



Paul Kieve

Theatrical Magic

BY DAVID BRITLAND

While cinematic wizards George Lucas and Steven Spielberg were busy painting digital dreams for audiences all over the world, Great Britain's theatrical producers fought back with some special effects magic of their own. It's no longer enough to depend on the audience's willing suspension of disbelief. Fantastic tales demand fantastic effects, but making them work live in the theatre, without the aid of computer-generated imagery, is a challenge that requires special skills. And, where do you find such skills? Meet England's Paul Kieve, theatrical illusionist, technical advisor and, of course, magician.

For ten years he has been working with theater companies to put on the stage what had previously remained firmly on the page. Thanks to Paul, the audience no longer has to imagine that ghosts can walk, doorknobs talk, or that witches can turn children into mice. They can see it for themselves, once a night, twice on Saturday.

Paul wasn't always a backstage wizard. With his sister Karen, he was runner up in the Magic Circle Young Magician of the Year competition in 1985, and for several years, he joined fellow magician Lawrence Leyton in a double act, the Zodiac Brothers. It was during that period that he met David Shakarian, an expert craftsman, who helped them build an original levitation illusion for a 1991 appearance on *The Ronn Lucas Show* on British television.

Later that year, Paul and Lawrence went their own separate ways. Lawrence became a successful mentalist and hypnotist. Paul didn't have a future career in mind. "The only thing I knew was that I didn't want to do a double act and take it all over Europe. I didn't want to have to book gigs a year in advance. I wanted a little freedom and the time to live in one place for a while." Their last contract had been on board the QE2 and, when Paul left the ship in June of 1991, he had only the haziest of ideas about what he might do. However, the day after he left the ship he got a call from actress Kate Williams, a friend of his mother's and someone he knew from working variety nights at the Theatre Royal in Stratford East. Playwright and theatre director Ken Hill had written a stage adaptation of H.G. Wells' *The Invisible Man*. It required some special effects. Would he be interested in advising?

"Ironically it was the first time in almost five years that I was free to say yes." The money was minimal, but Paul worked out that he could survive for three months if he focussed

on that one job. "I'd be really scraping to pay for rent and food, but I thought it would be great to do."

Ken Hill had been artistic director of the Stratford East Theatre, where he worked with Theatre Workshop, one of Britain's most innovative theater companies run by the legendary Joan Littlewood. He had produced a musical of *Phantom of the Opera* prior to Andrew Lloyd Webber's version, and had a string of successes with productions such as *Curse of the Werewolf* and *Dracula*. Now he had bought the stage rights for *The Invisible Man*.

Critics have described Ken Hill as the author of intelligent pantomimes for adults and *The Invisible Man* was no exception, incorpo-

"Ken had a notion of how things might work and was sure it could be done. His favorite expression was 'we can always jig it out of a bit of ply.' Nevertheless, he was completely open to my ideas and fascinated with the use of magic to help tell the story. The prospect of actually achieving a convincing invisible character on stage really thrilled him."

Ken was thrilled at the prospect of creating a convincing invisible character on stage and gave Paul a free rein when it came to producing the necessary illusions. If Paul suggested an effect that didn't match the script, Ken was happy to rewrite it. He even put bits of business into the script that facilitated the effects. There's a moment when a tramp comes in with



PHOTO: BARRY MARSEN

*Paul Kieve began his career as theatrical illusionist and technical adviser in 1992, when he successfully caused the main character in a stage adaptation of H.G. Wells' *The Invisible Man* to magically become visible.*

rating plenty of tongue-in-cheek humor. When Ken wrote it, he gave no serious consideration as to how the lead character, the Invisible Man, would be manifested on stage. It probably wouldn't have mattered much if the effects were a little on the "hokey" side, all badly hidden strings and wires, because the essence of the story was that it was being told within the setting of a 1904 music hall. It wasn't a magic show. It would entertain but it didn't have to baffle. However, at the suggestion of the theatre administrator, he met Paul and the staging of the play took a new direction.

muddy boots and the landlady picks up the doormat and shakes it out. It's not there solely for its humor. The mat lies over some threads, keeping them out of the way until required. As soon as the mat is lifted, the threads are free to create the illusion of the invisible man carrying a knife through the air.

A key scene was the unmasking, in which the invisible man unwraps the bandages around his head to reveal nothing but empty space. "I had an idea for the unmasking and I called Shaks (David Shakarian) to see if he could build it. Shaks being such a positive guy



Kieve's effects in The Invisible Man were the talk of the town, with even rave reviews from The Times, as the show played London's West End for seven months.

simply said, 'I'll be able to make it work.'

The success of the illusion depended not only on the device that Paul and Shaks created, but also on a strong moment of misdirection provided by the script and the direction of the action on stage. In other words, complete collaboration. "For me it was a learning experience," Paul said. "At that time I knew nothing about how a professional production was put together. I'd never worked with scenic or lighting designers or directed a cast. I was going for full out magical methods mainly because I was ignorant of what others in the field had done. I didn't know an easier way to approach it! People have said to me since 'How did you know any of it would work?' In retrospect I didn't know any of it would work."

At the end of the show, the Invisible Man dies and becomes visible. In performance, a cloth is thrown over an empty chair and a man's shape instantly appears beneath it. When the cloth is pulled away, the man is there, visible for the first time. The effect was cleverly accomplished by using a "De Kolta Chair" in reverse. "In the first preview, the cloth was so still that there were a few moments when I was convinced that the actor hadn't got there in time. It was terrifying. Then they lifted it up and, to my relief, there he was. It got a gasp from the audience."

Paul discovered that the best theatrical magic happens within the context of an

enthralling story. "The unmasking is a classic moment and it is at the end of act one. There is great anticipation as the local people confront the mysterious stranger about his behavior and appearance. When this dramatic climax was enhanced by the illusion of the bandages being unwrapped, and the cigarette smoked by invisible lips, the reaction was fantastic"

The show was lauded by critics and loved by its audiences. Paul's effects stole the show, with even *The Times* raving about his work. Everyone, magicians included, was astounded at how good the unmasking looked. The instant hit transferred to the West End, where it ran for seven months, before touring Great Britain. For Paul it was the beginning of a new career.

After *The Invisible Man*, Paul got a call from actor Roger Allam whose partner had worked on the production. Allam (the original Javert in *Les Miserables*) was appearing in the Royal Shakespeare Company's version of *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. The play had two different actors to play Jekyll and Hyde and used a series of physical switches to exchange them whenever the potion was taken. Ali Bongo had started working on the show, but he was also a member of the production team on the Paul Daniels television series, which was taking up most of his time.

One major challenge was the finale in which Jekyll drinks the potion and collapses to the

stage. When people burst into the room they discover that he is now transformed into Mr. Hyde. The problem was that there seemed no place on stage for the switch to take place. "At first glance it didn't seem achievable," said Paul. "I had no clue as to how it could be done. I remember sitting in the theater, thinking, 'I'm responsible for the end of this play, and I don't know how to do it. Oh, my God!'" That was when the solution came to me. Unlike solving a problem in your own act, you're not on your own. In most theater projects the whole team wants, and needs, it to make it work."

The team included multi-Tony award winning lighting designer David Hersey (*Cats*, *Les Miserables*, *Miss Saigon*), known as the "King of Darkness" because of his minimalist use of light. Paul discussed the effect with Hersey and writer David Edgar, and gradually saw how misdirection and Hersey's talents could bring about the final transformation. Also, Paul was now working on one of the biggest stages in the country, the main house at the Royal Shakespeare Company's London home, and he realized there was a much bigger picture. "I could use anything that was happening on that stage to focus people's attention, and my experience on *The Invisible Man* had taught me to be bold about suggesting things.

"I thought that when the adult characters came in and found the body, they wouldn't want their kids to see it. Therefore, it would be theatrically right to cover him. At the back of the set was a stack of shelves. By lighting them sharply from above, the recesses beneath would appear black. It was Black Art even though the scene appeared to be well lit."

"I also took an idea that Ali had mentioned. He thought that there was something helpful about the books and bottles at the base of the shelves. They created a visual barrier that looked impenetrable. I got a crate of Norm Nielsen bottles, filled them with foam and stuck them to a base, along with some specially made foam books. Now I had a barrier of bottles and books that the actors could just roll over. They would just squash down and instantly pop back up!"

In performance Dr. Jekyll staggered about the stage and knocked one or two real bottles from the shelves before collapsing onto the floor. Adults rushed into the room wondering what all the commotion was. They saw the body and prepared to cover it with a blanket. As they did, the children came in, creating a strong moment of misdirection as the adults tried to keep them back. That's when Jekyll rolled out, over the rubber books and bottles, and Hyde rolled in. The switch only took a couple of seconds and was not revealed for about a minute after. It seemed as if there was no way that the two actors could have swapped places.

Protecting not only the secrecy of the illusions but also any copyright that may exist in

their performance is a major concern. Everyone on the production has to sign a secrecy contract and Paul's own contract specifically states that his contribution to the project is copyrighted in the same way that the director's work is. The wording has been built up bit by bit, an accumulation of his experiences on various productions and the type of contracts used by theater lighting and set designers.

Safety is another factor. Levitation and flying effects have a long history in theater and have to be carefully supervised. A lack of rehearsal or care can lead to serious injuries. "If a show doesn't allow enough time for a technical rehearsal, I will not get involved with it. I am incredibly safety conscious." Paul has good reason. Theaters are dangerous places, and he has seen accidents occur as a result of silly oversights. It is one of the few places you can work with a suspended load hanging over your head and not have to wear a hard hat! He once saw a piece of scenery fall from the rig and crush a chair. Only luck prevented serious injury. The actress that should have been sitting there had, fortunately, missed her entrance.

Stage traps are the magician's most obvious hazard. "I try to drum into people how dangerous they are. You can't get much more dangerous than a hole in the floor." In Singapore, he was perturbed to find that the stage managers were untrained school kids and safety just didn't seem to be on the agenda. "There was a double-trap system used for a Jarrett 'Dracula Vanish,' which they would reset by hinging it open from under the stage. I was astounded to find that they would often forget to check whether anyone was standing on the trap at the time they reset it! I had to tell them that it took two people to reset, one above and one below. Singapore is the least safety-conscious country I've ever worked in!"

One of the most technically demanding shows to come Paul's way was *Point of Death*, written by Michael Cooney, and performed at the Liverpool Playhouse. "It was set in the ward of a hospital where a man had flashbacks to four years previously. The opening scene had the man rushed to the hospital, having had a heart attack. He is in street clothes. They put him on top of a hospital bed and draw the curtains around it. Instantly, they draw the curtains open, because it's morning. Now he is in pajamas, wired to a heart monitor, with suction pads on his chest. For the audience it was astounding."

The script was more like a movie than a play, and part of Paul's job was to realize all the instant transitions between scenes. He collaborated with set designer Paul Farnsworth (who had also worked with Paul on *Scrooge*) and, between them, they began to create some startling scenic effects. "One of the characters goes to sleep and dreams that he stabs a patient. You see the stabbing, and blood is splattered every-



PHOTO: STEVE VAUGHAN

[Top] Kieve-designed special effects turned a hospital dream scene nightmarish in the 1995 production of *Point of Death* at the Liverpool Playhouse. Paul collaborated with writer Salmon Rushdie [center] for his production of *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*. Kieve's theatrical magic always produces the right words [right] to ballyhoo outside a theater.



where. The next moment he wakes up in a completely different bed, there are different patients in the ward and there's not a single drop of blood on the wall!"

The dream sequences meant devising a hospital set in which walls and beds and patients could be changed instantly, the action illuminated by pools of light, the mechanics of the method hidden by the surrounding darkness. "The only thing we had going for us was that the play was set in one ward. As for the methods, our chief inspiration came, surprisingly, from a matchbox. We designed beds that had shells over them, like matchbox covers. We extended the rail at the side of the bed through the back wall and off-stage. The shell could slide along this rail and through the wall in a matter of seconds, taking an actor with it." So for the opening scene the moment the curtain was drawn around the bed, the shell — complete with backboard, pillow, covers and heart monitor — would be pushed through the wall and cover the original. The dis-

a mirror. Marley's face materializes in a door-knocker and a giant Ghost of Christmas Future chases Scrooge about the stage, before changing into an empty bed sheet. The production has toured all over the world. "Every time they do it I think I'd love to put additional illusions in, but I always say no because there is only enough time to technically rehearse the pieces that are already there." *Parsifal* at the Paris Opera House, *Peter Pan* in Copenhagen, *Alice in Wonderland* with English National Ballet at the London Coliseum, and *The Witches Of Eastwick* at Theatre Royal Drury Lane are other success stories that Paul has contributed to.

When author David Wood turned Roald Dahl's *The Witches* into a stage play, he gave Paul his first opportunity to conceive the illusions before the set had been designed. "David is the UK's leading children's playwright, and writing and producing good quality shows for children is his mission. He's written a lot of plays, produced with Cameron Mackintosh,

could do almost anything we wanted to get rid of the other witches."

It was then that David Wood came up with the idea of adopting a surreal, slow-motion style as soon as the poisoned soup starts to work. "There are slow-motion sound effects, clocks ticking, bizarre screaming. It allows the extras to disappear through a trap backstage, while the audience's attention is focussed on the grotesque disappearance of the Grand High Witch into the soup tureen, where she changes into a mouse. It's only after the main action has finished that the audience realizes all the other witches have changed into mice as well." You really have to force yourself to watch the other witches if you want to see them leave the stage.

On a touring show, extras can be a source of problems. As with *The Witches*, they are often hired locally and any illusions they are involved in must be extremely simple to learn, otherwise disaster is assured. Yet, cast members can also be an illusion consultant's best friend, as happened during a production meeting of Noel Coward's *Blythe Spirit*. The show starred 1960s supermodel Twiggy, and the producers were very keen on making her first appearance as the ghost Elvira memorable. With the help of Olivier-award-winning set designer Tim Goodchild, Paul devised an ingenious illusion. The audience was looking into a room at the far side of which was a large curved set of French windows leading into a garden. They could hear Twiggy talking outside the windows as she approached. As her voice grew louder the lighting inside the room dimmed, while the lighting on Twiggy, now just outside the windows, was raised. Unexpectedly she continued her walk, penetrating right through the window, brushing the flimsy transparent curtains aside. Then she leaned against the glass she has just come through!

Twiggy loved the idea. It was, after all, a remarkable entrance. On the first day of rehearsal, the director asked Paul to run the cast through the various effects. He was just describing the window illusion when the production manager announced that the effect had been cut. They'd run out of money! It was a mistake to say this in front of the cast. Renowned actress Maureen Lipman spoke up, "If Twiggy doesn't get her magical entrance back, I'm not going on. Bye, everybody!" And out she walked. The illusion sequence was soon restored.

Paul's résumé is littered with the names of theater's famous. He's worked with directors such as Trevor Nunn, Gillian Lynne, and even Oscar-winner Sam Mendes. He's even been consulted by the Lord of the Dance himself, Michael Flatley, who wanted to run across the stage towards the audience and vanish into thin air at the end of the show. The idea was dropped on the grounds that the show was making a fortune anyway; why change it?

The king of commercial theatre is surely Andrew Lloyd Webber, who these days, practi-

PHOTO: ROBBIE JACK



When former '60s supermodel Twiggy played the ghost "Elvira" in *Blythe Spirit*, a remarkable illusion was devised that enabled her to make an ethereal entrance through a set of glass windows.

appearing blood on the walls was accomplished by revolving panels. The result was an incredible series of shocks and surprises for the audience. Just as the author had intended, it was like watching a movie on stage.

"It was difficult for everyone backstage. They worked in near darkness, doing fairly intricate changes. However, there was a great feeling among the crew. We knew it was a different kind of show. The director, Bob Tomson, said he'd never known a show that relied so much on the technical functioning of the set. If anything went wrong, if a bed derailed for instance, it would literally be a showstopper!"

A good many of the classics have come in for the Paul Kieve treatment. In Leslie Bricusse's *Scrooge—The Musical*, the Ghost of Christmas Past appears in a chair and disappears through

and he is very knowledgeable about theater. He had seen my work on *The Invisible Man* and, although he's a member of the Magic Circle, didn't want to be his own magic consultant."

Once Paul was on board, he explained his requirements to designer Susie Caulcutt, who developed the set around the magic elements, so that the illusion props blended in perfectly with the rest of the scenery. The finale of the show occurs when a stage full of witches is magically changed into mice, after drinking charmed soup. It seemed an impossible task, but Paul solved it by deciding it was the fate of the Grand High Witch that audiences would be concentrating on. "I suggested to David that if we made the Grand High Witch a little more resistant to the magic potion, and had her disappear by shrinking into the soup tureen, we



cally owns the West End of London. For some time, he has been working on a sequel to his blockbusting musical *Phantom*, and Paul was asked to create some new illusions for it, one of which he had the opportunity to present.

“Every year Lloyd Webber holds a festival in his home town of Sydmonton, near Newbury. He bought an estate there, after the success of *Jesus Christ Superstar*, converted a church on the grounds into a 100-seat theatre. *Cats*, *Phantom of the Opera*, *Sunset Boulevard*, *Aspects of Love*, he has tried them all there on the tiny stage that is no more than 20-foot by 10-foot. He said he always wanted to stage an illusion at Sydmonton. That’s how I came to be involved in the festival.”

For *Phantom 2*, Lloyd Webber had written a sequence in which the heroine is trapped in a maze of mirrors, and then disappears. Paul worked on the idea with Shaks, Arlene Phillips created the choreography, and it was to be debuted at Sydmonton. The little church in which the show would take place did not lack anything by way of stage facilities. There was enough lighting and state of the art sound to fill two theatres. But the night before he arrived in Sydmonton, Paul realized his original idea wasn’t going to work as planned. He quickly restructured it, but was worried as to whether it would still fit the newly created *Phantom 2* score. When he queried it with Lloyd Webber,

“*Stretching Table*” illusion [above left] and “*Queen of Hearts Appearance*” [above right] from Derek Deane’s production of *Alice in Wonderland* for the English National Ballet. [Right] Paul Kieve appears on John Fisher’s *Heroes of Magic*.

he was amazed at his response. “It was incredible. It was the Monday morning rehearsal, and he was actually composing the music on the piano as he played, very happy to rewrite it to suit the illusion.”

As per the brief, the heroine danced in front of the mirror, became trapped inside it, then vanished on cue. The rehearsal was such a success that Lloyd Webber decided to move the piece nearer the end of the show, so that it followed his own performance on the clavichord of the title number from *Whistle Down The Wind*. This sudden promotion was to prove a nightmare because there was very little time to clear the stage of the clavichord and bring on the illusion, both having to pass through the same narrow stage entrance. It more than halved the original set-up time,

which was tight at best, and made for a few heart-stopping moments backstage. Yet, Paul and Shaks managed to get the illusion set in record time, and the “*Maze of Mirrors*” illusion received an enthusiastic response.

Collaborating with others is one of the joys of Paul’s business. It doesn’t get any better than being able to design an illusion with Shaks, have it choreographed by Arlene Phillips, work it to music written by Andrew Lloyd Webber, and then have it applauded by a celebrity audience. It’s been a long journey, from performer to advisor. However, as career choices go, it seems an enviable one for any magician. Paul Kieve works with the best in the business with one goal in mind, to create new and exciting illusions for the arena that is their true home — the theater. ♦