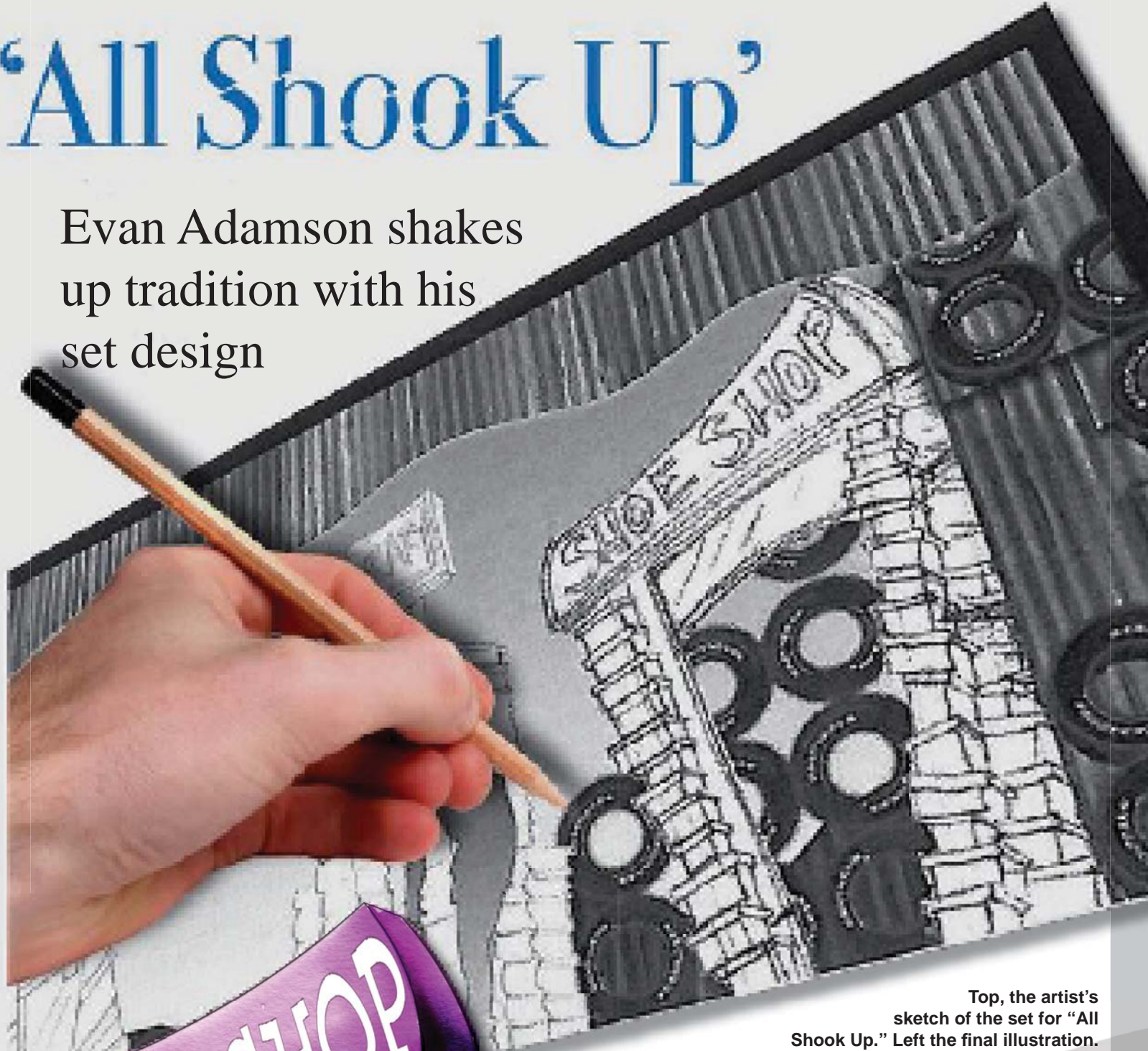


'All Shook Up'

Evan Adamson shakes up tradition with his set design



Top, the artist's sketch of the set for "All Shook Up." Left the final illustration.



COURTESY ILLUSTRATIONS

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An Elvis fan from way back, set designer Evan Adamson was surprised when he initially heard the soundtrack for the musical "All Shook Up."



Evan Adamson

He was expecting to hear Elvis impersonations of songs such as "Don't Be Cruel," "Heartbreak Hotel" and "Hound Dog," but what he heard was non-traditional.

"I think the expectation of a lot of audience members is to have an Elvis character, or to hear his songs done

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in the way that he would perform them," Mr. Adamson says from his home in New York. "But the show takes departures from that. So the music is a surprise to them. But I think it's a successful way of using his material to create something new and a little bit different from expectation."

So the set designer tried to take what he heard and interpret it visually. Or, as he puts it, "That sort of reinterpretation of something traditional is something we tried to reflect in the design of the set as well." For example, the red-and-white poles outside the barbershop are "completely over scale," out of proportion, and instead of bricks in the walls of the shoe shop, there are shoeboxes.

"There's no sense of traditional architecture at all," he says. "It's a playful and more vibrant approach to something. That was done, really, to mimic the way that the story is being told, a new approach to these classic songs that everybody's typically familiar with."

This production of "All Shook Up," which has played at previous Prather theaters in Pennsylvania and Arizona, plays at the Broadway Palm Dinner Theater in Fort Myers from Feb. 19 through April 11.

"I remember being in the thick of it a year ago," Mr. Adamson says. "It's remained one of my favorite shows. It's a pleasure to work with Marc Robins, the director, in particular. We had a very easy time collaborating with each other, and encouraging each other's ideas."

When he first listened to the musical's score, it was jarring.

"Once I realized that it was different, and I listened to the songs again, it opened up a whole new take on them and a whole new vibrancy. That was my immediate reaction both in reading the script and in hearing the music."

And that was what he wanted to do with the show's set design too, to present something completely different than what audiences might expect.

"I wanted it to be as successful as the music was," he says. "And of course, I hope it was. But that's traditionally how I work: whatever grabs me the most in the script or in a piece of lyric or music, typically, I try to cling on to that. That's my initial reaction, and I try to emphasize that as much as I can."



Initial sketches for one part of the set of "All Shook Up"



As the set looks on stage.

Of course, he says, he tries not to go too far away from the root source. So the musical has a jailhouse set and a carnival set, to represent "Jailhouse Rock" and "Roustabout."

The sets are "Seussical in a way," says Broadway Palm General Manager Susan Johnson. "They're over the top, larger than life, crazy, fun. They're zany."

Mr. Adamson, she says, has designed sets for more than a dozen shows at the Broadway Palm, including "Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat," "Godspell," "The Full Monty" and "Singin' in the Rain." He also designed the set or the upcoming production of "Peter Pan."

There's also a traveling theme in "All Shook Up," he says.

"The story itself is a constant reiteration of people moving, both figuratively and literally," Mr. Adamson says. "They're always going from place to place in the script. And figuratively, quite a few of the characters are taking journeys for themselves, starting the show off in one place, and ending the show with a different mind frame, and consequently, in a happier place. So the theme of travel is something we wanted to emphasize."

So Mr. Adamson created a background of old tires and license plates all over the set. In Sylvia's Restaurant, for example, the bar is the front bumper of a car and the stools are made of old car seats.

When he was growing up, Mr. Adamson wanted to be a painter, but couldn't figure out how he could make a living at it. He'd never been to the theater, except for his brother's high school productions. Then one year his parents took him to Radio City Music Hall in New York City to see the Radio City Christmas Spectacular.

"I'd never seen anything like that," he says. "I'd never been in a theater as large as that before. I'd only seen high school productions. It blew me away."

Because he was sitting very far to the left, he could see men moving sets around backstage.

"I could see how much went into a production," he says. "And that moment is probably what propelled me into designing scenery. Because it was the first time I realized that someone has to figure out all this stuff. Never had it crossed my mind in the theater or in the movies, either, that

someone has to draw all these things up and create them, that there were soundstages in movies. It just never dawned on me that there was a great deal of process that went into creating environments."

He was hooked. He began watching movies and analyzing the design. He'd ask himself: why did they do that? What would I have done? Could I have done it as well?

"That's something that lives with me to this day," he says. "I can't watch a movie without asking myself why those choices were made, or what choices I would've done to do it better, or do it differently. The same goes for theater. I see any piece of theater, and I critique the set."

The ideal is to have the audience respond to the set subconsciously, emotionally, he says.

"I never want to have such a bold set that the audience thinks, 'Oh, that set was designed,' or 'Oh, look how cool that set is.' There's never been a playwright who thinks: 'Now I'm going to write something in this story that I want the audience to think how cool the set is.'"

"I never want to take away from the audience's experience. I just want to help it along without it being known. It goes back to when I was a kid and I never thought about it. A great example is 'Star Wars.' I watched that when I was 6 or 7, and it was a great movie, and I didn't know why. I just remember being in awe of seeing two suns in the sky. It was crazy. But it wasn't until I was in my teens that I realized that someone had to think that up, had to put two suns in the sky. Well, they didn't have to, but the fact that they did made that scene so interesting."

Mr. Adamson does pencil drawings, mechanicals, then develops the images even more, using everything from watercolors, acrylics, collage, markers, pastels. The pieces themselves are works of art.

Life came full circle for Mr. Adamson when he was asked to redesign the Radio City Christmas Spectacular for its 75th anniversary. It was the very show that had inspired him to become a set designer.

"It was amazing," he says. "I dropped everything when I got called to work on the redesign. We redesigned about 90 percent of the show. And when I got called, I pretty much dropped all my other projects, to work on that. Because to this day, I remember sitting in that theater, and looking backstage and seeing things, and I actually was very critical. I thought that they were doing some things wrong. I was actually frustrated, as a kid, thinking, 'Why can I see these guys back there? They're moving stuff around!'"

The entire time he was working on the show, he'd remember what it was like as a kid, seeing it for the first time.

He'd worked on a team that redesigned Radio City's touring shows, so when the 75th anniversary redesign came up, it was just natural that he'd be asked to work on it.

Mr. Adamson's worked on Broadway and off-Broadway shows, including the 2003 production of "Fiddler on the Roof," which was nominated for a Tony for best set design. Currently, he's working on "Beauty and the Beast" as an associate designer and right-hand man for Tony Award-winning designer David Gallo. The show will play in different countries, including Russia, Spain, the Netherlands, and possibly even the United States.

"It's great," Mr. Adamson says. "I love working with David, and I'm learning just from being around him. I'm learning about design, and how to handle situations in a theater environment. And it's great, it's really great." ■