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Misalliance Scenic Design

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THE CARL AND WINIFRED LEE HONORS COLLEGE

CERTIFICATE OF ORAL EXAMINATION

Joseph W. Shoup, having been admitted to the Carl and Winifred Lee Honors College in Fall 2001 successfully presented the Lee Honors College Thesis on April 6, 2006.

The title of the paper is:

"Misalliance Scenic Design"

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Greg D. Roehrick', is written over a horizontal line.

Mr. Greg Roehrick, Theatre

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Jim Daniels', is written over a horizontal line.

Mr. Jim Daniels, Theatre

Joseph Shoup
4/14/06
Honors College Thesis

Misalliance Scenic Design: The Passion is in the Process

As scenic designer for George Bernard Shaw's Misalliance, put on by the WMU department of theatre, I feel ready to graduate. I have gained deeper insight into the design process, and through a large quantity of research, preparation, and hard work, have accomplished a set that I can be proud of. I have also been awakened to a fashion of architecture that has become my favorite style.

Shaw's Misalliance takes place in 1909, Hindhead Surrey, England. It is a time of Victorian conservative values, as well as the breaking down of the social structure, most likely caused by the industrial revolution of the time. Everything was transitioning due to this newfound industrialism. Shaw captures this spirit in Misalliance within the character of John Tarleton, a thinking man who is very fond of new ideas and new inventions. The play is all about transitions actually, the transition of generations to be more precise. "Parents and Children, and the eternal gulf that lies between them."

Designing the set for Misalliance was both stressful and invigorating. The components of the process include: Researching the period, sketching the idea, modeling the idea, drafting the idea, building scenery from the draftings, painting the built scenery, and dressing out the set with props. Each one of these has its difficulties, and each one also has its rewards. Most of the research was spent on the Victorian architecture, the Gothic Revival, and Art Nouveau, as these were the main architectural movements at the time of the play.

Victorian architecture was all about elegance. The intention of the Victorian style was to show off the wealth of the owners. Scattered furniture in all directions, expensive knick-knacks filling up floor and mantle space, area rugs covering bare floors in multiple arrays, and ornamental carvings and moldings throughout the architectural design. Appearances made all the difference in the social strata, to which the house was a dominant portion of appearance.

The Gothic Revival, a movement of architecture that occurred during the Victorian era, had two directions of design. Gothic is on one side very ornamental in the grotesque design, where elaborate carvings in the woodwork and stonework were used practically on every inch of the buildings or pieces of furniture. The second direction the Victorian Gothic period takes is in the simple stonework. It is a grand representation of the gothic castles from the medieval period. They were simple styles, yet elegant in its simplicity. The Gothic style was begun by Horace Walpole's Strawberry Hill manor, which became the epitome of the Gothic Revival.

During the process of research, I was introduced to the architectural period of Art Nouveau. Art Nouveau offers a tremendous amount of free-flowing curves and arcs, plant life and animal life captured throughout the designs. The curves are typically partial arcs that flow from one to the other reversing, repeating, and offsetting, and proceeding to connect to the entire piece of architecture. It has truly become my favorite style simply because you can't help but look at the whole work. The eye follows one curve, which leads to the next, and all of a sudden you're looking at the opposite side of the wall. The style of Art Nouveau, also known as "the new style", is a perfect fit into the household of

John Tarleton, a man whom is always yearning for new ideas. After the research into the Victorian, Nouveau, and Gothic revival, the scenic design came together like a puzzle.

Once researched I brought my ideas together through sketches. The sketches were drawn and discussed, then discussed some more, and drawn again. We held weekly meetings to congeal the designs into a complete collaboration between the set, the lighting, the sound, the costumes, and the props. At the point where the director, Jim Daniels, was content with the scenic design sketch, I then had to build a model to represent the space that was going to be played on. In a sense it's a pre-build of the set in order to prepare for the upcoming larger build of the design. It is a half-inch scale representation that is basically the last pass before the director prior to drafting the scenery for the Technical Director. The model was finally approved, and I moved on to drafting the design.

As a brief description of the pieces of the puzzle, there are two sections to the design for Misalliance. They consist of the main living room, and the glass conservatory. The living room became a Gothic look, using the shape of arches found in my research from the simple and elegant Gothic architectural style. The conservatory was a part of Victorian architecture that represented status around this transitional period. Glass was becoming used widely and in grander scales. Called for by Shaw in his description of the set, stated as "a wall of glass", it was very fitting for the home of John Tarleton. The conservatory would have been "a new idea!". To continue with the "new idea" theme, it seemed fitting to utilize the art nouveau style for the conservatory design. Ironwork framing and railings, and window leading became free-flowing curves that were the most

enjoyable to design as it gave a freedom that is not found in designing Gothic stone architecture.

Once the draftings were given to the Technical director, he was able to figure out how to build the set, and interpret my draftings so the carpenters are able to construct it. The finished pieces would then be painted by a paint crew, and the finishing touches are adding props to the set to finish dressing it up.

As a whole, the set was beautiful. It was not, however, complete. The problem with being a designer is not the process, though it has its stressful situations because so much is relying on information from a single mind, but it's the depth of involvement. By being so enveloped in the work, all the small, unfinished details that might make it a little bit better are noticed every time I look at the stage. It's a rather uneasy and unfinished feeling. To the audience, however, it seems to have been very enjoyable to look at. Commentary from audience members and those not involved in the process are the only objective feedback available to me. I have received compliments such as "Broadway quality," "It couldn't have been better," or, "Very successful and it worked well with the play". It is the commentary that ultimately brings the sense of pride and satisfaction that I currently hold for my accomplishment.

The process is what must be enjoyed for such a thing to be worth doing. The show only lasted for four days, and then the set was torn down and thrown into a dumpster, but it is the collaboration, the research, and the overall goal that releases the passion for such a temporary art form. In a way, it is very similar to *dul-tson-kyil-khor*, (mandala sand painting) performed by Tibetan Buddhist monks. They spend days, weeks, or even

months intricately laying out colored sand in a beautiful pattern onto a flat platform, only to wipe it away after it is finished as a symbol of the impermanence of all that exists.

I feel as if I have taken a tremendous leap towards the professional arena. It is rare that an undergraduate student is given the opportunity to design a set on such a large scale except for here at Western Michigan University, where it becomes the norm. Because of this I feel that I have been well prepared for entering into a higher level of education. Designing the set for Misalliance has been a tremendous experience that will shine in my portfolio as well as in my memory. I am truly grateful for the opportunity to place something, from inside my head, onto a stage for many to see and enjoy.



Misalliance Scenic Design

Designed by: Joseph W. Shoup

