# The future, by design

## Traditional fine arts in the digital age

BY KATE MORGAN

THE PAST QUARTER century has seen a paradigm shift in the world of theatrical design. Set pieces that once required the human touch of a highly skilled fine artist can now be rendered on a computer. Time-consuming three-dimensional set models can be created in just a few hours. Massive scenic drops can be printed for a fraction of the cost, time, and labor required to have them painted by scenic artists. The digital age has arrived, and many people feel its innovations are a death knell for an entire industry of scenic artists.

In 1994, well before programs like Adobe Photoshop and design software like Vectorworks

Lead scenic artist Jane Snow from Scenic Art Studios paints a drop intended for the 2017 Broadway revival of Hello, Dolly!
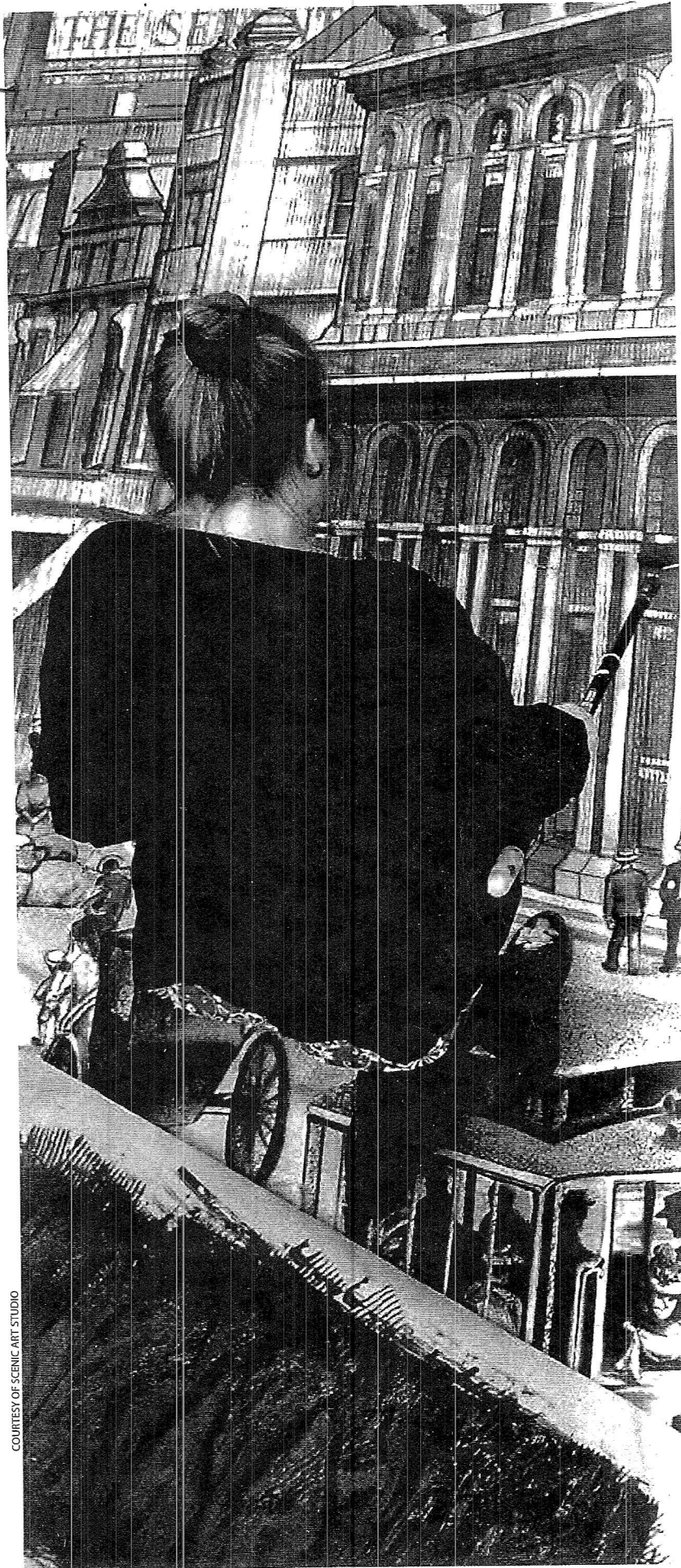
COURTESY OF SCENIC ART STUDIO

LAWRENCE GREGONEK
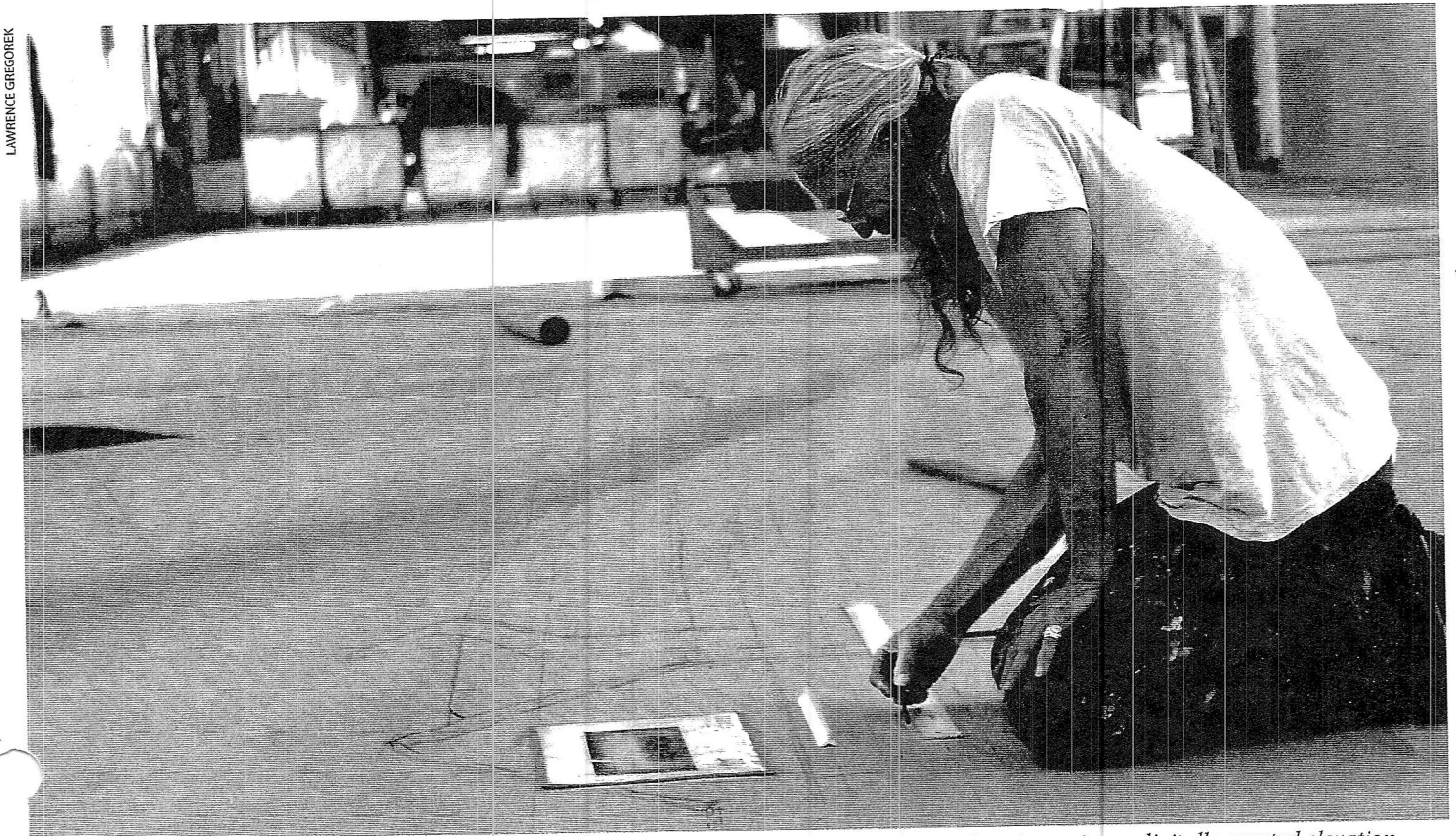
Scenic artist Richard W. Prouse from Scenic Art Studios sketches a drop for the musical Dirty Dancing *using a digitally created elevation.*

became ubiquitous, Joseph Forbes founded Scenic Art Studios. From its headquarters in Newburgh, New York, the studio and its artists have painted drops and constructed set pieces for more than 300 Broadway shows and many more operas, plays, concerts, festivals, and ballets. "In addition to drops, we're always painting and texturizing doors, windows, staircases, fire escapes," Forbes says. "We send crews into theatres to paint all that scenery. We sculpt. We sew. We do crazy things. We made a huge sculpture for Kanye West's Coachella performance. We'll sometimes do 15 Broadway shows in a year and anywhere from 200 to 400 drops. When we're busy, we're busy."

Though business for Forbes is teaming along, he knows some

people think it's a matter of time until he's replaced by a computer. "I've been threatened with my imminent demise for a quarter of a century now," Forbes says, "but I'm an old man, and I have my ways. To me, printed drops are devoid of life. When you take an image on your screen and blow it up to 60 feet wide, there are things that don't make sense anymore. They just don't look real. Plus — and this goes to the core of it — we're bombarded by digital images 24/7. I don't think you go to the theatre to see more digital images. You go to see things that are created by man, that are human and ephemeral."

Forbes believes many, if not most, designers still prefer to use painted drops but are confined by their

production's budget. "I don't think anybody *really* likes printed drops," Forbes says. "They go that way when they can't find the money to do it another way. It's frightening, because the designers are constantly under budget pressure. Our worst enemies are the money people trying to get this thing into budget. They turn to the designer and say, 'You can have your spiral staircase and get the drops printed, or you can have the drops painted and lose the staircase.' In the theatre, that's a Faustian bargain."

Despite the threat of an all-digital future, Forbes says some technological innovations make his work much easier. "There's a good side to all of this," he says. "We use the digital imaging and the tech available to us to speed along the drawing and layout

processes. We have giant plotters now, and we can print the sketch full-scale. That saves us a tremendous amount of labor. To draw these things by hand, we need anywhere from five to 10 days. If we print it, we're looking at two or three days. We also have companies cut laser-jet aluminum stencils for us. We just cut stencils for a show at Radio City Music Hall that were each 5' by 10'. In that way, technology has been a real blessing and has helped us save a lot of money."

Matt Crane, a freelance designer and scenic artist who recently finished graduate school at Rutgers University's Mason Gross School of the Arts and now is working in New York City, says his generation of artists and designers is infinitely more employable. His peers have been using digital technology their entire lives. "Students in design programs talk about this a lot," he says. "Designers — and even university faculty of a certain age — grew up without computers, and it's difficult for them to learn the thousands of programs out there now. We essentially get hired right out of school, because we know these programs." Crane is often hired by designers to assist with the technological aspects of conceptualizing a set. "I've gotten far more work because established designers know I do 3-D computer drafting," he says.

As impressive as his screen-based skills are to potential employers, Crane says he still begins every design with a good old-fashioned pencil sketch and a white model — a scale model of the set built by hand out of foam board or cardstock. "My hands need to figure out what the show is first. My wrist has a different brain than my head does, and I can make things when I'm drawing that I'd never get using a mouse. On the computer you have to think more math-based, but on paper you make the lines where the lines want to go. I strongly believe that to do this job you have to have that background in fine art."

Plenty of set pieces and props cry out for human creativity and finesse. Katie Woodward, a freelancer based in New York City who's worked with Juilliard and Stella Adler Studios, says creating these unique pieces requires a wide array of fine art skills. "I do a lot of props work, particularly at the Signature Theatre here in New York City," she says. "Sometimes it's pretty ordinary stuff: painting a bunch of chairs or painting a table to match a stool. Other times I'll be doing something like painting 90 individually casted [sculptures of] heads. I do more painting than anything else, but there are also sculpting and sewing projects."
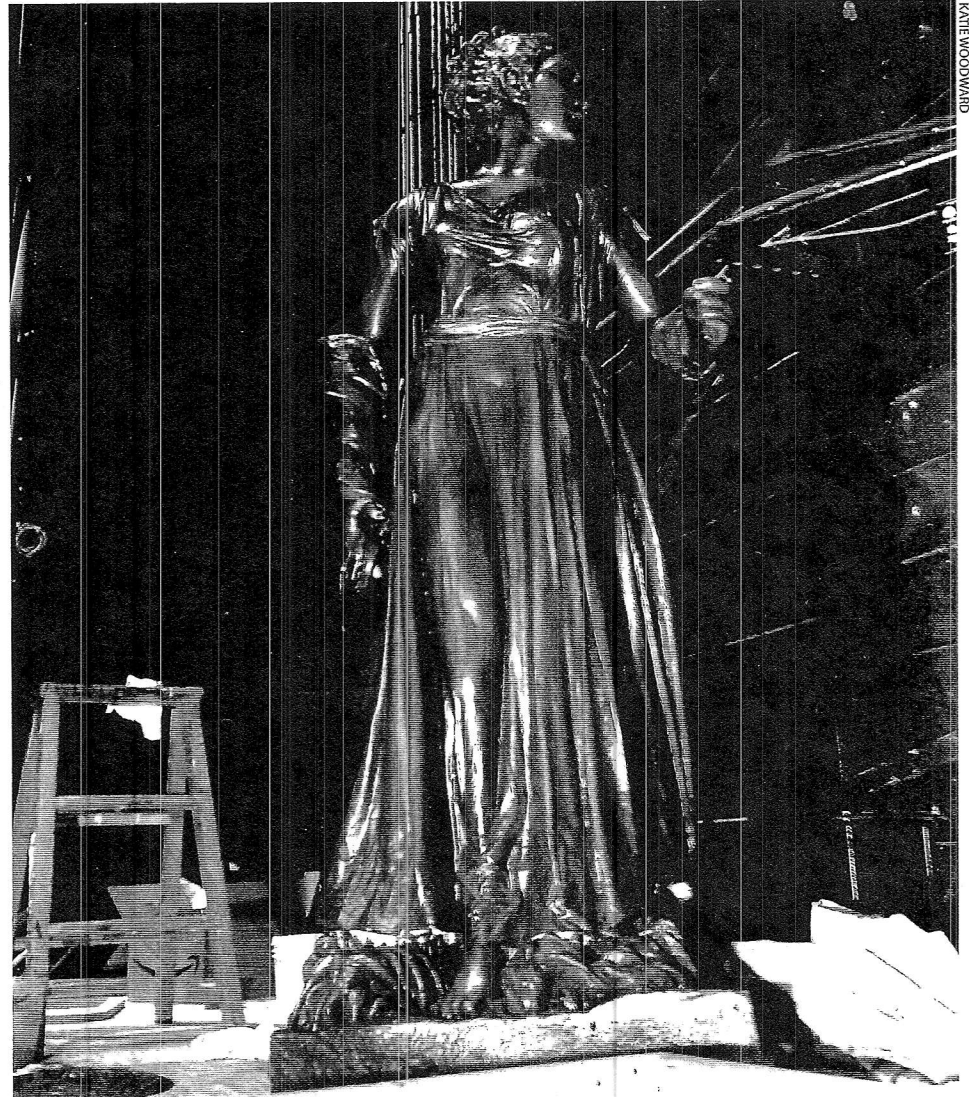
This statue of Mother Russia, created for the Hartford Stage premiere of the musical Anastasia, required the fine art skills and special attention of a human — not a computer — to achieve the desired bronze texture.

In 2016, Woodward got a call from a friend working on the premiere of *Anastasia* at Hartford Stage in Connecticut. "My friend who's the props master at Hartford Stage called me up and said she had a nude Athena statue that needed to be turned into a clothed Mother Russia statue," Woodward says. "It was going to require someone who could drape and sew and make it look bronze. There will always be textures that are impossible to print." In other words: The project required a person, not a computer. Woodward's Mother Russia statue followed the production to Broadway in 2017.

Woodward points out the constant crossover between digital design and fine art. Elevations — the small-scale images that designers provide scenic artists to guide the look and color palette of huge drops — are now commonly created in Adobe Photoshop. "Most designers recognize that painting frequently looks better and push

to get things painted when possible," she says. "Even if they're Photoshopping the elevations, the fine art skills still apply."

Forbes says his shop receives a lot of elevations created in Photoshop, which sometimes requires his artists to take their creativity a step further. While some are true-to-life drops rendered in miniature, others are more abstract, with photos or graphics that give the artists an idea of the designer's vision but require them to rework elements to make them work at 60 feet tall. "We get those much more often now than hand-painted elevations," he says, "and it means you have to be really good at what you're doing to take that information and turn it into the designer's vision.
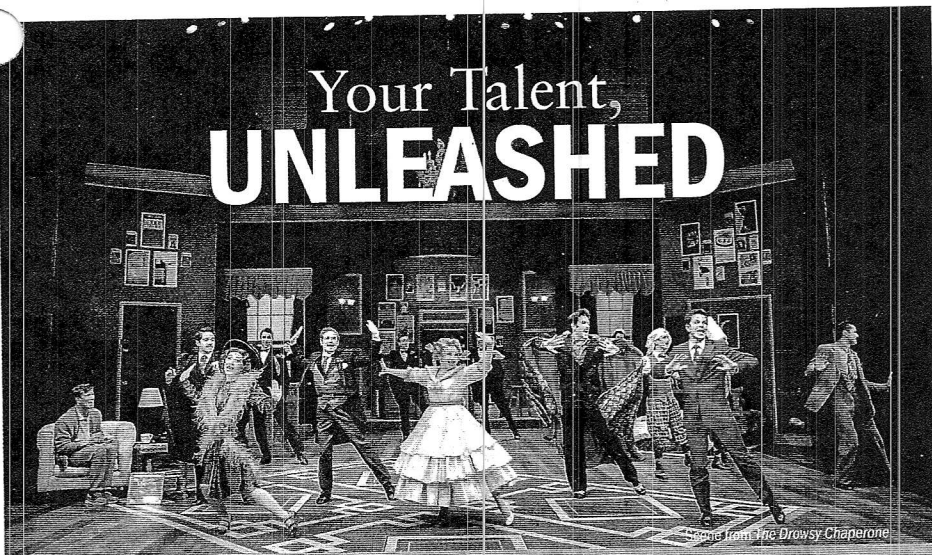
"But that's another argument for theatre artists. If your starting point is computer-generated, you need an artist's experience and skills even more. We understand perspective and color,

highlights and shadows, and the way light will play off a painted canvas on the stage. We know how to make that giant drop you imagine when you see it on your computer screen into reality."

While Crane extols the virtues of designers mastering computer programs, he doesn't think that being tech savvy is enough to join the next generation of great scenic designers or scenic artists. "The best advice anyone ever gave me about being a better designer is to draw every day," he says. "There's an act of observation that goes into daily drawing, where you have to be there in the moment with a piece of paper, eliminate distractions, and force yourself to see things the way they actually look. There's a difference between what our heads think things look like and what they look like in the world, and it's important to practice both skills: drawing things and just looking at things. That translates to how people will see what you put on the stage."

He also thinks the future of innovative stage design will be a marriage between the traditional and the modern. He points to the 2017 Tony-winning revival of *Hello, Dolly!* as an example of both worlds working together cohesively. "It's a love letter to old school Broadway," he says. "For me, everything about that show is a celebration of Broadway past and present. There are traditional painted drops, and there are hyper-detailed and dimensional set pieces that are a staple of modern scenography. There's room for both in the theatre world. There's room for both in the same show."

Crane knows computers aren't going anywhere, but then, neither are seasoned, skilled scenic artists. "The thing that will get me — and other designers of my generation — hired is my technological ability," he says, "but the thing that will make me better as an artist are the hand skills. As much as fear-mongers might say otherwise and think that hand skills will die out in favor of computer skills, when I look into the future of my industry, I see them moving forward hand-in-hand." ▼