Scenic Design: A compilation

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SCENIC DESIGN: A COMPILATION

by

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Bachelor of Arts
Sweet Briar College, 2010

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ABSTRACT

Scenic Design: A Compilation ventures into the process of creating three productions including, Boeing Boeing, Fusions and Three Sisters. Exploring the foundations of each design, the content covers all aspects from the beginning to the implementation of each production. Supported through historical research, inspiration, function of space and the endless possibilities of creation, this thesis will reveal the growth of each design in great detail. Theatre is about collaboration, creating a world from a script and transforming it into an art of performance and design.
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INTRODUCTION

Beginning my course of studies as a M.F.A. Candidate in Scenic Design at the University of South Carolina in the 2011 Fall Semester, I was eager to explore a new art form. Graduating from Sweet Briar College with a B.A. in Studio Art and Art History with the 2010 Leigh Woolverton Prize for Excellence in the Visual Arts, one year had passed since graduation, and I was beginning to think my career was not heading in the direction I had planned. I loved to create and envisioned myself as an artist, but I was in search of more knowledge and experience. Seemingly frozen in my art and professional life, I approached my new acquaintance, Nic Ularu, in search of guidance and perspective. We began by discussing where I saw myself, and I told him I had been seriously thinking of applying to graduate school in Interior Design. Design, as a whole, allowed room for opportunity and creativity. It remained a passion of mine, for I loved visualizing a space, inventing a new idea and playing with objects, studying how they affected the eye. I had wondered about stage design but had never been properly introduced—until I met Nic.

There were many aspects of scenic design that I wanted to explore. Through my experience at USC, I have gained an entirely new vision of life and creativity. What I most appreciate about scenic design is the ability to see within a text and create a world of imagination and dreams. I came to USC unsure of my path, but through this experience, I have discovered a new art form that has been inspiring and exhilarating, awakening a new sense of vision.
CHAPTER ONE

BOEING BOEING

The University of South Carolina Department of Theatre and Dance presented Marc Camoletti’s Boeing Boeing as the third main stage production of the 2012 - 2013 season. Presented in the Longstreet Theatre February 22 through March 2, 2013, Boeing Boeing was a highly anticipated slapstick farce. The production was directed by Richard Jennings, Distinguished Professor Emeritus, University of South Carolina. The production and design team included scenic designer Meredith Hart, lighting designer Robert Eubanks, costume designer Caitlin Moraska, sound designer Daniel Wilson, and technical director Andy Mills.

Boeing Boeing, written by French playwright Marc Camoletti, premiered in 1960 in Paris at the Théâtre de la Comédie-Caumartin. Advertised as the “The Big Comedy of Nine-teen Sex-ty-Sex,” (Film Advertisement) Boeing Boeing became the longest running French farce and the most performed French play in the world. In the 1960s, the subject of sex was seemingly everywhere with birth control widely available, and to put it more broadly, the social constraints of the past were breaking. Knowing even those few details of the Swinging Sixties, one can easily understand the concept behind Marc Camoletti’s script and what transpired in Longstreet Theatre.

Richard Jennings exaggerated the characters of three women: Gloria, Gabriella, and Gretchen. He focused on the different stereotypes of the women’s assumed cultural
identities relating to Texas, Germany and Italy. His directorial methods allowed a great deal of artistic freedom for the design team.

1.1 THE SWINGING SIXTIES

   Across the globe, the 1960s saw a rise in a counterculture revolting against social norms and standards. A pop culture was forming with changes in clothing and music and a new attitude toward sex and race. Conservative people viewed this as a decay of social standards. The world was changing, and with the War in Vietnam, the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Bay of Pigs, construction of the Berlin Wall, the assassination of John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr., the 1960s saw a rise in protests and riots, especially in Western cultures. It was a time when the young broke free from the constraints of the past, questioning their government and their rights, demanding independence for minorities and women.

   The 1960s Second-wave Feminism movement exposed issues of equal rights in the workplace, home, and in voting. Popular culture had a strong role in both advocating women’s rights and demising them. Women were encouraged to be free from social norms but, in the media, the old standards were often still in place. With the introduction of birth control pills, developed in the 1950s and available to the public in the 1960s, the perspective on premarital sex was changing rapidly. But there was still much to overcome in reality and the media.

   Due to the Hay’s Code, enforced from 1934 until 1968, women’s roles in film were strongly affected. The Hay’s Code was created as a self-regulation against possible federal regulation toward freedom of speech. The Code was enforced to regulate moral values and guidelines in film plots, limiting the use of violence, sexuality and nudity. The
Code also prevented degrading social or vulgar behavior in film. Andi Zeisler stated in the book *Feminism and Pop Culture*, “Though adultery and pre- or extramarital sex were acknowledged by the code to be occasionally necessary plot points, filmmakers were to avoid presenting them as anything other than immoral” (Zeisler, 29). Before the restrictions the Hays Code placed on female actors, their roles were more racy, dealing with realistic situations. In discussing strong leading roles played by women like Jean Harlow, Clara Bow and Mae West among many others, Zeisler stated, “Elsewhere, pre-code women on screen held powerful jobs, had affairs with married men, birthed babies out of wedlock, and seduced other women--and those were the comedies! But these socially and sexually empowered women are often forgotten when we talk about movies in “the old days,” because once the Hays Code was enforced, it became difficult to find such women in theatres” (Zeisler, 30).

Written, directed and controlled by mostly male figures, the depiction of women on screen frequently dealt with matters inside the home: cooking, cleaning, raising children and tending to the man’s every need. This was an attempt to depict conservative social normalcy, however, it made little impact on the viewers. “By 1960, 40 percent of American women worked outside the home. And, contrary to what happy-family propaganda put forth, divorce rates spiked twice after World War II. But no pop culture centered on the women described by those statistics” (Zeisler, 37). While *Boeing Boeing* revealed unmarried women working as flight attendants, it did little to boost the sense of empowerment within women. Rather, this slapstick bedroom farce demoralized women making them into sexual objects.
Boeing Boeing was made into an American film in 1965, starring Jerry Lewis and Tony Curtis. Bernard, the lead character in both script and film, is a bachelor, luring convenient women into the sack. Bernard and his visiting college friend, Robert, are incapable of uttering an honest word to the three women: Gretchen, Gloria and Gabriella. At first, Robert depicts a man looking for love and monogamy but is quickly engulfed into the playboy lifestyle of Bernard, tricking all three women into kissing him throughout the script. There is no sense of love–purely deception and sex. The female characters have exaggerated roles based upon nationality and gender. Choices in food and behavior, along with depictions of them parading around in nightgowns, towels and sexy flight attire, clearly make this a man’s show. The entire script and film revolves around the need to keep these women from discovering one another, making them appear to be bimbos. Shuffled offstage, forced into other rooms and remaining without question, as if they cannot hear the voice of another woman outside the door, the women are kept in the dark. The men constantly help one another from being caught in their deceptions. Only Gabriela seems suspicious and questions any odd behavior from Bernard or Robert, yet she is all too easily coaxed into belief. Only through the overworked maid, Berthe, does any sense of intelligence come through on behalf of a woman, shown through her witty remarks and behavior toward Bernard. Berthe’s strength is limited, however, because she has the right to quit but remains, working to keep Bernard’s chaotic love life in order.

“Through advertising, advice columns, television, and music, pop culture had for decades played a crucial role in dictation to women who they were, who they should aspire to be, what they wanted, what was good, and what was bad” (Zeisler, 44). Boeing Boeing depicted as lighthearted, was creating an ideal type of woman for a 1960s man.
Yes, the women were working, independent and sexually free, but they ignored a fundamental right—that women were not objects. At the end of the script, all three women discover one another and confront Bernard. However, Bernard and Robert, yet again deceive the women with more lies, facing no repercussions for such behavior. The women seem unscathed. Gloria reveals she too has another lover; Gretchen reveals her love for Robert; Gabriella remains with Bernard. The message behind the script suggests that women should accept this male behavior. In reality, discoveries such as these would be painful, but with Gabriella remaining, it sends a bad message to men and women. Bernard gets what he wants, or at least one-third of what he wants. What will stop him from doing it another time? In reading the script and understanding the repression women suffered, it was hard to appreciate the comedic aspect of the script. Nothing really happens, no one prevails, for all just go on with life as though nothing has changed.

1.2 FIRST MEET

Although my first reading of Boeing Boeing was bothersome, I had to keep an open mind toward the farcical aspect of the script. Meeting with the director, Richard Jennings, for the first time helped to steer my thoughts away from the objectification of women, for his enthusiasm about making this production boisterous, unrestrictive and lighthearted was immediately inspiring. We scheduled our first meeting September 27, 2012, because I wanted to be as prepared and ahead of schedule as possible. I already knew it was going to be a big show, and being my second main stage design, I was eager to begin. The nature of our first meeting was to loosely discuss the direction Richard was planning with the actors and how the set should serve this outrageous slapstick comedy. He spoke candidly about wanting an exaggerated environment with unusual obstacles, boundaries
and places for actors to “hide.” We spoke about the need for Bernard to juggle these women with a clownish humor, touching base almost instantly on the many doors the set would need to support this notion. Referencing different door styles, Richard’s enthusiasm grew, listing styles like, Dutch doors, French doors, swinging doors, sliding doors, and pocket doors.

Continuing with the meeting, we discussed the basic foundation of the design, agreeing we would need a split-level structure with multiple ways of going from one place to the next. We wanted Bernard to be able to slide down the staircase railing, and Berthe to run from one point to the next quickly, seeming to exhaust herself. I knew this set was going to be crazy from the moment we started talking, and I was thrilled to begin the design.

1.3 INSPIRATION

Considering the preliminary meeting, I began researching for wild, spirited and playful inspiration. Influenced by the Pop Art movement, I let the fine arts guide my thoughts, delving into different genres and styles. Ranging from fine artists including, Wassily Kandinsky, Henri Mattise, Fernand Leger, Piet Mondrian, Ellsworth Kelly, Roy Lichtenstein, Jasper Johns, Jim Dine, and Ed Rushca, I began to notice that my eye was drawn to the juxtaposition of an organic form, seen in Matisse’s “Blue Nude” (Figure 1.1) to that of hard geometric patterns found in Mondrian’s “Composition” painting (Figure 1.2). The use of the primary colors was also a driving force for my research, for it was decided, based on the script, that all three women would be identified individually by solely wearing red, blue or yellow.
Before creating any idea on paper, I had to formulate who this “apartment” was for and why. There were two ways I could approach the design, one being to go completely in the direction of goofy and clownish or something with sophistication and grace. In thinking about the character Bernard, an architect living in Paris with three beautiful flight attendant girlfriends, all of whom are unaware of his playboy intentions, I began thinking of the style that such a man would have in life, fashion and at home. The James Bond movie Dr. No came to mind, for the technicalities, sophistication and advancements of the interior and style were impeccable and tasteful. To support such a lavish lifestyle, I wanted Bernard to look like he had money—lots of money. In thinking about what drew me to the paintings, I was attracted to the juxtaposition of organic and geometric shapes and how that would affect the eye. I thought that if the action of the characters was to be of an exaggerated nature, then so should be the set, but in contrast. Essentially, the set would be the geometric Mondrian painting, while the actors would be the organic Matisse
painting. This abutment of shape was at the core of almost all of my design choices. My eye continued to gravitate toward this idea and, through my research, I found the right image that would be my guide (Figure 1.3). This resulted in the right mixture of loose, free shapes with contrasting stark lines that blended beautifully. While still finding inspiring images for the design was crucial, I needed to focus on the foundation, structure and function before getting too involved in the details.

Figure 1.3 Monga, Priyanka. “Add the Pop Art Punch.” New Delhi. 2012.
1.4 THE STRUCTURE

With time on my side, I had room to explore varying options for the set design. I consulted with my advisor, Professor Nic Ularu, about some ideas. We discussed the practicalities and basic needs for the design, which included: six or more doors leading to one master bedroom, two spare rooms, a bathroom, a door leading to a “kitchen,” and a door leading to a “dining area.” The stage floor would serve as the living area, and one vomitorium would serve as the front entrance and another vomitorium would serve as the “kitchen” entrance. The audience would not see an actual kitchen or dining area. The design would include a split-level, and all bedrooms would be on the platform. We discussed how a volumetric space would create a peculiar but satisfying sense of the home. With a script like Boeing Boeing, I did not find it important to follow a set of rules on how the actual home would need to be architecturally. Meaning, the interior shape did not need to match a sense of an exterior shape. This allowed a great deal of freedom to play with different shapes and texture. With the basic needs of the set understood and ideas forming, I began playing with different locations for the rooms, envisioning how the actors would need the space to flow with the action. From the first meeting with Richard, I knew the action would be fast, loud and goofy, so the need for the actors to move freely and quickly was essential. Creating a white model and ground plan, I set a meeting to discuss the structure with Richard (Figure 1.4).

We bounced around ideas and made some adjustments to the plans, and Richard liked the overall direction of the design. He was happy about the solution to create a bookcase that the actors could climb up to get to the platform, a direction he really wanted for the design. I also showed him an idea to create Bernard’s room using
Figure 1.4 Hart, Meredith. “Ground Plan.” _Boeing Boeing_. University of South Carolina. 2012.
windows so that the audience could see in, giving ample opportunity for parallel action with the actors. The idea was enthusiastically accepted, for he immediately had ideas on how to play with the openness of the room. We spoke more about the plan for Bernard to slide down the staircase railing, and having already discussed the logistics and safety of this with USC Technical Director for Theatre and Dance Andy Mills, we had a big decision to make.

An issue that unfolded with having the staircase inside the vomitorium while able to reach the platform, was that the existing structure of the theatre would not allow for a smooth transition. This was because the vomitorium height was 11’, therefore our staircase needed to match. We decided that an 8” rise and 1’ 3” run would create the best ratio for each step to reach the platform. The problem was that if the staircase went to the top of the vomitorium, then the platform would also need to be level with the last step, creating a high platform filled with potential sightline issues. We discussed taking the existing vomitorium railing and part of the wall out, which ended up being out of the question due to the electrical wires and an exit sign located where the cut needed to be.

The next solution was to have the stairs match the height of the vomitorium, having a few steps down to a lower platform. We toyed with that idea for some time, but it was scratched once we knew it would interfere with the actors’ need for swift movements. Having the stairs flush with the platform was imperative. Wavering between ideas and suggestions, Richard, Nic, Andy, Sam Gross (assistant technical director) and I agreed that the platform would be on the 5th level, allowing the staircase to smoothly transition into the platform. This unanimous decision meant that the platform would be at the height of 11’. Our next step was to discuss with the fire marshal whether the staircase
would follow code orders. He said, on stage level, we could block only the one exit with the stairs, since there were three other exits. However, the fire marshal pointed out that the walls on the platform’s 5th level were prohibited from blocking the exit, as it was shown on the preliminary ground plan (Figure 1.4). In case of an emergency, no one would be able to use that exit and, by law, there had to be three or more fire exits on that level in the theatre. Our solution was to simply mirror the entire set, allowing that fire escape to remain open (Figure 1.5). In doing this, nothing was really affected, but this taught me to consider more codes and possible safety violations well in advance for future designs.

Construction began on the platform, and I continued with the rest of the design. Everything seemed to be going smoothly until questions began to surface from Jim Hunter, Chair of the Department of Theatre and Dance. As the artistic director, Jim had concerns regarding the platform height, noting that the inevitable sight line dilemma would affect the number of seats available to the audience. Jim explained, as the Chair and producer of the shows, that selling seats was part of his job and, as a designer, I should not take away the ability to sell more seats. These issues continued into the room orientation positioned on the platform, because I had the rooms pushed back against the gallery wall, allowing plenty of space on the platform for action (Figure 1.4). We needed to make a change for the audience to see everything that was happening; otherwise we would only see half of the actors’ bodies on stage.

With the platform completely built, Jim, Nic, Andy, Richard, Sam and I all met to consider our options. It was extremely frustrating, for the platform height had been the
Figure 1.5 Hart, Meredith. “Final Ground Plan.” Boeing Boeing. University of South Carolina. Longstreet Theatre. 2012.
topic for some time, discussed in production meetings that everyone attended. No one stopped us, saying it was too high until after the platform was built. At one point in the meeting, Jim suggested taking the platform apart to lower it one level by 21”. Not only would that mean a complete rebuild, losing time and resources, but we would also be struggling with finances to complete all other aspects of the design. Luckily, it did not get to that point, and we decided to change the orientation of the bedrooms, moving them closer to the platform edge and making the width of each room smaller (Figure 1.5). This served as the best solution for all involved, allowing us to move forward with ease.

1.5 DESIGN CHOICES

With the foundation of the set moving forward, I was able to continue with the details of the design. With the right inspiration, I had to come up with a supporting color palette. At first, I wanted the set to be filled with color, mirroring what can be found in much of the 1960s interior design. Continuing to view the art research for inspiration, I began preliminary renderings, using Vectorworks, making the walls color blocked in varying shades of the primary colors.

Discussed in a design meeting, Lisa Martin-Stuart, Associate Department Chair and Head of Costume Design, pointed out that too much color would wash out the costumes, rather than compliment them. I needed to create a supporting color palette that would allow the colors in the clothing to pop. I tried toning the bold colors down, making the walls a grayish white, while painting the bedrooms in bright colors (Figure 1.6). My hopes were that by separating the colored interior bedroom walls from the white exterior walls, the color pop effect would remain in a subtle way. The costume department
thought there was still too much competition of color and asked that I tone down more, so I continued making adjustments to do what was best for the costume and set designs.

Figure 1.6 Hart, Meredith. “Color Blocking Rendering.” Boeing Boeing. University of South Carolina. Longstreet Theatre. 2012.

Working with my Vectorworks 3D model, I was beginning to feel lack luster about the design. With a tamed color palette, the set was in desperate need of something that would give it some pizzazz. Searching through old material and finding new inspiration, I came across a photo online that made me rethink the existing design (Figure 1.7). The craziness of this volumetric interior with the sky light trim made me wish I had approached the design with clownish intentions, rather than the sophisticated approach first chosen. I met with Nic to discuss the set with the research in my hand, and we explored options on how to enhance the existing structure. Not wanting the structure of
the apartment to appear too realistic, we discussed adding windows in the rear side of the master bedroom. Although I had previously opted against windows since it had been decided that the “windows” would be in the audience, it did not make sense to have windows in the master bedroom. The space would be understood as an apartment, supported by the script and identified by the actors. If windows surrounded 360 degrees, then the apartment would appear panoramic, a look I was not opposed to, for it would give an even larger sense of lavishness with a touch of style from The Jetsons television show. However, my inclination was to leave the idea behind, for it would most likely
confuse the audience without clear representation. This idea would have been better if developed from the beginning.

Nic and I discussed installing a skylight. It would not only compliment the design in the railings and bookcase, giving a unified feeling of the interior, but also form a peculiar shape for the architectural aspect of the design, as seen in the research image. This skylight would enhance the volumetric sense of the space. In (Figure 1.8) one can see the drafting for the balustrade, stair railing, bookcase and skylight, showing the asymmetrical geometric patterns that I had been drawn to in the Mondrian paintings. This style would stay in theme with organic shapes mixed with stark harsh lines. The solution to install the skylight gave that extra pizzazz I had been searching for, while also giving Robert Eubanks (lighting designer) a motivating source for dramatic lighting. In (Figure 1.9), one can see the realization of the skylight under stage lighting and the playful approach Robert took with the set, infusing the space with color.

Figure 1.8 Hart, Meredith. “Construction Plans: Skylight, Bookcase & Baluster.” *Boeing Boeing*. University of South Carolina. 2012.
1.6 COLOR CHOICES

With a neutral color palette of cool whites and grays, I needed something that would make a statement while not being intrusive to the costumes. I decided that hanging paintings from my research would create a sense of color and shape, while breaking up the solid plane walls. This would also help clarify the lavish lifestyle the character, Bernard, would embody. Similarly, I decided that a colorful rug would not only stay in the spirit of the time but would give me that punch I so desperately wanted. I later found out that this desire for color was clouding my judgment.

Figure 1.9 Hart, Meredith. “Dramatic Light.” *Boeing Boeing*. University of South Carolina. Longstreet Theatre. 2013.
Originally, I wanted the rug to fill the stage floor as an oval with a length of 20’ X 18’. Speaking with Andy about this size, reality sank in, for a carpet that size would cost thousands. Shopping around and searching for a rug that would give me the look I wanted, I had to find it at an affordable price. I made my way to Cogdill Carpet, and upon seeing the desired shag carpet, I realized the prices were not within our budget. It was time to find a plan, for I wanted a larger orange rug from the start of designing. I needed to choose an inexpensive fabric in a white oatmeal color and, using an airbrush, I would simply paint the carpet the desired color. This method served to benefit me in many ways, for I was able to get a larger rug of 12’ X 12’, and I was able to paint the exact color of my choice, making the center orange with a yellow trim.

While never being disappointed in the choice of color in the rug, the problem came from not knowing that under the stage lights the color would not remain. Seen in the Vectorworks rendering (Figure 1.10), one can see the desired richness of color I was aiming to achieve. In (Figure 1.11), one can see that under the fluorescence of the work lights the value brightened a few shades. Painting the carpet many times, I had to accept that the orange would not get richer and was, perhaps, a poor color choice on my part. The most unsatisfying result came once under the stage light (Figure 1.12). In the photo, one can see how the stage lights overexposed the rug, making it too bright and reflective, appearing not as a deep orange as I had hoped. Robert worked hard to tone down the brightness of the rug, but it was impossible to juggle both lighting the actors while avoiding over exposure in the rug. Having seen the renderings well in advance, Robert had not mentioned any concerns regarding the rug. Once we saw the reaction under stage
lighting, we discussed that what happened under the lights was hard to predict, for he thought it was going to be a darker value.

As much as I loved the idea of a colorful rug that enhanced the set, it did some damage toward the costumes and lighting. The costumes did not stand out like they should, and more communication between Caitlin and Robert might have prevented the situation.

Figure 1.10 Hart, Meredith. “Scenic Rendering.” Boeing Boeing. University of South Carolina. Longstreet Theatre. 2012.
Figure 1.11 Hart, Meredith. “Rug.” *Boeing Boeing.* University of South Carolina. Longstreet Theatre. 2013.

Figure 1.12 Department of Theatre and Dance Production Photographs. “Rug Exposure.” *Boeing Boeing.* University of South Carolina. Longstreet Theatre. 2013.
1.7 SET DRESSING

With construction of the set well underway, I wanted to add to my duties as a designer. Loving furniture and interior design, I asked to be the props master for Boeing Boeing. There was no one hired yet for the position, and I knew Andy had his plate full with construction. I spoke with Nic about wanting the props master job, and he seemed concerned about me taking on too much. He explained that as a designer I needed to focus on that aspect first, and that the props master job was on its own a huge position to fill. Considering his words, I spoke with Andy about the job, saying I wanted to be a part of it, but not solely responsible. Andy came up with the plan that we would do it together. This organized my position, allowing me to be in the space painting when needed, but knowing that props would not be neglected. The solution turned out wonderfully, for not only did I have artistic freedom and trust with Richard, but now I would be fully involved with set dressing and props.

Having a budget of $1500 for furniture and props, I knew shopping for the right furniture was going to be hard. Because of television shows like Mad Men, the retro style was extremely popular during my quests to local antique, thrift and commercial furniture stores, making pieces easy to find but expensive. Having created a collage of furniture and design elements using Photoshop (Figure 1.13), I arranged my more inspiring research to keep my mind focused. The collage worked more like a guide while shopping. The majority of what I found during my free time was either far too expensive for our budget, damaged beyond repair, or did not fit right with the style the set needed.

There were times when having such a small budget became discouraging, but Andy guided me through the steps of making the right choices. After many weeks and having
been to almost every known store in town and browsing the internet, I was not having good luck. My confidence faltered when I would find one piece that seemed right but did not fit with what we already had or what I was still hoping to find. I approached Andy with the list in tow and furniture selections I had photographed, and he could see my frustration. We spoke about the budget, and he made the suggestion of looking at Ikea, for if I wanted a cohesive collection of furniture, it was going to be hard to piece everything together with the budget we had. Luckily, this served as the best solution. I shopped around online and found enough pieces that would fit the overall desired look. Since shipping the furniture from an online purchase would cost $100, we made a trip to Charlotte to pick out the pieces and bring them to campus using the USC work truck.

Figure 1.13 Hart, Meredith. “Furniture Collage.” *Boeing Boeing*. University of South Carolina. 2012.
This trip was worthwhile, for two of the chairs I had picked online did not have the same appearance in person. We were able to find something a little larger with the same aesthetic. We purchased a red sofa, something I really wanted for the design, two lamps, a dresser, sheets, two white chairs and a side table. The giant beanbag was a piece Richard had been wanting since our first meeting, for he had several scenes in need of one. It was a great addition to soften the look of the angular furniture, again in theme with organic mixed with the geometric lines. The leather white chair and ottoman were pulled from the shop. The coffee table was a piece I found while shopping at an antique store, and the globe was kindly lent by the geography department (Figure 1.14).

The globe was an essential element to support the script. Bernard, being the playboy that he is, would keep track of the three flight attendants using a time chart, using the globe to support this action. Finding a globe that made enough of a statement proved difficult. The cost of something as large as what was needed would be hundreds to thousands of dollars. Luckily as a university, we had support from other departments; otherwise, we would have not been able to afford a real globe in the right size. We could have easily built one, but there was something aesthetically pleasing about obtaining a real globe (Figure 1.15).

Another element, essential for the props, was the picture frame with all three women’s photographs in storage. When one woman was there, Gloria for example, Bernard, Berthe, or Robert would have to quickly change her photograph once Gloria left and the next woman would arrive. This quick change was one of many that had to happen to support the comedic aspect of the show. It needed to be large enough for the audience
Figure 1.14 Department of Theatre and Dance Production Photographs. “Furniture Orientation.” Boeing Boeing. University of South Carolina. Longstreet Theatre. 2013.

Figure 1.15 Department of Theatre and Dance Production Photographs. “Furniture Orientation.” Boeing Boeing. University of South Carolina. Longstreet Theatre. 2013.
to see and it needed to change easily for the actors. The photo change grew increasingly more rapid throughout the play once the Boeing jet was introduced and Bernard’s trusty timetables were failing him, creating comedic chaos for the knowing characters. Toying around with many ideas for the photographs, Richard and I tried to come up with the best solution to make an easy transition from one photo to the next. Simply having a picture frame with three photos stored inside which the actors would have to sort through, find and change, would make for a slow and ugly transition. Needing to be fast, we consulted with Andy, who suggested placing it on a triangular swivel. This would mean having all three pictures, separate from another, on a stand that would easily spin. Knowing we wanted the picture to be placed on the bookshelf, the idea turned out to be the best choice to incorporate all necessary needs and functions. However, once it was built, the audience members to the West and East seating banks would see the photo of the other women. This visibility would lose the comedic aspect. Not having a good idea of how to fix this without having an ugly box wrap around the sides, Richard and I left it alone to refocus. Even though he explained that it would be fine and that the audience would understand what was meant, I knew it bothered Richard for it bothered me too.

We intended to revisit the photo issue. However, Jim had ideas of his own although he had not been involved in the previous meetings discussing the problem. He expressed much displeasure that I had not resolved the problem and that the audience would see the pictures. He insisted upon using bend board to wrap around the sides and back, an idea that had already been discussed. This had not been done because I did not like the aesthetic it would bring to the bookcase (Figure 1.16).
We seemed to have no choice in the matter, unless we were to start from scratch with a new build. While seeing the board bending around was bothersome to my eye, Richard was much happier that the two other pictures were covered from the audience. This solution worked, however, I would have preferred a different method of resolution.

1.8 INTEGRATING WITH LIGHT

Throughout the process of designing Boeing Boeing, one thing that remained consistent was the set needed to be playful yet sophisticated and conflicting yet functional. Similarly, this applied to the lighting, which I thought in many ways worked. With a limited color palette of neutral grays and whites, with pops of colors throughout, and with the use of paintings and furniture, Robert’s vision was to enhance this through his design. Remaining neutral in the walls allowed Robert to be creative with his color
scheme, which in turn did the same for Caitlin’s costumes. The idea was that he would wash and texturize the walls while changing primary colors of blue, red and yellow, representing the women’s costumes and entrances. In production, this concept was not used as dominantly as had been previously planned, because what looked good on paper did not translate in reality.

Robert’s initial design ideas were more edgy and creative in the beginning. Function mostly overruled, although he was able to use LED tube lights, placing them under the furniture that would cast a glow onto the floor. He applied the same method behind the paintings. This use of light separated these elements making more of a volume in the space. Similarly, I found that when the actors would all be on the upper platform, Robert effectively turned down the lights on stage level, creating a more detailed focus of what was happening upstairs. The same applied to stage level. When this was done, it was a slight change, making a subtle yet dramatic transition that was beautiful. He had some striking highlights and contrasts on the furniture, the balustrade, and the stairs, that were revealed, but only for a short time (Figure 1.14). A major set back with the lighting design was that the actors, naturally, needed to be well lit. After the lights covered all areas, things would get a bit flat with over lighting. Seeing more of his creative color schemes and textures throughout would have been my preference.

Never wanting the “apartment” looking too serious, I did want it to be architecturally dynamic and volumetric, hoping that lighting would accentuate that idea. The design was not about being extremely realistic, which had been established from the start. Robert’s use of colors and textures enhanced that concept, especially with his use of the skylight.
It was playful and colorful, leaving behind the sense of a true sky. I would have preferred that Robert’s idea to allow variations in the skylight had been accepted.

With limited time to get his rig up and running, Robert’s focus was primarily on the issues of how close the platform was to the grid. Having sent him the elevations and section drawings for the set, he knew it was going to ask for more time in focusing, yet it seemed he was unaware of these possible issues. He kept having dark spots on the actors’ faces. I had high hopes that the skylight would be a friend to Robert, and that he would have viewed it as an exciting element. Robert was unable to achieve much of what he wanted, due to time constraints. While the skylight caused some issues for Robert, it was necessary to set a tone for the entire production architecturally and visually.

Having discussed possible issues with Robert before his arrival, his main concern was focused on the walls not having texture. Originally, I had the walls smooth and clean, which remained on the upper platform. Often, construction in theatre does not come out perfectly. The designer’s job is to hide flaws and find solutions to cover imperfections. With the materials used, building on an existing structure, and time constraints, creating smooth edges can often be difficult. Having discussed this already, we decided to use brick on the lower platform. However, we could not afford enough foam to cover the entire lower platform walls. There was only enough brick to cover the wall behind the bookcase. Robert questioned the treatment for the exposed walls, saying that through the strong lighting the audience would see any flaws on the smooth walls. He asked that I texturize them. I discussed this matter with Nic, who suggested using joint compound or stucco to create an inverted cement pattern. Although it took some time for me to accept this need for texture, it subtly created a variation of pattern, while hiding imperfections.
Robert was pleased with this solution and was certain it would maintain the clean sophisticated look I was hoping to achieve.

1.9 LOOKING BACK

Working on *Boeing Boeing* was an experience I will never forget. Despite the hurdles and set backs, the show was a lovely success. Working with Richard was a wonderful opportunity, for his trust truly allowed me to explore many ideas, playing with all aspects of the design. Richard was the one who never seemed concerned about the platform’s height. Richard’s direction utilized the numbers of steps, making it one of the key comedic points. Watching the character, Robert, climb the stairs with piles of luggage, was one of the funniest parts of the show (Figure 1.17). While the character Bernard never did slide down the railing, as anticipated from the start, the staircase became an important aspect for creating this slapstick comedy (Figure 1.18). Similarly, seeing Bernard climb the bookcase to the platform surprised the audience and was well received with laughter. I was happy that Richard chose to incorporate this moment only once, for it was a perfect touch that did not need to be seen twice. Using the parallel action in Bernard’s open room was also a strong part of the show. Seeing the character Gretchen move around in the room, unknowing of another woman’s presence within the home, created a necessary comedic tension (Figure 1.19). This also enhanced the bimbo quality and exaggeration of the characters.

The ability to build the set early, allowed for the actors to move into the space a couple of weeks earlier than scheduled. This proved essential, for this time allowed them to really become familiar with moving through the space and doing the physical actions
Figure 1.17 Department of Theatre and Dance Production Photographs. “Stairs.” Boeing Boeing. University of South Carolina. Longstreet Theatre. 2013.

Figure 1.18 Department of Theatre and Dance Production Photographs. “Stairs.” Boeing Boeing. University of South Carolina. Longstreet Theatre. 2013.
that the set demanded. This extra time also allowed room for change in Richard’s direction, creating more natural comedic moments.

The color combinations for the set, costumes and lighting integrated well. The rug and stage lighting integration caused me the most concern. This taught me to carefully consider the major set pieces and the need for partnership with the stage lights. Implementing the suggestion to tone down the set color palette was a good choice, for the pop of color in the costumes went wonderfully with the gray and white palette of the structure (Figure 1.20). The main concern, pre-production, was possible sightline issues caused by the platform height. Yet, Richard’s positive attitude allowed for fantastic scenes for the actors.
The height became an essential quality for this production, creating an exaggeration of movement. By addressing the sightline issues early on, we were able to make a simple solution, while maintaining the quality of the design. This height was at the benefit of the production, intensifying the slapstick experience. I needed to be more effectively assertive when defending my design, better preparing myself for the intervention of others. If the height of the platform had been lowered, then this production would have lost much of what made it successful.

In hindsight, I would have spent more time discussing the elevations of the set with the lighting designer, Robert Eubanks. By simply sending section drawings and the elevations, I did not have the one-on-one interaction that we needed. It was difficult not having him physically present. Simply looking at the drafting clearly did not convey the
massive structure of the set. Further discussing with Robert in specific detail of set
decisions, could have allowed for more anticipation of potential problems.
Implementation of effective communication methods was an important lesson, for in
theatre; most designers do not have the luxury of collaborating in person. Clear telephone
and internet collaborations will be key tools that I work toward incorporating in my
method.

I learned much throughout the production of Boeing Boeing, which taught me to
defend my decisions, wisely listen to the advice of others, and to look more closely at the
details. I was lucky that I was working with a director like Richard, who seemed to take
anything and make it work for the benefit of the show. His trust and patience with me
allowed for much growth and change. While I still have so much more to learn, Boeing
Boeing will remain my first real creation, one that I am proud to have designed.
CHAPTER TWO

FUSIONS

Written and directed by Nic Ularu, Head of the MFA Design Program at the University of South Carolina, Fusions made its debut on September 9, 2013, at the Richard Burton Theatre. As part of the World Stage Design Festival held in the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama in Cardiff, Wales, the Fusions production team consisted of director Nic Ularu, scenic designer Meredith Paysinger Hart, costume designer Vera Katharina DuBose, projection designer Baxter Engle, makeup Satako Shidahara, puppetry and dance Federico Restrepo, actor Paul Kaughmann, and actor E.G. Heard Engle.

Fusions provided a glimpse into a series of different emotions, vulnerabilities and laughter. It was an experimental piece, bringing in elements of the unknown and unfamiliar. Combining theatre technology with the magic of puppetry and integrated with live performance, Fusions was developed mainly on the foundation of how technology was changing theatre and society. The minimalistic approach to the script was dissected into varied segments in sequence including: a fat suit monologue; a cowboy monologue; a tent dance; a voyeur monologue; a puppet suit dance; a nerd monologue; a wire puppet dance, and then all segments wrapped into the finale. The 45-minute performance created an appealing series of dramatic moments. Once we were able to rehearse as an entire group, including Federico from New York, the performance intertwined with the set, costumes and projections into a compelling amalgam.
2.1 THE START

To understand *Fusions*, one must examine how *Fusions* developed. In the Spring Semester of 2013, Nic Ularu invited all of the MFA graduate students from the Theatre and Dance Department to take part in a performance for the 2013 World Stage Design Festival. Those choosing to participate included: Vera DuBose, Xuemei Cao, Billy Love and me. Nic proposed that we develop a class specifically focused on the project. It was very exciting, for it was the first class I had taken that would be dealing with experimental and open thought design.

The class was named “Installation,” and allowed room to explore all aspects of the meaning within this word. Structured as an open floor for discussion and debate, the informal approach allowed for much creative thought and interpretation. We discussed issues of how culture was supposed to bring us together—not drive us apart, civilization versus alienation, falseness of theatre, decomposition of life, and the evolution toward destruction. Topics of religions and culture and how stereotypes follow how people dress, talk, eat, sleep and move would lead us to iconography and how everything within an image meant something. Nic urged us to explore the many ways of creating, revealing that nothing was limited through definition. How could we correlate this to a freeform installation? Meaning, that everything had its own purpose, its own message, its own symbol and its own truth. Nothing should be put onto a stage without a purpose or a meaning, for without a meaning it did not belong. This idea reflected beyond theatre into our very own existences.

The class covered artists, dancers, directors, comedians, sculptors and actors including: Sandy Skoglund, Sylvie Guillem, Alexander Calders, Marcel Duchamp, Pina
Bausch, Ariane Mnouchkine, Philippe Decouflé, Alwin Nikolais, George Carlin, Richard Serra to Charlie Chaplain and more. Viewing specific performances by Philippe Decouflé, Pina Bausch and Sylvie Guillem, the class examined how the human body could, without words, evoke a story with raw passion and fervor. Using the body as a language tool was an important aspect in our development for this piece. We examined how it can transform into a story with subtle grace and ease. Decouflé’s 1998 film, *Abracadabra*, created a humorous illusion of the human body. As the viewer, there was a group of acrobats moving in a way that defied the laws of gravity. His method was to simply film from above, while the acrobats were moving on the ground, creating the remarkable illusion. It was this simplicity of thinking for which the class was searching.

Pina Bausch was able to create avant-garde performances, revealing to an audience something innovative and far ahead of our time. In pieces like *Rite of Spring*, she tapped into the souls of her spectators, rattling them to the core. She was completely unbiased by the traditional structure of the “ballerina,” for she focused on truth within movement rather than appearance. She paved the way for modern dance and had a message for the world. Mark Twain once said, “Whenever you find yourself on the side of the majority, it is time to pause and reflect.” That was how Pina viewed the world, and it was also what we wanted to address for our script.

Sylvie Guillem, a trained classical ballerina, left behind traditional dance, finding truth within experimental dance. Watching her perfection transform into a free form of movement was magical, especially in *Smoke* and *1 Film (4)*. It was amazing to see how someone classically trained could leave her roots behind, entirely reinventing herself. To be free to explore the world and the arts was the most inspiring part of our class.
wanted to create a deep emotion without knowing exactly why or from where it came. We wanted to question humanity and the arts, just as Pina, Philippe and Sylvie had and just as the likes of Duchamp, who all questioned the world. A hybrid of performing installation, a question of humanity, creating a universe that was multi-functional, transformable and the disposition of impossible objects—that was what we wanted to create.

In knowing the broad direction for the piece, we began discussing in more detail how to create a story. We discussed the issue of conformity and how technology seemed to alienate people. Nic asked that we explore the issues that we wanted to address. We discussed how, as a generation, we do not express ourselves, as we should. We have every bit of freedom, yet as an entirety we do not address the real problems in the world. Instead, we hide behind our computers, channeling ourselves into entertainment, turning our heads away when we hear of war, hunger and abuse. How could we address these issues without being obvious? We wanted to allow the viewer to piece the elements together without being spoon-fed. These were all serious issues that had to be addressed. How could we create something with meaning that did not preach?

We had many questions that had to be answered before continuing, and we had to face practicalities of traveling to Wales with our design. Whatever we created needed to be transportable and multifunctional. The word multifunctional was used quite a bit in class. We researched Charlie Chaplain, who in his movies created and built everything around him, including the costumes and set. He gave multifunction to every object he used, giving each piece purpose. We talked about stories, our own and others, either funny or sad, bringing a new perspective. Nic urged the class to reconnect with the
kindergartner within, emphasizing the importance of being free to think as a child. That was my biggest struggle, for I found it was hard to reconnect with the innocence of a child’s simplicity in thought. However, this created a new consideration, for we thought of the importance of being able to laugh and cry, finding the balance between Tragedy and Comedy—a difficult process in theatre.

2.2 CREATING THE STORY

Now that we had the right inspiration to help us create a story and having already discussed the need to send a message, we needed to decide just what message that would be. In his book, Experimental Theatre from Stanislavsky to Today, James Roose-Evans discussed how Edward Gordon Craig described theatre. Craig wrote to his friend and composer, Martin Shaw, about his vision of the Theatre of the Future.

“The place is without form-one vast square of empty space is before us-all is still-no sound is heard-no movement is seen…Nothing is before us-And from that nothing shall come life-even as we watch, in the very center of that void a single atom seems to stir-to rise-it ascends like the awakening of a thought in a dream-No light plays round it, no angles are to be seen, no shadows are visible-only the slow deliberate inexorable ascension of a single form-near it, yet further back, a second and a third atom seems to have come into a half existence-…and while they grow the first atom seems to be disappearing-a fourth, a fifth, a sixth, and seventh…slowly shapes continue to rise in endless numbers-to rise and fall while still the folds unfold and close, mounting one higher than another, others falling until there stand before us vast columns of shapes, all single yet all united-none
resting until, like a dew it settles-no more-enough. And may my love beginning, have no end” (Evans, 33).

Edward Gordon Craig’s vision toward the future of the theatre was to eliminate the actors, play and plot. His dream was that of a theatre dealing with the emotions found through movement, sound and light. If he was to have actors on stage, they were to be silent, speaking through movement alone. The idea was to create a kinetic sense of theatre, giving the audience an experience, not entertainment. He wanted to see, not hear, feeling that theatre had become jaded and overburdened by realism. Craig became the leader for the revolt against realism. Craig said, “To save theatre we must destroy it” and that theatre “will not show us definite images which the painter and the sculptor show us. It will unveil thoughts to our eyes, silently-by movement-in visions” (Evans, 34).

Reading how Craig and others like Adolph Appia viewed theatre, our vision was heading in a direction similar to this idea. We had discussed not using words, rather using movement. But there was one problem–we did not have any dancers. With budget concerns, we needed to choose our performers wisely. With such a young idea forming, we did not want to limit ourselves to purely movement. Instead, we decided to incorporate movement as a form of expression incorporated with speech.

We focused on the ideas of kinetic movement, bringing in research of mobile performance installations. Each person brought research to the class, allowing for different interpretations about our discussions and of kinetic movement. With my research, I used Photoshop to create a collage (Figure 2.1). I was thinking more about the dehumanization of society, isolation, and the conformity from the individual self. With our research in tow, we began discussing Futurism in the arts and society.
Beginning in the early twentieth-century, Futurism was led primarily by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, inspiring many. The Futurists focused on concepts of technology, rejecting the past. They were in awe of industrial machines and believed that technology would triumph over nature. We questioned this movement, thinking that without the past there would be no foundation for the future. But this movement seemed essential for the arts and society today, creating a more focused outlook and influencing movements such as Surrealism, Dada and Art Deco. It led us to question why there was no more passion in the arts and music as there had been in the generations before us. Had we lost touch on how to communicate with one another? How could we deliver a manifesto? Through the

Figure 2.1 Hart, Meredith. “Installation Collage.” *Fusions*. University of South Carolina. 2013.
internet where it would go unnoticed? We wanted to do away with the internet and technology and try to be human again, to be free once more.

It was baffling to us to think that the generations to follow would only know nature through computers or would be unable to use a pen as a tool of expression. Our society was living in a fake reality, conjured up through technology. I told a story of how I had met a young girl, who was out on a horse farm but was playing with an IPad. She asked me if I wanted to see her art, which I was excited to hear. What she showed me was something not created by her, but through technology. All she would have to do was draw a line and the computer would create an intricate design, filled with patterns and colors. I could not believe what I was seeing. I remember growing up drawing and creating many stories of my own, and I would not have considered doing such a thing while outside, especially on a horse farm. They were my stories, coming straight from my imagination. Technology has stripped us from originality, and we are all guilty of succumbing to its temptations.

We had it–the effects of technology would be the core for our script. We did not need the theatre any more because we had television. Why go out and socialize in the world, when we could be entertained in the comfort of our own home? We questioned why there are so many depressed people in the world, especially in the U.S. When people had more than they needed, why did they remain sad, or feel the need for more in life? What void were we trying to fill? How had technology shaped the modern world? We were racing and racing, but for what? We had forgotten how to slow down and look around us. We were all ants, creating a world that would ultimately fail us. Looking at what we had done to our planet with technology continuing to advance, how capable
were we to handle such progression? Technology created a world beyond our wildest dreams and nightmares. A world without technology would force us to speak, to touch. We would not be able to hide behind computer screens. Our world could become simpler, a world without bombs, planes and war. We would fight for what was right or what was wrong, not what we could obtain. We became greedy, forgetting what being a human felt like. A world without technology would force us to see, and to realize that every being on this planet was an individual. The only way of solving this would start and end between you and you.

As a class we began forming an actual story that would encompass these questions. We wanted to avoid addressing too many issues specifically, keeping in mind that getting too heavy might do more damage than create inspiration for our audience. Therefore, we needed to find some sense of comedy within, thinking we could somehow make fun of these questions with a serious undertone.

Our story would incorporate three actors, with one as a dancer. No words, only movement through the body would create expression. The stage would be separated in three parts: a ruins area, a middle audience area, and an untouched world area. We wanted the audience to be a part of the action, facing one direction, until the course of action would change. The beginning would start with the three actors on one side of the stage, surrounded and covered in ruins and waste. They would be trapped inside, bounded by ropes. They would try to escape, but could not break free. At last, one actor would find a way to release the ropes, discovering he was never truly bound at all. This actor would dramatically move through the space, shedding away the waste and revealing the human form. Interweaving and interacting with and through the audience, he would
command their attention. The stage lights would go down on the ruined world, leaving
the other two actors in darkness. The lights would focus on the free actor, the audience
turning with him. The free actor would discover an untouched world, and the stage lights
would beam down on a world of beauty and simplicity. This actor would then create a
space of his own, co-existing with the surrounding beauty. He was happy.

Suddenly the lights would dim on him and quickly focus back on the ruined
world, where the dancer had broken free. She would perform a dance. She then would
help the third actor unbind and move through the crowd as the first actor had. When they
arrived at the untouched world, they all would create a space of their own in the new
world. However, the third actor would become jealous over his space and would start
taking from the other two. He would build and develop, destroying the beauty. The
dancer and first actor would try to stop him. A war would start, and the lights would go
dark. In the end, the lights would come up on both sides of the stage, forcing the audience
to see both sides in ruins. I created a rough rendering using Photoshop to express the
general look (Figure 2.2).

The story line would set in motion many of the issues discussed, delving into the
premise of how human beings were capable of destroying even the purest forms of life.
This script would reveal the destructive nature of humanity and modern technology. This
was a broad idea, without details. It was something we would work from and continue to
develop. We decided that the elements of the set and costumes would be constructed with
everyday objects, such as foldable laundry hampers and laundry lines, duct pipes and
trash bags. Everything we used needed to be transportable and function in multiple ways.
Figure 2.2 Hart, Meredith. “Rough Scenic Rendering.” *Fusions*. University of South Carolina. 2013.
There still seemed to be something lackluster about our story line. It was too obvious, and there was not enough depth. We needed something that would jump from story to story, expressing a wide range of emotions. Our idea was too simple. We were not certain what space we would be using at the Royal Welsh College. We knew that there was a variety of spaces, but the World Stage Design committee had not yet assigned them. We were shooting in the dark when it came to realizing a space. Our story, created in class, was meant for a smaller scale. We did not know who our actors would be or if we could have a dancer. Nic had wanted to use students from USC, both from the MFA graduate actors and from the dance department. Unfortunately, due to events happening on campus during the World Stage Design dates, students were unable to attend. We had to outsource actors and dancers for the performance. We played with ideas for the performance, trying to create different elements using simplistic material, but in not knowing the space or the actors, our motivation was waning. As the semester was ending, preparation came to a standstill.

2.3 A SUMMER LATER

Before school began, Nic arranged a meeting, August 5, 2013, to discuss the script. The class now consisted of Vera and me. Billy had moved away for a teaching position, and Xuemei also had to resign, because she was designing a main stage show on campus. With two people gone and three weeks until technical rehearsals and one month before leaving for Cardiff, it was crunch time! Nic had spent part of his summer developing the script, changing the story line to impart a dramatic punch. It was more creative, dissected and simple. We found out that the actors would include Paul and E.G. and a dancer would come from New York, N.Y. Nic had mentioned his acquaintance
with Federico Restrepo, from Loco7 Theatre Company. They had previously worked together at La MaMa Theatre in New York, N.Y. Federico was a visionary, creating ground-breaking performances incorporated with dance and puppetry. He would bring needed dynamics to the performance. We were all very excited to work with Federico, and nervous at the same time, for we would only have three days to rehearse with him on August 29-31.

On August 13, Nic and I sat down and discussed what the set would need. The World Stage Design Committee had assigned us to the Richard Burton Theatre, which was much larger than we had expected. Nic gave me the ground plan of the space, with the metric measurements, equipment and material available. All we needed to worry about bringing was our set, costumes, computer, and any other material to rig everything. The lighting, sound and projector equipment was supplied. We decided to keep the lights simplistic, since we did not have a person to run the lights.

Nic and I discussed the script and the dances that Federico was preparing and decided that creating a labyrinth, using mosquito screen, landscape fabric and plastic sheets would be the chosen materials. The screens and plastic would create panel layers through which the audience would see. We would control visibility with light, showing a silhouette or clear image of a person or projections cast on and through the screens. We knew Baxter would create projections that would amplify the set’s appeal. The set would be grouped into separate areas of screen netting with several large plastic sheets that would create a unified appearance. The rendering showed the look as one, but for the performance, there would be different panels flown in for different scenes of the show. For example, when Federico would enter in his body puppet suit, the panels with the four
windows would fly down, while all else would be out of sight. Federico would dance behind and in front of the screen panels, popping his face out of the windows from time to time and interacting with the stage elements, while different projections would cast onto the panels. I created a ground plan and section drawing in Vectorworks (Figure 2.3 & 2.4) and made a 3D rendering (Figure 2.5). I used the costume designs, made by Vera, in the rendering to show how the two would work.

2.4 METAMORPHISIS

The week before school, I began to build the set and Vera started on the costumes. Once school was back in session on August 22, 2013, we were well underway with construction, but deadlines were fast approaching. Since our technical rehearsal was our only time to practice together, we needed costumes and set finished and ready for the actors. If set changes needed to be made, or costumes needed to be altered, or projections needed to be added or fixed, this was our only time. The actors needed to interact and know where they needed to be, what cue by which they should enter or leave and what would or would not work for them.

However, Nic and I received some bad news. We learned there was a big problem with the set design. Ian Evans, the technical director for all Festival performances contacted us the week before our technical rehearsal. He said that our show was going to be the most complicated they would have, and they could not be able to accommodate all our requests. The Festival was to be run by mostly volunteer students, who would need to quickly strike the performances each day, making room for the next group of performances. He said we would have to downsize our set.
Figure 2.3 Hart, Meredith. “Ground Plan.” *Fusions.* Richard Burton Theatre. Royal Welsh College. 2013.
Fortunately, this was an unexpected benefit. I had already been quite worried about traveling with so much material and was unsure it would all fit in my luggage. This also allowed more time on the day of the show to focus on the performance rather than hanging the set. We stripped the set down to only using the mosquito screen with the window holes. Materials offered by the Festival that we needed included a cyc, measuring 8.5 m width with a 6 m drop. We would use the cyc to create the shadow effect (Figure 2.6). Everything seemed to be coming together, even though the set was reduced drastically. Throughout the process, everything seemed to be quite organic, pieces coming in and out, a metamorphosis.

Figure 2.4 Hart, Meredith. “Section Plan.” Fusions. Richard Burton Theatre. Royal Welsh College. 2013.
Figure 2.5 Hart, Meredith. “Scenic Rendering.” *Fusions.* Richard Burton Theatre. Royal Welsh College. 2013.
2.5 REHEARSAL

On August 29, 2013, Federico arrived and technical rehearsals began in Drayton Hall Theatre on USC’s campus. Nic had been rehearsing with Paul and E.G. for some time, and Baxter had completed the majority of the projections. The set was up and ready to go and costumes were in place. Our technical team was limited, and just Vera and I would set everything up prior to rehearsal. We would have the fat and nerd suit suspended in the air. E.G. would enter slipping the fat suit on, while Paul would simply stand behind the nerd suit. Once Federico arrived, he showed us his wire puppet that needed to be rigged to a batten. It was amazing to see how, using a pulley system, this puppet came to life (Figure 2.7) Federico had prepared three pieces to perform: a tent dance, a body puppet suit and the wire puppet. It was my first time working with puppets, and I fell in love with the process. A photo taken from rehearsal (Figure 2.8) depicts the stage and Federico dancing in the puppet suit.
Figure 2.7 Production Photographs. *Fusions*. Richard Burton Theatre. Royal Welsh College. 2013.

Figure 2.8 Production Photographs. *Fusions*. Drayton Hall Theatre. University of South Carolina. 2013.
Nic appointed us to our positions. I was to run the fly system and the wire puppet.

We needed three people to run the wire puppet, and since we were limited in numbers, E.G. and Paul would run the puppet with me from the wings. The rehearsal was running smoothly and positions and cues were understood. I had never run a performance, and I was thrilled that I gained this experience. The positive attitude from everyone involved created a symbiosis between us. Once technical rehearsal was finished, we found out that Baxter, who had been running Q-lab during rehearsal could not come to Cardiff.

Knowing the show’s every detail, Baxter was a key figure for the performance. Nic asked if I would run the show, something I had never done and was not going to be able to practice with the actors. I had been running the fly system and puppet, something of great comfort at that point. I had no clue what to expect while running the entire show, projections, and sound. Luckily I was able to meet with Baxter once, who quickly taught me how to run Q-lab. I figured out that I would need about 30 to 45 minutes to orient the projections on the cyc at the Richard Burton Theatre, for I had done some practice tests, using my computer screen. Baxter tried to make it simple for me, but he could not have prepared me for what would happen.

2.6 REALIZATION

After stuffing the costumes and set pieces inside three suitcases and one huge box, Vera and I struggled to get through the airport. We were traveling with E.G. and Paul, who helped us when we needed an extra hand. Once we landed, we found our accommodations and dropped off our belongings and went to find Nic at the Theatre. We were jet lagged and blurry eyed, but Nic was full of energy, having arrived several days previously. He said we could begin setting up that evening after the opening ceremony
and performance from that day were cleared from the stage. While this was good news, giving us more time to prepare, we were delirious and tired.

After a long day followed by a long night, we had most of the set rigged and ready to be hung and most of the costumes prepared. We left the theatre at 11:30 PM, feeling and looking like zombies. The next morning we had to be up at 6:30 AM and at the theatre by 7:30 AM. While we were all still exhausted, the excitement helped us focus. Our time-table included: 8:00 AM theatre opened, 1:30 PM first performance, 6:30 PM second performance. This left us with five hours to complete the rigging of the set and costumes, instructing the volunteers on their needed positions, setting up projections and doing a complete run-through of the 45 minute performance. It was very important that the actors be acquainted and comfortable with the new space.

We had arranged the set pieces and the cyc in home rehearsals, trying to match what we would find in the Richard Burton Theatre, but things could not be completely the same. In the Richard Burton Theatre, there was very little wing space, making it hard for the actors, especially Federico in the tent suit, to move off stage. These were technicalities that had to be sorted through in order for the actors to move smoothly during the performance. There was little backstage space, and because actors needed to cross through the dark rear upstage, they had to know how to avoid the lighting equipment and cords.

Once I finished rigging the panels and instructing the volunteers on the jobs that I had been doing during rehearsals, including the fly and the puppetry, I was able to step into the role that challenged me most—Q-lab. It was 9:45 AM, giving us plenty of time.
Unfortunately the technical crew had some problems with the projector and one hour had passed and still no changes or progress. We needed our rehearsal, not only for the actors but also for the crew and for me to run the program. Yet the drama was not over, for it was 12:45 PM, less than one hour until opening, and we still had not rehearsed, nor had I been able to orient the projections onto the cyc, run a sound check or instruct the lighting volunteer on what to do.

More time was spent bringing me a head-set and setting up the projector. At 1:10 PM, the projector was turned on, but it was dimmer than I wanted and I asked that they turn it up. They were able to boost the quality, but with it being an older projector, it was not as sharp as I had wanted. As soon as they finished setting the projector up, they informed me they would need to let the audience in and asked how much more time I would need. I moved quickly, orienting the projections as close to the desired look as possible.

Once the audience entered and the crew was ready, the performance began with a sound cue for Federico, Vera and Paul to perform a cell dance behind the cyc, creating the shadow effect (Figure 2.6). Watching, I noticed the cue was not perfect, for they were a few beats behind what we had practiced. Yet they quickly and smoothly transitioned themselves on target, creating a strong and beautiful moment during the performance.

Baxter had simplified the cue a great deal, during Paul’s cowboy performance. There were many transitions streaming through the cue. I jumped the gun, thinking I needed to hit the “Go” button into the next cue. I was wrong. There was supposed to be an old cowboy song playing that supported Paul’s monologue, but it did not play for it had been streamed in sequence with the previous cue. I was too unfamiliar to go
backward in the cue sequence, thinking I might make more of a problem. If the cue never played then the audience would never know. Paul rescued this mishap, creating a comedic moment to which the audience responded favorably. He began singing the song himself, continuing with his performance without a flinch.

A common issue during the performance was that the lighting was wrong in parts of the performance. The scene where the wire puppet was to float down from the “sky” was too dark (Figure 2.7). While only those who had seen it during rehearsal noticed this, it remained a beautiful moment with a strong dramatic feeling. This was the part I knew so well, for in rehearsal it was one of my jobs.

The performance, despite not having a run through, was delivered strong. The audience responded to the comedic aspects with laughter and applause. They seemed to thoroughly enjoy the dramatic moments and the streaming series of dances and monologues. It was an upbeat performance with a strong message, one that each person could find his or her own reflection.

When the show was over, I reflected over the past five hours. I searched for Paul, E.G., Vera, Federico, Satoko, and Nic. It was 2:45 PM. We got some lunch, spoke about the show and returned to the theatre. We were thrilled we had another performance that evening at 6:30 PM. I got the time I needed to sort through the cues, positioning the projections properly.

With the right amount of time to get ready, I felt adequately prepared for the next performance. A much larger audience began to enter at 6:30 PM, and the show ran smoothly as planned, hitting each cue right on time. It was clear the entire team was more at ease and comfortable with our surroundings. Fusions was well received, and
throughout the week people from the audience would recite lines to Paul or E.G., speaking to them about how much they enjoyed the performance. Sometimes we would even hear their names called when we walked through the main lobby area, filled with people. They were the Fusions celebrities.

2.7 REFLECTIONS

Fusions, which started in class as an idea, transformed into a script with a strong message, developed and found its way on stage at the World Stage Design. Throughout the process of creating Fusions, I discovered a new strength toward design. Gaining this experience, I have a new perspective toward experimental theatre, one that I want to further explore. The opportunity to travel to Cardiff, allowed me to view performances and designs that truly expanded my mind.

As part of the Fusions team, the positive group dynamic was quite rare. All of us worked together, listening and helping. There were no egos or ulterior motives–it was a pure theatre experience. I am proud that I was able to step up into an unknown position, take charge and execute. This was one of the greatest experiences in my career as a graduate student, teaching me lessons of the unpredictable nature of theatre, how to take charge when a problem presented itself and how to implement fast and successful decisions. We were able to overcome the boundaries placed by the projector issues, delivering a well-received performance. We relied on technology, but technology failed us. Ironic, since technology’s effect on our culture was one of the main themes emphasized in Fusions. I was proud and honored to be a part of this production, gaining a new perspective in understanding the many roles that must be fulfilled within theatre. The
experience and opportunity was a positive reassertion of what design meant to me—what theatre meant to me.
CHAPTER THREE

THREE SISTERS

The University of South Carolina’s Department of Theatre and Dance presented Anton Chekhov’s Three Sisters at the Longstreet Theatre from November 14 - 21, as part of the main stage 2013-2014 season. The production was directed by Steven Pearson, Head of the MFA Acting Program at the University of South Carolina. The production and design team included scenic designer Meredith Hart, lighting designer Andy Smith, costume designer Vera Katharina Dubose, sound designer Steven Pearson, and technical director Andy Mills.

Considered to be among the greatest writers in history, Anton Pavlovich Chekhov, lived from 1860–1904. Chekhov’s profound ability to capture the timeless essence of human nature has challenged and stimulated audiences throughout the decades. Within each of his characters, a particular type was created, embodying distinct aspects of morality. Three Sisters was written in 1900 during a time of reform and industrialization in Russia. First performed in 1901 at the Moscow Art Theatre, Three Sisters encompassed the effects of changes during and prior to this time. Although a defined time was not specified in the script, readers could assume Chekhov was writing about the transformation of the Russian elite during the late nineteenth-century. This was the focus found in many of Chekhov’s scripts.
3.1 BEHIND THE SCRIPT

The events in Russia during the late 1800s and early 1900s were an essential aspect in understanding *Three Sisters*. Russia was changing rapidly, and Moscow was at the center of modernity. The revolution was inevitable and fast approaching, and time and change swarmed Russia, which was the central theme of *Three Sisters*. The play is set in the provinces of Russia, where the Prozorov sisters have been living for eleven years. Although time and dates are not addressed specifically, readers assumed that the eleven-year absence takes place during the 1890s, a time of overpopulation, change and growth in Moscow. The sisters, Olga, Masha, and Irina, are originally from Moscow, a place to which they long to return, a place that no longer exists, as they had once known.

What was discovered in my research was that with the industrial boom came the need for more workers. Russian serfdom was eradicated in 1861, a change that should have called for celebration by the peasants, but actually came with many unfavorable terms. With the newfound “freedom,” the peasants rapidly migrated to the Moscow in search of work, creating an overload of people in a city that was not yet ready to accommodate such numbers. Overcrowding and the existence of slums created disease, earning Moscow the title of “Europe’s deadliest metropolis” (Thurston, 19). What the peasants found was a new type of ownership, unable to escape the wrath that came with such overpopulation.

In the script, before such changes, the Prozorov’s live in the heart of Moscow on Old Basmany Street, which was once populated with Moscow’s elite, a place held dearly in their memories. With the industrial boom, these once pleasant streets became stricken with overpopulation, poverty, disease and crime. The sisters once loving home would
have been unrecognizable to them. While the sisters hate their existence in the provinces, they seem unaware of what their home in Moscow has become. Chekhov never addressed these issues directly, making it unclear whether the characters know of the changes or if they are simply ignoring them. It would seem that due to the behavior of the characters, and their lack of action in returning to Moscow, they know of the current conditions that have taken over their beloved home. Rather than facing reality, they are free to dream of returning to a place that only exists in their memories. It may be why the character Chebutykin, for example, only reads parts of the paper dealing with unimportance, “To prevent loss of hair…dissolve ten grams of naphthalene in half bottle of alcohol…and apply daily…Let’s make a note of that” (Act I, 122). But what was interesting in his readings of newspapers was his reference towards Nikolay Dobrolyubov, who was a Russian poet and revolutionary democrat. Dobrolyubov was against the autocracy of the Russian government and the reactionary university administration. His writings strongly promoted revolt and education of the people. However, Chebutykin says, “The newspaper says there’s a man named Dobrolyubov, but what he wrote I don’t know…God only knows” (Act I, 123). With this recognition, it can be decided that these characters are choosing to remain ignorant of the change that swarmed Russia, especially Moscow.

All the characters within the script seem trapped in the past, unable to move forward or accept change, holding on to a memory that will never be relived. The measure of time throughout the play is ambiguous, sending a message of the need to accept modernity and move forward, or, if not, accept being trapped in a world that no longer exists. A key moment within the script happens in Act III when Chebutykin
drunkenly breaks the clock that belongs to the sisters’ mother. Rather than viewing the broken clock as something used to measure time, it is only viewed as something expensive. Chebutykin responds saying, “But maybe I didn’t break it; maybe it only seems I did. Maybe it only seems we exist when we don’t exist at all” (Act III, 162). This line represents the confusion found within the characters, for they remain the same, unable to move forward, while seemingly unaware of the rapidly changing world around them. The sisters are the broken clock, trapped in a timeless existence.

All the characters seem to be in a state of perpetual disarray, unable to make positive changes in their lives. For example, Vershinin, who is unhappily married to a woman who cannot take care of herself much less their child, responds to her every whim and fake attempt at suicide. Instead of creating a positive change for himself, Vershinin falls in love with Masha, who in return cannot stand her husband, Kulygin. As well, Tusenbach, who leaves the military for ordinary work, does so only in attempt to impress Irina. In return, Irina views him as boring and simple without a military uniform, making her character superficial. Even though most of the characters only discuss change, some implement taking action. Examples include Irina working at the telegraph office and Olga reluctantly accepting a position as head schoolmistress. These changes, however, leave the characters in a state of sorrow.

This dissatisfaction toward life is a point Chekhov is making about the change in life for this elite generation. Growing up, the sisters were excessively educated and privileged, coming from a generation that did not have to work hard, if at all, for what they had. Both Olga and Irina are unhappy in their positions, working at a much lower level than their capabilities, creating boredom and restlessness in their lives. The sisters
never seek challenging jobs that might better suit their abilities and desires. In his book, *Chekhov and His Russia A Sociological Study*, W. H. Burford stated that, “It is the world of officers and officials, children of the former serf-owning, class for whom life had been made economically so easy and politically so free from responsibility, that they had never known what real work meant, nor any aim in life but the satisfaction of their private impulses” (Bruford, 124-25). The sisters are incapable of thinking in that way, for what they once had is what they will always have. They embody a generation of elite aristocracy, which will no longer exist once they are gone. The character Vershinin states, “A Russian likes nothing better than to think lofty thoughts, but why, when it comes to life, why does he aim so low?” (Act II, 142). Much of what the characters do within the play is to complain about their current situation, constantly hoping for more, yet they never make a decision that will change this or please them. Their complete distress over rather trivial matters somehow pull at the heartstrings of its audience. Perhaps it is the fear of change and the inability to move forward that captures the audience.

Another aspect that affects the sisters, though not recognized within the script, is that education is no longer valued as much as in generations before the sisters’, when knowledge of several languages and musical instruments was part of a proper education. During the nineteenth-century, under Aleksandr II, Emperor of Russia 1818-1881, educational reforms were changing with the times, and after the emancipation of serfs, peasants and women were allowed into schools, where both classical education and practical training were taught. For the Prozorov’s, the scope of knowledge they are taught is now considered unnecessary. In Act II Masha explains, “It makes me suffer to see a person lacking refinement, lacking sensitivity, manners. Whenever I’m with those
teachers, my husband’s colleagues, I simply suffer” (Act II, 141). The sister’s view those in the provinces as lacking in refined education, thinking only the people in Moscow are to be considered acceptable. Irina, thinking she will find her true love in Moscow and nowhere else, is a prime example. They are unaware that these changes have been implemented everywhere. Their expectations in life are much higher than they can ever achieve during this time. Chekhov said, “I don’t believe in our intelligentsia. It is hypocritical, false, hysterical, half-educated, and lazy. I don’t believe in it even when it is suffering and complaining, for its persecutors come from its own midst. I believe in individual people, I see salvation in individual personalities, scattered here and there all over Russia, whether they are educated men or peasants. Though they are few they are a power that counts” (Bruford, 164). Chekhov was pointing out the true issues found within the masses, not the individual. He accompanied this opinion thinking that while in the university, individuals would be filled with such idealism and hope for the future, but once out in the world prove as bad as everyone else.

The frustration toward the intelligentsia, which the characters within the script embody, is focused in their inability to use education to make a difference in their culture. This can be found in the military presence, for the Prozorov house is filled with actively serving soldiers, such as Vershinin, Solyony, Tusenbach and Fedotik. Aleksandr II radically reformed the military, creating the Military Statute in 1874, requiring that all men serve actively for six years and remain in the reserves until the age of 40. This Statute was created due to the terrible loss of the Crimean War, a loss that could have been prevented had there been more military force. It was supposed to serve as protection, but what was created was an overflow of military presence. The men were not
serving to defend their country in battle; rather it was a waiting pool of boredom, which was made very clear in Chekhov’s characters. In Act III, during the town’s fire, for example, the soldiers were the ones acting as firefighters, an act that saved the town, but revealed the true duty of the soldiers. The soldiers were, similar to the sisters, trapped in a position they could not escape.

The characters constantly dream and philosophize, but when it comes to reality, rarely do they implement what they discuss. The sisters worry about forgetting their memories and education. To them, Moscow hold all of this, and if Moscow is lost, then their past, present and future will also be lost. Bruford wrote, “A longing for the past, perhaps, than for Moscow itself” (Bruford, 124). This idea was what made *Three Sisters* so strong, for it was not about a place so much as it was about a time lost. Holding onto their memories was all they had left. It is almost comical when, in Act III, Irina is distressed over forgetting how to say window in Italian, for in her eyes, it is as though the world is coming to an end. But to the majority of people, they can not relate.

Interestingly, Chekhov juxtaposed Irina’s silly worry to the profoundness of what she says next, “I forget something everyday. And life moves on and will never come back, never” (Act III, 166). This line reinstated the sense of sorrow. Irina goes on, “As time goes by, I find myself pulling away from what makes life beautiful and real, pulling farther and farther away, into an abyss” (Act III, 167). So much of what Chekhov wrote was a push and pull between sympathizing and relating to the characters, while on the other hand, finding that their worries and problems in life were rather ridiculous. They had food on the table each night, a place to call home, a family to love, even a memory to cherish. Not everyone has such blessings. However, Chekhov focused on the majority,
for most could relate to these characters, for we are not always focused on or concerned with serious issues, able to make life-changing decisions, nor move on with our lives. Every person understands the feeling of being stuck in a moment, a place, a relationship, and or a job. It is the existential crisis that all have faced at one time or another.

3.2 FINDING THE ESSENCE

Before beginning discussion with director Steve Pearson, my focus was spent on the initial reaction toward the script. I enjoy reading a script without any understanding or intervention, giving the true sense of a fresh perspective. At first, I was unsure about reading without any initial ideas from Steve. For this particular production, reading and meditating on the concept first seemed important. My first reaction from the script was to be honest, not filled with much enthusiasm. It was the type of script that needed to be read more than once, with a notion of historical background, to truly grasp what Chekhov wanted his readers to gain. Without a thorough understanding, one gets the juvenile impression of a group of people complaining about their old home. It was not until the second reading of the script, that I began putting aside the details that Chekhov gave his readers, for example Vershinin’s description of the Prozorov’s home, “And what a fine house. I envy you…Flowers like these—that’s what I’ve missed all my life” (Act I, 131). The script was scattered with such details that were not necessarily important in revealing the core of what the script meant. Although extreme realism was vanguard for the theatre during the late 1800s and early 1900s, it was not necessary to evoke the message behind the script.

In Professor Nic Ularu’s class, he stressed the importance of finding the essence of the script, something now ingrained in me when it pertains to the design process. It
was about looking through the details and finding the true message living within the text. Irina said, while discussing the way life has treated them, “It’s stifled us, like a weed. The reason we’re so unhappy and take such a gloomy view of life is that we don’t know what work is. We come from people who had nothing but contempt for work” (Act I, 135). This line helped to represent a key part of the essence. When I interpreted Masha’s line, “A green oak stands upon a firth, a chain of gold round its trunk” (Act I, 137), I found the core of Chekhov’s *Three Sisters*. Chekhov had rewritten the lines from Alexander Pushkin’s poem *Ruslan and Lyudmila*, written as an epic fairy tale. I began to notice that everything Chekhov used within the script came with its own backstory. This poem evoked a similar essence found in *Three Sisters*, for at the core of both was time slipping away and the apathy toward existence. *Ruslan and Lyudmila* referenced much of Russian history before the industrial boom. Masha, and the other characters, embody this quote, something unclear to them yet ringing with absolute truth. My inspiration was found within these lines, something I was ready to explore.

Once I read the script multiple times, I thought it best to speak with Steve. It was still summer, so our discussion was through a phone call, which was not my preferred form of communication. He spoke of selective realism, a direction I had not considered, for I was thinking more abstractly. This phone call proved absolutely necessary as I realized he wanted the sense of something real, but not by any means naturalistic. He mentioned words like minimal, incomplete, depth, and implied elements. All adjectives he mentioned were inspiring, although I was stumped by the idea of selective realism. He urged me to do research on Russian homes during the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century. I began to worry that through realistic research my understanding of what was
most important would be hindered, which was to complement the underlying meaning of the text.

Within one Google Search of the *Three Sisters*, one can find exactly what Chekhov had written, the Russian style, and a structure that was representing a home. But what I wanted for the design was much more than recreating what had already been done. Something I had noticed about myself when designing was that I can fixate quickly, losing what matters most. Finding a balance between what directors and designers want can be a struggle, but a crucial aspect to a production. I began my journey through Russian style, customs, and traditions, finding little inspiration for a design. I came up with a few rough ideas. When showing the renderings, I could see Steve was finding little inspiration. I was ever so grateful for his reaction, for I did not believe in the ideas; I was just trying to find a solution. This was something I learned never to do in the future, for one should only reveal an idea that had belief and trust behind it. However, frustration sank in and needing to find the right idea was imperative.

Coming up for air from Russian style, I began a more thorough historical study of the time period, proving critical for the design. All of the characters are unappreciative of what they have, only what they think they want. In the moments between Tusenbach and Vershinin philosophizing about the future, Vershinin says, “To my mind, all things on earth must change gradually and are in fact changing before our very eyes. In two or three hundred years, in a thousand years perhaps-time is not of the essence-a new and happy life will dawn” (Act II, 145). Time, and the changes that come with it, proved to be the foundation of the design. These characters are living in a state of either oblivion or
denial of what time has brought to their dear Moscow. Time and memory represent ambiguity for the characters.

With better incite toward the unfinished lives of these characters, I approached Nic Ularu for guidance. Having already delivered some faulty ideas to Steve, I knew the next set of ideas presented had to be strong to move forward. I spoke with Nic about the essence of the script. From that, we began discussing ideas of staging. I told him that I wanted the feeling of something that was once there but no longer existed, representing that of Moscow and the characters’ lives. Nic began talking of seeing through their existence in layers. He searched for an image of a door slightly opened with a beam of light streaming through (Figure 3.1). This image, for him, represented what I was thinking. I took that image and pondered over it for a while after our discussion.

Figure 3.1 Dark Tower Junky. “Eyes in the Doorway.” darktowerjunky.wordpress.com. 2013.
With more research, ideas came pouring in, and I found images that would inspire the idea and further push the boundaries of what the design was capable of conveying. Revisiting the notes from the first phone conversation that I had with Steve, I refocused on the incomplete feeling. To achieve a sense of depth, the layers could be created with mosquito netting screens, something Nic and I had discussed as a good material for this look. These screens could reveal different aspects of their home and their life. I developed a rough monochromatic rendering using Photoshop, hoping to reveal a minimalistic idea, not bothered by furniture or details at the time (Figure 3.2). Before this rendering, I had been focusing on details that were not representative of the essence that I had wished to convey. Because of this, it seemed I would lose Steve, who would think of the actors and their movement through the space. I was not finding the right way to communicate imagery with him. What I focused on for the next rendering was to reveal only the bones of the set. While the rendering was not at all perfect, I was confident in the idea for the overall concept.

3.3 DELIVERING THE IDEA

Upon entering Longstreet Theatre, where Steve and I planned to have an informal design meeting, nerves began to set in, for I had something in which I truly believed, something with a message. Rather than revealing the rendering to Steve before talking, which I had done previously–I spoke. This was the first time as a scenic designer that I truly felt confident and passionate about what I would say. I began to talk about the importance of the text, the feeling it created, and the peculiar sense of time. I introduced my idea, backed with historical points and the nostalgia one gets over a place that was no longer there. The symbol for this script would be represented through the screens
adorned with fragmented elements of a home that was incomplete. My main point was that I wanted the world of the characters to feel ambiguous and detached, seeing movement behind and around the screens, creating an unclear idea of space and time.

With my words pouring out, I handed him the rendering. He took a moment to soak up my descriptions and what he was seeing. That moment felt like a century, time was lost. With my heart racing and my confidence sinking, Steve began to move through the space, visualizing what was on the paper. He then said he was interested in the idea and wanted to see it grow. In my mind all I could feel was relief, for not only was this something he

Figure 3.2 Hart, Meredith. “Rough Scenic Rendering.” *Three Sisters*. University of South Carolina. Long Street Theatre. 2013.
was interested in, but he wanted to see more. This idea would work for his staging and blocking, and we discussed some movement possibilities.

Before ending our meeting, he gave me suggestions on making the fragmented elements even more disconnected, making them less obvious, and warned me against being too ghostly. He wanted a warmer sense of the space than what I had represented in the rendering. He suggested that I take a look at architectural drawings, specifically Palladio. Upon leaving the meeting, I immediately went to speak with Andy Mills, Theatre and Dance Technical Director at USC, to discuss the details and materials. Later, I was thinking about the few meetings Steve and I had. If I had not been so focused on the word realism when Steve spoke in our first discussion, I could have avoided my mental block. The rendering was very much representative of the direction Steve was thinking, and I could have found it sooner had I not been stuck on the word.

3.4 PRACTICALITIES

Once the general idea was set in motion, we could begin planning the structure of the space. So much of the script had parallel action occurring, and much of the active action took place offstage. The screens would help us with this parallel action, placing them in a staggered orientation up the banks, creating a sense of layers and displacement (Figure 3.3). What also needed to be created was the sense of separate yet visible rooms, the drawing room and the dining room. A platform would create the best solution.

Earlier, Steve and I had discussed the status of the Prozorov’s, and he wanted a sense of wealth without being overly grand.
We had talked before any design decisions about whether to use a platform, creating a ¾ stage, or using the space as a complete arena. Steve was concerned that if we used a platform there would be too much disconnection from stage level. We talked about varying heights and positions, thinking of the different feelings height could evoke to an audience. Ultimately, we decided to build on the second bank, creating a platform that sat at 4’ above stage level. This proved too high, so we cantilevered the platform to the seating bank so that it would create a height of 3’ 6½”. By cantilevering, the platform would look as though it was floating, an appearance which will be revisited. Overall the

Figure 3.3 Hart, Meredith. “Ground Plan.” *Three Sisters.* University of South Carolina. Long Street Theatre. 2013.
platform height gave a sense of separation without suggesting the height of power or
grand appearance, something Steve and I agreed was important.

All other rooms would be understood with the use of the vomitoriums and the
screens positioned throughout the bank. Once the bones of the design were in harmony,
we could move on with the details. The biggest part of the design was to create a sense of
detachment for the characters with the use of the screens. Placing them appropriately for
function and light presented a fair share of transformations, changes with which I was
happy to comply, as long as the overall look was maintained. The importance of the
screens was not about where, rather how they were being used. I was excited, thinking
about the characters moving behind the screens, supporting the concept of a fragmented
and unfinished existence. I thought I was very clear about this importance and thought
that all involved understood, but I later found out there would be issues.

3.5 FACING SET BACKS

On October 3, Steve and I met with Andy Smith the lighting designer, who was
only in town for a couple of days. I was anticipating the meeting, because I had not seen
Steve in about a month, for he had been traveling with another show and I had been at the
World Stage Design Festival in Cardiff, Wales. This delay allowed little time to finalize
the design, for it had been, technically, due a week earlier. This meeting was to fine-tune
the ideas and drafting so that the scene shop could begin construction. The meeting was a
two-part discussion, one to decide furniture layout and the other lighting.

Arranging furniture is one of my particular strengths, creating how a space can be
used functionally with good rhythm. We had set the meeting to do the furniture design
together, but when I arrived, everything was already laid out for Act I & II. While open to
change in any design, if it supports the idea and script, finding the furniture already arranged created a disconnect from an important part of design.

Moving forward, I showed my ground plans and elevations. The meeting started mainly between Andy and Steve, discussing position and direction of light. Once the actors arrived, Steve had to start rehearsal and began blocking with the newly placed furniture. This gave Andy and me time to discuss the overall direction and feeling we hoped to achieve. Everything seemed to be going well until Andy referred to the screens as a backdrop. I immediately interjected, questioning this description. He explained that he was under the impression that the screens were not to be used as anything but a backdrop. This was a hardship that can occur when designers are not working side by side on a project from the start. Even though we had briefly discussed the concept for the design over the phone and with emails, much was lost in translation. Explaining the full concept, while referencing the ground plans, I specified in more detail where I wanted the design.

With the description, images and ground plan in front of Andy, he understood the plan and was excited that the screens would be a part of the action, not behind it. This allowed him many lighting possibilities, and experimented with the positions of the screens, moving them around to give him the best abilities for dramatic light. We also discussed the height of the potential panels, because they reached the grid. Andy asked if they could be lowered by 2’, giving him enough range for light, making the panel height, in order from down stage to upstage, 20’, 14’ 10”, 13’ and 10’ 4” (Figure 3.4).

During a rehearsal break on October 3, Andy and I were able to speak with Steve about the screens. Steve explained that the screens would be part of the action, not behind
it. It was a relief knowing that everyone was on the same page and moving forward in a clear direction with the designs.

Later on in the production process, the 20’ down stage panels needed changing. They were going to be attached directly to the edge of the platform, hanging down to stage level. We later decided it would be best to cut them so that the platform maintained the floating look. The 20’ panels were then reduced to 16’5”. At my next meeting with Steve, I wanted to be sure of the final direction for the design.

![Diagram of stage panels and placement]

Figure 3.4 Hart, Meredith. “Panel Elevations.” *Three Sisters*. University of South Carolina. 2013.

3.6 ARRANGING THE STAGE

It was important to understand Steve’s thoughts when making the furniture placement choices. It would help me understand the direction of actors and their
movement through the space. The orientation of the screens needed to compliment the space, for the architectural elements painted on the screens were representative of the structure. Something Steve had wanted, from the very start, was to have the “house” run parallel with the vomitoriums. To achieve this, the furniture would be placed to signify the “walls.” The lighting would provide support through its direction entering the space. Any seemingly peculiar placement would be backed up with this perception.

Understanding the direction and blocking for the actors, I was able to see more clearly how he envisioned using the space.

Eventually, I had to release my concerns over the furniture placement and look at the bigger picture for the design. This decision was based on the premise that I had to defend the use of the screens, for I remained uncertain that Steve planned to use them as more than a backdrop. I expressed my concern, and he said that if I gave them to him, he would use them. We discussed logistics of leaving enough space for the actors to move between one bank of screens to the next, with particular entrances and exits for the actors to move comfortably. We decided to leave the stage left side clear of any screens, creating a line of path for the actors to move. A fragmented suggestion of a Palladiostyled column would be used, as part of a structure for a door. This would be thinly painted on one of the stage left screens, allowing the audience to better understand where and what was represented.

Later, I took part in the furniture design in more detail. Andy Mills and I had much shopping to do to find the neoclassical style chosen for the set. We found pieces we could afford, but were in bad shape and would need new upholstery. We shopped for a rug that would fit the profile, finding a suitable one that would complement the simplistic
color palette of the costumes. Next was to find fabric that would complement all other aspects of the designs. I was excited to be a part of this process, for I had wanted to do it since becoming a graduate student at USC. I spoke with Vera about her textures and colors and based my choices on this information (Figure 3.5). In looking at the costumes and set together, we were creating a truly romanticized atmosphere (Figure 3.6)
Steve and I also discussed the use of a swing for Act IV, where the entire act would be placed “outside.” In the script, Irina left the primary action and began to swing. It was one of my favorite moments, for it revealed her ever-present connection with her youth and innocence while foreshadowing the imminent death of Tusenbach.

I wanted the swing positioned on the platform behind the first layer of screens, creating a sense of separation from the primary line of action (Figure 3.7). At first Steve did not seem interested in incorporating this moment, but I persisted and kept suggesting how it would be visually strong for both the design and the directorial point of view. I continually placed the swing in the ground plan, as if it had already been confirmed. Once rehearsing in the space, Steve decided to incorporate the swing as part of the action. My insistence created a beautiful and strong moment (Figure 3.8).

Figure 3.7 Hart, Meredith. “Act IV Ground Plan.” Three Sisters. University of South Carolina. Longstreet Theatre. 2013
Figure 3.8 Department of Theatre and Dance Production Photograph. “Swing.”
3.6 THE ROOT

During the design process for Three Sisters, my advisor Nic Ularu was on sabbatical. There were some moments when I needed guidance, and, luckily, Nic had invited Professor Miodrag Tabacki, a well-known designer, director, and professor from Belgrade, Serbia, to teach our Scene Design class. I could ask Miodrag particular questions about the design and was able to explore options with his guidance.

The idea of covering the furniture with sheets would work with the overall look (Figure 3.9). It would suggest the characters’ desire to leave for Moscow, accepting the unsettled state of the home. I did not want the space to give a sense of comfort and belonging, for I wanted the furniture to support their hopes of leaving. I met with Steve to discuss the idea and he said that while this family was living a restless existence, they still lived in comfort, having come from money. Something I appreciated about Steve’s direction was that he would not completely shut down my ideas; rather he would push me to think in other ways with subtle suggestions, allowing me to find and explore different options.

Trying to think of another idea that would incorporate the overall feeling of an unfinished life, I started to get frustrated, unable to visualize a realistic setting with my overall design. The world of the screens and the world of the furniture choices were not coming together. Something had to connect these opposing elements, something that would not necessarily suggest a real place or a real time. If realistic furniture was to be used, finding another solution was imperative.

I began to think about what could be changed to make sense of my concept. The treatment of the floor was to be painted wood parquet, a decision that I was beginning to
seriously question, for not only would it represent a particular place and a settled feeling, it would make no sense for Act IV, which took place outdoors. Having a wooden floor was not satisfying the outdoor feeling. Before speaking with Steve, I approached Miodrag with my worries and frustrations. We had a long discussion about one of his designs for The Cherry Orchard, where he too came across a similar concern of indoors versus outdoors. He showed me an image of his design where he used a layered painting on fabric that swept through the entire stage. With furniture in place, it was understood that the scene was taking place indoors; without furniture the scene was outdoors. His design was something that moved and changed, representing multiple elements. I was beginning to see what he was suggesting, that not all scenic elements must be hand fed to the
audience, for it can create a story of its own within the script. I loved the idea of a painting representing both interior and exterior, and I began researching Russian romantic painters. When I came across Rafail Levitsky’s 1885, “The Bridge in the Woods” (Figure 3.10), I found what was needed to merge all ideas. The woman in the painting evoked a strong feeling for the script—the ability to cross and change one’s place in the world, yet an inability to do so.

Figure 3.10 Levitsky, Rafail. “The Bridge Under the Woods.” 1885.

This painting would serve as my treatment for the floor, creating an allusive more metaphysical world for these characters (Figure 3.11). Having found the right solution, I needed to sell Steve on the idea. It was a big change from a parquet floor. Manipulating the image through Photoshop to eliminate the woman and the bridge, I decided to make the painting look impressionistic, using the representation of time seen through light and how movement could change this. I wanted the bright colors and unfinished strokes to
represent the characters’ existence and fleeting lives as suggested when Vershinin philosophizes, “Yes, we’ll be forgotten. That’s the way things are. There’s nothing we can do about it. Things that appear serious, significant, so very important—the time will come when they’re forgotten or seem unimportant” (Act I, 128). This powerful line remained with me when thinking of this design for the floor, for not only in life was this so true, but especially in theatre. One will agonize over a concept or a solution, searching for the meaning of it all, working hard to implement the idea, only to see it vanish when the show ends. That was what I wanted for this floor. It would not remain.

Figure 3.11 Hart, Meredith. “Act IV Scenic Rendering.” Three Sisters. University of South Carolina. Longstreet Theatre. 2013.
I brought the image of the floor to a production meeting to show to Steve. What came next would prove to be the best misunderstanding I had come across as a designer. Showing Steve the image, I explained the idea for the floor. Nodding, he pointed to an area of the painting, saying he liked the idea of brushwork and imperfection for the floor. Maybe it was the excitement, but I questioned no further, pleased that Steve was approving this big change. Luckily, we started painting that week, before Show and Tell on October 28. On the Monday of Show and Tell, Steve entered the space, seeing the floor for the first time, and was surprised and shocked. My heart fell inside my stomach when he said he misunderstood, thinking I meant only a part of the painting was to be used, a part that was brown. Life as I knew it was crumbling, for I had never felt stronger about an idea as a designer. One could imagine my relief when he explained that he was happy he misunderstood, because he liked what he was seeing and did not think he would have approved the idea on paper. I was not sure what lesson should be taken here; because of this misunderstanding one of the stronger elements for the design was implemented.

3.7 JUMPING FROM ACT TO ACT

Act I, II and IV were complete, but Act III was still undecided. From our very first meetings, Steve spoke very specifically about the feeling he wanted to achieve for Act III. While the entire town around the Prozorov’s home is on fire, the action during the fire alarm is taking place in the safety of an upstairs bedroom. Not harmed by the fire, the sisters are preparing to help their community. The progression into this Act needed to have a completely different feeling, one of claustrophobia and constrictions. Steve wanted the space to feel tight, and the use of lights would help create this feeling. Using
the focus of lights was not enough. Deciding to drop the pit 7” would help create a sense of sinking and restriction. We decided to paint the rising side of the stairs, pit and platform black, allowing a feeling of floating and isolation, while also emphasizing the very real feeling of disconnection.

The juxtaposition from real to unreal was gathering organically, for the furniture and costumes would have the touch of realism, yet the set would not be of a familiar perception. Since the screen panels on the bank would not be lit, not even to represent the fire, I wanted to incorporate them in a different way, reiterating what they symbolized. The decision for the action of Act III would be inside the pit, so I asked Steve if we could reincorporate the screen panels. This would not only connect with the screens positioned on the bank, but would generate the feeling of constriction while giving a sense of architectural space. The audience would see through the action of the characters, fostering a fishbowl point of view (Figure 3.12). Perhaps I was giving up the fight on certain aspects, or was too late, or could not find a way to sell the idea, but either way, I accepted without much question Steve’s decision to use folding partitions to indicate the space instead of using any screen panels for support. He already had ideas for the partitions that would create a humorous separation for the characters, something that was successful. However, if I could do it again, I would have pushed having the screens up until the last day, for a more dramatic viewpoint.

3.8 AFTER ABSORPTION

I was pleased with the process, execution and performance. The costumes Vera created were beautiful, and keeping the three sisters in the same attire, with subtle changes that reflected their inner characters, was a wonderful notion. Vera’s ability to
deeply analyze characters and create costumes showing progression or decline, with subtle suggestions that could be understood by the audience, was a particularly noteworthy skill.

Figure 3.12 Hart, Meredith. “Act III Scenic Rendering.” Three Sisters. University of South Carolina. Longstreet Theatre. 2013.

The lighting created by Andy was natural and pure, using warm whites, clear and soft blues to sweep across the stage. His approach and execution was very organic with the script and set. During technical rehearsals, I wanted Act IV less bright. The floor was very reflective, and since it was the only time the audience would see the entire floor without rugs and big pieces of furniture, I wanted there to be a depth to it, something like an oil painting. Andy created an amazing image on the platform, using tree gobos and soft light; it provided the depth I had been hoping he could create (Figure 3.13). There
was a high contrast compared in the value of the platform to the stage (Figure 3.14). The value of paint was the same, but with the treatment of stage light, one can see the difference it can make. Practicalities in lighting the actor did not allow for more of this use of lighting depth on the main stage. Using the screen panels and lighting to suggest the canopy of trees would have supported the script dramatically.
My central goal for the set was to reveal the sense of lost emotions, reality, and hope, creating something that was either once there or supposed to be there but no longer existed. While particular moments supported this metaphysical feeling, I wanted more, for I felt that the screens were not used to their full potential. Seen in the model, one can get a sense of the many layers of screens (Figure 3.15). Thinking that more action would have been taken through and behind, the concept for the screens could have been further executed to evoke these emotions. While the decision had been made to keep the panels in a fixed position, it would have been powerful to slowly remove panels throughout, showing the change of existence for these characters. Life as they think they know it is
disappearing, and they will have to make the decision to either remain or move forward, accepting their existence. Either way, in the end, all will eventually vanish from reality.

As the designer, I wanted to firmly execute my ideas with a clear indication of why and how. Occasionally, I accepted rejection too easily, failing to question others or myself thoroughly. I defended and promoted many aspects of my design but there were some ideas that I should have found a way to implement, revisit or rework. At times, I too easily allowed the opinions of others to affect my concept. I want to develop a more assertive demeanor while remaining professional and effective.

As the design grew and changed, communicating my ideas to others was key. At some point, Andy was not clear on the floor treatment from production meeting via

Figure 3.15 Hart, Meredith. “Model.” Three Sisters. University of South Carolina. Longstreet Theatre. 2013.
phone conference. This was not a huge setback, but he did have to make some adjustments. Calling him separately to reiterate the changes would have prevented confusion. I will need to create a better system for communicating with those not physically present at meetings.

The design for *Three Sisters* helped me grow by looking deeper within the text of the script, finding a personal aspect to Chekhov’s words. Going from not even liking the text to finding such passion within the words, I could feel the difference as a designer. The process and working with Steve, allowed me to see design as more than just arrangement but as a true message of life.
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