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## Set Design for Three Sisters: An Extraordinary Encounter with Chekhov

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Set Design for *Three Sisters*: An Extraordinary Encounter with Chekhov

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, Theatre, and Communication Arts  
Set Design

By

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## Abstract

The thesis *An Extraordinary Encounter with Chekhov* strives to examine the process and phases involved in the design of the set for Anton Chekhov's *Three Sisters*. This play was produced in the Spring of 2007, at the University of New Orleans. This production was chosen by the graduate committee, as the final work to complete my Master of Fine Arts degree in set design. I seek to examine the nature of the creative process for the set design through a series of encounters, from the initial encounter with the play to the various encounters with the director and other collaborators. These various encounters will include the, research and preparation to the final creation of the set design examined in detail. Copies of all the research, renderings, photos, draftings and any supporting materials that were relevant to the creative process will accompany the text of the thesis.

Keywords: Encounters, universal language of design, authenticity, creativity, atmosphere, artistry, craft, mood, integrity, communication.



## Introduction

My first instinct was to approach the set design for *Three Sisters* by Anton Chekhov as I do all my creative endeavors. I am both a painter and a designer and feel I have a strong understanding of the disciplines of design. When design is broken into categories, it is easier to understand the intuitive process necessary for the design process.

I discovered over the years that there is a very simple and universal formula to follow regardless of the design or art capacity. This formula states that good design should incorporate color, line, shape, texture, balance, proportion, movement, contrast and variety. Numerous books and manuals on the virtues of good design include all of these elements, sometimes with a slight variation on the theme. As these categories translate into the same language in all fields of design, a specific design project becomes a matter of rearranging the order of this design formula into a new set of relationships, depending on the specific function.

The above formula produces good, solid design if all of the elements are included. However, I believe there is a difference between good design and great design. Yes, the definition of “good” and “great” may be a matter of subjective opinion, but throughout the history of art and design, certain creative works have stood out above the rest and have become examples of great art and design. Do these works stand out because they contain something special, something different, something extraordinary? I think great design is based on good design, but creativity is what sets them apart.

The concept of creativity, applied to works of art from the first cave paintings from 40,000 years ago to the modern and post-modern art and design of today, has engaged great thinkers in constant discourse. Its meaning has been questioned and defined by the philosophers of classical antiquity, like Plato and Aristotle, as well as twentieth century philosophers like Derrida, Nietzsche, and Foucault. Poets have written about it; artists have tried to figure it out. As a result, the definitions of “creativity” are countless and the arguments endless.

I had never really explored and questioned where my creative ideas come from as an artist. From a young age, I have had a very active imagination and just took it for granted that this was the reason I could design and paint. When we describe a person as very imaginative, we assume that this person is also very creative. I have studied art for most of my life, from elementary school through high school, and eventually received a BA with a major in painting. I interned at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art in California for three years and have continued to read and study the latest books and literature on both art and set design. I worked as a photo editor and as an interior designer, and I have designed and decorated sets for TV commercials, theaters, and some small-budget films. I knew that all of this experience could only enhance my ability as a set designer and broaden my professional options.

However, I feel my real creative strength comes from my background in fine art. When I paint, I find it easy to arrange and compose on a two-dimensional canvas. I have worked by myself in a studio for the last fifteen years, and I have gotten the formula down without almost thinking. When my paintings do not work, I set them aside or paint over them. I know intuitively why they do not work. Either the composition is off, or the

colors are flat, or there is not enough contrast, etc. Over time and with experience, I have learned to solve the problems I encounter. If I am in a slump creatively, I pick up my pencil and draw the human figure or objects from nature, or I read art books to give me inspiration. I cannot begin to paint unless I am inspired. I cannot become inspired unless I tap into my creativity. Where does my creativity come from? When I first approached set design, I wondered what kind of a creative process it would take to bring all my two-dimensional knowledge into a three-dimensional set design. Actually, set design has a fourth dimension: walking and talking bodies who interact within the three-dimensional space.

I see actors as an additional creative force. They are individual pieces of art who collectively bring the play to life with the words they speak and the movements of their costumed bodies within the space. Where would my creativity come from with so many variables to work with? I had worked on other sets previous to this one, and for the most part held creative autonomy. Most of the directors were not strong or not interested in the area of design and were happy to let me create without too much interference. *Three Sisters* had a strong creative team with designers from various backgrounds; it had a director, a lighting designer, and a costume designer. Speaking the same language of design and remaining on “the same page” was important. I wanted to come to the table confident and inspired and willing to collaborate because I knew this would be crucial to the overall success of the design. I had to approach this creative endeavor in a different way and redefine what I already knew as a fine artist. In order to make connections on many different levels authentically and successfully, I had to establish and explain my process.

I perused numerous books on the different opinions and theories of creativity and came up with a few that made sense to my creative process. Robert Pope, in his book *Creativity, Theory, History, Practice* explains that “creativity is a process that can be observed only at the intersection where individuals, domains and fields interact,”<sup>1</sup> adding that “[we] never create anything fresh or valuable in utter isolation; we always create in relation to other people and other things...”.<sup>2</sup> Pope’s definition seemed especially relevant to my creative approach to set design. I would not be alone in this creative endeavor; I had to work together with other creative collaborators to create one unified set design. A writer writes the play; a director has a vision on how the play should be produced; a lighting designer has his/her ideas, and the costume designer creates the costumes for the actors. Creating a space that would have a life and creative force of its own would take a team effort and the meeting of many minds.

The notion that things come together, meet, or connect became a dominant theme throughout my research on the various theories. Creativity cannot occur in an act of isolation but happens when many forces meet each other. The concept of creativity as the result of many encounters made complete sense to me, and I found further confirmation in the theory of Rollo May in his book *The Courage to Create*: “Creativity occurs in an act of encounter and is to be understood with the encounter as its center.”<sup>3</sup> I related to this theory as an artist because his research was based on discussions with many artists and poets. He explains, “Cezanne sees a tree. He sees it in a way no one else has ever seen it. The painting that issues out of this encounter between a human being, Cezanne

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<sup>1</sup> Pope, p.67

<sup>2</sup> Pope, p.xvi

<sup>3</sup> May, p. 77

and an objective reality, the tree is literally new, unique and original. Something is born, comes into being, something that did not exist before.”<sup>4</sup> May continues that the work of art is born from the encounter and that this is true for all forms of creativity. He says that in poetry, “[the] poet marries the language, and out of this marriage the poem is born.”<sup>5</sup> He further expands this notion and explains that “it is the continuous experiencing of encounter and re-encounter that is the significant happening from the viewpoint of ultimate creativity.”<sup>6</sup>

Would this theory work in terms of set design? Since I believe that art and design are inextricably linked, I assume that my set design can be considered a form of art. In his *Dramatic Imagination*, Robert Edmond Jones further confirms my idea: “The art of stage designing is poetic in the sense that it seeks to give expression to the essential quality of a play rather than its outward characteristics”<sup>7</sup> “A good scene I repeat is not a picture,” he continues; “It is something seen, but it is something conveyed as well: a feeling, an evocation.”<sup>8</sup> I wanted to evoke the meaning of the play through my design. Could the role of stage designer then be considered as an artist? According to Jones, “[a] stage designer is, in a real sense, a jack of all trades. He understands architecture, but is not an architect: can paint a portrait, but is not a painter: creates costumes, but is not a couturier. Although he is able to call upon any or all of these varied gifts at will, he is not concerned with any of them to the exclusion of the others, nor is he interested in any one of them for its own sake. These talents are only the tools of his trade. His real calling is something

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<sup>4</sup> May, p.77

<sup>5</sup> May, p.85

<sup>6</sup> May, p.86

<sup>7</sup> Jones, p.78

<sup>8</sup> Jones, p.23

quite different. He is *an artist of occasions*.”<sup>9</sup> Even though I came from a predominantly fine-arts background, I could approach the set design as an “artist of occasion” with the stage as my three-dimensional canvas. In order to validate and explain the final work as “art born from many encounters,” I had to find and explore the creative process for the set design of the *Three Sisters*.

My set design for *Three Sisters* was born from three separate but ultimately connected encounters: First from an encounter with the play and the writer Anton Chekhov, secondly from an encounter with the director and the other creative collaborators, and thirdly from my personal encounter as a designer and an “artist of occasion” with the research and the collaborative effort of the production team.

However, in order make these encounters productive and meaningful, I needed a definite process. Creativity can be inspired by a great idea, but it takes action to make the creative act happen. Doing and taking action brings an idea to life. Wondering what exactly this process would entail, I turned to Robert Pope, who quotes a theory by Graham Wallas in *Creativity, Theory, History, Practice*. The theory states that most creative actions go through four stages:

“Preparation – when the problem is investigated in all directions

Incubation – a period of not consciously thinking about the problem

Illumination – the appearance of the happy idea

Verification – the conscious testing of the solution.”<sup>10</sup>

Each of my three encounters with the project would provide the inspiration necessary to transport my work on *Three Sisters* through the four stages of

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<sup>9</sup> Jones, p.67

<sup>10</sup> Pope, p.73

preparation, incubation, illumination and verification and bring it to life on the stage. The preparation phase would include all research on the playwright, the play, and the collaborative ideas of the director Professor David Hoover, the lighting designer Ms. Katie Anderson, and the costume designer Professor Anthony French. The incubation and illumination phase would entail my personal encounter as a designer with the entire creative process. The verification phase would represent the actual “birth” or production of the design, my set design brought to life by the actors.

## Chapter 1

### An Encounter with the Play and Chekhov

In preparation for the encounter with Chekhov and his play *Three Sisters*, I had to analyze the script and research the works and life of Anton Chekhov himself to understand what drove and inspired him as an artist. I had never seen the play *Three Sisters* produced nor had I had the chance to read it before it was presented to me as my thesis production. During the initial read, I had to get a sense of the characters talking, to feel the rhythm and flow of events through this dialogue. After the first read, I could not get a sense of flow; the work seemed complicated and heavy. However, considering Chekhov's importance as a modern playwright, I knew that creating a Chekhov set would be a rare opportunity for any designer. I welcomed the challenge, and as I continued reading and re-reading the play, I discovered its many layers of meaning and understood details I had overlooked before. The theme initially seemed simple: a group of malcontents constantly searching for something better. After each read, however, I was able to dig deeper to really appreciate the subtlety of Chekhov's text. I understood that these words were the creative product of another artist, a writer esteemed in the annals of theatre history. I knew I needed to make the encounter with the work meaningful, and to understand it fully in order to create a space that would compliment it. The script was the keystone to the design-making process, and a good in-depth analysis would help me make creative choices that were closer to the author's intent.



The three sisters, Olga, Masha and Irina Prozorov, live in a “provincial city” in Russia. The setting is an important factor in the play because the three women constantly lament the fact that they live in this place. They long for the good life they had in the past, when they lived in Moscow, and they yearn to go back to the city and to a more exciting life. They believe they can find happiness and fulfillment again if only they can move back to Moscow. The country with its birch trees cannot compete with the brighter lights of the city. Chekhov is one of many artists who have incorporated the contrast between the beauty of nature and the ugliness of human intervention into their works. *Three Sisters* is set in the country, where the beauty of nature surrounds the three sisters in the form of the birch trees. The trees, although a beautiful part of nature, are more like prison bars that trap them in their small and stifling world. The sisters long for the urban environment, a place where man has replaced trees with brick and grey ugliness. Chekhov, a great lover of nature, uses this theme throughout his works, contrasting natural beauty and cruelty. In his book *A.P. Chekhov*, Julius Katzer quotes the writer Vladimir Yermilov, who comments on the function of beauty in the playwright’s work: “Chekhov uses the beauty of nature not to belittle man but to elevate him to the beauty that must become firmly established in the whole of human life, in all human relations.”<sup>11</sup> “In Chekov’s stories,” he continues, “nature herself longs for happiness, for a life for man that will be worthy both of the beauty of nature and the beauty of man. Nature herself does not wish to be callously indifferent to man! She does not want her warmth, tenderness and inspiration to be a hurtful, humiliating and mocking estrangement from

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<sup>11</sup> Katzer, p.136

the lives of the people! She wants to be human and not a monster. She always wants to be the expression of the happiness and triumph of life.”<sup>12</sup>

With each subsequent reading of the play, one I discovered more information, and the characters began to unravel slowly like fragile skeins of thread. Yet, I wondered if they had any substance at all. Their lives seemed so banal and uninteresting: One sister is married to a local high-school teacher, another has become a teacher herself, and the third sister has resigned herself to a dull job in a telegraph office. In order to get another perspective on the play, I turned to other critics for enlightenment, which made the encounter with the script more authentic and meaningful. Peter Bitsilli analysis of how Chekhov uses his characters answered some of my questions: “His plays do not divide characters into major and minor figures. They lack the traditional intrigue that begins with a conflict and ends with a resolution. His task here as in his stories is to show a segment of time – however incidental or trivial it may be – all life a single process having neither a beginning nor an end.”<sup>13</sup> Bitsilli’s description echoed my own impressions of *Three Sisters*. None of the characters really stands out from the rest; there is no real drama or conflict. Most of the excitement revolves around the arrival of a small garrison of soldiers in the town, and the story ends when they leave as they have come, quietly and uneventfully.

There is a dignity, however, in the struggle of the three sisters to create meaning in their life after it has been stripped bare of illusion. Chekhov ultimately comments on the downfall of the privileged class in Russia and the search for deeper meaning in the modern world. Yes, these people seem incredibly dull and boring at first, but Chekhov,

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<sup>12</sup> Katzer, p.136

<sup>13</sup> Bitsilli, p.118

true to his own nature, does not want to pass judgment on them. We become privy to the everyday events that fill the characters' lives, but we also see their dreams and longings for a better life. Like the characters in the sit-com "Seinfeld," Chekhov's figures apparently talk a lot about nothing, but their conversations really mask some deeper pain. They are imprisoned in a world that has beauty and nature outside their door, yet their inner world is full of pain, disillusion, and longing. I cannot help but agree with Ronald Hingley's summary of the play: "In *The Three Sisters* and in dozens of the tales we find just a group of people circling round and round, like goldfish in a bowl, saying always, I can't get out, I can't get out. The invocation which called these fools into a circle is a self-suggested attitude of mind."<sup>14</sup>

As time passes for the sisters, they continue to hope, but with each passing year, things stay the same and their dreams of going to Moscow remain unfulfilled. The end of the play marks the end of another year and the beginning of another cycle.

In conjunction with the character analysis, I had to look at the time and place the play was set in. This process is sometimes referred to as "dramaturgy," and it marked another step in my preparation phase. The dramaturgical information about the playwright and play would help me make better-informed choices in my design. *Three Sisters* is set in turn-of-the-century Russia, during a time of great social upheaval and struggle. The sisters and their family come from the privileged class of Russian society, but they are no longer as rich as they once were. Their father has died, which is why they have moved to the country.

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<sup>14</sup> Hingley, p.227

The format of the play is very important for the physical layout of the set. The *Three Sisters* is written in four acts, which become one of the most challenging aspects of the design. The first two acts take place in a living room, the third act in a bedroom, and the final act outdoors in a garden. I knew that the director, David Hoover, wanted the period furniture and costumes, and so I began researching the furniture for the different acts. Since this was the preparation phase, I gathered and stored all this information in my mind, to be used later in my personal encounter as a designer for the final act of creating the design.

Irina Kirk refers to Chekhov as “an observer of life and people,”<sup>15</sup> who peels his characters like an onion, one layer at a time, slowly but surely. This technique is quite evident in the *Three Sisters*. Chekhov develops his characters slowly and methodically, gradually letting the audience into the lives of these lonely women. Since a real-live encounter with Chekhov was not possible, I had to research his life to find out what other critics and writers, including his peers, said about his work and about his person. This would provide a more meaningful encounter with a man who left behind a remarkable body of work as his creative legacy. I scrutinized all aspects of Chekhov’s life in order to facilitate the “incubation”<sup>16</sup> and “illumination”<sup>17</sup> phases of the creative process.

Anton Chekhov was born on January 17, 1860 in the sleepy port town of Taganrog in the South of Russia. He was one of six children and born into a family of modest means, into what was considered the “merchant class” in Russia. Chekhov later described Taganrog in letters to his brother “as a place where people do nothing but eat,

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<sup>15</sup> Kirk, p.75

<sup>16</sup> Pope, p.73

<sup>17</sup> Pope, p.73

sleep and multiply and have no other interests.” Taganrog was obviously the inspiration for the town the sisters are forced to live in. All they seem to do was eat, sleep, and talk about nothing. Taganrog did have a theater with a good acting company, and Chekhov made his first visit at the age of thirteen. This was a pivotal moment in his life because from then on, the theatre became a life-long obsession. He loved to go backstage and meet the actors and see the bright lights and colorful costumes. The world of the theatre provided a complete contrast to the sleepy town and its uneventful life. Chekhov is said to have been a great “observer of people”<sup>18</sup> as a child, and this served him well in later years and helped him in his acting and his character development. He became obsessed with acting during his teen years. He learned everything he possibly could about the craft and became very skilled at make-up. He was a very clever mimic and loved to entertain other people with his impersonations of various town elders. He did not laugh much himself, but he never tired of making other people laugh at his antics. He began to write his stories down and soon found a market for them in a Russian comic magazine. His boyhood love of mimicry planted the seed for his emerging talent as a writer.

When Chekhov was sixteen years old, his life was forever altered when his father fled to Moscow and left the family to hide from his debtors. His mother followed shortly thereafter, with his sisters. The entire contents of the house were auctioned off to pay the various debts. After the house was sold, Chekhov stayed on as a renter, paying his room and board by tutoring. These were very dark and humiliating years for the young writer, and we see many references to this time in works like the *Cherry Orchard* and *Three Sisters*.

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<sup>18</sup> Kirk, p.75

After the three years of servitude, Chekhov moved to Moscow to attend medical school. It seems that writing and the theatre were not his only interests. He was a “Renaissance Man,” so to speak, and possessed a very keen mind and sharp intellect. Quite possibly, the hardships the family suffered may also have steered him in this direction. He needed to bring money into the family to provide stability. He cared deeply for his mother and siblings and strongly felt that he needed to support them since his father could not. Yet, he could not altogether abandon his of writing, and when he set up a medical practice, he supplemented his income with his writings. As his writing became more prolific and popular, his medical practice tapered off.

Seeing the success of his literary endeavors, he started to produce prolifically. His involvement with the Moscow Art Theatre catapulted him from relative obscurity to fame. A wealthy actor and director, Konstantin Stanislavsky and his partner Vladimir Neimirovich-Danchenko, had founded the Moscow Art Theater as an alternative form of theater, departing from the highly stylized dramatic style of the time. The founder intended to create a true ensemble theatre based on a more realistic method of acting and production. The Moscow Art Theater became the stage for many of Chekhov’s plays. The partnership was not always smooth as Stanislavsky and Chekhov were often at odds with each other on how his plays should be produced. Interestingly, Stanislavsky considered *The Three Sisters* a drama while Chekhov considered it a comedy.

*Three Sisters* was written about 1900, specifically for the Moscow Art Theater. Ironically, at the time of his writing this play, Chekhov had to sell his main home in Moscow. He had contracted tuberculosis and was forced to move to Yalta, where the climate was more agreeable to his condition—not unlike the three sisters, who are forced

to move to the country as well. So again, his writing echoes his own life situation; his art imitated his life.

Chekhov was also known for bouts of wanderlust, and he traveled throughout Russia and Europe. When he visited Rome and Florence, he wrote to his sister Masha, April 1, 1891, “Italy apart from its natural scenery and warmth, is the only country in which one feels convinced that art is really supreme over everything, and that conviction gives one courage”.<sup>19</sup> Again, his love of art and beauty was a very powerful force in his life.

Anton Chekhov constantly strove to make his art better. He worked with other great artists and writers, who spoke highly of his creative and ambitious nature. Again, to enhance and intensify the encounter with Chekhov, I picked a few excerpts of what his peers and other writers said about him and his work. Maxim Gorky, a renowned Russian writer himself, said about Chekhov: “ No one ever understood the tragic nature of life’s trifles so clearly and subtly as Chekhov did; never before had a writer been able to hold up to human beings such a ruthlessly truthful picture of all that was shameful and pitiable in the dingy chaos of middle class life. Vulgarly was his enemy. All his life he fought against it, held it up to scorn, displayed it with a keen impartial pen, discovering the fungus of vulgarity everywhere.....)”<sup>20</sup> He goes onto say, “Reading the works of Chekhov makes one feel as if it were a sad day in late autumn, when the air is transparent, the bare trees stand out in bold relief against the sky, the houses are huddled together, and people are dim and dreary. Everything is so strange, so lonely, motionless, and powerless. The remote distances are blue and void, merging with the pale sky breathing a dreary cold on

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<sup>19</sup> Kirk, p.47

<sup>20</sup> Katzer, p.19

the half-frozen mud. But the mind of the author, like the autumn sunshine, lights up the rutty roads, the crooked streets, the dirty cramped houses in which pitiful little people suffocate in boredom and idleness, filling their dwellings with meaningless, drowsy bustle.”<sup>21</sup> (This particular passage would subsequently provide added inspiration for the color choices in the set design.)

The more I read about Chekhov, the more I was able to understand what drove him creatively. I could identify and connect with him on a much deeper level, which made the encounter more meaningful. I read in many books that he despised vulgarity and looked for simplicity. Again, Gorky enlightens us on this matter: “He had the art of exposing vulgarity everywhere, an art which can only be mastered by one whose own demands on life are very high, and which springs from the ardent desire to see simplicity, beauty and harmony in man. He was a severe and merciless judge of vulgarity.”<sup>22</sup> I found it especially interesting to read what Chekhov thought of his fellow countrymen and how this related to the characters in *Three Sister*: “The Russian is a strange being,” he once said. “He is like a sieve; he can hold nothing for long. In his youth he crams himself eagerly with everything that comes his way, and by the time he is thirty nothing is left of it all but a heap of colorless rubbish. If one wants to lead a good life, a human life, one must work. Work with love and with faith. And we don’t know how to that in our country.”<sup>23</sup> The importance of work is a constant theme in *Three Sisters*, given voice in the character Tuzenbach’s laments: “The longing for work – God how I understand it. I’ve never worked, never.... Something vast is coming soon. In its wake laziness,

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<sup>21</sup> Katzer, p.20

<sup>22</sup> Katzer, p.14

<sup>23</sup> Katzer, p.17



snobbery, prejudice against work, our whole morbid boring society will be swept away. I'll work, and in twenty-five or thirty years everyone will work – everyone.”<sup>24</sup> Even though *Three Sisters* suggests that there is not much hope for the future for the three women, there is evidence of a counterbalancing movement, a strange kind of optimism about the future of man. These “work” speeches are ironic especially with regards to Irina and Olga, who are trapped in their boring jobs.

Masha is determined, despite the odds, to find a purpose in life. She rallies the other sister constantly, saying, “I think man ought to have faith or ought to seek a faith, or else his life is empty, empty...To live and not to understand why cranes fly; why children are born; why there are stars in the sky... One must know what one is living for or else it is all nonsense and waste...”<sup>25</sup> The sisters are frustrated with their lives, and their frustrations are the source of their eloquent discourse. They cannot find true happiness, so they create a world to embody their sense of an ideal life, which is filled with images of spring warmth, blossoms, snow, and the freedom of birds flying.

The more I read about Chekhov, the more it became apparent that he was a sensitive and astute artist in all areas of the arts. He was a great writer, doctor, and family man who lived what he believed. He searched for places and people that held the same beliefs. He was a man of courage and conviction in his personal life who did not take the easy way out and who stayed true to his beliefs. I did not necessarily need nor would use all this information in terms of designing the set, but my encounter with the author provided me with inspiration for a more authentic design in the “illumination phase.”

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<sup>24</sup> Van Italie, p.100

<sup>25</sup> Van Italie, P.119

## Chapter 2

### An Encounter with the Director and the Creative Team

After my first read of the play and some preliminary research into Chekhov's background, it was time for my first meeting or encounter with the director, Professor David Hoover. I needed to speak with the Mr. Hoover before I got too far into the conceptual phase. I had worked with him on Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors* and found him to be very agreeable and open to ideas. In the first meeting, he handed me a copy of a photograph of birch trees and explained that he felt these would be an important element of the design. We both agreed that the trees and nature were obviously important themes throughout the work. I explained that I was not interested in a totally realistic interpretation of the work. I felt that, based on some of my preliminary research, Chekhov constantly disagreed with Stanislavsky on his heavy-handed and overly realistic approach to set design. Mr. Hoover listened to me patiently and reiterated that the trees needed to part of the design, but he was open to an abstract set design as long as it incorporated realistic pieces of furniture. I was not sure at this point if realistic furniture would work with the abstract set design, but since he was the director, I had to respect and consider his wishes, whether I agreed or not. Since this was my thesis project, I felt Mr. Hoover gave me a very wide berth in which to experiment and design. I forged ahead in a more confident manner now that I knew Mr. Hoover accepted my initial idea for a more abstract style of set. My meeting with the director was very necessary in order to keep the communication between all the collaborators open. Once the design phase was in motion, we met with and the rest of the team every week. Mr. Hoover, I believe, felt

confident from his previous experience with me to allow lots of space and did not suggest any particular style or idea, other than that the trees needed to be incorporated. He agreed initially to the set having a more abstract look but wanted the furniture and costumes represented realistically. Since it was still early in the design phase, I had to put this information in the back of my mind so I could work on the bigger picture. The meeting for the final design proposal went extremely smoothly. Mr. Hoover liked the concept, so I went ahead, satisfied that this was going to be a good working relationship. Once the preliminary sketches were approved and the model built, Mr. Hoover gave me free rein of the project.

With the set was under construction, meetings were arranged when there was a specific problem or need. Sometimes this was two and three times a week. These meetings or encounters were extremely important to keep the creative process moving along. Encountering problems and solving them was another factor in getting the set built. The furniture and its layout was probably our biggest disagreement, but after many talks and discussions, we were able to resolve the various issues. Mr. Hoover proved to be a very good listener and compromiser, but he also stayed true to the needs of the actor, which I totally respected. He was instrumental in keeping the focus on the performance and in keeping the creative team in line with this notion.

The meetings with Ms. Katie Anderson, the lighting designer, were extremely successful from the beginning. She would ultimately be the “painter of light” and help enhance the atmosphere and mood of the play. We discussed the paint treatments needed in order to illuminate the stage. Her input was extremely invaluable in terms of how light worked on the various colors of paint. This was an area in which I had little experience,

and I trusted her advice. I shared my preliminary sketches and ideas with her, and she was completely open to them. Her ideas and comments were a welcome addition to the information I already had gathered. We truly spoke the same language of design and agreed completely on all aspects of the lighting. She proved to be a very astute and thoughtful member of the team, and the atmosphere of the set depended heavily on her talent as a lighting designer. In my research of Chekhov, I felt the following passage would be helpful in describing the *Three Sisters* atmosphere, and I shared it with Ms. Anderson:

“Chekhovian Heroes do not make an indelible impression on the readers mind. Like pale, transparent shadows, they merely cast a feeble glimmer before us, and they are easily transposed from one story to another in our memory, or simply forgotten – like people in real life whom we have chanced to meet only casually and briefly.”<sup>26</sup>

I developed a very close working relationship with Ms. Anderson because I wanted to “paint with light” this time. I felt that the mood and atmosphere could be created by the lighting, so I did not have to focus so much on the paint color, which often makes the set look flat. I had experienced this on the set of *Comedy of Errors* and did not want it to happen again. We met constantly to discuss the layout of the furniture in all four acts. We talked about light in terms of the mood of the characters, and Ms. Anderson’s lighting plan was exactly what I had envisioned.

We also met with the director frequently to present our ideas, and Mr. Hoover made the necessary changes to enhance the performance of the actors. The encounter

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<sup>26</sup> Bitsili, p.2

with Ms. Anderson was a necessary and valuable contribution to my creative process. This was truly a good marriage of minds and ideas that helped create a beautiful design.

Professor Tony French was assigned as the costume designer for the *Three Sisters*. Mr. French had worked on countless productions and has enormous talent and experience in his field. He is not only a great designer but also a great craftsman. Good quality stagecraft in all of the design areas is of vital importance for the overall unity of the set. Without good craftsmanship, a good design is rendered useless. We met briefly a few times to discuss the color palette of the set and the lighting ideas. His research and drawings of the costumes represented the time period accurately. The women's dresses were muted and mostly neutral organic colors made up of dark browns, beiges, blacks, and the occasional splash of color to add a little contrast. The men, too, were dressed in like colors, the colors of that particular period. The costumes added a rich and historical context to the performance and to the overall look of the set.

All of the encounters with the director and designers only deepened and my knowledge of the design process, of what it takes to create a set design. I felt we all had the same goal in mind and were also willing to give up an idea if it did not work for the performance. After all, we were all "artists of the occasion," and the occasion was the performance. That was where the emphasis needed to be.

### Chapter 3

#### My Personal Encounter as a Designer

My approach to the set design began at a very basic level with the incorporation of the basic elements of good design. As I stated earlier, I had all the fundamental skills for the basics of good design and a solid background in fine art and painting. I needed to apply this knowledge in a way that would work within the design of a set. There was one other critical element needed to begin the process, however. A good design should ultimately revolve around a concept or theme. This concept should bring all the disparate elements together in one unified, cohesive design. This applies to all areas of design and art. Since I had mainly focused on art books for my inspiration in design, I decided to include the ideas of other theatre designers. Arnold Aronson explains in his book *Looking Into the Abyss* that one of the most important characteristics of modern set design was “visual and conceptual unity.” He further explains, “The design embodied a fundamental concept or metaphor of the production, and through the use of a single unit or set, or through the use of transcendent motifs, the design provided a structural unity to the whole production.”<sup>27</sup>

Another aspect of creativity is the ability to think “outside the box” and perhaps break some rules. It was important to me as an artist that I push the envelope and come up with a design that worked both for the director’s vision and also challenged me creatively as a designer. My artistic sensibility in painting has always leaned towards the abstract, the non-representative, and this also spills over into my set design style. I was

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<sup>27</sup> Aronson, p.17

not interested in completely realistic interpretations in any aspect of my designs or in recreating everyday ordinary surroundings. Why create exactly what was already there? I wanted to take the viewer out of ordinary and into a world that is extraordinary. I wanted the audience to have an extraordinary encounter. Robert Edmond Jones even comments on this fact: “ [There] is no more reason for a room on stage to be a reproduction of an actual room than an actor who plays the part of Napoleon to be Napoleon.....” <sup>28</sup>

I fully realized that not only did I have to design a stage setting, but that I had to consider the actors’ moving around on it, so there was always a practical and functional aspect to set design. According to Robert Edmond Jones, “a designer must learn to sense atmosphere.”<sup>29</sup> I believe that this is the most important element of stage design - creating the right atmosphere. The right atmosphere would be achieved with the right costumes, lighting, and set design coming together in one unified theme. They had to work together as a unified and complementary unit. Once the stage was set, all that was left was for the actors to take the play to the next level and experience an extraordinary encounter with the space around them and the audience. Jones emphasizes that the performance is an occasion and “that this occasion has its own characteristic quality and atmosphere. The goal of the designer is to “intensify this characteristic quality by every means in his power.” <sup>30</sup>

Since I was not interested in a literal interpretation, I had to come up with a compromise that would combine my more abstract sensibility with the realistic representation of the furniture and the costumes Mr. Hoover requested. The creation of a

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<sup>28</sup> Jones, p.22

<sup>29</sup> Jones, p.17

<sup>30</sup> Jones, p.17

realistic set, I felt, would be a dull, heavy, and predictable approach. In my research, I discovered that Chekhov eschewed naturalistic set designs. He was often at odds with Stanislavsky, his director, in regards to the set treatments. He favored a more metaphorical approach to the design. I definitely leaned towards this approach also. It was important to find the “essential quality of the play rather than its outward characteristics.”<sup>31</sup> The dramaturgical information was necessary to provide an idea of what the furniture and costumes would look like in this time and place. Since they would be represented realistically, I decided that the style called for partial or edited realism. This is a described style in the theatre that would allow for some realism, in this case as in the selected areas of furniture and costume. I did not want to create the whole world of the narrative as we imagine an audience would see it. I would select individual elements to represent the world.

With all the information from the various encounters, I needed to find the shape of the play, and I continued to read and analyze it many times through the characters and their words and actions. I believe it also helps to think like a director and understand the needs of the actor through the action of the play. As part of the MFA theatre program at the University of New Orleans, directing and acting were required classes. I believe that a highly creative set designer should be able to understand the job of each collaborator in order to elevate the communication level. My class experience in directing was very valuable to this first step and helped in the communication between Mr. Hoover and myself in terms of blocking and the furniture placement.

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<sup>31</sup> Jones, p.68



I chose the excerpts from the different reviewers and writers to intensify the encounter with Chekhov and the play *Three Sisters*. This, in turn, helped my creative thought process and inspired the concept for the set design. Yet, I had to find a symbol to convey the larger sense. I looked at Anton Chekhov and his work through the eyes of others and it provided me with a more solid foundation than just my interpretation of the work itself. He was highly regarded by some of his peers, and at the same time often misunderstood. This is the price an artist who is the forerunner of any new movement or idea has to pay. It's a cycle of rejection, ridicule and final acceptance.

Out of the various encounters, a motif or concept began to emerge very slowly. It did not come to me immediately. I was in the "incubation phase" and needed to let all the information and experiences from the various encounters stew in my mind for a few weeks. The analysis of the play, research on Chekhov, the brainstorming and ideas discussed with the director, and other designers provided me with a solid platform to begin my creative process. I let the information mull around in my mind for a few weeks, and did not even try to make sense of it.

Soon it was time to take the knowledge gained from the encounters and combine it with my design basics into a coherent and recognizable concept that would be true to the author's intent. I was moving into the "illumination"<sup>32</sup> phase and according to Rob Pope in his book *Creativity*, this is when the happy idea would begin to appear.

As stated earlier, it was very important to find a visual metaphor, to represent the meaning of the play. At the back of my mind, through the whole process, it was important to remain true to the author's intent. In the preparation and incubation phase of

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<sup>32</sup> Pope, p.73

the design process, the shape and colors of the work came through my interpretation of the script and the various analyses of other writers. Looking at what other writers have said about Chekhov, I picked words that formed a theme. I looked for repeated motifs, and patterns and found that the circle was a recurring shape :

Peter Bitsilli, a critic of Chekhov's work had described *Three Sisters* as a play with "People circling round and round like gold fish in a bowl." <sup>33</sup> and further added that a recurrent theme in the work was the idea that "all life a single process having neither a beginning nor an end"<sup>34</sup> George Calderon describes Chekhov's plays as "centrifugal" rather than self –centered."<sup>35</sup> The idea that life is a cycle that churns endlessly is certainly a recurring theme in Chekhov's works.

Another theme that occurred frequently was the contrast between the beauty in nature and the ugliness of humanity. Chekhov had a deep respect and love of nature, especially the beautiful Russian countryside, and in later years retired to a tranquil home in the country, where he loved to garden. Nature inspired him, yet left him in awe of its power and cycle of birth, destruction, and death.

I decided to use the circle as my metaphor for the overall shape of the set about the same time I stumbled across the sawn top of a tree trunk on a walk through the park. It was a perfectly formed circle with the concentric circles of its age lightly visible on the surface. Chekhov loved nature, and I decided that it was only fitting, that the annual rings of a tree should represent the concept. This was my visual metaphor for the stage. As the years go by, circles form inside the trunk. Likewise, the lives of the three sisters continue

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<sup>33</sup> Bitsilli, p.227

<sup>34</sup> Bitsilli, p.118

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, p.81

in a seemingly endless cycle of boredom and banality. The circle was the main shape of the stage, and the long cylindrical shapes of the trees would contrast with the dominant shape of the stage area. The trees were representative of both the beauty of nature and the prison bars that keep the sisters confined.

All those months ago, when the director Mr. Hoover handed me the photograph of the birch trees, it never occurred to me that I might have found the shape in a simple tree. I myself had completed a circle: A journey of encounters that began with a black-and-white photo of trees and ended with the actual encounter of a real tree itself.

## Chapter 4

### The Creation of the Set

One of the first considerations I had to take into account was the shape of the actual space for the set design. This was in essence the “canvas” that the set design would be created on. However, it was not a two-dimensional but a three-dimensional space with twenty-three foot ceilings. The UNO thrust theatre space extends into the audience on three sides and is connected to the backstage area by its up-stage end. A thrust has the advantage of greater intimacy between audience and performer than a proscenium while retaining the utility of a backstage area. Entrances onto a thrust are usually made from backstage, and in the case of the UNO space, vomitory entrances were also available for performers. This thrust space can be a difficult space to work with when it comes to building walls and vertical planes. For my design, walls were out of the question for the thrust area because it would block audience viewing. If walls were placed back in the proscenium area, they would conceal the trees. Walls would create a closed-in interior feeling, and I wanted the play set among the birches in the outdoors of nature. There was no need for walls because the sisters had essentially created their own, and the audience would sense this in the performance.

The second consideration was that the play called for two acts in a living room / dining room area, one act in a bedroom, and the final act outdoors in a garden. This seemed overwhelming at first because of the amount of furniture and scene changes. The best solution was to have no walls and to keep the set completely open with a minimal amount of furniture and props.

The open, abstract set worked best within this thrust space. The circular constructed main platform was positioned as far down stage as possible. This is where the majority of the action would take place, and the proscenium area was left for the trees and the actors' entrances and exits. The vomitory areas provided both exits and entrances for the actors and facilitated smooth and time-efficient scene changes.

The stage, a twenty-four foot diameter circle, was divided into an upper and lower level by two steps. It was both wide and versatile enough to give the cast both plenty of room when needed while suggesting a sense of containment within invisible walls. The circle became the metaphor for the endless cycle that represents the lives of the three sisters. The abstract nature of the circle design gave me versatility to transform it from indoor to outdoor easily. There were no walls or windows to contend with.

The stage was constructed on two different platform levels. The downstage half was 6" off the ground, and the upper half was level with the lip of the proscenium, which is 24" high. The upper portion of the stage overlapped the proscenium lip to make an eight-foot wide area for the actors to enter and exit the thrust area. A three-foot wide ramp was attached to the stage right of the circle to facilitate moving the furniture on and off stage. When the actors were on this stage, I wanted them to feel confined, as if their lives were closing in on them. They would be forced to use this shape to walk around and around. There was nowhere for them to go but round in circles, just like fish in a fishbowl. The circle was ideal in many ways for this play, especially because of the constant flow of visitors to the house. They all belong to this endless cycle, and their movements would echo the rhythm of the circle.

The circle was divided into two levels to represent the ups and downs in the three sisters' lives. In addition, their lives are not colorful, so the stage floor became a neutral, warm, organic color that added little besides warmth to their environment. The monochromatic floor echoed the sisters' lives, whose camaraderie adds warmth to their otherwise bleak existence. Outside the circle, the color changed to cooler tones. This represented a future that was unknown and always in the distance. Leaves in the warm colors of autumn were scattered on the floor, leaves that had passed through the cycle of their lives.

Twenty-foot long, thin trees soared into the atmosphere up stage. Chekhov loved trees and nature, a constant theme throughout his work: The beauty of nature contrasting with the ugliness of human nature. The play contains numerous references to the birches that surround them in their country environment. These birches represented both the tranquility nature provided for the family and the prison bars that keep them in this small provincial town, where nothing ever really happens. The trees, with their soaring verticality, added a strong contrast to the dominant shape of the circular stage. Because of my knowledge of basic design, I knew I had to break up the dominance of the large, solid circle with the verticality of the trees.

Since the design called for trees with trunks the length of eighteen to twenty feet, I had to come up with a fairly easy and inexpensive way to construct them. Mr. Kevin Griffith, my professor on this project, also acted as its technical director. His excellent design advice and ideas helped me make good practical decisions in terms of the design's functionality. Not only is he a great artist and designer, but he is also a great craftsman. My encounters with Mr. Griffith helped me finalize and build my design.

As far as the trees were concerned, Mr. Griffith had already informed me that the budget did not allow us to use of long PVC pipes. After brainstorming for a couple of days, Mr. Griffith and I came up with a solution: The trees would be constructed from corrugated cardboard. We purchased 3 by 250 foot rolls and solved a problem that could have cost us a lot of time and money otherwise. Because we needed twenty to twenty-five trees for the set, Mr. Griffith came up with a great idea for a production line to construct them. They were relatively easy to make as long as we had at least three people, somebody near each end, and one in the middle. Using a 20-foot existing plastic pipe as a mold, we lightly sprayed the cardboard with water and shaped it around the pipe. We then taped it together with masking tape and reinforced the tubes with thin gauge wire, spirally wrapped around the exterior before we paper-maché the column with brown butcher paper, which added texture and created a good surface for paint. We then dry-brushed them with light lavender and dark eggplant paint. When they were finished, the trees suggested prison bars, columns, and birches, all at the same time.

Orange, yellow, and rust-colored leaves were strewn on the outside of the circular stage area and upstage, where the trees were located. They added texture and contrast to the cool tones on the outer edge of the circle. I got the idea from an art exhibit I had seen at the CAC with hundreds of leaves made from thin paper; they looked beautiful and fragile. This article written about Chekhov by M. P. Wilcocks in 1922, also gave the leaves more meaning.

“To see Chekhov at work is to watch the cutting open of a pomegranate, so drab is the plain exterior of his typical group, so cunningly packed are the seeds within. Each seed too is alive, so that he provides a refuge from one of the great horrors

of existence, the dread of swarming, multiplying human life. For to this man the leaves in the human forest, the drops in the human ocean, are not only alive, but full of secrets which they share with him. This revelation of life in the ocean, in the forest of existence is Chekhov's contribution to modern art. ."<sup>36</sup>

Rather than trying to find the natural leaves in New Orleans, which I knew I would have trouble with, I decided to make them. They were simply made from brown, butcher paper painted the warm colors of autumn and then torn into leaf size shapes. The leaves were scrunched up and then opened to give them a more authentic and textured appearance.

When the time came for painting the set, I used very little color, just enough of a wash to indicate the inner warmth of the circle, and the cool tones on the outside and upstage in the trees. I basically had warm colors contrasting with cool colors. On the thrust floor outside the circle, I used dull lavender with a cool, grey-blue tone and then dry brushed in areas with a pomegranate red to create contrast. This evoked a sense of the loneliness and isolation the sisters were feeling. The warm colors consisted of brown earth tones with a hint of ochre and burnt sienna. They represented the warmth and hope that remained in the sisters' hearts. These colors were compliments of each other and provided a strong contrast. The colors had to be subtle because I did not want the color of the paint to create the atmosphere as the set would be washed in light. This would add a luminescent quality that paint could never achieve.

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<sup>36</sup> Willcocks, p.226



I gave the trees a cool lavender wash of paint over to complement the warmth of the circle area. The trees had to play several roles in my design: besides actual trees, they signified prison bars and the interior columns of the house. I divided the trees into two different areas by hanging a scrim center stage. Thanks to the lighting designer, who filled the area between downstage and the proscenium with diffusive light that evoked a sense of loneliness, the trees represented the far-away place that the sisters yearn to escape to. We lit hurricane lamps and candles to represent the small flame of hope burning in the sisters' hearts despite their unfortunate circumstances.

I first wanted to paint the plywood floor a warm earth tone color, but because that would leave all the seams exposed, Professor Griffith suggested that I use cardboard to cover it. I liked the idea. Not only would the cardboard provide a smooth texture, it would also be inexpensive and a warm, earthy neutral color. Once the stage was covered, however, I decided the cardboard didn't quite have the right feeling. It needed more texture and depth.

Throughout the process, I kept going back to my research to look for ideas and inspiration when I needed them. In this particular case, I found it when I thought of the tree trunk I had studied during the preparation phase: I solved the problem by brown butcher paper the color of warm, brown wood. Soaked in glue and then directly applied to the plywood, the paper looked like a wood-textured floor. I tore the paper into medium-sized pieces and crumpled them to give them texture before I overlapped and glued them to the plywood surface, which created a versatile and ambiguous surface that could be both interior and exterior.

After the actual set construction was completed, I began to focus on the furniture and props needed for the play; I had assistants to help with this task. My preliminary research included turn-of-the-century furniture in Russian households. I discovered that “British Victorian” was probably the closest style we could find. I knew that I could not be totally slavish to the style of that period because we did not have the means to procure these types of furnishings. I initially wanted the furniture to be abstract and not indicate the period; I thought that cubes and cylindrical shapes pushed together as chairs, settees, beds, or whatever they needed to be, would work with my abstract set and facilitate scene changes. However, Mr. Hoover, the director, rejected that idea was rejected in one of our first meetings. He explained that the actors needed more realistic furniture and props to give them something to do. He had ten people onstage, talking a whole lot about nothing at various times, so they needed to engage with their surroundings. We agreed to a compromise: a few really nice pieces of furniture to ground the actors and give them something to work with. We both agreed that the set should not be cluttered so as not to distract from the open feel of the stage. The actors would fill in the missing details.

Ms. Jessica Cook, the furniture assistant, had looked into renting the furniture, an idea first proposed by Mr. Hoover. However, because of our budget constraints, renting furniture was not an option. Although I had envisioned a couple of beautiful pieces to set the tone, I had to remind myself again that this was theatre design and not interior decorating.

Again, Mr. Griffith came up with a solution to the problem and suggested that we procure all the pieces we needed from The University of Tulane’s prop department and the New Orleans Opera Association. A few pieces had to be modified, but for the most

part, I was satisfied with the furniture collection. Mr. Terry Marek was in charge of the props and did a fine and thorough job on procuring and making them. As a fellow set design MFA student, he was completely in sync with the design process.

I had met with the actors in the early phase of the design process and explained with drawings and a model what the set was going to look like. This encounter was very helpful in terms of the feedback and the various concerns they had. They were receptive to the idea of the open circular stage from the very beginning and complimentary of the design.

Many more people contributed to the success of the set design. The stage manager Melissa Gregus diligently and thoroughly mediated between the different parties. E-mails kept us informed on what was happening in rehearsal, what problems had arisen, and what the director and other collaborators needed.

For all the problems we encountered throughout the entire process, we managed to find a solution. For the most part, the process went quite smoothly. The floor texture in the initial phase of application constituted my biggest challenge because it had been glued to the cardboard on the lower level of the stage. The water and glue caused the cardboard to buckle and made the floor look like it had broken out in giant hives. Mr. Griffith, a team of students, and I pulled the cardboard up gently, poured carpenter's glue on the plywood and replaced the cardboard. I didn't think it would work and wanted to rip the entire floor up and start from scratch, but Mr. Griffith assured me that it would work if we rolled it continuously with a heavy metal tubular bar. His solution worked out great, and the added padding of cardboard dulled the noise of the actors' shoes on the stage. The settee used in the first two acts presented another problem. The first settee was

too big, the next one too small. It came from the University of Tulane's prop shop and had to be reupholstered and painted to match the rest of the décor. When the character Vershinin sat on it, I knew it had to go because it was completely out of proportion with his large frame. We eventually found one that was just right: Melissa Gregus let us borrow a loveseat from her parents' home. Its upholstery was too white, but we draped a colored blanket over the back and added some embroidered cushions. Since the play was in four acts, we had to keep the change of scenery to a minimum. Mr. Hoover wanted fast-paced set changes between the acts so the play could finish in less than two and a half hours, so we could not use large and cumbersome pieces of furniture. Overall, the problems we encountered were fairly minimal because the concept kept the creative process unified and communication between all the collaborators remained open and responsive throughout the entire process.

Through a series of encounters, I finally reached the “verification phase and the conscious testing of the solution.”<sup>37</sup> According to Robert Edmond Jones, “[a] stage setting has no independent life of its own. Its emphasis is directed toward the performance. In the absence of the actor it does not exist.”<sup>38</sup> When opening night arrived, I was very pleased with the overall look of the set. I believe that, as an “artist of occasion,”<sup>39</sup> I did everything within my ability to enhance the essential qualities of the performance. The set came to life in an extraordinary encounter of the actors and the audience, and it was ultimately an extraordinary encounter with Chekhov.

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<sup>37</sup> Pope, p.73

<sup>38</sup> Jones, p.68

<sup>39</sup> Jones, p. 68

## Chapter 5

### A Close Encounter: My Personal Journal

I am including the notes of my personal journal in order to give the reader a closer encounter with the set design process for *Three Sisters*.

August 2006: Professor Kevin Griffith informed me the week I returned to school for the Fall 2006 semester that my MFA thesis play was *Three Sisters* by Anton Chekhov. I must admit, I was not totally thrilled at first. I had thought of Chekhov as depressing, wooden, and full of stifled characters. But how long has it been since I had read Chekhov? I had studied *The Cherry Orchard* and the *Seagull* back in high school, and so I realized that I have to take a look at Anton Chekhov again, through more mature eyes.

September 2006: I had read several books on Chekhov's life to get a feel for the context of his work and gained a whole new respect for Chekhov as an artist and a writer. My reading shed new light on my interpretation of the play. What an incredible man he was for his time! Chekhov was quite a controversial figure, who blazed a trail where other writers in Russia were afraid to go. He had a vision and he held on to it tenaciously despite the difficult circumstances and social upheavals in turn-of-the-century Russia. I felt the need to design a set for this piece that Anton Chekhov would have liked. Even at the risk of sounding absurd, I believed he and I would have agreed on the definition of good design. I realized I could design this set unless I understood the meaning behind his work and did it complete justice. Everything I read about his creative ambition suggested

that he had a very strong work ethic and that he truly believed that “the arts” reigned supreme. He really cared about the artistic process and was very concerned with all aspects of the design of his work, from make-up to costumes to set design.

October 2006: I had read the play three times, and I was beginning to appreciate the subtleties and layers that at first do not seem apparent. What a complicated yet simple group of people! Why was everything a contradiction? They seemed so grey and brown, or their lives seemed that way – so monochromatic!

November 2006: The images for a set design were getting stronger in my mind. The characters of the play reminded me of gerbils in a wheel who run and run and never get anywhere. I saw circles all the time. The circle was a very strong image that kept coming up in my mind as an overall shape for the set. I tried other shapes, but I kept coming back to the circle. I drew them all the time when I stopped to do my sketches. I didn’t know if the director, David Hoover, would go for it. I needed to listen to what his concept was first before I started running with this idea.

December 7, 2006: I talked to Mr. Hoover to arrange a meeting to discuss the concept for *Three Sisters*. I wanted to work on it before the Christmas Holidays. I needed to remind myself constantly that it really did not matter whether I liked the play or not but that it was my job to interpret it and help the director translate his vision into an environment for the actors. I was worried now that the director and I may not even be on the same page. I knew that it was not commonplace for the designer to come up with the concept for the space. Perhaps because this was my MFA design, the director would give me more autonomy.

Dec 14th, 2006: I found Mr. David Hoover in his office and sat down and had a brief discussion about the play. We didn't have a lot of time to talk in depth. I told him I had some ideas running around in my head, but nothing too firm yet. He handed me a black-and-white picture of ghostly-looking tree trunks against a very atmospheric background. We both agreed that nature, and trees especially, had to be an integral part of the design.

Christmas holidays 2006: I decided to go ahead and make a white paper model. I needed to see if this circular stage would really work in the thrust space. I saw the trunk of a tree that gave me inspiration. I also thought it would help the director to see whether the circle would work with the large number of actors. After I made it, I felt very confident that it would work. It is so much easier to see the design in 3D format.

January 23, 2007: I presented my model and my visual metaphors for the set design to Professor David Hoover and Kevin Griffith. I had placed long, tall trees into the upstage area. The trees were to represent nature, the interior columns in the house, and the prison bars trapping the three sisters in their little world. I did not put leaves or branches on the trees. I was pleased with the overall look but still apprehensive that Mr. Hoover would not be open to a circular stage.

February 2007: Professor Davis Hoover liked the idea for a circular stage. He had already thought about the monotonous cycle these characters were caught in and thought the circle, as a metaphor, was strong and meaningful. He also liked the idea of the trees in their ambiguous role of trees, interior columns and prison bars. His idea that the trees play a strong role would pose no problem. I was delighted and excited to proceed with the set design.

February 15, 2007: I drew the floor plans for the set at ¼" scale. James Jenkins, a UNO senior, was hired to do the carpentry work. We did not have a resident T.D. He drew a ½" scale plan to help him figure out the materials. He worked out a very efficient way to build a 24-foot circular stage with existing flats and materials, which we supplemented with new plywood. The only problem was that the step was not deep enough. I drew it at an 8" depth, but we ended up changing it to a 12" step. Mr. Griffith felt that this change would make the set more comfortable and safe for the actors. I was apprehensive about losing space up stage on the circle, but it worked out just fine. Several students were working well on the trees. They were rolling them out at a good, steady pace.

February 18, 2007: Mr. Griffith had already begun work on the leaves. He had the students paint some light-weight butcher paper a warm ochre color on one side, and a deep, warm rusted red on the other. The paper was torn into rough oval shapes about 4" in length and 3" in width. They were then crumpled and opened up slightly to show both of the colored sides. They looked amazingly like real leaves.

Feb 27, 2007: I had another production meeting with Mr. Hoover. He wants to have more furniture on the set than I feel is necessary. We are now in discussion about the furniture layout. I gave him a preliminary floor plan. I do not know how he wants to block, but I know that he will have to change the layout to suit his actors' needs. We do not agree about the position of the settee. I feel that it is too close to the grand piano and makes the downstage right side of the set heavy and awkward. We may come to a compromise and find a smaller piece that will not take up so much space. I found a 7-foot sofa for sale on Magazine Street. It was a reproduction Victorian style sofa upholstered in



a light peach brocade. I called Mr. Griffith and described it to him. He gave me the go-ahead to buy it. We hauled it over to the set. It was too big. We all agreed on that.

March 3 2007: I had a meeting with Ms. Katie Anderson and Mr. Hoover about the lighting design. I showed them the visuals I had accumulated. Both Mr. Hoover and Ms. Anderson liked them. Ms. Anderson said the abstract design of the set gave her a lot of freedom to be really creative. I believe visuals are the best way to explain an idea to another creative person. It is after all how we think – in pictures.

I shopped for props and furniture the first weekend of March and worried that we would not find the right styles to make the set look credible. Renting the kind of furniture that I think would look beautiful was too expensive. I shopped a few places, but none of the prices were within our budget. New Orleans antique stores were just crammed with the most beautiful antique furniture. It was literally at my fingertips, but the prices were too high. Mr. Griffith suggested we call Tulane and the New Orleans Opera to see if they could help us out. I thought this is a much more affordable and realistic idea. Part of being a creative is coming up with creative solutions to problems.

March 12, 2007: Ms. Cook and I visited Tulane's prop department. They did not have as much as I had hoped. Mr. Griffith and I were unloading the few Tulane pieces we found onto the dock at UNO when a New Orleans Opera truck pulled up. Mr. Keith Christian jumped out and asked if we were interested in some steps left over from the last opera. We inquired if it would be possible to borrow some props and furniture. "No problem," he smiled. Mr. Griffith and I thought this a godsend in our desperate hour of need. The New Orleans opera set and prop shop was loaded with everything we needed. I got everything except a small settee, two twin size beds, and a perambulator. We sent

word out among the cast and crew. Ms. Melissa Gregus, the stage manger, informed me that her parents had a love seat that might work. Mr. Griffith and I brainstormed about the beds. I did not want heavy, cumbersome life-sized beds. I felt the beds needed to be what I call the “suggestion of a bed,” something that was easy to assemble and that could be moved on and off stage quickly and efficiently.

March 15, 2007: I drew a sketch of the beds, and we made a scaled-down version of two twin beds with light wood headboards that afternoon. I found some rich-colored fabrics in the costume shop to upholster them. They were certainly easy to transport on and off the stage.

April 4, 2007: I was not completely satisfied with the overall look of the love seat in the first and second act; it needed to be re-upholstered. It was spray painted gold and upholstered in red brocade and looked cheap and out of proportion, especially when the men sat on it. Derek, who played Vershinin, completely dwarfed it when he sat on it. We had to find a replacement.

April 6, 2007: I attended a rehearsal and let Mr. Hoover know that we needed to replace the sofa. I shared my concerns about its size in proportion to the actors. He agreed and so did Mr. Griffith. Everything else looked really good.

April 7, 2007: We put the word out by e-mail that we needed to find a sofa. That afternoon, Ms. Melissa Gregus showed me a picture of a loveseat in her parents' home. It worked just fine. The set was finally dressed.

April 19 2007. Opening night at last. I was excited to see the play come to life. It had been a challenging few months, but it was worth every minute. One thing I knew was that Anton Chekhov would have liked the set.

April 20, 2007: The play was great and brought tears to my eyes. The actors were in top form and gave the performance of their lives. The set really enhanced their performances and helped create the mood and atmosphere that was the life of the *Three Sisters*. I believe Anton Chekhov would have approved it.

## Chapter 6

### Final Analysis

The constant evaluation of a creative work while it is in progress is critical to its success, no matter what the creative capacity. My experience on the set design of *Three Sisters* was very different to working in a painting studio. If a painting was not working, I could leave it aside and begin another, or paint completely over it. The key to solving any problem in design is to keep on working until there is a solution. I would ultimately have final control on how the piece would look if it was acceptable to my design sensibilities as a painter. This was not always the case in the world of set designing.

First of all I did not have the final say on the design of *Three Sisters*. The director Mr. David Hoover had creative control over the entire production. That meant I had to acquiesce to a higher authority on all aspects of the design whether I agreed or not. I was not used to relinquishing control. This taught me a valuable lesson in the art of persuasive argument and compromise. The most intimidating factor however, was to give up control of the design and hand it over to another party to build and assemble. I was not alone on this project, but worked with many different collaborators to make it happen. It was all about collaboration and communication. The collaborative effort combined with good communication skills were the two most important elements of the success of the set for *Three Sisters*. Mr. James Jennings was assigned as the set carpenter for the project. We had very few problems with the construction of the large circular stage area. The main reason the stage construction proceeded fairly smoothly, was because I provided a very accurate and detailed set of drawings with a small scale model to back them up. Good

information meant better communication. I also provided him with my cell phone number so that we could talk when I was not on the set. He was very easy to work with and was also a great teacher. I learned how to make a more accurate mitered edge in joist construction so that the stage would not creak under the weight of the actors. Mr. Jennings was a perfectionist in his work and this translated into a very solid and well-made, circular stage. He unfortunately had to leave in the middle of production for personal reasons. I was alarmed at first but was relieved that Mr. Kevin Griffith handled the rest of the build. The main stage area was finished and all that was left was the work on the trees, leaves, texture on the floor and the furniture.

The furniture proved to be the biggest thorn in my side. My original concept was that the play would be set in an outside environment, on a stage that was essentially the essence of a giant tree trunk stump. I did not visualize realistic furniture in the original concept, because it would detract from the minimalist and organic look that I had in mind. The chairs and tables would be cylindrical shaped pieces that were versatile in terms of the desired function. They would serve in a practical manner also to enable quick efficient scene changes.

My idea for the furniture was rejected however. Mr. Hoover wanted realistic furniture and lots of it. This was my first major disagreement with the director, and it eventually manifested itself into the weakest aspect of the design. The furniture, I felt would add too much clutter and confusion, and on opening night it certainly proved true. Not only did the furniture clutter the set but it was shabby and out of proportion in scale. We borrowed furniture from Tulane University's prop shop and the New Orleans Opera Association because it was free of charge. It was the closet style to a "period" look for

turn of the century Russia. The old adage comes to mind, “you get what you pay for” and we paid the price with a very amateur looking set that I felt was not a graduate level design. The only possibility that could have worked was perhaps if we had been able to procure a few beautiful antique pieces, to set the tone of the period. I did shop around originally, to get prices at the various antique shops in New Orleans, but it soon became apparent that this would not be an option because of budget constraints and insurance issues. I had Ms. Jessica Cook as an assistant with the furniture design, but she was not able to help me that much because she was also writing a thesis. I believe that if I had more help with the research and furniture options, it would have made a difference in terms of the furniture choices. The circumstances were that I did not have a large repertoire to choose from, and had to make the most of what was available. In terms of solving problems with the furniture, anything that appeared shabby and in disrepair was reupholstered, painted and fixed. It was the best solution for that particular problem. However, like a woman with an ugly face, no matter how much make-up she puts on, it can’t make her beautiful.

The rug, the beds and the sofa were the other pieces that did not work well within the set design. Mr. Hoover wanted a rug on the floor, and I felt, that the rug broke the symmetry of the circular stage area since it was rectangular in shape. It was also too small in scale, but it was all that was available at the time. I would have eliminated the rug, and painted an abstract design that blended into the warm earth tones of the paper, to represent the “essence” of a rug.

The beds were too small in scale, but that decision came about because we felt that real beds would have proved cumbersome and noisy in the scene changes. Again I

think real wood headboards with rich opulent bedding could have added more balance and richness to the design.

The sofa was a borrowed piece from one of the stage crew. It was a pristine, white, jacquard covered, Queen Anne reproduction that glared like a bright light bulb when the lights went up. We solved that problem simply, with a red-fringed throw placed over the back to break-up the stark whiteness, and some embroidered pillows were thrown on the seating area. I had originally found a five foot sofa in a garage sale for \$50.00. It had a beautiful ornate wood frame, and I felt that this piece could have worked just fine. Mr. Hoover thought it was too big, and again I was not able to convince him that it was a better design choice. He felt that the blocking would be compromised and I accepted his decision reluctantly.

My relationship with the director was weak in terms of design compatibility. Mr. David Hoover did not come from a design background, so the idea of a concept for the work was not familiar to him. He did not propose an idea on how the set should look except to offer me a picture of birch trees, and tell me that they must be part of the set. This was the extent of our first creative meeting, and I walked away with no idea of what he wanted to achieve in terms of a look. If a director is not strong in the set design capacity, then it is necessary for the designer to take the lead and come up with the concept. This is what a designer is trained to do, and I was happy to do so. I was used to creative autonomy and working with art directors who trusted my sense of style and design. I work best when left alone, but at the same time am willing to discuss, debate and collaborate with other people who can challenge the process in a creative and

intelligent manner and speak the same language of design. If a working relationship is not compatible, then the outcome of the work can only reflect this incompatibility.

Despite the furniture debacle, there were many aspects of the design that I was satisfied with. I think that Ms. Katie Anderson, the lighting designer did a wonderful job in terms of interpreting the concept. I explained to her in the early phase of the design that I wanted her to literally “paint the set with light”. She completely embraced all my ideas and added many of her own. She back-lit the birch trees in cool tones of blue and magenta to reflect the far away dreams of the three sisters. The main stage area was lit with warm amber colored tones to contrast with the cooler background of the birch trees. We worked together as a very strong team and were completely “in sync” with the entire design process. This was especially effective when we presented ideas to Mr. Hoover. We were able to persuade him to change some of his lighting choices to the way we envisioned them. There is strength in numbers.

An important lesson that I learned was to make the most of what was available, and it usually turned out better than I anticipated. The advantage of working with other people in a collaborative design capacity is that somebody else may come up with a better solution to a problem. I needed twenty to twenty-five, tall trees for the forest area but knew we could not afford to buy long PVC pipes. Mr. Griffith came up with the idea of corrugated cardboard rolled into twenty foot lengths, and re-enforced with thin gauged wire. The students had a good time making them and they proved to be an effective and cheap solution to our budget problem.

I was also very pleased with the texture for the floor for the main stage area. Painting the floor was not going to be an option because there were so many seams in the plywood



construction. I took an idea that I learned when I was in interior design, and soaked brown butcher paper in glue and pasted it directly to the floor. We did however encounter problems in the first few attempts by the student helpers. The problem occurred because of a lack in communication and supervision. The glue to water ratio was not clearly stated and the brown paper was soaked in too much water. This resulted in a buckled and warped floor for a few days. Mr. Hoover however was patient until we solved the problem with more glue and man power.

The student workers proved an invaluable help to the entire process. They worked hard and showed up for their specific chores. I also discovered that the students had different strengths and weaknesses and I tried to match their ability to the chore. This gave them confidence in their work and as a result they showed up more often with a willingness to work.

There was always plenty of work to do and when the main stage and tree construction was finished, we had hundreds of leaves to make. I think this was my favorite touch, because it was so simple but yet effective. Brown butcher paper was again the medium of choice. Long lengths were laid out on the shop floor and painted the warm earthy tones on both sides. Once it was dry the paper was torn into “hand” size pieces and then scrunched up to look like fallen autumn leaves. They were strewn around the circular stage area to soften the edges and dropped from above in the last scene outside in the garden. It was a necessary touch to reflect the poignancy of the sister’s plight in their lives.

In conclusion, I feel that a successful set design can be achieved if the director, the lighting designer, costume designer and the set designer all work together, and meld

their ideas into one unified concept for the look of the production. I also think that if the director is not strong in the design area, then the designer should have control. If the designer is professional and trained well, then a director should feel relieved and confident that the work will be executed in a professional and creative manner. It is also critical that all the collaborators speak the same universal language of design in order to communicate effectively and efficiently. This was not the case on the set of *Three Sisters*. I probably achieved half of what I wanted because Mr. Hoover and I were only in agreement part of the time. The key to a great production is communication, collaboration and agreement on the same goals.

Appendix A  
Research Photos



Black and white photo provided by the director Mr. David Hoover.



Concept photo of a trunk of a tree for the set design.



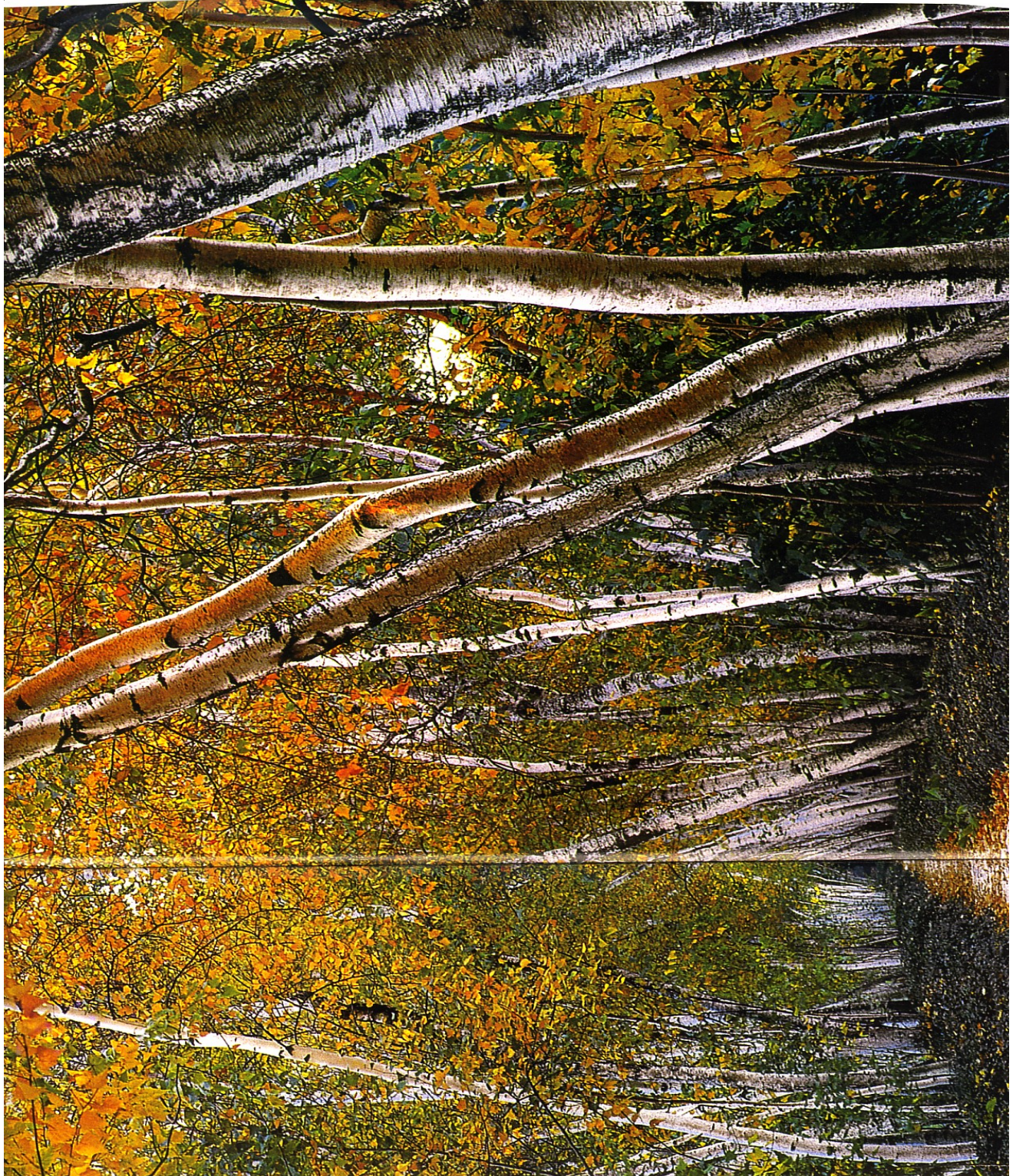


Photo of birch trees for texture and shape.





Photo for backlighting the trees in silhouette.

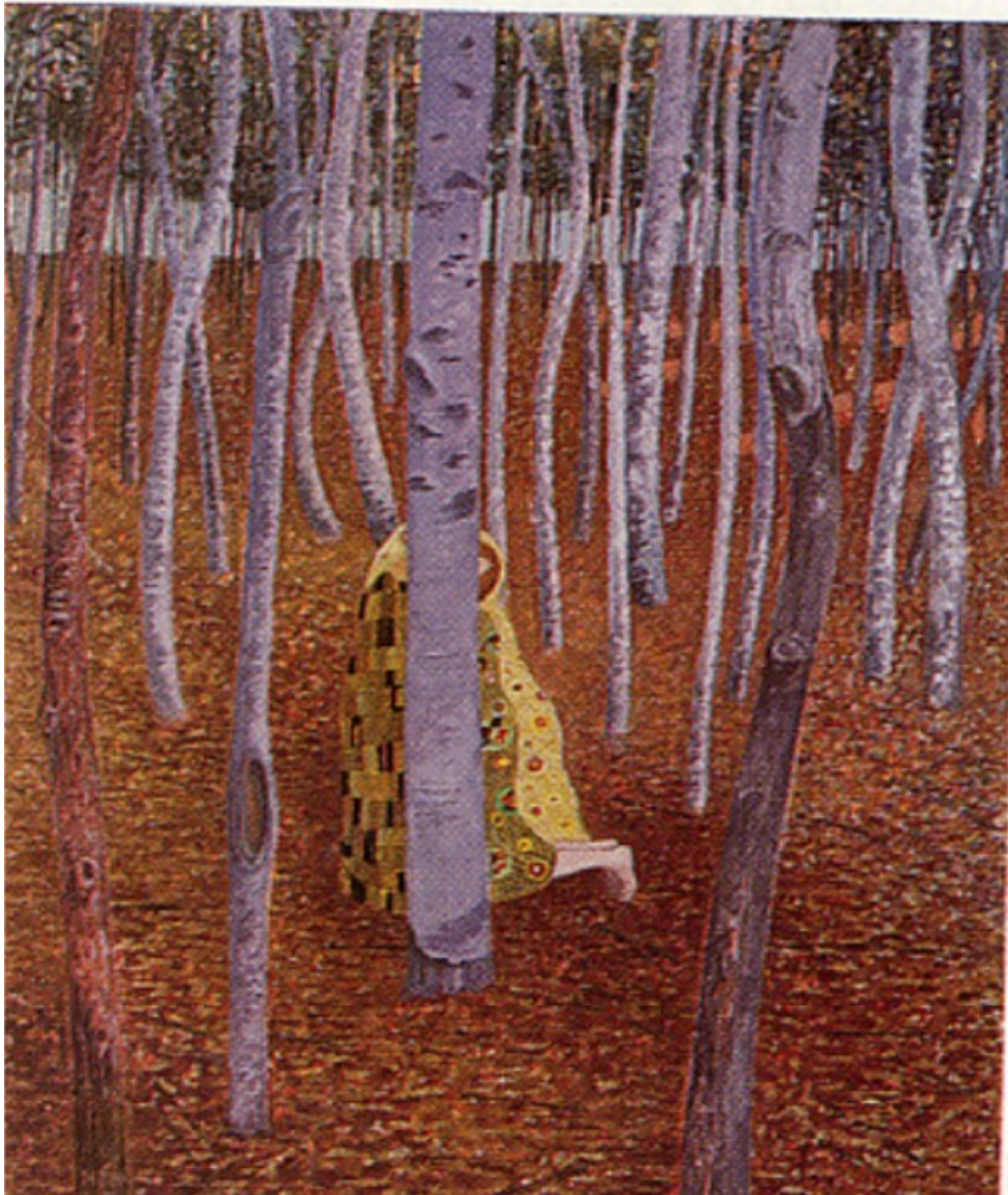




Photo of garden furniture and leaves for scene IV.



Color for trees and leaves.



Color for trees and leaves.

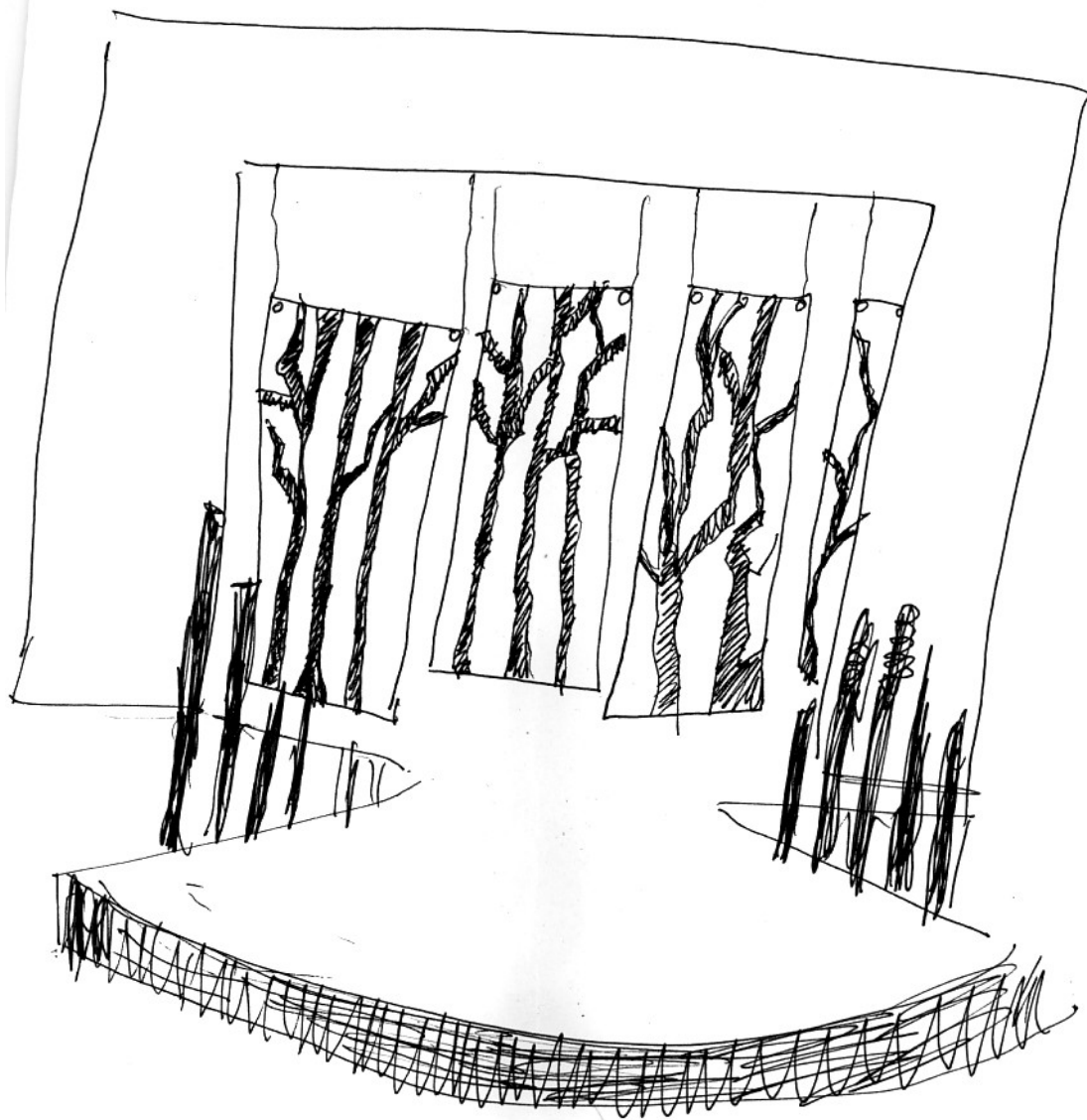




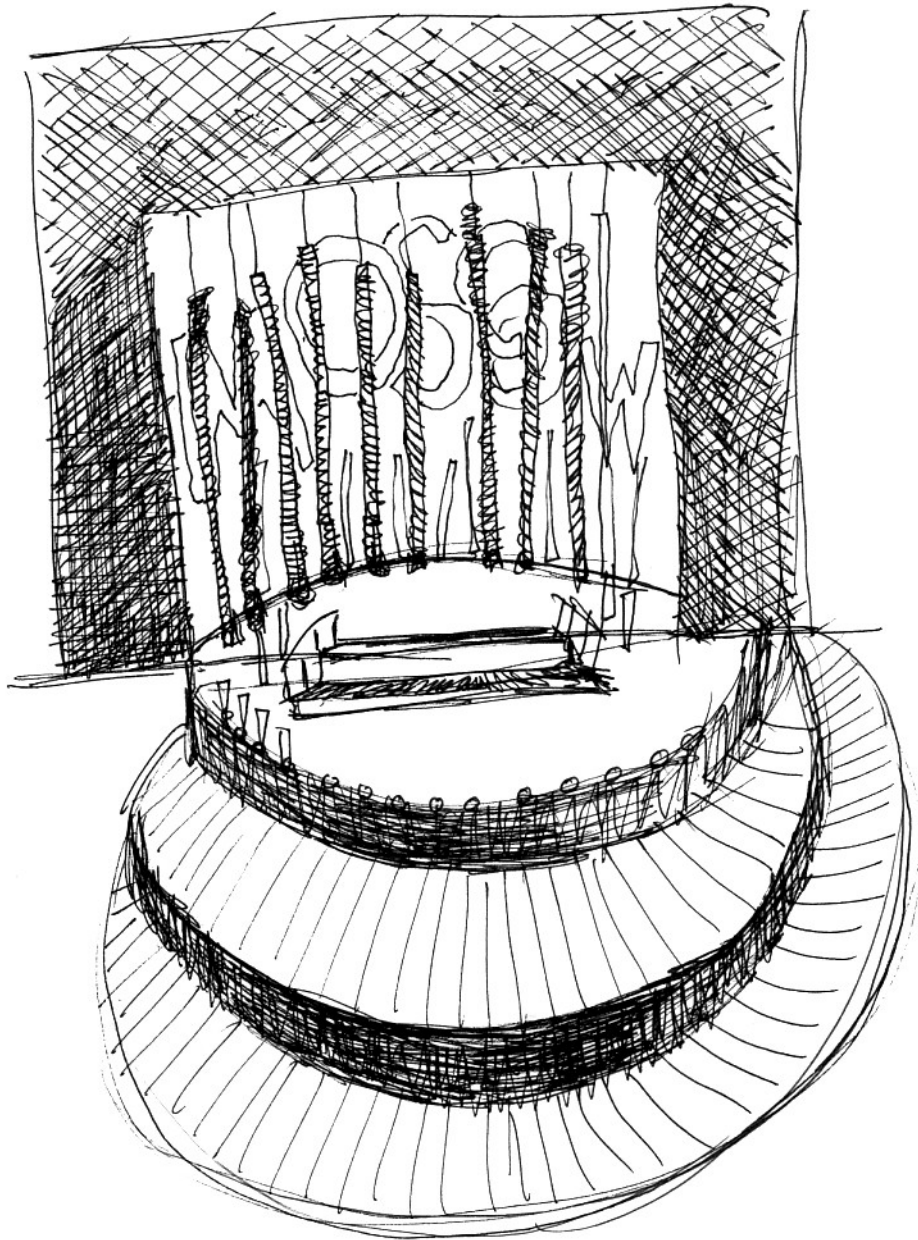
Early ideas for the layout of the trees.

Appendix B

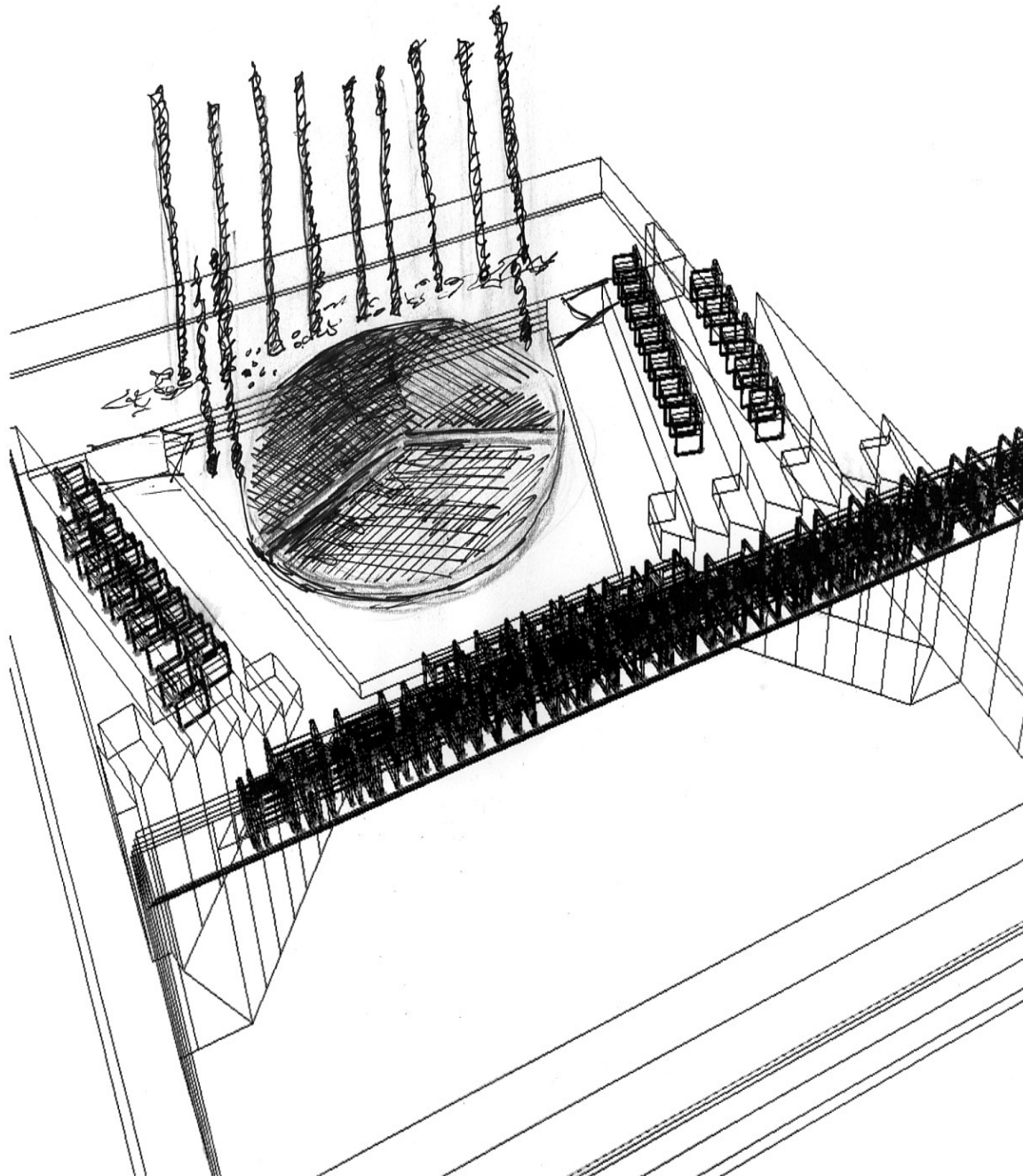
Renderings of Initial Ideas



Early thumbnail ideas for the set design.



Early thumbnail idea for set design.



Design for the stage rendered in Sketch-Up( program for drafting).

Appendix C

Final Renderings





Rendering for act I and II.





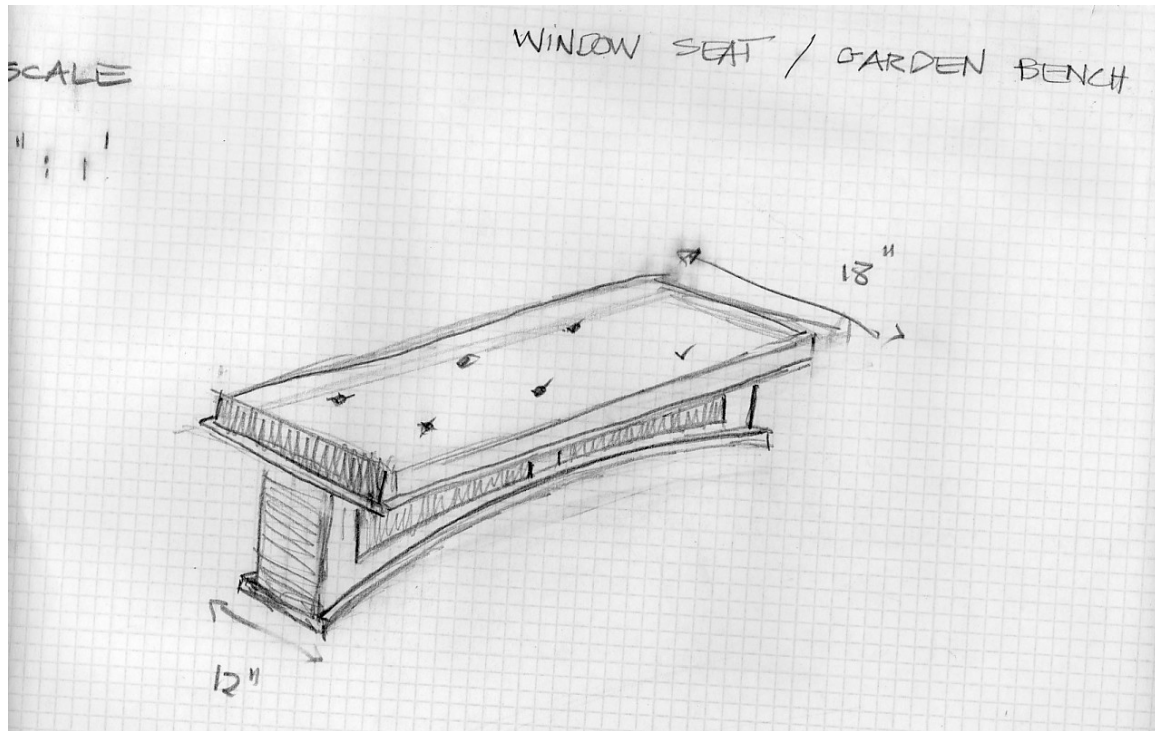
Rendering for act I and II.



Rendering for act III.

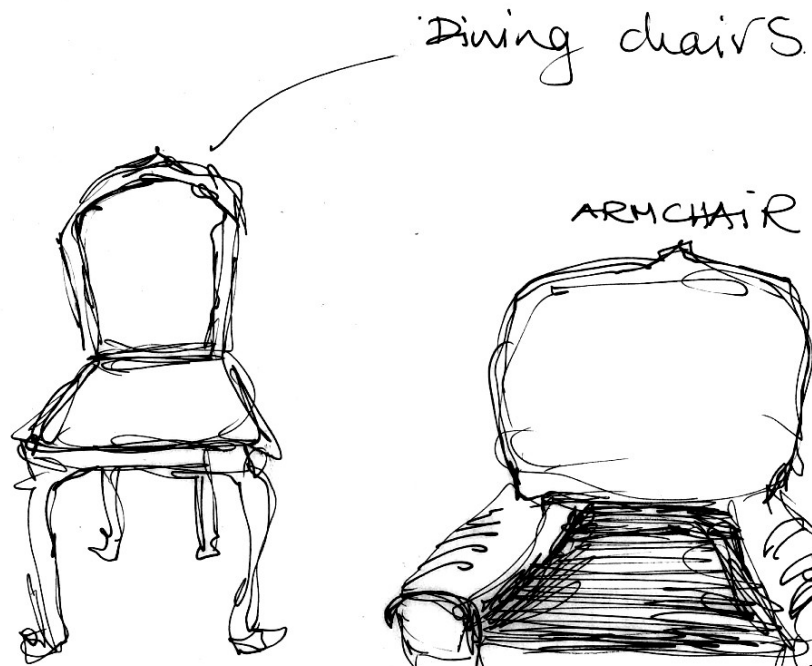
Appendix D

Furniture and Prop Renderings



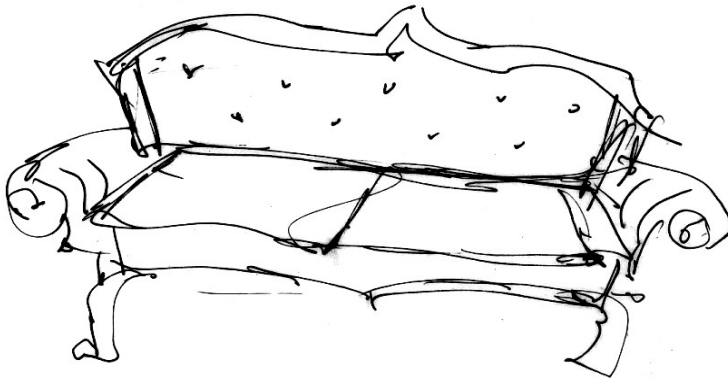
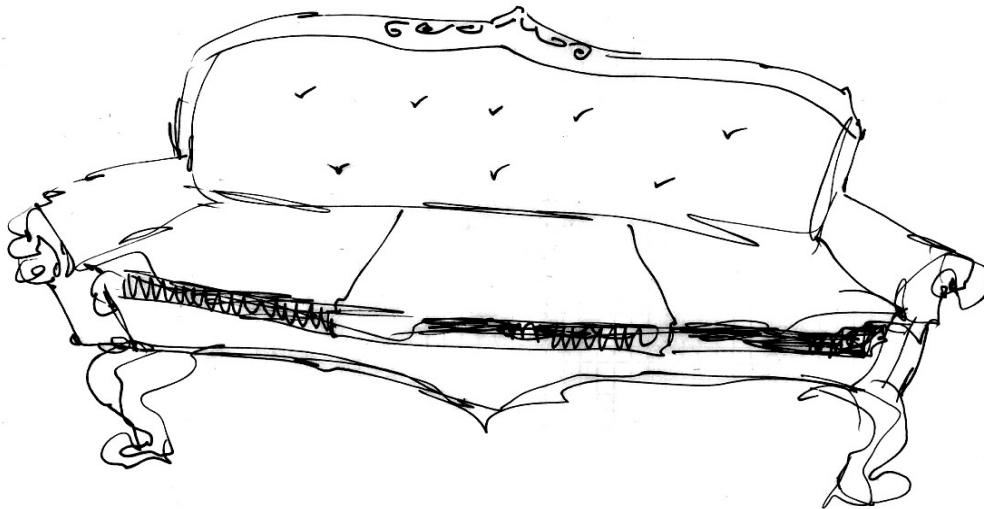
Sketch for bench in act I and II.



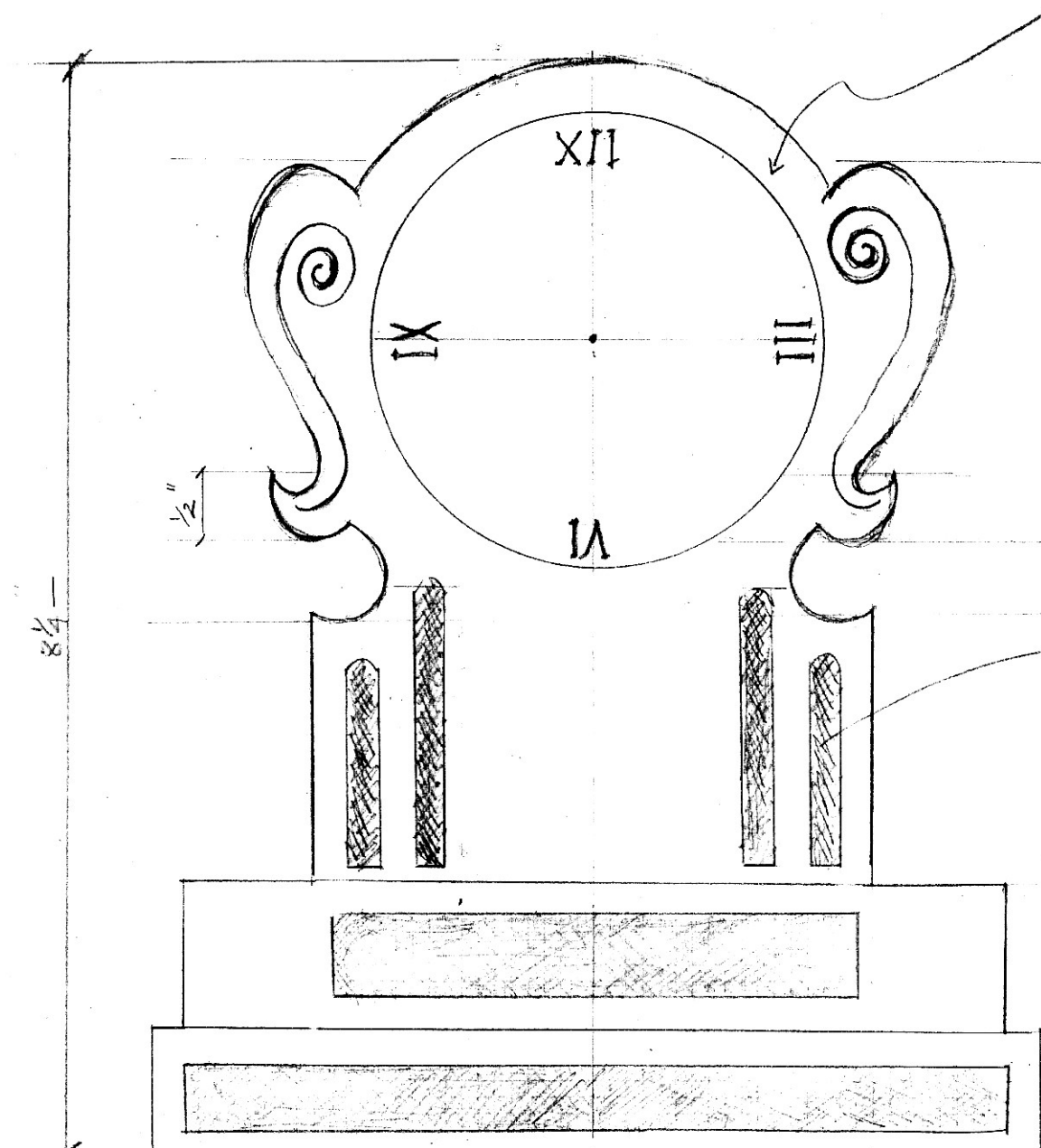


Sketches for the furniture in act I and II.

LOVE SEAT 5' or less



Sketch for the sofa in act I and II.



Clock sketch for prop master.

## Appendix E

### Paint Colors





Paint color chips for the trees and outside the circle.



Paint color chips for the circular stage area.



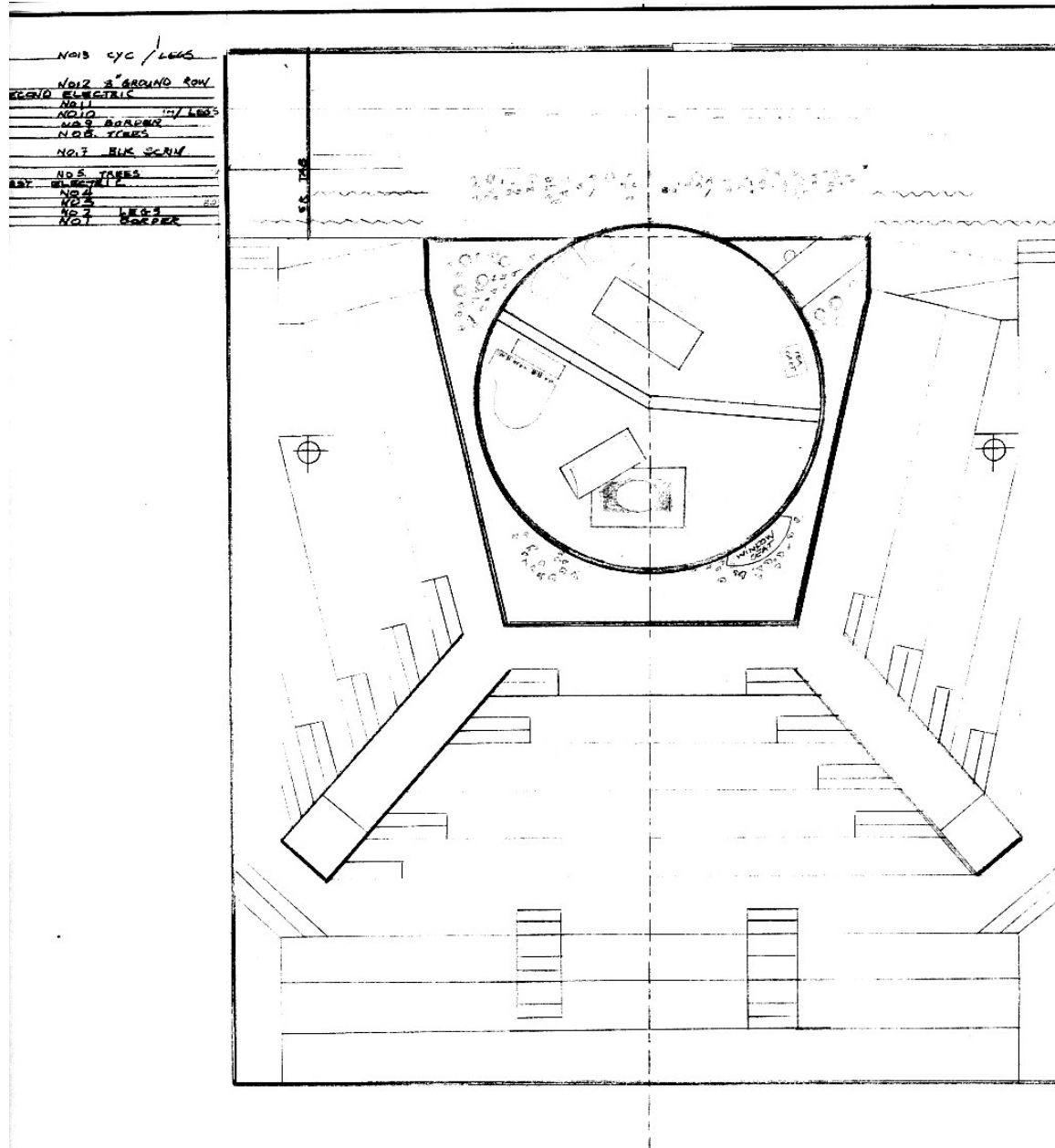
Paint color chips for the furnishings and fabrics in act III.



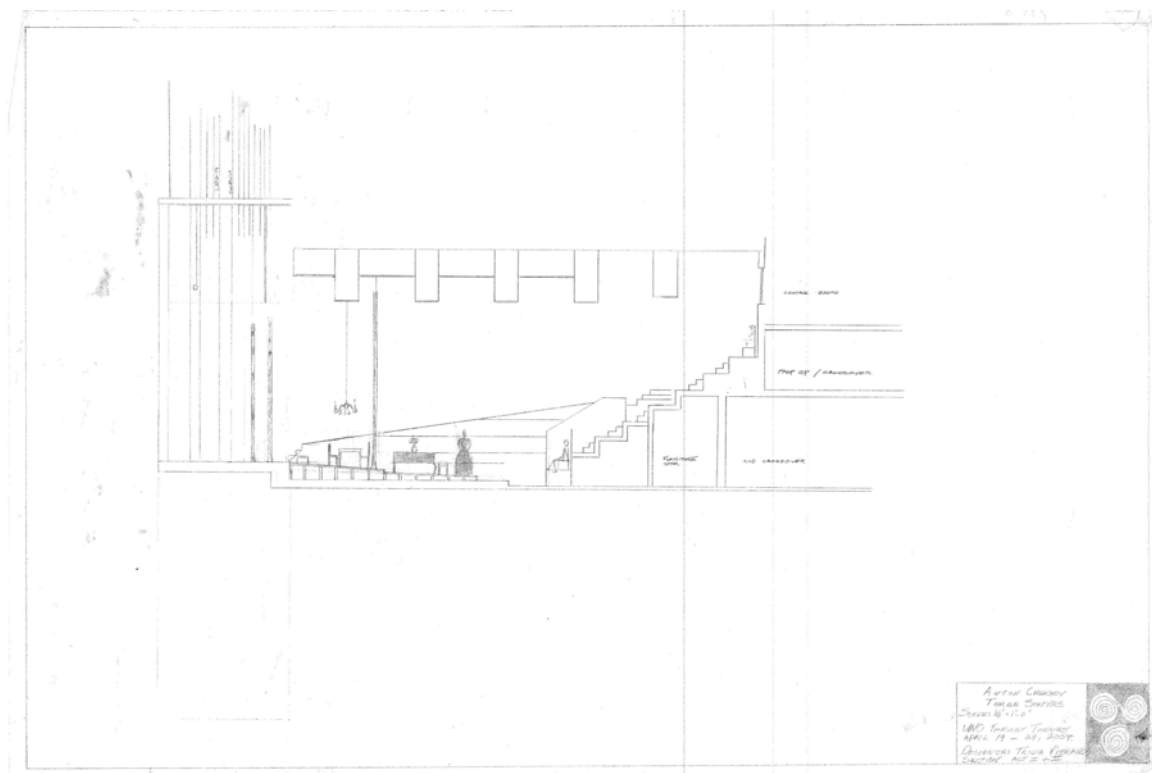


Texture and color for the floor.

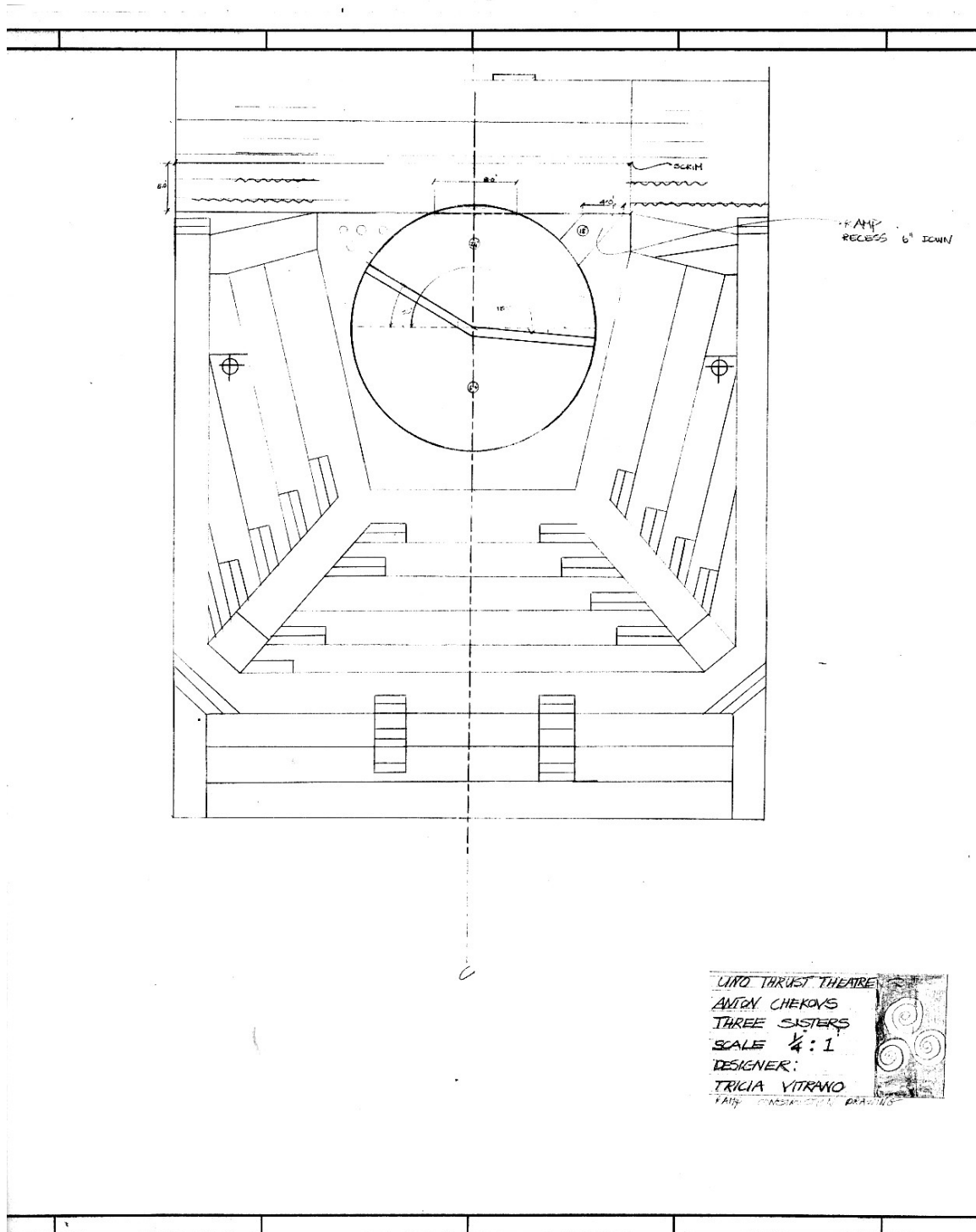
Appendix F  
Final Draftings



Floor plan for Act I & II.

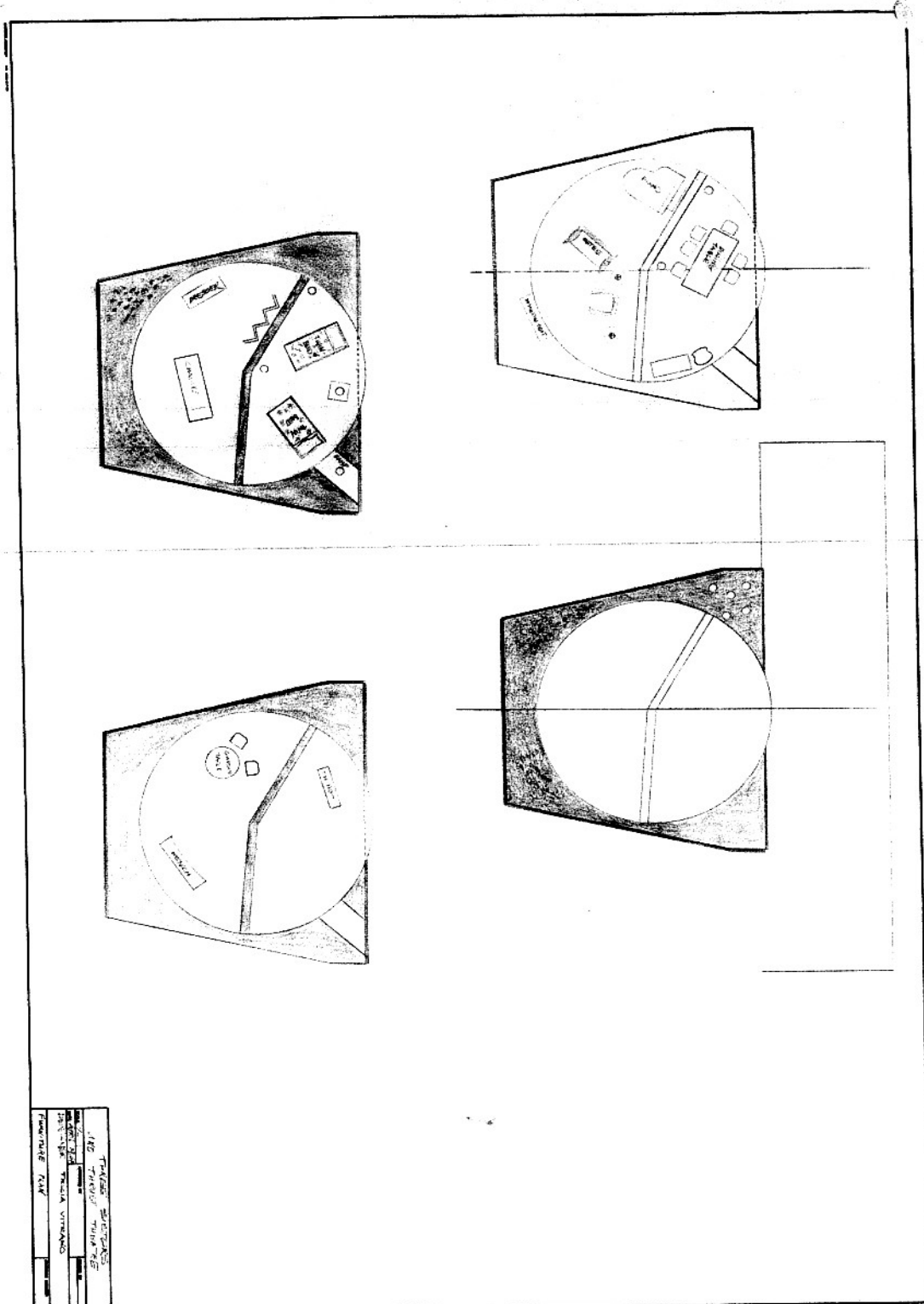


Section view of act I & II



Floor plan for the construction of the circle and the angle of the step.





Furniture Layout Floor Plans.

## Appendix G

### Photos of Set Design in Production



Beginning construction on the 24ft diameter circular stage.



Construction of upper level of the circular stage.



Construction of the legs,



Cardboard application on the floor of stage.





Leaves made from painted crumpled brown paper.



Beginning constriction of twenty-foot length trees.





Re-enforcing trees with wire.



Trees ready for painting.

## Appendix H

### Photos of Set Furniture



Furniture for act I from New Orleans Opera Association.





Screen and tea cart from New Orleans Opera Association. Tea cart for act I & II.

Screen for act III.



Chaise for act III.



Reupholstering chairs for dining area.

Appendix I  
Photos of Model







Model of set. Act III.



Model of set. Act I & II

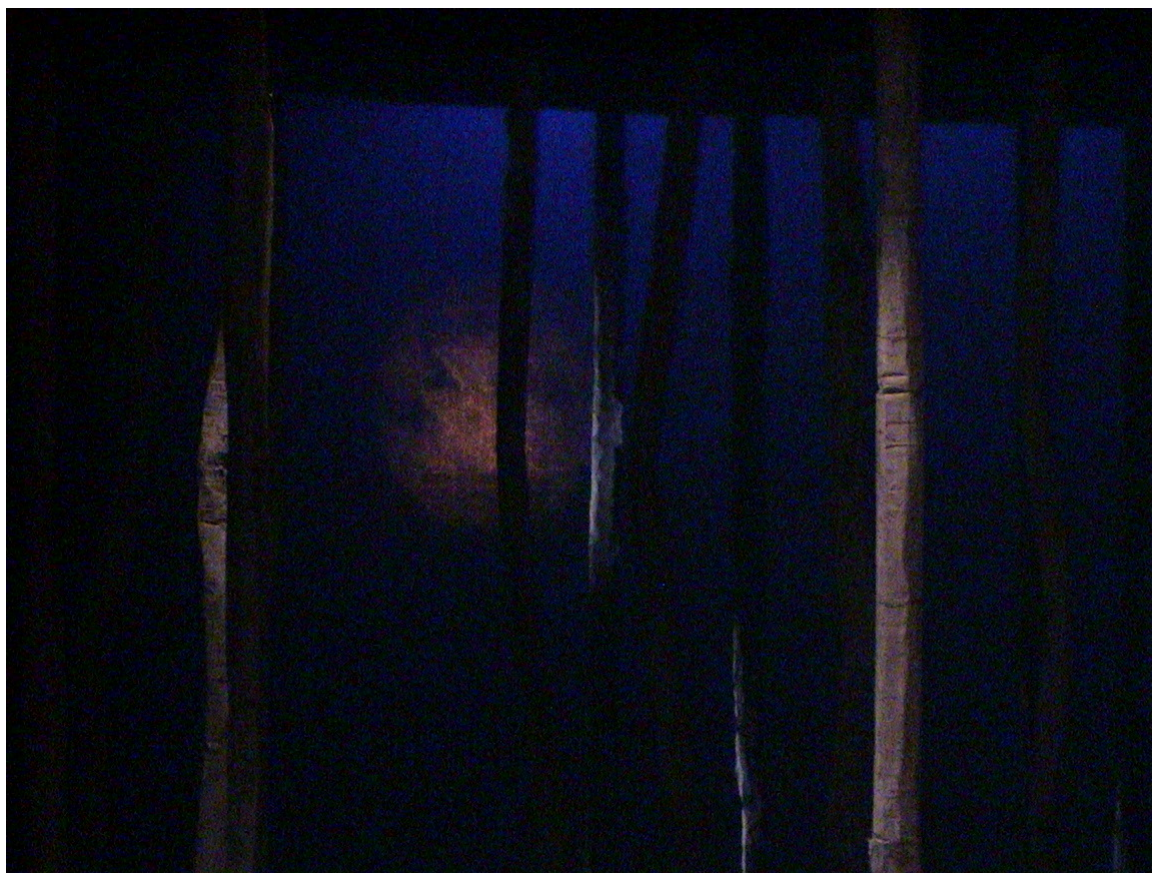
Appendix J

Show Photos





Dining area. Act I & II.



Trees and moonlight in Act III.





Act I.



Dining area in act I.





Act II.



Garden scene in act IV.





Bedroom scene in act III.

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## Vita

Tricia Duffy Vitrano was born In Ireland and received her B.A from the University of New Orleans, Louisiana in Liberal Arts with a major in painting. Ms. Vitrano will continue to freelance as a set designer and hopes to teach part-time in a local university or high school.