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### A Pattern of Patience: On Providing Technical Direction for *King Lear*

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A PATTERN OF PATIENCE: ON PROVIDING TECHNICAL DIRECTION FOR

KING LEAR

by

Theron Seckington

A THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of

The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Fine Arts

Major: Theatre Arts

Under the Supervision of Professor Ed Stauffer

Lincoln, Nebraska

May, 2010

A PATTERN OF PATIENCE: ON PROVIDING TECHNICAL DIRECTION FOR  
KING LEAR

Theron Seckington, M.F.A.

University of Nebraska, 2010

Advisor: Ed Stauffer

The following writing will document my process as technical director for the 2009 mainstage production of *King Lear* at the Johnny Carson School of Theatre and Film (JCSTF) at the University of Nebraska – Lincoln (UNL). *King Lear* was directed by Virginia Smith with scenery designed by fellow Master of Fine Arts (MFA) candidate Patric Vendetti, lights by senior Angela Sharman, and sound by sophomore Max Holm. Costumes were designed by MFA candidate Cecilia Sickler. The shop foreman was Bryan Ruhs, and the production was stage managed by junior Amber Naylor. I was advised by JCSTF technical director Ed Stauffer.

In this work, I will discuss the planning, construction, and production of *King Lear*, as well as how I overcame challenges along the way.

## DEDICATION

To Emily, Cece, Tiffiney, and Aaron. Your friendship, and our mutual suffering, kept me  
sane.

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## Prospectus 1

My thesis project was to provide technical direction for the UNL main stage show *King Lear*. This prospectus will outline and discuss the rationale, methodology, and organization of both the written and project portions. In order to prepare for the project portion of my thesis, I attended production meetings, arranged individual meetings with designers, and provide leadership within the scene shop.

In preparation for the written portion of the thesis (hereafter referred to as “the thesis”), I documented the process through journaling. I also read existing theses from past graduates of this program. As technical direction is a craft more than an artistic endeavor, I do not have an artistic process to document; therefore, my journal consisted of a day-to-day account of the challenges I encountered.

The project was organized on a day to day, as needed basis. I will set goals for each week of the build and follow through with them.

The thesis is organized into several chapters with an appendix. A brief summation of each chapter and its contents follows:

- Chapter 1, pre-production: Detailing the short planning period and leading up to the first day of build.
- Chapter 2, production: The “meat” of both the project and the thesis will be the actual production period, leading up to tech.

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1 This prospectus was completed October 20<sup>th</sup>, 2009, prior to completion of the project. I have since rewritten it to encompass the following work, hereafter referred to as “the thesis,” and included it here for completeness.

- Chapter 3, special effects and sound: This chapter documents my additional role as the special effects technician and sound mentor for *King Lear*.
- Chapter 4, tech into opening: The final push towards getting the project ready for opening night. “Tech” refers to the rehearsal process once technical elements such as sound, lights, and costumes are integrated.
- Chapter 5, opening to close: A chronicle of any events that happened after opening that necessitated my attention, and a summary of strike (when the set is dismantled after the final performance).
- Chapter 6, conclusions: In which I sum up the process, what technical direction means, and how well I felt I handled the execution of the project.
- Appendices: Copies of photographs, reviews, or other materials I found may help the reader and improve the validity of the project.

## CHAPTER 1: PRE-PRODUCTION

My experience with the show *King Lear*, by William Shakespeare, began near the end of the Spring 2009 semester when I approached my adviser Ed Stauffer regarding my thesis show. It was agreed that *King Lear* would be a suitable project to fulfill my thesis requirements, as it would involve special effects and require me to undertake a more substantial leadership role than the other three productions of the season. The timing would work out well, allowing me ample time to draft and redraft the written portion of the thesis.

Planning for the show began in May, before I went away for the summer, with a brief talk discussing some of the ideas behind the story and some of the director's initial concepts. She had been impressed by a production of *Madama Butterfly* at the Met, and so conceived of a set with the same massiveness and imperiousness as that production. The scene designer had produced a rough draft of the groundplan, which was a massive assembly of stairs, platforms, and fabric, taking up more real estate than any set I have provided technical direction for to date.

The summer arrived and I went to Colorado to serve once again as technical director at the Perry-Mansfield Performing Arts Camp. I returned in August in time to move forward with *King Lear*. Substantial conceptual progress had been made on the show; the director had dropped the Asian aesthetic influenced by *Madama Butterfly* from the production design in favor of a Napoleonic approach. The storm was discussed in great detail; plans were made to look into special effects such as a rain curtain, fog

machine, wind, and haze. At this meeting, I also learned I had a budget of \$2900.

At these early meetings, it was brought to my attention that the sound designer lacked a faculty mentor. As I was the most qualified person available to provide mentorship to the sound designer, I volunteered to take on the role. By September 9<sup>th</sup>, it was determined that I should serve as the mentor for the sound designer. The two of us set goals for paperwork, concepts, and implementation. As my role as a mentor was both part of my process and a way to sum up my role in the department, I will discuss it in greater detail later.

I received a finalized groundplan on October 6<sup>th</sup> and communicated with the lighting designer about her needs as far as the front of house pipe went, the size of the set precluded use of our personnel lift (in layman's terms, the set prevented easy access to that particular lighting position). A large portion of the scenery was also angled toward the audience, or "raked," creating an uneven surface that would not readily accommodate ladders.

With a final groundplan in place, or so I was led to believe, I could then devote time to my part of the pre-production process. I spent four days working out the most efficient way to take advantage of our stock, as I believed the only way we could afford the show was through careful allocation of existing resources. This planning process normally only takes me two days, but new notes and information from the scene designer and director doubled the time it normally takes.

Eventually, I was able to devise a layout for our stock platforms and masking that allowed me to start a budget. I did not have more than an estimate for fabric and paint, so

I budgeted the platforms assuming they would take up the bulk of the budget. I then added 20% to the cost of this estimate to be on the safe side. I made up estimates for fabric based on prices I had discussed with the scene designer, and then made up a reasonable figure for paint. Finally, with money left over, I decided to create a “miscellaneous” category.

At this point, the reader may find it helpful to consult Appendices 1 and 2 where I have placed copies of the groundplan. I will also begin using vocabulary in this section which I will use for the remainder of the work. I will also use this section to devote individual attention to the unique challenges faced in the planning of this project.

Starting upstage (or closest to the east wall of the building), I noticed the designer called for a full stage cyclorama (the “cyc”) and there is a platform and stairs only 24” away. I assumed at this early point that there would be strip lights in this gap.

Traditionally, technical directors are asked to leave 30” of space for actors to pass through, so there would not be room for the cast to pass through this area. Luckily, the designer and director had planned for this eventuality and created a solution.

Additionally, the 9” rise height of the set (meaning each step would be 9” below the previous level) meant I would not be able to use stock step units for construction. Our stock steps use 6” or 8” steps, which would not help me for this show.

The highest level, at 90” in height, presented the solution to the traffic problem mentioned above. The scene designer conceived of a passthrough space that the actors could use to move rapidly stage left or right; as the underside of the platforms I would bolt together would be just over 7’ above the deck (the level of the stage), he reasoned

that they could be constructed and reinforced in such a way as to create a tunnel for the cast to utilize in their frantic rush to make their entrances. The only difficulty in these platforms would be their installation. Additionally, the escape steps leading off the platforms were massive in size and did not leave much room for actor traffic; I simply saw no way around this obstacle and let it be. There are times a cast must adjust to what they are given.

The tall platforms gave way to the rest of the set: basically an enormous staircase leading down to the front of the apron. It became my task to determine how to best use stock platforms to save money. I anticipated that storing these units until they were ready to load in would challenge my organizational skills as well as the physical strength of the shop labor. I turned out to be correct in my estimate; unassembled, the platforms filled nearly 400 square feet of the adjoining Studio Theatre. In order to fit the unassembled set into the Studio, I had my labor pool stack platforms on top of each other, sometimes leading to stacks up to twelve feet high.

Each of the four playing levels required accessible and safe escape steps. I knew that our stock was not up to the task, so I had to determine how many steps had to be custom built; as this task required skilled labor to avoid costly mistakes (in both time and money), I knew I would have to divert the most skilled labor available to creating steps. I also thought many of the stairs were on the slim side, being designed with a smaller tread than I would have preferred, but the set was so large that the steps ran alongside the theatre walls already. Were they any deeper, the steps would have run straight into the walls of the building itself. I also determined that with minute adjustments to the

positioning of some stairs and platforms, we could use stock instead of having to build new platforms. On the drawings in the appendix, these platforms are rendered in purple.

The rake, starting at the proscenium and ending at the edge of the apron, presented its own challenges. My greatest concern for the rake was that it ended right in front of the audience; I was worried about the rake becoming a safety issue and anticipated the need to add some kind of slip-resistant tread. A secondary concern was legal; I was informed indirectly that there might have been a problem with the angle of the rake in regards to Steve Patterson's Equity hazard pay (Patterson was the professional actor brought in to play the title role). I determined I needed to wait until I received more information before proceeding with the rake.

Consulting the groundplan once again, the thick black lines on the far left and right sides of the set represent the masking. The scene designer and I determined that we could use the stock masking available to us as it was of a uniform size of sufficient height to hide behind borders (masking flown out to hide lighting instruments). To my later chagrin, I did not anticipate any challenges with the masking.

The show as designed included many elements hung from both the Vortek (the automated fly system) and manual pipes, including gauze strips, silk swags, and silk strips hung from a traveling track. These elements would fly in or out to create opulence or desolation as required. I expected the fabric elements would go up very quickly, so I decided to do them last. I also needed to mask an enormous amount of lighting instruments requiring all five of the borders the department owns. I only required a single pair of soft legs far upstage. As mentioned before, the show also required the cyc for

lighting effects.

In closing this chapter on pre-production, I have a few observations and comments. I was unable to find an assistant technical director, master carpenter, or even scenic painting charge for quite a long time. In the end, I only found a pair of charge artists; there is a dearth of designers and technicians in the department.

At the time planning started, I was still hoping to have the set in by the first rehearsal. Though technically feasible, it would have required the use of much of the shop labor and limited my time with *You Never Can Tell* (hereafter *YNCT*), the first show of the season, which required my help as part of my graduate assistantship. Additionally, *YNCT* required enormous backdrops that could only be painted in Howell theatre, which limited my use of the stage. Finally, *The Laramie Project Epilogue* conflicted with the proposed load-in date (as it went up in the same space after the first *King Lear* rehearsal). I still think my goals were reasonable were it not for a conflict with labor distribution: had I been able to pull aside a limited amount of the crew and work on *King Lear*, and had *The Laramie Project Epilogue* not been in the same space, I would have had no problems loading in the set in time for the first rehearsal.

## CHAPTER 2: PRODUCTION

The build started shortly before the end of *You Never Can Tell*. I began with an enormous lumber order, only a quarter of what I would eventually need, and I broke the shop workers into small teams to spread the work out. I prefer to work this way and find that keeping people occupied and solving problems is a full time occupation.

Construction was split up into several phases:

- Platforms
- Load in
- Ready for light focus call
- Ready for paint call
- Troubleshooting
- Ready for first technical rehearsal (tech)
- Tech notes
- Performance notes

I have a different approach than most of the technical directors that I have worked with, based on a few maxims I have formed during my three years as a technical director:

- “A chain is as strong as its weakest link.” A technical director must be aware of the limitations of his or her crew. The limitations of this crew were not its numbers but its schedule and skill level. I was able to use *You Never Can Tell* to gain an understanding of the quality of workers I had to

build this show with. This would prove invaluable up until they finished shop hours and new workers replaced them.

- “Perfect is good, but done is better.” Wisdom from an old shop foreman. It is best to get things up on their feet as soon as possible so troubleshooting can take place. Everything needs to get onstage as soon as possible, because there will be a thousand problems with a set that are impossible to anticipate. Actors need to adjust blocking, lights will need to be refocused, the sound designer has to work around sound reflective surfaces, and fights need to be reworked. It is best just to put in everything as soon as possible. Most things can be worked with or made better after they are on the stage.
- “Yes, and...” I was trained as an actor and had a heavy interest in improv, and I was pretty good at it; the phrase “yes, and...” is the foundation of all improv training. I do not believe that any drawings survive contact with a carpenter, nor do I believe that monthly goals are possible to maintain. Instead, it works best for me to have a good picture of the entire set in my head before I set out, then to make weekly and daily to-do lists. This method is more effective when one has an assistant, but I keep to it regardless. The sooner I am aware of problems, the quicker I can resolve them.

Those previous thoughts are the reason I dislike build schedules. I get frustrated when they fail to work out, and I have never seen them survive more than a week, tops.

As soon as an actor sets foot on the set, a director sees it with new eyes and passes his notes along to the technical director; repeat this process as necessary for the painter, lighting designer, costume designer, and stage manager. Everyone involved on a production staff has disparate needs that often work at cross purposes, and it often falls on me to try and accommodate. Therefore, as I can not anticipate the needs of five or more people, I can not plan for anything other than a week-by-week basis.

Before *You Never Can Tell* was struck, I had pulled the majority of platforms out of storage for use in *King Lear*. I wanted to pick up lumber several days before we were supposed to start construction so that I would have ample time to judge our supply during the process. The shop foreman was ill the week leading up to construction, so I had to pick up lumber on my own as the shop's work study students are mostly not authorized to drive the truck. This led to a small interlude on Vine street where I blocked traffic for 30 minutes at a stoplight after lumber fell out of the truck due to my inexpert application of ratchet straps.

My two-day absence due to illness marked the first official week of build. I came back to discover that Stauffer had consulted the groundplans and taken the initiative to build the 90" level with a passthrough already. I certainly appreciated his efforts, though I had planned on starting at the other end of the set (at the proscenium) and working upstage. I had purchased lumber according to this plan; with the shop foreman still absent, I found myself needing to purchase lumber once again.

Platforms were pulled, legged, and crossbraced before being stacked in the Studio Theatre. I delegated the skilled workers to assemble the platforms that needed building

from scratch. The first phase of build encountered no problems, and went much faster than I anticipated. Several people I had come to rely on over the course of *You Never Can Tell* finished their shop hours, so new labor began to trickle in around the time load-in began. By far the largest portion of the set's budget was devoted to constructing the platforms.

The design also called for a large rake, ending in front of the audience and taking up most of the apron. I toyed with the idea of building the rake out of stock platforms, but ultimately decided it would be much easier to build from scratch. I further decided to wait until load-in to build the rake. I could order lumber and build the supports, but actual construction would need to wait. I worked alongside the shop foreman to figure out the mathematics of the rake late in the week before load-in. I entrusted the shop foreman to handle the project once he and I came to a conclusion about how best to approach the construction.

The second phase of construction was to put in the set. *The Laramie Project: Ten Years Later* was to go up in the space on the 12<sup>th</sup>, the ten year anniversary of the murder of Matthew Shepard, so it was necessary to push back the load-in until after the performance. The design necessitated starting load-in at the proscenium, because it provided a solid reference point with which to start a set that filled almost the entire playing space. I decided, due to the scale of the set, loading in as pieces were constructed would not be helpful to the director or cast. It was all or nothing.

As load-in approached, it was decided that I would act as “special effects technician” for the show. Though I would not cue or design any of the effects, the

scenery and lighting designers would work together through me to ensure each designer got what they wanted out of the special effects. I go into more detail in the section “Sound and Special Effects,” which documents my journey through the FX process. At any rate, I found myself running a demonstration of the FX which included almost every piece of technology we had in-house to demonstrate for the director, lighting, and scenic designers.

There was some urgency to the load-in on October 26<sup>th</sup>, as I felt rushed: This set was huge, and I felt I just could not put part of it in in the time allotted. I was also due on set for a film shoot that night, so knew I would be unable to stay to the last moment to put finishing touches on (most load-ins take longer, often right up until rehearsal, to address last-minute issues). Luckily, many of the most reliable workers showed up that day. Additionally, all the students on work study were in that day, which I would need to accomplish my goals. I quickly realized I had made a few mistakes in constructing and planning the set. Many of the platforms overlapped in ways I had not anticipated, so several of the platform legs were too long. Fixing minor problems in one area caused problems in others; I ended up with holes or gaps offstage that I would have to fix eventually. However, I will say in my defense such occurrences are not uncommon; during *You Never Can Tell*, the technical director was astonished to learn that his crew had somehow built an elaborate curved step unit both upside down and backwards. My solution to such difficulties mirrors his: “The actors will have to deal with it for one day.” Technical directors need to strive to remember the whole, not the details. As it stood, I wound up with a number of problems and safety issues to address with only an hour left

in shop.

Several holes needed to be filled so that nobody would fall to their doom; railings were attached to address the problem. Despite my large labor pool, we were unable to install the rake. I had to arrive at a solution to allow the actors access to the proscenium level (a three foot step from the floor), so I had the shop foreman pull a stock step unit from the basement that, though awkward, would provide the cast a way to make their way to the first level of the set. I confess this was not ideal, but on the other hand, I had finished probably 80% of the set and addressed a number of concerns in one surprisingly productive day.

The very next day, I was able to install the rake with little trouble and take care of several of the safety issues remaining – stage management brought to my attention that many of the steps still needed safety railing and that several of the holes were falling hazards. There was also a tense moment as production stage manager Brad Buffum demanded I make significant changes to the scenery in order to accommodate the stage manager for the show. The stage management console is actually located downstage right, so while the complaint was legitimate, I felt that the first solution proposed (to remove about three feet of platforms and tell the director to adjust her blocking) was beyond unreasonable, and said as much. We discussed options such as moving the comm bay, which would allow the stage manager (“SM”) to call the show from the other side of the stage, moving the SM to the booth (rejected by the SM, who felt that she needed access to the stage), and moving the stairs that were obstructing her easy access to the stage and downstairs. Ultimately, we agreed to discuss solutions at the production

meeting the next day. Eventually, the scene designer and I were told to address the issue in whatever way we felt would be most effective, and we later decided to shrink the stairs down to 24” wide, the bare minimum width for escape stairs. and to move them as far offstage as they would go. Everyone concerned seemed to find this solution acceptable. To be perfectly honest, this only created about three more inches of room for the stage manager; I felt that whatever made everyone happy and did not require any more work for a complaint that should have been addressed several weeks prior to load-in was the best solution.

The next major step to prepare for was light focus call, while at the same time ensuring that I would not block the initial light hang. I try as hard as I can to accommodate for the needs of all departments. We are told time and again that theatre is a collaborative art form, so I feel that is a good attitude to take to the production process as well. The key difference between the light hang and the focus call, as far as it affected me, was the masking; to put up masking before light hang would be to invite disaster, as the hard masking makes it difficult to fly linesets in and out. Conversely, it would be just as bad not to have masking up before a focus call. I had to learn this lesson the hard way during *The Unvarnished Truth*, my first show as technical director, when I failed to adequately mask the set in time for focus call. As a result, I was determined not to make that mistake again.

Immediately following load-in, the electricians (collectively referred to as “electrics”) requested that the shop build a counter-raked platform to help them reach lights at the front of house. This counter-rake ensured that a ladder set on the rake would

sit flat instead of at the angle of the rake, allowing electricians to work safely. Using leftover trusses from the rake, we were able to build this unit in just a few minutes. The main disadvantage of this system was the weight and cumbersome size of the counter-rake, preventing easy transportation.

At this same time, I had to ensure the rake was safe. In addition to normal traffic, the rake was host to a pair of fight scenes. After some discussion with the scene designer and Ahna Packard (adjunct professor, designer, and veteran scene painter), I determined to try all of the suggestions offered to give the rake more of a tread. We created a mockup of all three methods on a piece of masonite, dividing it up into a few sections, and screwed it down onto the stage for the actors to play on. By the next day, we had our answer. The scenic charges would put Tread-Tex, a form of deck grit, in all their paint when they got to the rake. Though I harbor personal doubts that the grit provided any extra security to the actors' footing, I find that placebos have a place even in scenic carpentry.

On an amusing side note, it was near this point that one of my shop workers pointed out I had installed a step unit backwards. Embarrassed, I immediately had it torn out and turned around. Nothing is a problem if it has a solution.

With lights hung on Halloween day, I had a week to address the challenge of masking while simultaneously preparing for a paint call. I had already hung most of the soft masking early in the process, on a day with a light work load. This left hard masking to put up. However, I ran into a hurdle when putting up the hard masking. Due to slight errors in load-in, the set, which fit exactly where it needed to on all offstage points, was

angled slightly relative to the flylines. This means that masking I put up suddenly ran the risk of affecting lights as they flew in and out for focus. There was nothing to be done at this point, and I did not notice the disparity since the set lined up offstage exactly where it was supposed to.

Not to be deterred, I decided it would be simple enough to shuffle around flylines until there was room to accommodate both the masking and the necessary materials in the air. The lights, of course, were there to stay, which necessitated the use of long poles to guide flylines gingerly around lighting instruments. This kind of difficulty has been shared by every design I have worked with on Howell Stage, and I expect it will continue in the world at large.

Paint call occurred the day after focus. To prepare, I had made sure to tape off everything I did not want painted: the proscenium, the hard masking, and splay walls. I also began to cover the set with masonite, a hard particle board that takes paint well. Unpainted, untreated masonite is an extremely slick surface, so I had to ensure that the painters were able to get on set in time to apply a primer coat before rehearsal. There was confusion on the part of the painter who was not aware of the 6 PM fight call and began painting much later than I would have preferred. I decided to set a 4:30 PM painting cutoff time for the rest of production so that the paint would have more than an hour to dry, as I knew that actors would begin arriving shortly after 5:30 to warm up.

Before the first tech rehearsal (tech), the shop workers were able to put up the required masking and adjust for sightlines. We had put gauze strips in the air to create the hovel that Lear and his entourage take shelter in during the storm. Though the gauze had

not been painted, I was under pressure from the director to put it in the air so the cast could interact with it. Ultimately, I felt like this was a failing on my part; I eventually had to take that same gauze back down to have it painted. I certainly could have delayed the installation of the gauze for two days and had the painters move it higher up in their priority list, the difficulty was that the two paint charges had inconsistent schedules and were often out of the communications loop. I feel this scheduling challenge was a problem that should have been addressed before the charges were assigned, but everything worked out in the end.

Like most other pieces of scenery, the gauze strips carried their own set of challenges. I observed during installation that several gauze strips hung very close to lighting instruments. For safety, we decided to apply Flamex (a theatrical flame retardant) to the gauze when it received a paint treatment. Additionally, the light gauze was great for wind effects during the storm but had so little weight that the natural draft in the space was enough to blow the gauze around and cause it to become tangled or stuck on lights. I first tried using safety pins to attach small pouches of lead weights, and eventually replaced these weights with a lead-lined tape used by golfers.

The majority of the set was finished by the week before tech, which is the part of rehearsal where the scenic, lighting, sound, and costume elements are added to the process. Except for the communication problems and a distinct lack of assistants, I felt it had been smooth sailing. The week before tech left me to deal with with only the Vortek, the placement and safety of the special effects, as well as who would be interacting with them, or so I thought.

A number of small challenges began to crop up. One of the masking flats upstage was terribly off center, and I simply had not been out in the house to see it. The biggest challenge turned out to be the blue silk swags that I had put off installing, believing they would not take long. The design also called for black silk panels that would travel in at the top of the show; these presented some difficulty in that the traveler track they would hang on took the better part of a day to hang and adjust. The batten it hung on also was not long enough to hold the entire track, so we had quite a bit of fine tuning to do in order to adjust it so it would hang close to center. I was not happy with the end result, and even when the scene designer attached weight to the silk panels, they blew around and would get caught on the masking when flown out.

I had also been asked to program the Vortek computer to fly pieces in and out for rehearsal. Although I personally dislike giving that kind of control to stage management before tech, the request was not necessarily unreasonable. I was able to program the Vortek's simple controls in a matter of minutes and instruct the assistant stage manager in its operation. After one day of experimentation, I was asked to address the problem of the Vortek's squeaking during operation. The scene shop informed me, after inspecting the flyline, that fixing the problem could take up to a week, so I presented the SM with limited options: The Vortek could move quickly, or it could squeak. I recommended speed in that situation. Together, we decided to slow down the Vortek as much as we could for the scene transitions and to allow the squeaking to get by.

The final challenge going into tech was the three sets of swags. As designed, these blue silk panels were meant to help set the opulence of the first scene. These swags were

my greatest hurdle, and the only one I feel I failed to adequately overcome. I had contacted the costume shop for assistance in sewing the panels together, as each one was approximately ten feet wide and needed a confident hand to assemble. I did not feel that my skills were up to the task. Though I took a sewing class and would encourage every potential technical director to do so, I am a terrible stitcher and could not entrust this task to myself. The costume shop found itself overwhelmed by the scale of the production, however, and I was unable to find adequate help in assembling the panels. I also severely underestimated the time they would take to install. These factors meant I did not have any of the swags prepared for tech. In the future, I will need to assign more time for manipulating fabric.

Despite the fabric situation, by the time the shop closed on Friday the 13<sup>th</sup> I was pleased with the work I had overseen. The show would even contain touches I had a hand in designing, and swags aside, I had delivered everything on time.

I have learned I am a better technical director when I am administrating and delegating, and much less effective as a leader when I take projects on for myself to do. That being said, there are days where the labor pool is not up to snuff; those are days I have to leap in and take responsibility for projects.

As always, I think there were times during this process that the design team worked at cross purposes. As a technical director, I have my personal list of priorities, which may differ from the priorities of the lighting designer, the scenic designer, and director. I feel like I stood by my list of priorities the entire time, and I made sure the concerns of stage management were my first priority every day. I also feel like making

sure all departments understand the groundplan is not my responsibility, yet I still felt upset with myself when mistakes were made that could have been avoided with better communication.

Poor communication remains the biggest obstacle to effective technical direction. As George Bernard Shaw said, “The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion it has taken place.” It is a technical director's responsibility to ensure that they understand the needs of the director, stage manager, and production crew. It is also the responsibility of the production team to make sure their needs are clearly articulated to the technical director at the same time, just to be on the safe side. The greatest example of a failure during this production came immediately after the first day of load-in; the director made it clear I had not met her expectations by not installing the rake. Had I known, I would have placed the rake higher on my priority list. With better communication, this incident would have been avoided.

### CHAPTER 3: SPECIAL EFFECTS AND SOUND

It was decided during pre-production that I would become the special effects technician for *King Lear*. I would complete this task both in fulfillment of the project portion of the thesis and for a grade in Lighting I, which I was taking concurrent to this production. As previously mentioned, it had been determined that I would be mentoring the sound designer through his process.

My first task as special effects technician was to verify that we could produce every effect requested with technology we had in house (in our inventory). A short list of requests from the first few production meetings follows:

- Rain Curtain
- Fog
- Haze
- Strobe effect for lightning
- Rolling fog
- Wind

In house technology included a LeMaitre G300 fogger, a Rosco ColdFlow Chiller unit (which, working in conjunction with any fog machine, would provide the rolling, low-hanging fog requested), a Neutron hazer, and a pair of large carpet blowers (for wind). Stauffer also provided an antiquated carbon-arc light, which would provide an extremely bright strobeflike effect at the hands of a conscientious operator. Thankfully, the rain curtain was cut soon after a conversation between the scene designer and

director. I had discussed the difficulties of the rain curtain with the scene designer, including the safety problems it presented, and both of us were reluctant to promote the rain curtain. Though I looked forward to the engineering challenge, I think its exclusion was for the best.

The next challenge to overcome was the resistance of the master electrician (“ME”). A heated discussion led to a round of emails and conferences to determine whose job it was to haul the technology out of the basement, put it in place, apply necessary ducting and cables, and essentially do everything except write the cues. This is the only instance in my experience where two technicians were actually fighting for a larger workload.

Each of us claimed that setting up the technology should be his duty, but I resolved it with an email from Laurel Shoemaker, the faculty lighting advisor (and the professor responsible for my grade in Lighting I). It was determined that 1) both the scenic and lighting designers had requested special effects, and I was therefore the best person to attend to their needs, 2) hooking up and cueing the effects would still fall under the responsibility of electricians, and 3) I would be responsible for locating, maintaining and placing the appropriate technology. It also came to light that the ME and lighting designer had somehow come to believe that I intended to write the cues for the FX, which would have been a horrifying breach of etiquette (for the uninitiated reader, this is the domain of the lighting designer). I quashed the rumor, discussed Shoemaker's email with the lighting designer, and we declared the matter settled.

I next had to set up a demonstration of some of the technology that neither

designer had worked with. I worked with the shop foreman to hook up the fogger, chiller, carbon-arc light, and carpet blowers so that the lighting designer, scenic designer and director could preview what each effect would look like. Since all three were familiar with hazers, it was decided I did not need to set that machine up. The demonstration took place on the empty stage the week before load-in.

Some research determined that the carpet blowers could not be placed on traditional dimmers, as dimming the circuits they were on would cause the motors to burn out. Our house electrician, former graduate student Kathleen Lorenzen, assured us that the school possessed “non-dims,” a type of dimmer that would either be all the way on or off, sufficient to protect the motors of the fans. This was the final piece of knowledge I needed in order to proceed, and I decided to put the FX in place at light hang to ensure I would have access to the personnel and expertise I needed; normal shop hours required my constant supervision of work and this task would require my concentration and problem solving abilities.

The lighting designer and I determined that a second carpet blower would be necessary to provide the effect the two designers wanted. I was assured by the shop foreman that the scene shop's budget would cover the expense, so I approved the purchase. Much to my dismay, after spray painting the brand new blower a matte black, I discovered that Stauffer had not approved the purchase, deeming it unnecessary. My budget was stuck with the bill for the \$200 carpet blower (as Home Depot will not take back a carpet blower covered with spraypaint). Luckily, I had planned for \$300 in miscellaneous purposes, so I was still within my projections.

My single greatest frustration also came out of the FX process. The chiller we used was operated by freezing carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>), creating dry ice within the machine. The chiller is hooked up to the fogger, which then blows warm fog over the dry ice to create a low-hanging fog effect. I began by using 50 pound bottles of compressed CO<sub>2</sub>; by the shop foreman's estimate, a bottle that size would run two hours of constant use. It soon became apparent that this information was completely inaccurate, as we ran through four bottles in a like number of days and had no carbon dioxide for the first technical rehearsal. I demanded that nobody “test” the chiller again, as I believed this was a flimsy excuse to play around with the captivating effect. The shop foreman recommended we rent a 200 pound tank and quoted this rental at around \$40. I agreed; not only would it provide plenty more CO<sub>2</sub>, the particular tank he looked at would actually use less carbon dioxide due to its cooling system – this tank held denser liquid carbon dioxide, which then sublimated to a gas when released; in other words, it held much more than four times the CO<sub>2</sub> of a 50 pound bottle. After the tank was delivered, it turned out that the rental actually cost us just over \$200. I was shocked, but really had no other option, hoping that lighting would hold up their offer to shoulder some of the cost of maintaining the FX.

Meanwhile, I also acted as mentor to the sound designer for this show. I had been working to help the sound designer with his design to the best of my abilities. He joined the team with no experience, taking Sound I and Sound II with Associate Professor Jeff O'Brien concurrent to his involvement in the show. His inclusion on the production team being something of a mystery to me, I nevertheless tried to be the best mentor I could be,

as then-graduate Shawn Deiger was to me when I designed sound for *An American Daughter* my first year here.

The two of us discussed his concept early on, and I tried to help him develop his ideas into a more concise statement. He had a good understanding of the text, and wanted to make the storm into Lear's character peak, which, if you are doing the sound, makes good sense. He had also requested help accessing the NAXOS music library, an online database of streaming music that UNL students have access to. I am familiar with the NAXOS library, so I showed the sound designer how to access and record samples from it.

As he had come from a film background, the sound designer did not have an understanding of the paperwork other designers would rely on, so I introduced him to an aerial plan, a box plot, and the idea of a shop order list. I gave him deadlines to complete this information and spent the next several weeks advising him how to solve some of his problems with mixing, technology, and research.

Unfortunately, as light hang approached, it became apparent the sound designer had not done any of the preparation I had instructed him to do. To his credit, he had been diligent about gathering cues and meeting with the director to develop the sound for the show. However, I was frustrated to learn that his assurances that he knew where the speakers were going and had discussed this matter with the lighting designer were not accurate. The lighting designer cornered me the day before light hang to discuss the sound designer's speaker placement, which he had not shared with her; or if he had, had not communicated his intentions and requirements clearly.

At this point I began to feel I had failed as a mentor. Possibly, I had not clearly explained why this paperwork was so important as far as other designers were concerned. Regardless, the sound designer had neither created a speaker plot nor informed the house electrician what he planned to check out of the sound inventory. Normally, the latter would not be a problem, but light hang fell into conflict with a “haunted house” fundraiser which used several of the speakers he had wanted to use. I emphasized that without a shop order in place, we could not simply take whatever we wanted from the sound storage closet. Eventually, I contacted the sound designer for the “haunted house” to straighten out what we could and could not borrow.

Compounding my frustrations with the project, the sound designer requested we move the speakers to an occupied flyline during the light hang. I explained that was frankly impossible with this short of notice. He gave in and decided that the then-current position of his speakers, in the air on pods hung left and right, would suffice.

In the end, the sound design went over well. Combined with the special effects, lights and performance from veteran actor Steven Patterson, the storm was probably the highlight of the show.

I realize I am in an unsympathetic spot describing my actions as a mentor. It is true, there are things I could have done better to explain the importance of paperwork to the production team as a whole. However, I feel that this show was not an appropriate first experience for an untrained sound designer. Furthermore, I feel I explained numerous times that the paperwork I requested was vital not only to the design team's understanding of his intentions, but vital to me as a mentor and assistant were I to help

him in any meaningful capacity. It is likely that he did not understand some of the theatrical vocabulary I take for granted, but I do know there came a point where I actually drew a diagram for him and asked him to reproduce it with his specifications. It took him a number of days to get back to me and state that my request had confused him.

I may not have had the best methodology for teaching the sound designer how to work as part of a production team. I have little teaching experience up to this point; maybe I could have done things differently or done more hand-holding throughout. However, as evidenced by the diagram just mentioned, the times I tried hand-holding were ineffective. Paradoxically, I believe firmly that everyone has to make mistakes in order to learn – so I suppose the lesson for myself is, let people screw up, especially in school. I worked behind the scenes a few times to ensure that the designer would have a good product and I should have let him have some of these confrontations on his own. I know my greatest successes have come from a trial by fire.

I suppose my greatest question as a potential future educator is: at what point does one trust that others will do their jobs? I believe this question will plague me for the rest of my career, as it did during this process (as seen by the \$400 in unnecessary expenses and my experiences with the sound design). I do not believe it should be necessary that I check and double check every decision made during the technical process; I certainly could, and would be well within my rights to do so, but it simply is not my job as technical director to make sure that other people in leadership roles are doing theirs.

## CHAPTER 4: TECH TO OPENING

The first tech always makes me nervous. I know problems will arise that I did not think about, that everyone will be stressed, and that I will have to make a number of tough decisions. This tech was not like that. Everyone arrived with their paperwork in place, the crew was on time and each cue had been written. I had the foresight to bring my own power cord and power strip, allowing me access to my laptop throughout. We even finished our cue to cue shortly after dinner and managed to complete a runthrough of the entire show in the evening. I have never seen a tech move so smoothly.

That being said, I wound up with a few notes. The fogger and carbon arc machines needed to change positions, and carbon dioxide ran out again, making the chiller my number one frustration during the run of the show. The majority of the gauze strips and fabric were cut from the production after this first tech, which meant I needed to reprogram the Vortek before the runthrough. I was able to address these few notes before the dinner break was over.

The runthrough went smoothly, and we collected our notes and left. My major task on Monday was to install the swags. As I prepared to put the first one in the air, I was informed by electricians that I would need to hang aircraft cable to dress back the swags so they could put lanterns on the same line; this information further delayed the installation. I had been given a book on how to create the specific type of swag the scene designer wanted. Though I followed the instructions I was given verbatim, the final product hung far, far too low, blocking the faces of actors. totally destroying the lighting

design in the first scene, and looking nothing like what the scene designer was after. I tried the single swag I was able to install that night and it was judged unsuitable. Further discussion revealed that even if the swags were lifted to the level the scene designer wanted, the lighting designer had not planned for their presence. I admit this was my mistake, but can only say once again that I was not aware of the varying priorities they occupied. I had assumed the lighting designer was aware of their existence and planned around them, just as I had assumed they would not take as long as they did.

Monday night in tech, the Vortek operator missed her cue and the swags did not come in on time. Accordingly, all the fabric elements were cut. I was actually relieved, as it made my life easier and I could focus on the few remaining masking problems. I also had to devise a method to protect the curtains from the carbon arc machine's brilliant heat, accomplished with a simple dog clip and piece of tie line.

There were a few cleaning notes I passed onto the stage manger; what we thought was a paint touchup actually turned out to be the mud and makeup worn by actor Ryan Kathman in his Poor Tom costume. Additionally, I had concerns about the stage blood staining the set. I had to ensure that these housekeeping issues would be addressed each night. The stage manager took matters into her own hands and purchased baby wipes for the crew to use in cleaning.

As noted earlier, I had many difficulties with the fogger/chiller unit. For a long time, we assumed the difficulty lay in the chiller or in the DMX-fogger communication. After some trial and error, we discovered that a pump in the fogger itself was broken, preventing fog fluid from reaching the unit properly. This was the last thing we checked,

as one does not expect a brand new fogger to malfunction. It was the second week of performance before we finally fixed the problem.

By Tuesday, all of the problems had been handled. The scene designer attacked the swags again and arrived at a product he was happy with. After one more trip to the Vortek's control system, we were ready to open.

## CHAPTER 5: OPENING TO CLOSE

*King Lear* got through its first week uneventfully, with a one week break for Thanksgiving, followed by an understudy performance and its second week of performance. After what seemed like barely any time at all, it was time to take it all apart.

I received some unexpected but welcome assistance in the form of the husbands of two cast members. I knew going in that strike would be fairly uncomplicated, but that the set had to come down in a specific order. We worked upstage to downstage, starting by removing escape stairs, railing and masonite. Eventually, we worked down to the rake and started pulling in lights and fabric to remove, including the fabric elements I left in the air because there was no time or need to take them down. I decided to leave the borders in the air, recalling how much trouble they had been to find, and because the school does not yet have a good storage space for soft goods.

One of the things I learned from previous strikes is that, with large casts, there never seems to be enough for everyone to do at once. I have taken to dividing scenic labor into two pools, “scenic,” which takes apart the actual scenery and transports it to the scene shop, and “salvage/demolition,” in charge of breaking scenery down and saving units that may be of use in the future. The salvage team is also in charge of cleaning our stock platforms so they will be free of staples, screws, nails and anything else that might injure future technicians as they transport the platforms for the next show.

Strike encountered few difficulties. The greatest one was a lack of batteries for our cordless screw guns and impact drivers, forcing us to resort to our supply of pneumatic screwdrivers. Also, with a cast the size of *King Lear's*, ensuring that everyone

has something to do can be a challenge. As I do in shop, I made constant rounds to troubleshoot and make sure everyone had the amount of personnel and tools they needed.

As predicted, the lights took the longest, but it is difficult for them to start until the scenery has been taken care of. The only difficulty that strike ran into was an overabundance of labor near the end, leading to some of the cast working on the light hang for *Santaland Diaries* instead of *King Lear* strike. The problem I saw was that there was work for only 3 people to remove the few remaining lights from the splays, while 30 stood around. I would have preferred to have called it a night at that point and sent the cast home and volunteered to stay there myself and take down the remaining instruments, but I had officially turned strike over to the house electrician once the scenery was struck.

Strike always seems like the perfect time for thoughtful reflections and fond memories. In truth, strike is way, way too busy to reflect and ponder, and I do not usually have the time or patience to share inside jokes with the cast and crew.

Morale is an important part of strike. At some, strike is a chance to say goodbye to a rewarding experience, excellent crew, or graduating senior. At others, everyone just wants to finish up and go home to their friends or families. For this reason, I strongly favor ending strike once it reaches a point where there is not enough work to sustain the momentum. Sometimes that means a few skilled workers need to stay another 45 minutes to release dozens of unskilled workers with no professional stake in the show.

## CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSIONS

The most difficult part of this writing is to discuss how I feel about my performance. The reader has just devoured over 30 pages of my triumphs and failures over the course of the process, which should serve as a primer to this section.

To begin with, I badly needed an assistant. I approached two students with an interest in technical direction for help, but neither felt they could commit the time to this project. An assistant would have gone a long way toward allowing me to keep the workflow active in the shop and allowed me to dedicate more time to planning and troubleshooting. I found myself overwhelmed by the amount of work and planning I needed to do in addition to keeping the workers moving.

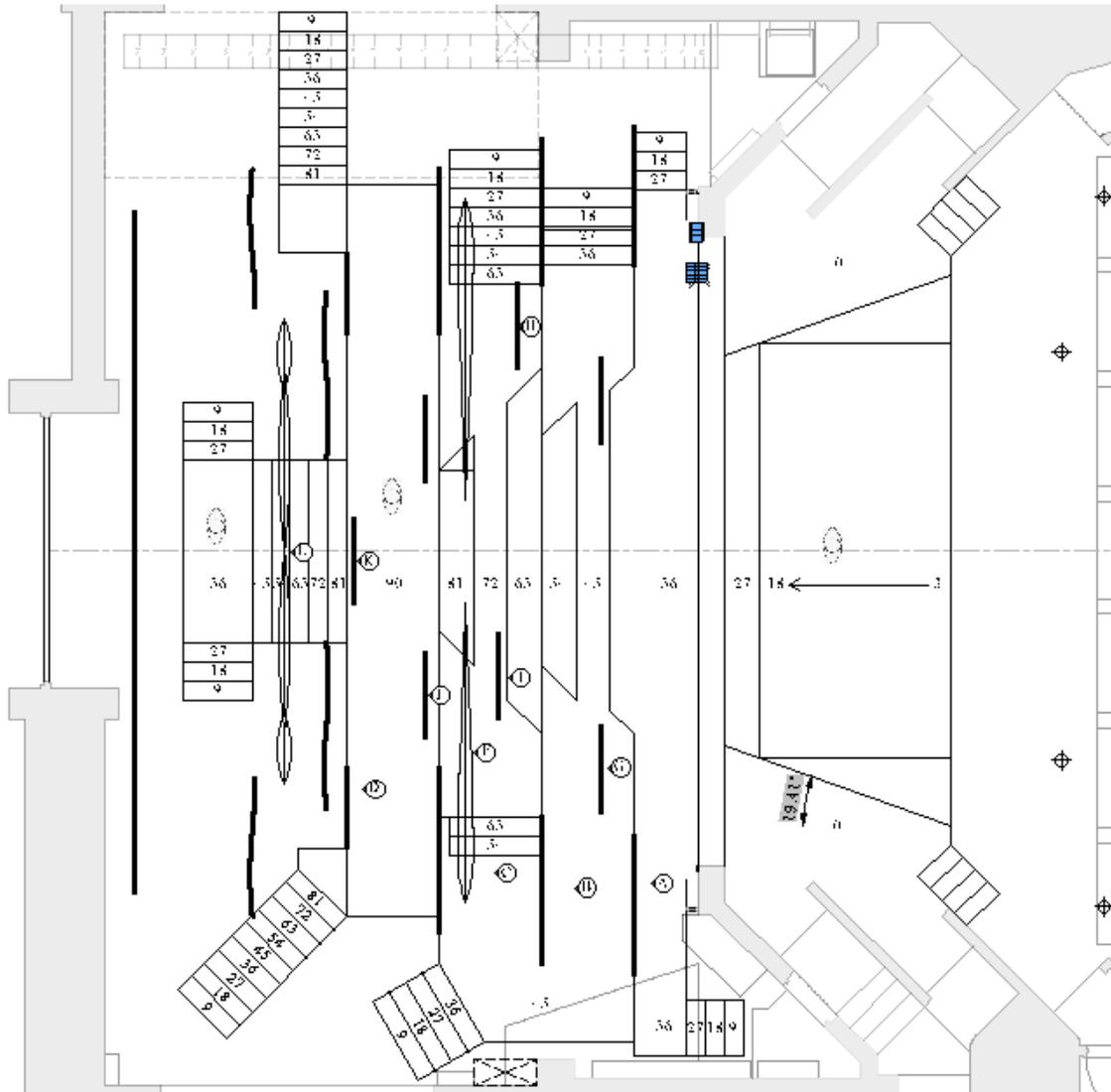
As mentioned, I severely underestimated the amount of time that the fabric elements would take to install. I feel like this was my biggest failure during the process, since it impacted the scene designer's work directly, concluding with almost all of the fabric elements cut from the show.

In general, I feel I need to improve my planning; though I am committed to trying to understand the "big picture," I feel like I slipped up several times during this process. I feel like both of my previous experiences with technical direction at UNL, on *The Unvarnished Truth* and *The London Cuckolds*, went much more smoothly as a result of my ability to see the big picture. With *King Lear*, I felt overwhelmed and unable to grasp the whole process at once. In part, I think this was due to several redrafts of the floorplan that came after my planning process had started; additionally, I am not certain I was

always in the communications loop between the scenic and lighting designers, though I have no proof or specific instances in mind.

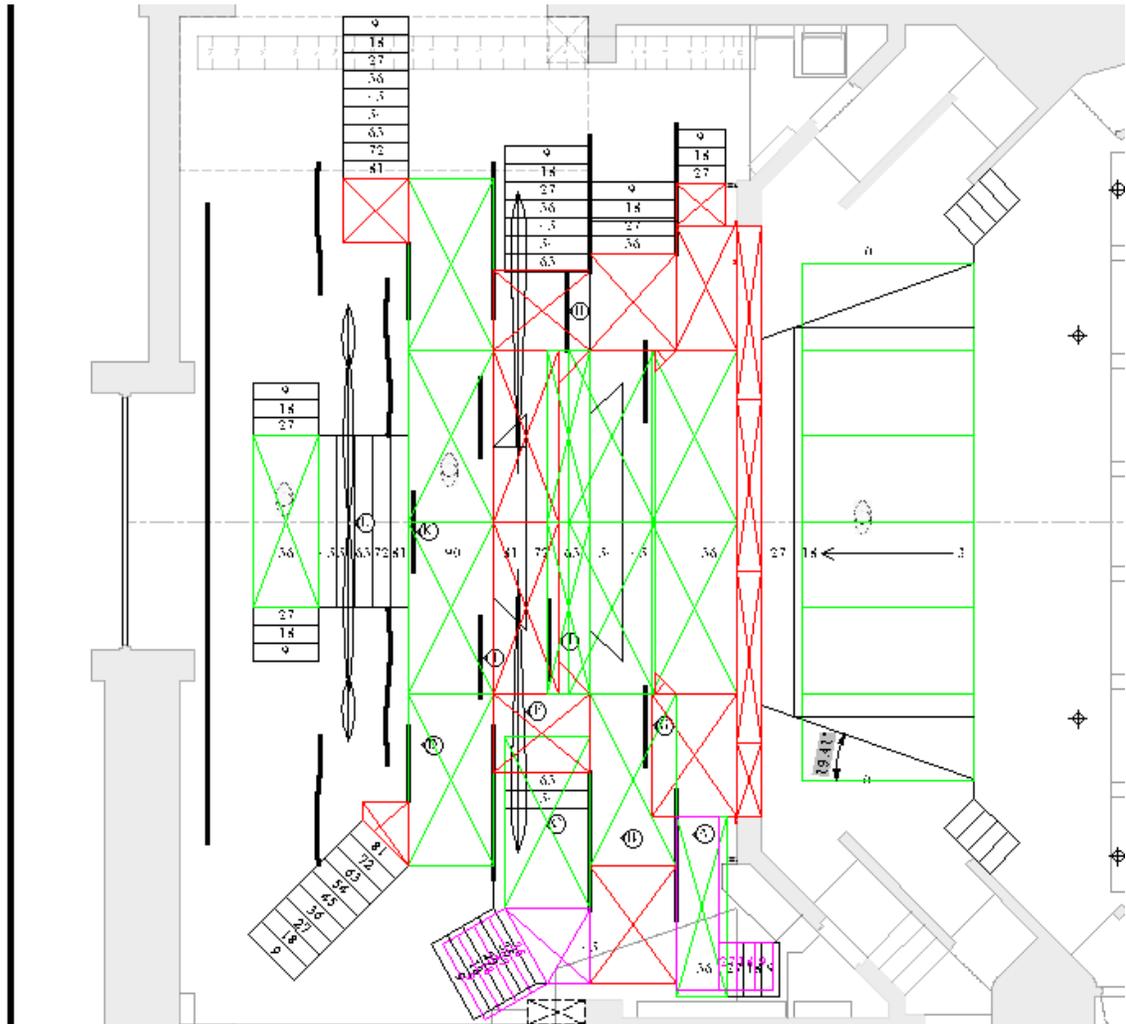
In short, I do not believe that *King Lear* was the best process I have worked on, and I was extremely surprised at the amount of challenges that cropped up with such a straightforward set. The best lesson I can take away from the process is not to underestimate any show.

## APPENDIX 1: ORIGINAL FLOORPLAN



This is the groundplan I received from the designer.

## APPENDIX 2: FLOORPLAN WITH MY ADDITIONS



I took the scene designer's original groundplan and used VectorWorks 2009 software to lay it out in a manner easier for me to understand. Green lines represented stock platforms; red lines indicated platforms to build from scratch; purple lines indicated my proposed changes.