

Lighting & Sound America

Island Gods

By: David Barbour

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BONUS CLOSE-UP: DANCE

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Jazz Island, at Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, celebrates the legacy of Geoffrey Holder



Erzulie's dress "has a structure," Crawford says. "The petals have control arms, like a puppet. And she is on top of somebody's shoulders, with the other dancers under the skirt. I had to make it feel like she is on the water, riding the wave of her own element."

Cuban-American choreographer Maija García made her debut with Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater this fall with *Jazz Island*. Based on a folk tale from the

book *Black Gods, Green Islands*, by actor-director-designer and all-around polymath Geoffrey Holder, it features Erzulie, Afro-Caribbean goddess of love, intervening in the affairs of

young Bashiba, who is engaged, unhappily, to a young traveling man. Supplying the jazz in *Jazz Island* is a score by Trinidadian composer and trumpeter Etienne Charles.

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At the top of the piece, Erzulie makes a showstopping entrance, courtesy of costume designer Carlton Jones, sporting billowing skirts that briefly hide the presence of several dancers. Lighting/scenic designer Al Crawford supplies the rest of the Caribbean ambience, with an upstage set piece depicting a mountain ridge and a moon that flies in at various heights in the landscape.

Crawford, who for 25 years was Ailey's lighting director, notes that Garcia had "a desire to make something new for Ailey in a style that we might not have seen for a while. It's more dance theater. There's a history of this with Alvin Ailey; particularly in the '70s and '80s, they did a lot of story ballets, with many character roles as the company had such strong dancers who were also strong actors."

Garcia, a Minneapolis-based artist, has a fairly extensive theatrical

resume, including the Broadway musical *Fela!*, *West Side Story* at the Guthrie Theater, and John Leguizamo's musical *Kiss My Aztec!*, at Berkeley Rep and La Jolla Playhouse. "She had a pretty strong idea that it would be a tribute to Geoffrey Holder in some way," Crawford says. Originally, a Katherine Dunham dancer, Holder cut a wide swath through show business, appearing in the musical *House of Flowers*, appearing with Josephine Baker, rescuing the musical *The Wiz* from out-of-town disaster with his direction and costume design, playing the villainous Baron Samedi in the James Bond picture *Live and Let Die*, and gaining celebrity as a pitchman for 7-Up soda. In addition to a busy career as a painter, he also choreographed for Ailey and Dance Theatre of Harlem.

Crawford notes, "A lot of Maija's work is built around the African dias-

pora and Haitian storytelling traditions. But, in essence, *Jazz Island* was inspired by *Black Gods*, *Green Islands*." The book, published in 2011, explores the history, culture, and people of Trinidad and Tobago. At the same time, the designer notes, the choreographer was looking to create something distinct from *The Prodigal Prince*, Holder's piece for Ailey, which handles the same story. Garcia's approach, he adds, "is a little more Broadway, which I think the Ailey audiences will adore."

To realize this vision, Crawford says, "We landed on a design that felt potentially like an illustration from the book. Maija knew she wanted a mountainside, with some height and changes of level, where the gods would come from. Because most of the story takes place at night, we thought to explore a moon element. It started as a projection but, in the end,





Opposite: The piece goes through several changes of mood, and, Crawford says, "I had to have clear ideas about each sequence." Above: Baron Samedi, who interferes in the action, is, Crawford says, "a classic sexy, manipulative character. I needed a color that spoke to that. For me, that was a deep royal purple, a sassy color."

I wanted something physical."

The moon, which takes the light very interestingly, was painted by Susan Jackson of Scenic Art Studios. "She was great and really became a collaborator in the development of the paint treatments," Crawford says. He adds, laughing, "It's the story of the lighting designer doing the set. I started in the modern dance world, where the question always was, 'Can you do the set, too?' Ultimately, I wanted scenery that would take light well because that's going to be my problem when I'm sitting in the theatre. We used a lot of metallic paints on the moon unit, along with diamond dust." The latter, he says, "is almost like glitter but in larger chunks. Depending on how it's lit and from which direction, you can get different glimmers. I also wanted a little glow on the backside, so I integrated some LEDNeon RGB+A Ecoflex by Environmental Lights there." The show, he adds, is built for

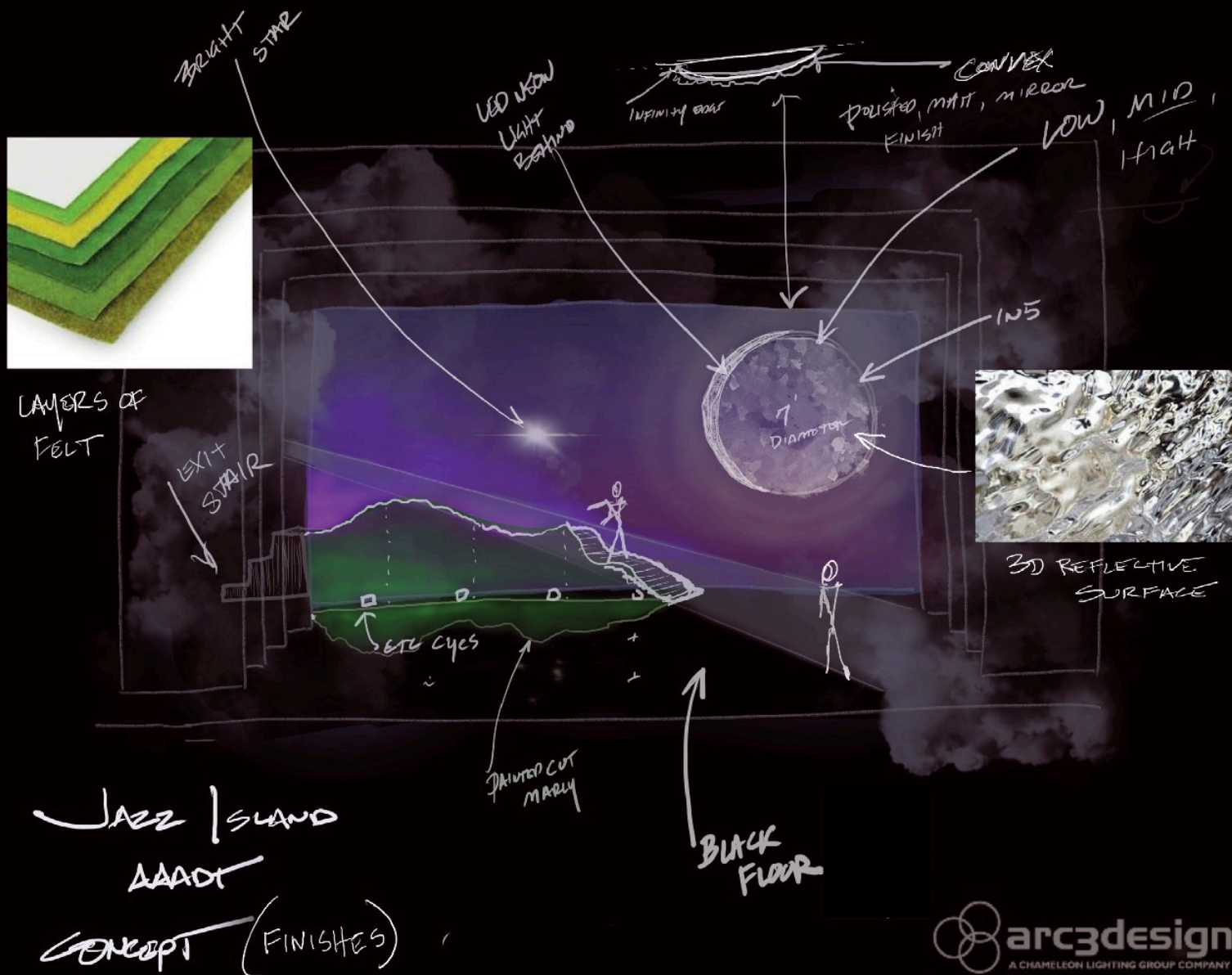
touring: "The set breaks apart in 60 seconds, and the moon flies away."

In terms of lighting, Crawford says, "Ailey has a consistent rig that travels with them. It's all rented through 4Wall Entertainment. They use Robe fixtures for their moving lights." He notes, "The really interesting thing about the rig, since I retired from Ailey touring, is the introduction of LED units. An evolution is happening in repertory companies; we're seeing rigs that are now 100% LED." There are multiple reasons for this: "When companies go to Europe, they can't bring 200 incandescent Source Fours, because it doesn't meet local regulations. [The EU has severely restricted the use of incandescent units.] So, they have to make that transition to LED." Among other things, Ailey has, in the last few seasons, finally done away with scrollers in favor of ETC Lustrs, moving in an all-LED direction. "It will be a challenging evolution for a company that has so

much historical lighting. The team at Ailey is exceptional, and they are handling this reality with grace and responsibility. Yi-Chung Chen, Ailey's lighting director, has navigated this beautifully, way better than I ever could have."

Lighting *Jazz Island* posed many challenges, beginning with Erzulie's entrance in that dress. "It has a structure; the petals have control arms, like a puppet. And she is on top of somebody's shoulders, with the other dancers under the skirt. I had to make it feel like she is on the water, riding the wave of her own element." This was achieved with the Robe units, creating color and soft, moving patterns, including blues and purples, on Erzulie's dress and the moon above.

The piece goes through several changes of mood, and, Crawford says, "I had to have clear ideas about each sequence. The hardest parts were transitional: How do we get from one



This sketch shows the meticulous planning behind the relatively simple set's design, ensuring that it would take lighting well.

place to another visually that meets the musicality of Etienne's score? Are there applause moments we want to carefully craft? Is one moment tied to the next? Is there a shift in time? How do we use the sky? I used Geoffrey's book as an inspiration for color and other ideas. The book gave me a map to create a world that I believe would help tell the story uniquely."

Baron Samedi, who interferes in the action, is, Crawford says, "a classic sexy, manipulative character. I needed a color that spoke to that. For me, that was a deep royal purple, a sassy color. We're not sure what's up with him:

Maybe he's gay; maybe he's an equal opportunity cat. He keeps us guessing. This purple world was fun to create."

Crawford uses other striking color touches, for example, backlighting the moon in red. Research was key: "I looked at a lot of Geoffrey's paintings in Haiti and other Caribbean countries," he says, "They're incredibly colorful." Indeed, the crescent moon seen late in the piece is also derived from Holder. "It was a crescent cut by Holder from a pie tin, used as a gobo in *The Prodigal Prince*. I pulled it from my personal archive of gobos and asked Clifton [Taylor, lighting designer

of *The Prodigal Prince*] if I could use it. Of course, I had to do it with a moving light, so it's a very subtle homage."

The lighting rig includes ETC Source Fours, ETC Lustr 2 LED fixtures, Source Four MultipAR, Strand Iris cyc lights, and Robe Fortes. Ailey uses an ETC Apex console.

In an interview with *The New York Times*, García called *Jazz Island* "a reclamation of a cultural heritage that lives inside the Alvin Ailey legacy." To be sure, it's a piece that looks forward and back at the same time, suggesting interesting new possibilities for this storied company. 🎭