

The Art of Theater Design

Setting the Stage is an Art in Itself

BY JIM MAGNER

You enter the theater clutching a program, looking for your seat. People are filing in. It's not brightly lit, but not dark either. Almost hidden behind the buzz of voices is music of a certain time period to be recalled when you get settled. Structures and objects of various kinds are placed in the space in front of the seats. That revelation – the set – is the first visual hint of the fantasy that is about to untangle over the next couple of hours.

Even if it is a familiar play or musical, one you have seen before, you still want it to be something onto itself, a new work of art. And that's where every production begins—with art. It literally sets the stage for the magic of the theater.

It is said that there are an incredible 80+ theater companies in the DC metro area, from very small companies competing for limited production time in small “black box” spaces to the high-end, lavish productions of the Kennedy Center.

The enterprise of staging is pretty similar for all and begins early. Creative minds mull it over even before a business decision is made to “do it.” Drawings are made and scale models are produced through a process of talking, listening and visualizing. This is the art you rarely see.

Solas Nua, the Irish Contemporary arts orga-

nization performing at the Mead Theater Lab at Flashpoint, often offers the sparsest of sets. Enda Walsh's celebrated “Disco Pigs” features two actors and a grocery cart on a bare stage—but the ferocious physical action and script fills in the visual imagery.

Linda Murray, the Creative Director, says: “Visual aesthetic is important, but it has to contribute to the play, not distract from it. Sometimes a lack of a set may be required.” She tries to work the physical needs around the script. “There should be nothing on the stage that doesn't absolutely need to be there. For ‘Woman and Scarecrow,’ by Marina Carr, the set and costume designer Lynly Saunders provided the tricky essentials of a bedroom setting that allowed a central bed without obstructing views.

For Paul Douglas Michnewicz, the Theater Alliance Artistic Director, everything – sets, lighting, sound, costumes – starts with the story. “What is it? What is it trying to elicit?” Although the script dictates the visuals to a certain extent, there is still room to be inventive. With “Gretty Good Time,” starting on June 3, the stage model begins the process.

Research is also important “...you have to get the eras right.” All the elements have to combine to add up to – “The Moment!” “If something jumps out, the audience gets suspicious: What is going on?

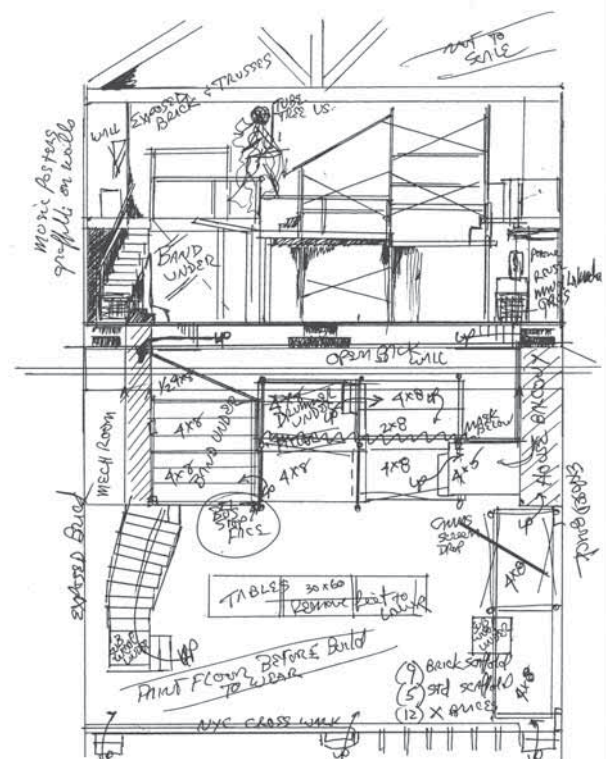
Why is the door that color? All the various parts have to add up to the center of the story.” Theater Alliance does mostly new productions. When a play premieres, there is no history of set design and the creative forces are free to flow.

At Constellation Theater Company, Allison Arkell Stockman, the Artistic Director and A.J. Guban, the set and lighting director, do extensive visual research and share it with the other designers. Unlike Theater Alliance, Constellation does well-established works, but there is no desire to reproduce previous theater sets. AJ makes drawings, elevations and models. He designs, and the carpenters build. The determining factors are space, time, labor, and lighting...all of which add up to cost...the final determinate. For example, in an Art Deco theme, curves can be expensive. “I would like a spiral staircase, but may have to go with straight.”

I enter the Keegan Theater Company's Church Street Theater to see the musical, “Rent.” The set sits quietly as dark sculpture. The balance is good; form is sparse; color is muted. My interest grows. It has a New York feel to it...graffiti, construction walkways; posters... It's not entirely an outdoors scene, it could easily double as an indoor setting. The set gradually becomes a living thing as cast members mingle in



“Gretty Good Time. Working model with research collage. Set design by Tony Cisek. Theater Alliance.”



“Rent. Set sketch. George Lucas. Keegan Theater Co.”



"Rent Ensemble. Set design by George Lucas. Keegan Theater Co."

front, run up stairways and dance on balconies. Yellow, red and blue lights add depth and warmth, and at times, a cold, dark reality.

George Lucas has been their set designer for 13 years. He doesn't look at previous sets from popular plays—he doesn't want someone else's vision in his head. He does his foam core model right away and takes it to the initial reading. George is a painter, a sculptor and a builder. He thinks of the set as sculpture. It has to balance. It has to work as a visual whole. He also understands that a structure has to hold up under 10 dancing people and not sway, creak or complain. He lets the lighting designer supply the color—"otherwise, weird things can happen when the lights hit bright painted surfaces." He pays a lot of attention to the small details that make something more authentic, like smudges on a door, or scribbles on a wall. He uses mostly on-hand materials and can make anything

out of Styrofoam. His sets are almost always under \$1000.

Shakespeare Theater's production of the bard's "As You Like It," directed by Maria Aitken, was a wild ride through Fred and Ginger's golden age of Hollywood with the likes of WC Fields and Groucho Marx reciting Shakespeare. Derek McLane, the set director, Martin Pakledinaz, the costume designer and others were involved early in the creative process. The elaborate settings provided great opportunities for design and imagination, as well as limitation, as large sets needed to be moved easily and often.

Across the river, at the Arlington County scene shop, Jared Davis designs sets and coordinates construction for the county theaters. Jared usually starts with pencil drawings, which he runs through photoshop, or an online program, AutoCAD. He then builds detailed models so the directors and carpenters will know exactly what



"As You Like It. Costume sketch. Costume design by Martin Pakledinaz. Shakespeare Theater Company."



"Ramayana. Working model. Set design by A.J. Guban. Constellation Theater Co."



Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dream Coat. Set design by Jared Davis The Arlington Players.

it's supposed to look like. Most of the preliminary drawings and materials "get tossed," but some props are kept and reused, like wooden wheelchairs and candlestick phones—anything old, especially pre-1920's. For Jared? "Musicals have the most elaborate requirements—they have to integrate the arts more than set plays. There are more challenges—more set changes." But it's all a matter of having vision and being creative.

So, having the chance to talk with the directors and designers, and seeing the staged productions, I discovered that large or small, they are all grand in their own way. In looking behind the dramatic and lifting performances, and behind the sets that propelled them, I found a collection of art that could be hung on the walls in any theater lobby—an exhibition in itself.

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