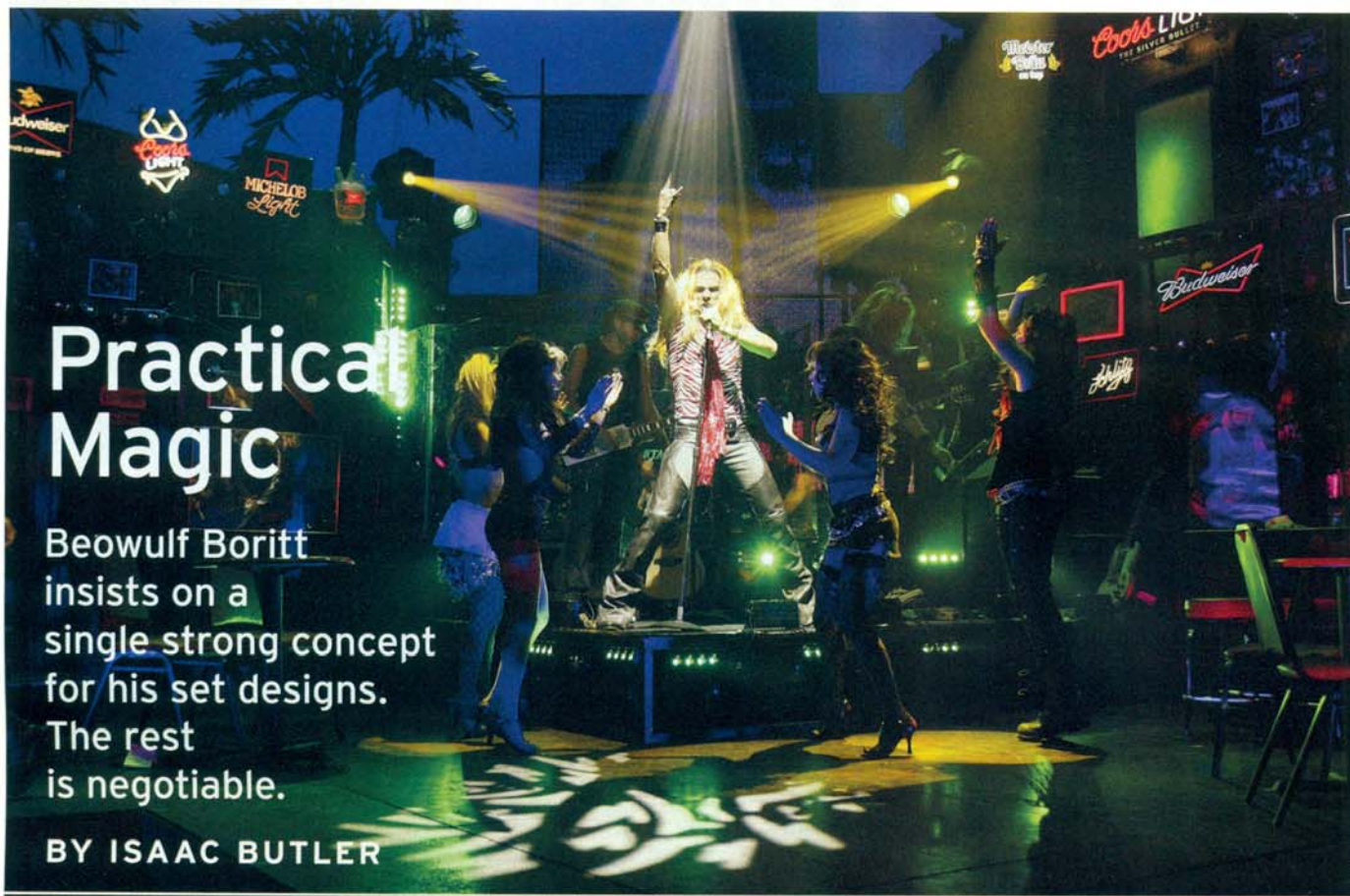


# Practical Magic

Beowulf Boritt insists on a single strong concept for his set designs. The rest is negotiable.

BY ISAAC BUTLER



Beowulf Boritt's scenic design for *Rock of Ages* in 2008 at New York's New World Stages. PHOTO: MARCUS

**A**BOUT TWO-THIRDS OF THE WAY THROUGH MY interview with scenic designer Beowulf Boritt, I ask him if he's comfortable talking about money—about the ways that money and the business realities of making a living in theatre shape the lives of its artists and the work its audiences see. It's a question that makes some people nervous. Luckily, what in the 19th century might be called Borritt's "bespectacled countenance"—surprisingly youthful for one so accomplished—lights up. It's his favorite subject, he tells me.

We're sitting in his Upper East Side apartment, which he shares with a small poodle named Hermione (after the character in *The Winter's Tale*) and his wife, the actress Mimi Bilinski. They met on a production of *Twelfth Night* he designed, the first of several productions of the Shakespeare comedy that dot his résumé.

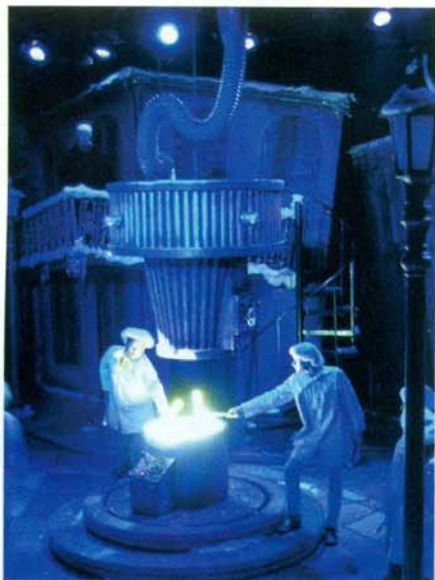
"I find when I talk to students, I just talk about money constantly," Borritt begins. "Not just in terms of making money, but its effect on art. Being a set designer is so much about what the budget is. I had a teacher once who said, 'You can design whatever you want as long as you have the money to do it.' You can design the Statue of Liberty made out of the original materials standing upside down on its torch, but if you have a budget of 10 dollars, that better not be your idea."

He goes on to explain how, as budgets go up, the realities of money and production schedules become more relevant to the work. "When you're on Broadway, the set is being loaded

into the theatre while you're going into rehearsal, so it has to be designed *months* ahead of time." And no matter what, of course, there's never enough money to do everything. "All theatre, to some extent, is no-money theatre," Borritt quips. "On big-budget shows I have to end up cutting roughly the same percentage of scenery—it just all costs more."

The life of a successful designer also involves working on roughly a dozen shows simultaneously, as evidenced by Borritt's workspace. In stark contrast to the well-ordered, meticulously clean and tastefully appointed apartment on the other side his office's door, chaos reigns in Borritt's office: Models in various stages of completion take up most flat surfaces; watercolor studies sit in a pile on a desk; research tomes and other books bulge out from the shelves, sitting in an uneasy detente with the trademark elephant figurines he tries to sneak into each design. Borritt spends much of his time commuting between theatres in various cities—one year he spent a total of 81 days out of town—and he's designed shows whose final sets he's never seen in person. Last year he increased his workload from his typical 20-plus shows a year to a staggering 31, including the New York shows *Tin Pan Alley Rag*, *Toxic Avenger* and *Rock of Ages*.

Borritt's life and career have ever been thus. The artsy, constantly drawing son of an aspiring opera singer and a history professor, Borritt spent a peripatetic childhood in various New England locations as well as St. Louis, Mo., Memphis, Tenn., Ann Arbor, Mich., England and elsewhere



Boritt's design for First Stage Children's Theater of Milwaukee's 2008 *The Happy Elf*.



A model for *Sondheim on Sondheim* on the desk of Boritt's New York studio.

before his family settled in Gettysburg, Pa., for his high school years. His interest in sets began early, as his earliest design memory reveals. His mother was singing in the chorus of a Memphis Opera production of Verdi's *Macbeth*, and, says Boritt, "I remember fairly

vividly my mother taking me backstage. I remember seeing this Stonehenge-y set, and at intermission a guy would walk out and push this enormous boulder across the stage! I remember not understanding how that was possible. The magic of that sunk in."

As a high school junior, Boritt learned about set design at a summer stock theatre in Pennsylvania, but it never occurred to him that it could be a profession. At Vassar College, where "there were no design students and three design professors," he studied with the late Tadeusz Gesek, who advised him to get his MFA from NYU and study with John Conklin. At NYU, the teacher/student ratio was reversed: "There were far too many students for the number of professors, so you didn't get to design much—you spent three years building models and talking about design." After six months, he says, he was "ready to blow my brains out," so he started taking any job he could get designing.

Boritt did his self-started design apprenticeship at the Belmont Italian American Playhouse in the South Bronx, a little 75-seater over a grocery store. After churning out the costumes for *Titus Andronicus* in 10 days, he became a fixture in the space. "I worked there for seven or eight years—I did every [show] there for a while. Right around the time I graduated from NYU, one of our shows got picked up commercially and taken Off Broadway." The show, *In-Betweens*, only lasted four weeks, but it launched Borritt's career. The Belmont, sadly, went quietly into its good night in 2001.

It was less a steady rise for Boritt than a series of happy accidents that led to his eventual Broadway ascension. Director/producer Harold Prince took a shine to the young designer when they met at the NYU design "clambake," and quickly became his rabbi in the industry, helping Boritt score a

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Craig Baldwin on Boritt's set for *A Number*, at Pittsburgh Public Theater in 2008.

job designing Daisy Prince's production of *The Last Five Years* at Chicago's Northlight Theatre, and later Off Broadway's Minetta Lane, and hiring Boritt for several of his own projects, including the forthcoming *Paradise Found* with Susan Stroman.



COURTESY OF BEOWULF BORITT

Boritt

Eventually, Boritt was approached about designing a small work in development he says he thought sounded stupid and annoying. He was finally worn down by his agent and signed on—to a little show called *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee*, which made its way from a tiny East Village rattrap to Massachusetts's Barrington Stage Company to a lengthy Broadway run and four separate touring productions. Boritt's star rose accordingly: He is in demand all over the country,

and in 2007 he won the Obie's equivalent of a lifetime achievement award in his field, despite being not even 40. "When they called me, my first reaction was, 'My God, I'm not cool enough for this award!' he says, cracking himself up. "I thought only funky downtown artists won Obies! In theatre, it's so easy to feel unappreciated, so it's nice when you get some kind of tangible signal that someone thinks you're worth it."

#### **BORITT'S APPROACH COMBINES HIS**

low-budget roots, the intellectual approach of his early mentors and lessons from then-NYU faculty member Eduardo Sicango in how to translate a concept into various styles. "In design, you have both your concept, which is whatever the intellectual idea is for the show, but then there's the style you're working in. If you've got an idea, you can layer different styles onto that idea and it can be a starker, more conceptual-looking thing, or it can be a frilly, fluffy thing."

He strives to work in ways that are simultaneously conceptually rigorous and connected to the practical. This stylistically flexible approach helps explain his remarkably

diverse portfolio: sets for everything from gigantic entertainments like the Ringling Brothers Barnum & Bailey Circus to several smaller projects for the Keen Company to large regional productions of established classics like *The Merry Wives of Windsor* at Trinity Rep. He even did the sets for Mike Birbiglia's one-man stand-up show *Sleepwalk with Me*.

Boritt likes to talk about the "strong idea": He believes, for instance, that Shakespeare plays have room for exactly one big idea from the creative team, and his own designs always have one central concept that holds them together. The "strong idea" approach is clearly visible in his designs, which show a marked preference for striking, playful and versatile unit sets over complex, multi-location scenery. *Sleepwalk with Me*, for example, began with its star entering out of a Chuck Jones-esque man-shaped hole in a blue wall resembling plate glass—a reference to the pivotal moment of Birbiglia's onstage memoir. *The Toxic Avenger* is performed on a unit set that looks like a toxic waste dump, with barrels that open up to reveal a veritable pastiche of embarrassing moments in American interior decorating.



Boritt's design for the Broadway production of *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee*.

*The Last Five Years*, which Boritt considers a creative apogee, offered an object lesson in the value of his approach. The two-hander musical by Jason Robert Brown chronicles a doomed relationship in which an aspiring author goes forward in time from meeting his actress wife to their divorce, while she

goes backward from his leaving her to their first date. The only time the couple meets in the same moment in time, then, is at their wedding. Boritt's design playfully referenced both the warped chronology and the central importance of the couple's nuptials: The back wall of the set featured a vertiginous circular dais set up for a wedding ceremony, complete with chairs and flowers that jutted perpendicularly out from the ground. The wedding ceremony thus both hovered over the couple's history while threatening to come unmoored and crush them under its weight. The set earned Boritt high praise: *Variety* called the design "deliciously ironic," while Ben Brantley at the *New York Times* wrote that the "elegant de Chiricoesque setting, which suggests gravity gone haywire, conveys a matching sense of time out of joint."

#### TO BORITT, HAVING THE RIGHT IDEA

means that both the particular stylistic vocabulary and logistical restrictions of set design flow organically. For his upcoming job designing Prince and Stroman's *Paradise Found*, the set had to be redesigned for a venue change from a Broadway-sized space to London's Menier Chocolate Factory, which is roughly the size of a 99-seat theatre. The original design made extensive use of a fly system, while the Chocolate Factory had none. Luckily, the central idea of the show—which Boritt describes as a "a slick black lacquer box that becomes different locations with the addition of minimal but specific scenery items," and which gradually rots from the inside over the course of the play—proved strong enough that the move

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ANGIE LEBLEU

Lauren Kennedy and Norbert Leo Butz in the Boritt-designed *The Last Five Years* at Chicago's Northlight Theatre.

has proven relatively painless. “Honestly,” Borritt attests, “we got it completely worked out into the smaller theatre without sacrificing anything. It startled us a little bit, but I think it shows the strength of the idea—that it wasn’t traumatic.”

After a hectic year that has included *Matthew Modine Saves the Alpacas* at Los Angeles’s Geffen Playhouse, *The Glass Menagerie* at Guild Hall in East Hampton, N.Y., and his return to Broadway with *Rock of Ages*, Borritt is considering slowing down his frenetic pace a little. Having a hit on Broadway supplies weekly royalty checks that “are not enough to live on, but they help smooth out the rough patches.” But slowing down might prove more difficult than he imagines. He never knows, after all, which of the shows he’s working on is going to prove to be The One—the once-in-too-long experience that all theatre artists crave, the show that revives one’s belief in the art form and the creative process.

“I try to cling to the shows that mean something to me,” Borritt says. “They’re usually not the ones that are ‘successful,’ and when for whatever reason a show touches my soul, to be very touchy-feely about it, I appreciate that. It doesn’t happen that often—I’m lucky if there’s one a year. It’s not always the ones you expect it to be.”

**Isaac Butler directs, sound designs and writes about theatre. He also maintains the blog *Parabasis* ([parabasis.typepad.com](http://parabasis.typepad.com)), where he writes about culture and politics.**