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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO

How Scenic Design is Affected by Organic Approaches to Theatre and Dance Productions

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Master of Fine Arts

in

Theatre and Dance (Design)

by

Samantha Rojas

Committee in charge:

Robert Brill, Chair
Judith Dolan
Mark Guirguis

2018

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The Thesis of Samantha Rojas is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

Chair

University of California, San Diego

2018

DEDICATION

For my graduate mentor Robert Brill

For my undergraduate mentors Mark Guirguis and Judith Dolan

For my Mom and my Dad

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Thank you to Robert Brill, Judith Dolan, and Mark Guirguis for the continued support in my pursuit of Scenic Design. Robert, thank you for the support these last three years. Your mentorship has really helped me discover my own voice in this field among many talented designers.

Thank you to my Mom and Dad for always coming along for the ride. I know that the productions I worked on did not always make sense to you both, and I am grateful for all of the laughter and continued diligence to attend all of my shows. I am fortunate to have your continued support. I love you both.

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

How Scenic Design is Affected by Organic Approaches to Theatre and Dance Productions

by

Samantha Rojas

Master of Fine Arts in Theatre and Dance (Design)

University of California, San Diego, 2018

Professor Robert Brill, Chair

ABSTRACT

The Introduction overviews some of the challenges in working within a very loose and organic approach to design in theatre and dance productions. Chapter 1: *Near Lifetimes* discusses my first experience in working with a very fluid design concept and Chapter 2: *Before the Horses Crash into the Ground, and then the Ground* continues to discuss how the experience from *Near Lifetimes* influenced my approach to designing for dance.

Chapter 3: *Revolt. She Said. Revolt Again.* goes into detail about how I learned to consider the theatre space in a less specific context and how to prepare for a rehearsal process

that required a lot of contingency due to its fluctuating requirements. Chapter 4 discusses how my classroom experience prepared me to think quickly and without attachment to any one design idea and how to express conviction in my design choices.

INTRODUCTION

Before graduate school, I assumed that developing ideas for a play or dance piece required more concrete information from the director or choreographer creating the piece, that the main ideas for a piece's narrative needed establishment early on. Collaborating on projects took on more depth of meaning for me after my experiences in graduate school, and I realized that the main ideas for a piece were not always figured out in the beginning stages of a production. When working on productions, I learned that remaining flexible to the needs of the projects were important to the collaborative process. This type of process was a great challenge, yet it pushed me to find ways to think more creatively and quickly. In terms of the production timeline, for scenic designers, the design for the play or dance piece must be submitted well before rehearsals have started, which proved difficult when working with others who required a more organic and flexible process.

Organic and flexible ways of working allowed directors and choreographers to further develop their pieces during rehearsals and to make discoveries. Most of the productions I have collaborated on in graduate school required great flexibility. Embracing an organic process was difficult when trying to work within the deadlines of scenic builds and engineering, and I needed to find ways in which to develop preliminary designs to present to the production staff and to illustrate the scope of the show. Even though the final details could not be answered at that point, at least the budgetary scope of the show could be determined. Trying to find the balance between relating information to the production staff and to the director or choreographer was challenging, but it was a great learning experience in communication. I learned how to articulate details more

effectively so that each part of the design process and its support for the director, choreographer, and production staff was well represented and clear.

Often times, with this process, I have had to think very quickly to adjust designs due to the discoveries made during rehearsals; the needs of the productions fluctuated. Although this process of designing was strenuous, it offered me many opportunities to explore different ideas and to also make my own discoveries. Since ideas from the director and choreographer were not solidified, I learned that there were moments where I could take initiative and offer ideas that could support the production and the narrative or style of the piece. These collaborations pushed me to become a more present figure than I was used to and to become a larger part within the rehearsal process.

My first design on a graduate production was on the dance piece *Near Lifetimes*, choreographed by Dina Apple. With dance-making and choreography, I learned about the importance of space and its relation to how choreographers interact with their environment, and that choreographers were extremely dependent on what was discovered by interacting with the physical space surrounding them. When I worked on *Before the Horses Crash into the Ground, and then the Ground*, choreographed by Veronica Santiago Moniello, I was able to take what I learned from *Near Lifetimes* and apply it to this production. With both of these productions, I realized that even though the choreographers had an idea of where their pieces were headed conceptually, it was helpful for me to offer my knowledge about theatre spaces and to offer design ideas that related to their concepts in a more physical way. Both of these experiences lead to collaborations that resulted positively in visually representing the ideas they wanted to share and express to the public.

With theatrical plays, the designer will usually begin with the script and with the director's ideas in visualizing the script for the stage. From the dance pieces to the more theatrical pieces, an organic approach was also taken with the Alice Birch play *Revolt. She Said. Revolt Again.*, directed by Sean Graney. This production became a great opportunity in developing a neutral space from a very loose idea shared by the director. The process for this production needed flexibility, yet with an established script, this production included requirements that were necessary, as compared to the dance pieces, which developed a choreographic script during the rehearsals, and necessities were often discovered through the process. *Revolt. She Said Revolt Again.* became a mixture of the dance piece processes and the more theatrical processes. The written structure of the script allowed for this process to work, and the director expressed the need to develop a space that evolved with the play.

Productions that preferred a more organic approach taught me how to adapt to changing situations. Preparing for these types of productions was difficult as the possibility of ideas changing quickly was high, but learning how to explore different design possibilities instead of just one or a few was very important in adapting to changes frequently. Robert Brill's Advanced Scenic Design class challenged his students to explore numerous possibilities for the scenic design of a play, musical, or opera before narrowing down options. Learning to develop many varied, bold, and original ideas was difficult, especially when trying to come up with dozens of new designs in a short amount of time. I found that these class exercises reflected my experiences in actual productions, because ideas changed so often.

I navigated working with the director and choreographers, illustrating their ideas onto technical drawings and scenic details that I communicated to the shops. With processes that

lacked a solid design from the beginning, there was the chance of losing time for the construction of the set. When the design changed, I needed to redesign and redraft, which delayed construction. This was perhaps the largest risk in working on a process like this, because in losing time, the reality of losing visual elements could potentially take away from the depth of the environment of the play or dance piece. With all of the pieces mentioned above, we found ways to keep the integrity of the visual story-telling, because everyone involved was aware of the circumstances surrounding time and budget in relation to the needs of the productions. Remaining in communication with the production staff and the creative team about the reality of time was vital and kept any changes within the scope of the resources.

Being flexible with design did not necessitate creating generic set designs. I learned how to be flexible yet offer a space that lent itself to telling a story, a space that indicated that some event occurred or was about to happen. I learned the importance in finding ways to avoid diluting a design, to create an environment that could accommodate the rest of the creative team and offer a chance to develop dynamic moments in theatre and dance.

CHAPTER 1: *Near Lifetimes*

Near Lifetimes was a very unique opportunity for me, especially as my first graduate production. Dina Apple's concept involved creating situations in which people found ways to connect with others and the environment surrounding them. These situations included waving to the person across the stage, or dancing with them, and these situations were treated like small, individual worlds that eventually merged with other small worlds to create one world. In developing this piece, Dina wanted the audience to act as the dancers and explorers on the stage. She wanted to create an environment that offered the possibilities for people to connect and make discoveries individually and together. There was so much that fascinated and excited me about this project, yet also left me nervous about where to start, because I was very unsure how to approach this piece.

The ideas were not very specific about what was desired visually, and I tried to decipher the elements Dina wanted to see on the stage and the particular details she wanted the audience to notice. I realized that she related space and visuals to how people interacted with their environment and that movement and keywords were ways in which she communicated visuals to me. At the time, this was difficult for me to grasp because I always thought that I needed more information, but I realized that the explanations she gave were all I needed to move forward and start designing. This was a wonderful opportunity for me to let go of the need for very specific direction and to explore a looser sense of creating. This process allowed me to help create the narrative and collaborate in a more integrated way that I think would not have been possible had the ideas been more concrete early on. Dina allowed me to take initiative of what the space

would become, and I needed to make sure that the space developed for the stage also supported her ideas and desires to have the audience explore.

To start, Dina gave me three keywords to work with: Astrology, Ecology, and Navigation. She encouraged me to find my own interpretation of what these words could mean visually. These words reminded me of stars, the Earth, and ships, so I looked into nautical maps. Going in this direction felt fitting for the environment and fit the idea for the audience to explore. In Figure 1, the floor of the stage illustrated a grid of solid and dashed lines, and this was my interpretation of a nautical map. Steel poles connecting from the floor to the stage ceiling indicated that the grid lines from the floor continued in a three-dimensional way and helped to incorporate all aspects of the theatre into a more connected space. The map was my interpretation of creating the small worlds in which Dina choreographed the individual situations for audience members. The map allowed for more concentrated areas to be activated for specific moments, while also representing the entire world of the piece as the entire stage floor. Interaction with the space was very important, and Dina expressed wanting a tent within the space for the audience to lie down and see the environment from a different perspective, so we attached a tent to one of the steel poles. Not rigged at the start of the piece, setting up the tent allowed audience members to have a task within the environment. This was possible because audience members wore headphones, listening to a narrative that Dina wrote and recorded. This recording guided the audience throughout the space and encouraged people to interact with each other.

With the stage being small, located in the Theodore and Adele Shank Theatre, it was important to offer surprises and discoveries within the set to keep the audience from discovering

all the environment had to offer too quickly. In Figure 2, the seating on the risers were removed. We used the bare risers to create topography within the space and added astroturf that allowed audiences to see the risers in a different way and to feel free to sit and lounge. Alongside the path of astroturf, sat lamps and small end tables. Hidden within the tables were candy, drawing paper, colored pencils, binoculars, and rocks that almost appeared like gems. Adding the items allowed the audience to discover objects within the world and many took great advantage of eating the candy and drawing on the paper, which added to how the environment evolved throughout the length of the piece.

With this production, I realized that I needed to have flexibility of thought and approach to design, that I should let go of the need for prescribed direction and embrace the opportunity to create more freely. Surprisingly, this was very difficult to do early on, but became a very positive experience once I understood that this freedom gave me such a unique opportunity to explore.

CHAPTER 2: *Before the Horses Crash into the Ground, and then the Ground*

Before the Horses Crash into the Ground, and then the Ground, choreographed by Veronica Santiago Moniello, was a piece that required a lot of flexibility and pushed me to adapt quickly to changing ideas and visual themes. Similar to *Near Lifetimes*, the piece began with keywords, such as territories, shaping light, and organic material. Having worked with Veronica before on a studio project, I knew that this piece would connect to the previous piece in some way conceptually, and that Veronica would spend some time in Europe developing this piece further. In Europe for most of the design process, Veronica worked on developing the choreography of the piece and its evolution from a smaller studio project to a thesis project in the larger space of the Sheila and Hughes Potiker Theatre. We established long-distance communication through email, which was helpful, yet proved difficult at times. When ideas were so organic and in flux, it felt so much more effective to be near the collaborators. The added pressure of having a scenic design deadline before Veronica returned from Europe rushed the process of developing a design on paper, and I realized that Veronica and I needed more time in person to discuss these ideas more fully.

Trying to balance the production schedule with developing a project like this was challenging, yet each department understood the needs of this piece and respected the process. I adapted to Veronica's process and her need to explore more fully without committing to any one idea right away. We both exchanged many ideas via email, some vastly different from the other, but the theme of a broken floor remained constant. Before she returned, we had agreed on a scenic design that developed from her idea of creating a broken floor. The design relied heavily upon scenic builds and prop builds, which meant that Veronica and the other performers in the

production would not have access to the scenic pieces until the week of technical rehearsals due to the construction schedule, which also meant that they would only have one week to work with the scenic pieces. This situation was not ideal as the scenic pieces were needed earlier to continue developing the work and to explore how they could manipulate those pieces and create a visual narrative. The rehearsal process in developing the trajectory of the production required several weeks instead of just one. Because of this, the design was let go, and we started again.

Back from Europe, Veronica and I were able to speak in person and discuss the needs of the production more thoroughly and clearly. Returning to the idea of a broken floor, Veronica presented some examples of what she thought could embody that idea, and I realized that her interpretation of a broken floor included numerous variations. This realization led me back to Dina's production, and I remembered the flexibility in thought that was required for that piece, that one word could be interpreted in so many ways. Initially, for the broken floor concept, I researched broken floors, such as floors with cracked tiles and faulty foundations, but I saw that the scope of my research was quite narrow, and that a broken floor could be any number of ideas.

After several iterations of working off of single ideas, we knew that we still had not found the right setting for the piece, but we were sure that the set needed to contain soil to represent something organic and natural, to represent earth. This element was pivotal for Veronica, so I started with that in mind to develop new ideas. With the scenic deadline past due, we knew that the design necessitated solidification soon. Meeting with the production staff about the design of the piece, we found out that the department purchased a new marley dance floor and was ready to get rid of the old marley floor. I asked if we could take all of the old marley floor being thrown out, and the production manager was happy to let us use that floor as a

resource. Because the marley floor was no longer needed by the department, we had the freedom to transform the material.

This was such a fortunate occurrence and allowed us to visualize the idea of territories again. By this point, Veronica and I had several discussions, and I felt ready to present a new design based heavily on using the old marley floor. Territories was a keyword that Veronica had discussed during the early stages of the project. Thinking about territories, we discussed the configuration of continents on earth and tectonic plates. I realized that the broken floor idea from before could become the cracks formed by adjacent tectonic plates. Going in this direction, adding soil to the design became a huge aspect of the environment. I redesigned the set to consider all of these necessary pieces and after the numerous back-and-forth of ideas and adjustments, I found that reusing old material really gave us the opportunity to create something dynamic on a larger scale because of the vast amount of old marley floor available to us. We were able to create a huge statement with a single material, which became very exciting and allowed us to transform the theatre space with greater volume. I redesigned and redrafted the set showing how the old marley floor would be cut to appear like cracked and broken pieces that were once connected. These pieces became the representation of tectonic plates. In between and underneath those pieces, soil and rubber mulch was added so that it appeared as if the earth exploded from beneath the floor to form the cracks in Figure 3. The soil connected each piece of marley in a way that gave it some history, and that history could have been interpreted in various ways by the audience. The marley floor was also painted to appear as if it sat within the dirt for a long period of time and helped to ground the material more fully within the surroundings so that it felt like a part of the environment instead of just sitting on top of it. We also hung marley floor,

so that it appeared as if it used to be connected to the marley used on the floor. Doing that indicated something more about the pieces of marley on the floor and created a space that contained more movement and flow with the existing structure of the theatre. The hung marley also provided a surface for projections to take place, which helped to activate that piece of scenery more. The design for this set became one of my favorite scenic designs during graduate school, and I was very proud of the work that we all accomplished in such a compressed amount of time.

There were moments in this process where I was at a complete loss on how to move forward. The combination of the long distance communication and the fluctuation of ideas made solidifying a scenic design difficult. Communication became very important, but it was not always consistent, which also led to the frequent remodeling of the design. With dance, I understood the hesitation to commit to a design and knew that the space would influence how the rhythm of the piece evolved. When we realized that we could reuse the old marley floor, that became the moment when I felt sure on what the design could become and with the material ready at hand, we were able to prepare scenic pieces that Veronica and the performers could use right away in rehearsals, which was a necessary step for her in further developing the piece. This availability and step towards recognizing scenic elements in a physical sense gave Veronica and myself a solid visual for how the theatre space could be transformed.

Having the willingness to change the design multiple times took a lot of endurance and perseverance, which eventually resulted in a stimulating environment that suited the dance piece. I respected Veronica's process and her way of developing ideas, but I also acknowledged that in a practical sense, I could only design as fast as I could draw and model. Each day that I took more

time to redesign, production time in constructing the set was lost, and we ran the risk of losing scenic elements. Through all of this, I discovered my process, too, and tried to adapt by remaining energetic and diligent through a process like this. I remained willing to change ideas and worked to translate those changes quickly so that they could be communicated in technical drawings for the production staff. My role in helping Veronica visually translate the environment she wanted to achieve meant that I needed to keep drawing and discussing ideas until they became something solid.

Working with Veronica, I appreciated the gravity she carried in creating art that was raw and that came from a place of depth. The work created for this production was one of the most thrilling for me to help develop. I respected Veronica's use of the entire theatre space and her commitment to using each scenic element present onstage. That commitment and the dedication from the other designers in lighting, video, music performance, and sound resulted in a dynamic and bold production.

CHAPTER 3: *Revolt. She Said. Revolt Again.*

After reading the script for *Revolt. She Said. Revolt Again.* by Alice Birch, I felt that the approach to this play would be different from previous experiences working with text. The structure of the script, the bold visuals, and the absence of a set environment caused me to wonder how the director, Sean Graney, would visually interpret the script. When we first spoke, he directed me towards female installation artists who inspired him, such as Yayoi Kusama and Judy Pfaff. He expressed wanting to transform the theatre space into installation art and that the acting would take place in this type of world. He also wanted to reorient the space in a simple way that allowed for the audience to view the production from a different perspective. This was an interesting challenge to solve since we would work within the thrust space of the Mandell Weiss Forum Theatre. He also discussed having the stage manager remain visible as well and navigating how that could work visually was a great challenge, not just for me, but for the stage manager who had to learn how to observe and call the production from a non-traditional location. Because of the nature of the text, Sean explained that the scenic design did not have to relate to the text directly, which left me open to explore an abundance of possibilities, and was an exciting opportunity. His role as a director was different, and he discussed being more of a curator and allowed for actor-driven discovery during the rehearsal process. Knowing this, I realized the need for flexibility and the need to explore for several weeks, understanding that design elements could change each day.

With this information, I researched the artists and worked on developing the theatre space to resemble installation art. Because of this direction, the visuals of art galleries became the path I took in starting the design. Similar to Veronica's piece, Sean and I had most of our design

correspondence over email and phone due to his location in Chicago, and we were not able to meet in person until after the scenic design deadline. Communication became a huge factor in how the scenic design developed and changed. We exchanged sketches and drawings over email, but at some point, I had translated his interpretation of research in different ways without realizing that occurrence. My interpretation of an art gallery was less realistic and tried to solve the shape of the theatre space in a way that took away from the initial concept. This way of thinking felt so foreign to me and it was not until Sean expressed confusion over the design I presented, that I realized what I was trying to do: I tried to create an art gallery within the theatre instead of transforming the theatre into an art gallery. The design tried to specify a space rather than embrace the theatre space itself and working within its existing shape. This was a great learning experience for me and helped me realize the need to be more thorough in the specificity of what we both saw and responded to visually. Sean noticed the characteristics of the art gallery in the research, whereas I tried to take parts of the research and rationalize it into a scenic design. We both studied the same research and agreed that it headed in the right direction, yet we did not discuss which aspects of the research should be translated for the scenic design, and I assumed that what we saw was the same. I had completely missed elements that he thought would be included in the design.

This called for a redesign of a set that was already budgeted and ready for construction. Fortunately, most of the elements were present, but just needed reconfiguration. I also realized that elements needed to be cut to account for scenic pieces that were more important for Sean, and I felt that it was important for me to accommodate these changes and find ways to make the new design elements work within the space. I learned that the play needed a workspace that gave

the actors freedom to help create the installations and in some way create a narrative for how the space transformed during the performance. Instead of trying to have the design tell the story, it was about creating a neutral space in which events could take place in any shape. Time really became a factor in this production, as we lost construction days due to the extra time it took to redraft the set, recalculate the budget, and reengineer the new drafts. This experience helped me better understand what it took to create a space that was more about leaving room to explore, instead of creating a space that solved all of the answers right away. To create a space that would lend itself to being very open-ended was so new to me, and it was novel to accept that I did not know how each element may be used within the space right away.

Figures 4 and 5 illustrated the final version of the set. The colorful, hanging extension cords draped from above and the numerous lightbulbs interspersed within the cords offered a type of installation that allowed freedom for the space to transform with lights, costumes, and sound. Filling up one of the stage entrances with beach balls was another way to keep the space playful, and allowed for more movement and interaction with the scenic elements to happen. A swing was also added within the space and housed a radio for the first two acts before being lowered to be used for the third act. To reorient the the space, we blocked off a section of seats and added about fifteen chairs onstage for the audience to have the option of sitting on deck. This readjusted the center line of the set and changed its perspective. In additional to the added seats onstage, stuffed burlap sacks were placed in some audience seating. The purpose for this was to create some type of installation, but to also encourage the audience to notice that an object placed in a seat could affect how they chose where to sit. The blocked off section of audience seats became the green room for the actors, since the actors remained visible throughout the play

even when out of the scene. The green room also housed stage management, and they were able to observe and call the show visible to the entire audience, which was not typical for a production. Once the space was determined, we focused more on the props and details that became more actor-driven.

The props for the play changed often in rehearsal, so we set aside a large contingency to account for changes that could occur later. When working with a production that needed flexibility and time to explore, I realized that it was always better to wait than to assume that a prop used for one week would remain. I saw during rehearsals the time it took to discover what each scene meant to everyone in the rehearsal space and how difficult it could be to add energy into a scene with a challenging text and vague visual structure, and I saw the importance of exploring the text with props and figuring out which props helped the scenes and which did not.

This production had the structure of the dance pieces previously mentioned, yet carried the specific requirements of an actual script, which made this process even more complex. When there was text from an established play, it was not something to ignore and with the play being so open to visual interpretation, I initially found it difficult to contain the words and their significance within a scenic design. After working with Sean, I realized that the approach in creating an art gallery and installation became more clear. I saw how this type of space could serve the text and also allow freedom for the rest of the creative team and actors to add layers to a space that could transform into each scene without having to worry about solving specifics, that the props and staging designated certain spaces. This way of approaching a scenic design really helped me open up another avenue of thinking that I had not encountered.

CHAPTER 4: Advanced Scenic Design Class

Robert Brill's Advanced Scenic Design class emphasized exploring hundreds of options for a single idea. Whether for a play, musical, or opera, he encouraged his students to figure out a number of different ways one idea can be interpreted. This was very challenging for me, as I became caught up in the details of a singular idea, which was a habit of mine. I tended to focus on creating detailed models of one idea for a play when he encouraged his students to explore different ideas very quickly, by forming simple shapes with paper instead of spending hours working on one model without having exhausted all of the possibilities. These exercises helped me become comfortable with letting ideas go when I found that they did not work, that these ideas were in no way precious and that I should keep redesigning until I found the most complete idea for a scenic design, which often required many iterations. Through those iterations, I have learned more about the process and what can be gained by keeping some ideas and letting go of others. The structure of this class prepared me for the shows previously mentioned. With each of those productions, I worked with choreographers and directors who were willing to let go of ideas when they found that those ideas no longer worked, and it did not matter if those ideas were already set into motion. I had to accept that to keep going in a singular direction, without giving adequate time to explore other possibilities, could limit the scope and impact a production could accomplish. Even with all of the setbacks during these productions, I could never have imagined the work that resulted in remaining patient and willing to adapt and change designs that already existed. The quick thinking and redirection exercises encouraged in the class setting helped prepare me to really embrace adapting to change. The class also taught me that although being able to adapt to change is a wonderful and necessary skill, it was important to keep the

integrity of my own voice visible in some way throughout each process and to make sure that the conviction I had in my own thoughts were articulated clearly and not ignored.