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Scenic Design for Dancing at Lughnasa

Terry Marek
University of New Orleans

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Scenic Design for *Dancing at Lughnasa*

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
In partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
In
Film, Theater and Communication Arts
Scenic Design

By

Terry Marek
B.S. University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin. 1987

May 18th, 2007

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Abstract

This thesis examines the process of designing the set for the fall 2006 production of Brian Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa* at the University of New Orleans. This production was chosen for me by the graduate committee in partial completion of my Master of Fine Arts degree in scenic design. I will examine the process I went through from initial introduction to the project, the interpretation, communication and execution of the design as well as the response to this design. The text of this thesis will be accompanied by copies of all research, renderings, draftings as well as all supporting materials relevant to the design process.

Introduction

Robert Edmond Jones states that a set designer is “an artist of occasions.”¹ The “occasion” in this instance is Brian Friel’s *Dancing at Lughnasa*. This play was chosen by the faculty of the University of New Orleans as the first production of the 2006 – 2007 season in its Theater East, also known as The Thrust. I was assigned this production as my thesis project in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Master’s of Fine Arts degree in Theatrical Design. This thesis seeks to examine the artistry of this occasion, i.e. the set design for this production.

Jones describes the set designer as a “jack of all trades,”² recalling a seemingly endless list of theatrical skills required of a set designer:

Although he is able to call upon any or all of these varied gifts [carpentry, scenic painting, sewing,] at will, he is not concerned with any one of them to the exclusion of the others, nor is he interested in any of them for their own sake. These talents are only the tools of his trade.³

Jones’ description of a set designer’s craft as being “skills”, “gifts”, “talents”, “tools of his trade”, and “artistry”, does little to help understand how a set gets designed. The artistry of set design lies in the interpretation, communication and execution of a theatrical occasion. These three broad categories can translate Jones’ mythical gifts-artistry-talents-tools into recognizable skills. The examination of this set design process in this thesis will focus on my approach to these skills and my successes and failures in applying them.

¹ Jones, p. 68

² Jones, p. 67

³ Jones, p. 67-68

Interpretation, communication, and execution are distinct yet encompassing skills required of a successful set designer. They act as the three wheels of a work cart holding the skills, gifts, and talents a designer uses when displaying his artistry. Directors collaborate with designers to make the production happen in a space. Directors are primarily concerned with making the action of a play come to life; designers make sure the action comes to life within the constraints of the laws of physics. Designers must bridge the gap between the realms of the dream-like imagination and the hard concrete facts of reality. It is one thing to be able to imagine a play taking place in a certain space and time and color; however it takes a completely different set of skills to communicate this idea to those who will get the production on its feet. Ideas often collide with the pesky laws of physics as the show is racing towards opening night. The magic is complete once the show is in front of an audience, where seemingly insurmountable difficulties dissolve and new unexpected difficulties come to the fore. No amount of analysis or categorization will assure a designer that he will successfully communicate his design ideas with the collaborators or the audience. However, a look at the through line of the interpretation, communication, and execution of a theatrical occasion can help support the designer's choices when approaching another theatrical occasion. This creates an examination of one's own actions as evident in the artistry of that occasion.

I came to this project with 6 years' experience working in commercial theater in New York. I started my advanced degree at The University of New Orleans in 1996, finishing half of my degree credits before moving to New York City in the spring of 1998. I worked for a properties production company doing Broadway, Off-Broadway, national tours, film and industrial productions. I started as a crafts person, and in short

order, moved to a supervisory position, working directly with designers as the props supervisor. My first big show was *Dinner with Friends*, directed by Daniel Sullivan at the Variety Arts Theater in New York. I supervised and did the show call as the head props person, which garnered me an IATSE union card. From there I worked on numerous Broadway shows as the props supervisor or props head, collaborating with a variety of creative forces including, Susan Strohman and Nathan Lane (*The Frogs* at Lincoln Center), David Rockwell (his first two Broadway productions, *Rocky Horror* and *Hairspray*), Robert Crowley (*Sweet Smell of Success*) and Mark Thompson (*Bombay Dreams*). The pinnacle of my commercial theatrical career was working with Edward Albee on his Broadway premier of *The Goat or Who is Sylvia*. I learned a tremendous amount from these experiences, including how the role of the designer fluctuates from person to person and from production to production. Some, like Derek McClain, are detailed and focused on every element of the production, while others, such as David Gallo, are very loose and free-wheeling on the details and often leave a large amount of decision-making up to collaborators. An individual's personality is reflected in his or her work; the more organized individuals are the easier to work with however, not always the most successful. Each designer's approach and style varies greatly from production to production. Bob Crowley's sparse and moody atmosphere for *Sweet Smell of Success* is juxtaposed with Thompson's *Bombay Dreams*, which explodes from the proscenium into the audience like a Bollywood movie spilling into The Broadway Theater. In all cases, the designers' successes and failures rest with their ability to tell the story through the creation of atmosphere and environment. Huge budgets and massive amounts of machinery could not help Ricardo Hernandez's overly conceptualized design for *Bells*

Are Ringing starring Faith Prince, yet Robert Brill's hanging gallows set, which looked like a roller coaster, for the 2004 Roundabout Theater Company's *Assassins* simply and accurately told the story.

I left New York to return to New Orleans to finish my master's degree. After spending my "Hurricane Katrina Semester" at the University of Michigan, I returned to the University of New Orleans in January of 2006. My first design was *A Waltz Between*, which was the qualifying project for my degree. *A Waltz Between* was an original script commissioned for the Tennessee Williams Festival, produced at U.N.O. and transferred to Southern Repertory at Canal Place in New Orleans for the festival. This was a sparse production that required only a park bench. I focused exclusively on atmosphere and environment creating an ethereal world comprised entirely of sheer drapes hanging about the stage.

In addition to six years' worth of watching and participating in theater in New York City, I bring other qualifications to this project. These include: a Bachelor of Science in Theater/ Drama and Communication Arts Education from the University of Wisconsin, Madison, completed in 1987, two and a half years spent overseas, which includes teaching English in Japan for one year, and thirty years experience working in the restaurant industry in New York, London, Sydney, Osaka Japan, Chicago, Washington D.C., and New Orleans. In every city and every country I've lived, I've focused on viewing a variety of theatrical events, including both high and low-brow entertainment. I love being in a theater both as a member of the audience and as a member of the production. My goal as a theater person in general and as a theater designer in particular is to continue in the academic world as an instructor. The best

thing I believe I can do with the remainder of my life is to give back the joy and enthusiasm I've received from theatre to those who will make the art form in the future.

Chapter I

Interpretation

When approaching the design of a theatrical production in general, and *Dancing at Lughnasa* in particular, there is a natural sequence of events that fall under the category of interpretation. Jones' idea of a theatrical production as an "occasion" implies that it is an event, happening in a particular time and at a particular place. Interpretation is a melding of these three: the event, the time, and the place. To use a metaphor, the event, time, and place act as spokes supporting the wheel that is interpretation. Two of these three spokes are fairly straight-forward. The event is the script itself, and the place is the theater in which it is produced. The third spoke of interpretation, time, cannot be applied directly. Time is relevant in a logistical sense involving scheduling and labor; the term does not refer to historical time. The historical timing of this production as it relates to academic, cultural, local or national issues will not be examined in the thesis. Time, as it relates to interpretation has more to do with the production schedule and how that shapes what is actually produced for the occasion. The effects of the greater world can be found in every production; however escapism and suspension of disbelief are two of the most compelling reasons for the existence of theater. There is something to be said for setting yourself up in a large windowless building for two months creating a unique world.

Of the three spokes of interpretation - place, event and time, - place (the theater) was the first I had knowledge of prior to being introduced to the project. The event (the script) came second, with time hovering above the whole project.

The Theater East is the largest of U.N.O.'s theater spaces and a good example of a thrust theater. The modern architecture of a thrust design for the theater can be traced to the Bauhaus movement in Germany of the 1920's. Founded by Walter Gropius, this modernist movement focused on a total design for living.⁴ Gropius designed his vision of a "total theater"⁵ by combining a shallow proscenium with an extended part of the stage thrusting out into the audience, which could be rotated to create an arena arrangement for the same space. Gropius hoped that this theater design would "force them [the audience] to participate in experiencing the play."⁶ This layout, combined with a large array of projection screens and wide European seating, would have allowed for spectacular productions had his theater been built. Although The Bauhaus movement fizzled shortly after its inception, theory and practice of theater in an ever-engaging way spread through Europe and the United States after World War II.

Off-Broadway theaters in the United States of the 1950's and 1960's saw the first real signs of experimentation with both arena and thrust stages.⁷ The designers of this time embraced the "new" architecture, creating a new environmentalism of audience immersion. Ming Cho Lee's designs for the Delacort Theater in Central Park in the early 1960's, as well as Eugene Lee's mid-1960's designs for The Circle in the Square Theater New York, and Santo Loquasto's designs for The Arena in Washington D.C., all embraced the thrust architecture and developed a heightened environmental movement of stage design.

⁴ Brockett, p. 600

⁵ Brockett, p. 600

⁶ Brockett, p. 600

⁷ Brockett, p. 654

Arnold Aronson considers Ming Cho Lee the “dean”⁸ of American set design. Aronson explores these early designers, pointing to their adoption of the new theater. According to Aronson, Ming Cho Lee “[wanted] the audience to experience the performance as directly as possibly”⁹ whereas Eugene Lee “[saw] the stage and the auditorium as a single, unified space.”¹⁰ These designers explored the “new” theater architecture in productions of Pinter, Albee, Stoppard, and Pirandello. Most of this new theater, however, was considered experimental.

Tyrone Guthrie’s success with the thrust stage in Minneapolis in 1964 propelled the construction of thrust stages across the United States in the late 1960’s and 1970’s. The Guthrie Theater’s productions of classical and Shakespearian dramatic “occasions” set on its eponymous thrust stage designed by architect Ralph Rapson created an institutional acceptability of the theatrical form. Institutions building new performance arts centers around the country built thrust stages not always to allow for a flexible space, but also to increase the sensation of live theater.¹¹ The thrust stage, also known as the open stage, allowed for a larger number of audience members to be grouped around the stage rather than just in front of the stage as in the proscenium.¹² The open and exposed nature of the thrust stage meant that productions focused more on the dramatic word rather than on the dramatic production. Christos Athanasopoulos, in his book Contemporary Theater, sums up the appeal of the modern thrust stage: “By and large, therefore, it was, and continues to be, a form of theater favored by a segment of the public composed of intellectuals, students, and people who looked upon the theater as art

⁸ Aronson, p. 102

⁹ Aronson, p. 87

¹⁰ Aronson, p.88

¹¹ Athanasopoulos, p. 187

¹² Athanasopoulos, p. 188

and not mere entertainment.”¹³ Whereas the new theater was initially confined to Fringe Theater in its early stages in New York, academic institutions embracing of the form brought it to both large and small communities around the United States.

When christened in the fall of 1972, the Performing Arts Building, in which U.N.O.’s Theater East is located, was heralded as a great building by the architect critic of *The Times Picayune*. This facility was the first and only one of its kind in the state of Louisiana¹⁴ at its opening. It provided the students and faculty, as well as the community, the opportunity of examining the newest forms of theater here in New Orleans.

My approach to this space was to strip it of other production forms that I had seen in that theater. This process began with questioning how best to tell a story in that space. The audience house has a unique arrangement of ramps and permanent platforms rising from the acting areas. This structural feature invited me to look at re-orienting the audience to the acting area, possibly swapping the acting areas with the audience space. Although this was an exciting proposition, once I read *Dancing at Lughnasa*, I realized it would not work for this play. I think this out-of-the-box- approach is beneficial in that the “box” of the theater should not constrain a designer’s thought process. The main feature of this space is of course, the thrust stage which I happily embraced because I strongly believe in its abilities to envelop the audience in the performance. The dream aspect of this play attempts to take the audience back to another time and place. The thrust is perfect for such immersion in the action of a play

¹³ Athanasopoulos, p. 188

¹⁴ Louisiana State University, Self Study Report, p.413.

U.N.O.'s thrust is fairly deep and wide. This large size means the majority of the action of any play produced there is able to be front and center, on the thrust directly in front of the entire audience. The audience surrounds the acting area on three full, long sides. Two sections look straight across the acting thrust area to the other side of the auditorium. The third section looks straight across the acting area towards the scenic opening of the stage. The focal point becomes the action at the center, on the thrust acting area. This orientation of the proscenium backing up the action being played on the thrust acting area poses a problem in that it can really only stand in support of the environment being established in the larger acting area. This framing of the action on the thrust by the scenic opening gives perspective and/ depth. Any design for this space must deal with this type of perspective. The physical depth of the scenic opening is average to small, fifteen feet, but is enough to support and create environment and mood. It is also a long way from the audience, helping with the suspension of disbelief.

The positive elements inherent to this thrust stage belie its challenges. The line where the proscenium meets the thrust forms a 25" lip. Because the proscenium, which is 25" higher than the thrust acting area, is immovable, productions have to accommodate this lip at the line where the two meet. It must be dealt with as a physical limitation just as the size of the house and the impossibility to fly scenery. Several approaches to dealing with this lip have been tried over the years of this theater's life. Painting it black and pretending it will "go away" has been tried, as have any number of ramps and platforms. Since this lip is immovable, the most accessible way to alter this shape is by extending the lip and decreasing the thrust acting area. This, in turn, decreases the impact of having a thrust in the first place.

Several other positive features of U.N.O.'s Theater East include the fully accessible grid, unobtrusive vomes, an easily accessible scene shop and a well functioning HVAC system. There is a complete and easily accessible grid above the thrust acting area that allows for total illumination of the set and easy access for the electricians to service the stage lights. The audience enters the theater through vomitoriums, "voms," under the seating areas, creating wonderful opportunities for entrances and exits for the actors. The scene shop is attached to the theater via loading doors off stage left of the scenic opening. Being a modern building the HVAC system is superior. This was important not only because of the searing heat in New Orleans in August and September, but also because it filtered out dust from on-stage fabrication before rehearsals and actors on stage.

When I first approached this theater, not only did I consider re-orienting audience and acting areas, I also wanted to bathe the entire space in the environment of the production. This desire came from my studies of the early designers such as Eugene Lee and Santo Loquasto but also from working with David Rockwell on *The Rocky Horror Show* at The Circle in the Square Theater. Starting in lobby upstairs from 51st Street, Rockwell had the walls covered in what we affectionately called the Rocky fabric – blood red velvet, which was wrinkled and textured. The lower lobby before the theater entrance was covered in the same Rocky fabric, with the addition of mannequin limbs and partial torsos encased in the fabric. This gave the effect of disembodied parts stretching to break free of the fabric. This same effect was carried out throughout the theater itself, with the back and side walls covered with protruding and fabric covered body parts. The same color, texture and draped body parts were prevalent throughout the

production itself, thus completing a true, all-encompassing occasion for the audience. Director Chris Ashley further encouraged the audience envelopment by placing central characters in small acting areas among the audience. Perhaps because this was my first true Broadway production, or perhaps because Rockwell's design was integral to the telling of a story while supporting outstanding performances, or simply because I believe in the tenets of Santo Loquasto and Eugene Lee, I feel it is important to give everything to the audience a designer has at his/her disposal. This invites the audience to participate in the production. All histrionics aside, theater was and is competing with the exploding domination of mass media. The biggest trump card theater has is its live format – the aura of the occasion. The audience's need to make theater an occasion can be seen in the predominance of the standing ovation for Broadway shows. People feel compelled to make such an expensive and often eagerly anticipated occasion as seeing a Broadway show live up to their exaggerated expectations. Unfortunately, not all shows can live up to those expectations. However, the audience doesn't want to be disappointed by a mediocre production, so they leap to their feet at the end of every performance to manufacture a heightened sense of occasion.

With all this in mind, I considered what it would require to design the "lobby" as well as the back and side walls of U.N.O.'s thrust theater. Although I could not possibly hope to have the budget or time for *Dancing at Lughnasa* to accomplish such a feat, I felt it was a good exercise to see how far I could take it. I thought I would continue whatever environmental elements I would use in the scenic opening around the entire theater. This was perhaps not essential to the telling of the story; however, constituted an example of the artistry of the occasion.

The ideology behind the thrust stage, as Gropius puts it, is “to force an audience to participate” may not be palatable today, however a thrust gives an excellent opportunity to allow an audience to fall that much more into a production. Bringing the actors and the action close to the audience so that the audience feels they are involved in the occasion heightens the sensation of live theater. My personal experiences combined with my familiarity of this space prior to being told what show I would be designing shaped how I approached this design.

The event – or the script itself – is the second spoke in the interpretation wheel. *Dancing at Lughnasa* was written by Brian Friel in the late 1980’s and was first produced at the Abby Theater in Dublin, Ireland in 1990. Its American premier was at The Plymouth Theater in New York on October 24, 1991, where it ran for 421 performances. Brian Friel was given the Tony Award for Best Play in 1992, as was Brid Brennan for Best Featured Actress in a Play. Other nominations included Joe Vanek, nominated for both his scenic design and costume design, Terry John Bates for Choreography, and Patrick Mason for Best Director of a Play. This production also won two Drama Desk Awards for Best Ensemble Performance and Best Director. Joe Vanek was nominated for a Drama Desk award for set design as was Trevor Dawson for lighting design¹⁵.

The awards history of a play is only background information, which can be considered when selecting a play. It is good to know the pedigree of a script before committing precious resources to a project. Once the selection has been made, this information is so much filler for the production staff. As the designer, I find it interesting to know these things; however, I don’t believe they inform my creative process. Although I did search for photographs of Joe Vanek’s set, I was unsuccessful. Mr. Vanek

¹⁵ www.ibdb.com/awardproduction

used the same set design for this production from its premier in Dublin to the London and New York productions¹⁶. In further researching this thesis, I ran across a detailed description of his set, which sounded spectacular. I believe it is good that I did not have images of this set or a description of the set prior to conceiving my design for this occasion. I tend to fixate on those images and then waste a lot of energy trying to avoid repeating someone else's design. I'd rather put that effort into my own design. Knowing that the play was a commercial success on Broadway helped me feel comfortable with the project in that it fit into a world with which I was already familiar. Friel actually holds disdain for Broadway and commercial success in contempt. Richard Harp in his book Companion to Friel sites this contempt. "Friel takes no pride in doing well on Broadway. 'Broadway Theater is completely commercialized and is remote from real life.'"¹⁷ The theaters for the Dublin, London, and New York premiere were all strict proscenium theaters. The Plymouth Theater in New York is an average-to-small-size classical proscenium stage with a small pit and a wide house. I was the prop supervisor for *Bells are Ringing* at that theater in 2000. It is interesting to consider how differently I would have designed this play for such a theater. I must say I prefer the distinct advantages of a thrust stage for this particular script. The distinct separation of the audience and the action in a proscenium house does not allow for the audience to be absorbed by this type of memory play.

Brian Friel is a prolific and reclusive Irish playwright. *Dancing at Lughnasa* is his most commercially successful play in The United States. Mr. Friel was an accomplished and celebrated Irish playwright prior to *Dancing at Lughnasa*. However,

¹⁶ Jones, p.164

¹⁷ Harp, p. 454

the body of his theatrical work goes back to 1959, to *Doubtful Paradise*, and stretches to the London production of *The Home Place* in 2005.¹⁸ His early life informs this production because the similarities between his childhood and that of Michael, the narrator in *Dancing at Lughnasa*, are striking. Friel recounts how *Dancing at Lughnasa* began when he spotted two vagrant women on the streets of London. He recalls telling to a friend the story of his two real-life maternal aunts who left for London and ended up in a vagrant's hospice.¹⁹ Friel had seven maternal aunts while Michael in *Dancing at Lughnasa* has only five.

Friel was born in Killyclogher, County Tyrone in 1929. His father, a school teacher, took a job in Derry Northern Ireland, which is of great importance to his work. His father's family was of the Catholic minority in Protestant Northern Ireland whereas his mother's family lived across the border in the Irish Republic county of Donegal in a rural town called Glenties.²⁰ Nesta Jones in her book, *A Guide to Brian Friel* recalls his childhood with, "Friel spent his holidays a short distance across the border with his mother's family... Here he experienced a freedom and a place to which his imagination could respond. The emotional significance of this locale pervades his work."²¹ Jones points out, "The majority of Friel's plays are set in Donegal in a mythical place called Ballybeg."²² Friel uses memory and emotion interchangeably. However, we cannot call *Dancing at Lughnasa* autobiographical. It is a memory play in which the narrator voices Friel's opinion in his closing monologue: "...and what fascinates me about that memory is that it owes nothing to fact. In that memory atmosphere is more real than incident and

¹⁸ www.homeplace.theplay.co.uk/

¹⁹ Harp, p.459

²⁰ Jones, p. 2

²¹ Jones, p. 2

²² Jones, p. 6

everything is simultaneously actual and illusory.”²³ This quote pinpoints the atmosphere that must be created for this production.

After a stint in a seminary in 1946, something Friel deeply regrets²⁴, he joined his two sisters and his father in the teaching profession in Derry for a few years before finding success as a writer. We can see in his plays the institutions and environments in which Friel was deeply embroiled throughout his entire life: the Catholic Church, education and rural Irish communities. In addition he spent six months in 1963 at the then new Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis collaborating with Tyrone Guthrie²⁵. He credits this visit with helping to shape his first large-scale British success, *Philadelphia Here I Come!*²⁶ Although there is no precise information on the exact nature of their collaboration, I find it interesting that the playwright of the event (*Dancing at Lughnasa*) and the forerunner of the place (U.N.O.’s thrust theater) actually came together for a brief time.

A dream play such as *Dancing at Lughnasa* seemed ideally suited to the physical set-up of environmental backdrop combined with audience-surrounded action presented to me by the thrust stage. Once these two elements of event and place were defined, I had to me to formulate how they would be physically married. I took two approaches: script analysis and photo research.

I first read *Dancing at Lughnasa* shortly after I was told it would be the script for my thesis production. This was in June of 2006. The action of the play centers around the remembrances of a twenty-something writer. This narrator, Michael, is calling upon

²³ Friel, p. 71

²⁴ Jones, p. 3

²⁵ Jones, p. 190

²⁶ Harp. p. 482

the memory of two particular days during the summer of 1936. He is seven years old in the recollection, living with his four aunts and his unwed mother, the Mundy sisters, in a rural Donnegal town called Ballybeg. At first glance, the script seems quaint and puzzling. It isn't until the second read that one feels the deep sadness and uncertainty of these particular times the narrator is recalling for us. The time of the action is late summer, the time of harvest and the local Lughnasa festival. Friel permeates Michael's speeches with tender lines that express his longing for a childhood that, when critically examined, could not have been easy or trouble free. The play uses the language of emotion and longing to evoke a great depth of heart-felt nostalgia. From Michael's mother's unwed status to Uncle Jack's "uniqueness" to the two sister's eventual demise on the streets of London, Michael compels the audience to relive with him his golden childhood memory of his aunts dancing around the kitchen table. The dichotomy of isolation and the love of a close knit family are the themes around which Friel exposes the troubles of Irish life which lie just beneath the surface. It's a rough and lonely life, but is it not grand all the same? Friel, along with this overriding general wash of golden memory and the great troubles just beneath the surface, gets very specific with structural needs for *Dancing at Lughnasa*.

The stage directions in the script contain a good amount of information about the setting. Friel pays close attention to the requirements of an interior as well as an exterior setting, calling for both a "kitchen" as well as a "garden". He unfortunately mixes his terminology in his stage notes; first his directions declare, "Left and right from the point of view of the audience" but then he repeatedly uses the terms "stage right" and "stage

left,” which universally describes the stage from the actor’s perspective.²⁷ In rare instances, I feel the stage directions must be followed to the letter. In this the instance of “left” and “right”, especially considering their rather confusing nature, I think the question, “What does IT want to be?” is far more appropriate than “What does he (the playwright) want it to be”. I learned the usage of this phrase as an approach to working on properties for Broadway productions. “What does IT want to be?” The ideology behind this question encapsulates all of the tenets of design, including the script, the place, the resources and talents involved. This approach attempts to get to the heart of the meaning surrounding three-dimensional objects. A set designer must ask him/herself “With all things considered, what form, shape, and attributes does IT (the set, the prop, the furniture) take, what does it feel and look like and where does it want to be placed?” While Friel gets specific as to placement and physical orientation of the set to the audience, I think more of the emotional structure of the play, of Friel’s extremely rich and textured atmosphere in this memory piece; whether Friel wants the kitchen to be left or right on the set becomes secondary. This emotional structure is then layered on top of the place in which the occasion is to be held, and the shape of actual pieces develops from there.

Here is the meat of interpretation: This layering of the emotional structure of the play onto the physical structure of the space, the meeting of dream-like memories with hard concrete (or cinder block, in this instance) lies at the heart of theatrical design. If the action of the play takes place almost exclusively on the thrust area of the stage, both

²⁷ Identical quotes are found in two separate copies of the script. #1. Friel, Brian. *Dancing at Lughnasa*. Pg. n/a. Faber and Faber 1990. #2. Friel, Brian. *Dancing at Lughnasa*. Dramatists Play Service Inc. 1993.

the kitchen and the garden have to be on the thrust. Friel calls for two doors and two windows for this kitchen, as well as “the furnishings of the usual country kitchen of the thirties: a large iron range, large turf box beside it, table and chairs, dresser, oil lamp, buckets of water at the back door, etc., etc.”²⁸ He also calls for an exit to the bedroom(s) from the kitchen. The only specifics for the garden are that there is a garden seat and that the garden not be cultivated. He allows that this is the home of five women and that the “austerity of the furnishings is relieved by some gracious touches – flowers, pretty curtains, an attractive dresser arrangement, etc.”²⁹ The characters’ socio-economic background information is reflected in the “lean circumstances” of their clothing and repeated in the action of the play. Their meager subsistence existence is of great concern to all of them, driving Kate Mundy to anguish and tears, and Rose and Maggie to run away.

Through the second read of the script, the melding of the play to the space started in my mind’s eye. I formulated what it wants to be from the information garnered during the readings and brought to the readings from prior knowledge. Challenge number one was the proscenium lip. If both the garden and the kitchen were to be on the thrust, what was the raised area of the proscenium going to be? I saw, as I read, the kitchen occupying the stage-left area of the thrust acting space and the garden at stage right. That meant that the twenty-five inch lip was at the back of both the interior kitchen and the exterior garden. It also meant a full frontal exposure to the audience in the center section, and an elongated view from both side audience sections. I needed a door going from kitchen to garden, one from kitchen to the back of the house, and one from the kitchen to

²⁸ Friel, introduction

²⁹ Friel, introduction

the bedroom(s). I also felt I needed some variance of levels within the kitchen for variety and interest. Since the thrust had the majority of the action, I was free to use the majority of the scenic opening to set the atmosphere of the play. It took the visual research for me to formulate an actual co-existence shape for that space. Friel locates the Mundy household two miles from town, isolated and remote. Using the scenic opening to create that feeling would not be terribly difficult. Research provided me with an idea of the exact shape of the space.

It became apparent to me that the lip could be used as another level within the household and could be an interesting way to shape the location of the bedroom(s). I kept in mind that I would need to keep this playing area on the lip to a minimum, so as not to encroach on the environmental depth of the proscenium but also because of its distance from the audience. In an effort to fully incorporate the lip into the kitchen, I thought of a shallow cubby hole bookcase running the length of the lip in the kitchen, with a couple of steps roughly left of center to allow for traffic up to the back door and the bedroom(s).

My research followed shortly after these initial readings. (See Appendix A: Photo Research) I sought out images of Irish rural farm houses, County Donnegal in particular. At first I was being very strict and refused to accept images that were not from Donnegal. This helped me to pin down regional variances; however, it limited the images in scope. I found the internet particularly useful; on-line images constitute fifty percent of my photo research. The most successful images show lonely, remote distant Irish thatched cottages sitting on the turf with low, dark hills in the background. The interior images show rich shafts of white sunlight splashed on textured, white gloss walls. The garden /

cottage combination photos are more bed-and-breakfast advertisement shots than candid countryside, yet they show lush, leafy creeks with stone walls and arched bridges. I also have black and white copies of 1930's photos showing Irish men and women in a variety of situations: at a hearth, in a pub. I responded visually and emotionally to the sparse interiors, the limited practical furniture, the lonely distant earth-toned hills fronted by stone walls and arched bridges. The tone of the photos matched well Friel's sense of the dreamy reflections of time long past and the hard, dark reality of rural life. That was the story I needed to tell with scenic elements.

I never thought of walls for the kitchen, nor any formal structure. I did want the real elements Friel lists in the script, but nothing to block the atmospheric elements on the proscenium lip. The dark hills seen in the background in the photo research could be created with simple rows of painted scenery called ground rows. Placing walls in front of the very scenic elements that are intended to support the action of the play would have defeated the purpose. I wanted the audience on all three sides to have a basically unobstructed view of the hills in the background. Since I only needed about three feet of the lip for the kitchen landing, I had twelve feet to play with. Armed with this basic outline and the research, I had my first meeting with the director, David Hoover.

With the two spokes of my interpretation wheel firmly in place, I still needed to get a grip on the schedule for this occasion. The show was scheduled to open on September 28th, 2006. Fall classes began on August 21st. Counting the first week of the semester, there were five weeks until opening. I would have to have some form of shop drawings ready at the start of classes if I was to make good use of the limited time I had at my disposal for fabrication. The first meeting with Professor Hoover was scheduled

for the first week of July. Neither he nor I would be available through July and the beginning of August prior to the start of classes. I intended to bring some concrete thoughts to this meeting so I would be able to work on drawings over summer the break.

Chapter 2

Communication

It's all well and good to have great ideas and to be able to borrow images from the internet to exemplify them. It is a totally different thing to change those ideas into direct and real representations of what IT wants to be. The fixation on how the scenic elements, furniture, and stage want to feel and look, and where they wanted to be placed began in earnest after the initial meeting with the director. I would have to communicate my ideas through words, renderings, and drawings, all of which took a lot of effort and hard work. A set designer coming to the initial meeting with the director with only some research and a lot of ideas garnered from several readings of the script may seem scantily prepared; however a good pitch is a good pitch. If the designer can connect with the director on this basic level, then the hard work begins to solidify the specifics and create direct communicative devices representing these specifics to be communicated to all collaborators such as lighting designers, and costume designers and again with the director.

The initial meeting with David Hoover went exceptionally well. We had an even exchange of thoughts regarding the structure, feel, and emotion of *Dancing at Lughnasa*. We spoke for a bit before I presented my research. I wanted to see if we were speaking the same visual language before I showed the images. We both strongly agreed on the force and influence of the distance and lonely existence of the Mundy family. The dream-like feeling of reminiscence is what Mr. Hoover focused on, in addition to a strong sexual repression in the sisters. He responded well to my wanting an open view to the

distant hills. He received the images I presented equally well and loved the feel of the solitary cottage surrounded by a vast swath of low scrub and dark hills. He loved the idea of using an arched bridge to allow for actors to move up stage from the garden onto the lip and into the distance off right or left. My ideal plan to place the kitchen stage-left and the garden stage-right worked for him as well. He suggested making the kitchen a raised, one-step platform, an idea which I embraced instantly and appreciated wholeheartedly. I scribbled a hasty outline of a floor plan [See Appendix A for this outline] to illustrate the possible traffic patterns for the actors. There was a nice flow from the down-stage left vom, crossing through the garden in front of the “house” to the bridge at stage-right, where the thrust meets the lip of the proscenium. The bridge then took the actor to an off-right position up-stage of the proscenium. We debated whether we needed real structural pieces such as doors and windows. We agreed that walls defining the kitchen were out of the question. We also discussed the central role the wireless “Marconi” radio was to play. A tremendous lot of action stems from the operation of this 1930’s Irish radio that sits in the Mundy kitchen. Mr. Hoover believed, as did I, that the sound needed to emanate directly from the radio. During the wild kitchen dances, the sound would crescendo to the point where it would be coming from the theater house speakers. I assured him that this would not be a difficult technical problem and that the radio would be placed as centrally as possible. Mr. Hoover told me that he was open to looking at whatever I could show him when we came back from the summer break. We both agreed that this project was going to happen quickly once the fall semester began. I left the meeting very pleased with the agreement and direction the project was taking.

I began sketching while I worked on a piece of property I own in the Smoky Mountains of Tennessee, working in rustic conditions and designing a show with many of the same qualities. (See Appendix B: Renderings). Over the summer I managed three renderings, trying to cobble together the kitchen [at stage-left], stone bridge over a lush creek, the thatched roof, the hills in the background, low stone walls, and a garden only inches from the audience. The size and orientation of the kitchen vexed me horribly. Sightline issues are an inherent demon in a thrust. Above all, I wanted to keep the set open and spacious. I was also concerned that the Irish setting be evident before the audience opened their programs or the actors spoke. The image of the thatched roof and the white-washed low stone walls pushed this theme for me in addition to the stone bridge.

The first rendering shows a good initial pulling together of these elements in one image. I dealt with the lip face by creating the low “bookcase” in the kitchen and an outdoor “lushness” surrounding the bridge. Initially, I dealt with the problem of the garden and the kitchen sharing the thrust acting space by dividing the space fairly equally. The main feature is the winding path creating that diagonal flow from the down left vom to the bridge discussed in the first meeting with Mr. Hoover. I created the undulating curves of the path as a reaction to Mr. Hoover’s idea of sexual repression in the five female figures of the play. I also started toying with the idea of an actual water feature on stage. The primary reason for the bridge was to move actors from the thrust to the lip. However, I wanted a “natural” reason for it to exist. Placing a form of a “babbling” brook underneath the bridge would give an aural dimension to the design. There is a fair representation of hills in the background. I created a wall leading off stage

left with the intent of continuing the representation of the cottage bedroom(s). The audience would see an exterior wall with a window in the center, permitting a view of characters entering from and exiting to the bedroom(s). In this first rendering of the set, the furniture placement is rough and approximate. There are real doors at the kitchen entrance from the garden and out the back of the house. There is also a real window facing upstage. This first rendering takes advantage of every inch of acting and environmental atmospheric space.

The second rendering more coherently fleshes out the bridge and garden and adds a tree up on the lip at stage-right. It also gives a more defined shape to the kitchen platform.

I drew the sketch for the third rendering in Tennessee but painted it once I returned to New Orleans. This rendering became the design. The lip is fully treated as both a low book case and a stone wall. The stone effect is carried out and under the kitchen to visually support the kitchen deck and to tie the whole of the acting area together with a visual cue: the white-washed stone found in all of the research. I removed the door leading to the garden from the kitchen to open up the audience's view at center. That door becomes merely indicated by the course of the garden path and the actor's use of that space for a door. I kept the furniture very sparse on purpose. I did have a particular china hutch in mind for the upstage-left corner of the kitchen, which I included in this rendering. I intended the china in the up-left corner of the kitchen, to assist in the pretense that actors entering and exiting behind the hutch up on the lip are headed to the bedroom(s). The hutch butted up against the exterior wall that follows the proscenium line off stage left.

In homage to the mountain upon which I created the sketches, I included ground cover in the garden and up on the scenic opening similar to what I saw in Tennessee. I felt that short (6" to 12") saplings with leafy details would bring home the wild nature of the setting. The script calls for a Sycamore tree hanging over the kitchen. I balanced this in the rendering with a tree at the upstage base of the bridge at stage right.

The palette for the design is very much natural earth tones taken from the images my research uncovered. The kitchen's warmth comes from the saturated color used in the floor boards. For the floor, I wanted to create the effect of aged, wood plank flooring that shows generations of wear. The hills were to fade from an earthy green to lavender purple to a rich blue.

These floor boards run diagonally from up-stage left to down-stage right. I wanted to create an inviting visual into the kitchen so that the audience did not have an obstructed pattern of boards running across their vision.

With several renderings completed, the next step towards being able to communicate with collaborators was to create a ground plan. I created the ground plan by first drafting the thrust acting area with the scenic opening. When approaching the shape and size of the kitchen and garden, I had trouble pinpointing how they were to be laid out. I then turned to building a model. In order to achieve correct proportions, I needed to see the shapes in three-dimensional forms. I started the model with the theater house, using black core foam board as my medium. The audience risers were exceptionally difficult to fabricate to scale; however, I had to get it right in order to get a true feel for how the set rested within the total environment of the theater. Next, I created

the thrust acting area, which is raised approximately 9” from the true floor. I modeled the scenic opening next, rising 25” above the thrust acting area.

With a basic structure of the model built and a three-dimensional sense of the space taking shape, I was able to proportion out a division of the thrust acting area so that the kitchen had a wide upstage presence leading to a narrow downstage presence which extends almost to the edge of the thrust. This gave the kitchen a dynamic, pyramidal shape that cut diagonally across the thrust acting area. I had to cut several foam-core shapes for the kitchen deck before it felt right. In the garden the flow of the path and the placement of the bridge were my main concerns. I followed my rendering to create the garden on the ground plan. Again, I was loose and sketchy with the kitchen furniture because I wanted to wait for feedback from the director to see what best suited his needs.

(See Appendix C: Working Draftings). I presented the first ground plan at the first production meeting on Tuesday, August 22, along with the color and pencil renderings. Professor David Hoover (director), Professor Kevin Griffith (technical director), and Gretchen Wulf (stage manager) attended this first production meeting. Although the ground plan went a long way in placing the elements in the space, it was scaled to ½”:1’, not the standard ¼”:1’. This mistake, on my part, had the technical supervisor and the director worried that the kitchen would be too large. My idea was to give the actors the space they needed to dance themselves into a feverish pitch, yet still suggest that they are living in close quarters with the entire family. At this meeting, we discussed the open nature of the set and the deletion of the door to the garden and agreed that it was a good decision. We also questioned the need for a back door to the upstage

side of the kitchen. We agreed that could go as well. All wanted to keep the window up center.

Mr. Hoover offered insights regarding the actual shape of the kitchen platform. He suggested flattening the very downstage left edge to make a more useable acting area. He expressed surprise that I had chosen a round kitchen table while he envisioned a rectangle. I had thought of nothing else but round since reading the script. It never occurred to me that there would be anything else in the Mundy kitchen. The roundness of the table makes an appealing circular pattern in the center of the kitchen and also symbolizes the femininity in the household. The practical side of this choice was that the U.N.O. Theater Department already possessed a table of the perfect size and feel for the Mundy kitchen. It would need different legs, but otherwise it was well suited for the occasion. The remainder of the meeting centered on Marconi, the old-fashioned, radio in the Mundy household. Mr. Hoover and I agreed not to put it in the china hutch far upstage. We agreed that it would need its own piece of furniture and that it needed to be centrally located. I originally considered locating it on the far downstage edge of the kitchen, but I worried that placing a table tall enough to hold the radio so far downstage thus obstructing the view of the kitchen. Mr. Hoover agreed and suggested something over by the “door” to the garden. I thought that would work. Mr. Hoover and Mr. Griffith approved of my initial placement of the stove and the turf box stage left at the edge of the playing area. I also suggested some type of a sink, which I placed near the stove.

The biggest disagreement at this initial production meeting concerned the exterior wall which follows the scenic opening off stage right, and the thatched roof hanging over

the kitchen. Mr. Hoover and Mr. Griffith did not consider the wall or the thatched roof necessary or even doable. I argued that the thatched roof was immediately recognizable as Irish and that without it; the locale could be mistaken for any rural countryside. They both assured me that this was not the case. I didn't give up hope for the thatched roof. As for the wall, they argued that it just didn't make sense to show the audience an exterior wall while they were looking at the interior of the kitchen. I saw their point.

Overall, it was a very positive meeting. The cast was being finalized that week with an initial reading on the following weekend. Mr. Hoover asked if I would do presentation for the cast at the initial reading, to which I happily agreed. I promised to revise the ground plan and have it ready for presentation at the next production meeting. It was finished in time to tape the stage prior to the initial script reading with the actors. With the assistance of the stage manager, we were able to place a rough approximation of stairs close to the location of the bridge as well as in the kitchen leading upstage to the lip. Rehearsals were to begin the following week. Mr. Griffith expressed a desire to have the kitchen deck built for the start of rehearsals. In an effort to expedite the building of this deck, I drafted 4' x 8' partitions of the kitchen, trying to utilize existing platforms. Although very positive towards the idea, Mr. Griffith felt it would make construction better and easier if it were fabricated from new lumber, not from existing platforms. We agreed to use cut strips of luon (a thin, plywood sheet material), for the top of this deck, and to lay it down as true floor planking.

I re-drafted the ground plan as I built the model. (See Appendix D: Model Photo) You can see the following changes from GP #1 (ground plan) to GP #2: GP # 2 is properly scaled to the ¼":1' standard. The shape of the kitchen deck is now a diamond

pattern as opposed to the triangular pattern found in GP #1. I believed this shape was not only attractive but also served the needs of the show thematically as well as practically. I removed the stage-left exterior wall and the remaining actual door. With the wall gone, I repositioned the china hutch and moved it 6' towards center. The model proved useful in this repositioning as it anchored the visual weight at the center-back of the kitchen.

Another result of losing the wall was that the exit off left to the bedroom(s) was flat and uninteresting. While placing rehearsal steps as a stand-in for the bridge, it occurred to me that the exit to the bedroom(s) could be up a few (three) more steps. Actors entering from the bedroom(s) would walk down the steps, be in view for 6 feet, cross behind the china hutch and then be at the top step leading into the kitchen. The steps leading to the bedroom(s), complete with a hand rail, masking blacks and an escape platform, created a much more dynamic entrance.

While re-drafting the ground plan and building the model, I played around with the kitchen pieces and where they would live on the set. The sink and stove were moved to a stage right position on the kitchen deck. I placed an additional chair far downstage in the kitchen with a little foot stool. I also placed a rocking chair by the remaining window upstage on the lip. I imagined the sisters sitting and knitting in both of these locations for long periods of time throughout the play. The garden remained unchanged with a "pool" under the bridge for a water effect.

I was able to present ground plan #2 as well as a model with movable furniture pieces at the second production meeting on August 29th. This allowed us to move the furniture around in a three-dimensional space. Mr. Hoover liked the sink in its stage-right position, but we moved the stove back to the upstage left corner of the kitchen.

Costume designer Tony French and I briefly discussed color to establish a coherent palette between set and costumes. He was going to use earth tones with little or no bright colors. We all agreed that this would work well with the set.

GP# 2 and the model were the main working plans from which the set was built. Over the course of the next few weeks, I drafted specifics for fabrication. The director, stage manager, costume designer, lighting designer, as well as the construction staff of the show were well on their way by this second production meeting to having a cohesive structure for the play. We had a plan in place derived from two months of interpretation and several meetings of communication.

Chapter 3

Execution

It would be far easier for a designer to do the design work, i.e. interpretation and communication, and walk away --- only to return on opening night to a fully realized form of the design. Unfortunately, this does not happen, not even with the big-budget Broadway shows that have the most experienced technical staff in America. A show, or theatrical occasion, is a living, breathing entity, which must be tended as one would a garden. As the process of rehearsing evolves, so does the construction. The continual dance between imagination and the laws of physics keeps the creative team bouncing back and forth as they try to find appropriate solutions for the theatrical occasion at hand. Time remains a hovering entity, exerting more and more pressure as opening night draws near.

Aside from my role as the designer for this occasion, I was also the scenic charge, responsible for painting the set. I was assigned an assistant, whom I immediately put to the task of mixing paints. (See Appendix E: Paint Chips) There were three main areas that would require paint: the kitchen floor, the entire garden, and the hills in the background (referred to as “ground rows”) – basically the entire set.

Fabrication began the second week of the fall semester, Monday August 28th. I had finished GP #2, and Mr. Griffith had purchased the lumber necessary to build the kitchen deck. Although I had drafted a 4’ x 8’ breakout of this deck with the thought of using existing platforms, he chose instead to build a new deck. We also discussed

leaving a 4” overhang on the downstage and center stage sides of the kitchen deck. This would allow for the placement of the stone/bricks, which would “support” the kitchen and visually connect to the garden bridge. As Mr. Griffith was putting the kitchen deck together I noticed he was using a 24” center for the floor joists. When I questioned whether 16” center joists would better support the action on top of this deck, he assured me that 24” center joists would be fine. A designer needs to trust the people he has chosen to build and give them the autonomy to fabricate his/her creation. We topped the deck with a first layer of ½” plywood, to be finished with the strips of luon to make it look like planking. The actors were allowed on the deck by their fourth rehearsal before we added the final luon layer. The actors were not comfortable with the kitchen deck, and immediately complained that they felt unsafe, and felt as if the floor were going to give way. In response, Mr. Griffith and I installed another layer of luon sheets on top of the plywood and assured them that the final layer would solve the problem. It helped but it did not eliminate all actor complaints.

The cutting of the floor planking into 2” strips [by shop students] took time. As the scenic charge, I was concerned about raw wood showing through the narrow gaps in the planking, so I back-painted the top layer of the floor a dark brown before the planks were applied. Once the planks were in place, I base-coated them in a creamy pink tone. I demonstrated the wood graining technique to the students of a scene painting class. A student asked specifically why I chose a bright, light color as the base for wood graining. I replied that it functioned for two purposes: One, I liked how it contrasted with the red/orange of the wood color selected. Two, I thought it fit with an underlying theme of the play in that there was, somewhere under the turmoil of the Mundy kitchen, some ray

of hope shining through the wear and tear of the surface grain of their lives. I was never under the delusion that an audience member was ever to get that symbolism; however, this is the manner in which interpretation manifests itself in a practical application. The three-step wood-grain technique I used involved painting each individual plank to allow for uniqueness of board and variation in grain. I pulled a reddish orange color across the cream color base, and then while the reddish color was still wet, I pulled an umber/Van Dyke brown through the reddish/orange to create the grain. I felt it important to do the entire floor myself in that I did not want a variance of technique and application, just a crafted variance of wood grain. I spattered with the Van Dyke brown while the applied colors were both wet and dry to create knots and worm holes. I sealed it with a gloss floor finish after the graining was completed; the planking would cover the entire kitchen as well as the three-foot section on the scenic opening which functioned as a part of the kitchen. I accomplished this the weekend of September 4th due to the Labor Day holiday, which occasioned no rehearsals for a 24 hour period. The authentically rich, deep-looking wood-grained floor was the most successful aspect of my painting on the show.

With the kitchen deck complete and painted, I began to focus on the garden by the second week of rehearsals. From the beginning, I had envisioned the garden details being three-dimensional. The undulating, curvy path was to be created with little hillocks. The easy way would be to paint the thrust floor to look like a garden path; however, that was not acceptable to me. When discussing this with Mr. Griffith, he suggested a couple of different techniques for accomplishing these little, three-dimensional hills, including covering chicken wire with paper mache or sculpting a sheet material called sound board (also known as fiber board). Considering the extent to which I wanted to cover the

garden in these hills, the 6” to 12” finished height of the hills and the time constraint facing us, he was exceptionally reluctant to embark on this project. Since I insisted having a three-dimensional aspect to the garden, I chose to take on this fabrication. I selected the fiberboard technique. These sheets were to be layered one atop of the other until the desired height was achieved. They were then to be cut in an approximate shape and then sculpted with a portable, hand-held grinder. This technique was effective yet tedious and painstaking, to say the least.

I purchased 32 pieces of 4’ x 8’ sheets of sound board and went to work. I followed my ground plan by scaling up the shape of the path and transferring this shape via a chalk outline to the thrust floor. I then cut an initial sheet to match each section of the garden. Since the material was ½” thick, it would take twelve layers to get to a 6” height. The pieces were nailed to the floor then glued one on top of the other. I freely sculpted each individual hillock based on feeling and flow. The grinding was incredibly difficult and created a mountain of dust and debris. This dust coated everything in the theater; including workers for the ten days it took me to accomplish the effect. Stage management was incredibly patient with the mess, as was Mr. Hoover. In hindsight, I could have fabricated these as units in the scene shop and brought them into the theater, but I am not sure they would have had the same “in-place” effect and the same natural flow.

The “ground cover” for these hillocks was not as successful as their shape. As stated previously, I had planned to have twig-like saplings covering the garden. The first step in this creation was an earth-like covering on top of the sculpted fiber board. I used the collected fiber dust/shavings from the grinding of the fiberboard to act as dirt. I

rolled the sculpted boards with glue and covered them in the fiber dust. Undisturbed, the effect was fantastic. Unfortunately, only the first layer (1/32") of dust/shavings adhered to the board. Everything else on top was free to be kicked about which exposed the glued fiber board underneath. (See Appendix F: Twig-like Sample). The solution was to cover the hillocks with hundreds of little twigs to optimize the three-dimensional nature of the garden, hide the flaws in the covering, and to prevent actors from kicking up the top layer of turf. The twig covering was to be fabricated by using real broken-off twigs approximately 4" to 6" on length. The leaves were to be made from painted pieces of medium-weight vellum paper, cut into leaf shapes and glued to the branches. These twigs would then be stuck into the ground-covered hillocks at random, covering the entire garden. This, unfortunately, never occurred. Lack of labor and time prevented this project from ever getting off the ground. I was able to paint the hillocks with a combination of greens, browns, and yellows to push their turf-like nature, but their development stopped with the paint. Although the application of a final glue layer helped hold this finish together, there was a perpetual fight to keep the hills covered in this turf. Actors continually kicked whole divots free, exposing unpainted raw material underneath.

I had more success with the creation of the bridge and accompanying "stone" wall and brick work for under the kitchen. Mr. Griffith undertook the fabrication of the bridge, which was a bit problematic in its angle and pitch. I cut the original archways that were to be used as the arched framing for the left and right sides of the bridge. I based the pitch of the bridge on the height of the scenic opening, with the length of the bridge extending into the garden. The bridge had to be a certain length due to the

location of the “front door” of the kitchen. For a fuller effect and a better visual, I set the bridge at an angle coming off of the scenic opening, thus cutting its length even further. Thanks to his great skill, Mr. Griffith, finished framing and covering the bridge in three days. His use of “pig’s poop”, a cost-effective, spreadable, mortar-like putty, created a more natural feel to the walking surface and gave it texture as well as some protection against actors’ slipping.

Mr. Griffith’s “pig’s poop” was instrumental in creating the finish for the hundreds of stone/bricks needed to create the authentic look for under the kitchen deck as well as for covering the structure of the bridge. We used fiberboard cut into 4” wide strips and layered to a 9” height. They were then cut to 8”, 10” and 12” lengths and sanded down with rounded edges to create an uneven and hand-made brick effect. These were then applied to the bridge structure and the entire on-stage length under the deck and then covered in paint-tinted “pig’s poop”. This was a good project to give shop students as it was repetitive and fairly simple, yet with a bit of creative flair. The bricks did not have an industrial, manufactured look, which was perfect for the old-world Irish feel I was going for. The resulting effect was exactly what I wanted. The bricks were a visual cue carried through the entire set from the kitchen to the bridge. We used real stones, painted to match the fabricated bricks, to cover the exposed front of the scenic opening lip between the kitchen and the bridge. The overall feel matched, to a high degree, the feel from the research of the low stone walls of Ireland.

A few furniture issues began to arise as rehearsals progressed. Stage management had requested [via e-mail] that there be some kind of food locker/chest at the furthest down stage position in the kitchen. The director wanted the actor to have a motivated

reason [choosing the putting away of stores] to cross to this position. I couldn't visualize the action and was unavailable to see it in rehearsal, thus I could not grasp the necessity or practicality of a new piece of furniture. My main objection to this locker was that it would obstruct the depth of view through the kitchen. At the fourth production meeting on September 12th, Mr. Hoover and I discussed respective opinions. As Mr. Hoover was adamant that there be something, anything, in that most downstage position for the actors to cross to; I promised I would come up with something. After a bit of consideration and having passed an old dresser in the shop for several days, I struck upon the idea of taking a drawer from this dresser, using the bottom of another drawer as a lid, and attaching very low-profile, small, square feet to use it as the food locker. It required no painting as the wood's natural patina fit perfectly with the existing wood on stage. The chest was completed in of two hours with a couple of old hinges and a simple finger pull for the lid. Mr. Hoover had a chest the following day, and I was pleased with its unobtrusive nature. I did, though, have a problem with the idea of the Mundy's keeping food in a locker on the opposite side of the kitchen from their cupboard. However, this was for the director to decide. I was happy to solve the issue of providing some motivation for the actors to cross.

Other furniture issues were easier to deal with. The sink was a simple solution. As Friel calls for the bringing of buckets of water from outside the house, we did not have to pretend that the kitchen had running water. The U.N.O. Theater Department had a small porcelain counter which, with the aid of a water pitcher and basin, made for a nice washing stand. I added a shelf for dressing and painted it to coordinate with the rest of the wood on stage. We had agreed from the outset that we wanted the chairs in the

kitchen to be a mixture of appropriate styles and shapes. I pulled a selection from stock and tried each out through rehearsals. The dining table had three chairs around it; a very small chair with a foot stool occupied the down-stage position. I also placed a chair near the Marconi table. We had two rocking chairs to choose from, one smaller and daintier than the other. I tried the smaller one first but got little positive response from stage management. The larger of the two was much better received. The Marconi radio stand was also a table pulled from stock. I draped it with a dainty fabric to soften the look and also to draw focus to the radio.

The remaining fabrication issues fell into two categories as we moved from the fourth production meeting to the fifth meeting on September 19th. The ground rows, the free hanging window, turf box with turf for burning, the sycamore tree and the garden bench were in the easy category. The stove and the Marconi were more difficult.

The ground rows were to be built out of R-Board, a cheap, easily cut, light-weight fiberglass material which takes paint well. I drafted the ground rows with the 4' x 8' sheets of the R-Board sectioned. Shop students laid out the huge pieces (often stretching 18' long and 12' high) and cut them according to my drafts. Mr. Griffith and the students taped them together and stood them up with flat jacks according to GP #2. Once the ground rows were in place, I had the assistant scenic charge base-coat them. After the base-coat was applied, I realized that they were not proportioned correctly. With a piece of chalk, I marked what I thought was an appropriate size and cut them in place with a reciprocating saw. It worked perfectly. The ground rows supported and reflected the theme of distance and loneliness of the action on the thrust viewed in the periphery under

stage lighting. . The ground rows were surprisingly magical and echoed the action on the thrust.

The free-hanging window was drafted and given to a talented shop student. Once it was completed, I realized it resembled a crucifix too closely. I disassembled the mullions, moved the horizontals up 6", and reassembled and painted the piece. Mr. Griffith hung the piece from the first electric according to the model and my specifications. The effect was good. The three-dimensional window facing upstage as the only real structural piece of the house drew attention to the absence of any other structural features in the house. The window helped increase depth and heighten the focus on the distant hills in the back ground. Its slight resemblance to a crucifix thematically reinforced the power of organized religion over the Mundy household without hitting the audience over the head with the symbolism.

The one safety incident on the show occurred while a shop student was assembling the turf box. I drafted the turf box and gave it to Mr. Griffith, who gave it to a student to build. That student turned it over to another student, who, in turn, handed it over to a third. This last student unfortunately shot herself in the finger with the pneumatic nail gun. She fortunately was fine but bandaged, so I finished assembling the piece and distressed it to look appropriate. I fabricated large cuts of "turf" for burning in the Mundy's stove from odd bits of the "brick" made from the fiber board. These I painted black and covered in fiber board dust/shavings for texture.

The solution to fabricating the garden bench was simplistic enough to make it one of those issues you deal with at the last minute. The Wednesday before opening, I created piles of stones pulled from stock. These two piles were the support the bench

seat. Mr. Griffith and a student cemented them in place and put a piece of wood (also from stock) on as a seat. Unfortunately, we really didn't give the whole thing enough time to solidify and harden, which caused it to wobble a bit. This was resolved with a bit of the "pig's poop" and some shims.

The Sycamore tree was the most fun set piece, fabrication-wise. Mr. Griffith had a few ideas for making the limb which I had originally thought of as a cut-out behind the house but then changed to a limb overhanging the kitchen. I wanted real, three-dimensional tree branches. I found exactly what I was looking for on Elysian Fields Avenue, not far from U.N.O.: two fallen Magnolia Tree limbs. With the assistance of a shop student, I hauled them back to the theater. Each was approximately 14' – 16' long and had multiple branches. In one afternoon, Mr. Griffith, two shop students, and I hung the tree limbs above the kitchen. The effect was good. The bare, spindly branches contrasted beautifully with the smooth, curvy hills in the background. The weight and size of the branches hanging over the Mundy household visually reinforced the weight and pressures of the world on the family. The juxtaposition of the suspended window as religion and hanging branches as the wild, natural, pagan environment of the hills surrounding the Mundy family worked very well. The branches were also rigged to move to create the illusion of a character climbing the tree.

Two difficult issues remained regarding furniture as we approached the week before our technical rehearsals scheduled for September 22nd and 23rd. As of the production meeting on September 19th, there were no concrete plans for a stove design or a Marconi radio. The discussion up until this fifth production meeting involved "finding" these two pieces. Mr. Griffith believed that there was an iron stove at The University of

Southern Mississippi, but that did not materialize. I drafted a stove by the Friday before the technical rehearsal, and Mr. Griffith had it built, painted, and on stage before the first dress rehearsal on Tuesday September 26th. The Marconi radio was more difficult. On Tuesday, September 26th, we went into the last production meeting before opening with no Marconi. I believed that we should purchase this prop. Unfortunately, that did not happen because of a lack of funds and availability. This was exceptionally difficult for the director as the radio was central to the telling of the story. All actors in the show have some business to do with the radio, including having a character change out the batteries on-stage in front of the audience. I had a piece of photo research showing what I thought the radio should be, but that was all. On the Wednesday before opening, Mr. Griffith built a prop radio based on the research. (See Appendix G: Marconi Research) I scavenged face pieces and decorative details from stock radios and clocks while Mr. Griffith accurately fabricated a radio shell based on the research photo and my dimension specifications, with the necessary battery repository. Ms. Tricia Vitrano did a beautiful job replicating the veneer of the photo research. The Marconi made its successful debut on the Wednesday before opening to raves from the director and the actors. That Wednesday evening also saw the replacement of the kitchen table legs. Mr. Griffith and I removed the too-shapely original table legs, and replaced them with straight, no-nonsense 4” square posts. We bolted them in tightly as the central character Kate dances on top of the table. I distressed and painted the legs just before curtain. Although this was not an ideal situation, I got the job accomplished before an audience saw an unfinished and inaccurate scenic element.

I need to acknowledge the work of Jessica Cook on the hand props, which was a smashing success. The time, effort and professionalism she put into assembling the load of groceries with which the lead character Kate enters at the top of the show was heartwarming. Her sacks of flour, sugar, and butter were excellent. Her “wonderful, wild Woodbine” cigarettes were dead-on correct. With the audience being so close to the action it was vital that the hand props look authentic. Although we had discussed the general feel and look of the items, Ms. Cook did all the research and fabrication. I dressed the remainder of the set, including the china hutch, the low book case, and the shelf under the wash basin, from stock.

The technical rehearsal weekend was not a success. Scheduling issues and a lack of crew members meant that run-of-show issues had to wait until two nights prior to opening. All was smoothed out by opening night; however, it was a bit disconcerting. My last two issues as the scenic charge had to do with the ground rows and the garden path. I had the students in the scenic paint class paint the garden path once; however, because I continually had to re-touch the hillocks I had to repaint the garden path, which I accomplished over the tech weekend, along with giving the ground rows their final scenic treatment.

I dealt with final masking issues on the Wednesday before opening. I was pleased with the sight lines. I could not see anything I should not and I could see everything I should from every seat in the house. However, there was one item that was a bit of a disappointment: the water feature. To create a “babbling brook” under the bridge, I pulled a small water pump from stock and placed it in a 5-gallon bucket. This bucket was then placed under the bridge, hidden from view. The head electrician and I rigged it to a

dimmer so that it could be controlled throughout the show. Unfortunately, we never got the sound level correct. Unless one was seated directly next to the bridge at house left, one couldn't hear the water effect. The water effect was there, it just wasn't effective.

Execution, over all, was only mildly painful and mostly successful. As opening night arrived, I was still pining for the thatched roof. By the time of the curtain on the second night, I was happy there was no thatched roof. Mr. Griffith and Mr. Hoover were correct in knowing that the design did not need the additional structure. It would have obstructed the depth of view tremendously and been redundant in meaning and effect. I still have not gotten over our failure to cover the garden with twigs and saplings. The continual repairs and wildly unfinished look of the hillocks remain a disappointment. I would like to revisit this effect in a future design that calls for some kind of outdoor foliage. (See Appendix H: Final Draftings and Appendix I: Show Still Photos)

Chapter 4

Response

When opening night arrives and there's been a good run-through at dress rehearsal the night before, there is no reason for a set designer to worry. I had rolled my little three-wheeled cart filled with my "tricks," "crafts," and "talents," up to the theater and dumped it out onto the thrust. I performed what artistry I had at my disposal at that time, and I believe I had good results. My response to what I saw on opening night was positive. I was proud of the work and the excellence I saw displayed, the fruit of so many people's efforts. Because I was so closely involved in the occasion, I can only turn to others' writings for objective responses.

There were two reviews in local publications: *The Times Picayune* by David Cuthbert and in *Ambush Magazine* by Brian Sands (See Appendix J: Published Reviews for full articles).

I was pleased and a bit taken aback that Mr. Cuthbert of *The Times Picayune* called my set a "humdinger". I did take slight issue with his description of the ground row hills as "stylized 'Brigadoon' hills". I don't think a musical-theater atmosphere was what I was going for, but perhaps he may have been referring to a mystical, dream-like aspect found in *Brigadoon* and *Dancing at Lughnasa*. He mercifully ignored the garden by just calling it "an exterior with a path". Mr. Sands of *Ambush Magazine* was much more effusive. He wrote that the set "perfectly evoked rural Ireland, the distances between people's homes and the barriers between people's hearts" which I greatly

appreciated. I was particularly happy that he called the ground rows, “soaring mountains”. It is fun to take the good reviews when they’re really good, but not so much fun when they are bad. However, I believe, either way, it is good to get responses from individuals not involved in the production. Reviews tell me whether I have connected with the audience or not. I feel I did connect with *Dancing at Lughnasa*.

As part of an extra-credit assignment, students in the Film Theater and Communication Arts Department Basic Visual Design course were given the opportunity to see *Dancing at Lughnasa* and to write a short paper regarding the design elements of the production. (See Appendix K: Student Reviews for full papers) I very much appreciate the students’ impressions because they are basically untrained and give an untainted opinion. Mr. Janusa’s observation that the set seems “well balanced, because the bridge at stage left and the tree at stage right [their placement on stage was reverse of this] held the stage up and gave it apparent framing” was countered with his confusion as to why the rocking chair was on the raised part of the stage. This is something that had not occurred to me until I read Mr. Janusa’s comments: that the 3’ section on the lip that I used as part of the kitchen would not visually appear blended into the kitchen. Listening to other’s opinions is always valuable. It’s up to you to decide what to do with the information. I’m not sure I would have changed the design to prevent such confusion as Mr. Janusa’s even if I had been able to. However, for the future I will remember that there is a distinct possibility of missing the mark in this manner.

Working with skilled and knowledgeable individuals such as Mr. Hoover, Mr. Griffith, and Ms. Cook makes me feel honored and lucky to have completed my Master’s Thesis Production at the University of New Orleans. We accomplished more than we

had hoped for still left room for improvement. From this occasion, I plan to take my artistry, which has been improved, expanded and honed, to other, younger students in the New Orleans charter high school system. I will roll my little three-wheeled cart up to Lusher Charter School in New Orleans and begin teaching and practicing the artistry of creating occasions as I have learned it on Broadway and at the University of New Orleans.

Appendix A

Research Photos

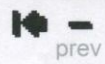
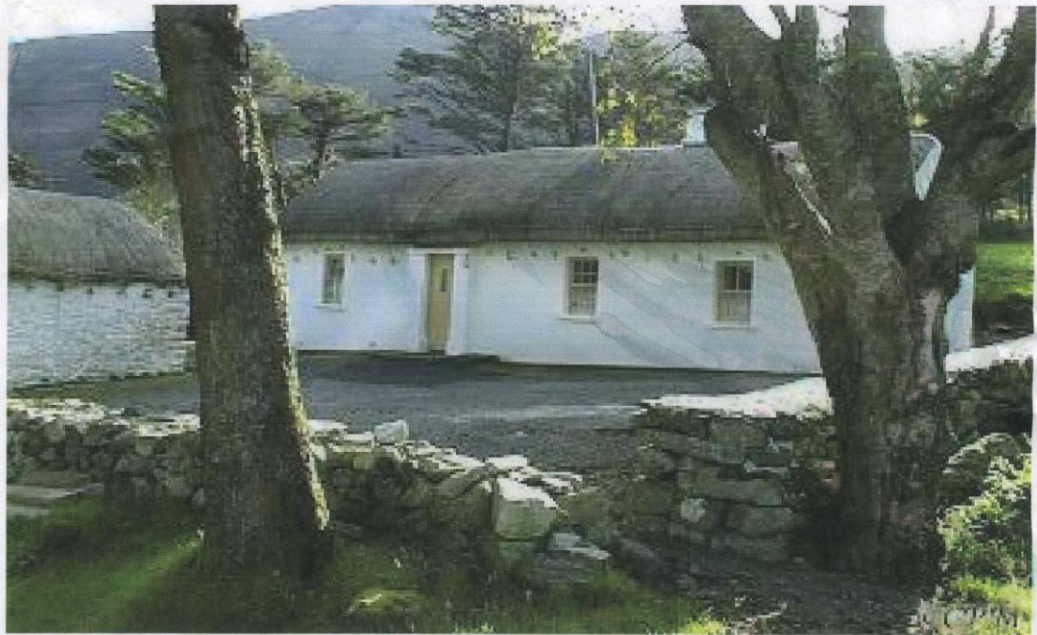


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6/28/2006

Picture 3 of 20

.... in a peaceful hillside setting



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Picture 1 of 20

A Traditional Thatched Cottage



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<http://www.globalchild.org/99pics/ireland/grmfld.jpg>

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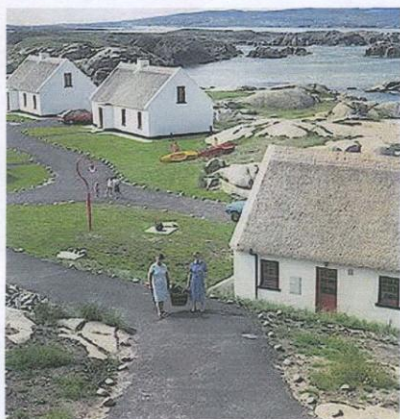


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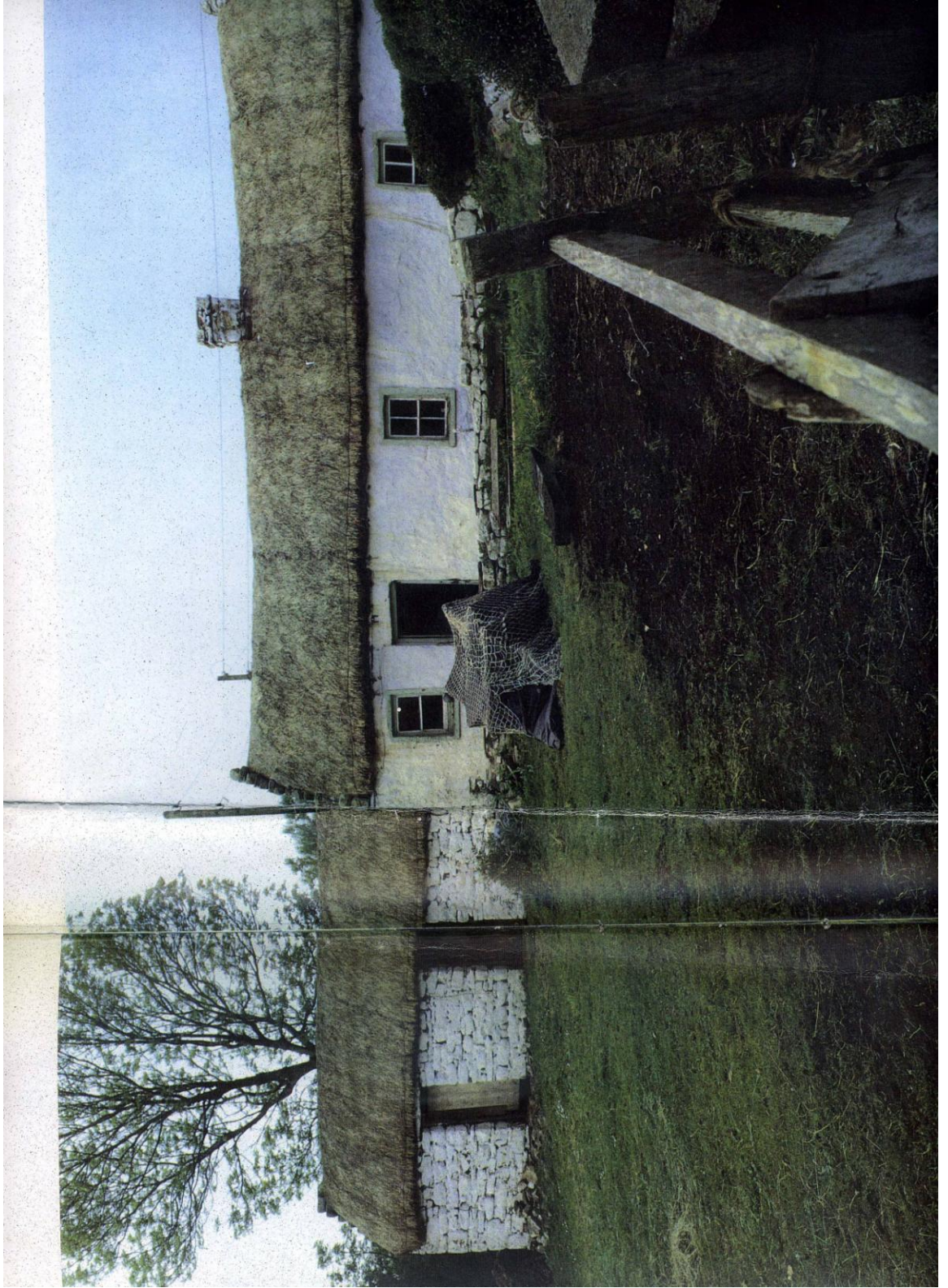






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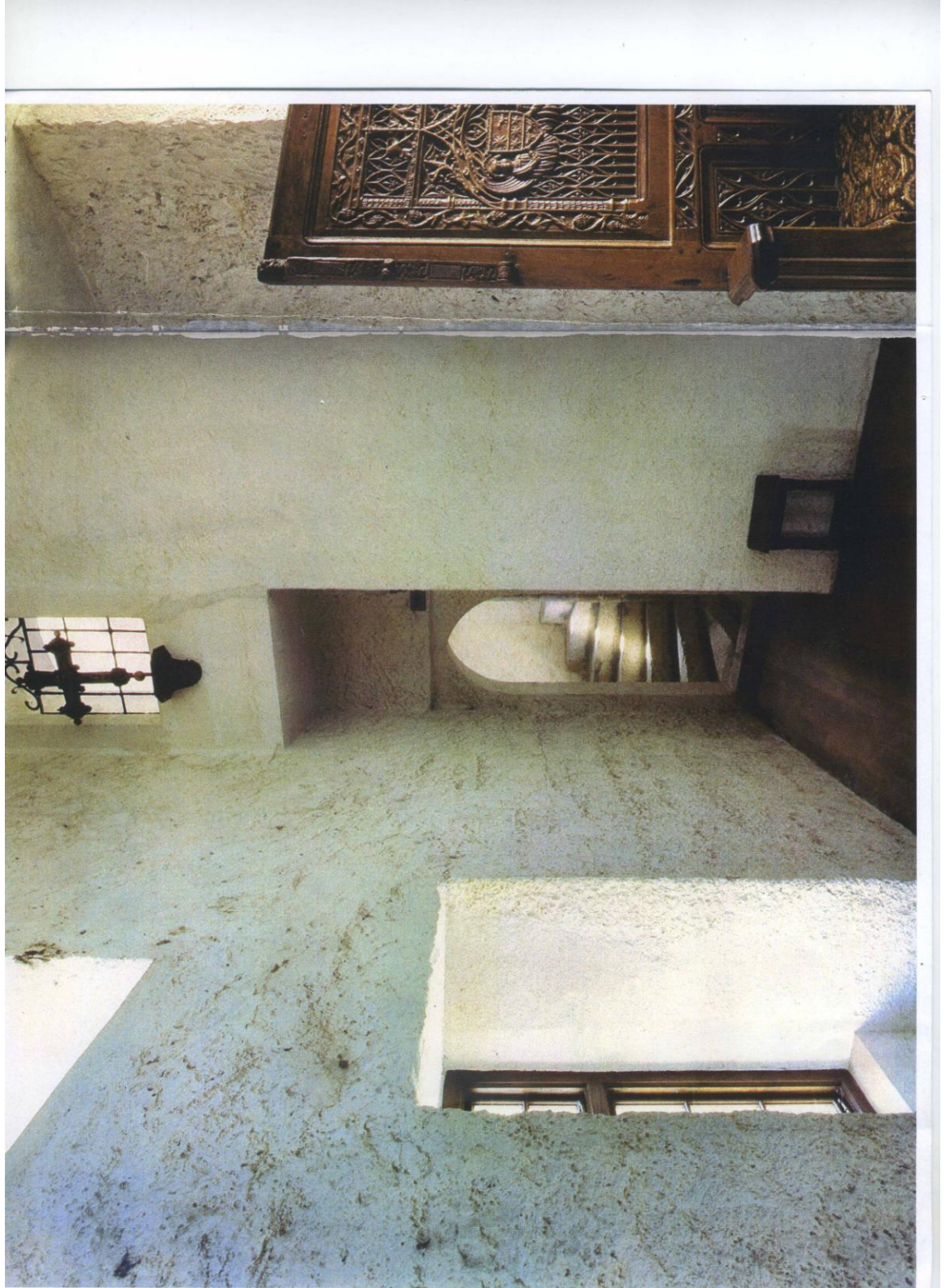
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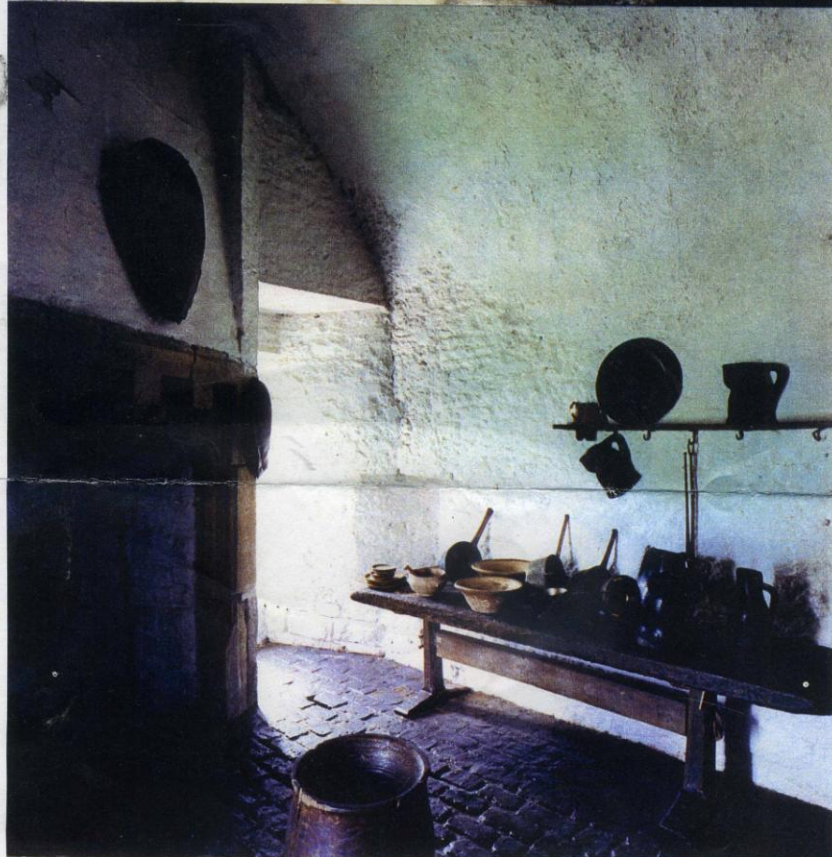


<http://www.rathmullancottages.com/ray/ray-cottage-interior-new.jpg>

6/28/2006



BUNRATTY
CASTLE



Part of the old kitchen and dining-rooms. Wooden containers for spices, wine and oil are of English origin. The fireplace surround in the kitchen is mediaeval. Banquets in the mediaeval style are now held regularly in Bunratty Castle.

H-5

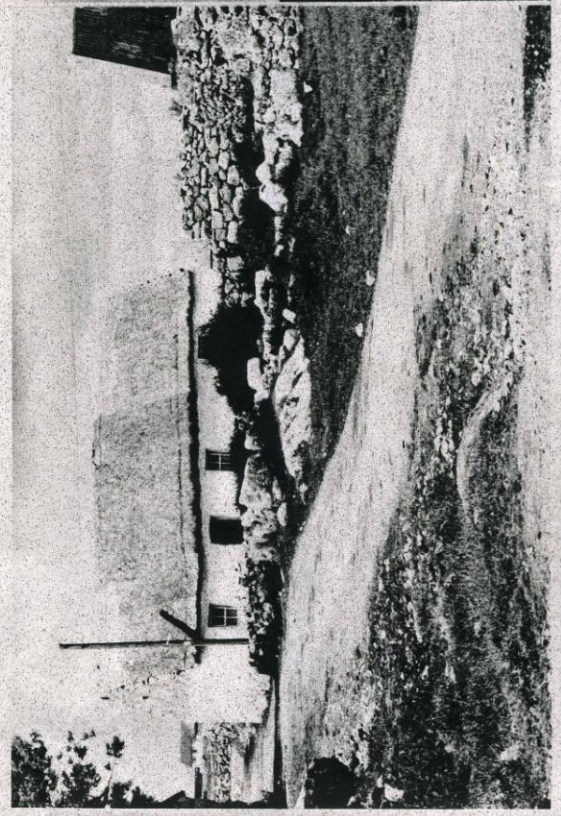


A-4

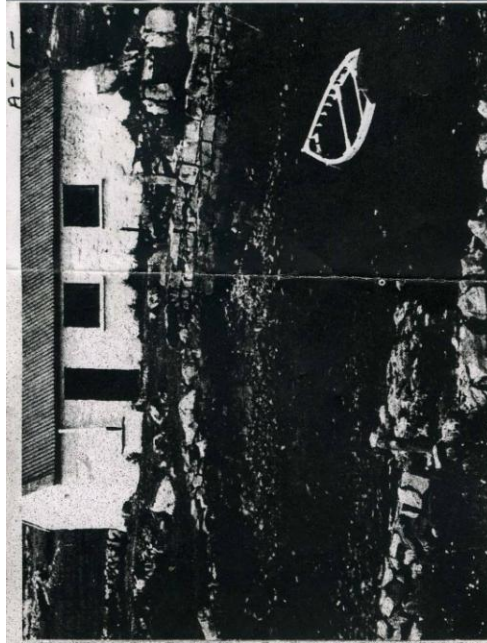




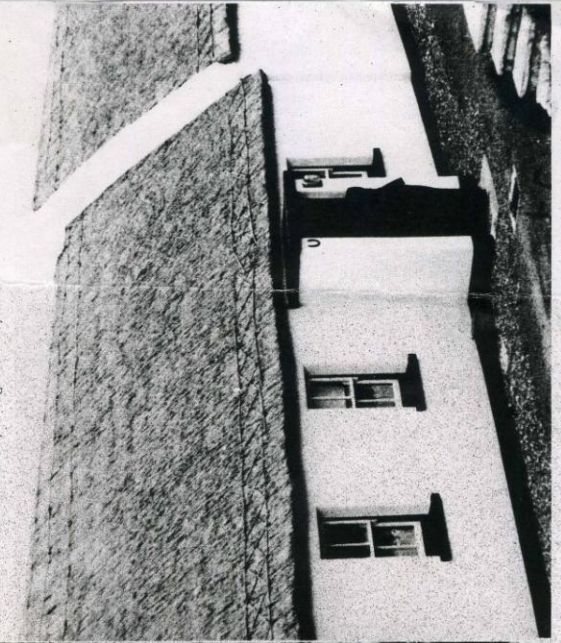
9. A primitive small cottage in Ballycastle



10. A cottage in Iar-Chonnacht, Galway

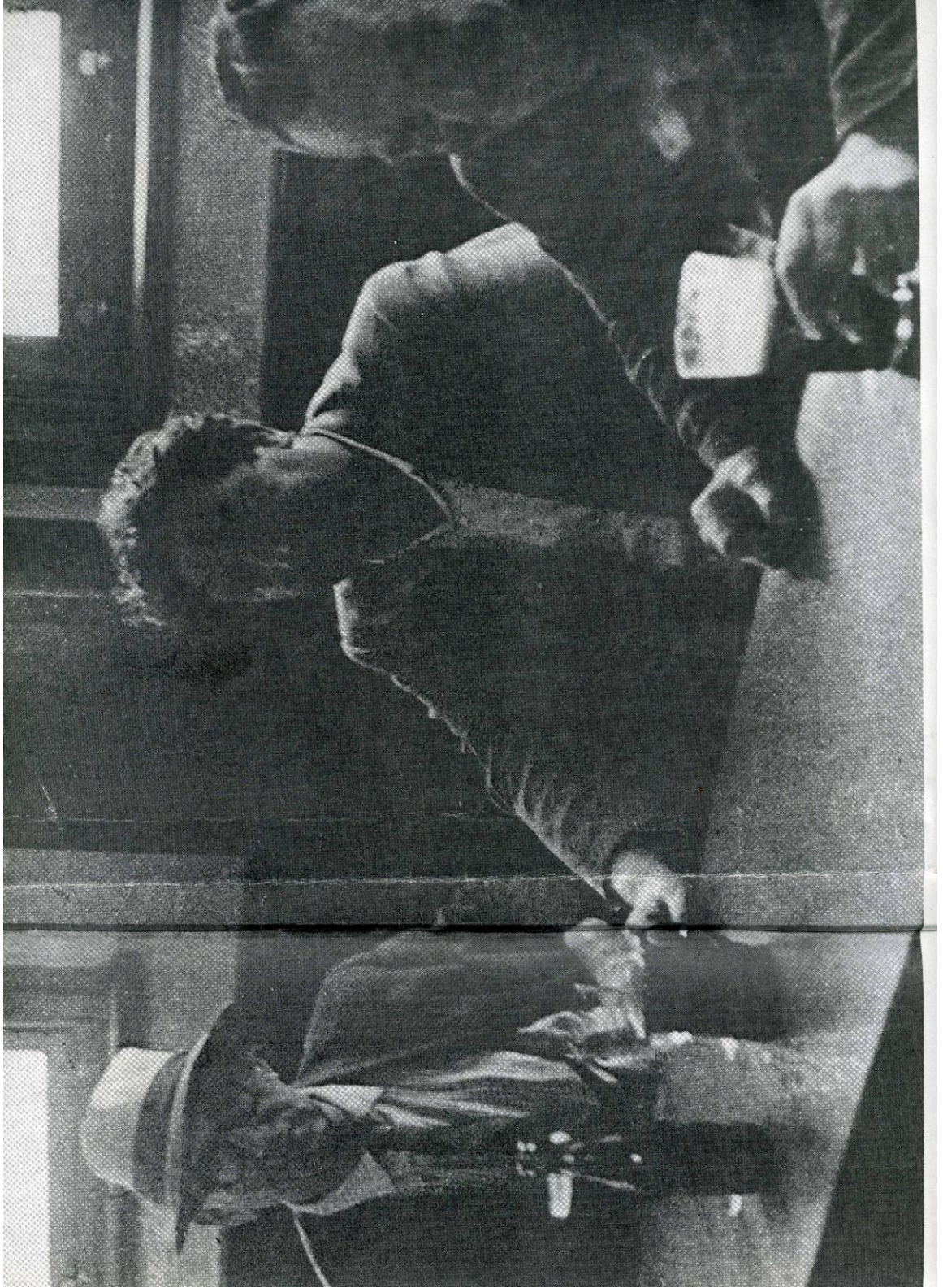


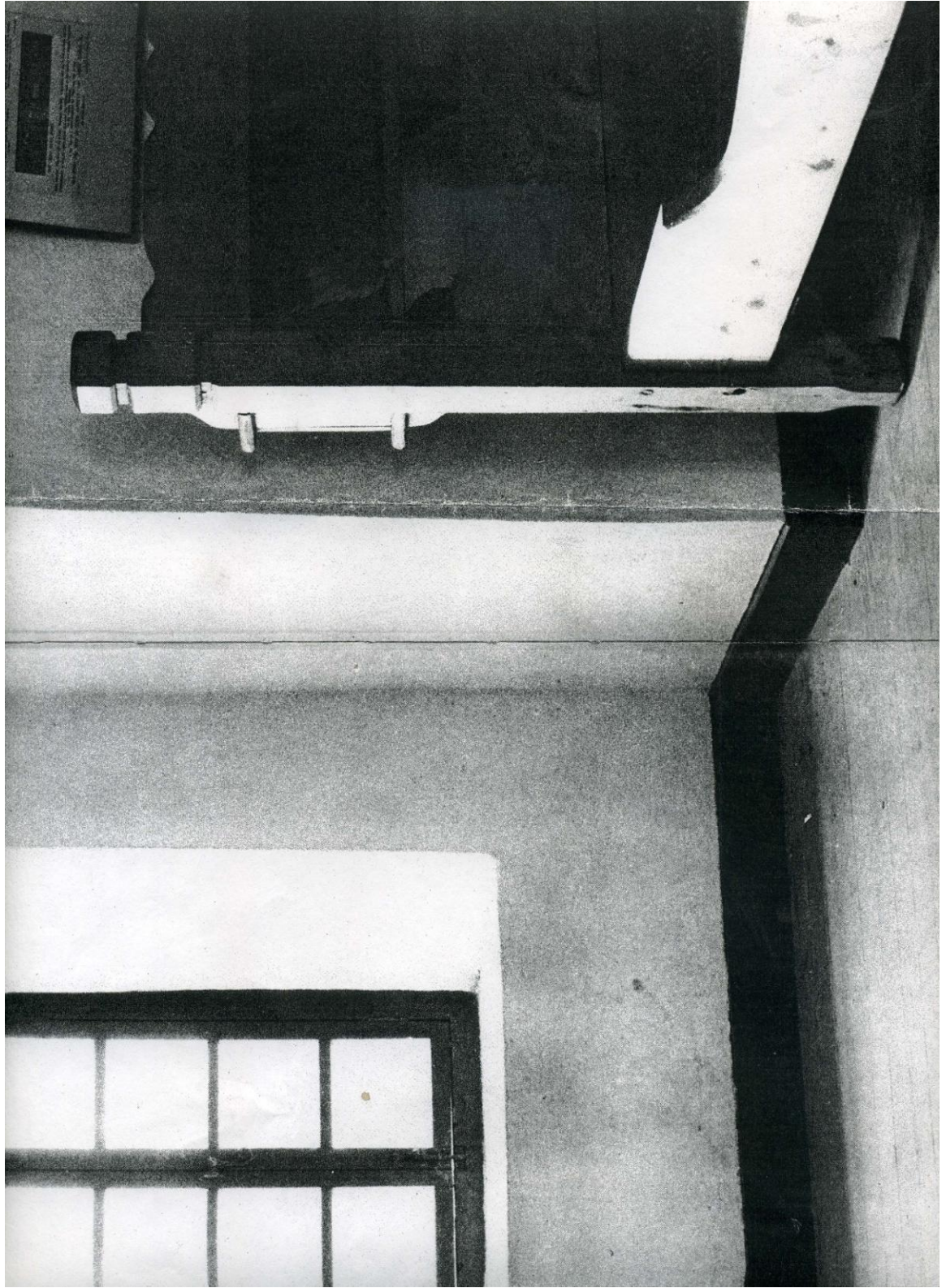
11. An iron-roofed cottage near Ballyconnelly



12. Modern holiday cottages at Tully Cross







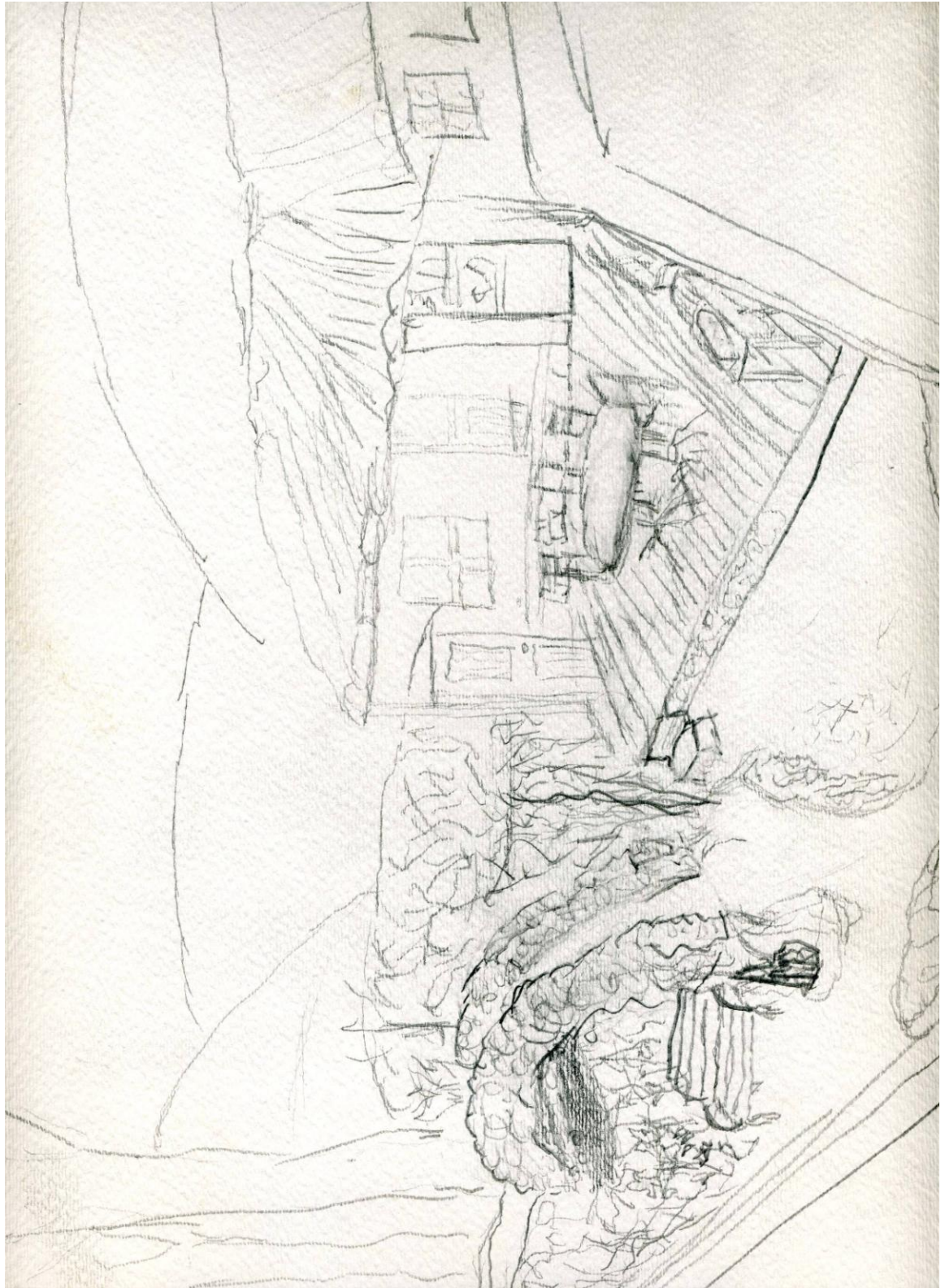
Appendix B

Renderings

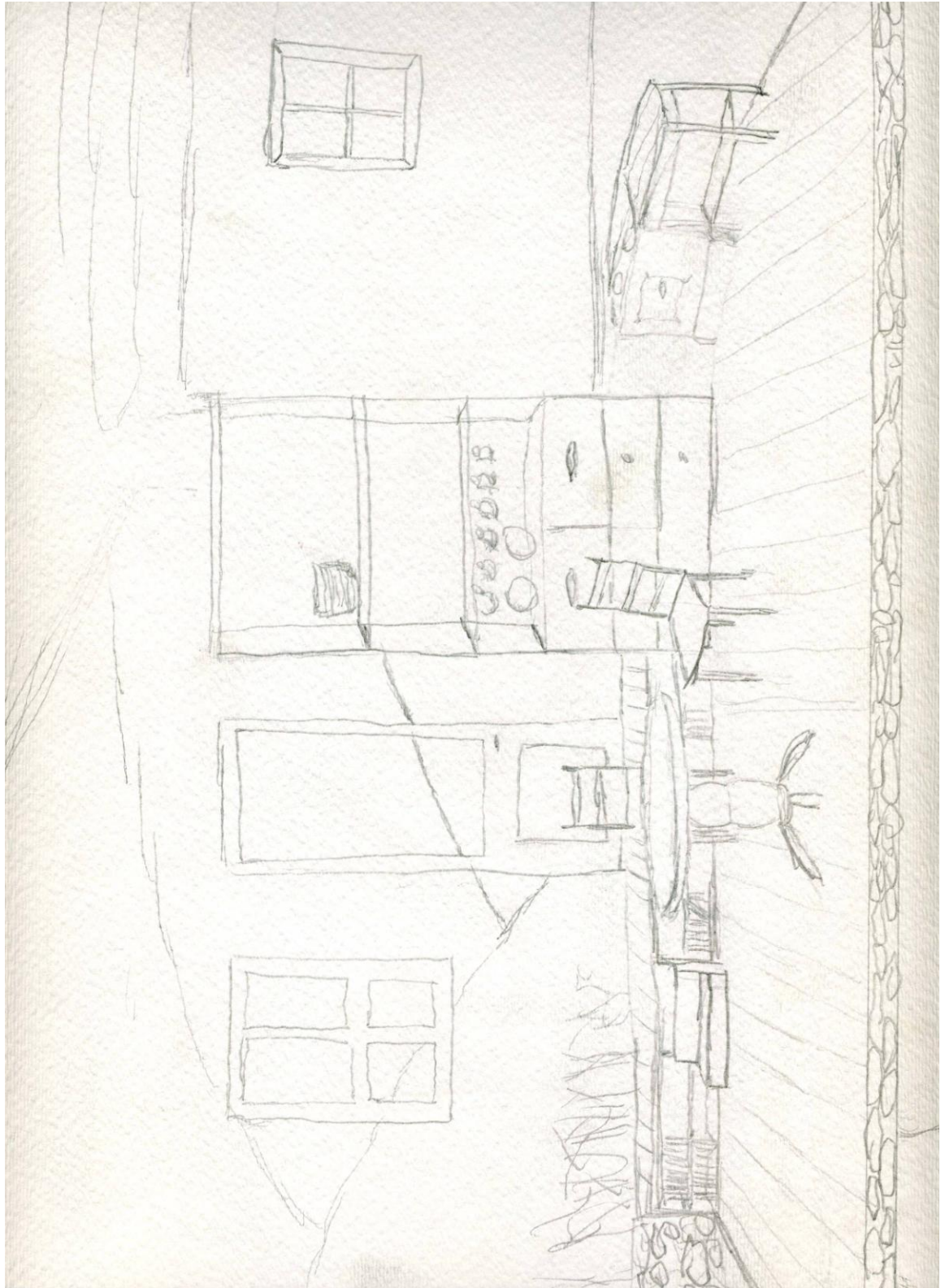
Rendering1



Rendering 2



Renderings – Kitchen Detail



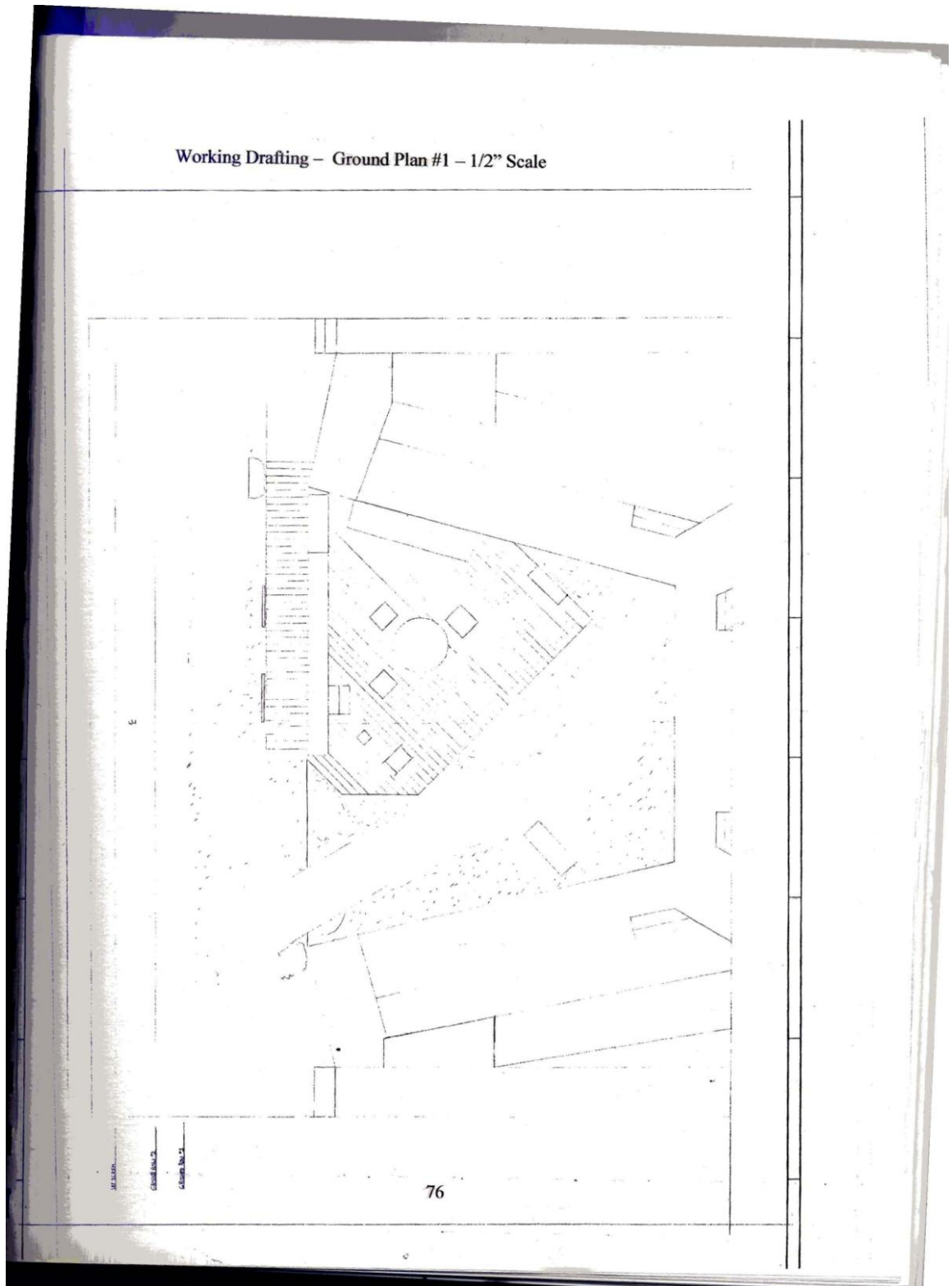
Renderings - #3



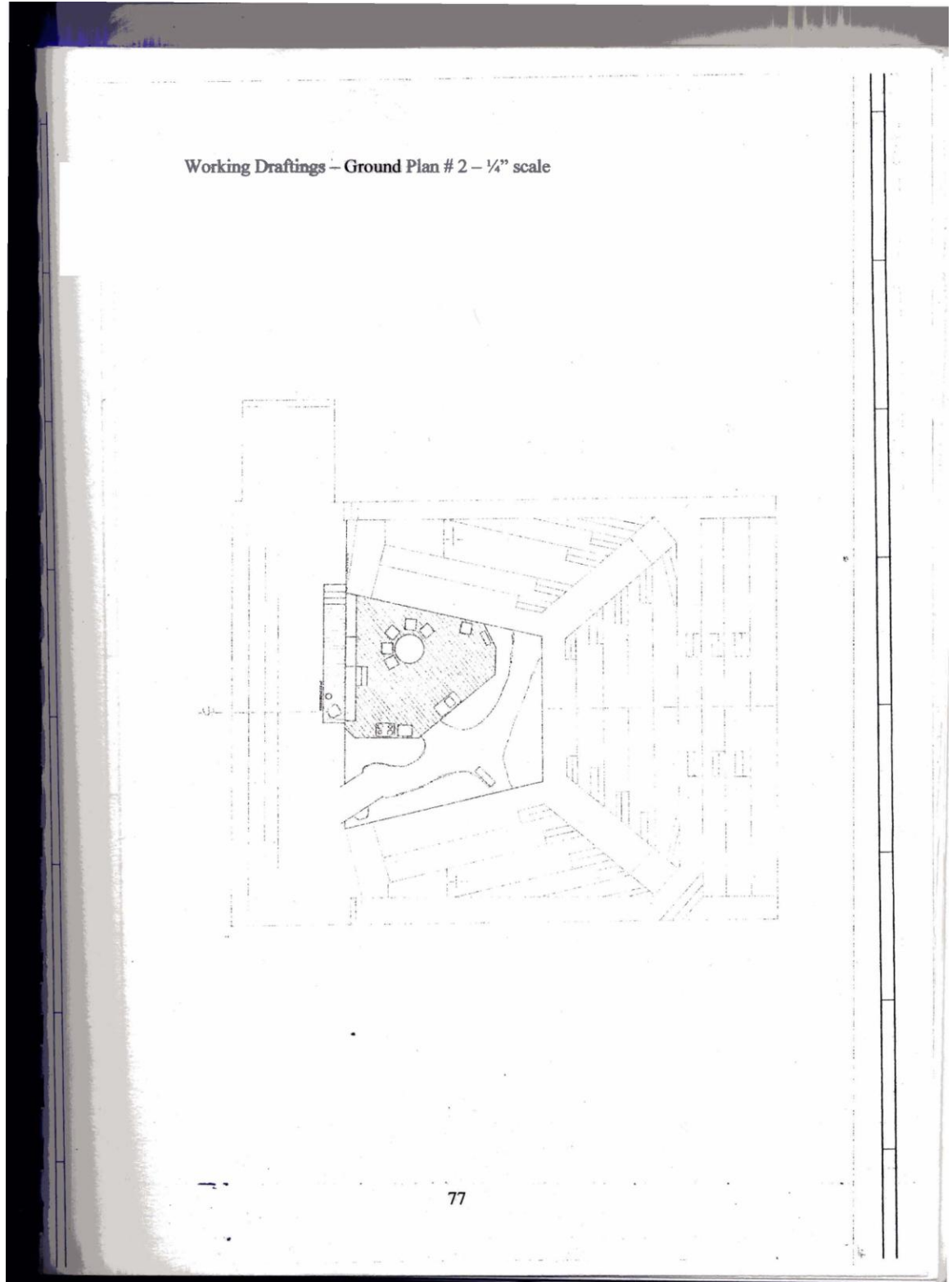
Appendix C

Working Draftings

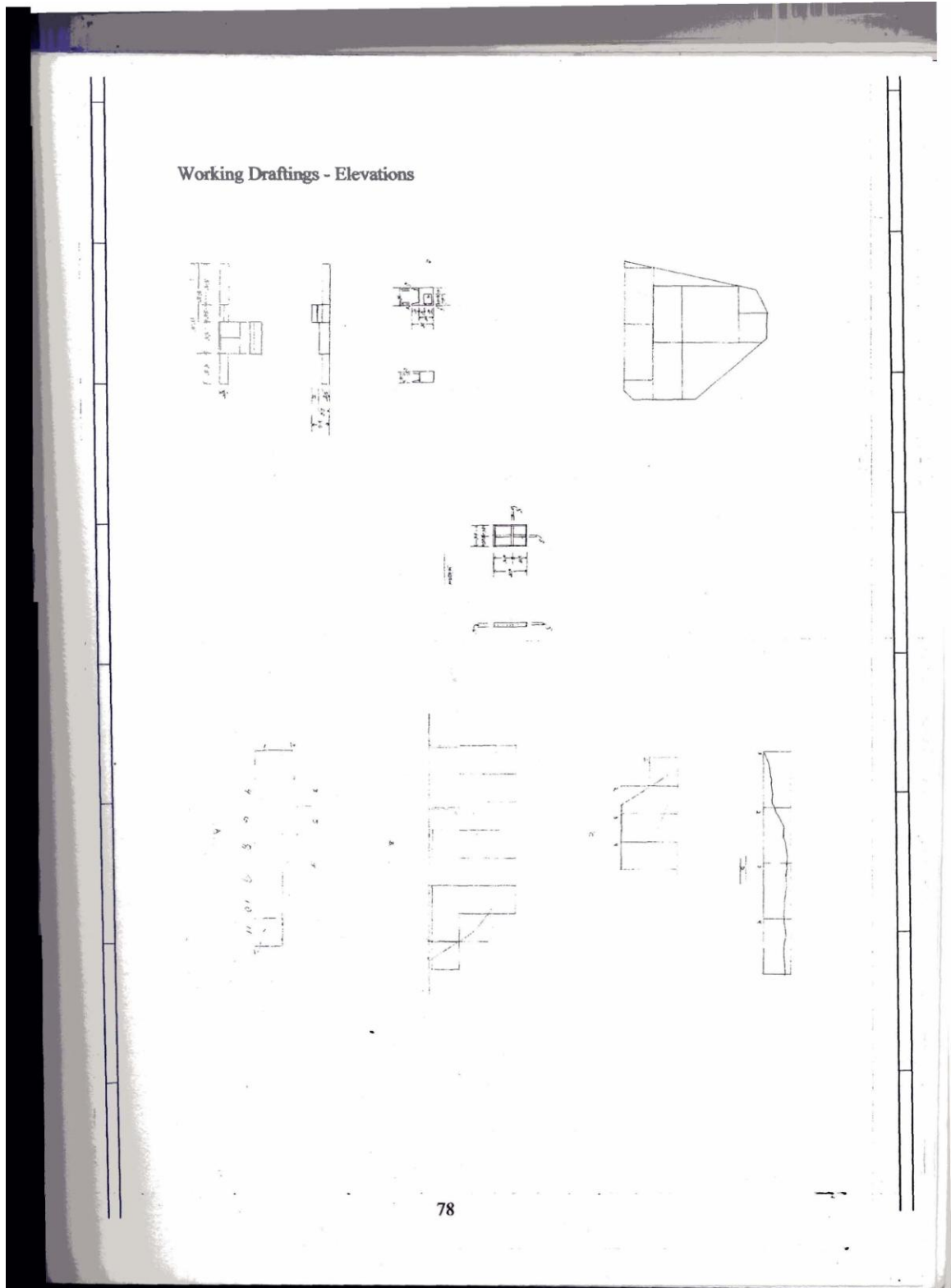
Working Drafting – GP #1 – 1/2" Scale



Working Draftings – Ground Plan # 2 – ¼" scale

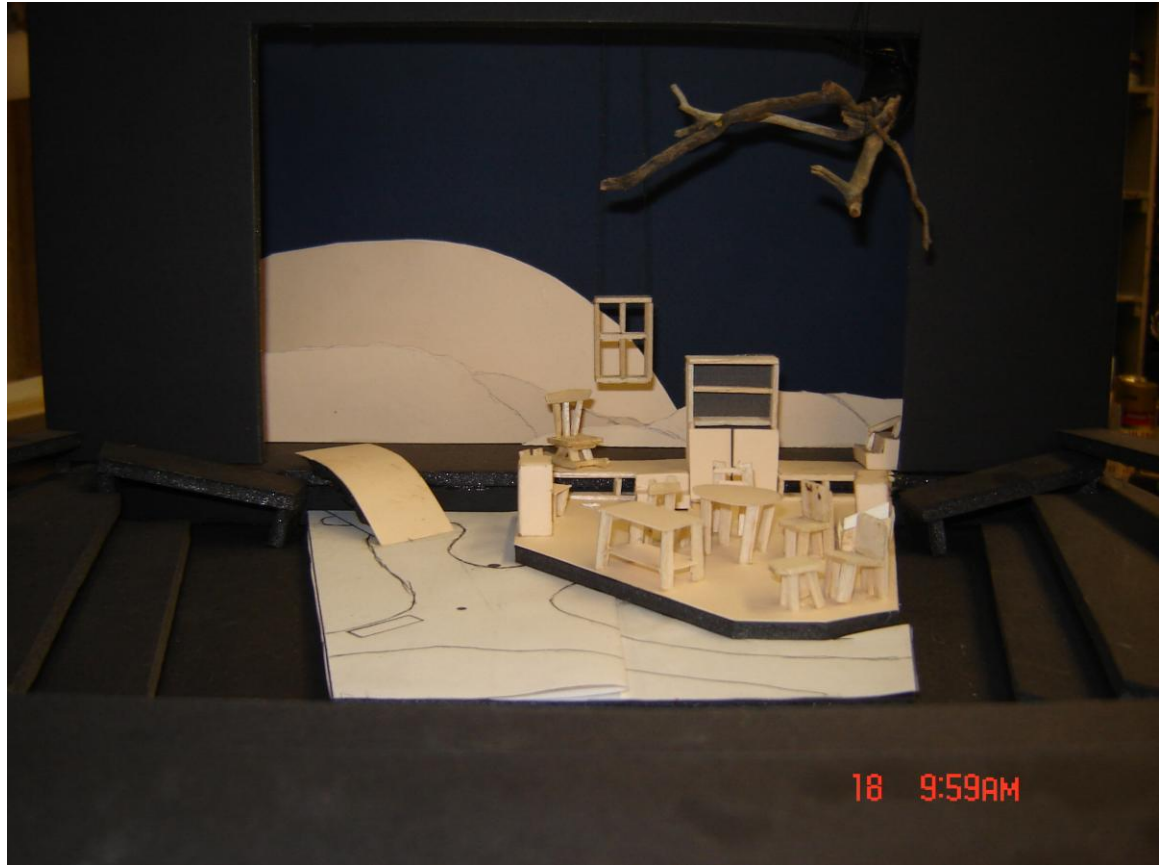


Working Draftings - Elevations



Appendix D

Model Photo



Appendix E

Paint Chips

Floor Sample



Background Hills



Background Hills and Garden



Appendix F

Twig-Like Sample



Appendix G

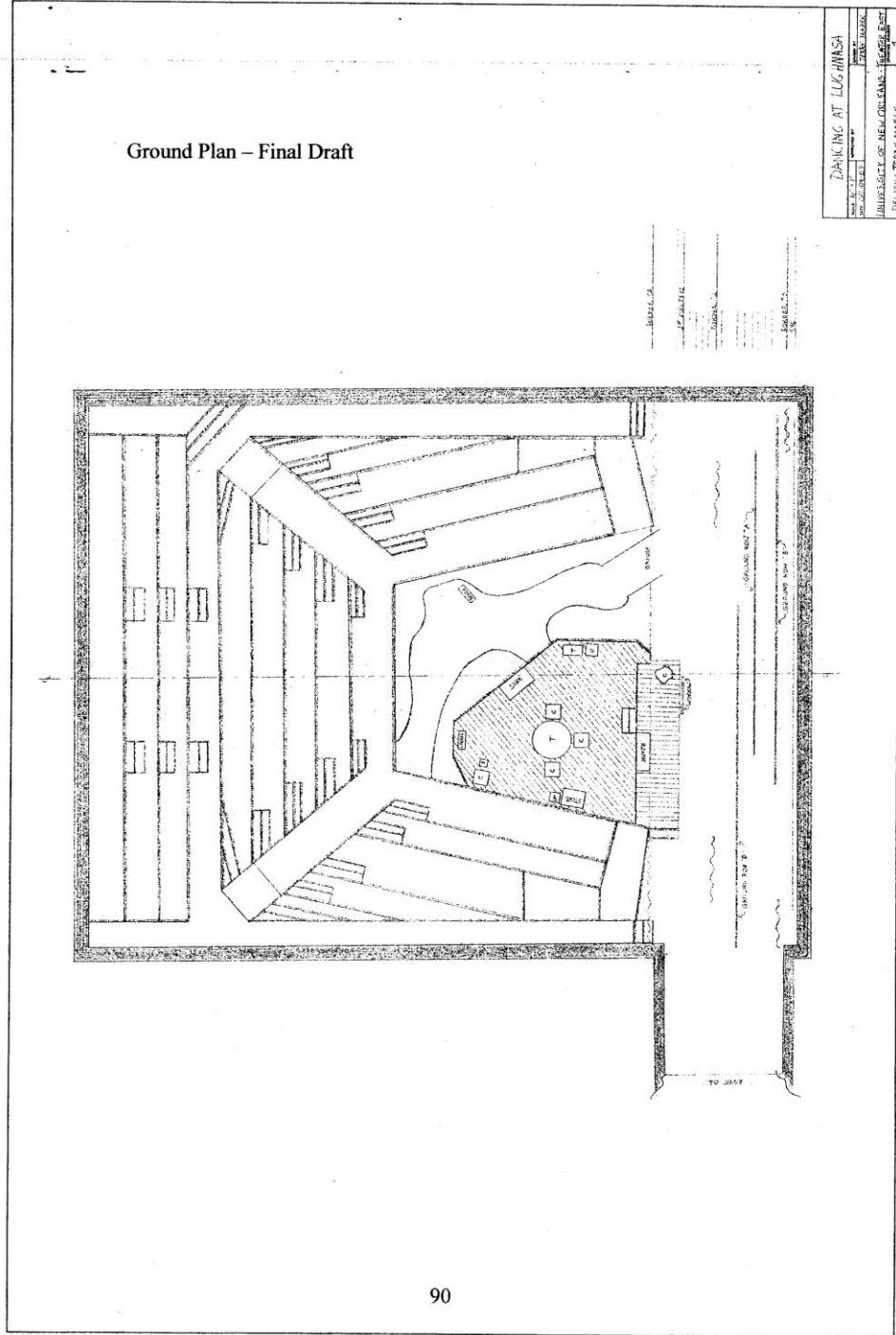
Marconi Research



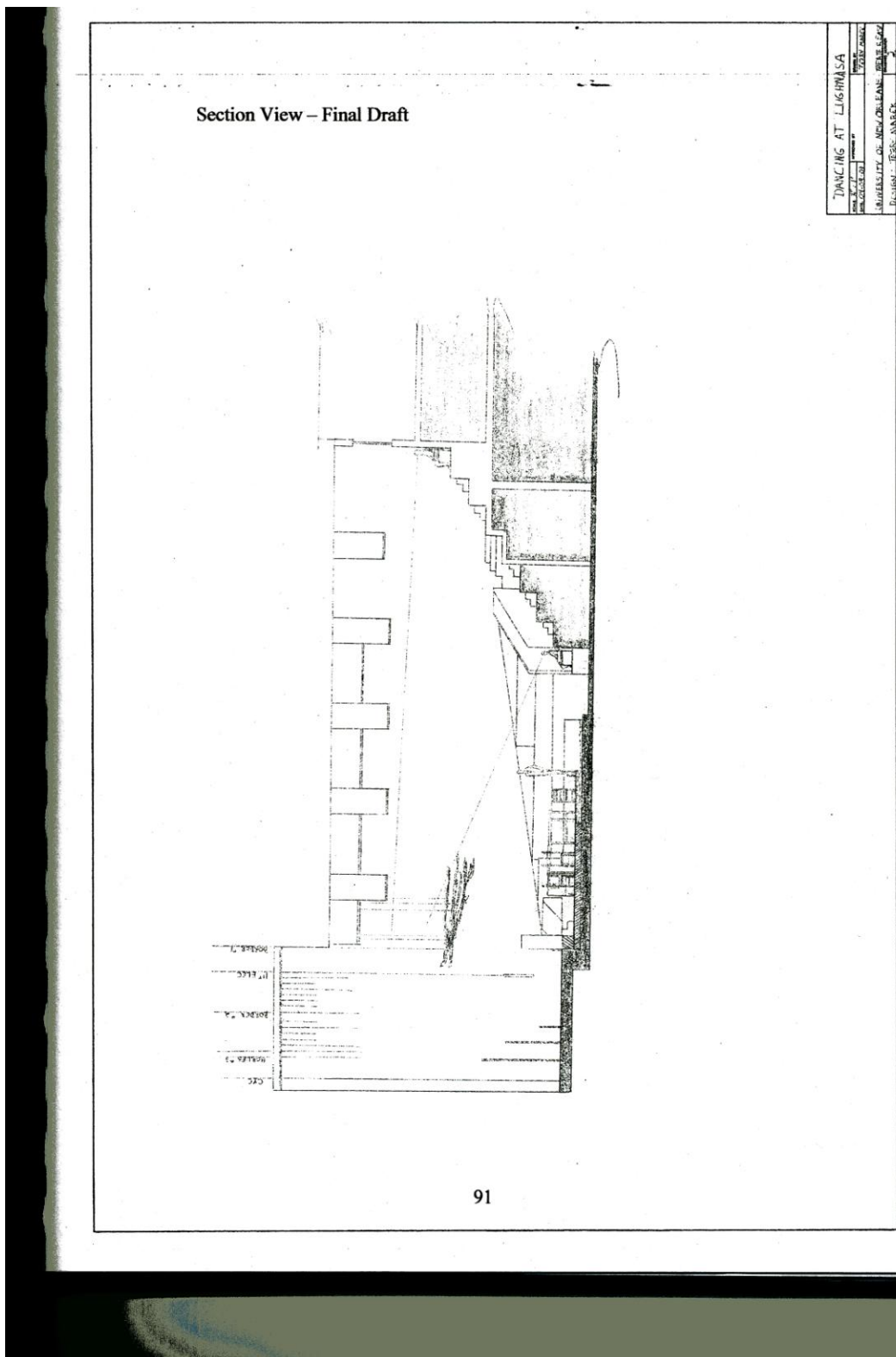
Appendix H

Final Draftings

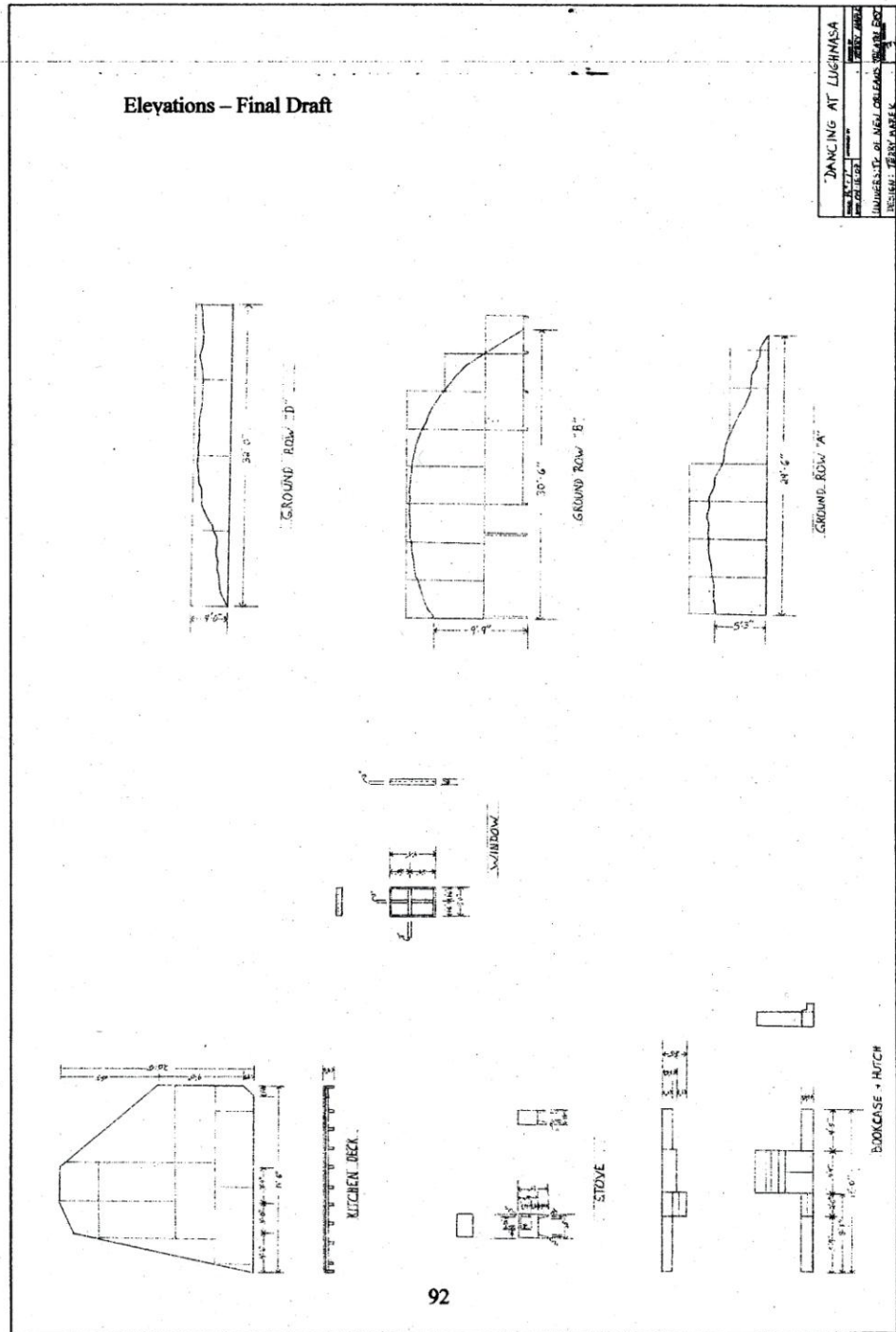
Ground Plan – Final Draft



Section View – Final Draft



Elevations – Final Draft



Appendix I

Show Still Photographs





Appendix J

Published Reviews

THE ARTS | MUSIC | DINING | DIVERSIONS

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'Dancing' in the dark at 'Lughnasa'

By David Cuthbert
Theater writer

REVIEW

"Dancing at Lughnasa" is Brian Friel's memory play, the summer of 1936 as seen through the Irish eyes of a 7-year-old boy's adult self, looking for that elusive moment when the world he knew as a child began to irrevocably change. Not as dark as Friel's other masterpiece, "Faith Healer," it still carries powerful undercurrents of emotion and of passion beyond words.

The five unmarried Mundy sisters eke out a living in their home outside the village of Ballybeg in County Donegal, Ireland. Kate teaches and Aggie knits gloves, but both jobs are in jeopardy. Tough Maggie is the cook and homemaker, who deeply inhales a cigarette and sighs, "Happiness." Rose is entranced by the lure of the Lughnasa festival, which has pagan roots. Christine is the sister who has had a child, Michael, out of wedlock and seems to dress every day in expectation of a visit from Gerry Evans, the boy's lying, likable rogue of a father, who barely knows their son.

The sole Mundy brother, Father Jack, has returned after 25 years' absence working as a priest with lepers in Africa. Addled and recovering from malaria, he gradually reveals the truth of why he was sent home.

DANCING AT LUGHNASA

What: Brian Friel's play, directed by David Hoover.

Where: Thrust Theatre, University of New Orleans Performing Arts Center, Lakefront campus.

When: Tonight and Saturday at 8 p.m.; Sunday at 2:30 p.m.

Tickets: \$12; \$10 seniors and \$8 students with ID.

Call: (504) 280-7469.

Helping to make life bearable is their first, battery-powered radio. When Irish dance music comes on and the spirit seizes them, the sisters dance ecstatically; Donegal dervishes. But they're all dancing in the dark, longing for escape, as Rose's fascination with the Lughnasa dance rites, Father Jack's de-

scription of African rituals and Chris' pas de deux with Gerry indicate.

Michael, the grown child who hovers on the periphery of the action as he narrates and occasionally interacts with his aunts, is well-played by Blake Balu, who strikes the right balance between the man he is and the boy he was. Michael tells us of his aunts' fates, which lends a Chekhovian poignance as we see them when they were still a family, gossiping and arguing, not knowing, as we do, what lies beyond.

Director David Hoover doesn't make the mistake of preserving Friel's characters in amber. Within their contained circumstances, they are fiercely, yearningly alive. Hoover orchestrates Friel's themes, leitmotifs and counterpoint with a conductor's skill.

Luis Q. Barroso, who played Father Jack in another fine production of "Dancing at Lughnasa" 13 years ago and was acclaimed for his work then, surpasses it here. As the confused, querulous cleric who shocks and rivets his sisters — and the audience — with accounts of religious fervor, Barroso himself seems to vanish into the character as simply as Father Jack was drawn into the mesmerizing African rites.

All the actresses are playing workaday women and the secret selves that simmer away and occasionally boil over. Angie Joachim's smart, funny Maggie seems the best-adjusted. Chrissy Garret is the giddy, chatty Rose; Lisa Picone the deceptively quiet Agnes. Kat Johnson's Kate determinedly shoulders the responsibility of Jack's care, and Mandi Turner is the pining Chris, whose prince will never carry her off on his motorbike. James Yeargain is her glib seducer, a charming Mr. Right-Now, a bum over the long haul.

Terry Marek's setting is a humdinger: a realistic kitchen with a hardwood floor and believably weathered furnishings, half circled by an exterior with a path, stylized "Brigadoon" hills in the background. Tony French's costumes are consistently right, and hair/wig stylist Jessi Norton gives Kate a movie marcel wave and free spirit Rose has hair that flies free.

The true, deep feeling of this "Lughnasa" stays with you long after its lights have dimmed to black.

LAST VEN

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TRODDING THE BOARDS

by Brian Sands
E-mail: bsanola@aol.com

Schoolhouse Rock Live! at the Contemporary Arts Center

Black Blocker Presents' production of *Schoolhouse Rock Live!* may no longer be running, but those of us who have kids or are old enough to remember those short *Schoolhouse Rock* segments on Saturday morning TV, may want to consider moving the plasma screen aside and hiring BBP & Co. for a performance in your very own living room. It sure will beat most things on television today.

Striking together about 20 of the songs that instructed young viewers on everything from grammar to math to civics, *Schoolhouse Rock Live!* provides nearly 90 minutes of entertainment guaranteed to have folks from 5 to 90 smiling and humming along. With its catchy melodies and witty lyrics, *SRL!* may be broad and slick but that should not be taken as an insult. Rather, anything that can instill knowledge smoothly and painlessly should be applauded, which was just what a recent audience at the CAC packed with kids (and the adults they brought with them) did.

SRL!'s framework is a simple one: a teacher (Jimmy Murphy) ushers of his lesson plans as he's about to embark on his first day of classes in his bedroom by five spats (or fragments of his imagination or guardian angels or whatever) who instruct him with musical numbers on how best to get his charges to learn. *Lolly, Lolly, Lolly!* turns about adjectives; *Ready Or Not Here I Come* drills the 5 times table into little heads; and *Mother Necessity* gives a lesson about famous inventors.

All the best-known cartoons were represented as well, including *Interjections*, *A Noun Is A Person*, *Place Or Thing*, and *Just A Bill* which Matt Graus put over with great flair. The roller-skated *Figure Eight* may not have been quite in the same league as *Starlight Express* but if it caused one to wonder how much insurance BBP had, the entire cast pulled it off with a tremendous sense of fun. And in *Interplanar Janet*, the uncredited creators presumably would not have minded Blocker's up-to-the-minute-ness with the interpolation that "Pluto's not a planet any more."

In this fairly demanding piece of nearly non-stop singing and dancing, the cast's energy never flagged. Murphy was his usual genial self; he's not a flashy performer but a very real one and just the right presence to enable an audience to enter *SRL!*'s slightly goofy world.

SRL!'s men (Murphy, Graus and the endearing Ethan Anderson) were not so much stronger than the women (Alexa Bruza, Jennifer Marks and Lindsey Price) but emerged as more individualized and hence made a greater impression. Bruza did register for her Sarah Brightman-esque voice, particularly in *Unpack Your Adjectives*, but both Marks and Price nicely contributed to the proceedings.

Blocker directed with his usual panache giving each number a distinctive feel and the entire show a professional look. I had actually thought the accompanying videos were provided by *SRL!*'s licensing company until informed that they were created especially for this production. As with all BBP shows, one is impressed with the attention to detail, a bubble machine was an unnecessary but very nice touch.

I would just question Blocker's having the cast literally putting cut-outs of people from different ethnic groups into a large pot for the *Great American Melting Pot* number—a little too much the implication of cannibalism for me. And PC-ness aside, having three similar-sized

brunettes in the cast caused the women to blur together a bit; couldn't we have had at least a blonde or a redhead? But these are the smallest of quibbles in an otherwise fine show.

Casey Leigh Thompson's choreography was filled with endless variations on moves from an aerobics workout—just the right combination of perky and fun. Scott and Carol Gauber's costumes were bright and imaginative while Earl Lemmie's lighting was equally bright and as energetic as the performers. The production design by David Raphael was appropriately flat and cartoony.

As *SRL!* already teeters on the edge of camp, one could only wish that BBP might be allowed to do *Schoolhouse Rock—Live At Midnight* as reworked for a cheeky all male cast. With *Conjunction Junction* given a whole new meaning, that could offer some lessons we might still be able to learn a thing or two from!

Dancing at Lughnasa at the University of New Orleans Theatre

After seeing *Dancing at Lughnasa* on Broadway, after it had won the Tony and other awards and after its original cast had been replaced by American actors and actresses, I couldn't figure out what all the fuss was about. Though I had heard it had left some audience members in tears, I wasn't that impressed with Brian Friel's so-called masterpiece. I supposed it might have lost something after its Irish players had gone home taking with them an innate sense of how to put over Friel's language.

Seeing it again at UNO, I'm not sure I really missed that much. For though *Lughnasa*'s tale of the five poor Mundy sisters and their brother is a sad one, when all is said and done, and there's a lot to be said these being Irish with the gift of gab, it's not a terribly moving one. I'd say call me a cad for my "So what" response to this tale of unyielding woe that's speckled with a few slivers of joy, but in recent conversations I've discovered that others feel the same way both in regard to the play in general and UNO's production in particular.

Notwithstanding my qualms about the script, David Hoover directed efficiently. He paced the show well so that *Lughnasa*'s two and a half hour playing time rarely sagged. But he never fully illuminated the text; his cast only occasionally brought the necessary poetic and emotional depth to give *Lughnasa* the existential scope and awareness it requires for it to fully succeed.

To its credit, the cast never overplayed the script's "Irish"ness. As good-hearted Maggie, Angie Joachim was all angular movements that added to a well-underplayed sense of comic relief. Lisa Picone was sold as the industrious Agnes whose life ends tragically. If Chrissy Garrett was a bit of a pain as the simple Rose that would not be out of order for this somewhat addled character. Kat Johnston's stern Kate may not have been craggy enough but touchingly conveyed a woman who cannot allow herself to enjoy life.

Best of all was the Chris Mundy of Mandi Turner who shyly revealed the still burning love for the father of her child. Gerry Evans, an irresponsible Welshman, James Yeargan provided some sparks as Evans but was ill-suited for the role and, after a while, gave up altogether on attempting any sort of accent.

Luis Q. Barroso offered a forlorn portrait of brother Jack, newly arrived back in Britain after 25 years of work in a Ugandan leper colony; as he tried to regain his grasp of the English language, he subtly made clear his unspoken feelings for the manservant he left

behind. As Chris' son Michael who narrates the play from a grown-up perspective, Blake Balu tried to make poetry from his endless expository monologues, but the burden was too much for even this actor so fine in Le Chat Noir's recent *Thick as Thieves*.

The most telling component of this production was Terry Marek's set that with its hand-scraped Mundy homestead and soaring mountains in the background perfectly evoked rural Ireland, the distances between people's homes and the barriers between people's hearts. If only the rest of *Lughnasa* had been on that level.



Blake Balu, Angie Joachim and Kat Johnston in *Dancing at Lughnasa*

cookin' 'wauentie dee ...from M-20

1 cup packed brown sugar
1 egg
2 teaspoons vanilla
3 1/2 cups all-purpose flour
1 teaspoon baking soda
1 teaspoon salt
1 cup cornflakes cereal
1 cup rolled oats
1 cup chopped walnuts
1 cup unseasoned flaked coconut
Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Beat sugar and butter until fluffy. Slowly add oil and beat until oil is well blended. Add egg and vanilla and beat to mix. In a small bowl combine flour, baking soda and salt. Add to butter mixture and stir just until mixed. Combine corn flakes, oatmeal, nuts and coconut and add to cookie mixture; mix just until combined.

Using a cookie scoop or drop by rounded tablespoons onto an ungreased cookie sheet. Bake in preheated oven for twelve minutes or until lightly browned. Cool on rack. Yield 30 cookies.

ORANGE DROP COOKIES

2/3 cup shortening
2/3 cup white sugar
1 egg
1/2 cup orange juice
1 teaspoon orange zest
2 cups all-purpose flour
1/2 teaspoon baking powder
1/2 teaspoon baking soda
1/2 teaspoon salt
2 cups confectioner's sugar
2 tablespoons butter
2 tablespoons orange juice
1 teaspoon orange zest
Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Grease cookie sheets. Mix together flour, baking powder, baking soda and salt. Stir 1/2 cup orange juice and 1 teaspoon orange zest into the flour mixture. Cream shortening and white sugar together. Beat egg into the sugar mixture. Slowly blend flour mixture into the egg and sugar mixture. Drop by teaspoonfuls onto greased cookie sheets. Bake for eight to ten minutes. Cool completely on racks. Make icing: mix confectioner's sugar and two tablespoons butter until smooth. Pour orange juice into the mixture and 1 teaspoon orange zest, mix well. Ice cookies.

WHIPPED SHORTBREAD COOKIES

1 cup butter, softened
1 1/2 cups all-purpose flour
1/2 cup confectioner's sugar
red maraschino cherries, quartered
Preheat oven to 350 degrees. In a large bowl combine butter, flour and confectioner's sugar. With an electric mixer, beat for ten minutes, until light and fluffy. Spoon onto cookie sheets, place a maraschino cherry in the center of each one. Bake fifteen minutes in the preheated oven or until bottoms of cookies are lightly browned. Remove from oven and allow to cool on cookie sheet for 5 minutes, then transfer to a rack. Yield 36 cookies.

OATMEAL, PEANUT BUTTER & CHOCOLATE CHIP COOKIES

1/2 cup butter
1/2 cup white sugar
1 cup packed brown sugar
2 eggs

1/3 cup peanut butter
1/4 cup water
1 teaspoon vanilla
1 1/2 cups all-purpose flour
1 teaspoon baking soda
2 cups rolled oats
1 cup semisweet chocolate chips
Preheat oven to 350 degrees. In a medium bowl, cream together butter, white and brown sugar. Beat in eggs, one at a time. Stir in peanut butter, water and vanilla. Combine the flour and baking soda, stir into the creamed mixture. Stir in the rolled oats and chocolate chips. Drop by teaspoonfuls onto an ungreased cookie sheet. Bake for eight to ten minutes in the preheated oven until cookies are lightly browned. Remove from cookie sheets to cool on wire rack.

SOFT GINGER COOKIES

2 1/2 cups all-purpose flour
2 teaspoons ground ginger
1 teaspoon baking soda
1/2 teaspoon ground cinnamon
1/2 teaspoon ground cloves
1/2 teaspoon salt
1/2 cup margarine, softened
1 cup white sugar
1 egg
2 tablespoons white sugar
Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Sift together the first six ingredients. Set aside. In a large bowl, cream together the margarine and 1 cup white sugar until fluffy. Beat in the egg, then stir in the water and molasses. Gradually stir the flour mixture into the molasses mixture. Shape dough into walnut size pieces and roll them in the remaining two tablespoons of white sugar. Place cookies 2 inches apart on an ungreased cookie sheet, and flatten slightly. Bake for eight to ten minutes in the preheated oven. Allow cookies to cool for five minutes on the cookie sheets then transfer to wire rack. Yield 24 cookies.

LEMON BARS

CRUST:
1 cup all-purpose flour
1/3 cup butter, softened
1/2 cup confectioner's sugar
TOPPING:
1 cup sugar
2 eggs
2 tablespoons all-purpose flour
2 tablespoons lemon juice
1/2 teaspoon lemon extract
1/2 teaspoon baking powder
1/2 teaspoon salt
Confectioner's sugar for dusting
Combine the flour, butter and confectioner's sugar, pat into an eight inch square pan. Bake at 375 degrees for 15 minutes. Meanwhile in a large mixing bowl combine all the other ingredients except confectioner's sugar until frothy. Pour over the crust. Bake for about 20 minutes or until lightly brown. Allow to cool. Dust with confectioner's sugar. Cut into bars. Makes nine bars.

Now take a large selection of your home baked cookies and start walking the streets and when you see a hot man ask him, "Wanna a cookie sir?" And if he answers in the affirmative, smile warmly, you just might get your cookies too.

You may contact me at donniejay@hotmail.com.

Appendix K

Student Reviews



Dancing At The Lughnasa

The set design of *Dancing at the Lughnasa* really created the mood of the play. Everything was clearly thought out and innovatively built-in to the look set designer, Terry Merck, had in mind.

The meticulous choice of objects gave the house the natural feel it had. Everything had a place; from the mismatched kitchen chairs, the basket in the corner, to the books lining the back. Everything around the house was also incorporated to create the feel of the area. The window was cleverly integrated into the design by being hung from wires because there was no physical wall at back of the house. The book shelves were a clever way to disguise the edge of the stage. My favorite incorporation into the design was the tree branch. It could have overtaken the design and been distracting, but the placement of it gave it just the feel it needed. It was raised high enough to just slightly hover over the house and it was lit in the same way- to be subtle.

The other outside design that gave the play the feel it needed were the rolling hills along the back of the stage and the garden and path in the foreground of the house. The hills were colored to give a feel of depth and shadows. The path was also very impressive. It was given a depth by being built up with other materials and also being painted with shading to create depth and shadows. The steps that led from the from the edge of the stage down into the garden were a innovate way of creating a path from the raised stage to the foreground

The only element outside of the house that caught my eye as being slightly off was the bench. It was built up on rocks; however, some of the larger, heavier rocks were toward the top, which seemed to offset the balance because, visually, heavier objects are better seen below smaller or lighter objects.

The set of the house itself was very well designed. The “wood” floor had a very natural look to it and the darkness of the paint allowed it to blend in with the other objects in the house, such as the table, the chairs, the radio, etc...Also, the way the house was raised on the bricks also contributed to the design. It’s hard to tell from the audience, but if the bricks weren’t authentic, Merek did a great job of creating a genuine look to them.

The colors also had a subtle way of creating a natural look. Using greens and blues for the outside world, such as the hills and the pathway, was highly contrasted by the dark browns and blacks that were incorporated into the house.

It’s hard to realize everything that goes into the design of a set. It’s not just picking out furniture for a room. It requires everything from working around the obstacles of the actual stage to using light and dark and colors to create the perfect picture that the play is trying to paint. It also requires the minute details of things as small as the cups they drink out of and the chairs they sit in. In the end, all of it comes together to create one cohesive design which is exactly what Terry Merek did in *Dancing at the Lughnasa*.



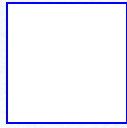
Thoughts on Dancing at Lughnasa

I think that the set and costume design were a success in showing the economic state of the Mundys and the state of Ireland at the time. I thought the set was well balanced, because the bridge at stage left and the tree at stage right held the stage up and gave it an apparent framing. The actors did a nice job of using the whole stage and interacting with everything on the stage. The placement of the rocking chair confused me a bit, because everything else in the room was together, but the rocking chair was off by itself and also raised as if to give it more significance. The problem with this apparent significance is that Rose and Agnes were the only ones to sit in the chair and when they did, it was to sow. The table upstage had much more meaning, as it was used by the entire household for activities ranging from preparing dinner to spying on other family members. I think that the set was an ideal depiction of a family in early 20th century Ireland.

The costumes were also a beautiful representation of the Mundy family and the era in which they lived. The costumes were not too expensive, nor were they overly shabby. They clearly showed that this was a family that faced struggles and was working through those struggles in order to survive. I did not understand Michael's costume, because the play was about his memories of growing and the struggles he went through during the Lughnasa festival, but he was dressed in much better clothes and we as an audience were not given any details to his future. In other words, I did not know if

Michael went on to have a successful life as an adult and if such an extravagant wardrobe, compared to the others, was warranted.

Dancing at Lughnasa was an enjoyable play, though it was not my favorite of the UNO productions that I have seen. The set and costumes did the jobs that they were made to do. They both depicted the setting and era in a way that was clear to the audience, but I thought that certain performances would have only made the production that much better.



Dancing at Lunanasa

The set design was a thrust stage and was a house stage left and stage right was a walkway. The stage was set with items of the era in which I think was the early 1900's. The play is based around a group of women who are devote Catholics who celebrate this pagan dance ritual at harvest times. The window set on stage is almost ironic because it is so large it almost doesn't seem scale to the house, but the way the window appears as it hangs over the home in the middle bears a cross. Symbolically stating the home is a Christian home but and how that seems to be the glue that is keeping the family together. The other feature to the play is the Marconi radio that always seems to have bad batteries but when ever it is on the girls seems so much happier and light hearted. One of the themes of the play is the women all seem sexually oppressed and all get really upset when Michael's father returns. I think this is solely because well he left them but mainly because they wish they had something like that. The dance though they share memories of dancing with other boys and how it makes them feel good. The stage is set around the kitchen with the kitchen table as one of the centerpieces. The women even dance on the table when Marconi starts to work. In the play I feel they almost personified Marconi as another character. Michael is the one telling the story so the play works as a flashback and he generally feels in the gaps. The women while on stage perform many duties that women generally did during the era. They sewed toward the back of the stage sitting in

rocking chairs and they cooked with the oven toward the front of the stage. This movement gave a lot of everyday life typically of a female of the time. The cross would represent their Christian ways but I believe Marconi would represent their pagan ways. The women of the play are Irish and sometimes it's was hard to understand what was going on. The play was long with lots of lengthy filler dialogue. It was well played and the set was really well done. In class we saw the model of the staging and it looked almost to scale and a replica of the model. I was truly impressed.

<http://www.bjcsconf.org/conferences/annual/abstracts/abstracts.htm> of 1/16/16

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Vita

Terry Marek was born in Kaukauna, Wisconsin and received his B.S. from the University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin in communication arts education and theater and drama education. Mr. Marek will continue in the academic world as the technical director and theatrical instructor at Lusher Charter High School in New Orleans beginning in fall 2007.