

A SET DESIGNER WHOSE GOAL IS TO GO UNNOTICED

By JANICE ARKATOV

"When you're inside the theater, enjoying a play," Christopher Idoine remarked, "I'd really rather you didn't notice my work."

Idoine is a set designer, his current project being the repertory production of "The Slab Boys" (opening Wednesday) and "Thin Walls" (Nov. 3) at the Back Alley. It's a job he considers rich and challenging—yet secondary.

"No matter how lavish or stylish the set design has to be," he stressed, "in the end it's the actors delivering the words, the action, the story. That's the most important thing. So I have to be very, very subtle. If the set's too interesting, you're defeating the purpose; you're defeating the production."

Consequently, a lot of responsibility lies in his preparations.

Depending on the project, you spend a great deal of time in research," Idoine agreed. "But I do that background work early on, before even dealing with the mechanics of the play, and then it becomes a vocabulary you can draw from, although it's not the only thing. The experiences that happen to you outside the theater—words, music, literature, film, people—all those impressions are equally valuable in establishing your craft."

Idoine discovered theater as an undergraduate at Ohio University and, in his newfound enthusiasm, "ended up assisting teaching labs, construction of scenery and electrics. Then a lot of lighting, which became my main interest."

Even now, "nearing 40," that early affinity remains.

He emphasized, "There are those who approach lighting from a fairly technical standpoint, which isn't

right—I mean, it's *painting*. You see nothing on a stage till the lights are turned on, and then it can drastically affect the way you see a given object. When possible, I like to do both sets and lighting, establish the whole picture: proportion, scale, color, detail."

Most of the time, though, as with "Slab Boys," Idoine has his hands full with the busy floor plan.

"It's set in a carpet-dyeing factory," he offered, "with lots of movement, lots of action, very physical, you've got to know where everything goes. You've got to mix the paint here, get a dish from here, a color there, water from there. Then

somebody walks in with this, somebody walks out. There's a sink, a window that somebody climbs through, a door that goes somewhere, a closet that somebody hides in. The geography is critical."

And the historical realities—although acknowledged—are less so.

"It takes place in late-'50s Scotland," Idoine explained. "Now for me, that fact is not very important; for somebody walking into this show, that's not the key. What is necessary is to make the unfamiliar familiar, to help the audience understand the environment, the chaos, the sense of growth and transience, the people who've come and gone through this place."

In "Thin Walls," he added, "it's almost 180 degrees in the other direction. The setting is very, very familiar, something all of us have experienced—the Valley living-room. And in this case, it's looking for the unfamiliar you can find within the familiar, the things that



RICK MEYER / Los Angeles Times

Christopher Idoine on his carpet-dyers' set for "The Slab Boys"

are unique and special in the most mundane surroundings. So they've got completely different textures."

Idoine's own life encompasses some "different textures" as well.

He serves as the art director for NBC-TV's "Gimme a Break," while his background in theater has included graduate design work at Brandeis, time as resident designer at the Milwaukee Rep, plus productions at Santa Maria's Pacific Conservatory of the Performing

Arts, San Francisco's American Conservatory Theatre, the Berkeley Repertory and the L.A. Public.

"I'm considered a bit of an oddball," he admitted. "I walk into a theater I've never worked before and the attitude is, 'Oh, you do television, don't you?' And the television people think, 'Well, he's going off to do his little plays, isn't that cute.' That's OK. I know what's important to me—and I'm going to keep doing it."