

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Student Research and Creative Activity in
Theatre and Film

Theatre and Film, Johnny Carson School of

Summer 7-21-2010

The Scene Design for Macbeth

Michael Leonard
mike@mtleonard.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/theaterstudent>



Part of the [Other Theatre and Performance Studies Commons](#)

Leonard, Michael, "The Scene Design for Macbeth" (2010). *Student Research and Creative Activity in Theatre and Film*. 14.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/theaterstudent/14>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Theatre and Film, Johnny Carson School of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Student Research and Creative Activity in Theatre and Film by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

THE SCENE DESIGN FOR
MACBETH

By

Michael T. Leonard

A THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of
The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska
In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements
For the Degree of Masters of Fine Arts
Major: Theatre Arts

Under the Supervision of Professor Ed Stauffer

Lincoln, Nebraska

July, 2010

THE SCENE DESIGN FOR *MACBETH*

Michael T. Leonard, M.F.A.

University of Nebraska, 2010

Advisor: Ed Stauffer

This thesis presents the scenic design for *Macbeth* written by William Shakespeare. The play was produced by the Department of Theatre Arts at the University of Nebraska – Lincoln and performed in the Howell Theatre on April 17, 2003 through April 26, 2003. The written portion of the thesis is divided into sections: The Play and Synopsis, Scene Design Analysis including Time, Place, and Physical Needs, Design Concept, The Design Process, The Process of Realization, Reviews and Comments on the Scenic Design, and Self Evaluation. The final portion of the thesis is a collection of sketches, drafting, paint elevations, and productions photos.

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
The Play	
Synopsis.....	2
Scene Design Analysis	
Time.....	4
Place.....	5
Physical Needs.....	7
The Design Concept	8
The Design Process	12
The Process of Realization	16
Reviews and Comments	20
Self Evaluation	28
Bibliography	30
Appendix	
A. Research	32
B. Sketches	35
C. Models	37
D. Drafting	38
E. Paint Elevations	44
F. Vapor Projection Screen	45
G. Tarot Cards.....	46
H. Production Photographs	48

Introduction

This paper is in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Scene Design by Michael T. Leonard. It is a thesis on the scenic design for William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, a production produced by the Department of Theatre Arts at University of Nebraska – Lincoln and performed in the Howell Theatre on April 17, 2003 through April 26, 2003. The production team consisted of:

Stan Brown	Director
Michael T. Leonard...	Scenic Design
Adam Mendelson	Lighting Design
Kathryn Burton	Costume Design
Scott Raymond	Sound and Projection Design
Catherine Wallis	Stage Manager
Nils Haaland	Technical Director

This thesis documents the process of the play's scenic design from the initial meetings and conversations, through construction, rehearsals, and the play's opening night. It begins with a brief overview of the play and analysis. Next, the design concept and the process of designing the set is reviewed, followed by its implementation on stage. Finally, it considers reviews and evaluations from outside and within the department concluding with a self evaluation. An appendix contains a collection of research, sketches, drafting, paint elevations, and productions photos, and related images.

Synopsis

On a deserted Scottish heath, three witches set the tone of the upcoming action. They confront Macbeth and Banquo, both generals in the army of Scotland who have recently shown great courage and bravery in battle. The witches declare that Macbeth will first become Thane of Cawdor, and later king of Scotland. But the witches also predict that future kings will be descended not from Macbeth, but from his comrade, Banquo. King Duncan has sentenced the Thane of Cawdor to death after traitorous actions and confers the title on Macbeth. After accepting his new position as Thane of Cawdor, Macbeth sees the witches prophecies coming true and wonders if kingship is within his reach. King Duncan announces his intentions to make his son, Malcolm, heir to the throne, and to show gratitude and friendship by visiting Macbeth at his home.

Stung with ambition and confusion, Macbeth allows himself to be persuaded by his wife, who wants to use evil means to quicken the destiny her husband has been promised. The opportunity is presented when the king is sleeping in Macbeth's home, and at Lady Macbeth's urging, Macbeth murders Duncan. Fearing for their lives, the king's sons flee the country, and Macbeth is crowned king of Scotland.

Macbeth is haunted by the witches' predictions that Banquo's children are to attack his throne, and arranges to murder Banquo and his son Fleance; however Fleance escapes the slaying. During a great banquet that night, Banquo's ghost appears to Macbeth who is thrown into horror; his frenzied and incriminating remarks break up the feast and make some, including Macduff, suspicious of Macbeth's actions.

Returning to the witches, Macbeth asks to reveal the truth of their prophecies. The witches respond with horrible images of new prophecies: "for none of woman born

shall harm Macbeth” and “Macbeth shall never vanquished be until great Birnam wood to high Dunsinane hill shall come against him” (Shakespeare 807). Macbeth retreats, believing the predictions are nonsense, but when told Macduff has fled to England he becomes alarmed, ordering Macduff’s wife and children murdered.

In England, while urging Malcolm to come to the aid of Scotland, Macduff hears of his family’s murder, and swears to seek revenge and liberate Scotland from Macbeth’s tyranny. They return with an army to Macbeth’s castle at Dunsinane, where they disguise their advance with branches cut from Birnam Wood. Macbeth’s nerves are shaken as he recalls the witches’ predictions, and learns of his wife’s death, who was overcome with remorse and guilt. He reassures himself that he can not be harmed by any man born of woman and prepares for battle. Upon meeting Macduff in battle, Macbeth learns “Macduff was from his mother’s womb untimely ripp’d” (Shakespeare 814). Realizing he is doomed, Macbeth fights to his death rather than be captured, and Scotland’s freedom from tyranny is announced.

Time

William Shakespeare wrote *Macbeth* during the Elizabethan period in England, around 1606. It was first published in the 1623 Folio Edition. Shakespeare likely based this play upon the historic events written in Ralph Holinshed's, *Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland*, first published in 1577 (London: J. Johnson, 264). The book chronicles Macbeth's reign between 1040 and 1057, the Saxon period in England and Scotland.

The play makes several references to time of day. Several scenes are set during the day; however more often, night has usurped day with its twilight.

Place

The action takes place across Scotland and into England. A list of the scene descriptions before each scene as listed in “The Complete Works of William Shakespeare” follows (729-815):

Act I, Scene 1	<i>A desert place.</i>
Act I, Scene 2	<i>A camp near Forres.</i>
Act I, Scene 3	<i>A heath near Forres.</i>
Act I, Scene 4	<i>Forres. The palace.</i>
Act I, Scene 5	<i>Inverness. Macbeth's castle.</i>
Act I, Scene 6	<i>Before Macbeth's castle.</i>
Act I, Scene 7	<i>Macbeth's castle.</i>
Act II, Scene 1	<i>Court of Macbeth's castle.</i>
Act II, Scene 2	<i>The same.</i>
Act II, Scene 3	<i>The same.</i>
Act II, Scene 4	<i>Outside Macbeth's castle.</i>
Act III, Scene 1	<i>Forres. The palace.</i>
Act III, Scene 2	<i>The palace.</i>
Act III, Scene 3	<i>A park near the palace.</i>
Act III, Scene 4	<i>The same. Hall in the palace.</i>
Act III, Scene 5	<i>A heath.</i>
Act IV, Scene 1	<i>A cavern.</i>
Act IV, Scene 2	<i>Fife. Macduff's castle.</i>
Act IV, Scene 3	<i>England. Before the King's palace.</i>

Act V, Scene 1	<i>Dunsinane. Ante room in the castle.</i>
Act V, Scene 2	<i>The country near Dunsinane.</i>
Act V, Scene 3	<i>Dunsinane. A room in the castle.</i>
Act V, Scene 4	<i>Country near Birnam wood.</i>
Act V, Scene 5	<i>Dunsinane. Within the castle.</i>
Act V, Scene 6	<i>Dunsinane. Before the castle</i>
Act V, Scene 7	<i>Another part of the field.</i>
Act V, Scene 8	<i>Another part of the field.</i>

There are many places visited within the twenty-seven scenes in the script, both interior and exterior. Many contemporary scholars do not believe Shakespeare should be limited to the stated place in the script, but an open interpretation of place which allows for imagination. (Kott, 110).

Physical Needs

In the script, there are several elements that are essential requirements to a production. Some of the items I found most important from the text are:

Thunder and lightning: recurring element throughout the play.

Banquo's ghost: appearing to Macbeth during his banquet, Act III, Scene 3. This is an element that is dependant on the director's interpretations of Macbeth's state of mind.

Boiling cauldron: a representation of a cauldron is called for in Act IV, Scene 1 for the witches to perform witchcraft into.

Apparitions: during Act IV, Scene 1 apparitions appear to Macbeth. First, an armed head, second a bloody child, third a child crowned, with a tree in his hand, and fourth a show of eight kings, the last with a glass in his hand, Banquo's ghost following. This is another element dependant on the director's interpretation.

Places to hide: for the murderers before they kill Banquo, Act III, Scene 3. For the Doctor and Gentlewoman to hide while watching Lady Macbeth sleepwalk, Act IV, Scene 1.

Birnam wood: the woods or a representation of them encroach Macbeth during the final scenes of the play, beginning at Act IV, Scene 2.

The Design Concept

My approach as the scenic designer was to begin without preconceived notions or ideas about the direction of this production before listening to the director. With various designers involved in creating the lighting, sound, costumes, and special effects, it was important for everybody to get behind the director's vision to help fulfill their ideas by creating design styles that complement each other and support the story, as told through the director. Luckily, Stan had a strong conceptual approach to the script and this staging of *Macbeth*.

From the beginning design discussions, Stan brought a sense of mysticism and spirituality that was in touch with the paranormal. He wanted the designers to be open and creative, and sought for us to travel along a path of interpreting the script and coming to new realizations and ideas that furthered our creativity. He constantly fed us with quotes interpreting Shakespeare, and gave us questions to provoke our thought.

Concerning the text of the play, Stan had a basic philosophy behind all text-driven decisions made. His thoughts relied on Peter Brook's book *The Shifting Point*, which opened a curious splicing of verse and prose to resonate meaning for us today. (Brook 191-192).

Many years ago it used to be claimed that one must "Perform the play as Shakespeare wrote it." Today the absurdity of this is more or less recognized: nobody knows what scenic form he had in mind. All that one knows is that he wrote a chain of words that have in them the possibility of giving birth to forms that are constantly renewed. There is no limit to

the virtual forms that are present in a great text. A mediocre text may only give birth to a few forms, whereas a great text, a great piece of music, a great opera score are true knots of energy. Like electricity, like all sources of energy, energy itself does not have a form, but it has a direction, a power.

Some of Stan's early thoughts about costumes and settings were in sync with Jan Kotts, whose book, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, has had a lot of influence in the theatre over the past twenty years (110).

A fashion we have just now, which I approve of; designing shows so that their period can't be pinned down precisely. We go for a mixture of modern elements and Renaissance, Elizabethan, or Jacobean elements. The word we use to describe it is timeless. It springs from the belief that to put actors into, say Renaissance costumes is to put them into fancy dress and to diminish their humanity. They don't seem real and their social background can all too easily distort Shakespeare. This "timeless" style is of course a healthy reaction against finicky historical exactness. And Shakespeare's actors themselves performed, in what in their terms, was modern dress; this went on right through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It was the nineteenth century that invented the idea of meticulous historical accuracy; and films and television have perpetuated the fashion. It is not what Shakespeare himself had in mind

and it is useful to remember the Elizabethan way. And particularly to root a play in recognizable social detail.

Jan Kott adds to his argument that comparisons to various eras can be drawn from Shakespeare in the following quote (113).

What I have in mind is not a forced topicality... Shakespeare does not have to be modernized or brought up to date... What matters is that through Shakespeare's text we ought to get at our own modern experience, anxiety and sensibility.

Stan also stressed that we find modern parallels to what we are creating; however he did not want these parallels to dictate any one style, or make the play about the parallels. He planned to make the parallels only a comparison that would feed our imaginations, a point for us to grow from.

As the early weeks of the conceptual stage progressed, Stan developed more specific requirements for our play. He was interested in an observable response to the three "weird" witches, a norm which would make them visually weird. There would need to be a recurring element to the witches reality, and a supernatural sense to them. The witches should appear and disappear in their own unique way.

The weather was another aspect that would be important in our production. Shakespeare used weather as a symbol of human turmoil. Stan's thinking was the thunder and lightning could create an interchange between what is literal and what is

symbolic, using drums, percussion and music that imply random and desperate movement.

It was important to Stan that the mood and atmosphere were in sync with the characters comfort or discomfort during the different scene. After peace has been restored in Act I, Scene 4, there is no perceived danger to anyone's life, and we could see the splendor of the Scottish court. Likewise, in Act IV, Scene 3, when MacDuff visits Malcolm before King Edward's palace, there is relative calm throughout England, and the darkness has been purged away. However, many scenes, such as the cinematic ending with its building sense of explosion and resolution, are discomfiting.

The apparitions presented to Macbeth during Act IV, Scene 1, could be interpreted in many different ways. Stan wished to show these apparitions in a unique way that seemed mystical. Likewise, during the banquet scene where Banquo's ghost appears to Macbeth, it was important to the director that the ghost be seen by the audience in an unnatural way.

Lastly, Stan was interested in the presence of mysticism and gnosis, the spiritual knowledge or insight into the infinite, divine and uncreated in all and above all. He wanted to toil with uncertainty in life. By being told his prophesy, Macbeth became certain of great success; however knowing how his life was laid out instead led him to become anxious and commit horrors that would have otherwise been unimaginable. We are reminded by Robert Fulgrum about the benefit of uncertainty, "uncertainty is a blessing in disguise; everything and anything are always possible, the miraculous is always nearby and wonders shall never cease" (5).

The Design Process

After the production team established the direction of this production, my next step was to create a theatrical stage design that implemented the concept. I was already familiar with the popular prints created by artist M.C Escher (1898-1972). His mathematically inspired graphic work explored many ideas including tessellations, infinity, architecture, and impossible construction. The worlds he created contradicted the “logic” of space, by violating visual paradoxes, and creating optical illusions, using unusual vanishing points and forcing elements to obey them. It was clear that drawing parallels between Macbeth and the impossible worlds and unusual perspectives created by Escher would successfully reinforce concepts of uncertainty, unease, and skewed perspectives.

After researching M.C. Escher’s work, I began assembling visual references which would lend themselves to our production of *Macbeth*. Images of impossible stairways (Appendix, Fig. 2), spatial arches, repeating patterns, elements breaking visual rules (Appendix, Fig. 3), and infinite images (Appendix, Fig. 4) were most helpful. I began working on how best to incorporate these into scenery.

I saw that creating a unit set that had the ability to transform itself into different configurations would be a feasible approach. The staging convention known as a “Jack-Knife platform,” in which the platform and the scenery upon it pivots upon a fixed point, seemed to make logical sense to help move a unit set. In the ground plan, I sized two platforms, one either side of the stage, and began examining how I might incorporate impossible stairs, railings, levels, arches, and walls in the front elevation, while bringing the two units together to create another space (Appendix, Fig. 6 & 7). I began cutting

and bending paper and Bristol board into three dimensional shapes representing stairs and platforms, and came up with two platform units that could pivot into each other, creating a 'V' in plan. Once the size and shape of stairs and platforms had been solved, I added walls and railings, and looked into how the actor would access different areas.

Upon refining the 1/4" scale white model, I saw that the two jack-knife platforms only had three different looks, and did not yet have the complexity of Escher's work. I began studying the plan and saw by adding another unit upstage, we could create additional acting space, and more variety in setting the scene.. The upstage unit would become a "tracked platform," moving in a straight path upstage and downstage, so it could be moved out of the way for the jack-knife units to close, and also moved downstage to create a more intimate space.

Adding dimension to the model, I thought of ideas to bring the staircases of Macbeth's world out of the theater's proscenium, and closer to the audience. I concluded with two large walls with awkward forced perspective angles, a doorway, a platform jutting into the audience, a misplaced set of stairs, and a balcony stage left to stage more intimate Lady Macbeth scenes.

Another idea was to place a door in the stage floor, in keeping with Escher, that would allow the witches to ascend onto the stage. The door was further refined to resemble a steel gate and covered with plexiglass so action could continue on top of it. This also allowed for multitudes of lighting design opportunities

Other scenic devices were also examined during the design process, such as giant mirrors behind all of the set walls, which would serve to double the size and complexity of the set, while reflecting Macbeth's inner tragedy. I conceived a vapor curtain that

would project Banquo's ghost and the witches premonitions, and give the actors a penetrable device to work with, and also add interest and appeal to the audience.

A parallel to tarot cards was also drawn; their symbolic meanings gave us a unique opportunity to reinforce our gnostic theme, giving Macbeth mystically enlightened knowledge and insight. When laid out to an individual for a reading, the cards reveal answers to important concerns of life. Displaying these cards to the audience during the course of the play would augment Macbeth's prophesy. The cards were chosen that would forecast future events were (Appendix, Fig. 20-25):

Act 1 – Scene 4, Duncan's Palace

The Six of Wands: Triumphal procession, victory after strife. Good news and conquest (Gray 34)

The High Priestess: Unrevealed future, silence, mystery, duality. Hidden influences at work (Gray 154)

Act 3 – Scene 1, The Palace at Forres

The Seven of Cups: The seeker has had too many different ideas and desires, all in the realm of the imagination; great dreams; castles in the air. Some attainment but nothing substantial as yet. His forces have been scattered (Gray 66)

The Seven of Swords: Unstable effort, partial success. Uncertainty; a plan that may fail. The seeker finds someone trying to make away with that which is not his (Gray 96)

Act 3 – Scene 4, Hall in the palace

The Tower: Overthrow of existing modes of life. Conflict, unforeseen catastrophe. Old notions upset; disruption that may bring enlightenment in its wake. Selfish ambition about to fall (Gray 182).

The Ten of Swords: Sudden misfortunes, burdens to bear. Not a card of violent death. May mean ruin, pain, affliction, tears. In spiritual matters, it may betoken the end of delusion. (Gray 102)

With the major elements worked out, I drew a rough ground plan, and built a working 1/4" scale white model (Appendix, Fig. 8). Once all of the pieces were dimensional, I assembled and took note of all the different set configurations, when and how they worked within the script, and brought it to the production meeting to present my set design. The production team approved the design I presented, and together worked through each individual scene to settle on staging.

The Process of Realization

With the set design approved, the next steps were to draft a ground plan, a section view, and to prepare elevations of each unit. The overlap of the three wagon units in their different configurations meant the accuracy and tolerances would become very important. By building a scale three-dimensional AutoCad model of the scenery, and bringing that model into 3D Studio Max to animate the scene changes, I was able to study the relationship between the units, and to accurately draw 2-dimensional elevations of the wagon units with appropriate tolerances.

Our technical director, Nils Haaland used these drawings to begin planning the construction. Together we prepared construction drawings, finding that the complexity of the stairs and cantilevers that were necessary for the units to come together had many challenges. We concluded that framing the wagon units with steel construction and adding counterweights to offset the cantilevers would provide a safe and stable set.

We created a five week construction calendar that began on March 3, 2003 continuing to the first technical rehearsal, a trial run of scene changes on April 12, excluding a weeklong Spring Break after the second week. The three wagon units would require the most time to build - one week planned to construct each steel frame, and the following week to complete the facing and railings of that unit.

A construction estimate was created by Nils for each piece of scenery by assessing the materials and methods and making adjustments for costs to fall within the budget allocated by the Department of Theatre. With free labor coming from theatre classes, a work-study program, and graduate assistantships, the primary expenses would be for

construction materials. The largest expense would be for steel, plywood, luan facing, and polycarbonate plexiglass.

The props were overseen by Catherine Wallis and Kelly Daily, the supervisor of the property department, with my close collaboration. With many battle scenes, the weapons became important considerations. Stan also wanted the weapons to heighten the realism and strengthen the actor's connection to the character. Weapons such as pikes, daggers, swords, maces, and a double headed ax were carefully crafted from wooden handles and steel for stage use. Additionally, props such as benches, tables, serving dishes, food, letters and such were assembled. The props chosen were neither historic or contemporary so they could not be dated to a specific period.

It was necessary to hang black masking curtains and flown scenery on available line sets before any of the large wagon units were brought onstage, thereby blocking those line sets from being flown in. In addition to the masking, the design also included six tarot cards that would be flown in for individual scenes. For these cards, muslin was sewn with pockets and stretched onto a paint frame; the chosen cards were then projected onto the fabric and traced with charcoal, and finally painted.

The use of a trap door on-stage that is open for necessary scenes is common practice in both institutional and professional theatres. The challenge to overcome was the design used plexiglass over a steel gate, and this would need to support the wagon units that would roll over the gate during scene changes. Adding to the challenge, the weight of the wagon unit and the counterweight would be concentrated on a few casters that would roll atop the plexiglass gate. With advice and direction from classmate Rob Dutiel, a platform plug with a hinged steel frame was built and covered with a strong

polycarbonate plexiglass, having escape stairs to the basement trap room for entrances and exits.

The penetrable vapor projection screen used for Banquo's ghost and the premonitions from the witches was an ambitious project that had rarely been used on stage. Finding a Finnish research paper describing how a non-turbulent "laminar" airflow with fog injected into the center could create a suitable projection surface, I looked at ways to recreate their experiment with minimal budget and labor. The solution was \$15 in drinking straws, 2 box fans, and a fog machine. The dry ice fog was injected into a center row of straws, surrounded on either side with additional straws that directed the fans airflow in a straight upward direction. The vapor projection surface was tested with an LCD projector using different types of vapor, including a haze machine, liquid nitrogen, Rosco liquid fog, and dry ice fog machine, finding the later to be most successful. With a working projection surface, Scott Raymond was given the task of producing video content of the apparitions and Banquo's ghost.

The actual construction of the wagon units proved to be a large undertaking. The construction lagged behind the schedule that was set forth because of a lack of skilled welders and metal workers to assemble the steel frames. Nonetheless, work continued and once each frame was complete, it was brought onstage to test its movement, and skinned with plywood and luan.

The stage right portion of the false proscenium also proved to be problematic. The suspended platform and staircase, though made of lightweight foam, became difficult to maneuver and safely rig from the rafters. Assessing the build schedule, it was decided

this unit did not contribute to the action on stage, and the unit was cut to keep our construction priorities aligned with the production.

With all the major units slowly being finished on stage, and the technical rehearsals quickly approaching, it was time to paint the set. The dark foreboding color palette was achieved with several steps. A hopper gun was rented to spray the wall surfaces with a texture that would give depth to the lighting. Then a three color scumble was applied and blended into the wall and floor surfaces. And finally two colors were spattered onto the surfaces to unify the colors.

Throughout the construction process, rehearsals were carried out on stage without the use of the set. The construction schedule had rehearsals on the set 1-1/2 weeks prior to tech rehearsal; however that time was reduced to less than a week due to construction delays. Finally rehearsing onstage without as much time as the actors had hoped for, they found themselves concerned that the set was unsafe. Some of these concerns may be attributed to the superstitions surround “the Scottish play”, associated with actual spells cast by the three witches, but for me it was a validation that the set design caused the unease and uncertainty intended. Fears were finally overcome with Stan’s affirmation and rehearsals continued.

The set performed as intended during rehearsals without any difficulties in transitions. The staging made use of the areas as they were intended in the design, and only minor additions and changes were made to keep the pace of the play moving along. Before a full audience on opening night, the set lived up to expectations, and the play made for a enjoyable night of theatre.

Reviews and Comments

The following are reviews from various sources including The Lincoln Journal Star, The Daily Nebraskan, and Charles O'Connor.

Below is an article entitled "Macbeth Meets Escher" written by Emmy Thomas for the *Daily Nebraskan* printed Thursday, April 17, 2003. The piece was written before the show opened and features how the scenic design was created and its relation to the play.

Graduating seniors might do well to take a lesson from *Macbeth*.

Appearing tonight on the Howell Theatre stage in the University Theatre production of Shakespeare's classic, the title character displays a fear common to many students preparing to leave college.

The fear of the unknown.

Macbeth, played by theatre arts graduate student Rick Smith, deals with the uncertainty of life by attempting to thwart it with magic and murder. The tragedy that unfolds because of his inability to accept a hazy future should be a warning for anyone too eager to pin down the details of life by any means necessary.

Macbeth's warped approach leads to bloodshed and mayhem, and its twisted nature is reflected in the production's elaborate set.

"He can't accept that he doesn't know what's going to happen and what the outcome of his actions will be," said scenery designer Michael Leonard. "He wants to force things to go his way, but life isn't like that."

So Leonard, a second year graduate student, designed a set that reflects the inescapable uncertainty of life. His master's thesis project is filled with staircases leading to nowhere, steps ending with open arches and doorways looking into empty space and precarious perches that seem to be supported by nothing but thin air.

He drew inspiration from the art work of M.C. Escher, whose paintings feature optical illusions that blur the lines between reality and imagination.

Director Stan Brown said the set was a representation of the twisted mind of Shakespeare's tragic hero and of the human mind in general.

"It's an exploration of how, when something is not tangible or real in a physical sense, our imaginations create something for us to relate to," he said.

Leonard said such a setup allowed the actors to play on the uncertainties of the audiences.

"The set moves in many configurations, so you never know where the steps might lead," he said.

"At times the actors are standing on cantilevers, where the audience might not be sure whether someone can stand in those places or not until a character does."

In addition, it provides artistic benefits for the visual elements of the production.

“I tried to design a playground for the actors to use for blocking and movement; I wanted to provide a lot of options for placement and strong entrances,” Leonard said.

According to Brown, this flexible and varied approach reflects the ethereal feeling of a story featuring witches, prophecies and apparitions.

“The scenery gives a sense that there’s something beyond what we’re able to perceive in this physical world,” he said, “There’s a sense that something’s always coming from or leaving from that other world.”

One example of this supernatural world is the group of apparitions the witches call on to prophesy about Macbeth’s future.

Leonard used a vapor screen technique to portray the apparitions. Their images are projected onto clouds of a dry ice flow, producing a visible but intangible picture.

Brown called the effect “very theatrical.”

“Along with the dramatic set, it establishes and heightens the idea of magic and otherworldliness in this play,” he said.

“The witches’ magic is based on their ability to show Macbeth what’s already inside himself,” Brown said.

“His desire for absolute control over his destiny leads to tragedy, one that takes place in and because of his imagination.

The following is a review entitled “Howell Theatre’s Effort at ‘Macbeth Turns Tragedy into Travesty” written by Larry L. Kubert for *The Lincoln Journal Star* on Friday, April 18, 2003.

While William Shakespeare’s “Macbeth” is certainly one of the playwright’s darkest dramas, the current University of Nebraska-Lincoln Howell Theatre production of such is much more a travesty than a tragedy.

Shakespeare can be a difficult contemporary undertaking, but – as demonstrated by the recent Haymarket Theatre production of “Hamlet” – an undertaking that is achievable.

Unfortunately, that cannot be said about this Stan Brown-directed fiasco.

Shakespeare’s play follows Macbeth’s ambitious and bloody rise to power through the murder of the Scottish king. But the killing of the king and the ascension to the throne by Macbeth is just the beginning of a sanguinary spiral of gore and violence that follows.

The play that trods the Howell Theatre stage is a tedious, impotent production, bathed in superficiality and misdirection.

Playing before an almost full opening night house, this 2¾-hour feeble attempt manages to strip away the dignity of the classic tragedy, even coaxing the audience from muffled giggles to loud laughter during some of the play’s closing scenes.

This reaction is generated by a lamentable portrayal from Rick Smith in the title role.

The actor – who has furnished acceptable performances in other productions – completely misses conveying Macbeth’s obsessive need for power and control as motivation for his actions.

Instead, the Macbeth that we get is an oafish buffoon falling deeper and deeper into dementia for which there seems little incentive.

While Smith’s effort is disappointing, director Brown has to be held accountable for permitting the actor to go so far astray.

But then, Brown is also guilty of some questionable decisions with the production.

Seemingly infatuated with background music, Brown has banal anthem throbbing through virtually every scene of the play, giving almost more of a feeling of a theatrical movie than live theatre production.

It’s like he is using the music to try to distract the audience from the holes in the production – but cavities are too large to be masked.

There are, however, glimmerings of hope within the production. Steve Barth as Malcolm, Timothy Hornor as MacDuff, John L. Marinovich as Seyton and Amber Irvin as Banquo all provide respectable support.

And Erinn Holmes in the pivotal role of Lady Macbeth, while rather taciturn in her effort, is still acceptable.

Also, Michael Leonard’s heavy and dark set design, punctuated by several brooding staircases, and Adam Mendelson’s stark and defiant lighting are pluses.

But unfortunately, in the end, this production of “Macbeth” makes haggis look appealing.

Comments by Charles O’Connor, Scenic Design advisor, June 25, 2003.

Michael Leonard asked me to provide my comments and observations, for inclusion in his thesis, of his scenic design for *Macbeth* at UNL. I served as Michael’s advisor on the project, attended most of the production meetings, and communicated with Michael on a daily basis.

First let me state an obvious bias. As Michael’s teacher and mentor at the university, I considered it my job to be co-responsible for the success of his education and entry into the profession. Like many teachers, perhaps my own desire for a student’s success can cloud my perception as to whether true success has actually been attained. I think Michael is enormously talented, and that his design for *Macbeth* was outstanding. Nevertheless, I will try to offer a fair and balanced opinion.

I thought the entire show was an unqualified success. The acting and directing was the strongest I have seen for a Shakespearean production at UNL. All the design elements, lighting, sound, costumes, and sets, were unified in the sense that although they possessed individual and somewhat divergent texts and meanings, they allowed each other the space to say what it was they had to say. I am not a proponent of the idea that a text only lives in the author’s mind, that the objective of production

team is to “figure out” what the author felt, thought, or meant. I believe a play belongs ultimately in the viewer’s imagination. The theatre artist’s objective is to incite the imagination of the viewer, not control where it goes. That a text can have many parallel and conflicting meanings does not bother me, it engages me. I thought the director, Stan Brown, evoked and received the spirit of individual reactions from all the designers.

I felt that Michael’s set, dark and architecturally complex, served as both a canvas for the lighting design, a frame for the costume design, and ultimately a statement itself. It said to me that we are in an unsettled world, where perspective is skewed by our own limitations to try to glean order through it. Like an M.C. Escher print, the world that this set created is a false one, a representation of a non-sensical, three-dimensional reality made that way because it is manipulated on a two-dimensional plane. Is not Macbeth’s ego on one plane and the terms of the real world on another?

As for the production process, it was not all that great. It seemed that everyone was behind, including Michael, and that ultimately put pressure on the shop to build the set without going through a formal and planning budgetary process. Certainly these problems were not caused by lack of effort on Michael’s part, but it happened. And they were not without consequences either, for the chair of the department had to supply more money to ensure that the production be completed. I commend Nils Haaland, the technical director, for the hard work at the end.

These criticisms aside, Michael designed a great set. It was a wonderful evening of theatre.

Self Evaluation

The design of *Macbeth* was both rewarding and challenging, and from it I learned many lessons that will help frame my profession. The collaboration and involvement of the production team and cast led to a satisfying production of *Macbeth* that everybody should be proud of.

I thought the stage design fulfilled Stan's concepts including mysticism, uncertainty, our view of the physical world, and our perception of reality. By drawing a relationship to M.C. Escher and creating a heavy and dark palette, the set caused the desired unease and uncertainty in both the cast and audience. Other successes were the amount of acting space and flexibility afforded to blocking. The set incorporated good principles of design and was composed artistically in regard to shapes, colors, props, and actors.

Adam Mendelson's lighting is also commendable. His interpretation was stark and resolute which led to his choices of color, angle, texture, intensity, and contrast. These elements all came together to enhance the mood and direction of our production.

The production was not without its faults. Though the process got off to an early start, more time was spent talking about what could be done, rather than actually "doing" the work required. This would eventually lead to missed deadlines and added pressure on various entities to ensure the production was complete.

Additionally, the acting seemed below average in several key roles, including the part of Macbeth. The presentation of Macbeth as a dimwitted oaf was difficult to embody and proved unbelievable. It could also be argued that the soundtrack playing

throughout much of the production and an emphasis on violence and gore were overly dramatic distractions.

The unfolding process taught many lessons, including the importance of deadlines and budgets and the consequences when they are not adhered to. Set designers should not only need to be trained to set the stage as it relates to the story, but also taught to be project managers who can effectively oversee the larger scope and its cost, time, quality, and overall satisfaction.

In the end, the scenery, lighting, costume, and sound designs came together in a unified approach that reinforced the dramatization on stage. The production was a success and brought new attitudes to the interpretations to William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*.

Bibliography

Brook, Peter. *The Shifting Point*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1987.

Bool, F.H., Kist, J.R., Locher J.L., and Wierda, F. M.C. Escher: His Life and Complete Graphic Work. New York: Abradale Press, 1992.

Ernst, Bruno. The Magic Mirror of M.C. Escher. England: Tarquin Publications, 1985.

Fulghum, Robert. Maybe (Maybe Not). New York: Villard, 1993.

Gray, Eden. The Tarot Revealed. New York: Signet Mystic Books, 1969.

Holinshed, Raphael. Holinshed's Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland. London: J.Johnson, *et al*, 1808.

Kott, Jan. Shakespeare Our Contemporary. Trans. Boleslaw Taborski. New York: Norton Library, 1974.

Kubert, Larry. "Howell Theatre's Effort at Macbeth Turns Tragedy into Travesty." The Lincoln Journal Star 18 Apr. 2003.

Thomas, Emmy. "Macbeth Meets Escher." Daily Nebraskan 17 Apr. 2003.

Shakespeare, William. The Complete Works of William Shakespeare: Arranged in their Chronological order. Vol.2. Ed. W.G. Clark and W. Aldis Wright. New York: Nelson Doubleday, 1961.