AN AUBADE
Set Design for Muncie Civic Theatre
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Set Design for Muncie Civic Theatre

Bachelor of Architecture Degree Program  
Thesis Design

Thesis Design Committee

Michele Chiuini • Professor of Architecture • Thesis Studio Critic

Eric Nay • Professor of Architecture • Thesis Advisor

Eric Koger • Technical Director (MCT) • Thesis Consultant
Dedicated to my parents, who introduced me to the finest of the arts... human relationships.
Eric Koger- Muncie Civic Theatre. Technical Director: for teaching me "the basics" of set construction, and guiding the project through to its completion on time. Also for keeping me from cutting my hand off, and providing a few laughs while working on the set.

Judy Schroeder- Director for "You Can’t Take It With You" for entrusting me with the design despite my inexperience in the field.

Nancy Crouse- Muncie Civic Theatre. Managing Artistic Director: for her support for the production, and her encouraging the display of the design drawings in the lobby.

Michele Chiuni- Thesis Studio Critic: for his support of my thesis project topic from the beginning... even though it lay beyond the conventional definitions of architecture. Also for the delicious spaghetti dinner at his home which brought the members of our studio together in a social environment.

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Emily Linderman- Thesis Student: for showing genuine interest in the projects of other thesis students, and for listening to my grumbling, and for sharing my (rare) successes.

Chris Schmidt- Thesis Student. Confidant: His profound influence cannot be degraded to text... and he won’t read the text anyway! Thanks Schmidt, for being the closest of friends through all of this, I will miss you more than you know.

Brian and Bradley Collins- My brothers: For their help in the construction of the set and for their constant presence in everything that I do in my life.

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MORE IMPORTANT, I THINK, than seeing the final result of my work over the past months, is to understand the decisions which informed the design process. A designer makes choices, that is the essence of design. By understanding the rationale for decisions made by others, we are afforded the opportunity to question our own design theories and methodologies. It seems appropriate to begin this record of my final project here at Ball State by addressing some of the issues that brought me to this college, and this major in the first place.
Why Architecture? The first question. Both of my parents are teachers, and I have always been fascinated with the notion of presenting my ideas to others in a public forum. The potential power of educators is enormous. Educators have the ability to alter the perception of the world, and thus the world itself. They are able to create new worlds, and to question what is generally accepted. But not all teachers utilize this power, some merely try to convey the accumulated stock of knowledge and technique of thinking to the young, they attempt to adhere to the conventions of education, and minimize their intervention by limiting their own personal interpretation of the material that they present. Stepping beyond this presentation of fact we have the designer. The designer does not simply want to transmit the truth, but to create it. A designer takes a view, and interprets in order to create a new understanding. As Leszek Kolokowski writes, "A view of the world does not emerge from an accumulation of facts; it also requires words to interpret, judge, and order the facts. Thus, by attempting to uncover, that is, to produce, the meaning of facts, the intellectuals-as philosophers, poets, writers of fiction, and political thinkers-turn out to be ideologists."

I have always wanted to be this kind of person, a designer of worlds. I initially wanted to explore this desire through written media. I wanted to express my ideals to people, but the written word seemed to exclude a major portion of the audience that I wanted to reach. I searched for a medium with which I could express myself, and therein my beliefs, to all mankind... to make an impact on people's lives. I thought that perhaps architecture could provide this outlet. The built environment shapes our lifestyles in a variety of ways... it demands human interaction. I thought that architecture would be somehow more pure than the written word. It seems to me that many times the superiority of intellectuals (writers in particular) is perhaps only a skill in the manipulation of language. They use words to seduce, and if they are seducers, they can seduce for good or evil. But as far as the distinction between good and evil is concerned- be it in moral matters, or others-are they necessarily more reliable, are they less fallible guides than other people? Hardly. Seduction is also a powerful tool available to those involved in the architecture profession. Our lies are hidden in the power of a beautifully untruthful drawing. I found that architecture is no less subject to the forces of corruption than writing is. With this revelation I had to think of another way to legitimize my existence within the profession. I have always been one that desires a tangible result to a days work. Architecture provided something that I could see and touch, and show others.
But was it really architecture? Have I ever produced architecture? Here at Ball State University architecture is often pieces of paper, the same paper, in many cases, that I would have used as a writer. Bordering on hypocrisy, and still searching for something that could help me out of this psychological ordeal, I began my education here at the College of Architecture...
In the first years I was taught the power of graphic seduction. I learned how to make stuff look cool. Aesthetics. These are valuable lessons, and obviously they are a vital part of expression in our profession... but I also knew that there was nothing behind the lines that I drew. They were untruths produced by an ignorant hand. I had some lofty intentions, but they were never translated into my designs.

During my third year I was fortunate enough to hit the lowest point of my five-year experience here at BSU. I came under the negative influence of some narrow minded design professors with whom I fought continuously. It seemed that my ideas about architecture were not consistent with those rigidly defined by the professors that I had. They were so bad that it challenged me to do a number of things. First I learned to fight for what I thought was right, and not let my ideas get watered down by haphazard suggestions from idiots. I also learned to articulate these ideas into architectural expression, and lastly I learned to accept lower grades as a consequence of adversarial professor relationships.

The next summer I was recharged by a field study trip to Russia. The trip, and the show that we put on upon our return was the first time in this college that I felt pleased with something that I had been a part of. I was proud.

Internship in Los Angeles was a great time. I learned that I love swimming in the ocean, and hate designing shopping malls in Indonesia.

Fall of my fifth year I lived and studied in Volgograd, Russia. The depth of emotions conjured by this experience has changed me forever. Never have I experienced such a bittersweet existence. The increased awareness of my own identity, and the daily struggles that I witnessed and lived through has fostered an acute awareness of the depth of human experience. I think often of the people that I came into contact with during my stay. I wonder if they are safe, I wonder if they have enough to eat... and I wonder if they are happy. Though often during my stay I wondered if it was I who was actually missing something, and not my new friends.
“Art focuses and organizes experience so as to give us a better understanding of it” - Laurence Perrine
SO THAT FINALLY PUTS US UP TO THIS SEMESTER... in which my inquiry through design has revealed many new aspects of the world of architecture. Our lives are a series of stories. We follow these stories, but we also help to shape them. The importance of a place is derived through our experience with that space, and ultimately the memories that we associate with that experience. In the case of my thesis, the story is spelled out very clearly in the form of a text... the script. Through the interpretation and manipulation of those ideas I can create a new set of meanings for the world to experience. Such it is with good architecture. The place of your creation must have a story, a meaning. Thousands each year visit a field in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. That field, by appearance only, is no different than others, yet it evokes emotions within people because of the story connected with the place. The physical environment provides an opportunity for the imagination to emerge. It sets the scene. Each time you design, you are writing a story, and applying it to the environment. You are creating conditions for human interaction, the stage for a play that you shape through design decisions.
Being an author of human interaction, a storyteller of sorts, requires a degree of responsibility and integrity on the part of the designer. Have you created a story that you believe in? Have you created a new and improved world? Or have you fallen back on the tired conventions of the past which have given rise to the atrocious conditions we find our world in today? Pollution, Violence, Corruption, War, Murder, Alcoholism, Suicide, Child Abuse, Rape, Domestic Violence, Starvation, Homelessness, and Depression. I hate to think of people in positions of power (which designers are) as being those who achieve only the level of mediocrity expected and accepted by our society. Architecture school develops the potential in us all to attack some of the bigger issues in this world. Whatever the medium you choose, remember your role as a storyteller and challenge yourself to create a new set of ideologies to replace our current failures.
Therefore, since the world has still
Much good, but much less good than ill,
And while the sun and moon endure
Luck’s a chance, but trouble’s sure.
I’d face it as a wise man would.
And train for ill and not for good.

-A. E. Housman
PERHAPS I SHOULD BEGIN to talk about some of the details of the project that I have undertaken for thesis. Many factors contributed to my decision to design for the theatre as part of my thesis project. First of all is a personal love for theatre. I am convinced that there is a great potential for meaningful expression within the theatrical context. Secondly, I wanted to have something actually built, to move away from paper to see if the lines I create translate effectively into the built environment. After exploring the possibilities available in the time frame I needed to complete the project, "You Can't Take It With You" at Muncie Civic Theatre seemed the best option, so I contacted the theatre to see what I could do. Soon after I came onto the project I was asked to take over the role of scene designer. The play is one of the most often performed works in the United States. It centers around two lovers whose romance brings two families together so the playwright can exploit, for comic effect, the differences between their two sets of ideals. The play is set in New York City in the late 1930's. Just coming out of the depression, and with an ever-increasing awareness of the possibility of world war, this was a time in American history when we began to question the fundamental beliefs that define the character of our nation. The play alludes to these difficult issues that faced the nation, but at the same time exists primarily to entertain. The aim of the show is to make people laugh and feel good. If you feel good by the end of the show, then the production succeeded.
The pre-construction design phase lasted approximately six weeks. During this time I had numerous meetings with the director to discuss entrance and exit requirements, blocking considerations and requirements for various props. During this period I also had frequent design discussions with the technical director about budget, construction methods, construction sequencing and other scheduling issues. While the stage was still being used for the previous show, I laid out, in tape, the stage to scale in the rehearsal space of the theatre. In this space the actors had their first experience with the physical layout of the design, and I could also watch rehearsals to see any problems that were arising and adjust the design accordingly. Once "Midsummer Night's Dream" cleared from the stage we began construction.
We had three weeks to build the entire set. We had limited hours during the day, and the cast performed on the in-progress set each night so we had to make sure that the pieces in place were safe for their use. The platforms that provided the base for the raised section of the home went up very quickly. We had a two-level working stage for the cast to use by the end of the first day. Set construction utilizes many stock pieces to realize the design. The proper incorporation of these sizes into the design made for faster erection, and saved both time and money. I wanted a space with angled walls, and non-rectangular projections, and we were able to accomplish this through the inventive positioning of stock elements and some supplemental wedges. The overall effect is an irregular shaped space (both in plan, and three dimensionally) that was constructed using common material dimensions. Structurally, the set performed even better than I had originally hoped for. We tested the stair tower in the early stages by having a heavier fellow from the cast do a tap dance routine on the main platform. He offered, so I said what the hell... Fortunately it held steady.

There was not a single event of failure on the part of the set for the entire run of the show. I take great pride in that. I did go to every performance so I would be there if some catastrophe took place, and was happy each night when it performed beautifully.

The basic structure for the flooring consists of 2x4 framing, decked with ¼” plywood and ¼” luaun. The walls consist primarily of 1x2 framing and ¼” luaun, supported periodically with 2x4 angled bracing. Many of the construction details were developed on site, and included the use of non-traditional materials such as gaff tape, c-clamps, string, fishing line, and coat hangers...
The things that I drew out each night didn’t always work out as cleanly on stage as it had in the drawing. It was quite interesting to see how the drawing and modeling process coupled with the actual construction. As this was the first project of mine, of any substantial scale, to be built, it was fascinating to watch the thing come to life. It was awesome to see the things that I created in my mind become something that people move through, walk on, lean on… and live in. I have known for quite some time that this is what architects do, but those lines really do come to life, and they really do have consequences. They mean something.

There are basically two kinds of drawing, and sometimes they become one and the same. There are drawings that capture the emotive and spatial aspirations, and those that explain how to put the thing together. These drawings, I’ve found, really do have to support one another. It’s not possible to fake one drawing to make it look cool, and disregard the effect which the construction documents have on making the project become a reality. They must go hand in hand. This was difficult, because for the past few years I have really learned how to make something out of nothing with my drawings, and now all of the sudden, I was being held accountable for the realization of my “fantasy” drawings. It makes me question whether or not this college really teaches us how to make successful buildings, or just successful drawings to sell those buildings? I really wish that more studios in the college would participate in design/build opportunities exactly for the purpose of learning this lesson which has come so late in my experience at Ball State, and unfortunately some people are never afforded that opportunity during their time here. I think that needs to change. Anyway, in this quest for an honest drawing, I was quite pleased when I heard from both architecture and non-architecture people “Damn, that really looks like your drawing!”
Working within the realm of the theatre itself was a terrific experience. I have been one that has always hated group projects. Probably due to some bad experiences here at the college in which I have ended up doing a disproportionate amount of the work. But the theatre atmosphere provided for the first time, a true feeling, for me, that I was part of an important team that had the same goal, and that there were many people who, regardless of the skills that they brought to the project, were genuinely interested in creating a quality product. These people really wanted to do this stuff. Obviously... since most of them were volunteers. It was nice to get out of the architecture building where everyone (including myself) is always bitching about something or another. There is a feeling of pride in the production they are working on, and a true sense of it being a community project. Young and old, families, singles, an eclectic bunch came together. The theatre is Muncie CIVIC Theatre, and that is just what it turned out to be... a representation of the community, not only a place for people to come and watch a show, but a place to come and watch their husbands, wives, children, friends and neighbors express a commitment to their community. One of my favorite things was to give the small children of the cast members tours of the set. The wonder with which they explored the set, and their unguarded reactions were the most wonderful critique that I could have gotten. Theatre is a truly social experience. A social experience which is obviously missing in a night at home in front of the television.

On one of the performance nights I sat behind the curtain that hides the piano from the audience, and unseen to those watching the show, I observed the reactions of the audience. It was actually the most interesting performance from my point of view. I knew the show so well that I knew what they were seeing at any particular moment, and could see their reactions... a wave of smiles, a sudden jump back, or an outburst of laughter. I was glad to have been a part of something that moved people in that way. I was pretty happy with myself.
But during the second week of performances we had a brush up rehearsal on Thursday night that changed my perception of the entire experience.
FOR THIS REHEARSAL someone had arranged for the people from the local Salvation Army to come and watch the performance for free. When they showed up, it was obvious that all of them had prepared for the night out... wearing their finest. It was touching that they showed such respect, whereas people of means had shown up on previous nights in jeans and T-shirts. They were regal in a way which I had not expected. They showed class, and a genuine graciousness for being allowed to come and watch the performance. The laughter they emitted seemed to me more honest than I had heard on prior nights. The twenty or so that attended that night truly laughed at the things they thought were funny, a deep, rich laugh that infected those around them with true happiness. I was pleased to have helped make them happy for the time of the performance.

As they were on their way out of the theatre that night I heard one of them say, “Oh and what a beautiful house they live in.” I then began to think about how I had just spent three months painstakingly designing and building this temporary house interior while the people who had just watched the play don’t even have a home. I really began to feel bad about myself. I began to wonder if what I had done really was all that wonderful, and if the feelings of pride which I had experienced were simply delusions, enabled only because of my blindness to the larger problems of the society in which I live.

Where can my talents best be used?

What is my responsibility to these larger issues?

Did I serve these people in a way which best utilizes my talents?

What the hell am I doing with my life?

Then I return to my decision of why I want to be an architect instead of a writer... have I actually moved further away from the direction I intended by entering into theatre set design? Or does theatre play a larger role in all of this? Can it change this world for the better? Or is this field simply an enabler for escapism... both for the audience and myself?
I have no answers. I am weeks away from moving halfway across the country to pursue a career which I know has the potential to change people’s lives, but rarely does. I struggle to legitimize my own existence, and worth in all of this. Perhaps the only thing that has made any sense to me in my life is the water. I am heading for the ocean, and there, the possibility of beautiful moments... moments of certainty.
The set took three hours to tear down. But before that, it raised in me some of these issues that I have shared with you in this book. Perhaps this is the magic of theatre, its ability to start in motion a mind. The space becomes immortal, preserved through memory... not the lumber and screws that put it together, but the story which surrounds it. Ultimately, this is what you design for yourself and others... stories, memories, experiences which feed the mind, and perhaps therein lies the magic of architecture. I wish all of my classmates the best in the coming years. Remember to take pride in what you do, and do things that make you feel proud.
Among other things, you'll find that you're not the first person who was ever confused and frightened and even sickened by human behavior. You're by no means alone on that score, you'll be excited and stimulated to know. Many, many men have been just as troubled morally and spiritually as you are right now. Happily, some of them kept records of their troubles. You'll learn from them— if you want to. Just as someday, if you have something to offer, someone will learn something from you.

-J.D. Salinger, THE CATCHER IN THE RYE
thought this area needed to be a bit larger to accommodate when a man needs to carry goods out of this entrance.

is what the 3-step fence amounts to. provides more clearance to the cellar escape.

i adjusted the back wall by a few inches so it would fit stock sizes of plywood, etc., hopefully cutting some cost time.
PROGRESS PHOTOGRAPHS
These photographs show the sequence of construction over a three-week period. They were taken about every other day.
JOHN MICHAEL COLLINS (Set Designer), designed this set as a thesis project for his BSU architecture major. John, a native of East Lansing, Michigan, spent the fall semester of '97 studying architecture, painting, drawing and sculpture in Russia at the Volgograd Academy of Architecture and Engineering. Upon his return, he designed and directed “Truth and Interpretation,” a multi-media show for the Ball State College of Architecture and Planning that documented his architectural field study in various cities throughout Russia. Prior to that he had a seventeen-month internship at RTKL Associates in Los Angeles. He admits that the theatre holds great attraction for him. In fact, he’s agreed to work with the media show in Civic’s upcoming show, Tommy. After his graduation in May, John would like to find a job working in theatre in the San Diego area for a year before getting his masters in set design at the University of California, San Diego. Civic thanks John and his brother Brian who also spent many hours working on the Vanderhof home. Don’t miss John’s design display in the lobby.
Civic Theatre cast, set shine, and you can take it with you

By MICHICELLE KINSEY
The Star Press

MUNCIE — We need more people like the Sycamores — people who truly enjoy what they do, whether it's taking ballet lessons, writing a play, playing Mary Had a Little Lamb on the xylophone or building a better firecracker.

That was the point of You Can't Take It With You, on stage in Muncie Civic Theatre today through Sunday and April 3-4.

The Sycamores might not be your normal everyday family. But that's what makes them so great. "We just want to go along and be happy in our own little way," Grandpa (Ed Strother) said.

It certainly looked as if the cast was happy playing this madcap family, brought together with the up lift contrast of the corporate Kirbyys when Alice Sycamore falls in love with Tony Kirby Jr.

This was Ed Strother's first return to the stage after 10 years. He was delightful as Grandpa, the family's advice-giver.

Wanita Spence really had me believing she was a doughnut short of a dozen as Penny Sycamore, mother of the family and on again-off again playwright. And she deserves a big pat on the back for being able to handle two kittens on stage at one time.

Ashley Hammon had me giggling with her portrayal of Essie, an aspiring dancer with two left feet. Earl Campbell was right-on as her nerdy, xylophone-playing husband. Chris Raleigh was hilarious as the dopey Donald.

Jan Etchison (Paul Sycamore) and Ashley Wagel (Mr. DePinna) played off each other very well as the bumbling fireworks inventors. Carmen Ruggero was convincing as the drunk actress who crashes on the couch.

Charles Redferd and Sue Tempin were perfectly upright as Mr. and Mrs. Kirby. Maggie Cassidy (Alice) did a fine job as the "normal" member of the Sycamore family, and Dan Besser (Tony) was a good compliment to her as Tony Kirby Jr., a man who wanted a little abnormality in his Wall Street life.

The rest of the cast did a fine job of rounding out the production — Dee Hartmann as the elegant Grand Duchess turned waitress, Maureen Mustard as Reba (who was always in the kitchen whipping something up); John Huston as Essie's cocky Russian dance instructor Kolenkov, and Chip Etchison as the all-work and no-play Internal Revenue Service guy.

One of the stars of the show, I must confess, wasn't an actor. It was the set. Created by Ball State architecture student John Collins, the design was simply fantastic.

Collins definitely concentrated on details when creating the interior of the Sycamore's Victorian home — from the molding on the walls, to the fireplace, to the photos on the walls, to the working wall lights.

My only hang up: I thought the madcap scenes could have been a little more, well, madcap. The level of zaniness (the pace) could have been turned up a notch or two.

But as the cast completed its final bow, I couldn't help but leave wanting to be a little more like the Sycamores.

A ballet class, perhaps?

The production is set for 8 o'clock nightly through Saturday and April 3 and 4 and at 2 p.m. Sunday. For ticket information, call 288-PLAY.
All good things must end

Muncie Civic Theatre has brought together a triumvirate of behind-the-scenes talent — Eric Koger, Jared Grohs and John Collins — that will soon be splitting up.

Koger is Civic's technical director. Grohs and Collins are set designers.

A 2-year employee of the theater, Koger is planning a return to graduate school in another year.

Grohs and Collins — an Ball State architecture school graduate and soon-to-be architecture school graduate, respectively — are leaving sooner. Grohs has accepted a graduate assistantship at Florida State University, where he will study scene design. Collins is headed for San Diego, where he plans to pursue theater work.

For Grohs and Collins — neither of whom was involved in theater before college — these plans mark a significant departure from earlier ambitions.

"Once you get in theater, it's sort of addicting," Grohs explained with a shrug.

While Collins intends to do architectural work on the side, he said he had found the switch from designing buildings to backdrops refreshing.

"Theater kind of pulls it back to a human scale," he said.

Besides, he added with a laugh, there's a certain comfort in the temporality of theater work. "If you have a failure, it gets torn down in a month."

John Carlson

TALENTED TRIO: John Collins, Jared Grohs and Eric Koger (from left) on the set of Tommy.
"... the person who loves everybody and feels at home everywhere is the true father of mankind. He expects nothing of men, so no form of depravity can outrage him."

-Ayn Rand, The Fountainhead