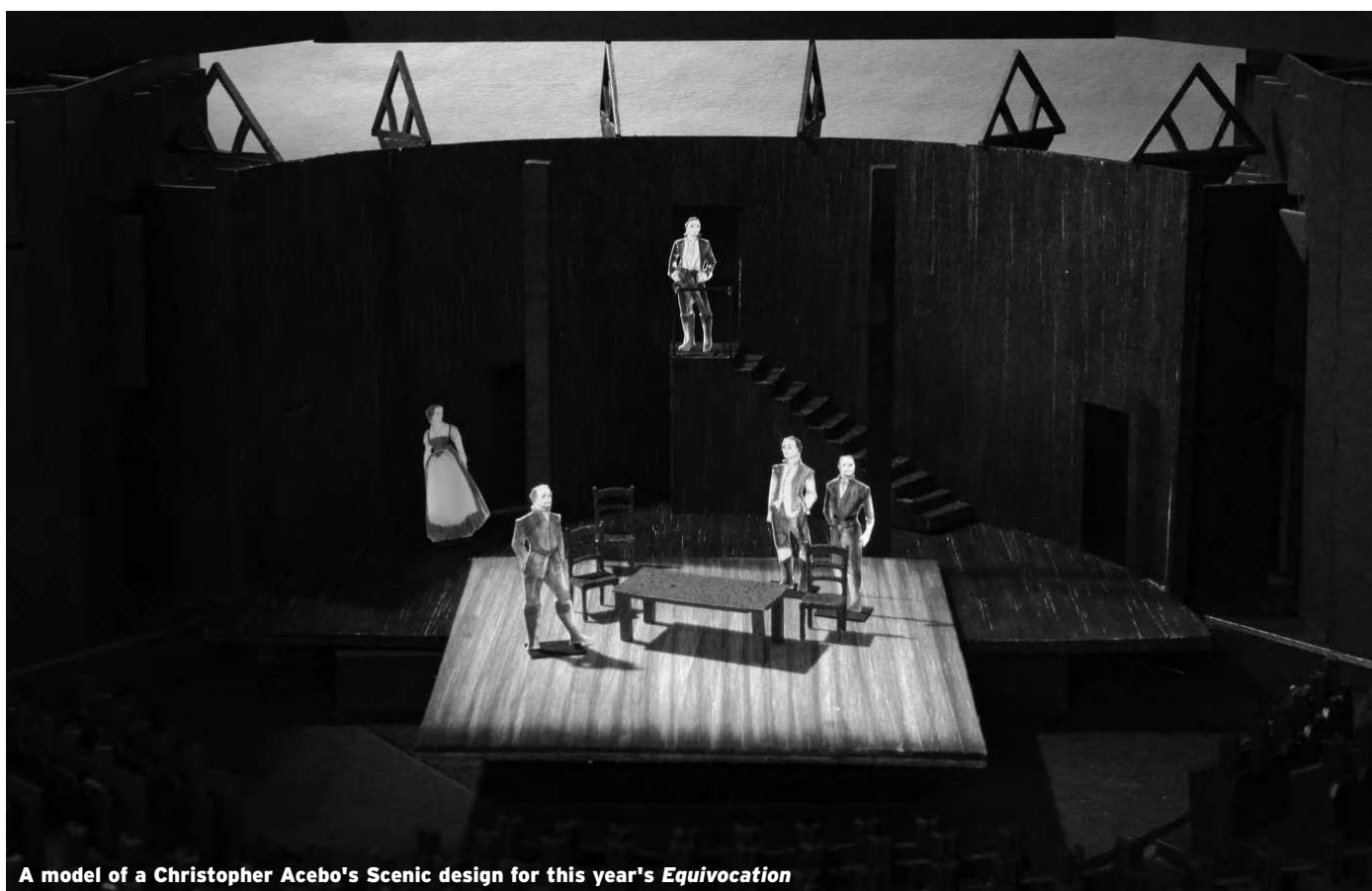




A model of a Christopher Acebo's Scenic design for this year's *Equivocation*

RICHARD ANDERSON

Rubble from Styrofoam, Magic from Rotolocks

Theatrical magic at OSF's 'art factory'
by Suzi Steffen

Every year I write that visitors to Ashland shouldn't miss the Oregon Shakespeare Festival's Backstage Tour. Facts about the acting company, details about the sets, discussions of costuming and understudies, plus a sped-up video of an entire set change-over and a few moments hanging out in the green room? Theatrical gold, people.

At the end of the tour this year, after hearing about the hundreds of employees and the hundreds more who volunteer for costuming, ticket-taking, ushering and more; after watching stage crews wrangle heavy pieces of set on the far too sunny and hot Elizabethan stage, I heard my mother say, "It's almost like the actors are an afterthought!"

Not exactly, of course, but later this fall,

long before the actors pack up and leave, the scene shop will swing into full gear. I went way backstage, into the warren of offices and buildings that make up OSF's design office and scene shop, to find out how the majestic sets come to be. My guides were design associate Rick Anderson and assistant technical director Steve Willeby, both of whom were prepping for vacations — Willeby, as a matter of fact, was one of the last people left in the scene shop before they closed up for a couple of months.

Anderson shares an office with legendary designer Richard Hay (official title: principal theater and scenic designer; see my interview with Hay, on our blog beginning Aug. 21), who not only designed all three of the theaters at the OSF but still creates scenic designs for several plays a

year and supervises the designs. Others, including a design intern, work around the piles of reference books (most from Hay's thousands-of-volumes personal library), large-screen computers, stacks of scene sketches and little models. A model for next season's *Well*, a contemporary play by Lisa Kron that will run in the New Theatre, sits on the large table in the middle of the high-ceilinged office. That's right — the director and the designers have already met, and once this teeny model has been roughed out, revised, perhaps rebuilt and then approved by everyone, including Richard Hay (who hand-paints the models so the paint team can start matching colors and the costume shop can make sure those fuschias don't clash), Anderson starts putting the information into the computer.

Does the computer help? Technology in other arenas has given the lighting designers wondrous options (highly visible this year in *Henry VIII*, *Death and the King's Horseman* and most of the other plays), and the scene shop uses everything from elevators to wireless technology. Anderson says he gets obsessive with the computer-aided design (CAD), double-checking every tiny block of print and every line to make sure they're in the right places. And when he creates things like painter's elevations, the paint colors themselves have to come from real life. "On a computer, the colors will never be right," he says. Still, for some things — a portrait of that got slashed each night in *Jekyll and Hyde* a few years ago — the large color laser printer makes nice, slashable, inexpensive, recyclable prints.

In addition, computer measurements are more precise; the carpenters get very, very clear measurements and can start cutting plywood almost as soon as the scene shop receives the designs. In that massive scene shop (a building that had an earlier life as a roller rink), Willeby demonstrates the difference between this exact measuring technique and the way carpenters used to have to estimate sixteenths of inches. "You'd say, 'Is this 5/16 or 3/8?'" he says, miming a squint at a plan.

A sixteenth of an inch isn't a big deal at some theaters, but at the OSF, the plays run in rotating repertory. That means the sets have to come together in movable pieces using rotolocks, and those pieces must deal well with being bumped around several times a week and crammed in backstage with other plays' pieces. Every day at the OSF is a gargantuan moving operation, with blankets and safety regulations and dollies and hoists and a lot of brawny people sweating and swearing as they maneuver, lock down, dust, polish and repaint the bits that make the magic. "You can't put these together with the kinds of hex keys they give you at Ikea," Anderson says. (See the 2007 changeover of *A Winter's Tale* to *The Importance of Being Earnest* on the blog starting Aug. 21.)

Willeby takes me to the Bowmer Theatre, where, variously, *The Music Man* (lots of building siding), *Macbeth* (foam-core bodies protruding from the floor, a stage-width bridge and sweeping staircase), *Paradise Lost* (a two-story set) and *Equivocation* (pictured) share space behind the visible stage. Willeby says that sets like that for *Music Man*, whose designer, Rachel Hauck, "likes wide-open stages," counterintuitively take up more room than the more apparently crowded, horizontal sets. A foam hand sticks out near *Equivocation*'s wooden floor, under a piece of the Scottish play's stairs, above some rubble.

Back in the scene shop, the floor shows an outline of the Bowmer, an outline of the Elizabethan and the dimensions of the New Theatre. Those spaces are empty right now, waiting for the scene shop folks to return from their out-of-contract months. Waiting for the designers to finish fiddling with the computer, take several "final" glances at the details — and send an email telling the technical directors it's time to open the files on the computer and turn those designs into reality, or as close to reality as stage magic can make it. —

Greening the Green Room

In the scene shop, OSF assistant technical director Steve Willeby looks over his shoulder at a pallette of compressed blue material. "That's recycled denim," he says off-handedly.

Turns out the OSF has an all-volunteer Green Task Force and that it's got people doing things like buying recycled denim instead of fiberglass to muffle the sounds of actors walking on set floors. The greenies are "grass-roots," says this year's Task Force head. That's Janice Taccioni, OSF safety manager (she who helps figure out when there's too much lightning, snow or rain to proceed outdoors). Last year, costume designer Deb Dryden headed it, but everyone at OSF has meetings, tasks and anywhere from two to nine plays to work on at the same time,

so, Taccioni says, leadership is likely to switch again next year.

Small groups of the 35 or so who show a deep interest meet to work on things like drought-resistant plantings (not on the bricks! The color spots are staying, Taccioni says) or using soy-based ink on recycled/recyclable programs. Then there's the wine. Patrons drink thousands upon thousands of plastic cups of white or red during the season. Of course, the bottles get recycled, but the cups aren't recyclable in Ashland — so what about compostable cups? And where would they be composted? Would it be better to have biodegradable corn-based cups even if they can't be composted in Ashland?

The group created new, clearly marked recycling bins for the theaters and for the

actors' apartment buildings. A production group, which came up with the recycled denim thing, looks for ways to recycle or reuse material or to source materials that don't use a lot of energy.

In the long-range plan, Taccioni says, are wish-list items like motion-sensor lighting in the offices and parts of the theaters, or hybrid cars for the OSF fleet. Pieces of sets go to high schools or Southern Oregon University, but the scene shop recovers the metal. The wood is trickier, but it might be able to go to a biomass plant, she says.

"This is nobody's real job," Taccioni says. "We're taking baby steps, but we are taking steps."

In some cases, those steps bounce off of denim. —