THEATRICAL LIGHTING DESIGN FOR CHICAGO: A MUSICAL VAUDEVILLE

By

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PROJECT OPTION IN LIEU OF THESIS PRESENTED TO
THE COLLEGE OF FINE ARTS
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA

2014

To Shamrock McShane.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my father, Shamrock McShane, who raised me in a life in the theatre. Dr. Linda Hermer, Charles Ely and Dr. Judith Williams for their persistence and encouragement when I pursued my Master of Fine Arts. Stan Kaye, my advisor and mentor, who gave me this excellent opportunity. Mr. Tony Mata for his trust in my craft. Ben Hawkins and Alena Aissing, my wonderful design assistants, for their patience and expertise to realize my design. The University of Florida's School of Theatre and Dance for welcoming me back. Master electrician, Todd Bedell. The Electrics Shop: B. Lussier, Tim Reed, Ryan Bible, and Topher Stumreiter. The Chicago Design Team: Janiel Myers (Stage Manager), Jovon Eberhart (Scenic Design), Stacey Galloway (Costume Design), and Kim Yeoman (Properties Design). The Santa Fe Opera for allowing me to serve an apprenticeship and opened the door to meet Broadway lighting designers Rick Fisher and Ken Billington. This lighting design is dedicated posthumously to Paul Favini.

Summary of Project Option in Lieu of Thesis
Presented to the College of Fine Arts of the University of Florida
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Fine Arts

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April 2014

Chair: Stanley Kaye
Co-Chair: Ralf Remshardt
Major: Theatre

The University of Florida's production of Chicago: A Musical Vaudeville was performed from November 11, 2011 through November 20, 2011 on the H.P. Constans Mainstage. My assignment was to design and implement a theatrical lighting design for this production. This design allowed for ample exploration in lighting a complex multi-set musical imbued with alluring choreography in the style of Mr. Bob Fosse.

“How can anyone do their thesis on Chicago?”

Ken Billington, Broadway Lighting Designer.

"Hurt the People!"

A Gainesville, Florida Theatre Idiom
Shamrock McShane

CHAPTER 1
DRAMATURGICAL RESEARCH

Robert Louis Fosse (June 23, 1927 – September 23, 1987), better known as Bob Fosse, was a legendary American choreographer and filmmaker. Fosse's contributions as a choreographer on Broadway include Chicago: A Musical Vaudeville, The Pajama Game, How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying, Little Me, Sweet Charity, Redhead, and Pippin. Fosse had the opportunity to direct and choreograph some of Broadway's legendary performers, among them: Gwen Verdon, Joel Grey, Liza Minelli, Ben Vereen, Chita Rivera, Sid Caesar, Shirley McClaine and Jerry Orbach. Fosse's style of filmmaking greatly impacted how dance is depicted in film. With his films, Sweet Charity, Lenny, Cabaret, All That Jazz, and the television special Liza with a Z, Fosse showcased the performer at their zenith.

In The Fosse Style, Ben Vereen said of Bob Fosse: "to have worked with Bob Fosse is to have had your hand directly on the pulse of life. On the outside the work may look wonderfully stylish and easy; however, it comes from that inner pulse of life." Gwen Verdon, Fosse's longtime partner, said of his choreography, "It's funny. It's sexy. It's quick. It's romantic. There's so much detail. And, you have a sense of accomplishment – when you are finally able to accomplish it." Bob Fosse confided in Ben Vereen "if you learn to dance this way, you'll dance for the rest of your life" (McWaters ix). Fosse turned his singer-dancers into dangerous and at times sexually inviting "liars and crooks [who] lead the audience to fall in love with them. The cooler the choreography and the more flawed the character, the hotter the dancers." Fosse brought to a Broadway audience, "aspects of theater in which sex and vulnerability consort with humor and cynicism" (McWaters xii). Fosse "was more interested in musical staging" than choreography in the way that Jerome Robbins or Marge and Gower Champion would approach a number. Fosse had the uncanny ability to "fix" shows by putting "dance front and center to

camouflage a paper-thin score or a weak book" (Gottfried 179). He learned from Broadway masters George Abbot and Hal Prince how to be an "eleventh-hour stage paramedic who could resuscitate an out-of-town flop and turn it into a Broadway box-office blockbuster" (Grubb xx).

In Charlie Chaplin, Fosse found his model: "a skinny little vaudevillian with a bowler hat and a cane, the star performer who had become a writer, a director, [a composer], and even a producer" (Gottfried 125). The movements of Chaplin's "Little Tramp" character are an example of what Fosse would in 1974 term "eccentric" dancing. This was the style of dancing Fosse saw used by vaudevillians "whose sources for steps were eclectic and whose execution of movement was idiosyncratic" (McWaters xiv). The word eccentric also means, "off-center." In Fosse's choreography an off-center "visual style is constant in either walks or in asymmetrical isolations or poses" (McWaters xiv). While choreographing the film Kiss Me Kate, Fosse had the opportunity to work with Carol Haney. Haney introduced Fosse to the dance language of Jack Cole, a prominent choreographer in post-WWII Hollywood. Cole established the rhythmic snapping of fingers in his choreography. "Fosse did not mimic Cole in his steps, nor did he adopt Haney's own mannerisms wholesale." Fosse was exploring and finding his "dance self" (Gottfried 73). Fosse met Gwen Verdon, another disciple of Jack Cole, while choreographing George Abbot's Damn Yankees. Verdon became synonymous with Fosse's choreography and became his dance and life partner. In spite of Fosse's blatant promiscuity, Fosse and Verdon were an inseparable duo. Bob Fosse died of a heart attack in Gwen Verdon's arms on September 13, 1987 after leaving the National Theatre before the opening night of the revival of Sweet Charity. He was sixty years old.

While Fosse's choreography is at the heart of Chicago: A Musical Vaudeville, the musical is "quintessential Kander and Ebb. . . . [It] uses performance to draw attention to the

relationship between theatre and everyday life." John Kander (b. March 18, 1927) and Fred Ebb (April 8, 1936 - September 11, 2004) worked for nearly forty-two years as a preeminent songwriting team of late twentieth century Broadway musicals. The two grew up in the time of post-World War II optimism. Kander and Ebb's approach made "the musical more socially aware, more political, and more international." Kander and Ebb's career coincided with several major changes in the genre of musical comedy. Their work spans across the "post-Rodgers and Hammerstein era, the rise and fall of the so called rock musical, the British invasion, the age of the mega musical, and the incursion of Disney on Broadway." In their lifetime, Kander and Ebb successfully "transformed the musical theatre genre into something more than just entertainment." The art form of the American Musical could entertain audiences while telling "serious, mature stories" (Leve 28-34).

James Leve notes "the composer and lyricist have strikingly different artistic temperaments" (Leve 19) John Kander is more "sentimental," while Fred Ebb is "campy and cynical" (Leve 19) Kander and Ebb's collaboration is a perfect balancing act. Their ability to produce "accessible songs" has yielded quite an oeuvre of classic Broadway songs (Leve 24). The "self-referential" musical is most certainly an invention of Kander and Ebb. The exploitation of meta-theatre, the "show within a show framework," is apparent in their work. In Kiss of the Spider Woman, Luis Molina dreams of a femme fatale who visits him in a cinematic fantasy. Sally Bowles performs "Cabaret" in the Kit Kat Klub in Cabaret. Roxie Hart obsesses over her name in the headlines in Chicago: A Musical Vaudeville. Kander and Ebb keenly resolve the "inherent contradiction of breaking into song in the middle of a realistic scene" (Leve 5). This exploration adds a "diversionary, edgy quality" apparent in their work (Leve 22). Fred Ebb explained their exploration best: "We're looking for a new form of musical theater, one that'll

break away from what's become stale and static, and self-imitative. We're looking back in time only to look forward in form" (Leve 35).

Kander and Ebb caused a paradigm shift for the American musical comedy along with Joe Masteroff in the landmark Cabaret. Its fame was not particularly expected in 1966 and it allowed Kander and Ebb to make their mark on Broadway. Cabaret combined "Ebb's acerbic wit and Kander's broad stylistic range [to produce] powerful results." It was no doubt the "dark subject matter and unconventional dramatic structure of the musical" that allowed Kander and Ebb to soar into popularity (Leve 27-28). The composer/lyricist team created such memorable musicals as Flora, the Read Menace, Kiss of the Spider Woman, Curtains and The Scottsboro Boys. The film adaptations of their musicals Cabaret and Chicago both won the Academy Award for Best Film.

Bob Fosse started with Fred Ebb on the script for Chicago: A Musical Vaudeville in 1973. Fosse and Ebb "reset the Maurine Dallas Watkins [1926] play on a vaudeville stage so that all the musical numbers would be 'justified'" (Leve 31). Fosse perfected this technique in his film adaptation of Kander, Ebb and Masteroff's Cabaret. The structure of Chicago: A Musical Vaudeville was a gateway in response to "changes in the status of the musical and [would address] a wider range of social concerns." Fosse was "in a mood even blacker than his usual, for he was suffering post-operative depression after open-heart surgery" (Gottfried vii). With his new outlook, "there was no room in [Fosse's] concept of the show for sentiment," Jerry Orbach observed. "He wanted something with an undertone of corruption" (Leve 87-89). The Cook County Jail became a "Jazz Age prison" where a "collusion of the media and the criminal justice system" meet (Leve 81). Interspersed with "sketch like scenes," the musical would be supported by acts performed and introduced by the characters as if they were on a vaudeville stage. Initially

a “fun gimmick,” this device allowed vaudeville to become “a metaphor for the American justice system in which the best performance wins over the press and the jury.” In Tony Walton’s final design, the stage was raked in the manner of a vaudeville house. “The result was a much more organic and seamless work than anything Kander and Ebb had written before or have written since” (Leve 80). On June 3, 1975, Chicago: A Musical Vaudeville opened at the 46th Street Theatre. It ran for a total of 936 performances and closed on August 27, 1977.

In May 1996, Walter Bobbie chose to direct Chicago: A Musical Vaudeville as a limited four-performance run in a concert series entitled, Encores! Great Musicals in Concert. The production muted the 1920’s aura and removed the vaudeville aspect. The show even removed the word vaudeville from the title. Chicago: The Musical was “stripped of scenery and performed with actors in black costumes before an onstage orchestra, Chicago was set free to bare its nasty power” (Gottfried vii). Ann Reinking reinterpreted Fosse’s choreography and “revised history by creating additional choreography ‘in the style of Fosse.’” In the eyes of some critics, this became an overly clichéd choreographic use of “pelvic grinds, tipped derbies, and Fosse look-alikes – often effective but inevitably repetitive and ultimately a travesty of the original style” (Gottfried vii-xvi). This production opened on May 10, 1999 and was an instant hit. It moved down the street to the Ambassador Theatre and opened on November 16, 1999 with a new book by David Thompson. For Kander and Ebb, the atmosphere for the revival’s opening night, “was all of a sudden electric” (Leve 96). Chicago became a posthumous hit for Bob Fosse. As of April 2014, Chicago is currently both the longest-running musical revival on Broadway and the longest running American musical in history.

CHAPTER 2
PRODUCTION CONCEPT

Director Tony Mata wanted to evoke Bob Fosse's 1975 production and its use of scenery, color and pizzazz and not Walter Bobbie's showcase minimalism. The production would be staged on the H.P. Constans Mainstage. His production would be "bluesy, jazzy, sexy, [and] sophisticated." There is sensuality to Bob Fosse's original choreography, but there is also something dangerous about it. The director was certain that the play's environment should be metal and in no way elegant. The "reflective quality that could be very interesting with lighting . . . The idea of the sharpness of the steel. It's a metaphor for the danger. What does that metal represent? Blades, knives and guns!" The director wanted the set to have a sleazy quality. The lighting for the show should provide elegance to moments that would never be perceived as elegant: the life of women in a correctional facility. Only through song can the characters be taken out of the cold world and into the warmth of Kander and Ebb's music. "The environment the characters inhabit is not sophisticated in any shape or form," the director said. "What's glamorous about being in jail?" The glamour, color, and brightness would be achieved through lighting and the costumes.

The production's aim was not to recreate an era; instead, to make the heightened sense of an era. The show's lighting should be "so out there," the director said, "that it's in-your-face!" Isolated lighting so that characters could seemingly pop out of nowhere. Vaudeville style footlights were most certainly an element requested for this particular show. The orchestra would play an integral part in the stage picture and its lighting should be affected within the musical numbers.

CHAPTER 3
DESIGN PROCESS

At the initial design meeting, the director presented his production concept. Scenic designer Jovon Eberhart presented period photographs of steel architecture in Chicago, Illinois to the design team. One of the books she brought was a scaffolding manual from 1918. At the second design meeting, the scenic designer presented a scenic rendering that offered plenty of opportunities for light to "break through" the set. The set had a "physical cage" around the band via scrim panels with a central revolving hexagon underneath the band where scenery could be loaded out of sight upstage while a scene played downstage. There were multiple stair units, two Chicago firehouse/Fosse burlesque stripper poles, and vertical drop stair units. The design team at the second meeting discussed several approaches to footlights. The scenic designer suggested low-footprint MR-16 "birdie" fixtures in a footlight trough downstage to concealing the fixtures. As another source of uplighting for the performers, interim lighting design faculty member Jeremy Sinicki suggested implementing plexiglass overlays in the rotating hexagon platform so that Phillips iCove LED modules could light up the platform.

Graduate lighting design advisor, Stan Kaye, suggested watching Rob Marshall's Chicago with the lighting designer for inspiration. Broadway lighting designer Jules Fisher lit the original show and the film. Fisher was Fosse's lighting designer and was featured in All That Jazz. Fisher's lighting in Rob Marshall's Chicago is awe-inspiring. The lighting design advisor remarked how the musical numbers had little flecks of light that bounced off the highly reflective surfaces. What caught the attention of the lighting design advisor was the "Hot Honey Rag" light curtain in the film. Fisher alludes to two prior effects used in productions with Fosse. Fisher created a stunning logo that flickered to life to begin Fosse's film All that Jazz. In Pippin, Fisher created the striking image where performers were silhouetted in a "curtain of light." The lighting

design advisor remarked that a similar luminous element could be a spectacular image to leave the audience with. The lighting designer drafted and constructed with aid of the electrics shop a custom light curtain. The "Hot Honey Rag" Light Curtain was a five-by-two grid of 9,360 LED Grain of Wheat (GOW) lights that was controlled by ten dimmers. A blackout drop was flown in behind the light curtain to enhance the perceived brightness of the light curtain. A "Roxie and Velma" sign made of lauan and rope light would fly in and be lit on the button of the song.

Upon viewing the scenic designer's rendering, the lighting design advisor suggested making the many rivets on the revolving hexagon platform luminous. The scenic designer would mold and cast the rivets from resin. They would then be spray-painted to look metallic. Sample LED Backlight modules were ordered as a potential solution. The lighting designer drafted the low heat/low footprint LED modules to scale in Vectorworks in alignment with the rivets on the scenic designer's drafting. Subsequent tests with the scenic designer were conducted as to the spacing of the resin rivets with the sample modules. The tests proved quite successful, but would circumvent the scenic designer's original intent of not running wiring through the revolving hexagon platform.

After the third design meeting, the lighting designer researched mylar "rain curtains" and LED sources to provide a "sparkle" to the show's lighting design. The lighting designer consulted with costume designer Paul Favini as to which style and color to select for a potential purchase of a mylar rain curtain. Mr. Favini believed Rosebrand's "crushed ice" style of lavender and silver mylar strips would look "intentionally crinkly" and be much more interesting than crisp mylar strips.

The lighting designer found a solution during his apprenticeship at the Santa Fe Opera for an actor operated camera flash. For Gian Carlo Menotti's The Last Savage, the electrics

department wired a battery-operated nine-module LED into prop cameras. It was an excellent solution for the reporter's cameras in Chicago. Property designer Kim Yeoman built the reporter's cameras and assistant lighting designer Ben Hawkins wired a three-watt LED with a momentary switch. The director commented that the effect achieved by the designer was a brilliant solution.

The lighting design team investigated how to make battery powered practical lamps for this production. The solution came from housing a singe three-watt LED chip in the base of an A-19 lamp minus the filament. The assistant lighting designer wired a prototype for the total cost of five dollars. The LED A-LAMP punched through the theatrical lighting and read very convincingly from a distance. The lighting design team did not investigate running the LED A-LAMP through any rheostat or conventional theatrical dimming. The assistant lighting designer wired the LED A-LAMP into an existing standing lamp and a desk lamp that were pulled for the show. A mixture of water and glue was made to coat the lamps in the event one dropped to absorb the impact and reduce shattering onstage. This was a technique the designer saw used at the Santa Fe Opera for the lighting design of La Bohème. Luckily none of the LED A-LAMPs shattered.

The budget for Chicago was not sufficient to cover any of the additional design materials researched and tested. The lighting design advisor suggested submitting a budget proposal to acquire the additional funds. The budget proposal passed offering the lighting designer over $4,000 more as part of his show budget. The elements to build the light curtain, luminous rivets, camera flashes and LED A-LAMPs were ordered and incorporated into the design along with a Rosebrand Crushed Ice mylar rain curtain and a new Wizard Velour full stage black curtain.

Once the lighting designer made choices for gel color, he tested them in the School of

Theatre and Dance's Light Lab. With costume designer Stacey Galloway, the lighting designer conducted tests on available fabrics and several completed costume pieces. The gel color for the front light system, Gam 885, brought clarity to the textures in the costumes. Lee 716, a saturate blue gel, enhanced Billy Flynn's jacket. Lee 127, a "port-wine" saturate pink gel, brought out Mama Morton's feather boa and the ensemble's accent pieces for "When You're Good to Mama" and "Razzle Dazzle." The costume designer conducted a final test with several different tuxedo jackets pulled for the male ensemble in "Roxie." The jackets were meant to match, but differences in texture and sheen were clearly visible in the lighting designer's choice of crisp front light. Seeing this discrepancy allowed the costume designer to find an alternative solution for the tuxedo jackets. When costumes were added at the first dress rehearsal, the color and texture of the costumes read as both designers intended.

When building his initial cue score, the designer considered every potential accent and shift in the music based off of the Broadway revival cast album. Lighting design assistant Alena Aissing interpreted the designer's cue score into a preliminary followspot tracking cue sheet. The H.P. Constans Mainstage has two Lycian Midget II followspots. This model has only an iris and a shutter with no means to dim or douse the light. The lighting designer noticed a very clear imbalance in the quality of light emitted from the followspots. The house left fixture had a "punch" to the beam of light and could be focused to a very sharp, defined edge. In contrast, the beam of light from the house right followspot was not as bright and appeared to have an inability to maintain a sharp edged focus. Once the director realized this discrepancy, he played the mismatching followspots for laughs. Characters would fight to have the "better" followspot or command to have both followspots focused on them. Bradley Miller and Emily Parker were the show's followspot operators. The two had worked on the previous musicals City of Angels and

Damn Yankees at the University of Florida. It was a load off the lighting designer's mind to have them on the run crew for the show. During technical rehearsals, assistant lighting designer Ben Hawkins kept notes and updated the followspot tracking paperwork.

The lighting designer approached drafting the show by initially creating lighting systems in Vectorworks. Once the budget proposal passed, he made individual plates as to how the custom LED light curtain and luminous riverts would be constructed. The initial drafting was made three months ahead of the production schedule. It allowed the lighting designer time to take the systems he drafted in Vectorwork and import them into WYSIWYG. WYSIWYG, developed by Cast Software, is a powerful computer aided drafting (CAD) software that focuses on accurately rendering lighting for stage and film. The lighting designer first built a basic three-dimensional model of the set that was placed in a pre-existing CAD model of the H. P. Constans Mainstage. He then added additional lighting positions and hung the virtual inventory based on the initial Vectorworks generated drafting. The designer saw vital rea-time data about photometrics, shutter cuts, color choices and angles on surfaces that matched the reflective quality of the constructed scenery. Critical errors in hanging positions for side lighting were obvious once the fixtures were turned on in WYSIWYG. The designer tested the flexibility of his lighting rig a month before it would be hung and focused in WYSIWYG. Once the designer focused the fixtures in WYSIWYG, he programmed cues using the Whole Hog III PC lighting console. The designer spent a month pre-visualizing and cueing Chicago in the School of Theatre and Dance's Light Lab. Before technical rehearsals began, there were 450 cues preprogrammed into the console.

Once the show's rig was hung and focused on the Constans Mainstage, the designer patched the instruments in WYSIWYG as they corresponded to the actual lighting fixtures. The

changes made in WYSIWYG were transferred back into Vectorworks and then into Lightwright. The show file of the designers pre-visualized programmed cues was transferred from the Light Lab computer to the Whole Hog III PC lighting console that was used to program and run the show. The cues along with their fades, intensities, color and tracking successfully transferred. The process of working in WYSIWYG saved the lighting designer a lot time when it came time for the technical rehearsals. The lighting design for the show was programmed up to the finale sequence "Nowadays/R.S.V.P./Hot Honey Rag" prior to technical rehearsals.

The lighting designer and his advisor watched together the first full run of act one of Chicago: A Musical Vaudeville. The designer took very accurate blocking notes, but the complexity of Mr. Dyer's choreographer for "The Cell Block Tango" made it difficult to record all of the blocking for that particular number. The designer had to attend subsequent rehearsals to ascertain the blocking of that particular number. The blocking notation taken was sufficient to start cueing in WYSIWYG. The designer returned rehearsals to watch and take blocking notation during a full run of the second act of the Chicago. The director's style for this production followed in Bob Fosse's footsteps and was "finding it in the space." Bob Fosse said of his process as a director, "My primary contribution to the show will happen when we're in rehearsal. That's when I think of lines, that's when I think of business, that's when I think of throwing out whole scenes or redoing them or re-conceiving them in terms of movement" (Gottfried 290). The director's exploration was constant throughout the technical process.

It took four meetings to entirely paper tech Chicago: A Musical Vaudeville. There was significant difficulty in scheduling due to the stage manager's school schedule. The meetings were held with the stage manager and the scenic designer in the Lighting Lab. The lighting designer played back real-time cues in WYSIWYG that were synched to the tracks of the

Broadway revival. The lighting designer gave the stage manager a strict cueing schedule for the cue-to-cue process during technical rehearsals. Each cue sequence in the show was carefully scrutinized by the designer and was given a precise amount of time needed in order to work through each sequence in the show. The lighting designer asked the stage manager to be given time warnings to maintain the strict schedule. The designer focused at the beginning of a technical rehearsal on more musical numbers with large quantities of cues. Then, priority was given to smaller cue sequences for ballads and book scenes. Nearing the end of a technical rehearsal, the lighting designer scheduled large ensemble numbers to maintain the energy of the technical rehearsal process. The lighting designer kept an accelerated pace in working through the first two days of technical rehearsals. On the third day of technical rehearsals, the director demanded the lighting designer slow down "frenetic" his pace so the director could properly take in the lighting for each moment of the show. The lighting designer slowed down to a more relaxed pace, but kept on track with his strict schedule. The director and stage manager were very grateful for the change in pace.

When it came time to program the "Hot Honey Rag," the designer spent three hours cueing the number independent of actors. The designer used a recording of a rehearsal made by his assistant as reference during cueing. The lighting designer recorded the completed cue sequence on his laptop and in Final Cut Pro superimposed each cue number to assist the stage manager in cue calling. The choreographer helped the lighting designer and the stage manager place the cues in their respective scores.

CHAPTER 4
EPILOGUE

On November 11, 2011, the University of Florida's production of Chicago: A Musical Vaudeville opened on the H.P. Constans Mainstage. Assistant lighting designer Ben Hawkins ran the lighting console for the entirety of the production and called followspot cues. Both the director and the lighting designer's advisor were very happy with the designer's work. The director told the lighting designer that he had successfully "managed" the design process of the musical better than anyone who he had previously worked with at the University of Florida. It was certainly an incredible feat for a designer who had previously never designed a musical. The production closed on November 20, 2011. The lighting designer received a nomination from KC/ACTF Region IV for the Barbizon Lighting Design for the University of Florida's production of Chicago: A Musical Vaudeville.