

The Designer as Co-Director

How *Carousel*'s Bob Crowley shaped the show

BY GERARD RAYMOND

When designer Bob Crowley talks about his work on *Carousel*, you may mistake him for the director of the show. And that isn't surprising, given that Crowley, who's in his early forties, belongs to a new generation of designers that blurs the conventional lines between design and direction. *Carousel*, currently at the Lincoln Center's Vivian Beaumont Theater as well as at the Shaftesbury Theater in London, is unquestionably directed by Nicholas Hytner, but Crowley was involved with the project from its very conception at Britain's National Theater. His input on the final product is immeasurable.

Typically, Crowley's designs are minimalist, but they speak more powerfully and are often more spectacular than the most intricately designed, smoke-filled, hydraulic set you are likely to encounter. For Richard Eyre's memorable production of *Racing Demon* at the National Theater, he designed a stark, cruciform set, brilliantly providing a context and a metaphor for David Hare's exploration of the Church of England. Audiences in New York may remember the casually strewn sheets and open chest of drawers that so powerfully evoked the sexually-charged goings-on in the Royal Shakespeare Company's Broadway production of *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*. More recently, his militaristic designs for *Richard III* at the Brooklyn Academy of Music signalled Ian McKellen's reading of the play as an analogy for the potential of fascism in 1930s Britain.

I talked to Crowley in London last December, just before he started work on the New York production of *Carousel*. In his characteristically droll manner, Crowley explains the thinking behind his work.

TheaterWeek: So now the Brits are bringing American musicals to New York!

Bob Crowley: Well, I'm not British, I'm Irish and I don't think the Irish are any great threat to the American musical theater! But I know exactly what you mean. Obviously, we never thought we would be sending it home. And this is not just any American musical. *Carousel* is one of those totem poles, and there is a huge responsibility for that.

Did its stature influence how you approached it?

Well, we are looking at it with a European eye, and very much a European eye of the '90s, as well. We went back to the original play [*Liliom*] by Molnar, which is, of course, also European. We never approached it as if we were doing a musical. We went about it exactly the way we would go about doing a play by Shakespeare, a comedy by Sheridan, or, indeed, an opera by Mozart. I mean, the only difference is that the songs were written in this century by Americans.

The three of us—that is Nick [Nicholas Hytner], myself, and [the choreographer] Kenneth MacMillan, who, as you know, died three weeks before the show opened—didn't know the piece very well. We had no real preconceived ideas about it. I had certain images in my head, obviously, because I had seen the film as a child. The one thing all three of us decided was that it is not a musical about a carousel.

The carousel is the central motif, the idea of something turning around like a world turning, but the actual realization of the carousel itself in terms of the period wasn't of any great interest to me. And the extraordinary thing is it never comes

back. Once you have seen it in the overture they never refer to the carousel again. [In our production] we revisit the dilapidated carousel, what we call the horse graveyard, for the ballet when it is 15 years later.

What did you mean by a "European eye of the 90s"?

Whenever I design a piece of work I don't refer backwards. I'll research a piece, obviously, if it is in period, but I reconceive it for now. We weren't interested in doing a slavish evocation of the mid-1800s on the East coast of America. We weren't documenting a piece of social history. *Carousel* is about bigger things than that; it is not about how people lived their lives at that time. Although, having said that, one of the first images you see is of those girls working in the mill.

You place them in a very definite social context during the overture, don't you?

It does have a social context, but visually the show isn't reproducing things slavishly in a naturalistic way. There is a difference between realism and naturalism. I think that is what I mean. We think everything realistically, in terms of the relationships, the social conditions and the place where the people are working. What we haven't done is to be naturalistic about it, because it is not a naturalistic medium. For a start, it is a musical which deals with the after-life, therefore there is a spiritual dimension to the piece which is most unusual. That is the central issue with the design. How do you put heaven on stage? We started with those big questions.

But didn't you do a lot of research in America?

Yes, we went to Maine and I did all my research about whaling on the East coast.

Everything comes from the visit to New England, without a doubt. I can't imagine how [the show] would look had we not gone there. We went in June, as a matter of fact, and we were overwhelmed by the beauty and the scenery. The season hadn't quite taken off so we were a bit early to go to a real clambake, but we did everything else, including visiting a period carousel that we found. We were also looking for a context in which to place the sort of pseudo-spiritual religious context [for] these girls. We were touring around and we came across this Shaker community, probably the last one there, if not one of the last in America, and that's where the image of the blue box came from.

What was this blue box? Is that the key to your design for *Carousel*?

We visited this Shaker meeting house which had been built in the late 1700s to early 1800s. We walked into this room, and the walls had been painted blue, this fabulous blue. The guide told us it symbolized heaven and that [the Shakers] used to dance and sing in this room. Nick and I had exactly the same reaction. We said, well, that's it, this is what we have to do: we have to design a room in which people

will sing and dance and it has to symbolize heaven, and the earth as well, because you are dancing in it. That's where that incredible blue comes from, coupled with the blue Atlantic and the blue azure over our heads at the time. The whole thing is danced within that, and into that we bring all the various elements. And of course the imagery for the Heavenly Friend and the Star Keeper came from these Shaker-like or Quaker-like Elders. We had [found] a context for them rather have than people with wings playing harps or whatever.

The next thing was how do you design heaven? I failed to research that [he laughs], so I didn't design heaven. I designed the earth instead—the view down to the earth. Then I needed a context for the stars and [I designed] this huge Shaker cupboard. I am so obsessed with the Shaker aesthetic. I love the clarity and the cleanness of its line. That has tended to influence the way [the show] looks. It is quite hard-edged and clear and crystal against these blue skies. I was very struck by those clapboard houses illuminated against that kind of green landscape.

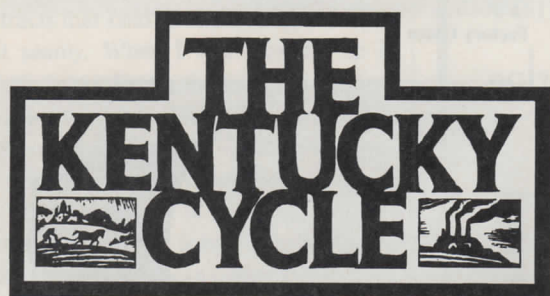
Of course I also looked at a lot of paintings. [I looked at] artists from that part of

the world and others who have an innate conduit to the American heart, the loneliness and the size of America, people like Edward Hopper and Andrew Wyeth, primitive painters like Grandma Moses and Grant Wood, and local painters of the period like Winslow Homer, who painted all those fishermen and fishing girls and the villages around there.

So we did masses and masses of research, but as I say, we filtered it through. We have taken away, I think, a lot of what I would call the heavy Victoriana associated with carousels and things like that. We decided to reinvent the overture.

Yes, how did the overture design and staging come about? It's one of the most remarkable achievements of this production.

The three of us worked on it from day one. I remember the first day we sat around and listened to the score. The very opening notes of that overture. . . we all agreed that this was not a celebratory piece—at the start. It starts very obliquely and darkly with a rather sinister chord, rather depressing, actually, and it gradually builds, very, very slowly to that fan-



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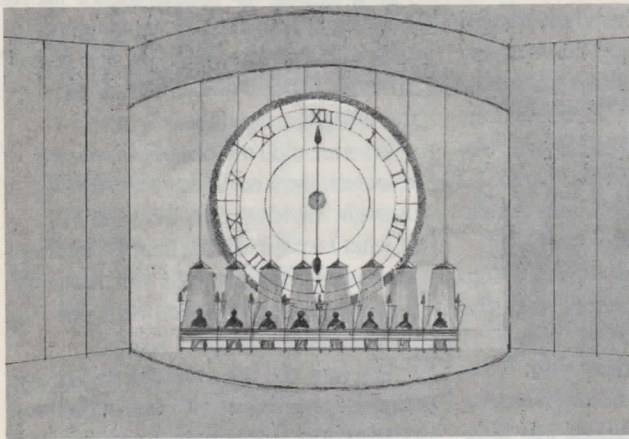
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tastic, very famous “Carousel Waltz.”

We felt [the music] didn’t warrant the carousel being there by any means [when the overture begins]. It seemed that there

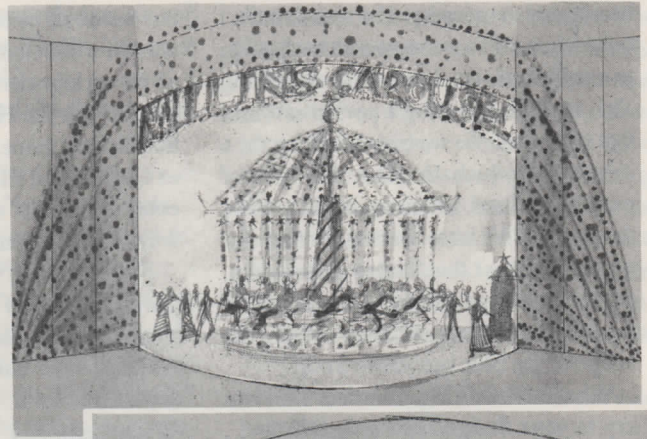
was a point in the music when you brought on the carousel, a real opening, like a flower opening—like time-lapse photography. That was one of the images I had. I

was going to film a funfair over maybe three or four hours, from dusk till the evening and watch the lights coming on one by one until everything started whizz-



Bob Crowley’s original drawings for the *Carousel* sets:

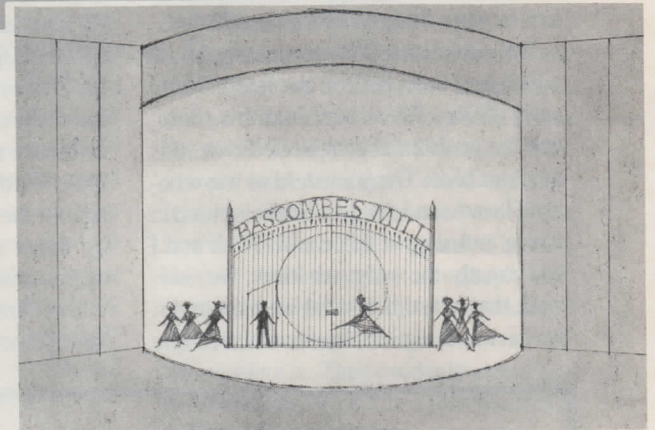
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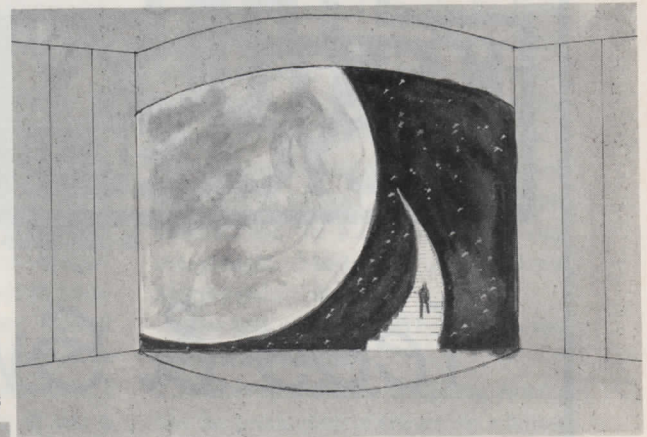
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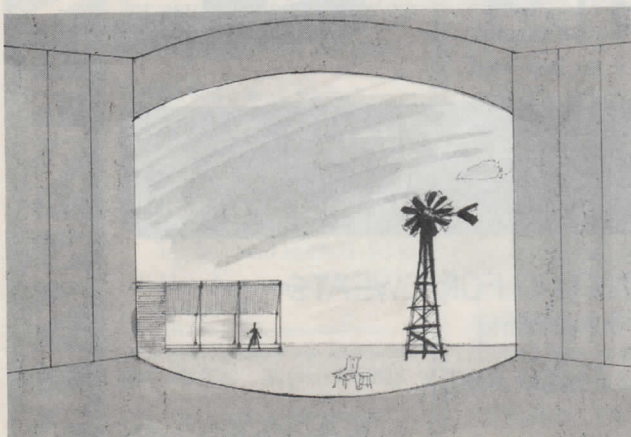
One of Crowley’s *The Importance of Being Earnest* sets irritated Maggie Smith (inset). Catherine Ashmore



Factory Gates



Finis



Julie’s Cottage



June

ing around. That was very much the image—of something gradually being put together before your eyes.

We became very interested in these people's lives and relating them to that social context we talked about earlier. So by the time you arrive on the carousel you know where they come from and who they are. You know the girls work in the mill, that it is 6 o'clock on a Friday night, and that they are off to have a good time with the boys, and you have seen the boys building the boats in the boat yard [and being] let out through the factory gates. All this visual information has been given to you very lightly.

It's not just the carousel but the whole world of funfairs. It's the idea of that kind of excitement in a tiny little fishing village, what the impact of something like that arriving would have. To get your kicks these days you have to go to Disneyland, or virtual reality. We were desperate to try and reinvent that kind of excitement through the eyes of the people in the show, and therefore through the audiences' eyes. So that [the audience] could understand the context of someone like Billy Bigelow, that the funfair was actually rather dangerous, and in fact it still is. When we were in New York, we went to Coney Island and it still attracts that kind of underbelly, it's still a bit seamy. When I was growing up in Cork, every Easter the fair used to come to the place where I lived and, as kids, we weren't allowed to go down there unsupervised for the same reasons.

The other thing, of course, is that the production doesn't actually depend on its scenic effects. It doesn't depend on a huge amount of machinery, it is very low tech, unlike a lot of musicals I can mention.

Well, it is certainly a refreshing change from the musicals of the '80s, which seem to have made hydraulic sets and fog machines an integral part of production design.

The '80s musicals did a lot of damage to create this expectation. I honestly don't think designers deliberately set out to swamp the musical. I think what happened was—and I will be really shot down for this, I know—I think in a lot of cases there was such a lack of intellectual content both in the music and in the lyrics. A lot of the musicals were sort of brain dead, you know. They weren't dealing with life as we know it. The human element got taken out and had to be replaced with

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something. That coupled with the '80s and that big explosion of design and video all came together and it was like the buck stopped with the designer. He or she was the one who then had to start putting back in the kind of excitement that music and lyrics used to generate. There, I have put my cards on the table!

What does bringing the show to Lincoln Center entail?

As you know, we have moved it from the Lyttleton [at the National Theater], which has a very wide proscenium, to the Shaftesbury [in the West End], which is almost half the size. Nick and I are both very used to working in large spaces; we have done lots of stuff at the Olivier [the National] and Stratford [Royal Shakespeare Company]. The bigger the space, the more I like it. The Vivian Beaumont is known for being a difficult space, but it seemed that the architecture of the actual theater, the sort of semicircular auditorium, was like a metaphor for the piece anyway. The *Carousel* you see in New York is not the version you saw either at the National or at the Shaftesbury. I mean the references are all the same, the colors are the same, but it hasn't been lifted bodily and taken across the Atlantic and put down again. Everything has been re-looked at and re-conceived. For those who haven't seen it before, it will look as if it is designed for the Beaumont and nowhere else, because it is such a unique space.

You design both sets and costumes. Is that usual in England?

It is in England. I would say 95 percent of the time here the designer does both. Whether that is because English managements are too mean to pay for two designers. . . Actually it's more to do with training. In England you are not trained separately, [sets and costumes] are seen as complementary and indeed inseparable. I have had on a few occasions to use a costume designer, but normally I can't imagine separating the work. I am such a control freak about color and stuff, I have to know what everybody is wearing at a certain point and what shade. I get the space first and then I know how people are going to look in it. I see fashion designers delivering a collection of 40 items three times a year, well, designers do that every two weeks; every production is our new collection. You are not aware of it, but there are 150 costumes in *Carousel*.

Is there a reason why the bulk of your

work has been at the Royal Shakespeare Company and the National Theater?

I am a child of the subsidized theater and I have done very little work outside it. But that is true of a lot of designers in England because a lot of us are not interested in the commercial theater and what the West End has to offer a lot of the time. In fact, I have only worked there twice. *When She Danced* [1991, starring Vanessa Redgrave] was the first thing I did [in the West End] and I had already been working in the theater 15 years. Then I did *The Importance of Being Earnest* [directed by Nicholas Hytner] earlier this year [1993]

Is it true Maggie Smith did not like your sets for *Importance*?

She hated them. I'm not sure why, she never told me. In fact, we never had a cross word, but I was told she used to take her parasol and beat the shit out of it before she made her entrance in the last act! It is very interesting because I remember saying to Nick, before we handed in those designs, that I thought it was deeply conventional and he said if we were doing it elsewhere we might be a bit more adventurous about it. Then suddenly everybody started talking about it as a post-modernist production. I mean there was a whole article about the Act 2 set describing the hedge as you would describe the Hong Kong Bank by Norman Foster. Since when has Oscar Wilde been naturalistic drama, I ask you? I mean he is taking the piss out of the English aristocracy and a certain kind of writing of the time and turning it on its head. But a lot of people liked it, and the audience used to clap every night. Maybe that's why Dame Maggie didn't like it!

One last question: What made you become a designer?

I discovered theater designing when I saw the production of *Oliver!* by a fellow Irishman, Sean Kenny. It had an incredible effect on me. I knew people painted backdrops and things like that, but up until then I didn't know that designers could physically manipulate the emotional curve of an evening, to the extent that what you saw was what you felt about something. I didn't realize it was about moving sculpture, a three-dimensional thing rather than a flat, decorative thing. I suddenly became aware of it as an art form. And it has only taken me 25 years to get to do my first musical!

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