

Keeping Things Small For My Scandalous Life

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My Scandalous Life was presented earlier this year at New York's Irish Repertory Theatre in the studio theatre. Directed by Jack Going, with set design by Charlie Corcoran, and lighting design by me, Michael O'Connor, our challenge was to create a large room on a stage only 16' wide by 15' deep, with a ceiling less than 10' high.

Instead of a typical box set, Corcoran used elements rather than full walls to create the space. A door unit up-center and a window unit stage-right were the two main set pieces. This opened up the very small stage and let the room breathe. The spaces between these elements had paintings suspended from above, allowing the audience to define the walls. These gaps in the set allowed me to flood the room with light, helping it seem even larger.



Photo Carol Rosegg

Surprisingly, with such a small theatre, the challenge wasn't where to put lights, but where not to put them. Keeping lights out of sight was nearly impossible but incredibly important. I am never a fan of seeing the light source unless it's a concert, and it would have been especially distracting for this production. When your grid is 9' off the stage, and the lead actor is more than 6' tall, you need to give up the idea of lighting anything from directly overhead. Pushing things into corners and off stage was key.



Photo Carol Rosegg

I used 6" Fresnels, 16 ETC Source Four PARs, three Altman Lighting 3.5Q ellipsoidals, two Altman single-cell cyc units, six PAR16s, and an ETC Express 125 console. The Fresnels allowed me to create soft, even front- and side-light washes while keeping a low profile when tucked up against the ceiling. They were also key in highlighting the set.

I don't know anyone who doesn't like the ETC PAR for an application like this. The fixture gave me the punchy back light I needed and was the streaming sun light system that brought so much reality into such a small room. Everything else was used to highlight the fantastic scenery.

In addition, with a shorter throw distance, you need twice as many lights just to create a smooth even wash. I added tons of frost and neutral density to diffuse hot spots. Beyond lighting the actors, a great deal of time was spent tucking birdies everywhere to really define the boundaries of the set.

Set light is always important but never more so than in a tiny space. Touching even one top corner of a set piece with light keeps the audience's vision in the world of the show rather than seeing the building's steam pipe 6" away.