

DESIGNER SARAH ETHERTON AND A FRIEND WORK ON THE SET OF VERY LITTLE THEATRE'S CURRENT PRODUCTION OF *TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD*

IT TAKES A VILLAGE

A peek behind the scenes at the technicians who bring Eugene theaters to life

When we think of live performance, we probably picture actors or dancers — the people we regularly see onstage. But where would a production be without the tireless, behind-the-scenes magicians who create the sets, lighting and sound?

University Theatre's Janet Rose helps her UO students understand the action on stage is supported and enhanced by a whole network of supporting actors, as it were. "As I've explained to the basic technical production class," Rose says, "'Yes, theater is a essentially human acting out a story to other humans.' However, adding scenery, lighting, sound, costumes and all of the elements add to our overall reaction to the theater event."

So sit back and enjoy Theatre Design 101, taught by some of the many people in our community who routinely make our stages shine.

Let's start with the set, which can move a narrative forward and create emotion, often before the play even starts.

"First, I try to communicate the where," says Cottage Theatre's Tony Rust. "Where is this taking place, where are these people interacting? Then I try and reflect the inner world of the characters and stories through color, textures and shapes. When an audience first sees a set, they should have important clues as to what sort of story we are telling."

Adds Actors Cabaret's Joe Zingo: "The set design for our theater must communicate the essence of the emotional content of the piece. The shape and placement of the platforms and walls, the colors, the scenic elements constructed must always reinforce the actors' intent without competing with them for the focus."

But how will the set be lit? Is it flaming oranges and yellows or murky grays and blues? Is it a spotlight trained on one dramatic moment or a bank of footlights glimmering across a stage full of hoofing chorines?

In both theater and dance, lighting adapts to the needs of the moment.

"The visual enhancement of theatrical dance is predominated by light," says UO Dance Department chair Jenifer Craig. "What is important for each dance is that the choreographer's intent is enhanced by the choreography of lighting," she says.

But as audience members, few of us probably realize how much skill and finesse the plotting, hanging, focusing and running lights for any show requires.

"All lighting designers start out with the technical knowledge of lighting equipment and electricity," Rose says. "I draw a light plot, which is a technical drawing showing the placement in the theater and the particulars (type, color, lens) of each lighting fixture. For us [UO

Theatre], that's between 100 and 125 individual fixtures for a production."

And perhaps most ephemeral of all, sound has the capacity to add to a performance. A creaking door, a gust of wind, music and mayhem: Sound transports, adding to the experience.

"Sound design is an unseen enhancement to a production," says The Shedd's Cosmo Cole. "At best, it should hardly be noticed. At worst, it is a distraction to what the audience should really be focusing on."

So whether it's in the area of set-building, lighting or sound design, local theater wizards have white-knuckled their way through some pretty amazing feats.

Maybe you saw Very Little Theatre's *Tempest* design, based on Jung's concept of individuation? Or Actors Cabaret's *Les Miz*, with its many passages of time? Perhaps you caught the UO's production of *Metamorphosis* that featured a 3-by-12-foot water trough onstage? Or Cottage Theatre's *A Flea in Her Ear*, with its three-story staircase that appeared and disappeared between acts?

As we celebrate a new performance season, let's take a moment to champion these unsung heroes of local theater: the set, lighting and sound designers who make stages sparkle, but never take a bow.

We salute you! — Rachael Carnes

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