

SPECIAL REPORT: ALL-STATE ALL STARS

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I recently had the opportunity to design the lighting for the Illinois High School Theatre Festival All-State production of *Ragtime* at the Krannert Center at the University of Illinois. While this was not my first all-state project — it was my seventh — this one proved to be one of the most challenging.

The Illinois High School Theatre Festival (IHSTF) is one of, if not the, largest festival of its type in the United States. Serving the high school theatre programs in Illinois for the past 30 years, and sponsored by the Illinois Theatre Association, the festival hosts approximately 4,000 high school theatre students and educators as they descend upon either the University of Illinois or Illinois State University (they alternate years) for a weekend of performances, workshops, demonstrations, and fun. The festival culminates every year with the All-State production, which is presented with a cast and crew of high school students from all over the state of Illinois who audition to be included.

The remarkable thing about this is that these kids, along with the production staff, get together for 10 to 12 rehearsal days over four weekends and produce the show. They act, dance, sing, build, paint, sew, and do everything necessary to put on the production in this short time. They get a short two-day tech period in the actual theatre and then perform the show four times in two days in front of their peers at the festival. Every year it is great, and every year it is special.

This year's show is no exception. I was asked by director Kristen Mackie to design the lighting for *Ragtime* since she and I had worked together in the past, both at her school and on other All-State performances. John Mizanin, the scenic designer, and I had worked together many, many times and is a very good friend. The technical directors, Bob Stelk and Matt Erbach, were new to me, but I found them to be quite organized and easy to work with. With this staff in place, it was easy to accept the invitation.

I assisted in auditioning technical candidates, the cast and crews were chosen, and we were off and running. Due to the nature of the production and the scenic design, all the crew members participated in the construction and painting of the scenery the first two weekend periods (By the way, not only are there ten rehearsal days, there are only ten days to get all of the technical aspects of the show together). At the third rehearsal period in October, I started work with the lighting crew.

For this production, it was decided that it was not feasible, neither in time nor budget, to paint custom drops, and once again due to budget, renting all the needed drops was not a possibility. We then decided on using projections for backgrounds. This was all new for not only us, but for the All-State production as well. The cyc at our performance venue was able to handle rear-projection, and there was space we could allocate for the projector. This solved a lot of problems.

As lighting designer, I was given charge of creating the projections for the show. Having worked as a technician for Rent Com some years ago, it was logical — albeit foreign, in terms of the new technology — for me to handle this aspect of the production. So I called upon my former employer, Glen Steinberg of Rent Com, and asked for some assistance. (This is exactly why burning bridges in this industry is not something you want to do.) He graciously offered us a Sanyo PLC-UF10 with a 1:8 lens, which was perfect for our application, and in the spirit of the festival worked within our budget constraints.

I assembled the lighting crew and gave them a generalized list of projection images we were looking for. We discussed the scenic design elements that needed to blend, the time period of the show, and what the technical needs for the actual graphics needed to be. The crew then went to work researching and finding content for us to use. I am continually amazed at the technical and computer savvy of these students, and how willing they are to work as a team, even though they barely know one another. One of our crew members set up a web space for us to use as a clearing house for the images we were collecting, so we all could look at them, pick our favorites, and then submit them to the director and scenic designer for approval.

In the middle of this whole process, my mother, who had ovarian cancer, suddenly took a turn for the worse and passed away. Her love for the theatre was a major driving force in my choice to be in this industry, and her loss was, and continues to be, difficult. Needless to say, my thoughts were not with the show. I got behind in my design duties very quickly, the director and other staff understood and knowing my situation, the lighting crew students proceeded to work without me, collecting images and preparing everything for what needed to be done. Once again, I am inspired by these students and am grateful that they are as dedicated as they are to this production.

As I got back on track with the design elements, we then turned to the decision regarding the control of the images. What did we need the control to do? Should we investigate the use of a media server? It was decided that given our extremely short time frame and the high learning curve, a media server was not feasible. We needed to keep it simple, so we turned to a laptop and Microsoft PowerPoint®. Since we were

not manipulating the images in real time, this was the perfect solution. The crew all knew how to use PowerPoint and it made the process quick and relatively painless.

Other images were created for use in Rosco ImagePro™. We needed some images to front project for certain aspects of the show and the most cost-effective means was to use this wonderful new tool. I have had experience with the ImagePro previously, and coupling it with a 90° Selecon Pacific fixture made short-throw, large-image projection a reality. By placing the fixtures on the light bridge (the position is equal to a 1st electric), we were able to project the images we needed cleanly and large enough to work for our effect. For the techie in all of us: the images and text were rendered in Microsoft Word (of all things) and printed on Office Max Ink Jet Transparency Film with a Lexmark X5150 printer set to the “Best” setting.

Production week is rather involved, with tech and rehearsals and blocking issues all being worked out at the same time. It is rare to have any time for one element to be worked on, and this was the case with this production as well. Our truck was three hours late arriving on Tuesday, so we were behind from the start. The set went together Tuesday night and Wednesday morning, with the cast taking the stage for the first time Wednesday afternoon. Wednesday night was the start of our cueing process, at which time we also spiked all the scenic pieces and choreographed the backstage shuffling of everything.

Time constraints with the facility only allowed us to complete the cueing for Act I on Wednesday, and with run-throughs scheduled for Thursday morning and afternoon, and a complete final dress scheduled Thursday night, there was no time to cue Act II. I along with the director, student stage manager, and student board operator, went in early on Thursday morning and pounded out cues for Act II in a hurry. We then had our run-throughs and final dress in preparation for the first performance on Friday morning.

Were all the cues the way I would have liked them? No. Did I fix some of them? Yes. Could I have done more? Perhaps, but there was a point in the process that I did not want to change the flow that our stage manager and my board operator had with the show. It was complicated enough without having me constantly adding and deleting cues. I checked with the director, who was satisfied with what we had and handed the production over to the students. After four exhausting performances, we struck the show and everyone was on their way back to their respective schools.

For the lighting students involved — Drew Califf, Matt Leske, Michael Nardulli, and Kristie Waters — as well as stage manager Claire Peters and deck manager Angela Ames, this experience, I hope, was one of learning and of fun. For the educators and staff involved, it is one of exhaustion, but also of awe and enlightenment.

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