

# Little of this, lot of ingenuity and voila! an Equity-waiver set

EVAN YEE/DAILY NEWS

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The list of 1980s bargains, including the \$98 flight to New York and the \$5,000 Korean car, can now be amended to include the \$150 set.

That's what Dale Carney figures he spent designing and building the set for the Group Repertory Company's recent production of Arthur Miller's "A Memory of Two Mondays."

His set for "The Tavern," seen there late last year, might have even cost a bit less. But, he warned, his work on the theater's upcoming production of "Sly Fox" will probably cost more.

Who knows — he might even cross the \$200 threshold.

Carney and his colleagues surely have one of the most difficult jobs in Equity-waiver theater. How do you construct an attractive, functional, professional-quality set on a tiny budget? We recently talked to three acclaimed designers about this problem and their approaches



Susan Lane, left, and Rich Rose must meet the challenge of designing creative sets for Equity-waiver

work.

Consider their cunundrum. Actors, after all, need only their brains and their bodies to do good work. Writers need only a pen and pad.

Designers, however, need boards and paint and tables and chairs and doors and door frames and the occasional moose head for the wall. They have to either buy them, find them, steal them or build them.

"Have you ever gone to the refrigerator and whipped something up out of nothing?" asked Carney. "It's very much like that."

### Leftovers

Carney's "leftovers" are, of course, the remnants of previous productions. His work consists largely of creative cannibalizing — taking props from past shows and reshaping them to serve his needs.

"It's like building a club house. Can we take this thing apart or bend it this way or turn it or in some way rework it? In 'Ah, Wilderness,' there was a window at stage left that had curtains and was really beautiful. I took that whole window and turned it horizontal for 'A Memory of Two Mondays.'"

Voila: The beautiful picture window in Eugene O'Neill's idyllic comedy became the grimy window of a depression-era automobile-

parts warehouse in Arthur Miller's bleak drama.

Such resourcefulness, of course, can only work in certain instances; only an automobile muffler looks like an automobile muffler, and you can't really build one. Fortunately, Carney said, "a lot of people donate things. We have a large collection of old lamps — anything you can imagine."

"Then you'll have the actors contributing to make their play special. The industrial lamp hanging from the ceiling in 'Memory' was brought in by one of the actors. In 'The Tavern,' one of the actresses' father donated the elk's head that was a focal point of the play."

Susan Lane, designer of the Odyssey Theatre Ensemble's current production, "Master Class," has her own technique for coming up with difficult-to-find items.

"I have friends at Paramount (Pictures)," she said. "I went there (to find props needed) for one show I was doing at the Tracey Roberts Theatre with a bunch of television actors." She's been going back ever since, scavenging the props department for off-the-wall (and on-the-wall) things she might need.

"I go around the bins by myself now," she said with a grin. "They love me." And why is her reputa-

tion there so good? "I always bring stuff back."

If a designer can neither find nor build what he wants, there's always the second option, which is to amend the original design. Rich Rose, designer of many shows at the Back Alley Theatre (including the current hit "Jacques Brel Is Alive and Well and Living in Paris"), knows how that works.

"With 'Days and Nights Within,' I wanted to have a rusted steel framework," he said. "Well, steel is very expensive, and we would have had to hire a welder. So we went with wood instead."

"I try not to know how much money there is," said Rose, who is as soft-spoken and introverted as Carney is wise-cracking and flamboyant. "If I knew a dollar figure and was trying to stay within it, it might limit my thoughts."

### Vague idea

So producing director Laura Zucker gives Rose a vague idea of the money available compared to previous shows — "She'll say, 'More than that one' or 'About the same as that one'" — and Rose will go to work. If the resulting design then proves impractical, "I'll try to come up with alternative

ways of coming up with the same look," he said. "I'll find ways of making it work."

Rose's comments illustrate the complexity of the creative process leading to a successful design. Beyond the budgetary constraints, designers must face the more basic obstacles of how best to express visually the ideas and emotions of a play.

Each describes his as a collaborative art.

"It's got to be a collaboration to work, because every little piece has to jibe with what everyone else is doing — the director and the other designers," said Rose. "My best designs, I find, are when somebody asks me, 'How did you come up with that idea?' and I can't really answer the question, because I can't honestly say where one person's idea began and another person's took over."

"The (Group Repertory Theater) is a group thing," said Carney. "There are no prima donnas. I get input from the 'lowest' person there that is very valuable. One actor in 'The Tavern' complained about the coat rack; he said something wasn't working for him. He played sort of a comedic character.

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### *Gritty realities*

"I wanted to underscore the gritty realities of life," he said. "Therefore there are cinderblock walls. There's not a velvet cover



**Dale Carney**

"Something out of nothing"

on the piano; there's a rusted tin look." If the set had been bathed in bright, warm colors, "it'd be a different show," he noted. "It wouldn't be the show Alan was directing."

Small budgets mean small stipends for designers (as well as virtually everyone else involved in Equity waiver). Lane, who has a master's degree from USC in set design, makes between \$500 and \$1,000 per show; she said she makes a living from her work but admitted her Significant Other pays the rent.

Carney, a newcomer to scenic design -- he's been doing it for

less than a year — gets nothing at all; he makes his living through his Sherman Oaks-based interior design business. Rose, who is happy if his remuneration "covers the gas" he burns driving to and from the theater, teaches scenic design at UCLA, where he got his own degree.

"You don't (work in Equity waiver) for the money," he explained. "You do it for the chance to be working away from school and meeting a lot of different directors and producers. It's very interesting."

Carney's considerations are also non-monetary.

"I haven't had anyone say, 'I read your bio (in the program) and I want you to do my home,'" he said. "If that happened, I'd certainly be open to it."

"But you can't approach it that way. If you do it for some gain, other than for the audience and for the purpose of communicating, then everyone will know it. They might not be able to pinpoint it, but they'll know it."

"I do it for fun. I've met wonderful friends there. It becomes a lot like family."

Lane also thoroughly enjoys her work — even if she gets sick of people making wrong assumptions about her profession.

"People go, 'What do you do — costumes?'" she said. "I say, 'No, honey — I'm here to pound nails!'"

# Design

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so I raised the shelf so that he had to actually jump to hang his coat up. That made the play a lot sil-

lier and more farcical. One little thing like that can make a difference."

But the designer's primary collaboration is, of course, with the director: Lane joked that she must sometimes "be a Henry Kissinger" and politely point out why a director's idea wouldn't

work. Usually, however, she and the director reach a point of understanding—a process facilitated by the fact she studied directing and acting for two years before deciding on set design as a career.

"It's real easy for me to talk to directors, because I can relate to (their concerns)," she said. "What's the motivation here? Fine. I can get an image out of what's supposed to be happening."

Rose explained how director

Alan Miller's approach to "Jacques Brel" influenced his design of the show. Since Miller declined to put a bright, happy face on Brel's often sad songs, Rose decided "I wouldn't choose warm, romantic-type backgrounds" for his abstract set.