

DANNY BURSTEIN AS HAROLD ZIDLER



Welcome to
Moulin Rouge!
The Musical

BY IRIS WIENER

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BROADWAY FAVORITES Karen Olivo and Aaron Tveit may have top billing at Broadway's *Moulin Rouge! The Musical*, but they are not the only stars of the highly-anticipated show; that credit goes to the many elements of the production design, which is in and of itself a character in this high-concept, immersive experience. An adaptation of Baz Luhrmann's 2001 marvel of a movie musical, *Moulin Rouge!*, starring Nicole Kidman and Ewan McGregor, the story centers on Christian, an impoverished, aspiring American singer-songwriter who vies for the affection of Parisian beauty Satine, the headliner of the famed cabaret night club Moulin Rouge. The jukebox musical features more than seventy hits spanning decades, all of which are accompanied by unforgettable, innovative visual artistry.

Director Alex Timbers, the luminary behind such iconographic treats as *Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson*, *Peter and the Starcatcher* and *Beetlejuice*, is at the helm of *Rouge*, which stunned audiences at its out-of-town tryout last year in Boston. Over the past six years he has been crafting a show that envelops audiences the moment they enter the theater, which has been transformed in its entirety into the "actual" Moulin Rouge. "I thought a lot about the scenic envelope for the show," he recalls of the concept for the audience's entrance. "From the first conversation I had with Baz, it felt important that you're in this club."

Timbers says that he has always been interested in world creation and the idea of "the audience and actors being in a room together, without the footlights separating you." When audiences arrive at the Al Hirschfeld Theatre they will find a pre-show in progress, featuring actors already performing in a show-within-a-show. "You're entering the club in motion a little bit," he adds. "This is about mood and atmosphere. It's going to be really exotic and transporting."

For Timbers, it is also crucial for audiences to have a role in the show. "If you're in a club scene, are they the actual audience at the Moulin Rouge?" he says of the questions he asked himself while creating the show, "versus, in this intimate book scene, are they people voyeuristically listening in? It's a delicious proposition for the director because you get to do those big shifts where you're

looking in on the action and then you're right there and part of the action. Those can instantaneously switch." Derek McLane's scenic design was instrumental in breaking the fourth wall as well. He says they "break the proscenium frequently with passerelles and ramps out in the theatre that people come out to during the course of the show."

piece of design. That was both challenging and exciting, figuring out how to honor the spirit of the movie and its design, and also make it something new."

To accomplish this, McLane wanted to convey a strong sense of 1899 in the Montmartre district of Paris, the show's setting. Coincidentally, his childhood in

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DEREK MCLANE
PHOTO BY MATTHEW MURPHY

CATHERINE ZUBER



ALEX TIMBERS
PHOTO BY
JOAN MARCUS

They have even built their own opera boxes very close to the proscenium to be used during the action of the play.

McLane felt that it was his duty to honor the beauty of the film, which was memorably designed by Catherine Martin. (In 2002 she won two Academy Awards for her art direction and costume design for the film.) "I'm very aware that the production design for the movie is one of the most famous and memorable production designs of all time," he says, recalling how he was "blown away" by the film. "I knew that the show couldn't be a copy of the movie—it needs to be its own thing and to feel like a contemporary



India helped inform some of his designs. "There was a lot happening architecturally and a real interest in scientific innovation amongst artists and bohemians," he says of

the time period. “A great sense of exoticism existed, and many Parisians were lovers of artwork from Asia and Morocco, particularly Indian and Chinese art. That love, mixed with the ornate, cast iron architectural styles of Paris in the late 19th century is a really interesting mixture.” McLane says that he aimed to share a similar credo in how Martin

remained a bit more period in her choices. “Even though we had this [combination], we always tried as much as possible to make sure that any choice could have existed in 1900, that it wasn’t so far gone,” she says. For one scene, Zuber had to consider what performers would wear for a show rehearsal. “They wouldn’t have sweatpants, tank tops

the period while considering what it meant for people to be outsiders at the time. “In the storytelling, there’s the Bohemians and the idea that the club is a refuge for people that feel they don’t belong in traditional society. I felt that the Moulin Rouge and Paris needed to be more brazen than if it was set in London or New York at that time.”



KAREN OLIVO AS SATINE, AARON TVEIT AS CHRISTIAN (CENTER) AND COMPANY

designed the film. “She said that everything they did design-wise was period in some way, but the way the colors and the patterns were combined made it feel modern. I thought that was an interesting comment.”

Timbers also points to this “mash-up” as being integral to the show. “One of the things that Baz and [Catherine Martin] do, which is really smart and is one of the tools that we’ve used on this, is they have an incredible rigor to what is period, what is contemporary, and what the rules are,” he says. “They were really influential in creating a vocabulary for us because it is different than the movie; we use very contemporary, theatrical lighting, electronic dance... but still have period elements. Their idea that there are true rules to how the visual world and the sonic world of a mash-up works was really inspiring.”

Costume designer Catherine Zuber

and leggings, but they would probably want to wear underwear, corsets, and swimwear, and kind of customize them in their own way. They would want to wear something that is comfortable but shows their body, so that’s what we did in that particular scene.”

Collaborating with Zuber came easily for McLane, as they have known each other since attending the Yale School of Drama together in the early ‘80s. In fact, they even share a studio, allowing for what she calls a “beautiful shorthand.” “[McLane] has a brilliant eye and he’s so clever. Coming up with a solution that is at once traditional but at the same time untraditional, it’s a wonderful mixture of sensibilities and he is a master of that.”

To begin her process, Zuber immersed herself in researching the Belle Époque period in Paris by looking at films, magazines, photographs and paintings of

The theme of class differences and their effects on the characters’ lives was important to Timbers as well. “Separating the worlds of extreme poverty in Montmartre and the deluxe maximalism that is the club was essential,” he says. “We wanted to service those two worlds in a really strong way and separate those worlds as much as we could. The world of the club is filled with rich, saturated colors and the world of Montmartre is charcoal greys and blacks. That was the beginning to the way into the visual world of the show.” Timbers also notes that there is a third world visited briefly in affluent Paris that is only slightly touched upon in the film; on Broadway, the Duke’s world has an entire sequence. “It’s colorful but has more pastels and watercolors and a completely different vibe from the other two.”

When it came to choosing colors for

the mesmeric theatre, which McLane calls a 360-degree environment as it features a giant windmill and elephant, as well as draperies overhead and walls covered in cut velvets, he used approximately seven different shades of red. “The combination of purple-reds, magenta, orange-reds, and fire engine red gives you a lot of energy and depth,” he says. Zuber married McLane’s concepts with the iconic attire from the film. “We looked at the green fairies, we looked at Zidler and his red tailcoat, and we looked at the men in the tutus,” she says of referring back to the film. “There were so many things we felt that fans of the film would want to see on stage.” She notes that making this happen was not always artistic; there were practical matters that dictated what she needed to design. “There are so many quick changes, and you can have the same artist play many different characters, with only maybe thirty seconds to make a costume change.”

Luhrmann, Martin and even film co-writer Craig Pearce have provided input for the stage production (Luhrmann has a producing credit), but also gave Timbers a lot of freedom with their work. “One of the many things that I got excited about with this project was the fun challenge of thinking, ‘This is a movie where a lot of what was so delightful was the energy built by the virtuosic editing and camera work,’ Timbers says. “In the theatre we don’t have whip pans or Steadicams and we don’t have impossible crane shots. We also don’t have music video-style editing. How do you create that same sort of energy and viscerality in a room while simply using tried and true theatrical techniques? That was really fun to think about and try to execute.”

McLane helped to overcome this challenge by creating a few miniature Montmartre buildings on stage. “You see those same buildings a couple of different times, even in different sets, like out the window of Satine’s apartment, and in the background on the street when Christian meets Toulouse-Lautrec and the Argentinean for the first time,” he says. “You sort of feel like wherever you are, you’re looking out at the same neighborhood.”

With the film in mind, McLane pinpoints two aspects of the design that acted as launching pads for his concept: “I’ve done a version of the heart-shaped pieces that



KAREN OLIVO AS SATINE
PHOTO BY MATTHEW MURPHY



BOSTON SET DESIGNED
BY DEREK McLANE, PHOTO
BY MATTHEW MURPHY

you see in the Moulin Rouge in the club; those in the Broadway production look like they’re gold iron work and lacy so they seem like really large lace valentines,” he says. “They are much more detailed than in the movie because on Broadway you sit and stare at them a lot longer; with the movie you just get these fleeting glimpses of them.” Along with lighting designer Justin Townsend, he designed the hearts so that they do a variety of lighting tricks as well. The other focal point was Satine’s iconic apartment in the elephant. “It pays homage to the design of that room in the movie, though it does have some differences,” notes McLane. “Hopefully, fans will see a lot of other details that are new to this production.”

The unique construction of *Moulin Rouge!*

The Musical is enhanced by a number of Easter eggs for the avid fan. “You’ll see them popping up in songs and in the design in ways that surprise you,” says Timbers. “The catalogue from the movie comes in, but perhaps it is in ways you wouldn’t expect it, like it’s re-shuffled with things that are retro or contemporary.” He hints that audiences may hear hooks from songs as a teaser, and then hear the entire song later. Additionally, eagle-eyed audiences will catch fun nods to the film in the details of the sets. “My hope is that if you’re a lover of the movie like me, there will be so much to adore in this and a ton of fun treats to find within.” *

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