as well as the fog and wind effects. (The fog is generated by Le Maitre G300 and LSG units.) Adirondack also provided the automation engineering for the boat and the projection screen panels. The drive unit for the boat is a purchased component from Transbotics, an industrial guide vehicle manufacturer, run by a hidden operator inside the cabin using a joystick; it is dependent on four cameras for visual navigation. "If you have a problem with confined spaces, it is not a good place to be," says Matt Reardon, project manager for Adirondack.

The stage floor is made of an extremely hardy, melamine-faced laminate. "Because of the weight of the boat and the pirouetting it has to do onstage, we went through several different sample floor processes to come up with a treatment that would maintain its look and support the boat," says Carl Zutz, sales manager, Adirondack. Durability is a key factor in building for theme parks, he notes: "Stage scenery doesn't have to stand up to handling by guests, so it doesn't have to have an impermeable surface, but it does have to be dependable and solid to hold up through the season," he says. "And here we were, lifting it up over the actors' heads, so it had to be robust and adhere to safety regulations just as if it were over the heads of guests."

Gil, rock star

The 21st-century Gil is a bad-boy, rock-star kind of creature who gets the girl with a combination of brutality, gallantry, and song. "It's primeval, heavy-duty rock 'n' roll," says Ruzika. "The automated lights are dynamically orchestrated with the music." He had prior experience in this very theatre in the late 1980s, when he spent several years "in the space with Conan," having been brought in a couple of years after that show opened to implement some modifications. "There I was, 20 years older, crawling around those catwalks, which hadn't been designed as lighting catwalks. For *Creature*, I got them updated. I didn't get everything I wanted but, because it was a musical, I wanted a whole lot of side lights. I had them fabricate outrigger pipes to make it easy to hang and focus, and give me better lighting angles. I was fortunate to get a handful of moving lights, and designed the outriggers to accommodate them. We got the lights into a good position for design as well as maintenance." The console used was an existing High End Systems Hog iPC. "We didn't want to invest in a new lighting board, and the Hog did everything: moving lights, conventional lights, LEDs, everything." The venue's existing ETC Sensor dimmers were also used.

The lighting package for the show includes approximately 180 ETC Source Fours in various models and degree sizes, 16 Vari*Lite VL3000 Spots units, two VL2500 Spots used as shin busters on the deck, plenty of colors from Rosco and Lee Filters, and gobos, both custom and off the shelf, from Rosco, Gamproducts, and Apollo Design Technology.

The fly sequence called for simple treatment: "Two people on wires, two [Lycian 1200W] followspots," says

Ruzika. “I put custom gobos in the follows to soften them, make it more underwatery. Between the moving lights creating the water effect and the video, it was very pretty.” The followspots were stationed near the back of the house for a past production. “They wouldn’t let me move them,” says Ruzika, “and we had very flat angles, split left and right, that, in a strange way worked very well.” For the rock-concert moments, he adds, “the lights move and flash and sweep through the house exactly to the beat of the music.” Ruzika collaborated with his associate and programmer, Mark Matzkanin, with Dayna Morgan as a new assistant learning the ropes on her first theme park show.

“Universal really put themselves behind this show 110%,” remarks Ruzika. “They bought a whole new lighting package just for the show—boxes of brand new Vari-Lites and brand new Source Fours. It is wonderful to have fresh, out-of-the-box VL3000s.” He notes that a show of this kind requires a vastly longer tech period than a traditional theatre production. “You really have to allow a day per minute to tech through the show. The point where you stop picking at it is the point where a producer, or someone else with a set of fresh eyes, comes in.”

Music from the deep

All the music (except for vocals, which are live) was recorded and produced by Peter Fish. Philip G. Allen used a combination of speaker placement and Meyer Sound LCS (Level Control System) gear to simulate the experience of being in a live rock concert. “I worked with Peter to construct a mechanism for delivery of the music to make it exciting and interesting,” he says. In addition to positioning speakers in front of the audience, at the sides and behind, he placed them overhead pointing down, with others pointed at the roof. “In the scene where Kay dives and swims, we take the sounds of the water and the jungle, and play them through the speakers pointed at the roof. It reinforces the sense of being underwater, in a unique space.”

The speakers are arranged in three main clusters of Meyer line arrays, each with five speakers, plus eight surround locations. The system includes 15 Meyer M1D compact line array units in a left-center-right arrangement, with five boxes in each location. Six Meyer MM-4XPs provide front fill, Six UPA-1Cs are used for rear fill, and eight Meyer UPM-1Ps constitute the surround system. The low end is represented by two Meyer 700HP subwoofers. In terms of monitors, the system includes four UPM-1Ps for downstage foldback, four more UPM-1Ps for overhead foldback, along with four Anchor AN-1000X program speakers and one pair of M-Audio BX-5A nearfield units. One Sennheiser SR-3256 and four EK3253 in-ear monitors are also available.

Also in the rig are Renkus Heinz PNX15IT/4A loudspeakers with six P-3500 amplifiers, used as band source speakers, and six Meyer UPA-1Cs with Crest 7001 amps, used as rear fill speakers.

The sound is controlled by an LCS Cue Console system. “What LCS does is give the ability to move sound in time from any place in the room to anywhere else in the room in a specified pattern,” says Allen. “The music has movement as well as spatial quality. You can position a sound anywhere you want and leave it stationary, or position it and have it go anywhere in the room, and adjust the timing to fit with the beat. It’s very powerful, but you need a wizard of a programmer. Jake Davis was ours. He’s programmed several shows for Cirque du Soleil using this system; without him, we wouldn’t have gotten its full value.”

The sound was mixed in-house with a pair of mainframe audio servers. “LCS allows you to add and subtract hardware as you need it,” notes Allen, who mostly works in traditional theatre, and also teaches at USC and Cal Arts. “During production, Jake and I each had a control surface. In the finished version, we scaled down to one small mixer operated by the sound engineer, and a computer. The operator is a standard park employee. The mixing consoles were rented from Meyer and can be brought back if needed. This kept the purchase cost significantly lower than for regular gear. It's a very elegant solution for a place like Universal.”

> “Part of our job is to distribute sound so it is exciting, without taking anybody’s head off. Volume isn’t quality—it is just volume” —Allen

Allen was as pleased with his new sound gear package as Ruzika was with his lighting equipment. “One thing about installing an entirely new sound system is that you get the benefits of state-of-the-art,” he says. “New speakers are more suited to the job than 20 years ago—and now we understand how to focus the energy of a speaker just where we want it. Sound design and control technology have made enormous strides over just the last 10 years. Every speaker sounds great when you’re standing 6' away from it, but 60' is where the rubber meets the road—it should sound just as good there. Part of our job is to distribute sound so it is exciting for everybody without taking anybody’s head off. We’re pleased that *Creature* was kept under 95dB, even though it is rock ‘n’ roll—it saves the sanity of the



Gil and Kay get to know each other better.

crew and the people in the show. Volume isn't quality—it is just volume."

When it came to designing the sound effects, "the biggest job was the Creature," says Allen. "We had to find a voice for Gil, and in this we were helped tremendously by the actors. The Creature spends the first half of the show as a guy in a suit, and then as an enormous puppet. When he becomes the puppet, the actor who plays the part goes backstage and does all the vocals and dialogue. Our job was to give him the kind of sound that befits that size monster, a voice that was human and monstrously big as well. There was a lot of carbonated beverage in the Foley booth one night that produced some fiendishly clever belching and swallowing effects. Jane McKeever, an assistant of mine, created the sounds of the Creature roaring and attacking the boat. The other element of sound effects design was to create a jungle atmosphere as three-dimensional and detail-oriented as the music was—the jungle river, the jungle at night, and the Creature's cavern all have distinct ambient qualities to them that helps deliver a fully realized theme park experience." The microphone set up includes five Sennheiser EM-3532 dual-channel receivers, nine Sennheiser SK-5212 body pack transmitters, and ten Countryman E-6 mics. Four Shure SM58s mics are also available.

Overall, the various design and technical disciplines come together to create a vivid and amusing spectacle that pays tribute to the horror films of the past while making use of the technology of today.

As if to demonstrate the enduring appeal of this story—from the last century to this one—the press opening fanfare included a stunt in which Gil, en route to his new venue, escaped the confines of his container and galli-vanted around the park. He was captured by armed guards and marched into the theatre, where he met up with Julie Adams, the actress who first played Kay, looking much as she did in the original film.

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