

THE PAINTER'S JOURNAL

A Forum and Resource for Scenic Artists in Theatre

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Mission: The Mission of *The Painter's Journal* is to provide a forum where scenic artists can share their ideas with each other. The aim is to facilitate the sharing of information from professionals to educators to students in the areas of techniques, tools, products, research, and health and safety issues in scenic art.

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CONTENTS

Volume 6, Number 1

Spring 2008

Featured Articles

- 4 **TEMPORARY PAINT TECHNIQUES
FOR FILM AND STAGE**

Donna Wymore

- 11 **LESSONS FROM THE 19TH
CENTURY MASTERS**

Peter S. Miller

Departments

- 3 **LETTER FROM THE EDITOR**

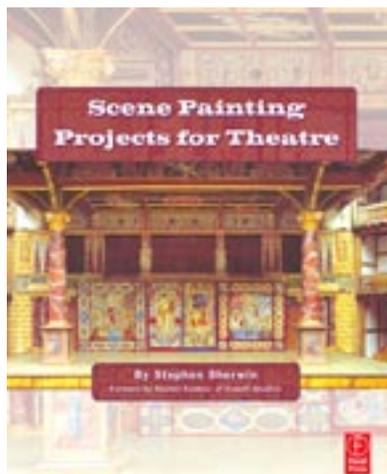
Anthony R. Phelps

- 7 **YOUNG SCENIC ARTIST'S AWARD
WINNERS ANNOUNCED**

Judith Staicer

- 22 **BOOK REVIEW: SCENE PAINTING
PROJECTS FOR THEATRE**

Michael J. Riha



LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

THANKS FOR ANOTHER GREAT YEAR!

From year to year things always change, but this one has been very special. First, we have just held our first annual Young Scenic Artist's Award competition; second, we have just completed our first ever large advertising campaign, and we have completely overhauled our website. And to top it off, we have a new and improved look to our USITT booth (#982). Please stop by and visit!

After a previous false start, our first annual Young Scenic Artist's Award contest has just been concluded, and it was a success. The level of accomplishment and the talent of the applicants were very high, and we are very proud to be able to share with you a sampling of the work of the top three contestants, beginning on page 7.

In February we completed our first large scale direct mailing campaign, and I would like to extend a warm welcome to our many new subscribers. We hope you enjoy The Painter's Journal.

In December our website was overhauled, and it now has a brand new look along with some new features, such as forums for discussions and also for posting employment opportunities. We'll be making additions and improvements over the coming months to make the website a useful resource, and we welcome suggestions. Please check it out at www.paintersjournal.com.

Finally, for those of you who have not already renewed for 2008-09, a subscription form is enclosed with this issue. While new subscribers for 2008-09 will pay \$25.00, current subscribers can renew at this year's rate of only \$22.00. This discount applies only to current subscribers who renew by mail with this form. The discounted price is not available online.

Thank you again for all your support. I hope to see you at USITT, but if not, here's wishing you a great summer.

Anthony R. Phelps
Executive Editor

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TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES

TEMPORARY PAINT TECHNIQUES FOR FILM AND STAGE

OR

“WHAT DO YOU MEAN IT HAS TO COME OFF?”

by Donna Wymore

Let's admit it: a great amount of the scenic artist's time is spent trying to make paint actually stick to certain surfaces. Metal, Formica, plastics, linoleum - it's always a challenge to make paint stick to any number of surfaces. This article is about the opposite - how to temporarily paint something so that it works for a short time and then can be restored back to its normal appearance.

This challenge is often encountered on a film, photography or television shoot, where a location, piece of scenery or object is being rented. On stage, the same can apply to rented or borrowed furniture or set pieces.

Here are a few simple techniques to consider the next time you are met with this seemingly difficult challenge.

Sandblast Paper

Several years ago, I was a scenic artist on a film called *Switchback*. One location was a closed diner in Denver called The Pig n' Whistle. It had some very fanciful nursery rhyme murals that the owner didn't want to ruin by having them painted over. The solution was to first cover the walls with sandblast paper and then paint as required. Sandblast paper is actually used by sandblasters to mask the areas of glass which they want to protect. It is a thick (about 4 to 5 mil) latex-based material that has a peel-off backing and one surface that's sticky (much like contact paper). The top face is porous and can be painted with any latex or acrylic paint. It bends well around corners and ceiling coves. It peels off walls (or columns or any surface) as one big sheet.

Where to buy it: look in your local phone book for "Sandblast Suppliers;" it's also available from Mann Brother paints (800-618-6266; mannbrothers.com). The Mask-off Company (626-359-3261; www.maskoff.com) has a similar product called Sharpline 200. See their website for a list of distributors.

Colored Hair Spray

As goofy as it sounds, colored hair spray is a quick and easily removable product great for temporarily painting many types of surfaces including non-porous ones such as glass, metal, Formica and plastics. These days, thanks to fashion, it comes in many more colors than the usual hair colors such as brown, black or gray. It is formulated to wash out of hair with soap and water, and that's all it takes to wash it off non-porous surfaces as well. Beware of using it on porous or non-sealed surfaces such as wood or cement because it tends to stain the surface.

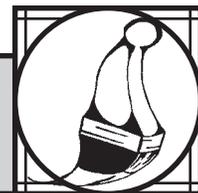
Where to buy it: drug stores, Halloween specialty stores, or beauty supply stores such as Sally Beauty Supply (stores nationwide or sallybeauty.com). The most popular brand is called Streaks n' Tips but there are other brands.

“Future” floor wax and tempera (poster paint)

This combination works well together because both ingredients are readily available and inexpensive. Adding the Future floor wax to the tempera paint gives the paint the power to stick and the ability to be washed off. This technique typically has a sheen (much like semi-gloss). It works best on sealed surfaces because the tempera can stain. It's easy to apply with brush or roller. One effective formula is two parts tempera to one half part Future, however, it's really one of those "feel" situations and every project calls for adjustments. You may need to add a little water. I would suggest doing a few samples to get your formula down prior to actual painting.

Where to buy it: Future floor wax can be purchased at any grocery store. Tempera paint can be purchased at hobby stores such as Michael's or Hobby Lobby and at most retailers such as Kmart or Staples.

TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES



Murphy's Oil Soap and old fashioned dry pigment (a.k.a. dry color)

This combination is great for porous and some non-porous surfaces, and especially for making a large amount. It washes off with water, or, in case of large amounts, with a power washer. It's brushable and rolls well. The biggest challenge is buying the dry pigment since it is not as common in scenery studios as it used to be. Once again, it's a "feel" formula. The Murphy's acts as a temporary binder, and creates an almost flat finish when dry. Using a dust mask, combine the dry pigment with a little water to make a paste; add the Murphy's until the paint is the consistency you want. Once dry, it stays put until washed off with water. I like Murphy's Oil Soap brand for this. I have found that other brands don't have the same consistency.

Where to buy it: dry pigment can be purchased from Benbow Chemical Packaging, Syracuse, NY (315-474- 8236). Murphy's Oil Soap can be purchased at most

grocery stores. Power washers can be rented at equipment retail stores and home improvement stores such as Home Depot.

Spraylat

Spraylat is a paint undercoat that is especially formulated for the purpose of temporary painting. This product is terrific when you have to paint rented objects (such as the school bus pictured here). It peels off in big sheets, kind of like peeling dried paint out of a bucket. It can be brushed, rolled or (as the name suggests) sprayed. Spraying may require more than one application to build up enough thickness for a good peel-off. It works as a resist coating. After applying it, paint on top with your latex or acrylic paint. To remove: pick an edge up with a matte knife and peel, or use a power washer.

Where to buy it: Mann Brothers (800-618-6266; mannbrothers.com). It comes in white, black or clear in one or five gallon pails.



Figure 1- Rented school bus temporarily painted with Spraylat and latex for a Japanese clothing company television commercial.



TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES

GreenStuff Lawn Paint

Once again, as goofy as it sounds, on film shoots you may be required to “paint” a real lawn or sports field to look greener than it is (especially in the spring or autumn). GreenStuff is formulated to do just that. It’s biodegradable and will not harm lawns. It washes off after a few rain storms or with a garden hose. This is best applied with an airless sprayer or pressure pot, mainly due to volume. It’s important to mask around any obstructions because it may stain them for a little bit of time (a lesson I learned the hard way in a cemetery).

Where to buy it: Mann Brothers (800-618-6266; mannbrothers.com).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Donna Wymore has worked as a professional scenic artist since 1977. From 1984 to 1994, she painted scenery in Los Angeles for many bad “B” films and quickly canceled television shows. Some of her better films are: *Pacific Heights* with Michael Keaton and *Patty Hearst* with Natasha Richardson. These days, Donna is the backdrop rental manager at Cobalt Studios in New York State. She currently teaches two Pro Seminars at Cobalt: *Painting for Film and Television* and *All About Foam*.



Figure 2- GreenStuff Lawn Paint



Figure 3- Lawn before spraying GreenStuff.



Figure 4- Lawn after spraying GreenStuff. The area closest to the brick edging was not sprayed to provide contrast.

YOUNG SCENIC ARTISTS AWARD

THE FIRST ANNUAL YOUNG SCENIC ARTIST'S AWARD

by Judith Staicer

The Painter's Journal is delighted to announce the winners of the **First Annual Young Scenic Artist's Award**:

First prize (\$300): Leanne R. Myerson

Second Prize (\$150): Laura Prengaman

Third Prize (\$100): Katherine Fry

In addition to awarding cash prizes, *The Painter's Journal* is publishing a selection of the work of these talented young scenic artists on the following pages.

This award was established to recognize the accomplishments of outstanding young theatre artists and to encourage their pursuit of a career in scenic art. Our winners were chosen from among the many entries by a panel of three judges. The competition was open to all college students pursuing an undergraduate degree at the time of application. Applicants were required to submit a portfolio of 8-12 photos of their work, either from actual productions or class projects, with a description of their work on the project and the process they used. In addition, they were required to submit a resume, a brief bio, and three letters of recommendation.

There can be no winners without judges to judge, and we want to express our deepest appreciation to Eric Levenson, Crystal Tiala, and Tim Jozwick, who graciously volunteered their time to review all the applications and provide their thoughtful assessments. Without them this contest would not have been possible.

And of course we also want to thank all the students who applied for the award. It was very exciting to see so much excellent work being done by so many talented young scenic artists, and we wish them much success in their college careers. We hope these winning entries will inspire another crop of up-and-coming scenic artists to apply next year!

ABOUT THE JUDGES

Tim Jozwick is a member of the faculty at Emerson College in Boston. In addition to his responsibilities with Emerson Stage, he serves as a Resident Designer for Chamber Repertory Theatre. His work has also been featured at Michigan Opera Theatre, The Indianapolis Opera, The Repertory Theater of Saint Louis, The Goodspeed Opera, The Memphis Opera, The Opera Theatre of Syracuse, Mayakovsky Theater Moscow, Teatro Sanleonardo Italy, Opera Boston and Carnegie Mellon University. Tim's exhibit designs have been installed in The Museum of Science of Boston, The California Museum of Science, The Franklin Institute, The Chicago Museum of Science, The Ohio Center for Science and Industry, The Science Museum of Minnesota and The City Museum of Saint Louis. Tim is also the recipient of a Regional Emmy Award and he was the art director for a film documentary that went on to win the National Golden Eagle Award.

Eric Levenson is a theatrical set and lighting designer, and a scenic artist for theatre and film. Major motion pictures for which he has been a scenic foreman include *Good Will Hunting*, *The Departed*, *Twenty-One* and *Gone, Baby, Gone*. Eric is an all-categories member of United Scenic Artists Local 829, the chair of the USA 829 New England entrance exam committees, and an At-Large Trustee on the 829 Eastern Regional Board.

Crystal Tiala is a professional union scenic designer who teaches at Boston College. She received her MFA in scenic design from the University of Connecticut.

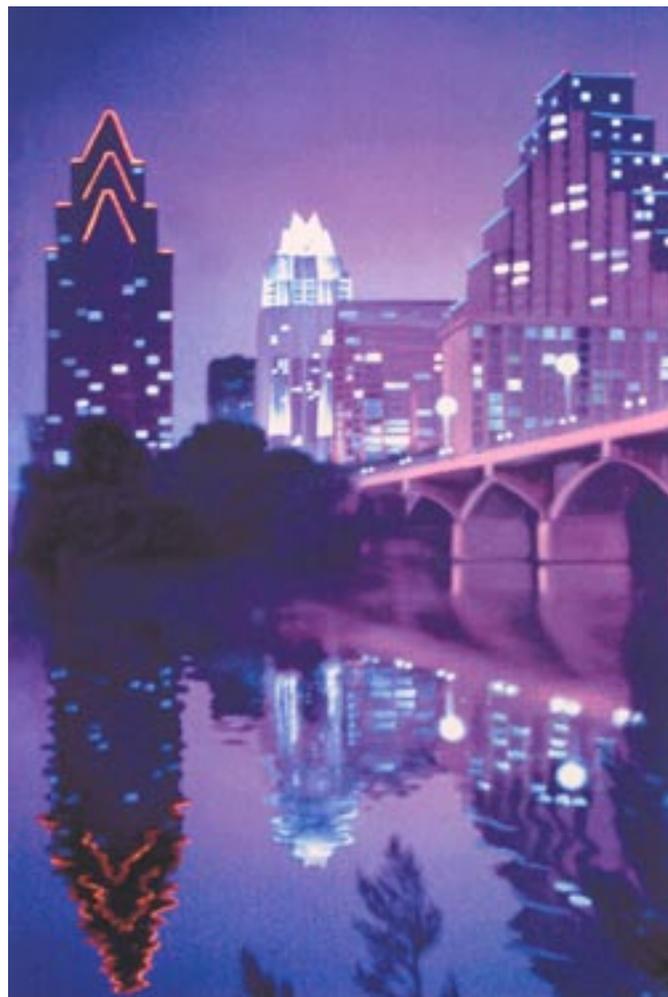
Crystal has worked for regional theaters throughout the East coast including The Emerson Majestic, The Boston Conservatory, StageWest, The SpeakEasy, Merrimack Repertory Theater, and Worcester Foothills Theatre in Massachusetts; Barter Theater of Virginia; Bristol Riverside Theater in Pennsylvania; Two Rivers Theater in New Jersey, the Rybinsk Theater in Rybinsk, Russia; The American Stage Festival in New Hampshire; the Connecticut Repertory Theater, Connecticut Opera, Trinity College, and the University of Hartford in Connecticut.

Crystal is Chair of the United States Institute for Theater Technology/New England Section and the Chair of Design and Technology for the Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival Region I. She is a Scenic Design member of the United Scenic Artists Local 829 union. Her professional portfolio can be seen at <http://www.mindspring.com/~tiala>.

YOUNG SCENIC ARTISTS AWARD

Leanne R. Myerson: 1st Place

Leanne R. Meyerson grew up in Austin, Texas, where there is loud support for the arts. She has always been interested in artistic expression of any kind, but when she attended a Waldorf arts school for high school it became clear over time that she would always want to keep painting. In fall of 2004 she enrolled at the University of Texas at Austin as a studio art major. She soon realized that she preferred working on larger group projects, so the following year she became a theatre major and has been studying scenic design and scenic painting ever since.



Austin Day and Night

These pictures show the same painting under daylight and under a blacklight. This 4' x 6' fluorescent drop was painted with scene paint as well as Wildfire visible and invisible UV paint. First, the "daylight" colors were tested under blacklight, with and without UV paint brushed on. The day image was painted with scene paint in normal light. Then, under blacklight, the sky glow, the lights in the windows, and reflections on the water were painted with UV paint.

YOUNG SCENIC ARTISTS AWARD

Laura Prengaman: 2nd Place

Laura Prengaman grew up in North Canton, Ohio, and graduated from Hoover High School where she was involved in theatre and art. It was here that her passion for the arts led her to scene painting. She is currently attending Otterbein College in Westerville, Ohio, and intends to earn a BFA in Theatre Design/Technology with a minor in art. Her future plans include a scenic painting internship at the Goodspeed Opera House in East Haddam, Connecticut.

Public Amenity #9 from *Urinetown*
Wet-blended base coat followed by spatter; distressing done with multiple gray and brown washes, and more “grunge” added with a sprayer and rusty washes.



Locomotive cutout, *Hello, Dolly!*
Wood cutout covered with muslin.

YOUNG SCENIC ARTISTS AWARD

Katherine Fry: 3rd Place

Katherine Fry is a junior at Virginia Commonwealth University majoring in scene design. She has been working in professional theatre since she was 17, and in the past two and a half years has found a passion for both scenic painting and design. In addition to painting at Seaside Music Theatre for the past two summers, she works with an antiques dealer restoring finishes and painted designs, and also volunteers and teaches at Swan Ballet Dance School.

When You Comin' Back, Red Ryder? (Right)
Hardwood floor and 2 linoleum floors, wood and aluminum wall treatments, formica counters and table tops, as well as booths, counters, and signs.

Pirate Ship





LESSONS FROM THE 19TH CENTURY MASTERS:

F. LLOYDS AND THE SCENIC ARTISTS OF O.L. STORY

by Peter S. Miller

In rural America during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, entertainment was “live.” In those days, before television, radio, and talking motion pictures, when telephones and electricity were limited to the largest cities, townspeople and farmers from the countryside flocked to the town hall or “Grange” where local amateur groups or troupes of touring professionals offered a range of dramatic, humorous, and musical performances.

In the village of Reading, Vermont, such a space still exists. Robinson Hall is located on the second floor above the Town Clerk’s and Postal offices; it has a small proscenium stage with modest wing space, no stage house or fly loft, and a simple auditorium with wooden folding chairs. Although it has been modernized with electric lighting, traces of the original gas fixtures are still visible.

The stage is also still equipped with its original set of scenery, painted approximately a century ago, by the O. L. Story Scenery Company of Boston, Massachusetts. Considering its age, the scenery - consisting of a Grand Drape or house curtain, and several backdrops, some with matching borders and pairs of wings or “ears” - is in a remarkable state of preservation.

Reading’s scenery has been cleaned, repaired and restored by the Vermont Painted Theater Curtains Project, an organization which seeks to preserve and restore pieces of theatrical scenery around the state. Under Project Director Christine Hadsel, the Curtains Project has identified and is in the process of restoring 177 scenic elements. A previous article in the fall edition of *The Painter’s Journal* gave an overview of the program, and interested readers can also visit the website of The Vermont Museum and Gallery Alliance, which originated the project, at www.vmga.org.

Except for very special productions, most scenery during this period was not created for specific shows. Instead, the scenery at Reading represents the stock locations that figured in the popular melodramas and comedies of the era. They are also outstanding examples of the quality work created by scenic artists active at the turn of the last century.

In the library at Cobalt Studios in White Lake, New York, there is a copy of a remarkable scene painting textbook from approximately the same period. This slightly damaged copy has no date on it, but appears to be from the late 19th century. A cheaply-produced American reprint of a more expensive English edition, which sold in America for four or five dollars, it may have been commissioned by the paint suppliers Messrs. Jesse Haney and Company. It was printed by the Excelsior Publishing House on Murray St. in New York City.

The book, entitled *Practical Guide to Scene Painting and Painting in Distemper*, is by F. Lloyds and originally sold for the very affordable price of one dollar. It supposes that the student



Figure 1- Digital image, copyright Carolyn Bates.



EDUCATION & TRAINING

has some artistic skill and knowledge, but little or no scene painting experience, and thus provides insight into the tools, materials, techniques, and shop practices of scenic artists a century ago.

It is difficult to read Lloyd's words without an indulgent smile: to the modern reader, his language seems a bit formal and pretentious and some of his sentence constructions are elaborately labyrinthine. However, his is an authentic voice; he speaks for the many anonymous scenic artists of his era, who labored in an age when photography was in its infancy and a gas-lit, painted backdrop, flanked by canvas-covered wing flats with profiled edges, was still a viable representation of "reality" for an audience.

Although there is no evidence that the scenic artists of the O.L. Story Company were familiar with Lloyd's book, they are from the same period; and by juxtaposing his words with their images, I hope to shed some light upon the scenic practices of the past. The painted theater curtains of Reading are a catalogue of scenic techniques; foliage, drapery, architecture, landscape, lining and trompe l'oeil ornament are all represented, rendered with effortless ease by master craftsmen.

In his *Preface to the American Edition*, the publisher describes the opportunities for employment, including such jobs as the scenery at Robinson Hall:

The demand for Scene Painting and Distemper Painting is quite large and likely to increase. Distemper Painting is called for in many public buildings, halls, churches, schools and private residences. Scene Painting is also called for by the improvement of public halls, which as a small town or village grows, almost always demands the addition of a set of scenery for the local hall. Then, too, there is the considerable demand for scenery for school exhibitions and for local amateur dramatic associations. These are all outside of, and in addition to, the prime and constant demand of the theatres everywhere, and of the innumerable traveling "combinations" each of which usually requires an outfit of scenery.¹

The Nineteenth Century Scene Shop

In chapter one, Lloyds describes a professional "painting room" approximately fifty feet long, twenty feet wide and at least twenty-five feet high. Backdrops and framed scenery were attached to large paint frames which were raised and lowered to working height through slots in the floor, using counter-weighted windlasses.

Natural light in the painting studio was provided by a large skylight covered with a moveable shade to soften the glare upon the canvases, or "burlaps" as he calls them. At night, work continued using gaslights, suspended in a row down the middle of the room.²

While the large, moveable paint frames dominated the long side walls of the room, the shorter ends were occupied by a smaller frame on one wall, while the other contained shelves for storing pigments, tools and a gas stove or range for boiling water and melting the size. A long worktable ran down the center of the room.³

The "Distemper" painting referred to in the preface was a water-based paint made of powdered pigment, often ground from lumps of organic material, opaque chalk or "whiting," and an animal glue binder known as "size" which was purchased from a paint supplier. The size had to be melted and diluted with water to create a concentrate known as "strong size" and a thinner or "working" consistency.⁴ But if commercially produced size, or carpenter's glue is unavailable, Lloyds describes how the aspiring scenic artist can make his own:

...you might still avail yourself of leather or parchment cuttings, pieces of skin of any kind, or in short; of any gelatinous substance that has no grease in it. Put them with water into any metal vessel and let them simmer till they are converted into a strong jelly, from which you can produce the same descriptions of size as those I have already alluded to.

As size does not keep well during the hot weather, when it gives off a very offensive odour, do not make more than will suffice for the day's work. A little carbolic acid, however, mixed with the size, will prevent its decomposition. The mixed colors likewise will probably deteriorate before your scene is finished, should the weather be hot. In that case, if you allow the color to sink to the bottom of the mixture, the size will float on top. Pour this out and replace it with fresh size.⁵

The Grand Drape at Reading

One of the most spectacular drops at Reading is the Grand Drape (Figure 1, page 11). Like the other drops, it is rigged to roll on a batten due to the lack of fly space. The design follows the traditional format: a romantic European vista surrounded by an ornamental frame, and flanked by elaborately swagged drapery.

EDUCATION & TRAINING



The landscape, with its ruined, overgrown castle (Figure 2) and a lake nestled in the mountains, is loosely based on a view of the castle of Chillon in Switzerland, on the shore of Lake Geneva. Made famous by Lord Byron's romantic poem "The Prisoner of Chillon," variations of the castle were used on other grand drapes painted by O.L. Story, and it also was prominently featured in their company logo. Figure 3 shows an advertisement from the Boston Business Directory of 1912, in the archives of the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities.



Figure 2- Detail of Castle from Grand Drape.



Figure 3- O.L. Story ad

Lloyds gives a description of the first phase of painting such a landscape, after "straining" or stretching the fabric onto the paint frame, sizing, and priming it with a mixture of whitening and size. The artwork was transferred by gridding the scaled

elevation and the fabric followed by sketching the composition in charcoal.⁶

I will now suppose that your landscape has been satisfactorily sketched in with drawing charcoal, as before directed. The next step will be to color it. To begin with, take some VanDyke brown, burnt sienna, or a purple color composed of ultramarine and damp lake combined, and mix any one of them with half-and-half size. Thin the color a little so that it will flow freely from the brush, and carefully go over the outline with it, using a small quill tool (brush) and correcting where necessary. You will have to warm the color occasionally, as the size it contains would soon subside into a jelly if allowed to get too cold. When the outline is finished and the color quite dry, which will be in about ten minutes, take the flogger and flog off the charcoal that has been used in tracing the outline and squares.

Now put some raw sienna in a pot and mix it up with working size, a little strong being added, so that a thin glaze or stain is made from it. Using as large a brush as you can, cover smoothly all of the foreground across the picture...As soon as that is dry, take some stronger raw sienna in the shading... adding in parts, a little VanDyke brown. You have now got a ground color, which you will find very pleasant to work on, and which will also present a better appearance than a white one, should you have missed a few places here and there during the process of laying in the solid color. Provided, moreover, that you do not lay in your solid color too thickly, which you must endeavor to avoid; such a ground as this will show a little through all the laying-in color, and impart a pleasing tone to the whole subject of your scene.⁷

In the closeup, Figure 4 on page 14, the dark areas of the gold ornamental detail appear to have been stenciled, while the lights and reflected orange lights seem to be painted with a brush, using the stenciled repeating pattern as a guide. Note the subtle shift in the gold palette as the border passes under the shadow of the drape. The reddish brown



EDUCATION & TRAINING

“ground” is clearly seen beneath the greens of the foliage and above the castle archway in Figure 2. In his chapter on color mixing, Lloyds has this to say about the technique of painting gold ornament:

Gold colors are made up in a variety of ways. Pure light ochre is a good, quiet gold color, and so are brown ochre mixed with a little Dutch pink, Dutch pink with Vandyke brown, and the same with burnt sienna. These are laying-in golden colors. For the lights, use either flake white added to lemon or orange chrome, pure lemon chrome alone, or orange chrome mixed with lemon chrome or Dutch pink. For the dark parts use Vandyke brown added to a little dark brown ochre; burnt sienna, and a purple made

of ultramarine, lake, and the least bit of whiting. The reflected light in the shadow parts will require orange red with Dutch pink and burnt sienna. Where ever there is any strong color near the gold, the reflection will, of course, be of that color.⁸

The “Fancy Interior”

Painted with apparently effortless technique is the “Fancy Interior,” a symmetrical room with stenciled wallpaper and off-white woodwork. There is a central cut-out door opening, through which the formal garden drop may have been viewed. The interior and the garden were probably paired with two sets of profiled “ears” or wing flats. One pair (Figure 5), still in fairly good condition today, features elaborately swagged drapery with a tasseled border and stenciled ornamental pilasters, similar to those in the Fancy Interior.



Figure 4- Detail of border, foliage, and drape.

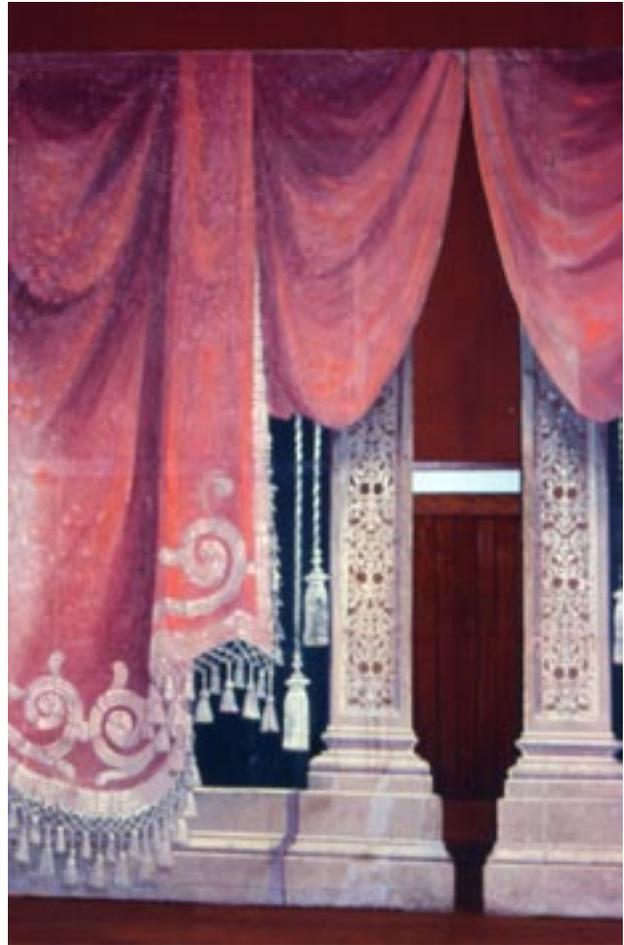


Figure 5- Pair of Fancy Interior ears, leaning against back wall of auditorium.

EDUCATION & TRAINING



A close-up of the area stage right of the cut-out door opening shows how effectively the architectural detail is rendered with minimal colors: a warm, off-white local color, or lay-in, a warm white highlight, a purple-brown dark, which in places also serves as a cut-line, and a translucent, bluish-purple cast shadow glaze. The darker areas of the ornament, lighter in value than the dark lining color, are stenciled, and probably served as a guide for the brushed-on highlights.

The architectural elements in the remaining pair of ears were rendered in much the same way with minor adjustments. The local color of the woodwork is cooler and darker where the shadow of the drape falls across it, and a hint of peach-colored reflected light from the drapery is barely visible on the underside of the tassel and the off-stage lining of the pilaster (Figures 6 and 7).



Figure 6- Stage right detail of Fancy Interior.



Figure 7- Close-up of Fancy Ears.



EDUCATION & TRAINING

The Italian Garden Scene

Foliage is a dominant element in the “Italian Garden Scene,” the most romantic and “European” of the drops at Reading (Figure 8).

On the technique of painting foliage, Lloyds has this to say:

I may as well here mention that it is almost impossible to lay down rules for the painting of foliage, in as much as nearly every scene painter has a method of his own. Some at once lay in large masses of the different greens, both light and dark, and afterwards with dark marking colors, which may be green, purple or a dark, rich brown (that is brown lake with a little indigo) mark out the whole mass to the required form, only having to put in a little extra light here and there. Others lay in the dark greens and transparent browns, and then, after putting in the stems and branches, paint the leaves making them stand out from the dark ground colors in various degrees of light green, both cool and warm, and finishing by strengthening both the light and the dark parts.⁹

You can see in Figure 9 the wet blend of warm and cool colors in the stone work and the way the shadow of the foliage is implied by deft, diagonal brush strokes and interrupted highlights on the mouldings. In the darker areas of foliage, behind the railing and underneath the dark green, the reddish-brown of the ground color can still be glimpsed.

Figure 9- Garden scene-detail of balustrade, foliage and drape.



Figure 8- The Italian Garden with Fancy Interior ears. Digital image, copyright Carolyn Bates.



In his section on foliage, Lloyds also discusses a technique for painting flowers:

Should there be any flowers connected with the foliage it is sometimes advisable to lay in the foliage first of all, and then paint the flowers in, although the colors of the latter will, in a slight degree, become tinged with those of the foliage. Some of the flowers may be designed to tell out as brilliantly as possible, in which case, paint them first in their proper forms with whiting and strong size, and then when that is dry and hard give them their appropriate colors and glaze them in.¹⁰

Figure 10 shows an area of flowers stage left of the fountain. It is also interesting to note the dotted and dashed cut line at the bottom of the photo, defining the edge of the first step.



Figure 10-Close-up of flowers and dashed cut-line.

Some of the most effective details in the Garden Drop are the elegantly swagged draperies that frame the scene, a design element also featured in the grand drape. Figures 11 and 12 show how O.L. Story's artists managed to distinguish the textures of two different kinds of fabric. The garden scene drape, in Figure 12, appears to be made of soft, plush material like velvet or velour. The contrast between

the highlights, lights, local color and darks is fairly subdued, and the folds are heavy. In Figure 12, the fabric from the grand drape is a shiny, reflective material like satin, the folds are crisp, the highlights have sharp contrast, and there is a strong reflective glow from the off-stage side. In both cases, the rendering of the folds gives the drapes a marvelous sense of volume, and they appear to exist in real space instead of merely being painted illusions.

Lloyds describes a technique for painting drapery:

To lay in crimson drapery, use damp lake, a little orange red, whiting and vermillion. Glaze in the shadows with damp lake, strengthening them

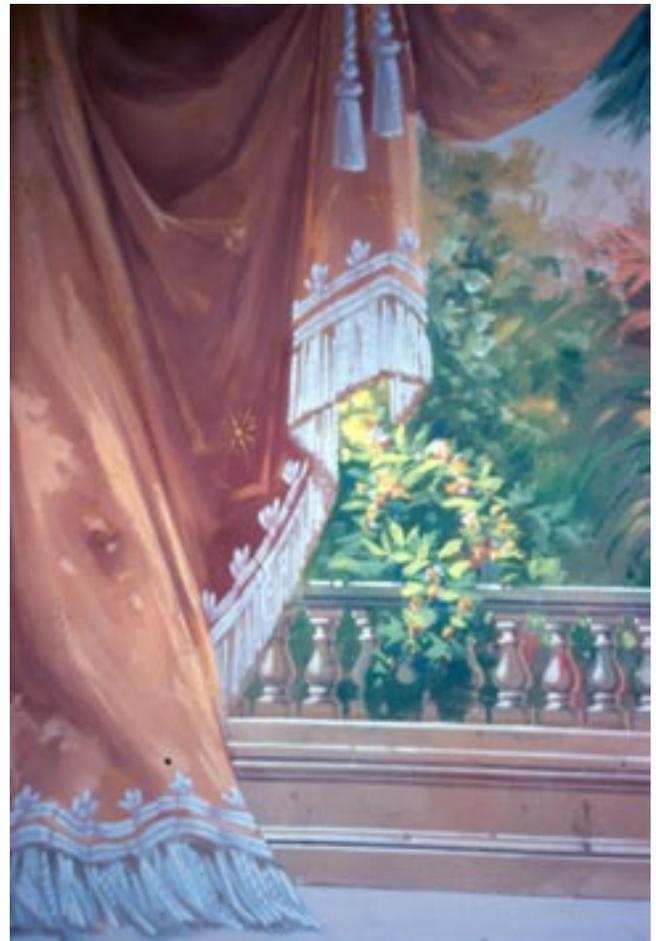


Figure 11- Garden drape detail.



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with brown lake, damp lake and a little strong size. When this is dry, cover the whole canvas with a very thin glaze of carmine paste, and on this being also dry, put in the highlights with carmine paste and whiting, taking care not to make it too white. Should the light look too chalky, go over it again with a very thin glaze of carmine paste. For the reflections in the shadow, use vermilion with a little orange red added to it. Should this look raw, glaze it with carmine paste and strong size to which a little molasses has been added.¹¹



Figure 12- Grand drape detail

The focal point of the Garden scene is the beautifully detailed fountain center stage. It appears to be made of cast iron, and the trickles of water and the reflected light on its underside are especially convincing (Figure 13).

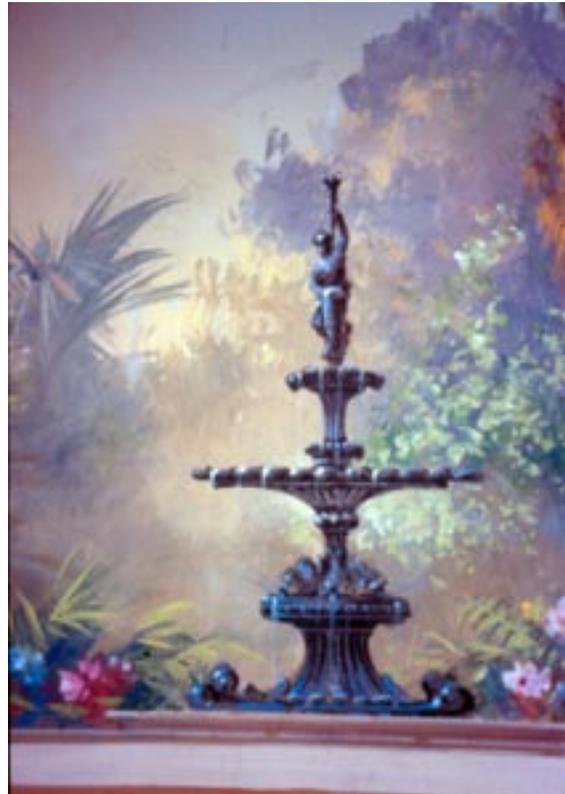


Figure 13- Fountain detail, garden scene.

Street Scene

The backdrop in the best state of preservation is the street scene, which was found by Ms. Hadsel's crew in an out-of-the-way corner under the stage still in the original packaging for shipment from Boston. The only work the restoration team needed to do was to mount it on a new batten and rig it to roll. The colors are as fresh and vibrant as it if had left the shop yesterday, instead of a century ago.

The urban street was a common setting during this period and the Curtains Collection includes several of them. Reading's drop (Figure 14) is especially notable for its sophisticated composition. Many street scenes, including Charles Washington Henry's (featured in the December 2007 issue of *The Painter's Journal*), are symmetrical, with a relatively high horizon line, and a single, centrally-located vanishing point.

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The only elements breaking the pattern are the colors, heights, and architectural details of the buildings.

At Reading, the low horizon line and off-center vanishing point combined with an asymmetrical composition – a row of storefronts on one side and a park bordered by a wrought-iron fence on the other – avoids “repetition of form” which Lloyds describes as “a thing in itself, very injurious to pictorial effect.”¹²



Figure 14- The central area of the Street Scene drop.

Lloyds explains the advantages of a low horizon line:

A high horizontal line is very objectionable, particularly on the stage, for interiors, street scenes or avenues. For in an interior, the painted floor in perspective, like a road in perspective in an avenue or street is supposed to be a continuation of the stage itself; and if a high...horizontal line is used, the floor in one case, and the road in the other, seem suddenly to spring up, at an angle of extreme elevation so as to be very far from appearing to form a part of the stage, and the effect is rendered still more ridiculous, especially in the case of interiors, the moment the characters begin to make their appearance in front of the scene.¹³

The rich colors of the street drop lead one to speculate as to what the others may have once looked like, before sunlight, age, neglect, a leaking roof, and a hundred years of set changes had taken their toll. One area which immediately caught my eye was the foreground, where a skillful blend of warm and cool colors creates the shadows of the corner post and trees of the park, falling across the pavement (Figure 15).



Figure 15 – Detail of shadow, on pavement street scene.

Figure 16 is a close-up of the spherical finial atop the corner post, created with effortless brushstrokes of highlight, light, local color, dark, dark accent and reflected light. The flicker of highlight on the moulding is also a lovely touch. It is also interesting to see that although the stone making up the shaft is a warm beige color, there are hints of blue scumbled into it.



Figure 16- Finial of corner post.



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Figure 17 is a closeup of the facade of a grocery store in the middle distance. Notice the shadows of the awnings and the barrels, the suggestion of the reflection in the windows and the warm reflected glow of the pavement on the fruit boxes.



Figure 17- Grocery store detail, street scene.

Although the street scene is not like the interiors Lloyds uses as an example, this is perhaps the best place to quote him on the value of a lay-in made up of several shades of “broken color.” Like the raw sienna ground mentioned earlier, he is speaking of a technique used early in the process. The principle can also be seen in the architectural elements of the Garden drop.

If a prison, hovel, vault or ruined chamber has to be painted, scene painters frequently have the scene laid-in all over with some half-dozen tints of various kinds, broken one into the other, for which purpose they use up the smudge colors that are sure to accumulate in a painting room....It is surprising what admirable tints are accidentally produced by such means as these. ...This laying-in of the broken colors makes also an excellent ground for rocks..., this ground being retained over almost all the scene, just as a discreet artist would do when he selects tinted paper for his crayon or water-color drawings.¹⁴

The street scene also has several minor examples of a classic theatrical sign-painting technique known as “Greeking” or “Greeking-out” (Figure 18). As the buildings recede in perspective, the lettering in some of the smaller signs is rendered as a series of indecipherable letter-like shapes. The technique helps create the illusion of distance and foreshortening and also insures that the signs are not unduly prominent or distracting.

Theatrical tradition holds that the term may come from the resemblance of the distorted letters to those of the ancient Greek alphabet, or possibly from this exchange in Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, when Casca tells Cassius of a comment made by Cicero in Greek, a language Casca does not understand.

Cassius: Did Cicero say anything?

Casca: Ay, he spoke Greek.

Cassius: To what effect?

Casca: Nay, an I tell you that, I’ll ne’er look you in the face again. But those who understood him smiled at one another and shook their heads; but for my own part, it was Greek to me...”

Julius Caesar, Act I, sc. ii, lines 283-289.¹⁵



Figure 18- Detail of storefronts and “Greeked” signage.

A parting word from F. Lloyds

It seems only fair to give the final word to F. Lloyds. I hope that his century-old words, and the beautiful work at Reading, produced by the anonymous artists of O.L. Story, will prove inspirational to students and scenic artists living and working today.

EDUCATION & TRAINING



Before bidding my readers farewell, I will again impress upon them the great need of care and attention in the study of scene painting, and at once disabuse their minds of the popular notion that scene painting is nothing but a mass of daubs, and that anyone can undertake it without the slightest trouble or experience. On the contrary, I think this book will prove that there is a great deal to learn, but at the same time, nothing but what devotion and study can overcome on the part of those who are desirous of practicing a most delightful art.¹⁶

Acknowledgements

This series on the Painted Theatre Curtains of Vermont would not have been possible without the assistance and support of several individuals. I want to thank my mother, Margaret Miller of Johnson, Vermont, who first made me aware of The Curtains Project, and Carolyn Bates, whose digital images are seen in this article.

Rachel Keebler of Cobalt Studios kindly allowed me to photocopy her fragile photocopy of F. Lloyds' marvelous book. The folks at Robinson Hall in Reading, Vermont have made their curtains accessible for viewing and photography and have made the effort to preserve and restore a precious fragment of America's glorious theatrical past.

William and Mari Fujimoto-Sakas, Steven and Rita Schneps, and Grace Uffner all graciously provided computer assistance; from a person far more comfortable with nineteenth-century technology than with that of the twenty-first, a heartfelt "thank you!"

Finally, a special note of thanks to Vermont Painted Theater Curtains Project Director Christine Hadsel, who has generously shared her historical research files and has taken the time to introduce me to the curtains at Reading and at other places around the state.

Carolyn Bates's digital images are available for purchase in note and postcard form. Sales support the restoration and conservation effort. For information on purchasing, see www.vimga.org, or email chris.hadsel@gmail.com. All images are copyright 2006, all rights reserved.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

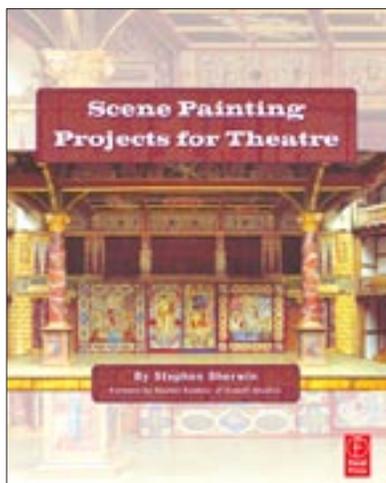
Peter S. Miller has an undergraduate degree from Harvard and studied scene painting with Lester Polakov. He grew up in Vermont and has fond memories of Charles Andrus' grand drape at the Hyde Park Opera House (now lovingly restored). For many years he has designed the backdrops and scenery of Harvard's annual all-male drag musical, *The Hasty Pudding Show* and is a member of United Scenic Artists, Local 829. Broadway credits as a scenic artist include the recent revivals of *Seascape*, *Suddenly*, *Last Summer*, and *Heartbreak House*, as well as Tom Stoppard's *The Coast of Utopia* at Lincoln Center. Films include *Unfaithful*, *War of the Worlds*, *Music and Lyrics*, *August Rush*, and the upcoming *My Sassy Girl*, *Revolutionary Road*, and *Ghost Town*. Peter teaches scene painting for the United Scenic Artists' Apprenticeship program and at the Mason Gross School of the Arts, Rutgers University. He is a member of USITT.



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BOOK REVIEW: SCENE PAINTING PROJECTS FOR THEATRE

review by Michael J. Riha



When I was first asked to provide a review of *Scene Painting Projects for Theatre* by Stephen Sherwin, my initial response was, what more can I say that I haven't already said in the review I wrote for the Fall 2007 TD&T Journal. I soon realized that I am better able to evaluate this book, now that I am using it as the primary textbook for a formal scene painting course. I do want to express my most sincere appreciation to Mr. Sherwin for taking on the monumental task of creating such an in-depth book for a relatively small market. With the advent of computer-generated backdrops and CGI artists, there are fewer and fewer individuals choosing scenic art as a career. The time and energy he dedicated to creating this much-anticipated text is a testament to Mr. Sherwin's commitment to continuing the rich tradition of the skilled scenic artist.

As I write this review, we are in the eighth week of the semester, and my class has completed 5 projects with varying levels of results. (See Figures 1 and 2). The class is a mix of undergraduate students and first-year MFA design candidates who may have had some experience in scene painting. The fact that my students have completed 5 projects in just over 7 weeks is, I believe, a testament to the wonderful organization and clarity of the projects.

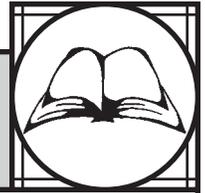
The strength of this text lies in its layout and the use of color examples for ALL steps – not just the final result. The way the text is organized is useful not only in the content and composition of each project, but also in how procedures are

repeated throughout each project. The repetition of technique, terms, and procedures for each project emphasizes the importance of the “process” of scene painting as opposed to the final outcome, which helps the novice painter build confidence and the ability to evaluate their own work and that of others. It might be more helpful if the projects were grouped together based on their use of similar techniques – dry brushing (or combing), scumbling or wet blending, etc. – so the student can apply what he or she learns from one project to another similarly structured project. Currently, there is no “right or wrong” way to work through all of the projects, and the author makes it quite clear that the projects can be painted out of sequence, but a more structured arrangement based on techniques may be useful.

I would like to see a chapter at the beginning on one of the more elusive aspects of scenic art, which is paint mixing, and the sensitivity a painter has to develop toward paint and how to handle it. This text does what many others do, which is to give percentages of opacity for each paint technique. As useful as this may be to an experienced painter, it really doesn't provide much for the novice. Just what does 50% opacity mean? Having grown up working with casein paints as well as dry pigments and hide glue, the only instruction I was given (that I remember) was to “mix it until it gives you the result you want.” This kind of advice and instruction will probably not be useful in a textbook for novice painters; however, upon further consideration, it really is the truth. Likewise, a chapter that gives specific ratios of paint to water – 2 parts paint to 1 part water for example – can also be a treacherous path to take due to inconsistencies in scenic paint as well as in household paints. Often, paint consistencies vary from gallon to gallon, brand to brand, and from color to color as well. To try to provide an accurate, fail-safe recipe for each paint application is nearly impossible. What's needed is an overview of how the consistency of paint must differ depending on whether the paint is to be applied to soft goods or to hard surfaces, as well as whether it is to be applied on vertical or horizontal surfaces. This could be accompanied by swatches of paint of varying consistencies to help illustrate the idea; but in addition, the beginning painter needs to realize that each painting project requires a unique approach to paint mixing, which will only be mastered through years of practice and many, many trips to and from the paint mixing area.

Moving on to the actual projects, I am divided on my opinion regarding the quality (or lack thereof) of the computer-generated images. On one hand, I like the fact that the images are not intimidating in their quality, which allows me to

BIBLIOGRAPHY



tell the students that their projects will look much better than the book example simply because they will be done using actual paint, and will have more life, variation, and dramatic punch than the stale, rigid computer images in the book. This seems to instill a sense of confidence when they begin their project.

On the other hand, I've spent a great deal of time explaining to new painters that what's in the book was done using a computer so their project will look much different, only to have them ask the obvious question, "How different? And what do you mean, different?" (see student example and book example) Remember, this book is primarily for beginning scenic artists who have NEVER painted before; when they are instructed to follow steps and make their project look like the one in the book, they need to know what can actually be achieved. Therefore, I often prepare a test flat on which I illustrate each technique shown in the book. I have no doubt that the use of computer images was done to save time and money; however, seeing actual painted projects, in my opinion, may be worth the investment.



Figure 1- Project from the text.



Figure 2- Project completed by a student.

If I had to eliminate something from this text, it would be Chapter 18 – Flat Construction and Preparation. Since this is a scenic painting book, it can be assumed that students should have already taken a set construction course in which this was covered. In closing, the project in Chapter 19 is a wonderful addition – The Globe Theatre Stage Project, in which a large paint elevation is divided into sections assigned to individual students. (See Figure 3). This collaborative project, although something that would never happen in any professional setting, gives students the opportunity to be responsible to each other and see how wonderfully inclusive theatre can be.

Although our industry is continually evolving and embracing more technological ways to create painted scenic drops, I don't think the computer will ever match the sensitivity and human emotion that are brought to life through the scenic artist's brush. I equate it to the difference between seeing a movie and seeing a live theatre performance. They both are entertaining and have their place, but there is something beautiful in the actual brush strokes on a canvas and how they seem to breathe life into the art work; somehow the digitizer tablet and mouse dehumanize the art. Maybe one day; but for now, this text helps to inspire us with the importance of helping young painters develop into young artists.

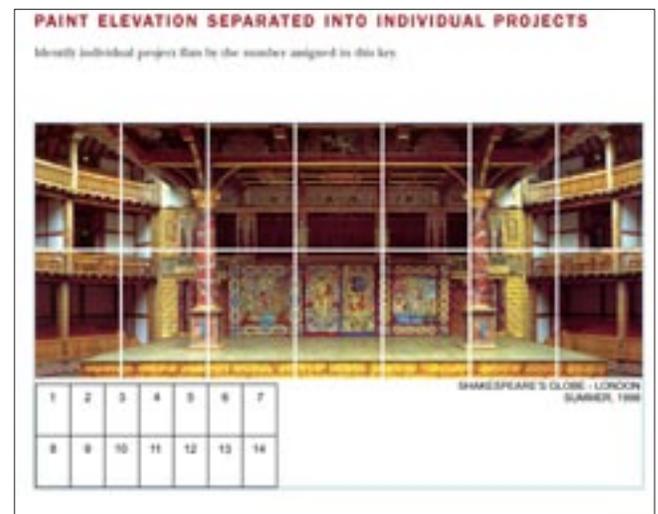


Figure 3- Final Project

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

Michael J. Riha has been on faculty of the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville since 1992 and holds the position of Director of Design for the Master of Fine Arts program. He has designed scenery, lighting, sound, and costumes (under protest only) for over 80 productions. His freelance work includes projects at the Muny in St Louis, the Olney Theater, University of Tulsa, Theatre Squared, the Oklahoma Shakespearean Festival, Brown County Playhouse and the Subterranean Theatre Company in Los Angeles. He also continues to work outside of the theatre world designing and painting trade show booths for such clients as Tyson Foods®, Levi®, and Coleman®. Michael is also a member of United Scenic Artists Local 829 and USITT. www.michaelriha.com

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