



ENTERTAINMENT & ARTS

100 gallons of water and fake blood: Behind the scenes of that epic rumble in ‘The Outsiders’



Actors rehearse fight choreography for the climactic rumble before a showing of the “The Outsiders” at the Hollywood Pantages Theatre. (Carlin Stiehl / For The Times)

By Jenelle Riley

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They say it's always sunny in Los Angeles, but inside the Hollywood Pantages Theatre, you can count on it to pour eight shows a week. That's thanks to a climactic moment in "The Outsiders" musical in which real water falls from the rafters as teen gangs brawl in a fight filled with rain, mud and stage blood.

Staging that key three minutes of the show's meticulously choreographed, highly anticipated climax, is a technical feat involving more than 100 gallons of water and unwavering physical acumen on the part of the cast.

"We are really careful with each other in a really great way," says Rick Kuperman who choreographed the show with his brother Jeff Kuperman, adding that the rumble is "not more or less dangerous than any of the things that happen on a Broadway stage. It's choreographed within an inch of its life — it has to be with that many bodies and that much traffic and activity."

While "The Outsiders," may feature two warring teen gangs, it's all love an hour before the curtain rises on the L.A.-premiere stop of the national tour. The actors will soon slip into their 1967 costumes as the impoverished Greasers and the privileged Socs — and spend the next two hours hating each other onstage. But at the "lift call" they do every night, there's nothing but harmony.

The cast looks out of place in ordinary clothes, and it's odd to see the two gangs laughing with one another as they run through the precise fight choreography that has become a hallmark of the Tony Award-winning show. Dance captain Hannah Jennens, who is also a swing in the show, talks through the staging while asking the performers to be "at 65" — a way of saying they should not run at full speed and energy.



The rumble between warring teen factions in “The Outsiders” is a technical feat of unwavering precision. (Carlin Stiehl / For The Times)

“It allows the actors to feel things out in order to perfect the timing and preserve energy for the show,” says Jennens, who is on her first national tour with the production. “We never reach past 65, just for safety and to keep the actor from getting confused about how real the fighting is.”

Every member of the cast and crew joining the show knew audiences would be wondering one thing: How would they pull off the great rumble, where two factions face off? In her 1967 novel, S.E. Hinton puts focus on the psychological impact — detailing how the Greasers spruce themselves up and how the lead character, 14-year-old Ponyboy, begins to wonder what he’s fighting for. The 1983 movie, directed by Francis Ford Coppola, portrays the fight as gritty and grounded, taking place during a rainstorm where mud flies as fast as fists. In some ways it was too real — while shooting, actor C. Thomas Howell was knocked unconscious by a real punch to the face.



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The musical’s book, written by Adam Rapp alongside Justin Levine, blends the best of both worlds. “It begins as fight choreography but as it progresses, it starts to get more expressionistic,” says Jeff Kuperman. So the first punch looks realistic, with no backing score. But as the water rains down, the sound and lighting shift with the action into more of a movement piece.

Says Jeff, “We go from a naturalistic expression of this conflict into Ponyboy’s nightmare, which transports us into his brain and perspective. It’s a memory play. We’re seeing it as it happens, but we’re also seeing his memory of how hopeless and destructive it is.”

Danya Taymor, who won the Tony Award in 2024 for directing the musical, didn’t want to separate fight and dance choreography. “I knew very early on I wanted all the movement to be created by the same hand, that violence and dance would interweave seamlessly throughout the piece,” she says. “And that is exactly what the brilliant Rick and Jeff Kuperman have done.”

It didn’t hurt that it was all there on the page. “The rumble is an iconic part of ‘The Outsiders’ story and it is one of the most exquisitely written parts of the show’s book,” Taymor says. “I felt so inspired by the language used to describe this momentous event in the lives of these young people, and that stage direction became my North Star.”

While one might assume there’s a small dedicated area where the rain is confined, that’s not the case — it splatters over the whole stage. “It’s such insane technology,” Jennens marvels. “I don’t know how they did it — or how they pack it up each week and put it on a truck for a tour.”



Actors participating in the rumble near the end of “The Outsiders” at the Pantages must practice the scene every night before the show in order to ensure safety. (Carlin Stiehl / For The Times)

An estimated 100 gallons of water are used each performance; it exits through a drainage system on the floor and is then recycled for the following show.

Perfecting the rain-soaked rumble and other key moments took some trial and error. “It was developed over years with many brilliant artists, technicians and performers contributing to the collaboration,” says Taymor. This meant every department was involved; Rick Kuperman calls it one of the most collaborative environments he’s ever experienced. “No one could sit in their silos; we all spent a lot of time in the sandbox together,” he notes. “The scene works because the sound, set, lighting, costuming and choreography all have to work.”



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Jeff Kuperman says there were even intense discussions about soil. “A lot of research went into what dirt we would use onstage,” he says. “The rain has to fall through it, and it has to dry on a certain schedule. You need the exact right substance.” So the stage floor is covered with what looks like loose gravel but is actually EPDM synthetic rubber, not unlike what playgrounds use. It’s completely waterproof and helps provide traction.

The actors’ costumes are not waterproofed, however, and the cast gets soaked. “Our wardrobe crew are amazing,” Jennens says. “Right after we get out of our wet clothes, they go straight to the laundry and get everything washed and dried for the next show.”





More than 100 gallons of water pour down on the stage — and the actors — during the epic rumble in “The Outsiders” at the Hollywood Pantages Theatre. (Carlin Stiehl / For The Times)

And of course, safety is the No. 1 priority. It’s why the lift call is, according to Jennens, “the most important part of our day.” She adds that she’s never witnessed an accident.

Most importantly, the technology transcends stage gimmick and is essential to telling the story. Taymor says they all worked together “to create something visceral and deeply felt that would not sensationalize violence but show its cost.”

Still, it’s really cool to witness — for the audience and actors. Jennens says that when she joined the tour, they spent five weeks in rehearsal before even introducing the rain at the end of the tech process. “That first time we did it — full rain, full blood — I still get chills talking about it now. It was surreal and beautiful and like a dream come true.”

Even now, on the road, she loves to hear the crowd respond. “It’s special. It’s truly a ‘pinch me’ moment every single time I get to do the show.”

'The Outsiders'

Where: Hollywood Pantages Theatre,
6233 Hollywood Blvd., L.A.

When: 7:30 p.m. Tuesdays-Thursdays,
8 p.m. Fridays, 2 and 8 p.m. Saturdays,
1 and 6:30 p.m. Sundays. End Oct. 18

Tickets: Start at \$57. Prices subject to
change.

Contact:

www.BroadwayInHollywood.com or
Ticketmaster.com. Or in person at the
Hollywood Pantages Box Office

Running time: 2 hours, 25 minutes
(including one 15-minute intermission)

Where: Segerstrom Center for the
Arts, 600 Town Center Drive, Costa
Mesa.

When: Oct. 20 - Nov. 1.

Contact: Scfta.org

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