



[David Rockwell on designing productions and the spaces that house them](#)

By Ruthie Fierberg

September 18, 2023

From the technical ingenuity of an upright bed that opened “Hairspray” to the jewel-box vibrancy of “She Loves Me,” Tony Award-winning scenic designer David Rockwell has put his stamp on 29 Broadway productions since his debut in 2000. In the past four years, Rockwell has also made his mark on New York City, architecting spaces like The Shed at Hudson Yards, the Civilian Hotel in midtown and the lobby, restaurant and terrace at downtown’s newly opened Perelman Performing Arts Center (PAC NYC).

“I’ve never seen a boundary between theater and architecture as a designer,” Rockwell told Broadway News. “When I was 11, I saw my first Broadway show, ‘Fiddler on the Roof,’ and went to my first New York City restaurant, Schrafft’s, and I guess those ideas were sort of seared together into what I find compelling about cities, which is how people congregate, how people move.”

Of course, the scenic world for a specific script and the place for revolving visitors and purposes differ, but Rockwell has always thought of both scenic and building design architecturally. “There are different toolkits, and so the kind of skillset of making is different, but I find there’s so much about the two that are congruous.”

“For instance,” Rockwell continued, “one of the great things about theater is you have a chance to make an entrance. The curtain comes up and you get to hear [and see] the rules of the play you’re telling.” So, too, with the physical entrance of a building.

With the Perelman, specifically, visitors climb a steep set of stairs to the front door, so Rockwell focused on the ceiling. “It introduces you to this warm embrace of a room,” he said, which serves the building’s purpose as an elegant and inclusive communal space.

Just as with Rockwell’s theatrical projects, the story is in the details. “There are dropdowns from the ceiling in four different places that act as chandeliers, and those dropdowns happen over the main activity nodes: the informal performance area, the lounge, the bar/restaurant and the terrace,” he explained of the Perelman lobby. The space serves as a narrative guide of how to interact with it and inside it. “In addition to that, the other story this tells is a space that goes from casual to ‘it’s time to get to the show.’ And when that happens, these ribs all dim and the ribs that go in the east-west direction get brighter [to direct you to the theater].”

As much as Rockwell loves creating permanent spaces, he hasn’t abandoned scenic design. In fact, Rockwell is currently at work on the pre-Broadway production of “BOOP! The Betty Boop Musical” in Chicago as well as Roundabout Theatre Company’s upcoming revival of “Doubt.” The two projects could not be more different: one a razzle-dazzle musical centered on a fizzy cartoon character and the other a weighty drama about child sexual abuse in the Catholic church.

“I like the range and staying curious,” Rockwell said. “I think you’ve got to stay at a point where you don’t know the answer before you begin.”