

LIVE DESIGN

Dead Man Walking: Dead Man's Shoes

Nov 13, 2012 7:48 AM, By Davi Napoleon



Photos Chris Purchis

Problem

When the Performance Network Theatre (PNT) (<http://www.performancenetwork.org>) in Ann Arbor, MI, invited a small group to a concert reading, one spectator ventured that the new play would be impossible to stage. The story of outlaw Injun Bill, out to avenge the wrong done to a friend who was hanged, skinned, and whose skin was used to make a pair of shoes, unravels in more than ten different locales that include a bar, a brothel, and a church. *Dead Man's Shoes* was a screenplay, wasn't it? Certainly, it couldn't be done by PNT, with a stage that's 45'10"x26'6", or at the Williamston Theatre, (<http://www.williamstontheatre.com/wp/>) 50 miles away, where the stage is 21'6"x19'6".

That didn't faze PNT's artistic director David Wolber, who wanted to direct this mysterious tale of redemption, nor did the dark comedy give Tony Caselli, AD of the Williamston Theatre, pause; he committed to the rolling production almost as soon as playwright Joseph Zettelmaier sent him the script.

Both theatres had done other multi-location plays with simultaneous sets, but Wolber was concerned about how to frame this story and how to use objects to tell it. Some locations, like the inside of a moving train car, would be tricky, even in a play with fewer scenes. A jail scene requires two cells, with some action occurring outside both, using the full stage. And how would they get from a jail to a cave without transforming the stage? "We were crossing the Wild West, with wide open skies, and on horses. If we had been making a movie, we would have had the horses," Caselli acknowledges.

Would sound be called upon to indicate locations? Could lighting set the stage properly? Or might there be a scenic solution? And how difficult would it be to move the coproduction to PNT after a run at Williamston, 50 miles away?

Would the team eschew movie-like realism or rely on it so audiences cared about the characters? Would the production be playful or try to recreate the Wild West, circa 1883, with realistic costumes and props?

Solution



Wolber decided to embrace realism. "I specifically was interested in the look and feel of campfire light, shadow puppets, vaudeville, traveling circus, traveling revival shows, and the idea that these performers are also performers in that time, not just characters," he says. Taking his cue from the conventions of the period, when painted scenery was common and high-tech solutions undiscovered, two actors who played eight of the smaller roles stepped in and out of each character to become the performers playing them, while two played leading characters.

In this frankly theatrical production, a bench didn't have to be a bench; it could be a prop put on stage by members of a touring company. "They make up their pageant wagon stage and jump into it," says scenic designer Kirk Domer. "It gave us more ownership. We didn't need to say, 'This is now a bench or a bed.' Of course it is, because we never said it was anything else." Depending on how it was placed on stage, a flexible wooden structure could be a horse trough and become a pew, a bar, or a bathtub.

Domer's theatrical scenic solution also involved a platform and a horizontal roll drop. The curved wall of the platform stage sported a hand-painted scroll, depicting each scene in the show. It took nearly an hour to paint each foot on 130' of fabric; only a little of this fabric, at each end to wrap around supporting columns, went unpainted. When a scene was almost cut, then kept, Domer missed a location and wound up having to cut and reattach the fabric so it looked seamless.

In the spirit of a traveling vaudeville show, two actors took turns turning the spool that moved the scroll, changing the scene so spectators knew where they were. A jail? No problem—a painted jail sufficed, with a ladder placed in the center of the platform to suggest bars separating cells. And when an actor ran keys to the cell along higher, invisible bars, they were evoked by mime and sound effects.

The spool could only be turned in one direction, or the fabric would not stay taut enough to remain on the tracks that held it lightly. There had been talk of creating a mechanism that could move it in either direction, but technical director Ed Weingart feared there wouldn't be enough time to test and finesse it if it didn't work smoothly. A simpler mechanism would be better when using a prototype, he felt, even if it came with issues: If an actor moved the scroll too far, he would find himself in the wrong scene.

Too much friction when the scroll hit the wooden background made it difficult for actors to turn and control the scroll at first. Covering the wall in plastic ground sheeting made it easier for the scroll to slide, but that friction had been fighting gravitational pull and holding it up. Now, the scroll needed to be seated exactly so it would stay in place and resist gravity. "There's a point of attachment at the top and at the bottom. It was important that the two were perfectly parallel," says Weingart, who visited a specialty metal shop for tubing that fit around pipe and fit regular pipe into the sleeve to create a structure to hold the scroll; he had to create the bearing-type surfaces himself to stay within budget, steel on steel, not actual bearings. He placed pins in the top of the wall where the cable would run. If a little pin wasn't reset carefully after each performance, chaos would ensue. And so it happened that, at one performance at Williamston, the scroll fell, briefly stopping the show. Because the stage at PNT is higher, Weingart was able to add a cable on top to guide the scroll so it wouldn't fall again.



Photos Chris Purchis

The rough-hewn wooden platform was slightly uneven, elevating actors who also played on the apron below. Weingart built the platform and floor to tour, using quarter-inch medium-density fiber board for the floor so sheets could be laid out in a grid and easily moved and laid in the same order. He constructed the stage in four parts, but modularly, so legs and facing didn't have to be removed. Although PNT is usually used as a proscenium house, seats can be placed on either side of the stage, creating a thrust similar to the Williamston seating arrangement. The seating plan also decreased the playing space at PNT, making it closer to Williamston's in size.

Lighting was limited by height of the downstage area and the small number of dimmers available at Williamston, making it tricky for lighting designer Dan Walker to place light where it would illuminate actors without shining in the eyes of spectators. Another concern was that there would be too much light on the curved wall that held the scroll, washing out the images that were so critical to the storytelling. "The grid is within 6" of the network, and they have 36 low-capacity dimmers. There was some desire to keep the spaces more isolated," says Walker, explaining that they had to come in steep in several places. With areas that are big and far from each other, area lights would be difficult, too. It was also difficult for Walker to get in front of the space, but he was able to hang "a slew of under-hung Fresnels" that helped him fill in surfaces. There were footlights on the platform, designed to look like period lights, and Walker depended on them, too. Blue downlight—"always our friend for moodiness," he notes—was essential. And a set of specials gave character to

several scenes. Walker's advice to those with too few instruments: "Pick your specials well so you get some impact."

Lighting included ETC (<http://www.etcconnect.com>) Source Four ellipsoidals at both theaters, with ETC Sensor+ dimming at Williamston and Leprecon (<http://www.leprecon.com>) dimmers at PNT. A variety of Altman fixtures completed the show, and both venues have ETC consoles.

Moving from scene to scene seamlessly without blackouts required more than scrolling to the next frame. Large props had to be moved, costumes changed. Zettelmaier wrote "The Ballad of Injun Bill," and stage manager Rochelle Clark, also a member of a band, The Potter's Field, wrote music to his lyrics. If one "player" actor sung a stanza while the other turned the scroll and changed costume, action could be continuous.

That helped sound designer Will Myers. "I thought I would have to do a lot of work to establish time and place," says Myers. When he heard the song, his job became more about creating the mood than managing transitions. With death hovering about, he wondered how supernatural sound should be. "Our protagonist is ostensibly on the hunt [for the shoes and the man wearing them], but they and we don't realize they're the ones being hunted," says Myers. Myers set out to maintain suspense. "I ended up going to spooky sounds, wind, and distant train whistles...creating a sense of something that's just over the sunset, something following them," he adds, noting that the goal was to try to avoid imposing much recorded sound and to keep sound almost subliminal.

We hear ravens three times, whenever death approaches. Particular sounds became associated with particular characters. Injun Bill's wannabe friend and uninvited sidekick, Froggy, Myers says, "carries his own band," playing harmonica in two different keys. A coyote follows the sheriff. For Bill, whose mother was a Lakota, Myers used native American drums and a slowed down and distorted recording of flamenco singer Pepe De La Matrona to suggest some part of his inner life. "The play doesn't exist in the realm of a conventional Western. There's a ghost story aspect and larger forces at play, [with] raw, emotional performances," explains Myers, who couldn't find the gut-wrenching mythic quality he wanted in Native American recordings. Drum circles were too busy, and he wasn't looking for a war chant. A lone voice was ideal. "When you contextualize the flamenco music with the drums or sound of wolves in the background, it sounds like it could be a First Nations' song."

Myers didn't do much field recording, relying on www.freesound.org (<http://www.freesound.org/>) for most cues. "They'll find a pub in Belgium, and since no English is spoken, it sounds like hubbub," he says, and used this to create the sounds of a crowd in a saloon. Actor Paul Hopper was good at mimicking bats, barking like a dog, and supplying other effects that Myers used, too.

Figure 53 Qlab (<http://figure53.com/qlab/>) software was used, along with QSC (<http://www.qscaudio.com>) amplifiers and speakers. Both venues have Mackie (<http://www.mackie.com>) mixing consoles, and Myers also employed Audacity (<http://audacity.sourceforge.net>) editing software, a Tascam (<http://tascam.com>) DP-02 Portastudio, and Shure (<http://www.shure.com>) SM57 mics.

When actors were characters, not players, acting wasn't stylized; actors wore realistic costumes and worked with realistic props, down to the train tickets. Props included a revolver, appropriate to the period, and loaded. Prop designer Stefanie Din was charged with finding the right weaponry and making sure weapons were safe. She also had to dull the knives, while making sure they looked sharp. Some props weren't dangerous, but they could have been hard to find—tumbleweed, for instance, or period lanterns.

Din was able to buy and borrow the period props. She had planned to make the tumbleweeds by drying weeds and twigs but found what she needed online for a reasonable price at www.tumbleweedforsale.com (<http://www.tumbleweedforsale.com/>). Domer, who heads the theatre department at Michigan State University (<http://www.msu.edu>), found lanterns for her in the MSU prop shop. They were rigged to a Christmas candle; a switch on the bottom allowed actors to turn the lantern on and "blow" it out. Zettelmaier and Caselli both had knives she could use and a giant antique store in Williamston had almost everything else.

Din found a revolver at www.collectorsarmoury.com (<http://www.collectorsarmoury.com/>) and loaded it with blanks. Din and Caselli fired the first shot in the theatre alone and again at a meeting called to test the gun. During intermission for each show, everyone who would be onstage at the time the gun is fired or touch the gun participated in a gun check. Clark opened the barrel, so the actors could see it was empty. Then she showed them the blanks, distinguished by yellow powder on the tips. She loaded the gun and put it into the holster, where it stayed with an assistant stage manager until the actor put it on. There were never any real bullets in the theatre. Din had all knives dulled at a True Value hardware store. "If you take it to a professional grinder, they can do it so it doesn't look dull."

Costume designer Amber Marisa Cook bought Western-style clothes, a lot of it from the website Wild West Mercantile (<http://www.wwmmerc.com>). Distressing clothing for intimate houses proved tricky. At first she tried excessive laundering, adding tennis balls to the dry cycle to pound marks into garments. That helped but not enough. She wanted to avoid bleach, which would weaken garments that had to survive two runs. "I ended up painting most everything with acrylic paints and dyes because the tennis ball method, and using bleach, which I tried out of desperation, didn't really seem to faze the clothing. It goes to show that the Western wear I purchased really is meant for rough and tumble work and wear! I did stay away from ripping or fraying fabrics because the garments wouldn't have held up during the two runs of the show. Instead, I added patches to imply wear and tear, and over time the clothing actually acquired some small rips and tears just from the actors living in the clothing, which in this instance was a good thing."

Finding the right pair of shoes and reworking them to look something like the historic shoes was perhaps Cook's biggest challenge. The shoes would have wooden heels and leather soles, and they had to look masculine. Using a combination of paint and Shoe Renew, a leather dye, she recreated a look that could have been mistaken for those worn by the governor of Wyoming.

To distinguish costumes worn by actors playing four characters, vest length might vary as well as palette. Staging helped the costume crew. An actor would remove his vest so that he bled on his white, easy to bleach, shirt.

Flexibility on the part of the design team also helped solve problems. At an early production meeting, Domer drew a new rendering on the spot when questions arose about the size of the platform. "It was a demonstration of his agility and facility to adapt and draw very quickly, capturing the ideas we were throwing at him in the meeting," Wolber says. "It basically is the epitome of how everyone worked on this show, taking the challenge, messing around, and then realizing a clearer way to tell the story and running with the improvement." Domer, too, always enjoyed the collaborative process; if there was an issue with a particular knife, for instance, Cook devised a different holder, while Din found a way to adapt it, and Zettelmaier wrote it out of the scene.

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