

LIVE DESIGN

Hope floats

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The Hope Zone is the ironic title of a new play by Kevin Heelan, staged in February at the People's Light and Theatre Co. in Malvern, PA (just outside of Philadelphia). The title is ironic because Heelan's play is set in a seaside rehab center presided over by the Countess, a flamboyant character whose checkered past includes a history of addiction, a dead son, and a troubled relationship with her self-destructive daughter Maureen. It's a challenging design problem for many reasons, and LD Thomas Hase's inventive work used light to indicate various locations, sensibilities, and states of reality.

The play's single setting is the living room of the Countess' rest home, a space defined by windows and mirrored panels, courtesy of set designer Louis Folden. But the first scene is an AA meeting, where the Countess, a recovered alcoholic, holds forth, entertaining her fellow drunks. "The Countess is really an actress, and her new addiction is to act in front of these AA meetings," says Hase, who suggested the psychological location by bathing the stage in a deep "infrared" wash that was, he says, "basically quadruple Rosco 27." A moving light tracked the Countess around the stage while she spoke, an effect that made her the star of her own show.

Hase used a similar effect to create the ghost of the Countess' dead son, a haunting presence that is required for several scenes. Both this and the look mentioned above were created using the Ellipsan moving-mirror unit from Meteor Lights. "It's an amazingly stable and inexpensive piece of equipment, a moving mirror for a Source Four," says Hase. "I also used a gobo rotator in it with one fixed and one moving pattern. First, I drew the boy's shadow, using Photoshop, on dichroic infrared glass, then feathered it out with a Sharpie marker; that was the fixed pattern. The moving pattern was used to make him look watery. With double Lee 116 in front, it gave him the eerie presence of a moving shadow." The ghost shadow often tracked across the stage between scenes, providing unsettling transitions.

At other times, by treating the set with light, Hase gave the stage a highly surreal look. Because of the upstage set's many glassy surfaces, he says, "The more abstract the lighting got, the more the upstage area turned into a maze and eventually engulfed the downstage area." For a series of nighttime scenes, the LD tracked the Countess' disintegration by using a succession of patterns, from clearly defined windows to "watery" windows, to "shards of glass breaking up the stage." The latter look was created by taking glass used in City Theatrical's EFX machines, and building custom holders for ETC Source Fours. "They're now commercially available," he adds.

The glass look was all too appropriate for the scene in which Maureen commits a shocking act of self-mutilation, by sticking her hands in a bag filled with broken glass. This is followed by a scene in a church, featuring the Countess and Veeche, a mysterious faith healer, which was defined by fragments of vibrant color, like a kaleidoscope. "I used the new Apollo Prismatic gobos and various shard patterns, and put them in gobo rotators," says Hase. "The church is all moving, broken light. It's a stained glass look, but a disintegrated one, because Veeche's church warps the ideals of Christianity.

"The conflict between fragments and color versus structured clear light is a theme that director Stephan Novelli and I worked with," Hase continues. "Clear white light and distinct patterns were set up to create a 'normal' reality that the characters are trying to either find or deny throughout the play." This conflict culminated in the second act, where the designer used "a boatload of simulated HMI white light" to cut through the deeply fragmented color, creating a stinging sense of clarity in bitter, truth-telling confrontations between mother and daughter.

Hase's plot consisted of approximately 140 units, a combination of Source Fours and PAR cans, most of which came from the theatre's inventory. Chicago Spotlight provided crucial assistance, supplying the Ellipsescans and working with City Theatrical on the pattern frames; the LD singles out Cathy Zukasky at Chicago Spotlight for her aid and assistance on the project. The show was run on an ETC Expression 2, also owned by the theatre.

The Hope Zone was just one stop on the designer's busy itinerary this season. Right after this production, he designed The Beauty Queen of Leenane for Milwaukee Repertory Theatre, then returned to People's Light and Theatre for a production of The Diary of Anne Frank. Next up is A Little Night Music, for Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park, a new Eugene Onegin for the Lyric Opera of Kansas City, and The Barber of Seville at Seattle Opera. Unlike the characters in The Hope Zone, work seems to be Hase's main addiction; Given his busy schedule, there seems to be no recovery in sight.