Projection designer Alex Koch on imagery and 'Invisible Man'

"In theater, the lack of money drives us and drives us hard, and the result is really great work for an impossibly small amount of time and money," says Alex Koch, projection designer for "Invisible Man," pictured on the Huntington Theatre Company set.

By Joel Brown | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT   JANUARY 05, 2013

"Invisible Man" projection designer Alex Koch, 30, is a founder of Brooklyn, N.Y.-based design group Imaginary Media Artists. He grew up in Cambridge, where his parents, John Koch and Sharon Basco, were both arts journalists who between them worked for the Globe, the Herald, and public radio. Recently, at the Huntington Theatre Company, he sat down to talk about the show.

Q. How did your work on "Invisible Man" come about?

A. I was collaborating with the director, Chris McElroen, on a small downtown show in New York City called "Living in Exile." And on the last day at the bar, he mentioned that he was doing Ralph Ellison's "Invisible Man," and would I be interested in doing a show that had, whatever it is, 1,369 light bulbs in it — did I think I could somehow find a way to fit in projections. As often happens, I didn't hear another word for six months, and I did five or six other shows, and then I met him for coffee in the summer [of 2011], got a copy of the book, and four days later we started building the show.

Q. How does the Boston production compare to the Chicago and D.C. versions?

A. The first time Chris and I cast the projections, we cast them as completely affected by the invisible man's imagination, so that whatever was seen up there was a fractured memory. We sat down after the [Chicago] show saying, well, what if [instead] these were other people's ideas. And that was all wrong. We ended up about halfway back to where we'd been. By the time we got to D.C., we were again in the invisible man's head, but we said we don't want to aestheticize it the same way we had in Chicago. It felt like maybe we were telling too much of the story with the visuals.

Q. Give me an example of matching an image to a moment onstage.

A. Toward the beginning of Act 2, it's the first moment when the invisible man really gets a sense of how high he could go in the world. He's an ambitious guy, he's a dreamer, and when he gets into Emerson Jr.'s office, suddenly he sees the great expanse of New York City he's been dreaming about, [from] this fabulous office on the 50th floor of a skyscraper. So it's choosing an image that really lands the audience at one glance with the height and the glamour of New York City. You get this grand sense that we're up in the sky.

Q. How did you collect and assemble the images?

A. It started with shooting the performers in costume in front of green screen, doing research at the Library of Congress and the National Archives, culling images by going to museums and scanning and shooting them and filming images off their original 35mm. The Library of Congress has a huge digital archive. I have multiple research assistants, and all of that ends up on a hard drive. We did an underwater shoot, in a

pool down in D.C. There's illustrations; I hired an illustrator. Oh, and we had a computer animator for an element that got cut in Chicago. So we have the full gamut of how you get content.

Q. And how is it projected in the theater?

A. We condense it all down into .mov files and play them back through this program called Isadora. We tell the computer to play this movie here and play that movie here, shrink it, scale it, bend it across a surface. We can map it to any shape we want. It goes from two Mac Pros to six projectors. And there's a live feed of the actors as well. We have rear projection, front projection, side projection.

Q. Research assistants and travel and computers — it sounds Spielbergian, but theater budgets aren't.

A. I worked on the set of "Law & Order: Criminal Intent" for a few years, and I was so put off by how hungry I was to create and how regimented their system is, which means that I didn't get to do anything fun. In theater, the lack of money drives us and drives us hard, and the result is really great work for an impossibly small amount of time and money. You have set designers who are trained to build models. On a film set, someone's going to charge you $80,000 for that model, but [in theater] the set designers will build it overnight so you can shoot it.

Q. Tell us your story, how you ended up in projection design.

A. I'm from Cambridge, and to me it's important that I grew up seeing a lot of theater, with two parents as critics. The curtain goes up on three different shows in the same week, and three different worlds are created. I fell in love with it so fast. I ran through an ambition to be an actor. As a youngster I did lots of that in this town and drove lots of people crazy. There were two sides of me, the one that loved theater and the one that loved technology, and the two sides never really had a meeting place until about 1998. Apple released the iMac and it had really easy video editing. Technology was making this huge turn toward giving anyone who had access to a school media room the potential to tell a story with technology. The media department at [Cambridge Rindge & Latin School] was headed by this guy Peter Kastner, who was in Francis Ford Coppola's "You're a Big Boy Now." Peter's life path took him to running this media department, and he was impassioned about putting the tools in the hands of anyone

willing to listen to his yarns and his study of technique. Out of it came this crazy idea that I was fully capable of making professional decisions with the gear. That was really empowering. And very entitled, probably.

Interview has been condensed and edited. Joel Brown can be reached at jbnbpt@gmail.com.