

THE COMPLETE 2015 GUIDE TO THE KEYS

Key West

WINTER 2015

MAGAZINE

30 Reasons We Love Our Island

REASON NUMBER ONE:

Watching the sun rise and
set from White Street Pier

Sunset over the
Atlantic, looking
west from the
White Street Pier.

THE GUIDE
KEYSWIDE

Food, Drink, Shops, Fishing,
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The Waterfront produced *The Drowsy Chaperone* in 2012.

Creating Worlds on the Waterfront

Michael Boyer designs sets that take audiences from Mallory Square to Broadway and beyond

By Nancy Klingener

The stage at the Waterfront Playhouse is 30 feet wide and, at its deepest, goes back 24 feet. In that space, Michael Boyer creates living rooms and roller rinks, churchyards and jury rooms. This season, he'll be making the rotating set-within-a-set for *Noises Off* and, somehow, the almost absurdly complicated 30 set pieces for *Monty Python's Spamalot*.

"It's the biggest challenge since I've been here," Boyer says.

And all this happens within the confines of a 19th-century warehouse, where one set is under design and construction even as the current production is taking the stage in the

evening. The person who works that magic doesn't appear on stage, but his vision permeates every production at the Playhouse. It's that vision

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that allows the Playhouse to present professional-level theater, which often comes as a surprise to visitors who expect small-town productions.

Those folks are often "blown away" by what they see on stage at the Waterfront, says Danny Weathers, the managing artistic director. And "they like the fact that it's so typical of Key West." With 150 seats, it's an intimate theater—and there's no escaping its Mallory Square setting, which sometimes drives the crew crazy but delights visitors.

"While the play is going on, you can hear roosters crowing, and sometimes the salsa band next door," Weathers says.

Boyer has been the theater's technical director and scenic designer for 10 years—and his work is as important to the production as that of the people who are on stage.

"It's really about creating the world of the play," says Weathers.

Boyer reads each play several times after it's selected, and researches the setting—all while keeping the Waterfront's logistical limitations in mind and thinking about how the



Above: *Other Desert Cities* was one of the hits of the 2014 Waterfront season.

Left: In 2013, the Waterfront put on the popular 1978 classic *Deathtrap*.



actors will be moving around the set.

"You can't just make a pretty picture," he says. "It's about making a set that's totally functional for the actors and interprets the play so it works with the mood of the production."

Reading a play and designing a set, Boyer says he thinks about "whose house is it? Who is the controlling influence?"

This year, Boyer is working within the Waterfront's confines to create the complicated set for *Noises Off*, which requires nine doors—that get slammed. A lot. The play also requires that the set have second level, a challenge in the tiny theater that has no fly space above to raise and lower scenery. Last year the Waterfront put on *Xanadu*, a musical built around the Olivia Newton John hit from the '80s—with most of the cast on roller skates. The Waterfront has almost no room in the wing on the left so Boyer strategically placed a mattress to catch the actors rolling off on that side.

And then there's the challenge of getting materials for sets and maintaining

the lighting and sound equipment on an island 150 miles away from a lot of specialty stores and services.

"It's much more difficult doing theater on an island," Boyer says. The Waterfront has very limited storage for materials on the side and each set is newly created for each production—then struck and dismantled when it's done.

Looking back, Boyer's favorite plays aren't necessarily the ones with the trickiest sets or the most heartfelt

acting, but the ones where the set and the play worked so well that audiences felt they had entered another world while they were at the Waterfront.

"When they both come together and work together," Boyer says, "that's the best." ■

For information on the Waterfront Playhouse's 2015 season—the 75th—go to www.waterfrontplayhouse.org or call (305) 294-5015.