



BEOWULF BORITT: THE DIRECTOR'S DESIGNER

By David Thompson

It's October 2016. The World Series was tied. The Cleveland Indians and the Chicago Cubs. In New York, it had been hot. Everyone was watching the national headlines, assuming the upcoming election would break the right way. In Times Square, tourists lined up for shows like "Hamilton" even though they knew they were on a fool's errand. And just two blocks north on 48th Street, a new show was in tech at the Longacre Theater. "A Bronx Tale" had completed a successful out-of-town tryout in February and the word was good. And yet, there was the Tony-Award winning set designer, Beowulf Boritt, in the alley of the Longacre, beating trashcans with a stick.

"Wulfie," as everyone calls him, was in a t-shirt, covered with New York grime, pummeling the already mercilessly dented trashcans. "I was given a stick and I used it every time I could." Frustration brought on by a week of slow-moving technical rehearsals? No. Boritt was just giving these props an added layer of "humanity and life." In fact, Boritt had been beating the set with that same stick every chance he could. "It's hard to give something the feeling of life when it was made only a few months ago. So I used that stick to hit the scenery, dent the corners, round the edges, leave scuff marks." In other words, make the set look as authentic as the fire escapes and trash cans in that very alley outside the stage door.

"I look at it this way: if you are going to put something on the set, make sure it matters."

This attention to detail has made Boritt one of the most sought-after designers in New York. Every element Boritt brings to the stage, no matter how large or small, contributes to the emotion of the story. “It’s all about emotion. That’s what I want to convey more than location. Location is important, of course, but that’s secondary to me. It’s about the emotion of the story.”

Boritt is a “director’s designer.” His design is always in service of the director’s vision. He doesn’t come to a project with pre-conceived ideas or notions. His own design aesthetics never dictate his work. Instead, his measure of success is how well he brings the director’s concept of the story to life.

“When you work with directors who have a vision, who are comfortable being at the helm, who are certain where you are headed, you see how the theater works. And you see results.”

In a very short time, Boritt has collaborated with many of Broadway’s most celebrated directors. His work is a perfect interpretation of their approach to theater: the grand gesture of Harold Prince. The visual brilliance of James Lapine. The sweeping emotion of Susan Stroman. The down-center storytelling of Jerry Zaks. And it all starts with Boritt’s ability to collaborate – and listen.

“He’s a great listener,” says Jerry Zaks. “He doesn’t impose his own style. It’s not the tail wagging the dog. But he’s also a great storyteller. He’s relentless in finding the best vision for the story. Balancing his passion for great storytelling is his passion for creating great art.”

“Wulfie is the consummate collaborator, always willing to explore any idea,” says Susan Stroman. “And not just with me, but with his fellow designers and performers. He really listens to everyone’s concerns and is respectful to all. He brings inspiration to every department.”

“Wulfie is an artist. He has a great aesthetic,” says James Lapine. “He thinks outside the box and is willing to try something new.”

This willingness to try new things is reflected in his varied portfolio of designs. Each one is distinct, each contains a signature element that sets it apart. The real trees in “Come from Away.” The river of water in “Therese Raquin.” The post-modern chairs in “The Scottsboro Boys.” The flooding bathtub in “If There Is I Haven’t Found it Yet.” The dizzying vision of New York in “Act One.” And the gritty (and yes, realistic garbage cans) in “A Bronx Tale.”

Reality is interpreted into abstraction in order to make art that conveys emotion.

“You start with the story as literature,” Boritt says. “You read the words that are being presented. Then you ask, ‘what is it about.’ Not the details of the plot, but more thematic. What is the story trying to say? And that leads to the bigger question: how can the design participate in this discussion.”

Boritt’s approach to scenic design is guided by an overriding principle: “Set design is the transformation of space over time in service of a story. It almost sounds like a scientific dictum, like Newton’s Law of Gravity. But Boritt explains, “Look at it this way: a set is a piece of physical sculpture that you are going to see over a duration of time. It’s not the primary thing the audience responds to, but it is part of the experience. In a play, what creates drama? Characters must change. The physical world must change too.”

Boritt is the son of noted Civil War scholar Gabor Boritt and opera singer Elizabeth Boritt. He and his brothers, Jake and Daniel, lived in different small towns growing up and he credits his grandmother, Anita Marie Wilson Norseen Hooker, for his early inspiration to express himself artistically. “She gave me my first set of paints and I was always painting or sketching something.” Boritt went to Vassar to study literature with no intention of pursuing a career in design, even though he continued to be involved in theatrical projects -- designing, writing and even performing but never seriously. “I thought I might become a college professor.”

Boritt was encouraged by a teacher at Vassar to go to New York University's Tish School of the Arts and study design with John Conklin. "I don't think I would ever have come to New York. I was too terrified." But after moving to New York for graduate school, he conquered that fear and embraced the pressure-cooker pace of the city. "At school they piled so much work on you, it taught you how to design too many projects with too little sleep. It's been useful."

Before Boritt graduated, he had designed projects for dozens of little theater companies all over the city. "I banged on every door. In my first jobs, I built most of the sets I designed. It was a huge help because I could do everything. Frankly, that's why I think I was hired." By the time Boritt graduated, he had already begun to develop a network of contacts in the world of the theater. "I hate to network, but I taught myself to do it. If you don't, someone more gregarious is going to get the job. It doesn't matter how talented you are, how nice you are, you can't be a wallflower." Networking, of course, is important – just like hard work. But so is luck. And if not luck, at least being in the right place at the right time. And that is what happened when Boritt graduated from NYU.

BEOWULF BORITT AND HAROLD PRINCE

With a portfolio full of projects, Boritt, like all the other graduate school designers from around the country, applied to attend the annual Memorial Day tradition, "Ming's Clam Bake" at Lincoln Center Library. Ever since 1990, legendary designer Ming Cho Lee and his wife Betsy hosted a two-day showing of portfolios of the brightest talents from the top design schools from all over the country. "It was a little like a debutante ball for the industry," Boritt says.

Like all the other young designers attending that year, Wulfie brought his best designs, sketches and models. "I had done a model for 'Love's Labour's Lost.' It was a turntable set. I had rigged it on an old record player so you could push a button and the turntable moved. I looked up and there was Hal Prince, pushing the button on my model, delighted by the silliness of it. There was no mistaking who Hal was. We had a nice chat."

"I attended it every year, checking out over a hundred artist," Hal had said in an interview before he died in 2019. "Beowulf was one of the most impressive."

"I was completely overwhelmed," Boritt admits. "A few days later, I got a letter from Hal saying, 'It was nice to meet you. I'm heading off for the summer. But I wish you luck with your career and maybe we'll meet again.' I've kept the letter framed on my wall. It's an incredible thing – getting a bit of encouragement from a person you respect. It's massively important."

Every six months or so, Boritt wrote Hal and the connection resulted in Hal's recommendation for Boritt to design Jason Robert Brown's 2001 production of "The Last Five Years."

"Hal became a mentor for me." And before Hal died, Boritt had designed Hal's productions of "Love Musik," "Paradise Found" and "Prince of Broadway."

"When I first started working with Hal on 'Love Musik,' I was terrified," Boritt says. "I was aware of trying to keep it in check. And Hal said, 'I am going to say a lot of things to you, just because I tell you something specific doesn't mean you have to do it.'"

Hal was demanding of his designers and considered them to be an integral part of the entire process of creating a show. "If you know what your set is, you can understand how your show will flow," Hal said, "how the scenes will move, how you get from moment to moment. It becomes the motor of the show."

But the simplicity of the concept was the one thing Hal always insisted upon. And for Hal, it always came down to the Black Box.

“It’s all about the power of the Black Box.” Hal said. “That’s where everything starts. And into that world of the Black Box, you only add what is truly necessary. Less is more. Put as little onstage as possible. The most important tool in the theater is the audience’s imagination. You give the audience a beautiful chair or table and they fill in the blank spaces. They put in the wallpaper and doors and furniture and pictures. Each person puts in a different vision. It’s a living, breathing entity.”

Hal has been credited with directing some of the most lavish productions on Broadway: “Follies,” “A Little Night Music,” and of course, “The Phantom of the Opera.” But Hal would argue that these designs were in fact quite simple.

“Hal always talked about ‘Phantom’ as a black box production which I thought was absurd until I went back and studied it. Conceptually, that’s what it is. There might be a staircase or a chandelier, but each functions as a way to define a location and elicit an emotion.”

“The wonderful thing about the theater,” Hal said, “is that you can stand in the middle of an empty stage and say, ‘Here we are in the middle of the Sahara and the audience is right there with you. Yes, this is exactly what the Sahara looks like because it’s all in our minds.’”

“The empty black box is evocative,” Boritt agrees. “Less is more. Economy and brevity is usually better storytelling. Although as Sondheim once said to me, ‘Usually economy is brevity. But there’s always Tolstoy.’”

Hal was a demanding director but also a powerful mentor. He was generous with praise, encouragement and most of all his support - especially of young artists and designers.

“I was invited to a Christmas party at Hal’s New York apartment,” Boritt remembers. “It was very overwhelming, filled with all sorts of famous celebrities: writers, actors. It was like it was from another time. And I remember thinking for the first time: ‘The door is opened and you are allowed to go in.’”

BEOWULF BORITT AND JAMES LAPINE

Boritt’s first Broadway show was a project he had initially turned down. “Schedules, or something like that.” “The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee” started its journey at Barrington Stage in Massachusetts in 2004. It was slated to re-open off-Broadway with James Lapine taking over the direction. “I had just done ‘The Last Five Years’ and James asked me how I got the job. I said I had been recommended by Hal Prince and he seemed impressed. At least I think he was,” Boritt laughs, “and then he hired me.”

“Spelling Bee” opened at Second Stage and then moved to Broadway almost immediately. “That one changed my life.” The show ran for almost three years and suddenly Boritt was “a Broadway designer.” It was also the beginning of his collaboration with James Lapine. “Wulfie has a great simple aesthetic – which reflects my aesthetic,” Lapine says. “Which is graphic. Geometric. Using space. Wulfie thinks outside the box – which is what I like to do as a writer and director.” “James is always trying to do something new and different,” Boritt says. “What’s exciting to me about James is that he has a graphic design and photography background before he became a writer and director. So he’s willing to take on an interesting visual for a set even if it makes the show harder – as long as he thinks it will ultimately benefit the show.”

“There aren’t many director/playwrights who work the way I do,” Lapine says. “I have a visual background. I tend to see the show when I write it. It’s not spelled out. I don’t spend a lot of time describing what I see. But I see it.”

“He’s very hard on me,” Boritt says. “He makes me work my ass off.”

“I’m not easy to work with. I’m well aware of that,” Lapine admits. “But I challenge myself with everything I do. I don’t like to repeat myself. I want every project to go a little further out there.” The collaboration continued with the 2012 production of “Sondheim on Sondheim.” “It was a documentary in the form of a musical,” Boritt says.

The set consisted of fifty-four flat screen LCD monitors, that, for the first fifteen minutes of the show, were used as one big video screen. “People thought, ‘Oh, I get it, we’re watching a documentary.’ But then, when the show began to explore ‘West Side Story,’ suddenly the set tore apart and the top half of the video wall lifted, revealing actors. The monitors turned around and you saw the world behind the world. The deconstructed side. It was my way of showing Sondheim’s impact on the form and how he ultimately turned the form on its head.

“James said to me, ‘You have created a puzzle – and that’s appropriate. Sondheim loves puzzles. His musicals are puzzles. The man himself is a puzzle. And in that sense, the video stood in for Sondheim.’”

Following “Sondheim on Sondheim,” Lapine and Boritt began one of their most ambitious collaborations – one that would win Boritt his first Tony Award: “Act One.”

“Act One” is based on the Moss Hart autobiography and required reading of anyone who has ever worked in the theater. It traces Hart’s rise from a tenement in the Bronx to becoming the most successful, sophisticated and celebrated director in New York.

“It’s the story of a young man, trying to get ahead in the world. It’s about his energy, his youth, his drive. It’s about what we all experience in the early years of our careers in the theater: we run up and down a lot of stairs. In and out of offices, banging on doors, running into rooms. That’s the energy of New York. That’s life in the theater. And despite all the running, you never know where you are going.”

James Lapine’s initial draft of the script was over 175 pages long and took place in countless locations. “When James first handed me the play, I realized very few scenes were longer than a page or two. Everything moved quickly from one location to the next.”

“When I approach a script,” Boritt says, “I go through it and decide what I need to tell the story. If I see that someone has to knock on a door, I will need a door. They’re eating lunch so I need a table. What are the things the writing demands for clear storytelling. And then I try and see if I can put nothing more onstage than what is needed. It’s not a hard and fast rule, but what is the minimum the writing requires?”

But when Boritt put down the script after the first read of “Act One,” he realized the design would require more than a doorknob or a table or a window. He would have to create all of New York: from the slums to the alleyways, from the backstage to the second balcony of a theater, from the agent’s office to the grand mansions of the Upper East Side. What’s more, it had to move from one location to the next with the same breathless energy of the young Moss Hart.

“I knew it required a concept. A big concept. If you have a concept, it starts to answer a lot of questions. Until you have something to start answering those questions, there are too many choices and you don’t know where to go.”

What’s more, the design needed to meet the unique demands of the Beaumont Theater, New York’s third-largest theater.

“The Beaumont is my favorite theater. It allows you to be both massive and epic and also very intimate.” Still, the 75-foot wide stage presents real challenges. “I had run into John Lee Beatty and he said, ‘Don’t forget how long it takes to get scenery on and off.’”

Boritt began his design work like he always does: sketching, researching, building small rough models. “I always build a model. That shows me what the set does in detail in three dimensions.

Maybe I'm old fashioned but sketches are just tools to get to the model because ultimately, set design is a three-dimensional sculptural form that will surround living breathing people. And until you create a three-dimensional model, you don't know what you have."

Boritt's initial design was something quite different. "I was off to a bit of a false start." The design was more traditional, flatter, and not reinforcing the emotion of the story.

The night before Boritt was supposed to present his ideas to Lapine he had a breakthrough moment. "I started thinking, what if we had an enormous 75-foot revolve. And on that, I'd put a three-story set with each location only suggested. And then, eureka, the idea was there."

Boritt spent all night creating a model with matchsticks, paper and hot glue. "I felt a little like the character in the story, staying up all night." The next day he presented his design idea to Lapine. "And we never looked back," Lapine says.

The concept not only solved the problems of creating all kinds of locations all across the city, it reinforced the emotion of the story in a very real and visceral way. The design provided its own visual engine and captured a life in the theater, running up and down stairs, through doors, in and out of rooms, on and off stage. It also capture the feeling of life moving forward, life stalling, life going in reverse – all realities of life in the theater.

"Those actors were running marathons. No one realized the physical challenges of all those stairs."

"Not everyone was happy," Lapine says tactfully. "The set would revolve, sometimes very slowly, and the actors would get very disoriented – they wouldn't know if they were exiting stage left or stage right. So to help them, we had to put lights in the wings, a red light on stage right, green light on stage left so they would know where they were. It did involve a lot of reorientation for the actors. It was interesting ..."

But the design was spectacular and a highpoint in Boritt's career. "It was truly one of those shows when I would stand onstage and think, 'How did anyone let me do this? I am so lucky.' These are the moments when I pinch myself. To be on Broadway where we have the resources to do this – and then actually do it."

BEOWULF BORITT AND SUSAN STROMAN

Of course, not all stories can be told with a three-story set on a 75-foot turntable to create multiple locations and seamless transitions. In fact, in the case of John Kander and Fred Ebb's "The Scottsboro Boys," the storytelling was just the opposite.

The entire production consisted of twelve chairs and two planks. Over the course of the entire show, that's all that would be used to create multiple courtrooms, a box car, jail cells, windows, doors. What's more, each of these locations would be built in nearly full light, often without the audience even noticing how the chairs were being reconfigured or what was coming next.

The design was not an exercise in story theater. Rather, it was in service of one of the most racially charged chapters in American history. In 1931, nine African American boys, ages 13 – 19, were pulled off a boxcar and accused of raping two white women, a crime they never committed. Their story divided America. The trials became a media circus. In fact, one reporter from the North wrote that the trials had all the trappings of a minstrel show. The musical uses the minstrel from as a subversive Brechtian framework.

The story is told by a travelling minstrel troupe of Black men. "At the top of the show, they are willing participants. But through the course of the show, they turn the minstrel form on its head in service of their greater truth. And by the end, in protest, they walk away from the form," says Susan Stroman.

“The minstrel form was risky – that’s for sure – but it was very deliberate,” Boritt says. “It was all about the deconstruction of the form.”

Stroman asked Boritt to come to an early reading of the show. “I immediately responded to the material,” Boritt says. “I felt it was important. It had something to say. And, quite frankly, it was the kind of material I came to New York to do.”

Stroman recalls her first meeting with Boritt. “I told Wulfie that I wanted an abstract set and that I wanted to be able to perform the whole show just using 12 chairs.”

“It was daunting,” Boritt admits. “But, of course, thrilling. I love the idea of putting all your tools onstage and then throughout the show doing new tricks, finding new ways to reconfigure them. It’s so much more rewarding than hiding scenery in the wings. The audience becomes part of the process of the invention of the visual with you. It’s something they have to imagine. You give them as little as you can in order to tell the story and the rest is up to them. That’s theater magic for me.”

Of course, the twelve chairs were not twelve ordinary chairs. “Instead of using traditional bentwood chairs usually seen in Vaudeville and minstrel shows, he used modern silver chairs,” Stroman says. “These chairs represented the idea that this story of injustice was not bound in the past, but, absolutely resonated with society today.”

“I started with a scale model of the set and scale models of the chairs,” Boritt says. “I began experimenting how the chairs could interlock to create different shapes. And once Stro signed off, we had a couple prototypes made by a scene shop. Very light weight. Made of hollow aluminum tubing that could be strong enough for nine men to jump around on.”

“Wulfie solved the puzzle of how to make that concept work,” Stroman says. “He created chairs that the actors could lock into place quickly as we transitioned into the different locations. With set changes under seven seconds, he made it possible to morph those chairs into interesting shapes.”

The set was, in fact, a living breathing sculpture made out of chairs that, in the spirit of Boritt’s design mantra, “transformed in space over time in service of the story.”

“But the astonishing thing was how the reconfiguring of the chairs was choreographed,” Boritt says. “During tech, I watched Stro staging these transitions. In one moment the chairs were a box car. And then there would be a very quick piece of stage business – a misdirect, really – and then, the lights would change and we were in a jail. It all happened, right in front of me, but I didn’t see it coming. How was it possible? And Stro did it transition after transition. That was genius.”

But so was Boritt’s set. In fact, the original set model and one of the chairs are in the permanent collection of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington D.C.

That same impulse to tell a story with visual elements that are constantly reinvented in full view of the audience was central to Boritt’s design for “Marie, Dancing Still.” Lynn Ahrens and Stephen Flaherty’s musical tells the story of Marie van Goethem, the young dancer who modeled for Edgar Degas’ famous sculpture. “I love this piece,” Boritt admits. “When I first read it, I cried I was so moved.”

“Marie, Dancing Still” is unique because it is cross fertilization of classical ballet, musical theater and visual art. “Because Wulfie is well versed in all these genres, he was able to contribute on every level,” Stroman says. “Collaboration is the key to any successful musical. Wulfie collaborated closely with lighting designer Ken Billington, costumer William Ivey Long and projection designer Ben Percy. They all followed Wulfie’s lead. They were all on the same page and they delivered the most beautiful show I have ever seen.”

Because so much of the show was danced, Boritt knew he needed a set that could disappear at a moment's notice. "The set needed to open up to accommodate up to twenty-five dancers swirling around the stage," Stroman says.

"The set was ultimately just a series of five blank giant painter's canvases. The canvases revolved and reconfigured in a thousand different ways. Some had arched windows hidden in them, some had other scenic elements, but they were essentially the same five canvases that made all the different locations.

"As each scene appears, the canvases are saturated with lighting and projection—as if every bit of light is a painted brushstroke on a large canvas," Stroman says. "Every scene is reminiscent of an actual Degas painting. The colors and finishes – they all harken back to Degas' work."

"What I discovered studying Degas' painting is that he was very economical about what he put into the painting," Boritt says. "They seem very complete. But when you look at them, you realize that aside from a few details, much of the painting is just impressionistic paint strokes, not realistic details.

"Another thing I learned is the way Degas cropped his paintings. The way he crops a room, or just has an arm or a leg coming in from the edge. Sometimes he crops the space right in the middle, implying space extending outside the picture frame. It's a concept I love to bring into design work as well – it allows the audience to imagine something the audience can't see. It makes them complicit in what they see."

"He is a true artist with the heart of a storyteller," says Stroman. "His design always plays a part in pushing the plot forward. Boritt immerses himself in the world of the show and creates a set where the characters and their story make sense. Through research, sketches and models he approaches each element as a visual artist first—the technical always follows."

Although Boritt would likely push back on being called an artist in the same breath as Degas, he does, like most artists, "sign his work." When a set is complete, Boritt will hide a small toy elephant somewhere in the structure. "I loved elephants when I was a kid. They were big and I was little. When I was in college I started putting elephants on the set. So that's when I started and I always do it. People have given them to me over the years and I have more than I know what to do with."

BEOWULF BORITT AND JERRY ZAKS

Which brings us back to the garbage cans in the alley of the Longacre Theater and the stick Boritt used to give his set a life and humanity all its own.

"Because when all is said and done, it all comes back to the story and the world that it inhabits," says Jerry Zaks.

In the case of Chazz Palminteri's "A Bronx Tale," the story is set in the Italian section of the Bronx from 1960 – 1968. "Wulfie created an entire world that was in the intersection of two city blocks," Zaks says. "Everything, every element, brought that world to life. You could see it, you could smell it, it was real."

Boritt had spent time in this part of the city during his time at NYU. One of his first jobs was designing "Titus Andronicus" at the "Belmont Italian-American Playhouse," a 60-seat theater on Arthur Avenue in the South Bronx.

"I knew that world," Boritt says. "There are whole neighborhoods of New York that are small towns. And that was my inspiration for this set. I wanted this tight little neighborhood that was warm and nurturing – and also closed down and confining– all at the same time.

“It’s filled with people who know who you are, what you are doing. Undoubtedly, it’s a wonderful place. But it’s also a cage that’s almost impossible to escape. And in the end, that’s what our main character has to do: choose between love and hate.”

The challenge was finding a way to create a concept that had the lightness of a musical balanced with the heaviness and grit of New York City.

“When I sat down with Wulfie,” Zaks says, “we knew exactly where to start: the show needed a stoop and a streetlamp. These are the quintessential images of the neighborhood. The stoop is the front yard. It was right there in the writing.”

And the discussion moved from there.

“We started talking about the heart of it, what the essence of it was – we were talking plumbing as much as we were talking about art. In other words, how do we get from Point A to Point B.”

“And from the stoop and the streetlamp, that led me to the fire escapes,” Boritt says. “They represent the architecture of the neighborhood. But they also represent that feeling of being in a cage, of being trapped, boxed in.

“My assistant and I went to the Bronx and started taking pictures of everything – the stores, the storefronts. And the fire escapes. I knew I wanted to make the towers out of real fire escapes – that would move, but that they would still be real. And that’s what we did. Those four massive multi-story, fire-escape towers were immensely heavy – and made of iron. About 6,000 pounds each. Everything was reinforced because they were so heavy. But it was the authenticity that made the difference. They didn’t wobble like flimsy flats. They were real.”

Of course, 6,000 pound towers of iron had the potential of killing the pace of the show and required their own choreography. They spun, moved and gracefully slid around the stage

“Jerry doesn’t want to wait for scenery. It has to move quickly. It has to get there. It’s about the speed of the transition.”

“How precious are those seconds,” Zaks agrees. “Who wants to wait for scenery?”

“It’s amazing how each second gets layered on top of the next.” Boritt says. “And that’s the thing that amazes me the most about Jerry’s skills. He knows the beats, the gestures, the looks that make a moment. He knows how fragile those moments are, yet how important they are to create. When he creates a moment, it comes down to the nanosecond. And you can mess it up if you add a second. He crafts them just perfectly. And that not only goes for the moments with the actors – but the moments of the set transitions.”

“If anything gets in the way of the story, it goes,” Zaks says. “Same with a musical number. A chunk of dialogue. Same with a bit of over-direction that is contrived. Wulfie gets that. He treats the elements of the scenery like I treat the characters in the play. They all have to contribute something. It’s the direct line in storytelling.”

WHAT’S AHEAD

Looking at the astonishing breadth of Boritt’s career, you might think he was extremely old. After all, he has designed twenty-four Broadway shows, eighty-two off-Broadway shows, not to mention numerous operas, ballets, international productions and even a circus or two. And that doesn’t even begin to scratch the surface of the shows he has done in regional theaters.

Even his list of awards and honors is staggering. Tony Awards, Outer Critic Circle Awards, Drama Desk Awards, Lortel Awards, Obie Awards – and this is only the beginning of the accolades.

But Boritt is a very young man who, in the words of the New York Times, looks like a graduate student. He happily lives with his wife, actress Mimi Bilinski. He has no visible scars from working in one of the most demanding and unforgiving businesses in the world. Hal Prince said

of Boritt, “He has the perfect combination of talent, tact, an even disposition and boundless enthusiasm.”

In other words, Boritt is still very much in his own “ACT ONE” of his career.

What’s ahead for Boritt in an industry that is still closed for business? James Lapine’s “Flying Over Sunset,” a new musical with a score by Tom Kitt and Michael Korie, is finished, teched and ready for audiences at Lincoln Center’s Beaumont Theater. “We were getting ready for our first preview on March 12 – and then we were notified Broadway was shut down.”

James Lapine is excited about the work. “I think it’s our best yet.” And Boritt agrees. “It was an incredible project for me and I can’t wait for audiences to see it.”

Of course, when Broadway returns and the marquees are lit once again, the landscape will be very different. A lot will be driven by the new reality of producing shows. Ticket prices, which had skyrocketed before the theater closings, will need a reality check if audiences are expected to return to the theater. There will be fewer tourists in the short-term. And the average theater goer is unlikely to spend \$300 per ticket to see a show. There will be a moment of reckoning when everyone in the theater – theater owners, producers, writers, actors, musicians, stagehands – will be expected to give something back. Shrinking budgets will mean shrinking productions.

Is that a terrible thing? The thought doesn’t faze Boritt who won a Tony nomination for a set that consisted of twelve chairs and two planks.

Boritt assesses the situation in a very pragmatic manner. “How small can you keep the crew? How small can you keep the physical production? If you can get just enough scenery onstage to tell the story without needing forty guys to move around millions of dollars of stuff, then the show’s likely to be successful.”

All that’s required is an idea – a concept – a grand gesture. And then to draw on one of the most powerful things in the theater, the audience’s imagination.

“When I did my first show, a stagehand said to me, ‘It’s called show business. It’s not called show art.’ And I always remember that. I’m trying to create art within a business structure.”

In the meantime, there is a set on the stage of the Beaumont, waiting to tell a story. There is a tiny toy elephant hidden somewhere in that structure. There are set models in Boritt’s studio for projects waiting to happen. There are stacks of new scripts from directors, eager to get back to work. And there is Beowulf Boritt, sitting at his desk in his studio, thinking about new ways to transform space over time in service of new stories.

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