

# WHAT IS TECH WEEK?



*Lyric's summer technical work is crucial to the success of each production*

*by Roger Pines*



DAN REST



*Don Giovanni's* hair-raising death scene for the title character, the revolving set in the Humming Chorus of *Madama Butterfly*, the otherworldly first appearance of the water-nymph heroine of *Rusalka* – these and countless other riveting moments onstage at Lyric are the result of painstaking technical preparation. They were all tried out during “tech week” of each production, the summer before the season began. Tech week is a chance for the creative team, stage crew, and stage management to look at the physical

production onstage, assessing what works and what doesn't.

This is the first time all the different elements of the production – lighting, technical, directorial, stage management, props, costumes, wigs and makeup – work on the production together. Lyric stage manager John Coleman views his role as “helping to facilitate communication between all the elements.” There is so much information to be dealt with during the tech process, and clear communication between each department is

vital. In every tech week, says Coleman, “we also determine what physical things we'll need for rehearsals. There are choices to be made – how much those things cost to put in the room, if they can physically get in there, the time and the labor that it takes to change from element to element.” Every step of the way, “we're working through the process with everyone so the piece can eventually be realized onstage.”

Lyric tech weeks usually occur in an order that reverses the actual season calendar (although it doesn't always work that way, due



DAN RIST

(Center)

Technical director Michael Smallwood (second from right) and members of Lyric's technical staff onstage during tech week of *The Merry Widow*.

(Clockwise from upper left)

Scenic challenges fine-tuned during tech week have included the death scene in *Don Giovanni*, the staircase in *Lucia di Lammermoor*, *Klingsor's eerie lair* in *Parsifal*, and the revolving set in *Madama Butterfly*.

which must all be carefully programmed into the light board. This results in "a rough storyline, a rough sketch and model for the show," Smallwood explains. "When a show comes back for rehearsals, there's not much time. You can't be putting it together at that point – you can only be 'editing.'"

It's generally on Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday of tech week that the production is lit. As the cues are programmed, "we also take notes regarding the painting and scenery," says Smallwood. "We're basically determining everything that's needed for the production to look its best." By Friday the show is already being taken apart to make room for the next one to be "tech'd." When it's packed up, usually one or two trucks are kept. Material in those trucks – mainly the essential props – are brought in a week before rehearsals start. The show's other elements return several days before they're needed onstage.

A few months prior to tech week of a production, Lyric lighting director Chris Maravich begins communicating by phone and email with the production's lighting designer, "talking about what the opera house will be able to do. I'm also trying to get their design out of them! Then, during tech week, I'm there to help the designer implement their design on our stage."

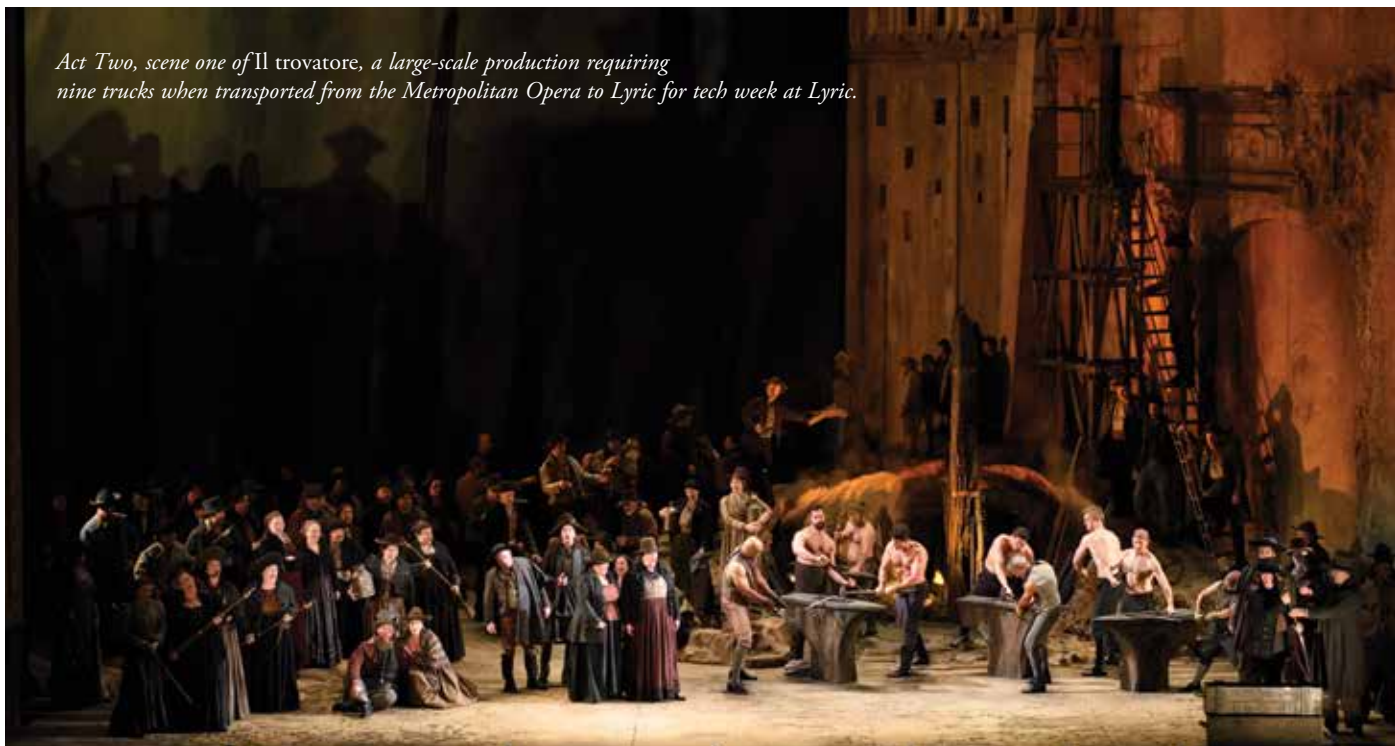
The stage crew's 13 electricians – with the lighting designer, as well as with Maravich and his staff – take about eight hours to focus the lights, with each light's position precisely documented. "We focus between 200 and 300 lights," says Maravich. Prior to arriving in Chicago, the lighting designer has a plan for how he/she wants the lights focused. "They may want side light, back light. Sitting out in the house, the designer may tell us, 'I want the back light to be blue, half as bright as the side light.'"

to director and designer availability). Any tech week starts with pulling the production out of large trucks and into the theater. The sets aren't always in Chicago – they often need to be transported here from other companies, whether in America or abroad. With last season's *Il trovatore*, which had premiered at Lyric in 2006, "the set was built in Wales, then shipped here in containers," Lyric technical director Michael Smallwood recalls. "It went to San Francisco in 2009, and the Met has done it several times – they'd had it in storage

there ever since the 2013 revival. As soon as it went into Lyric's schedule, we called the Met so they could make sure it was available for us at the time."

Once the crew has the set onstage, "the first thing we always do is fly anything that needs to be flown," says Smallwood. Various special effects are tried out, too – smoke or fire, for example – and any scenery moves involving the stage turntable must be practiced as well. The most vital task for tech week, however, is to establish the production's lighting cues,

Act Two, scene one of *Il trovatore*, a large-scale production requiring nine trucks when transported from the Metropolitan Opera to Lyric for tech week at Lyric.



Over the next two or three days the director, set designer, lighting designer, lighting director, and stage manager spend hours at the tech table. “The lighting designer talks to one of the electricians who controls our computerized lighting console,” says Maravich. “That’s how the various lighting looks are set.” For instance, an opera’s first scene could be a market square, but as the lovers sing their romantic duet, the lighting has to change in responding to that mood. Another cue might have a special light on the door of the set to specifically control what the audience is seeing.

Lighting cues are set with up to four Lyric supernumeraries functioning as “lightwalkers,” standing in for the individual artists onstage. The director has a general idea of where characters will be, and that gives the lightwalkers their positions. The work is painstaking, even occasionally intimidating. During tech week for *Lucia di Lammermoor* (2011-12 season), Mary Sennott-Shaw, a longtime Lyric “super” and lightwalker, spent a lot of time standing at the top of the very high staircase from which Lucia would descend during the Mad Scene. “It did have a wire on the outside, so small it couldn’t be seen by the audience,” Sennott-Shaw remembers, “although the stairs were winding and got very narrow!” Last season, during *Tannhäuser*’s tech week, Sennott-Shaw

played one of the dancers, “and I had to roll down the table. You need to be in pretty good shape to light-walk!”

One also has to be patient awaiting the creative team’s decisions. “We usually get our instructions from the director or assistant director,” says Sennott-Shaw. “After being quite still, you then have to react very quickly to their requirements. You’re being moved around, hitting the performers’ marks so the lights can be directed where they need to be.” Maintaining the stamina and patience needed for standing stock-still onstage is challenging, but worth it: “The team effort it takes to put Lyric productions together is impressive, and you get to see how they create the stage magic!”

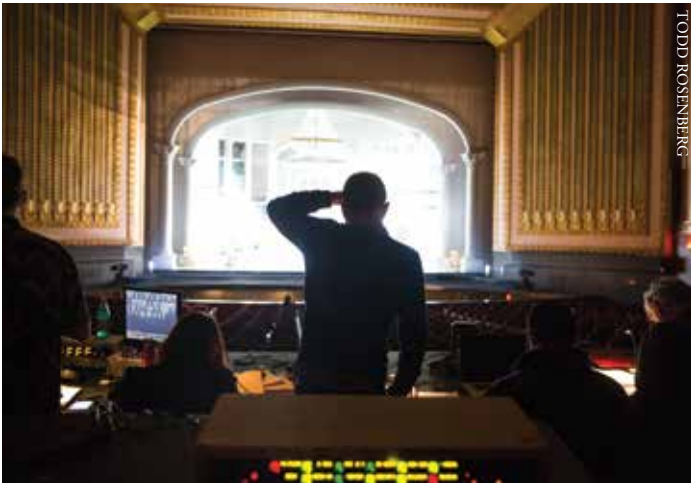
If there’s enough time later in tech week, the entire show will be worked through from the beginning. With big scene changes, Maravich plays a recording so everything is timed in coordination with the music. Once work is completed, the lights have to be refocused for the *next* show – another eight hours.

Central to any tech week is the production’s director, invariably collaborating with either an associate or assistant director. To whatever degree is possible at the time, the director will work with the stage manager to map out the production’s rehearsal schedule. “The director presents their needs

to the company,” explains John Coleman, “and if something has a monetary impact, management can make a decision about that.” Stage management will also set up auditions for the director to cast supers and actors.

For this season’s *Merry Widow*, Susan Stroman was on hand for the entire tech week. She directed and choreographed the production for her Met debut last season, and will debut at Lyric with it in 2015-16. “Tech week is *very* important,” declares Stroman. She views her role during Lyric’s tech week as “making sure that the lighting cues were all in the right place, and that the stage manager’s book was correct about calling the cues. In tech week I can confirm that every moment up on that stage is the way I want it to look.” Stroman is full of praise for Lyric’s stage crew (“They’re fantastic!”); because the advance work has been so thorough, Stroman knows that when she returns for rehearsals with the cast, “I can concentrate on them and their performances.”

For Stroman, tech week confirmed that “*The Merry Widow* fits into this theater beautifully.” Because the theater has a slightly smaller proscenium opening than at the Met, “some of the lighting cues have changed a bit, and we can actually add some more internal cues in a lot of the music. Tech week allows me to make this *Merry Widow* right for this house.”



TODD ROSENBERG



TODD ROSENBERG

Director Kevin Newbury and his colleagues at the production table for *Bel Canto* during tech week.

As assistant director for *Bel Canto*, Elise Sandell was instrumental in helping to lay out physical and visual groundwork during the tech week of this world-premiere production. Tech week gives Sandell “my arsenal of information that I carry into the rehearsal period. I write down everything that happens, as does the stage manager. The director of *Bel Canto*, Kevin Newbury, may be making decisions at any given moment, now that he has the set in front of him. It’s my job to keep track of that information, so I can help him later in

remembering it all – ‘Where was Hosokawa going to be when he sings that aria?’ Once we get into the rehearsal room, if Kevin changes his mind about something we’d worked on during tech week, I can pass this on to the stage manager and designers so they can take that moment in a different direction.”

The visual side of *Bel Canto* involves designer Greg Emetaz’s complex projections. “During tech week we created all the projection cues,” says Sandell. “We also made a lot of decisions about props – including meetings

about what the terrorists’ guns would look like – and we determined how we would arrange the furniture.”

Property master Charles Reilly and his staff are other vital figures in tech week. With the revival of a production done in a previous Lyric season, “we unload it, put it on prop tables, check out the condition of the props, and see what needs to be fixed or replaced – either through buying or building,” says Reilly. Decisions in that regard are confirmed when he meets with the director, designer, and stage manager. “We may need to build or upholster a chair, a sofa, an armoire. We get a drawing from the designer and proceed from there.”

With the props arranged according to the opera’s act/scene breakdown, “the director and designer, seated out in the house, will ask us to move things around,” says Reilly. “We then ‘spike’ it [mark the position] by act – we might spike the Act One furniture in blue tape, the Act Two furniture in red. We take pictures and document everything. You think you’ll remember it later, but you don’t!”

With Lyric’s new *Figaro*, “a big bed is carried onstage by the Prop and Carpenter Department during a scene change, and we have to have a 16-foot bolster for it,” notes Reilly. “There’s no elevator for a 16-foot bolster! We had to rig it and drop it in on lines to get it onstage.” For *Bel Canto* “there are three piles of chairs stacked high, and the team wants them all to stay together.” Tech week revealed that “we’d need to cut a hole through the bottom so a singer could crawl through

*Lightwalkers* onstage for the final scene of *The Marriage of Figaro* and the party scene of *Romeo and Juliet*.





*Souvenirs of tech week for Bel Canto: (left) a massive portion of the set during the production's "load-in" and (right) the slashes the hostages need to draw on the wall during their captivity, created by Lyric's prop department with washable crayon.*

it." Many props are needed for Lyric's new *Wozzeck*, "big props – things like mechanical carts, welded together and maneuvered on the set. [Director] Sir David McVicar likes everything in the correct period, and we enjoy the challenge of that. We want a vision given to us that we can make a reality."

Maria DeFabo, properties and scenic art coordinator, finds that the trend in opera these days – at least, for new productions – is to have "a significantly larger number of props than there were 15 or 20 years ago. Many *Wozzeck* props were done by the time the creative team arrived for tech week." Much of *Wozzeck* was built in Great Britain, but for *Figaro* "we decided for budgetary reasons to build more of it at Lyric. But here again, we were able to show those props to the team during tech week. We always hope to have things far enough along so that we can try them onstage. The sofa built for *Figaro* needed to be a *trick* sofa, so during tech week we tried the trick to see how it would work, and it did!"

One of DeFabo's challenges during *Bel Canto*'s tech week was how to make the slashes the hostages draw on the wall, showing how many days their ordeal has lasted. "Of course, the slashes have to come off so we can reset for the next performance – it would be rather expensive to redo the set!" For the actual *method* of drawing, DeFabo ordered many samples to show the creative team. The

approved choice was "a washable crayon made by Crayola that we tried out during tech week. The team liked it a lot, but they wanted it to be thicker and to go on a little smoother." This experimenting brought forth a solution: "I worked with Brian Traynor, our scenic artist, who makes molds. We were able to melt the crayons down and create a thicker crayon."

Tech week for any opera at Lyric is production design director Scott Marr's opportunity to begin work with Lyric's wardrobe department on preliminary costume fittings. "That's mostly for the chorus, especially for any new production," says Marr. "Vicki Mortimer is both set and costume designer for this season's *Wozzeck*, so when she was here for tech week we needed to coordinate her time between the costume shop and the stage. Tech week is a time for me to see where we're at in terms of costume production. If anything that might be related to costumes happens onstage during the tech period, it's my responsibility to relay that to the costume designer or vice versa. In that respect, tech week is important for me."

Wigs are certainly part of the design process and the total look of a show in a more significant way than formerly. Wigmaster and makeup designer Sarah Hatten meets with the costume designer during tech week to narrow down logistics, and Marr is usually part of those initial discussions. "If we mount a rental or a revival, the director or associate becomes

our main contact for information early on," he says. "The costume designer doesn't usually come until later in the process for these types of productions. In general, summer tech also allows me to connect with the production team. It's important that I'm acquainted with the director, assistant director, and stage manager so we can problem-solve any crossover or costume/wig related issues that may arise during the rehearsal process. Since I'm in charge of the budget for the costume and wig areas, additions and changes are often up to me to approve."

Tech week involves meeting after meeting, including a wrap-up session at the end of the week, in which stage management, electrics, props, wardrobe, and wigs/makeup are all represented (if schedules permit, the director and designers are present as well). When the production finally gets onstage – with orchestra and chorus, cast, sets, costumes, wigs and makeup, and lighting – "that's when we can fine-tune it," says Elise Sandell, "because we have the actual performers and we've all made so many discoveries throughout the rehearsal process. But it's tech week that gets the process going. It's something of a guessing game, going with your gut and following your instincts, with a little bit of luck."

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