

Daughters of Survival

Theatre Intime

C. Scott Ananian

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“Daughters of Survival” commemorates the 50th anniversary of the Holocaust, memorializing the women who struggled and died in places like Auschwitz. It is a memory play, but the voices heard are not the voices of those who have experienced the terrible events of the Holocaust, but rather the voices of our generation, the last to be able to hear these stories directly from the survivors, a generation responsible for repeating the stories, for ensuring that the events retold are never forgotten.

The piece is organized as a collection of tableaux and monologues, on a mostly bare set. This gave me, as lighting designer, a lot of flexibility to determine the “look” of each part of the whole, and the ability to set the stage for each piece using only light. Talking with the director was invaluable for getting a sense of what each piece meant to her, and she was able to articulate colors and feelings for each piece. These specific light images were not always incorporated into the final design, but they provided a strong place to begin, and ensured that I was working on the same concept as the director (something which did *not* happen on the next show I worked on, *True West*).

The colors and ideas the director provided inspired a “first go” at the lighting design which used a white-painted set and saturated colors to create a different atmosphere for each piece. I experimented with using red-green-blue top lights to allow maximum flexibility in mixing, but the color gamut was insufficient to create the saturated colors I was looking for. It was also very difficult finding a “pure” red-green-blue set. Some combinations yielded brilliant magentas, purples and oranges, but poor yellows (the color mix was uniformly too warm), and other combinations the opposite. Ultimately, the

multi-colored shadows cast by the RGB top light proved too distracting, and I decided to use single-colored top lights.

I drafted the plot using a blue-pink-amber triple-hung front light, and a plethora of single colors to wash the (white-painted) floor, (white) projection screens, and cyc. The January blizzard postponed the show after I had hung and focused the plot (while I was snowed into the theatre and able to get a lot of work done, the director and actors were stranded in airports all over the country), so I put the project on a back-burner until the show's new April date.

In between, I decided that the saturated colors were likely to tire the audience if used as I originally planned, and that the white floor, though attractive creatively, highlighted shadows and distracted from the show's concept (I would have to deal with white sets in the next show!). Further thought (and a particularly moving performance as part of the Princeton Atelier with Peter Sellars) convinced me that what I was looking for was much more of a 'reflective' atmosphere, more suitable for a memorial to a tragedy. I thought of a cathedral or other place of worship as the feel I wanted, and decided to draw more heavily on light and shadow than color. I still had a white cyc and two foreground projection screens to color and cover, however. While focusing the previous incarnation of the front-light, I found that my color mix did not blend as well as I would have liked, so while I kept the blue-amber-pink triple-hang, I tweaked the colors. I also switched from fresnels in the front-light to lekos, to help shape shadows and give a slightly harsher feel to the light. The floor was not white, but I insisted that it not be repainted black to keep the color a worn grey, which reflected a hint of top-light color without being too bright so as to be distracting. I used a cool blue top-side light, and a pink-blue side-light, originally hung for a dancer who never materialized. Most specials I gelled no-color blue to help cut through predominantly warm scenes, but I left a strong uncolored back-light.

The set was spare and simple: a row of gnarled branches across the back of the set which when lit properly, recalled tangled barbed wire. Backlighting the branches against a saturated cyc yielded memorable images: I often joked that the branches were lit much better than the actors because, of course, they were present at every rehearsal, never complained during tech, and always stood still!

The play opened with a thunderclap and the actors quick entrance, followed by a series of tableaux. I was surprised to find that a strong white

back-light and a little no-color blue front light to fill in faces gave me precisely the “afternoon thunderstorm” feel that I was looking for. I had cued back-light mostly to give an auspiciously dramatic quality to the light — the thunderstorm came free.

The tableaux were lit against a sky-blue cyc; the final tableau switched to a blood red cyc and projection screens, with strong blue top-sidelight. The front and side light faded away to leave the actors and tangled branches silhouetted against the red cyc before fading slowly away.

The next scenes were described to be as “in a lecture hall,” progressing to monologues about the cattle cars to the concentration camps, and ending up inside the camps. I selected R99 for the cyc and walls and warm front light, which gradually faded to a single crack of light across the speakers’ face (with amber top light filling in the rest of the area and reinforcing the hot, stuffy, crowded train) during the cattle car monologue. A sudden light cue as the “doors to the train were flung open” and we return outside, with amber front light casting the twisted shadows of the branches on the cyc. A much harsher feel than the previous boardroom, while using most of the same colors and lights. The added shadows created the new dark feel.

The next monologues drew on the director’s original color descriptions, but instead of attempting to wash the whole set with the chosen color, as I had in my first naive attempt, the colors were used as highlights. For example, in a scene titled, “The Beauty Treatment,” the director’s yellow appeared outlining the branches in the background, while the actor appeared in a no-color blue. “Motherhood” recalled to my mind pinks and blues, and so the projection screens were washed in a saturated pink and the cyc was a sky blue. An extremely slow cross-fade yielded a pale pink spotlight on the seated actress, a blue wash over the “dark” portions of the stage, and pink specials focused through the branches upstage to cast a shadowed pink on the cyc. A scene about the hospitals of Birkinau was lit with intense white instead of the director’s pale green: the back-lit branches glowed snow-covered white. A favorite cue was a long sun-rise, which used low balcony hung 6x12’s gelled orange to give the proper low light-angle of early dawn. An added benefit was that the low front-light spilled onto the cyc to wash the horizon in sun-rise.

A technical challenge was the projection screens. I didn’t want to spill light onto them inadvertently, and I needed them dark when slides were projected. Sidelight on the apron was ruled out because it would wash onto the projection screens, but I was able to use a front diagonal as a pseudo-

sidelight, and shutter the edges off the screens. I did eventually run out of lights: in particular, one of the last cues in the show featured multi-colored actors because I was unable to hang a pink apron sidelight to complement the no-color blue apron sidelight. So the actors in front were slightly more blue than the pink-front-lit actors in the center, who contrasted with the strongly side-lit actors nearest the off-stage booms. This was probably only noticable to lighting designers in the audience, however.

“Daughters” was great fun to light, mostly because of the great freedom I enjoyed as lighting designer to create the “set” of each scene, and because the spare set and staging let me do some really creative things with the lights. Ultimately, I think the design was a great success, and I was able to both illuminate the actors (the lighting designer’s primary job!) and strongly reinforce the director’s concept for the show.