

12-14-2015

Coercing Beauty: From Peanuts to Daggers in the Night

Brad Cozby
University of South Carolina - Columbia

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Coercing Beauty:
From Peanuts to Daggers in the Night

by

Brad Cozby

Bachelor of Arts
Grand Canyon University, 2006

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Fine Arts in

Theatre

College of Arts and Sciences

University of South Carolina

2015

Accepted by:

Jim Hunter, Director of Thesis

Lisa Martin-Stuart, Reader

Lacy Ford, Senior Vice Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to show the journey of a young designer. I will show through three separate productions the struggles, along with the triumphs of a designer learning the ropes. I will discuss in this paper the process by which the designer grew and expanded his understanding of design as well as the role of a designer in a theatrical production.

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Introduction

Being busy does not always mean real work. The object of all work is production or accomplishment and to either of these ends there must be forethought, system, planning, intelligence, and honest purpose, as well as perspiration. Seeming to do is not doing.

-Thomas A. Edison

And thus begins the busiest, most rewarding, taxing, adventurous time in my life. Lighting design became not only a passion, but a drive to prove my abilities, skills and overall self worth. It's a time of reflection, growth, and at points all-encompassing personal sacrifices.

"Many people confuse imagination with ingenuity, with inventiveness. But imagination is not this thing at all. It is the peculiar power of seeing with the eye of the mind. And it is the very essence of the theatre."

-Robert Edmond Jones

I was forced, coerced, stretched, massaged, and ultimately inspired towards the expansion of understanding and creation of beauty. Beauty in lighting is a creation; a response to the written word. It is an adaptation; a

memory of reality. It is a tool; a method of sharing a feeling. Lighting is like adding the final sanding and polish to a fine piece of furniture.

I came into my graduate program, prideful, cocky, and lacking in humility in my understanding of lighting. I 'understood' that lighting was a form of control over the audience, a way to make them feel what I felt, to truly force them to my ultimate vision. How wrong I was: lighting is not an art-form of control and strong-arming of my audience, but an opportunity to enhance a production and allow the audience to better see through their own 'life' filtered eyes. I learned that I couldn't act the scene for actors, create new words and new meaning to the script, I needed to create a strong but supple mortar that would assist in giving a scene strength and truly support the action on stage. My job was to assist in creating a mirror for the audience's soul. I couldn't obstruct that with my pride. I had to surrender myself to the gentle lapping, crashing waves, and at times the lashing tempests that was the ocean of theatre. All of this to say, I learned to get out of the way, and let the show speak.

Over the three years of my graduate program I had the opportunity to design over fifteen shows, ranging from

sweat-ridden cheese balls to an arrogant king, the love between brother and sister to dealing with the oppression of jewish homosexuals. These years stretched me in ways I couldn't imagine. It forced me to retool my understanding of art. Did I finish as a better artist? Unquestionably. Did I finish as a more critical observer? Most assuredly. Did I run through a gauntlet of time commitments, life commitments, due dates and stress? Welcome to Graduate School.

Through the rest of this paper you will observe my struggles and trials through the three shows that forced me to grow the most. I learned to develop my own individual process, and through that realize that each individual production would force me to be flexible in whatever path that process would take. I went through some dark times as I pushed through my personal struggles and some amazingly bright moments as I began to truly understand this art-form to which I dedicate my life.

Chapter 1

The Arabian Nights

The Journey

It has never been, and never will be easy work! But the road that is built in hope is more pleasant to the traveler than the road built in despair, even though they both lead to the same destination.

-Marion Zimmer Bradley



Figure 1.1 Looking towards
the coming dawn.

Beginning with dusk, its depression and coldness slowly becoming morning. The morning is full of frivolities and energy, fun and newness, distracting oneself from the day prior. Afternoon then appears with new discoveries. As afternoon becomes evening old worries surface bringing frank discussions and sobering realizations. Frantic movement heralds the coming dawn... but not a breaking dawn... a delicate one that softly caresses ones face as if to say, "Wake up and start anew."

The Arabian Nights was my first main stage design of graduate school, the overwhelming commitment to classes and school projects, the chaotic whirlwind of life away from family leaving me isolated from lack of close personal friends, and the oppressive shadow that hung over me making me question whether or not I was cut out to be a lighting designer. This show helped me rediscover my desire to be a designer as well as advancing my growth and maturity as a human being.

The Arabian Nights is a story of a man in decay and desperation. Through threats of violence he drives one woman into weaving tales of beauty, compassion and redemption to break through his walls so that he cannot help but see his downfall, and truly resurface as a human once more. Playwright Mary Zimmerman's imagery and her theatrical storytelling inspired our creative team through the decision making process and shaped all of our design choices. Many challenges beyond serving the play and my team, pushed me during the design.

The design team that traveled on this journey with me was made up of a wide range of personalities, backgrounds and experiences; Heather Abraham our scenic designer, a 1st year MFA was discovering the nuances and challenges of

designing for an arena theatre. Amy Turner-Thomson our costume designer, another 1st year MFA, felt the challenge of developing an elaborate and cohesive whole across a large cast. Our sound designer Adam Bintz, Sophomore in college, was thrown into the mix working on his first collegiate design. Our Director and anchor, Amy Boyce Holtcamp, lead us through this adventure with a fresh concept and energy to spare.

In our first design meeting with Mrs Holtcamp, she set us with her overall design concept. Mrs. Holtcamp's concept was based of the bombing of The National Library of Baghdad.

In 2003, during the chaos that resulted after the US invasion of Iraq, Baghdad lost another library... The National Library of Baghdad... Much of the collection - including rare book and documents dating back to the Ottoman Empire - was damaged or destroyed.

In the time since, Iraqis have worked to reopen the library, but have met with violence from extremists. A terrorist group kidnapped two of the library workers. One, A Shia Librarian, was killed, the other, a Sunni, was tortured and sent back to the library with the message: Do not reopen this library. The library had become a target, but the library workers did not abandon the place. Today the library's doors are open.

To me, the ruined library of Baghdad, where real people work to preserve their nations culture in the midst of violence seemed the perfect setting for this play because it presents a world where books, stories and tales are important: important enough to kill for and important enough to die for.



Figure 1.2 Heather Abrahams scale model for the scenic design.

Working with these weighty words I set out to research and design a production that only time would show me that I was ill-prepared for. Luckily in my Script Analysis class we had taken apart and worked through the entirety of the script and I was versed on the ins and outs and intricacies of the play. This gave me a leg up in many respects but also gave me a false sense of security in thinking that the play no longer held any secrets or mysteries for me. I did not yet understand the weight of designing a large show, that just having an understanding of the play and a rich design concept were not the only tools I needed to become a successful lighting designer.

Shortly after our first design meeting I headed back to Arizona for winter break. I started the break off with the grandiose idea of staying in constant contact with the director and scenic designer, developing my lighting morgue, and beginning to really delve into what the show really meant. However, I was not as proactive as I should have been and all that I accomplished during the break was to have read the play a few more times. Part of the fallout from this decision was that I had no input on the design of the scenic elements, I couldn't help the overall integration of our two designs into a cohesive whole. I returned to Columbia with scant more knowledge and ideas than when I had left.

When I got back to Columbia, the scenic design was more or less finished. Now of course, I was aware of the general thoughts and ideas that went into the design, but I soon became overwhelmed by the sheer size and complexity of what I was now tasked to help bring to life. I panicked a little bit. Even though I understood the basics of the script and had a grasp of the director's vision, I didn't yet have a handle on how to bring that out in a design. But through the help and guidance of my advisor, Jim Hunter, I started to pick apart the script and develop a

better understanding of what I needed to do. He began by giving me different ways and tricks of looking at the story and better methods to really get to the meat of the script.

I started with breaking up the show into it's 'beats' and discovering from there the internal descriptors that would give me an insight into how the show wanted to be designed.

[The] world darkened [and] gave way to madness
[with a] cry of horror.
[But] be comforted, fear not.
Join me. It is permitted.

[The] veil of the world [was] melancholy mad,
an ode [to] the hidden beauty.
Cry out "I am content,"
[oh] Horror of Horrors.

Dawn

I repent [with my] family dance.
[Welcome] to the vast chamber of my heart.

Dawn

[I] must have rest, [I have a] great weariness.



Figure 1.3 "The world darkened and gave way to madness."

This breaking down of the script into tiny chunks allowed me to view it as a cohesive whole and then take this information and start to look for inspiration in photos and history. I did an extensive amount of photo research to try to find a visual representation of the internal emotions of the script.

The world darkened and gave way to madness. The above gave me an insight into Shayryar and the turmoil that raged inside of him.

The morning is full of frivolities and energy, fun and newness, distracting oneself from the day prior. The adjacent helped me to truly understand the joy that I needed to help bring to the production.



Figure 1. 4 Morning of Frivolities

And finally *the breaking dawn that caresses, as if to say "Wake up and start anew."*



Figure 1.5 Breaking

With these images and many others like them I started to craft the color palette and decide on the light energy that would be needed to 'fan the flame' of the story and the emotions the actors would bring to stage. From this, mixed with more meetings with the design team and rehearsal visits, I then started to develop my light plot.

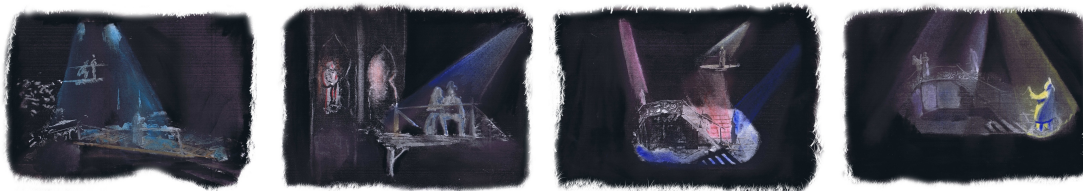


Figure 1. 6 Pastel Renderings of scenes.

During the entirety of my research and development process, with the continually mounting stress, I always returned to the thought and idea of maybe I'm not cut out for this, that I came here to try to prove something to someone, not to develop myself and to build a better understanding of what it was to be a designer. But I pushed through and struck out against those insecurities and began to craft myself and hone my talents.



Figure 1.7 Scheherazade, played by LaToya Codner, weaving the final strand of the story.

I began work on my light plot with energy and focus. I spent many nights pondering over what I was trying to create, whether or not I made the right decisions, reworking those decisions and then finally turning my plot into Mr Hunter. After numerous revisions and lengthy sessions with Jim I finally had a light plot that I would

use for the show. My light plot seemed to be one minor disaster after another. Even after its finalization, once it was in the air, it began to be reshaped and reworked until it almost didn't resemble the original work. Now, looking back I realize that all of these disasters helped to push me to new heights and greater and better choices for my craft.



Figure 1.8 One of the story sequences, where I had to learn to just stay out of the way.

Then Tech Weekend struck. With grumbles from behind me, muttered curses of "It's a Comedy," and sighs and harumphs, I started to create the world around the actors. I stumbled, I stressed, I scrapped entire sequences. I started to become a designer. These stresses pushed me beyond myself, but I was able to overcome that and again find the beauty that I originally saw in the script. I spent the next 3 days and nights refining and polishing the

production until I had a product that I was proud to have an audience come and see. One of these nights spent snowed in and trapped in the theatre, just myself, a grape soda and a chance to create some beauty.



Figure 1.9 You can see the use of different lighting elements to influence the scene.

Once the show opened I began to understand why I wanted to be a lighting designer: to be of a team that creates beauty around the characters, enhances and lift the story, creates art. This play was a great challenge for me; to capture the moods, and great passions in the scenes, all the while being sure that I was not over-designing or

upstaging the actor with lighting effects. My job is not one to "act" the scene or to "drive" the emotions, but as Jim Hunter has constantly reminded me, "just blow a little air on to the fire" that the actors bring. Never "step on toes" but rather add a helping and supportive hand. My job then became to be as Scheherazade and weave magic around what the actors bring to life.

Chapter 2

Our Country's Good

The Refinement

The artist's job, I think, is to be a conduit for mystery. To intuit it, and recognize that the story-germ has some inherent mystery in it, and sort of midwife that mystery into the story in such a way that it isn't damaged in the process, and may even get heightened or refined.

-George Saunders

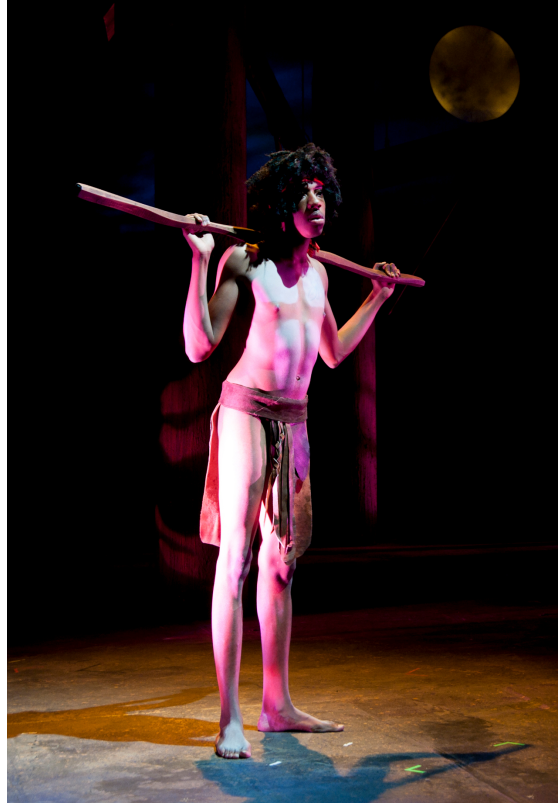


Figure 2.1 Joey White
playing the Aboriginal/
Narrator.

Eighteenth century Britain, a time when simply stealing a loaf of bread could have you sentenced to imprisonment in the newly formed British penal colony in Australia. A harsh, untamed, foreign wilderness, Botany Bay was a place full of disease, insufficient farming land and a frequently hostile Aboriginal population. This is the hell that Britain chose to send it's outcasts. Set in this dehumanizing environment, Timberlake Wertenbaker's *Our Country's Good* is a tale of how a group of prisoners met these challenges and rediscovered their humanity.

Founded in 1788 the penal colony of Botany Bay, later known as Sydney Australia, became home to some of the 165,000 convicts that were transported there over an eighty year span. *Our Country's Good* is a story set amongst the first wave of convicts. The wardens that oversaw these convicts are military men that have just fought and lost a war to the American colonies. These men and women, wardens and convicts alike, have all been condemned to this purgatory.

From the desolation of the Botany Bay experiment, an unwillingness and a brutality stemming from a hard fought life and recent defeat, a new hope rises. A single officer, Ralph Clark, takes it upon himself to find a way of raising morale and at the same time hoping to secure a promotion for himself. His plan; to take the illiterate and frequently untrustworthy inmates and put them into a play in the hopes reviving the human spirit. Dredging from these broken souls a forgotten humanity that was beaten, raped and stolen from each one of them. At the same time, causing a change in the officers and wardens watching over them, to show them that they are all the same stock, that of a human being. They all deserve a chance to right

themselves, to turn over a leaf and try to better themselves. To transform.

In the fall of 2010 I was fortunate to be a part of the Theatre South Carolina design team that tackled *Our Country's Good*. This experience would be a chance to build more upon those things that I had learned from *The Arabian Nights*, as well as those serving as the assistant master electrician at *The Lost Colony*. My duties for *The Lost Colony* didn't end until the start of the fall term and would test how well I could coordinate a design while being out of town for the initial design meeting phase. It was also an opportunity to create photorealistic computer renderings in Vectorworks. These renderings tested my abilities to successfully build a fully lit stage setting in a three-dimensional computer environment. These renderings became the springboard for lighting moments in the actual production. Our design team worked until the last possible moment, pushing through difficulties that made us question whether 'good' was really enough. We stood by all of our initial designs and never bowed to the pressure to just call it done. *Our Country's Good* helped to refine the process that I established during *The Arabian Nights* while at the same time expanding my skill set.

I was reunited with my Arabian Nights design team on *Our Country's Good*. These collaborators were to be my whet stone once again, helping to sharpen my skills. Our director, Amy Boyce-Holtcamp, would lead us through the normal hurdles and pitfalls a production would encounter while maintaining a tight grip on the harsh realities created inside this show. Amy Holtcamp sent out her early design ideas and some words of inspiration.

This play is definitely about the transformative power of theatre - it is also an exploration of the depths of human brutality. Theatre, in OCG offers a chance for the characters to change their lives, offers them a chance for redemption and (re)awakens their humanity. . . There is power in the imagination and those who are willing to give in to the illusion are set free. . . This is not a realistic environment. The audience should be aware that they are in a theatre since the play is about theatre. Non-realistic sets, iconic costume pieces, transformation of objects, of space, in full view of the audience are all appropriate. Nothing need be fully and realistically realized - the audience needs to meet the production half way. I see the transformation of the world over the course of the play as being about turning a prison into a theatre - a theatre that holds a sort of magic, beauty, elegance and grace. The movement of the play is an opening up and out - we start in the small, cramped hold of the convict ship and end backstage [at] an outdoor theatre. . . [In] the final scene the convicts need to seem heroic. In terms of what I have been thinking of visually - I have been thinking about a line in the play when the soldiers are

discussing whether or not they should hang the convicts who have stolen food. One of the characters says that the hangings are the convicts theatre.

'The hangings are the convicts theatre.' What better way to look at the show, to have a starting place of such base morals and then to bring an audience on an emotional "ride" with the convicts from purgatory to the rebirth of their humanity. From a time where they viewed the death of a fellow inmate as the ultimate in entertainment, they would be transformed through their own performance of a play. Transformation, rebirth, rediscovery those are the things that would shape the vision of our performance.

These themes of transformation began to shape my decisions and drive me to search out some relevant imagery. I now entered into a fermentation phase, allowing myself to reflect on what this script was to become. Due to my remote summer stock job I had little to no contact with the director and design team for weeks after the first letter. Through issues with phone reception to lack of e-mail correspondence, I failed my team at being proactive in contacting them. This was compounded with the fact that I wouldn't receive a copy of the script until two or three weeks after Amy's first e-mail. When I was finally able to

contact the design team, many decisions had already been made and I began to play a frustrating game of catch-up.

I would finally get some face time with my design team at the first read-through. I arrived at the read-through minutes after driving back from Manteo, North Carolina; a six hour drive. With no rest I tried to focus on the show and present my design concepts to the actors and design team. As can be expected it was a brief presentation discussing the emotional tone of the play and how that would effect the lighting. This was also my first chance to see the fully realized model by Heather Abraham, second year MFA scenic designer. Heather was challenged by the need to create a unit set with changes made by the actors onstage. I also had the opportunity to see Amy Turner-Thomson's, second year MFA costume designer, initial costume mockup for both the military men/women and convicts. Amy was challenged by the need to create period costumes for a large cast. Her concept was to have the costumes, over the course of the show shift in color palate reflecting the actors rediscovery of their humanity. I came away from this read-through again enthusiastic for the show and what the team was attempting to create.



Figure 2.2 *Hope* became a springboard for the color scheme.



Figure 2.3 *Despair* insight into Liz Morden as she was waiting to be hung.

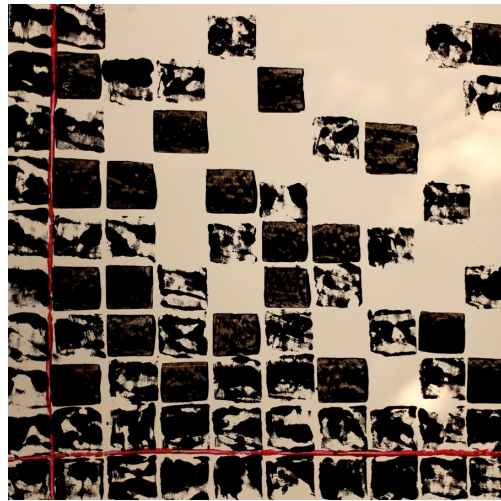


Figure 2.4 Haphazard Frontier.

Armed with a better understanding of the goals for the show I dove back in looking for some key influential research. My main goal was to find imagery that would, truly reflect the emotions from the characters, represent the magical nature of the unexplored and barely understood

country and aboriginal narrator, and give some grounding to the alienation and separation the convicts felt from their captors/wardens. *Hope* by Nicolas Evariste gave me a fantastic and beautiful image for parts of the show as well as a sense of newness for these travelers to an unknown land. Scheinbar's *willkürliche grenzziehung* (roughly translated haphazard frontier) gave me a visceral view into the separation and alienation of the convicts lives. Stanislav Kalashnikov's *Despair* gave me a great starting point to discover a look for the opening scene of the show. A figure lit but shadowed surrounded by turmoil, standing at the edge of an unknown destiny.

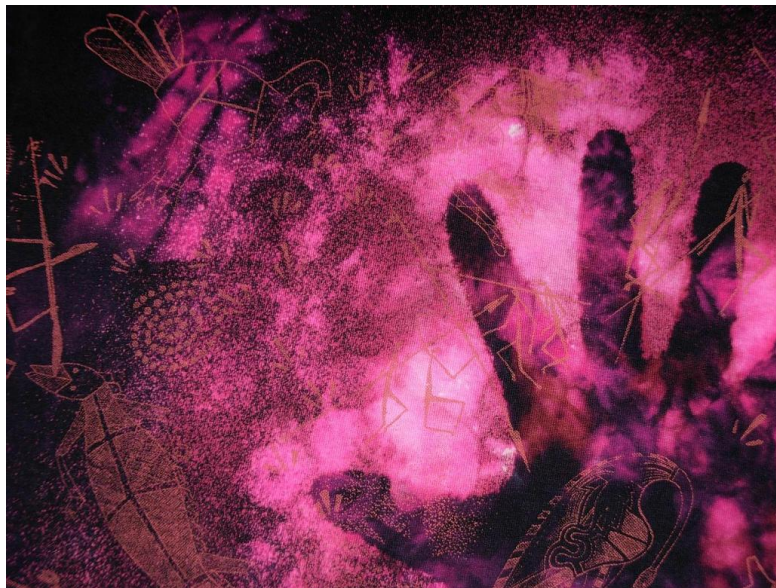


Figure 2.5 A 'magical weaving' of color and artistry gave me a sense of wonder for the Aboriginal Narrator.

The final image I have is one that Amy Holtcamp gave us in the beginning. It served as a personal springboard to begin the conversation about the magic of this place that we were heading into. Something that we needed to help create and imagine around these characters, an intangible but knowable magic that would surround this world. This image from an unknown source was the key for all the 'magic' scenes that I would help create for the Aboriginal Narrator. I tried to recreate the essence of the picture using multiple projected patterns across the stage.

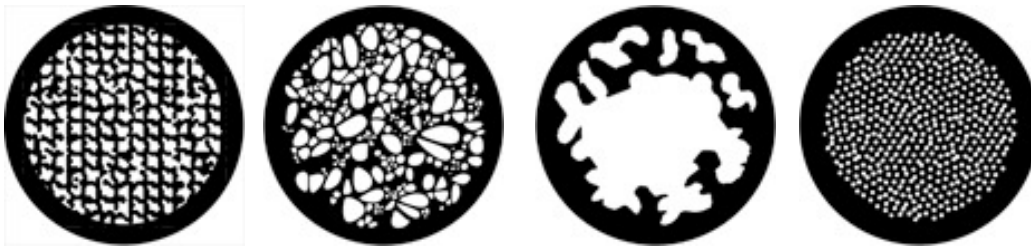


Figure 2.6 Inspired by 'magical weaving' these patterns were combined artistically to create the moments surrounding the Aboriginal narrator.

Now that I had a visual understanding of the show I experimented with three-dimensional computer renderings of the set with various lighting looks. I would use these to pre-visualize the show, so that once I had a chance to work with my lighting rig I would know exactly what I wanted out each scene.



Figure 2.7 Computer Rendering.



Figure 2.8 Production Photo.

The opening scene on the ship was a moment to create a separation between the beatings of a convict on the deck of the ship and the cramped confines inside the prisoners hold.

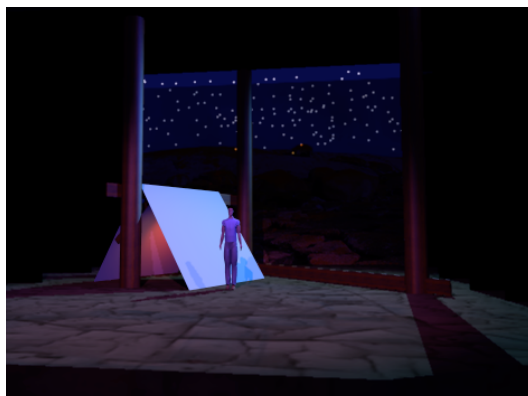


Figure 2.9 Computer Rendering.



Figure 2. 10 Production Photo.

The scene between Ralph Clark and Ketch called for the creation a somber evening motivated by a lantern and full moon while still maintaining visibility onstage.

Looking back now I realize how effective and helpful it was to put the time and effort into creating these renderings. This allowed me to first play in the virtual



Figure 2. 11 Rendering



Figure 2. 12 Production Photo

I sought to isolate Duckling as she mourned the death of Harry Brewer in order to support her desolation and despair.

rehearsal space and polish my abstract thoughts without slowing down the tech process that would soon be approaching. They truly gave me a leg up in the final creation of each scene.

After compiling all of my research and renderings I began the creation of my light plot. Compared to my *The Arabian Nights* plot, this one seemed to almost be a breeze. This had to do with my comfort with designing for a proscenium space, as well as a better understanding of the show and my own personal aesthetics. This process took

little time and soon the lights were hung, focused and ready for me to play and experiment.

During this time of designing and experimenting I began to collaborate more extensively with the sound designer Adam Bintz. Adam, a double media arts and theatre major, created a sweeping underscore that beautifully counterpointed the action onstage while still maintaining the discreet and subtle nuances of environmental sounds. Adam and I spent numerous long sessions discussing how we could enhance and expand each others designs. We would



Figure 2. 13 The sound designer and myself had to be perfectly time to have the creaking of the boat coincide with some of the shifting lighting effects I created.

also spend a fair amount of time coordinating our cues to create flowing transitions into and out of each scene.

Days after starting to play with the lighting rig our team dove into technical rehearsals. I was surprised how painless most of that week was. We only became bogged down on a couple cueing sequences when I realized that I wasn't supporting the story. One of these sequences involved the scene with penal colony hangman, Harry Brewer. The scene portrays the extent of Harry's madness. The grief he feels for the hanging of HB and the other's culminates with his pleading with the apparitions of his victims. Originally I had planned for a sequence of cues that fade back and forth



Figure 2. 14 Grief consumed Midshipman Harry Brewer after hanging Handy Baker.

between highlighting Harry in the foreground and highlighting the apparitions projected onto the side of the tent. This, as it sounds, soon became inherently cumbersome, we ended up cutting much of that sequence for simplicity so that the story would be better told.

While experimenting with lighting looks I had a memorable experience of accidental beauty. As we were working through the final moment of the production, the play-within-a-play, I kept struggling with creating the right look. During a rapid fire exchange of changes my light board operator, Mimi Draft, inadvertently took out most of the lights onstage, leaving only a set of side lights with a little top light. I started to have her



Figure 2.15 The final moment in the show, depicting the collaboration between my self and Mimi's accidental button fiasco.

change it, but then looked again. It was perfect, accidentally Mimi had created one of my favorite looks in the show.

There would be a few additional instances where I would realize that a single cue could be more effective than multiple cues. I also discovered lighting sequences designed into my plot but realized during the technical process that they were unnecessary or not exactly what I needed. I ended up cutting or re-magining these tools which my advisor, Jim Hunter, calls "killing my children." This became a great lesson for me. I realized from this that theatre is an art that thrives on adaptability, you should never be so attached to an idea that you can't give it up for a better solution.

"The green reed which bends in the wind is
stronger than the mighty oak which breaks in a
storm."

-

Confucius

Learning from my past designs at Theatre South Carolina where my attentions were pulled in hundreds of directions, *Our Country's Good*, and the preparation I had going into it, finally gave me a chance to focus on the storytelling. It reinforced the belief in myself as a designer, that I could create moments of beauty with

lighting while supporting the story. I also learned that simplicity is often the more artistic way of designing something. Theatre is about the hands that work on it, never a single person with all the answers, but the melding of thoughts, ideas, sweat and instances of 'accidental beauty.' This show refined my artistic eye.

Chapter 3

The Suicide

Finding the Comedy

"The only difference between a suicide and a martyrdom
really is the amount of press coverage."

-Chuck Palahniuk - American Novelist



Figure 3. 1 Yegor, played by Sam Kinsman, speaking out against injustice.

Suicide: a way to achieve peace, a result of unrelenting life pressures, a way to escape, an end for the intolerable, or a means to an end. It was a society crushed under Stalin's rule, where each individual would live, love and die under the scrutiny of all of their close friends, neighbors and enemies. In Russian Playwright Nikolai Erdman's black comedy, the plight of Seymon, an unemployed, desperate man is explored in a satirical manner. Through the exploration of Semyon's personal journey from unemployment to thoughts of suicide, with a brief venture into learning the tuba, we learn of the self-

centered needs of the local businessmen that circled our nearly helpless protagonist.

The Suicide, my third main-stage show gave me the opportunity to work with the respective heads of each of the design departments. Professor Nic Ularu, the scenic designer and head of the Graduate Design Program, placed the show in a multi-storied apartment, a world without borders, privacy or joy. Professor Lisa Martin-Stuart, our costume designer, helped to bring color, in support of the scenic design, to this world, giving each of the characters a voice and an inner life that strained against the difficulties throughout each of their pasts. Professor Walter Clissen, sound designer, created a subtle underscore that gave the environment a depth and richness. The director, Professor Steve Pearson, explored the seriousness of the created world, helping to uncover and accentuate the struggles each of the characters would have to persevere through and ultimately use to bring about a change in their own unique way.

Due to vacations, location differences and time differences, our team never had a chance to meet as a whole. Despite this challenge, through Steve's guidance, we were able to come up with a workable design that created

a platform for the characters to live their story. I began my process of exploring the world of Semyon and his struggles in determining his course of action. Through lengthy discussions with Steve, we explored the satire at the center of the piece. Specifically Semyon's choices through the story to find work and if it's not available, learn to play the tuba and create a future, or simply to kill himself and become a martyr for one of a hundred different causes. Many characters in the story sought to use Semyon's 'suicide' plans to help further their own cause.



Figure 3.2 All the characters in the play trying to persuade Semyon.

We discussed the world in which Nic's set design placed us, we wanted to help ground the world in reality. One of the solutions to that need was to source the light from practicals hanging above each of the rooms, and using those to help key the scenes. It was after these discussions that I moved towards my pictorial research, which would define my design choices for the show. I needed to look for pictures that would help me to better understand a gritty world in which the characters would live. I was looking for broken yet soft lighting elements.



Figure 3.3 Claustrophobic by Le-Enne helped to define color as well as texture.



Figure 3.4 G. Vauth's photo gave me a great sense of softly difused light.



Figure 3.5 This piece helped to show the reality of closeness that the scenic designer wanted to represent.

I used the photo Claustrophobic by Le-Enne as a basis for some of my color choices, as well as finding a texture for some of the lights coming into the interior rooms.

This photo by G. Vauth inspired my move toward softly diffused light that I used in the show.

Finally I used the piece titled Soviet Style by Vladislav Mavrin as a window for my understanding into how cramped the living situation would be for the characters in our story.

One of the challenges of working on this show was that during the later part of the design phase as well as the light install, I was in Florida assisting my advisor,

Professor Jim Hunter with the show *The 39 Steps* at Florida Repertory Theatre. Jim kept describing the situation as a good introduction to lighting design as a career, because of the similarity of scheduling. I would be at another show working on it until it opens, and very likely fly to my next gig just in time to focus the show, see a designers run, and then program the show just before we would move into tech weekend. As part of this process I pulled double duty the entire time I was in Florida. When I wasn't directly assisting Jim or the Master Electrician, I would be working through my design, researching, setting up my light plot, or finishing my magic sheet.

I actually enjoyed the experience for the simple fact that the Master Electrician for my show was my good friend and fellow MFA lighting candidate Marc Hurst. With our close friendship and mutual understanding of the theatre environment, we were able to communicate effectively as to any problems either of us ran into during the install phase. It was because of this solid line of communication that I felt comfortable and secure in the fact that when I showed up to focus the show, everything would be hung, prefocused, and troubleshot.

Due to this I was able to focus the show in short order and as part of a pre-arranged understanding with Steve I began to cue the show over the top of the rehearsals. This deal was struck because of Steve's desire to do what he termed as a "rolling tech", where we wouldn't stop the show unless something drastic and dangerous happened. He wanted to do this to give the actors more time running the show as well as a better understanding of the show as a whole piece instead of the individual segments they would run during their rehearsals. This "rolling tech" became quite a nuisance for me because I would only be able to make changes on the fly, without stopping the show, and/or taking copious notes as to issues I ran into during the technical process. For the most part the process didn't hurt me too much in the long run, but I lost out on the ability to craft my looks around the actors and had to light the actors rapidly, and then later tweak that look with no one else in the space.

I think in the end I can call the show a generally successful lighting design. There were moments, the scene in the graveyard, where I missed the ball on the design of the scene. I was unable to truly convey the sense of a textured exterior, with crisp cool lighting streaming



Figure 3.6 The scene in the graveyard.

through the winter stripped trees. I conceded defeat to battles over lighting looks, the opening scene, where I was kept from lighting the actor for visibility, while still maintaining a sense of nighttime and darkness. Lack of



Figure 3.7 A moment of beauty where Seymon, played by Don Russell, contemplates his options.

lighting inventory, as well as dimmer quantity, shackled me a little on the ability to effectively light the 'massive' set. Despite all of these challenges I believe I was able to help the sense of stark desolation portrayed by the set, the vibrant beauty of the costumes, and at times support the satirical nature of the show.

Chapter 4

Conclusion

Where to go from here

Three years and fifteen shows later, I concluded my career in Graduate School. I designed lighting for five main-stage shows: *The Arabian Nights*, *Our Country's Good*, *The Suicide*, *Present Laughter*, and *Macbeth*. Four Lab Theatre shows: *The Book of Liz*, *John and Jen*, *Bent*, and *Dead Man's Cell Phone*. A new work by Amy Holtcamp; *The Odysseys*. As well as my professional internship with the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts designing *Stars In the Morning Sky*. Besides those I also designed scenery for two different shows; *A Streetcar Named Desire*; A Night of Tennessee Williams One-Acts consisting of *27 Wagons full of Cotton*, *Lady of Larkspur Lotion*, *This Property is Condemned* and *The Pretty Trap*.

When I started this journey I saw light as a method to maintain control, to bring my audiences to the conclusions that I formed, and to flex my artistic muscles. I realize now that lighting is an art that should be a subservient and supplemental form to enhance the action on stage. Ultimately and simply, provide visibility to the director's concept of the playwright's words. Now this may seem to downplay the art form, but not so; to subtly and carefully wrap this package that the director brings to the table, without interfering with their vision, becomes a much more

varied and challenging work. I came to understand that I couldn't force the action, but in reality I could wrap the actors in an atmosphere that would give them a place to live and breathe.

My time at USC allowed me opportunities to work with an amazing collection of artists across all theatrical disciplines. I was stretched and expanded in so many areas of my life thanks to these artists. Ultimately, I was taken out of my shell of preconceived notions of what it is to be a designer, and molded into something completely new and different that will be able to go out into the world with a broader sense of art and self that will serve me throughout the rest of my life.

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