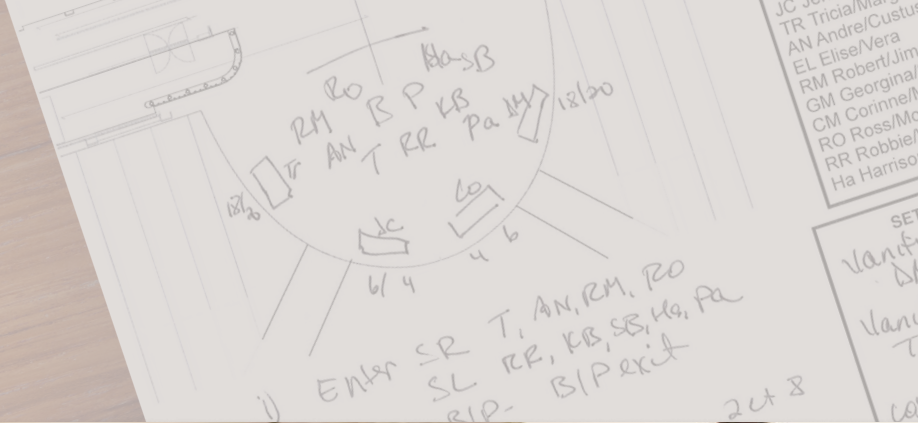


# NEA ARTS

Number 4, 2017



Behind the Scenes:  
What It Takes to Mount a

# MUSICAL



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"Hey kids, let's put on a show!" When Mickey Rooney rallied his gang to show biz in the 1939 film *Babes in Arms*, he and his friends embarked upon a theatrical lark. A couple of kids, a few costumes—what else do you need?

Turns out, a lot. In 2014, according to Bureau of Economic Analysis data, performing arts presenters contributed \$8.7 billion in value to the U.S. economy, but it isn't all due to the people onstage. For actors, musicians, and dancers to succeed, there are multitudes behind the curtain that make it happen. In fact, in all the arts this is true: from the people mounting the artwork at a museum to the publishers and editors behind a literary work, the workers behind the scenes contribute to an artwork's success.

In this issue of *NEA Arts*, we go backstage at the Signature Theatre's production of *The Gershwins*<sup>®</sup> & Ken Ludwig's *Crazy for You*<sup>®</sup>, which will run through January 14, 2018, in Arlington, Virginia. Based on the songs of George and Ira Gershwin, the exuberant musical debuted on Broadway in 1992 and received three Tony Awards for Best Musical, Best Choreography, and Best Costume Design, in addition to six other Tony nominations. To remount this sprawling love story, which is set during the 1930s in New York City and Deadrock, Nevada, a massive crew of casting directors, costume designers, stage managers, marketing associates, choreographers, music arrangers, and light and set designers was required to execute the director's vision, and to make sure the actors and actresses could fully shine.

We spoke with six members of the behind-the-scenes team about their experience with *Crazy for You*, and how their work supported the full production. Told in the interview subjects' own words, these stories illuminate the truly massive effort required to put on a show. Make sure to check out the magazine online for audio interviews with additional members of the *Crazy for You* team.

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## About the cover:

Top right: Blocking page for  
*Crazy for You* at Signature Theatre  
in Arlington, Virginia, courtesy of  
Kerry Epstein

Center: Ashley Spencer (Polly)  
and Danny Gardner (Bobby) in  
rehearsals. Photo by Christopher  
Mueller

Bottom right: Paint supplies in the  
prop shop at Signature Theatre.  
Photo by Christopher Mueller

Bottom left: Soundboard. Photo by  
Christopher Mueller





WALTER WARE III, RESIDENT CASTING DIRECTOR

# FINDING THE RIGHT

# PEOPLE

BY JOSEPHINE REED AND DON BALL



Walter Ware III.  
Photo by Paul Luckenbaugh

**W**alter Ware III began his tenure with the Signature Theatre as an artistic director intern in 2010 while still attending Catholic University in Washington, DC. After he graduated, he was offered a full-time job as the theater's executive assistant and casting assistant. "Once I started full-time at Signature," Ware said, "I quickly moved into the casting director position, because I just loved getting to know these actors. I loved getting to be a part of this community."

Ware continued to cast shows for Signature until his departure in August 2017, including the Gershwin-saturated musical *Crazy for You*, for which he found the local cast members. Josephine Reed talked with Ware about the production and about what a resident casting director actually does.

The cast of *Crazy for You* performs "Slap that Bass." Photo by C. Stanley Photography





## THE ROLE OF THE RESIDENT CASTING DIRECTOR

I think what most people assume of a casting director is possibly not true, at its core. Many folks think that the casting director is the final word on who plays the part in a production, and that just simply isn't the case. The final word always lies with the producing and creative team as a whole. Essentially what casting directors do is they get to know the actors in their pool on many levels, from talent in the audition room to talent in the rehearsal room and onstage, and they get to know the actors personally as well.

▼ Danny Gardner as Bobby Child and Bobby Smith as Bela Zangler. Photo by C. Stanley Photography



So, how do you do all that? That means seeing a lot of shows, and also having a lot of one-on-one meetings with performers. Who you are and how you represent yourself is just as important, if not more important, as how talented you are. With all of that knowledge, the casting director would then meet with the creative and producing entities at the beginning of a process when you've chosen a show, and start brainstorming who we can make direct offers to and what roles we definitely know that we want to audition. A character breakdown, which essentially has all the characteristics and attributes being sought, is generated, and then the casting director sets up the auditions and interviews for the various roles, and meets with and aids and guides the team to arrive at the final decision for the cast.

And then, as it usually happens, you have to start all over and recast roles, as actors are constantly getting booked and offered other productions, and sometimes have to leave yours. So I am just as much a recasting director as I am a casting director.

## LOCKING IN THE LOCAL TALENT

Something that's unique about the Washington, DC, casting culture is that we're casting shows a year to a year-and-a-half in advance. These local actors, phenomenal talent, are being sought by so many regional theaters that it's important to us to get them the offer as soon as possible, and get them locked in for our productions.

Frankly, one of the things that I love about Signature is that it has such a commitment to local casting and to making sure that the Washington, DC/Northern Virginia/Maryland artists are supported and brought center stage. The New York side of things usually happens on our bigger musicals. So, for example, *Cabaret* and *West Side Story*, those were productions where we sought out some New York talent as well. But one of the reasons why you're going to see more out-of-towners in *Crazy for You* is because of the demands of the tap performance.

With *Crazy for You*, once we had identified those direct-offer people, we locked them in. We also confirmed Denis Jones, who is an amazing New York choreographer, who has this immense well of talent and such a unique voice, choreographically.

The next important audition was the dance call because the show has so much choreography and so much movement. We definitely wanted to get as many local tap dancers as we could. We called



in around 50 male and 50 female tappers in the area, and we looked for the folks that were going to make the specific puzzle of our *Crazy for You* work. We were able to identify some folks, and there were still some holes. We also went to New York for some of the ensemble talent, and we got to work with another Signature family member, Laura Stanczyk, who's pretty much Signature's go-to New York casting director.

### THE AUDITION

We brought in a group of dancers, and they got to work with Denis on a combination from the show. It's not necessarily the exact choreography that he was going to use, because he wanted to see who captured the technique of tap, and also who captured the style of this particular production. So everybody learns the combination together, and once about 30 minutes has passed and everybody feels like they've got a good understanding of it, they audition in groups of three. I would be putting out the headshots and resumés for Denis to notate on, and for Matthew [Gardiner, the director] to notate on as well. They would essentially decide, "Okay, we want to see these six or five dancers for 32 bars of a song, in the style of the show." We asked for them to prepare some Gershwin. So there was an initial cut, and then we go into those callbacks right after.

It's never necessarily a very pleasant experience, but everybody understands that there are many attributes and many decisions that have to be made in order to arrive at the cast, and it's nothing personal. I would ask the actors to meet me in the hallway, and I would read down the folks that we would be keeping, and then I would say to the rest of the folks, "Our sincere and heartfelt thanks." Auditioning's never easy. Auditioning is definitely an art form to itself.

### MY FAVORITE PART OF CASTING

As artists, you're baring your soul onstage in these performances. But if you think about auditioning as just this singular entity, you have to capture who you are, and you have to convince these creatives that you're the right person for the role, all in under maybe 60 seconds. I am always in awe of the incredible talent that come in and are able to just keep cool, keep calm, and be themselves, because that is truly what makes the casting process, the artistic process, the art of storytelling, so much more compelling and so much more remarkable.



I think that's definitely one of my favorite parts of casting: not knowing who's going to come in and just blow you away. Just being in the room when that click happens, and the entire ensemble and cast falls into place.

When you're working on new musicals—or new work, in general—if you're not casting folks who are not only talented but also able to intellectually engage with the writers in a productive way, you're not going to get very far. If you can believe it, *Crazy for You*, this huge musical, is being rehearsed three weeks in the rehearsal room and then one week of tech. It's an incredibly quick process. If you don't have the folks that are able to rise to the occasion in a really quick way, you're not going to get very far.

I absolutely think that when you put the right people on the right story at the right time, that is when the true magic happens. 🌟

▲ Cole Burden as Lank Hawkins and Natascia Diaz as Irene Roth. Photo by C. Stanley Photography





Costume Designer  
Tristan Raines  
preparing for *Crazy  
for You* at Signature  
Theatre. Photo by  
Christopher Mueller

Tristan Raines, Costume Designer

# Clothing the Characters

BY REBECCA SUTTON

**A**lthough Tristan Raines had been involved with theater in high school, it was always onstage, rather than behind the scenes. But in college, while working in the costume shop, "I found that I could actually create 26 characters a show instead of just creating one as an actor," he said. "It stuck."

Based in New York, Raines designs for plays, musicals, and dance, and has worked on productions as stylistically varied as *A Christmas Story*, *Ring of Fire: The Music of Johnny Cash*, *The Cottage*, and *I Do! I Do!*, for which he received the 2014 Best Costume Design Award from Broadway.com. After seeing a production of *Crazy for You* a year ago, he was immediately taken with the storyline. So when he got the call from Matthew Gardiner, the director behind *Crazy for You* at Signature Theatre, it was an easy sell.

Raines spent months researching, designing, sketching, and refining for *Crazy for You*, but he and his team had only three or four weeks to build, fit, and alter the 150 costumes needed for the show. There were also milliners and cobblers to hire, garments to rent, pieces to distress, and between 75 and 100 fabrics to source. As Raines understated, "It's a big team to get this show up." We spoke with him a few weeks before opening night about just what the process was like.



## LOOKING (OR NOT) AT PAST PRODUCTIONS

I don't look immediately at original productions. With a show like this, there's a conversation of "iconic" that we have to have. I think you have to have that conversation with any revival. It's, "What about the show do people know and will they expect?" The next conversation is, "Is it okay if we can't have that? What will people feel? Will they not remember it, or is it so iconic that we *have* to have it?"

For instance, the Fantasy Follies in the beginning of the show are always pink. I asked myself, "Why are they pink? Does that still ring true in our production?" We decided that it doesn't totally ring true. I thought that with our production, a purple and coral palette would solve the emotional feeling that [the original designers] were solving with pink. I needed to look at theirs to understand that we could change it. But I try not to look at it so immediately because I do want to be able to have my own opinion.

## CREATING AN AESTHETIC

Matthew and I love reality-based things. We love things that feel relatable, but we also wanted to highlight the grandeur of the period, the '30s. There's a glamour, there's an iconic shape to the period and the clothing. I think what you'll see is a beautiful juxtaposition between this glamorous New York versus this grounded, realistic Deadrock [the fictional Nevada town where half the play is set]. When we're moving to Deadrock, we're looking at a masculine, earthy palette. When the Follies come in from New York, we're playing with a jewel-toney palette. We're looking at shape as well. [New York] is very form-fitting, a very fashionable fit. Then it goes into something a little more homemade.

The play winds itself through all of those layers of visual society and fashion of the period. We're using some amazing vintage pieces. So these clothes that these [actors] wear when they're in Nevada are actual clothes from the period that people lived their lives in. What that does is it grounds our piece in the lives of these characters and in the life of this beautiful music. Denis [Jones, the choreographer]—his choreography highlights that, the shapes and the beauty of that juxtaposition of these working people who are struggling to make it and reminiscing about the grandeur of yesteryear and New York.



◀ A costume design by Tristan Raines for the character of Polly Baker. Image courtesy of the artist



◀ Ashley Spencer as Polly Baker. Photo by Christopher Mueller



► Fantasy Follies costume design by Tristan Raines. Image courtesy of the artist



## THE BUILD-OUT

There are 150 costumes in the show, and we only have three weeks to put the show up. We built about 20 costumes [from scratch], which is a lot of clothes to build in three to four weeks. The shop here [in New York] or at Signature looks at all of the designs and says we can build this, this, and this. For instance, they're building most of Polly's [costumes] and all of the Follies'. Once they decide what they can build with their staff, we have other artisans bid out the show and build [certain elements].

And then [there are] half-builds. For instance, we're buying corsets for our Follies, and then we're building the skirts and adding trim and panels and fabrics to make them what we want them to be. A lot of things are being rented too. We found some amazing vintage dealers that are allowing us to rent actual 1930s clothes for some of our characters, to round out the period feel that we need in select moments.

There's no costume that is just, "Let's buy this costume as it is." Everything has some sort of tweak that has to happen. Or it's a combination of we bought it but then we altered it or we're mixing it with a vintage piece. There are a lot of different hands making it all come together.

► A dress for a Follies Girl in *Crazy for You* at Signature Theatre. Photo by Christopher Mueller



## COSTUME MAGICIANS

We have a wonderful wardrobe staff who are basically costume magicians. There are a lot of different rigging techniques that we can do. If we're building a garment, I sit down with the costume shop draper, who is the head of the team within the costume shops. Let's say she's building a dress for Polly—say it's a 20-second quick change. As she's draping and creating the clothing, she can begin to work that rigging into that garment, whether the front looks like it buttons up, but it's really just a zipper down the back, or maybe it snaps under the buttons. She starts to plan that through the build.

So it's a lot of planning, and it has to be done for every transition, every costume change. There are a lot of costume changes that happen in the dressing room. The actors can do it themselves, or the dresser can meet them there. But there are a lot of costumes that have to be managed backstage because they happen extremely quickly. For instance, there's a scene where the girls are getting ready for a performance in Deadrock, and they're in a dressing room. We're staggering the change so they'll appear onstage in partial costume. As the scene goes on, they



put the clothes on. Then the finishing touches will be a quick change as they exit into the next scene.

Additionally, we do a lot of underdressing. For instance, if it's a tight-fitting garment in one scene, we can maybe overdress a costume on top of that costume. So instead of removing a look then adding a look, we can just remove the look and they're ready. There's just a lot of planning and it takes a lot of thought.

### BRINGING CHARACTERS TO LIFE

I always like to contact my principal actors and some of my ensemble to say, "What kind of shoes do you like? What kind of undergarments do you like? What kind of things make you be able to do your job better?" As I'm designing, I make sure that I'm including them into that process, because we're creating the character together. And they [should] feel comfortable in the clothes. At the end of the day, they're living in these clothes for nine weeks. I'm not living in them at all. So I have to make sure that the choices we're making allow them to do their jobs well.

Where the character really comes in is once they start fitting. I live for getting into a fitting with an actor. That's the moment where the character comes to life. All of those little quirks, and all of those little character traits kind of click. If I've done my job before those fittings to really lay down an idea and a style and a point of view, we can adapt that vocabulary to bring out whatever those actors and I and the director are discovering throughout the rehearsal process. Like, if this is shorter and the skirt kicks out, that feels flirtier and I really want this girl to feel extremely flirty. Or she's going to be more conservative, so is there a way to do the sleeves differently? Can we add fur? Do you want glasses? Is this heel high enough?

There's nothing better than when you're in a fitting and you try something on and suddenly the actor completely changes the way they stand, the way they move their arms, the way they hold their head, the way they talk. That means it's right. Clothes are just clothes. When you look at a rack of clothes, they're just fabric on a hanger. They might have character choices within the fabric or the cut of them, but until they're on a body, that character just doesn't exist. 🌀

▼ Danny Gardner as Bobby Child and the ensemble. Photo by C. Stanley Photography





Choreographer Denis Jones in rehearsal  
for *Crazy for You* at Signature Theatre.  
Photo by Christopher Mueller



# DENIS JONES, CHOREOGRAPHER

## DANCING THE NARRATIVE

BY MORGAN MENTZER

**A**s a self-professed theater kid, Denis Jones lived and breathed all things musical theater. On any given weekday after school, you could find Jones directing his own plays in his backyard with his brother and any other neighborhood kids he could rally together. But it wasn't until his father took him to see the 25th-anniversary performance of *Singin' in the Rain* when Jones was in third grade that he truly found his calling. "I was absolutely transfixed by Gene Kelly's performance and by his incredible feet and immediately started taking tap class after that," remembered Jones. Although he went on to study jazz and ballet as well, "at the end of the day, tap is my first love," he said.

It was a childhood passion that stuck. Jones has had an expansive career as a Broadway dancer, dance captain, and associate choreographer to Jerry Mitchell. Nine years ago, Jones decided to become a choreographer in his own right, which landed him a 2017 Tony Award nomination for best choreography for the Broadway production of *Holiday Inn, The New Irving Berlin Musical*. Jones is currently putting his creative genius to work on Signature Theatre's production of *Crazy for You*. A massive, tap-centric show, Jones declared that "this musical is like a kid in a candy store for a tapper."

Arriving just five weeks before opening, Jones and the cast worked tirelessly during rehearsals, focused on forging original, memorable dance numbers. In his own words, here's Jones on his process of creating dance, his love of Gershwin, and his determination to develop authentic work.



### AN AFFECTION FOR THE GERSHWINS' SONGS

I saw the Broadway production of *Crazy for You* a couple of times when I was right out of college, and of course, had the cassette tape, which I wore out because the arrangements are pretty spectacular. Obviously, the score and the Gershwins' music are just so incredible. Growing up, every Sunday when my parents were making breakfast, they would put on *An American in Paris*, which was a big favorite in my house; many of the songs are also in *Crazy for You*. So that was my first introduction to Gershwin and to Gene Kelly, which was a double whammy for me!

These are some of the greatest songs that have ever been written, and it's an honor to create dance to them. I consider it a privilege. As soon as the pianist starts playing the score in rehearsal, the dancers light up. I can see it in their faces, I can see it in their feet, the way they move, that they share the same affection for this great American music that I do.

### GOING YOUR OWN WAY WITH THE WORK

Since finding out that I was going to choreograph *Crazy for You* at Signature Theatre, I've stayed away from it. Out of respect for the great work of Susan Stroman [who choreographed the original Broadway production of *Crazy for You*], I feel like it's important not to replicate or plagiarize her work. She sets the bar very high, I think, for anybody who's working on a musical that she has choreographed or directed. You want to create a work that lives up to that expectation level, but you still want to create your own work that operates at that level. I've tried to let the dance that I've created for this only be inspired by what is on the page, and to go my own way with it. We want to create a production that is specific to this theater and for this specific audience, in this time and place, and not to try to remount someone else's work.

▼ Ashley Spencer as Polly Baker (center) and the ensemble.  
Photo by C. Stanley Photography





► Danny Gardner (Bobby) in rehearsals for *Crazy for You* at Signature Theatre. Photo by Christopher Mueller

But it's not like I'm putting everybody on roller skates—I think you have an obligation to an audience who buys a ticket to see *Crazy for You* to deliver *Crazy for You*. You can create your own version of it, but you don't want to, you know, set it on Mars.

## WALKING IN CIRCLES

My process of creating dance always starts with listening to the music and just walking in a circle. Getting up on my feet, listening to the music over and over again, walking and thinking and listening to the lyrics to see what body language helps me communicate that lyric information. I have approached all [the songs] in different sorts of ways, but I always start by walking in a circle.

When creating a dance, I do think that the most important thing to start with is the story. At what point does the number live within the larger narrative of the play? Who are the characters involved and what are they learning within the context of the number? It is important for these musical numbers to have a beginning, middle, and an end—they're not there just to be dance for dance's sake. It always wants to further the storytelling.

▼ Choreographer Denis Jones in rehearsal for *Crazy for You* at Signature Theatre. Photo by Christopher Mueller



For “I Got Rhythm,” there are all kinds of crazy directions that this number has gone, but it is solidly rooted in the idea of where do we find rhythm in our world, in the world of this town? The number starts with the residents of a small Western town picking up percussive objects that act as instruments and work with tap dancing: a hand-held tire pump, a twisting socket wrench, a violin bow screeching against the edge of a saw, a plunger pulled off a deck, etc. These items create rhythm with one another in the same way that this



community is finding rhythm with one another in order to create something artistic.

## AN INCLUSIVE PROCESS

I did a fair amount of pre-production over the course of a month before I arrived at Signature Theatre. I did a number of sessions in New York with other dancers just to start to create movement. I do find that I like to approach a rehearsal with my work about 70 percent done, and leave enough brain space to be inspired by things that I see in the room, because I think it's very important to create movement on the actors that are in the show. You want movement that looks good on the person who's going to be dancing in front of the audience, so that they're invested in it and they feel good dancing onstage, and they will get that rush that I enjoyed for so many years as a dancer.

There is enough time to get these dances right [in the weeks leading up to the show], but it does involve being extremely focused from 10:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m., and what is being asked of the cast is enormous. They're all rising to the occasion. I see them dancing on breaks. I see them asking questions to one another. They come in and they warm up before we start rehearsal. They stay after rehearsal to go over things. They want to film everything on their phones to make sure that they get the choreography right.





◀ Notebook pages showing choreography ideas for *Crazy for You*, courtesy of Denis Jones

▼ Danny Gardner as Bobby Child. Photo by C. Stanley Photography

I will make alterations right up until opening night, and then it is set. And hopefully, the adjustments that I continue to make will become more and more focused as we get to opening night so that I don't, in the last hour of rehearsal, say, "Hey, guys, put on your roller skates! We're changing everything."

I hope that I'm very respectful of the actors' process and how much information they are able to actually manage leading up to opening because obviously, there's a lot on their plate. Once we get into the theater, they're dealing with costumes, they're dealing with the set and the orchestra and the wigs and the makeup and all the other things that they have to think about. I choose carefully what additional information I give them leading up to opening because they have a lot to focus on.

The dancers have a generosity of spirit and artistry that allows me to try steps on them. I'm very blessed to have an amazing associate, Robbie Roby, on this project with me; he's happy to try things over and over again, which can serve as a jumping-off place to some other idea. Sometimes it takes a bunch of performers together in a room to find solutions for a dance number. It's an inclusive process with the dancers, and I do believe that we're all holding hands and taking a leap together. ▲

*Morgan Mentzer was an intern in the NEA Office of Public Affairs in fall 2017.*







Ashley Spencer as Polly Baker, Harrison Smith as Sam, A. Ross Neal as Moose, Kurt Boehm as Mingo. Photo by Christopher Mueller

## Paul Tate dePoo III, Set Designer

# CHOREOGRAPHING SCENERY

BY REBECCA SUTTON

**W**hile growing up in Key West, Paul Tate dePoo III celebrated his birthday either at the Ringling Brothers Circus or at a performance by the magician David Copperfield. It fueled a love of spectacle, and by high school, he had created his own two-and-a-half hour magic show, complete with assistants and conjuring an airplane onstage. But in 2005, Hurricane Wilma flooded the island's performing arts center where he was to perform and damaged his sets. "I realized that my passion was more about creating the project, versus performing the project," he said.

He soon made it his career. A set and production designer for theater, opera, and dance, dePoo's projects have included *Rent*, *Guys and Dolls*, *A Raisin in the Sun*, *The Wiz*, and *Les Misérables*. Based in New York, dePoo is a frequent collaborator with Signature Theatre, and received a 2017 Helen Hayes nomination for outstanding set design for the theater's production of *Titanic*. He began work on *Crazy for You* a year ago, and estimates that he oversaw the execution of 30 pieces of scenery and more than 100 hand props for the show. We spoke with him just before he left for Korea, where Seoul's Charlotte Theater is remounting *Titanic* this winter.



## BUILDING TWO UNIVERSES IN ONE

I think the reason why I do theater versus film is that film can be edited. But [theater] is in front of people—you see it all transform in front of everyone’s eyes. There’s no editing process. So that’s the biggest challenge. It’s figuring out, in *Crazy for You*, how you get from New York City to the Nevada saloon to the Nevada theater, back and forth, back and forth, back and forth, and not have the audience get bored because they’re waiting for you to change a piece of scenery. There has to be a very clever way that encompasses the universe; there has to be an overarching home for the set to live in that can accommodate all these scenes.

The way we did it was [we decided] the universe was Nevada. The way to bring New York City into it was to bring in two massive panels that are basically rear-lit billboard material. I illustrated them in a very period, Broadway 1930s [style], that on top has all these period marquee lights. So there’s a mix of billboard technology of today with very vintage artwork that’s being illuminated, plus all of these other small pieces of electric devices that blur your eye to make it believe there’s the cacophony of the lights of Broadway.

Those open up to reveal the architecture of Nevada. It sounds simple, but you’re opening and closing four different types of visuals. Whenever you’re designing Broadway onstage, you want as much eye misdirection as possible. Everyone knows the magic of that, being there in real life. You need as much flash as possible. But containing that in the smallest footprint as possible, to open it easily to reveal Nevada, was the biggest challenge. And we accomplished that.

## CREATING AN AESTHETIC

As soon as Matthew [Gardiner, the director] said that Nevada was the universe, I looked up old Western banks, and saw what porches looked like, and homes [with] gingerbread detailing. I was looking at rough, aged wood. That



created a beautiful silhouette of architecture, but when you zoom into it, it’s distressed and deteriorating, and sand-blown from the deserts. So I would start honing in on the fine details of architecture. I am a very architecturally based designer.

One small detail that’s really exciting is the floor. The audience in the Signature looks at the floor, and you can appreciate the design of the floor. As the set designer, when I do a site visit at a venue, that’s the number one question: does the audience see or appreciate the floor? In some theaters, you absolutely see the floor

▲ Paul Tate dePoo III’s set design rendering of Deadrock, Nevada, for *Crazy for You*. Image courtesy of the artist

▼ Props Master Becca Tuteur begins to paint a truck that she built for *Crazy for You* at Signature Theatre. Photo by Christopher Mueller







▲ Paul Tate dePoo III's set design rendering of Broadway for *Crazy for You*. Image courtesy of the artist

every single minute of the evening. Whereas some theaters, if the audience is lower, there's no point of putting the energy into executing an amazing floor.

So how do you go from New York City to Nevada? I found this beautiful inlaid marble Art Deco floor. I took the design of it, altered it to be pretty much custom, and then I took away the marble and inlaid it with different versions of weathered wood. It's this amazing contradiction of a fabulous line design executed by really rough wood. So it gives you Art Deco, and it gives you Nevada at the same time. Clearly we're not going to redo the floor every time we go back and forth. The easy way out was painting it black and making it very ambiguous. But we didn't want to do that.

Then there's this massive Folies Bergère finale, where there's this big grand staircase. We looked at the artist Busby Berkeley for that. Busby Berkeley was [known in] the 1920s and '30s for showgirls tiered on massive, wedding-cake platforms, women doing synchronized dancing in pools, huge stage set-ups. It was epic. It was beautiful. That was our inspiration.

So how do you achieve that after you've taken up every square footage of the stage? The way we did that was we made this massive staircase that's cut up into four pieces. That gets assembled onstage in front of everyone while they are being misdirected by these massive Follies costumes. So there's magic right there, of the costumes misdirecting the audience while the stage is being transformed and delivered in

front of their eyes. It's like, "Oh my God, look at that massive headdress," and you end up staring at that, and then you look onstage and, "Oh my God, how did that staircase get onstage?" That's the most exciting part of all of this.

### THE COLLABORATIVE PROCESS

I'm basically the architect for everything you see physically onstage—both the architect and the interior designer. I'm usually the one that's producing an overarching rendering that other departments then collaborate on. Then there's

another version of [the rendering] that I go back to and alter based on those conversations. It's not out of the ordinary for a costume designer to say, "What if we did this with your set? What if we made that a little more metallic, graphite silver with inlaid glitter for the finale that will support all the white glitter costumes I'm doing so that the costumes pop?" The lighting designer and I are friends, and I can say, "What if the lighting does this at this moment?" There are a lot of working parts that go into it.

The challenging part [of my job] is it goes from a huge, broad, zoomed-out scope. Then I have to zoom into every single detail and have [the team] build it. As a production designer, you have to have that eye for all. So we provide drawings and draftings that say exactly what kind of molding goes where, and what kinds of paint treatment goes there, to what kind of fabrics we are going to use to upholster furniture and pillows. However, I'm not the person that's building or sewing the pillows. There's a whole team that's behind me that executes that. I have a very close relationship with all those members of those departments. So there's props, there's paints, and there's scenery. Every day I'm getting calls or text messages of photos saying, do you like A or do you like B? It's a constantly evolving process of all departments.

Hopefully it looks like it's effortless, and this world just dropped down in Signature. The goal is never, "Look at that fabric on that pillow." [The goal] is more, "Well, of course that's the world—there wouldn't be anything different."



**BACKSTAGE LOGISTICS**

A set designer doesn't just end with the design. I do the whole world—how it moves, how it dances onstage, how it transforms from one to the other, how it efficiently goes from scene to scene. It's choreographed scenery. In the process of a show, I'm sitting there with the director saying out loud, "I think that that could move two seconds earlier and it should land when the music does this." I had to logistically think how do we fit in [lighting designer Jason Lyons'] lighting equipment physically? This was a small stage. He also needs equipment that's in the air—it takes up about 50 percent of the stage overhead. So there's that conversation.

A designer can usually say, "Who cares about how it functions?" But in a musical theater setting, it has to be all about efficiency. How many conversations have we had about how will the headdresses fit backstage because the scenery's in the way? Do we cut the headdresses? No one wants to do that. So we figured it out. [The actors] bend over and duck their heads the entire way [to the stage]. We literally have an area where they can straighten their backs back up, and come onstage and look like they weren't ever crouched over trying not to ruffle the feathers. It's all backstage choreography. 🎭

▼ Danny Gardner as Bobby Child and the ensemble. Photo by C. Stanley Photography





Stage manager Kerry Epstein at work on a rehearsal of *Crazy for You*. Photo by Christopher Mueller



## KERRY EPSTEIN, PRODUCTION STAGE MANAGER

# “MAGIC HAPPENS WHEN I SAY GO”

BY PAULETTE BEETE

**A** former dancer, Kerry Epstein studied theater in college, intending to focus on acting. After a few stints as a stage manager, however, she shifted her focus from onstage to backstage. As Epstein remembered, “I loved how all aspects of the theater that I absolutely loved coalesced into that particular job. The more I did it, the more I just fell in love with it.” As she honed her stage management skills, Epstein’s undergraduate history studies also came in handy, teaching her about research and documentation, two skills she considers essential to her job. Epstein has now been a full-time stage manager for 16 years, 12 of those with Signature Theatre. While she can’t get through a production without her trusty notebook, she also considers a sense of humor essential. As she put it, “We are grown-ups putting on costumes and putting on a show just like Mickey Rooney and Judy Garland did.”

We spoke with Epstein about how she defines the job of the stage manager, what her day-to-day looks like, and why she considers her job “a joyful experience.”



## THERE FOR THE WHOLE PROCESS

[The stage management team] is the only one that is there for the whole process, beginning to end. So we are there in the rehearsal room with the actors and directors. We're also there with the designers as the production elements come together. Everybody comes together at tech, so that's sort of the central focal point. Then as folks go their separate ways, we're still there to maintain the communication.

Because we aren't onstage like the actors or we're not as known as directors or designers, it's very much a behind-the-scenes profession, which I think is also where the beauty lies. There's lots of magic that we get to work to make things happen, and there is an art to doing that. There is an art to the rehearsal reports and the tracking of the props and things like that.

Sometimes you get asked to describe your job in six words or something like that. My six words are, "Magic happens when I say go." I think it is kind of amazing that you say, "Light 57, go," and all of a sudden the stage is bathed in a bright blue light with twinkly stars in the background, or that a chandelier is coming down from the sky, and it happens seamlessly.

## A VERY PARTICULAR SET OF SKILLS

I feel like the stage manager is the historian of the production. We're the record of everything that happens, from the blocking in the rehearsal room to tracking where all the props and costume pieces need to start offstage to make sure that they end up onstage in the right place. [Stage management includes] sending out the daily reports to the design team so that they know all of the wacky, ridiculous things we created in the rehearsal room that we would like for them to make for us for the next time we hit that scene, or making sure that actors know what time they need to be called for rehearsal. During performances, since the rest of the design team and the directors usually leave the production at that time, it's communicating with them as to how each individual show has gone that night, how the audience reacted to a certain song...just keeping everybody informed as to how everything has progressed.

## THE NITTY-GRITTY

For *Crazy for You*, I have Jessica Skelton, who is my assistant stage manager, and Regina Vitale, who is my production assistant. We go through the script and find out how many actors are in

which scene, where we think they're going to be entering and exiting, what props are going to be used, and basically mapping out everything we need to know to start, knowing that once we start rehearsals everything is going to change. Flexibility is essential to survival; you need to be rigid to get everything prepped and then bend like a tree to make sure everything can change.

In the rehearsal process, I have my eyes going in all different directions to try to absorb and pick up everything that is happening. Once we get to technical rehearsals, as we're putting all of the elements together with the lights and the sound and the costumes and all of that, then I start talking a lot more. It's making sure that everything is together as I start calling the light and the sound cues and the automation cues—we've got one chandelier that has to fly in here or the truck has to come onstage—so it's more of air-traffic control.

Once we're in performances, I'm still calling the cues and watching the show. But I try to have the director's eyes on the show as well to make sure that the actors are maintaining the performance as the director has intended. So there's some acting notes that get given. I will work with the dance captain to make sure that all of the dance moves are the same way that the choreographer intended. So maintaining the artistic integrity of the show comes into play during performances so all of the work that the designers have done up to that point is still there for every audience member to enjoy for the whole run.

Actors are called a half-hour before performances, and I will usually arrive an hour before that to make sure that everything is set and ready for that evening. I'll check-in with the

▼ Ashley Spencer (Polly), Sean Bell (Billy), Thomas Adrian Simpson (Eugene Fodor), Andre Hinds (Custus) and Danny Gardner (Bobby) in rehearsals for *Crazy for You* at Signature Theatre. Photo by Christopher Mueller





crew, make sure everything is functioning. I'll give the half-hour call and then head down to the green room to be there as an available reference if anybody needs anything. I will give a 15- and 10-minute call to each dressing room to let actors know that we're on schedule and ready to perform, and then I will head up to the stage management booth.

Even though it is challenging to do all that, it's a lot of fun to try to piece all that stuff together. I think if I didn't enjoy that kind of detailed puzzle piecing, this [would be] the absolute wrong career. You really have to enjoy getting all the details and getting the nitty-gritty.

### THE CHALLENGES OF CRAZY FOR YOU...

[*Crazy for You*] is a huge show. Every element is huge, and we have a 23-person cast. We've been staging "I've Got Rhythm" for the past couple of days, and the song never ends. What the choreographer is doing with the actors is amazing, and the centerpiece of that song is townspeople finding ways to create music and rhythm based on everything that they have discovered. While those rehearsals are going on—and I've got one eye on that—I'm trying to figure out how to get 23 wig and costume fittings scheduled in the next two rehearsal days. It's a whole scheduling Tetris that has to happen. I cracked it right before the end of the morning session, so I'm feeling very proud of myself for getting all that figured out in puzzle pieces. Now, could that all go out the window when the director decides to change his mind on the schedule? Maybe, but I really hope not.

### ...AND THE JOYS.

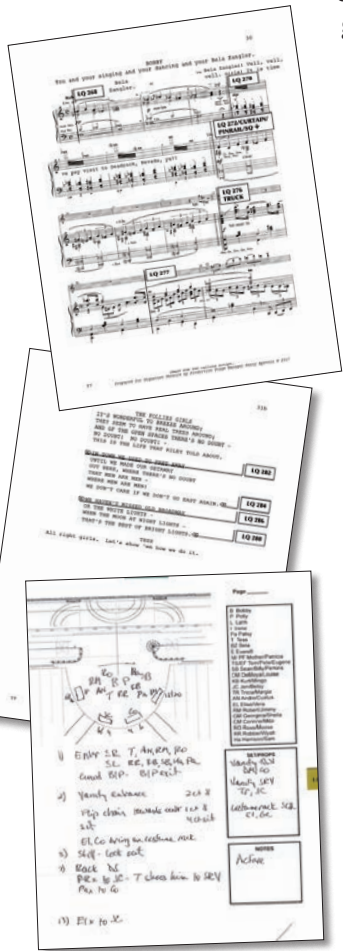
One of the great things about *Crazy for You* is that it's such a joyful show. You just have a huge smile on your face when you're working on it, and the dancing is amazing. To be able to showcase performers who have that great tap-dancing ability is really wonderful. I have a dance background, and so I loved the old movie musicals and the Gene Kelly/Fred Astaire kind of genre. To be able to work on this show, which has so many callbacks to that era, is just wonderful.

### WHY THE SHOW MUST ALWAYS GO ON

Sometimes [success is] the fact that no one can tell that I have done my job, because if I have done my job correctly then everything is prepared, it's smooth, there are no hitches. It's the art of trying to anticipate what someone is going to need and have it ready for them as they're saying, "You know what, we need..." and you're putting it in their hands, [whether] it's an actual prop or solving whatever scheduling issue is coming up.

It's also watching the show every night and having the audience have the same reactions that I had during rehearsals. That's more of a personal notation of success. It's less about the glory in this profession. You are watching it happen for other people, which I think is great.

I am very fortunate that I have a fantastic team here at Signature. The backstage crew is wonderful. I cannot do my job without them, so I really rely on them and their abilities. What you try to do is anticipate everything that might go wrong and have a tentative backup plan for what you think could happen. It's also knowing that things will go wrong. That's fine; we just pick up and keep on going.

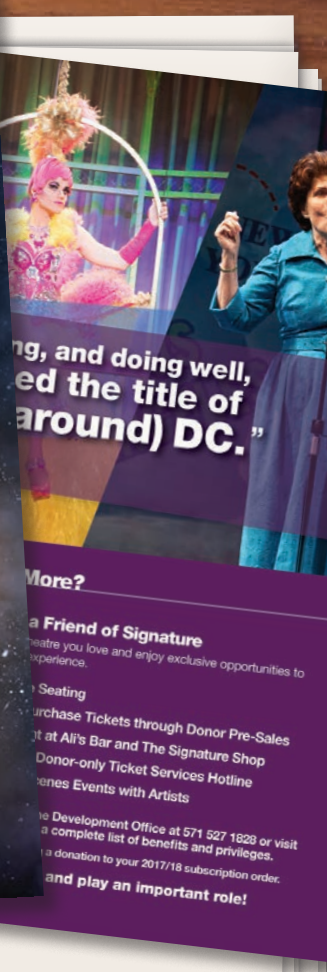


▲ *Crazy for You* calling script and blocking pages. Images courtesy of Kerry Epstein



► Danny Gardner as Bobby Child and Ashley Spencer as Polly Baker, and the ensemble. Photo by C. Stanley Photography





# Jennifer Buzzell, Director of Marketing and Sales

## ESTABLISHING RELATIONSHIPS



BY PAULETTE BEETE

**F**or Signature Theatre's Director of Marketing and Sales Jennifer Buzzell, marketing is not just about selling tickets and promoting a show. Instead Buzzell sees her job as working with her team and the Signature family to develop ways to initiate, develop, and foster relationships both with potential audience members and the theater's wider community. From creating video trailers to use as advertising to writing promotional copy to creating photo ops so patrons can snap a selfie on their way into the theater, it's all part of providing Signature's customers with, as Buzzell put it, "a lot of fun and escape from the outside world for a few hours."

### THROUGH THE CUSTOMER LENS

People think marketing is just selling. For me, it's about helping to establish a relationship. Signature Theatre's job is to help change people's lives through musical theater and theater in general, whether that means the artists or the people that experience the art that's created. That is very difficult if we put barriers in their way such as it's hard to buy a ticket or our usher was rude to them or they had a bad time at the café right before the show. I am completely

looking at marketing from a customer lens. How do I want to hear about something Signature's doing? When I am interested enough to buy a ticket, is that process easy, whether it's online or on the phone? When I get there, do I know where I'm going? Do I know where to park? Do I know what to expect when I walk in the door, how to dress, how to act? Do I know that I can't bring my baby into the theater and things like that? That's the big-picture vision of how I do my job, and it involves seven thousand million pieces.

▲ Pages from the 2017-2018 season brochure, courtesy of Signature Theatre

◀ Jennifer Buzzell. Photo by Margaret Richey Photography





▲ Cole Burden as Lank Hawkins and Natascia Diaz as Irene Roth. Photo by C. Stanley Photography

## THE PRICE OF ADMISSION

I have to figure out how much to charge for the show. I have to figure out the budget and how much income we're going to make and how much money we're going to spend on advertising so that we can set the organization's budget for the next year, so that we end up with a balanced budget and not a deficit. We change the seating configuration almost every time we do a show; I have to figure out every time which seats are going to be the best seats, which ones might have some obstructed views. I have to figure out how many of each type of tickets I will sell at what average ticket price and that [gives us] the final revenue number for the show. We do that very scientifically, based on sales of similar shows and based on our subscription sales pattern. We look at lots of different statistics from all of our systems to figure out those budgets. We read all of the shows and listen to the music so that I can say, "Okay, I really think that this show's going to appeal to these kinds of audiences, therefore, it will sell about this much and about this average ticket price." [It takes] a combination of expertise in the product and reliance on past data to come up with the budget. That's the biggest first step.

## GETTING THE WORD OUT

We generally have three to four months before each show where we really get down to a very specific marketing plan for attracting single ticket buyers and groups. If we can, we have the director talk to us about their vision for the show.

They will talk about how they want to interpret the show. They'll tell us a little bit about the sets and costumes that they have been working on with the designers, and anything that they feel is important to get out to the customer so that they understand what the show is going to be like.

*Crazy for You* is the first time Signature has done a show that is essentially an homage to the great MGM musicals. We're known more for [Stephen] Sondheim and [John] Kander and [Fred] Ebb and gritty musicals, and this musical is nothing but pure joy. It's really important to [the show's director Matthew Gardiner] for the show to remain nostalgic and happy, but feel fresh and new. Once we know that, and once we look at the costumes and the sets and how everything is going to happen, we talk about who are the different kinds of people who are going to want to come see the show, and what messages are going to be the best to get through to them.

For example, for *Crazy for You*, we have Signature's musical theater lovers—people who love grittier musicals. The messaging point for them for this show is that it's going to be a fresh and sexy take on a classic, [done] only the way Signature can revive and reinvent a musical. We [also] have people that love coming to musicals at Signature for the holidays with their whole family. So trying to find those families and get the message out to them that this is going to be a great show to take your whole family to is important. This [show] is basically all of Gershwin's greatest hits in one show, so that's the main message we want to get out for [Gershwin fans].

We talk about fun social media things. For example, in *Crazy for You*, there are more than 150 costumes, so we talked about how it might be really interesting to feature on social media our Associate Costume Director Natalie Kurczewski making all these amazing showgirl costumes with all the beads and sequins and feathers and how she is going to get all those things done in time. There is a choreography challenge that has been going around on Instagram, and we talked about doing a choreography challenge with our lead actor.

## ENGAGING WITH THE LOCAL COMMUNITY

[The marketing team also talks] with our education team about what kinds of things we want to do for the community. For this show, we're doing some backstage tours. We're doing a book club [with the Shirlington Library]; we've chosen a book called *Mr. Monkey*, which is about backstage antics, which is what *Crazy for You* is



also about. We have [previously] done a series of free community dance classes when we do a show that's really big with dance. So we're going to do a tap class for *Crazy for You* with one of the actors. We also talked about how it's the holidays and we would like to partner with a food bank. We're looking at the Arlington Food Assistance Center to do a food drive; hopefully everyone who will come to the show will get the message to bring donations. Anything we can do with the cast for charity around the holidays is really important. We're part of a community at Signature, so we try to partner with our community as much as possible and help out where we can.

### WHAT SUCCESS LOOKS LIKE

Success is not only did we meet the revenue expectations and did we sell the tickets. It always feels good, of course, for the actors when all of

the seats are full. But success is: did we find those people to whom this show is going to be the most meaningful? Did we actually bring those people in and have them experience this show? Did we engage our community in the right way? Did they have an amazing time when they were here? Did we engage a new section or a new part of the community that we might not have talked to before? Were the partnerships successful? Did all those plans we put into place, all the customer service training we do, all of the work that goes into the website and the box office and the café, did all of those things work? Were people happy while they were here? If the answer to all of those is yes, then we have succeeded. ▲

▼ Danny Gardner as Bobby Child and Bobby Smith as Bela Zangler. Photo by Christopher Mueller







Ashley Spencer as Polly Baker and Danny Gardner as Bobby Child in *Crazy for You* at Signature Theatre in Arlington, Virginia. Photo by C. Stanley Photography



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