

## Tim Stapleton: an artist's life

*The beauty of theater is that it's so magical*

BY ANNDEE HOCHMAN

**T**alk into Tim Stapleton's house and you walk into an environment stitched together with artist's eyes. He sold everything to move here three years ago, a little nervous to start from scratch after eight years as set designer for a Michigan theater company. Before that, there was six years of high school teaching and, quite a few years before that, in Southeastern Kentucky, gifts of crayons

### Profile

and construction paper and the Appalachian Mountains for backdrop. He started college with a double major in theater and art that turned into a tug-of-war between the stage and the studio. Art won.

Now Stapleton has a foyer piled with armloads of dried flowers, a swag of evergreen looping like crepe paper through the living room, a book on Matisse, thick as the Manhattan phone book, leaning against one wall. He has a slide collection of sets he designed, sets he is proud of — a weatherbeaten front porch scene that reminded him of his birthplace; giant, colorful batiks for a production of *The Little Prince*.

He has a résumé, too, peppered after only three years in Portland with set design credits for local productions at Storefront Theatre and the Portland Civic Theatre. This month he heads to Newport for an artist-in-residence stint at the town's performing arts center. Next month, he goes to the Salt River in Kentucky to look for some answers in paint and canvas and quiet.

Deep-set eyes sober Stapleton's face, and a Kentucky twang rounds the edges of his voice when he talks about home and art and work. In theater, he explains, you always start from scratch. Fresh script, blank stage, new paint. It becomes what you make it. And then there is theater's other lesson, the un-making of the magic. It's the same last line in every play — the curtain drops, the actors go away, — the set comes down. Creation's flipside.

It's not unlike his approach to life. Harvest the art, and let it go. Each day is a resurrection, he says. But some things carry over. The chair he's sitting in, for instance. It's brown and wooden and weather-rough and, although it sits in the middle of a Southeast Portland living room, it looks like it might have spent a few winters on an Appalachian porch. Tim Stapleton folds his stockinged feet up onto it, and he looks perfectly at home.

"Designing for theater is different [from individual art] because it's a collaborative art form. Before, I'd been concentrating on teaching and working with individuals, and on doing my own work. Artists work in solitude. And I had to transfer my thoughts from two-dimensional to three-dimensional.

"*The Passion of Dracula* was my first professional design for the Boarshead Michigan Public Theater. I was probably painting scenery five minutes before curtain. The hardest part was tearing it down, what in theater is called 'strike.' That was hard to deal with at first, because I hadn't been used to throwing anything away. But I think that's a lesson artists have to learn.

"After eight years at the theater in Michigan, there were some political changes; there was a group of artists who had been there a long time and had watched the theater grow into what we had helped make it. The board of directors took what we felt were some drastic

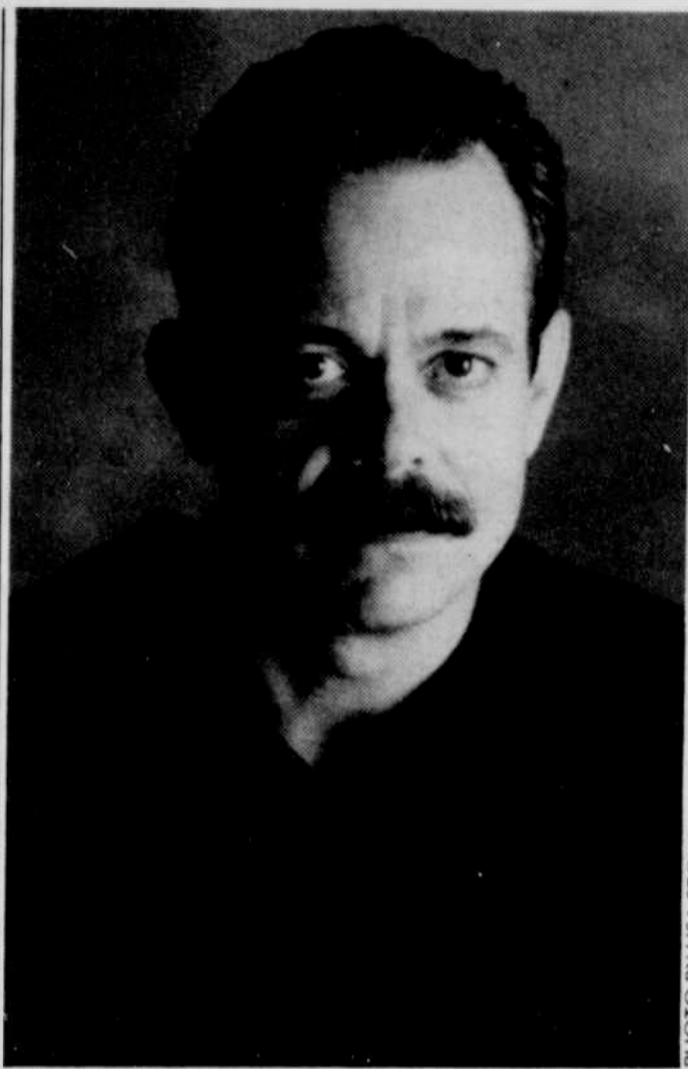


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moves and so we left. Although I was a little frightened after having had all these years of security, I rallied and sold everything I owned and packed two suitcases and came to Portland. I thought I'd stay about four months. My family (a brother living in Estacada) embraced me. I managed to meet really wonderful people in the arts and theater community here. I've been here almost three years now.

"I've designed a few shows; I've done *Passion for Fresh Flowers*, *On the Verge* and *Crossing Niagara* for Storefront [Theatre] and *Marry Me A Little* for the Portland Civic Theatre. I worked with the Civic Theatre School and the Art Institute last summer, and we produced *The Myth of Perseus*.

"I feel a lot more confident about my skills than when I started. My approach is the same, but when I first started designing professionally, I didn't really have a clue, technically. So I learned all that.

"[When you do a show] you get the script first. It's all black and white. Sometimes it's been done before, and sometimes it's a new script. If it has been done before, I tend to ignore what other designers have done. I think that's the best way because no two spaces are alike, and you really design for the space. But those words are what is important. We're there to serve up the message, if there is one, or to serve the words up. The scenery is just supposed to be background noise. But it plays a big part in the audience response to what they're seeing.

"I read the play once just to read it. Then I read it again and take notes about where people move, what they pick up, what kind of furniture's there. Then I keep reading and delve into period and characterization of these people. I'll start making sketches, and those adhere to the givens — the space, the budget. Usually I try to design without any limitations. I try to free myself up to design as extravagantly as I want to, and then cut back, trying to keep what's necessary to serve the piece.

"The beauty of theater is that it's a gigantic job, and it's so magical, you don't want the audiences to have any clue that all that happened before they sat down to see it. I don't think you should go away from a show singing the scenery or singing the costumes. I think it all has to work together. But it's always good to have the critics or the public mention everything that went into it and not just the actors.

"I don't think you ever know for sure if a set design works because if you say, 'That's it,

that's the best,' then you must stop. I always look at the finished product and think, 'I could have done this,' or 'I could have done that.' I think we all do the best we can, but I don't think you ever know if it works until opening night, and it's there. Some have worked better than others. I mean, I've had some real bombs. How do you know when it works? I don't think you ever know that it really has. You just take it for what it is.

"I have a great deal to learn. I'm just beginning. I just turned 40 and, although I started drawing at an early age and probably knew by 12 or so that what I wanted to do was be an artist, that's really not very many years. I'm really starting to do art that's more succinct and more true to me. I've designed for the theater; I've exhibited my work in the Midwest and the South as an 'artist.' Creative energy is funny; the more you tap into it, the more there is. I've had to work hard at keeping it going, you know, drawing a little bit every day, looking at things aesthetically every day, trying to surround myself with beauty, just honing the skills. And it really pays off. I think, in ten or 20 years, I'm going to be pretty thrilled at what I create.

"I'm going to Kentucky for the month of June to live on the Salt River with another artist who's a friend of mine and just paint. I've given myself that month to not have to say yes or no to jobs, or tend the garden, or answer the phone, or pay the bills. I'm really looking forward to seeing what happens, although I'm not predicting or going with any preconceived ideas. I'm just going to open myself up and see what happens.

"My father was a coal miner for 50 years; I grew up in Southeastern Kentucky in the Appalachian Mountains. It was real rural; it's a really remote part of the world. Most people there grow up, get an education, get married, have kids and stay there. "If they go away, they come back. I was always really different. My father really pushed us all, without forcefully doing it, saying, "There's a big world out there, and you can find out what you want to do." My mother led me around by the hand and said, "This is a tulip; this is a forsythia." I was always surrounded by nature, the woods, the mountaintops. I played in the mountains.

"But as far as encouragement . . . They encouraged me, but I don't think they really knew what the possibilities were. It's hard, at 12 or 13, to say, 'Okay, I'm going to go to Pratt Art Institute.' There you are, in Kentucky . . . where the hell is Pratt Art Institute? I did have my sister-in-law, who is an art teacher and really talented, and she did encourage me.

"I'm really proud of my heritage. I would never want to go back there and live, but I am very proud to have come from there. Because I learned at an early age what enough is. I learned that we don't need a lot.

"And I learned that because we didn't have a lot, my toys were what I found in the woods, or occasionally the toys my parents did have the money to give me. But mostly it was books, or crayons and construction paper. Always music, always flowers, always hard work. That played into my work. Although, as I got older, there was also a dark side. There were other issues — my homosexuality, death — things that are not unique to me, but to all of us. That played into my art, too.

"I'm learning more and more that I'm probably more of an abstract artist than I thought I was. Even though that's not the way most people read art; if they read emotions, they need a human element there so that they can identify with it. But I think abstract painters get closer to that ethereal quality or emotion, the way it washes over you.

"We are like rivers. I feel my life to be very fluid. In order to grow, you just have to let things run off. If you have a gift, you have to give it away. You can't hold onto it. You need to give it to other people. It's your responsibility to humanity to share it, and hopefully to enrich someone else's life, to say something for someone else that they can't say." ▼

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