



## **A Proposal for Staging**

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Ars Pro Concreta

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## I. ARTIST STATEMENT

### *The Show*

Based on the 1961 Richard Attenborough-produced film and the novel by Mary Hayley Bell, *Whistle Down the Wind* is a thoughtful study of childhood innocence and simple faith contrasted with adult cynicism. In brief, the plot follows the fortunes of a mysterious man caught between the prejudice of adults and the innocence of the young. When this stranger takes refuge in a barn on a remote farm, its owner's three children (Swallow, Brat, and Poor Baby, in the novel and the musical; they're renamed in the film), who've recently lost their mother, mistakenly believe him to be the Second Coming of Christ, and they vow to protect the stranger from the world that waits outside – the townspeople who are determined to catch a fugitive hiding in their midst.

The original was set in Lancashire, England, but for the musical, composer Andrew Lloyd Webber and lyricist Jim Steinman, together with Patricia Knop and Gale Edwards (co-book writers with Webber), reset the original story in America's deep South (specifically, Louisiana) in 1959, causing the musical's story-line to revolve in part around the time and place where the word "teenager" was invented. They also aged the oldest daughter, Swallow, up to 15, to be able to play with a "coming of age" angle where, as fantasy and reality collide, Swallow is torn between the two and begins to discover who she is and where she is going.

This change of scene and material allowed them to create an emotive score, combining what Webber does best (hauntingly beautiful love songs) with the influence that Steinman could bring to the table (explosive rock music), that contrasts the relentless influence of the modern world with the traditional values of the old days – something which the community at the heart of *Whistle* yearns to return to.

### *My Background with the Show*

At an early age, I was a huge fan of *Jesus Christ Superstar*. With the advent of the Internet, and its arrival at my home, I discovered what Webber had been up to since then, including *Whistle*.<sup>1</sup> It's not perfect, but the story's fascinating and potentially powerful, and the score boasts some of Webber's best compositions<sup>2</sup>, as well as Steinman's strongest work as a lyricist – no false rhymes, or at least very few, and everything (even when recycled) seems to tie perfectly to character.

I followed its fortunes and misfortunes along the way, from its disastrous world premiere in Washington, D.C. in 1996 which led critics to dub the show *Whistle Down the Drain*, to its successful run of over two years at the Aldwych Theatre in London, to its many UK tours and its brief second attempt at cracking the American market with a 2007/08 national tour.

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<sup>1</sup> Funnily enough, *Whistle* was my indirect gateway to my love of all things Steinman and *Tanz der Vampire*, but that's a story for another set of notes.

<sup>2</sup> I particularly enjoy "Vaults of Heaven," "Cold," "If Only," "Tire Tracks and Broken Hearts," "A Kiss is a Terrible Thing to Waste," and "Nature of the Beast."

I own the original cast recording, the various artists compilation of celebrity covers of the show's score (I hesitate to call it – and anything like it – a concept album; it fits the technical definition, in that the songs are all from one score, but it conveys nothing of the actual show), and many other items, both legal and less so, related to the show.

As I've followed the many revisions made to it (each following the Aldwych run, in my opinion, worse than the last, except for the decision to revert to an earlier not-perfect-but-better version for licensing to stock and amateur markets), I've played in my head with what I would do in my production almost since I got into the show. That vision follows in the notes below.

Before I continue, however, I must apologize upfront. *Whistle's* just popular enough that people know the general story-line, but just obscure enough that the specifics escape most audiences outside the UK. When writing notes like these, especially on a slightly more obscure show, one must be thorough enough for everything to be comprehensible to people reading about the show for the first time, but concise enough not to overwhelm them, and I'm not great at concise, which is what really sucks about writing this – it'll probably be really long just from explaining stuff. Sorry in advance!

Ars Pro Concretum

## II. PLAY ANALYSIS

Popular opinion considers *Whistle's* main problem to be its book. As with all musicals, the script is the central construct, the key to how the whole show works.<sup>3</sup> Obviously, if a show doesn't have as well-constructed a book as possible given the elements available, it might not work. It can find an audience due to good casting, promotion, the subject matter, etc., and even be a hit, but that doesn't change the fact that the show doesn't inherently work.

In this case, popular opinion is correct. Unfortunately for *Whistle*, the book problems start with a premise that's shaky to begin with and weakened by changes to the characters from the original novel and film: three kids find a mysterious wounded stranger hiding out in a barn, ask him his name, and his response, groaning in pain and shocked at being discovered, is "Jesus Christ!" which they take to be an answer to their question. Though they're painted as the "good old days" by conservatives, the Fifties weren't as clean-cut as people like to remember. Nasty things were hushed up more easily, but that doesn't mean they didn't happen. Which is why I say, Deep South or not, Bible Belt or no, even if religion and belief are stronger there than other places... what children would mistake someone hiding in their barn for Christ because of an expletive?

Maybe the Fifties were comparatively innocent times, but no one ever "took the Lord's name in vain" in front of these kids? Even in a deeply religious community filled with rabid Southern Christians, surely someone's had a heated moment at some point! In other versions of the story, when they were all sweet naïve kids who were adolescent or younger, one could maybe let it slide. But Swallow's 15! If she believes he's Jesus just because he said the words "Jesus Christ," it's hard to argue she's anything but mentally challenged. They know what swearing is – in the licensed script, Brat apologizes to The Man for saying "hell" in exasperation – so surely they know the difference between imprecations and identifications (even if they don't know to call them that)!

Frankly, in addition to the film and novel not being as popular in America as in the UK, it's not hard to see this premise, especially as redeveloped, sunk the show here. Critics felt patronized, even offended, anyone would believe we're that stupid just because the South lays claim to the country's authority on morality. I can't say I blame them, but it's been the central premise as far back as the original novel. Simply excise this plot hole and the entire show's lost, so like it or hate it, we have to deal with it another way.

Webber and Steinman started the process by finding an equivalent American community where this could conceivably happen and the choice of Louisiana – and the Deep South in general – is a good one. Religion can be quite intoxicating, especially when it's been drilled into one's head (and that of their friends, family, and neighbors) throughout their childhood. The main issue from there, if we stick with Swallow being 15, is how to make her faith in The Man as "Jesus" believable.

The best I could come up with, my only help being subtle re-direction and changes in line reading, is this:

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<sup>3</sup> It's for this reason that, like Stephen Sondheim, I'll never understand people who say they write the score first and then find a librettist.

Swallow has a *lot* on her plate. She's on the cusp of womanhood, with all that *that* entails, and no mom to guide her<sup>4</sup>; her distant dad's doing the best he can between his drinking, his grief, and his inability to open up to his kids, but he'll never win Father of the Year, so her two younger siblings<sup>5</sup> basically look up to her as the "new mommy"; and then this stranger winds up in her barn.

She doesn't know what to do or who he is, but he's hurt, the kids think he's Jesus Christ himself (hey, girl, if you can't follow it, try being in the audience!), and people in a small town rush to judgment, especially when looking for an escaped convict. If he *isn't* who they're searching for, she doesn't want him lynched, and if he *is*, she doesn't want him to hurt her or the kids, so she'll play along with their misguided belief. Besides, why break their hearts? He's a symbol of hope for them; Poor Baby's possible Christmas bonfire notwithstanding, it's the first thing they've really been excited about in ages. Better to handle this alone – she's not a kid anymore, after all. (Or so she thinks.)

But then new feelings we adults would call "hormones and sexual tension" (the latter not just with her old crush Amos, but with this mysterious man) play their part and, oh shit, now he's *something* to her because it's the first time she's felt hopeful since Mama died. Now she's relying on him. Now she believes it as fiercely as the kids; she *needs* him to be who she thinks he is. She's *clinging* to this fragile belief.

It's a stretch – not the most perfect solution, relying as it does entirely on subtext indicated nowhere in the script – but it goes a long way towards affecting the main plot hole positively. However, that's not nearly enough to make the show "work." Digging deeper, with the help of dramaturgy and other factors, yields even more positive results.

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<sup>4</sup> She frequently says she wants her mother back; it's the primary point of several of her numbers.

<sup>5</sup> Evidently *much* younger, if they're able to accept the notion that this stranger is Jesus with little doubt.

### III. VISION

#### *Dramaturgy*

The many productions of *Whistle* have been plagued by problems largely stemming from cuts made to script and score in subsequent revisions that muddied the waters rather than clarifying anything. While they served the general purpose of reducing the show's running time, which is always an issue (as a producer, I keenly feel their pain), they also took away some of the show's "meat," so to speak. Subsequent productions, such as the UK and U.S. tours produced and directed by Bill Kenwright, tried to correct those mistakes, but made new ones.

I believe it's clear what motivated Kenwright; he probably felt the show delved too deeply into the story's darker elements, and wanted to restore some of the film's lightness. When you watch the movie, bleak and black-and-white as it is, it's a simple fable of children's faith, pure sentimental corn, with sap and treacle on top – cute kids (one of them Hayley Mills) finding the grifter in the barn and thinking he's Jesus. There's a lot of innocence in it. So, figuring audiences – at least in the UK, where the film's more popular – wanted what they recognized (usually a safe bet), he reintroduced material from the screenplay including its last two lines in particular, made The Man's guilt more ambiguous<sup>6</sup>, edited the score, added a clunky family-friendly song called "The Gang" (later "The Tribe," in a revision) with lyrics by Don Black to replace The Man's harrowing tale of Annie (and Charlie) Christmas and threw in endless reprises of the show's big hit song "No Matter What," and restored dialogue shared by the D.C. production and the show early in its Aldwych run that was cut later on, among other changes. Some of them worked; most of them didn't.

When it came time to license the show to amateur markets, they put it back the way it was by the time the West End run closed, warts and all. However, even in that revision, enough material had been cut to render the book uneven; many of the dialogue scenes (some of which don't really carry over or tie into the story so well) feel like vignettes designed purely to set up the next song.

One of the biggest problems with analyzing the licensed script is a lack of stage directions. This may seem contradictory to an avid reader of mine. After all, scripted stage directions aren't sacred; they're usually notes made by the original production's stage manager, and while they can aid a reader in visualizing the show if the text is their first exposure, and occasionally help a director with complex scenes, one will often find themselves disregarding the printed directions for the most part as one mounts their own production for a variety of reasons.

*Whistle* is one exception; its script offers little if any aid to its reader in visualizing the show, especially if it's their first exposure. For example, in Act I, Scene 3, the character

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<sup>6</sup> In Kenwright's production, the bartender in the "Cold" scene said the escaped convict swore he didn't commit those crimes, a lyric in "Safe Haven" was adjusted to state that "he was just a young man, condemned, with no chance to explain," and some of The Man's sung material was shuffled around so that the nature of his character was revealed more gradually over the show's course.

of Earl just appears instead of describing how he arrives or what he's doing – suddenly Earl is there, not much later there's a revivalist preacher and tent makers with him, and then the sheriff arrives and he's yelling at all of them... and the first-time reader, looking for a clue and shit out of luck, is confused as to where these people came from, with little more idea what they're doing and only vague clues from dialogue re: who they are.

It's not like more detailed stage directions don't exist; they do, in a fairly complete piano/vocal score including script (typical of a Webber musical) from earlier in the West End run dated 1998, which is widely available in trading circles. Purely to give context clues to someone reading the piece for the first time, I'd start by restoring many stage directions to the script from this version.

However, that's not all I'd restore. Minor elements of dialogue and music, most of which are present on the cast recording and likely deleted purely due to time constraints, were cut from the piece which helped establish character or tied into later moments in the show, and in either case, things about the show no longer make sense without them. Some of the most important ones (read: not mere re-addition of dialogue and stage directions to flesh out story or add context) are denoted below in show order.

### Act 1, Scene 2

- The scene in the licensed version opens with the kids at play, and Brat drawing Swallow's attention to their field hand Edward, who's got a sack in his hand. As heard on the cast recording, however, the scene originally opened with a dialogue exchange between the kids. While I understand why it was cut and why the scene was reshaped in general<sup>7</sup>, without this conversation, we don't learn anything about them; we're plunged directly into plot without establishing any personality. It's not the best dialogue ever written, but without it we don't learn who the kids are, what personality traits we're supposed to find endearing, etc. Their dynamic is more neatly established with the lines intact, so I'd restore them.

### THE RUNT OF THE LITTER

- Most of this scene (especially the kids deciding who gets which kitten, with Poor Baby complaining about the choice he's stuck with) replaced a cutesy song called "Spider" that was cut following the D.C. tryout. It covered the same ground plot-wise, but wasn't that great a tune.<sup>8</sup> When the show moved to London and was first revised, only a small snippet ("The Runt of the Litter," per the '98 rehearsal score) remained, as can be heard on the cast recording, with the rest replaced with dialogue. This itself was later cut; however, two lines are reprised during a critical scene in Act II, except now they come from nowhere. With minor surgery to the dialogue that replaced it, I'd restore "The Runt of the Litter."

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<sup>7</sup> One glaring omission compared to the cast recording is the absence of Swallow falling into the sewer and nearly being swept downstream whilst attempting to rescue the kittens. It was probably a holdover from the days when *Whistle* as a musical was intended for the cinema, where something exciting needs to happen every few minutes or you lose the audience's short attention span, and not the stage. I'm not sad it's gone.

<sup>8</sup> To my ears, most of its main melody bore a nagging resemblance to the *Maude* theme.

### **I NEVER GET WHAT I PRAY FOR**

- The current version works the way it should, with the right lines assigned to the right characters (i.e., Brat's too young to "wanna be beautiful and sexy and smart," more realistically a dream for Swallow); however, I'd restore a rhyming couplet referencing the atom bomb from the cast recording that was changed by the time it reached the licensed version. Not only is fear of "the bomb" mentioned in the novel and therefore it's a lovely source nod, but during the early days of the Cold War in which this show takes place, teenagers – and even younger children – in America watched educational film strips in school about hiding under their desks to be safe from a nuclear attack on a regular basis. It was a clear and present danger in the minds of many. Its significance may be lost on a postmodern audience that'd wonder why a teenager would care, but this type of missing material adds depth, and audiences are often confused about more mundane things anyway.

### **Act 1, Scene 3**

- This scene marks the entrance of Amos; he's the center of one of the main subplots – a young rebel without a clue who runs around with a slinky broad named Candy, but is sweet on our young heroine Swallow, owing to their shared childhood past. It's implied that Swallow's his real love interest, and Candy's just "forbidden fruit." However, that's not developed very well in the final show. Amos' interest in Swallow is clear enough, but Candy's take on it is never explored until Act II when she encounters Swallow and "spills the beans" in the revival tent, and by then her jealousy of their bond comes across as pure spite since it's never firmly established to begin with. Early in developing the London version, however, as preserved in the '98 score and a plot summary on Jim Steinman's website, Candy appeared with Amos in this scene, none too pleased about his paying more attention to her rival than her; evidently this didn't last long, as it's not present on the cast recording. It's important to establish this dynamic (how much is real or imagined is up to the director and actresses), so I'd restore her appearance – and the spoken line preserved in the '98 score – and have her be a simmering, (mostly) silent, presence in the background.

### **GROWN UPS KILL ME**

- Lots of extraneous music from the Washington production was cut on the way to the West End. Most choices were for the best, but I feel some were missteps. One was eliminating "Grown Ups Kill Me," which incorporated Boone's later solo "It Just Doesn't Get Any Better than This"<sup>9</sup> but also included a rendering of the kids' attitudes toward the adults of their world. This was a lovely moment where Steinman managed to work key elements of the original novel into his lyrics, so it was a shame to lose it. Though the scene proper is now structured a bit differently, I'd re-include as much of the song as I could.

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<sup>9</sup> It's intriguing to note that in all versions of the score, the title of what became "It Just Doesn't Get Any Better than This" on the cast recording is still rendered as "Grown Ups Kill Me" – perhaps a sign of the sheer amount of changes the show underwent in a short timeframe.



**Act 1, Scene 8**

- While this is an otherwise standard case of re-adding stage directions and dialogue to enhance what's there, it's important in this case to state why I'd re-add them. The cuts streamlined the scene, but in the process they took away some meat, especially in Candy and Amos' relationship; a lot of the excised action in this scene – where Candy tries and fails to get Amos to dance, and flirts with other men to make him jealous – reveals just how unsteady their bond really is, and why Amos might be reconsidering Swallow to begin with.

**Act 1, Scene 11**

- A portion of this scene was cut, and not for the better. I noticed the stage direction "The SHERIFF discovers the KIDS passing" in the score just before our adorable crew encounters Amos again (instead), and wondered if there was a reason. Turned out it was because, originally, the kids first encountered the Sheriff and nearly failed big-time at lying about getting medicine to tend to The Man. It was cut, presumably for time, but Kenwright's production restored it. It's a nice little "near miss" moment, and so I'd make the same choice.

**Act 2, Scene 8**

- Another example of poor housekeeping (see "Grown Ups Kill Me") can be found here: the sharp-eyed reader may notice at some point mention of an "Aunt Dot" in the stage directions. She's a character who was cut after the D.C. tryout. Pay her no mind; it has no impact on the stated blocking anyway.

**Act 2, Scene 12**

- At a certain point in this scene, there's an instrumental reprise of the "No Matter What" theme. Kenwright's production added vocals for the children and adults, presumably as they reunited and left the scene – shaken up, but with their closeness restored by this experience. Not a bad idea to reprise the show's big hit melodically, but I don't ultimately think it's necessary to include the lyrics. However, I would take a cue from him in holding the kids' spoken lines until after this theme's appearance, to allow for the full effect implied by the stage direction of the rising sun revealing the barn's charred remains.

*Music and Lyrics*

Firstly, in terms of orchestrations, I'd choose where possible to utilize alternate key signatures, arrangements, etc. from the celebrity concept album. While they may not always fit Fifties Louisiana, a lot of the "pop" versions sound more inspiring, invigorating, and fun than the versions on the cast recording or in the final show.

Secondly, for certain numbers, I'd discard the licensed London materials and revisit some of the material created for the 1996 D.C. tryout production. Washington's orchestrations were of a more folky/Cajun feel, which contrast to the outright rock the London production ended up with.<sup>10</sup> I especially love the original Washington

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<sup>10</sup> The only hint of the Washington orchestrations in the final edition were in the occasional use of a harmonica (a synth part, at that) and an electric violin, the latter not having been used in D.C.

orchestration of "Cold" as sung in the bar – it sounds more like something that would've been played in such a dive at the time. My idea with this would be to contrast the more rock-oriented orchestrations in the Amos/Candy numbers, as well as those of The Man, with the more naïve Swallow et al., whose songs should be more folky (although as Swallow progresses through the plot she'd become more influenced by rock). It'd offer interesting dramatic cohesion, and help accentuate the battle between traditional values and the outside world at the heart of the show.

### *Casting*

Some of *Whistle's* problems stemmed from incautious revision, but others resulted from West End casting choices that were frozen into the material and created new problems that the original D.C. version never had. In casting, I'd have to confront one issue in the Gale Edwards production that the Hal Prince version never dealt with.

To quote Foster Hirsch in *Harold Prince and the American Musical Theatre*:

*In the baking Bible Belt setting, sex was more tangibly present than the film's gray, forlorn Lancashire. Two characters not in the film, Amos and Candy, boosted the show's erotic quotient. Feeling trapped by church and farm and contemplating the dead-end lives stretching up ahead, they yearned to break away. For these young rebels Lloyd Webber wrote "Tire Tracks and Broken Hearts," driving Dixieland jazz as interpreted by a savvy outsider. In Washington, appropriately, a slinky bleached blonde played Candy. In casting a black actress for the role in London, Lloyd Webber and his British collaborators revealed an essential misunderstanding of their American setting: in the pre-Civil Rights-era Bible Belt, a black girl would not have intermingled with whites in the casual way the show presented.*

Hirsch is right. In the D.C. version, Amos and Candy's relationship wasn't intended to be taboo, or at least far less so than an interracial pairing; they were just two teens with visions of big city life who wanted to leave the sticks, like any suburban kid today who wants to go to Hollywood or New York. However, Webber apparently wanted to cover *everything* happening in Louisiana circa 1959, and also to justify (by now mandatory in the industry) multi-ethnic ensemble casting. He wound up hiring a black actress for Candy and hand-waving the rest with a hopelessly naïve-sounding statement to the effect that "the children would get on, black and white, but at a certain age the cut-off happened and they were segregated." Although possibly true, the race issue was still needlessly pinned on the show. It's a shame race remains so negatively impactful, but still it must be dealt with, given the time, location, and plot elements the authors chose.

In the mid-Nineties, my company presented an urban production of *Godspell* in Harlem, tapping into a genuine spark and sentiment in the black Christian community that one doesn't easily find elsewhere. It was in past innovation that I found inspiration: I'd strip out the racial prejudice angle that did the London (and any subsequent) production of *Whistle* no favors by exploring the possibility of a largely black company.

First of all, from a commercial standpoint, this choice gives the show extra impact and connects *Whistle* to an in-built audience. With strong casting, vocal power that could

lift even the run-of-the-mill religious numbers (such as "Vaults of Heaven" and "Wrestle with the Devil"), and direction in the mode of a "prayer warrior" piece, even a modest production might easily run for years on what's now called the Tyler Perry circuit. This particular market suffers from a lack of quality family-friendly material that *Whistle* can fill. Further, many of its venues are churches, which have surely noted that drama clubs, and even one-off theatrical presentations, are among the fastest-growing ministries across the U.S. today. A powerful theater piece can touch those both within and without the church with its simple message, and benefit growth by becoming a unique community outreach, providing new opportunities for laypeople to become involved.

As far as plausibility goes, this ethnic makeup was far from nonexistent in parts of Louisiana at the time. It'd only take minor script emendation to keep the bulk of the show while jettisoning unwelcome moments: for example, rather than issues about interracial relations, puritanical views would be what keep Candy from flirting with Amos in the bright light of day. Young black men who had few pop culture role models of their own extraction might've tried to pattern themselves on James Dean just like any white-bread corn-pone. And think of what might happen if black kids raised in the church, "washed in the blood," who've witnessed speaking in tongues and dancing with snakes and heard that Jesus lives and will send them to Hell if they don't believe in him their whole lives, discovered this guy in their barn.

With regard to authority figures, the Sheriff would be one of the only white people in the cast. The powers that be at the time probably would appoint a white Sheriff to keep "them" in line; while my Google skills aren't the best, the closest thing I've turned up to a black Sheriff is two of the first black deputies appointed to a local parish in 1964. So that's probably a safe bet, casting-wise, if a little "on-the-nose." If one wishes to explore tension between the races beyond that small point, there is the possibility of going photo-negative (i.e., casting a formerly black character with a Caucasian performer) – the role of Edward could be more like Celia in *The Help*, a down-at-heel white hick in the boonies who's had it hard and never developed a problem with black people, someone accepted in this community because "polite society" has no room for *him* either. It'd put a different "race traitor" spin on the Sheriff coming down on him in the bar after "Cold," saying he "won't be responsible if they find you in a place like this."

### *General Design Ideas*

I envision middle-tech scenic design. The cinematic fluidity implied by the show's script would remain, but the impulse and overall goal would be simplistic, painterly images, a return to an older, simpler stagecraft relying on scrimms and flying drops. Not quite minimalist, but of a similar aesthetic. Don't expect chandeliers, helicopters, car chases, hydraulic lifts or levitating stages – the main design vocabulary of this show is a barn.

One useful resource to tap might be the actual research that went into writing *Whistle*. Per an interview with Jim Steinman, "We went to New Orleans for research and a lot of the story is based on a town called Donaldsonville which is about an hour outside of New Orleans. I swear it could have been 1959. The cars were the same and literally every car had a bumper sticker about Jesus. In every store window there was a sign that mentioned Jesus. Religion was rampant – it was everywhere. It was like entering a

whole different world. It was not a sophisticated, questioning, cynical world." The D.C. version even explicitly referenced Donaldsonville as either the location itself or close enough to the show's setting to be mentioned in the local newspaper. With that in mind, exploring photographs or video of Donaldsonville may prove helpful to approximating a small-town setting like *Whistle's*.

As for costume designs, the London production seemed to verge on stereotype and the Kenwright tour(s) didn't improve on that count. I have to say I prefer the Washington designs, which seemed far more real to me. For example, Amos' look in Washington was almost identical to the London production, but there were subtle differences such as hairstyle that made him more "real" in the former than the latter. Only exception I'd make is The Man's costume, which revealed (literally) the man beneath The Man in its London rendition.

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