

VULTURE

Is a Bank Heist Supposed to Sound This Groovy?

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Nobody would consider *Dog Day Afternoon* to be a music-forward film. The 1975 bank-heist drama breaks out a trio of songs only at its start and end, focusing instead on the interior complexities of the leading men portrayed by Al Pacino and John Cazale who want to take the money and run. So imagine the surprise for viewers of its new Broadway adaptation when they sit down, the curtain rises, and “Queen Bitch,” by David Bowie, reverberates with a sound quality that rivals a Madison Square Garden concert. While the reviews of the adaptation have been mixed — our critic had a more positive take — one particular accolade has followed the show since opening night: Man, the music kicked major ass, didn’t it?

“We started to build a palette months ahead of being in the theater to keep that ’70s, gritty New York feel,” sound designer Cody Spencer says. “I paid attention to what was being played on the mainstream and college radio at the time. What were people hearing in Brooklyn in 1975?” While Spencer was left to his own devices to answer that question, playwright Stephen Adly Guirgis specified in his script that Bowie’s music should be prevalent. “Queen Bitch” is joined by “Moonage Daydream” to close the first act, while “Aladdin Sane” punctuates all the action in Act Two.

Two Marvin Gaye songs, “Inner City Blues” and “Trouble Man,” further enhance the pressure-cooker environment inside the bank, and a few transitions are even set to avant-garde jazz. That includes “The Edge,” one of the most-sampled songs in hip-hop that was composed by the man who played Ducky in *NCIS*. One cue, “I Zimbra,” by Talking Heads, was selected despite being an anachronism due to how good Jon Bernthal strutted to it. “We did look the other way on that one,” Spencer admits. “We put it in early and were like, Okay, at some point we’ll get something different. We just didn’t find anything. It’s the land of imagination doing theater. It fits so well for his entrance and gives you a little suspense.”

Spencer estimates that he selected 150 songs to experiment with, only to whittle them down to 14 final picks. “In the preview process, we were changing out songs constantly to see how they felt,” he says. “Sometimes it lasted one show, sometimes it lasted multiple shows. There’s a lot of transitions where we’re just playing eight seconds of a song. It’s trying to make them land and have people not think, Oh, that’s a whip playing,

but actually have an emotional response to that whip playing.” He was disappointed that he couldn’t find a place for one of his favorite bands, New York Dolls, despite a seemingly obvious narrative synergy. “It was too gritty and too hard to place in any of these eight-second segments,” he explains. “We couldn’t find the right place. I’m a little sad about that, but you know how it is.” Attempts to include MC5’s “Kick Out the Jams” were also thwarted for reasons of melodic agelessness: “It doesn’t sound like it fits in that time period at all. It honestly sounds like it was recorded in 2001.”

With the soundtrack set, Spencer began the process of tuning the room’s system so theatergoers could best listen to it — an experience, for a play, he had yet to try in his career. “I took the approach of, How would I want to listen to music? Bad-sounding music drives me crazy,” he says. A piece of cutting-edge technology in the concert and Broadway worlds, L-Acoustics, was used to ensure the most immersive sound possible, which bled over to the more impactful helicopter and gunshot effects. (He had previously used the technology for the musicals *Here Lies Love* and *The Outsiders*.) “It’s hyperreal,” Spencer notes. “Because of this technology, I’m able to process the music a bit differently to give it that shine. Down there in the orchestra is our optimal location. That’s where I tuned for, because I know that’s where a lot of people are sitting and that’s where the more expensive seats are. But I wanted to make sure every seat in the house had that same experience.”

Underneath the orchestra and above the mezzanine, he mounted miniature subwoofers to the ceilings. “This was the first time I ever did that with a play, because I felt this show needed an extra oomph since it has star power,” Spencer adds. “I have a special processing thing I’ve never done before to help Jon and Ebon Moss-Bachrach’s microphones stand out more onstage. But I can’t give away all of my secrets.”

As *Dog Day Afternoon* reaches its crescendo, the audience feels more and more of an outside presence — where the crowds and police officers loudly congregate — while the action is contained inside the bank. Spencer used more than a thousand sound effects throughout the show to get to this moment, since, unlike the film, he couldn’t just employ hundreds of extras to loiter on a city street. “Some of the effects nobody notices,” he says, “and some of them are so subtle that you’re like, Did I just hear a police siren go by outside or was that part of the show?” Being on a busy midtown street didn’t help matters during the rehearsal process. “There were a few times during the tech rehearsals where our director was like, ‘I really like the siren that went by right then,’” Spencer recalls. “And I was like, Uh, that might have been an actual emergency outside.”