

FROM PAGE TO STAGE

*This exhibit will remain on display in the
Besserer Street lobby during the entire
run of Noises Off.*

The ninth exhibit in the 100th Anniversary Season, **From Page to Stage**, looks at the demands imposed by the script, and the choices made by Ottawa Little Theatre directors and designers when faced with those demands.

Many scripts present major challenges and the following panels and artefacts are evidence of just a few of the many successful (and some not so successful) ways that Ottawa Little Theatre practitioners have faced those challenges.



THE ART OF SETTING THE SCENE

The plays presented on our stage often require more than one set. Staging the story effectively may also require that spectators be aware of changes in time and/or circumstances. The play *Auntie Mame*, directed for OLT by Peter Cochrane, is a good example. The playwrights, Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee, indicate in the script that the decor for Mame's Beekman Place Apartment be changed dramatically each time that the story returns there. In order to accommodate this requirement and due to the need to make rapid changes, when OLT produced this play in 1996 it was decided to custom design the majority of the furniture, as well as most of the art work, to be used in Mame's apartment.



Set designer Margaret Coderre-Williams, working with Gord Beckingham (technical coordinator) Tom Pidgeon (head carpenter) and Ed Guingnion (scenic artist) created the following looks for Mame's apartment:

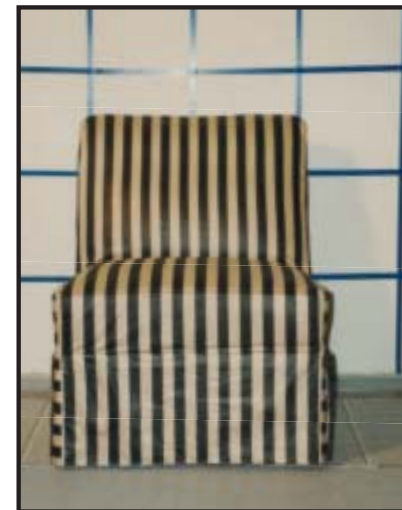
Oriental Motif:

All of the furniture and the art work in this scene are original; designed, built and painted specifically for this production.



Art Deco Motif:

The low bench from the first scene now has an upholstered cushion with an attached side table. The upholstered chair to the left of the image was taken from stock and the look of both the chair and the upholstered cushion on the bench were accomplished by taping and spray painting stripes on the fabric with metallic paint. The art work in this scene was created specifically for the production.



Stock chair before fabric was painted for *Auntie Mame*

MULTIPLE SCENE CHANGES

Literary Motif:

Most of the furniture for this scene was taken from stock with the exception of the pedestal which was custom built. In order to make the quick scene change possible, the bookcase contains Styrofoam filled book jackets.



Modern Art Motif:

The action in this scene required that the furniture be very awkward to sit on. The bench from the first two versions of the apartment is back with an entirely new look, and two companion chairs, with extremely slanted seats, are added. An Ikea clothes butler has been modified to represent a modern art sculpture and a three dimensional art work, used in an earlier production, has been repainted to blend with the colours of the decor.



Art work, originally created for another production, before it has been repainted for use in *Auntie Mame*

sculpture and a three dimensional art work, used in an earlier production, has been repainted to blend with the colours of the decor.

Safari Motif:

The final version of Mame's apartment takes us back to a very basic look, several of the furniture pieces have been removed and a fabric wall hanging, created specifically for this scene, and a potted plant are the sole items added to the stage.



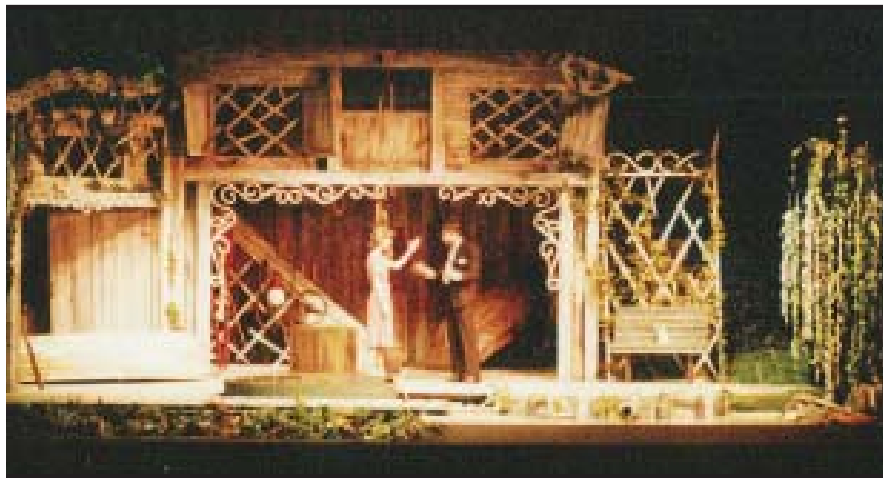
STAGING THE ELEMENTS

It is frequently required to represent the elements - such as water and fire - on stage, either to enhance the atmosphere or to provide given circumstances, and often to provide a dramatic moment.

WATER

The play, *Talley's Folly* by Landford Wilson, directed by Sybil Cooke for OLT in 1984, requires, as its setting, a dilapidated boat house and its adjacent dock. Set designer Leslie Hutchins provided, not only the specified boat house, but a portion of the lake itself. This entailed covering the front section of the stage with a shallow pool of water, complete with an agitator to ensure that the lighting would reflect ripples from the "lake" back onto the actors and the set. It was a very successful effect.

For *You Say Tomatoes* by Bernard Slade, directed by Sheila Shields in 2005 with set design by Edward Guignon, Tom Pidgeon, OLT's head carpenter, created a rain effect so that rain would be seen falling behind the windows of the set. This required an elaborate set up with a pump, troughs and tubing, ensuring that the rain would fall on cue without creating slipping hazards backstage.



Set of Talley's Folly



Water recycling system
attached to back of
window unit

STAGING THE ELEMENTS



Flo Fancott, as J.B.'s wife Sarah
and Joe O'Brien as J.B.

FIRE — *When it Works*

A very moving moment, involving flame, was created for the 1963 production of *J.B.* by Archibald McLeish, directed by John Knight. *J.B.* is described as a verse drama - a modern version of the biblical story of Job. Joe O'Brien, who played the title character, describes how an on stage effect involving a candle provided a very uplifting moment in an otherwise tragedy filled story:

“Following the death of their children through accident, rape and murder, J.B.’s wife (Sarah) leaves him. After an atomic war, J.B. finds his wife in the rubble of their home. She is on her knees in prayer, holding an unlit candle. (Unseen by her,) J.B. moves down behind her and, as he places his hands on her shoulders, the candle miraculously lights.”

This was accomplished by Flo Fancott (the actress playing Sarah) surreptitiously making a contact between batteries causing a spark at the wick and resulting in a flame. It was very dramatic and there were gasps from the audience every performance.”

FIRE — *When it Doesn't Work*

The Admirable Crichton set, designed by Leslie Hutchins, required a burning campfire at centre-stage for Act 2. This meant placing a flickering device under the fake logs which required a long extension cord going into the off-stage wings. On opening night, the 2nd Act, began with the campfire flickering heartily as anticipated – until one of the actors tripped on the extension cord and pulled out the plug – effectively dousing the fire.

Ah, well – this is LIVE theatre after all.



Set of The Admirable Crichton

STAGING DEATH

Unlike the dramas staged by the Ancient Greeks, where all deaths occurred off-stage, it is very often the requirement in plays to have the gory deeds done in full view of the audience (the death scene in OLT's recent production of *Deathtrap* may be taken as a perfect example).



Snake in the Grass set:
Trapdoor
(under chair)

For the production of *Snake in the Grass*, by Alan Ayckbourn, produced by OLT in 2009, director Tom Taylor and set designer Robin Riddihough respected the playwright's directive that a body be disposed of by throwing it down a well. In order to accomplish this, the one existing trap door in an on-stage position at OLT had to be put into use. The trap door is above OLT's workshop, therefore in order to use it for this production a slide was constructed to deposit the actress (aka the corpse) from the on-stage well opening to the work table in the basement.

To ensure safety, a stage hand was in position below the trap door for each performance aiding the "corpse" in her descent.



For *The Scarlet Pimpernel* by Baroness Orczy, adapted by Beverly Cross and directed by George Stonyk in 1998, set designer Robin Riddihough designed a miniature "working" guillotine which when it was lit from an off-stage position projected an enlarged image of the guillotine onto the on-stage cyclorama. The blade of the guillotine came down on cue giving the audience the horrific impact of the execution required for the culminating moments of the production.

The table in the shop where the slide from the well to the table was situated.



ESTABLISHING LOCATION

For the most part, play scripts demand specific locations and Ottawa Little Theatre's productions have been greatly enhanced by the set elements and detailed backgrounds which have been created to depict the play's locale, pique the audiences' interest and enhance their experience.

Try to imagine the following productions without the backgrounds details which have been provided by the set designers, scenic artists and lighting designers involved:



The Wild Guys
by Andrew Wreggit
and Rebecca Shaw

Directed by
Sarah Hearn
in 2004

Set design by
Robin Riddihough



Pride and Prejudice
by Helene Jerome

Directed by
Sybil Cooke
in 1997

Set design by
Robin Riddihough



Mail Order Annie
by Carl C. Cashin

Directed by
Joan Sullivan Eady
in 2006

Set design by
Edward Guignon



Epic Proportions
by Larry Cohen
and David Crane

Directed by
Geoff Gruson
in 2002

Set designers
Robin Riddihough
and Edward Guignon