

Simplify your set design

Capture the essence
of the story

name

period

BY GEORGE F. LEDO

CREATING SETS on a budget can sound daunting, but it doesn't have to be if you keep the most important part of the theatrical experience in mind: the story. Every set design starts with the story — not the script but the story contained within it — and with imagining the best physical environment for that story, an environment that will “feel right” to both actors and audience. However, there's no need to be literal or realistic.

Make your choices carefully. There's an old technique taught in creative writing courses: Once you have a draft you're OK with, go through it to find anything that doesn't move the story forward and eliminate it. It could be a scene, sentence, word, or even minor character. Trim and keep trimming, until every word counts. The same technique applies to creating a set, and it can work wonders, especially when faced with a tight budget.

Provide a blank slate

In 1975, the Royal Shakespeare Company produced Shakespeare's four Henry plays (*Henry IV* parts 1 and 2, *Henry V*, and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*) in rotating rep during the summer at their theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon. The set for all four plays was, literally, a bare stage. No masking, no legs or borders — nothing. You could see the back wall of the stage, the line sets, the lights overhead, and everything else.

But when those actors came out in their gorgeous costumes and makeup and started to tell their stories, they grabbed the audience. I

was still shaken a week later. They used the necessary props and furniture, but there was no question whether they were in a castle, a battlefield, or anywhere else. It was an awesome theatrical experience, totally focused on the story and characters. For these productions, huge sets and elaborate set dressing would have been superfluous. For me, this story hits to the heart of what set design is.

Scale the set

Those four productions had a huge impact on my approach to design. For more than a decade, I've de-

signed sets for several "small" shows presented on large stages (40 feet or more across). One early design choice was how much of that stage to use. Examples of these shows include *An Inspector Calls* (six to eight characters with most of the action around a dinner table), *The Diary of Anne Frank* (a small family in an attic), and *My Way: A Musical Tribute to Frank Sinatra* (several singer-dancers in a nightclub).

Instead of filling those stages with scenery, I chose to create spaces just large enough for the story to develop and to bring the action down to the apron. The rest of the space was black: legs, borders, and a back curtain. The results were shows that felt more intimate, with audience attention focused on the characters — and much less scenery to build.

For *The Diary of Anne Frank*, the director and I agreed we didn't want a literal attic with all the usual and predictable distressed wood walls, so we chose to have no walls at all — just a few 4"x4"s at specific places to suggest where the walls would be. The rest was stock platforms at various heights, three free-standing doors, and furniture. I did add a fourth "secret" door downstage right with a hinged bookcase to serve as the entrance to the attic. Up center, in the "dormer," was a light box, built like a window, that could change the sky color from bright blue to light or dark gray as the story progressed.

Focus on the essence

Say you're doing a show that takes place in a castle (*Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, or something similar). If you're on a tight budget, don't try to create

an entire castle complete with tall stone walls, arches, a huge fireplace, all the other trappings you see in movies. Think in terms of the essence of a castle. Is it dark? Is it cold and drafty? Is it cavernous or claustrophobic? Is there sunlight or moonlight coming through a high window, creating shadows?

This is where research comes in. Spending an hour or two looking through photos of real castles can give you a lot of ideas. Chances are you'll see much heavy wood furniture, tapestries, heavy curtains, stone doorways, and maybe a few sconces, but you probably won't

even notice the walls. Some carefully placed furniture, a tapestry or two, and maybe a nice stone doorway, all in a pool of light in the middle of a black stage (and great acting), can say "castle" far more effectively than a stage full of flats painted like stone.

The generic castle shown below is little more than some platforms (which most theatre groups already have or can easily obtain), a staircase (ditto), and two tall half-arches, which need to be built. A lot of period pieces or specialty items, like tapestries or suits of armor, can be rented or borrowed from other the-

atre groups or even antique shops (with the understanding that "you break it, you buy it") in exchange for a free ad in your program or even purchased and resold. Start early, do your research, and make sure the piece fits the period and style of your show. The rest is up to great lighting and great acting.

Use unit sets

Many scripts (especially musicals) feature multiple settings, and one solution is to build numerous sets that are switched out and stored offstage. A great alternative is a unit set that fulfills all the various locations. Minor changes to a properly designed set can provide several appropriate and compelling spaces for the story. A unit set also eliminates lengthy changes and keeps the action moving.

One show that frequently results in multiple set changes is *Kiss Me, Kate*, which features a play-within-a-play requiring both backstage and onstage locations. When I did this show some years back, the director and I decided we would not make the audience sit through those changes. Instead we built a unit set to serve the needs of both backstage and onstage locations with only minor changes. All required changes were made either by cast members or crew members dressed as characters in the show.

The space upstage of the proscenium arch (an open two-story framework) served as "backstage" areas, and the apron served scenes in the play-within-the-play (*The Taming of the Shrew*). The main switchover was accomplished with a large drop that unfurled like a sail. Lighting helped orient the audience as to whether they were backstage or watching *Shrew*.

Although the show required building several pieces (including a doorway and wine press), the only flats used were from stock, and these leaned against the back wall as set dressing.

Try nontraditional storytelling

This is what the late Stephen Mallatratt did with his best-known play, which has been running in London for 27 years: *The Woman in Black*. In 1987, Mallatratt was commissioned to write a play for the Stephen Joseph Theatre in Scarborough, England: a filler piece for the Christmas season, with the stipulation that it have minimal actors and settings. He had read Susan Hill's novel of the same name and was intrigued by the idea of turning it into a play, although the novel

had many characters and took place in several locations, including two houses, a lawyer's office, a country road, and a cemetery.

Mallatratt decided to focus on the story, more specifically on the idea of the main character, Arthur Kipps, relating a chilling experience from his past to his friends and family. To help him prepare, he hires an actor (The Actor) and rents a theatre in which to rehearse. The entire story in the novel is told by three characters (Kipps, The Actor, and The Woman, who has no lines and is only seen briefly three times) playing all the roles. The set consisted of the bare stage, empty except for a scrim and several pieces of stock furniture. All the locations were created by the characters pulling pieces of furniture as needed and the scrim was used to show the inside of a bedroom and the graveyard.

Several plays and musicals use this approach, including *Man of La Man-*

cha, in which all the props and costumes for Don Quixote's stories are pulled from road trunks. Many shows lend themselves to this idea, resulting in very compelling and enjoyable experiences for the audience.

Ignite imagination

In 1938, the Mercury Theatre on the Air broadcast a radio play that reportedly convinced about one million listeners that Earth was under attack by Martians. The play, of course, was Orson Welles' adaptation of the H.G. Wells novel *The War of the Worlds*, broadcast on October 30. Granted, some people tuned in late and didn't hear the introduction and disclaimer, but the actors' voices and a few sound effects — plus the audience's imaginations — were enough to cause panic and remind us to this day of the power of drama.

Designing a set isn't about selecting or building scenery. It's about smart choices, appropriate scaling, and capturing the essence of the show. Above all, designers must be sensitive to the story as told by the characters and give those characters the environment and atmosphere to help them tell their story. Sure, designers love to read rave reviews, but those reviews most often speak to how appropriate the set was to the overall presentation — to the theatrical experience — and not to how much scenery was onstage. So, creating a set on a tight budget doesn't have to be daunting. Simply start with the story and let it guide you to creating just what it needs. ¶