

# THE ROAD TO NOWHERE

TURNING GREEN DAY'S **AMERICAN IDIOT** INTO A BROADWAY CONCEPT MUSICAL.

By: DAVID BARBOUR

**M**ichael Mayer's transformation of Green Day's Grammy Award-winning album—14 million copies sold worldwide—has arrived on Broadway in a blaze of controversy. Reviewers have called *American Idiot* everything from a “thrillingly raucous and gorgeously wrought Broadway musical” (*The New York Times*) to “a half-exploitative, half-lobotomized attempt to fake a youthgasm” (*New York Magazine*). It earned three Drama Desk Award nominations (including one for outstanding musical), with Mayer winning for outstanding direction of a musical. It was for three Tony Awards—but, mysteriously, and to the consternation of more than a few members of the theatre community—Mayer was not nominated. (In the event, the show took home two Tonys; one for Christine Jones' set design and one for Kevin Adams' lighting.) At the same time, it continues to post solid—if not blockbuster—numbers at the box office; as we go to press, tickets are being sold through the beginning of 2011.

There have been few, if any, rock musicals like *American Idiot*. Not a groovy nostalgia trip (like *Hair*), a spoofy jukebox tuner (like *Rock of Ages* and *Mamma Mia!*), nor a curated museum of golden oldies (like *Jersey Boys* and *Million Dollar Quartet*), the show at the St. James Theatre presents a startlingly nihilistic vision of American life in the George W. Bush era. Its three protagonists—Johnny, Will, and Tunny—grow up in a suburban strip mall culture dominated by consumer aspirations and trashy tabloid media. Frustrated and angry—and lacking any concrete dreams or goals—the three vow to escape, but, sadly, they end up on the road to nowhere: Will is sidelined when his girlfriend becomes pregnant; he spends his days in a pot haze, watching his new family slip away. Tunny, duped by aggressive television commercials, enlists in the

Army; he is sent to Iraq, where he loses a leg. Johnny ends up in the big city, where he falls for the winsome Whatsername; he also meets the satanic St. Jimmy, who entices the young couple into drug addiction.

The book—by Mayer and Green Day's Billie Joe Armstrong—expands on the central scenario devised for the album, which follows the misadventures of the young Jesus of Suburbia in the big city. Johnny—a modified version of Jesus of Suburbia—provides the central focus point, with Will and Tunny's less-detailed stories amplifying the show's themes of disillusionment and loss. Like most rock operas, *American Idiot* is essentially a song cycle; each number illustrates another step in its young protagonists' painful progress toward self-knowledge.

The process of turning a concept album into a concept musical isn't an easy one, and the success of *American Idiot* can largely be attributed to the vision of Michael Mayer, which has resulted in a remarkably unified production. The director also guided *Spring Awakening*—another high-concept musical about troubled youth—to Broadway, and *American Idiot* reunites the *Spring Awakening* team of scenic designer Christine Jones, lighting designer Kevin Adams, and sound designer Brian Ronan, adding the video/projection designer Darrel Maloney to the mix. But where *Spring Awakening* used edgy, soulful indie-rock music to forge a link between the tormented adolescents of the 19th century and today, *American Idiot* is an act of punk provocation in which sound, lighting, and video imagery form a furious assault on one's senses.

*American Idiot* played a triumphant engagement at the Berkeley Repertory Theatre in the fall—following a developmental workshop at the Powerhouse Theatre at Vassar—and always hoped to open on Broadway in April. That time frame

became more complicated when Sherie Renee Scott's musical memoir, *Everyday Rapture*, secured a last-minute, end-of-the-season booking at Roundabout Theatre Company. Scott's show, which was seen at Second Stage in the spring of 2009, was also directed by Mayer and designed by Jones, Adams, Ronan, and Maloney. Suddenly, in addition to opening *American Idiot*, the same team had to prepare a second—if more intimate—Broadway show, in less than two months.

## Strip mall suburbia

In designing the set—with its towering walls and dozens of video screens—Christine Jones, a notably text-based designer, poured over *American Idiot*'s music and lyrics; in addition, she sought out any and all commentary made about the album by the members of Green Day. (In addition to Armstrong, they are Mike Dirnt and Tré Cool.) The designer says, “A phrase of Billie Joe's stuck with me: ‘It's all about the energy inside you, the pulse inside your head.’ We knew from the beginning that we were making a piece of theatre, but it had to have the energy of a concert.”

Therefore, she says, “I distilled the lyrics the way I distill texts, and listened to the album as much as I could, to ingest it.” In her research, she drew on a number of sources, looking at images of televisions, loudspeakers, and people thrashing to rock music. She also drew inspiration from images of underground clubs, and warehouse lofts designed to serve as working/living space for artists. “I built collages with those images,” she says. “The collages are remarkably true to the set; when people look at them, they think they are the set.”

Her research also informed the set's unusual height. “Tom Hulce [the lead producer] joked that I obviously had the Metropolitan Opera in mind,” she says, adding that she made the

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collages before a theatre had been chosen. Anyway, she adds, “The music is big, and it felt like the space needed to be big—big and dense. Billie Joe talked about a warehouse where he once lived; I imagined his flatmates scattered around such a space, along with the rats that they apparently killed with a BB gun.” Adding a sense of density are the collages that cover the set’s walls; about them, Jones says, “I looked at clubs, like CBGB and 924 Gilmore, where Green Day got started. These places are covered with layers of posters and stickers.”

Overall, Jones says, “I wanted it to feel like a space where a rock concert could happen, but I wanted it to feel like it could be Johnny’s bedroom, too.” To secure this effect, she consulted with experts: “In addition to Ed Coco, my associate, who does all the drafting, I hired Damon Pelletier to work on the model, because I had a feeling he would have a good instinct for the kind of space I was trying to create. As I showed him research, he said that it looked exactly like his bedroom when he was growing up. A lot of the carpenters and our guitarists commented that we got the posters—the cacophony of them—right.”

Other aspects of the set include a clunker of a car, hanging, nose down, from the upstage right corner. Also, a stairway, with four landings, is built into the upstage left corner; it provides a staging and entrance/exit area for the cast. Musicians are stationed on the third and fourth landings. To suggest various locations, additional set pieces roll on stage. These include a couch for Will’s living room and a set of hospital beds for Tunny’s convalescence. An

onstage piece of scaffolding becomes the bus that brings Johnny and Tunny to the city in the number “Holiday.”

The stage is filled with stereo gear as well. “I found lots of great images of speaker stacks while looking at research of underground clubs and garage-band garages, as well as the bedrooms of teenage boys, which were stacked with equipment,” says Jones. “They provide the feeling, I hope, that the show is going to blast out at you; they also provide additional levels for staging.”

Another big-ticket scenic effect unfolds during the number “Extraordinary Girl.” Tunny is in the hospital, recovering from his accident, and, in a dream sequence, he takes part in a lyrical aerial ballet with the Extraordinary Girl, who is dressed in a burqa. (She is, in fact, a vision of the nurse who cares for him, and who eventually becomes his lover.) “That was Michael’s idea,” says Jones. “At the top of the number, there are drums that sound Middle Eastern. Michael had the image of Tunny meeting a woman in Iraq, and imagined her coming from nowhere, from inside his head.”

And, of course, Jones quickly realized the use of video screens “felt like an essential element, for storytelling, as well as for the pure energy of images they could deliver.” Forty-three video screens are built into the walls of the set, where they provide a nonstop cascade of imagery. It’s a design concept that works on many levels. It provides a workable, tone-setting environment for the show’s three storylines, and it also serves as a canvas for the assertive lighting and video effects.

Interestingly, Jones says, “The set

changed very little from the original Berkeley production.” Even more interestingly, she says that the Berkeley Rep is bigger than the St. James. “The ground plan remained identical onstage; offstage, we had to make do with much less space in New York. The crew was phenomenal at figuring out how to store items like the scaffolding and hospital beds.” For Broadway, she says, “We also added 5’ more to the height. The proscenium is about the same height in both spaces, but I wanted the top edge of the wall to completely disappear, and Neil [Mazzella, of Hudson Scenic Studio] said, ‘Yes, we can do that.’ The rake of the audience is much flatter at the St. James than it was in Berkeley; we added 5’, but it felt like 15’.”

Two elements were added for New York: One is a wall of fluorescent tubes seen in “East 12th Street,” when Johnny, now off drugs and separated from Whatsername, becomes an office worker. Originally, the wall was seen in the number “Favorite Son,” in which a television army recruiter literally bursts out of the screen, urging Tunny to sign up. “While [the tube wall] helped to focus the space, we felt it distracted from the celebrity who comes out of the TV to become the army general,” says Jones. “Michael and I talked about using it in the office scene of ‘East 12th Street,’ which already featured projections of fluorescent tubes. Then Kevin Adams had the inspired idea to use grey gel on the tubes, which was not only beautiful, but perfectly dreary.” The second new element—a frame of halogen bulbs—was used in the number “Rock and Roll Girlfriend, but was eventually eliminated. However, says Jones, “After we cut it, Michael and I had the rather good idea to take it down the street and use it in *Everyday Rapture*. It works perfectly for that production!”

Overall, says Jones, the road from Berkeley to New York was “remarkably smooth.” She adds, “The



Top: Jones’ towering set, filled with video monitors, is splashed with saturated color by Adams, using the VLX units. Below: Maloney’s large-scale projections are sometimes used to cover the set as well.

support of the Berkeley staff, the Hudson staff, and our crew at the theatre, led by Donald Oberpriller [the production carpenter], was phenomenal. Berkeley Rep did a kick-ass job of building, painting, and dressing it out there. Neil Mazzella has very high standards; the fact that he thought the set we brought to New York had integrity was a true compliment to everyone at Berkeley Rep. The team in New York made sure we could get it into the theatre, and make the show work as smoothly as possible.” Additional specialty props were built by The Spoon Group.

In addition, says Jones, “It is interesting to note what a significant contribution to the environment the clothes [designed by Andrea Lauer] make. People have no idea how many costumes are in the show. There are full costume changes for the ensemble almost every three minutes, with every new song. In addition to projections, video, and



lights, the costumes were working their butts off to take us where we needed to go.”

Jones also cites the support provided by Hulce and his producing partner, Ira Pittelman; Darrel Maloney, for his video and projections; the members of Green Day, and, of

course, Mayer. She also mentions another, more unexpected name: “I worked for Tony Walton when I first got out of school, and I marveled at his commitment to detail. I don’t think that Tony’s work would naturally come to mind as having been inspirational for a set like this, but the

execution of it was definitely inspired by his passion.”

That attention to detail took on unusual dimensions. “My favorite thing to do at Berkeley was to put on headphones, listen to music, and walk around the set, drawing on it, and sticking up things I had found around the offices and the streets, while the crews worked around me,” she says. Recalling that story about Armstrong and company hunting the rats in Armstrong’s loft, she notes, “I put a BB gun on the wall of the set, in addition to a piece of piece of paper like the one that Billie Joe says they used to keep score.”

Also, Jones says, “I invited carpenters to bring in posters from their own bands to add to the walls, and asked people like Sam Ellis [of Hudson Scenic], one of our project managers, if he would contribute a treasured item to our space. Anybody who worked on the show was invited to make their mark—and, while 90% of those marks are not visible, I hope they work collectively as part of the energy that is the show.”

### The media blitz

Providing a significant portion of that energy is Darrel Maloney, the video/projection designer. He fills all of the screens in Jones’ set with a

nonstop array of images, including tabloid TV newscasts, test patterns, strip malls, home movie footage, bus stations, and blocks of color. At other times, he blasts the set with giant projections of nighttime urban skylines, color bars, and splattered paint. The video sequences reinforce the show’s point about the junk-filled media culture inhabited by the characters. The projections add to the production’s size and audacity.

Interestingly, Jones notes that Maloney was a fellow student with her at NYU’s department of design, but, Maloney adds, “This is my first theatre project in years. After NYU, I opened a company [Atmosphere 13], which did post-production on motion graphics for film, commercials, and television.” In 2006, he created a short projection sequence for Jones, who was designing *Joseph Merrick, The Elephant Man*, for Minnesota Opera; last year, he got together with Jones again, creating another projection sequence for *Everyday Rapture*. While working on that production, he also got to know Michael Mayer, which led to *American Idiot*.

“When I was up for the job,” Maloney says, “I brought in some ideas about projections and content. It all started with the song ‘American Idiot,’ with its images of the media

and the war. We talked about how to make the monitors an integral part of the show.” Later, when work began, he says, “We’d meet every day and go through the show, scene by scene. They’d say, ‘What’s the video here?’, and I’d come up with ideas. By then, we knew it would be a combination of projections and video. We all had a pretty unified aesthetic, and, without overtalking anything, we were able to figure it out.” The designer also created a website that allowed him to demo images for the rest of the creative team.

Out of these discussions, an approach emerged. “Basically,” Maloney says, “we ended up using images to help tell the story, and sometimes to set the location. For example, when we get to the 7-11 parking lot, there are 7-11 signs, along with secondary mixes to give us a feeling of what’s going on. ‘Jesus of Suburbia’ features an animation using graffiti stencils of a suburban street. Basically, there’s every kind of moving image in the show. We shot some stuff in [‘Favorite Son’], and also some suburban images—strip malls and stuff like that—for ‘Jesus of Suburbia.’ We also have live video as well.”

Then there are the big projections, which cover the walls of the set. “The first time we see them is in ‘Holiday,’ when the three leads are on a journey,” Maloney says. “They’re used in ‘Boulevard of Broken Dreams,’ to create a sense of the city, and in ‘Holiday,’ to give the sense of a road trip. In ‘St. Jimmy,’ they’re used as a graphic design element.” Overall, he says, “The storytelling with the projections is less subtle and more about broader strokes.” The video is subtler, he adds, because each image appears repeatedly on relatively small screens: “If you’re projecting on top of that huge set, it takes very big, bold, images.”

One of the most striking sequences takes place in “Extraordinary Girl.” Tunny and some of his wounded colleagues are resting



Note how the walls of the set are covered with a collage, an idea that Jones derived from looking at images of rock clubs like the legendary CBGB.

in their hospital beds. One sees heart monitors on the video screens; as the number begins, with its Middle-Eastern drum motif, the blips on the screens are transformed into Arabic lettering. “We always had the blip,” says Maloney, “and, one day, Michael said, ‘I think it should be Arabic.’ We did it, and it was up there two days later.” Such quick turnarounds were new for the designer, who was used to another sort of time frame working with his film and television clients: “In my other career, I would produce less material in a year than I did in two months for this show.”

Maloney notes that the complexity of the system grew between Berkeley and New York. “In Berkeley, we had six channels for 38 monitors. In New York, we have 43 monitors with 43 channels,” he says. “That way, I can do individual images on each screen if I want. It’s far more exciting to put 43 different neon signs, for example, on the stage. In ‘Jesus of Suburbia,’

you see 43 little pieces of a garbage dumpster—that makes it more interesting.” Also, many of the video screens, the designer says, “are treated to look like old televisions,” so he used Adobe AfterEffects to treat the content differently for each screen. “There are some really bad color television looks and some cable glitching,” he says. “The video on the ‘70s-era screens tend to shift to yellow, like bad color television of that era, while the ‘50s screens feature black and white.”

Delivering the images are 15 Green Hippo Hippotizer HD V3 media servers, supplied to the production by Los Angeles-based Senovva, Inc. and supported by Green Hippo Special Projects division. [Green Hippo products are distributed in North America by TMB]. Twelve Hippotizer HDs are specially configured, running custom software, each outputting four 1280 x 720 feeds to the 43 HD Sony monitors built into the set. The

remaining three HD Hippotizers utilize Green Hippo’s new UberPan feature to create an ultra-HD scenic projection across the surface of the set via three sideways-mounted 20K Barco R20 projectors. All the HD Hippotizers, plus one HippoCritic, a smaller, rack-mount server, are networked by Hippotizer’s Zookeeper software, running a timeline triggered by the show’s lighting control console, an ETC Eos.

Like Jones, Maloney feels that the intensive application of details is a key to the production’s overall effect. “When people see the show more than once, they’re intrigued by how many layers there are,” he says. “I don’t think there’s any point in the show where the details are meaningless.”

### A rock show at the Met

Ramping up the energy even further is Kevin Adams’ lighting, which provides a full complement of vibrant color chases, eye-searing blinder



This shot, from the Berkeley production, shows the impact of the video screens.

Photo: Kevin Bieme

Photo: Paul Korink



The LED frame, used in "Rock and Roll Girlfriend," was cut before the opening. It was repurposed in *Everyday Rapture*, which opened a couple of weeks later.

effects, and strobe cues—all while carving the cast out of that towering set. In many ways, the designer must have been the obvious choice for the job; given a list of Broadway credits that includes *Spring Awakening*, *Passing Strange*, *Next to Normal*, and the just-closed revival of *Hair*, he has become the go-to person for lighting rock musicals. He says this fact provided him with his first challenge. "Having done these high-profile pop-rock shows, I didn't want to do anything with lightbulbs and fluorescent tubes," he says, referring to key elements of his work on *Spring Awakening*, *Passing Strange*, and *Next to Normal*. In fact, he adds, when designing *Hair* in the winter and spring of 2009, "I knew I wanted *American Idiot* to be a strobe-heavy show, so I deliberately made *Hair* less stroboscopic. I also kept audience blinders out of *Hair*. I saved them all for *American Idiot*. I wanted to find a different vocabulary for this show."

In addition, Adams says, "From the beginning, I didn't want *American Idiot* to look like our work as a team on *Spring Awakening*." One thing that defined *Spring Awakening*, as well as other rock shows like *Hair*, *Rock of Ages*, and *Fela!*, is an environmental design. This time out, he says, "I

wanted it to look like a rock show at the Metropolitan Opera—with very little equipment in the house, which would be uniformly and minimally hung, and with all the energy of the show behind a simple red curtain." To his evident relief, he adds that *American Idiot* "doesn't look like a big, messy rock show at Madison Square Garden."

One notable feature found behind that red curtain is the large number of units built into the set, including 11 PAR 64 strobes, 54 Pulsar MR16 LED RGB units, bus head and tail lights, car headlights, six 3" Fresnels, 66 fluorescent units, and custom units for the deck trough. "I love the little birdies I used in *Passing Strange*, so I put them into the wall," Adams says. "Starting at Berkeley, I hung strobes on the staircase, pointing them at the audience. We came up with the idea of hiding strobes in the vintage speakers on stage. At the St. James, we've also got these little PAR lights that point at the audience."

Of course, given the set's shape and height, Adams notes, positions were at a premium. "The electrics are trimmed at 40'," he says. "The first 8' of the downstage area is given over to the flying rig [for the "Extraordinary Girl" aerial ballet] and a few pieces of

scenery. I don't have an electric until we get 11' or 12' upstage." Therefore, he relies heavily on sidelight. "We have 6'-wide ladders, about 30' high, with moving lights, some 5K units, and a long row of vertical ministrrips; a lot of the lighting for the downstage area comes from them."

One element of the rig that's visible from the audience is a pair of vertical arrays of moving lights, located on either side of the proscenium. These consist of Philips Vari\*Lite VLX LED moving head units; *American Idiot* constitutes the VLX's Broadway debut. "That was such a happy accident," says Adams. "I didn't have anything like them in Berkeley; my plan there was to do a very simple plot, to which I would add units later, as the show expanded. I was just about finished with the plot for the St. James when I noticed a space above Brian Ronan's proscenium loudspeakers. At the same time, my moving light operator from the London production of *Hair* was doing an event at Madison Square Garden, and he said, 'Come see these new lights.'" It was Adams' first encounter with the VLX.

"I really responded to the VLX's white light," the designer continues. "For some time, I had been trying to get some kind of LED white light for the show—I really wanted this bright white LED frame that wrapped around the proscenium—and couldn't find anything that we could afford. The VLX was exactly what I was looking for; it had the white, the colors were really bright, and it had a fast strobing unit. I left Madison Square Garden, and I called my associate, Aaron Sporer, and said, 'How many VLX units can we fit in that space if we stack them tightly?' He said, 'I think we can fit ten on each side.' I thought we could never afford it, but Hudson [Sound and Light] did a wonderful job of delivering everything I asked for. The 20 VLX units are just more fabulous than I ever thought they would be."

The effect of the VLX units can be

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felt from the beginning, he notes: "The first number, 'American Idiot,' is a prologue, and Michael Mayer said, 'Let's roll out the spectacle of our show.' At the beginning of the song, the VLXs are pointed at the upstage wall, and they strobe between a bunch of colors. It's so fast it's absolutely brain-melting—from blue to green and green to red. Then, in the middle of the song, they're pointed at the actors, and it's so bright that it really looks fabulous. At the end, they swing out at the audience. I had no idea I could do so much with them."

The rest of the rig includes approximately 220 ETC Source Fours and Source Four PARs in various models and degree sizes; two ARRI 5K compact Fresnels; 12 Arri 2K compact Fresnels; ten 6" Fresnels; one Arri 4K compact HMI Fresnel with one Wybron Eclipse douser; 12 ministrrips; 15 mini-tens; 14 Philips Vari\*Lite VL2416 Wash units; 25 VL3500Q Spots ("a beautiful unit to use," says Adams); five Dataflash AF1000 strobes; two Wybron large-format scrollers (for the 5K units); 46 additional Wybron scrollers; three Philips ColorKinetics ColorBlast 12s, controlled by one City Theatrical PDS-375 wireless DMX receiver and one City Theatrical wireless DMX transmitter; one MDG Atmosphere hazer; three Ultratec Radiance hazers; six JEM DMX fan; 11 Diversitronics strobe cannons; and three Lycian 1293 followspots.

As mentioned earlier, the lighting is controlled by an ETC Eos console. "I wanted a user-friendly board that could program both moving lights and conventionals, and could allow for a single programmer instead of two," says Adams. "I also wanted a console that would be easy to work from if this show transferred to another theatre. I

enjoy having an intuitive board that is not overly complicated to use, both live and in blind. For me, the Eos is a low-stress board to work on." He adds that he and his programmer, Victor Seastone, "easily pre-programmed the entire show—even the curtain call—in about four days. There are about 500 cues."

In contrast to the expansiveness of the opening, Adams also achieves some tightly focused effects. For example, there's the aerial ballet, which, he says, "took me a long time to figure out. In Berkeley, you could see the strings holding the actors, but, as I took units out of the number, it looked just awful. Then Michael said, 'Let's make the spots tight on their faces and shoulders,' and it really worked out. Michael and I have been working together for 17 years now; it's a really great collaboration, because we're always helping each other up the hill."

Overall, Adams says, "In trying to counter *Spring Awakening*, which was so meticulously focused, we embraced maximalism. We wanted to layer image over image over image. At times, the picture is so big and so purposefully busy your eye doesn't know where to look. There are many points of focus. It was our intention to do that; in some numbers, there are 12 strobes—and three narratives—coming at you."

### Beating the drum

It's never easy to create a sound design for a rock musical, especially a punk-rock musical, in a traditional proscenium theatre, but, for Brian Ronan, there were other challenges, as well. For example, he says, "We're not using the orchestra pit. Every choice I made was built around the fact that the drummer is located at center stage, unprotected by any

shields. That was Michael Mayer's choice; the openness of the set is indicative of the openness of America, and he wanted the musicians placed around and above the stage."

Ronan has been in this situation before, on *Spring Awakening*. "I wanted to shield the drummer then, but Michael said no," he says. "By the time we got to *American Idiot*, the idea didn't scare me. I know the guy standing in the middle of the stage, playing the hard drums, will be at 90dB—and that informs where I have to go, which is to have the vocals rise comfortably above that without blowing the audience away. It affected my choice of speakers and where to place them."

In Berkeley, the designer says, "I saw how tough it was—how gymnastic—and how the singers had to hit the floor and come up singing." Therefore, he opted to go with a rig largely made up of Meyer sound gear: "Meyer speakers tend to punch the vocals a little more than other brands," he notes. An added plus was the fact that Meyer is located in Berkeley. "They were just down the block, so I took full advantage of their proximity and support," he says, adding that the company recommended the use of its M'elodie ultra-compact curvilinear array loudspeaker for the proscenium hang: "They worked a deal and got me added gear, so I had an amazing amount of sound. I stayed with that model and worked it out for the St. James, so I could hit the entire audience at a consistent volume level."

To do so, Ronan used a primary rig for the main house, with additional off-axis boxes to cover the room's sides. "We have M'elodies at orchestra right and left, and also on the mezzanine, on the overhead truss and center cluster," he says. "On the outside of both levels, we have Meyer



The cast wears DPA 4065 mics. A discontinued model, Ronan chose them because they can be custom-fit to the performers' heads, allowing them to stay in place during the many strenuous moments of staging.

UPQ-2Ps, for side coverage. Meyer M1Ds cover the entire balcony, with the UPQ-2Ps again on the outside, where the primary speakers fall off. We also used some E3s [from d&b audiotechnik] for mezzanine delays and some EAW KF695s for extra warmth in the mezzanine. The surround system uses Meyer's UP 4-XP [ultra-compact loudspeakers]. We needed a fair amount of surround, because the opening montage [which mashes together a speech by George W. Bush and various newscasts and bits of music] wants to come from all over the place. The UP 4-XP is a nice, compact little speaker, and we put them all around the house.

"For our front fill," continues Ronan, "we wanted to get what we had in Berkeley, where the theatre has no orchestra pit; we covered the St. James' pit and recreated the front apron from Berkeley. We built a frame with [Meyer] M1Ds for front fill, and six 600-HPs for bass. We also used the apron to service downstage

monitor speakers for the cast." The monitors consist of five Meyer UPJuniors downstage and a set of UPJs at left and right, plus a couple of Meyer MM-4s for the staircase landings. The musicians use an Aviom personal monitor mixing systems, with Ultimate Ears in-ear monitors provided by the show's general manager. "One thing about the Aviom system, especially at these levels, is that the musicians are so separated physically, they have many different models in their ears," he says. "If we change the EQ for, say, the kick drums, it's consistent for everybody who is listening."

The cast members wear DPA 4065 boom mics; this is a discontinued model, but Ronan chose it in part because "the choreography is so aggressive. The mics sound very good, they're dependable, and I can custom-fit them to the performers' heads." Even so, he adds, "We had to lock them in there with lavalier miking tricks," so the actors could handle the

choreography—and, in a couple of cases, the aerial ballet—without the mics moving around on their faces. The wireless systems are Sennheiser 3432-U dual-diversity receivers with SK 5212 receivers. Audio gear was supplied by Masque Sound.

Having used a Yamaha PM1D console in Berkeley, Ronan opted to stay with it for New York. "I was shopping around for New York, but it was already programmed, and, instead of reinventing the wheel, we went with the 1D. We also have a PM5D backstage, to distribute all the mixes to the musicians." The only outboard gear consists of a couple of T.C. Electronic M3000 reverb units.

Speaking of the design challenges, Ronan says, "It's a rock 'n' roll show, but it's not drastically different from a big musical. You have to pull the lyrics out of the music while they're dancing and flying." Also, he says, David Dignazio, the sound operator, has to be careful not to overwhelm the audience

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with sound. "You can't just step on the gas pedal and give it to them for 90 minutes," Ronan notes, adding that the addition of a couple of ballads not on the *American Idiot* album provided some additional dynamic contrast. Tom Kitt's orchestrations, which provide some surprisingly delicate moments with violin, viola, and cello, are also helpful in this regard.

"The biggest challenge is the St. James Theatre," says Ronan. "It's a reflective building, so we have the architecture working against us. That held us up for a couple of weeks, trying to make the show work in a traditional theatrical environment. I wasn't really that happy with it until a couple of nights before the press showed up." But, as is true of his colleagues, Ronan has become adept

at fitting avant-garde musical theatre into vintage Broadway houses.

Aside from those already mentioned, other key members of the production team include James Harker (production stage manager), Freda Farrell (stage manager); Ashley Hanson (associate sound designer); Dan Scully (associate video/projection designer); Nico Sarudiansky (assistant editor); Jeff Cady/SenovvA (video and projection programmer); Dave Brown (flyman); Mark Diaz (flying automation/deck carpenter); Greg Husinko (production electrician); Eric Abbott (head electrician); Joe Lenihan (deck sound); Greg Peeler (production video/deck audio); Joseph P. Harris, Jr. (production property supervisor); Eric Castaldo (head properties); Sue Pelkofer, Tom Maloney, and Bob

Miller (followspots); Bethany Russell (assistant stage manager); Benjamin Travis (assistant lighting designer); Barbara Samuels (assistant to the lighting designer); Alex Marshall/SenovvA (video and projection assistant); and Cody Spencer (assistant sound).

In what represents a remarkable case of teamwork, Mayer and his designers got *American Idiot* up and running, then immediately moved on to *Everyday Rapture*. (Due to his work on *Promises, Promises*, Ronan worked in association on *Everyday Rapture*, with Ashley Hanson and Kurt Eric Fischer, with whom he shared design credit.) Both shows prove that when it comes to innovation in musical theatre, this team is on the front lines. 📶



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