

Shoptalk: The Scene Shop

by Jennifer Kiger

Theatre transports us to another world. From the comfort of their seats, audiences have the opportunity to travel to other cities, countries and centuries. This winter, A.R.T. audiences will journey to Padua with the aid of a life-size semi truck when they attend *The Taming of the Shrew*. The set designer, scene shop and prop shop crews have worked for months creating the world in which this production takes place. Their work still continues, as they try to bring the designer's ideas to the stage.

The process started in August, when set designer Christine Jones met with director Andrei Serban to discuss the show. A.R.T. audiences most recently saw Jones's work in last season's *Man and Superman*. Her association with the A.R.T. began several years ago when she was a graduate student at NYU. At that time, directing students at the A.R.T. Institute and design students from NYU collaborated on projects. Through that venture, Jones was introduced to the A.R.T. New Stages series, for which she designed several productions, including *Picasso at the Lapin Agile* and *Hot 'n' Throbbing*. Working with Andrei Serban on this season's *The Taming of the Shrew* has given Jones the opportunity to approach the actual process of designing the set in a different way. "Generally I look at the script first on my own and get in touch with any initial gut reactions I have. With Andrei, the process was different. He is very interested in the theatricality of the piece and creating an event full of surprises. We haven't done a lot of text analysis or character analysis. It has been a process of coming up with fun ideas."

One of the first ideas discussed revolved around approaching the

show from the point of view of a circus or fair. Jones researched these ideas, and soon the two of them became interested in the lives of traveling performers. This included the details that surround a circus, such as the loading and unloading of trucks, the individual trucks parked outside the tents, and the people behind the scenes. Those images sent the set design in the direction it has now taken. "There is a truck in our production similar to an A.R.T. touring truck. The conceit of the show is that these performers arrive as part of a touring company putting on this particular production of *The Taming of the Shrew*."

Once the decision was made to use the truck, Jones met with the A.R.T. department heads to give them a preview of the set. To achieve the best design for the production, Jones must collaborate with the A.R.T. technical staff as much as she works with the director. Numerous factors come into play when designing and building the set. These include not only the vision of the director and designer but also more practical concerns, such as budget, time, and availability of craftsmen. In preliminary meetings, Jones presented a model and rough story boards of each scene. Next Steve Setterlun, the technical director, calculated a budget. At this point, Jones engaged in a series of discussions with Serban and Setterlun to find creative solutions to problems with budget, materials, and labor hours.

Another major consideration during this process of collaboration and compromise comes with the unique status of repertory theatre. Unlike most theatres in America today, the A.R.T. continues to run shows in repertory. This requires building two sets (we hope on time and within the budget) that will share the stage for the run of the show. As technical director, Steve Setterlun must take the two completely different set designs and make them work together

within the space of the theatre. When one set occupies the stage, the other waits backstage and in the wings for its next performance. The structure of the theatre itself causes many constraints on staging shows in repertory. According to Setterlun, "A lot of things we are doing in terms of weight, safety, or sheer volume constantly challenge what the walls will really allow us to do." Consideration of the architecture of the space includes how far the set can be dragged off stage before it hits a wall, how many set pieces will fly in from the grid above the stage, and the amount of space available for cables and rigging lines, as well as the feasibility of using house goods, such as doors, scrims, and drops. At times, the requirements of one set conflict with the design of the other set in repertory. When that happens, Setterlun must wear the hats of master technician, diplomat, and foreman at the same time, looking for solutions that maintain the integrity of each design, while also protecting the interests of his crew.

After working through these major considerations during the preliminary process, the crew begins to build the set. Often, the scene shop crew works on more than one show at time. On the day this article was written, the crew attended a meeting addressing the *The Taming of the Shrew* set. They studied blueprints, elevations, and drawings made by Christine Jones, and then they discussed specific technical concerns, such as how to disassemble the truck for storage in the wings of the theatre, how to make the desired wheel assembly for the truck, and which pieces of the set will fly in from cables attached to the grid over the stage. They also examined renderings of individual pieces the scene shop will build, including a 16-foot-tall statue of Michelangelo's David, a 20-foot-tall Leaning Tower of Pisa, seven sheep, and a 14-foot-wide fresco of a bull.

Located apart from the Loeb Drama Center, the A.R.T. scene shop houses equipment suited to build any kind of set. The main floor of the shop is divided into essentially three areas: one for metals (cutting and welding), one woodworking, and one for painting. On the second level of the shop, blueprints and ground plans line the walls of individual office areas. At any given moment, the scene shop technicians can be found grinding, sanding, sawing, welding, or painting the next piece needed for an A.R.T. production. Throughout the season, the scene shop holds a staff of eight, including Setterlun, his two assistants, three carpenters, the shop supervisor, and a scenic artist.

The Taming of the Shrew set will consist of found elements, as well as built pieces. During one trip to Cambridge, Jones went with Setterlun to a store that supplies truck parts. They found the cab for the set's truck at a junk yard. She says she has enjoyed the process involved in this production of The Taming of the Shrew. "I love the magical coincidence of finding just the right thing at some out of the way Salvation Army store, in the middle of a field, or a junk yard. I love these adventures."

Jones also keeps in contact with Cindy Lee, the props shop manager. She sends Lee research or sketches of individual props, and then Lee looks through her own stock or goes shopping to find the closest match. Often, the props department also builds pieces. Early in the process, Setterlun and Lee meet to decide which elements of the design constitute set pieces (scenery used as part of a stage set) and which are props (items of furniture, ornaments, or decorations in a stage set or any objects handled or used by an actor in a performance). Usually, sets and props remain separate from each other, but there is always room for cooperation between the two departments.

This spirit of cooperation remains constant throughout the process of creating a set. Each aspect of the production affects the others. Setterlun notes, "Because scenery has the biggest budget and the most time involved, a tremendous amount of planning depends on the set; for example, the available space for electrics, how the structure of the set affects the stage crew's ability to move it efficiently, and whether the floor will affect the costuming choices." The goal remains the same for any production: to provide the best realization of the director's and designer's vision. According to Setterlun, the challenge is the reward. "At the A.R.T. we have the resources to try new things constantly. Each piece we build is a prototype. We find inventive solutions for new problems every time we work on a different set. Usually, when we build a piece, it is the first and last time we may ever have a chance to try a certain idea." After all, how often does a person have the opportunity to build a truck or a 16-foot-tall replica of Michaelangelo's David?

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