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One Design Approach for a One-Person Show

Creating a simple look can require a rigorous theory and specific gear choices

by David Barbour

Off Broadway got a late-season surprise with *The Tricky Part*, Martin Moran's solo memoir about a childhood scarred by desire and abuse. Moran, a regular in Broadway musicals (*Titanic*, *Bells Are Ringing*, *Cabaret*), recalls growing up Catholic in 1970s Colorado; what begins as a funny, if familiar, tale takes a darker turn to when it focuses on Moran's three-year sexual relationship, beginning at age 12, with an adult mentor. The story reaches its harrowing climax as Moran, now an adult, confronts his abuser; instead of a demon, he finds an ailing, aged, loser who is convinced of nothing so much as his own victimization. *The Tricky Part* is a stunningly unsentimental examination of evil and forgiveness.

That unsentimentality is the key to Seth Barrish's production, which uses a low-key design approach to heighten the accessibility of Moran's script. The actor spends most of the play seated at stage center, backed by two warm, sepia-colored walls. The only set piece is a table bearing the photo of a 12-year-old boy. The production also features one of the most discreetly executed lighting designs in recent memory.

That minimalism was achieved only after long, hard thought, says set designer Paul Steinberg, who notes that, attending one of the play's many workshops, "I saw the empty stage with a stool and a photograph and thought, why do they want a set?" However, he adds, Barrish "kept saying he wanted the set to meld into the theatre," a choice that would help erase the barrier between Moran and the audience. Moran says, "We had discussions with Paul about a natural texture, something that held the world of Colorado and yet something elegant and simple." Steinberg's solution was to create two walls made of cork; their warm brown colors provided an inviting backdrop and blended well into the rest of the McGinn-Cazale Theatre. Also, he reworked the pillars located at the proscenium, covering them with a brick facing that matched those on the auditorium's walls.

Lighting designer Heather Carson adds that the design was the result of a "four-way conversation" between her, Steinberg, Barrish, and Moran. She admits she was plagued by the same questions as Steinberg. Barrish adds, "I kept reminding them, it's not a play, and that we had an interesting challenge—to take advantage of a theatrical setting and embrace what is theatrical about the piece in the simplest way. Heather's first instinct was to create a series of light settings for different parts of the piece. I had an instinct that that might get in the way of Martin painting his pictures—it might have been read as commenting on things."

Carson continues: "I started the way I normally do—by really analyzing the architecture of the set, which is something that Paul excels at. Because the piece is so simple, every single choice was loaded. I knew right away that I wanted a ceiling of scoops, because of the quality of light that scoops produce—the soft, embracing mushiness that just fills the whole volume of the space—and also because I knew that they would effortlessly light the whole theatre, which would help the idea of blending Marty with the audience. We in the audience would be lit by his light. Because the area to light was asymmetrical, and each wall had a different radius to its curve, I decided to place the scoops as if each wall was radiating out its own array of scoops—sort of like audio waves emanating out from the walls. It ends up more clustered on the stage left side, but somehow it works. In Vectorworks—which is brilliant for working out these kind of ideas in layers—I copied and pasted the walls, fitting them inside each other, and then placed a row of scoops along each curve.

"The next thing I knew was that I wanted whatever lit the house before the show, when the audience came in, to continue over the stage. That came from very early design discussions where we talked about how beautifully the show would fit into the McGinn/Cazale Theatre—but what would happen if it toured? I suggested that we bridge that gap by traveling with our own idea of what the houselights were, so that they were specific to our show. I used my favorite unit, the Lowel V-light, and we suspended two lines of them down from the grid, with two of them over the stage. It was important that these look more industrial, that they were slightly outside the language of the warm curved walls." (The designer adds that she worked with a very restrained color palette that consisted of, in her words, "cork, cork, and more cork!")

Having worked on the whole environment, she says, "Then I had to light Marty. Yeah, you need front light—it's a one man show—but what would be the logic of where those lights were placed? I was stuck on that for days. When Seth told me, 'He's basically not going to leave the stool,' I had a kind of breakthrough, and hit on something I've never done before. I decided that the logic of Marty's lights would be a direct relationship between him and the curved walls, as if the stool was a kind of anchor point for him within these orbiting arcs. You have to understand, I was in the middle of teaching a new course on stage lighting theory, and had been reading a lot of architecture theory by Peter Eisenman (see the book *Cities of Artificial*

Excavation). So, again in Vectorworks, I drew lines through the stool to the edges of each wall, and that told me where to place the lekos. They created a kind of constellation around him which echoed nicely when he talked about the camp experiences."

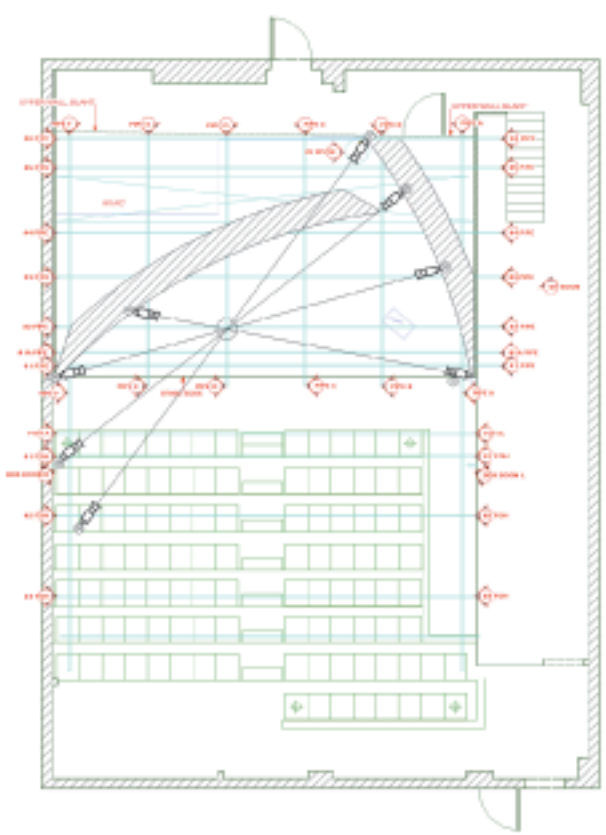
There are only two obvious lighting cues in the show. Moran enters onstage as the house lights are still up. As the actor begins to speak, they begin a long, slow fade; by the time they are fully dimmed, the audience is fully caught up in the narrative. The other cue comes when Moran read from his diary, recalling his first sexual experience; the lighting dims down to a small focus on the actor of just one V-light at a very low glow, with his constellations lights at the barest minimum as he reads his vividly detailed account. The result is a moment of hushed silence in the theatre. "We wanted the campfire feeling without being literal," says Carson.

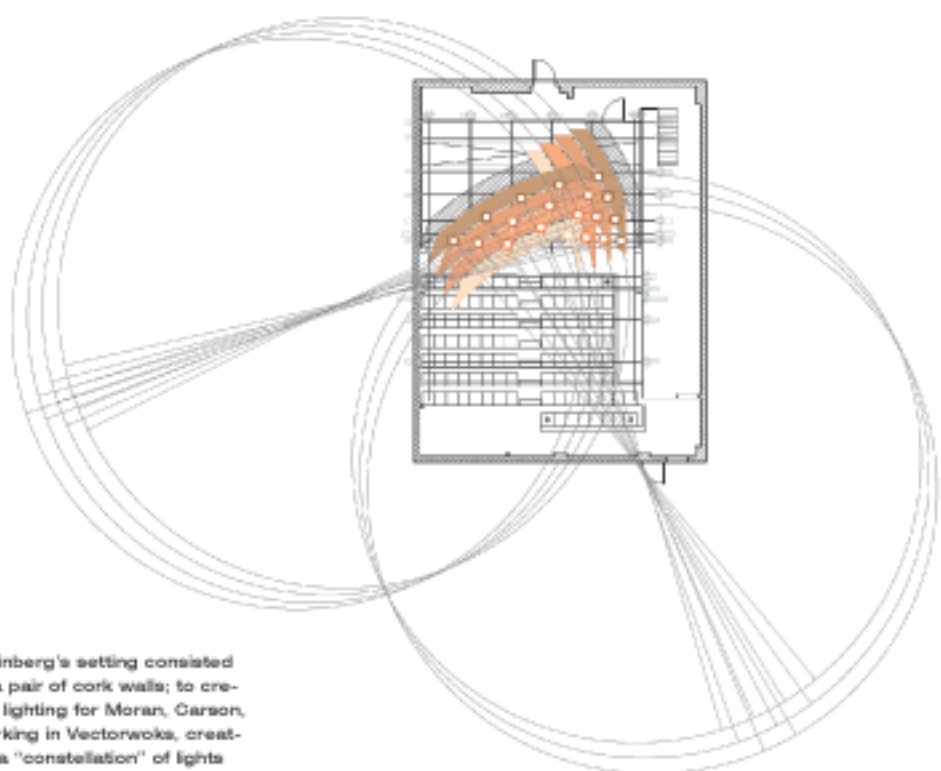
She adds, "Initially, I thought there would be subtle shifts throughout the piece that would score some of the emotional undertones, that would make the walls more imposing or recede, or shift the energy from one wall to the other, or maybe throw Marty's shadow around the room. But Seth was rigorous; because it's not a play—it's just Marty, telling us this story—and he's not acting out the memories, just telling us, the lighting doesn't need to set the scene, except, of course, for the campfire scene, when he reads from his diary. Because he's reading from something he has written and not telling us directly, it allowed us to break that logic. The first cue, when he enters, was originally much bigger, since he goes back and forth to the photo—really another character in the play—and we were trying to fill it in. But I said, "If we're really going to do this, it should be lit the way it will be for the whole play, and he can walk out of the light when he goes to get the photo.' When we tried that it all fell into place."

By carefully analyzing the script, the problems associated with a solo performance, and the highly specific nature of the material, both Steinberg and Carson made choices that were at times invisible and yet were crucial to the piece's effect. Many might assume that a one-person show wouldn't require such a deeply analytical approach, but success is its own best argument. "Paul and Heather are such exacting, intelligent thinkers," says Moran, adding, "We spoke of Heather as someone who could light it without sentimentality. I knew we could get simple from various designers, but, from them, it would a particularly disciplined and elegant form of simple."

Scenic construction was provided by Tom Carroll Scenery, with lighting equipment supplied by Fourth Phase. Carson's assistant was Beth Turomsha and the production electrician was Matthew Gross; the designer praises the latter for his meticulous work. Having completed its acclaimed Off Broadway run, *The Tricky Part* opens this month in Denver, Moran's home town, for a four-week run at the Curious Theatre Company.

HEATHER CARSON





Steinberg's setting consisted of a pair of cork walls; to create lighting for Moran, Carson, working in Vectorworks, created a "constellation" of lights around the actor, based on his relationship to the walls.