

# Bold steps

LD MARILYN LOWEY BRINGS MOVING-LIGHT  
TECHNOLOGY TO THE CLEVELAND SAN JOSE BALLET

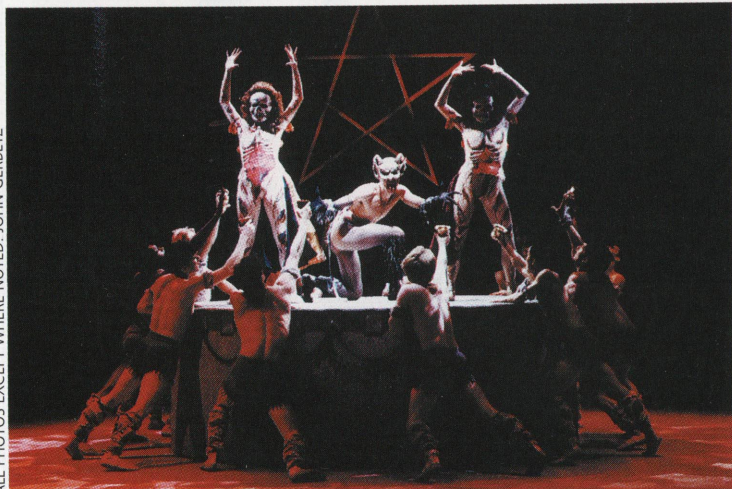
©1997 ROGER MASTROJANNI

BY AMY L. SLINGERLAND

**“If** you had told me two years ago that I’d be designing ballet, I wouldn’t have believed it,” says Marilyn Lowey, best known for her work in live television productions, industrials, and with celebrities like Neil Diamond and Bette Midler. “I guess I’m at a point in my life where I really appreciate the music, and I appreciate the art form.”

Marilyn Lowey’s first professional encounter with the art form of ballet came in August 1996 when Cleveland San Jose Ballet (CSJB) artistic director Dennis Nahat approached her to design the lighting for *Blue Suede Shoes*, an evening-length modern ballet work based around Elvis Presley songs. Lowey remembers, “For *Blue Suede Shoes*, Dennis knew he needed something different, and once we started working together it was an education for both of us—I learned more about dance and he learned more about lighting, and now he knows what it can do.”

This year, Nahat decided to present a rotating repertory season comprising a wide range of dance and music



ALL PHOTOS EXCEPT WHERE NOTED: JOHN GERBETZ



styles, including world premieres of his new choreography: *Carmina Burana*, set to Carl Orff's dramatic, operatic score, and *Marilyn*, the story of the rise and fall of Marilyn Monroe, danced to several Ella Fitzgerald songs. Other works were *Ozone Hour*, a ballet covering the history of rock and roll from doo-wop to disco, Balanchine's *Serenade* and *Theme and Variations*, Nahat's *Coppélia*, Agnes de Mille's *Three Virgins and a Devil*, plus *The Nutcracker*. Nahat invited Lowey back to design all these works from scratch using moving lights.

The LD thought it was a great idea. "From a lighting point of view it makes perfect sense. We do one load-in and do a versatile plot, in combination with conventional lights. We would only need to call up different disks for each ballet," she explains. "It was a challenge, but the fact that I got to go to work every day and light something different was really wonderful and a great treat for a designer."

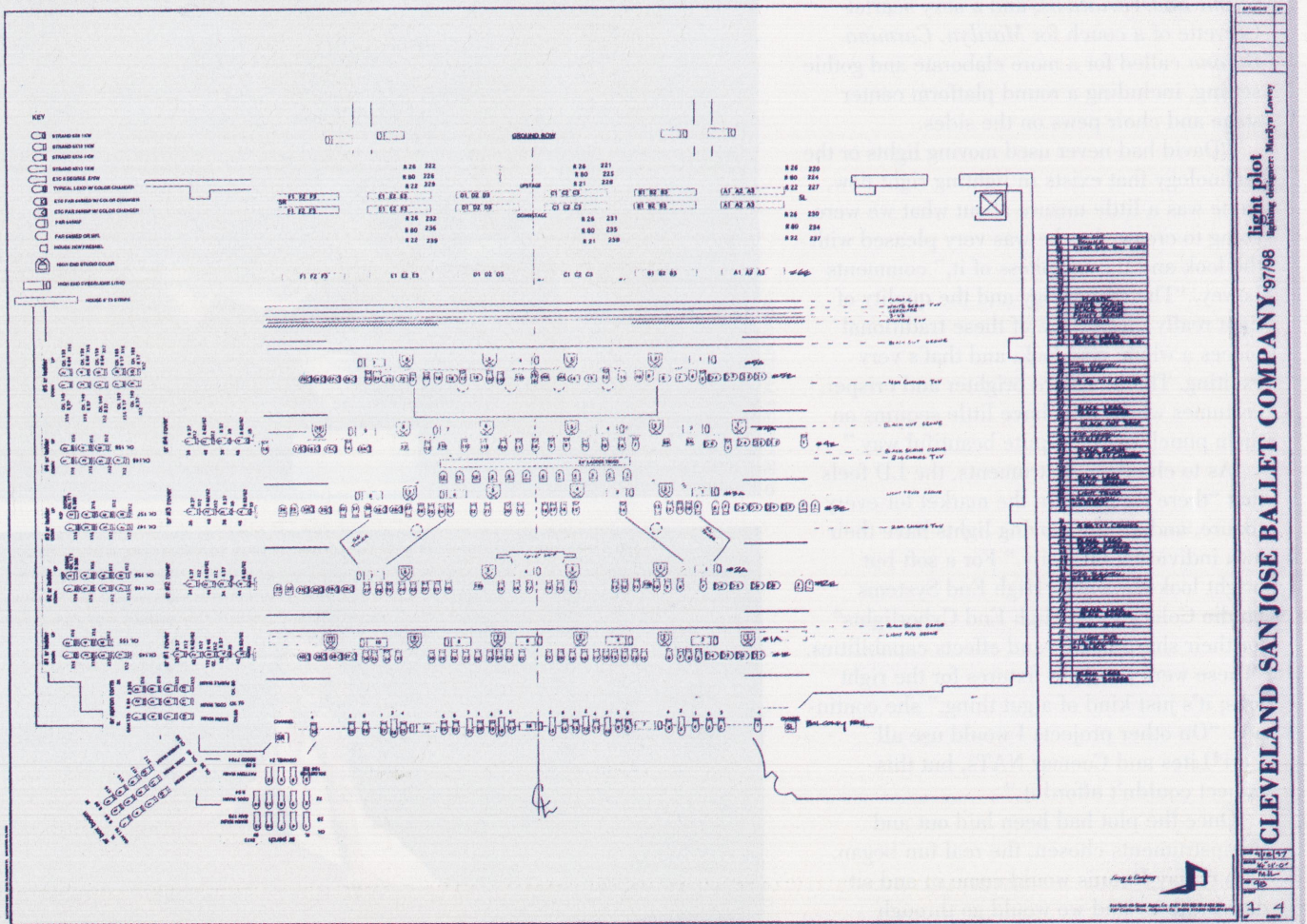
Lowey met with CSJB resident set/costume designer David Guthrie to work out the division of the overhead space. "He needed to come up with a hanging plot for all these ballets that would work in one venue, leaving more space than usual for lighting, because automated instruments are larger than conventional." Guthrie went for simple but striking set designs, such as raw, industrial scaffolding for *Ozone Hour*, chandeliers for the classical



"I've always wanted to light *Carmina Burana*. I've always loved the music," comments LD Marilyn Lowey. "I have one CD playing in the car, I have a CD for the gym; the music is just fabulous. It was fun dealing with a choir and dancers onstage, to have all of your senses working at the same time. I loved working on it everyday, and the audience reaction was spectacular." The LD composed memorable images, accentuating the music and the stage action. Pastel lighting and costumes plus foliage templates equals *Spring* (below). The devil made them do it: Monks in the tavern (facing page, bottom) succumb to the sin of gluttony and roast a Swan (above) then slaughter it (facing page, top) and feast on it.







## CLEVELAND SAN JOSE BALET 1997 FALL SEASON

### LIGHTING EQUIPMENT

- (22) High End Systems<sup>128</sup> Studio Colors
- (24) High End Systems Cyberlights  
(4 with floor plates)
- (12) Thomas<sup>159</sup> 400W MFL PAR-46s
- (20) Thomas chrome NSP PAR-64s
- (18) Thomas MFL 1kW PAR-64s
- (12) Thomas NSP PAR-64s
- (40) ETC<sup>131</sup> Source Four MFL PAR-64s
- (40) ETC Source Four NSP PAR-64s
- (33) Strand<sup>160</sup> 1kW 6x9s
- (138) Strand 1kW 6x12s
- (99) Strand 1kW 6x16s
- (33) Strand 8x13s
- (2) ETC Source Four 5° with iris
- (36) ETC Source Four 10°
- (100) ETC Source Four 19°
- (155) ETC Source Four 26°
- (48) ETC Source Four 36°
- (9) Strand Ianiro 2kW fresnels
- (1) Altman<sup>161</sup> 6" fresnel with floor plate
- (18) Altman T3 1kW striplights  
(12 with floor plates)
- (30) Wybron<sup>162</sup> Colorams for ETC PARs
- (66) Wybron Colorams for Strand Lekos
- (2) Reel EFX<sup>63</sup> DF-50 smoke machines
- (80) standard stock templates
- (100) custom stainless-steel gobos for Cyberlights  
(varied and standard patterns)
- (24) star strobes
- (1) Flying Pig Systems<sup>164</sup> Wholehog II with effects engine
- (1) ETC Expression 2X

Circle Number on Reader Service Card

Lowey lights the blues, facing page: Flower children open a Pandora's box of mind-altering substances, courtesy of an MR-11 in a jewel box, in *Ozone Hour*; Marilyn Monroe spirals down into depression as her star rises; corps dancers pose in Balanchine's moonlight *Serenade*. Lowey and Company, below, left to right: Dean Moyé, Marilyn Lowey, Christian Choi, Terry Enroth.





*Theme and Variations*, and a sexy scarlet Corvette of a couch for *Marilyn. Carmina Burana* called for a more elaborate and gothic setting, including a round platform center stage and choir pews on the sides.

"David had never used moving lights or the technology that exists in lighting right now, so he was a little unsure about what we were going to create, but he was very pleased with the look and the crispness of it," comments Lowey. "The technology and the quality of light really gives some of these traditional pieces a whole new look, and that's very exciting. The blues are brighter and crisper, costumes where they have little sequins on them punch out in a quite beautiful way."

As to choice of instruments, the LD feels that "there's a place in the market for every fixture, and all the moving lights have their own individual intensity." For a soft but bright look she chose High End Systems Studio Colors®, and High End Cyberlights® for their sharp beams and effects capabilities. "These were the right fixtures for the right jobs; it's just kind of a gut thing," she continues. "On other projects I would use all Vari\*Lites and Coemar NATs, but this project couldn't afford it."

Once the plot had been laid out and the instruments chosen, the real fun began. "Every day Dennis would come in and sit down with us and we would go through each scene of the ballet and light it accordingly. And we would run it that night; sometimes we'd have an orchestra rehearsal with the choir at the same time, and that was exciting. When you're first starting to work with a new plot you know what to expect, but there are also a lot of surprises, so it was fun seeing that."

A case in point was *Theme and Variations* on opening night. Since Lowey and Company had programmed all the pieces from the balcony, that was her first chance to see her work up close. She recalls, "We had used the Cyberlights as sidelight, and I had an abundance of sidelight to begin with, and the Cybers just cut through in such a wonderful manner that I stood there and tears came to my eyes."

The pièce de résistance of the season was *Carmina Burana*, which featured the Robert Page Cleveland Singers and Ohio Boychoir. Orff's classic score is based on decidedly non-sacred 13th-century manuscripts discovered in a Bavarian monastery, so Guthrie's set design is made to look like stone with carvings of medieval arches and pagan symbols. Says Lowey, "David just said to me, 'I'm leaving it gray so that you can paint.'" Which the LD did, not just with

©1997 ROGER MASTROIANNI



©1997 ROGER MASTROIANNI





color but with lots of templates. “The textures from the Cyberlights were wonderful because they would just cut through the conventional lighting and give a three-dimensional look.”

Because gobo costs can quickly add up when a show uses upwards of 50 automated luminaires, Lowey had to be creative in her use and combinations of templates. “You don’t want to use your run-of-the-mill gobos, you want to make it a little special and add something that would apply for your ballet. So you have to handle it gingerly—sometimes you have to put in generic gobos, and sometimes you need to put in very specialized gobos, and you need to put the money where you really want to see it. It really adds up, and it’s tough explaining it. On the Cyberlights you can overlay a couple of wheels and use all those tricks. By knowing my fixtures, I could get more effects out of some of the standard gobos.”

*Carmina Burana* is about the turn of the seasons, the turns of Fortune, and human appetites and desires. It opens in winter, so Lowey created atmosphere with cool steel blues and a gobo “that looked like ice crystals.” For the transition into spring she used “pinks and straw colors to give a complete opposite feeling, from the cold into the warm,” and a soft foliage pattern.

“When we get to the tavern scene it’s a dark, eerie, dirty feeling,” Lowey continues, “so we used heavy, broad, ‘butch’ gobos, and played with some lavenders.” The tavern scene turns into a delirious bacchanal, the monks throwing off their robes, glutting themselves with wine, roasting a swan and feasting on it. For the dying swan sequence, there is a light flame red with a swirling featherlike or flamelike pattern on the center platform, anchoring the dramatic solo. When the monks lift the Swan into the air and

slaughter it, the Cyberlights punch to a saturated crimson.

The LD added texture to the classical pieces with careful blending and layering of color. *Serenade*, which Balanchine described as a “dance in the light of the moon,” has of course traditionally been lit with blue. With the help of automated fixtures, Lowey was able to put more sophistication into this simple idea. “It’s lit from one side, from one light source, which is actually all of the light from stage right, and then as we progress into the scene the blues get a little lighter and tend toward blue-green, and then it very slowly starts making its way back to its original color. We managed, through the subtlety of cross-fading colors, to lighten it, build it, shape it.” Lavender sidelight provides a quiet contrast to the cool blues and a blush to the dancers’ skin.

For *Marilyn*, the artistic director wanted people to feel like they were watching a film, so he framed the stage with black drops and borders. The solo ballet follows Marilyn Monroe from her arrival in Hollywood as an innocent young woman to the desperation and loneliness of her stardom. Lowey’s approach was very simple: “The lighting in this reflects the moods of the music; it creates an environment to allow the dancer to perform.” The LD started the piece with “perky” pink and magenta and blue. “We kept it very simple so that we had a ways to go. Then we made a transformation to the purples as she got deeper into her depression, and the couch got redder, just to follow thematically what was happening onstage.”

After obeying the musical subtleties of *Serenade* and *Marilyn*, Lowey was able to pull out all the stops on *Ozone Hour*, first choreographed in 1979 and set to a pop rock score performed live by the orchestra and a rock band. Since

the piece ends an evening of several classical ballets, the LD figured she could “play it for all it’s worth, make it raw and brassy. They did it a few years back and they had no money and it was very primitive—they put Christmas tree lights on the scaffolding,” she points out. “So I told them we could do rotating patterns and color bumping and chasing and make it look like a real rock show.”

To build up to the glam rock era, Lowey began the 1950s sequence with a “black-and-white” feeling, morphing into the psychedelic 60s with purples, blue-greens, and dichroic gobos for a “tie-dye” effect. The LSD scene is bathed in Cyberlight congo blue, “an old trick,” Lowey says, to imitate UV. The disco scene featured pulsating cueing and block color changes. The piece ends with dancers dressed in KISS-style costumes and makeup, which Lowey accentuated with “shafts of light and harsh angles.” She adds that “the biggest challenge on that is that I just wanted to kill some of the facelight, but Dennis wanted to see faces. So of course you reach a happy medium.”

*Serenade* and *Carmina Burana* were performed as a single bill in San Jose one weekend in February. “We had conversations like ‘How do we recreate this with conventional lighting?’ And we don’t. So we’re going to take all the moving stuff.” To save money, she left out the color changers and hung extra conventionals for each color instead.

“I love working with this group because they’re very creative and it’s a joy to be around them,” Lowey enthuses. “I’d like to thank them for allowing me to participate in a wonderful project like this. It was fun to do drama in the way that some of these pieces have always wanted to be done. And to be able to have the intensity and the quality of light that you can do that with.” □