Sam Lowry Interview – Ghost Tech

Do you mostly do set design work?

"I do directing through my own company and then I do mainly projection work in town."

In Nashville?

"Yeah."

So, what are some of the other projects that you've worked on?

"So, I did projections for the original run for The Battle of Franklin in fall of 2016, and then I did the animations and projections for the production of Spamalot last spring. So those are the two major projects that I've worked on. I'm friends with the technical director at Harpeth Hall so I've done some stuff for them, and just smaller stuff around town."

Any hopes of directing?

"Yeah, so it's why I keep myself in the theatre community of town and to build up a body of work, and then hopefully, eventually, do more directing stuff around town. Right now, I mainly do that through my own theatre company that I have with two friends of mine."

Can you speak a little bit to the Nashville theatre community?

"That's a bit of a broad question. It's a good theatre community, its one of the stronger regional ones...

What are some of the main studios or…?

"There's like four main theatres. You've got the Nashville Shakespeare Festival, NashRep (Nashville Repertory Theatre), Studio Tenn, and then probably Actor's Bridge is the fourth largest one in town. Mainly the first three are the big name ones in town. Actor's Bridge has been around for a while and they're pretty popular.

Studio Tenn is musical theatre, correct?

"Studio Tenn does a lot of musical theatre, they also do straight theatre, like they're about to open or have just opened a production of Doubt. They did The Elephant Man last year, so yeah, they definitely do. Studio Tenn and NashRep are the ones that do musicals in town, and then the Shakespeare Festival does Shakespeare. Then Actor's Bridge does a lot of smaller, newer works from all over the country."

Is there a lot of crossover in production staff and actors?

"Yeah. Then there's also the Children's Theatre in town, which I should've included as well. That's kind of a big deal. There's a lot of people who move between, I mean I've worked for SHakespeare and Studio Tenn, and then I have friends who've worked for Shakespeare and Studio Tenn and NashRep. I'm really good friends with the people from Actor's Bridge, so it's not that big of a community. If you're an active player in the community, everybody kinda knows everyone."

So you got involved with Nashville Shakespeare Festival just through that?

"Kinda, yes. So, the way that wound up is that my sophomore year, we were doing a production of Metamorphoses and the director wanted to do some projection stuff. We had nobody in the department who knew anything about it and just through some fluke they said, "hey, do you want to do this?" And I was like, "sure, I know nothing about this, but I'll take a crack at it". I picked it up pretty quickly and it kinda seemed to click for me. So, I did it for that show and then I did it for a production of a show called Alice, written by a girl in the department and It won some awards. So, I did that, and then for the King they had a production designer, Collin Pearson, who works mainly at the children's theatre. He had to back out for some reason, so they needed another one. So, Paul *inaudible*, who was the head of the theatre department, was doing the set for the show and Denise said "do you know anybody who does projections?", I said "Well I am a student" and that's how I got it. Then apparently, they liked me enough to bring me back. It's very much an example of "it's just a matter of who you know"."

When you started working on Hamlet, how did the projections of the ghost come to be?

"So, I was originally hired, essentially last January during Romeo and Juliet. Right before we were about to open up Romeo and Juliet last year, Denice asked me if I wanted to do the projections for Hamlet and I said "yeah, sure. That would be awesome." I read an article, not long before, about a dance show that had done an interesting thing where they had a rear projection behind the dancer and they had a live video feed of the dancer that they then fed into the program and then manipulated so that she had a larger than life, distorted shadow behind her that moved exactly with her as she moved and that idea was interesting to me. That was actually the original idea for the ghost. We were going to record Bryan live and feed that into the system."

Onstage?

"Either onstage or off stage. I was like "I have this idea for the ghost" when she asked me a year ago. I was like "I have this idea for the ghost. I don't know how well it'll work, but whatever." She was like "yeah, I want to do that." And then about February she was like "hey, do you want to do this set as well?" and I was like "sure?" Because she really wanted the projections to be super important in this show, so she figured that having one person do both wouldn't be a bad idea and I guess it wasn't. I think it turned out pretty well. So then, for the ghost, the more we started to talk about it, it shifted more from the ghost being onstage and projector at the same time to just being a projection of him and originally he was just going to stand offstage in a wing somewhere and do the whole thing and then that became a whole bunch of technical hurdles that we had to jump through. So, we realized it would just be easier to record him doing a bunch of stuff and then I just edit together all the videos that are then projected. It took a little bit more work on the part of the other actors, because rather than reacting to a live feed that they could kind of play with, it was a recording, but they figured it out and it worked well. That is kind of how the evolution of the ghost was. It was originally going to

be live and then that became too much to do in the amount of time that we had left and so I just wound up taking Bryan and just recording him in front of a green screen for like an hour and getting a whole bunch of different stuff with him and Denice and then I cut that together into what was the show."

Great, and so then those were cued by someone at the show - was that you?

"No. It has been me in the past, I did it a few times for King Lear and Romeo and Juliet, but I was too busy this time, just with work and stuff so there was just a board-op they had. The program that I use, I can set it up to be dummy-proof where it's just like any other program. You just press the spacebar and it goes to the next one. So, I did that and I worked with the stage manager and the director to figure out when exactly the video should be called to ghosts and get everything timed out properly."

What is the program?

"It's a program called Isadora, it's by a German company called Troikatronix. It's an audio/video program so it's actually more designed like a sound program or like a sound board cause everything is modular and it's kind of like you've got all these different boxes and then you have inputs and they do something and you have to, like, chain inputs to outputs and things like that and that's how you do everything which is very note heavy and kind of workflow kind of thing. Very similar in the way that sound flows through a sound system or some things like that - so that works in my brain. Generally when people look at what I'm doing, it doesn't make any sense cause it's just like gray boxes and green and red and it's just going everywhere. But once you have some minor experience if you sit down with it for 5 or 10 minutes you can "see through the code". But yeah so I've used that program for three years now."

So you had Brian stand in front of the green screen and that's when you got the raw footage and so what did you/how did you get that video to what it is on stage?

"So generally in my work I use Isadora to program projections, cue the projections and things like that. And then I just used the adobe creative suite so Photoshop, premiere pro, after effect, anything like that to get the effects so depending on what I'm doing or if I'm just editing a photo or a still image I'll go in to photoshop and I'll do what I need to do and then export that to the program. Or if it's video, I'll go into after effects and add the detail that I need and things like that. I'll cue up the animations and then maybe run that into premiere pro if it has to be that has to be chained together with other things - you know, just to edit the video. So most of the detail work on the projections is done outside of the program and it's just a single video file that's fed in to it. And then generally if I'm doing anything to it, I can do some stuff like distortion and stuff like that in the program because it's pretty simple to do, but anything more complicated than that is easier to do ahead of time. Cause the thing about the program is that it's having to render all of that live every time, so the more effects you try to put on stuff, the more likely it is to lag the video or to crash the program or run the processors out or whatever. It's easier in the long run to do as much to the video as I can beforehand and then just….essentially just playing the video."

So, when you were designing those videos, what did you really have in mind and did Denise just give you free reins and let you do your thing?

"It was kind of a bit of both. I mean we definitely had a number of conversations before I started doing anything of me trying to get at what she wanted from them. It was mainly in our

main conversation, in what do you want the set to do and how do you want the projections to work? More of those broader...like how does the whole show look? As far as the ghost went, she was there with me and Brian, when we were filming him. So, she definitely had things in mind, she had very specific motions for things. So, we got those shots that she wanted and I had some that I wanted to get. And then after that I pretty much had free reign to do whatever I wanted. And then she just needed to approve it. What you saw was, not quite the 3rd version, I made one edit and she liked it but she didn't really like the way it flowed. I was able to just edit around it, so he walks on, and he stops, and he points, and he walks off and he walks on again and he fades out of view. So, what if you flip this and he walks on and he fades and then he walks on and points and then he walks off. So, it was like the 3rd round but I didn't have to edit a new video, I just had to put it in a new order for what was actually seen. So, at the end of the day it was down to what she wanted but she gave me a lot of free reign in creating it."

That's great it was cool, I thought it really interesting. I didn't know how the ghost would be treated, because it seemed to be a bit of a wildcard.

"Definitely one of those things where is a person going to stand on stage or are they gonna do something else with it? So definitely we wanted to try and do something different that hadn't been done before, and I think we succeeded in that."

And if I remember correctly in almost every case musicians were playing, like a bow on a symbol.

"Yeah, Natalie and her band did a good job of helping to set atmosphere for stuff. And then Anne and I worked really closely together as far as how the lighting looked so things didn't get washed out or too saturated. I mean, at the end of the day to get the total effect of the ghost being on stage and the scenes happening, it was definitely a team effort. And that's the way it should be."

I think that's about it for me, unless there's anything you think we should know about that ghost?

"I mean no, I think I've talked about everything that's interesting about it. It was a fun challenge, I definitely think it was the most challenging part of the design."

When you did King, Leader… was it a similar situation?

"I mean it was a similar situation, but it wasn't nearly as complicated. Because there wasn't that same level of supernatural stuff happening on stage. There was more of playing with warp and distortion on images. It was like walls would shimmer and shake, or a stone wall started to turn into snakeskin once. So it was a little more of the subtle stuff that I did, whereas with this it was just like 'annnnnd ghost.'"