

Irena's View:

Alex Koch Designs Projections for a World War II Heroine's Story

Irena's Vow is the incredible true story of Irena Gut Opdyke, a young Polish Catholic woman who, during World War II, sheltered a dozen Jews—keeping them in the basement of the Nazi major for whom she worked as a housekeeper. Dan Gordon's drama opened Off Broadway last fall, a co-production of the Invictus Theatre Company and The Directors Company, then moved to Broadway this spring; in both venues, it provided a stunning showcase for Tovah Feldshuh, who pulled off the not-inconsiderable feat of playing the 20-ish Irena. Both Off Broadway and on, the production featured a multi-level set by Kevin Judge, with projections by Alex Koch that filled in many of the story's details—the factory where Irena works, a town square where the bodies of Jews are hung, the interior of the major's house. Most movingly, we saw images of Irena herself.

Koch combed through the Library of Congress and various public libraries in New York, looking for period photographs. Many of images used were collages, made up of

details taken from several sources. He adds that Opdyke's memoirs provided him with crucial reference information; the Opdyke family provided photos as well.

As he worked, however, the designer's approach grew less literal. "We went through a number of drafts of what the major's house would look like—at one point, we had a hyperrealistic image that would change over the seasons," he says. "But as we worked through rehearsals, we began to zoom in on little architectural details. The idea was to make the world more terrifying by misusing the scale—by, say, blowing up the size of a wall feature. That way, we could offer a glimpse into Irena's head."

Koch adds that his images changed even more when the show moved. Off Broadway, the upstage projection screen was fairly narrow, and the audience sat in stadium seating. At Broadway's Walter Kerr Theatre, the screen was considerably wider (if not higher), and the audience sat in a conventional theatre orchestra, looking up at the stage. For these reasons, the

images had to be heavily reworked.

"As much as we would previsualize images in a computer rendering of Kevin's set, once we got into the Walter Kerr and saw actors against some of the manipulated images, we saw that they weren't serving a purpose," Koch says. "Once we started using the screen to zoom in on details, that approach often spoke volumes. We didn't need to show an entire room. You can add too much information sometimes. It was more fun to distill it, and make specific choices." He adds that he worked closely with the lighting designer, David Casteneda: "I love the idea that any projection was an extension of the scenery and lighting."

The projections were delivered using the Isadora media server from Troika Tronix, the first time that this technology, which is largely associated with downtown theatre and dance, has been used on Broadway. "I've used it for every show I've done in New York and I wanted to take it to the Kerr," says Koch. "I talked to Mark Coniglio [at Troika Tronix] and he opened the door to newer versions of it as they came out. We were programming with versions of it that hadn't been officially released." Isadora drove 6K Panasonic projectors, using a single Mac Pro computer. "It felt a little wild stepping onto Broadway the first time, using this software. But we've passed our 100th performance, having had only one four-hour work call. It's been incredibly successful."

Other personnel on the production included Koch's associate, David Tirosch. "He did a lot of the technical building and blending in Isadora," Koch says. He also credits Kevin Cunningham and the staff of 3LD Art & Technology Center, the downtown performance-and-technology lab, for being "an indispensable resource in trying out some of our blending tricks. They let us come in during their dark days and build the rig for ourselves." The production also featured costumes by Astrid Brucker and sound by Quentin Chiappetta. *Irena's Vow* closed at the end of June. ☞

