





The School for Rockers

School of Rock graduates to Broadway

By: David Barbour

When it was announced that Andrew Lloyd-Webber and Julian Fellowes had teamed up with the lyricist Glenn Slater to create a new musical based on the Jack Black film *School of Rock*, the collective reaction up and down Broadway was—really? Yes, Lloyd-Webber, wrote *Jesus Christ Superstar*, one of the original rock operas, but wasn't that 40 years ago? And why Fellowes, best-known for keeping the pot boiling at *Downton Abbey*? What could they bring to a property best-known for its raucous, lowdown humor?

In classic Broadway fashion, a show that looked on paper like nothing but trouble has turned out to be a fast-on-its-feet crowd pleaser, filled with rollicking humor and driving rock anthems (not to mention insightful character songs and a touching ballad or two). Reviewers loved all of the above, but they went absolutely ape for Alex Brightman, who electrifies in the lead role of Dewey, would-be rock star and slacker extraordinaire, who, abandoned by his bandmates and desperate for cash, takes on—without the slightest qualification—a gig as a substitute teacher in the kind of posh private school where parents willingly fork over \$50,000 a year to get their grade-schoolers on the fast track to success. Bored to tears with his new job, Dewey immediately sets out to form a bunch of his students into a rock band, intending to challenge his former colleagues in a battle-of-the-bands competition. Brightman is surrounded by a troupe of astonishingly talented tween-age musicians; although there is a pro forma romance between Dewey and Rosalie (Sierra Boggess), the icy headmistress in need of defrosting, the real love story in *School of Rock* happens between Dewey, a boy trapped in an adult's body, and his ferociously talented, but largely misunderstood, charges.



The faculty lounge, like other locations in the school, features such details as leaded windows and dark brown molding.

These days, it can take upwards of several years to prep a musical for Broadway; by that standard, *School of Rock* happened extraordinarily fast, with the design team signing on to the project in late 2014, followed by a December 2015 opening. The show seemingly benefited from an unusual tryout: Instead of taking the usual routes—holding workshop performances for industry members only, going out of town for a commercial run, or playing one or more gigs at resident theatres—Laurence Connor, the show's director, staged a concert version at the Gramercy Theatre, a smallish music venue in Manhattan's East 20s, for an invited audience of frequent Broadway ticket buyers. All involved report that the experience was extremely helpful, letting them know what worked with audiences before they committed to a full production. By the time previews began at Broadway's Winter Garden Theatre in November, the creative team had a show that was good to go. One wonders if the concert-staging tryout might not become the next model for the development of new musicals.

Scenery

School of Rock is a fast-moving show that traverses a number of locations, including the rock club, the Olympic Powerhouse, where Dewey's career is brought to an ignominious halt; Dewey's appallingly filthy bedroom; an

assembly room, hallway, classroom, and faculty lounge at Horace Green School; a roadhouse; and the Palace Theatre, where Dewey, having molded his uptight students into a hard-rocking ensemble, plans to take musical revenge on his former bandmates. As Anna Louizos, the show's set designer, says, "The script reads like a movie. Cinematic stagings are a trend these days, but getting from one scene to another is much more challenging on a Broadway stage than cutting in a film." Interviewing for the job, Louizos showed Connor and Lloyd-Webber her designs for the short-lived Broadway show *High Fidelity*, another comic musical based on a popular film. More to the point, *High Fidelity* has a similar cinematic structure, and Louizos' scenery played a key role in keeping the action moving at a rapid pace. "It was very helpful for them to see a way to tell the story," the designer adds.

Once she was onboard, Louizos says, "Laurence and I spent a lot of time trying to figure out how to establish the very distinct looks of the school and the grungy urban environment that Dewey inhabits. The workshop at the Gramercy was helpful for everyone. We told the story with minimal scenery, just a set of flexible cubes that served as desks and a couple of rolling panels. The workshop helped Andrew and Julian refine the story, to figure out what they didn't need; the sequence of scenes changed dramatically." She offers an example: "I had designed the exterior

of the school, in a pastoral setting. We were going to start with that and crash through it to Dewey in the middle of a performance, then bounce back and forth between the two worlds. On paper, it looked like a great idea but, at the workshop, Andrew suddenly said, 'We're going to cut the school exterior because when the audience sees the kids, they don't want to lose them after that.' By starting with Dewey and segueing to the kids, it worked much better."

Of course, Louizos adds, "It was a big challenge, working with the model and trying to figure out how to track in and fly the school exterior, complete with lightboxes and doors." Therefore, cutting this set piece before scenic construction began saved everybody time, money, and stress. She adds, "Another thing that Laurence and JoAnn [M. Hunter, the show's choreographer] loved in the workshop was how the kids pushed their cubes/desks around the stage. I had envisioned desks on tracking pallets that the kids could spin around. After the workshop, we cut all the tracking desks; JoAnn gave the kids actions that prevented them being passive players. The desks are designed to glide across the stage, with spinning chairs, yet they are stable enough for the kids to stand on and jump off."

The style of the school's interior might best be described as Neo-Gothic Baronial, a faux-British approach with stained glass windows in the assembly hall and leaded windows everywhere else, august photos of past teachers in the faculty lounge, chandeliers that wouldn't look out of place in a one of Errol Flynn's films, and dark-wood molding set against light brown walls. (At first glance, one

might think that Fellowes hasn't traveled so far from *Downton Abbey*.) "We wanted the school to have some grandeur," Louizos says, "to suggest a moneyed institution filled with tradition and achievement. It's grander than most private grammar schools, but you have to fill the stage."

The main assembly hall, Louizos says, consists of six tracking panels and a header that flies in. For Dewey's classroom, of the four upstage tracking panels that are on two separate tracks, two panels pivot 180°, a movement handled by cast members. ("In the workshop, Laurence enjoyed seeing actors turn the panels," Louizos says, so she opted not to use automation for this bit of business.) Also, the upstage classroom wall, complete with chalkboard, flies in, along with a set of classroom lighting fixtures. The faculty lounge uses the tracking panels in a different configuration, plus a center section that flies in. "I think the pivoting panels are very effective," the designer says. "I like the transition to the hall, because you don't expect them to pivot. It took a lot of engineering for them to work that way; the actors have access to a toggle switch, attached to a cable, which allows them to pivot and then lock the panels." She adds that panels will not track unless they are correctly locked: "It's very well-engineered." (Scenery and effects were built, painted, electrified, and automated by Milford, Connecticut-based ShowMotion.)

For the rock club and other scenes from Dewey's life, a set of tracking brick wall panels comes in. There are two versions of Dewey's bed. One tracks down from upstage; the second comes up from the basement via an elevator.



Katz notes that her lighting of the school numbers is unusually restrained, since she saves her big effects for the rock-out finale.

"We needed two beds because of the sequence of events," Louizos says. "In the second act, we're preparing for the rock-n-roll platform [for the battle-of-the-bands climax], which lives onstage. The roadhouse uses the brick tracking panels plus a bar wall that flies in."

The number "If Only You Would Listen," in which the kids lament the pressures applied by their success-crazed parents, is staged against a painted suburban drop with a low brick wall. "The upper part of the drop is translucent, but, below it, a segment of the brick wall tracks open," Louizos says, "which allows various pieces to track through, such as Dewey's bed, a bar booth, and a drum kit."

The show's climax, at the Palace Theatre, features a stage, fully equipped with lighting and sound gear, which rolls downstage. The stage is raised, in part to accommodate all of its dedicated power needs. "Everything—a huge bundle of cables for all lighting and sound power needs—is hidden in the drum platform," Louizos says.

Michael Pitzer, the show's production electrician, says that the rock stage is controlled by "200A of three-phase power, with a commutator underneath the unit, in the center. It's connected to two deck tracks. The stage right track carries the power. The stage left track has ten Ethernet lines, including two for lighting and two for automation; the rest are for sound. There's also a 24-way dimmer rack for all the conventional lighting units and six

PDs for the non-dim power. We built, wired, and cabled the whole rock stage in the Winter Garden, because it was just too big to get into the theatre otherwise."

Speaking of the rock stage, Louizos says, "It's nice to have a new surprise that late in the show." Indeed, it plays a major part in bringing *School of Rock* in for a euphoric landing.

Lighting

Natasha Katz says the task of lighting the show involved taking a straightforward approach to the book scenes—"with no projections, real molding, and sets that move in front of the audience"—and employing a more uninhibited style for the rock scenes. If it sounds simple in theory, it proved to be more complicated in execution. "The challenging thing is that, normally, I really respond to a show's music, and Andrew's songs have so many key changes and rising and falling melodies, in addition to the rock element," she says. Specifically referencing the numbers set in the classroom, such as "You're in the Band," which in Dewey recruits the kids, or the rehearsal version of "Stick it to the Man," Katz says, "I would normally create effects with beams of light and color. But I couldn't do that, because I had to leave that for the finale. The lighting of these scenes is more understated than I would normally do in a big musical." Still, she notes, "These numbers still have some power behind them. 'Stick



The cast members sport DPA d:line 4066 mics with Sennheiser SK5212 transmitters and EM 3732-II receivers.



The assembly hall at the school features stained glass windows and impressive period chandeliers.

it to the Man' gets more intense as it goes along, with beams and a certain kind of brightness. Moments like this honor the rock-n-roll aesthetic, but nobody wanted to undercut the fact that the show is about the kids; if we had too many flashing lights, we might lose them."

Elsewhere, the designer provides warm incandescent wash looks for scenes set in various locations around the school, isolates each of the kids in his or own pool in the group tableau in "If You Would Only Listen" (a look that cuts to the heart of each child's feelings of alienation), and also deftly carves out Boggess out of the roadhouse set during her Act II ballad, "Where Did the Rock Go?"

Katz notes that one subtle effect employed in the classroom scenes provides her with a foundation for bigger things later on. Mentioning Jared Parker, who plays Lawrence, the group's keyboardist, she says, "He has a signature color, a lavender; it's the same for every single character." It's not obvious, she adds, but it helps to provide them with an arc that links the school scenes to the battle-of-the-bands finale.

When told that the Palace Theatre stage set makes a big impression as it rolls downstage, Katz says, "People say that to me, but there's really not that much equipment on it. It has five [Clay Paky] Sharpys doing the pin beam effects for that rock-n-roll feel, and also to help focus the audience's eyes; 12 [Martin Professional MAC] Auras, which are great because you can make a certain face a certain color, but they can also function as pieces of lit scenery; four [Martin] Atomic strobes; two old-fashioned nine-lights; and 24 good-old fashioned PAR cans." Speaking of the latter items, she says, "I wanted to take it back to the 1980s a little bit. In my mind, the battle of the bands isn't a super-sophisticated production. Of course, [the scene] has to have an arc; it starts out a little more quietly with the first band, and when the kids come on, we can really rock out, which is our way of subliminally communicating how awesome the kids are." Also seen on the truss are custom-built LED bars place on diagonals, for an extra touch of rock-concert eye candy. Pitzer says these were supplied by EnvironmentalLights.com, adding,

“We did their wiring in-house and installed them on the stage.”

If the automated portion of Katz’s rig has a workhorse, it is the Martin Professional Mac Viper; she has 52 Mac Viper Performances and 18 Mac Viper Wash DX units. “They’re much quieter [than most moving lights], which is a big thing for me,” she says. (This is a key asset for a show with fairly lengthy book scenes.) Also, she says, “The classroom set has those two pivoting walls, which made it hard to get sidelight in there.” To preserve the incandescent look of the classroom lighting, she blends Viper sidelight with a larger wash from conventional units. “LED units are still not face-friendly,” she says. “Fortunately, the warmth of incandescent lighting can cut through the LED side wash, making the actors’ faces look better.”

Running the numbers and models, the rig includes, in addition to the Vipers mentioned above, 235 ETC Source Fours in different degree sizes, 32 PAR 64s, four PAR 56 units, four Mole-Richardson nine-light Molefays, 15 Vegas minstrips, 16 mini-10s, 33 Philips Color Kinetics ColorBlast TRX 12s, 20 Rosco Miro Cube 4C RGBWs, 12 Clay Paky Sharpys, 19 Martin MAC Auras, seven Martin Atomic strobes, 50 TPR Star Strobes, 76 Wybron Coloram scrollers, three MDG Atmosphere hazers, two Look Solutions Viper fog machines, and three Martin JEM AF1 DMX fans. Dimming is provided by ETC Sensor racks, with control via an ETC Eos Ti console. Lighting gear was supplied by PRG.

According to Pitzer, RC4 Wireless control is used in a number of scenes, to control City Theatrical Qolor-Flex inside a guitar case, the light-up skull phone in Dewey’s bedroom, LED Christmas lights and lightboxes on the wagons of Dewey’s apartment, more Qolor-Flex LED tape in the roadhouse’s jukebox, and, in “If You Would Only Listen,” a table lamp and window light boxes in the brick sliders.

Katz also credits the Gramercy tryout with helping to streamline *School of Rock*. (Because of a scheduling conflict, she didn’t design the Gramercy Theatre version, but says she benefited from it: “It was like a workshop, but with an audience. In the rehearsal room, we’re all so close to the performers and you don’t get the distance that you get in the theatre. Even in the small Gramercy Theatre, you felt the divide. It was a big thing, being able to objectively watch the show on stage.”

Sound

Even though a certain other Andrew Lloyd Webber musical—hint: the hit song is “Memory”—played at the Winter Garden for 18 years and was followed by *Mamma Mia!*, which ran there for 12, Mick Potter is not the first sound designer to notice that the theatre poses certain acoustical challenges, especially for musicals. The



auditorium’s unusual width means that those sitting in the side sections can have significantly different auditory experiences compared to those in the center section. Also, the theatre’s placement, directly between Broadway and Seventh Avenue, makes for a higher-than-usual amount of traffic noise.

Potter notes, in his way echoing Katz, “We needed to be able to do two very distinct shows. It’s a book musical 50% of the time, another 30% is a rock musical, and the remaining 20%, in the finale, is a full-out rock concert. The sound was all about having a great rock-concert system and then working back to make it work for the rest of the dynamics of the show.” He adds, laughing, “It’s annoying, because it looks really simple. People expect a rock show, and it is—with the kind of music that Andrew started his career with—but most of the show is really a conventional musical, with a heart, about the kids.”

The designer’s rig features Meyer Sound LYON linear line array loudspeakers, with a smaller system of Meyer MINA compact line arrays, plus a set of DS-4P horn-loaded mid-bass loudspeakers. The latter, a discontinued Meyer product, is “a low mid-range speaker used to even out the low and mid-frequencies off-axis,” he says. “Even with the Lyon’s wide coverage, as soon as you get two-



Potter notes that Alex Brightman, who plays Dewey, regularly sweats out his mics. He adds that the performer is "a brilliant force of nature."

thirds of the way off-center in the Winter Garden, you lose a lot of punch and energy. We also have Meyer's new 900-LFC and 1100-LFC subs." Meyer LEOPARD boxes were used for the Gramercy tryout; it was Potter's introduction to the company's LEO product line, and it dictated his choice of Lyon for the Winter Garden Theatre.

The main proscenium system features an array of 12 Lyon-Ws per side, with an additional eight Mina arrays for side fill. "We did something a little different with the center cluster," Potter notes. "There's no height for a line array cluster in the center of the proscenium, so, with a lot of ingenuity from Colle Bustin, our production engineer, we turned an array of 13 Minas on its side; it provides hugely wide and even coverage of the auditorium." Providing underbalcony fill are Meyer UP4-XP compact speakers, with UPJ-1P loudspeakers arrayed in pairs handling the expansive mezzanine. The surround system consists of 60 L-Acoustics 8XT boxes. Sound gear was provided by Sound Associates.

Also, Potter says, "The rock stage has its own little Meyer CQ-1 and UMS-1P system that helps image to the

band. Everything the kids play is live, so all the guitar and drum setups are real. All of the speakers on the rock stage are Meyer UPJuniors." The speakers are, however, disguised: "The guitar amps on the set are props. The actual Fractal FX guitar processors are offstage; there's a Shure wireless connection from the sound desk, and then to the Meyer UP Juniors that are built into the prop amps on stage. It's a setup that allows the QLab show control computer to do all the drum kit and processor patch changes, as there are multiple patch changes within each musical number. In addition to the rock stage, we also have the classroom and audition stage, which each have the same setups, so there is a lot happening on stage!"

For foldback, Potter says, "There's a matrix of d&b E5 speakers built into the show deck, plus d&b E8 portal foldback and some Meyer UPJunior boxes at the sides of the stage. The drummer and keyboard player have d&b M6 wedge monitors for each setup, like they would in a regular band. But we also have the matrix of speakers in zones that we can control and send mixes to different parts of the stage, allowing someone downstage to hear dialogue while, say, the bass player can hear himself playing." The stage monitor system consists mostly of passive boxes "because it's difficult to run power and signal all over the stage, so passive speakers are much easier." The musicians in the pit employ a Roland M-48 personal monitor mixing system.

The entire company is on DPA 4066 d:fine omnidirectional boom mics with Sennheiser SK5212 transmitters and EM 3732-II receivers. The arrangement was chosen during the Gramercy Theatre tryout. "We tried DPA 4061 head mics there, but, to get clarity and gain with the kids, and also not to strain their voices, we decided with Andrew and Laurence that we needed boom mics. So it became the look of the show." At the least, they are hardly out of place in a musical about rock performance. The musicians in the pit also use a range of DPA mics for drums, guitar amps, and acoustic guitars. "DPA mics are small, so it's easy to get them in the right position without sacrificing quality. You can't mic in a theatre pit like you might in the recording studio, with more separation; the mic usually has to be very close so as to not to get any spill from the other instruments. The 4022 is a studio-quality mic that can take a high SPL." (He notes that Brightman, as Dewey, regularly sweats out his mics and they are still working on this, adding that the actor "is a brilliant force of nature.")

The show is run on a DiGiCo SD7T console, the "T" signifying that it has been optimized for theatre usage. In any case, says Potter, "The board is absolutely maxed out. It's processing 256 channels, with no room to spare." He notes that the show's mixer, George Huckins, "has a tough mix. When you're mixing an orchestral show dynamically, it



The rock stage, site of the battle-of-the-bands climax, features its own lighting and sound systems. The LED bars on the truss were supplied by EnvironmentalLights.com and wired and installed by the show's staff of electricians.

all flows quite naturally; in a rock show, it's not always as obvious where you need to pull back to accommodate the dialogue." One sign of the mix quality in *School of Rock* is that the lyrics are intelligible in even the loudest numbers.

Potter says that the Gramercy tryout "hugely informed the show from a sound point of view. Down there, [associate sound designer] Adam Fisher and I could deal with instant changes to instrumentation, orchestrations—anything Andrew and Laurence wanted us to do."

Other key personnel include Bonnie L. Becker (production stage manager); Matthew Leiner (stage manager); Julie DeVore (assistant stage manager); Jeremy W. Foil and Hilary Noxon (associate scenic designers); Craig Stelzenmuller (associate lighting designer); Ken Elliott (assistant lighting designer); Alex Fogel (moving light programmer); Walter Murphy (production carpenter); David Elmer (head carpenter); Sean Collins (fly automation); Tim Perry (deck automation); Jeremy Wahlers (head

electrician); John Sibley (head audio); Frank Lofgren (house head carpenter); Aarne Lofgren (house flyman); Reggie Carter (house head props); Karen Zitnick (house assistant electrician/followspot); G. Richard Klinger (head properties); Annmaree Rodibaugh (assistant properties); Brad Gyorgak (house assistant audio); Kayla Nault (scenic studio assistant); and Rob McFadyen and Atty Siegel (assistant prop designers).

School of Rock is comfortably ensconced at the Winter Garden, ready to enter what will surely be a most competitive awards season. As we go to press, the first school production has been licensed, to be performed by the Oakland School for the Arts at San Francisco's Curran Theatre. Whatever happens to the show on Broadway, it is almost certain to have a long, long run in ancillary markets. Expect to hear many a youthful performance of "Stick it to the Man" in the years ahead. 🎸

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