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SILENCE: A Technical Direction Project

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SILENCE: A Technical Direction Project

by

Matthew Michael Rightmire

A THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of
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For the Degree of Master of Fine Arts

Major: Theatre Arts

Under the Supervision of Professor Edward Stauffer

Lincoln, Nebraska

May, 2014
The Johnny Carson School of Theatre and Film opened its 2013-14 mainstage season with the play *Silence* in the Studio Theatre on October 10, 2013. This thesis project encompasses the Technical Direction of *Silence*. As the Technical Director, I was responsible for the budgeting of time, people, and money necessary to plan, organize, construct, and load into the theatre all the scenic elements required for the performance. Duties included purchasing materials, drafting construction drawings, and leading shop crews in the individual processes to create each scenic element as well as modifying the house seating equipment to accommodate the scenic designer’s creation. This thesis encompasses the technical direction process. Appendices include scenic design materials, construction notes and drawings, technical direction paperwork, and production photos.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

The 2013-14 mainstage season began with shows chosen as the thesis productions of the current Directing Master of Fine Arts (MFA) candidates. After reviewing the proposed scripts submitted by these directors, I requested to execute the technical direction of Silence. Directed by Dennis Henry, Silence was the first show of the season, slated to run October 10 through October 20, 2013.

This thesis is an overview of the preproduction and planning through the construction and final use of a safe and functional set as envisioned by the scenic designer and the rest of the production team. It includes information regarding budget, daily progress, and working drawings used to execute the design.

Silence is a contemporary work written by Moira Buffini about characters in 11th Century C.E. Britain. The drama follows the exile of Ymma of Normandy to Britain, at the hands of her brother, where King Ethelred arranges for her marriage to Lord Silence of Cumbria. The audience learns upon his wedding night that Silence is a girl. Her mother sheltered Silence from this fact in order to ensure Silence’s lordship of Cumbria after her father’s death. The balance of the story details the newlyweds’ trip to Cumbria while being pursued by King Ethelred, who, in a moment of supposed clarity, realizes that he should have married Ymma himself. Upon their arrival, Ethelred orders Silence killed and proceeds to marry Ymma. Silence manages to survive the fatal fall and returns to Ymma, disguised as her new handmaiden.

This production had a scenic budget of $2,500.00 and five weeks of shop time to build it. The major elements of the scenic design included a circular playing area twenty
feet in diameter. This was flanked by three sections of concentric seating banks separated by vomitoria which both performers and audience members utilized. Wishbone-shaped archways, eighteen feet in height, framed each vomitorium. A circular steel rod connected the tops of the three arches. A six-foot length of cheesecloth hung from the rod, acting as a 360° projection screen. Other scenic elements included four rocks crafted in rough cubes, a bedchamber chair, a stair unit, and a four-poster bed which stagehands rolled onto and struck from the circular playing area.
Chapter 2: Preproduction

Production meetings for *Silence* began at the end of the 2013 Spring Semester. At that time, the director presented the production team with notes about his vision for the play and some historical context of the characters and what was happening at the time the play was set. The team consisted of Dennis Henry, Director; Michaela Stein, Scenic Designer; Sarah Resch, Lighting Designer; Katie Davis, Costume Designer; Sonia Sandoval, Sound Designer; David Tousley, Properties Master; and Ethan Seagren and Drake Tucker, Projection Designers.

Before the close of the 2012-13 school year, the designers had research and starting concepts to share with the team. Ms. Stein completed a white model and presented it at a production meeting so the team could start planning some of the physical logistics of the space. The production team for *Silence* met with the electrics crew to get an overview of each of the video projectors available to be used in mainstage shows. The Directing MFA thesis shows needed to use some form of multimedia, so it was imperative that the video content designer, lighting designer, scenic designer, technical director, and artistic director all understood the abilities and limitations of the projection equipment in order to utilize the multimedia in an efficient and professional manner.

The production team was aware that *Silence* would be adjudicated as a part of the Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival (KCACTF), and could be invited to the annual festival in January 2014. To this end, the design, construction, and strike of the set would need to be repeated after being stored for three months in an alternate location.
Chapter 3: Construction

As the first show of the school year, construction for Silence could not officially begin until the lab students, our primary labor force, completed shop orientation during the first week of class. During this time the first production meeting took place, allowing the production team to regroup after the summer break and present any new information or ideas. During the first week, a preliminary construction plan allowed for building a working horse-drawn cart that could lose a wheel and then undergo repair in performance. A few days after the first production meeting, the scenic designer and director decided to cut the practical cart and repurpose the scenic rocks onstage as the base for set decoration to indicate the general shape of a horse cart in those scenes.

The largest and most tedious part of the construction process came in the customized building of audience seating risers to accommodate the circular playing area. My goal was to use as much of the stock riser inventory for the Studio Theatre as possible; those stock components, however, consist of rectangular platforms in six-foot and eight-foot lengths. Although they could function as parts of the second, third, and fourth rows of seating, they could not conform to the tight circumference of the twenty-foot diameter playing area. The first row, therefore, was built from scratch. In the interest of touring this configuration to KCACTF, and turning the overall goal into a series of teachable, repeatable tasks, the first row was designed and built as a series of fifteen identical wedge-shaped platforms that would then be connected together in the venue (see Appendix B, Fig. 1). This system had the added advantage of allowing one or more
sections to be removed for wheelchair seating (Fig. 2). The remaining rows were constructed using the stock riser platforms and several custom-built platform plugs, clamped together to conform to the curve established by the first row.

The wishbone-shaped arches posed the next significant challenge to the process. The nature of their design was organic and although they were to resemble wood in their final appearance, they were designed to have a minimal thickness (less than one inch) of material to aid in the overall visibility of the playing area and not to hinder any egress through the vomitoria. The base of each arch attached directly to the ends of the first row of seating risers. The top of each arch was rigged with a pick point in its top to help the entire arch stand upright and provide an anchor point for the ends of the cheesecloth projection screens.

The task of constructing the arches fell to my Assistant Technical Director, Greg Rishoi. His familiarity with sculptural construction led to a reliable and effective method of laminating layers of lauan mounted to a skeletal jig, which created three identical arches per the scenic design (Figs. 3 & 4). The laminated legs of the arches met at a block of 2x4s laminated to appear as a single piece. The sides of the 2x4 block were drilled out to receive the end of the 3/8” steel pencil rod on which the cheesecloth would hang. The three sticks of pencil rod were bent in the roller press to mirror the circumference of the playing area below. Single widths of cheesecloth were cut from the bolt to match the length of the pencil rod. A pipe pocket was hemmed into the top edge of each piece of fabric and slid onto the pencil rod for hanging. Each pencil rod-cheesecloth screen was rigged by three pick points to secure them to the arches and overhead rigging system in the Studio Theatre (Fig. 5).
Another sculptural element of the design was the “medallion,” in the parlance of the production team. The medallion was a circular piece designed in the motif of cathedral window panels and suspended over the center of the playing area. The aesthetic purpose of the piece was to provide a visual focal point that tied together the line and weight of the archways in the central space overhead. Its construction was comprised of 3/8” steel pencil rod, worked into individual rings and welded together to form the frame of the entire piece (Fig. 6). Ethfoam tubing encased the steel frame to increase the illusion of weight while three prongs extending from its circular center were built up from layers of lauan covered with a layer of extruded polystyrene foam. The entire piece was primed with elastomeric roof coating to create a uniform, bonded surface to which the paint treatment would adhere (Fig. 7).

Interactive scenic elements in the playing area included four rocks, a chair, a large step unit, and a four-poster bed. While the crew built and assembled them in the theatre, these smaller pieces underwent fabrication in the scene and prop shops and appeared in the venue later.

The most complicated of these pieces was the bed. I enlisted the help of our other Technical Direction Graduate Teaching Assistant, Cody Juttlestad, to build the bed frame per the scenic design. Mr. Juttlestad and I hypothesized that creating the intricate detail of the bedposts would be suited to carving wood and polystyrene foam stock on the lathe. These carved pieces would be drilled out and stacked together on lengths of threaded rod that could be capped with hex nuts to compress the entire assembly (Fig. 8). The wooden pieces were turned on the shop lathe, but the foam pieces were turned on a custom-built jig mounted to the shop drill press. This jig allowed for a longer piece of material to be
turned than the shop lathe could accommodate (Fig. 9). While Mr. Juttelstad fabricated the posts, I had other shop staff assemble the frame that became the base of the bed. They mounted casters to the frame so the bed could be placed and struck for the required scenes. Assembling the posts and canopy braces with the bed frame proved to us that the component-bedpost idea was not a suitably strong structure for the intended use of the bed. The scenic designer agreed to the compromise of using prefabricated wooden posts to provide rigidity and structural support for both the actors and the canopy of the bed (Fig. 10).

The biggest challenge regarding the bed was its locomotion on and off stage. The director and scenic designer both wanted the bed to be placed and struck without any noticeable handling by the running crew. The first suggestion of the scenic designer was to attach some form of push stick to the lower offstage edge of the bed frame so a crewmember could navigate the bed into the playing space without stepping into the sightlines of the audience. This was not a viable option because the length of push stick required to satisfy the necessary geometry of the space exceeded the amount of available space offstage. The second option was to incorporate a steerable drive wheel under the bed, operated by a crewmember stowed in the base of the bed frame. After considering different wheel options, the final installation utilized the front tire and pedal assembly from an oversized tricycle. The pneumatic tire had a large enough circumference to make locomotion of the bed feasible at the hands of the operator. The stem of the tire assembly was seated inside a pipe mounted to the bed frame, allowing the wheel to pivot left and right, thereby giving the operator steering control while powering the wheel in either
forward or reverse. To give the operator navigational control, clear ultraviolet-reactive paint was used to mark a path of travel on the stage floor. As the bed moved in either direction, the operator kept the drive wheel on the paint line illuminated by a black light mounted under the bed. This allowed the operator to propel the bed with sufficient speed while avoiding collisions with the audience seating risers and the archway through which it passed.

An oversized step unit was constructed to resemble the inside edge of a castle parapet wall at the end of Act II. The oversized treads of the unit were eighteen inches deep with a one-foot rise from tread to tread. The unit was castered to make it easier for the running crew to position it during intermission. The entire unit was covered in polystyrene foam that was sculpted to look like cut stone. The foam was then covered with fabric to increase its durability before it was painted (Fig. 11).

In a similar fashion, crewmembers constructed four rough-cut rocks as modular scenic pieces to be used in every scene of the show. They built two of the rocks as rough cubes. The other two they built as rectangular blocks, roughly twice the length of the smaller rocks. Lab students roughed out the frame of each rock with 2x4s and ¾” plywood. The staff scenic artists sculpted the polystyrene foam and painted the finished rocks (Fig. 12). One rock needed special modification to house a wireless microphone for the sound design. I cut a hole in the plywood base of one smaller rock and installed a wireless microphone bag inside the rock’s frame where it could safely hang, suspended by its belt (Fig. 13). The condenser of the microphone was fed through a hole in the foam on one side of the rock and pushed flush to its painted surface. The small surface area of the microphone (less than 3/16”) could not be seen from more than a few feet away.
All the rocks were fitted with mill felt material on their bottoms to allow them to slide across the stage floor with ease.

Some of the scenic elements were collaborative projects involving work with the prop shop staff. The bedchamber chair was parceled as a properties project. The prop crew both constructed and painted the chair. One particular prop collaboration was integral to the functionality of the scenic elements on stage. For scenes in which the characters traveled by horse cart, loose reins were included in the hand props to indicate the direction of travel. Without a horse onstage to anchor the opposite end, the performers needed a method of acquiring and interacting with the reins without the reins being completely loose. The solution was to feed the reins through the facing in the front of the first row of audience risers so the reins could be pulled into the playing area as needed, but retracted underneath the risers for other scenes (Fig. 14). After the prop crew finished painting and treating two lengths of rope to look like heavy leather reins, the reins were run under the audience risers and through the lauan facing, then each was tied into a loop. The two loops were installed on opposite sides of the playing area so the traveling action of the cart could change directions. The lauan facing kept the reins from being pulled completely off the stage and the reins being tied in a loop kept them from being pulled out of the facing. A piece of tie line was tied to the offstage end of the reins so the running crew could retract them during scene changes.
Construction Schedule:

Week 1 (Sept. 3 – 6)
- Medallion frame constructed
- Audience risers for first row constructed and base painted

Week 2 (Sept. 9 – 13)
- Medallion fleshed out, prongs added and fleshed out, sealed for painting
- Stage floor sanded for painting
- Stair unit frame constructed, plywood treads attached
- Wood and polystyrene foam pieces lathed for bedposts
- Audience risers painted black
- Jig for archways fabricated
- Lauan facing for risers laminated as one piece
- Rock frames constructed, covered in polystyrene foam, carved into rock forms

Week 3 (Sept. 16 – 20)
- Stock risers assembled to form remaining house seating
- Plug risers drawn to fit gaps, constructed and legged, clamped into place
- Arch pieces laminated together on jig, smoothed with joint compound, sanded
- Bed frame constructed
- Rocks skinned, sealed, and painted
- Medallion base painted
- Projections screen tested
Week 4 (Sept. 23 – 27)

- Bed tested in rehearsal, pulled for rebuilding, rebuilt with wooden posts
- Medallion installed
- Archways installed
- Stair unit skinned and painted
- Pencil rod bent at proper radius for projection screens to hang
- Projection screens hung roughly in position
- Stage floor base painted

Week 5 (Sept. 30 – Oct. 4)

- Wireless mic mounted in rock
- Projection screens trimmed and installed
- Drive wheel mounted under bed for steering
- Finish paint completed
Chapter 4: Technical Rehearsals

Tech Rehearsal Part 1: October 4, 6:00 pm

Tech Rehearsal Part 2: October 5, 2:00 pm

Notes:

- Remove threshold of prop shop door to allow clearance for bed
- Adjust hand brakes in the bed to a shorter throw
- Identify squeaking joints in bed frame and silence them
- Install new black curtains over prop shop door, add a bump-out to conceal bed
- Patch riser facing where old holes were drilled for reins
- Widen new holes around reins to minimize friction
- Secure house stairs to fifth row of risers
- Mask scene shop entrance with eighteen-foot black flats
- Dress Studio Theatre curtains to cover as much exposed wall as possible
- Steam out wrinkles from projection screen
- Trim edges of screens where they join the arches
- Add glow tape to edges of vomitoria and masking flats
- Line audience steps with white gaff tape
- Cover stair unit with black cloth
- Replace batteries in black light under bed
- Add night lights to perimeter wall of theatre for audience’s visibility
- Review riser section removal for wheelchairs with stage manager
First Dress Rehearsal: October 7, 7:30 pm

Notes:

- Fix or replace white tape along edge of front row of risers
- Attach lauan facing, painted black, to inside railings on scene shop vomitorium
- Mount tubes to floor behind facing for reins to run through
- Touch up floor paint – black in house areas up to playing area
- Replace casters on bed with quieter units
- Carpet the ramp leading offstage into the scene shop
- Mask outside of seating banks by tying a black border curtain to the railings
- Paint last riser plug black

Second Dress Rehearsal: October 8, 7:30 pm

- Pull up leftover tape line inside front-of-house entrance
- Add lock nuts to lauan panel that gets shaken in Act II
- Clean up spilled candle wax in first riser row; paint in second riser row
- Add black flats to top and sides of prop shop entrance; curtain performer entrance
- Touch up paint as needed
- Staple down sides of bed skirt
- Wash railings and vacuum audience seats

Notes were completed during regular shop hours before opening night.
Chapter 5: Performances

Performances ran October 9th – 13th and 17th – 20th. During the first weekend of the run lighting and projections experienced technical difficulties. In both areas, the technicians overseeing these respective operations were able to troubleshoot and resolve the problems without additional assistance. There were no other problems during the run of the show.

Stage management added two regular calls to the schedule of the run. In the first, the show paint charge touched up the side table after every performance, as it experienced cosmetic damage from being thrown across the playing area. In the second, the running crew executed a dedicated call forty-five minutes prior to show start in order to rehearse the entrance and exit of the bed.

Two respondents from KCACTF met with the cast and crew after each had watched the show. The overall responses were very positive, one specifically noting the structural integrity of the scenic pieces in light of their rough handling and the one and only instance of the bed bumping into the archway overhead. The result of these reviews was their selection of Silence for presentation at the annual festival in January 2014. The show received four Awards of Merit from KCACTF, including one for Technical Direction.
Chapter 6: Budget

A sum of $2,500.00 was to cover scenic building supplies and paint. The scene shop supplied certain consumable materials such as screws, staples, and hardware. The breakdown for materials purchased, their use, and their cost appears in summarized form below. This summary is a reconciliation of the receipts for all scenic supplies over which I had direct control. The total of $1,905.11 does not include the expenditure of paint already purchased that was on hand at the beginning of the production process.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scenic Unit</th>
<th>Material</th>
<th>Quantity</th>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Cost</th>
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<td>Archways</td>
<td>4’x8’ lauan</td>
<td>11 sheets</td>
<td>Menards</td>
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<td>Projection Screens</td>
<td>3/8” pencil rod</td>
<td>3 sticks</td>
<td>Rivers Metal</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Bolt of cheesecloth</td>
<td>100 yds</td>
<td>EBP Inc.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Hose clamps</td>
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<td>Pipe insulation</td>
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<td>Platforms (Risers)</td>
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<td>10 sheets</td>
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<td>2x4 x 16’ boards</td>
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<td>Facing</td>
<td>4’x8’ lauan</td>
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<td>Bed</td>
<td>3/8” pencil rod</td>
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<td>Acorn post toppers</td>
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<td>3’ steel angle iron</td>
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<td><strong>Stair Unit</strong></td>
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<td>Pencil sharpener</td>
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<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
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<td>$1,905.11</td>
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Chapter 7: Strike

As *Silence* could be invited to perform at KCACTF in January 2014, crewmembers struck the set with enough care in order for it to be reassembled with minimal rebuilding or repair. They disassembled the archways into three pieces each. Those pieces, along with the medallion, they stored in the wagon house of Howell Theatre. The platforms and facings built to fill in the audience risers they stacked in the scene shop. The stair unit, bed, chair, and rocks they stored in the scene shop basement. All hand props and costumes they placed in dedicated storage locations. A copy of the Strike List for the show appears in the appendices.
Chapter 8: Invited Production

Silence was honored with an invitation to perform at the Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival—Region 5—Festival 46 on January 20th and 21st, 2014. During the course of reinstalling the scenery, opportunities arose to change or improve the way in which we had executed the show during the original run. Two significant changes involved scenic elements.

First, the stair unit was prone to a slight rocking motion accompanied by a rattling noise when a performer walked on it. It was determined that the running crew could slide the stair unit into place during intermission without the aid of casters, so they were removed. This improvement made the base of the unit stable and eliminated the rocking and the noise.

The second change involved the reins of the horse cart. The reins were designed to be pulled into the playing area and stop automatically when the fixed end of the loop reached the two pieces of plastic pipe inside the riser facing. During strike, the wooden support bracket holding the pipes was damaged beyond repair. Instead of rebuilding the same apparatus that did not perform as well as expected, two tennis balls were cut open and affixed to the ends of each set of reins. The soft surface of the tennis balls was silent on the stage floor and stopped the travel of the reins by butting up to the inside of the riser facing.

Nominal expenses were incurred to remount Silence. Paint required $90.00 worth of supplies to repaint the stage floor and touch up scenery. Electrics required $70.00 for new gel. Props required $21.10 for food consumed during the show.
Chapter 9: Conclusion

Our production of *Silence* was the quintessence of a capstone project for a graduate thesis. It involved every basic function of technical theatre that a technical director should be comfortable handling. Although not actual scenic flats, the archways were a form of supported vertical scenery. The risers exercised all possible configurations of weight-bearing platforms. The archways, projection screens, and medallion were installed using basic rigging techniques. The stair unit and bed were built to be both mobile and safe to bear performers’ weight and actions. The use of projections required a constant open dialogue with the lighting designer, scenic designer, and projection technician in order to achieve the desired effect without hindering any other parts of the production. The use of lit candles onstage provided a training opportunity for the running crew and stage management about safe prop handling and emergency response protocols. Very few productions offer a comprehensive look at as many aspects of technical direction.

Skilled student artists met the challenges of *Silence*, ready and willing to solve any conceivable problem they might face. I was impressed with the calm and professional attitudes everyone carried throughout the production process. I was also happy and impressed with the eager and sincere work ethic of the running crew and their attention to detail. Their commitment to the success of the show was evident during the run, so it was no surprise that every one of them agreed to return for the remount of the show at KCACTF.
In discussing the show with audience members, it was enlightening to hear how much they enjoyed seeing a show in such an intimate space and yet were intrigued by all the things the physical space had to offer. My favorite comment was that of Professor Virginia Smith, who told me she enjoyed “lots of little surprises” throughout the show.

For all the complexities involved in this production, it was a manageable build thanks to the coordinated effort and talent of my fellow technical direction graduate students, our shop staff, and the willing lab students assigned to the production. The ease of managing the construction activities was a direct result of the professionalism and preparedness of the director and design team from the first production meeting through the final strike. Frequent open communication and a positive attitude toward problem solving kept our designers and technicians on a clear and productive path, able to realize this production on time and within budget. In my opinion, I could not have asked for a better production to have as a thesis project.
Plywood Layout
~use 3/4" CDX
~build 15 risers
  -frame & leg to 12"
~build 6 step units
  -frame & leg to 6"

JOHNNY CARSON SCHOOL OF THEATRE AND FILM
PRESENTS

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TECHNICAL DIRECTOR: MATTHEW RIGHTMIRE
DATE: 9/3/2013
SCALE: 1/4" = 1'-0"

Appendix A
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~frame with 2x4
~deck with 3/4" CDX
~undermount 4 casters
~use purchased posts
~see props for dressing
Fig. 1: Individual riser sections arranged to form first row of audience risers
Fig. 2: Riser sections shown disassembled
Fig. 3: Construction of jig for archways
Fig. 4: Laminating layers of lauan on jig
Fig. 5: Installation of archways and cheesecloth projection screens
Fig. 6: Beginning framework of medallion
Fig. 7: Finish painting of medallion
Fig. 8: Assembly of turned wood and foam pieces on the bed frame
Fig. 9: Custom built lathe used to turn foam posts on the drill press
Fig. 10: Bed frame with wooden posts, showing clearance under archway
Fig. 11: Finished stair unit
Fig. 12: Rocks in various stages of construction and finishing
Fig. 13: Modification of rock to house a wireless microphone unit
Fig. 14: Production photo showing use of reins
Fig. 15: Production photo showing use of projection screens and lighting cue

Fig. 16: Playing area with rocks, bed with dressing, and performers
STRIKE! & STORAGE! of SILENCE

First – Thank you for paying attention to this!

Order of events:
1) ~Run crew clears props to the prop shop (Propmaster David will coordinate organization and storage)
   ~Run crew clears ClearComms, prop tables, and any other offstage equipment.
   ~Sound strikes mics and speakers from the space.
   ~Untie & unbridle medallion. Fly in. Strike to scene shop.

2)~Projections/Electrics strike projectors and equipment from the arches.

**Projectors must be clear of the space before proceeding.**

3) ~Move all mobile scenic elements to the scene shop.
   ~Remove black masking from the house risers. SAVE ALL.
   ~Beginning with tallest rows, remove rails and clamps.
   ~Stack all chairs on carts. Move to outer wall for now.
   ~Once projectors are clear, screens may come down.

4) ~Remove 24 of the tallest riser legs and set aside for Lied.
   ~Load carts with risers, as needed, to give us working room.
   ~Arches may be dismantled. Move to wagon house in Howell.
   ~Gently remove facing from front row. Store with arches.
   ~Strike sections of front row to scene shop. Stack nicely.

5) ~When arches are clear, Electrics takes over the sky.
   ~Rearrange and set up risers per Laurel’s layout.

Questions? Please ask. Matt, David, and Cody will answer you!
BE SAFE. BE SAFE. BE SAFE!

Finally, THANK YOU for your attention and all your help.
You are my favorite (don’t tell the others).