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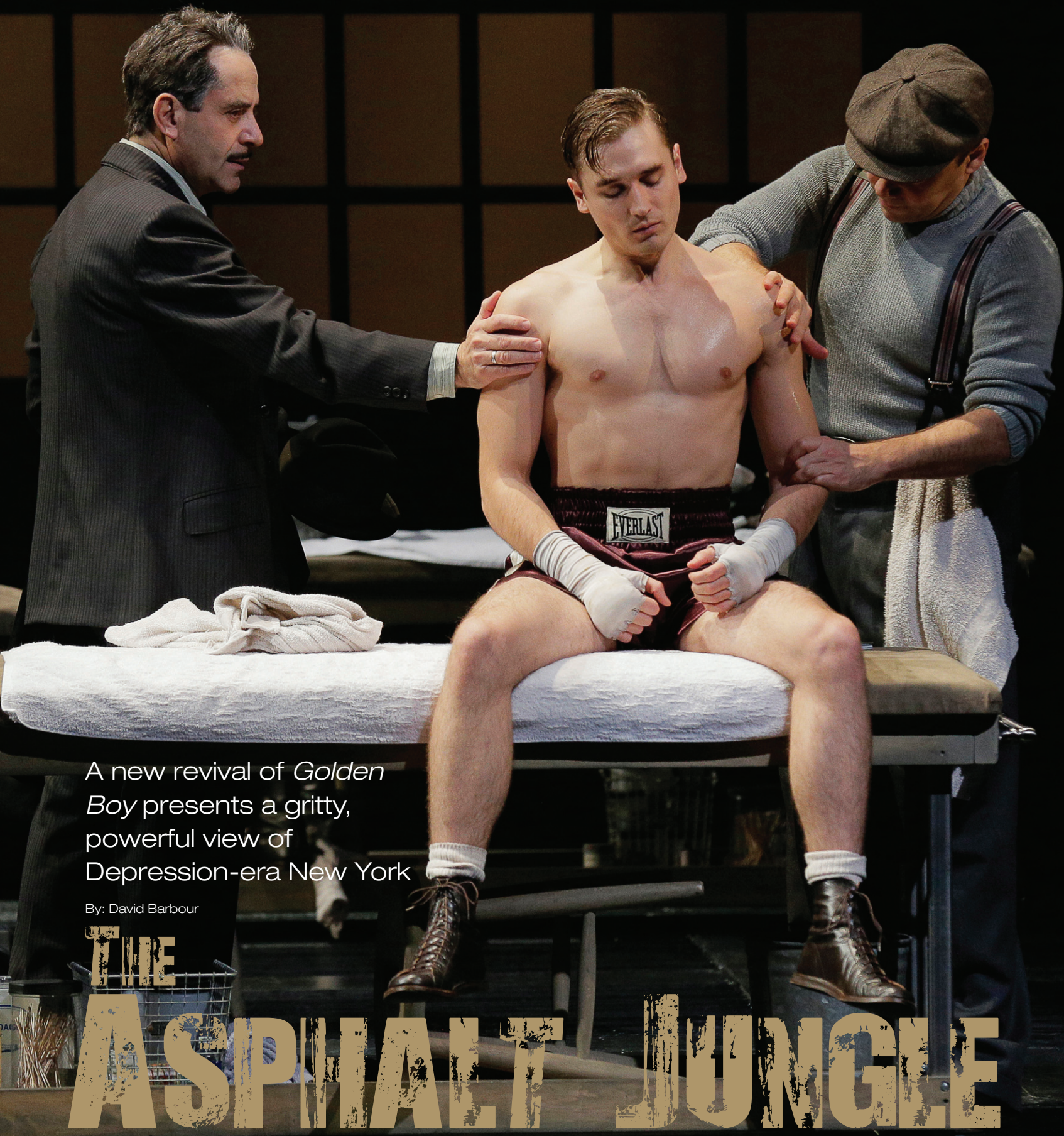
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Entertainment, Communication

Golden Boy:

Clifford Odets' classic drama returns to Broadway





A new revival of *Golden Boy* presents a gritty, powerful view of Depression-era New York

By: David Barbour

THE ASPHALT JUNGLE



Seth Numrich, Danny Burstein, and Danny Mastrogio in Lincoln Center Theater's production of Clifford Odets' *Golden Boy*.

For a great American playwright, Clifford Odets doesn't always get the respect—and the first-class productions—he deserves. Every Broadway season brings new revivals of works by the likes of O'Neill, Williams, Albee, and Mamet, but years can pass without a decent staging of an Odets drama. Worse, Odets' plays are all too often dismissed as period pieces, marked by melodramatic plots and wisecracking dialogue that sounds funny coming from the mouth of any actor born after 1920. More recently, however, Lincoln Center Theater has presented a pair of revivals that have revealed Odets—in all his full-throated fury and jagged romanticism—to be one of the finest American playwrights of the last century. And for whatever reason—possibly because contemporary Americans find themselves permanently perched on the fiscal cliff—Odets' great subject, the struggle for individual happiness in a world where only money talks, seems more urgent than ever.

Lincoln Center Theater's 2006 revival of *Awake and Sing!*, the drama of a family torn to pieces before concluding that "life shouldn't be printed on dollar bills," was revelatory. Director Bartlett Sher realized that, in its ambitious vision and lyrical language, the play was closer to opera than anything on a Broadway stage, and he treated it as such. Similarly, his current staging of *Golden Boy*—which reunites many members of the *Awake and*

Sing! creative team—occupies a vast canvas that makes most modern plays look like finger exercises. The numbers tell part of the story: 19 speaking roles and a three-act plot structure set in five fully-realized locations. You could write a play this way today, but nobody would produce it.

In its own way, *Golden Boy* is both intimate and epic; viewed close up, it's the story of Joe Bonaparte, a gifted young musician whose pursuit of fame and fast money in the boxing ring turns him into a monster, a burnt-out case, and, finally, a corpse. Surrounding Joe is a teeming cast of hustlers, promoters, and hangers-on who fill out Odets' portrait of Depression-era Americans maddened by dreams of making it big and cashing out of the rat race.

To this end, Sher's production is set in a Depression-era New York, a kind of asphalt jungle in which everyone is fighting to escape. It's an ugly, powerful vision, a kind of Ashcan School painting come to life. Not for nothing is the production's poster art a reproduction of the painting *One-Punch Knockout*, by Robert Riggs, which depicts a prizefight in all its unrestrained savagery.

Tenement walls

Michael Yeagan, who also designed *Awake and Sing!*, says *Golden Boy* is "one of those plays you dream of working on." He also says only a company like Lincoln Center Theater has the resources to do full justice to it. "It's an epic, with 19 people and all those locations," he

notes. “I really feel the scope of the script reflects the fact that Odets had been working in the movies.” (Many critics have suggested that Joe Bonaparte, torn between music and boxing, is a coded portrait of Odets, who hated the easy money he earned in Hollywood, even as he acknowledged he couldn’t live without it.)

One of the main challenges facing Yeargan was how to realize so many locations. (They include the office of Tom Moody, who becomes Joe’s manager; the apartment where Joe’s family lives; a street outside a city park; the gym where Joe trains; and a locker room in a boxing arena.) Interestingly, he says, he found an archival audio recording of the original production (which, like the current one, was staged in Broadway’s Belasco Theatre), that portended challenges to come: “The audio quality is reasonable,” he says, “and you can hear these hugely noisy scene changes.” As part of his research, he sought out Mordecai Gorelik’s original designs; he found pencil sketches of the designer’s schematics, which provided few clues about how to proceed.

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At the same time, he looked at the paintings of Riggs and of George Bellows, another prominent member of the Ashcan School, who specialized in violent, darkly rendered scenes of prizefights. He also studied such period films as *Kid Galahad* (1937); *Body and Soul* (1947), a boxing drama starring John Garfield, Broadway’s original Joe Bonaparte; and the 1939 film of *Golden Boy* (not adapted by Odets and afflicted with an improbably happy ending).

Overall, Yeargan says, he wanted to create a view of New York City ravaged by the Depression. He also needed to create reasonably naturalistic locations in the context of a more stylized design approach. And he had to consider the Belasco Theatre’s limited supply of wing space. His solution involved four automated platforms that come together on stage to provide the main playing area of each scene. Each platform’s underside is visible with its metal substructure exposed, adding another gritty touch. Also, Moody’s office has a door unit that flies in at stage right; the Bonaparte apartment has one at stage left.

“Bart wanted the height the platforms offered,” Yeargan says, who notes they are 9" tall. The process by which the platforms crossed upstage, met, and came downstage, he adds, “created a ten-second wait each time,” an eternity on stage. “But Bart embraced that,” he says, noting that

the scene changes, which take place in full audience view, become theatrical events of their own.

Other ideas were tried and abandoned. Originally, the entire stage deck consisted of subway grating, which gave lighting designer Donald Holder all sorts of uplighting opportunities. But this plan proved treacherous for Yvonne Strahovski, who, as Lorna Moon, the play’s leading lady, was forced to navigate a dauntingly uneven surface in high heels; ultimately, only a small portion of the grating was retained. Another concept, large industrial wheels for the decks, also went by the boards. (The production’s scenery was built, painted, electrified, and automated by Showmotion, of Milford, Connecticut.)

For the scenes in Moody’s office and the Bonaparte home, the platforms are dressed appropriately with period props. “We took a lot of stuff out of each scene,” Yeargan says. At one point, Moody’s office featured a series of over-scaled boxing posters that were ultimately removed. “Also,” he says, “the more sparsely furnished the Bonaparte apartment was, the more it felt dominated by the wall of tenements behind it.” (More about this in a moment.) With so many elements in play, the process of getting each scene change right took time.

Here’s how a typical scene change works: The downstage platforms, dressed for Moody’s office, slide offstage. The office furniture is switched off, and furniture from the Bonaparte apartment is added, including a piano that has been hollowed out for easy lifting. Meanwhile, the upstage platforms come together on stage and move into place. At that point, the two offstage platforms, now dressed with items like the piano and a sideboard, come on and complete the look. In both scenes, some additional pieces not found on the platforms are carried on stage by hand. (When not in use, most of the furniture is stored in a corridor behind the upstage wall.)

The play’s only exterior location, a street just outside a park, is sparsely, and artfully, rendered, using a metal fence, a park bench, a tree bench, and a traffic light. (One fun fact that Yeargan discovered in his research is that traffic lights of the ‘30s had red and green lights only; yellow, signifying caution, were added at a later date.) “Odets is never specific about the location, but I’ve always felt it is Central Park,” the designer says. “He was specific about the traffic light,” an oddly melancholy detail that, he adds, “gives the scene an almost Beckett-like quality.”

These scenes are placed inside a surround depicting a great wall of tenement exteriors, which imprison the characters in a concrete environment. Again, he considered a number of approaches before hitting on the right style. “We tried a look out of the Ashcan School, but it was too romantic; I tried putting in a number of fire escapes, but it was just too much like *West Side Story*.” Interestingly, he says, even though the tenements look extremely dimen-



The office of Tom Moody, who becomes Joe's manager, is just one of five fully realized locations in the set.



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Some scenes are placed inside a surround depicting a great wall of tenement exteriors, intended to show how the characters are imprisoned in a concrete environment.

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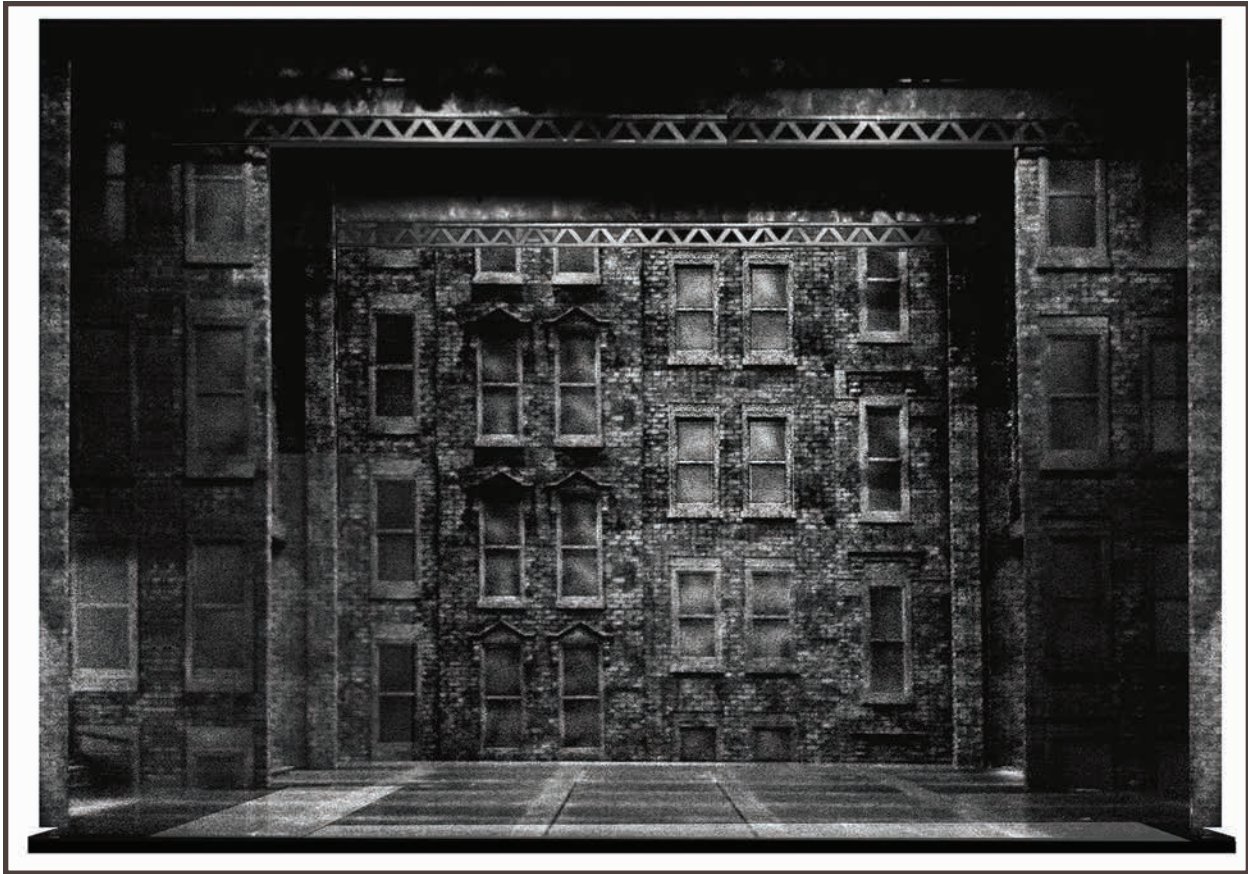
sional, “they are painted on velour. I hate plastic brick; you always see the seams. Painting on black velour gives us an extra, almost surreal dimension.”

Also painted on velour is the backdrop used in the gym and locker room scenes, which depicts a wall of gritty-looking translucent windows. In these scenes, the overhead portals lower in, their metal undercarriages adding to the industrial atmosphere. They contribute especially to the explosive, claustrophobic feeling of the penultimate scene, when Joe wins a big bout, but accidentally kills his opponent.

City lights

Yeargan’s design concept is aided to no small degree by Holder’s lighting, which, carving the platforms out of the stage, adds a highly dimensional quality to each scene. Also, working within a highly limited palette, Holder creates a variety of theatrical looks that add to the production’s overall impact. Like Yeargan, he drew inspiration from the paintings of Bellows and Riggs, both of which share a distinctive chiaroscuro quality. “The show’s poster [which depicts a pair of exhausted boxers surrounded by a furious crowd] spoke to me,” he says. “It shows that seamy environment, the underbelly of that world.” He adds that his lighting follows a straight dramatic line. “*Golden Boy* is almost like a Greek tragedy, and as the emotional stakes increase and the play gets darker, so does the world on stage. It starts out as a kid’s fantasy, a dream of breaking out of his sheltered life and becoming famous, and over time it starts to disintegrate. The lighting starts on a gentle note and moves toward a look influenced by George Bellows and film noir.”

As a result, the lighting is heavily dependent on side and overhead positions. There is little, if any, front light. “I’m not afraid to use front light, but in this production, the



Clockwise from top: Renderings of the tenement surround, locker room, and Tom Moody's office.

interactions are so truthful, you don't need a lot of front light to present the scenes," Holder says. "Also, Bart felt that the world on stage could be dark." He says he and Yeargan collaborated closely to find side positions that worked with the flying masking panels, which would seem to rule out the use of sidelight.

Holder's work also adds an extra layer of theatricality to the scene changes, often using uplighting effects shooting through the subway grating in the deck. "I came into the

first meeting and saw that the entire deck consisted of subway grating," he recalls. "Bart said, 'That will give you plenty of opportunities to light from below.' Of course, there are many lengthy transitions in the play, and they needed to be stylized in some way. I felt that the uplighting was a way of foreshadowing the story's movement to an expressionistic place; for example, at the end of the second act, in the locker room, Joe's father sees his son enter with his hands shattered, thus ending any chance of



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him pursuing his dream of becoming a concert violinist. It's a huge event in the life of this character, and it felt appropriate, on an emotional level, to include this surreal uplighting at this point in the play. So the use of light emanating from below was an effective way of creating a connection between the transitions and the more stylized or abstracted moments in the body of the play."

But then the majority of the subway grating was removed, for reasons mentioned above, and replaced by solid decking, which reduced Holder's opportunity for making a big lighting gesture. He dealt with this by adding a downlight look that mimicked the subway grating effect. "It worked well in the third act, because we're in the locker room, which is under the boxing arena, so you could justify this strong patterned light from above. And it's a pretty dramatic look when used in the context of a

transition." The remaining uplighting effects were created by the simple use of mini-tens under the subway grating. Holder made particularly strong use of uplighting in the final scene, set in the Bonaparte apartment, when Joe's father learns, via a phone call, about the fate of his son. And during the transitions, the uplighting bounces off the bottom of the moving platforms, creating a chilling effect.

The task of backlighting the upstage scenery proved to be tricky, as, once again, space was at a premium. "There are two different upstage drops and the upstage tenement wall, which is filled with windows; upstage of that is an RP cyc," says Holder. (Yeargan notes that the theatre's upstage wall was painted white to provide bounce.) The upstage light is provided by a series of ETC MultiPAR striplights placed on the floor and overhead, augmented by booms fitted with Source Four PARs on the right and left sides. Again, there is a sense of progression in the lighting, he notes: "I start with a warm, golden light coming through the windows, and, as the play progresses, the lighting becomes colder and more surreal. Basically, it's moving from gold to blue. The third act is lit by unfiltered HMI sources; I also use these same sources, earlier in the play, but in those cases they are color-corrected."

Supplementing Holder's conventional package is a set of automated gear, including City Theatrical AutoYokes, High End Systems Studio Colors, and Philips

Vari*Lite VL1000s, all of which were chosen in part because they are sufficiently quiet—no fan noise—for legitimate drama. The Vari-Lite units, he says, are especially useful for creating "shutterable, refocusable crosslight for the apartment and for Moody's office. VL1000s are ideal because they have programmable shutters and can be color-corrected to incandescent. I'm using only four of five of them, but they became workhorse units." PRG supplied lighting equipment, including an ETC Ion console.

Holder also notes that the time lost because of Hurricane Sandy made things hectic for him, especially as he was back at work on the NBC television series *Smash*, for which he lights the onstage musical numbers. But, he adds, "The piece really spoke to me, and that's when I do my best work. That and when you have a secure atmosphere, which is what Bart provides."

Violins and prizefights

Golden Boy is loaded with sound effects—street sounds, the roar of boxing fans—but music is an especially key component of the play. One of this production's most striking moments occurs when Joe, now a boxer of some note, is presented with a violin, a gift from his father. Seth Numrich, who plays Joe, exits the stage, and we hear about a minute of music. He returns, and the stricken look on his face tells you all you need to know about the psychic cost of his career choices. There is a kind of musical conflict in the scenic transitions, during which Stéphane Grappelli and Coleman Hawkins are pitted against Johannes Brahms and John Adams.

One reason for the eclectic collection of musical names, says Peter John Still, who co-designed the sound with Marc Salzberg, is simple: "The ground rule with Bart and me is, you need three different sources, or threads, and

says. Violinist Jennifer Choi recorded it at the studio of sound designer Scott Lehrer. "She really got inside the notes, feeling it rather than just stringing the notes together," Still adds. "The great thing about Seth Numrich is he looks like he could play the violin."

The off-stage roars of the crowd heard in the next to last scene are, Still notes, "very detailed. It's really helpful working with Bart in that, the first time you go through a scene, he moves slowly, so you have a chance to match the effects to what is happening on stage. Even so, you have to build a first draft of your own, looking for the right moments for the effects to be heard. It's a lot of work, a lot of cues, and you won't have much time to revise it."

While Still was working on the sound effects and musical sequences, Salzberg was assembling the show's sound system. The production features a certain amount of reinforcement using a set of AKG 451s with CK3

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you're covered. One of them will almost inevitably not be of the play's period"—hence the selection of *Violin Concerto* and *John's Book of Alleged Dances*, both by Adams—"which is what makes it interesting. With any play, you're working in three periods: when it was written, when it is set, and the period in which you're living."

Still adds that "You Took Advantage of Me," by Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart, as performed by the French jazz guitarist Django Reinhardt, is peculiarly appropriate for a play about a musician who puts his hands at risk in the boxing ring. Reinhardt "is the genius musician with broken hands. He burnt three fingers while getting his wife out of a fire; his signature style came out of that accident."

The production opens with a montage of sound effects, as if someone is switching the dial on a radio; it climaxes with a sequence of Franklin D. Roosevelt giving one of his famous fireside chats to the nation. "You can easily find [FDR]," Still says, speaking of his research, "but you have to find the perfect one, the one that is right year and month. The fireside chat I chose is not perfectly contemporary with the first scene of the play," which begins early in 1936; instead, he chose one that had content very much in period but that fit well with the play's theme: "It's all about creating jobs; it's unbelievably contemporary."

Still wrote the violin music Joe plays offstage, which "is designed to show off the beautiful tone of an E string, the highest string, which acoustically penetrates the mind," he

capsules. "I like the way they work better than any foot mic I have ever tried," says Salzberg, who, as the house sound man, has mixed such productions as *South Pacific* and *The Light in the Piazza*, both directed by Sher.

Another big contributor to the production's remarkably natural sound, Salzberg says, is the decision to go with an analog mixing desk. "We have a 32-channel Midas Venice," he says. "Peter's effects and music come out of the QLab [playback device], go analog through [a Weiss AFI-1 FireWire interface and Lavry Engineering converters], and we stay analog as long as we can." Also, he says, "Every mic is delayed correctly to every speaker. There are seven mics, running several systems through a Yamaha DME [digital mixing engine], so, as actors move around the stage, the delays change, too, and the sound moves with them." He adds that Wally Flores, the console operator, is skilled at mixing with analog gear.

Salzberg feels very strongly about this last point. "One problem with how we do sound in the theatre is the system is static. In real life, your ears detect where a sound is coming from. In the theatre, you hear the sound, but it comes from the speakers and you have to look to see where it is really coming from. This creates a tension between the ear and the eye, and the brain has to work to resolve it. This creates a wall between the audience and the performers. If we get rid of that wall, it is so much easier to reach the audience."



Anthony Crivello as gambler Eddie Fuseli and Numrich as Joe Bonaparte.

It helps, Salzberg adds, that the Belasco Theatre “is a beautiful house, acoustically. As you move up to the mezzanine and balcony, the acoustic sound gets bigger and bigger; you can hear quite well in the balcony. Under the mezzanine is more difficult,” which is where the Lehrer-inspired delay system comes in especially useful.

The loudspeaker system, Salzberg says, is relatively simple. “It uses d&b audiotechnik gear for the vocal system. There are Q10s and Q1s on the proscenium—six in total, two for each level of the house. For delays, we have about 40 d&b E0s, with additional E0s for front fill. There is no cluster; if we’d put one in, it would have to have been so high up it would mess up the delays, which didn’t make any possible gain for the balcony worth it. The onstage effects speakers are by Meyer Sound, mostly UPAs and UM-1Ps. (Still says these are used for moments of subtle underscoring, using excerpts from *Kisetsu*, by the Japanese composer Somei Satoh.) “At the last minute, we added some M1Ds for side fill in the vocal system in the balcony and mezzanine. We also had four Meyer 600-HP subwoofers for the music.” (Masque Sound provided the audio gear for the production.)

In an interview in the *Lincoln Center Review*, Walt Odets, the playwright’s son, notes that his father was

fanatically dedicated to his record collection, outfitting their living room with the latest in stereo equipment. He adds, “To my ear ... his relationship to music finds voice in both the structure and the language of his writing.” The work of both Still and Salzberg contributes enormously to the production, finding the music in Odets’ words and finding music that underlines the conflicts at the heart of *Golden Boy*.

Other key personnel in the production include Mikiko Suzuki MacAdams (associate set designer); Jisun Kim (assistant set designer); Caroline Chao, Jeanne Koenig, and Karen Spahn (assistant lighting designers); Benjamin Furiga (assistant sound designer); Faye Armon-Troncoso (props); Mallory Paige Marsh (props assistant); John Weingart (production carpenter); David Karlson (production electrician); and Mark Dignam (production propertyman).

The production, which was widely acclaimed, closes this month, but it has gone a long way to reestablishing Odets as a major American writer. Interestingly, there is more Odets in Broadway’s future: This spring, Roundabout Theatre Company will present *The Big Knife*, the author’s poison-pen letter to Hollywood. One can only hope it will get a production as vividly wrought as Sher’s vision of *Golden Boy*. 📻