

A Review of David Korins' Set Designs

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Abstract: This article examines three of David Korins' most successful works: *Hamilton*, *Dear Evan Hansen*, and *Beetlejuice*. By analyzing the set designs he made for these three shows, this article argues that Korins has a strong ability to find the solution to the specific design details that are linked closely to the plot, characters, and the author of the show to support the visual play and immersive environment. However, Korins' designs sometimes can call too much attention to themselves, suggesting that the live performance is in service to the set rather than creating sets that are in service to the show. This risky characteristic becomes more and more prominent in his career.

1. Introduction

David Korins is a creative set designer behind *Hamilton* and many other popular sets such as *Beetlejuice* and the 91st Academy Awards (the Oscars). As one of the leading set designers working today, Korins' unique approach to storytelling has shaped the ways audiences everywhere experience performance. His work crosses disciplines and industries, from concerts to television shows and Broadway, and his innovative designs have earned him three Tony Awards nominations in addition to Emmy and Obie Awards.

Korins' award-winning career crosses disciplines and industries but its roots are always in theater design. Korins grew up in Texas and received his undergraduate degree at the University of Massachusetts Amherst as a member of the Class of 1999. He enrolled in a theater course that covered all aspects of theater design—lighting, scenery, sound design, and costumes—and by the end of his sophomore year, he had run through the entire undergraduate theater design curriculum[1]. It was in 1997 that he started on his road to professional success. In 1997–2011, he was an intern, a design assistant, a director of the design program, a resident designer, and a guest designer at the Williamstown Theater Festival. This was where he found his passion for designing, especially in theater events and “learned to build, paint, prop, and design,” said Korins[2]. In 2004, he founded the company, David Korins Design, and signed some big clients like McDonald's, Target, Google, and even Kanye West. His widely admired set design for “*Hamilton*” promoted his fame. In 2016, the production for “*Grease: Live!*” gave him his first Emmy Award.

Here, I examine three of Korins' most successful works: *Hamilton*, *Dear Evan Hansen*, and *Beetlejuice*. By analyzing the set designs he made for these three shows, I argue that Korins has a strong ability to find the solution to the specific design details that are linked closely to the plots,

characters, and the author of the show to support the visual play and immersive environment. However, Korins' designs sometimes can call too much attention to themselves, suggesting that the live performance is in service to the set rather than creating sets that are in service to the show. This risky characteristic becomes more and more prominent in his career.

2. Hamilton - The show that starts Korins' career

The work that made David Korins famous is the hugely popular musical, *Hamilton*. This musical won eight Drama Desk Awards, including Outstanding Musical. At the 70th Tony Awards, *Hamilton* received a record-breaking 16 nominations and won 11 awards, including Best Musical. It received the 2016 Pulitzer Prize for Drama. Korins' set for the play displayed his creativeness and unique visual style.

As the play opens, Alexander Hamilton makes his entrance on the staircase that angles toward the ground like a ramp coming off a ship. This represents his arrival to the New York Harbor in 1776. The nautical ropes and pulleys featured throughout the set also carried over the theme of ship-based immigration.

The most important part of the *Hamilton* is a rotating stage floor centered in the middle of the set, and this is a clever logistical decision. The design is practical, effective, and highly significant. Consisted of two pieces of the independently spinning circle of wood that are built into the floor of the set, this device allows the actors to stand still and rotate simultaneously. Besides representing the hurricane that hits the Caribbean Island where Hamilton was born in the mid 1750s, this device serves as a metaphor for the relationship between Aaron Burr and Hamilton. Korins noted that "There's also this cyclical relationship between Aaron Burr and Hamilton, where they were spiraling around each other their entire careers and lives"[3]. Moreover, this device gives the duel strength and dramatic style. In the duel scenes, the two protagonists stalk each other on opposite sides of a larger circle, whizzing by one another before pausing to aim across the way, a crowd of dancers in between. In the famous final duel, burr fires only for a record scratch to announce a momentary pause in time. A dancer pinches the imaginary bullet in midair, slowly walking it across the circles toward Hamilton[4].

The rotating stage floor constitutes the most innovative part of the historical show combined with modern elements. In addition, the use of hip-hop music developed by African Americans and Latino Americans during the 1970s, roughly the same historical period as when the story of *Hamilton* happened, manifests the mix of classic story and modern techniques. *Hamilton* draws the audience into a limbo between past and present, allowing them to suspend disbelief and prepare to journey into historical imagination[5].

As for the background wall, Korins use it to represent America at that time. The whole background is a Colonial-era building under construction. Using the wooden scaffolding up around a half-made wall strongly supports the idea that this country is under "construction." During intermission, these brick walls are added eight feet taller. Although nobody sees this process, since they are buying merchandise or going to the bathroom, this adds permanence and weight to the design. As the height of the walls increases, the "country" is getting bigger, and the foundation is getting steadier. As Korins puts it, "We add to the height of the walls because the country is progressing and that foundation is getting bigger"[3]. The things hanging on the walls also change between acts, from rifles and wartime utilitarian objects to parchment paper, scrolls, and maps, because the time changes from wartime to a peaceful life. The first half of the show is about fighting a war, and the second half is about governing the country. About the color of the brick used on the walls, Korins tried 33 different shades before settling on the final version. This is important because he takes actors' different skin colors into account. For actors with light skin colors, they

can't stand in front of bricks with light color, or they can't be seen by all the audiences and vice versa. By choosing the color that works the best with actors with different skin colors, he makes sure that every actor "popped against the background"[3].

Yet a small flaw in the set design is that the set didn't show any sign of water. In the lyrics of the song, there are a lot of parts talking about seawater, and the story begins as a voyage. Although Korins uses nautical ropes and pulleys, stuff usually comes from boats, to represent this voyage, the set looks very dry and tidy, which can also be interpreted as a docked ship. At the Public, the show had a pool of water in early previews[6]. It would be better for Korins to keep this pool, which would give the audience a stronger feeling of sealing on the sea from the visual aspect.

Also, the show obsesses too much with actors' races. This is dismaying since the content of one's character is much more important than the color of one's skin. Hamilton himself was concerned with merit, not race. The Enlightenment pursuit of reason forges a nation that longed to be based solely based on merit instead of class, race, gender, or political pull[7]. This is could be better reflected in the set design. Korins tried 33 different shades of blocks, which shows that he takes different skin colors into account. However, he might focus too much on the issue of skin color and makes less effort on showing how Hamilton cherishes merits and honor. Since this show is named after Hamilton and is about Hamilton's life story, the set design should serve more to Hamilton's pride and honor.

3. Dear Evan Hansen - The show emphasizing on modern technologies

After creating *Hamilton*, Korins moved on to work on set design for *Dear Evan Hansen*. Compare to *Hamilton*, the set design he did for *Dear Evan Hansen* uses more technologies and is more modernized. However, it is a little distracting for the audience.

Evan Hansen is a painfully shy 17-years-old teenager with social anxiety living in a friendless environment. He is also luckless. His left arm is cast due to falling out of a tree during a summer internship at a local park. Under the encouragement of his therapist, Evan writes letters to himself to boost self-confidence. One such missive falls into the hands of Connor Murphy—like Evan, an adolescent outcast. When Connor kills himself, Evan's letter is found and widely misinterpreted. People thought Connor and Evan were secret friends, which made Evan famous and gradually trapped him into the false reality that he has helped to create.

This show wins six 2017 Tony awards and a 2018 Grammy Award, the 2017 Drama League Award for Outstanding Musical Production and off-Broadway production, two Obie Awards, a Drama Desk Award, and two Outer Critics Circle Awards, and two Helen Hayes Awards.

The set represents the connectivity and isolation of the Internet world. The whole set manifests elements of connectivity. Screens on the stage are hanging from all sides that display live tweets and messages from the characters of the show[8]. Teenagers are posting their lives, thoughts, pictures; teenagers are chatting through social app; teenagers are sharing their ideas towards news, events, and topics. Mutually influencing, teenagers are connected. Yet people are also isolated, as represented by the isolated screens. We are all independent individuals on the Internet, and it is isolation that causes social anxiety. Those screens are put in different places instead of combined as one, just like we cannot understand others perfectly.

Also, this drama shows how emotionally vulnerable young people being affected by social media such as Facebook, Snapchat, and Pinterest. Social media, which is originally designed for users to share their emotions and ideas, is now becoming the place full of manufactured feelings and facts, without regard to reality.

The most impressive detail is how Korins uses digital projects to bring the digital world into the real world. He uses nine video monitors that are rigged to fly, along with five tracking panels that are covered with scrim, which serve as projection surfaces. These immersive and glowing surfaces

are a representation of the screens of phones and computers, imitating how people receive information by looking at apps and websites on phones and computers. These monitors and panels are projected with posts, videos, and tweets moving around the characters, accompanied by automated lighting and a soundscape of voices offering running commentary. All of them contribute to a powerful audio-visual representation of our modern digital world. This represents that the characters are being dragged into a digital storm that with the help of the internet, Evan Hansen is gradually trapped in the world his lie creates: He gets attention from the girl he loves and becomes famous. In this fake reality, the longer he stays, the more lies he would make.

Although this is a good show that presents how sensitive young generations are affected by the internet, it fails to show how parents, or the elder generations, are influenced by the Internet. In the show, Evan's mother and Connor's family play important roles, but they get a free pass. Yet in the digital age, everyone, including the "last generation" who invented the Internet, is compassed by it. The lack of description of the last generation's experience with Internet is a major flaw of the show. The show would be completer and more realistic if the interactions between parents with digital products could be added.

Also, the nine screens in the scene of the bedroom are too much for the audience. The bedroom is the place where most conversation happens. Audiences should focus more on the facial expressions and body language of the actors. However, the nine screens with a lot of texts and pictures are very disturbing, which distracts the focus from the character to the screens. In addition, the huge moving screens dominate the stage, estranging Evan and his world. With the set design, Evan's new spaces become as empty as the ones he tries to escape, eerily and uncomfortably subverting the very message of the musical[9]. I think it would be better to have fewer scenes or even no screens, which would bring the audience a better watching experience.

4. Beetlejuice - A show about life and death

With the experience of creating the set design for *Hamilton* and *Dear Evan Hansen*, Korins brought *Beetlejuice* to Broadway. This design contains the most details, which is also the one that has the biggest problem.

Adapted from the 1988 film directed by Tim Burton, *Beetlejuice*, which is directed by Alex Timbers with scenery by Korins, has made a successful transition from Hollywood to Broadway. This show is one of the most acclaimed musicals of the season and have received eight Tony nominations.

In the show, David Korins shows his homage to the entire oeuvre of the Burtonian landscape since *Beetlejuice* was Tim Burton's second film. There are many details in the set design that, directly and indirectly, reference the worlds of *Coraline*, *Edward Scissorhands*, *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, and more. For example, the idea of the graveyard design at the beginning of the show comes from *The Nightmare Before Christmas*. Also, the netherworld model in the play was inspired by the tunnel that stretched out between the two worlds in *Coraline*. There is a painting on the wall in Maitlands' house above the fireplace. What is in the painting is the New England Town at the beginning of the original movie. When *Beetlejuice* owns the place, the black chandelier also shows how Korins combines ideas and inspirations from different works of Burton. First, the black chandelier looks like made from bat wings in homage to the two *Batman* movies Burton directs. Second, the inspiration for this chandelier comes from the small carousel on the head of Otho in the original movie. In addition, the bow tie of Jack Skellington, a character in Burton's 1992 work *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, can also be found on this chandelier. There is also a distorted black sculpture in Deetz's house, which is the same as the one in the movie. The whole set inherits Burton's visual vocabulary and the movie *Beetlejuice*'s aesthetic.

Before making big-budget live-action movies, Burton was an animator and an incredibly skilled illustrator and sketch artist. His illustration works become the source materials for many designs in the set. Inspired by a flower in Burton's illustration books, Korins resized it, created a new version as the pattern for the wallpaper, and then made a digital print as the wallpaper. Burton also inspires the style of the Beetlejuice's version of Maitland home. The spooky tooth and furs that Korins uses to decorate furniture come from Burton's drawing of monsters. Burton's cartoon and illustration style was used widely and effectively in the set design.

Using the forced perspective techniques, Korins makes the house look more oppressive, elevated, and psychedelic. The house is skewed in perspective and creates an open-mouth shape, just like a monster is going to eat the audience—the style of the house changes as the owner of the house changes. The Maitland home has country-style decorations, retro wooded furniture, and beautiful flower wallpaper mentioned earlier. The whole house is cast in natural light and green and pink decorations, which look peaceful and quiet. As the Deetz family moves in, the style of the room immediately becomes bold and metallic, and the world on the stage is completely modernized. Electronic lights, modern style furniture, and minimalist decoration make the house look like a typical American family. However, when Beetlejuice takes over the place, the whole style and decoration become frightening, magical, and demonized. The stage is cast in a psychedelic purple light, with the teeth decorated furniture and usage of black and white color. The undulating wall panels that bend and twirl create an impression of chaos and madness. The audience would feel like walking into a monster's cave or a witch's spooky castle.

As the style of the room changes, Korins works hard to make every piece of detail correlate with the change. Take the wall sconce as an example. Korins applies the classic candlestick in the Maitland home, which is common in movies made in the last century. As the Deetz family moves in, the wall sconce becomes metallic, minimalist, and modernized, changing into a spherical light bulb that sits on a gold-plated metal bracket. As for Beetlejuice's style, the lamp holder imitates the open mouth of a sandworm, and many small sharp teeth can be seen around it.

Beetlejuice is a typical ghost comedy. In ghost comedies, ghosts are relatively harmless. In order to make death less scary, they imaginings the afterlife in a humorous way. They turn the conflict of life versus death into one way of life against another. These films aim to teach the audiences how to live and suggest that death is not the worst of fates[10]. Korins' design serves this educational purpose. We can get a glimpse of their previous lives from objects hidden on the attic walls for the Maitland couple. Adam Maitland is a polite male, whose hobby was creating realistic sculptures. His wife Barbara tried to start a family and failed when she was alive, so she formed a liking for children. They worked very hard on redecorating their house when they were alive. After they died in a car accident and found that they become ghosts, haunted in the old house, they decided to scare the Deetz family out of the house to get their Victorian home back.

There are yarn balls, toolboxes, photo frames, vintage records, bicycles, fishing rods, and tennis balls, all hidden in the attic. The attic is a representation of the graveyard of their hopes and dreams. They spent too much doing other things, such as decorating the house, but they forgot to chase their dreams and spend time on their hobbies. All these abandoned hobbies and old stuff have brought a tremendous theatrical effect to the audience. This detail teaches the audience that we only live once, so do not let fear overtake your dreams. Just give it a try!

Although Korins' designs for *Beetlejuice* wonderfully represent the style and aesthetics of Burton and his movie work, this set is flawed. Those details in homage to Burton require a lot of background knowledge, which is a kind of insider joke. For audiences who did not have experience with or understandings of Burton's work, they will either ignore all these well-designed details and finish the whole show without realizing the ingenuity of Korins' designs, or feel confused about the purposes of these designs. Take the distorted black sculpture in Deetz's house as an example. The

audience might just consider it as a common decoration or have a different idea about the sculpture choice, without realizing that it is the same as the one in the movie. In a word, Korins' design for the *Beetlejuice* creates two groups of audience, one with insider knowledge of Burton's previous work, and another audience who misses most of the inside jokes. This division undercuts the cohesion of the show as a whole.

5. Conclusion

The article analyzed three pieces of Korins' set designs and presented him as a well-known and talented set designer who produced a lot of incredible works. As outlined in the article, He was good at putting details into sets and using these details as representations and metaphors for the plots, characters, and historical evidence, which was analyzed in the article and also can be reflected by the tons of praises he received. Yet sometimes he had taken on too much work, also shown in the article, which was distracting and not beneficial for the audience to enjoy the show. Therefore, Korins would get greater improvements in his career development if he can better balance the set design and the show in the future.

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