

Boy George (center) as Leigh Bowery.  
Not shown: 232 other costumes



## Dressed for excess

With Boy George playing performance artist Leigh Bowery, *Taboo* gave us the year's gayest costumes **By Michael Giltz**

**B**roadway offered many queer pleasures in 2003: Hugh Jackman embodying Peter Allen in *The Boy From Oz*, Robert Sean Leonard kissing Scott Foley in Richard Greenberg's *The Violet Hour*, Jefferson Mays dazzling as a German cross-dresser in *I Am My Own Wife*, the sexually confused puppets in the musical *Avenue Q*.

But no show's costumes were more out there than the giddily over-the-top spectacles on display in Boy George's *Taboo*. Designer Mike Nicholls was nominated for an Olivier (Britain's equivalent of the Tony) when it opened in London's West End, and both he and his Broadway collaborator, Bobby Pearce, are likely nominees come Tony time.

Nicholls was very faithful to the spirit of designer Leigh Bowery, who created his original costumes in the '70s and '80s and is played by George in the show. A friend of both artists, Nicholls shopped for fabrics in the same shops

Bowery used and then enlisted Bowery's old friends to help with the construction. But for New York, the guiding principle was "bigger and better." (That includes the budget, which Nicholls says went from about \$27,000 in the United Kingdom to hundreds of thousands in New York.)

"That's where Bobby was so great, because Bobby knows Broadway and he was able to help me translate that," says Nicholls. "The fabrics got more glittery, and some shapes got slightly exaggerated, even more than they were on Leigh."

Pearce says one of the hardest tasks was re-creating these fabulous costumes for a long-running show. "The kids used to put these outfits together from stuff they would literally steal or pull out of garbage cans," says Pearce, who, like Nicholls, is gay. "They'd wear them one night, and whatever they came home with, they came home with. That was the end of that outfit.

Some of Bowery's clothes were made the same way. It was very difficult for us to come up with something that would work eight shows a week and still look like an original."

The result is one of Broadway's most demanding—and rewarding—shows from the point of view of a costume designer. "This show has 237 costumes, which is an awful lot," says Pearce. "I think *Phantom of the Opera* has 225. There's a crew of 12 people that come in daily just to maintain the costumes."

With a U.K. road tour scheduled to run through July, *Taboo* is keeping the spirit of the attention-getting Bowery alive even longer.

"You could never miss him," says Nicholls, who met Bowery in the real *Taboo* club and is referring to his personality and his towering physique. "He would be spinning around and shrieking, so he was a big presence."

A lesser star might be abashed by the prospect of stepping into Bowery's platforms. But not Boy George, Nicholls says: "Anything that can have more glitter and be more extravagant, [Boy George] is always up for that." ■

*Giltz is a contributor to such publications as the New York Post.*