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Inspiring the Imagination

Nathan Terracio

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INSPIRING THE IMAGINATION

by

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Bachelor of Science
University of South Carolina, 1997

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

2022

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DEDICATION

For my family, who believed in me throughout this lengthy process. Allison and Van – thank you for your patience and unwavering support.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would not successfully be at the end of this journey without the Faculty and Staff of the Department of Theatre and Dance. Their belief in and dedication to furthering the theatrical art form is commendable. To Professor Ularu, thank you for believing in me enough to welcome me with open arms and push me at every step in the process.

ABSTRACT

As someone who has been a life-long audience member and who has worked in over a hundred different theatres on countless different productions over the course of my professional career, I have always been fascinated by the process of creating art out of thin air. I have watched artists undergo careful planning only to have that work thrown out during the rehearsal or technical process, or even sometimes during the last preview performance. I have watched moments unfold on stage at the last minute with seemingly no planning or effort. I have seen the reactions of audiences to moments that happen live on stage and know the varied journeys that the artists involved took to get to that point in time.

This thesis is an account of the process of learning what I didn't know about creating theatre and ultimately learning to believe in what I do know about the theatre. Over five years of study I was involved in the design of ten productions and this document is a journey through the process from the first solo scenic design to my last and how the process for each design changed as my knowledge and experience grew over the course of my time studying in the University of South Carolina's Department of Theatre and Dance.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: THEATRE AS MY DESTINY

I have spent what feels like the majority of my waking hours in theatres over the course of my life, and I find that real truth can come out on stage through great storytelling and exceptional acting when properly supported by the technical elements. I became a theatre person when sitting in the gymnasium in fourth grade watching *Peter Pan* unfold with a cast of middle school students. It was not the unexceptional acting that moved me in that production, but instead the seemingly perfectly executed flying special effects. I didn't know it at the time, but I was destined to work behind the scenes in the theatre from that day forward. For me, the design and technical elements of a production when done well provide the imagination a jumping off point and nothing can compete with the power of an inspired imagination.

1.1 PRIOR EXPERIENCE

My technical theatre experience began in high school. There were no theatre technicians, so the cast needed to hang and focus the lighting and paint the sets. My high school drama teacher inspired us to give up our Saturdays, but besides our enthusiasm there was not a lot of technical instruction. At this point, I realized I didn't know much about the theatre and that my technical skills were lacking. We learned by trial and error and I shudder to think what kinds of mistakes we made and never learned from. After high school I studied at the University of South Carolina and received a degree in

Chemistry and a minor in Theatre. I spent a lot of my time in acting classes and got cast in many department productions, but I spent all my free time hanging out backstage in theatres around town, where I learned by watching and doing and acquired skills from my copious mistakes.

When the opportunities were not there to work on community or department shows, the other students and I created our own opportunities to try new things. We took over the black box theatre and learned to find creative solutions to technical and artistic problems. We read new plays and got the rights from the publishers to put them on in that 50-seat space. We read about different plays and tried out the things that we learned about in that black box theatre: arena, thrust, proscenium, and alley seating configurations. We even made up some of our own to see what was possible – seating in an L in the corner of the room, creating rigging in a room with 10-foot ceilings, creating whole sets with paint being thrown out by one theatre and broken furniture from another. We repurposed retired lighting instruments and lit entire shows with practicals that we borrowed from the cast and crew. Throughout this process of exploration we blurred the lines between technicians and designers, and ideas were shared between the different design departments. Sometimes it wasn't until it was time to create the program that it was decided who was going to be listed as what position.

After I graduated from college, I took a job as an assistant with the Aquila Theatre Company, a small professional theatre company touring classical theatre using Columbia, SC as its home base. Under the artistic direction of Peter Meineck, the company was a professional version of what I had been doing in college where everyone's ideas were welcome, and everyone lent a hand. I had to learn quickly how to be an assistant stage

manager as well as scenic, lighting, prop and audio technician as there were two technicians juggling everything that needed to be accomplished. Traveling from theatre to theatre on a forty to fifty theatre national tour, I learned how to deal with the similarities and differences in each building while creating the same look on stage night after night. At this point that I began to realize how much the designers relied on the technicians to achieve their design creations. If one follows the same plan by rote over and over, one won't get the same results when the situation is different every time. I learned that the plan, and the design, had to change based on the size and shape of the space and the instruments provided if you wanted the finished product to look the same. I began to redesign the lighting and scenery on tour to achieve the look the designers had at the end of the technical rehearsals.

Over my years in the technical world I spent more and more time with one foot on the technical side and one foot in the design side. I learned that if I could get the designers to explain what they wanted conceptually and why, I could help them achieve what they were looking for faster and more completely. I had more and more opportunity to create and co-design parts of productions the longer I worked, and even found myself in positions where someone would need something done for a small event or reading and would ask me to do it for them. This translated to opportunities to be both the designer and technician for many small productions when the money was tight, or non-existent. I would be called upon to design and create the audio or the video or the lighting or the scenery or the props or sometimes everything. But throughout this whole process I had never taken proper classes in design. I just watched and asked questions and collaborated and learned by making mistakes.

1.2 WHAT TO GAIN FROM GRADUATE SCHOOL

When returned to work at the University of South Carolina almost twenty years after my graduation, I immediately saw an opportunity to come back to school as a student in the MFA Program. How could I be working on a university campus and not take part in the learning that was happening on said campus? So, I saw an opportunity to formally learn how to become a professional designer. My whole career I had been watching theatre, talking about what I liked and didn't like, and thinking about why I liked what I liked, and what I would do differently with the things I didn't like. I followed the creative process in the productions I worked on, but I didn't have the proper history, language or skills to really take things to the next level. This was the right time to ask the questions I had been asking my whole life, and I needed to learn more from people who could really answer them and help me achieve my full design potential.

I had worked as a technician and designer in lighting, audio, props and scenery, and at one point I thought I knew enough about the process, but graduate school was different because I wanted to become a designer for the theatre. I knew "how," still I needed to learn "why;" I needed to gain a better understanding of the process of how to pluck an idea out of the pages of a script and create a world that would inspire the imagination of the audience.

I reintroduced myself to the theatre department and was encouraged to apply to be in Professor Ularu's Graduate Design Studio class. Professor Ularu saw my desire to learn about the theatre and said it was the perfect class to start with as it introduced the

scenic, lighting and costume MFA students to theatre design as a whole. Before the end of that first semester he was talking to me about how much I would grow by studying for an MFA in Scenic Design. The course work would focus not just on scenic design, but would teach me about the process of creating visuals, analyzing texts, working with directors and other designers, etcetera. I was eager to learn how to design sets by focusing on the text, the story, what the director needed, and how the scenery interacts with the lighting and the costumes. I would be learning theatre design while focusing on designing sets both in the classroom and on stage for Theatre Program productions. I could not have been more excited to start.

CHAPTER 2

THE BEGINNING: A VERY GOOD PLACE TO START

Scenic Design for *Shakespeare in Love*

2.1 PRODUCTION DETAILS

Shakespeare in Love by Lee Hall was the first production of the Department of Theatre and Dance's 2018-2019 Season. The production was directed by guest artist Andrew Schwartz, a professor of Theatre at Coker University and a professional actor and director who also served as the production's Fight Choreographer. This was my first solo scenic design as a Scenic Design MFA Candidate and I was joined by second year MFA Candidates Allison Newcombe as the Lighting Designer and Molly Morgan as the Costume Designer. The design team also included Instructor Valerie Pruett as the Hair, Make-up and Wig Designer and guest artist Danielle Wilson as the Sound Designer. The cast was made up entirely of undergraduate students from the University of South Carolina and the production was Stage Managed by undergraduate Elizabeth Jennings.

This production of *Shakespeare in Love* was among the first licensed in South Carolina and would be produced in Drayton Hall, the Department of Theatre and Dance's roughly 400-seat proscenium theatre. The year before I had stage managed the department's first production of that season, *Twelfth Night*, and co-designed *Sense and Sensibility*, the final production of that season both of which were in Drayton Hall, so I was familiar with the space. The director and design team were finalized early in the Spring Semester of 2018 which allowed the research and the bulk of the design work to

be completed prior to the end of the semester so the scenic build could begin happening over the summer of 2018.

2.2 ABSTRACT

Shakespeare in Love by Lee Hall is an adapted work, but unlike many theatrical adaptations it is not based upon a book but instead based on the Academy Award winning film of the same title written by Marc Norman and Tom Stoppard. The play tells the same story as the film, that of the playwright and actor William Shakespeare still early in his writing career as he tries to overcome writers-block and produce a script that he is already overdue in providing to his producer. *Romeo and Ethel, the Pirate's Daughter* over the course of the play develops into the story of *Romeo and Juliet* as we know it today. Young Will falls in love with a new muse, Viola, and with her help and the help of the producers and actors in the company they defeat long odds and turn out a production that even Queen Elizabeth I can applaud in the end.

But more importantly the fictional story is about how Shakespeare the person becomes Shakespeare the world famous playwright. The answer that the play imagines is that he fell in love. Upper class Viola, who wants poetry, love, and adventure in her life, becomes much more than just his muse as she evolves from an object of desire into a mentor and eventually into his “spirit of freedom.” The mysterious Kit Marlowe is more than both a close friend and bitter rival, as he becomes Will’s inspiration. Real life people from Shakespeare’s time become fantastic characters in this historical fiction and spiritual guides in Shakespeare’s evolution from struggling young playwright to the most famous writer of the English language.

2.3 DIRECTOR'S CONCEPT

Guest director Andrew Schwartz felt that while the play was new, the story was well known because of the film and he entered initial discussions of the play by looking back to the film and its author Tom Stoppard. Tom Stoppard was trying to capture the spirit of the theatre that is a transformative shared experience and was quoted as saying “art has to feed on itself to make headway.” Stoppard said that the play explored the symbiotic relationship between art, love, and inspiration, but was also a celebration of storytelling, the creative process, and the infinite power of our imaginations. Andrew wanted this play to first and foremost bring insight to the humanity of Shakespeare and his work.

The goal was to start with a bare stage and engage the imaginations of the audience in order to transport them back in time to a world of arranged marriage, censorship, class distinction, and sovereign rule. Shakespeare's time, romantically speaking, was a time of invention, not convention, where new worlds were still being discovered and there was a rich appetite for beauty. In the world of our fictional Shakespeare the characters inhabiting it would be full of passion and conviction – a world where live performance is a powerful force to communicate ideas and theatre is a political force that provokes social change. Andrew wanted to recapture that spirit and provide the modern audience with a theatrical experience once again as potent and full of potential.

The director wanted to embrace the story and present a straightforward production of the script as written with the production firmly set in the Elizabethan Era when Shakespeare was writing his early plays. But since this was a modern historical fiction

where not all the facts are entirely correct, the stage production could incorporate some anachronisms and historical inaccuracies. This meant that the costumes would look Elizabethan, but could incorporate modern fabrics; that the scenery would suggest the theatres of the era, but would not be a reproduction of any specific place; and that there would be the occasional hand prop that wasn't entirely historically accurate.

2.4 RESEARCH

Shakespeare in Love revolves around the life of an actual person so my initial research process began with historical research of Shakespeare's time period and more specifically the 1590's – the time period around the writing and performing of *Romeo and Juliet*. I looked at the historical references in the script and did research into the buildings and theatres of the time including the Palace at Whitehall, The Theatre, The Rose, The Swan, The Curtain, and of course The Globe Theatre. I also looked at photos of the Tudor architecture that was built pre-Shakespeare and was not only a dominant architectural look of his time, but is still standing today. And because the play is about a playwright I looked at art that captured the spirit of the theatre of the time period. A key piece of inspiration was David Scott's *Queen Elizabeth Viewing the Performance of 'The Merry Wives of Windsor' in the Globe Theatre* because is similar to a scene in the play where Queen Elizabeth I comes to see the production of *Romeo and Juliet* at the end.



Figure 2.1: Research image of Tudor House and Garden in Southampton, England.



Figure 2.2: Oil Painting by David Scott: *Queen Elizabeth Viewing the Performance of 'The Merry Wives of Windsor' in the Globe Theatre (1840).*

At the same time I was immersing myself in Shakespeare's era, I began the process of watching and re-watching the source material, the film *Shakespeare in Love*, and comparing it to the theatrical script. While the story is the same the main challenge in dramatizing a film for the stage is solving the problem of how to take the audience in the theatre on a journey to over a dozen locations. We wanted to make this production a celebration of the theatre and while the film took advantage of its ability to create many locations, I wanted to make use of the biggest weapon in our theatrical arsenal – the audiences' imaginations. Since the play was based upon a film based upon a playwright I drew inspiration from other films and plays in addition to the historical research.

A major source of inspiration was another Tom Stoppard play and film *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*. The story follows two minor characters from William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as they navigate through the story of *Hamlet* largely unaware of the play's storyline as it unfolds around them. The production design for the film is set in Elizabethan times and the film captures some clever theatrical trickery via the traveling players who create the famous "play within the play" scene in *Hamlet* using only the items they have brought to court in their traveling trunks and their bodies.

Another inspiration was one of the biggest theatrical sensations of the time, Lin-Manuel Miranda's historical dramatization *Hamilton*. While not quite the same time period, it was still a historical production that took advantage of a unit set and relied on theatricality to inform the audience of the locations and storyline. The look and feel of that set seemed appropriate for what we were trying to achieve.



Figure 2.3: Research image of the Broadway set of *Hamilton* designed by David Korins and directed by Thomas Kail. Photo Credit: David Korins Design.

There was also no shortage of modern theatricalizations of Shakespeare in the form of theatres and permanent “unit sets” built all around the world where Shakespeare productions were routinely performed. Shakespeare’s Globe in London, the Oregon Shakespeare Festival in Ashland, OR and the Folger Shakespeare Theatre in Washington, DC were three examples that were particularly inspirational. The Globe Theatre was a recreation of the Globe Theatre that hosted Shakespeare productions in Elizabethan times and was a great research tool for how Shakespeare’s company would have had to stage *Romeo and Juliet* at the end of *Shakespeare in Love*. The Folger Shakespeare Library’s Theatre was an example of a recreated historical indoor space which was useful since our production was also going to be inside. The Oregon Shakespeare layout was an example of taking the architecture of the time period and incorporating it into something new.



Figure 2.4: Research image of the Globe Theatre at Shakespeare's Globe in London.



Figure 2.5: Research image of Oregon Shakespeare Festival, Ashland OR.

2.5 DEVELOPOMENT OF DESIGN

The key question in the process was how to start with a “bare stage” and create the twenty scenes of the play using theatricality to inspire the audience’s imagination while still clearly telling the story. The story is a celebration of the theatre and I wanted to be able to provide an opportunity to celebrate theatricality on stage; I sought to provide

elements of Elizabethan theatres on stage – a balcony, an inner below, and a trap door. Because the theatres of Shakespeare’s time did not have fly systems, I wanted to avoid relying on Drayton Hall’s fly system for scene changes. The director and I discussed the fact that undergraduate actors would be playing Shakespearean actors who would be playing famous characters from *Romeo and Juliet* and how this layered approach would lend itself well to actors using their bodies as well as simple props and set pieces to create the scenic locations needed to tell the story. To give the *Romeo and Juliet* of the play a feel of being thrown together by the acting company I started by simplifying the set decoration down to a table, some rustic crates for seating, and prop trunks.

The simple bare set approach to the production carried over into the overall design aesthetic. After discussing the research with Professor Ularu, I wanted to keep an open space that looked “Shakespearean” and supported the feel of a rehearsal room full of crates and trunks. A significant location in *Shakespeare in Love* is the theatre where *Romeo and Juliet* is performed at the end, but you need to see the actors both onstage in the play and backstage getting ready. I was inspired by the wooden floors of The Globe Theatre and the *Hamilton* set as well as the wooden bracing from Tudor architecture and the Folger Theatre at the Folger Shakespeare Library to create a suggestive set of open “walls” that looked like the framing of a Tudor house and seem to rise up out of an old weathered wooden floor. The cyclorama up stage center would complete the Tudor look of white walls with timber framing, but would also allow for scene and mood changes through changes in color.

With a “*Romeo and Juliet*” balcony on stage there was a need for staircases to get to the balcony and in consultation with my advisor I drew several different options

including a spiral staircase. Ultimately each variation of the stairs became a problem for one scene or another and Professor Ularu suggested that these issues could be solved with a rolling staircase that could provide practical access to the balcony in addition to functioning as a stand-alone set piece to be moved around the stage.

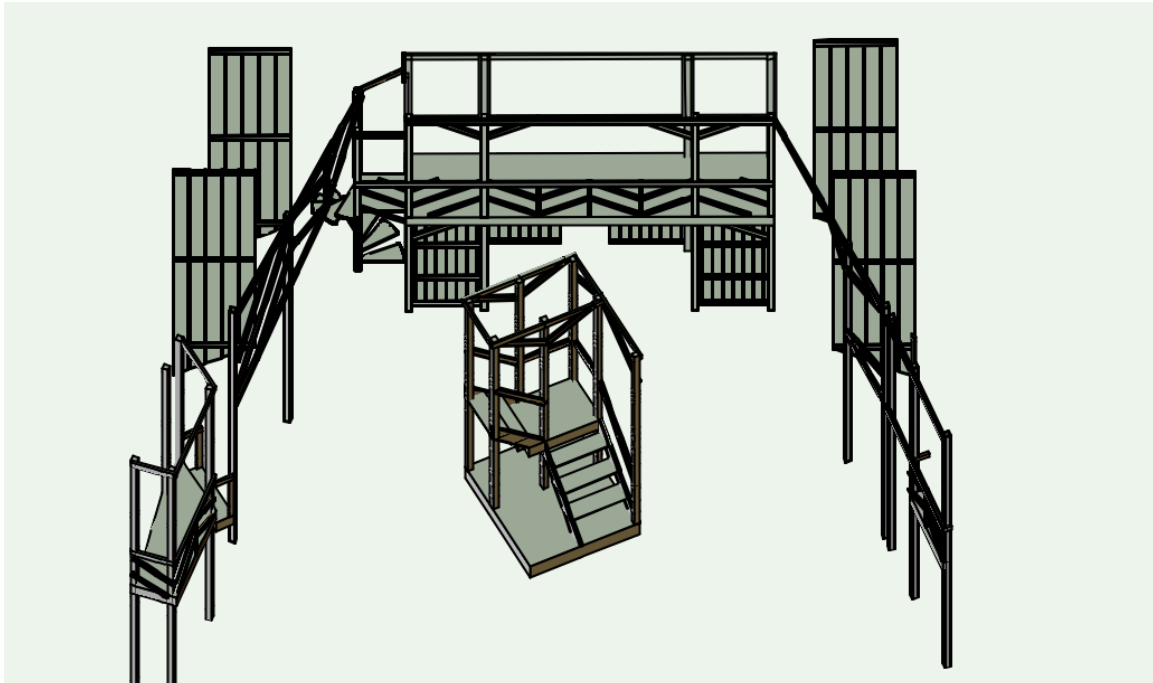


Figure 2.6: Early digital model of the set design for *Shakespeare in Love* with one version of the rolling staircase.

After a couple of iterations of drawings I settled on a pair of rolling staircases that would not only provide access to the central upstage balcony, but would also allow access between the downstage balcony that is a part of the theatre architecture and the stage floor. Two staircases would allow for symmetry on the set, but also asymmetry as they were moved around not always in pairs. The final design also allowed for the staircases to begin off stage and get pushed onto the stage by the cast in the opening scene allowing us to achieve the desired “blank stage” at the start of the production.

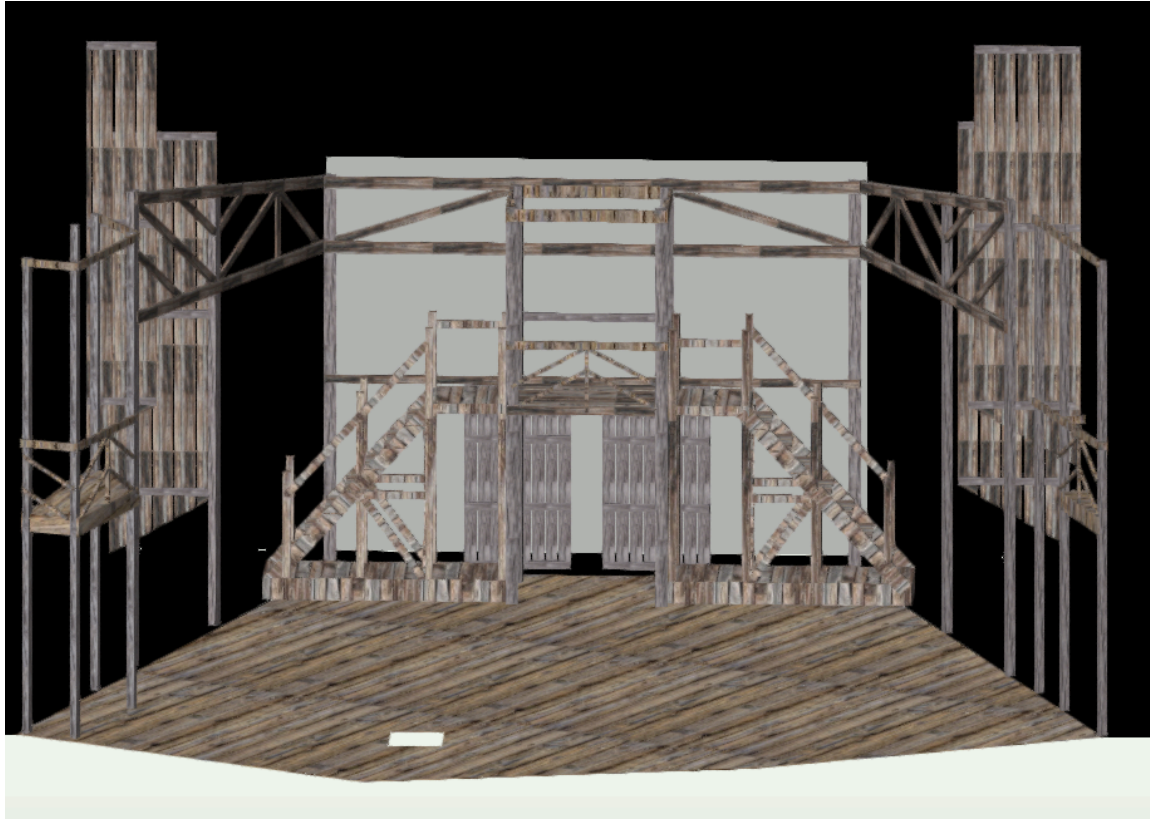


Figure 2.7: Final digital model of the scenic design for *Shakespeare in Love* with the two rolling staircases.



Figure 2.8: Rendering of the opening scene of *Shakespeare in Love* created during the design process.

2.6 REALIZATION OF DESIGN

The scenic design build began over the summer of 2018 and at the suggestion of my advisor I had several meetings with the director to work out what each scene in the production would look like with the different set pieces in different positions.

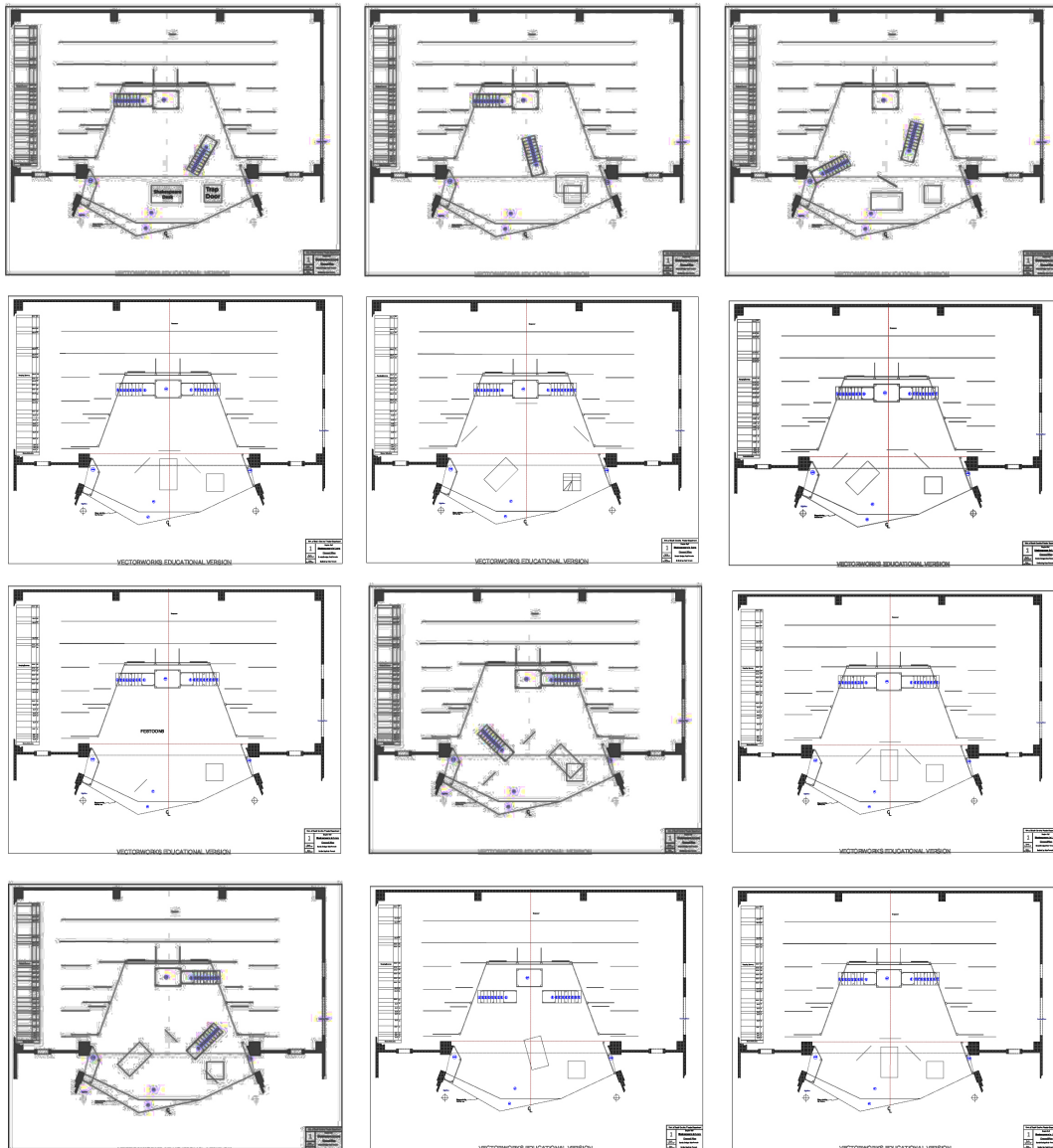


Figure 2.9: Ground Plans of the set for each scene in Act I in *Shakespeare in Love*.

Along the way I realized that each actor had not only their own character costume but also one or more *Romeo and Juliet* character costumes that they often needed to change in and out of onstage while the play within a play was happening. To solve the problem of moving costumes around Professor Ularu helped me design a pair of rustic rolling costume racks that could serve both as rolling screens while also providing a way for the actors to access their *Romeo and Juliet* costumes on stage in front of our audience.

While working through each scene I realized that the side panels in the original design that were planned to mask the wings and fly in and out to create visual difference in each scene were not needed to differentiate each location. It was going to be superfluous movement that was not actor driven and once I realized they were not needed for scene changes I cut them from the design to lessen the burden on the scene shop and allow time for the building of the rolling costume racks.



Figure 2.10: Production photo of *Shakespeare in Love* Act I, Scene 1. University of South Carolina 2018.

The location of the trap door in the stage floor also changed based on the furniture locations in the scenic breakdowns. The trap door in the stage floor was another opportunity for levels for the actors. I wanted actors to be able to stand in the trap and be at different heights in relation to those standing on stage. The trap door location was finalized in consultation with the scene shop to provide space for the access stairs needed for getting in and out of the trap that allowed for actors to stand at different levels.

The vertical set pieces were painted in the shop before the set was installed, but the final set decoration took place in the theatre once the set was mostly constructed on the stage. I was originally inspired by images of aged wooden structures and thought the weathered and lightened wood would allow the set structure to change color easily in the light. However, I soon realized that the weathered color on the floor was going to be too light in color and the floorboards were going to need to be a darker wood color. In order to tie the two color schemes together I blended the brown wood from the floor up the wooden uprights to transition between the floor and the vertical beams.



Figure 2.11: Production photo of the *Shakespeare in Love* set in its pre-show configuration. University of South Carolina 2018.

The final part of the set decoration was in collaboration with the lighting designer as we added lanterns across the front of the stage to mask some foot lighting. Additional lanterns were also added in the form of hand props that were carried by cast members, who eventually hung them around the stage during a scene that took place in the evening.



Figure 2.12: Production photo of *Shakespeare in Love* Act I, Scene 12. University of South Carolina 2018.

2.7 CONCLUSION

Shakespeare in Love had its final dress rehearsal for an invited audience on October 4, 2018 and opened to the public the next evening. While I had co-designed a production with a fellow Scenic Design MFA Candidate the previous spring in the same space, this process was the first scenic design on my own where I got to make significant decisions in collaboration with the director and learn from mistakes. This was the first time I had to draft an entire intricate set based on research and design ideas and my

advisor helped me learn how to take the needs of the scene shop into account when designing. It is easy to draw fantastical shapes that look good, but they also have to work in the real world. The final visual design considered practical issues like the heights of steps and the necessary bracing the scenic structures would need when being built.

The most challenging part of the process was the scenic painting. I had taken scenic painting class the previous semester, but this was my first time being responsible for the painting of an entire set. I had to not only master the painting techniques required to achieve the desired look, but also had to learn how to manage a team of student painters and break the process up into parts that each student, and their varied skill levels, could successfully achieve. Through discussion with my advisor and trial and error I managed in the end to create a look on stage that achieved the desired effect. Though I started with a paint job that was too light, I managed to in the end to create something that looked good not just under the work lights, but when the set was lit for the production as well.

The most significant part of the design process was the collaboration with the director in advance of rehearsals where we worked through how the set would function for each scene. While not everything we discussed ended up looking the same way on opening night, that collaboration really drove home the importance of the scenery in the story telling process and how the actors and director can rely on the set to paint an interesting visual picture on stage.



Figure 2.13: Production photo of *Shakespeare in Love* Act II, Scene 3. University of South Carolina 2018.



Figure 2.14: Production photo of *Shakespeare in Love* Act II, Scene 2. University of South Carolina 2018.

This production also continued to be a touchstone through my studies in scenic design as the design and the process was referenced throughout my coursework and other production designs. I used the shop drafting as a starting reference point for the rest of my designs as I continued to try to improve my output and increase my clarity in drawings. I used the process of making a 3D model to turn into renderings both using Vectorworks and Photoshop as the basis for future renderings for other designs. And finally, I began my journey of learning how to take and touch up show photos by taking hundreds of pictures through the technical rehearsal process in order to accurately represent on paper what the eye was seeing on stage live in the theatre.



Figure 2.15: Final set rendering of *Shakespeare in Love* Act I, Scene 1.

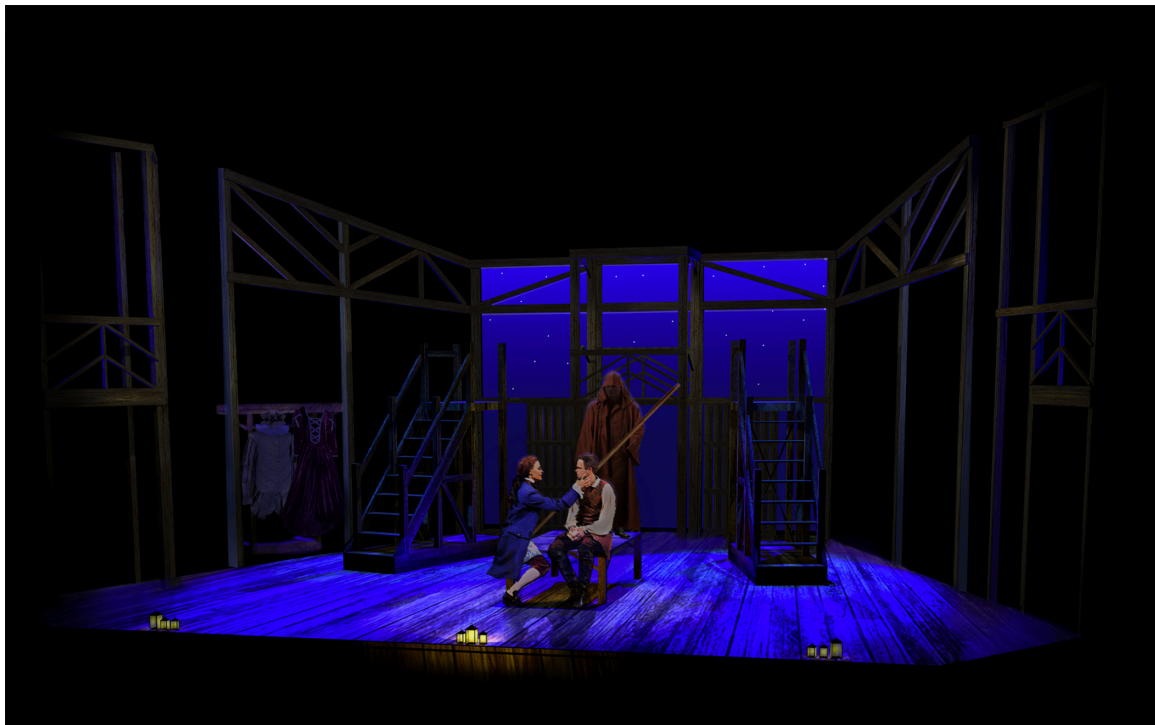


Figure 2.16: Final set rendering of *Shakespeare in Love* Act I, Scene 12.

CHAPTER 3

THE ONLY THING CONSTANT IS CHANGE

Scenic Design for *Much Ado About Nothing*

3.1 PRODUCTION DETAILS

Much Ado About Nothing by William Shakespeare was the first production of the Department of Theatre and Dance's 2019-2020 Season in Longstreet Theatre. The production was directed by the Department's new acting faculty member Dustin Whitehead and choreographed by new dance faculty member André Megerdichian, both working on their first production at the University of South Carolina. The design team included Scenic Design by MFA Scenic Design Candidate Nate Terracio, Lighting Design by Professor Jim Hunter, Costume Design by Professor Kristy Leigh Hall, and Sound Design by guest artist Danielle Wilson. The cast was made up entirely of undergraduate students from the University of South Carolina and the production was Stage Managed by the Department's Production Stage Manager Lisa Gavaletz.

3.2 ABSTRACT

Much Ado About Nothing is a William Shakespeare comedy written at very end of the sixteenth century. It is one of the more popularly produced Shakespeare plays and has inspired at least a couple of films so it was a reasonable assumption that an audience attending would be familiar with the story. The play was assigned its initial director in the spring semester of 2019 and I began work on a design with the director focusing on how a concept could provide solutions for the play's key plot points. The director's

original inspiration was the Bee Gees disco club music of the 1970s. He saw the entrance of the men at the top of play strutting to the “Stayin' Alive” intro from *Saturday Night Fever*, and thought the general feeling of the music worked well with *Much Ado About Nothing*. We discussed having a ramp out into the audience serve as a catwalk so that the cast could enter the stage from the audience and strut to the stage with the music.

I worked with my advisor and pitched several location ideas to the production’s first director, and we settled on the idea of the setting being the lobby of a hotel. The idea would be that Hero’s father Leonato runs “The Messina Hotel.” This would make the lower status characters the hotel staff; Hero’s ladies in waiting would be the maids and The Watch would be the bellboys at the hotel. The walls of the auditorium could be decorated to look like they are a part of the hotel lobby so the audience felt like they were sitting inside the hotel lobby. Having either a revolving door or an elevator on stage as a part of the set would provide interesting, and comedic, entrance opportunities. Hotel lobbies also have indoor plants that could be used as “the arbor” for tricking Benedick into admitting his love for Beatrice.

Another cultural touchstone that influenced early concept conversations was the idea of “deepfakes” – realistic videos created through the use of artificial intelligence software that show people on film saying things that they have never actually said themselves. A key plot point in the play is Hero’s seeming infidelity and a modern day explanation for Claudio’s believing in the deceit could be that he, and the audience, see the infidelity play out on a deepfake video. Hotel lobbies often have large monitors and we could use them as scenic displays but also for playing key plot points such as Hero’s infidelity and even her funeral. As the Fall 2019 semester neared, I worked with my

advisor to design and draft a hotel lobby for Drayton Hall, but then a major change happened: the director left the production.

3.3 DIRECTOR'S CONCEPT

Fortunately for this production of *Much Ado About Nothing*, Dustin Whitehead had just been hired by the Department of Theatre and Dance as a new acting faculty member and was available to jump in and pick up as director just as the semester started. I was eager to present the concept and design ideas I had worked on over the summer to see if anything could be translated into the new production. The first indication that keeping any part of the design would be difficult was the change in theatre for the production. The play would no longer be happening in the proscenium Drayton Hall, but instead would be moving to Longstreet Theatre, the department's approximately 350-seat arena theatre. I sat down for a meeting with the director after he had met with the other members of the design team individually and presented him the concept and design work that I had worked on. Despite the completeness of the concept and the design, he was planning on re-starting the process from the beginning and I would have to start over.

Dustin was a different style of director and didn't come to the production with a "concept" or major artistic influence for the design team to work inside. He wanted to explore the play's text and societal elements and figure out how they would work in modern times. A major element to explore was the idea of perception; different characters in the play see things differently which leads to Hero's accusation of infidelity being believed. He wanted to explore the idea that perception is the process of getting, interpreting, selecting, and organizing sensory information. Perception is an active process that starts with the collection of data from sense organs and follows all the way

through to the interpretation made by the brain. The perception of what was happening in the text by the characters in the play was their way of regarding, understanding, or interpreting something; a mental impression of their reality. Could visual perception and optical illusions be incorporated into the scenic design? Another way of introducing perception into our *Much Ado About Nothing* was through incorporating magical realism, a genre where magical events invade a realistic environment. What would happen if surreal and dreamlike elements were introduced into an otherwise realistic setting during the production?

The production would be modern with modern costumes. The clothing on stage would be High Fashion, more fashion design than daily wear, inspired by an Elizabethan silhouette and style. Dustin talked about the location of the play, Messina, in thematic terms. He wanted it to be a place that represented the decay of society and the decay of people's souls. He envisioned an opening sequence that starts with a promenade of the cast looking pristine and “traditional Shakespeare,” but then dissolves into a crumbling, fraying, destructive world where the clothes get distressed and torn and fall apart so that by the end the look is very different. Over the course of the play there could be paint or makeup that dirties and distresses the costumes. The set would also start looking neat and clean, but dissolve into chaos like the costumes over the course of the production. What kind of physical location would allow for this metaphorical unraveling to be revealed?

Dustin also wanted the fourteen actors to be a part of the scenery. Keeping with the idea of magical realism the characters would freeze on stage and be talked about and even walked around by other characters during their direct addresses to the audience.

Coming from a film background, he wanted the production to be cinematic in nature with scenes happening in small isolated spaces of the set. The production would jump between characters and scenes with lighting instead of scenic changes.

3.4 RESEARCH

Without a specific location concept or artistic design overview a lot of the initial research time was spent on figuring out the answers to some basic questions that the director had posed about the production. I spent some time with visual optical illusions to see if there was an optical trick that could be incorporated into the set. But with the production taking place in the round there was no singular audience point of view like there would have been in a proscenium theatre. With the audience not all looking at the same image the same way optical illusions would not work for everyone. I also looked into theatrical trickery such as the use of day-glow paints that could change their look in different lighting looks for different scenes. Ultimately I didn't want the design to revolve around a gimmick.

The director provided some inspiration images as reference points for talking about the design of the production. These included a number of photos of streets and alleys and a common theme was urban decay: graffiti, rubble, overflowing trashcans, and trash in the streets. Could a city street be a location for an environment that gets filled with trash and debris over the play? Closer inspection of the images showed that the graffiti, however, was not just part of urban decay. It was varying levels of street art ranging from intricate gang tags up to what looked like fully commissioned spray-painted murals. I wanted to embrace the idea that art and beauty can be born out of despair and

decay. Maybe the characters in this production of *Much Ado About Nothing* were nascent artists and their art blossoms over the course of the production.

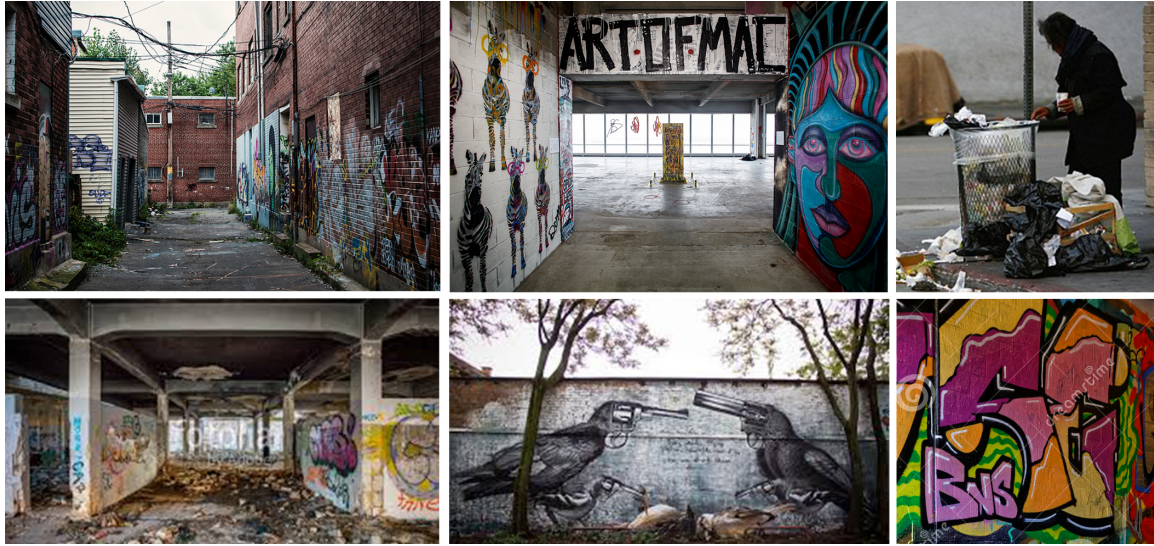


Figure 3.1: Research images provided by director Dustin Whitehead.

My advisor suggested that I shift my focus to the script and the locations needed. One element that I kept coming back to was Hero's bedroom and her bed. An image from the director that became a talking point was an out-of-place isolated bed in a field.



Figure 3.2: Research image provided by director Dustin Whitehead.

I wanted to explore the idea that the "bed" is a central focus in the production. A bed can be both a symbol of innocence and serenity or a symbol of the erotic. We dream when we are asleep in bed, and we have dreams when we are awake. Hero dreams of becoming married; the Marriage Bed is what Hero and Claudio want (and in reality what Beatrice and Benedick also want). If Don John is so upset by Hero and Claudio's engagement because he is an involuntary celibate and doesn't see a path to his own marriage bed, then the bed is a symbol to him of his failure.

We are perhaps most vulnerable in bed, and we sleep well when we feel safe in our bedrooms. Hero and Beatrice are bedfellows up until the night before the wedding and it is this change of sleeping arrangement that allows for Don John's attack on her character to succeed. We sleep in bed and we often say that death is our final sleep. The bed in the production could also be a symbol of our final resting place as Hero feigns death so that she can later be united with Claudio in her bed.

In addition to providing images as a conversation starter for the feel of the design, Dustin also introduced music as he felt the play's soundtrack would be an important element in the design. One key musician we discussed was Alex Cameron and his music videos as a style to be emulated for the production. The video for his song "Miami Memory" is a pretentious and shameless celebration of beautiful people being self important in visually arresting locations. The video is self aware as the couple in the video are both characters as well as the people making the video. The video captures artists making art.

3.5 DEVELOPMENT OF DESIGN

Changing directors just as the fall semester started compressed the research and design timeline and provided additional challenges as my advisor, who had worked with me over the summer on the original project, was on sabbatical during the Fall 2019 semester. In looking for a location to fit the themes introduced by the director I quickly settled on the idea of Leonata's home (Hero's father Leonato was cast with a female actor as her mother Leonata) as a kind of artists residence, or modern-day Salon. The young men coming back from the war were artists hanging out and seeking inspiration at the home of a wealthy patron of the arts. We could watch the house become distressed by artists living and creating in the space, but to start the set would need to have a luxurious feel. We would hang art on the walls of the arena theatre to transform the theatre itself, played in the round, into Leonata's Salon. I was inspired by the high fashion costume design, the music videos, and images of installation art exhibits to incorporate mannequins into the set as a pretentious element in the Salon.



Figure 3.3: Mannequins to be used as set decoration in Lonata's Salon.

Next I broke the characters in the play down into four parties and decided to provide each party their own space in the theatre: the natives of Messina (Leonata, Antonio) represented by Leonata's Salon, the young women of Messina (Hero, Beatrice and Margaret) represented by Hero's Bedroom, the men returning from war (Benedick, Claudio, Don Pedro) represented by a masculine and formal environment, and a space for Don Juan and Borachio to stew and scheme. With the entire arena theatre being the Salon, I wanted to push the scenery into the audience seating areas and assigned one seating section to each party. Leonata's Salon would be the central focus, and the first thing seen upon entering the space, and would need to be organic, provide levels for the cast. The bed would be the focus of Hero's bedroom. A massive set of stairs would provide a militaristic entrance for the men returning from war and a small platform across from the Salon would allow Don John to watch the scenes unfold around the theatre in disgust as those around him fell in love.

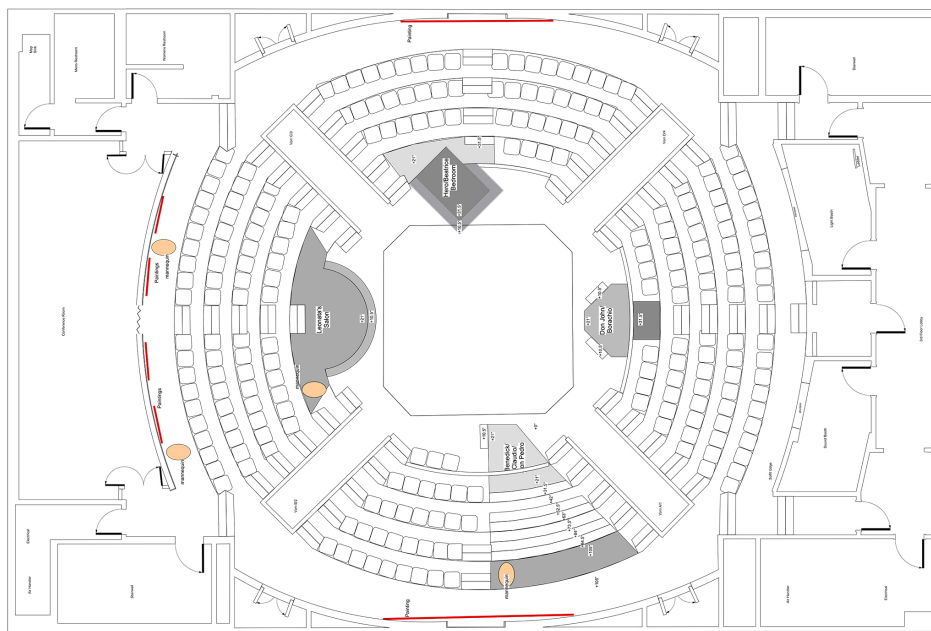


Figure 3.4: Initial *Much Ado About Nothing* ground plan.

One key factor with the use of the space was that the director wanted the cast to be able to walk throughout the theatre. At Professor Hunter's suggestion, I increased the actors' access to the stage by completing the partial audience staircases so that the cast could use them as entrances and exits from the stage floor. As I began discussing the use of the space with the director the details of the design began to change. Hero's bedroom became more feminine when I rounded the sharp corners of the bed platform. I added functionality and made it feel less weighty by making the bed a floating surface on top of rounded legs; this would allow Beatrice to hide under the bed when Hero and Margaret want her to overhear them talking about how much Benedick loves her. I also changed Don John's area to become grand piano platform. The actor playing Don John was a piano player. Since we wanted to incorporate live music into the production, this was a way to do that and it would not feel out of place in the Salon. We would build a piano shell and insert an electronic keyboard into the shell to be played. The piano shell would be a platform with stairs down to the stage allowing it to be sat, stood and even danced upon.

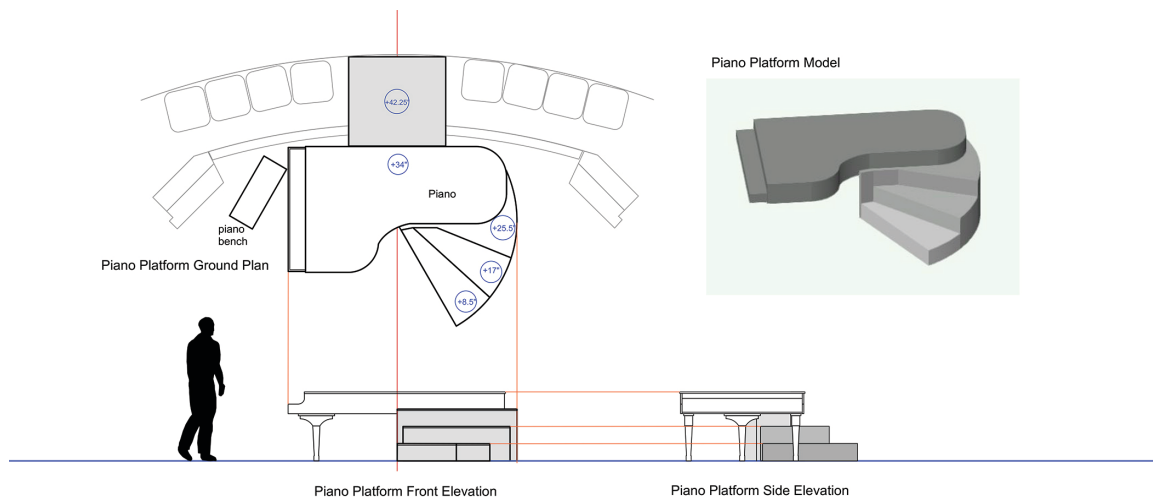


Figure 3.5: *Much Ado About Nothing* shop drawing details for Don John's piano.

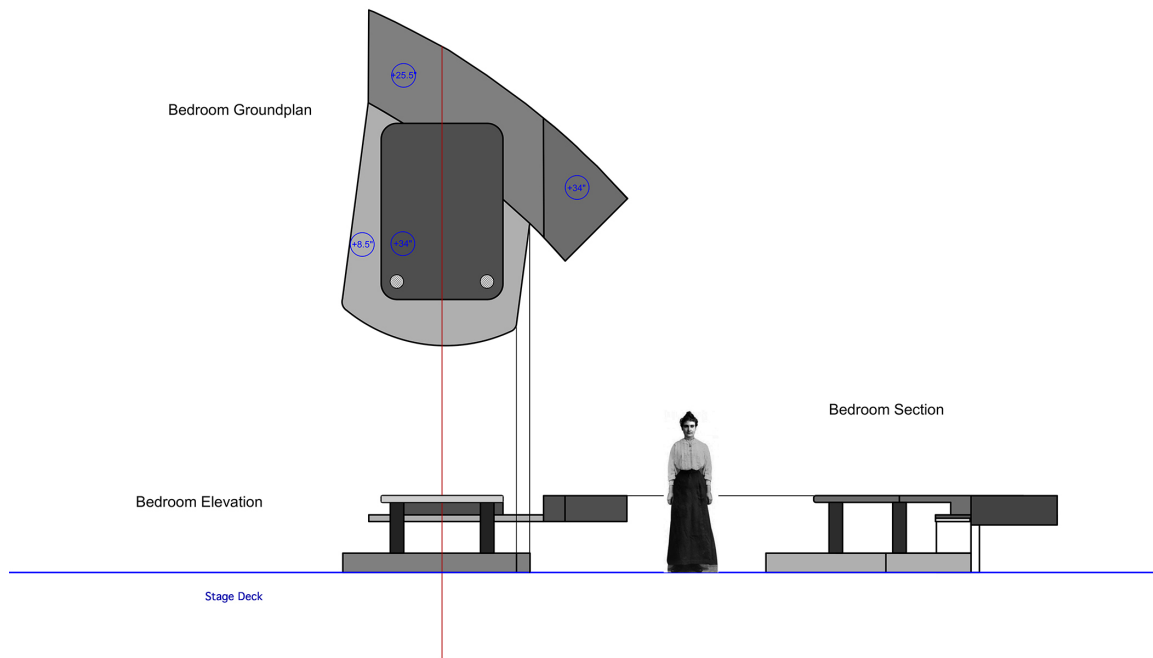


Figure 3.6: *Much Ado About Nothing* shop drawing details for Hero's bedroom.

The drawings for the scene shop needed to be provided early in the design process so the initial focus was on drafting the physical design. Once the shop got underway with the building, the next part of the design realization was figuring out the painting and finishes for the design. Since the set represented the Salon of a wealthy patron of the arts, I looked at incorporating marble finishes into the built set. I used samples I had painted in Professor Ularu's scene painting class as the basis of the design and had extensive conversations with my advisor, the director, and designers as to the color for the marble before deciding on green marble for the set. The marbling didn't make sense with the grand piano, so I wanted to have it painted to look like a zebra wood veneer.

With the set pieces marbled, the next decision was what to do with the floor. Unlike working in Drayton Hall where the audience can hardly see the floor, the floor of Longstreet Theatre is the thing that the entire audience can see throughout the whole

performance, and I talked about several options for the floor with my advisor. I had talked about Leonata's Salon being a rich world filled with marble, but the idea of the whole set being marbled seemed too overwhelming in design sketches so I investigated creating a hardwood floor design that would make the space look more like an art gallery. The color scheme of a hardwood floor with the marbled set pieces didn't feel entirely right and I even looked at creating dual world where the hardwood floor and marbled squares co-existed.

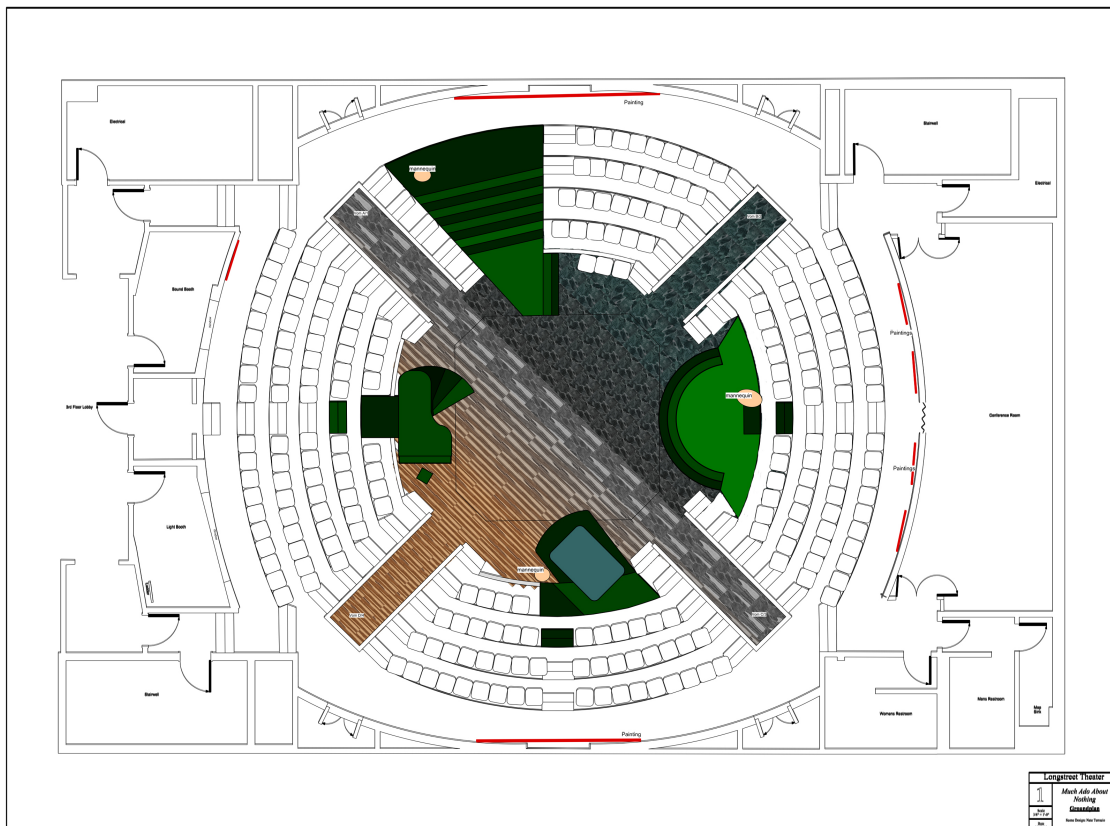


Figure 3.7: *Much Ado About Nothing* ground plan with scenic floor option 2.

3.6 REALIZATION OF DESIGN

The building process of the set was straightforward with the scene shop quickly transforming the seating areas into areas for the play's four parties. The biggest

challenge in the process was that as the set achieved completion the cast was eager to get out of the rehearsal room and into the theatre. With the arena theatre being such a unique environment and the set being an installation piece we gave evenings over to the director and the cast so they could master the theoretical blocking of the rehearsal room on the reality of a complicated set full of stairs and different levels. This meant that the painting process for finishing the set was pushed until after rehearsals ended each day. While I had the help of fellow MFA student Mona Damian Ulmu to paint overnight, the painting of the individual set pieces proceeded slowly, and I began to worry about not having time to complete a complicated design on the theatre floor. I revisited one of the directors most referenced research images again and wanted to bring the imagery bubbles in the water or stars in a galaxy to the stage floor. The midnight blue of the background seemed a good complement to the green marble and I wanted to keep the floor dark knowing that the lights on the floor would significantly lighten anything painted there.

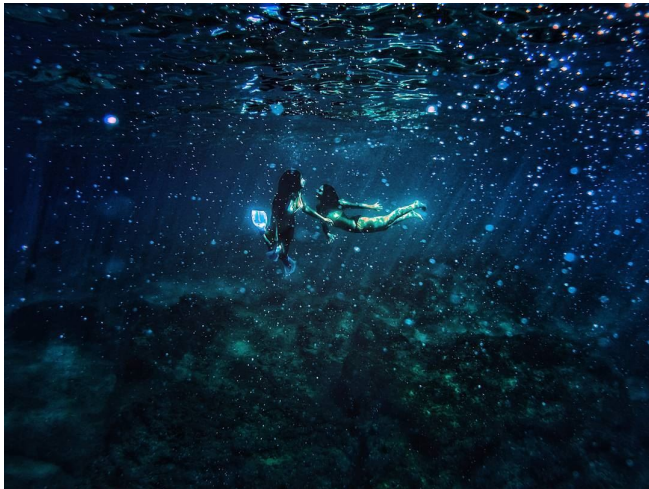


Figure 3.8: Research image from the director that we referred to as the Floating Lovers.



Figure 3.9: Floor research image of a galaxy of stars.

Throughout the design process we kept referring to the art on the walls of the salon. The size, location and numbers of artworks were quickly decided on, but what they should look like was a source of conversation throughout the rehearsal process.

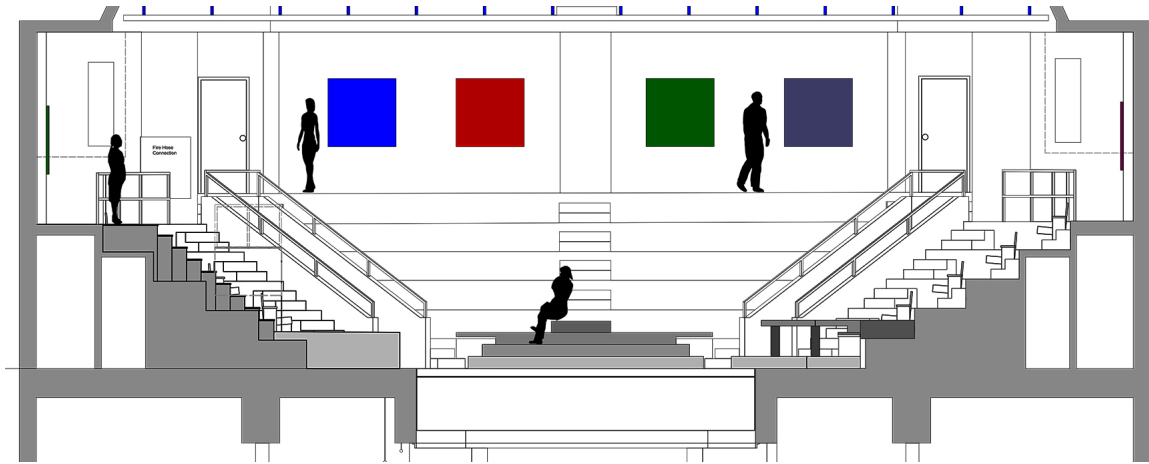


Figure 3.10: *Much Ado About Nothing* section drawing facing north.

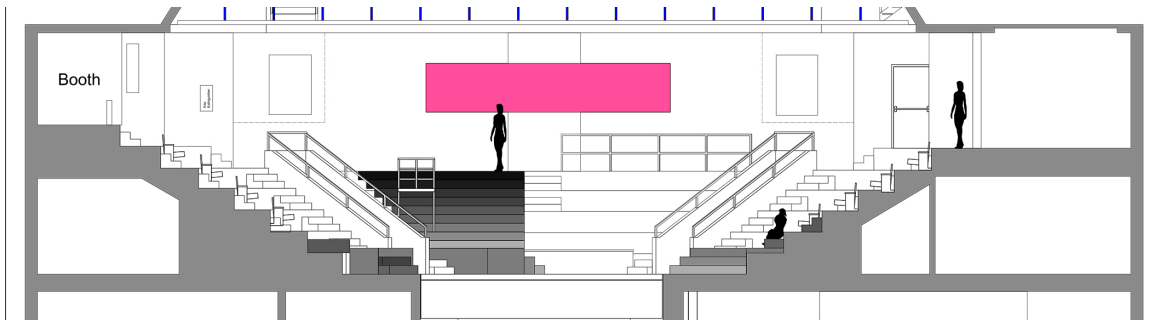


Figure 3.11: *Much Ado About Nothing* section drawing facing east.

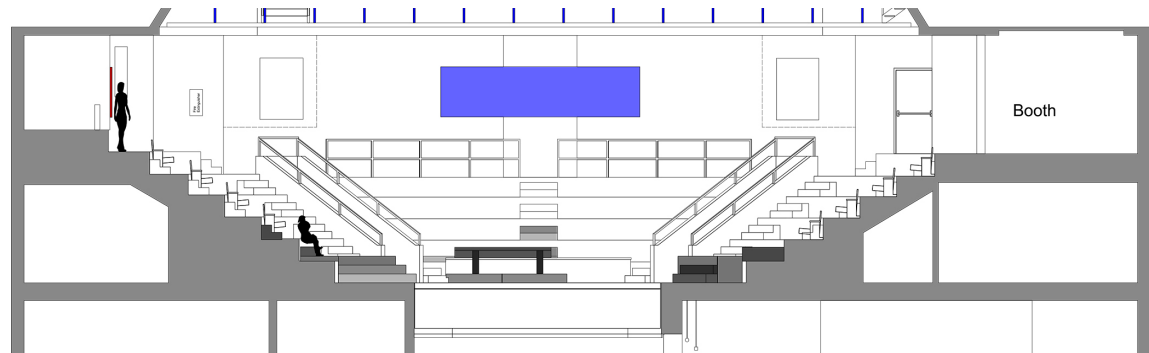


Figure 3.12: *Much Ado About Nothing* section drawing facing west.

The director and I eventually decided that the pieces of art should be Benedick's drawings, and that maybe they should be simplistic line drawings and not complicated works of art. I worked with my advisor on the idea that all the drawings were of characters in the play, or that maybe they would all be of Beatrice tipping us off to Benedick's love of her right from the beginning. However, in my research of black and white line drawings I kept being drawn back to the works of several masters, Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, and Egon Schiele, and the director liked the simplicity of their works.

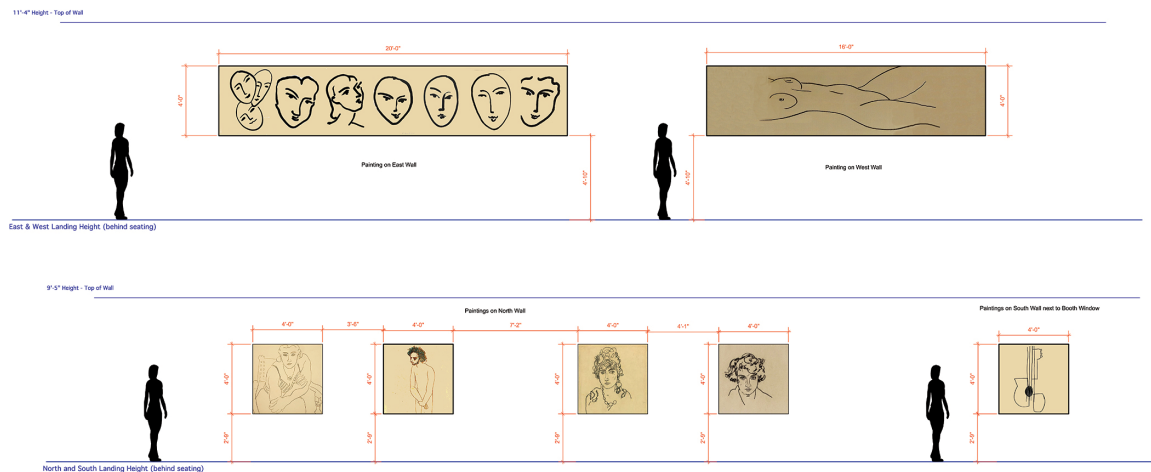


Figure 3.13: *Much Ado About Nothing* elevations for the set decoration paintings.

Instead of being drawings of Beatrice, I proposed that they were drawings of Benedick's perfect woman that he describes in Act 2, Scene 3: rich, virtuous, fair, mild, noble, of good discourse, and an excellent musician. Could the seven images each be something he could reference during his soliloquy? Ultimately the answer to the questions about what the line drawings should look like came in the form of an answer to the question about what purpose the mannequins on the set served. The mannequins served as stand in models for the line drawings; we would see Benedick arranging a

mannequin and then painting or drawing it during his soliloquy. Keeping the idea of simple drawings, I ended up with simple and incomplete line drawings of women that Benedick could still reference in his soliloquy but would also look they could have been drawn during a simple modeling session.

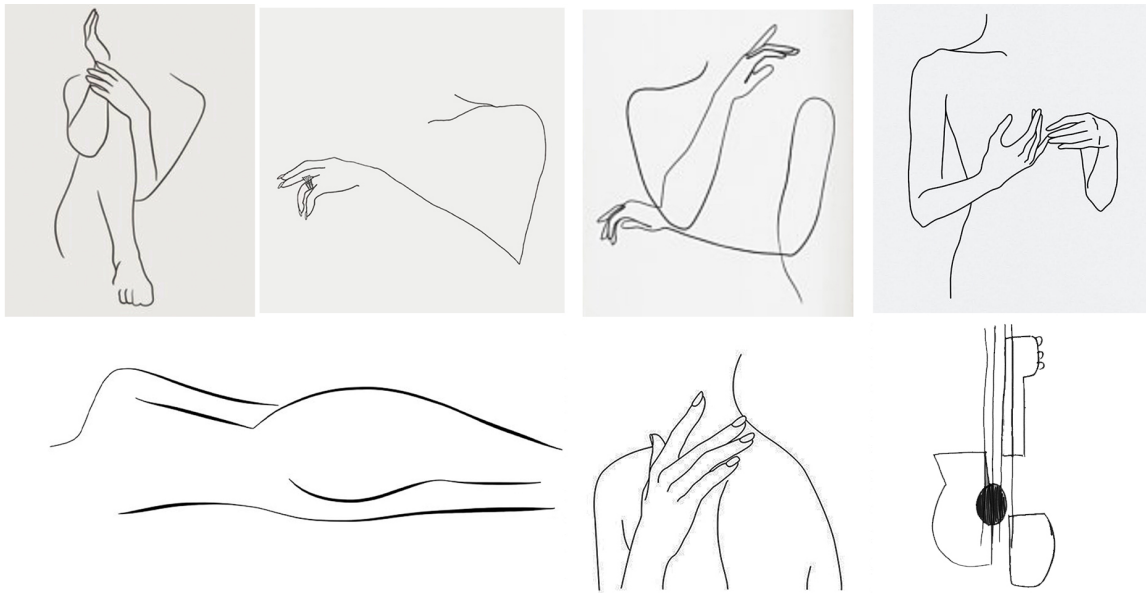


Figure 3.14: Final images for the set decoration paintings.

Just when all the portions of the set finally seemed to come together in time for the first dress rehearsal, one more change was needed. The modern rubber soled shoes that were a part of the costumes coupled with the choreography caused the floor to be completely covered in rubber scuff marks that did not want to buff out. Instead of a swirl of lights the floor was a cacophony of shoe scuff marks so much that you could not see any pattern in the floor. The clear coat finish was not scuff resistant and I needed to repaint the floor overnight between the first and second dress rehearsal and re-seal it with a different product. Finally at the last minute just in time for archival pictures to be taken during the last dress rehearsal, the set was complete.



Figure 3.15: Scenic Rendering *Much Ado About Nothing*.

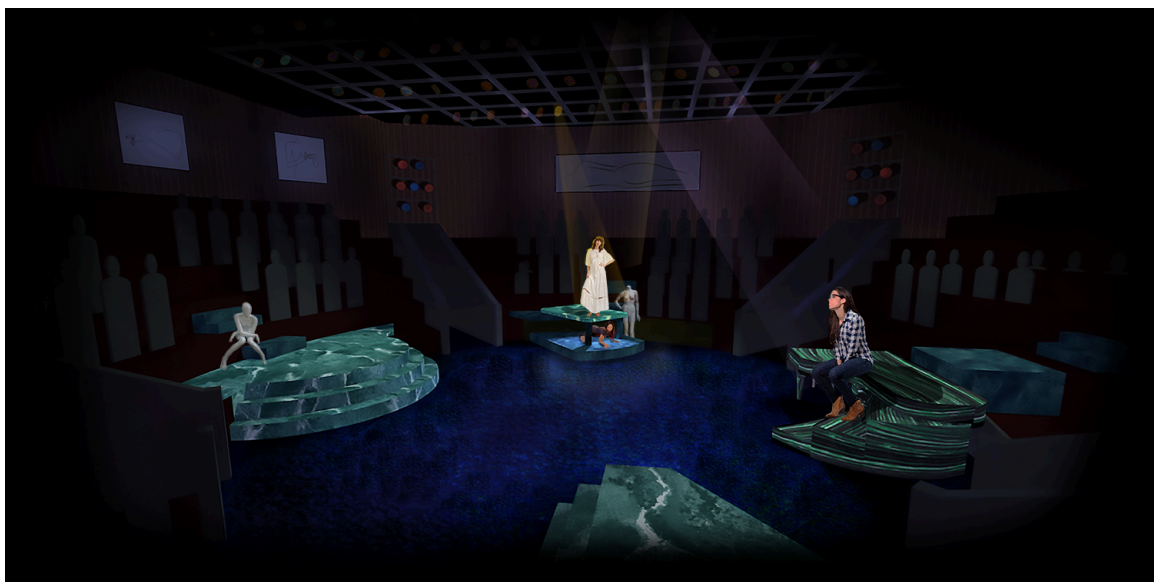


Figure 3.16: Scenic Rendering *Much Ado About Nothing*.

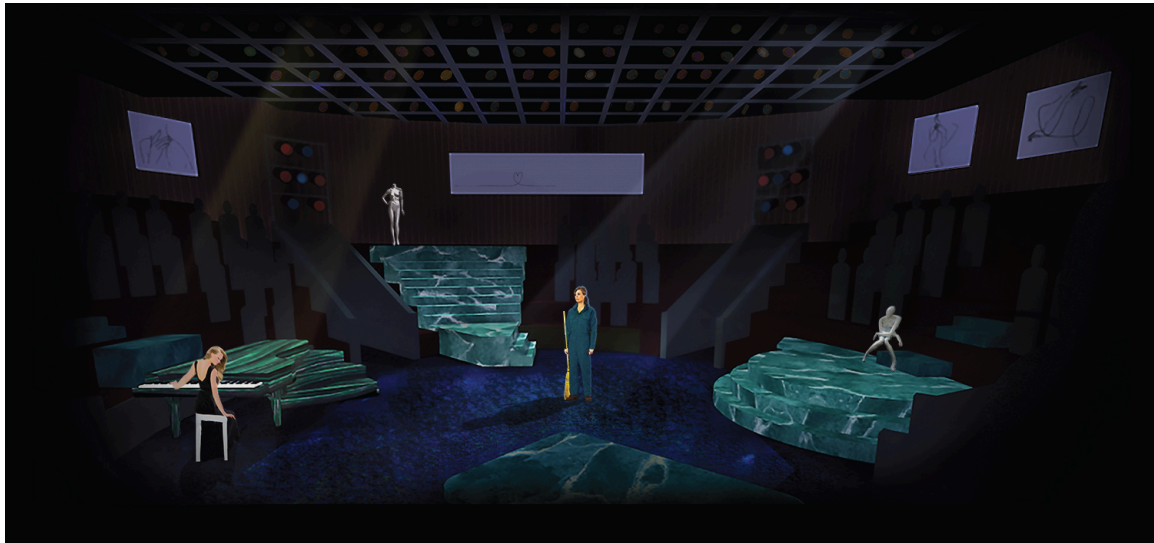


Figure 3.17: Scenic Rendering *Much Ado About Nothing*.

3.7 CONCLUSION

Much Ado About Nothing had its preview performance on October 24 and opened to the public October 25, 2019. This was my first time working in working as a designer in Longstreet Theatre. I had worked in traditional proscenium theatres and in black box theatres laid out to be proscenium or thrust spaces, but this was my first experience in a full 360-degree arena space. I had to learn how ensconce the audience in the set while providing an experience for everyone that allowed equal enjoyment of the design, the blocking, and the production as a whole. Professor Ularu helped me figure out how to provide the director the ability to move the cast around the space without hiding them from the audience or forcing the audience to turn around and look over their shoulder to watch whole scenes.

The change in director and location and the resulting lack of time was a major challenge to overcome for me as a new designer. I appreciated the director's exploratory process, but it was challenging to find the time to wonder and dream up possibilities

when the scenic shop needed concrete drawings to begin the building process. Luckily, my prior experience of drafting sets and coursework in scenic drawing came to my rescue as I had templates in place to work from and I was able to get drawings to the scene shop that allowed them to build the set and install it in the theatre on time. However, this happened before there was an opportunity to create a fully comprehensive concept design in order to render looks for the finished set. I was continually trying to find a way to tie together the physical set with the design ideas to make a fully realized and complete scenic design and the process lasted all the way up to the final technical rehearsal.

I learned how important it was to create a design concept that provides a framework for the design to happen inside right from the beginning. I also learned that while change is to be expected, that constantly changing the mood and feeling of the set throughout the process doesn't always yield better results. Second guessing concepts, themes, or images can take away time that could be used to execute the design. It can be better to execute an early idea more completely and successfully than to fail to finish completing more well thought through ideas. But I also learned that when the ideas don't quite connect together, continuing to talk and share ideas with the director and design team throughout the process can ultimately lead to a fully realized final product.



Figure 3.18: Production photo of *Much Ado About Nothing* set. University of South Carolina 2019.



Figure 3.19: Production photo of *Much Ado About Nothing* set. University of South Carolina 2019.



Figure 3.20: Production photo of *Much Ado About Nothing* set. University of South Carolina 2019.

CHAPTER 4
A LIVE PERFORMANCE – NOT A MUSEUM PIECE
Scenic Design for *Romeo and Juliet*

4.1 PRODUCTION DETAILS

Romeo and Juliet by William Shakespeare was the final production of the Department of Theatre and Dance's 2021-2022 Season. The production was directed by guest artist Carolyn Howarth, a professional director from California. This production was the final Theatre Department Design for Lighting Design MFA Candidate Lawrence Ware and Scenic Design MFA Candidate Nate Terracio assisted by Scenic Design MFA Candidate Ruihan Liu. Professor Kristy Hall was costume designer, guest artist Danielle Wilson provided the sound design, and the stage manager was Instructor Lisa Gavaletz. The cast was a combination of undergraduate students, theatre faculty and guest artists.

The two main-stage productions in the Spring 2022 semester were both held in Longstreet Theatre, an Arena Theatre with approximately 350 seats. Because the two productions were held back-to-back there needed to be a basic layout used for both *These Shining Lives* and *Romeo and Juliet*. Working with Department Chair Jim Hunter and the head of the MFA Design Program Nic Ularu, the scenic designer for *These Shining Lives*, Ashley Jensen, and I had to agree on the basic layout for transforming the arena theatre into a thrust stage by removing the seating opposite the entrances and creating levels that would be shared by both productions. A simple two-level staging area was

designed that allowed for use of the existing staircases on either side of the seating and that became the blank canvas that I had to work from for the design of *Romeo and Juliet*. The first contact with the visiting director, who had never seen Longstreet Theatre before, was to share the new basic theatre layout and discuss different possibilities of using the space.

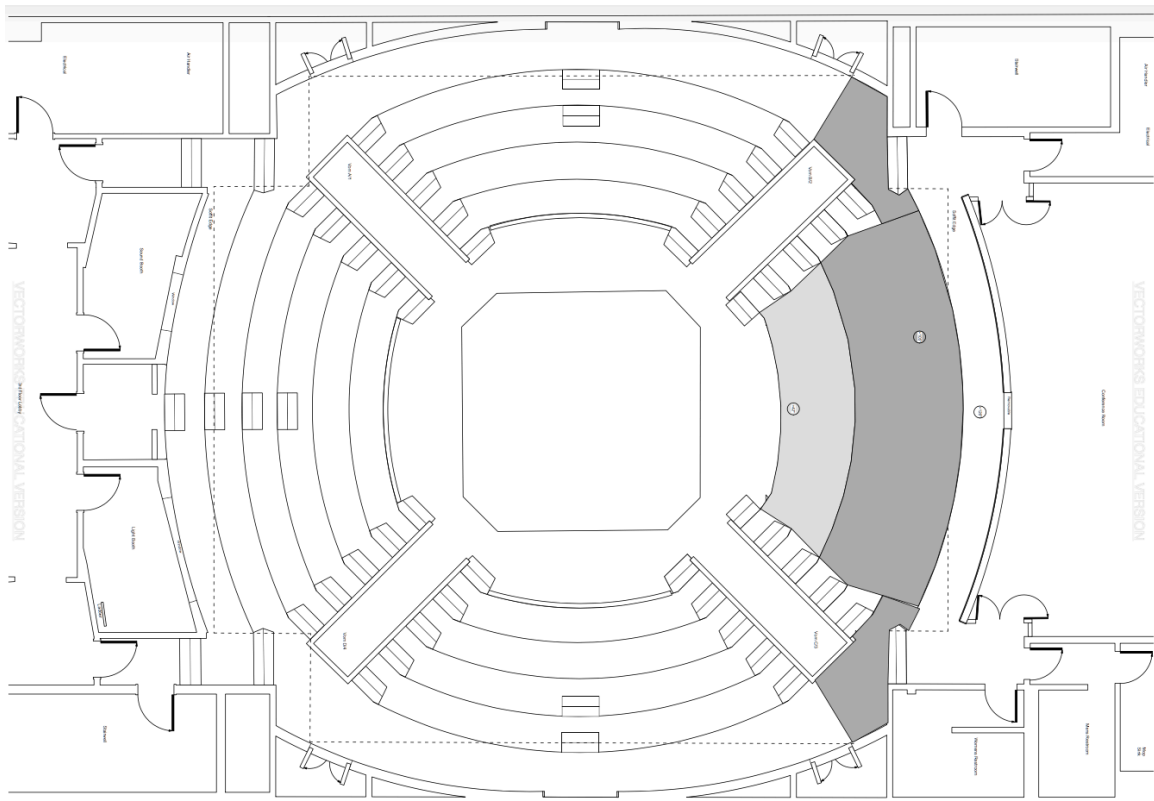


Figure 4.1: Ground Plan of Longstreet Theatre in the base thrust configuration to be used by *These Shining Lives* and *Romeo and Juliet* in the Spring 2022 semester.

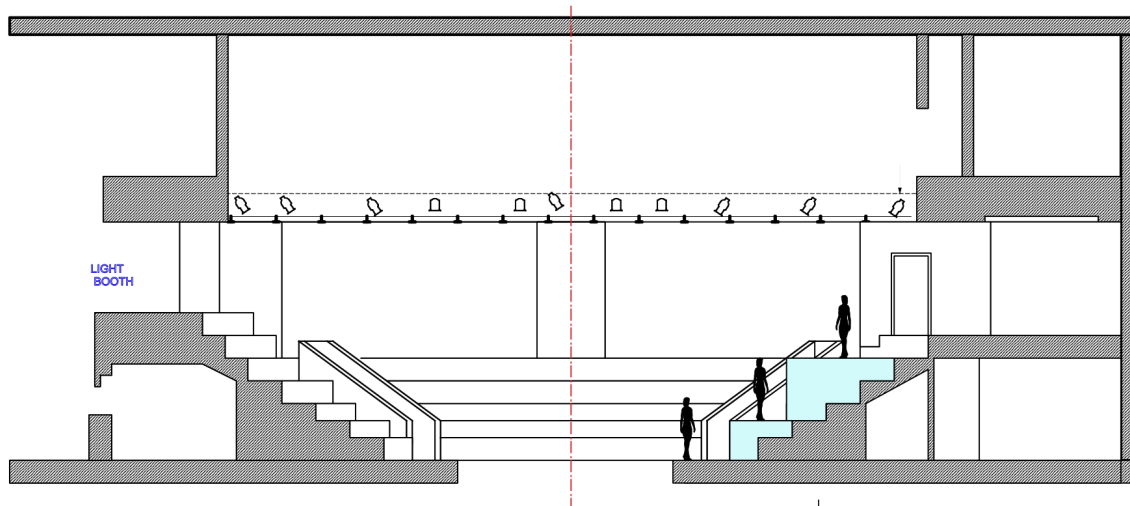


Figure 4.2: Section of Longstreet Theatre in the base thrust configuration to be used by *These Shining Lives* and *Romeo and Juliet* in the Spring 2022 semester.

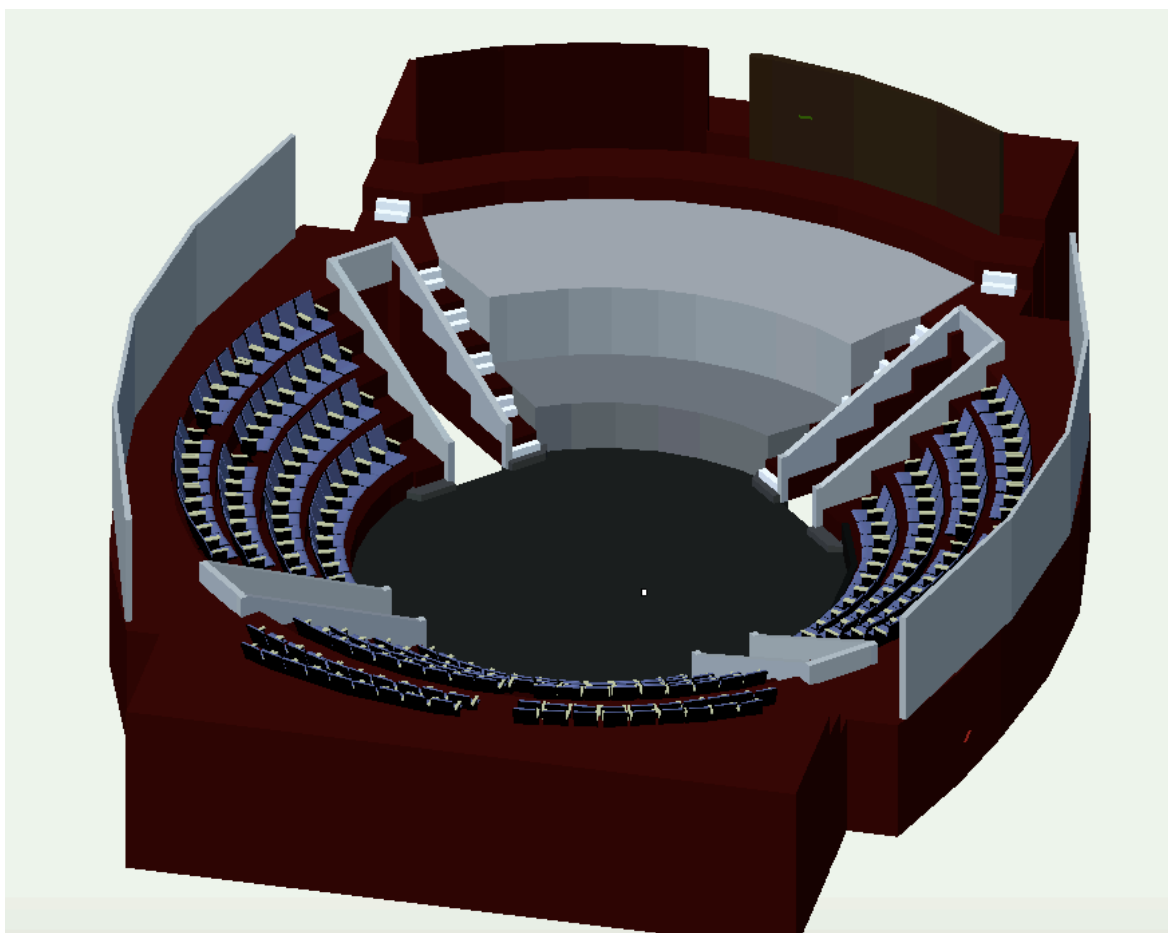


Figure 4.3: Digital model of Longstreet Theatre in the base thrust configuration to be used by *These Shining Lives* and *Romeo and Juliet* in the Spring 2022 semester.

4.2 ABSTRACT

Romeo and Juliet is one of William Shakespeare's early tragedies and was first published in quarto in 1597. Visiting director Carolyn Howarth came to the Department of Theatre and Dance with significant professional experience directing Shakespeare. Her approach to Shakespeare is to focus on conveying the story to the audience while giving the original text life and energy. While Shakespeare's scripts have survived until today, they are written for the stage, and she believes that Shakespeare is meant to be seen. The playwright's words, coupled with the actors' actions, are what help the audience follow the story. "There are no sexier stories than Shakespeare's," she says. "They're full of passion, violence, anger, guilt, and sorrow on the grandest scales. That's what makes them so special to see in a live setting." This production of *Romeo and Juliet* endeavored to be contemporary and not a museum piece.

4.3 DIRECTOR'S CONCEPT

Carolyn's take on *Romeo and Juliet* "is that the older generation of long-feuding families has kind of ruined the world for the younger generation. Juliet and Romeo have both been brought up in an environment of great dissent and are trying to find a way out of it. They're trying to navigate their way through a world they did not ask for." She wanted the look of the play to show a world in decline. The adult generation has been neglecting not just their children but their surroundings also. The disparity between the generations is on physical display as the opulence of their parents' era is still there but there are visible signs of neglect and decay. The older generation has ruined the world for their children as basic human needs are not surviving. The family and social

dynamics are falling apart, which is how we end up with the tragic deaths at the end of the play. But with the decay there should also be a sense of hope for the future.

She wanted to keep the play set in Verona, Italy, but not literally the actual Verona, Italy. Keeping the inspiration Italian she was inspired by the Italian Art Nouveau style of the late 1800's and early 1900's. She wanted a non-classical world that is organic and a-symmetrical – a modern style of grand opulence with a focus on metal (steel, silver, gold), glass and concrete with deep colors and gilded flourishes. Carolyn did not pick a specific time period, wanting the production to feel contemporary – but without cell phones or guns. Verona would have been built around the turn of the 1900's but Romeo and Juliet are living when that world is no longer new or pristine. What was once beautiful has become decayed and ruined for the youth because of the human frailty of their parents.

4.4 RESEARCH

I started the initial research process by re-reading the script and breaking down the scenes with my advisor before having my first conversation with the director. As the platform design that became the base for Longstreet Theatre came together, Professor Ularu and I began to discuss ways that they could be added onto to provide a world for the warring Montagues and Capulets. Should one entrance be designated for the Capulets and another for the Montagues giving each family a home base of sorts? The key for any production of *Romeo and Juliet* is that the set needs to provide both indoor and outdoor space. I began imagining how the platforms could be designed as a backdrop allowing for the action on the stage floor to be played as either inside the building or outside the building that they represented. There is a need for both open public area for the street

scenes and Capulet's ball as well as intimate private space for Juliet's bedroom. I began thinking about how to parse the platforms into different places: could the upper platform be used for Juliet's bedroom? And of course there needs to be a balcony for the most famous scene in the play. Could we build a platform over one of the vom entrances that would allow Juliet to be high up and still allow the audience to see her? Should that balcony platform also be used as Juliet's bedroom?

After an initial designers meeting with the director in December I had some initial research images and artist inspirations (Gustav Klimt and Max Kurzweil) to use moving forward in my own research. I also got some questions about the specifics of the scenic design answered. I would be designing a unit set, but while there would be no scenic changes, the set should have a "surprise in it" meaning that some element would get used in a non-obvious way during the production. There would need to be a balcony as while the "balcony scene" is not the most important in the play, but is the most famous and there is obvious need for a balcony in the set. The director and lighting designer both wanted to use practical lights and all three of us were interested in the idea of chandeliers as a way to incorporate the lighting and scenic designs together.

The play set in Verona, Italy, and while I didn't want to draw on draw on images of the actual Verona for location research I did focus on images from all over Italy. I also looked specifically for images of the Italian Art Nouveau style that incorporated concrete, metal and glass and kept coming back to an image of an asymmetrical sandstone colored cement building entrance with bas relief and metalwork as it was organic in shape and had flourishes. I felt that the scenic design should focus on a non-classical world that is organic and asymmetrical and looked at images of a modern style of grand opulence

focusing on those incorporating metal (steel, silver, gold), glass and concrete with deep colors and gilded flourishes. A strong influence was the idea that Verona was once wealthy and gilded, but has fallen into a state of disrepair through neglect. I wanted to show that the world was breaking, but not filthy and looked for images of crumbling plaster, peeling paint and cracked walls. I decided to have visible elements of decay with crumbling walls, broken fixtures, and a sense of nature imposing itself into the world through vines and overgrowth.

Because the arena/thrust Longstreet Theatre is a room where the entire theatre feels like the set from the moment you walk inside I was drawn to the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Harvey Theater. The Harvey Theater is also one where you feel like the theatre itself is its own set and is a good example of a grand building that is now distressed and looks like it has fallen into disrepair. A follow-up conversation with the director pointed me to a 1984 Royal Shakespeare Company production of *Troilus and Cressida* where the set was a grand old house that had fallen into disrepair as another reference point.



Figure 4.4: Concept research including asymmetrical concrete and iron work, and examples of former opulence in disrepair such as the BAM Harvey Theater in Brooklyn, NY and the 1984 Royal Shakespeare Company production of *Troilus and Cressida*.

Many of my research images of decay included buildings that had been overgrown and the director liked the idea that neglect would result in vines or plants growing in nooks and crannies around the theatre. The idea would be that the vines could be working their way inside or when the scene was outside they would be plants growing up the outside walls. They would also serve to be the source of Friar Lawrence's gathering of herbs in an early scene in the play foreshadowing the potion he provides Juliet with near the play's end. The idea of plants led me to the decision to incorporate a greenhouse or conservatory being a part of the set as it could feel like the characters in the play were either inside the greenhouse or outside it. And a greenhouse indicates a wealthy world that would have had extra money to spend at the time it was built.

One of the main things the audience sees in an arena theatre is the floor. The main floor of Longstreet Theatre needed to remain clear for the large ensemble scenes

that happen both inside and outside. I considered the idea of the floor being Italian tile so that it could feel like a tile or marble floor inside a home and also feel like an outside courtyard or the town square of a wealthy Italian village. The color of the floor needed to work with the costumes, allowing them to pop in front of it and not be too light in color for the lighting. It also wanted to have a design to show the wealth of Verona without being busy. After talking about a neutral terracotta tile, we decided to look at more of a black and grey marble for inspiration.

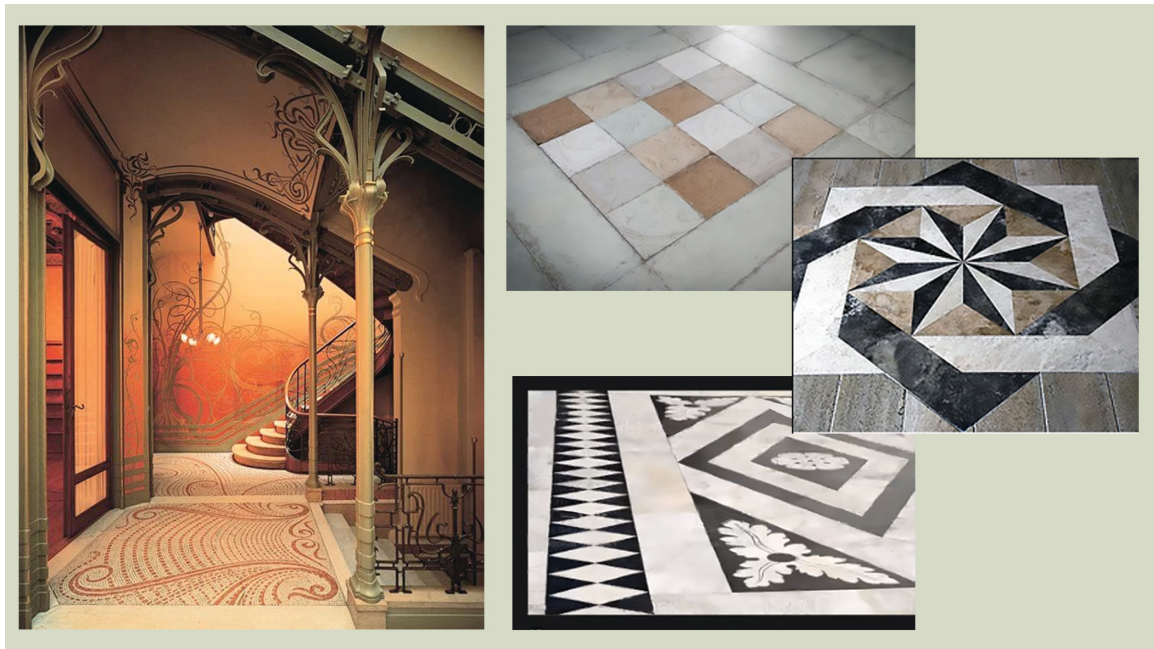


Figure 4.5: Research images used in the designing of the main floor area of Longstreet Theatre. Decorative tile and stonework that could be inside or outside.

4.5 DEVELOPMENT OF DESIGN

Ongoing emails and conversations with the director focused on the functionality of the set and the need to be able to get from the main floor of Longstreet Theatre to the lower platform and from the lower platform to the upper platform. I wanted to design two staircases that would allow movement between all three levels. Working within the

space confines of the two permanent platforms I looked at every possible staircase that could fit in the space: a spiral staircase, a “grand staircase” facing the audience, a sweeping curved staircase, stairs running parallel to the upper platform. The available space pushed me towards the idea of the staircase between the upper and lower platforms being sideways as there was not enough room for central stairs facing the stage floor or a spiral staircase without losing the functionality of the lower platform. Despite the desire for the world to be asymmetrical the functionality of having a double staircase with a central landing in the center was the final design feature because it allowed for increased access between the top two levels. Access around the set was important to allow the fight choreographer free reign for the early battles between the Montagues and Capulets.

The next piece of functionality to work out is what will be used as the balcony for Romeo and Juliet’s famous scene. Romeo meets Juliet at a ball hosted by the Capulets when he and his friends sneak into the party uninvited. He subsequently woos Juliet when he sees her out on her bedroom balcony after the ball. Following up on the idea that the entire theatre space is a part of the set we talked about using the four “natural balconies” that existed in Longstreet Theatre – the tops of the four vomitorium (vom) entrances. The idea to be worked out in rehearsal was to have Juliet moving from vom to vom around the seating area while Romeo was on the stage and kept turning from “balcony” to “balcony” as she moved. This would allow each section of the audience to experience the scene the same way but at different points in the scene. The railing at the top of each of the voms would have a metal arch over it so that Juliet was within a frame each time she stood above the opening below her creating the look of her being on a balcony throughout the theatre.

Because Longstreet Theatre had been transformed into a thrust stage the area in front of the lower platform is one of the strongest visually and the director and I discussed using that area for key moments of the play including the tomb scene at the play's end. Juliet, with Friar Lawrence's help, has faked her own death and her family has laid out her body to mourn it. Romeo, unaware of her plan, thinks she is dead and stricken by grief poisons himself at her side in her family's tomb. Juliet awakes to find Romeo dead next to her and kills herself with his dagger. There is a lot of stage business to happen in this final scene and it seemed like the opportunity to create the "surprise" in the set that the director was looking for while also solving the logistical issue of how to get the cast from the floor of the theatre to the lower level. The stage floor wanted to be used as both inside and outside so whatever stair structure I designed for there would need to work for both and feel appropriate to be used in many scenes as many different places. I was thinking about the possibility of a structure that looked like a fountain in a village square but it could also double a bed with a headboard for Juliet's bedroom and then bring Juliet's life cycle full circle with Juliet's bed becoming the tomb for the end of the play. However this fountain/bed would also need to practically function as a staircase for actors could move between the two levels.

The upper platform level usage also needed to be addressed. Because of its physical distance from the audience it was not practical to use it for significant action of the play, but it could be where actors were staged as background and used as an entrance to the rest of the set. This brought me back to the greenhouse/conservatory conversations for the set. An open framed structure at the top with doors would allow for people to be seen inside and outside the structure and allow for entrances and exits to be made from

the back/top of the theatre. The idea of a greenhouse would indicate a family with wealth, or it could be a public structure in Verona's outdoor spaces. The characters could be inside or outside it as the walls look similar regardless of which side you are on. The openness of the structure would also allow for the director to stage upcoming scenes inside and transition from one scene in the play to the next with minimal downtime between the scenes.

A key focus of the design was the final design for the floor as it would be an element present and obvious to the audience throughout the production. Once the final ground plan was created a geometric floor made of marble pavers needed to be designed that tied all the scenic elements of the stage floor together. Working within the color palette decided upon in the research phase a black, grey, and terracotta design was drawn that was not too busy to keep the ever-present floor from distracting from the scenes.

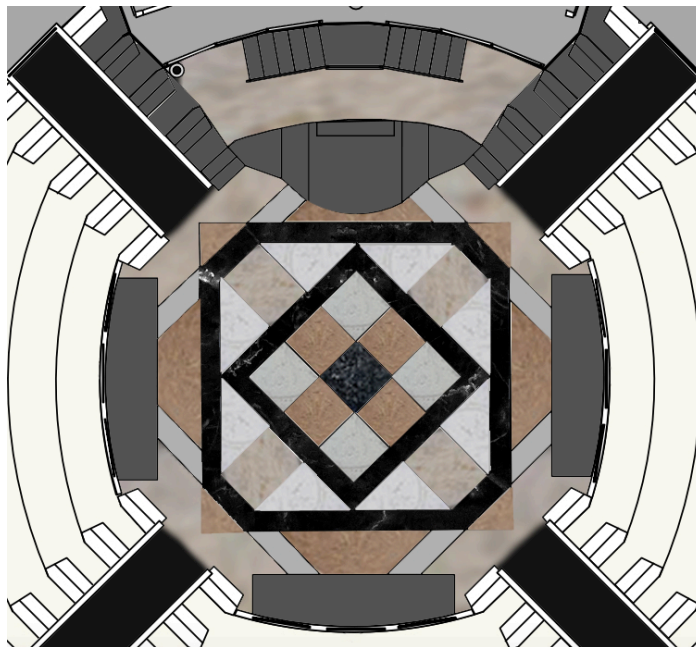


Figure 4.6: Painting elevation for the stage floor of Longstreet Theatre.

The final part of the design development centered around the physical structure of Longstreet Theatre and how to incorporate the theatre architecture into the world of Verona. Similar to the BAM Harvey Theater, see figure 4.4, I wanted the audience to feel that they were sitting inside the set. One way to achieve this was to augment the metal railing inside the theatre to make them feel like they were a part of the art nouveau world that the rest of the set belonged to. This would mean creating a wrought iron applique to apply to the existing railings. These would be something organic and asymmetrical, but with each one having a portion that was broken off to give the feeling of disrepair. I also discussed with the director the idea of adding painted drops and molding along the theatre walls that could be distressed to give the idea that the theatre walls were either the wall of the village of Verona or the walls inside the Capulet household. The final part of incorporating the audience into the set was to hang chandeliers over the audience so that the seating areas felt like they were being lit by the chandeliers during the preshow and intermission instead of the theatre house lights. This would also allow for the chandeliers in the audience area where scenes were happening to be turned on to incorporate the whole area into the scene.



Figure 4.7: Research images used for inspiration in the drafting phase of the set design. These include: a wrought iron topper above a doorway for the balconies, an overgrown greenhouse, an Italian fountain, wrought iron railing, an outdoor staircase in an Italian garden, and an overgrown conservatory.

4.6 REALIZATION OF DESIGN

The initial shop drafting happened early in the process with only small changes as details got added to finalize the scenic finishes and increase functionality. The drafting focused on the three principal areas of the scenic design which were then tied together with the final painting and scenic treatment. On the lower level a multi tiered platform gave the shape of a fountain or tomb while also functioning as a bed for the Juliet's bedroom scenes with levels that provided the functionality of a double staircase and seating area.

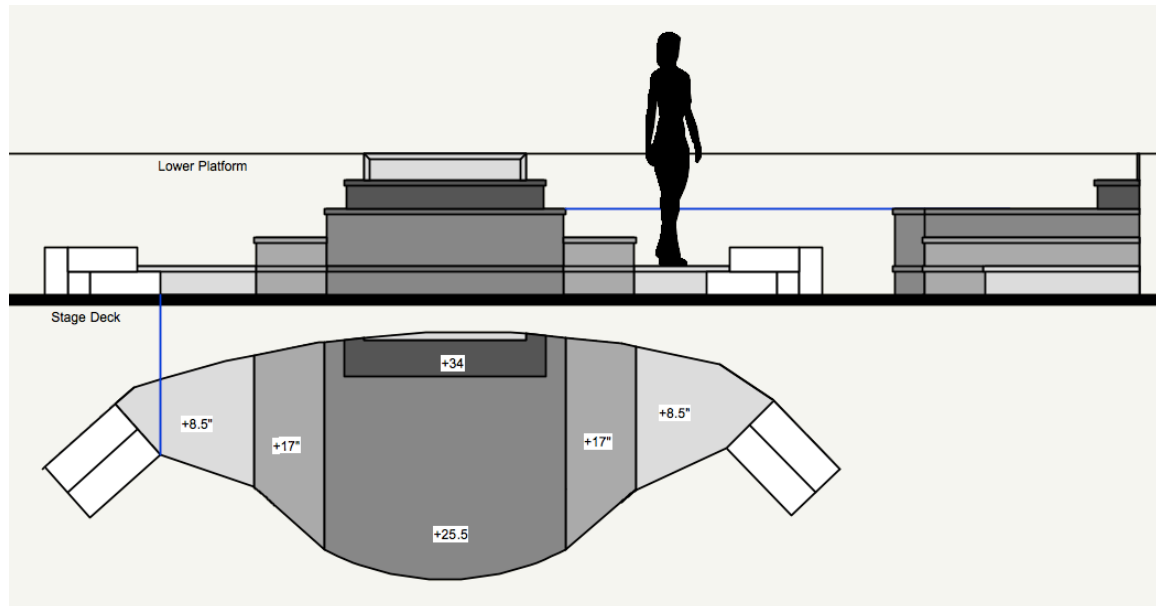


Figure 4.8: Shop drawing of the bed platform connecting the stage floor to the lower level.

The Lower platform had the double staircase with a central landing connecting the lower and upper platforms together. The railing had the same wrought iron treatment as the steel railings of the theatre architecture tying the set piece in with the theatre architecture. This staircase was designed to accommodate a fogger housed inside and underneath the central landing to allow for low lying fog to creep out of a grating at the footboard during the tomb scene at the end of the play.

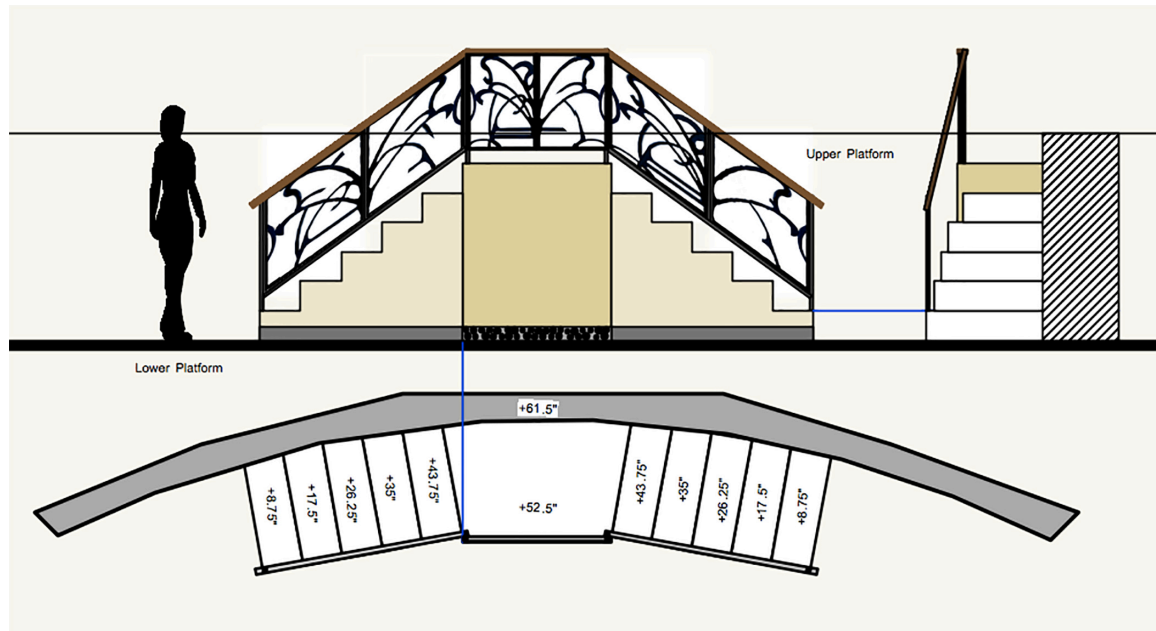


Figure 4.9: Shop drawing of the lower platform staircase connecting the lower level to the upper level.

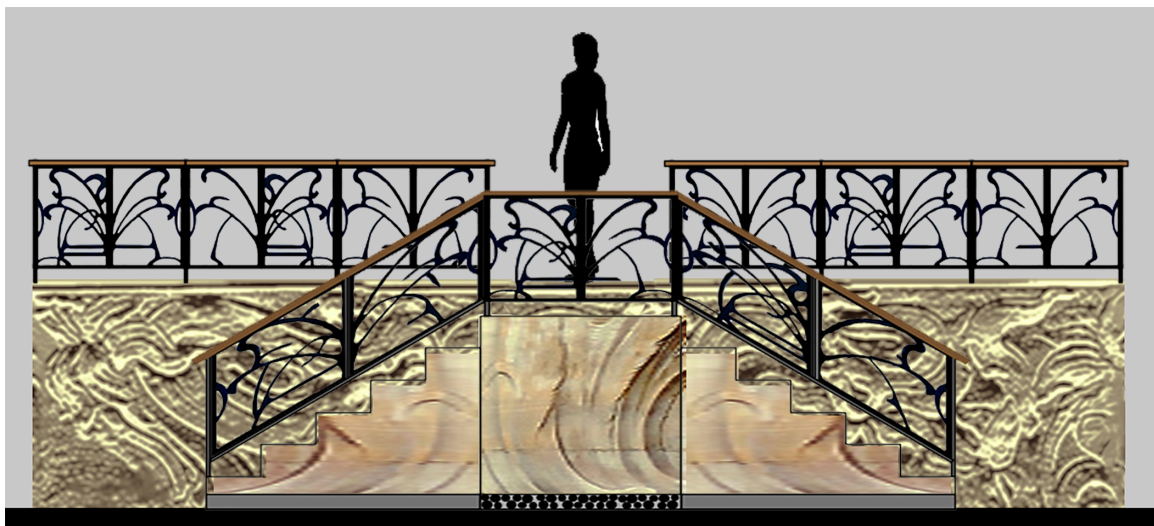


Figure 4.10: Rendering of the staircase on the lower level platform showing the bas relief on the walls and the railings on the stairs and the upper platform.

The upper platform would provide a greenhouse backdrop with two central doors as well as openings stage right and stage left to maximize the actor's egress in and out of

the structure. The greenhouse wanted to have some curvature to incorporate some of the organic design of art nouveau. We achieved some asymmetry through the decay of the structure that showed neglect of the Verona that this production was set in. I also added some whimsical wrought iron flourishes to tie in the structure with the rest of the set. The structure would allow for vines to be attached to further the idea of neglect.



Figure 4.11 Drawing of the Greenhouse on the upper platform.

Accommodating lighting positions was part of the process of adapting the set through the weekly production meetings. There was a need to provide additional lighting positions and the two balconies over the vomms by the audience entrances were converted to lighting trees leaving moving the two balcony arches from those two vomms to the two audience entrances on stage right and left. The lighting design also needed floor lighting to achieve the chiaroscuro lighting effects that the director was looking for but none of us wanted to see floor mounted lights in full view on the stage floor. This led to the addition of three concrete benches on the three audience sides of the floor under which the

lighting instruments on floor plates could be largely hidden from audience view. These three benches turned out to be key seating areas and additional levels for the cast to use during the production.

Another change through the build process was that the space under the staircase on the second level was not large enough to accommodate the desired fogger so the final build incorporated two grates into the facing of the bed platform to allow for the low lying fog to come out from under the tomb in the final scene. There was also the addition of black bobbinet scrim into the openings of the greenhouse structure to allow for the ability to reveal characters inside and to give more of a solid surface for lighting to use. As a result we added a chandelier inside the greenhouse to give added depth inside the structure.

Finishing the main portion of the scenic build early allowed for an early transition out of the rehearsal room and into the theatre where the cast could experience the set levels in real life. There was one major change in the use of the set that happened once this transition happened. The two above vom balconies were no longer used as “Juliet’s balcony” and the central landing at the top of the double staircase because the location for that iconic scene. By providing the director with options in the set, she was able to try several options and settle on what felt the best in the space.

The final part of the realization of the design was the painting and set treatment. The collaboration with Professor Ularu, and fellow Scenic Design MFA students Ashley Jensen and Ruihan Liu, allowed the design to achieve its fullest artistic life. We had the time to paint and apply texture to the set several times, allowing for reflection and

refinement throughout the process and the learning of new skills. In order to achieve the sense of bas relief and decay on the set we made a mixture of white glue, sawdust and joint compound and spread it on the walls to give them texture and on the lower level the look of bricks peeking out from behind a damaged stucco wall. It was the best experience of my time in graduate school of how the process of painting a raw set can transform it into something even more beautiful than the design.

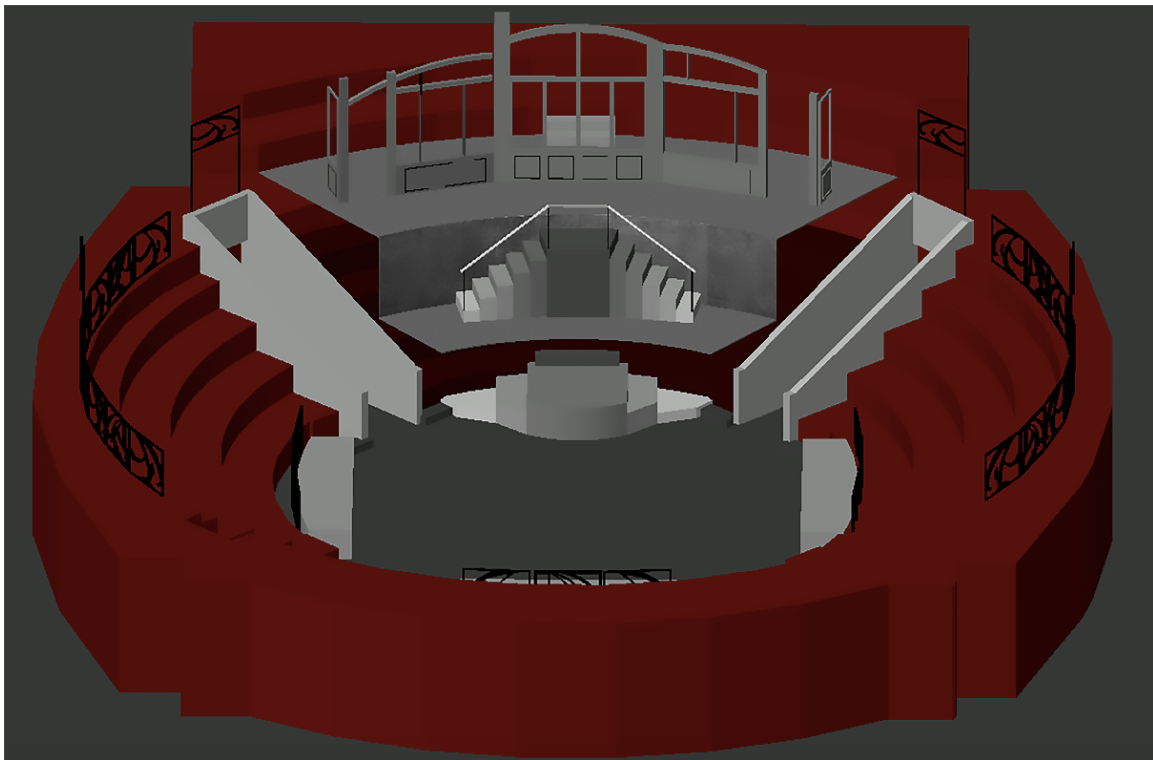


Figure 4.12: Digital Model of the final design created with assistant Ruihan Liu.

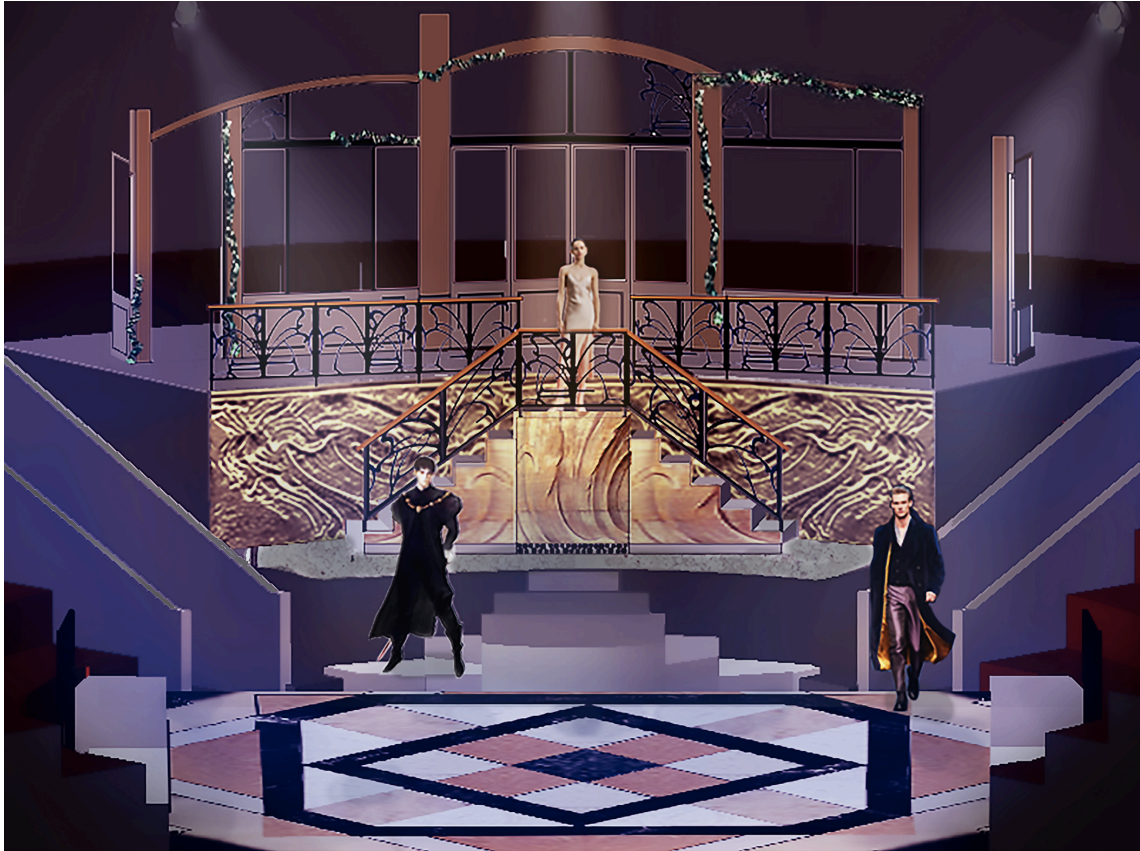


Figure 4.13: Digital Rendering of the final scenic design.



Figure 4.14: Production photo of *Romeo and Juliet* set. Univ. of South Carolina 2022.

4.7 CONCLUSION

Romeo and Juliet opened to the public with limited seating due to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, but the wearing of masks optional for the cast on April 8, 2022. This was my tenth and final scenic design as a Scenic Design MFA candidate and it was exciting to see that the coursework and previous designs all coalesced into the best design process and a scenic design that I was proud of. It also helped that I was already familiar with the script going into the production and that I had an assistant scenic designer to work with me on the paperwork and model as the design unfolded.

I was assigned as the scenic designer early for this production of *Romeo and Juliet*, and the design process turned out to be the easiest and least complicated for me of the department productions I worked on. Starting with pre-designing the layout for Longstreet Theatre, this set the tone as it decided in advance how the area theatre would be sat and provided levels that needed to be treated as a part of the theatre's permanent architecture. Knowing this going into the idea phase of the design provided a nice set of rules to work within. This allowed me to work with Professor Ularu to imagine the design possibilities for the theatre before talking with the director which helped me to feel prepared to take her ideas and immediately work with them.

The director Carolyn Howarth was a professional director with a background in Shakespeare plays who brought clear and well thought out concepts and design research to the production while remaining open to use those ideas as the basis for discussion and change through the design process. She was able to facilitate productive conversations between the design team so that we were all on the same page throughout the process, which allowed the set to support the other designers' ideas in addition to the director's.

Having time in the final stages of the design allowed for experimentation with set decoration. The floor was painted and adjusted several times before its final coat of sealant. Foliage was added and adjusted through the final rehearsal process as the blocking was revealed through on-stage rehearsals. By taking time at the end of the process it meant that I was able to make small, yet significant improvements to the final aesthetic on stage. A pair of potted plants, some additional foliage, and ultimately some wall decorations were added during the technical process to give the final design added elements of realism.



Figure 4.15: Production photo of *Romeo and Juliet* set. Univ. of South Carolina 2022.



Figure 4.16: Production photo of *Romeo and Juliet* set. Univ. of South Carolina 2022.



Figure 4.17: Production photo of *Romeo and Juliet* set. Univ. of South Carolina 2022.



Figure 4.18: Production photo of *Romeo and Juliet* set. Univ. of South Carolina 2022.

CHAPTER 5

PROFESSIONAL INTERNSHIP: FROM THE CLASSROOM TO THE STAGE

Scenic Design for *The Turn of the Screw* and *La Belle Helene*

5.1 INTERNSHIP DETAILS

I arranged to be hired as the Scenic Designer for Opera at USC's 2021-2022 Season of Benjamin Britten's *The Turn of the Screw* and Jaques Offenbach's *La Belle Helene*. Both productions were directed by Ellen Douglas Schlaefer and conducted by Neil Casey with musical preparation by Lynn Kompass. *The Turn of the Screw* held two performances in Drayton Hall on November 5 and 6, 2022 with Lighting Design by Julie Duro and Costume Design by Alexis Doktor. *La Belle Helene* held three performances in Drayton Hall on February 25, 26, and 27, 2022 with Lighting Design by Julie Duro and Costume Design by Heather Gonzalez.

The original plan for the opera season was to design a unit set for the Fall 2021 production that could be re-purposed into a set for the Spring 2022 production both as a design challenge and also as a way to stretch the Opera's budget at a time when there was limited seating to be sold. However *The Turn of the Screw* was chosen as the Fall 2021 production before the Spring 2022 production was finalized so the design process began without taking the second production into consideration. In order to limit the build costs for the two productions we switched from the idea of repurposing *The Turn of the Screw* set into designing the set around stock scenic pieces to limit the lumber and labor required for the bulk of the set construction.

5.2 ABSTRACT

The first production, *The Turn of the Screw*, is an English chamber opera based on the Henry James 1898 novella *The Turn of the Screw*. The Opera was composed by Benjamin Britten with libretto by Myfanwy Piper and it had its first performance in 1954. The short libretto follows the same story as the book. A young governess accepts a new position overseeing two small children at a country house from their uncle who is their guardian, but does not want her to contact him for any reason. She arrives at the country estate and meets the housekeeper Mrs. Grose and the two children, Miles and Flora. As she settles into her duties the Governess begins to see strange people around the estate. Upon describing them, she learns that they are Quint, the former Valet of the estate owner, and his mistress, the former Governess Miss Jessel, both of whom died previously. The children seem to be interacting with the two spirits but don't admit to Governess that they see them. The circumstances are so alarming that she disobeys the guardian's instructions and writes him a letter, but the letter never makes it as Miles takes it before it goes out in the mail. The Governess becomes so fearful that she sends Mrs. Grose away with Flora for their protection. When she confronts Miles about his interactions Quint, the ghost intervenes and the boy suddenly dies in her arms.

This ghost story of an opera was paired with the very different piece for the Spring 2022 production. *La Belle Helene* (The Beautiful Helen) is a three act French comedic operetta composed by Jacques Offenbach with script by Henri Meilhac and Ludovic Halevy that premiered in Paris in 1864. This opera bouffe is more in the style of a musical with much of the exposition and dialogue handled in the text between the operatic songs. This production was sung in the original French, but made use of Donald

Pippin's 1980's translation so the speaking was all in English. *La Belle Helene* is a parody of the Greek mythological story of Helen running away with Paris, the cause of the epic Trojan War.

5.3 THE TURN OF THE SCREW

For *The Turn of the Screw* I began by reading the script while listening to a recording of the production being sung. I had learned in Professor Ularu's class that for an opera you have to consider more than just the text in the libretto, which can be quite short, as the audience will be hearing the text being sung. Additionally in *The Turn of the Screw* there are scenic interludes played between each scene that set the mood for each scene and would be the music to which any scene changes or setups would be choreographed. The text for the opera is very short and left some questions to be answered by the director, especially about the ending of the production, so I followed this process up by reading the source material – the Henry James novella. The novella filled in a lot of the holes in the opera's story and provided background on the characters and descriptions of the setting that were useful for the design of the set, but it also leaves the ending ambiguous. Are the ghosts real, or is the Governess mad? How does Miles die at the end of the story? These were questions that I discussed with the director and she wanted to work out the answers during the rehearsal process.

Even though we wanted to keep the time and place of the production relatively accurate to the novella, I watched the Netflix streaming production of *The Haunting of Bly Manor* which is also based on the Henry James novella to get a sense of the story's place in current culture. The streaming series was a modernization of the of the story, but Bly House was still a fairly historically accurate manor house and the use of the home as

an element in the ghost story provided ideas for discussion with the director. I wanted the house to be its own character in the ghost story and provide an opportunity for the characters to feel like they were being watched.

The director wanted the piece on stage to have the look and feel of a ghost story so working with Professor Ularu I researched images of ghosts, especially Victorian era images. There were several feelings that I wanted to incorporate into the design for the production to give it the sense of a ghost story. Early photographs can have a haunting feel as the subjects are unsmiling, the images are in black and white, the people are often slightly blurry or even slightly transparent from the exposure time required, and sometimes due to the lighting in the room they have dark and sunken looking eyes. The isolation and otherness that results from these poorly taken photos can be taken to a further extreme with images of people in silhouette. Seeing a lone someone behind frosted windows or shrouded in fog creates an air of worry about who they are and what their intentions will be.

As the manor house would be the central part of the scenic design I began with research into houses to use for inspiration. My research was split into several areas: Victorian era houses, towers, isolated country houses, and classic hunted houses. Victorian era homes were the right time period for the story and many were traditionally built with a turret or tower. The tower in the manor house is an important part of the story so I knew that we would need a tower incorporated into the set and also looked at images of English castles with towers and estates with stand alone towers to get inspiration for the shape that could work as a stand alone tower. The text calls for the ghost Quint to appear in the tower at Bly House and I wanted to take advantage of the

downstage upper Shakespeare door built into the architecture of Drayton Hall to allow him to be seen in a tower and add height into the set.



Figure 5.1: *The Turn of the Screw* research images including inspiration for the tower, haunted house with moon, an isolated country house, a creepy lake, and ghostly figures.

I looked at images of haunted houses and realized that many classic haunted house images incorporate a Victorian era structure, including the house from the Alfred Hitchcock film *Psycho*. Other common theme in images of haunted houses is that they are pictured from a low angle to give the homes an ominous sense of scale. Even the relatively small house from *Psycho* is often pictured perched up high to make it feel larger than it is and to give it a sense of isolation. Isolation is another common theme in haunted house images as well as country houses. Bly House was an isolated building on an English country estate and its isolation, and therefore the isolation of the Governess, is a key element in the ghost story. I talked in Professor Ularu's class about how a picture of any country home could be made to look like a haunted house if pictured from a low angle showing the building in a skewed perspective and accentuating its isolation. Add

in an ominous sky or a large moon and there was no question about its place in a ghost story. The idea of a low angle to create a sense of unease also works well in the interior of a home. The image of someone perched at the top of a grand staircase makes them seem more powerful, mysterious and even sinister and I wanted to incorporate a staircase into the design. An element of neglect would also lend to a general feeling of unease as the interior of any haunted house is old and unkempt.

The director established that we would be creating a unit set with relatively few actual changes happening between scenes to keep the production from being about the scene changes. Since the opera is set at the Bly House estate, I presented the idea of depicting the whole estate with all the elements needed for each scene being on stage the whole time. We would see the manor house, with its tower and front porch, as well as the grounds outside with the lake and the local church. The production would shift locations by moving the cast around the stage and focusing the audiences' attention through lighting and use of the scrim.

A key location in the set was the lake on the Bly estate as there are two scenes there including one with the ghost of Miss Jessel. I wanted to give the suggestion of an isolated lake on the stage and thought the open orchestra pit could function as the deep water of the lake with the edge decorated with water grasses and cattails to suggest the water meeting the land. Building an old pier at the edge of the stage spanning the orchestra pit would give an opportunity to bring the ghost out of the set provide a location for the lake scenes to be staged away from the house.

The production also called for a chapel or church, and it was common in the English countryside for the local house of worship to be located on or adjacent to the manor property to provide worship services for the staff required to run the estate. I wanted to give the suggestion of the church next to Bly House with a steeple and cross but did not want to create a structure to dominate the stage. To further indicate the church as a location and add to the ghost story theme, I wanted to show the church graveyard and provide a stone bench amongst the graves as the location for the scenes in the opera. To add to the graveyard feeling, and the overall ghost story theme for the production, I wanted the silhouettes of trees to be in the background back lit by the cyclorama to further indicate that stage layout included outside locations as well as inside.

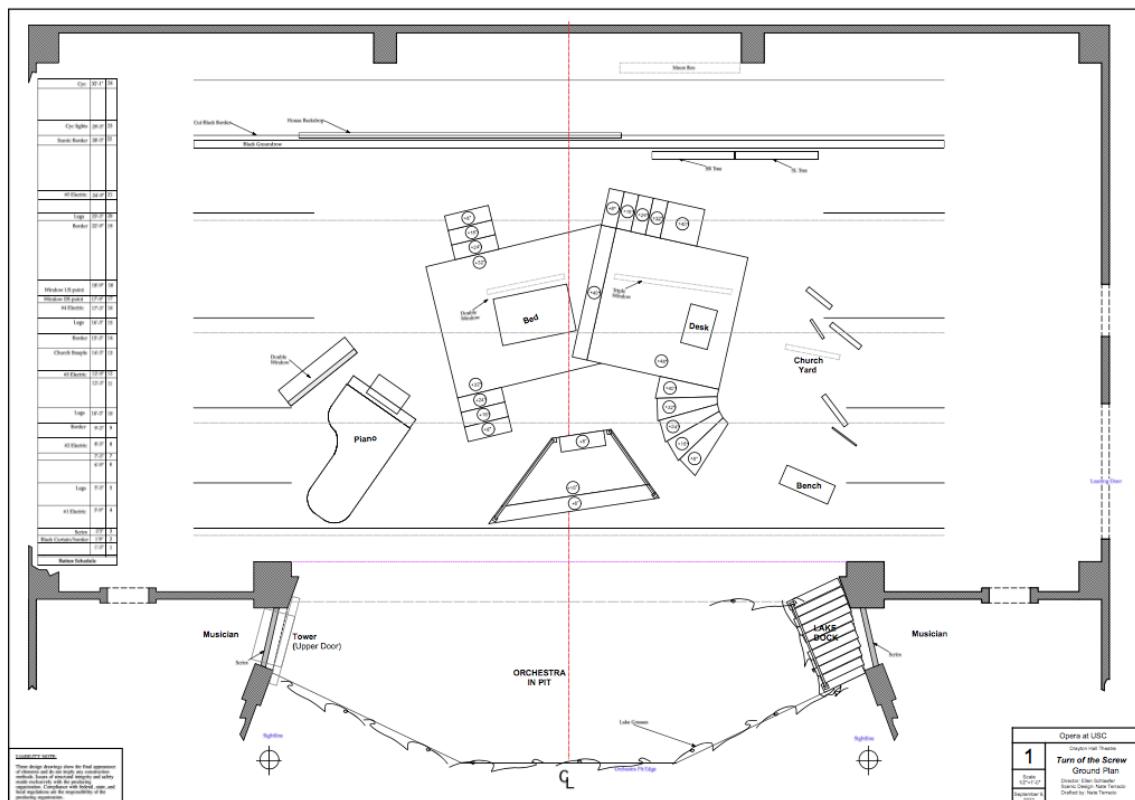


Figure 5.2: Ground plan for *The Turn of the Screw*.

Once the basic layout of the stage was finalized with a tower downstage right, the pier at the lake downstage left and the manor grounds with the church and graveyard stage left, all that was left was to design the specifics of the manor house. The director wanted several levels and wanted enough height so that the cast could have a clear view of the conductor in the orchestra pit. The interior needed to have three spaces – a bedroom for Miles, the school room, and a study with a piano – so I designed a floorplan of the home with the 3 spaces on three different levels connected by stairs. I had access to the grand piano shell from my earlier design of *Much Ado About Nothing* and decided to implement the piano into the study so that the children, Miles and Flora, could be children and hide under or climb on top of the piano in addition to sitting and playing the instrument (music provided by the orchestra). This meant that the study was on the stage level with the bedroom and study on raised platforms. The platforms were designed using the inventory of platforms in the scene shop while also taking into account the need for stairs upstage of the platforms while leaving enough space for the cast to crossover behind them. I also wanted to put in a grand staircase leading to the tallest platform to suggest the scale and grandeur of the manor house. To introduce some curved lines into the design, and to work within the dimensions of the set, I drew a curved staircase with a railing on only the outside of the stairs to visually separate the inside of the house from the outside.

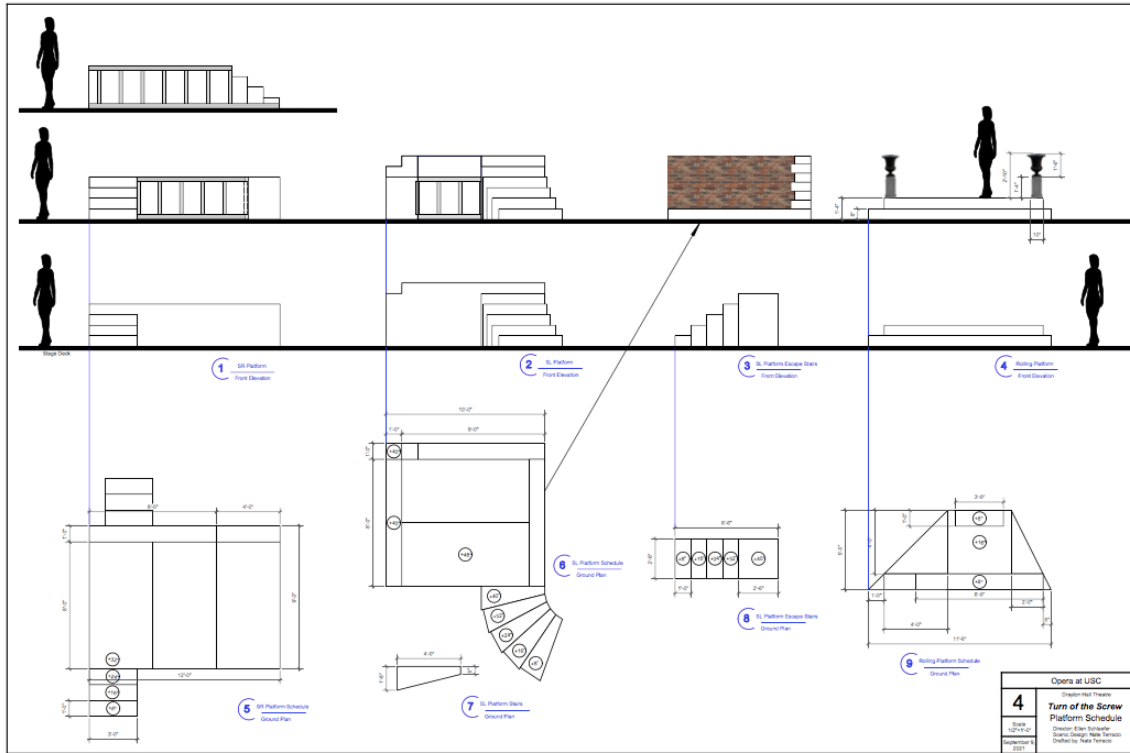


Figure 5.3: Shop drawings of Bly House platforms for *The Turn of the Screw*.

The other key element in the design was the desire for windows to give the feeling that someone was, or could be, always be looking through them. I looked at several different Victorian window styles with my advisor and settled on something with a Victorian Gothic arch at the top to give them more of an antiquated and ghostly look. Each of the three rooms would need a window for the ghosts to appear behind during different scenes, but I also wanted to use the windows for more than just static set dressing. From the beginning the director and I had talked about how to give the set, and the production, the feeling of a ghost story. I felt that things moving and adjusting either on their own, or being adjusted by the ghosts, would lend an air of creepiness to the scenery. The two sets of hanging windows for the bedroom and school room were hung at slight angles by putting the outside hanging points for each window on one fly pipe

and the inside hanging points on a fly pipe further upstage. This also allowed for one of the pipes to be moved to make the windows look askew. The third set of windows were in the study and were built as free-standing windows on wheels so the ghosts in the cast could move them as directed.

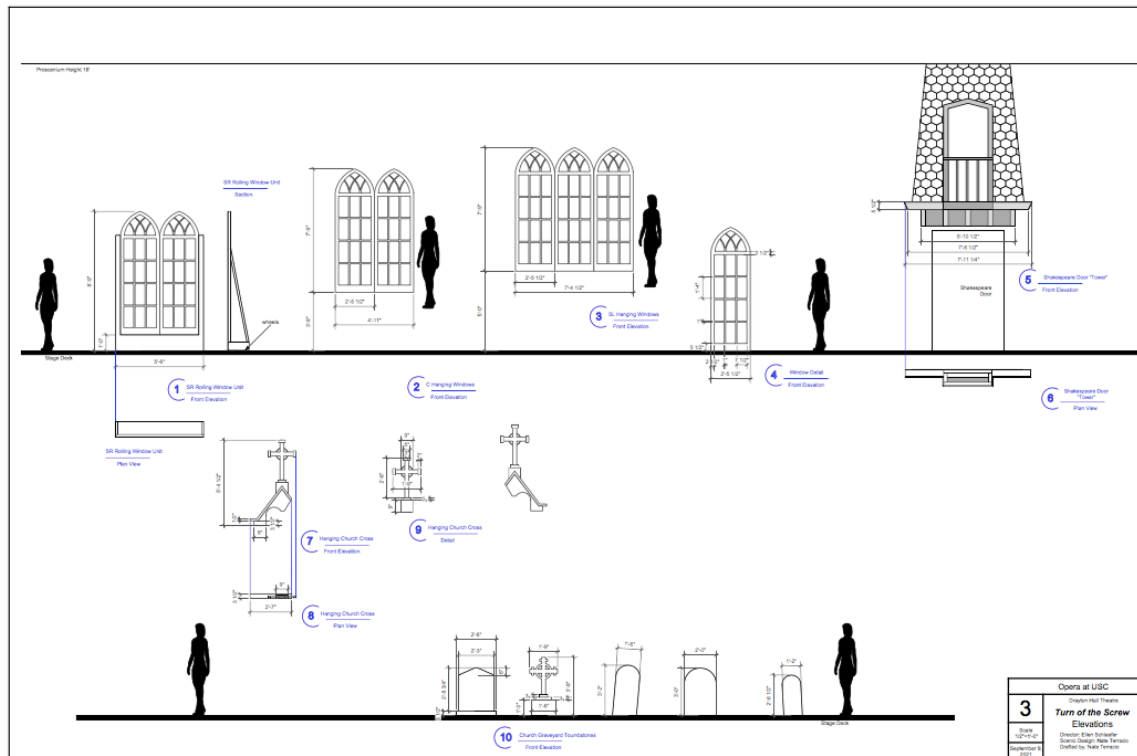


Figure 5.4: Elevation drafting for *The Turn of the Screw*.

The last thing was to find a way to indicate that the platforms and windows were a part of an old Victorian country home. Working with Professor Ularu, I drew the silhouette of a creepy Victorian looking haunted house to be used as the backdrop behind the interior to indicate that the stage right side of the stage was the manor house. The silhouetted image in front of the cyclorama also continued to give the general air of ghost story to the stage. The opera had a moon box in storage and I added it to the design as it did not require construction and it completed the image that I had seen over and over in

[illegible]

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Figure 5.6: Scenic rendering for *The Turn of the Screw*.



Figure 5.7: Scenic rendering for *The Turn of the Screw*.

The building of the set happened several weeks in advance of the technical time in the theatre allowing for ample time between the construction and the load in for the set to be assembled in the scene shop and for scenic painting and trouble shooting. Where the process got pressed for time is when we moved into the theatre and had a very short window of time to set up both the electrics and load in the set before technical rehearsals started. The final part of the process was the set decorating that happened during the technical rehearsals: the assembly of the pier, addition of the lake foliage, the arrangement of the furniture in the house, and general painting touch ups. The director didn't want scenic adjustments to distract from the cast and we in the end kept the crew's changes to a minimum. There was one scenic shift at intermission with adjustments to the windows and scenic border, and the rest of the adjustments between scenes relied on lighting changes and minor changes made by the supernumeraries in the cast.



Figure 5.8: Production photo of *The Turn of the Screw*. Univ. of South Carolina 2021.



Figure 5.9: Production photo of *The Turn of the Screw*. Univ. of South Carolina 2021.



Figure 5.10: Production photo of *The Turn of the Screw*. Univ. of South Carolina 2021.



Figure 5.11: Production photo of *The Turn of the Screw*. Univ. of South Carolina 2021.

5.4 LA BELLE HELENE

After the darker production of *The Turn of the Screw* the director wanted *La Belle Helene* to be as opposite in tone and design as possible. Inspired by French farces, she wanted to embrace the comedy in the script and play the production for laughs. Being a parody of the Trojan War story, the director wanted the overall aesthetic to be cartoonishly Greek. I took inspiration from the Asterix comics where the world of ancient Rome is parodied, and the books are filled with cartoonish imagery. She also wanted a world of anachronisms with modern props and costumes being peppered into an otherwise Greek design scheme. So I also looked at modern architecture where ancient Greek and Roman elements are coopted into modern buildings.

La Belle Helene is a three-act operetta with three distinct scenic locations and minimal scenic adjustment needed in each act. The first act location is introduced by the narrator, “Here’s the massive Temple of Zeus and over there, the lovely Temple of

Venus.” The director and I talked about whether we should show Greece as it was in ancient times or as we see ancient Greece today as ruins. I looked at images of the ancient world as seen today through current photos of different temples in ruins. Because gender dynamics play an important, and comedic, part in the script I decided it would be appropriate for the “massive” temple of Zeus to be a single solitary ruined column while the “lovely Temple of Venus” was presented more as it would have looked in ancient times. For budgetary reasons we needed to use stock items as much as possible, so I took a set piece from storage that had been a Roman inspired temple and redesigned a Greek triangular top to replace the Roman arch on top of the columns to be the Temple of Venus. The pre-existing scenic piece was on wheels which allowed the Temple of Venus to be moved and transformed for acts two and three.



Figure 5.12: Opera at USC production showing rolling platforms with columns repurposed for *La Belle Helene*.

Act two takes place in Helen’s boudoir. The two requirements in the script were a bed and a place for the men to play cards. I did research into ancient Greek stone beds as seen in museums today and thought that Helen’s bed should look inspired by the original.

Taking things cartoonishly too far I wanted all the furniture in the bedroom to look like it was the same marble as the Temple of Venus so I added a stone vanity for Helen and some benches for the scene where the men pass the time waiting for her by playing cards. To make the setting look like a bedroom I had sheer fabric flown in to give the indication that the Temple of Venus was the entrance to the boudoir flanked by two large windows covered by curtains.



Figure 5.13: Research images for *La Belle Helene* including Greek era temples, an antique Greek bed, the island of Santorini, and Greek key and wave designs.

Act three takes place at a seaside resort. The director wanted to keep with the cartoonish theme and wanted the cast to be at the beach of this seaside resort. I looked at a lot of pictures of current Greek seaside towns and a disproportionate number of images that I found were from the Greek island of Santorini. The simple Greek architecture in photos is a mix of ancient and modern reproduction and the color scheme is the white and blue of the Greek flag. Wanting to stay with imagery that was stereotypically Greek I

was inspired to incorporate the white and blue color scheme into the act three design. I flipped the Temple of Venus around and painted the back of the structure to be the blue and white of the Greek flag. But what purpose would the Temple of Venus, painted or not, serve at the beach? I added a sign to the structure with faux Greek lettering that said “Bath House” to turn the Temple from act one into beachside changing rooms for act three.

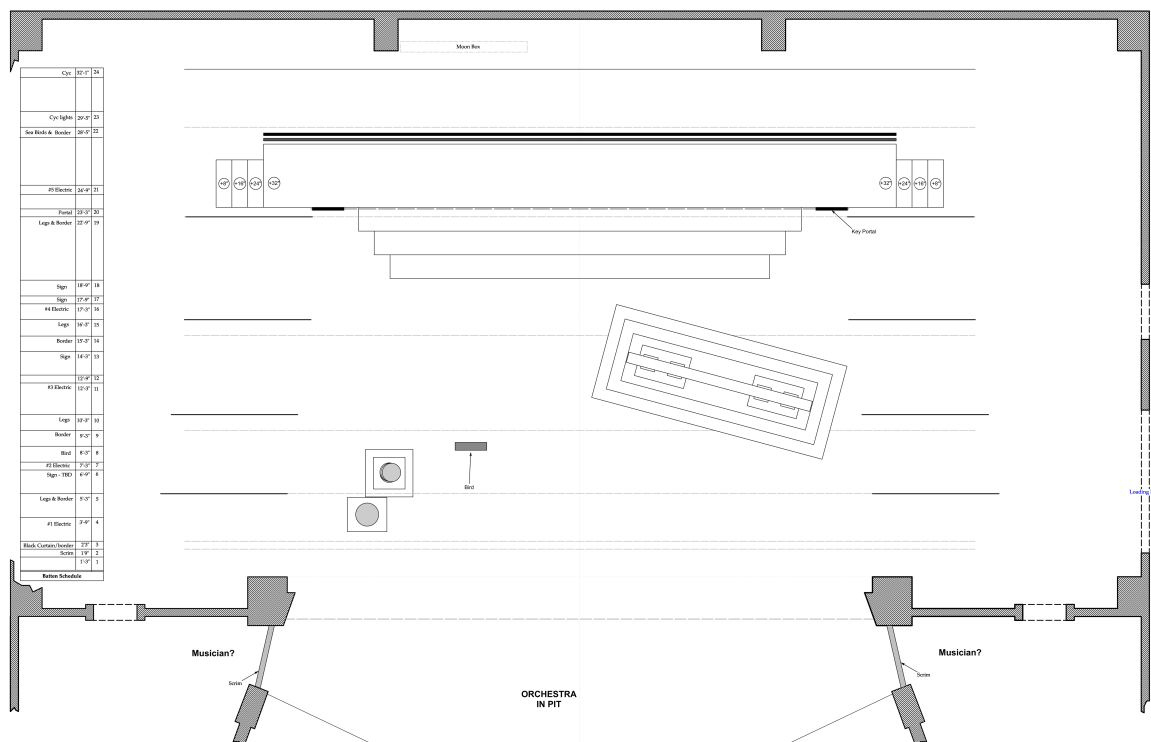
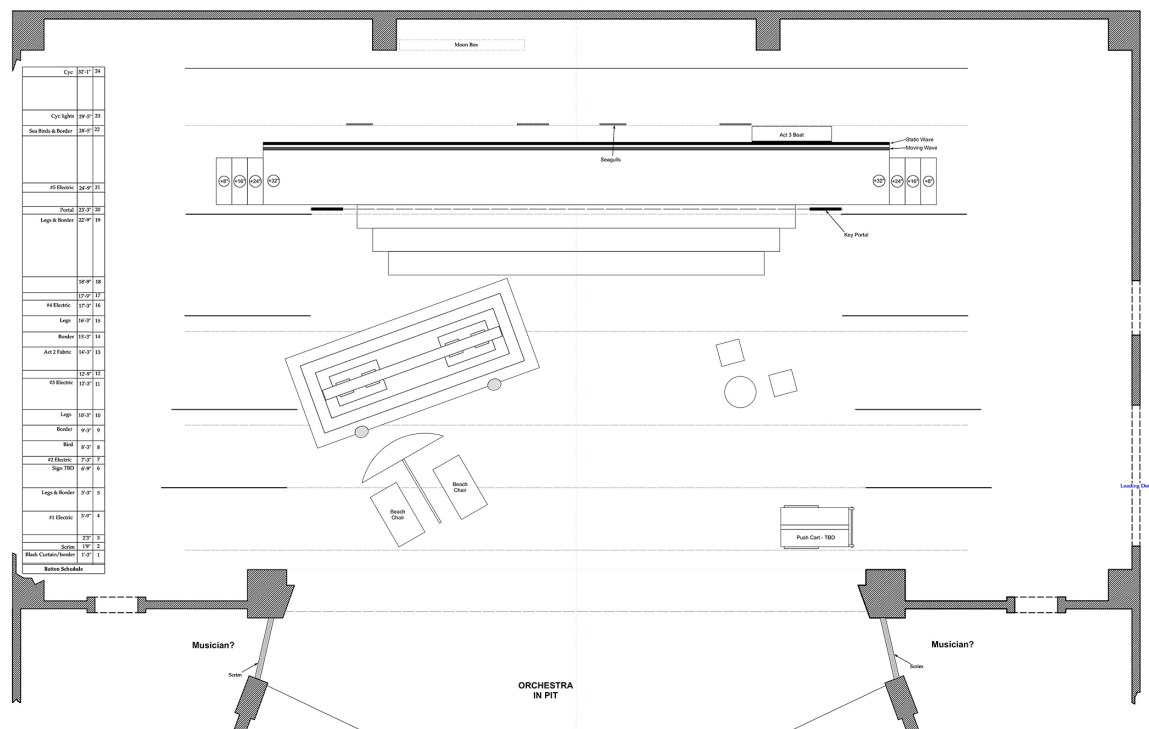
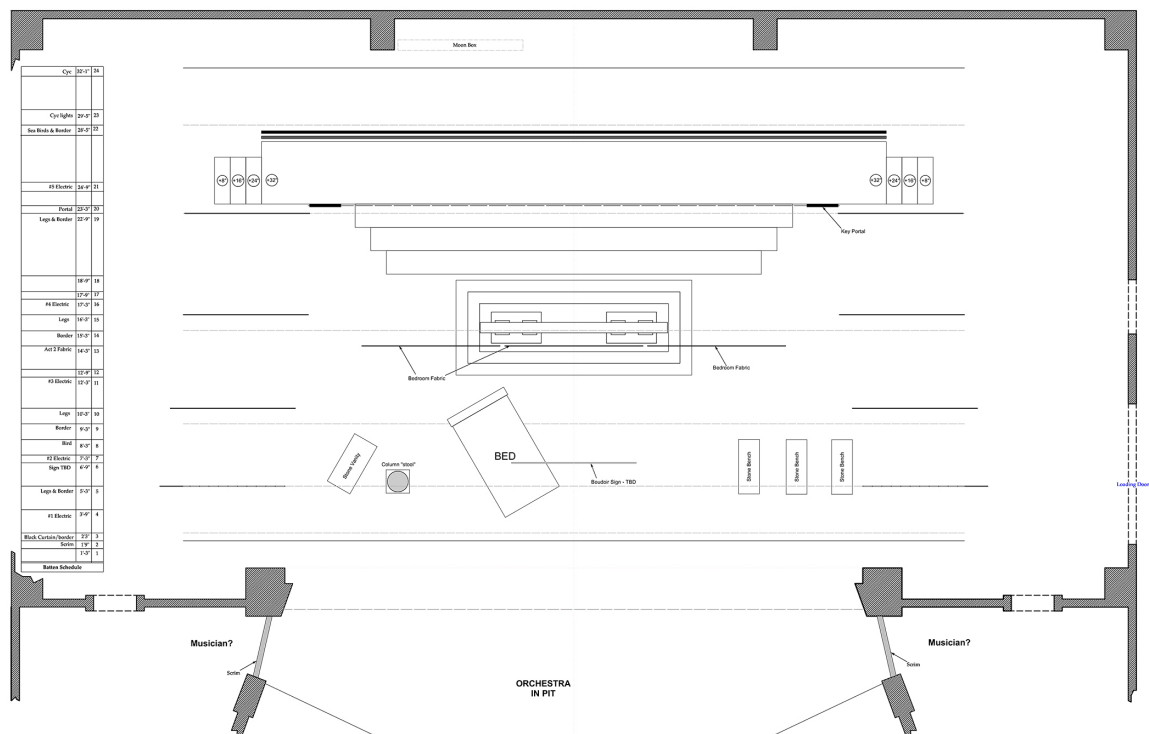


Figure 5.14: Act 1 ground plan for *La Belle Helene*.



Now that the basic design elements of the three acts were figured out, the details of each act's design needed to be finalized. For the first and third acts there was the need for space for the chorus on the stage and a set of stairs upstage would act as choral risers. I wanted steps that looked like steps to the Parthenon as that looked appropriate beside the temples in act one. For act three they would become the stairs up to the sea wall at the ocean's edge, and we would hide them upstage behind the boudoir curtains for act two. The cyclorama would be at the back behind the stairs to provide the classic blue Greek sky behind the set for act one and three, but I didn't want just a simple framing of black curtains at the back. I wanted to incorporate some stereotypical Greek imagery into the design and thought a repeating Greek key frame around the cyclorama would provide that. If the white were cut out, it would allow the key design to change color with the cyclorama. This Greek key frame would be repeated around the super title screen hanging above the set as well.

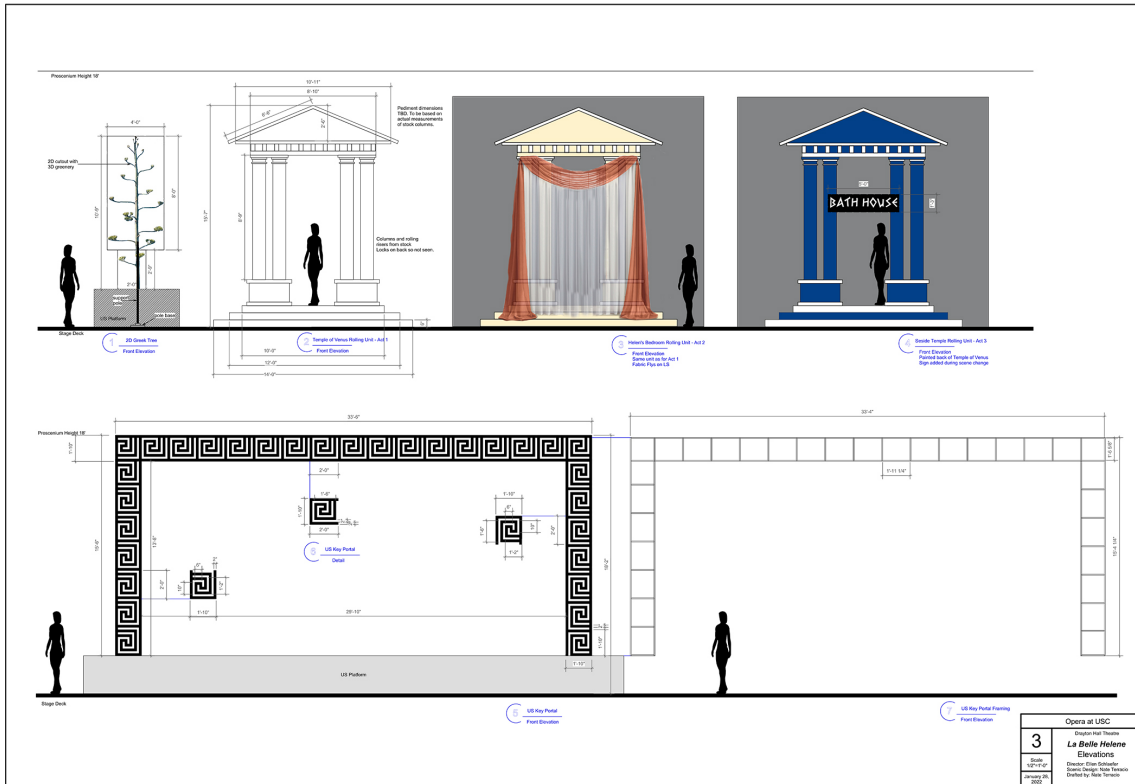


Figure 5.17: Elevation drawings for *La Belle Helene*.

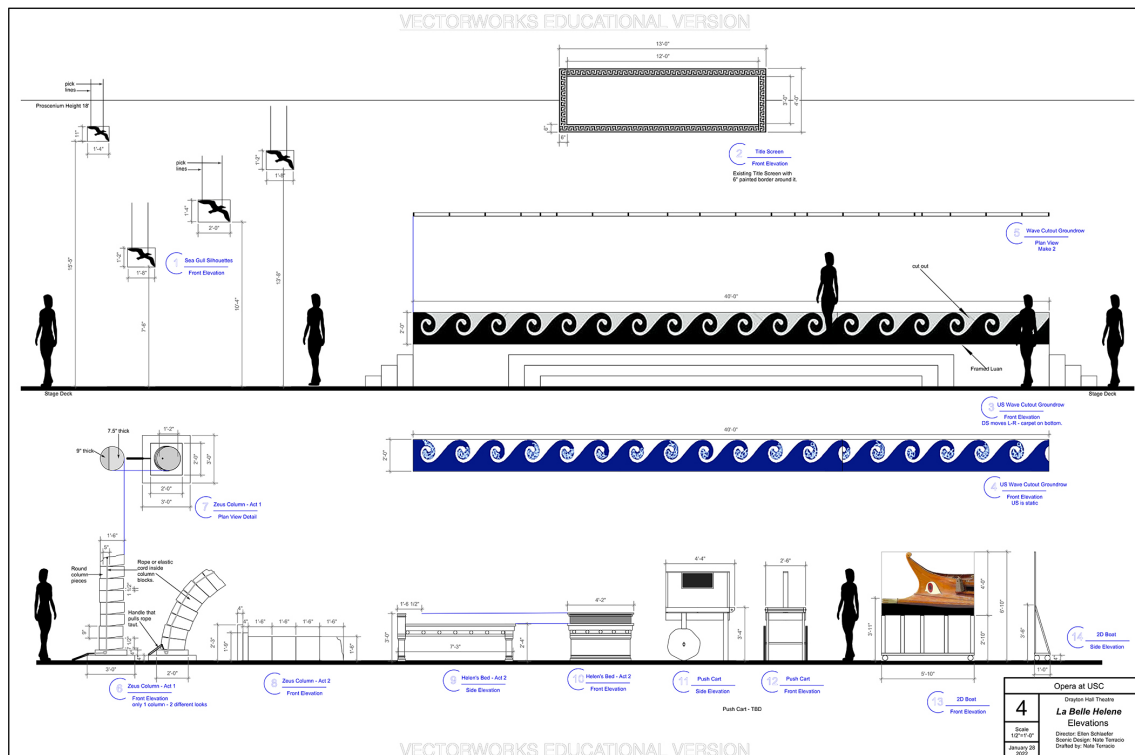


Figure 5.18: Elevation drawings for *La Belle Helene*.

The last part of the design was the set dressing. My rendering of act one seemed unbalanced with just the Temple of Venus and the small Temple of Zeus. The director had an album of photos taken when she was in Greece, and we found an image of a single solitary tree growing on a Greek island that seemed cartoonishly simple and the perfect element to drop into the back of the set to balance the height of the Temple of Venus. For act three I needed to fill the stage with set dressing that indicated a beachside resort. I added the silhouette of sea gulls at the back against the cyclorama to give the indication of beachside location and the stereotypical Greek wave pattern across the top of the stairs in the back to further indicate location. We made two sets of waves so that they could be moved side to side to give the illusion that they were the undulating ocean at the top of the act. The final seaside touches were a Greek inspired bistro table and chair set and Greek style seaside beach chairs and beach umbrella.



Figure 5.19: Scenic rendering of *La Belle Helene* Act 1.



Figure 5.20: Scenic rendering of *La Belle Helene* Act 2.



Figure 5.21: Scenic rendering of *La Belle Helene* Act 3.

Once again, the building of the set happened several weeks in advance of the technical time in the theatre giving time for the scenic painting to happen in the scene shop. The base design of the Temple of Venus was already marbled, so I set out to paint the newly constructed top and the boudoir furniture to match the existing painted marble texture. The choral risers were painted to look like weathered stone steps. To save on time and costs I again repurposed a pre-painted floor from another production that was in the opera storage, so we just needed to transport and lay the painted masonite down over the black stage floor in the theatre.



Figure 5.22: Production photo of *La Belle Helene* Act 1. Univ. of South Carolina 2022.



Figure 5.23: Production photo of *La Belle Helene* Act 2. Univ. of South Carolina 2022.



Figure 5.24: Production photo of *La Belle Helene* Act 3. Univ. of South Carolina 2022.

5.5 CONCLUSION

Through this professional internship process with Opera at USC I designed two different opera productions providing the opportunity to directly explore design concepts

learned through coursework in a real-world environment. I had studied opera and opera scenic design and done paper designs for operas in class, but this process allowed me to see the processes unfold on stage with a cast making use of the design. The process also allowed me to work with another professional director outside of the Department of Theatre and Dance. Each director I worked with inside the department balanced their vision for the production with the educational process for the students in the department. There was more allowance for discussion and changes in design to be introduced throughout the process as the designs would be discussed and worked on in the classroom in addition throughout the semester. While this process of academic and design discussion happened in the classroom for *The Turn of the Screw*, the director had a more concrete decision making process. Once scenic elements were decided on, she did not want to engage in the process of reevaluating them. Through the process of designing *The Turn of the Screw* I ultimately ended up with two versions of the same scenic design. One from the academic classroom point of view where elements were discussed and improved multiple times through a process of revisions, and one where a few basic ideas for the scenery were set in stone and everything else had to fall into place around them. Ultimately the production design built for the stage was the result of lots of research and discussion, but once the design specifics were introduced the decisions were finalized quickly and we moved forward making the best possible design in the time allowed with the resources available without second guessing ourselves too much.

All the productions I worked on in the Department of Theatre and Dance were built by the same department scene shop and working with Opera at USC gave me the opportunity to work with a different technical director and master carpenter. This

provided the opportunity to draw the design for a new team and learn what I was communicating well on paper and what I needed to clarify better. Working with the same team for both productions allowed me to learn from the building of *The Turn of the Screw* and revise the style and detail of the paperwork for *La Belle Helene*. It also allowed me to learn what the carpenters did well on the first production and take into account their skills in the design of the second production.

While both scenic designs were built by the same master carpenter and overseen by the same technical director, one major difference between *The Turn of the Screw* and *La Belle Helene* was that for *The Turn of the Screw* we engaged a professional scenic painter and for *La Belle Helene* I was the scenic painter. I learned some new techniques working with a professional scenic painter outside the Department of Theatre and Dance, and once the production was loaded into the theatre I had to replicate his work for the touch-up process. For both productions I was able to take techniques I learned in my scenic painting class and apply it to painting the sets in a professional design setting.

La Belle Helene was the first production that I designed completely outside the Department of Theatre and Dance without any mentorship or assistance from the team I had worked with throughout my years of study. The process was both freeing and nerve wracking because there was no safety net. Anytime I second-guessed a decision I had the opera design and technical team to fall back on, but no additional support network. The design timeline was short, as was the time between the load out of *The Turn of the Screw* and the build window for *La Belle Helene*. I was also working within considerable budget constraints which added an additional layer of challenge to the design process while at the same time providing a real-world scenario similar to classroom design

exercises I had worked on in Professor Ularu's classes: I needed to design the set using stock pieces to keep the construction to a minimum. I also revisited the process I learned during *Shakespeare in Love* where I created alternative uses for the set elements by putting them in new configurations to create a total set design with minimal set pieces.

I was also designing the Department of Theatre and Dance's production of *Romeo and Juliet* at the same time I was working on *La Belle Helene* and the rehearsal and build process for the department production overlapped with the technical rehearsals and production of the opera. This overlapping process with two different design teams being built by two different shops and being put on in two different theatres was insight into the professional world of designing where you are working on multiple projects at the same time and they often overlap. I had to let the creative process for each production feed the other while keeping all the details organized and not let the schedules conflict with each other. Everything I had learned in the classroom and in the design process for department productions all came together and I finally felt like I could trust myself as a scenic designer.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

As a non-traditional MFA student I had the benefit of additional time taking five years instead of the traditional three years to complete my coursework and internship. This allowed me to work alongside five different Scenic Design MFA candidates during my time in the program including working on two co-designs with two different fellow students. Over the five years I co-designed two department productions, designed six department productions in three different theatre spaces working with seven different directors. Through my professional internship with Opera at USC, I designed two different opera productions bringing the opportunity to directly explore design concepts learned in coursework in a real-world environment.

In the beginning the process of designing the set for a department production was similar to my past theatre experiences: the script was read, ideas were collaborated on, and decisions were made. But throughout my five years I kept learning more and more about the “why” involved in designing a production: why was the script chosen, why did the director choose a certain concept for the production, why did the decisions made work or not work in the final production. Through working with so many designers and directors I learned that not only are the “whys” different for different artists, but also how the process works is different for different artists. I had to learn how to adjust to the style of the different directors and the different members of the design teams and I became a

better communicator. Each new design, either in the classroom or in the theatre, taught me a valuable lesson about both how the process of creating theatre could work better, but why the things that worked well worked well.

I still feel that the process of plucking an idea out of the pages of a script and creating a world that would inspire the imagination of the audience is akin to magic. But like any stage magician there is a process for creating magic, and practice is required to make it easier. As I progressed through designs both in and out of the classroom translating ideas to paper and from paper to the stage became easier. The most important thing I learned was how to keep questioning the process and the reasons behind the design decisions made. As I leave the safety of the graduate design program I strive to continue the rich collaborative process of working with other artists to inspire people's imaginations. Though the graduate degree process I relied on the safety net of my mentor, my teachers, and my fellow students less and less as I gained experience. I look forward to carrying not only their knowledge and skills with me but, more importantly, the processes they taught me outside school and into the world.

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