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Turning the Tables

by Bryan Reesman

Set Designers Discuss the Pros and Cons of Turntables

I remember the first time I saw a turntable in action was in a performance during the original run of *Les Misérables* in the spring of 1987. My teenage self had never experienced a Broadway show before, and it was all rather overwhelming, including the sequence where Jean Valjean races through a series of important events in his life that were represented through rotations on the show's turntable. While I've always recalled that the sequence felt rushed (for the time), it was novel to me, it was state-of-the-art at the time, and it hinted at the direction that moving scenery would head towards in the future.

These days, many Broadway producers feel compelled to barrage audiences with as many bells and whistles as possible, particularly in musicals. At a talkback for the 2010 revival of *Promises, Promises*, one crew member told our group that he worked on the original 1968 production, and back then, all Jerry Orbach had to do when performing "She Loves Basketball" was sing the number with some personal movement and little else happening onstage. Now people expect more motion and energy in the background and all around.



The stage in Act One spins to reveal the George Kaufman house.

The Set Designer's Frenemy

Turntables can bring a dynamic motion and energy to a show, but they can also present technical and performance challenges for cast and crew. With this in mind, I reached out to four talented scenic designers — Anna Louizos, Beowulf Boritt, David Gallo and John Lee Beatty — to collect their insights on the topic.

“When used well, turntables are a fantastic solution to many of the challenges of designing a show,” says Gallo. “Some of the turntable designs I have always admired fall into two categories. Boris Aronson’s *Fiddler on the Roof* and Oliver Smith’s *My Fair Lady* are fantastic examples of turntables moving scenery elegantly while being thematically brilliant. The second category contains shows such as Bob Crowley’s *Carousel* and John Napier’s *Les Misérables* that incorporate the turntable organically into every single aspect of the staging while moving hardly any scenery at all.”

Gallo’s favorite personal example of turntable usage comes from the European tour production of *Beauty and the Beast*, in which he only employed one for the castle scenes. “It added an air of mystery as the castle revolved in endless circles, and each piece of scenery was used in full 360 degree dimensions,” he says.

While some people proclaim, “Go big or go home,” for theater, the “bigger is better” mantra presents its fair share of challenges. The biggest turntable that Beowulf Boritt ever created, which he was told was the biggest ever on Broadway according to Lincoln Center, was for Act One at the Vivian Beaumont Theatre in 2014. The three-story set was 60 feet in diameter and weighed 100,000 pounds, requiring Lincoln Center to hire engineers to ensure that the stage could support it. “ShowMotion, our shop, had these two massive hydraulic motors to turn it,” recalls Boritt. “Way upstage, we had to build a double walled sheetrock house to soundproof the motors so that the audience wouldn’t hear them kick in when it turned.”

Given that the turntable was so massive and surrounded the actors they often could not tell it was in motion. “They’d lose all sense of direction and not know upstage from downstage,” recalls Boritt. “We ultimately hung green and red rope light offstage out of sight from the audience — red on stage right, green on stage left — so they could orient themselves.” Maintaining the timing of the choreography in that show was essential.

Stage timing is of the essence, and it is important for actors and automated elements to be in sync. That is more easily achievable today. John Lee Beatty recalls working on *Irma la Douce* at the Los Angeles Civic Light Opera Back for the late director Michael Kidd back in the 1970s. “He had choreographed a dynamic dance on a revolve, but he was never happy with the speed,” says Beatty. “This was in the days of a hand winch operator, so he demanded more speed than an operator could produce and wanted the crew to try anything. A bolt driver was inserted in the winch and turned on — screaming dancers clung to each other for dear life, a human chain of desperation, some at the sides being thrown off. One or two were off to the hospital. Michael said, ‘Right. Well, that doesn’t work.’”

When he worked on *Grace* at the Cort Theatre in 2012, Boritt faced the opposite situation. “The conceit was that the turntable moved imperceptibly slowly through the whole play, and some door units tracked counter to it, also imperceptibly slowly,” he explains. “The effect was that without the audience being aware it was happening, by the end of a 20-minute scene everything onstage had completely changed its relation to the audience and the other objects, but no one could see it happening. It’s actually a real challenge to move a turntable that slowly, and Hudson Scenic had to get special gears to allow the motor to turn it as slowly as we wanted and still be smooth.”

Boritt and the crew were concerned about the turntable being quiet, and they began hearing “a high-pitched whine during some of the slowest cues” during previews. They initially experienced frustration in trying to pinpoint the source of the noise, but it turned out the shop had put felt soundproofing around the bottom of the turntable in an effort to dampen the sound of the casters. “As the turntable had settled by a fraction of an inch, the felt had been compressed and started to make a tiny noise, and the foot mics on stage caught and amplified the noise,” says Boritt. “So, it was actually our soundproofing that created the awful sound, and once we got rid of the soundproofing, all was well! It’s the hazard of every project being a unique machine with its own learning curve.”



Anna Louizos used the built-in turntable at the Bucks County Playhouse for *Guys and Dolls*.

Ups and Downs

When he designed for *The Nance* at the Lyceum Theatre in 2013, Beatty used a revolve owned by ShowMotion that “has half ‘up’ wheels and half ‘down,’” he explains. “The ups are at the outside, so anything that falls in the crack is okay. The ‘downs’ are in the inner portion. Best of both worlds because, for some reason, it is the quietest revolve ever. Designers love it, directors really love it. The only problem is directors start cheating and try to move the scenery without a sound cue as it isn’t needed to cover any creaks and groans. Bad idea! Looks wrong, but so tempting.”

Anna Louizos designed for the recent production of *Guys and Dolls* at the Bucks County Playhouse in New Hope, PA. She says that the venue owns the second oldest built-in operational turntable in America. As she points out, working with a limited summer stock budget is challenging, “but using the turntable enabled me to design a building unit that opened and closed and, combined with the turntable, could revolve to reveal an interior, and shift the building to a variety of positions on stage,” she explains. “Picture a slice of pie on a revolving dish. We managed to achieve a lot of looks for this not-so-little show.”

She reports that after decades of disuse, the Playhouse turntable became operational again two years ago. The last time it had been implemented was on a production of *The Lion in Winter* with George C. Scott and Coleen Dewhurst in the 1960s, but it has gotten some use recently. “There is a difference between what the Bucks County Playhouse has and what is generally used in most shows such as *Marvin’s Room*, *School of Rock* and *Groundhog Day*,” says Louizos. “Those turntables are installed on top of the theatre stages, and they are usually built by the scene shops and are part of the set design package that gets installed for each particular show. In the case of Bucks County, the turntable is actually a part of the stage. Built-in stage turntables are more a rarity these days.”

Louizos also installed a turntable within the current London production of *School of Rock*. She designed the New York show as well, but this staging is a departure from the Broadway production. The New London Theatre in London's West End has a prominent thrust stage, which naturally brings the performances closer to the audience. "There is no proscenium to speak of, so I created a look that honored the 'rough around the edges' look of our original workshop at the Gramercy Theatre downtown [in Manhattan]," notes Louizos. "We feature the band through a broken brick wall, and the turntable delivers set pieces and actors in a way that puts them close to the audience. Each scene is established with minimal scenery within the grungy, urban surround, and the turntable provides some dramatic moments when the story moves from backstage to onstage in the finale."



A render of the Anna Louizos *Guys and Dolls* set

A Show-Stopping Moment

These success stories lead us to another aspect of this topic — sometimes the biggest challenge a scenic designer can face is when a turntable does not turn. That scenario certainly gums up the works. In fact, *Playbill* reported that on the opening night of the *Machinal* revival at the American Airlines Theatre on January 16, 2014, the turntable, which rotated a massive cube-like structure containing multiple interlinking set pieces, broke down after only four scenes. This required 11 stagehands (some allegedly plucked from the understanding audience) to help manually turn the structure for the rest of the evening. (When I caught the show a couple of nights later, the Es Devlin-designed turnstile worked flawlessly.)

Such a situation can be tricky to deal with. Of his own experiences, Gallo explains that, "As the designer, my responsibility usually ends after I draw a circle on a piece of paper, place a dimension on that drawing and write 'turntable' below it. It's the simplest thing to design, but it's one of the hardest things to build well. Additional frustration comes when, as the designer, you are asked again and again what you are going to do about the non-turning turntable. All you can offer is to draw the circle again."

As evidenced above, turntables can prove to be a valuable resource for the right show, but the choice to use one has to be carefully considered and not simply utilized because it is possible. “Turntables come with many potential pitfalls, which often are not apparent until tech,” observes Gallo. “My best advice is to exhaust every other possibility before choosing a gigantic rotating contraption that forgives nothing and shows no mercy — either technically or artistically.”



Beowulf Boritt provided a turntable for Grace that moved imperceptibly slowly to achieve a transformative effect.