

The Stage Where It Happens

Old & New Theater Magic Help Tell the Story of Alexander Hamilton

Matthew Jaster, Senior Editor

Although David Korins had an impressive resume of Broadway, film, television and music credits, the New York-based production designer had something to prove when interviewing for the pop culture phenomenon *Hamilton*. “I prepped for the interview like crazy, sketching out my ideas, presenting a scene breakdown, basically doing everything I could short of begging for the job,” Korins said. “Lin Manuel Miranda (the show’s creator and star) had developed an incredibly effective blueprint. I just wanted the opportunity to help tell his story.”

For the uninitiated, *Hamilton* is a hip-hop musical about the life of the founding father that appears on the \$10 bill. The show highlights his many historic accomplishments, celebrates New York City (then and now) and takes several liberties because as Manuel himself stated, “History is entirely created by the person who tells the story.”

Politicians love it, celebrities keep coming back for more and there’s a great chance that by the time this article is published, the show will have some hardware to go with it (*Hamilton* was nominated for 16 Tony Awards, more than any show in the history of Broadway).

Korins nailed his interview and was given the gargantuan task of creating a set for a show that takes place over a span of 30+ years. “We had to create scenery that was both general and specific,” Korins said. “We’re not telling the story of the people that built the country, we’re telling the story of the people that built the *foundation* on which this country was built.” The New York carpenters during that time period were shipbuilders. This meant a stage full of ropes, joints, beams, pulleys and scaffolding. “It’s an early American tapestry of architecture,” Korins added.

After listening to all the song demos, Korins couldn’t shake the cyclical motion of Alexander Hamilton’s narrative. “I think it had to do with Hamilton’s personal history, the emotional and political storm, the scandals he endured and his rocky relationship with Aaron Burr,” he said. “I thought using a turntable on stage would help convey these ideas.”

Director Tommy Kail and choreographer Andy Blan-

kenbuehler had never used a turntable stage in a show before *Hamilton*. The idea was a rotating turntable (19 ft. in diameter) inside of another rotating turntable (25 ft. in diameter). “They asked me to come up with 10 places where the turntable would work in the show so I started drawing sequences where I thought it could really help tell the story,” Korins said.

The eight-inch tall deck moves via a chain drive motor run by an automation operator 40 feet in the air. “It has multiple speeds and it’s all timed within an inch of its life. There are obvious moments where the show is doing huge, pyrotechnic moves, and then moments where the stage is moving very slowly and subtly,” Korins said. “There’s probably 40-something turntable cues in the show, some last 10 seconds, some last two minutes. The whole thing is perfectly synched to lines and music. It doesn’t seem like much, but it’s the single defining scenic element of the show.”

As far as engineering goes, Korins said that *Hamilton* is fairly low tech. “We don’t use friction drives or remote controls, things you’ll see in other shows. It’s kind of like old theater magic in a way. When we’re not using the automated turntable, we’re moving wagons and flying in things using stagehands like the old days (people power).”

But it’s the turntable itself that has helped narrative elements on stage such as the duel between Hamilton and Burr or a musical number where characters are walking through New York Town Square. “I’ve done many complicated shows with crazy cantilevers and insane physical challenges, but *Hamilton* is pretty straight forward,” Korins added. **PTE**

