

Creatives

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Sounding out
SpongeBob

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Musical Theater

Letting SpongeBob Sing

CFA's Walter Trarbach earned Tony nod for sound work on hit Broadway musical / BY JOHN O'ROURKE



SPONGEBOB SQUAREPANTS, a long-running Nickelodeon cartoon about a sea sponge who lives in an underwater pineapple is an unlikely candidate for a hit musical. But since the \$20 million *SpongeBob SquarePants: The Broadway Musical* hit the stage in 2016, it's been

called a "ginormous giggle" (*New York Times*) and "eye-popping" (*Hollywood Reporter*). In May, it scooped 12 Tony Award nominations, including

Trarbach (left) is responsible for everything heard in *SpongeBob SquarePants: The Broadway Musical* (above). He had to create hundreds of sound effects, including a rumbling volcano and the little squeak SpongeBob makes when he walks.

for a crew member rarely given a curtain call.

Walter Trarbach (CFA'02) is *SpongeBob's* sound designer, responsible for virtually everything heard in the theatrical production. Along with his colleague Mike Dobson—the Foley designer who generates the musical's everyday sounds, such as footsteps—Trarbach was honored for Best Sound Design for a Musical, his first Tony nomination.

The complicated, nuanced work of theatrical sound designers involves creating sound effects and sonic atmospheres that aid in the dramatic presentation of the performance, and

JOAN MARCUS (TOP), KIMBERLY WITHAM (INSET)

the audience's emotional connection with it. They advise on how the performers and orchestra can best be heard, including acoustic adjustments to the theater and set, or the configuration of radio and float mics for the performers. Asked to describe his style, Trarbach says simply, "If I can't hear something, I make it louder. If I think it's too loud, I turn it down."

Trarbach, who has worked on such shows as the 2012 Broadway revival of *Jesus Christ Superstar* and 2015's *Doctor Zhivago*, has been involved with *SpongeBob* for six years. He was approached by Susan Vargo, the musical's producer and the head of live entertainment for Nickelodeon. They'd met when he was a student at BU. He hadn't seen a single episode of the TV show, and when they started workshopping the musical, there wasn't even a script. Over the next several years, more workshops took place, and he and Dobson continued to try out new sounds with the actors. "We got to grow the sound design of the show right along with its overall development," Trarbach says, adding that that's rare for a Broadway musical. "This allowed us to integrate sound design into every facet of the production."

Every show, he says, has its own set of demands. "Sometimes the scenery will be in the way of ideal speaker positions or the costume design of a musical will include hats over an actor's microphone, rendering it ineffective."

The biggest challenge on *SpongeBob* was the sheer scale of the project, he says. In addition to designing the sound for a huge Broadway musical, Trarbach had to create hundreds of sound effects, including a rumbling volcano, a cowbell that goes off each time a character hits their head during the show, and the little squeak that SpongeBob makes each time he walks, made famous by the Nickelodeon cartoon. The show's tap-dancing numbers and the fact that all of the actors play instruments onstage posed additional complications.

"In terms of the amount of sound in a show, *SpongeBob* will likely prove to be the biggest of my career," he says.

Gallery



↑ *Untitled #5B (Krakatoa)* (2007), mixed media on paper collage, 13 x 21 ¼ x 2 ½ in.



↑ *Video Drawings: Swimming* (1975), chromogenic print, framed, 14 x 16 ⅞ in.

Representational imagery wars with abstraction throughout **HOWARDENA PINDELL's** art. Her work is on display at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts as part of a career-length retrospective, *Howardena Pindell: What Remains To Be Seen*. The chronological exhibition, which spans more than 50 years, will travel to Brandeis University's Rose Art Museum in January 2019. In the exhibition's 144 works—from a self-portrait she composed during her time at CFA, to more recent vibrant and abstract collages—Pindell (CFA'65) pays homage to her experiences as a female artist of color.

In *Video Drawings: Swimming* (1975), Pindell enlivens the frozen image of a blurred man diving into an illuminated pool with frenetic Kandinsky-like marks composed of random dots, arrows, and numbers. To compose the *Video Drawings* series, a hybrid of figuration and abstraction, Pindell would affix drawings she made on acetate to an image playing on a television screen, and then photograph the composition.

Pindell grew up during segregation, and many of her works touch upon racism, inequality, and identity. She recalls a childhood visit to a root beer stand in Kentucky, where she and her father "were given these chilled mugs, and at the bottom of the mugs were giant red circles. I was stunned when I asked my father why that was and I learned that it meant it was dishware reserved for black people," she says. The circle recurs in many of her pieces, including the abstract collage *Untitled #5B (Krakatoa)* (2007). —MARA SASSOON