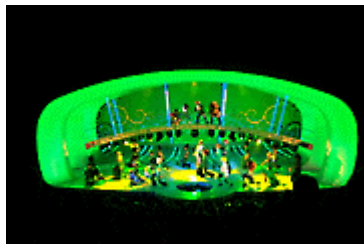


## WIZ KIDS

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A musical revival is not usually the victim of divorce, but when New York-based Dodger Productions “divorced” Joop Van den Ende’s Amsterdam-based Stage Entertainment in 2005, an anticipated revival of *The Wiz* was left hanging in the balance. In the end, the Dodgers retained US rights, and Stage Entertainment got the European rights — resulting in two major productions of *The Wiz* at virtually the same time.



*The Wiz* premiered on Broadway in 1975, overcoming lackluster reviews to run more than 1,600 performances and win seven Tony Awards, including Best Musical and Best Director nod for Geoffrey Holder. It was a daring breakthrough at the time: a large-scale, all-black musical based on *The Wizard of Oz*, playing up the theme of personal empowerment. Both of the recent revivals look back at it from the perch of the 21st century, updating the look and bringing *The Wiz* into the digital age in terms of design.

### Hoofing It In Holland

Stage Entertainment’s full-scale, Broadway-caliber production of *The Wiz*, directed by Glen Castle, opened on September 9, 2006, at the Beatrix Theatre in Utrecht, Holland. The design team included David Gallo, sets; Thomas Hase, lighting; Zachary Borovay, projections; Miguel Humidor, costumes; and Jeroen ten Brinke, sound. “It’s a little odd to hear ‘Ease on Down the Road’ in Dutch,” admits Hase, who points out that, rather than present a literal translation, the creators worked a lot of local references into the book. “The audience really appreciates that,” he says.

For Hase, *The Wiz* represented a shift in direction. “I haven’t done big musicals in a long time,” he explains, having moved almost completely into designing opera. “David Gallo and I were working on the Broadway revival of *Company* at the time, and he said he wanted me to work on *The Wiz*, but I wasn’t sure. The production is very hip, based on the idea of the Apple iPod societal takeover. I riffed on that.” This high-tech concept is reflected in a computer circuit board pattern on the floor of Gallo’s all-white set that was inspired by the clean white lines of the iPod itself and the flagship Apple store in New York City.

The original concept for the set called for an LED floor and LED screens for digital projection. “The idea was to use a media server for the images on the floor, with the lighting to reinforce those images,” says Hase, who notes that the entire LED floor was eventually reduced to a series of forced-perspective lines made of Lagotronics LED panels. “I found that I was faced with a huge white set — from the floor to the portals — that needed light and color,” he adds. “I really ramped up, still using a High End Systems Catalyst media server to control color patterns on the floor and portals.”

Hase then went to work designing custom templates for moving lights, working closely with associate designer Troy Martin O’Shia and Borovay on the color palette for the images. “I story-boarded each scene and sent it to Zak,” recalls the LD. “We wanted to make sure the lighting and projections meshed. Zak looked at the stage images and the lighting, and in some cases re-colored the projections.” The two designers also shared digital content to reinforce the seamlessness of the design.

Automated luminaries from Vari-Lite are a large part of the big rig: ten VL3500s and 28 VL3000s, all with custom gobos, plus 150 VL2000 washes and 60 VL2500 profiles, complemented by 150 ETC Source Fours with Wybron Coloram scrollers. The gear was provided by Flashlight in Holland, with Ezna Hommd programming on two MA Lighting grandMA consoles. “They were brilliant,” Hase says of Flashlight, and he gives props to Hommd. “He was unbelievably good and is one of the best moving-light programmers. He showed a lot of humor and care.”

The VL3000s are some of the real workhorses of the rig. “They never stop projecting gobo patterns,” says Hase, who used gobos from the collection of custom patterns he designed for Vari-Lite fixtures (his patterns are made by Apollo, sold exclusively by Chicago Spotlight, and found on [www.haseltd.com](http://www.haseltd.com)). Yet some of the big scenes, such as “Ease on Down the Road,” rely on the LEDs. “We used this scene as a transition sequence to allow the VLs to refocus and shift to the next scene,” Hase adds. Some of the automated fixtures were hung on offstage ladders that could fly in for sidelight, low or high, as needed.

Hase notes that his choice of a largely automated rig was motivated by three factors: limited space overhead to hang fixtures, a white set that needed to be colored, and a modern fairytale that wanted explosive, saturated colors. “There are so many different scenes in the show that a fixed rig would never have gotten through it,” he says. “It’s all about traveling.”

In addition to the white shell of the set, Gallo provided set pieces to reinforce the various scenes, from a large eyeball with a video projector in it (for the Wiz himself to ride in on) to windmills for the “Munchkin Land” scene. Here, Borovay echoed the windmills with images of rolling hills with windmills, and Hase added dots in every color of the rainbow. For an abstract cornfield, Hase placed wavy lines on the floor, which Borovay paralleled upstage on the 60'x20' Gerriets Opera RP screen. A second RP screen in three parts is also used. “In the Emerald City, the center portion of the screen flies out as the Wiz emerges on his ‘eyeball,’” says Borovay. “Thomas actually filled the area behind the breakaway screen with all kinds of fog and smoke effects, so the eyeball literally bursts through a mysterious cloud of fog. It’s a pretty thrilling effect.”

When Dorothy and friends arrive at the Gates of Oz, an iris in the wall opens. “There are layers and layers of lighting effects and multiple circuit board patterns,” says Hase, who adds that all of the patterns he used were black and white, with color coming from the wash luminaries placed around them. “This way, you can shift the color as you move from scene to scene,” he says. A star field pattern was conceived by Hase for the VLs — with thousands of tiny holes for the stars — and projected onto the RP screen for a starry, starry night in the land of Oz.

## **Oz Goes Digital**

What does an all-white set mean in terms of projections? “Typically, an all-white set means you cannot have a blackout on stage,” explains Borovay. “The unique design of our all-white set was that the deck was sloped up into a screen that was also the same shade of white, meaning the entire set and RP screen appeared as a seamless white environment. This way, we could use lighting and projections to paint the entire set [deck, RP, and portals] to appear as if it were any solid color of the rainbow.”

A challenge was controlling the light from the projections that bounces around on the set. “We had to cover every surface that was not seen by the audience with black fabric to kill the bounce light,” says Borovay. “We needed to calculate the angle of bounce light as the director was blocking the show, so we could position the actors in a way that they would be appropriately illuminated, but that the reflection of the light would not wash out the RP screen.”

The original concept for the projections was that they would be photorealistic 3D images that continued the smooth, graphic look of the iPod and Apple store. “As the director and choreographer shaped the show, it became more and more apparent that the actors would get lost in the big dance numbers if the imagery was too ‘interesting,’” explains Borovay. “In addition, the costumes were designed in a funky, urban 1970s style. So it became the job of the projections to tie those two worlds together, while supporting the action on stage.” In the end, the projections are based on a more illustrative style. “Except for one image that was based on a photograph, the images all started out as hand drawings that were scanned in and painted in Adobe Illustrator. The look is similar to that of a pop-up book — flat 2D images that move around in a 3D space, especially in the scene transitions.”

The projection gear includes six Barco SLM R12+ projectors that were edge-blended horizontally. (Initially there were just three, but another three dual-converged for double brightness were added, notes Borovay.) The show was created in Dataton Watchout 3.1.1, with Medialon Manager 2 used to cue the video from the grandMA lighting console via a MIDI interface, which also directly controls the Barco R12+'s internal shutters.

The eyeball unit has a Sony VPLPX51 projector inside it and a lipstick security camera (also controlled by Watchout and Medialon). “The main challenge was getting the movie files to play back smoothly when we were making such a huge image,” says Borovay. “We ended up cutting our pixel size in half and using Watchout to scale up the imagery to fill the screen. The images still looked very good, even at half the pixel size.” XL Video Netherlands provided the projection gear, with Martijn Meeuwis and Ruppert Bohle providing system design and technical support.

## **McAnuff's Vision of Oz**

The second high-tech revival of *The Wiz* ran from September 26 to November 26, 2006, at La Jolla Playhouse, located on the University of California San Diego campus. Directed by Des McAnuff (La Jolla's artistic director), this *Wiz* was designed by Robert Brill, sets; Howell Binkley, lighting; Michael Clark, projections; Paul Tazewell, costumes; and Peter Fitzgerald, sound. “For Des McAnuff, there were three main points for this revival. He wanted it to be multicultural, environmental, and contemporary,” says Clark, who collaborated with McAnuff and Binkley on the recent Tony Award-winning Broadway musical *Jersey Boys*.

Brill's set reinforced the production's environmental concept, with curvilinear trussing creating catwalks that stretched out into the auditorium of La Jolla's Mandell Weiss Playhouse. A large horseshoe-shaped walkway ran around the back of the stage, above two sets of seating risers that brought the audience right on to the stage, while a row of seats in the house had been removed to make way for a passerelle, or walkway, that brought the action practically into the laps of the audience. The musicians were located in galleries in the side-box boom positions, adding to the immersive experience in an arena-like setting. The stage itself had a central trap with “sunroof” and a turntable.

“All of the walls became projection surfaces,” explains Clark, who also used a 20'-wide-by-9'-high, 60-panel Daktronics ProTour™ 8i LED wall that was divided into two separate units (stage-right and stage-left), plus two Pioneer plasma screens so that the onstage audience members could see what was happening at all times, regardless of sightlines. Five Sanyo PLC-XF40 10,000-lumen LCD projectors were used: four focused on the walls and one for special effects, such as a swirling tornado or the witch dying in a cloud of smoke. Dataton's Watchout drove the images with Medialon show control and a MIDI

interface so that the light board triggered the projection cues. Sound Associates in New York City provided the video package. (The company also provided any sound gear that was not already in-house.) Paul Vershbow did the Watchout programming. “Des anticipates immediate results,” says Clark. “I don’t think we could have done it without Paul.”

The production’s artistic mood echoed McAnuff’s desire for the show to be “today,” with contemporary costumes and passages of hip-hop music added to the original score. “This was not a period show,” stresses Clark, whose computer-generated images added to the rock-concert ambience. Giant sunflowers and an abstract cornfield helped define the various scenes. “There was no real photography represented,” he adds. “These images were more impressionistic.” For the Tin Man, this meant images of metal that might have implied an automobile graveyard, while the Emerald City sprang to life with highly stylized animated graphics like one would find in a club environment. “Each of the characters joined this over-the-top world,” says Clark. “What the characters looked like is a testament to the imagination of Paul Tazewell.”

A portion of the video was live, primarily for image magnification. “The live video followed the characters, especially during transitions,” notes Clark. Five video cameras were used: two Sony DXC35s, one JVC HD1110, and one Panasonic GS 500 used as audience perspective cameras on stage and behind the seating risers; the fifth was a specialty camera placed in the hat of the actor who played Toto. “The images here were from what we called the ‘Toto-Cam perspective,’” Clark explains, noting that, after much discussion, it was decided that these dog’s-eye-view images should be black and white in contrast to the stylized color palette. Shawn Sagady and Andy Lowe served as camera operators.

Doing a production of this scale in a regional theatre was quite a challenge, yet one that was overcome. “We had to make concessions to make it work within the budget,” says Clark. “We had what we needed, but not necessarily what I wanted.” For example, his desire for multiple plasma screens resulted in two, but that did not seem to dampen his spirits. “We are especially proud of what we accomplished,” he enthuses.

### **LED Color Matching**

In an attempt to have the lighting as seamless as possible with the large Daktronics LED screens on stage, Binkley added 75 Color Kinetics ColorBlast 12 units to a rig of conventional automated fixtures. The conventional part of the rig, primarily from La Jolla’s inventory, included 82 ETC Source Fours, Altman PARs, and 183 Berkey Colortran ellipsoidals — many with Wybron Coloram II and Forerunner scrollers — six Colortran Far Cyc units, and seven L&E ministrips. The rig also included six Wildfire UV units, 118 GAM Star Strobes, 114 Egg Strobes, one MDG atmospheric hazer, and two Rosco Delta 3000 foggers. An automated package was rented from PRG in New York City, including 35 High End Systems Studio Spots, 40 Vari-Lite 2416s, two Martin Atomic Strobes, and 10 High End Systems Dataflash AF1000s. La Jolla’s resident ETC Obsession II console was used for the conventionals, while a grandMA console was brought in to program the automated fixtures with Hillary Knox at the controls. Stephen Terry served as associate designer, with Randy Anestsky as the Obsession programmer.

For Binkley, the environmental set meant there were lighting positions everywhere on the multiple layers of truss. “The automated fixtures were split between FOH to light the passerelle and overhead on the stage. We had two distinct playing areas — upstage of the proscenium and in the house,” he notes. “Real estate was not a problem, for once in my life.” [Laughs] The fixtures were all exposed in keeping with the rock-concert feeling. This look was heightened by 18 mirror balls that flew in when the action shifts to Oz, or what the designers called the “Wiz Land” scene, as well as strobes on the bottom of the passerelle, which were used as part of the special effects in the big musical numbers such as “Ease on Down the Road.”

“Each character had its own mood and palette,” notes Binkley, who shifted from warm tones for the Scarecrow and cool icy light for the Tin Man to saturated green for the Wiz and “scary” tints for the Lion. While the book scenes in the musical are crisp and clean, Binkley was able to let go a little more in the musical numbers and transition scenes. “With the live camera action on the passerelle during transitions, the audience had a lot to look at and didn’t notice the scenery shifts on stage,” he explains.

By adding the LED fixtures, Clark and Binkley were able to create seamless tableaux, “as if the lighting was an extension of the projections,” says Clark. “Howell and I felt especially integrated. His choices of color, saturation, and mood were just what I like to see. We really understand each other’s mind.” The LEDs were used primarily to model the truss. “A lot of the video hit the truss, and I wanted to match the colors on the LED screens,” explains Binkley. “It’s great to have this technology where we can match the colors on stage and define certain color fills and palettes to help tell the story.”

Binkley’s color palette — which included everything from white, yellow, and amber to lavender, red, and dark blue — marked a shift in his design aesthetic. “I usually don’t use that much color,” he admits. “Des really challenges his design team to take new risks.”

Now that *The Wiz* has enjoyed two successful revivals, one big question remains. Is a Broadway revival now in the offing? Only the Wizard himself knows for sure, but rumor has it he may be packing his bags as we speak and planning to turn the Big Apple into the Emerald City once again.