

Scenic Design and Projection Design for Ragtime, the Musical

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Abstract Ragtime, the musical (book by Terrence McNally, music by Stephen Flaherty and lyrics by Lynn Ahrens) for my Thesis project allowed me the opportunity to design in the large proscenium setting of E. Turner Stump Theatre. Particular challenges for this show included the devising of a unit set, the effective use of the fly space, the relationship of scenic design with the music, and the capturing of the specific architecture of the historical time period in order to visually support the stories. Since Ragtime is close to an opera and so much of the story and passing of time is sung in the song, I used a series of carefully researched and designed images as projections on various surfaces of the stage unit. The majority of the audience at KSU is largely students who are several generations removed from this time period. My job was to make the historic elements come alive visually with minimal changes in scenery. I researched turn of the 20th century architecture and specifically local Ohio architectural vernaculars to find the design elements that met these criteria.

Subjects/Keywords Theater; Ragtime; Scene Design; Projection Design; Design

Contributors Smith, Raynette (Advisor)

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CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION

This paper documents the process of the set and projection design for the Kent State University School of Theatre and Dance 2012 production of Ragtime by Terrence McNally, Stephen Flaherty and Lynn Ahrens based on the book by E. L. Doctorow. Ragtime was presented in Stump Theatre, a proscenium stage, located in the Music and Speech Center at Kent State University February 17-26, 2012. This thesis paper tracks the design process from directorial concept through my design concept for both the set and the projections, to a self-evaluation of the realized design. The production team consisted of the following individuals: Eric van Baars – Director Jonathan Swoboda and Kerry Glann -Musical Directors Jim Weaver- Choreographer David Krupla – Lighting Designer Kathleen Kovarik – Costume Designer Brian Chismar – Sound Designer Connie Hecker- Set Design, Projection Design Sean Jeffries- Projection Programmer Martin Simonsen – Technical Director Karl Erdmann – Production Manager Grace Steinbrecher – Production Stage Manager David Burrington – Prop Master Jim Koehnle – Charge Scenic Artist 2 Design Concept

In preparation for designing Ragtime, Director Eric van Baars and I met prior to the sharing of his design concept statement. I wanted to be alert to any preliminary ideas or expectations he had about the design. Initially, the set units van Baars envisioned were something that would reflect the industrial growth of the era. For scenic elements, he wanted two rotatable and movable levels that would be connected and separated depending upon the location of each scene. My preliminary research and background work over the summer included reading the book on which the play was based, and research into the time period.¹ I had access to several versions of the script to read, as the script of the concert version, which the school was licensed for, was not yet available. However, both the original Broadway and Kennedy Center Revival scripts were made available to the design team. The analysis of these scripts made it clear that one of the most challenging aspects of the design for this show was to illustrate the decade covered in the play from 1906-1916. The text references several well known buildings and neighborhoods of the period, including the Morgan Library, Henry Ford’s Factory, Union Square, and the tenements of the lower East side. Another challenge was the handling of the many specialized locations peopled by a number of cameos who played historical figures. My first impulse was to use projections to help cover the time span and the multiple locations. In early discussions with the director, we both were thinking about how the industrialization of the turn of the twentieth century influenced visual culture.³ We imagined having a scenic architecture that would involve industrial looking metal to reflect the excitement and hopefulness for the future. The director also felt the style of the production did not require a literal representation of each of the specific settings. He envisioned using, perhaps, turntables and movable levels that could be connected and separated depending upon the location of each scene. My historical research² provided me with information that later on helped me to create both the structural parts of the set and the imagery for the projections. At a subsequent meeting held in the fall of 2011 with the entire production team, the director provided a more formal conceptual statement. As I analyzed it,³ I highlighted what I felt was key to my design work and put into bold the key words that spoke to me and directed my thoughts as a designer. Key ideas included “Great American melting pot.” “Story of change,” “characters who adapt/flourish vs. the inert who do not survive.” Van Baars identifies the three central characters as Mother, Colehouse and Tateh. I used the geographical locations of these three characters in my design concept as New Rochelle, Harlem, Ellis Island, and the Lower East Side. Van Baars words “steeped in nostalgia” and the “roots of the extended family” were my key visual cues. The word “nostalgia” prompted me to learn more about the state of technological innovations from 1906-1916. So I researched that and made a list.⁴ Van Baars also wrote in his concept statement: For our production, I would want to capture the scale, grace and economy of the industrialist era that occurred during the timeline of the play. Large groups must be able to enter/ exit quickly and grandly- again the term “sweeping” comes to mind. The world of the play should be efficient, structured, and above all, grand. Keeping in mind the research, the aesthetic terms “sweeping” and “grand” and the pragmatic need for quick exits and entrances, I began to sketch in response to my research and the director’s vision. My goal was to capture the iron work structures of the late Victorian technology and show how this architecture of the early twentieth century served as a bridge between two worlds, by either blending with or contrasting with old world craftsmanship. This framework would also be symbolic of the European immigrants of the old world searching to make their place in the new, the black population making their mark on the dominant culture, and the high class established society learning to change their worldviews and embrace change.⁵

CHAPTER II DESIGN PROCESS

Initial Concept Development

To address the main structure, I chose to surround myself with the printed visual resources collected by my assistants and myself of the locations mentioned in the script. I examined the period architectural details to identify elements that I could adapt into a structure. In my initial designs, I envisioned a full stage portal truss structure that would represent some of the height found in the ironwork, glass houses⁵, and arcades of the late Victorian era. I continued to listen to recordings of the score for inspiration as I worked and pondered the scope of the musical. The songs in Ragtime are the primary medium for telling the story. Because realistic scenery was too cumbersome to work well for such quick scenic changes, and projected imagery could change and flow seamlessly with the action rapidly to illustrate the musical story, I wanted to include the use of projections in my set design. I began to think about the scenes that might work from a higher level; the attic scenes with Sarah, the bridge and ship scenes, and the boardwalk of Atlantic City. I also wanted this upper level to provide enough height and length to create the “sweeping” look that van Baars asked for. I knew I also had to work with horizontal line and perspective to create a sense of depth (see fig. 1-4). One challenge was to keep the set design’s influence on the director’s blocking options in consideration. Because my vision and the director’s vision on certain scenes⁶ could be different, our frequent communications allowed my design to be in line with van Baars vision and intention. For example I had an idea to use asymmetry and created a diagonal platform from upstage left to downstage right as a way to reach for a grand and sweeping effect (see fig. 5-8). In addition to a paper model, I created visuals in Photoshop to share with van Baars. He did not feel the blocking and choreography could work as well with a unit set that was asymmetrical. So he asked to have a more symmetrical stage picture, thus I continued to develop more balanced sketches. Research photographs on the Cleveland Arcade⁶ was fast becoming my main inspirational source. This fabulous example of the period architecture was built in 1890 and modeled after a Galleria in Milan. It was once known as Cleveland’s Crystal Palace and exemplified the same ideals for hope and prosperity that van Baars was seeking for our production. I explored various ways to use the storefront images from my Cleveland Arcade research to create smaller units within the set that could rotate and expose the different locations. I liked the potential of its mobility. I asked van Baars how much stage depth he wanted for the choreography and he provided me a minimum of 20 feet to a deluxe of 33 feet (see fig. 9-11). This was important information as I moved into the next phase of defining the main unit set. During the process of drawing sketches I came up with various uses of stairs. The grand staircases of the research architecture and the stairs at the Cleveland Arcade inspired them all (See fig. 12-13). I sketched out various stair styles, which (see fig. 14-17) I shared with van Baars to get his feedback (See fig. 18-21). After meeting with both van Baars and Raynette Smith, my advisor, I revised my plan to have an L shaped stairway instead of a curved unit on the offstage right area and a straight staircase onstage⁷ left. As a result, the details and the overhead trusses became the only remaining curves in the design (see fig. 22). A metal bridge structure with two staircases leading downstage, an upstage wall that could be used for silhouettes and projections, side legs and a window fly also for projection of imagery were the next segments to emerge in my design. A particular window image (see fig. 23) from the Cleveland Arcade became the inspiration for our favorite, key element, which evolved into the flying stage center window. This image served as the spine of the scenic structure. It not only provided inspiration for the use of other similar design elements, but it became a centerpiece to the mise en scene of the design by serving as a metaphorical portal which encapsulated the symbolism of transition so crucial to the play. Additional arcade images inspired other design details (see fig. 24-26). I designed a truss, rising from columns on the proscenium with a very narrow arch to extend the architectural feel and create a portal view of the stage.

Concept Refinement

Early research on projection surfaces included a review of my seminar with Jake Pinholster sponsored by Ohio Valley USITT in May of 2010. I had also researched projection surfaces for a class project on Hamlet and a class paper on the use of projections in stage design which I had written my first semester. Additional research showed muslin was good fabric for silhouettes and projections. Batiste had textures and was available as an IFR (Inherently flame retardant) fabric. White poly silk takes light well with some translucency. Allegro cloth comes in three colors, which offered me some design flexibility. Theatrical gauze would allow too much light through. A sample of 8 cloth that I obtained was Chamelion cloth. This came in 12” and 15” widths at just under \$40 per yard for the wider one and was excellent for projections. One odd suggestion for making a screen was to use wax paper!⁷ It is supposed to have a near perfect balance of opacity and transparency. A double layer, woven together in large strips and glued by an ironing process was a simple, cheap and easy screen. A PEVA shower curtain liner and vellum were other inexpensive solutions and I should keep them in mind for future applications. Much later in the process, and after much discussion with Martin Simonsen (Technical Director), we determined to use muslin as our best solution. Preliminary Design Meeting I presented some initial ideas at a preliminary design meeting in mid October 2011, I presented images which resembled hand

colored postcards from the era. They reflected the nostalgia the director wanted to evoke in our production and were well received (see figures 46-52). When I returned to the process after an interruption due to an unexpected personal tragedy, these post card images became my visual anchor for the style of the projected images. The final projection images I created for the production were colored and designed very specifically and were highly influenced by both the postcard research, and the color palettes of costuming and lighting. In mid October I gave a Power Point presentation, which demonstrated projection ideas for some of the scenes (see figure 52-54). This presentation became an important jumping off point for my later work with costume designer Kathleen Kovarik and lighting designer Dave Krupla. We shared our research. 9 Final Set Design Process In November, Simonsen, the Technical Director, informed me of budget issues with the preliminary design, which I immediately discussed with van Baars. Together we looked at adjustments to the set that could bring down the costs. The elimination of the stage right stairs and replacement with a ladder save cost and worked well for the staging of the firehouse. We also sacrificed the curved proscenium truss. The purpose of the proscenium truss was to create the sense of roof on the arcade shaped space. Columns decorated with a lion head supported it. By keeping truss work on the upstage legs, I was able to imply the ceiling structure that had been cut. By repeating the lion and column combination, I was able to maintain a sense of depth. Finally, looking for more savings and structural stability, Simonsen suggested that we forgo the metal and use a hard wooden stud wall on the upstage under the platforming. Van Baars and I decided to keep the door translucent to maintain a silhouette effect. With these changes, we were able to meet Simonsen's budget requirements. (Compare Figure 55 with Figure 56 and Figure 57, 59, and 60). At the November production meeting, I shared my idea of the bridge structure and the placement of the projections (see fig. 32-37). Previous to this presentation, I had met with the lighting designer and we had gone scene by scene through the play to discuss ideas about lights and the projections. The upstage wall was seen as both a silhouette screen and a projection surface. The legs were also to be used as both. I made a white 10 model (see figure 58) in early November. Details of lions' heads, on columns and truss work were added at this point. Many technical questions on the use of projections for our stage, had been raised at the previous meeting, so a special meeting held with Jason Potts (lighting and sound supervisor), Steve Zapatowski (sound design advisor), Jayung Seo (lighting design advisor), Smith, van Baars and Sean Jeffries (projection programmer). Props Design Process Initially, the school had planned to hire a professional props person from outside the university for this production who could also weld the larger props. It was, therefore, necessary to be as specific in the design as possible about built props early on. I needed to finalize the designs for the main prop items, the piano, silhouette cart, trellis and the car. (see figure 45.) At the time we had thought there would be a judge's bench and footlights, but we simplified, and decided not to build these items in order to keep the show within our budgetary and technical boundaries. As January came around, it became clear we were going to have to work with in house staff for the assignment of property master and building props. The welding class and shop would work together to build the larger metal props. Graduate student Dave Burrington was assigned to be a Propmaster. My job was to assist his advisor and select the chairs and lamp posts that would echo the metal design elements. We discussed the best approach to building the curtain for Crime of the Century. Should it be painted or draped from fabric? Burrington used his skills in sewing to create the curtain with fabric found in storage and spray painted fringe. Excellent 11 communications between the shop supervisor, technical director, artisan and myself enabled us to solve problems that pertained to the metal props, trellis, piano, and cart. 8 Projection Design Process In January 2012 I focused on designing the projections, an extensive component of my scenic design. A distinct advantage I had in designing projections was an experienced and supportive director. Besides his personal experiences, van Baars shared a very helpful article with the lighting designer and myself, which talked about considerations often overlooked in productions when using projections. 9 First I developed a projection schedule¹⁰ that indicated which of the surfaces were to have a projection during which song. Next I compiled all the images for each of these instances¹¹ to give to the programmer, Sean Jefferies. Each image required adjustments to appearance and texture, in areas of hue, saturation, brightness, contrast, and the application of filters and paintwork to bring it more into the postcard art world. This work was accomplished primarily in Photoshop. The most significant adjustments I needed to make to the images came after the first run through. Finally, I could see how they actually looked on the set walls. I learned that the color as I saw it on my computer screen varied greatly in hue, depth, and the values I was going to see in the projected image on the stage. I made more adjustments to the images and prepared for the paper tech. After this tech, the director, lighting designer, and programmer, and I scheduled our own mini tech in the theatre to review each scene with images. This very important step took place the day before the first cue to cue technical rehearsal. At this mini-tech, we were able to set lights cues, colors, and fade 12 times for all the projections in the show. The process also allowed the director to change blocking to take advantage of an unexpected dramatic effect of a rear projection image; it spilled like a gobo on the floor through the open doorway. CHAPTER III Design Concept Evaluation I was quite happy with the overall look of the show. I felt the set had a grace and elegance that touched upon the time period with accuracy. The metal set was all black except for the spirals in the railings and on some props. The gold touches on the spirals and lions heads were very effective; they had a look that married a style portraying old world craftsmanship with the new style shown by use of iron and the iron truss. A tension between the epic scale of the story itself and the nostalgia or sentimentality specified in the director's concept was achieved through the projected images and the wide lines of the unit set. The metal structure provided the sense of openness, allowing the cast to make swift entrances and exits. Set Design Execution Evaluation One area for improvement on my part would be to more thoroughly analyze the trim sets and prepare for the hanging of flying scenery with the lights on the section. I learned a lot in this process because I did not get it right the first time. Even with a rework, we still had difficulty with the flag drop not fitting the fly space as scheduled and that required additional adjustments to the set at the last minute. 13 As I look back at what I would change if designing this show again, for the same venue and budget, I would have painted the upstage wall differently. I felt the color did not create the depth that I was going for. I would use translucent walls rather than muslin covered hard flats, in both the projection legs and the upstage wall to allow the director to play with shadows and to create more stylized interaction with the set. However, these would have to be reserved for the less crowded moments of the stage picture, such as in the baseball park. If the budget would allow, I would add back the proscenium arch structure so that the use of the lions on the proscenium would make more visual sense prior to the opening of the house curtain. I would have asked the Lighting Designer to increase the lighting on the upstage walls and doors to obtain more shadows and texture so that the lighting texture would be consistent across the upstage wall. Props Design Evaluation The skeletal props design for the car, trellis and piano (see figure 65,66, and 67) turned out to be excellent choices for the simplicity of their structure, mobility and tempo of the scenes they were in. An unexpected and delightful discovery was by the actor in the role of Colehouse, they could sit on and roll in with the car- as opposed to a shuffle step lift and turn for which is what van Baars had originally asked. The casket was originally to be made as a metal piece in the style of the other large props. However, a wooden one that I found in storage (see figure 64) gave me the opportunity to increase the use of the mahogany wood to that which is used in the columns and the table in the Morgan Library.¹² This was important because I believe the 14 contrast between the metal and the wood echoed the contrast between the old world and the new age of the industrial revolution. Finally, as I looked at the production with costumes under the lights, I had to exercise "artistic self control," cut the designer apron strings and call it "finished," thus allowing the play live its own life. This was a good thing to experience. Projections Design Evaluation The biggest technical and aesthetic challenge to the set was rear projection on the translucent doors. I learned by observation in the actual production with the full stage projections that even black fabric could work as a projection color surface.¹³ In light of that, I would have painted the entire upstage wall black and used a black sheet on the doors because the color of black would have provided more of a sense of distance. A benefit to working with a director so open to the use of projections was the "happy accident" which came during tech week. I was inspired to try an image on the upstage center window for the funeral.¹⁴ Van Baars encouraged me to try it, so I prepared what turned out to be one of my favorite images in the show. It created a sense of reverence that worked well for that scene. My work with the director and lighting designer for the judicious use of imagery, precise timing and the understanding of how to move the story along with projection, along with the recognition of when a projection was going to be extraneous makes me particularly pleased with the projection design. I learned to calibrate how much brighter the images needed to be to look good on stage than the images on my computer screen. I also learned that on our particular ¹⁵ equipment, it was sometimes more useful for the programmer to use some of his filters to adjust color to work with the lighting, than for me to rework them in Photo shop.¹⁵ The Friday mini tech we had for lighting and projections cues helped us tie the projections and the lighting looks together for one unified stage picture. The only projection I might change would be using a vertical split screen image for the scene of the train station where mother and Tateh, with their children, meet. The tension between the scale of the set and that of the actors would have better underscored the contrast between the human and space.¹⁶ Personal Growth A brief word about my own personal growth through this process; I have noted in several places, comments about my learning experience. I would say that due to the personal tragedy I experienced early in the design process, I learned to trust my colleagues as well as my own instincts, to make decisions and take risks. I have been deeply humbled and encouraged by the support extended to me. I appreciate their confidence shown to me when I expressed my desire to continue my work on this show. Death teaches us that we never know how long we have to be impactful in the lives of those we live and work with. Theatre is a living breathing process. I am grateful to have had this particular group of people to work with me. This moving show about hope in fast paced changing times turned deeply meaningful as I anticipated the unknown future. 16

Endnotes 1 Some of my research images can be seen at these links. <http://www.sanfranciscocomemories.com/ppie/photos.html>, http://www.books-aboutcalifornia.com/Pages/Palaces_and_Courts/Illustrations/Palaces_and_Courts_Illu_35.html, Images of New Rochelle, 1902 "Timeline | Amon Carter Museum." Amon Carter Museum | An American Collection. Amon Carter Museum of American Art, 2011. Web. 24 Oct. 2011. www.cartermuseum.org/remington-andrussell/timeline?artist=1399. "51 Neptune Ave, New Rochelle, NY 10805, \$625,000, New Rochelle, New York Real Estate for Sale." Real Estate, Homes for Sale, Condos for Sale, Houses for Sale, Real Estate Agents. Web. 24 Oct. 2011. www.neighborcivcity.com/property/51-Neptune-Ave-New-Rochelle-NY-10805-31214827195678/. A parlor image: "The Parlor Is the Only Room in Which There Is Any Suggestion of Formality Print." Encore Editions - Prints and Canvas Giclee Reproductions. 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