



## SLEIGHT OF HAND

Jan 1, 1998 12:00 PM, David Barbour

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Goodspeed Opera House in East Haddam, CT, is a lovely little theatre in which to do lovely little musicals. That, however, was not the challenge given to LD Phil Monat in lighting Houdini, which opened at Goodspeed last October. Houdini is a big, ambitious new show which covers the famed magician's entire career; the plot centers on a triangle involving Houdini, his wife, and his brother, as well as the magician's pathetic reliance on phony mystics and seances after the death of his beloved mother. It's a sprawling story that covers 25 scenes over the course of two acts, rarely repeating a location. (Loren Sherman's scenic design made extensive use of traditional backdrops, as well as moving drops that created an iris effect, to keep the story moving at full speed.)

Such a show would already strain Goodspeed's technical resources, given the theatre's limited lighting positions and smallish power capacity. However, the show also contains a number of magic tricks that range from simple sleight-of-hand effects to the Chinese Water Torture Cell, a recreation of Houdini's most famous illusion, which called for Timothy Gulan, who played Houdini, to be shackled and lowered, upside down, into a tank containing two tons of water.

LD Phil Monat, however, seems to love such challenges, having done seven other musicals on Goodspeed's two stages. On Houdini, he had to pull off more than a few feats of magic himself, creating a fluid design for a musical that ranges from raucous, showbizzy production numbers to intimate dramatic scenes. Furthermore, he worked with magic designer Peter Samelson to carefully position the lighting in order not to reveal the mechanics of each illusion. "There's a very strict light line in place up there that we had to experiment with a couple of times," says Monat. "There's a set of fixtures that have a very sharp shutter cut across the middle of the stage at an exact point. The light line is a 12-unit plot inside of the regular plot. The fixtures are specially baffled so there is no spill. Not only is there a sidelighting component, there's also a downlight and frontlight component with the same thing. There is absolutely no



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spill past that line."

The use of the light line was most apparent in the second act number "Tell Them What They Want to Hear." As Houdini chases after a series of charlatans who pretend to offer him contact with his dead mother, a trio of phony mediums leads a sardonic number about their dubious trade. Behind them, a number of objects appear to float in mid-air against a black field, then vanish; in reality, the objects are moved by performers clad in black. "The biggest problem with that number," says Monat, "is that it's an up-front, up-tempo number and you can't use a followspot, or overlight the stage, because of all the disappearances. But the trick itself is a great payoff and, even though we're used to seeing the performers' faces more clearly, the audience does enjoy seeing, say, a shark, popping out of nowhere, then disappearing."

If Monat had to worry about overlighting the stage, when it came to color his approach was no holds barred. Houdini is a show business story, with several flamboyant supporting characters and a series of locations that include the Coney Island midway, Broadway, and various theatrical venues. Interestingly, Houdini marks the first time that a Goodspeed production has made use of scrollers (an earlier production, *Swinging on a Star*, had them too, but they were supplied by the producers who were shepherding that show to Broadway). Monat says the theatre "had a set that was donated off a tour of *The Will Rogers Follies*. These were the original Rosco scrollers, before Wybron and everybody else started up with them. I called Steve Cochrane, who was the electrician on *Will Rogers*; they were good scrollers but they were beat up in a couple of instances. They have the most fabulous crew at Goodspeed, however; [master electrician] J.W. Hilton is a genius. He went through the pile of scrollers, selected 12 or 16 of them, and swapped parts around, oiled and cleaned and tested them--he got them working.

"Also," the LD adds, "Don Stern of BASH Lighting Services was kind enough to loan me all the DMX cable to light the scrollers. The scrollers, by the way, are all individually circuited. On a stage that small, a two-lamp wash will cover the stage. I used the scrollers as an area control. If you don't want a lamp, you scroll to a dark color."

Goodspeed owns an ETC Obsession control board, as well as a Sensor dimmer rack, "but only 72, because of the power in the theatre," says Monat, who adds, "they have the most extensive system of double-throwing I've ever seen--out of the six double throws, it's possible to get 24 different switches."

Despite the immense difficulties of the project, Monat adds it's important to remember that, in spite of all that happened onstage, "It's a show about three people, about this intense personal relationship, the trust or lack of it among the three of them." On the other hand, the LD gives credit to his many collaborators on the project. "Loren Sherman did a wonderful job with reverse rollers, multiple travelers on one track--it's a dense package up there. Glen Grusmark, the production manager, is just great. Also Jason Harshaw, the technical director; Jennifer George, his first carpenter; and Karen Ford on properties." He also praises costume designer Pamela Scofield, for "one of the largest costume shows they've ever done at Goodspeed."

This seems to be Houdini's year. He's a featured character in the new musical *Ragtime* and he was also part of the film *Fairy Tale: A True Story*. Now he has a show of his own. Where, one wonders, will this escape artist turn up next?

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