A Brief History of Scene Design

Resources

Outside Reading...

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preRenaissance

During the Greek, Roman, Medieval and Elizabethan periods, the rear wall of the theatre was the scenery. Occasionally, especially during the medieval morality plays, scenic elements, such as the *Hells Mouth*, were introduced. Generally the scenes location was either obvious, unimportant, or stated in a character's lines. The latter was the standard practice during the Elizabethan era.

The Renaissance

The Italian Renaissance

Scenery, as we know it today, is a product of the *Italian Renaissance*. To a large extent, it is based on the discovery of the rules of perspective and their application to the world of architecture. The early evolution of the theatrical scenery is the work of a number of artists over a period of approximately two hundred and twenty five years: 1508 to 1638.

- Around 1415- Filippo Brunelleschi. (1377- 1446) goldsmith, sculpture and architect discovers the secret of linear perspective: a mathematical system for creating the illusion of space and distance on a flat surface.
- 1435- Leon Battista Alberti (1404-1474) publishes Brunelleschi's secret in *Della Pitture*, the first treatise on the geometric principles of linear perspective.
- 1508- Pellegrino da San Daniele (1467-1547) places individual houses (probably as angled wings) in front of a painted backdrop for a staging of Ariosto's *The Casket at Ferrara*.
- 1545- Sebastiano Serlio (1475-1554) publishes *Architettura* the first work detailing the design and construction of a court theatre.

Serlio's playhouse was erected in a large existing room (a Hall of State) in the court palace, the standard practice of the day. The stage, located at one end of the room, was raised to the ruler's eye level and the perspective scenery was designed to provide the *Royal Chair* with a perfect view. The front half of the stage floor was level, the rear half sloped up towards the back wall increasing the illusion of depth. The scenery was placed on the raked (or sloped) portion of the stage. Serlio's sets (*Comic, Tragic* and *Pastoral*) consisted of four sets of *wings* (the first three were angled -- one face parallel to the front edge of the stage and the other angled up stage -- and the fourth wing was flat and
parallel to the audience) and a **backdrop** or back shutter. His sets were conceived in architectural terms. They were not meant to be shifted.

**Sebastiano Serlio: Tragic Set**

- 1606- Giovan Battista Aleotti (1546-1636) introduces the flat (not angled) wing in Ferrara.
- 1638- Nicola Sabbattini (1574-1654) publishes *Practica di fabricar scene e machine ne' teatri* (Manual for Constructing Theatrical Scenes and Machines), the first practical stage craft manual.

**The English Renaissance**

**Ingo Jones** (1573-1652), England’s first major scene designer, introduced the Italian concept of perspective scenery to the English court theatre of James I in the beginning of the 17th century. He visited Italy in 1600 returning to his native England four years later. In 1605 he designed a perspective setting using angled wings and a back shutter for a production of Ben Jonson’ *The Masque of Blackness*. By 1608 he was framing his scenery with a proscenium arch and in the 1630s he abandoned the angled wings of Serlio for the more practical flat wings of Aleotti.

**19th Century**

The three major scenic trends during the 19th century, especially in Europe, were

- Historically accurate scenery,
- The development of the realistic box set, and
- A revolt against the two dimensional world of painted canvas.

**Historical accuracy**

The trend towards historically accurate scenery began in Germany around 1810 and is attributed to Josef Schreyvogel, the director of Vienna’s *Brugtheater*. Below are three managers-directors whose emphasis on historical accuracy has impacted the world of design.

Actor-manager Charles Kean’s (1811-1868) spectacular antiquarian productions, especially of Shakespeare’s major dramas, dominated the London stage of the 1850s. He believed that "historical accuracy might be blended with pictorial effect that instruction and amusement would go hand in hand." He brought centrality of *mise en scene* to the production of legitimate drama.

Georg II (1826-1914), the Duke of Saxe-Meiningen operated a small, professional court theatre. Like Kean, his sets and costumes were historically accurate. Although he used a realistic style of production, the plays he presented were primarily romantic. His two most frequently revised works were William Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* and Frederich Schiller’s *William Tell*. His acting
company toured the major cities of Europe for 16 years (1874 to 1890) influencing production techniques in both Paris and Moscow.

American producer, director and playwright **David Belasco** (1853-1931) is primarily remembered today for his emphasis on naturalistic detail. In 1909, for a production of *The Easiest Way*, his scenic artist placed the contents of a boarding house room, including the wallpaper, on the stage of the Stuyvesant Theatre and three years later (1912) he built on stage a fully functioning restaurant (Child’s Restaurant) for *The Governor’s Lady*. As a playwright he provided the dramatic source material for two of Puccini’s most popular operas *Madame Butterfly* (1900) and *The Girl of the Golden West* (1905). For more information link to [David Belasco’s production credits listed in the Internet Broadway Database (www.ibdb.com)](http://www.ibdb.com).

Development of the box set

As early as 1804, the manager of the Court Theatre at Mannheim (Germany) joined several pairs of wings with door and window flats creating a more realistic scenic environment. Actor-manager **Mme. Vestris** (1797-1856) is credited with introducing the box set to the English stage. In 1832, a critic wrote of one of her productions "the stage’s more perfect enclosure fits the appearance of a private chamber infinitely better than the old contrivance of wings." When Mme. Vestris produced Dion Boucicault’s *London Assurance* at Covent Garden in 1841, the critics noted the realism of the rooms with their heavy molding, real doors with doorknobs, and ample and correct furniture.

The New StageCraft

At the end of the 19th century, two designers, **Adolph Appia** (1862-1928) and **Edward Gordon Craig** (1872-1966), revolted against the scenic practices of the traditional European acting company. They objected to a three-dimensional actor standing on a flat floor surrounded by acres of "realistically" painted canvas. Their controversial ideas, published in numerous books and periodicals, would become the basis of the New Stagecraft. A stagecraft of simplification and suggestion.

A single Gothic pillar can create in the imagination of the audience the physical reality and spiritual force of the church that looms above Marguerite in [Goethe’s *Faust.*](http://www.northern.edu/wild/th241/sdhist.htm)

**Adolph Appia** (1862-1928)

Appia’s sketches published in *La mise en scene de drame Wagnerien* (1895), *Die Musik und die Inszenierung* (1899) and *L’Oeuvre d’Art Vivant* (1921) indicate a plastic, three dimensional set (steps, columns, ramps, platforms) revealed in directional light. He believed that shifting light should create an inner drama which flows and changes with the texture of the music; that the intensity, color and direction of the light should reflect the changing atmosphere or mood of the work.

**Edward Gordon Craig** (1872-1966)

Edward Gordon Craig was the son of actress Ellen Terry (Henry Irving’s leading lady) and Edward...
Godwin, a well known and respected architect and painter. His earliest designs, in 1903, was for his mother’s acting company at London’s Imperial Theatre. An exhibit of his designs in 1902 and the publication of *The Art of the Theatre* (1905) created such controversy that he was soon well known throughout Europe. In 1904 he designed Thomas Otway’s *Venice Preserved* for director Otto Brahm in Berlin, in 1906 Ibsen’s *Rosemersholm* for actress-manager Eleonora Duse in Florence and in 1912 *Hamlet* for Konstantin Stanislavsky at the Moscow Art Theatre. He continued to set forth his provocative ideas in *On the Art of the Theatre* (1911), *Towards a New Theatre* (1913), *The Theatre Advancing* (1919) and *The Mask*, a periodical published sporadically between 1908 and 1929. His designs, as illustrated in his published works, were monumental. Like Appia he broke the flat stage floor with platforms, steps, and ramps and replaced the parallel rows of flapping canvas with an elaborate series of tall screens which could suggest the essence of the local.

**20th Century - American**

Modern American design begins with the work of Robert Edmond Jones (1887-1954) and continues with those designers, such as Jo Mielziner (1901-1976) and Mordecai Gorelik (1900-1976), who apprenticed at the master’s drafting board. And they, of course, influenced the designers who followed them. In 1925 Donald Onslager (1902-1975) introduces the first college level course in scene design at Yale University. Below is a brief list of some of America’s major 20th century scenic designers.

**Robert Edmond Jones** (1887-1954)

Robert Edmond Jones, the "father" of American scene design, graduated from Harvard in 1910, traveled to Europe to study the New StageCraft and returned at the start of World War I. He shocked the American theatre audience in 1915 with his simple presentational set for *The Man Who Married a Dumb Wife*. Today he is primarily remembered for (1) his work with the Provincetown Players (1916-1929) and Theatre Guild (1919-) and their staging of Eugene O’Neill’s early plays and (2) the vivid dramatic lighting for *Macbeth*, *Richard III*, and John Barrymore’s *Hamlet.* Robert Edmond Jones’ production credits listed in the Internet Broadway Database (www.ibdb.com)

**Norman Bel Geddes** (1893-1958)

Norman Bel Geddes was an American theatrical designer who was heavily influenced by the work of Adolph Appia. He is primarily remembered for his massive theatrical designs, especially those for Austrian director: Max Reinhardt (1873-1943). Like most designers...
of the period, he created both the scenic environment and the lighting design. Probably his most famous theatrical creation was the monumental 1921 set for Dante Alaghieri’s *The Divine Comedy*. The set for this unproduced project was 124’ wide and 148’ deep. The two massive side towers which framed the pit were each 59 feet tall. This imaginative theatrical concept exists today as a notated "script", sketches, a scaled ground plan and front elevation, and a number of photographs taken on an 8’ by 8’ model.

Norman Bel Geddes’ production credits listed in the Internet Broadway Database (www.ibdb.com).

Boris B. Aronson (1900-1980)
Boris Aronson was born and educated in Kiev, and worked in Moscow and Germany before coming to America. His first success in this country was the *The Tenth Commandment* produced by the Yiddish Art Theatre in 1926. His first Broadway show, *Walk A Little Faster* (1932), was followed by some of New York’s most successful productions -- Clifford Odets' *Awake and Sing* (1935), Tennessee William’s *The Rose Tattoo* (1951), Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible* (1953), William Inge’s *Bus Stop* (1955), and *The Diary of Anne Frank* (1955) by Frances Goodrich and Albert Hackett. He will always be remembered for the imaginative settings he created in the mid 60s and early 70s for *Fiddler on the Roof* (1964), *Cabaret* (1966), and four Stephen Sondheim musicals -- *Company* (1970), *Follies* (1971), *A Little Night Music* (1975) and *Pacific Overtures* (1976). His last design was for Mikhail Baryshnikov’s staging of *The Nutcracker* (1976).

Boris Aronson’s production credits listed in the Internet Broadway Database (www.ibdb.com).

Mordecai Gorelik (1900-1976).
Gorelik, a native of Minsk, Russia, like Mielziner, was an apprentice to Robert Edmond Jones. He designed the sets for more than 50 Broadway shows during his 40 year career as well as being the principal designer for the Group Theatre. At the end of World War II Gorelik introduced his action-documentation-metaphor approach to design in the theatre class (*The Scenic Imagination*) he taught to American service men over seas. He became a research professor at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale in 1960 where he continued to design, direct and teach until his retirement in 1972. He authored the scene design unit, "Designing the Play," in *Producing the Play* edited by John Gassner.

http://www.northern.edu/wild/th241/sdhist.htm

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Donald Oenslager (1902-1975)
Donald Oenslager designed his first production, a ballet entitled Sooner or Later, in 1925, the same year he joined the faculty of the newly formed Yale School of Drama. For the next forty-five years, he commuted weekly between New York City and New Haven, Connecticut (the home of Yale University). He is credited with establishing the first professional university course in scenic design and is responsible for training several generations of American designers. He designed both sets and lights and worked in opera, ballet, musical theatre and drama. Some of his most important projects include the original Broadway productions of Cole Porter’s Anything Goes (1934), Kaufmann and Hart’s You Can’t Take It with You (1936) and The Man Who Came to Dinner (1939), and Garson Kanin’s Born Yesterday (1946).

Oliver Smith (1918-1994),
Oliver Smith, originally a student of architecture at Penn State, was one of Broadway’s most distinguished and prolific scene designers. He created the sets for the original New York productions of Leonard Bernstein’s On the Town (1944) and West Side Story (1957), Lerner and Lowe’s Brigadoon (1947), My Fair Lady (1957) and Camelot (1960) and Neil Simon’s Barefoot in the Park (1963), The Odd Couple (1965), and Plaza Suite (1968). In addition to designing the sets for multi-scene musicals and light situation comedies he also worked in dance (Fall River Legend (1948) for the American Ballet Theatre), opera (La Traviata (1957) for the Met), and film (Oklahoma! released in 1955 by RKO).

Ming Cho Lee (1930- )
Ming Cho Lee was born and raised in China. In 1949 he emigrated to California where he enrolled as an art major at Occidental College. At the suggestion of Eddy Kook, the president of Century Lighting, he moved to New York in 1954 and became an assistant in Jo Mielziner’s studio where he remained for the next four years. He passed the union exam in 1955. His first Broadway show, The Moon Besieged by Seyril Schocken opened (and closed) at the Lyceum Theatre on December 12, 1962. Many of his design credits are in the institutional and regional theatre. Between 1959 and 1963 he was the opera designer at the Peabody Institute of Music in Baltimore. In 1961 he was the resident designer at the San Francisco Opera. In 1962 he began his 21 year career as the principle...
designer with Joseph Papp’ s New York Shakespearean Festival. During his residency he designed over twenty of the Bard’ s plays. In 1970, after Donald Oenslager’ s retirement, he joined the teaching staff at the Yale School of Drama. Probably his most famous Broadway design is his Tony Award winning set for K2 (1983).

Ming Cho Lee’ s production credits listed in the Internet Broadway Database (www.ibdb.com).

Scene Design Home Page

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