

**ACTING, DIRECTING
&
DESIGNING LIGHTING &
SCENERY
for
THE THRUST STAGE**

PART TWO

**SUPPLEMENT
CHAPTER
TO**

ACTING IS ACTION

**by
Phillip Rayher**

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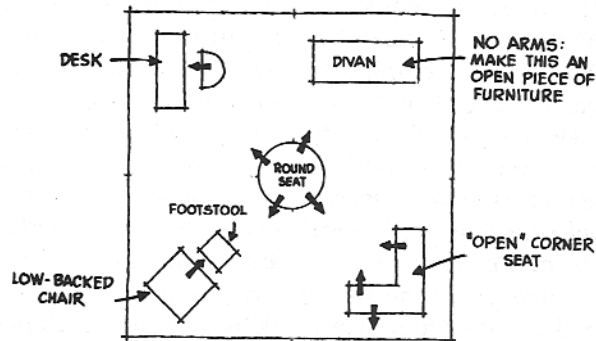
SCENERY DESIGN FOR THE THRUST STAGE

EXAMPLES AND TYPES OF DESIGNS FOR THE THRUST STAGE

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SCENERY DESIGN FOR THE THRUST STAGE

The thrust stage demands creative set and prop design, such as set pieces called *tumpties*, these are box-like pieces that serve double duty as both props and storage. On the thrust stage the scale is smaller, units must be more detailed and most items must be stage worth and visible from all sides. The designer must have no more thoughts of the “box set” with three walls and with doors and windows. You must rethink audience sight lines and pay continuous close attention to them. The designer must think of the parameter and the diagonal. There is not a “front” of the stage.



A ground plan can readily be designed that will fan out from the center (see the drawing above). The use of a center object approachable from all sides will avoid the deadlines of a cleared space and will provide the obstacle course so necessary in a dynamic ground plan. Note that the drawing has four major stage areas. By using the areas in combinations with only occasional use of one area, a dynamic interlocking of the stage will result, and all three audiences will see the play equally well.¹

A ground plan could rake the objects onstage along diagonal lines (again think diagonally), helping the majority of the house to see most of the action. You can also see that compositionally, using a triangle made by three figures is very effective on the thrust stage, not only for the person at the apex of the triangle.

Placing covered scenery on this stage would certainly obscure audience vision, but when skeletal frames are introduced you have both good vision and the suggestion of Baroque scenery. Looking through such frames is no problem at all for audiences, for we actually see much in real life through interrupted views. You must learn to exploit this stage in every possible way, for the communal theatre has great potential for our times because it is quite different from motion pictures or television.

Details or scenic elements, such as railings, columns, half walls and wainscoting, cutaway walls, fragmentary walls, door frames, etc., benches, window seats, props and set dressing, sofas, settees, love seats and couches with low or with out backs and are viable on all there sided.

POWER POINT:

The GROUND PLAN is the key to a successful production on a thrust stage. It must be thoroughly thought out and examined for sight line obstacles.

POWER POINT:

Consider items that extend up from the floor and/or down from the ceiling (hanging from the grid), such as ceiling beams and rib structures, plate rails, moldings, perimeter edges above that designated and defined the area below.²

POWER POINT:

Consider the use of levels that might define and delineate the various acting areas on stage.³

POWER POINT:

¹ Play Directing, Analysis, Communication, and Style by Francis Hodge, Second edition, Prentice Hall, 1982

² Illustrations of these various elements appear in the next two sections of this supplement.

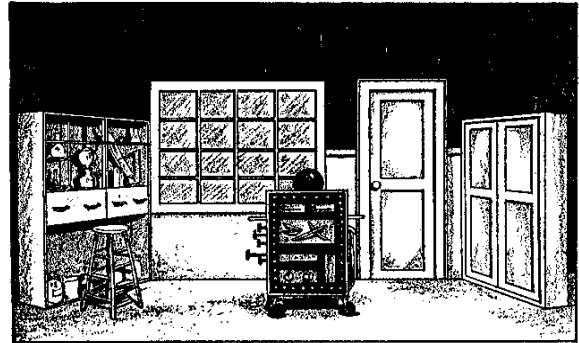
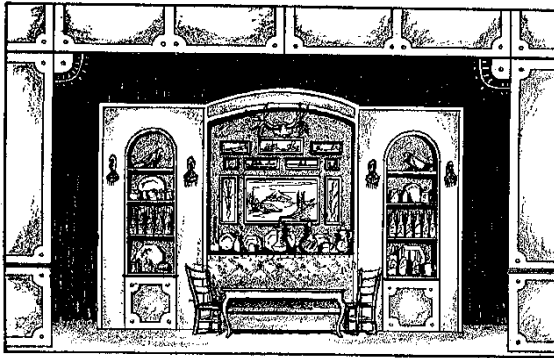
³ For examples see the photographs in the section: EXAMPLES AND TYPES OF DESIGNS FOR THE THRUST STAGE.

DON'T FORGET THE FLOOR ITSELF. Various sizes and shapes of rugs, various types and styles of wood flooring, tile, grass, weeds, and even dirt.⁴

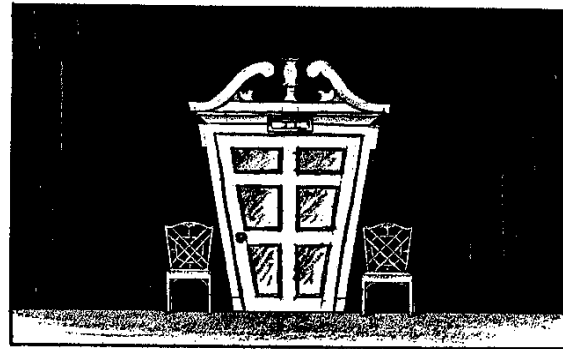
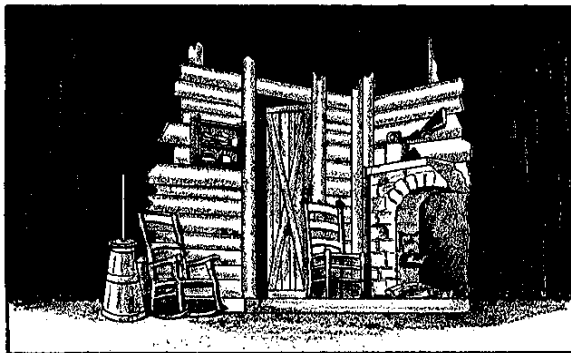
The various types of “**SELECTIVE**” **SETTINGS** illustrated below work well on the thrust stage and should be considered by the director and designer when preparing their production: (1) the Selective Setting, (2) the Cut-Down Setting, (3) the Fragmentary Setting, (4) the Profile Setting, and (5) the Minimum Setting.

What is a Selective Set? In the Selective Set certain elements of a setting are carefully ‘selected,’ while others are not chosen.

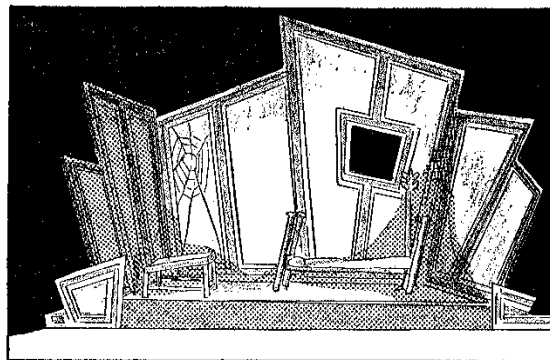
Selective items, set pieces, or units that define or delineate entrances— door frames, arches, columns, pillars, planters, gates, etc.— are especially desirable at the “vom” entrances. What type of space are we entering, or is it an entrance to another part of the “non-visible” setting?



Left, a **SELECTIVE Setting** for the play *Uncle Harry*, particular attention must be paid to the treatment of the units right and left edges and top of the unit. Right, a **CUT-DOWN Setting** for the laboratory set in Maxwell Anderson's *The Star Wagon*. The walls are cut down in direct relation to the architecture of the room.



Left, a form of Selective Setting, the **FRAGMENTARY Setting** for a cabin in the play *Dark of the Moon*. Right, a **PROFILE Setting** for a hallway scene in the musical *Anything Goes*.



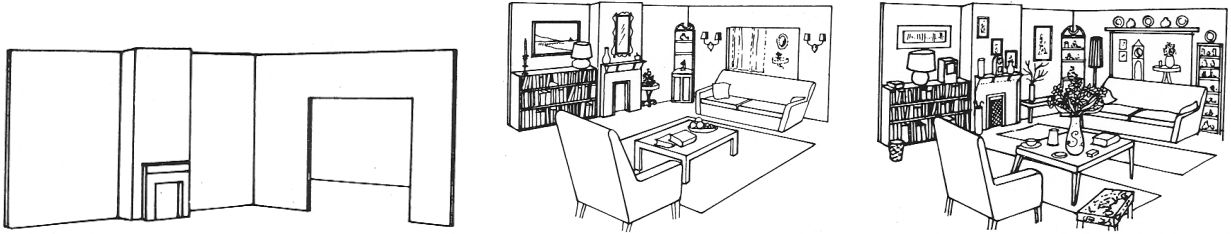
⁴ For examples see the photographs in the section: EXAMPLES AND TYPES OF DESIGNS FOR THE THRUST STAGE.

A **Minimum Setting** on a wagon. An expressionistic interpretation for the play *The Inspector General*.⁵

Using selected elements—

By using just a few carefully chosen features it is often possible to build up a convincing locale out of very little. It is fascinating to see how little is needed at times to create a convincing atmosphere. Seeing the door of a house, we assume that the rest of the building exists. A ticket-office represents the entire foyer of a theatre. Show someone holding a fishing rod, backed by a light blue cyc, and we have conveyed the idea that he is fishing. Add the sound of a river, and the audience is convinced. How necessary is it to add the grassy river bank, trees, or water reflections?⁶

If it is carefully chosen *part* of the location will suggest the entire situation to our audience. But these must be unambiguous, the audience must recognize and interpret the situation instantly. The technique is to imply the whole by showing a complete but localized part.



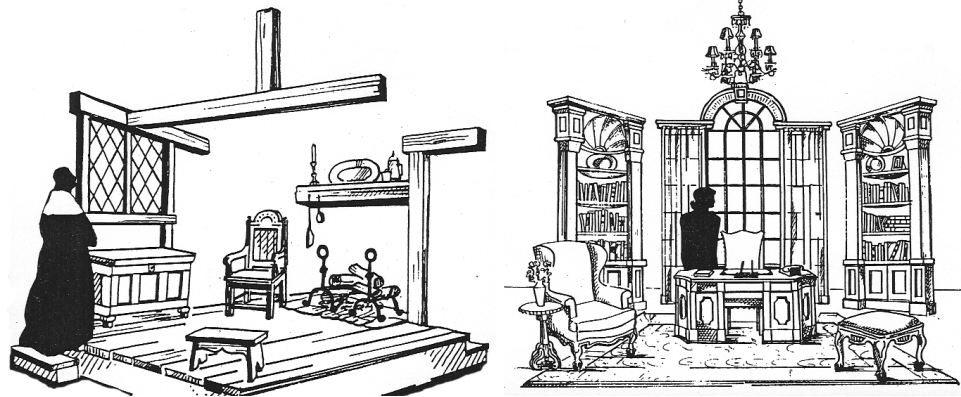
The three illustrations above show a raked wall unit that would function on a thrust stage. The illustrations also show how well thought out set dressing changes the feeling of a set. Left, the bare skeleton of the set— architecturally appropriate for the play being presented. Center, a personalized decor is developed, suitable for the period, the characters, and the action of the play. Carefully selected properties enhance the scene and give it conviction. Right, excessive set dressing produces an overfussy effect and clogs the composition. The location becomes confused and cluttered, perhaps just the effect needed for the particular play.

⁵ These five illustrations are from: Philippi, Herbert. *Stagecraft and Scene Design*. Houghton Mifflin Company, 1953. Out of Print.

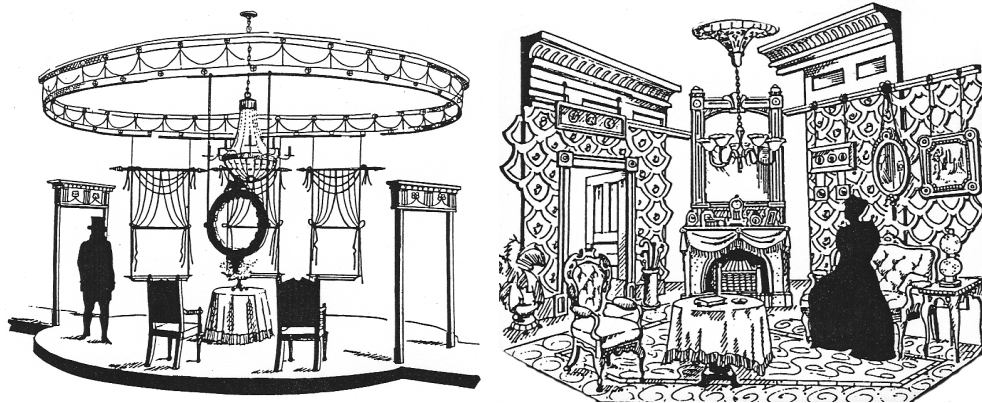
⁶ Both of the last two items can be achieved easily on the thrust stage with gobos.

EXAMPLES AND TYPES OF DESIGNS FOR THE THRUST STAGE

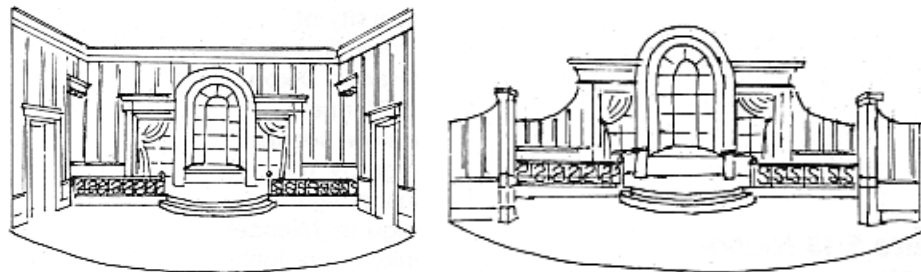
The following section of illustrations and photographs are examples and samples of the many variations of settings for the thrust stage, also scenery styles and scenic elements that lend themselves to set designs of the thrust stage. This section is intended to have the reader discover these elements by studying the drawings and pictures.



Left, a design for a play set in an Early American time period. (notice the unconventional raked angle of the set, the fragmentary and selective set design with ceiling beams that define the space, and the floor treatment.) Right, a design for a play set in an American Georgian design (notice the three separate free standing wall units that have defined capstones to the sides and tops, and the appropriate period chandelier.)

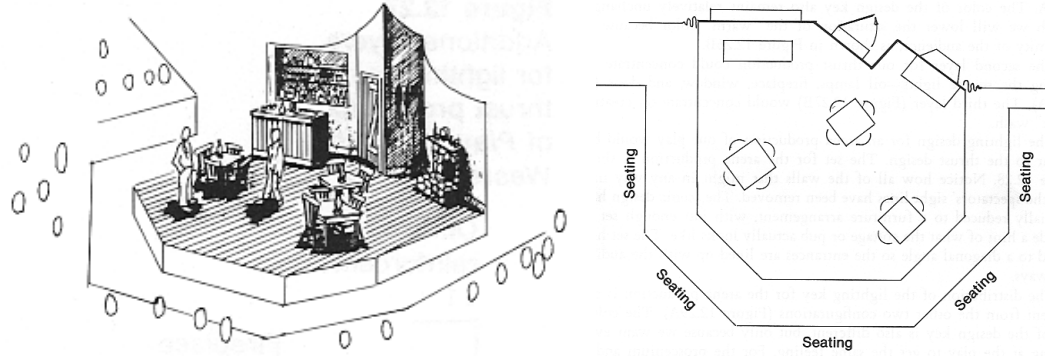


Left, a design for a play set in an Adam/Federal style. (notice the open ceiling unit that mirrors the shape of the stage foot print, the free standing profile doors and window units, and the appropriate period chandelier, all of which give the set an open, light, and airy feeling.) Right, a design for a play set in an Romantic Victorian design (notice, again, the unconventional raked angle of the set, the three separate free standing wall units of various sizes and shapes, that make this setting very busy, and the appropriate period chandelier.)

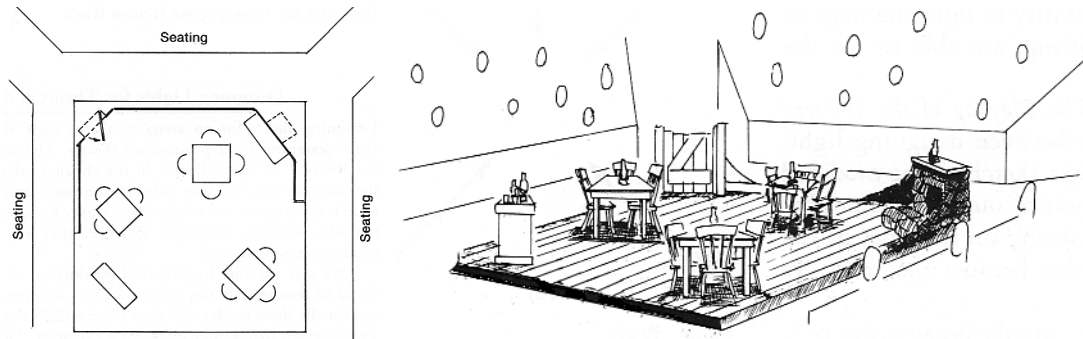


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Illustration on the left demonstrates a scenic design using a standard box-set for a proscenium stage, the right illustration gives an idea of a variation on that design using an interesting silhouette of a cut-down setting that would function on a thrust stage.



Left, a set design and right, the ground plan for a production of *Playboy of the Western World* on a thrust stage (notice the capstone treatment to the top of the upstage wall unit).⁸



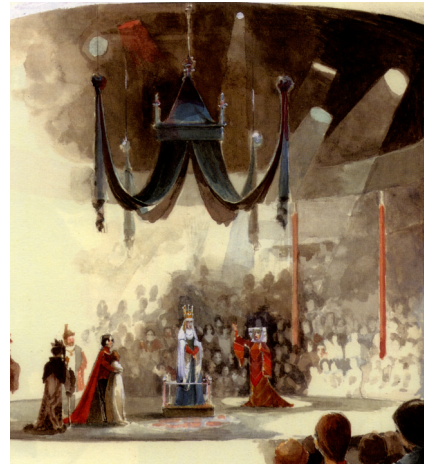
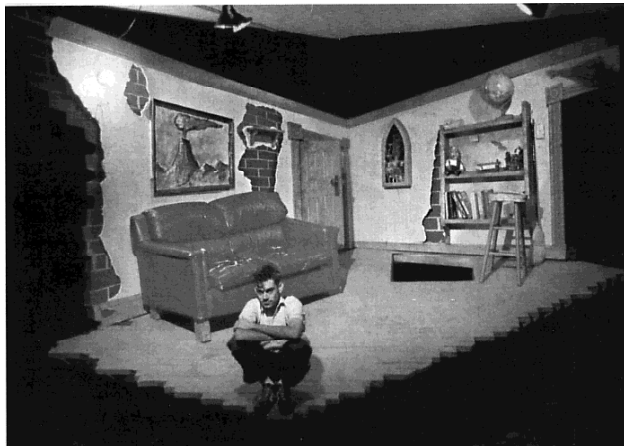
Left and right, a different variation on a scenic design for *Playboy of the Western World* (ground plan and elevation). On the elevation notice the scenic units of (1) the cut-down door and frame— up center on the drawing— and (2) the fireplace and mantle unit— on the right— which are placed across the “vom” entrances, which makes them visible to all three audience sections and keeps the sight lines acceptable).⁹



Another design for the play *Playboy of the Western World*. at Furman University (notice that the lighting instruments are placed at less than 45° — almost all are directly over the acting area).

⁸ Gillette, Michael J. *Theatrical Design and Production*. Mayfield Publishing Company. 1987

⁹ Gillette, Michael J. *Theatrical Design and Production*. Mayfield Publishing Company. 1987



Left, Play: *Freewheeling in the Attic* Theatre: Unknown (from American Theatre Magazine). Right, Play: Unknown. Theatre: Unknown (notice the scenic draping from above the center thrown unit)



Left, Play: *The Sleeper* Theatre: Unknown (notice the four distinct acting/setting areas: on the left— the couch and ottoman defined by the rug, on the right— the dining table and chairs defined again by the rug with the addition of the over head lighting unit, down center — the bed and headboard, and up center— the kitchen counter unit with window, door, and island.) Right, Play: *Rutherford and Son* at The Shaw Festival, Canada



Above two views of the Guthrie Theatre production of *The Constant Wife*. (notice the use of rugs to delineate acting areas, the railing surrounding the couch area on the stage right parameter, in the right photograph notice the placement of the three actors).



Left, Play: *Hamlet* Theatre: Guthrie Theatre. Right, Play: *Intimate Apparel*. Theatre: Guthrie Theatre



Left. Play: *Sand Mountain*, theatre unknown. Right. Play: *Cafe Puttanescas* at Arden Theatre (notice the use of the platform/step unit upstage and the half-column up right and the use of the floor treatment)



Left. Play: *The Foreigner*, Theatre unknown (notice the use of the half-wall/window corner unit in the front facing the audience with the center front actor looking through it. Right. Play: *Ovid* Theatre: Bolton Theater, Kenyon College (notice the floor treatment and steps surrounding the acting area and the upstage pillars and riser)



Left. Play: *The Cherry Orchard* Theatre: Denver University thrust stage of 21' x 17' (notice the floor treatment, the upstage pillars defining the door frame and the props on the outer edge of the acting area. The two people are playing over each other's shoulder to open each player to at least two tiers.) Right. Play: *Rainbow Bar & Grille* Theatre: EDU (notice the upstage bar scenic unit and placement of the actors and the furniture on the diagonal axis— especially the actors down left and right facing toward the center of the acting area.



Both. Play: *Unexpected Guest* Theatre: USM (notice, again, the actor placement, the floor treatment and rug, and the furniture placement— most units are facing inward on the outer perimeter of the acting area, also notice the interesting placement of the desk and its chair.



Left. Play: *Much Ado About Nothing*. Theatre: USM (notice the actor placement— facing inward and on the diagonal axis— and the scenic unit on a platform upstage.) Right. Play: *Memorandum* Theatre: Western Illinois University (notice the use of platforms, steps, the floor treatment, and the actor placement)



Left, Play: *The Adding Machine*, Theatre: Furman University (notice the floor treatment, the triangle separation of the three scenery groups). Right, Play: *The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds*, Theatre: Furman University (notice the use of the perimeter and the scenery radiating towards the center.)



Left, Play: *Antigone* Theatre: Furman University (notice the use of the central platform and step unit and the placement of the actors— actors upstage are standing and down stage are seated on various levels.) Right, Play: *Equus*, Theatre: Furman University. In these two designs notice the designers use of the change of the shape of the basic stage footprint.



Left and Right, Play: *Ah, Wilderness* Theatre Furman University (notice the grouping of the furniture at the four outside points, the upstage scenery unit, and in the second photo, the addition of the dining table in the center of the acting space for a different act. The two people at the dining room table are playing over each other's shoulder to open each player to at least two tiers.)



Left, Play: *Amphitryon* 38 Theatre: Furman University (notice the use of levels in the central acting area, the change of the shape of the actual stage foot print, and the scenery unit upstage) Right, Play: *The Bald Soprano* Theatre: Furman University (notice the furniture placement and the upstage free standing scenic unit with central entrance area).



Left, Play: *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, Theatre: Furman University (notice again the change of the shape of the basic foot print of the stage, the upstage free standing set units, and the benches placed on the perimeter.) Right, Play: *Charley's Aunt*, Theatre: Furman University. (notice the placement and direction of the furniture.)



Left, Play: *The Cotton Patch Gospel*, Theatre: Furman University (notice the use of platforms on the upstage wall and the actor groupings in the four corners of the diagonal axis. The railing units visible are the audience modesty panels and not part of the set.)

Right, Play: *The Cat's Cradle*, Theatre: Furman University (notice the free standing staircase and door unit up center. The railing units visible are the audience modesty panels and not part of the set.)



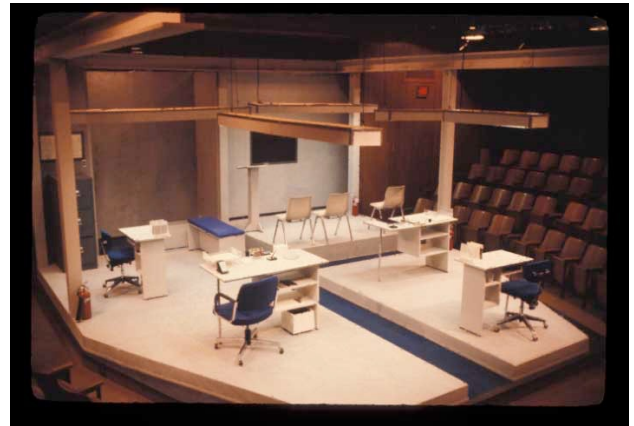
Left, Play: *The Imaginary Invalid* Theatre: Furman University (notice the benches on the perimeter defining the stage space, the circular bed in the center, the up center scenic unit, and the greenery on its right and left— used to soften the units end angles) Right, Play: *Doll's House*. Theatre: Furman University (again notice the up center scenic unit with jogs in the wall to soften the line, roof treatment, and furniture on the perimeter).



Left, Play: *The Blood Knot*. Theatre: Furman University (notice the makeshift cut-down wall sections, the furniture, and props on the perimeter) Right, Play: *Candida*. Theatre: Furman University (notice the rug defining the space, the open desk/table on the down center perimeter, and the fireplace unit up center with the bookcase units that cap the unit on each side. The actors are placed on the perimeter facing inwards at the corners of the diagonal axis.)



Left, Play: *The Chalk Garden*. Theatre: Furman University (notice the upstage open wall unit, the rug that defines the stage right dining table acting area). Right, Play: *The Dining Room*. Theatre: Furman University (notice the rug defining the table area, and the interesting wall/door way unit up center. The railing units visible are the audience modesty panels and not part of the set.)



Left, Play: *The Shadow Box*. Theatre: Furman University. (notice, although the ground plan represents rooms in a house, there are no walls or partitions to indicate separation. The use of the three levels define three distinctive setting areas. **Find other set designs in this collection that use the same technique.**) Right, Play: *The Memorandum*. Theatre: Furman University (again notice the three platforms defining the three acting areas, and the hanging ceiling beams and office lighting units)

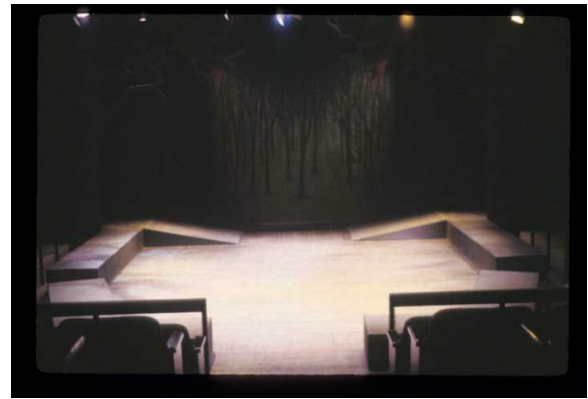


Left, Play: *Harvey* (Act One). Left center, *Harvey* (Act Two). Theatre: Furman University. (notice the floor treatment and the upstage scenic unit walls defining the space for each act— both the floor treatment and the wall unit also create unity as they are in the same scale/size). Right center, Play: *Winter Madness* Theatre: University of Denver using the alley configuration of the stage (notice how the rug defines the acting space and the very simple but appropriate furniture pieces.) Right, Play: *The Madman and the Nun*. Theatre: Furman University (notice the scenic unit including the wall fragment.).



Left, Play: *My Sister In This House*. Theatre: Furman University. (notice the staircase up center that arches into the acting area and the curricular platform up left defining the bed room. The railing units visible are the audience modesty panels and not part of the set.)

Right, Play: *She Stoops to Conquer*. Theatre: Furman University. (notice the very sparse design defined by the floor treatment, the step unit up center and doors/fire place unit.)



Left, Play: *Ring Around The Moon*. Theatre: Furman University. (notice the use of the platform and ramps, the open arch units, the floor treatment, and the placement of the swing at the stage left "vom.".)

Right, Play: *The Diviners*. Theatre: Furman University. (notice the reuse of the stock scenic units of the ramps and platform— also used in *Ring Around The Moon* on the left.)



Left, Play: *Amen to a Mantis*. Theatre, Furman University (notice the use of skeletal levels, ramps, and open frames that radiate from up center). Right, Play unknown (notice the seating unit in the center and the actor radiating out from it. Also, notice the actor— up center in the photograph— who is standing in the "vom" entrance to allow for the audiences sight lines, and the chair-rail height paneled half walls on the perimeter.)

¹⁰ Cameron, Kenneth M, and Patti P. Gillespie. *The Enjoyment of Theatre*. Sixth Edition. Pearson education, 2004