

# Scenic Design

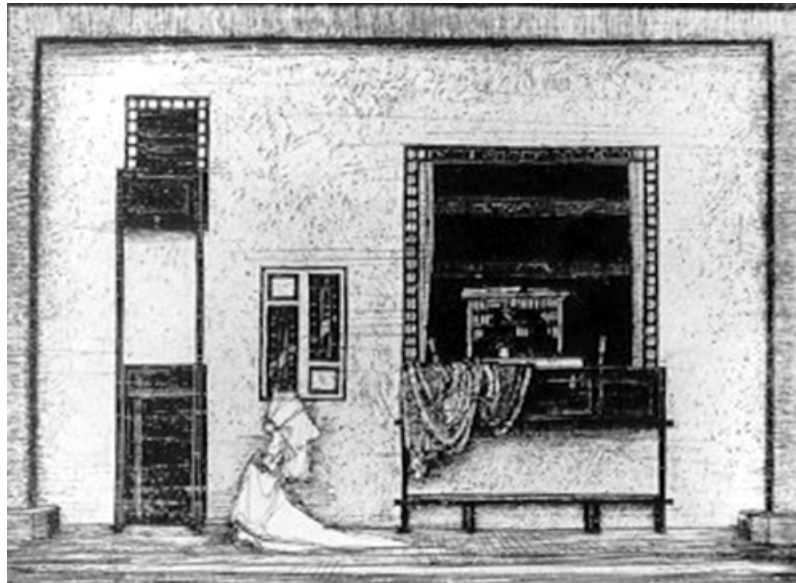
## Resources

### Reference...

J. Michael Gillette. *Theatrical Design and Production*, 4th edition. Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Publishing Company. 2000. Chapter 7: Scenic Design  
Jones, Robert Edmond. *The Dramatic Imagination*. New York: Theatre Arts Books. 1941.  
Payne, Darwin. *The Scenographic Imagination*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois Press. 1981.

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### 1. Who is considered the "father" of American scene design?



**Robert Edmond Jones**  
*The Man Who Married a Dumb Wife*

**Robert Edmond Jones** (1887-1954) graduated from Harvard in 1910, traveled to Europe to study the "New StageCraft" and returned to America at the beginning of World War I. He shocked the American theatre audience in 1915 with his simple presentational set for *The Man Who Married a Dumb Wife*. Today he is primarily remembered for (1) his work with the Provincetown Players (1916-1929) and the Theatre Guild (1919- ) and their staging of Eugene O'Neill's early plays and (2) the vivid dramatic lighting for *Macbeth*, *Richard III*, and John Barrymore's *Hamlet*.

[Link](#) to **Robert Edmond Jones'** production credits listed in the *Internet Broadway Database* ([www.ibdb.com](http://www.ibdb.com))

### 2. Briefly discuss the "action-documentation-metaphor" approach to scene design.

The "**action-documentation-metaphor**" approach to design was developed and taught by New York designer Mordecai Gorelik (1900-1975). At the end of World War II, in the fall of 1945, the US Army opened a university for American service men and women in southern France: the *Biarritz American University*. One of the Fine Arts courses offered was *Scene Design*. The professor was Mordecai Gorelik. Ten year later he was conducting 12 week workshops in New York City for designers, directors and playwrights. Twenty years later the class was called *The Scenic Imagination*, in homage to Gorelik's mentor Robert Edmond Jones, the author of *The Dramatic Imagination* (1941), and was being taught by Gorelik at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale. [Link](#) to Mordecai Gorelik's production credits in the *Internet Broadway Database* ([www.ibdb.com](http://www.ibdb.com))

**Action:** Provide those elements -- doors, windows, steps, furniture -- needed by the director and the actor to stage the show.

**Documentation:** Locate the action of the play in a specific place -- London, Berlin, New York -- and a specific time period -- 1890, 1936, 2000.

The **Metaphor** is Gorelik's trademark and is used to assist the designer in developing a specific tone, mood, style, or feel for the play. According to the [Free Dictionary](#), a **metaphor** is "A figure of speech in which a word ... that ordinarily designates one thing is used to designate another, thus making an implicit comparison..." For example: "All the world's a stage,..." (William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, Act II, scene 7). In less poetic terms -- the world is a stage. (*Note: A simile would add the word like: The world is like a stage.*)

A possible **scenic metaphor** for Moliere's *The Imaginary Invalid* (1673) could be "an apothecary's shop," a drug store. *Argan*, Moliere's imaginary invalid, does **not** live in a drug store (according to Gorelik: that would be "crude expressionism,") but the set, his sitting room, could have the tone, mood, style, and feel of a 17th century drugstore.

### 3. List five practical considerations a designer must face when designing a set for a play or musical.

1. The **play**,
2. The **director**,
3. The **theatre** and its physical **facilities**,
4. The **budget** (in both time and money), and
5. The **experiences** and **abilities** of the crew.

### 4. According to Darwin Payne (*The Scenographic Imagination*), what are the scene designer's "four areas of influence?"

1. The stage **floor** -- ramps, steps, platforms...

To resolve the stage floor into appropriate acting areas is the first major step in designing a production.

(Darwin Payne. *The Scenographic Imagination*, pg.46.)

2. The general **background** -- walls, wings and borders, backdrops,...

While the actors do not necessarily involve themselves with the background, they will always be seen in relation to it....This background can be, therefore, at one time, the least important part of the design to the performer and the most potent visual element in terms

of what the audience sees. Actors simply cannot compete with a background that is too bright or distracting. This is potentially the most dangerous area in which the scenographer works...

(Darwin Payne. *The Scenographic Imagination*, pg.46, 49.)

3. The **specific units** of scenery -- doors, windows, rocks, trees..., and

These units may be part of the general background but what separates them into a different category is that they may, in fact often are, used directly by the actors and therefore become much more important to them. Doors, windows, platforms, steps, rocks, trees, etc., can be used by themselves, that is separated from their surrounding background, to create the sense of a particular place without the connecting material -- such as a wall -- that would be found if the scene were completely realistic in conception.

(Darwin Payne. *The Scenographic Imagination*, pg. 49.)

4. The **furniture** and/or set props -- chairs, benches, beds, tables, shelves...

These elements are one step nearer the actor, both in physical proximity and usefulness to him as an artist. Although there are only a few major categories of furniture that man devised, there are innumerable variations and permutations on these basic forms; he needs something to sit or lie on (chairs, benches, stools, beds), something to hold objects and materials for his immediate use (tables in various forms), and storage units, something open, often with lids or doors, in which to keep his needs and possessions (chests, boxes, shelves).

(Darwin Payne. *The Scenographic Imagination*, pg. 52.)

#### **5. Develop a list of basic questions which must be answered before the designer can begin work.**

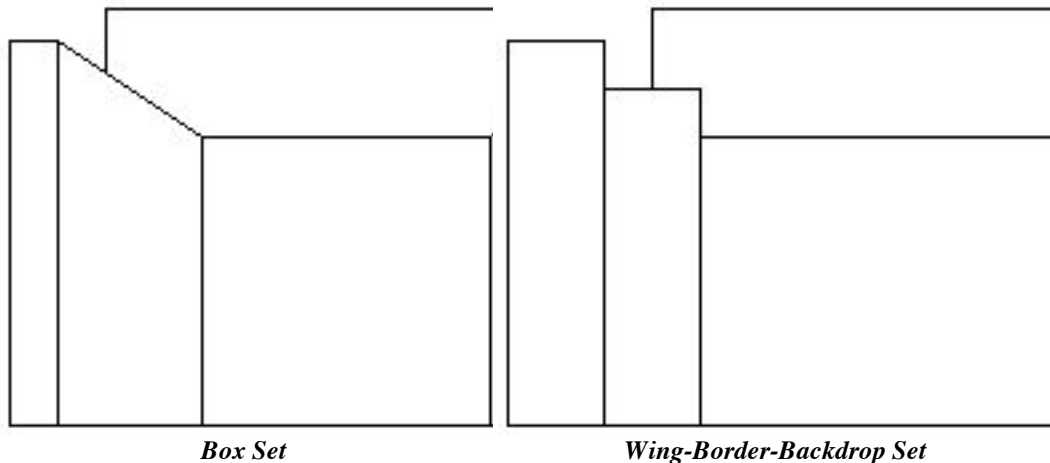
1. **Where** does the play take place? Country? City? Interior or exterior? Place: Cottage, House, Castle? Forest?...
2. **When** does the play take place? The period? The year? The season? Night or day?
3. **What is needed** to stage the action? Doors? Windows? Furniture: Chairs, tables, shelves?
4. **What is the style** of the play? Is it realistic or presentational?
5. **What is the tone** of the work? Is it light or dark? Warm or cool?
6. **What scenic image** (metaphor) does the script suggest?

#### **5a. What is a box set?**

An interior set which uses flats to create the back and side walls, and often ceiling, of a "realistic" room.

#### **How does it differ from a wing-border-backdrop set?**

The side flats in a wing-border-backdrop set are placed parallel to the front edge of the stage. In a box set, these "side walls" are turned so they run diagonal from up stage to down stage.



**6. Where, in a traditional box set, would you place a door for an important entrance?**

In the **center** of the **up stage** or back wall.

**7. Where would the door be located for an important exit? Why?**

Near the **down stage** corner of one of the **side** walls. **Why?** If the actor must make his dramatic exit through an upcenter door, he will be forced to turn his back on a major part of the audience.

**8. If a character burns a manuscript in the fire place, why should the fire place not be located on the upstage wall?**

Because it will require the actor to turn upstage, **masking** the character's actions -- the burning of the manuscript -- from the audience.

**9. What is the difference between representationalism and presentationalism?**

From the *Cambridge Guide to Theatre*:

**Representational** theatre tries to create an illusion of reality. **Presentational** theatre emphasizes theatricality and acknowledges the theatre as theatre--there is no illusion. A **representational** set gives the *illusion of reality*. Generally it is a **realistic** representation -- a **box set** with three walls and a ceiling -- of an architectural interior-- a living room, parlor or kitchen.

A **presentational** set is often a **wing-border-backdrop set**, a "painted drop" behind the performer. **Presentational** designs are used in multi-set musicals, plays with an exterior location, and the classical dramas of Shakespeare and Sophocles.

**10. What is the difference between presentational material and the working drawings?**

**Presentational material**, a *rendering* or *model*, is used by the designer to present his ideas to the director, producer and cast.



**Computer Model**

Scene designer Boyd Ostroff created the **model** of this *OperaPhilly* production of *La Boheme* on a Macintosh using [Strata StudioPro 2.1](#). Like the more traditional watercolor or pastel *rendering*, the computer generated 3d *model* can show how the set will appear under light. Click on the image to enlarge.

The **working drawings** are the "blue prints" -- *floor plan, front elevation, rear elevation, detail drawings* -- used by the production crews to build, paint, and assemble the set on stage.

The *Opera Company of Philadelphia* has posted online a nearly complete set of drawings (*Computer Models, Scenic Photos, Floor Plans, Section Views, Designer Elevations* and *Shop Drawings*) for a number of the operas they have produced. Go to their [Technical Production](#) Web Page. While there explore their shop ([OCP Production Center](#)) and the opera house ([Philadelphia Academy of Music](#)) in which they perform.

#### 11. What is a rendering?

A **rendering** is a *colored* sketch or painting of the finished set as it will appear, *under light*, to an audience member seated in the center of the house. Today many designers create their renderings on a computer using both a CAD program (*VectorWorks*) and rendering software such as *Art\*Lantis* or [RenderWorks](#). Link to the computer generated **renderings** for Northern's 2005 production Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*. or to some of my [early experiments](#) with the demo version of *Art\*lantis 4.5*

#### 12. Which, a rendering or a scale model, better illustrates a designer's concept of how the set will look under light?

A rendering.

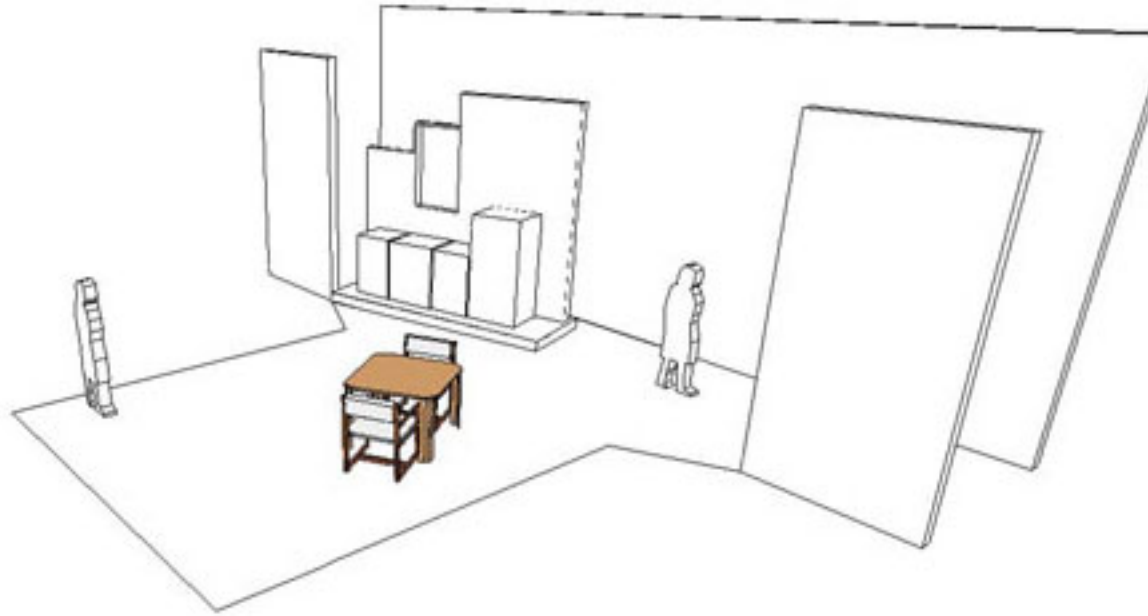
#### 13. Which will best help the director understand the stage space with which he has to work?

A scale model.

#### What is a virtual model?

Unlike pencil drafting where the designer is forced to work in only two dimensions, on a computer, the two dimensional world of the *ground plan* and *elevation* can be extruded into a three dimensional world. The **virtual model** can be viewed in perspective from the front, side, top, and back. Using *Flyover Function* it is possible to view the **virtual model** from any seat in the house.

Below is a view of the **virtual model** I created in *VectorWorks 8.5* for one of the two major sets in Northern's spring 2002 production of David Lindsay-Abaire's *Fuddy Meers*.



**Virtual Model: Gertie's Kitchen, *Fuddy Meers***

The 10'x12' kitchen wall plus the three 12' tall masking units were created using the *Wall Tool*. The 4x12 wagon plus the kitchen appliances (the stove, sink, counter, and refrigerator) began as simple 2D rectangles which were *extruded* to give them height. The two figures were imported from another drawing and the table and chairs were *symbols* included in the *VectorWork's Architectural Tool Kit*. Below is a photograph of the set as it appeared on stage.



**Photo: Gertie's Kitchen, *Fuddy Meers***

Link to additional photographs from Northern's production of [Fuddy Meers](#).

#### 14. What is a floor plan?

A *top* view of the set. The **floor plan** is used by the crew to *locate* the set on the stage floor.

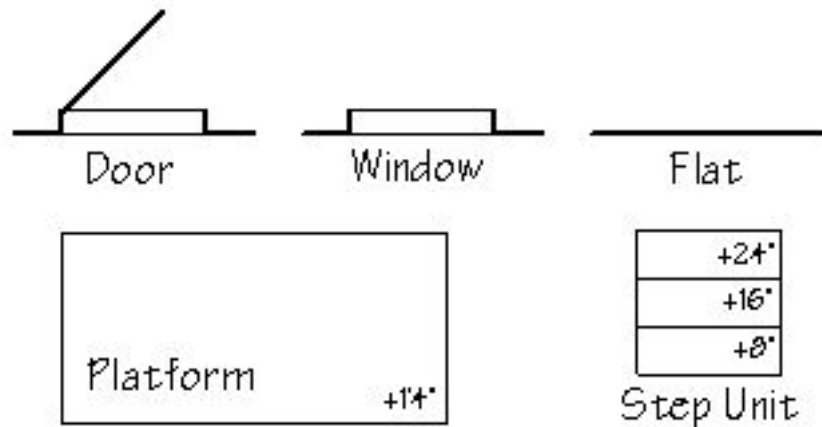


##### **Floor Plan: *La Boheme***

The **floor plan** shows not only the physical relationship of the scenic elements: platforms, door, chimney units, suspended skylight, table, stove, bed..., but also the set's location on the 73' x 90' stage of Philadelphia's Academy of Music. Click on the image to enlarge.

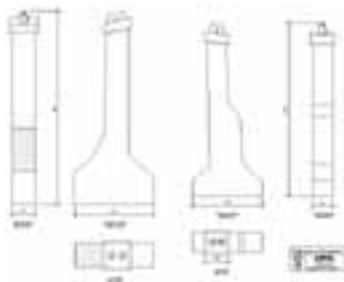
Link to **floor plans** (*PDF files*) of Northern's productions of [110 in the Shade \(Act I, Scene 1\)](#) (2003), [Rocky Horror Show](#) (2004) and [Syringa Tree](#) (2005).

#### 15. What is the conventional plan symbols for a door, windows, flat, step unit and platform?



#### 16. What is the difference between a Designer's (or front) elevation,

A **Designer's Elevation** is a *front* view of each individual piece of scenery. The designer's elevations are used by the shop crew to determine the *height* and *architectural detail* of each scenic unit.



##### **Designer's Elevation: *La Boheme***

This **elevation** presents a detailed (large scale) *front*, *side* and *top* (or *plan*) view of the two 22' tall chimney units which are major scenic elements in the first act. Click on the image to enlarge.

Link to the **front elevation** (a *PDF file*) of the Railroad Depot, Dry Goods Store & Water Tower from Act I, Scene 1 of Northern's production of *100 in the Shade* (2003).

## Painter's elevation, and

A **Painter's Elevation** is a copy of the *front* elevation which has been rendered to indicate the *color* and *painting techniques* which are to be applied to the final set.



### Computer model: *Tosca* Act II

To the left is designer Boyd Ostroff computer generated **rendering** for the Second Act of the *OperaPhilly* production of Puccini's *Tosca*. Below is the **painter's elevation** for the stage right wall. Click on the image to enlarge.



### Painter's Elevation: *Tosca* Act II

Each wall in this massive set was 34' wide by 30' tall. Each unit was assembled from 8 luan covered flats-- 4 measured 8'6" x 11' and 4 were 8'6" by 19'. Click on the image to enlarge.

## Rear elevation?



A **Rear Elevation** is a scaled drawing of the *back* of the scenery. It is the guide used by the shop carpenters to build the setting. The drawing to the left is the **rear elevation** of one of the 8'6"x22' units which form the walls of the Second Act set for *Tosca*. Click on the image to enlarge.

[StageCraft Home Page](#)

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