An Evaluation of Scenic Design

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AN EVALUATION OF SCENIC DESIGN

by

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Bachelor of Arts
University of South Carolina, 2008

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Master of Fine Arts in
Theatre
College of Arts and Sciences
University of South Carolina
2017

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I’d like to take a moment to acknowledge the Staff and Faculty within the Department of Theatre and Dance for their dedication to the art and the students who seek to make it. I greatly appreciated a second opportunity to work at the University with people who took the time to make enlightenment, and imagination possible.

Secondly, I would like to express a great deal of gratitude to my research partner, Elisabeth Gray Engle for her help and support through the process.
ABSTRACT

“…Allow me to explain about the theatre business. The natural condition is one of insurmountable obstacles on the road to imminent disaster… Strangely enough, it all turns out well… I don’t know. It’s a mystery”

-Tom Stoppard

I embraced this quote a long while ago in a moment of disgust and defeat while working through a flawed process of making theatre. Everything takes too long to complete, nothing works right the first time if ever at all, and ultimately the entire process is a maddening mess. It seems to me that the study and practice of the trade can work to make problem solving and development a more streamlined process, but the art that is worth pursuing is never easy. What follows here is a documentation of my process through three different opportunities to produce designs for the University of South Carolina’s Department of Theatre and Dance, and my progress in attempting to avoid the obstacles ahead.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

I’ve never been a good storyteller. I am generally a subdued and thoughtful person. I consistently find myself searching for the right words to make a point, taking the time to make sure that what is intended is correct. In retrospect, this is probably why I took to designing for the theatre. Instead of talking, I can build a story, spending my time crafting a timeline of events or a visual metaphor of emotion and thought. I can put my effort into a visual storytelling that aides in the overall ideal of an artistic effort towards, letting someone else do the actual talking while I work to create a world around them.

PRIOR EXPERIENCE

My experience in theatre started with an undergraduate degree from The University of South Carolina, I double majored in Media Arts and Theatre, working on several productions for the University in various fields of work. My focus began in the sound design field for theatre. Later, I trekked into studying film and animation in the media arts realm. What I eventually ended up with was a smorgasbord of media development abilities that covered various digital mediums. After college, most of my work came from small theatre projects, theatrical carpentry and digital design contracting for the corporate world. I contracted sound and video work for various purposes around Columbia, SC including work for Trustus Theatre, Workshop Theatre, and Town Theatre. Every now and then I would get offered a project outside of Columbia, including sound design for productions in Key West and Australia. My work acted as more of a
hobby than a functioning regular employment, and I struggled to find a balance between creating art, family, and finances.

In the Summer of 2013, I was asked to work on a project at the University of South Carolina with Professor Nic Ularu. I acted as the projection designer for Fusions, which was an original work to be performed at the Richard Burton Theatre in Cardiff, Wales. Ularu, who was both writer and director for the production, liked my work and offered the opportunity to work towards a Master’s Degree in Scenic Design under him at the University. I accepted the offer with aspirations to broaden my understanding of the art and the opportunity to closely study the art of scenic design. Ularu also offered the opportunity to branch out and practice other forms of multimedia art that I had not had the chance to fully delve into prior.

One year after the Fusions production, Nic Ularu hired me as the projection designer for his production of Hieronymus at Iasi National Theatre, in Iasi, Romania. Upon my return, I began studies at the University towards a Masters in Fine Arts Degree.

WHAT TO GAIN FROM GRADUATE SCHOOL

In deciding to pursue an MFA in Scenic Design I was looking to grow in a couple ways. I had not had many experiences in even the basics of scenic design. I had ventured vaguely into the field during several experiences in theatre due to some work in projection and video projects that dictated scenic design shapes. I didn’t quite know the rules though. I had only a little experience in design theory. I could instinctively point to the flaws and successes of artwork, but did not understand the syntax to explain it. I viewed that disability as severely limiting to any future trajectory towards becoming a progressive designer.
I had been designing for theatre in various medias including audio, animation/video, and some small lighting design. As I started to delve into scenic design, I sought out and became very thankful for the option to take time to learn the trade and the artistic skills. I was also hopeful to have a chance to experiment with technology past the limited resources that I had prior. I wanted a chance to branch out and play with various technologies that would allow for different and new types of art to be created.
CHAPTER 2
FINDING A MODUS OPERANDI
Scenic Design for Translations

PRODUCTION DETAILS

Translations by Brian Friel was the third season show of Theatre South Carolina’s 2014/2015 Season. Translations opened in February 2015 in Theatre South Carolina’s Longstreet Theatre Stage. The show was directed by Paul Savas, a guest artist that was the Executive Director at Warehouse Theatre in Greenville, SC. First year Lighting Design MFA Candidate Chris Patterson acted as the lighting designer. Costumes were designed by first-year Costume Design MFA Candidate, Rachel Harmon. Danielle Wilson designed the sound for the production. Undergraduate Student Hunter Robinson acted as the stage manager.

Translations was to be produced in Longstreet Theater, an arena theater that seats roughly 400. I had worked in the space before as a sound designer and knew some of the limitations or issues that could be present when trying to develop work for such a revealing space. I also knew from prior experience that the space could be transformed easily into a three-quarter thrust stage that would allow for a larger, more realized, and spacious design.

ABSTRACT OF TRANSLATIONS

Written by Brian Friel in 1980, Translations is a play that looks at some of the issues that arose during the British occupation of Ireland. Ireland’s political and social
issues that lasted from the early Seventeenth Century through the late nineteen-hundreds became the subject of Friel's career as he chose to explore and reinterpret an entire country's troubles through the actions and thoughts of small town Ireland. In *Translations*, Friel uses the cultural and historical enlightenment of a make-shift school house to juxtapose the encroachment, Anglicization, and potential loss of cultural relevance that came with the British Ordnance Survey and the continuation of British governance over the Irish isle.

Set in the small fictional town of Baile Beag in 1833, a hedge school is the center of a tumultuous encounter between British Royal Engineer Corp and local townspeople that are unhappy with British oversight that is being forced upon them. The basis of the conflict in the story stems from the inability to communicate due to the language and cultural barrier. As such, the story plays out amongst the beauty of an ill-fated love story and external tensions that arise from the inability to bridge the gap between societal differences and the disparity that comes from the notion of the “us versus them” mentality taken by both the British and Irish factions.

**DIRECTOR’S CONCEPT/NOTES**

My first communications with Director Paul Savas came through email in the form of early director’s notes and concept. Savas requested that the scenic elements somehow utilize borders as a device to push the major themes of the play. In the initial email, Savas wrote, "I like the ideas of borders, territories, maps, separateness/sameness and differences/similarities and want to make sure that we underline those concepts where appropriate and natural.

I feel as though the earth of Ireland should be part of the space. Obviously, we
need the structural elements mentioned in the script but they do not all have to be structurally connected. A window can be 'disconnected' from the walls supporting the stairs and the upstairs, but I do not want that window to be achieved solely by the imagination and our lighting designer.” (Savas, Meeting for *Translations*)

In later meetings with Savas, we examined the theatre space and talked about how it could work for us during the production. Longstreet theatre is an arena stage that presents some interesting challenges and perspectives that require close attention during the design process. Otherwise, the product will hinder the movement of actors and/or the visibility of the audience.

During our first meeting, we spent some time looking at the staging for Theatre South Carolina’s production of Our Town. While fairly minimalistic in its appearance we found quite a bit of discussion in how fellow MFA designer, Neda Spalajkovic’s design for the show, a raised floor that connected to the audience seating bank, presented an intimate connection between the audience and the actor. Our immediate reaction was to revert back to the height of the normal stage deck and to shrink the playing space so that we created the first of a few conceptual barriers/borders that were to exist in the design of the stage.

Our early conversations we also produced quite a bit conversation about the structure of the barn and how that could be represented on an arena stage without interfering with the sight lines of the audience. Savas wanted a space that had a definite difference or perceptual barrier between the interior of the barn and the exterior part of the barn. I had done quite a bit of research and knew some things that had worked in the space before, but I did not yet know how to approach a structural element of the show.
RESEARCH

I started the reading and research process several months before any actual meeting for the production. I immediately dove into the history of Ireland, the historical struggles that led to the conflict in *Translations*, and the visual history of Irish townships and countryside. I wanted to know the historical relevance of the Irish troubles due to the importance of the situation on the mindset of characters and their feelings towards the British soldiers. The political situation also led to and informed the financial and economic state of the town and should be directly influential on the look and feel of the old barn/hedge school that acts as the main location in the play.

![Figure 2.1: Translations image research, Interior of an old barn used to influence light and scenic elements, “Inside the Old Barn.” Warrior Cats of the Forest.](image-url)
Initially not knowing how to approach the scenic elevations of the set, I focused on finding images that could lead to developing ideas about texture, shape, and color. The main outer shell of my focus became early 1800s Ireland. I enjoyed looking through what little I could find of small Irish cottages and photographs of families surrounded by their meager furnishings. Due to the historical period, quite a bit of what I found was either museum reproductions or not quite the truest archival imitation. Fortunately, I found enough images of structures and bits of architecture that I thought I could be informative while accompanied with textures of wooden timber, thatched roofs, floorboards, room furnishings, maps, and landscapes.

Figure 2.2: *Translations* image research, old weathered wood texture, Davis, Kelly. “Weathered Old Barnwood.” 2014.

Later on in the process, after the conversations with Paul Savas, Professor Nic Ularu, and fellow designers, I branched out to look for specific images and styles,
narrowing down what I wanted to transpose into the design of the set. With those images in mind, I could start working on the actual physical properties that would appear on stage.

DEVELOPMENT OF DESIGN

I started the design process lost in thought and theorem about the context of the show. In my head, I knew that I wanted to use tall towers of books and metaphorical visuals of lost cultural identity that came with the themes of the Translations script. When I actually sat down to start on the shape and structure of the set I ended up with a large barn, a big bulky realistic structure in the middle of the stage. I had thought to utilize giant piles of books to express the dissolution of education, culture, and freedom that Irish people felt during the British colonization, but couldn’t connect all of my ideas to how they would work for the show or Savas’ conceptual ideals.

Figure 2.3: Translations image research, the hills and farmland of Ireland, Garret, Jerry. “IMG_3865.” 2014
It didn’t take long to figure out that I had fallen into the trap of thinking less about what would actually help to shape and enhance the storytelling. I had focused more on an effect and decoration of one single part of the show. In the end, my original ideas would have been a fairly pedantic and an expensive way of realizing a set, but completely lost the poetry of the Irish countryside setting that is important to the context of the story.

In seeing my first attempt fail, I struggled to keep some semblance of my early ideas while reshaping and reimagining the space. Professor Ularu pushed me to design a set that wasn’t a realistic representation of the barn, but instead to search for a way to utilize the barn setting while not losing touch with the background exterior of Ireland. His suggestions and guidance led me to experimenting with a series of disconnected panels that offered the physical properties of the barn while still allowing the background to be present. The panels allowed for the structural elements to be represented while still allowing for an interesting image to be presented.

I had been given permission early on to utilize a seating bank in the design, effectively turning the stage into a three-quarter thrust stage. I decided to utilize that space as the backdrop to the barn structure, the idea was to essentially use the space to allow for a perspective image of the background landscape with enough space to develop depth and dimension. In an effort to visualize and piece together the visuals of hills and topography of Ireland, I drafted a series of contoured fabric panels to serve as the countryside backdrop. The idea was to use dyed scrim-type fabric cut into a rolling hillside type pattern
Both Ularu and Savas pointed to some issues with the backdrop, indicating both structural and visual issues. Professor Ularu suggested that the scrim panels would be painstakingly impossible to hang from the overhead grid in the contoured manner that I had wanted. Along with being hard to construct, the visuals of colored scrim did not offer anything close to the actual aesthetic beauty of the countryside, instead it would act as a dull abstract representation. There would be no way to get the unique colorful quality and texture of the bright green grasses in the Irish hills.

Instead, I moved on to a series of ground-rows that would be textured and painted to resemble some of the research images that I had found. I was also able to still use the
depth of the seating bank to help give the illusion of depth across the hillside. The ground-rows, placed upstage of a scrim curtain, would help to create the illusion of a small town built on the Irish countryside that we needed. As an added bonus, Lighting Designer Chris Patterson suggested that a star drop be placed behind the hills. It was a great idea considering the drop could assist in elaborating a stunning image of the night sky behind the rolling hills of Ireland. The effect would only be used in one scene, but it would be efficient in realizing the romantic nature of night in the countryside.

Figure 2.5: Early stage design render of Translations. Engle, Baxter. “Opening Image.” Translations. University of South Carolina. Longstreet Theatre. 2014

REALIZATION OF DESIGN

Due to some issues with communication and planning, the drafted design plans were delivered a bit later than the scheduled deadline. The construction process would be fit into a tighter window than I would have liked, but once the shop opened after winter break we were off and running into the build process.
Under the direction of Technical Director Andy Mills, we began by building the tall panels that would act as the wooden structure of the barn. Mills had the idea to build the panels out of foam insulation panels which would give us the opportunity to cut a wood grain texture into the panels as opposed to only painting the texture. Utilizing a wire brushed normally meant for cleaning steel, we scraped a deep grain pattern into the foam that resembled the cracks and grain of old dried timber boards. We then sprayed the grained foam panels with several layers of paint from a sharp angle which allowed a dark brown under-layer to enhance the shadows of the texture, while a medium and lighter toned browns gave the effect of weathered coloring and highlights of natural wood.

It took a quite a while to get the panels laid out in the right manner, textured and painted. While the scenic artists spent a lot of the time working on the panels, Assistant Technical Director Sam Gross built the ground rows to spec in the theatre. By the time we got into the theatre to start painting, the ground rows had already been erected and covered with canvas so that the scenic artists could paint unobstructed. Not quite knowing how to approach the painting portion, Professor Ularu spent several days working with us to get the texture and paint worked out. With a little time and effort, the ground rows took shape and began to look like the hills of Ireland.

After the wooden panels had been placed into the space and the ground-rows were up and painted, we started to work on the floor. As had been the plan from early on, we saved painted luan boards from the Our Town set to cover the floor of the stage. The floorboards had already been painstakingly painted with a nice wood grain, and fit perfectly with the wood textured panels. It took about four hours to layout and staple the wooden slats to the floor creating the rounded floor shape that defined the barn floor.
Luckily, our initial build delay didn’t hurt us much in getting everything onto the stage in time. This would be the first chance I would have to realize the importance of having time to make adjustments and correct issues without having to stress an increasingly imminent opening date. Once we got the main pieces into the theatre space, I had quite a bit of time to orient the set pieces, add set decorations, and arrange furniture into place. I used every bit of the time that I had.

During the first rehearsal in the theatre, Paul Savas smartly pointed out that the two smaller panels that hung over the downstage edge of the playing space presented a problem for a section of the audience. I quickly shifted the hanging panels to avoid as many sight-line problems as possible. Over the course of a couple days, I adjusted every panel just ever so slightly to accommodate sightlines and actor movement. Eventually, I learned that each time I moved a panel the lighting designer and crew would have to refocus the lighting instruments that were aimed at and around the panels. Initially, I was flippant about the idea of this wasting the lighting crews time but became more aware of it as Chris Patterson and I discussed their time limitations and the projects that he had on his list to complete. I was putting them slightly behind each time I moved the panels due to them having to fix and refocus the lighting. Eventually, we decided that the panels would be set to their final location and that moving them further would be an impossibility.

Other projects included reshaping and painting several stools to match the style that I had settled on through furniture research. Andy Mills built a table that became the centerpiece of some of the action, and painted some benches to match. Other things that were built for the production included a set of crates that would act as a makeshift
bookcase and some small slatted knee-walls that covered and textured the upstage theatre seating banks. I added foliage, straw, and rocks to the bottom of the downstage ground-row and panels, mostly to add dimension and definition to the bottom of the painted structures.

**Figure 2.6:** Production photo of *Translations* set. Engle, Baxter. “*Translations.*” 2015

**CONCLUSION**

*Translations* had a final dress rehearsal/Circle Night on February 19, 2015, and opened to the public the next evening. While I wasn’t happy with how everything turned out, the set on stage was exactly as I designed and reflected all of my decisions throughout the process. In looking back at the process of the production I find that I grew considerably and began to grasp what it would take to make this art a profession.
Communication between designer and director worked well enough as I felt comfortable communicating with Paul Savas about the set and the direction in which we were heading. Otherwise, I did not fare as well, failing at times to have an open dialogue about scenic changes with the lighting designer Chris Patterson. I also delivered the build plans late which caused some stress during the early goings of the production process. Ultimately, these transgressions did not hurt the production but provided important lessons which I would need to work towards correcting.

I also learned, with Professor Ularu’s guidance, what it would take to creatively define a space while utilizing the essentials of structure and shape; something I would try to work on for the entirety of my MFA learning experience.
Figure 2.7: Production photo of *Translations* set. Patterson, Chris “*Translations.*” 2015
Figure 2.8: Production photo of *Translations* set. Ayer, Jason. Department of Theatre and Dance Production Photograph. “Night.” *Translations*. University of South Carolina. Longstreet Theatre. 2015
CHAPTER 3
COMEDY, REALISM, AND PHANTOMS
Scenic Design for Blithe Spirit

PRODUCTION DETAILS

Blithe Spirit by Noel Coward was produced by Theatre South Carolina in November 2015 as the second main-stage show of the 2015/2016 season. Professor Stan Brown directed the production which was staged on the Drayton Hall Theatre Space. Drayton Hall Theatre is Theatre South Carolina’s proscenium house. As with Longstreet Theatre, I had worked in this space several times, working on both projection and sound designs. The lighting was designed by second year Lighting Design MFA Candidate Rachel Sheets. This would be my second show working with Costume Design MFA Candidate Rachel Harmon, Sound Designer Danielle Wilson, and Hunter Robinson as stage manager.

This show came as a surprise to me at the start of the fall semester. I had originally been assigned to design a show in the spring semester of 2016, but was shifted to Blithe Spirit due to some scheduling conflicts. I had no issues with the change, but had to move quickly considering that I had been scheduled to meet with Director Stan Brown and I was not yet familiar with the script. Within a day, I had read, researched, and presented design ideas to Professor Ularu concerning the script. One day later, I met with Stan Brown and we were off and running.
ABSTRACT OF *BLITHE SPIRIT*

*Blithe Spirit* first opened in the West End in 1941 and is widely considered one of Noël Coward’s most famous plays. After its premiere, the show went on to become the longest running shows in British history. *Blithe Spirit* highlights the wittiness of Coward’s writing ability through an eccentric story about an ill-intentioned ghost that visits her former husband and his new wife. The play begins with a dinner party hosted by Charles Condomine, who has invited an eccentric medium to dinner in hopes of witnessing her perform a séance.

Condomine’s newest scheme/research experiment involved the clairvoyant Madame Arcati in an attempt to illicit the tricks behind a modern séance, which he believes to be absolute baloney. The ritual leads to surprising results, though, as the séance actually works, allowing the spirit of Charles’ former wife, Elvira, an avenue back into their lives. The catfight that follows is “absolutely beastly” as Elvira and Ruth, Condomine’s current wife, spar throughout the house in an attempt to establish dominance over the household and Charles.

**CONCEPT**

Stan Brown’s director notes for the production dealt with capturing Noël Coward’s writing to the fullest degree. He expressed interest in being able to use the space that was given, a large proscenium stage, effective without making the stage seem too large and overpowering to the actors and the story that would play out onstage. Brown wanted to make sure that we were accommodating in how we treated the séance moments and the exciting finale. We would need to make sure that the audience would understand the importance of the introduction of the spiritual world without making the
scenes either banal or overly exuberant. He also encouraged me to find and express my own artistic temperament in the set as we developed the project, giving me the freedom to develop concepts to suit the production.

My impressions of the project centered around the Condomine’s house, the sole location of the play. Charles Condomine’s abode in Kent, England needed to exude an atmosphere of a self-made writer who has taken great delight in fraternizing with the wealthy society that reside near him. The character is a 1940’s playboy that lives for the dinner party, and delights in the mischief and possible dalliance that may come out of them. Within the past few years, Ruth Condomine, Charles’ second wife, came to live in the house, and made small changes that brighten up the room and gives a gentler touch to the space. The set design had to display a darker, warm nature of a masculine parlor that had slowly been affected and altered by Ruth.

Books, trophies, and decorative trinkets would line the shelves of the comfortable parlor that feature plush ornamental furniture near a warming fireplace. Tall French doors lead to a hallway that runs through the center of the house, and acts as the main entry to the parlor room. Another set of doors would lead to a bright exterior garden.

The design would allow the Condomines and their dinner guests, the Bradmans, a comfortable and well-kept room built for entertainment, but immediately exclude Madam Arcati as an eclectic outside visitor that brings a mysterious eccentricity to the room. Elvira, and the séance that spawns her, highlight a spiritual atmosphere that is completely foreign to the grounded world that has been established for the audience.

The ethereal nature of the séances must initially encroach and eventually envelope the house as the Condomine wives thrash the house in a fit of phantasmal outrage. The
audience should catch a glimpse of the mystical ghost world in the first séance that allows Elvira to cross over into the house, and then witness the full emersion as Elvira and the recently deceased Ruth are sent back to the ghost world in the final sensationalized séance session at the end of the third act. Ghostly ethereal greens and blues highlight and shine through the walls to take the house into the spiritual world that Elvira and eventually Ruth, both reside in.

RESEARCH

I started the research portion of the *Blithe Spirit* design with the most interesting parts first. Considering the exciting treatment that the script allows the séance scenes, I wanted to get an idea of how I could approach these scenes. I found hundreds of images depicting early twentieth century séances and conjuring, some real and some obviously photoshopped within the past few years. Whether old or new, the images gave me the impression of the energy that would be needed during these instances in the production and informed some of the choices I would have to make going forward. The overall theme of the collection of images indicated a strong belief or respect for the supernatural and the effects that the spiritual could inflict upon the physical world.

I followed this up by contemplating the historical architecture and makeup of the houses in England during the historical period. I found several houses and layouts that I would want to use to incite the scenic design for the show, and quite a bit of imagery that allowed an idea of what set dressing and furnishing would be required to allow the room to look lived in.
Figure 3.1: *Blithe Spirit* image research, a séance. Mills. “Music in the Air.” c. 1920
One set of images that struck me as important was a series of paintings and photography of the Dennis Severs’ House, a whole-house art installation meant to imitate the daily lives of a Huguenot family from the 1800s though the 20th century. Each set of images depicted ostentatious objects and furniture in a fashion that appeared to be left about haphazardly, as if they had little importance. The installation served to illicit the ideas of an extravagantly decorated living quarters in recreation of life through “still-life drama”

Figure 3.2: Blithe Spirit image research, “Dennis Severs’ House.” C. 2015
(Dennis Severs’ House, 2014) While I did not seek to immediately replicate the luxurious nature of the images, I thought they could help to illustrate the ideas.
DEVELOPMENT OF DESIGN

*Blithe Spirit* would be a realistic set: pomp, large and exquisitely detailed, but also a vehicle for revealing a mystical, ghost world that exists beyond our own. Within a few hours of development, I knew exactly how I wanted to approach the design. I described a large box set, with looming walls that would be made from a scrim material painted as a warm wood paneling of a well-established estate. The scrim material would present an opaque surface when lit correctly, but then quickly become translucent when the lighting reversed. Establishing a solid, conservative world that can then be torn apart by theatrical special effects.

Without figuring out every detail, I pitched the idea to Professor Nic Ularu who approved the general idea. In regards to finding the shape of the space, Ularu pointed me towards *American Set Design* by Arnold Aronson as way of exploring traditional set design and the way that realistic box sets had enormous amounts of detail and special awareness within the architecture. I found great examples of traditional architecture being represented in grand scenic design. Explicitly the shape of David Mitchell’s scenic designs for *The Gin Game* from 1977 stuck out as inspiring for a method of creating open ceiling space that allows increased perception of depth and size. I translated the visual research imagery that I had found earlier into a parlor/living space that exuded the Condomine’s personalities and allowed for a shocking reveal. Within days I had drafted my ideas, and submitted them for approval.
Soon after submitting my plans for the design, I was asked to attend a design meeting for the production. The cost of the design was exorbitantly expensive, and the program staff wanted to explore possibilities of pairing back the cost and size of the set. Considering the scale of the original designs, I had no issue with reducing the size. I was also advised to reconsider the color and texture of the currently faux wood paneled walls so the actors and costumes would not be completely absorbed by dark, brooding wood texture.

Within the design meeting, Technical Director Andy Mills also wanted to emphasize the need to nail down exactly what tricks and effects we would be using for the climax moment at the end of act three. I had discussed several concepts for theatrical tricks that I wanted to add, but Mills cited several past experiences with special effects that spiral out of control. I promised to discuss the ideas further with Stan Brown and the design staff and to return with finite details of the tricks that we would want to use.
REALIZATION OF DESIGN

The scenic shop burst into action as soon as definite plans were in place. The steel frames for the scrim panels were constructed while the wooden columns and headers were being built. Just as soon as one project was completed, another would begin. Throughout the process, I worked to balance the task of constructing the elements of the set while staying far enough ahead to dictate the details of the design. At the same time, I spent time experimenting with the painting treatment for the wood columns and headers.
After the columns and panels were completed in the shop, they were taken into the theatre and dead-hung in place. I had a chance to paint a base coat on the header beams and columns, but did not have a chance to base coat the scrim panels before they were placed onto the stage. It worked out so that we could easily spray the base coat on the scrim fabric with an airbrush. Within a couple weeks of beginning, the interior shell of the room was in place and painted.

While looking around for trim and molding in the scenic shop, I found enough Styrofoam crown molding segments to complete the entire length of the boxed set. We used three quarter inch foam to cut out and build the chair railing and floor molding according to the design drawings. I realized through the process that I could have easily dictated an existing molding type instead of building my own, especially since I didn’t like the outcome. The alternative would have saved quite a bit of time and would have looked better in the end. There had been no need to reinvent the wheel, so to speak.

Due to the time that it takes paint to dry coupled with the multitude of projects that had to be completed for the show, the other two graduate painters helped me work at night to paint the detail, wallpaper, woodgrain and floor. I had chosen the wallpaper pattern a week before we started and cut the shapes out of acetate sheets, framing them for stencils to use with the airbrush. The process was tedious and it took a couple nights to complete all of the wallpaper sections. There were several mistakes through the process but ultimately the wallpaper pattern ended up looking as planned.

Professor Ularu came in to help paint the wood detail on the scrim panels and the upstage staircase flat. I was worried about getting the grain detail to be discernible on the material considering that the actual painted wood had a deep color tone and a clear coat
of glaze to make the wood tone particularly warm. This could not be achieved on the scrim because of the way the fabric absorbed the paint and the glaze could not be applied to the material. Ularu showed that the detail on the material did not have to be perfectly painted, and considered the clutter of furniture and implied texture from other surfaces enough to deceive the audience.

The floor was also painted in vertical perspective to help give depth to the room and complete the full view of the space. We started by painting the warm brown base for the floor and then lining the dark grain of a warm toned wooden floor. Finally, we covered some areas with decorative carpets to give color and divide room into three main spaces. The small details in the floor helped to cinch the illusion of a grand Living room in a wealthy house.

The week before tech became dedicated to the final touches and getting everything into place. We had the majority the larger set construction finished and in place, and we were painting at night to avoid conflicts with lighting crew and other staff. As a result, I started focusing on smaller things during normal work hours. We loaded in the furniture that we had, and set to finding enough books, decoration, lamps, and other items that would make the house look lived in. With Technical Director Andy Mill’s help, I was able to pull quite a bit of furniture from stock. We also ended up visiting thrift shops and furniture auctions around town to find specific styles that would fit the period and style. The hardest things to find ended up being a decorative lamp shade for the standing lamp and a chair that was suitable as a center piece to the room. For the set decoration portion, the idea was to push realism, at least as much as theatrically possible.

As time progressed towards the technical rehearsals and the cast rehearsed more
often on stage, it became apparent that Andy Mill’s assumptions about the theatrical tricks needed to complete the final scene were correct. Even without seeing everything happen, I knew that we had not accounted for enough of a spectacle in the end scene. I took some time to confer with Lighting Designer Rachel Sheets about adding a fogger for some mystical effects. I also added a fan to blow through a set of curtains, and rigged the side doors so they could be manipulated from offstage. It wasn’t much to add, but it made a huge difference. We only then had to make sure that the run crew would have time to trigger each of the effects that surrounded the stage.

Amongst everything else that needed to happen to make the set complete, I started to work on the video design that I had since neglected. While the video had been greatly pared down from the original idea, I still needed to take time to find the right color combination and visuals. Professor Jim Hunter had taken time to find a matching pair of projectors that I cross-focused across the upstage cyc. I also used a projector hung on a baton at center stage to project onto the upstage hallway panel.

For the actual content of the video I used stock footage of colored oil in water. I changed the color and sharpness of the video and edited the clips into a continuous loop. The video I ended up with resembled what I had expected, more or less, and would suffice going into tech weekend. The goal of the work was to have something to project so that the designers and director could see the effect and then decide for where to go next.
Once we got to technical rehearsals things started to slow down. The scenic elements had come together for the most part. Quite a bit of the set dressing had been put into place and the set lacked a few minor details. It now came time for all of the other design elements to be placed into the show. For the better part of a two-day tech
rehearsal, lighting and sound designers worked to incorporate their work into the production. Once we got the séance portions of the production, I inserted the bits of accompanying video and took notes on the changes that would need to be made. Due to the abstract nature of the video, most of the issues were a combination of color correction, finesse into the scenes, etc.

During the technical rehearsals, it became evident quickly that the effect I had worked to achieve with the scrim panels would not work with the lighting as designed. The opaque nature of front lit scrim could not be achieved in the way that we had hoped. Instead of being able to hide actors moving upstage of the scrim, the actors and upstage details were highlighted, exactly the opposite of what I had worked for. The reveal of the spirit world moving through the house during the magical séances would be given away before the show even began. I worked through several possible ideas to fix the issue, but all solutions were met with technical difficulties and time constraints.

On Sunday evening, we worked through all the special effects that would be used. After only a couple tries, the run crew settled into a routine that was satisfactory for the run of the show. Very few issues arose from the test runs, all of which could be finessed through the next few days before opening. We also worked through adding a fog machine to the end of the show, troubleshooting technical issues and orienting timing and placement of the effect. As the two phantoms are relegated back to the spirit world, the room would be consumed with a heavy, hopefully mysterious, and ominous fog. I spent the remainder of the technical rehearsal, working to add furniture and detail to the now fully exposed upstage hallway, as well as working to fix the special effects.

Amongst other notes that came during the last few days before opening, Professor
Nic Ularu observed the piecemeal condition of the furniture, and pointed out that a house of the Condomine’s affluence would have matching furniture. This was an issue that I overlooked during the decoration phase due to the budgetary constraints. While I completely agreed with his assessment, we were told that we were stuck with the pieces that we had. There was no money in the budget to purchase furniture or set dressing any further than the few pieces that we already had purchased.

I spoke with the director, Stan Brown about achieving the goals that we had set out to accomplish from the beginning. After continued discussions with the other designers and Brown, and various attempts to design around the flaws, I had to come to the resolution that I would have to reshape what I expected from the design. I felt like I was not able to achieve the design promised to the director even though the overall shape and feeling of the ideas were there. The ending simply did not carry the weight that I thought it could if the desired effect been achieved. In my attempts to fix the issues, I realized several ways that I should have approached the design to avoid the issues, but in the late stage of the production process, there was little that could be done.

CONCLUSION

*Blithe Spirit* opened for department donors, students, and invited guest on Thursday, November 12, 2015 for Theatre South Carolina’s Circle Night. It opened to the public the next day. Once again, I was not completely enthralled with the final product, but appreciated the experience and the opportunity that was afforded by working on the production. I had made progress in developing and improving communication skills since the last production. My drafting and design notes had improved, and I had made a concerted effort to communicate with the other designers and director through the
process. This worked to exercise and develop design ideas quickly and easily while also sheds light onto possible issues before they arose.


The limitations of the production came about due to inexperience. After weeks of working towards a design goal that would be integral to the perception of the characters and plot lines in the story, the effect fell through. The results of the translucent scrim wall panels left the design in limbo without clear concept or direction. The issues acted to immediately give away what was to be a surprising and enchanting end of the show. I had blindly led the production straight into the situation while continuously believing/thinking that the idea could work.

I had, on the other hand, put together a convincing set that could have worked for many other shows. The experience in thinking through and finding the right places for small details helped to define how much work would be necessary for realistic productions. Outside of financial limitations that constrained furniture purchases, I had
worked to beg, borrow, and steal the right furnishings to make the stage complete. The spacious setting of the Condomine’s parlor room had been a success.

Figure 3.9: Production photo from Blithe Spirit, Ayer, Jason. Department of Theatre and Dance Production Photograph. “Haunting.” Blithe Spirit. University of South Carolina. Drayton Hall Theatre. 2015
CHAPTER 4
THE MADNESS OF THEATRE
Scenic Design for COSÌ

PRODUCTION DETAILS

_Cosi_ by Playwright Louis Nowra was the second production of the Theatre South Carolina 2016/2017 main stage season. The show opened on the Longstreet Theatre Stage on Friday, November 11, 2016. The show was directed by the Head of MFA Acting Program and Professor Steven Pearson, who also crafted the sound design. Jeremy Winchester, lighting designer, was a visiting artist from the Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts. Fellow MFA Scenic Design Candidate Neda Spalajkovic acted as the costume designer, and undergraduate Kira Neighbors was the stage manager.

_Cosi_ was to be the last of three degree required practicum project/designs for the Master of Fine Arts program. _Cosi_ would be produced on the arena Longstreet stage and would once again be designed to be in three-quarter thrust, the set would be built upon the same Northern seating riser that accommodated the _Translations_ set. While I had not designed for Steven Pearson in the past, we both were very familiar with each other’s working process and it was easy to establish a working vocabulary for the production phase of the show. Working with fellow MFA Candidate Neda Spalajkovic also proved to ease the design work flow considering our familiarity and past opportunities to work alongside each other.
ABSTRACT OF *COSÌ*

*Così* is a play about an attempted production of its namesake, *Cosi Fan Tutte*. In the play, Louis, a young theatre artist has taken a job producing and directing a play at a mental institution. It is quickly realized that the process will not be as easily completed as initially thought after Roy, an exuberantly optimistic patient, proposes that the opera. The rehearsal process quickly gets kicked into high gear as actors are secured and the designers get to work building the show. As Louis’s personal life gets tumultuous and strained, the work to be done to get *Così* opened is a tall challenge that Louis struggles to complete.

In the final act of the play, the opera within the play, Louis avoids catastrophe and pulls the cast together to realize an appropriately eccentric production. Sometimes parallel to the source material, the characters of the play navigate themes of romance, infidelity, wartime ideology, and general calamity that comes from a sincere representation mental health issues and the ability to find middle ground in the arts. The play expresses the unifying power of theatre and the ability to escape realistic personal handicaps through art and the opportunity to share stories. Ultimately the theatre in the play is a location that allows the mental patients and a love torn central character the ability to escape real life.

DIRECTOR’S CONCEPT/NOTES

Steven Pearson seemed to want several things out of the scenic properties of the set. He had produced the show within the past few years as a smaller Center for Performance Experiment production. He came well prepared for the designs that could be implemented in the space.
Pearson had done various versions of research and found several abandoned mental institutions that helped to define the location that we would be exploring. This helped tremendously to inform my own visual research and ideas of the scenic design. We had discussions of the past iterations of the show as Pearson already had a sense of the timing that would be necessary for the production. There were several notes about the amount of decay that the theatre and the actors could handle, while not interfering with the storytelling.

We spoke on occasion about the importance of the shell of the space and the importance of allowing the audience to realize the borders and confines of the stage. In a way, the stage needed to be defined with established boundaries away from the audience to allow for the expression of safe individual space that the patients of the play become comfortable in as an escape from the real world. While the abandoned theatre is not specifically a place of comfort for most people, this building should become a safe place for the inhabitants. Pearson wanted to explore the ideas of establishing those borders in the scenic design, something that I immediately connected to the treatment of the Translations design.

Finally, Pearson expressed an absolute need for sincerity and compassion for the characters of the play. While Così is in part a comedy, at no point should the production make fun of the characters’ disabilities. While the note was meant specifically for the actors playing the characters, it became an underlying thought that influenced portions of the design. The elements in the play that are created by the patients would need to express a real talent as opposed to insane rambling of structures and ideas.
DEVELOPMENT OF DESIGN

In my first meeting with Steven Pearson he spoke about his experience with *Our Town* two years prior and the effect that the staging had on the relationship between the actors and audience. Instead of raising the height of the stage the full twenty-one inches to be level with seating height, he proposed that we raise the floor slightly, maybe seven or eight inches. This eased the discrepancy between the audience and performers, but also allowed us to shape the platform.

Pearson asked that the main floor platform be separated from the audience, making a smaller square stage in the middle of a round arena. On several occasions early in the process, Pearson and I had discussions about limiting and defining the acting area, forcing the spectator's focus to the central point of the action. The idea, relating to the final concept of the show, was to show the physical shape of the theater space, but to also emphasize how the experience inside the theater encapsulated and sheltered the asylum patients from their normal realm of existence. When the patients entered the theater, everything from their normal life remained outside and the theater became their full point of focus.

The main body of the stage design came together almost directly from a series of images from Julia Solis that I found while doing the inspiration research. The proscenium arch, the color, and the shape of the stage were all oriented perfectly for the needs of the production. It wasn't a direct translation, though, as several things were needed to fill out the story of the play and inform the history of the location. Two windows were added upstage to introduce the idea of the exterior of the building, allowing some semblance of natural light into darkened moments of the scenes, and allowing the audience a chance to
see the flames of the impending fire.

Other additions to the design included graffiti and chipped paint being added to point to the derelict condition of the building. A curve was added to the downstage edge of the stage, allowing some bit of thrust to the platform. We also added low hanging lighting to reduce the height of the space and to allow for the electric lighting to be evidently belonging to the institutional building, as opposed to the twenty-foot-high grid of Longstreet Theatre.

It was clear from the beginning that the shape of the proscenium arch and walls that were to be built would cause sightline issues for about ten percent of the audience on the far sides of house left and right. While I didn’t mind losing a few seats to complete the design, I was obligated approached both Nic Ularu and Steven Pearson about the
issue. Neither seemed to be worried about the losing a few seats, and both accepted the design as modeled. Pearson suggested that he would have to block actors to play further downstage, so as not to completely make the seating sections unusable.

Figure 4.2: Così research images (left) Gill, Stephen. “Shark Stimulation 2.” c. 2014 (right) Ettinger, Sarah. “Urban Decay 3.” 2015

One point of contention that I came across during the design process was Pearson’s inclusion of a few scenes that were set in Lewis and Lucy’s apartment. I became worried that the inclusion of the other location would ruin the shape and design of the ‘theater’ that was to be built onstage. This became heightened when I considered that the two proposed places to implement the apartment structure were directly attached to the designed theater walls and in direct conflict with the sightline issue previously discussed. The solution came after a viewing of the 1996 film version of the play. The
movie presented Nick’s approach to the apartment from a fire escape type landing, that led to an upstairs entrance. The idea worked for the space and Pearson approved of a stairway and landing style fire escape that would be constructed in a vomitorium opposite the theatre proscenium. The low-profile fire escape could be built in a way that allowed easy continuation of the story from one scene to another while not interfering with the visuals of the theater space.

Figure 4.3: Così scenic design research image texture collage, Engle, Baxter. “Texture Collage” Così. University of South Carolina. Longstreet Theatre. 2015
Figure 4.4: Così scenic design, Engle, Baxter. “Final Renderings” Così. University of South Carolina. Longstreet Theatre. 2015
REALIZATION OF THE DESIGN

Not long after the preliminary draft of the designs were turned in, Technical Director Andy ills and I sat down to look at the budget. Overall, I was told we would be about fifteen-hundred dollars over-budget if we built the set the way it was drafted. I knew I had several things built into the design that would be superfluous, so I started cutting.

The first thing to cut would be a compromise in construction plans. The elevator lift of Longstreet Theatre could be raised to replace more than half of the platforming that would otherwise need to be built. The downfall that I was otherwise attempting to avoid would be that edge of the lift elevator and the surrounding platforming that would never truly be aligned, causing evident gaps in the stage floor that would unnaturally interrupt any painted wood floor treatment that would be applied. It would be an inconvenience we'd have to live with.

The fire escape was originally to be built past the single level, rising to the grid above. This had the possibility of allowing the audience an idea that the apartment was larger than a single platform. Instead the upper half of the fire escape stairs were cut down to a single set of stairs. It was easy to cut considering that this was one of the pieces that I never thought that I would be able to do in the first place. Ularu suggested that place a ladder in its place to still give the space some feeling of verticality. It was an idea that I appreciated, but never came to fruition.

One last effort to reduce cost included restructuring the side walls of the proscenium so that they could be faced with fabric instead of luan. The framing would be simplified and cost considerably less money. Andy Mills directed me to an old painted
backdrop that we could stretch across the framing, instead of purchasing new fabric. I would have to paint over the existing mural that had been painted on the drop twenty years prior, and hope that the long set creases could be tensioned out. It wasn't guaranteed to work, but it did the job of cutting the estimated budget down to a level that Mills agreed with.

After the cuts had been made, the drafting was accepted and the scenic shop was off and running to get things built. Even after I had turned in the preliminary drafting, I continued to work to figure out the design for the play within the play. I didn't think that the design had to be groundbreaking or amazing. To be fair, I was designing a set piece that was supposed to be the brainchild of institutionalized designer. I felt like it could be anything, but I wanted it to be right.

The dialogue of the script vaguely lead to the initial thought that the design should be abstract, and possibly all white. Costume designer Neda Spalajkovic presented a few images of her design research that connected the final scene to somewhat over-the-top period costumes made from paper products. I liked the idea and used it to bounce around some ideas of the set as a series of theatrical flats with a paper front. I used various baroque scenic design drawings to find the column and arch style shape. Pearson saw it he agreed on the idea, also adding that he would like for the panels to be able to move from left to right across the stage to create the multiple scenes and a more dynamic presentation.

Due to scheduling conflicts, the scene shop couldn't begin to build in the space until one week before the stage was supposed to be available for rehearsals. Within a week of construction beginning, the university was forced to cancel classes for multiple
days due to weather issues, some of the students/carpenters left the campus to return home while others stuck around and continued to assist in the build. Because of the shortage of hands and the weather issues, the set was built in a hectic form.

When the students did return, I was also assigned to teach wood graining technique to Nic Ularu’s scenic painting class. I was allowed to have the students workshop their painting skills on the stage floor. After two class periods with the students and a couple extra hours with the help of Spalajkovic, the floor had taken shape.

I also worked to build the three scenic panels that would be set into place for the play within the play. Andy Mills suggested building the panels out of steel considering the need for a structure that would be rigid and heavy duty enough to not break with continuous use. The steel ended up weighing a bit more than a typical wooden flat but worked perfectly through the show. I faced the panels with cutout luan, and glued paper scraps to the face of the luan to achieve a paper cache type texture. Thankfully, Ularu came in while I was painting other parts of the set and drew out the design in charcoal. The effect was almost exactly as designed and took quite a bit less time than if I had tried to recreate it with an unskilled hand.

Ularu also helped paint the fabric panels that would be placed in the space for the side walls of the proscenium. The professor and his scenic painting class came in and helped to paint and texture the walls, making light work of the vertical texturing and painting. The entire surround of the proscenium walls were painted within a couple days, allowing the scenic crew to move on to more pressing issues leading up to the technical rehearsals.

Assistant Technical Director Sam Gross had been holding off on hanging the
curtains so that they would not get damaged during the painting. The steel staircase for the fire case was built and put in place, as well as the surrounding guard rails on the platform. As we neared the end of the build process, small details were continuously being added and changed to meet the demands of the developing production.

One idea that came late was the introduction of a subtitle runner for the show within the show. Considering that the music is in Italian, Pearson thought the idea of a banner running along the front edge of the rounded stage platform would be an appropriate addition. Spalajkovic and I worked in tandem to devise and build the new addition. She sewed spare muslin fabric into a long banner and painted the text in an appropriate fashion, while I built the housing fit it into place.

Technical Rehearsal went smoothly compared to some of the others that I had experienced at USC. It could be that the nature of the show is fairly realistic and generally required a lights-up, lights-down approach. It was interesting to watch Lighting Designer Jeremy Winchester work. Winchester had most of the cues already built by tech day, he spent most time adjusting levels and working on the composition. We ended up running through the show three times by Sunday evening with the final being the first dress rehearsal. I had a reasonable list of changes, but mostly I felt like I had to refine the specifics of the atmosphere.

The space had the potential to look realistic. While I didn't set out to create something that would fall into a hyper-realistic realm, I started thinking that the more atmosphere and realism that could be introduced, the better the stage could intensify the attitudes and emotions of the characters in the show. With one week left before opening, I set about to re-doing visual research. I wanted to find the most nuanced ways of treating
the decay of the building. Water stains, dirt between the floorboards, scratches and rips were things that I wanted to exploit. At times, I got maybe a bit too excited at the small details and spent too much time distressing the stage doors or window frames, but I found that I really enjoyed imagining the history of this fictional stage. I found myself leaving something as small as fingerprints and smaller graffiti across the stage that added to the cluster of the decay.

I also spent a lot of time focusing on the floor treatment. The lighting really worked to brighten the painted floor, to a point that it was overly bright for a dirty abandoned space. Pearson and I agreed on the contrast in the floor boards and thought the floor would need to be darkened quite a bit. While I agreed with the idea, I didn't know how to accomplish this without completely losing the contrast of the wood that we had worked so hard to accomplish. After the floor had been glazed, I took to scrubbing black paint across the floorboards to darken the browns of the floor. Instead of richer brown grain across a lighter brown, I ended up trying to layer a dark brown or even black grain against the now dark brown background. Ultimately, darkening the floor and losing the contrast. It worked out to be beneficial though as the floor began to look dirtier and older and forgotten, nearly exactly as designed.

The final project of tech week was to work on the scrolling banner across the front of the stage. While the banner did what we wanted it to do during the rehearsals, it wasn’t perfect and tended to fall over in the last few moments of the show. We worked to tension the tighten the banner so that the tension would keep the fabric vertical. After numerous trials and working through the issues, we figured that it looked and functioned exactly as it would if it had been constructed in a mental institution craft shop. It was
success and a nice addition to the ending of the show.

CONCLUSION

The final dress rehearsal/preview night occurred on Thursday, November 11, 2016, after which Così was off and running. I was pleased with the final iteration of the production and impressed with the ease of the design process. The overall design was not complicated or what I believed to be ostentatious. Throughout the process, I had been continuously wary of drifting away from something that would serve the production, especially considering Pearson’s sometimes perfunctory assessments of the progress or lack thereof. The production flow, communication, and design consistency that was executed by the production team become one of the best experiences during my duration at the University. Decisions came with ease and constantly worked in the production crews favor, mostly due in part to the forethought that was afforded by our ability to communicate and brainstorm effective treatment of new ideas and designs.
Figure 4.5: Production photo from *Così*, Ayer, Jason. Department of Theatre and Dance Production Photograph. “Finale.” *Così*. University of South Carolina. Longstreet Theatre. 2016

Figure 4.6: Production photo from *Così*, Engle, Baxter. “Empty Stage.” *Così*. University of South Carolina. Longstreet Theatre. 2016
Figure 4.7: Production Photo from Così, Engle, Baxter. “Make Him Laugh.” Così. University of South Carolina. Longstreet Theatre. 2016
CHAPTER 5
A BRIEF INTERNSHIP

I’ve been told that 3-Legged Dog Arts and Technology Center got its name from the dog that the founder became fond of years before the concept of the space actually came to fruition. Rumor has it that Sid, the dog, lost his leg while chasing a car down the road. After the accident, Sid got better at chasing cars, forming the basis of the metaphor that incites 3LD’s mission to uphold the drive to create art amongst any debility or setback.

I began the internship portion of my university studies at 3-Legged Dog in New York on January 16, 2017. I had met with several members of the company prior to starting to work with them and had a good understanding of the type of work that they sought to produce. Their drive to produce work that featured new uses of multimedia in theatre is what originally drew me to their work. The artist’s drive to create meaningful, socially insightful, and expressive styled work is what cemented my desire to work with the company.

My first couple of weeks with the company was not quite the glitz and glamour one might think of New York theatre. Instead, I was tasked with cleaning, arranging, and inventorying the equipment in the theatre storage spaces. I quickly became aware of the technology in stock that would available for use in the upcoming shows that I would be asked to work on. While the task was menial, I used the time to get to know some of the artists working in the space, the capabilities of the equipment, studying the art of
organization. I became invaluable to the theatre due to my ability to completely reorganize everything, I quickly became the go to person to find equipment in the space.

Within three weeks of working for the theatre, I was asked to fulfill the role of technical director for the upcoming projects. As acting technical director, I sat in on several production meetings and began to take charge of organizing the theatre for the upcoming productions. I began to work on several different projects at the same time. I jumped into an upcoming project as props designer for a new script that was being developed, 3/Fifths, an immersive theatrical production that would be produced at 3LD in May 2017. I also expressed interested and picked up working on a sound design for a mobile phone app that was in development. Amongst everything else I spent time drafting for video installations, built scenic pieces, and worked on interactive video for the theatre.
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