The Dissertation Committee for Christin Essin Yannacci certifies that this is the approved version of the following dissertation:

Landscapes of American Modernity: A Cultural History of Theatrical Design, 1912-1951

Committee:

_____
Charlotte Canning, Supervisor

_____
Jill Dolan

_____
Stacy Wolf

_____
Linda Henderson

_____
Arnold Aronson

Landscapes of American Modernity: A Cultural History of Theatrical Design, 1912-1951

by

Christin Essin Yannacci, B.A.; M.A.

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Christin Essin Yannacci, Ph.D.

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Until the end of the nineteenth century, theatrical design was the province of largely unknown craftsmen working behind-the-scenes. But as America entered a new century, designers emerged as artistic leaders, asserting their work as a vital contribution to the culture of American modernity. This dissertation examines select designs of prominent theatre artists as cultural texts conveying processes of modernization—industrialization, rationalization, urbanization, consumerism, and imperialism—that accelerated in the United States during the first half of the twentieth century. Designers Robert Edmond Jones (1887-1954), Norman Bel Geddes (1893-1958), and Joseph "Jo" Mielziner (1901-1976) participated in public dialogues alongside other modern artists who found new expressions for changes happening around them. Their designs significantly shaped the perspectives of twentieth century audiences, not only through their interpretations of dramatic texts but also their interpretations of the nation's cultural landscapes. By adapting the aesthetics of stage modernism to a variety of commercial

projects and venues, these designers expanded the circulation of their work beyond the theatrical stage, profoundly influencing American visual culture.

The time frame extends from 1912, a year in which Jones arrived in Greenwich Village, to the early 1950s, the years in which Mielziner gained preeminence as a Broadway artist. Designs included in my analysis include David Belasco's staging for *The Governor's Lady* (1912); Jones's designs for the Paterson Strike Pageant (1913), experiments with the Washington Square Players (1914) and the Provincetown Players (1915), and *The Man Who Married a Dumb Wife* (1915); Bel Geddes's designs for *The Divine Comedy* (1921), *The Miracle* (1923), and his New York World's Fair attraction *Futurama* (1939); and finally Mielziner's designs for *Death of a Salesman* (1949), *South Pacific* (1949), and *The King and I* (1951). With each design, I draw strategic connections between aesthetic theories and social, political, and economic ideas circulating during the early twentieth century, recognizing modern design as an embodied practice that has developed out of particular historical moments and cultural geographies.

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Chapter One:
Modern Design as American Cultural History

"[D]esign is a domain of contested principles and values, where competing ideas about individual and social life are played out in a vivid debate through material and immaterial products."
                              —Richard Buchanan and Victor Margolin, *Discovering Design*

There are generally two categories of coffee houses in Austin, Texas, both being friendly to graduate students who occupy their tables with laptop computers. The first variety is locally-owned and decorated in a quirky style of mismatched, second-hand furniture; its regular customers appreciate the eclectic, cheery atmosphere and often use the space to socialize with friends. Local shops like Austin Java sell "Keep Austin Weird" t-shirts reflecting the city's grassroots movement to stave off development projects displacing local businesses with chain restaurants and retail stores. Indeed, the second type of coffee house is a result of chain expansion; places like Starbucks offer a similar coffee product, but different customer experience. The décor of these corporate-owned establishments is deliberate and standardized, recognizable from one location to the next. The casual sophistication of the Starbucks-style permeates every aspect of the store design, from the sleek curves of laminated countertops to the plush upholstery of carefully placed reading chairs. When I need a quiet place to write, I often select Starbuck's subdued setting over Austin Java's lively environment. Looking around at the other nameless customers, who smile but rarely initiate conversation, it is apparent that they too use the space as a type of solitary retreat.

Starbucks' calm atmosphere is not arbitrary, but deliberately produced by its interior design. As someone researching design, I am often self-consciously aware of the ways in which the décor hails me as a particular type of person/character/consumer,

someone in need of a caffeinated beverage, convenient parking space, and wireless internet access. Within Starbucks, I am not specifically an Austin resident, but more generically an "American" or even "global" consumer, an identity similarly reconstructed at each location by the uniformity of the chain design. As I pause from writing, I notice that the bleached wood, oblong table with rounded edges is the same I have occupied at a variety of Starbucks, and that my laptop (also purposefully designed by Gateway product engineers) sits in the same place as it did on corresponding tables. Because I am also a theatre historian, however, I recognize that the relationship between design, chain recognition, and a consistency of experience is far from a recent phenomenon, remembering that almost a century ago director David Belasco delighted Broadway audiences with the modern marvels of standardization.

In 1912, Belasco placed a Childs cafeteria, the "Starbucks" of his day, on stage at the Republic Theatre for the epilogue scene of his latest production *The Governor's Lady*. Childs, in fact, was the first restaurant chain in America; after establishing their initial location in 1889, brothers William and Samuel Childs continued to open franchises across East coast cities like New York and Philadelphia.[1] They implemented a simple, standard design of bright white tiles, walls, and counters in each location to advertise their dedication to cleanliness as well as consistency and quality control with their food preparation.[2] Indeed, part of the cafeteria's public appeal was its signature, quickly identifiable interior style. When customers walked into a Childs, they could order the

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[1] By 1899, the Childs brothers had ten restaurant locations. They incorporated in 1902, and by 1925, they had 107 restaurants in 33 cities across the U.S. Virginia Kurshan, "(Former) Childs Restaurant Building," Report for Landmarks Preservation Commission (4 Feb. 2003): 1-2. <http://www.nyc.gov/html/lpc/downloads/pdf/reports/childs.pdf>. The report was prepared for a hearing on designating the (Former) Childs Restaurant Building in Coney Island, New York as a landmark.

[2] Richard Pillsbury, *From Boarding House to Bistro: The American Restaurant Then and Now* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990) 61.

same wholesome, reasonably priced, similarly prepared food they had received at other franchise locations. For the twenty-first century, global Starbucks' customer, such dedication to consistency of taste and experience is expected; for early twentieth century New Yorkers, however, the standardization of food preparation and presentation was an innovation, one more sign of their city's evolving modernization.

Belasco's setting replicated the visually distinct character of Childs, capitalizing on the novelty of standardization and New Yorkers' familiarity with the chain. The director went to great lengths to insure that the cafeteria depicted on stage was identical to the Childs that audiences encountered within the same Times Square neighborhood.[3] Belasco ordered equipment directly from the company that supplied Childs, including the same tables, bentwood chairs, signage, cash registers, coffee broilers, and griddle-cake cookers found at each location. The stage design, therefore, was not merely a faithful reproduction of a Childs; it literally *was* a Childs, the only difference being that actors instead of customers occupied its tables eating a late-night snack of baked apples. But this, of course, could be corrected after the show when audiences left the theatre, entered the Times Square location, and ordered the same menu items.

Belasco's production characterized Childs as a place suited to the rapid pace of modern living—convenient, consistent and efficient. Even further, it typified the popular eatery as a "hip" place within a modern city where a variety of urban dwellers mixed, breaking traditional boundaries between social classes as everyone shared the same experience. Ultimately, Belasco's stage design expressed the emerging processes of

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[3] The Republic Theatre was located at 207 West 42nd Street. Wendell Phillips Dodge's article on the production, "Staging a Popular Restaurant," suggests that the restaurant was located "around the corner of Seventh Avenue" in the Times Square vicinity. *Theatre Magazine* Oct. 1912: 104. A Childs menu from 1900 notes one of its locations as 1439 Broadway, located a block and a half away from Belasco's theatre. Menu posted at <http://www.nyfoodmuesum.org/childs.htm>.

standardization that increasingly transformed the everyday appearances and practices of American culture.[4] In other words, it was a design that *invoked* design, anticipating how Americans would deliberately shape their landscapes to accommodate modern lifestyles.

In 1912, chain standardization was novel, but increasingly it has become the norm. Today, with a Starbucks at nearly every major intersection, urban dwellers consistently negotiate a postmodern landscape that relentlessly hails them as consumers. From the standardized décor of chain restaurants to the familiar colors and contours of household appliances and personal electronics, design has become a pervasive force in American culture. Returning to Belasco's performance of design in *The Governor's Lady*, I am reminded of the inherently theatrical quality of the consumer landscape. Now when I sit in Starbucks, the "Child's of its day," I realize how much design, as both a concept and artistic practice, has influenced not only the direction of American theatre but also, in a broader sense, the development of American visual culture. Until the end of the nineteenth century, design was the province of largely unknown craftsmen working behind-the-scenes. But as America entered a new century, designers asserted their work as a vital contribution to the culture of American modernity. The occasions in which they emerged as cultural leaders deserve careful consideration, giving evidence of how they shaped the perspectives of Americans both in the theatre and the everyday landscapes where they worked, shopped, traveled, and lived.

As exemplified by the opening description of Belasco's *The Governor's Lady*, this project identifies moments in the early twentieth century when design emerges as a

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[4] George Ritzer identifies this combination of commercialization and standardization as the "McDonaldization" of American culture. *The McDonaldization of Society: An Investigation into the Changing Character of Contemporary Social Life* (Thousand Oaks: Pine Forge, 1993) 1.

significant presence and influence in American culture, a visual language that bridged theatrical stages and everyday landscapes. This chapter provides an introduction for this history, establishing my methodology for examining modern design as a culturally significant, embodied practice that developed out of particular historical moments and geographies. In using the term "modern," I specifically characterize design as an artistic and organizational practice that intersects histories of modernism and modernity, and I situate the work of theatre artists at the crossroads of that intersection. During the first decade of the twentieth century, American theatrical staging assimilated the theories and practices of modernism, an artistic movement including both literary and visual arts endeavors during the approximate years between 1890 and 1960. Modern artists challenged the objective approach of realism, experimenting with new mediums and representational techniques to uncover larger subjective truths below the surface of everyday life. During this same time, however, the artistry of theatrical designers also reflected the rapid acceleration of processes characteristic of modernity such as industrialization, rationalization, urbanization, and consumerism. The term "modernity" encompasses the Enlightenment perspectives and capitalist practices that first emerged during the sixteenth century, but as a period designation most often refers to the same years as the movements of modernism.

The designs created by theatre artists such as Robert Edmond Jones (1887-1954), Norman Bel Geddes (1893-1958), and Joseph "Jo" Mielziner (1901-1976) participated in public dialogues alongside the products of other modern artists—painters, playwrights, and novelists—who sought to find new expressions for changes happening around them. More than merely providing a background for the actions of dramatic characters, their

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designs shaped the perspectives of twentieth century audiences, asking them to engage in political protest, buy consumer products, or even support foreign policy initiatives. Audiences not only viewed their images in theatres, but also saw them printed in newspapers and magazines, hung on gallery walls, posted as advertisements, and even reproduced in Hollywood films. Accordingly, this study seeks to answer the following question: How do the designs of prominent American theatre artists convey broader themes of American modernity circulating during the first half of the twentieth century? I argue that the design of Jones, Bel Geddes, and Mielziner not only critiqued processes of modernization but also functioned as material products of these same cultural forces and practices. For each artist, I examine select designs as cultural texts, locating connections between the history of American theatre and American visual culture.

Before engaging in a series of case studies involving these designers, this introductory chapter establishes my working definition of "modern design," methods for evaluating design artifacts, and approach toward analyzing the products of theatre artists within the larger history of American modernity. In the following section "Writing Modern Design," I situate this project within the prevailing historiographical practices and terminology of design scholarship and locate myself as both a cultural historian and design practitioner. Next, I outline my methodology for examining design as a cultural image/artifact, identifying the interdisciplinary, theoretical influences structuring my investigation. In "Modern Design/Modernity's Design," I interrogate disciplinary tensions between understandings of modernism and modernity to frame my approach toward design analysis. My continued examination of Belasco's *The Governor's Lady* not only illustrates this analytical approach but also provides historical context for the

following chapters, establishing the dominant theatrical conditions which modern artists like Jones, Bel Geddes, and Mielziner challenged with their New Stagecraft rebellion. These designers not only transformed the aesthetics and practices of the American theatre but also expanded their influence beyond the stage as design increasingly saturated the landscapes of American modernity.

Writing Modern Design

Within American theatre history, the term "design" designates a type of staging that adheres to theories and practices first developed by New Stagecraft artists. As an artistic movement, the New Stagecraft was influenced initially by the design theories developed by European artists Adolph Appia and Edward Gordon Craig during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, circulated in publications like Appia's *Music and the Art of Theatre* (1899) and Craig's journal *The Mask* (beginning in 1908), *On The Art of Theatre* (1911) and *Towards a New Theatre* (1913).[5] Reacting against what they saw as the strictures of commercial theatre and stage realism, these artists rejected painterly or illusionary staging in favor of a more simplified, architectural stage environment that unified production elements; such an approach, they believed, could give fuller expression to the central ideas of dramatic texts. The "new" stagecraft, as opposed to the "old," was more than merely surface decoration or imitation but a deliberate process of

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[5] The phrase "New Stagecraft" eventually came to refer to the work of American designers, with "Continental Stagecraft" referring to their European counterparts. Linda Hardberger, *The New Stagecraft: Setting an American Style, 1915-1949*, gallery guide for Tobin Gallery exhibition, The Marion Koogler McNay Art Museum, exhibition dates 15 July-7 Sept. 1997. Both Appia and Craig are known primarily as design theorists because their application of stage modernism was limited to few productions. During the early years of the New Stagecraft, Americans were more familiar with Craig's theories than Appia; however, both were featured at the International Theatre Exhibition in Amsterdam (1922).

visual interpretation that drew inspiration from the subjective expressions and innovative

aesthetics of modern painters and sculptors during the same period.[6]

During the first two decades of the twentieth century, some American theatre

artists began to advocate the New Stagecraft as an artistic alternative to the imitative or

naturalistic practices that dominated commercial theatres. Their efforts were part of a

larger movement of American theatre reform beginning around 1915 and advocating

dramaturgical theories and techniques that unified performance into a single artistic

expression. These practices stemmed from the work of European directors such as

Richard Wagner who had developed his conception of *Gesamtkunstwerk* during the

1870s; indeed, the rise of the modern director, an artist whose sole function was creating

a "total art work" by unifying the contributions of theatre collaborators, was coexistent to

the emergence of the modern designer. By applying the theories of Continental artists

like Wagner and Craig, American reformers believed they would create a new,

indigenous theatre to equal the artistic quality of European stages. In books and articles

published by New Stagecraft critics and artists during the early twentieth century,

"design" increasingly became a preferred term to differentiate their artistry from the

seemingly superficial "decoration" of commercial realism.[7]

By the critical standards of the New Stagecraft, realistic settings like those found

in David Belasco's productions fell into the lesser category of "craft" as opposed to the

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[6] George H. Hamilton designates 1886, the year of the last Impressionist exhibition, as the beginning of European modernism, a period giving rise to a variety of movements including Fauvism, Cubism, Expressionism, Futurism, and Surrealism. *Painting and Sculpture in Europe 1880-1940* (1967; New Haven: Yale UP, 1993) 15. The avant-garde paintings of modern artists began to be exhibited in America at Alfred Stieglitz's New York City gallery 291 in 1908, but first gained wide-spread public recognition with the Armory Show in 1913.

[7] Sheldon Cheney repeatedly uses the term "design" to distinguish the New Stagecraft approach in *The New Movement in the Theatre* (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1914). He writes that New Stagecraft artists create stage settings "by suggestion rather than by naturalistic delineation, by simple *design* (my emphasis) rather than multiplicity and intricacy of detail" (124).

"art" of design. In fact, design historians often cite Belasco's Childs's setting for *The Governor's Lady* as an example of the illusionism and gimmickry that plagued Broadway theatres at the turn of the twentieth century, merely the imitation of a craftsman rather than the original creation of a designer. Belasco's ode to standardization may have captured the spirit of American modernity, but the literalness of his representation stood in direct opposition to the theories of stage modernism advocated by the New Stagecraft. Arthur Feinsod notes that contemporary critics like Sheldon Cheney, editor of the progressive *Theatre Arts Magazine*, were particularly aggressive in their attacks on "Belascoism," a pejorative term indicating their aversion to the commercial realism at which the director/producer excelled.[8] Compared to the modern aesthetics of designers such as Robert Edmond Jones, Cheney argued, Belasco's realism was distracting, unnecessarily costly, and unimaginatively literal. "Belasco's settings," Cheney wrote, "are undeniably natural; they are perfect imitations of the real rooms of tasteless people, down to the last unimportant detail."[9] According to his critique, precise imitation might demonstrate skillful stagecraft but was not the product of true artistry. A designer, by eliminating unessential details, created more meaningful and expressive stage images than Belasco's craftsmen who merely captured the surface realities of everyday living.

Historians of American theatrical design have relied heavily on the theories and histories of modernism because the New Stagecraft serves as the point of origin for the majority of their narratives. Outside the theatre, however "modern design" denotes a broader range of practices and aesthetics; scholars from a variety of academic disciplines have identified how commercial graphics, product design, architecture, and urban

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[8] Arthur Feinsod, *The Simple Stage: Its Origins in the Modern American Theatre* (New York: Greenwood, 1992) 28.

[9] Cheney 156.

planning have shaped the history of modernity. Theatrical design history tends to

marginalize commercial artistry, influenced by assumptions that modern artists required

autonomy from market forces to express their individual styles.[10] The same biases that

prompted theatre historians to disparaged Belasco's productions also kept them from

chronicling the many commercial endeavors of designers like Jones, Bel Geddes, and

Mielziner. Previous histories interpret their deviations from work on the physical stage

as anomalies, sometimes interesting but rarely significant. They position Jones's poster

for the Paterson Strike Pageant (1913) and collaboration with trade unionists as evidence

of youthful naiveté; Bel Geddes's defection to industrial design in the mid-1920s as the

moment marking the end of his contribution to the American theatre; and Mielziner's

postwar commercial negotiations with business interests eager to merchandise his designs

as a mundane distraction from his artistic processes. But as theatre designers began to

express their artistry in a variety of commercial venues, their designs were no longer

bound to New York stages, significantly increasing their public circulation.

Thus, despite the growing currency of the term "scenography" among theatre

scholars and practitioners, I have chosen to use the term "design" to designate the

processes and products of theatre artists specifically because it associates their work with

broader cultural forces and industry processes. In a recent collection of essays, Arnold

Aronson explains the emergence of "scenography" as the term preferred by many

scholars because, as opposed to current American design practices that separate artistic

responsibilities into discreet categories of scenery, lighting, and costumes, scenography

connotes "an all-encompassing visual-spatial construct as well as the process of change

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[10] Gay Morris, *A Game for Dancers: Performing Modernisms in the Postwar Years, 1945-1960*
(Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan UP, 2006) xviii. Morris gears her arguments specifically toward the
ways in which modern American dancers constructing their artistic credibility by rejecting commercialism.

and transformation that is an inherent part of the physical vocabulary of the stage."[11] British scenographer Pamela Howard argues for an acceptance of the term because it recognizes the wide-ranging contributions of contemporary visual artists in the theatre.[12] This recent change in terminology mirrors the shift that occurred in the early twentieth century when New Stagecraft artists and critics claimed the term "design" to distinguish their artistry from the "decoration" preceding their interpretative processes and modern aesthetics. According to current definitions, "scenography" does accurately describe the inclusive responsibilities of artists during the period under investigation, before current practices of specialization. Yet, by continuing to use "design," I acknowledge the term's historical specificity and, more significantly, draw direct connections to design practices within American industry, architecture, and consumer culture. I also prefer the term "design" because this study emphasizes scenic artistry rather than the entire spectrum of visual stage components, including lighting and costumes.

Cultural theorist and historian Michel de Certeau has argued that each generation writes the history it needs.[13] My project developed from my disciplinary positioning and participation in a graduate education that augmented and challenged conventional understandings of theatre history through an integration of performance theory, feminism, and cultural studies. The "Performance as Public Practice" emphasis of my program cultivated my desire to identify theatrical designers as citizen-artists who produce

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[11] Arnold Aronson, *Looking into the Abyss: Essays on Scenography* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2005) 7.

[12] Pamela Howard, *What is Scenography*, (London: Routledge, 2002) 128. Howard centers her discussion around European productions, indicating that scenography as a current practice is still more prevalent on the Continent than in America where professional theatre practice continues to separate design responsibilities between scenery, lighting, and costumes.

[13] See Michel de Certeau *The Writing of History*, trans. Tom Conley (New York: Columbia UP, 1988). De Certeau situates historians within specific cultural moments, always writing from a present that determines their perspective of the past; their historical narratives, therefore, fulfill present needs.

socially and politically relevant images. My interest in design as a research topic, as well as my approach for interpreting design as an embodied practice, developed from my own experiences as a practicing designer. As a design student, I learned to study the world around me so I could translate it to the stage. I became increasingly aware of details in my everyday environment that I failed to notice previously, particularly the way people occupied spaces and adapted them to their needs and desires. Texture, color, light—all of these were more than just formal elements but communicative of surrounding activity.

When I first encountered Jones, Bel Geddes, and Mielziner in theatre histories, I was disappointed that discussions of their designs failed to hold my interest with the same intensity as the evocative images printed alongside. I wanted to understand more about the actual people and places from which these designers drew inspiration. The books I encountered, such as Orville Larson's *Scene Design in the American Theatre from 1915-1960* (1989), focused primarily on the modern aesthetics of their work and how it communicated key points of a dramatic text. Other scholarship, like Arnold Aronson and Ronn Smith's series *American Set Design* (1985) and *American Set Design II* (1991), provided a look at the contemporary artistry American designers, but the emphasis was still on aesthetics and technique. I was sure these artists also felt the cultural complexity of the design process that I experienced, the way my work connected to local landscapes and allowed me to express my impressions of them, but I only caught a glimpse of this consciousness in academic discourse on theatrical design.

As I continued to study American design as a graduate student, I became aware of how my early design practice connected me to this history. Current designers are indebted to a genealogy beginning with designers like Jones who mentored younger

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artists and moving progressively through each generation with subsequent apprenticeship. It is a living history, a legacy remembered in the continuing work of designers and stage technicians. Like many design students, one of the first texts I read was *The Dramatic Imagination* (1941), a collection of essays by Jones which directly hails the "young stage designer" as its primary reader. Jones's inspirational philosophies and practices of dramaturgical analysis endure in the present-day practices of designers as well as their professional history. Through further study, I discovered that I had designed my first student production in a university theatre designed by Mielziner; thus, even before I was conscious of his name, his architecture shaped my understandings of performance. I became aware of Bel Geddes' work much later, and it was only when I studied his industrial design archive at The University of Texas's Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center that I realized the broader influence of modern theatrical design: the appliances he designed were the prototypes for the ones installed in my kitchen, the highway system imagined in *Futurama* anticipated roads I have driven, and even the ride technology developed for this same attraction was an early model for the theme park amusements I enjoyed as a child. Thus, well before I understood the impact of modern designers in the American theatre, they touched my everyday life and shaped my perception of American culture.

In large part, I selected the three designers included in this project based on my previous awareness of their legacy within the American theatre. Knowing I could trace genealogical lines from my own design practices to their early innovations, I determined that they would provide an effective starting point to uncover the influence of modern design within the American cultural landscape. But while my own experience served as a

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litmus test for the selection of designers, it was not used as the measure of their cultural impact. Increasingly, I expanded my investigation beyond the theatrical stage to examine a range of artifacts and sources. By bringing together the histories and theories of the theatre with those of other disciplines like art history, visual culture, American studies, and cultural geography, this study constructs a narrative that acknowledges the significant intersections between modern design and the landscapes of American modernity.

Design as Cultural Image/Artifact

Far from attempting to "correct" previous design scholarship, this dissertation relies on the foundational work of historians who recovered the contributions of designers to the modern theatre and reinforced their status as equal collaborators. Design scholars have increasingly corrected the relative absence of designers from the larger canon of theatre history that tends to focus on playwrights, actors, and directors, demonstrating how theatrical design, while not independent from dramatic texts, is more than merely a supplementary contribution. This scholarship has made designers more visible, yet its recuperative emphasis, in addition to progressive tendencies in American theatre history to celebrate exceptional individuals, has led to many of the "great man" or heroic narratives of design history. These studies emphasize a few prominent artists, chronicling their accomplishments rather than critically assessing their cultural impact. The social, political, and economic influence of their designs, therefore, remains largely unwritten.

This project continues the recovery work of previous design scholarship without reifying its heroic narratives. While I continue to organize my discussion around the careers of specific artists, my goal is to come away with a broader understanding of

design as a cultural force in the history of American modernity. Biographical elements are incorporated not to uncover exceptional abilities but to situate the designer's practices within their own historical circumstances and experiential landscape. Thus, I am indebted to previous scholarship that has shown how theatrical designers have fundamentally influenced critical and public understandings of modern theatre and drama, and hope this study contributes to a broader understanding of how they reflected cultural attitudes and actively shaped images of American modernity for both national and international audiences.

Methodologically, this study draws strategic connections between the formal principles and aesthetics of stage modernism and social, political, and economic ideas circulating during the early twentieth century. I often use the same artifacts analyzed by previous historians, but rather than interpreting them as evidence of the designer's personal artistry or style, I examine them as cultural artifacts, texts communicating the multiple perspectives of Americans negotiating the changes brought on by processes of modernization. For example, when analyzing Jones's scenic rendering for *The Man Who Married a Dumb Wife* (1915), a landmark in the history of American design, I am more invested in demonstrating how Jones's modern aesthetics communicate the socialist ideology and consumerist critique of Anatole France's dramatic text rather than showing how the formal arrangement of geometric shapes and primary colors differed from the realistic settings prominent in the commercial theatre at the same time. I examine the design as a product of American cultural politics by reading Jones's design choices as influenced by his associations with Greenwich Village activists and intellectuals.

Several scholars have oriented my approach toward interpreting artifacts, including historiographers Carlo Ginzburg and Michel De Certeau whose theories emphasize the processes by which historians write their narratives. Historians do not *find* evidence, according to Ginzburg; it is not "an open window that gives us direct access to reality." [14] Rather, historians *construct* evidence from artifacts as a means to support their argument. When historians transform artifacts into evidence, De Certeau argues, they divorce them from everyday practice to give them new life and new meanings within historical texts. [15] Bel Geddes's memorandums to General Motors's executives, for instance, communicate more than just the details of his plans for the *Futurama* attraction at the New York World's Fair; when read against the material practices and historical circumstances of Bel Geddes's career, the same artifacts become evidence of public relations strategies launched by corporations and designers in the post-Depression era.

This project also draws on artifacts and sources that deviate from those traditionally used to interpret theatrical designs such as press releases, posters, advertisements, commercial products, film images, and descriptive passages in novels. In previous histories, these types of artifacts were neglected or only included as minor points of interest. Historians considered them as ancillary or irrelevant to designers' primary focus: imagining and overseeing the construction of production staging. When considering the broader cultural influence of theatrical designers, however, such resources are particularly useful to indicate how designs circulated in the mass media in

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[14] Carlo Ginzburg, "Checking the Evidence: The Judge and the Historian," *Questions of Evidence: Proof, Practice, and Persuasion Across the Disciplines*, eds. James Chandler, Arnold L. Davidson, and Harry Harootunian (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1991) 294. Ginzburg further asserts that not all evidence is created equal and notes that evidence needs an "effect of reality," or appearance of proof, to give legitimacy to a historical narrative (306).

[15] De Certeau 73.

addition to their exposure on localized stages. This diverse range of material creates a bridge between discourses of theatre history and cultural studies, integrating design into interdisciplinary discussions happening within the academy as well as civic dialogues about the role modern art plays in developing and sustaining community identities.

This project also uses a variety of interdisciplinary sources from visual culture to interpret design artifacts. Because many of these artifacts are visual in nature, I rely on the theorists like Roland Barthes who asserts that images, like artifacts, are open to interpretation. [16] Though my analysis, I critique design images as products of ideologies circulating during a particular historic moment and situated within a specific cultural landscape. For the most part, I selected designs that have received previous scholarly attention such as Jones's design for *Dumb Wife* (1915), Bel Geddes's for *The Divine Comedy* (1921) and *The Miracle* (1924), and Mielziner's for *Death of a Salesman* (1949). Without reifying previous valuations of aesthetic excellence, my analysis calls attention to these designs as products of their time. By referencing sources on the cultural history, geography, and consumer culture of American modernity, I interpret the designs as reflections and critiques of the everyday lives and landscapes.

To uncover these cultural meanings, I first interpret the design image as a key element within the theatrical event that creates a visual context for the dramatic text, thus directly affecting the reception of the performance. Second, I study it as a cultural text, one that is related to the dramatic text but has the ability to convey meaning beyond that specified by the playwright, particularly in its representation of place. For example, I often reference the designer's personal experience with a particular geography, examining the influence of Jones's negotiation of the Greenwich Village neighborhood

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[16] See Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, ed. S. Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977).

on his design for the Paterson Strike Pageant (1913) or the effect of Mielziner's travels to Bangkok on his design for *The King and I* (1951). By bringing their own impressions of a landscape to a production, designers complement dramatic texts, imbuing them with meanings that are not necessarily present before they are translated for production.

As a visual text, design is involved in a two part system of representation. Using Stuart Hall's terminology, design images are "encoded" by designers and "decoded" by spectators. But as Hall notes, these acts "are differentiated moments within the totality formed by social relations of the communicative process as a whole."[17] In other words, the meaning of an image is negotiated within a certain framework of knowledge and cultural circumstance that encompass both the moment of production and reception. Although Hall specifically examines television images, his explication of this communicative process is useful for examining theatrical design as a representational object. Interpreted as one part in a larger system of social relationships, the design image reveals not only the designer's perspective but also actively constructs the audience and their viewpoints. Designers and spectators both inhabit and navigate their cultural landscape, which in turn shapes their point of view or framework of knowledge. The design image, thus, inscribes their collective experience.

By using the theories of Hall and Barthes to inform my analysis of theatrical design as a cultural product, I have filiated my project with the scholarship of visual culture. Although the phrase "visual culture" was first used in the 1970s, "Visual Culture" or "Visual Studies" emerged as an academic discipline during the 1990s along with other interdisciplinary trends, bringing together scholars from art history, cultural

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[17] Stuart Hall, "Encoding, Decoding," *Cultural Studies Reader*, ed. Simon During (London: Routledge, 1993) 93.

studies, and literary theory. According to James Elkins, visual culture scholarship arose

as a way to address topics outside the traditional canon of art history, including "film,

photography, advertising, video including television, and the Internet."[18] Visual culture

scholars also reject the formalist interpretative practices of some art historians in favor of

a cultural analysis that acknowledges the social, political, and economic influences on

image production. As an object for study, theatrical design falls in between the

disciplines of art history and visual culture; some art historians have considered the stage

work of canonical modern artists such as Pablo Picasso or Kazimir Malevich, but rarely

extend their analysis of a design beyond its relevance to the paintings or sculptures of that

artist. Visual culture scholars, on the other hand, tend to focus on mediated images from

film and television. There is little precedent in either field for integrating cultural theory

with the history of material theatrical staging. This project demonstrates how the images

created by theatrical designers stand up to the same rigorous, cultural analysis as other

visual texts that comprise the greater part of art history and visual culture scholarship.

In broadening my understanding of design beyond its application to the theatrical

stage, I have also turned to theorists in design studies, a field primarily dedicated to

studying the social implications of design for consumer goods, commercial and urban

environments, and other manufactured products. As Richard Buchanan and Victor

Margolin note, "design exists as the central feature of culture and everyday life in many

parts of the world. In highly industrialized societies, design appears to have replaced

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[18] James Elkins, *Visual Studies: A Skeptical Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2003) 36. Elkins prefers the phrase "visual studies" to "visual culture" because it describes a more "inclusive study of visual practices across all boundaries" (7). Elkins persuasively argues that visual culture's blanket dismissal of art history neglects the work of scholars who have produced a wide range of methodologies beyond formalism that acknowledge the cultural influences on artists. He writes: "the picture of art history as a blinkered aestheticizing enterprise or a hermetic and overly intellectual elitism is predicated on a limited experience of the discipline" (24).

nature as the dominant presence in human experience."[19] Each of the designers in this

study have played a role in these cultural processes, constructing designs for both the

stage and the street that directly influence the perceptions and experiences of modern

citizens. Design, Buchanan argues, functions at the level of rhetoric, "shaping society,

changing the course of individuals and communities, and setting patterns for new

action."[20] In other words, designers actively construct a world that is not arbitrary but

intentionally designed to serve particular functions and elicit desired responses.

Furthermore, designers impose particular viewpoints about how people should live within

their everyday landscape—creating products and images which anticipate and direct the

beliefs and activities of potential users/consumers.[21] Moreover, the ideological content of

a design is also shaped by the organizations that contract designers, such as business

corporations, community associations, and theatric al producers. Ultimately, the designer

is situated between the producer and the public, creating a product that reflects the needs

and desires of these two forces as well as the designer's own artistic vision.

Because this study situates the work of theatrical designers within the larger

history of design for industry and community planning, I use the phrases "theatrical

design" or "scenic design" specifically to indicate the images and material products

developed for a performance event. The more general term "design" indicates broader

concepts of visual language and systems of organization. "Design" can refer to either the

creative processes of conception and planning used by modern artists or the

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[19] Richard Buchanan and Victor Margolin, eds., *Discovering Design: Explorations in Design Studies* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1995) xii.

[20] Richard Buchanan, "Declaration by Design: Rhetoric, Argument, and Demonstration in Design Practice," *Design Discourse: History/Theory/Criticism*, ed. Victor Margolin (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1989) 93.

[21] Buchanan and Margolin xiv.

products/images created by those processes. As a cultural activity, design uses skills of imagination and organization to develop a plan for the eventual construction and distribution or presentation of specific products. In the initial stages of the design process, artists create a range of prototype produc ts—sketches, renderings, models— intended to communicate their ideas to producing organizations. The final product is the object presented before the spectator/consumer. Within the total design process, therefore, there are a range of artifacts that reflect each step of development, and the differences between these artifacts are an important consideration for design historians. Through an understanding of designers' working processes, historians can begin to reconstruct the context from which design artifacts were initially created.

The majority of artifacts analyzed in this study come from the practices and processes of theatrical design, and it is important to note that these artifacts have a more ephemeral quality than those created for purposes outside the theatre. Scenic design is both a space art and time art that is always changing during a performance—platforms regularly shift on and off stage, backdrops fly in and out, and lights fade up and down modifying color and visibility. As an artistic object, a scenic design is not fixed, and while critics have often interpreted it with the critical tools of the visual arts, there is no single artifact that can fully communicate the artistry of scenic designers like those created by painters or sculptors.[22] To reconstruct a stage design for historical purposes, therefore, the historian must analyze a combination of artifacts and sources. These include visual references, such as preliminary sketches, renderings, models, ground plans, paint elevations, production photographs, or images reproduced for advertising or films,

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[22] Aronson, *Looking into the Abyss*, 5; 97.

as well as written resources like prompt books, productions reviews, letters between members of the production team, and descriptions from first-hand accounts.

Theatrical design historians have often lamented the inherent problems in archiving design, particularly the issue of missing artifacts. Scenic designers rarely keep detailed records due to hectic schedules; they often give away renderings to colleagues; models become dismantled or thrown away during the construction process; research material is returned to libraries; completed scenery is rarely saved due to lack of storage space and the reuse of construction materials.[23] In the absence of these resources, first-hand accounts and production reviews can provide additional descriptions. Theatre critics, however, often reserve their design analysis to a few sentences, if it is mentioned at all. But many of these accounts are crucial to recovery efforts since theatrical design can only be fully experienced during the moment of performance. The designs of New Stagecraft artists, in particular, received a fair amount of contemporary criticism, due in large part to sympathetic critics such as Sheldon Cheney and Kenneth Macgowan who were similarly invested in theatrical reform. Subsequent theatre historians had a wide range of resources on New Stagecraft design, including not only contemporary criticism but also writings by designers themselves and additional drawings created for publication and exhibition. The increased availability of artifacts from New Stagecraft design compared to previous theatrical staging has played a significant role in advancing the movement as the cornerstone of American design history.

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[23] Ronn Smith, *American Set Design 2* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1991) xiii. In the preface for this second installment of interviews from contemporary American scene designers, Smith notes that he includes few rendering because "finished renderings appear to be a thing of the past," with current design practices leaning toward the creation of rough sketches and models (xiii). Today, a professional designer in the American theatre must commit to a larger number of contracts to make a living and, as a result, have had to shorten the time they spend creating conceptual plans.

When selecting visual artifacts, design scholars have relied heavily on scenic renderings to verify the artistic skills of designers and their contributions to theatrical productions. Designers create these scale drawings and paintings during a production's pre-production phase to communicate their visual interpretation of the dramatic text and intended use of stage space to their collaborators. Renderings anticipate the moment of performance, created to approximate the "look and feel of the scenery and lighting" and "convey an impression of a given moment in the living production."[24] Varying from black and white charcoal drawings to color painted images, renderings are more elaborate than the preliminary drawings that precede them, generally representing the designer's finalized intensions for a production. Because changes regularly occur between the design's development, scenic construction and installation, dress rehearsals, and previews, a rendering does not record the final version experienced by audiences. While some designers create "'after the event' watercolors" to showcase their artistic skills, historians often denigrate these recreations as less authentic records of the production.[25]

While production photographs are seemingly more reliable for documenting the final production, they do not capture the performance as evocatively as renderings. The black and white film used for the majority of productions during the time period under consideration only communicate subtle shifts in tone; even when using color film, photographs typically fail to accurately depict colors and intensity of stage lighting. Additionally, the large majority of production photographs are taken to record the work

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[24] Jules Fisher, "Jo Mielziner: An Appreciation by Jules Fisher," *Jo Mielziner Theatrical Designer Selected Works 1928-1960, From the Collection of Jules Fisher*, exhibition catalogue (Pittsburgh: Hewlett Gallery, Carnegie-Mellon University College of Fine Arts, 1983) 9.

[25] David Cockayne, "Documenting Design," *Theatre Design and Technology* Spring 1989: 25. Design historian Orville Larson reveals that Robert Edmond Jones, later in his career, began to re-draw some of his earlier famous designs, producing a number of renderings used in design exhibitions. "Exhibition Catalogues: Critical Resources for Research in Theatre Art," *Educational Theatre Journal* 28:3 (1976): 393.

of performers rather than designers, producing close-up images with faded or incomplete backgrounds.[26] Even a photographic image intended to display scenic artistry can only record a single moment in the production, unable to capture visual shifts during the course of the performance. Photographs are, however, an important resource, and many times provide the only visual documentation of a theatrical design, particularly in the absence of renderings or models.

In addition to sketches and renderings, some designers create models, three-dimensional scale replicas of settings, as a part of their pre-production process. As an artifact, the model most accurately portrays design as a visual representation of a system of organization because of its emphasis on precision and scale. Models help theatre collaborators during the development stage of a production with practicalities of spatial arrangement; because they are less evocative of mood, however, they are often interpreted as products of technical rather than artistic processes. In general, models are more identified with the work of commercial artists such as architects and industrial designers. Indeed, Bel Geddes regularly used models in both his theatrical and industrial work. Most New Stagecraft designers, however, preferred renderings, an inclination that subsequently influenced their dominant use by theatre historians as evidence of artistic skill. Renderings most closely resemble the painted canvases of modern artists during the same period, thus theatre historians have relied on them when documenting the New Stagecraft. The dominant use of visual artifacts like renderings, in fact, has predisposed theatrical design scholarship to emphasize modern aesthetics and apply the formalist

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[26] In explaining the selection process for scenic imaged included within *American Set Design*, Arnold Aronson notes that production photographs recording scenery are hard to come by and "tend to be publicity close-ups of actors, revealing little of the set and giving not sense of the context of the stage." (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1985) ix.

interpretations that often accompany narratives of modernism. Renderings, photographs, and models continue to be useful to this project; building from previous analyses that interpret them as evidence of a designer's artistic talent or individual style, I explore how these same aesthetics communicate their cultural positioning and influence within landscape of American modernity.

Often, the foregrounding of visual artifacts within theatrical design history has obscured other sources that could bring focus to broader cultural influences. In some cases, histories of theatrical design even overlook the dramatic texts that the designs were intended to complement. For example, the narrative content of Anatole Frances's play *The Man Who Married a Dumb Wife* is all but unknown. Because theatre critics and scholars labeled it a light-hearted farce, the play was deemed irrelevant to determining the aesthetic excellence of Jones' ground-breaking design. This erasure actually contradicts the dramaturgical theories of the New Stagecraft, which insisted that designers pay careful attention to dramatic texts so their staging would complement its central themes; without an understanding of those themes and the narrative content, it is difficult to determine the designer's success in conveying the text. Such interpretations exist almost exclusively for designs accompanying critically hailed plays. For example, Mielziner's work on Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* becomes the definitive case in the American theatre of the ideal visual complement to a dramatic text, yet his designs for musicals during the same period, such as Rodgers and Hammerstein's *South Pacific* (1949), fail to merit the same in-depth analysis. By examining the narrative content of previously neglected dramatic content, this project acknowledges that meanings of theatrical design are intrinsically connected to dramatic texts, and that regardless of the

their critical acclaim or canonical status, both designs and texts contain evidence of material practices and ideologies circulating during the moment of production.

Thus, through the combined study of archival artifacts, primary sources, and cultural histories and theory, I consider the social, political, and economic implications of a series of American designs. The artists under investigation have influenced the production and reception of dramatic texts as well as the construction and circulation of images outside the theatre; their designs attracted the attention of not only theatre critics, who saw their innovations as a sign of better things to come in the American theatre, but also industry executives, who sought to apply their design techniques to selling consumer products and services. The modern aesthetics seen on stage increasingly spread to the everyday visual aesthetic of modern American life, creating popular trends in fashion and interior decoration, generating effective symbols of political protest, and inspiring the manufacture of and advertising for consumer products. As an artifact of visual culture, theatrical design, therefore, is deeply implicated in the history of American modernity.

Modern Design/Modernity's Design

In shifting my analysis of theatrical design to emphasize theories and histories of modernity over those of modernism, this project delves into questions of time, space, and process rather than formal aesthetics. The term "modern," as Bruno Latour notes, "designates a new regime, acceleration, a rupture, a revolution in time. When the word 'modern', 'modernization', or 'modernity' appears, we are defining, by contrast, an archaic and stable past."[27] Cultural theorist and historian Raymond Williams traces the etymology of the term "modern" from its initial usage in the late sixteenth century to

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[27] Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993) 10.

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distinguish contemporary times from previous medieval and ancient periods to the nineteenth century when it took on its characteristic "progressive ring."[28] As a period designation, modernity is characterized by contradictory perceptions of anxiety and optimism about societal changes wrought by processes of modernization—the rise of capitalism and the nation-state, forces of urbanization, industrialization, and consumerism, and the increasing roles of science, technology, and the mass media. Many of these processes, in fact, were driven by a philosophy of rationalization that justified sweeping cultural changes as the result of reasoned progress; theorists such as Max Weber warned against the rationalized practices of modern governments and corporations that were transforming the everyday lives and landscapes of citizens.[29]

In addition to the shift in perceptions of time, another key feature of modernity is changing notions of space and geography. In his article "History: Geography: Modernity," Edward Soja calls for more scholarship that "re-entwines the making of history with the social production of space."[30] Processes of modernization such as those previously mentioned unleash broad-ranging and often revolutionary modifications to the landscapes in which individuals and communities live. Cultural geographer David Harvey notes in particular how the rise of the capitalist economy has influenced modern geographies: "Innovations dedicated to the removal of spatial barriers in all of these respects have been of immense significance in the history of capitalism, turning that history into a very geographical affair—the railroad and the telegraph, the automobile,

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[28] Raymond Williams, *The Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists*, ed. Tony Pinkney (London: Verso, 1989) 31-32.
[29] See H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, eds., *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York: Oxford UP, 1946).
[30] Edward Soja, "History: Geography: Modernity," *Cultural Studies Reader* (London: Routledge, 1993) 136.

radio and telephone, the jet aircraft and television, and the recent telecommunications revolution are cases in point."[31] Studies acknowledging the influence of modern geographies not only illuminate the structures of governmental and capitalist power that produce systematic changes in cultural landscapes but also uncover the experiences of people living within those circumstances. The artistry of theatrical designers is in dialogue with these concepts, creating representations of the places populated by dramatic characters within the literal space of the theatrical stage, a location which is surrounded by its own urban geography.   Stage design, therefore, is a productive site to study the places modern communities inhabit and experience.

Recent scholarship has focused also on the concept of multiple modernities, recognizing that even within a Western framework processes of modernization differ depending on the cultural circumstances of each location and population. Rather than defining modernity as a phenomenon specific to Western Europe, historians such as S. N. Eisenstadt argue that multiple modernities developed as different local and national populations integrated themes of modernity with their own particular local needs and circumstances.[32] Such studies acknowledge the multiple perspectives of modern citizens, that the effects of modernization not only differed between various localities but also produced a diverse range of experiences within each locality based on differences in race, class, gender, ethnicity, and sexuality. Cultural expressions that were once perceived as universally representative are reconsidered as products of specific cultural circumstances.

Modernity in America developed its own distinctive social patterns, collective consciousness, and cultural expressions, in part "through a confrontational discourse with

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[31] David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Conditions of Cultural Change*, (New York: Blackwell, 1989) 232.
[32] S. N. Eisenstadt, "Multiple Modernities," *Daedalus*, 129.1 (2000): 12.

Europe."[33] From its founding, the United States applied European enlightenment ideals

to the specific needs of its government; according to historian Jurgen Heideking, the

republican system of democracy and divisions between federal and state governments

fostered not only a sense of public independence but also support for a self-regulating

market economy. Americans' beliefs in individualism and private enterprise prompted

the growth of corporations as an influential civic presence.[34] "American modernity" is a

phrase typically designating a period beginning in the 1890s and continuing to the 1950s

or 60s. In the 1890s, the United States abandoned previous isolationist policies and grew

as an imperialist power, providing the nation with new opportunities for natural resources

and global trade. Consequently, it is also the period in which giant corporations emerged,

exploited new resources and technologies, and produced a wide range of consumer

products, thus generally transforming "familiar modes of economic life" and "hierarchies

of social status."[35] Social historians Elizabeth and Stuart Ewen note that "by the early

twentieth century, the double-prong of 'Americanization'—mass production and mass

consumption—had dramatically altered the social landscape of American life."[36] This

economic re-structuring prompted considerable population growth in American cities

during this period; places such as New York City, rather than smaller towns and

provinces, became emblematic of the American experience. Within these modern

metropolises, citizens bridged previous spatial and social boundaries, self-consciously

aware of the rapid changes affecting their daily lives.

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[33] Ibid. 13.
[34] Jurgen Heideking, "The Pattern of American Modernity from the Revolution to the Civil War," *Daedalus* 129.1 (2000): 219.
[35] Steven J. Diner, *A Very Different Age: Americans of the Progressive Era* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998) 3.
[36] Elizabeth and Stuart Ewen, *Channels of Desire: Mass Images and the Shaping of American Consciousness* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1982) 58.

During this period of American modernity, New York City emerged as a center of modern art, especially during World War I when many European artists immigrated to the city.[37] While American artists often sought to emulate the modern innovations of Europeans, many émigré artists found inspiration in the bold graphics of American advertising posters or the shock of electric lights on busy New York streets. As a center of modern art, culture, and capital, New York began to rival European metropolises such as Paris, Vienna, Berlin, and London, all serving as "transnational capitals of art without frontiers" and places where "the restlessly mobile émigré or exile, the internationally anti-bourgeois artist" thrived.[38] In *The Politics of Modernism*, Williams traced the vital connections between the early twentieth century metropolis and the development of modern arts communities, emphasizing the influence of the city in bringing together immigrant populations; "immigrant," in his view, included not only international émigrés but also native artists that came to the city from smaller provinces.[39] Within locations like New York City, these artists shared the challenges of negotiating a strange but exciting landscape that offered new freedoms but also feelings of alienation.

Modern theatrical designers increasingly gained critical recognition as part of a broader public fascination with modern art and artists during the early twentieth century. As art historian Matthew Baigell notes, it was the moment when "artists grew increasingly aware of themselves as American artists and wanted to reveal in their art an American presence."[40] Writers for both trade journals and popular magazines were

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[37] Wanda Corn, *The Great American Thing: Modern Art and National Identity, 1915-1935* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1999) xvi.
[38] Williams 33.
[39] Ibid. 45.
[40] Matthew Baigell, "American Art and National Identity: The 1920s," *Arts Magazine* 61 (February 1987) 48.

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particularly interested in how artists, designers included, had begun to develop a distinctly American cultural identity out of European influences. Events like the Armory Show (1913), an international arts exhibition in New York, prompted not only public dialogues about the civic role of modern art but also debates between the modern aesthetics of European verses American art. Cultural production became one of the arenas for defining national identity and promoting themes of American progress to an international audience, an important project during an era when U.S. economic and political interests were increasingly turning toward international ground.

In recognizing the role cities like New York played in forming artistic communities and the dialogic exchanges within its members, cultural historians like Williams challenge notions that modern art can only express universal qualities as interpreted by formal aesthetic components. Contemporary scholarship has increasingly examined the influence of modernism on the construction of Western art history—the universality previously assumed by the modern image is now examined as evidence of dominant beliefs and viewing practices within a specific time and locality.[41] Historians generally use the term "modernism" retroactively to designate an artistic movement taking place approximately between 1890 and 1940.[42] Formalist histories of modernism focus on notions of rupture, marking a definitive break from old traditions and new innovations and a self-conscious desire to overthrow previous artistic styles and practices. Theories of modernism advanced new ways of visualizing the world, specifically rejecting the objectivity of realism to emphasize subjectivity. Modern art, according to historian George Hamilton, "became more exclusively a manifestation of the artist's

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[41] Hans Belting, *Art History after Modernism*, Eng. ed. (Chicago: U of Chicago, 2003) vii.
[42] Ibid. 32.

intimate, subjective experience, and in turn its evaluation depended upon the spectator's subjective response to its particular artistic order."[43] Artists developed a new visual language to express the world of emotions below and beyond surface reality—colors were chosen for their symbolic or expressive abilities, distortion was used to free an object from its literal form, and systems of abstraction were developed to challenge viewers into new ways of visualizing and understanding their modern landscape.

For the advocates of modernism, art was no longer a window to the world; it reflexively commented on its own process, making the materials and means of production part of the image or content of the work. Although there were many variations in style, content, and subject matter between different movements, such as symbolism, expressionism, futurism, constructivism, and surrealism, modern artists were dedicated to re-imagining the function of art within the modern era. They believed their work, freed from traditional modes of expression, would awaken people to a new spirituality or modern consciousness or, at least, an awareness of the human consequences of the changes happening around them.[44] Modern artists not only questioned the nature of representation, but also their own relationship to the dominant power structures of Western culture. They attempted to distance themselves from economic forces, fearing their participation in the commercial market place would threaten their artistic

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[43] Hamilton 16.

[44] Modern art was influenced by contemporary theories of spirituality and consciousness. Movements like theosophy which theorized the spirituality of the natural world inspired the subjective styles of many modern artists. Cubist painters applied the concept of the "fourth dimension," considering the possibilities of a higher spatial dimension that could reveal new relationships unseen by the human eye. Other modernists such as Kazimir Malevich and Piet Mondrian understood the fourth dimension as more of a mystical concept, attempting to transcend the limitations of human consciousness into a "cosmic consciousness" with their work. Linda Henderson, "Fourth Dimension," *Guggenheim Museum Collection: A to Z*, 2nd rev. ed. (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2001): 88. Also see Henderson's *The Fourth Dimension and Non-Euclidean Geometry in Modern Art* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1983).

independence or attempts to overthrow the status quo. But few modern artists achieved full autonomy, and much of their work was gradually assimilated into the mainstream.

Twentieth century theatre designers drew inspiration from the innovative theories and practices of other modern artists; the same reflexivity that prompted painters to reveal the materiality of their work—the canvas surface, the unblended brushstrokes, the absent frame—also prompted designers to expose the theatricality of the stage. Modern designers embraced the stage as a space for acting, not for creating the illusion of reality. Aronson defines modern design as a set of practices and theories that brought a "visual and conceptual unity" to theatrical staging and "moved the stage picture away from the specific, tangible, illusionistic world of romanticism and realism into a generalized, theatrical, and poetic realm in which the pictorial image functioned as an extension of the playwright's themes and structures."[45] Modern design did not literally reproduce places beyond the stage, but figuratively suggested them—lines were simplified, forms were abstracted, and colors were selected for their expressive abilities.

Modern designers, like other contemporary artists, also struggled to position themselves in opposition to commercial forces, a move that inevitably placed their work in dialogue with mainstream culture. Even through critics advocating the New Stagecraft movement denigrated the commercial theatre, many of its designers eventually became Broadway professionals. Indeed, one of the main trajectories of this project is to trace the relationship between modern design and market forces. Jones's career demonstrates the complex negotiation of designers to establish credibility as modern artists and use that status to cultivate professional opportunities. Bel Geddes's and Mielziner's practices directly participated in processes of consumerism, applied by commercial interests who

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[45] Aronson, *Looking into the Abyss* 14-17.

rationalize their modern designs to plan, create, and advertise consumer products. Increasingly, modern design becomes co-opted by the mainstream, transforming previously radical or avant-garde styles into fashionable statements.

Concepts of modernism have been central to the narratives of American theatrical design because historians have selected the New Stagecraft as its point of origin, the moment of rupture between the "craft" of stage realism to the "art" of modern design. The formalist disciplinary practices that dominated previous histories of theatrical design produced an anti-historicism that placed modern designs above the cultural circumstances in which it was created. Scholars such as Marshall Berman were early advocates for interpretive methodologies which brought together the artistic theories of modernism and historical circumstances of modernity. Such investigations, argued Berman in *All That is Solid Melts into Air* (1982), "give modernist art and thought a new solidity and invest its creations with an unsuspected resonance and depth. [These projects] would reveal modernism as the realism of our time."[46] By considering the circumstances within which modern artists created their work and understanding these as enduring conditions of modernity, modern art becomes a relevant means for exploring the socioeconomic patterns that shape people's contemporary lives. In other words, to study "modernism as the realism of our time" is to take a style of art which many critics have marked as disinterested or ahistorical and make it relevant to everyday experiences.

Theatre scholarship has increasingly challenged the ahistoricism of previous studies of modern drama. In the first of two special issues of *Modern Drama* (Winter 2000 and Spring 2001), journal editor Ric Knowles identified recent trends within theatre

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[46] Marshall Berman, *All That is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity*, 2nd ed. (1982; New York: Penguin, 1988) 122.

and performance studies to "put pressure on the sources, origins, and relationships between modernity and modernism, locating 'modern drama' historically in critical relation to other forms of social, political, and cultural production."[47] In the second issue, Elin Diamond made a case for reconfiguring the formalist nature of modern drama scholarship by substituting the phrase "modernity's drama." At the center of her essay is the question: "How does one of modernity's key features—its way of inventing/thinking about historical time—get dramatized, and what would 'modernity's drama' as a configuration do to the ways we think about modern drama?"[48] While Diamond's question is aimed at dramatic texts, her approach is useful for analyzing theatrical design. By reframing the work of artists like Jones, Bel Geddes, and Mielziner as "modernity's design," this study asks: how do these artists embody the experience of modernity in their designs, and correspondingly, how do audiences interpret their visual texts as particularly modern cultural expressions? Additionally, how does design dramatize/visualize another one of modernity's key features—its way of inventing/thinking about historical space?

Theatre scholarship has increasingly examined the influences of geography on theatrical production and reception, initiated by Marvin Carlson's *Places of Performance: The Semiotics of Theatre Architecture* (1989). Carlson acknowledged interdisciplinary influences from anthropology and sociology that have increasingly prompted historians to study theatre "as an event embedded in a complex matrix of social concerns and actions, all of which give the theatre experience its particular 'meaning' to its participants."[49] His semiotic approach to geography, theatre architecture, and spatial

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[47] Ric Knowles, "Modern: drama (defining the field), part 1," *Modern Drama* 43.4 (2000): 527.
[48] Elin Diamond, "Modern Drama/Modernity's Drama," *Modern Drama* 44.1 (2001): 5.
[49] Marvin Carlson, *Places of Performance: The Semiotics of Theatre Architecture* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1989) 5.

arrangements of performance asks how audiences from various historical periods make meaning from not only signs visible on stage, but also from place-orienting elements that "structure the meaning of the entire theatre experience."[50] Interpreted from this geographical perspective, theatrical designs are distinctive from other mass distributed images because spectators view them, at least initially, from fixed positions. As opposed to film or television images that can be viewed simultaneously from various locations, spectators observe stage designs from within theatre buildings that are surrounded by the larger civic environment. They also view designs within a fixed time of availability and alongside other audience members, creating a communal viewing experience that differs from spectators observing paintings or sculptures in gallery.

More recent publications, such as Una Chaudhuri's *Staging Place: The Geography of Modern Drama* (1997) and the anthology *Land/Scape/Theatre* (2002), edited by Chaudhuri and Elinor Fuchs, explore how meanings of place have influenced modern dramatic structures and, in turn, how the theatre has reflected the changes wrought by modernization. According to Fuchs and Chaudhuri, modernism in the theatre brought "a new spatial dimension, both visually and dramaturgically, in which landscape for the first time held itself apart from character and became a figure on its own."[51] Modern theatre not only exists within the geography of the city, this scholarship suggests, but actively writes the city. The perceptions of place generated by the modern theatre informed spectators' perceptions of not only who they were but also where they lived.

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[50] Ibid. 2.
[51] Elinor Fuchs and Una Chaudhuri, *Land/Scape/Theatre* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2002) 3. See also Una Chaudhuri, *Staging Place: The Geography of Modern Drama* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1997).

Despite their focus on drama, in the case of Chaudhuri and Fuchs, and architecture, in the case of Carlson, these studies pave the way for a similar investigation of theatrical design. Scenic designs generate an immediacy of place, representing locations, either abstractly or figuratively, that exist simultaneously inside and outside the theatre. Because designers use the real space of performers as their medium and produce images that reference places inhabited by dramatic characters, their art fundamentally engages concepts of landscape and geography. As defined by Harvey, geography is a top-down designation determined by individuals with hegemonic power; geographies serve as official representations of place. Landscapes, alternatively, are experiential; created from the bottom-up, they represent a place created from everyday associations and experiences from the perspective of someone living within a location.[52] Theatrical designers translate geographies into landscapes, helping audiences understand places they may have never visited by recreating the experiential environments of dramatic characters; designers also re-imagine and critique the places where spectators live, even the city streets they traversed moments ago on their journey to the theatre, providing new insight to familiar landscapes.

The landscapes and geography of New York City figure prominently within this study because it served as the professional home of Jones, Bel Geddes, and Mielziner as well as the production site for each major design discussed. New York continued to serve as the center of theatrical production in America during the early twentieth century. Even though many New Stagecraft designers promoted the establishment of little theatres and university drama departments in cities across America, disparaging New York's

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[52] David Harvey, "From Space to Place and Back Again: Reflections on the Condition of Postmodernity," *Mapping the Futures: Local Cultures, Global Change*, eds. Jon Bird, Barry Curtis, Tim Putman, George Robertson, and Lisa Tickner (London: Routledge, 1993) 7.

monopoly over national theatre trends, they ultimately kept their base of operations in the city, reinforcing its dominance as a cultural center. New York City served as a literal and figurative staging ground for American culture, the seat of an entertainment industry that hired artists to generate images of various American landscapes. Its presence over artistic production was not neutral, and theatrical designers regularly featured images of the city in their work, shaping national and international perceptions of the quintessential modern American metropolis. The collaborative processes and products of designers, thus, are caught up within the broader cultural forces that produced New York City during the early twentieth century. A reexamination of modern designs that emphasizes their capacity to represent the fractured perspectives of citizens living in a rapidly changing urban landscape grounds their artistry within the cultural, historical, and geographical circumstances of early twentieth century America.

A New Beginning: *The Governor's Lady* as Modernity's Design

In 1912, director/producer David Belasco opened his latest production at the Republic Theatre on Forty-Second Street: *The Governor's Lady*. Written by Alice Bradley, the drama told the story of the tumultuous marriage between Daniel Slade, the Governor of Colorado, and his wife Mary. After staging the first three acts in various settings around Denver, Belasco created a homecoming for his Broadway audience, staging the play's epilogue scene in New York City at an authentically reproduced Childs cafeteria. Indeed, spectators were sitting mere steps away from one of the chain's locations around the corner of Seventh Avenue; many had passed Childs on their way to the theatre, and even more would likely pass by after the performance, some stopping to

enjoy the cafeteria's signature baked apples before returning home. Belasco's staging not only directed the audience's attention back to the local landscape of Times Square, but also emphasized trends of chain expansion and industry standardization that were increasingly transforming the modern city, giving urban citizens the opportunity to repeat similar consumer experiences in different geographic locations.

This chapter began with a description of Belasco's design for *The Governor's Lady*, illustrating an early intersection between theatrical staging and broader forces of American modern design. By returning to this performance as the starting point for my cultural analysis, I am intentionally applying an alternative interpretative methodology from previous histories of early twentieth century theatrical design that use the aesthetics of the New Stagecraft as their criteria for selection. Theatrical staging that failed to adopt New Stagecraft aesthetics and practices were ignored or denigrated and typically labeled as conventional or old-fashioned. But even though Belasco's setting demonstrated a realistic style—so realistic, in fact, that it used the very same restaurant equipment that could be found in every Childs—it was far from conventional. His staging, indeed, tapped into significant modern innovations, communicating new processes of industry and consumerism increasingly changing the experiences of urban Americans.

As a director and producer, Belasco was known for his dedication to realistic details and dictatorial control over his productions.[53] The popularity of Belasco's realistic staging, particularly his Childs's setting, made it a convenient target for New

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[53] Mary Henderson notes that Belasco "created the benchmark in realism on stage. It was frequently imitated, but rarely bested." "Scenography, Stagecraft, and Architecture," *The Cambridge History of American Theatre: Volume Two: 1870-1945*, eds. Don B. Wilmeth and Christopher Bigsby, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999) 499. Belasco's heavy-handed control of production elements means that he is generally credited for the staging of his productions, even though Ernest Gros, his employee, is officially listed as the designer.

Stagecraft advocates such as Sheldon Cheney. For Cheney, Belasco's staging conveyed the same material excesses and vulgar commercialism that New Stagecraft artists hoped to counter with their designs. In *The New Movement in the Theatre* (1914), Cheney argued that Belasco's productions left nothing to the audience's imagination, distracting them with an overabundance of visual minutia: "Belasco's first instinct is to 'decorate,' to destroy simplicity in a doubtful attempt at 'naturalness.'"[54] According to Cheney, Belasco was a "dangerous force in the American theatre" because the director equated his scenic approach with artistry of Émile Zola and the French naturalists.[55] New Stagecraft advocates drew a crucial distinction between the social politics of artists like Zola and the commercial objectives of producers like Belasco, and argued the formal aesthetics and interpretative practices of modern design would produce an even higher quality artistic expression that captured the essence of a dramatic text.

Influenced by these early criticisms, theatre historians regularly include Belasco's staging practices, particularly his Childs's setting, as a counterpoint to the New Stagecraft, contrasting the simplified, abstract, and subjective expressions of modern design with the excessively realistic commercial staging that prompted its revolt. The comparison helps historians mark the shift from theatre as a business enterprise to theatre as a legitimate art form. Their narratives typically include a brief description of the multitudinous details that ornamented Belasco's stage, but then move forward with a more in-depth discussion and analysis of New Stagecraft designs. For example, Arthur Feinsod compares the realism of *The Governor's Lady* to the simplicity, abstraction, and

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[54] Cheney 155. Arthur Feinsod notes that critical attacks on "Belascoism" started in 1912 with Clayton Hamilton, a theatre critic for *The Bookman*, and continued with Sheldon Cheney and Walter Prichard Eaton's subsequent critiques. These attacks prompted Belasco to respond with his own criticism of the art theatres in 1917, calling the movement a "fad" and its practitioners "incompetent." (28-29).

[55] Cheney 167.

subjective expressions of Max Reinhardt's production *Sumurun* (1912) which toured

America the same year.[56] Orville Larson's history sets up a visual contrast between

Belasco's Childs's setting and the modern aesthetics of Jones's *Dumb Wife* design,

generally acknowledged as the first successful example of the New Stagecraft by an

American artist.[57] The contrasts between the two productions tell the story of the origin

of modern American theatre design, the triumph of "art" over "craft." Belasco's realistic

imitation of a Childs down to working ovens and smells of baked apples drifting into the

auditorium, came to signify all that was brash, commercial, unimaginative, and

distracting [see fig. 1.1]. The *Dumb Wife*, on the other hand, became the departure point

for American stage modernism with its bold geometric lines, and mix of monochromatic

and primary colors representing innovation and high-quality artistry [see fig. 1.2].

Interestingly, both performances are included within theatre history only as

examples of theatrical staging. Critics largely deemed Anatole France's *Dumb Wife* and

Alice Bradley's *The Governor's Lady* as inconsequential. As a result, the dramatic

content of both plays has fallen out of historical narratives, with the designs standing in

for each production. Nevertheless, both Bradley and France's texts commented on the

"rapidly changing societies" of modernity, and each design captured the interaction

between dramatic characters and the consumer landscapes they occupied.[58] Yet, only the

Dumb Wife was recognized as "modern." Belasco's stage, instead of applying the formal

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[56] Feinsod 41-42.

[57] Orville K. Larson, *Scene Design in the American Theatre from 1915-1960* (Fayetteville: U of Arkansas P, 1989) 22; 50. A cultural analysis of Jones' *Dumb Wife* design follows in chapter two.

[58] Alice Bradley, "The Play of the Month: The Governor's Lady," condensed version published by *Hearst Magazine* Sept. 1912: 113.

Although Alice Bradley is given credit as author of the play, Belasco historian William Winter, also a theatre critic for the *New York Tribune*, notes that the play received extensive rewrites by Belasco. At the opening of the New York performance, the lead actor made a speech on behalf of Bradley, making it known that she "disclaimed credit for anything more than the 'central idea' of the play." *The Life of David Belasco* (New York: Moffat, Yard, 1918) 377-379.

aesthetics of modernism, visually illustrated the landscape of urban modernity, capturing

a particular moment in the development of New York City when companies designed

new spaces to satisfy the various needs of its urban population. Its visual specificity,

what New Stagecraft advocates found so abhorrent, captured the rapid changes in modern

urban environments. By emphasizing the historical rather than aesthetic implications of

the term "modern," Belasco's stage reveals itself as worthy of the same comprehensive

consideration New Stagecraft designs have received from design historians.

When Belasco selected a Childs Restaurant for *The Governor's Lady*, he did so

with the assurance that his audiences had familiarity, if not intimate experience, with the

chain establishment; the Childs just around the corner from the Republic Theatre, was

only one of many locations in New York. Most of the city's public eateries, including

diners, cafeterias, and lunchrooms, developed during the late nineteenth and early

twentieth century. The restaurant industry expanded along with other commercial growth

in the city, catering to businessmen, unmarried clerks and shop workers who could not

return home for mid-day meals, and urban residents who lived in rooming houses with no

board or kitchen facilities. Brothers William and Samuel Childs, founders of the chain,

were dedicated to providing wholesome food at reasonable prices in a clean

environment.[59] In the wake of negative press about health concerns at public eateries,

Childs promoted its locations as hygienic and reinforced their claim with a simple décor

of while tiles, walls, and counters.[60] Through a visually distinct, instantly recognizable

interior design, they advertised consistency and quality control at each location and, in

the process, gained customer loyalty, becoming a popular spot for lunch, dinner, and

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[59] Kurshan 1.
[60] Pillsbury 61.

after-theater supper.[61] Childs was also the first restaurant to introduce a self-service tray line; customers could inspect menu items to make sure food was fresh before purchasing their meals. By 1898, nine years after opening, Childs had become the first chain establishment in New York with nine city locations serving fifteen thousand to twenty thousand people each day.[62] They also had locations in cities along the East coast; for Belasco, this was significant, meaning preview audiences for *The Governor's Lady* at Philadelphia's Broadstreet Theatre would have the same local referent as eventual New York audiences at the Republic.

Belasco's insistence on setting the scene in not just any famous restaurant but a chain location instantly recognizable by its visual character is significant because it taps into recurring themes of standardization and duplication of experience that developed in this era of mass-production and mass-consumption. Belasco's critics denigrated his staging as mere imitation, but in actuality it was *not* an imitation. The setting did not duplicate or simulate the look of a Childs with the typical materials of stagecraft—wood, canvas, and illusory scenic techniques. It placed the exact same furniture and equipment used in a Childs, bought from the same supply company, on the stage of the Republic Theatre. Belasco's ability, in fact, to order his setting directly from the Childs Restaurant Company exemplifies the extent to which modern methods of standardization had developed by 1912. His staging participated in the same process of reproduction that had begun with the expansion of the chain.

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[61] Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994)164. Chauncey examines how cafeterias like Childs served as convenient meeting places for gay men in New York during the early years of the twentieth century; because it was reputable and well-established, Childs was less susceptible to raids from the police (174).

[62] Ibid. 163-164.

Despite the emphasis on the Childs's staging in production reviews and theatre

histories, the restaurant only appeared in the epilogue of *The Governor's Lady*, with the

majority of the dramatic activity taking place in domestic settings like drawing rooms and

libraries.[63] Historians who have studied Belasco's career disparage the dramatic content

of the play as "negligible" or "paltry,"[64] but during the time of production Belasco

promoted it as an up-to-date depiction of the social dilemmas of modern America, the

case of a "self-made man, striving to be correct and perfectly at home in a social stratum

to which he does not belong" and the unfortunate inability of his wife to adapt to their

new circumstances.[65] At the heart of the play is the increasingly fluid nature of class

within American modernity and the social complications that occur with the sudden

accumulation of wealth. Daniel S. Slade is the Colorado miner who strikes it rich, and

his "homely" wife Mary stands in the way of his new career in politics. After an initial

separation, Mary discovers that her husband has taken up with another woman: Katherine

Strickland, the ambitious daughter of a senator. Knowing that she cannot compete with

Katherine's social standing and ability to further Daniel's political ambitions, Mary

consents to her husband's request for a divorce and decides to move to New York City.

Two years later, a wiser Slade, now the governor of Colorado, finds her in a Childs

Restaurant, and professes his love for her—"Oh! Hell, Mary, what's the use . . . You

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[63] *The Governor's Lady* used three additional settings. Act 1 took place in Slade's drawing room. The setting for Act II was in Senator Strickland's library. Act III moved to the small cottage where Mary lived during her separation from her husband. Each setting demonstrated Belasco's photographic "fidelity to life," yet the Childs epilogue setting received the most attention. "The Story of *The Governor's Lady* Told in Pictures," souvenir program, Production Photograph Collection, Box13:53, The Theatre Arts Collection, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin.

[64] Lise-Lone Marker, *David Belasco: Naturalism in the American Theatre* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1975) 61. Also Craig Timberlake, *The Bishop of Broadway: The Life and Work of David Belasco* (New York: Library Publishers, 1954) 319.

[65] Bradley 113.

know we were made for each other."[66] He then picks her up and carries her out the door, leaving a generous five dollar tip for the waiter [see fig. 1.3].

The Childs' setting for the epilogue scene reinforced an understanding of New York City as a place where men and women could establish new identities and escape conventional expectations. Writing for the popular *Theatre Magazine*, reviewer Wendell Phillips Dodge suggested the appropriateness of the location for the reunion of the millionaire Slade and his ordinary wife. Dodge praised Belasco's choice to not set the scene in an upscale "Broadway lobster palace, as nine out of every ten managers would have done" because Childs' most characteristic feature is that its patrons are "people recruited from literally every walk of life, for who so rich or mighty has not some time or other invaded the democratic precincts of Childs'."[67] In this regard, Childs' was not only the specific location for this reunion, but was a symbolic representation of the types of democratic, urban spaces within the modern American city that permitted a blurring of class boundaries. The restaurant signified neutral ground, a place where the socialite and the shop girl can believably meet and interact. By suggesting that millionaires like Slade frequented the restaurant, the performance also certified Childs as a hip urban location, creating an aura of popularity around the chain.

Dodge applauded Belasco's mastery of stage realism, comparing it to that of the eminent French naturalist Zola. But he drew a crucial distinction between Belasco and Zola, accentuating the setting's specific encapsulation of the American urban experience:

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[66] Ibid. 128.

[67] Dodge 104. According to James Traub, the lobster palaces in Times Square catered to a wealthy New York crowd. Unlike Childs' cafeterias, lobster palaces were upscale restaurants where those who wanted to be seen could purchase lobster themidor served on gilded platters. *The Devil's Playground: A Century of Pleasure and Profit in Times Square* (New York: Random House, 2004) 27; 35.

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"None other, save perhaps a Zola, could have held in his mind's eye its

multitudinous detail, or have had the art to translate that detail into

concrete terms. But then, alas for Zola! France has no Childs'. Childs' is

essentially an American institution . . . There is no genre picture of New

York life, or than of Philadelphia, or a half dozen other cities, to be

painted without a Childs' restaurant occupying its proper place in the

perspective; a Childs' with its geometrically arranged assortments of

provender, its burnished coffee broilers . . . and, most significant and

characteristic of all else, its motley gathering of hungry and hasty

patrons."[68]

In contrast to Cheney's critique, Dodge suggests that concepts of artistry and realistic

detail are not diametrically opposed, a point he argues through the Zola comparison.

Instead of disparaging the everyday as "tasteless," he appreciates the location's value as a

meeting ground for a variety of urban residents. Childs is characterized as uniquely

American, its democratic character and standardized experience in direct opposition to an

upscale lobster house that socialites would encounter in midtown Manhattan.

Dodge's review also suggests the excitement that audiences felt in encountering a

familiar setting but being able to study it with a new eye. The epilogue setting

reconstructed the Childs' experience with such precision that spectators could easily

recognize themselves as the characters/consumers on stage, an experience they would

likely remember during their next visit to one of the franchise locations. Indeed, Belasco

insured that the Childs' depicted on stage would be identical to these locations, perhaps

especially the one that spectators would encounter on their way out of the Republic

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[68] Dodge 104.

Theater. Rather than take his audience on a journey to an unfamiliar place, Belasco

brought them home to the very streets they inhabited, helping them take a second look at

spaces that were starting to change their experience of the New York urban landscape.

Belasco's staging may have fallen short of the definition of design set by New

Stagecraft advocates, but his duplication of Childs reflected the beginning of commercial

design trends that would gradually shape America's consumer environments. Childs's

white tables and tiles were as recognizable to urban dwellers in the early twentieth

century as McDonalds's golden arches or Howard Johnson's orange roofs would be for

suburbanites and highway travelers decades later. Indeed, the processes that cultural

critic George Ritzer identifies as the "McDonaldization" of American culture—

"efficiency, services and products that can be easily quantifiable and calculated,

predictability, and control"—began with chain enterprises like Childs.[69] Thus, Belasco's

staging provides an early illustration of how modern design, as both a concept and artistic

practice, not only shaped the stages of American theatres but also, in a broader sense,

commented on and contributed to the development of twentieth century American visual

culture. In the following chapters, I extend the type of cultural analysis exemplified by

this interpretation of Belasco's production while still acknowledging significant

differences between the aesthetics of realism and modernism. As this study moves to the

work of New Stagecraft artists, I explore how their stage modernism—the bold,

expressive colors, simplified lines, and abstract or geometric shapes—continue to

characterize the experiences and beliefs of Americas living through and reacting to the

processes of modernization altering their everyday pursuits and pastimes.

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[69] Ritzer, 9-10. Ritzer's scholarship investigates McDonaldization as a largely suburban
phenomenon developing from the automobile culture of the 1940s and 1950s but does acknowledge urban
enterprises like lunch counters, diners, and cafeterias as ancestors of these processes (36).

Chapter Outline

This dissertation follows a biographical format, in that I divide each chapter along the careers of the individual designers selected for analysis—Robert Edmond Jones, Norman Bel Geddes, and Jo Mielziner. The time frame extends from 1912, a year that saw not only *The Governor's Lady* but also Jones' early experiments in Greenwich Village, to the early 1950s, the years in which Mielziner gained preeminence on Broadway with productions such as *The King and I* (1951). The designer-centered structure of my project arose from a need to work within archival collections organized around the careers of individual artists.[70] Chronologically, the careers of all three artists overlap; however, the designs selected allow me to progress in sequential order through events within the history of American modernity.

Each chapter opens with a reflection on a design artifact that communicates the wide-ranging cultural influences of the designer's career; within these beginning sections, I acknowledge my interaction with the artifact as a historian, and how my experiences and interpretative processes guide my investigation. My goal with this case studies approach is to demonstrate how theatrical designers interacted with modern landscapes, how their iconic images made modernization visible and understandable to audiences, and how their design aesthetics were co-opted for consumer products and environments. Because the forty year time period covered in this project is too expansive for a comprehensive study of American modernity, I limit my scope to events and

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[70] For this project, I conducted primary research at three archives, including the Robert Edmond Jones Collection at the Houghton Library, Harvard University; the Norman Bel Geddes Collection at the Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin; and, the Joseph Mielziner Collection, part of the Billy Rose Theatre Collection at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

circumstances referenced by select designs. My use of the term "American" specifically references events and circumstances occurring within the United States. Throughout, I am conscious of the way I use the terms "modernism" to reference artistic practices and aesthetics and "modernity" to indicate historical circumstances. The adjective "modern" is used not to describe something as new or fashionable but specifically to designate practices of modernism and processes of modernity.

I have purposefully selected designers who figure prominently within American theatre history; Jones and Mielziner's careers, in particular, have served as a cornerstone for communicating the development of American modern design, the first as the innovator whose artistry triumphed imitation and the later as the professional whose consistent excellence solidified the designer's status as an equal collaborator within a production team. Bel Geddes' designs, while less prominent, regularly appear as an example of the New Stagecraft's experimental spirit and innovative aesthetics. Like other modern artists during the period that disseminated their ideas through printed manifestos, interviews, and articles, designers drew attention to their work through publication, thus determining contemporary and future discourses of modern theatre. The first New Stagecraft theories were written by the movement's practitioners, and its earliest histories by their critic colleagues. In publishing theories and images of their work in newspapers, journals, and books, these artists and critics produced many of the primary sources and artifacts that theatre historians have since used to construct the history of modern American design. Accordingly, the design archive tends to privilege designers who not only demonstrated their innovative artistry on the stage but also openly articulated their practical and theoretical approach. Designers who achieved significant

financial success and peer approval also leave behind significant traces of their work to secure their place within the history of American theatre.

Working with familiar designs and designers also brings further attention to my interpretative processes; the meanings created through this cultural analysis will stand alongside existing meanings created through a formal analysis to create a comprehensive understanding of theatrical design and its influences. While there are many designers whose work would complement this study—Joseph Urban, Lee Simonson, Mordecai Gorelik, and Aline Bernstein, to name a few—the scope of this project requires that I limit my research. With my selection of artists and representative designs, however, each chapter provides an opportunity to investigate different venues of modern design in American culture: design in local/amateur theatre (Jones), design in industry (Bel Geddes), and design in Broadway/commercial theatre (Mielziner).

Chapter two examines the early history of Jones' design career, tracing his associations with Greenwich Village artists and how his experiences within the Village community significantly influenced his theoretical perspective and theatrical design practice. Jones is the most prominent figure of modern American design, known primarily for his foundational efforts in bringing New Stagecraft practices and aesthetics to high-profile commercial productions as well as his theoretical contributions to the movement, such as *The Dramatic Imagination* (1941). Yet, many narratives of his career neglect his early artistic collaborations during his years in the Village.

Jones' early career illustrates a moment in American modernity when the experimentations of modern artists and politics of progressive activists converged. Brought together within urban neighborhoods, these modern bohemian communities

produced performances that reflected their radical politics, such as the Paterson Strike

Pageant (1913), a performance for which Jones designed both the scenery and publicity

materials. Jones was also involved with the Washington Square Players and

Provincetown Players, organizations dedicated to producing experimental performances

that represented the fractured perspectives of modern citizens. Through his modern

designs, Jones helped these organizations achieve their stimulating blend of artistry and

activism. While many histories of American design begin with Jones' design for *The

Man Who Married a Dumb Wife* (1915), in this chapter it serves as the culmination point

of his journey of artistic and cultural discovery in the Village. The design's formal

aesthetics not only reflected the theories of modernism he learned in Europe but,

significantly, accentuated the socialist critique of the performance.

In chapter three, I investigate a series of modern designs from Bel Geddes'

theatrical and industrial design career. New Stagecraft histories regularly label Bel

Geddes as a "visionary" based on the innovative nature and massive scale of his modern

designs. But as a master of self-promotion, he differed significantly from the self-

effacing attitude of other American designers like Jones and Mielziner. Bel Geddes was

best known for a series of large scale projects, such as his unrealized designs for *The

Divine Comedy* (1921) and his redesign of the Century Theatre to house Max Reinhardt's

The Miracle (1924). With these projects, Bel Geddes envisioned modern design as a

means to envision a whole production rather than merely provide a stage setting. His

designs expanded the initial scope of the New Stagecraft to apply its theories to the whole

theatrical experience, moving past the physical stage and into the auditorium space.

Bel Geddes' desire to design new spaces for modern viewing eventually gave way to designing new spaces for modern living and new products for the American consumer. He applied New Stagecraft aesthetics and practices to create mass-produced household goods, revealing the influence of modern design on an increasingly image-driven American cultural landscape. Bel Geddes' design for *Futurama* (1939), an attraction designed for General Motors at the 1939 New York World's Fair, was his most successful public expression of modern design. This performance combined his experience in both theatre and industry to create a new standard in commercial entertainment and a new strategy for consumer sales. Bel Geddes revealed the power of modern theatrical design as a visual language that could sell a future American landscape shaped by corporate interests.

Chapter four investigates three theatrical designs created by Mielziner during 1949 to 1951, the years when his work dominated New York's Broadway stages. An early apprentice of Jones, Jo Mielziner inherited his practical, unassuming outlook on design. Mielziner, alongside Jones, serves as one of the two key figures of American theatrical design. If Jones serves as the "father of American design," then Mielziner becomes its heir, the embodiment of the professional collaborator whose artistic contribution does not just complement but *complete* a dramatic text. Mielziner's design for the original Broadway production of *Death of a Salesman* (1949) served not only as the highpoint of his career but also the pinnacle success of American design. New Stagecraft innovation had paved the road for further advances; critics no longer had to argue the merits of modern design because Mielziner's absolute visual embodiment of the

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central themes of dramatic texts proved the value of a designer's contribution to a production.

Mielziner's unprecedented critical and public success occurred as a result of not only his talent interpreting dramatic texts but also his ability to crystallize the historical moment with images that captured the rapid transformations of modern landscapes. His *Salesman* design critiqued postwar images of suburban domesticity and consumerism, illustrating the disintegrating urban landscapes resulting from these trends. An analysis of the Broadway musicals *The King and I* (1949) and *South Pacific* (1951) reveals the influence Mielziner's images of Bali Ha'i and Bangkok on American's exotic perceptions of foreign landscapes. With the overwhelming success of these musicals, Mielziner had the opportunity to adapt and replicate his design images for a variety of commercial products. His negotiations surrounding these reproductions call attention to the growing importance of images in America's consumer economy and the process by which design participates in changing perceptions and legal understandings of intellectual property during the early twentieth century.

Ultimately, this project aims to explore the legacy of these designers beyond the pages of American theatre history. Theirs is a history that lives on in the codified practices of contemporary designers, a history that I participated in alongside many theatre professionals well before studying the theories of the New Stagecraft. This dissertation continues my participation in American design, extending dialogues that began fifteen years ago with student colleagues on a stage designed by Mielziner. The provocative words and images of New Stagecraft artists that I studied early in my career helped me passionately declare the many ways in which design matters. This project

only enlarges the scope of that declaration. The more I examine the work of these

designers, the more my interest expands beyond my own genealogical link. Increasingly,

I see their legacy in the world around me, not just when I attend the theatre but also when

I sit in places like Starbucks. Their artistry lives in more than just the practices of

theatrical production but also in everyday practices and landscapes. A recovery of this

legacy forwards an understanding of design's pervasive influences—how it shapes

people's perceptions, elicits certain behaviors, and participates in debates about the

collective values of American culture.

EPILOGUE—The Wonderful Childs' Restaurant Scene.
Where the epochal events in the lives of Daniel and Mary Slade are played.
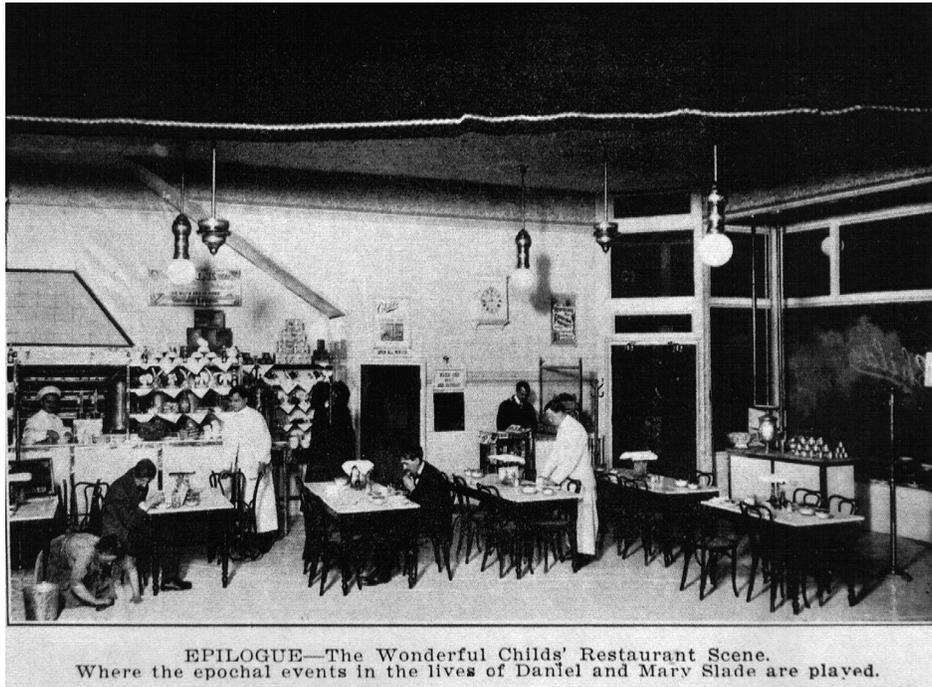
Figure 1.1: Child's Restaurant from *The Governor's Lady*, produced by David Belasco (1912). (Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin)
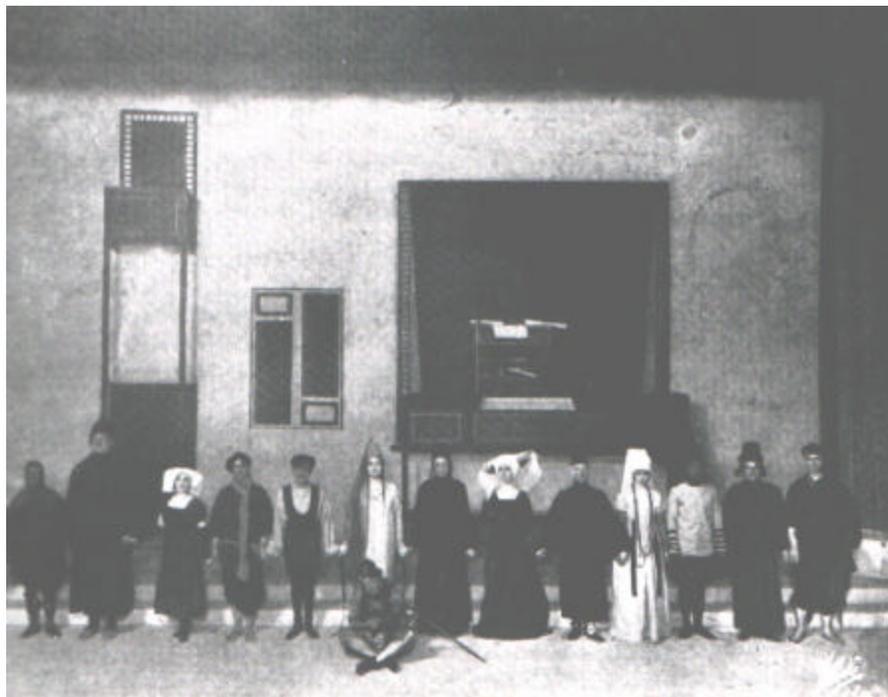
Figure 1.2: Jones's design for *The Man Who Married a Dumb Wife* (1915).

"After we are married," says Slade, despite Mary's protests, "we will go right back
and try all over again."

Figure 1.3: Daniel and Mary Slade in *The Governor's Lady*. (Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin)

Chapter Two:
From Greenwich Village Bohemia to Broadway: Robert Edmond Jones and the
Activism of American Modern Design

Art is not like life, only better. Art is different from life, and artists are different from laymen. There is a creative state of mind and there is a creative state of feeling. There is a peculiar point of view, a special point of view, a special way of looking at things that creative people know and share with one another.

—Robert Edmond Jones, lecture notes

As I watched the film *Reds*, I studied the background of each scene, secretly hoping to glimpse a figure that might represent Robert Edmond Jones—a tall, dark haired, young man earnestly discussing theatre and politics amongst a gathering of artists in a Village café or a group of actors rehearsing in a Provincetown cottage. I knew not to expect him as one of the film's main characters; his biography does not loom as large in the cultural memory of Greenwich Village as individuals like radical journalist John Reed (Warren Beatty), his lover, poet Louise Bryant (Diane Keaton), or Bryant's other lover, playwright Eugene O'Neill (Jack Nicholson).[1] But my research into Jones's early design career had uncovered his friendships with prominent Village artists and activists, and I was interested to see how the film fictionalized the early twentieth century bohemian neighborhood and the community's commitment to making modern art, promoting radical politics, and following unconventional lifestyles. I contented myself that even without sighting Jones, my *Reds* viewing would provide a sense of the place where he spent his formative years, developing the "creative state of mind" and "peculiar point of view" that he shared with other Villagers.

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[1] *Reds*, dir. Warren Beatty, screenplay Warren Beatty and Trevor Griffiths, Paramount Studios, 1981. *Reds* was nominated for nine Academy Awards, including Best Picture, and won three, including Best Director, Best Cinematography for Vittorio Storaro, and Best Actress in a Supporting Role for Maureen Stapleton, who played the role of radical labor activist Emma Goldman.

When I found Jones, however, he was not in the background. But rather than portray him as a character, the filmmakers featured one of his design images, a drawing of a worker propelling himself away from a dark background of ominous factories. The image first appears on a political leaflet clutched in Reed's hand as he sits in a Provincetown cottage, conflicted about whether he should surrender to his love for Bryant or follow his political dreams. As Reed stares at this flyer for an International Workers of the World (IWW) rally, Jones's drawing comes into focus. The factory is illustrated with simple geometric shapes and the worker's body through bold strokes accentuating his lean face with an unwavering expression of resolve, his shirtless torso with sinewy muscles created by manual labor, and his extended arm and leg that break through the image's frame and slightly cover the letters "IWW" [see fig. 2.1]. Reed's own diminished figure contrasts with the strong, defiant posture of the worker. But the image, symbolic of a powerful worker's coalition, firms his resolve. He leaves the cottage and Bryant, choosing the idealism of politics over the tumult of love.

I rewound the video, pausing on Reed's contemplation of the drawing. Jones may not have appeared on screen, but the prominence of his design gave evidence of his strong presence within Greenwich Village. Jones initially created the image for the posters and program covers of the Paterson Strike Pageant, an event that brought thousands of silk mill strikers from Paterson, New Jersey to Madison Square Garden to re-enact their conflict against factory owners. With a series of bold strokes, simple shapes, and a primary color palette, Jones condensed the worker's struggles with a single poignant image communicating their defiance against oppressive capitalist forces. This image, in fact, was so powerful that the IWW continued to use it to publicize their events,

gradually transforming it into an icon of workers' rights. In *Reds*, Jones's drawing

becomes an ideal symbol of Reed's dedication to labor causes, shown at key moments to

convey his struggle to maintain faith in his political convictions.

Filmmakers relied on Jones's drawing as a quick and effective citation of the

cultural moment, an image capturing the politics of the labor movement as well as the

aesthetics of modernism used by Village artists at the same time. Indeed, with its

emphasis on the IWW image, *Reds* references a period in American modernity when

visual artists, not just painters but also designers, used their images to articulate radical

beliefs and support progressive causes. Jones's drawing stands in the same company as

many of John Sloan's political illustrations for the Village publication *The Masses*, such

as his depiction of the massacre of striking miners in Ludlow, Colorado.[2] These images,

secured within the cultural memory of the Village, give evidence of the blurred

distinctions between artistry and activism fostered by this non-conformist community.

Jones's place within this cultural memory, however, has largely faded. Within

theatre history, the designer is known primarily for his Broadway work, not his

involvement in the Paterson Strike Pageant. The drawing of the IWW worker belongs

more to the history of the labor movement than Jones's artistic career. Residual traces of

his work, however, ghost the cultural memory of Greenwich Village, suggestive of the

role designers played in humanizing the struggle of workers and promoting politically

progressive ideals. During his earliest days in New York City, Jones made the Village

his home, walking its streets, living in its dilapidated rooming houses, attending its social

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[2] John Sloan was a prominent Village artist and part of a group who exhibited under the name "The Eight." Critics dubbed them the "Ashcan" school due to their willingness to show the seedier side of the American urban landscape. Sloan served as the un-official art editor for *The Masses*; his "Ludlow Massacre" drawing appeared on the cover of the June 1914 edition. Patricia Hills, *Modern Art in the USA: Issues and Controversies of the 20th Century* (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 2001) 4-5.

events, and joining its café discussions. The Village gave him a place to refine his artistic

skills and learn the "creative state of mind" shared by community members. Jones's

designs, in turn, vitally shaped the Village's cultural expressions and community identity.

Seeing the prominence of Jones's image in *Reds*, I was reminded that he was

never a background figure, but a central participant in the activities that defined the

artistic and activist character of the Village landscape. Even though the film's depiction

of the neighborhood trades in nostalgia, painting its ramshackle streets in charming sepia

tones and heightening the sounds of café laughter over ardent political dialogue, Jones's

design retains its original form. At the end of *Reds*, the IWW leaflet appears one last

time, lying discarded on Reed's bedside table in a Russian hospital. Reed is dead, but

Jones's image remains, a material reminder of the activist spirit that grew out of a small

community of Greenwich Village artists who believed their work would transform the

sensibilities and realities of Americans living in the new century.

This chapter traces the early design career of Robert Edmond Jones from his

undergraduate education at Harvard (1906-1910) to his Broadway success with *The Man

Who Married a Dumb Wife* (1915). By uncovering his associations with Greenwich

Village artists, intellectuals, and activists, I examine first the way in which Village

culture influenced Jones's artistic development and, secondly, how his innovative design

practices shaped the Village community's public discourse. Through Jones's

contributions, Village theatre became an artistic enterprise committed to not only the

development of dramatic literature, as most histories of this period emphasize, but one

which promoted a unified theatre art. Jones's designs illustrate how the radicalization of

the American theatre during this period occurred not just in the content of dramatic texts but in the abstract, minimalist, and expressionistic forms of its staging. This chapter, therefore, builds on previous cultural and theatre histories by outlining the significant intersections between Village culture and the development of American modern design. By analyzing his work on the Paterson Strike Pageant (1913), early experiments with the Washington Square Players (1914) and the Provincetown Players (1915), I investigate how modern design functioned within the Village community, significantly influencing their use of theatre as a mode of modern artistic expression and political protest.

This chapter, therefore, draws connections between the Village's cultural politics and Jones's theatrical designs. Following an examination of Jones's "official" history and the reasons behind the neglect of his radical roots, I reconstruct the Village landscape where Jones spent many formative years. This reconstruction is informed by Michel de Certeau's essay "Walking in the City," in which he theorizes the difference between formal city geographies and the experiential landscapes that urban citizens construct through the action of walking; I strategically use the term "landscape," therefore, to indicate Jones's experiential knowledge of Village culture and its particular combination of modern artistry and progressive politics.[3] The Village reconstruction provides cultural context for analyzing Jones's designs, starting with the Paterson Strike Pageant and continuing with his work for Village amateur theatre organizations. I conclude with an analysis of his design for *The Man Who Married Dumb Wife*; rather than further celebrate it as the Broadway inauguration of the New Stagecraft, however, I analyze it as evidence

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[3] Michel de Certeau, *Practices of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: U of California P, 1984). Cultural geographer Sharon Zukin also defines "landscape" as "an ensemble of material and social practices and their symbolic representation." Landscapes visibly signify the relationships between social, political, and economic forces, between people and the places they organize and inhabit. *Landscapes of Power: From Detroit to Disney World* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1991) 16.

of Jones's continued allegiance to the artistic theories and progressive politics he learned from the Village community. The formal aesthetics of *Dumb Wife* not only looked "modern" but accentuated the socialist critique of Anatole France's play, particularly its satire of bourgeois pretensions and commercial excess. By positioning the *Dumb Wife* as the culmination of Jones early career, this narrative offers an alternative to histories that position the same production as the origin of American theatrical design.   Interpreting the design as a product of the Village's intellectual discourse and political activism gives complexity to the history of theatrical modernism, recognizing roles cultural politics and the urban landscape played in the emergence of the New Stagecraft.

Interpreting the Cultural Memory/Theatre History of Robert Edmond Jones

Years before Jones became a respected Broadway designer, he was a young Village artist, participating in activities that shaped the neighborhood's non-conformist, bohemian identity such as Mabel Dodge's famous salons (1912-1913) and Liberal Club meetings at the Boni brother's bookstore (1912). As a community member, Jones absorbed the progressive politics and avant-garde artistry advocated and practiced by the Villagers, and this cultural radicalism left an indelible mark on his designs. His symbolic imagery, expressive color choices, and non-conventional stage arrangements reveal the spirit of experimentation and social consciousness that he inherited from this community. The Village gave Jones a place to grow as an artist, gain exposure to new ideas and experiment with their application, and build a network of professional associations that served as the foundation for his successful theatre career.

Jones, however, was not the only one to gain from these relationships. What he gave the Village community in return were staging practices adapted to their particular needs. Jones not only broke from aesthetic conventions, offering an alternative to realistic settings, but also eliminated the need for the elaborate designs used by the commercial theatre. He showed Villagers how to transform the everyday spaces they inhabited into simple stages. Under his guidance, a platform in a bookshop became the first stage of the Washington Square Players and a cottage veranda provided the same function for the Provincetown Players. Because Jones lived in the Village, he understood the community's available resources and desire to engage new ideas through non-conventional performance. His staging maximized the goals of Village performances, whether the community intended them as intimate laboratories to explore new theoretical precepts or as a large-scale political spectacles meant to attract nation-wide media coverage. Jones's designs recognized the familiarity and cooperative atmosphere of the Village, bringing performers and spectators together for an intimate experience. Critics even noted that his interactive staging for the Paterson Strike Pageant brought strikers and audience members closer together in the expansive Madison Square Garden, unifying them in an electrifying emotional experience.

Jones was one of many artists who came of age during the first decade of the twentieth century and found themselves drawn to New York City, specifically Greenwich Village. Around 1910, the Village emerged as the central location for New York bohemia, a place that was, according to historian Christine Stansell, "visible and audible not just to its protagonists but to the whole city—and the country."[4] Young artists and

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[4] Christine Stansell, *American Moderns: Bohemian New York and the Creation of a New Century* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2000) 40.

intellectuals like Jones relocated from their small towns to the Village, eager to escape the provincialism of their local communities. Within the self-consciously bohemian neighborhood, they developed a youth culture dedicated to living modern lives, thinking modern thoughts, and creating modern art. "Greenwich Village bohemia," a phrase meant to encompass the cultural activities enacted by this group of self-styled moderns, was a product of this moment in American modernity when New York became a major international metropolis. Greenwich Village was one of many bohemias that, according to Raymond Williams, found a "foothold" in the modern metropolis, something "that would not have been possible if the artists and thinkers composing them had been scattered in more traditional, closed societies."[5] The Village's low rents and eclectic atmosphere provided a safe haven for Jones and his colleagues, a place to exchange ideas and establish their roles as modern bohemians. Their performance of these roles, in fact, often expanded beyond the neighborhood's streets, spilling over into midtown and uptown New York and locations like Provincetown, Massachusetts, thus widely advertising the Villager's rebellion against accepted societal and artistic conventions.

Both cultural and theatre historians have acknowledged the significance of performance within the wave of cultural activity between 1912 and 1919 often referred to as the "Little Renaissance" or "Insurgence." In *American Moderns*, Stansell examines amateur theatre as a major development in the Village's "conversational communities."[6] By moving their discussions of feminism or Freudian psychology from café tables to the

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[5] Raymond Williams, *The Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists*, ed. Tony Pinkney (London: Verso, 1989) 45.

[6] Stansell 96. Also see George Chauncey's discussion of Village theatrical and cabaret activities in *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of a Gay Male World 1890-1940* (New York: Basic, 1994), and Emily Kies Folpe's investigation of the Liberal Club and Provincetown Players in *It Happened on Washington Square* (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 2002).

simple stages Jones often constructed, the Villagers created a space to further experiment

with new ideas through physically embodiment. Theatre historians like Brenda Murphy

and Cheryl Black have interrogated the cultural politics of the Provincetown Players, a

prominent Village producing organization, and scholars from a range of disciplines have

studied the Paterson Strike Pageant, examining the Villagers' strategic use of theatre to

convey political ideals.[7] Previous scholarship on Village theatre has focused primarily on

how dramatic texts reflect the community's political activism and intellectual discourse.

Writers like Susan Glaspell, John Reed, and Eugene O'Neill, for example, are the

principal figures in studies about the Provincetown group.[8] When mentioning Jones's

participation in Village theatre, historians by and large describe the formal aesthetics of

his designs, but rarely contextualize them within cultural analyses of dramatic texts or

investigate their contribution to Village activism.

Biographies of Jones's career typically gloss his time in the Village, beginning in

earnest with his design for *Dumb Wife.* This production was not only Jones's Broadway

debut, but also the first Broadway appearance of the New Stagecraft by a native designer.

For many design historians, the *Dumb Wife* is the watershed event in American design,

marking the progress of theatrical staging from decorative "craft" to serious art and

securing Jones's status as the "father of American design."[9] Indeed, the design has

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[7] Brenda Murphy, *The Provincetown Players and the Culture of Modernity* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2005); Cheryl Black, *The Women of Provincetown, 1915-1922* (Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 2002). Sources for the Paterson Strike Pageant referenced later in this chapter.

[8] In addition to more recent books like Stansell and Murphy's, earlier studies like Helen Deutsch and Stella Hanau's *The Provincetown: A Story of the Theatre* (New York: Farrar & Reinhardt, 1931) and Robert Karoly Sarlos's *Jig Cook and the Provincetown Players* (Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1982) also focus on the literary achievements of playwrights affiliated with Village producing organizations. Cheryl Black's *The Women of Provincetown, 1915-1922* is an exception to this literary emphasis, including a complete chapter on the organization's women designers.

[9] See Ronn Smith's "American Theatre Design Since 1945," *The Cambridge History of American Theatre: Post World War II to the 1990's Volume III,* eds. Don Wilmeth and Christopher Bigsby,

received so much critical attention that the play's title has come to signify Jones' artistry rather than Anatole France's dramatic text. Critics such as Kenneth Macgowan, Hiram Kelly Moderwell, and Sheldon Cheney first characterized the *Dumb Wife* as an exceptional design, using the production to articulate New Stagecraft theory and advocate its practical application as the next step toward a culturally relevant national theatre. They promoted Jones's designs to a national readership in articles for *Theatre Arts Magazine*,[10] a journal dedicated to the artistic reform of the American theatre. Other modern designers like Lee Simonson and Norman Bel Geddes gained some critical recognition, but Jones's triumph with *Dumb Wife* increased his status among audiences who still looked to Broadway to measure theatrical success.[11]

When describing the primary influences on Jones' artistic development, most critics and historians emphasize the designer's trip in Europe (from June 1913 to September 1914). After visiting Paris and Florence, Jones traveled to Berlin where he spent a number of months studying the design practices at Max Reinhardt's theatre.[12] In 1917, Moderwell's article, "The Art of Robert Edmond Jones," painted the designer as a vibrant, up-and-coming artist with a winning combination of European inspiration and

(Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998) 514. Also see Mary Henderson's article, "Scenography, Stagecraft, and Architecture," from Volume II of *The Cambridge History of American Theatre*, 504-505. and Orville Larson's *Scene Design in the American Theatre from 1915-1960* (Fayetteville: U of Arkansas P, 1989).

[10]Under editors Sheldon Cheney and later Edith Issacs, *Theatre Arts Magazine* devoted many articles to New Stagecraft artists, including Jones, Joseph Urban, Norman Bel Geddes, Lee Simonson, and Jo Mielziner. Many of these designers also wrote for the journal. In 1923, the publication changed its name to *Theatre Arts Monthly*, and then again in 1939 when it became known simply as *Theatre Arts*.

[11] In 1923, Oliver Sayler described Jones as the most important American designer, listing Bel Geddes and Simonson as his "chief rivals." *Our American Theatre* (New York: Brentano's, 1923) 153.

[12] Jones left for Europe after the Paterson Strike Pageant, accompanying Mabel Dodge, John Reed, and Carl Van Vechten, a theatre critic. While in Florence, Italy, Jones unsuccessfully attempted to meet Edward Gordon Craig; Larson blames Jones's failure on Dodge's falling out with Craig. "Robert Edmond Jones, Gordon Craig, and Mabel Dodge," *Theatre Research International* 4 (Feb. 1978): 125-33. During this same trip, Jones also visited Hellerau where he saw Adolphe Appia's "rhythmic space" design at Jacque Delacroze's school of eurhythmics. Arthur B. Feinsod, "Stage Designs of a Single Gesture: The Early Work of Robert Edmond Jones," *The Drama Review* 28.2 (1984): 104.

American ingenuity.[13] Moderwell, like Macgowan, knew Jones from Harvard and wrote

with personal authority about the designer. He emphasized Jones's connection to

Reinhardt, a leader of the Continental Stagecraft whose name had become "a synonym of

theatrical progress" for many American artists.[14] Moderwell, however, also explained

that the designer's "American" independence and creativity kept him from merely

imitating European styles; the *Dumb Wife* demonstrated Jones's ability to produce the

same artistic quality but with designs adapted to the specific needs of American stages.

In a 1925, Macgowan published an article on Jones that marked the designer's

triumphant return from Germany as the starting point of his career. Before Europe, notes

Macgowan, Jones only "swept along in the main currents of the modern theatre,"

following the examples set by other artists, but Jones came back a leader, prepared to

transform the American stage: "The moment when he arrived in New York was one of

those moments known as psychological; it was a moment which had been waiting

patiently for a man."[15] Again, Jones's *Dumb Wife* success is positioned as a direct result

of his European journey, giving him the confidence to follow his own lead and develop

his own individual style. The experience serves as the turning point in Jones's early

career, indicating his transition from impressionable youth to committed professional.

Certainly, Jones's observation of European staging was significant to his artistic

development; as Jones biographer Dana Sue McDermott writes: "During the end of his

Harvard years and the beginning of his time in New York, Jones was described by friends

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[13] Hiram Kelly Moderwell, "The Art of Robert Edmond Jones," *Theatre Arts Magazine* 1.2 (1917): 51.

[14] Mordecai Gorelik, *New Theatres for Old* (Samuel French, 1940) 180. Gorelik was a New Stagecraft designer and a contemporary of Jones's.

[15] Kenneth Macgowan, "Robert Edmond Jones," *Theatre Arts Monthly* 9 (1925): 723. Jones and Macgowan were close collaborators. In 1922, they traveled to Europe to gather research for their joint publication *Continental Stagecraft* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1922). The following year, they worked with Eugene O'Neill to form Experimental Theatre, Inc. at the Provincetown Playhouse.

as charming, idealistic, but somewhat aimless young man. After his European venture, Jones's career became clear, directed and highly productive."[16] But this trip was far from his only influence. The emphasis on Jones's European training followed by his *Dumb Wife* success, initiated by contemporary critics and repeated by subsequent historians, has minimized his Greenwich Village experiences as inconsequential or anecdotal. Jones's time in the Village becomes a mere footnote, the metaphorical waves that swept him along the currents of modernism until he found his own artistic voice.   Jones's Village associations, however, gave him the impulse and opportunity to experiment with modern design. Even when he returned from Europe and began his Broadway work, his participation in Village cultural activities continued to shape his artistic desires.

Many critics and historians who minimized or erased Jones's Village experiences and associations likely hesitated to associate him with the community's political activism. For example, neither Moderwell nor Macgowan's articles mention Jones's involvement in the Paterson Strike Pageant; when Moderwell published his essay in 1917, radical politics had come under attack following the escalation of violence over labor disputes; police arrested many IWW leaders such as Bill Haywood who had organized the Pageant.[17] During the same year, the U.S. Congress passed the Espionage Act, a law that set penalties for anti-war public statements; journals publishing the work of dissident Village artists, for example, were denied delivery by the U.S. Post Office.[18] Thus, in the conservative climate following the U.S. entry into World War I, artists seeking

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[16] Dana Sue McDermott, "The Apprenticeship of Robert Edmond Jones," *Theatre Survey* 29:2 (1988): 206.

[17] Stansell 312-313. The Espionage Act and subsequent Sedition Act directly affected Village artists when the U.S. Post Office denied delivery of their journals due to potentially seditious speech.
    Haywood's arrest is discussed by Martin Green in *New York 1913: The Armory Show and the Paterson Strike Pageant* (New York: Scribner, 1988) 240.

[18] Stansell 313.

professional credibility disassociated themselves from organizations such as the I.W.W. Although there is no indication Jones asked his colleagues to conceal his Paterson involvement, the tendency to demonize radical politics might have motivated critics to select other designs to illustrate Jones's allegiance to the American theatre.

While subsequent histories of Jones's career do not entirely erase his radical associations, most characterize the designer as a mere observer of Greenwich Village bohemia rather than an active member, a designation saved for his collaborators such as O'Neill and Reed whose writings more forcefully asserted their political leanings. Design historians tend to dismiss Jones's Paterson involvement as a youthful dalliance, an anomaly among his other designs that seemingly emphasize modern aesthetics over political content. Orville Larson, for example, writes that the Communist Reed "conscripted" his friend Bobby after finding him sleeping on a park bench, insinuating that the former took advantage of Jones's poverty and political naiveté.[19] McDermott notes that the designer "was never known to be involved in political activity at any other time," characterizing his contribution as merely a favor to his friends John Reed and Mabel Dodge.[20] In addition to their dismissal of the Pageant, most histories assume nonpolitical motivations for Jones' founding contributions to groups such as the Provincetown Players or Washington Square Players, concentrating on his ability to work within limited spaces and financial resources rather than exploring how his choices helped the producers develop and communicate their progressive politics.[21] These accounts overlook the activism behind Jones's modern aesthetic because political

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[19] Larson, "Robert Edmond Jones, Gordon Craig, and Mabel Dodge" 126.

[20] McDermott 201.

[21] See Feinsod's discussion of Jones' contributions to the Washington Square Players and Provincetown Players in *The Simple Stage: Its Origins in the Modern American Theatre* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood, 1992) 143-44.

objectives seemingly belong to the history of the Village playwrights and producers, whereas the history of design largely tracks progressions of style and technique.

Some recent articles have recuperated previously neglected elements of Jones's biography. McDermott's "The Apprenticeship of Robert Edmond Jones" (1988) reclaims much of the designer's history before *Dumb Wife* in an effort "reveal the complex nature of his progression toward a career as a theatre artist." Specifically, McDermott examines the influence of Jones's psychotherapy on his artistry, first with the American doctor Smith Ely Jelliffe and later in 1926 when he went to Zurich to undergo psychoanalysis with Carl Jung. In "Not as Other Boys: Robert Edmond Jones and Designs of Desire" (2002), Jane T. Peterson recovers fragments from Jones's personal life and early career to speculate on how his closeted homosexuality served as a source of conflict and inspiration for his designs. Notable absences in the designer's biography, Peterson suggests, are not accidental but a strategic erasure of Jones's homosexuality by the designer's family, who reportedly burned a manuscript that Jones had been working on before he died. [22] Some scholars suggest that Jones' initiated Jungian therapy because he was afraid to admit his homosexuality, and his 1932 marriage to Margaret Carrington, ten year his senior, was arranged as a matter of convenience.[23] Thus, the disassociation of

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[22] Jane T. Peterson, "Not as Other Boys: Robert Edmond Jones and Designs of Desire," *Staging Desire: Queer Readings of American Theatre History*, eds. Kim Marra and Robert A. Schanke (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2002) 339-40. Peterson verifies Jones' homosexuality from an anonymous source.

In 1927, Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant indicated that Jones was writing his personal memoirs, but none of these writings have yet surfaced. "Robert Edmond Jones: Protean Artist," *Fire Under the Andes: A Group of North American Portraits* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1927). Jones could have been writing his memoirs as part of his psychoanalysis, similar to his mentor Mabel Dodge whose memoirs emerged from her therapy sessions. Lois Palken Rudnick, ed. *Intimate Memories: The Autobiography of Mabel Dodge Luhan* (Albuquerque: U of New Mexico P, 1999) ix.

[23] Green 55. This is only one interpretation of the reason Jones began therapy with Jung. Murphy suggests that he "broke under the stress" of his work with the Experimental Theatre, where he was serving as director and designer (217). McDermott argues that Jones, who was 39 when he left for Zurich, was having a mid-life crisis and questioning whether he wanted to continue his theatre career. "Creativity in the Theatre: Robert Edmond Jones and C. G. Jung," *Theatre Journal* 36.2 (1984): 216. Peterson speculates

Jones from the Village community could have resulted from those who wished to distance him from the gay and lesbian populations associated with Greenwich Village culture and prevent public exposure of his homosexuality.

Theatre historians have also dismissed Jones's Village experiences because they are deemed relatively insignificant compared to his commercial success. The designer's Broadway accomplishments and continued work in mainstream venues led many to assume that a professional career was more important to him than an adherence to the amateur ideals of Village theatre.[24] Jones increasingly gained professional credibility with his Broadway designs, particularly through his fruitful collaboration with director Arthur Hopkins. Even when Jones returned to the Village neighborhood in 1923 to work alongside O'Neill and Macgowan at the Experimental Theatre, many believed that this new professional iteration of the Provincetown group signified a rupture from the amateur ideals of the group's founding.[25] Despite Jones's continued allegiance to experimental staging, his defection to Broadway seemed inconsistent with the founding spirit behind Village endeavors that had rebelled so vigorously against commercialism.

But even when Jones moved to Broadway, he brought with him the innovative practices and artistic theories he learned from the Village community. He became one of many artists who found commercial success using the same theories and practices that they had cultivated in the Village. Indeed, Jones's success with the *Dumb Wife* stemmed from his ability to use the aesthetics of stage modernism to delight mainstream audiences.

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that "Jones's inner, homoerotic desires and the outer, social prohibition against any form of transgressive sexuality that dominated his upbringing had reached a crucial impasse" (348).

[24] Dorothy Chansky identifies the tension between professionalism and amateurism as one of primary debates among groups like the Provincetown Players. *Composing Ourselves: The Little Theatre Movement and the American Audience*, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2004) 46.

[25] Murphy 217.

The once radical, experimental aesthetic became fashionable, and artists who previously

rejected the mainstream now became part of it. As Stansell notes, even though they

"prided themselves on living life apart—a modernist secession," these artists also

"shrewdly identified and exploited certain openings in the establishment they

denounced."[26] Jones, in fact, became part of the commercial theatre establishment, with

his design for *Dumb Wife* illustrating a profitable alternative to stage realism. His early

design career, therefore, exemplifies the porous nature of the Village community, the

constant comings and goings of artists and intellectuals not content to keep their dialogue

confined to café tables and bookstores. Jones did not abandon the progressive ideals he

had learned from Villagers, an education that had begun during his earliest days at

Harvard. Rather, he continued to use modern design to address the conflicts of modern

living, expanding the circulation of Village culture outside the neighborhood's geography

and into the consciousness of mainstream America.

Encountering the Village Landscape

Bobby Jones, as his friends called him, entered Harvard University in 1906,

moving from his small hometown of Milton, New Hampshire to Cambridge,

Massachusetts. Although he arrived with the intention of studying mathematics, he

shortly changed his emphasis to fine arts.[27] Under the leadership of Charles Eliot Norton,

Harvard had recently developed an innovative program emphasizing art history and

aesthetic theory.[28] In general, American college education during the late nineteenth and

twentieth centuries began to shift away from classics and philosophy and toward the

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[26] Stansell 6.
[27] McDermott, "Apprenticeship" 197.
[28] R.L. Duffus, *The American Renaissance* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1928) 23.

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study of modern history, literature, social sciences, and the arts. This change "catalyzed political and intellectual debate on major campuses, interrupting a long tradition of upper-class hijinks, school spirit, and obsessive athletics."[29] Many political and artistic currents within Greenwich Village bohemia had their roots in the academic settings of Northeast colleges. Artists like Jones who relocated to the Village used their undergraduate experiences not only to establish professional contacts but also find compatriots who shared the same social, political, and artistic beliefs.

Jones's undergraduate years coincided with a moment known as the Harvard Renaissance when a small faction of liberals challenged the conservative campus majority. A conflict arose between the "Yard" and the "Street"; inspired by the intellectual debates they encountered in class, a group of relatively poor students living in Harvard Yard dormitories began to defy the traditional campus class system benefiting the wealthy students living in private clubs on Mt. Auburn Street.[30] Students barred from elite social clubs formed their own associations and publications that encouraged a free exchange of ideas. Walter Lippman, who later gained a considerable reputation as editor of the *New Republic*, formed a Socialist Club to further political discussions on campus. Others gravitated towards literary endeavors; Reed, Macgowan, and Moderwell, for example, wrote for the *Harvard Monthly*. Reed was also a school cheerleader, an activity he later used to spectacular effect in the Paterson Strike Pageant.[31]

A scholarship student with a modest family background,[32] Jones associated with many of these progressive student leaders. His introduction to modern art and politics

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[29] Stansell 56.
[30] Ibid. 57-58.
[31] Granville Hicks, *John Reed: The Making of a Revolutionary* (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1968) 40.
[32] McDermott, "Apprenticeship" 195.

came not only from professors, but from his participation in extra-curricular pursuits.

Jones's primary involvement was in campus theatrical activities. Through George Pierce

Baker's English 47 workshop, Harvard students had access to a practice-based theatre

education, an approach that created some anxiety among traditional Harvard faculty. [33]

Baker expanded the study of dramatic literature on campus to include not just playwriting

but also techniques of theatrical production, including costuming, lighting, and scenic

design. He also sponsored the Harvard Dramatic Club, and Jones became involved in

their production of Percy MacKaye's play *The Scarecrow*, an early example of poetic

symbolism in American drama. Jones played the violin in the pit orchestra, while

Macgowan served as the stage manager and Reed joined the business staff. Macgowan

later recollects Jones's excitement in learning all aspects of production work: "The next

thing we knew, he was making up the faces of the actors."[34] Harvard gave Jones his first

theatre experience, and his enthusiasm extended from production work to play-going. He

spent many evenings attending performances in Boston and Cambridge where he

witnessed many of the earliest examples of the New Stagecraft, such as Joseph Urban's

designs at the Boston Opera House and Livingston Platt's staging at the Toy Theatre.

Jones also gained exposure to the theories of Edward Gordon Craig when he attended a

Harvard lecture by William Butler Yeats (1911) during his year as a graduate student in

fine arts. [35] In Cambridge, Jones found himself at the geographical center of early New

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[33] Shannon Jackson writes that Baker's English 47 "exceeded both the spatial and temporal limits of the conventionally scheduled course. It also involved a much wider engagement in 'the technical' than any composition course ever had." *Professing Performance: Theatre in the Academy from Philology to Performativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004) 66-69. Stanley Russell McCandless documented Baker's influence in the American theatre with a map plotting the locations of Harvard and Radcliffe students working in professional or little theatres. "The Baker Map," *Theatre Arts Monthly* 9.2 (1925): 106.

[34] Macgowan, "Robert Edmond Jones" 723

[35] Kenneth Macgowan, "Robert Edmond Jones: A Tribute," *Educational Theatre Journal* 7.2 (1955): 136.

Stagecraft experimentation, and these early experiences, combined with his academic focus, stimulated his enthusiasm about modern design.

Many design scholars reference Jones's early contact with the New Stagecraft at Harvard, but few make note of his exposure to theories about the role of modern art and theatre could play in advocating social causes. Jones, along with Reed and Macgowan, spent many evenings at the home of James and Percy MacKaye, sons of prominent New York playwright and theatre manager Steele MacKaye.[36] During these meetings, Percy expounded on ideas which he would eventually advocate in *The Civic Theatre* (1912) and *Community Drama* (1917). Along with the other the Harvard men gathered, he imagined a community-based theatre radically different from the commercial establishment of his father's generation. Percy described "civic theatre" as a new expression of democracy, a culturally relevant art created by community leaders who strove to serve a citizen audience.[37] In particular, he promoted pageantry, large-scale performances involving community members in a celebration of local or national history, as significant social events that could awaken a new civic consciousness, recalling the spirit of the ancient theatre performed by the Greeks. Jones would later discuss many of the same ideas with Provincetown collaborators, many of whom also had Harvard training including Reed, Macgowan, Eugene O'Neill, and Hutchins Hapgood. Jones's early exposure to these ideas about integrating artistic theory and progressive politics, as well as the rigorous critical training Harvard provided, equipped him for the dialogues and activities that he would encounter in Greenwich Village bohemia.

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[36] Hicks 40.
Steele MacKaye was best known for melodramas like *Hazel Kirke* (1880) and for introducing the Delesarte system of actor training to the American theatre.
[37] Percy MacKaye, *The Civic Theatre* (New York: Mitchell Kennerley, 1912) 15.

His initial Village contact was Reed, who ran across Jones during the winter of

1912 "thin and hungry, wandering from impresario to impresario."[38] Reed had begun to

make a name for himself as a journalist, writing for publications like *The Masses*, a

Village mainstay. The journal, according to Gerald W. McFarland, "set the revolutionary

political and artistic tone for the community," featuring articles on an assortment of

topics including Marxism, labor politics, feminism, and Freudian psychology.[39] Reed

gave Jones lodging at his rooming house at 42 Washington Square South and introduced

him to his circle of contacts. Reed and Jones were not the only Harvard graduates living

on Washington Square, which became dubbed an "annex" of Harvard Yard. Village

historian Allen Churchill suggests that the Harvard crowd were conspicuous characters in

the neighborhood, noting that they "spread their high jinks over the winding streets of the

Village."[40] The inexpensive rents at 42 Washington Square brought in many young

artists, and the rooming house became a Village landmark when Reed immortalized it in

"The Day in Bohemia: or, Life Among the Artists in Manhattan's Quartier Latin." In the

poem, Reed rhapsodized the dilapidated condition of the building and the sense of

freedom felt by the "young men of spirit" who inhabited it.[41]

For Jones, newly arrived to the city, the rooming house gave him an immediate

sense of community and the independence to concentrate on his artistry. The permissive

atmosphere also gave him the freedom to explore an unconventional lifestyle. Many gay

men and lesbians relocated to the Village, historian George Chauncey notes, because of

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[38] Hicks 82. Previous to finding Reed, Jones worked briefly as a costume designer for Morris Gest, a commission that he had received through Kenneth Macgowan. McDermott, "Apprenticeship" 201.

[39] Gerald W. McFarland, *Inside Greenwich Village: A New York City Neighborhood, 1898-1918* (Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 2001) 192.

[40] Allen Churchill, *The Improper Bohemians: A Re-creation of Greenwich Village in Its Heyday* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Company, 1959) 73-74.

[41] Poem quoted in full in Churchill (37).

the neighborhood's tolerance for nonconformity, its eccentric modes of behavior and dress, and its practice of "offering cheap rooms to unmarried men and women who wished to develop social lives unencumbered by family obligations."[42] Within the Village landscape, Jones encountered a wider range of bohemian identities and lifestyles than he had experienced in New Hampshire and Cambridge, providing him with new models for developing his personal and professional identity.

The Greenwich Village where Jones lived in 1912 was at once geographically specific—"Washington Square and Fifth Avenue to the east, Tenth Street to the north, Houston Street to the south, and the Hudson River to the west"—but also an imagined landscape of cultural freedom and commonality constructed by the newcomer community.[43] The Italian immigrants who dominated the neighborhood at the turn of the century called it the "Ninth Ward," but "[o]nly when native-born bohemian writers, artists, and radicals began to move into the neighborhood in the 1900's did it begin to be called 'the Village' . . . and then only by the self-styled bohemian 'Villagers' who moved there, not the Italian 'Ninth Warders.'"[44] The neighborhood's cheap rents freed Villagers from commercial models of artistic production, and its run-down appearance sustained their romantic self-identities as modern bohemians living in an American Left Bank.

The concept of bohemia as an urban location for youthful revolt against bourgeois conventions began in 1890's Paris (exemplified in Puccini's opera *La Bohéme* [1896]), and Villagers were quick to note the "vaguely Parisian" look of Washington Square Arch

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[42] Chauncey 229.
[43] Stansell 41.
[44] Chauncey 228. Stansell also argues that, despite their progressive politics, Village artists tended to ignore long-time residents of the neighborhood, including Italians, Irish, and black Americans. They had "a selective vision of city life that installed some people in the foreground as protagonists and shunted others to the background or offstage altogether. The notion of the "Village" enhanced the mutual awareness of newcomers but not that of longtime residents" (42-43).

and jumble of narrow neighborhood streets.[45] The explosion of cultural activities that

started in the early 1910s provided a geographical center for an American bohemia;

previously, artists met in a variety of locations around downtown Manhattan.[46] The

"Village" became a common staging ground for modern living, a place where the

community could rehearse their roles as modern artists and activists before bringing these

ideas to a larger audience. They gathered in a variety of planned and spontaneous

locations—bars, restaurants, literary salons—to discuss "Freud, free love, feminism,

homosexuality, modern art, birth control, personal fulfillment, and radical politics."[47]

Jones, upon his arrival, joined many of these dialogues, acclimating himself to the

Village landscape and learning the customs of the bohemian community.

Through Reed, Jones became friends with Mabel Dodge, a wealthy New York

socialite who used her connections to secure patronage for many Village artists. Jones

eventually moved out of the boarding house into the backroom of Dodge's 23 Fifth

Avenue apartment. Dodge was a supporter of the New York Armory Show (1913), a

landmark art exhibit that introduced the American public to avant-garde European art.

The majority of work on exhibit was American, but critics largely commented on the

European paintings of Cubists and Fauvists, the most notorious being Marcel Duchamp's

Nude Descending a Staircase.[48] Alfred Stieglitz's 291 gallery had previously exhibited

European modern art, but the Armory show brought it into public consciousness,

sparking a nation debate between those favoring traditional aesthetics verses modern

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[45] Churchill 21.
[46] McFarland 190.
[47] Andrea Barnet, *All-Night Party: The Women of Bohemian Greenwich Village and Harlem 1913-1930* (Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books, 2004) 1.
[48] Milton W. Brown, *The Story of the Armory Show* (Greenwich, CT: Joseph H. Hirshhorn Foundation, 1963) 27.

experimentation. Jones's fine arts training prepared him to appreciate the Armory Show, and his association with Dodge would have assured his attendance.

Jones's move to Dodge's residence placed him at another important landmark in Village culture: Dodge's famous "evenings." With the help of Hutchins Hapgood and Carl Van Vechten, Dodge organized salon events around a gathering of diverse personalities who ensured a lively dialogue, including "socialists, trade unionists, anarchists, suffragists, poets, lawyers, murders, psychoanalysts, IWWs, birth controlists, [and] newspapermen."[49] Every Wednesday night of the 1912-13 social season, guests arrived at Dodge's apartment to eat, drink, and engage in controversial discussions against the backdrop of her white walls hung with modern paintings. As historian Andrea Barnet describes, uptowners in "jewels and formal evening clothes" mixed with downtowners wearing "handmade batiks and sandals"; the poets of white Village bohemia met the singers of black Harlem; "and women—to the scandal of the press— openly smoked."[50] The evenings created a temporary discursive space erasing the city's geographical boundaries that divided different classes, genders, races, and sexualities.

Through Dodge's salons, Jones not only mingled with political activists and cultural leaders, developing contacts for his professional career, but also began to discover the boundaries of acceptability within Greenwich Village bohemia. Some evenings included discussions about homosexuality, particularly within the context of psychoanalysis. Chauncey indicates that despite the progressive nature of the Villagers, their "consideration of homosexuality was not necessarily positive, and it often

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[49] Stansell 103.
[50] Barnet 143-144.

condemned homosexuality in scientific rather than more overtly moralistic terms."[51]

Jones's decision to remain closeted could have resulted from negative associations towards homosexuality espoused at these gatherings. He learned that the permissive Village atmosphere had its limits, and that his professional career would require a continual negotiation between nonconformity and adherence to long-established social codes. Society members who came downtown for Dodge's salon found the discussions titillating and unconventional Village behaviors entertaining, but expected different conduct from those who brought their artistry uptown. The contacts Jones gained through Dodge, combined with his Harvard credentials, positioned him well for a professional theatre career, assuming he could present an image of respectability.

Jones balanced Dodge's society connections with other Village activities, such as his membership in the Liberal Club. Founded in 1912, the Liberal Club was a meeting for local inhabitants who gathered in a brownstone on Macdougal Street, upstairs from Polly Holiday's restaurant and next door to the Boni brother's bookstore. As opposed to the exclusivity of Dodge's salon, the Liberal Club promoted open membership, hoping to eliminate conventional boundaries between class and gender and create a space for "intellectual mingling" that "lay beyond the divisions of the Victorian gender system and the segregation of those who worked with their hands from those who worked with their brains."[52] Their transgressive gatherings, they believed, would provoke a new consciousness about modern living. The Liberal Club became another key event in Village culture, a place where self-identified moderns met to exchange new ideas and

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[51] Chauncey 230.
[52] Stansell 88.

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develop new strategies for espousing those ideas, simultaneously building a community identity and community discourse to sustain and publicize their activities.

Thus, within weeks of his arrival in New York, Jones was an active participant in Greenwich Village bohemia, surrounding himself with artists, activists, intellectuals, and socialites who stimulated his imagination and familiarized him with theories that defied conventional thinking. After this initial period of intellectual discovery, Jones began to develop his role in the community as a designer. Playing on his strengths in the visual arts and theatre, he filled an important niche in the neighborhood, constructing stages with minimal means but maximum symbolic effect and helping the community stage their radical discourse. Jones's membership in the Liberal Club and friendship with Reed and Dodge, in fact, provided his first concrete opportunity to experiment with modern design: the Paterson Strike Pageant. Through his pageant design and publicity illustrations, Jones both discovered his passion for theatrical design and solidified his active participation in the political activism of the Village. For one evening at Madison Square Garden, Greenwich Village bohemia brought artistic innovation and trade unionism to an audience of thousands. With Jones's help, the pageant drew attention to the struggle of mill workers in Paterson, New Jersey, humanizing the political struggle of a marginalized population and building a solid community among its participants.

The Paterson Strike Pageant

Within the cultural memory of Greenwich Village, the Paterson Strike Pageant epitomizes the community's use of theatre as a means to articulate their political ideals. The pageant pre-dates other Village theatrical activities, such as the Washington Square

Players and Provincetown Players. Indeed, Jones's participation serves as a through-line between these theatrical endeavors; his designs were not merely supplementary but helped these organizations conceptualize and realize their goals. Jones's early discussions with Percy MacKaye about pageantry and later dialogues with Villagers about the civic function of modern art had prepared him to serve as one of the primary pageant organizers. By framing the radical politics of the IWW within a pageant format, the Villagers characterized the Paterson strikers, primarily an immigrant population, as Americans with fundamental rights of citizenship.[53] Jones's modern design gave the performance an up-to-date, polished appearance, representing the strikers' demands as similarly modern, thus justifiable in this new era of progressive ideals.

The impetus for the Paterson Strike Pageant came from the Villagers' interest in labor politics; Liberal Club members invited IWW leader William "Big Bill" Haywood to join an evening gathering and discuss the union's involvement with the silk worker's strike in Paterson, New Jersey. The IWW had successfully united the diverse immigrant population of strikers, including ribbon and broad silk weavers, dyers, and unskilled laborers,[54] but New York newspapers, largely sympathetic to the factory owners, failed to report strike activities. In her memoir, Mabel Dodge credits herself with the pageant idea; if the press would not cover the story, she suggested, "Why don't you bring the strike to New York and *show* it to the workers?"[55] A pageant at Madison Square Garden could bring public attention to the unfair labor practices and the violent treatment the

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[53] Steve Wilmer compares the Paterson Strike Pageant to another pageant occurring the on the same day in New York at the Henry Street Settlement, a "rags to riches" story about immigrants becoming American citizens; the striker's performance, in comparison, demonstrated the immigrant struggle to secure their rights in the face of the "oppressive force of the capitalist system." *Theatre Society and the Nation* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002) 101.

[54] Joyce L. Kornbluh, ed., *Rebel Voices: An I.W.W. Anthology* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1964) 199.

[55] Dodge Luhan 188.

strikers had endured from manufacturers and authorities. John Reed volunteered to direct the performance, and he asked his friend Bobby to arrange the staging.

Although Jones had participated in a number of Harvard theatrical activities, the pageant presented his first opportunity to design a production of any significant size. Indeed, arranging the event at Madison Square Garden, one of the premiere entertainment venues in New York City, far exceeded his previous experience. Reed too was untested in his theatrical expertise. He would soon gain journalistic fame for his stimulating coverage of the Mexican Revolution (1913) when he rode with Pancho Villa's army and later for his *Ten Days That Shook the World* (1919), chronicling the Russian Communist revolution. But at this time, Reed was primarily known as a Village playboy with unproven abilities. Indeed, he first established his journalistic credibility with the "War in Paterson" story, published in *The Masses* (April 1913), which related the story of his arrest in Paterson and personal experience with striking mill workers.[56]

Jones's role as designer for the Paterson Strike Pageant positioned him as a primary figure in the high-visibility endeavor. Like many of the Villagers involved in the performance, Jones visited Paterson, New Jersey to witness the strike first-hand.[57] The Village community became interested in IWW activities during the 1912 textile strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts, but became even more involved in the Paterson strike because it was a relatively short distance from Manhattan.[58] With their Paterson involvement, Villagers took the rhetoric of worker unification published in *The Masses* to a new level

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[56] Churchill 76-79.
[57] Anne Hurber Tripp, *The IWW and the Paterson Silk Strike of 1913* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1987) 141. The other participants who visited Paterson included Mabel Dodge, Walter Lippman, Max Eastman, and Hutchins Hapgood. The Hapgoods also opened their home to some of the children of strikers so they would be safe from violence that came as a result of their actions.
[58] Kornbluh, 201.

by staging it in real time and space. They served primarily as organizers; the silk strikers performed all the roles in their recreation of the strike, playing both themselves and other roles such as police and factory owners. Reed led three weeks of rehearsals in Paterson, helping the strikers devise the script and learn songs from the IWW's little red song book such as *The Marseillaise* and *The Internationale*.[59] Reed's previous experience as a Harvard cheerleader came to practical use when he taught the strikers Harvard fight songs with new lyrics specific to the Paterson situation.[60]

On June 7th, the strikers boarded a train in Paterson, transferred in Hoboken to a ferry headed to Christopher Street in Manhattan, and began to walk up Fifth Avenue to Madison Square Garden. Their march was planned as part of the Pageant festivities, a rally to generate even further publicity for the performance and their cause.[61] The strikers accentuated their role as silk workers and citizens by waving American flags and wearing ribbons stating, "We weave the flag/We live under the flag/We die under the flag/But damn'd if we'll starve under the flag."[62] They developed the slogan in response to flags that mill owners had hung on the factories, trying to convince strikers that returning to work would be their patriotic duty. Once they reached the Garden, the strikers held a final rehearsal on the stage Jones had arranged for the performance.

Audience members were greeted by a ten-foot high IWW sign hung from the Garden tower and electrified with red lights. The organizers kept the sign a secret so authorities would not be able to turn it off until it was too late. As historian Martin Green notes, the sign allowed the IWW to "flaunt its presence in one of the famous new

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[59] Linda Nochlin, "The Paterson Strike Pageant of 1913," *Art in America* 52 (May/June 1974): 64.
[60] Hicks 100.
[61] Green 197.
[62] William D. Haywood, *The Autobiography of William D. Haywood* (New York: International Publishers, 1929) 262.

buildings of Manhattan. They had taken it over, for one night, one of the palaces of the ruling class."[63] Factions hostile to the union must have been shaken to see several thousand workers invade midtown Manhattan to speak, sing, and listen without censure. The Pageant not only brought workers together to articulate common goals but also created a spectacle of worker solidarity for a city-wide audience.

Various accounts estimate Pageant attendance at approximately fifteen thousand, a large number of who were members of New York workers' unions. Vendors walked through the audience selling programs with Jones's drawing of the rebellious worker on the front and a list of the striker's demands inside, as well as other essays written by union leaders such as Haywood and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn. The IWW's signature color red dominated the auditorium, in banners hung around the venue, in the carnations held by spectators, and even in the bow ties and hair ribbons of program sellers.[64]

Once the Pageant began, it fluctuated between a recreation of recent events and a present declaration of rights. The strikers presented a series of episodes illustrating the conflict at the factory, performed through song, moving tableaus, and speeches. The story started at dawn, the symbolic beginning of the worker's recognition of injustice, and progressed through the formation of picket lines, protests of scab workers, scenes of police brutality, the funeral of Modestino Valentino (an innocent passerby killed by the police), and final speeches by IWW leaders and strikers proclaiming their refusal to work until the owners meet their demands.[65] The reviewer from the *New York Tribune* described how the funeral scene "worked the actors themselves and their thousands of

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[63] Green 199.
[64] Ibid. 199-200.
[65] "Program of the Paterson Strike Pageant," republished in "Paterson Strike Pageant," ed. Brooks McNamara, *The Drama Review* 15 (1971): 61-71.

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sympathizers in the audience up to a high pitch of emotions, punctuated with moans and

groans and sobs."[66] The critic from *The International Socialist Review* also noted the

"sweeping emotion" that united those in attendance: "Waves of almost painful emotion

swept over that great audience as the summer wind converts a placid field of wheat into

billowing waves. It was all real, living, and vital to them."[67] The crowd became one as

spectators joined the strikers in singing workers anthems, and the final speeches

reminded everyone that while the performance was ending, the strike would continue.

Jones's design helped achieve these intense feelings of unification between the

strikers and their audience. During rehearsals, he collaborated with Reed in staging the

episodes, including the movement of over a thousand performers on stage at once, and

suggested an arrangement that would interrupt conventional separations between the

performers and spectators to emphasize their solidarity. The massive stage spanned the

Fourth Avenue side of the Garden and included a long center aisle that ran through the

middle of the floor seats occupied by workers in the audience. Dodge describes Jones's

use of New Stagecraft theory to implement the staging:

> 'Our Bobby Jones' as Reed began to call him, insisted on making it a
>
> Gordon Craig affair, and having a long street scene right through the
>
> audience and up to the stage, and this was a most dramatic idea because
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> the actors enters at the far end of the hall, and the funeral procession
>
> marched right through it, so that for a few electric moments there was a
>
> terrible unity between all those people. They were one: the workers who

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[66] "Strike Realism Staged in Pageant," *New York Tribune*, 8 June 1913: 4.
[67] "The World's Greatest Labor Play," *The International Socialist Review* (July 1913).
Republished in "Paterson Strike Pageant," *The Drama Review* 51 (Summer 1971): 67.

had come to show their comrades what was happening across the river, and the workers who had come to see it.[68]

Jones deliberately brought the workers and spectators together at crucial dramatic moments in real space to remind them of their shared objectives, effectively politicizing Craig's abstract theories. As the reviews of the pageant indicated with their emphasis on "high pitch" or "sweeping" emotions, the arrangement helped the audience feel more directly involved in the recreation of the strike events. Dodge's original recommendation had emphasized how a pageant could *show* New Yorkers what was happening in Paterson; Jones's staging, however, went a step further by helping them imagine that they were participants in the Paterson conflict. The stage arrangement amplified the "waves" of emotion fluctuating between performers and spectators, blurring the distinction between the two categories. Jones's staging also helped the workers take control of the space; they were not relegated to the stage, but showed their power over the whole venue.

In addition to his innovative use of space, Jones applied New Stagecraft theory to design the Pageant's scenery. John Sloan, the unofficial art editor for *The Masses*, helped Jones by organizing the construction and painting of the scenery. The Pageant setting was immense, but also displayed an aesthetic simplicity that directed attention back to the strikers and their political message. Similar to his program illustration, Jones uses bold geometrics and monochromatic colors to characterize the factory as a dark, ominous influence. The massive stage held a large backdrop painted with rows of windows and stark outlines of buildings to represent the Paterson silk mills; a series of wings painted in a similar style surrounded the stage [see fig. 2.2]. The canvases' shades of black and

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[68] Dodge Luhan 204. Martin Green also notes that within John Reed's papers pertaining to the Pageant, he wrote the word "Craig" over the stage directions calling for the strikers to enter through the audience. Apparently, the original script had them entering from the stage right and left wings (201).

gray suggested the oppressive quality of the factories. The backdrop's enormous size added to this impression; Churchill notes that "even with a thousand persons on the stage, the Jones' mill continued to look vast and ominous."[69] Even though the script indicated different locations for various scenes, such as a meeting at the neighboring town of Haledon or in Turner Hall, the factory served as the backdrop for the entire performance, a constant visual reminder of the industry forces threatening the strikers' livelihood.

Jones also designed lighting effects to further communicate the factory's menacing presence. In the first scene titled "The Mills Alive—The Worker's Dead," light projected against windows gave the impression of the silk mill coming to life as "men and women, old and young, come to work in the bitter cold of the dawn."[70] The scene also made effective use of sound effects, such as a factory whistle and the scraping of looms as work began for the day. As the episode continued, lights outside the factory grew in intensity, representing literally the dawn of the morning but symbolically the "dawning of a new age" as workers escaped the factory and began their strike by singing *The Marseillaise* and asking the audience to join them.[71] One reviewer asked: "Who could sit quietly in his seat when that mill, wonderfully portrayed on canvas in the first scene, suddenly ceased its grinding whirr and shot from its belly that mass of eddying, struggling human beings loudly chorusing their exultant war songs as they proclaimed themselves on strike?"[72] The lights now faded from the factory windows as the strikers moved to their next episode, "The Mills Dead—The Workers Alive." Designed in conjunction with the setting, Jones's lighting conveyed the striker's control over the

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[69] Churchill 80.
[70] "Program of the Paterson Strike Pageant" 210.
[71] Wilmer 105.
[72] "The World's Greatest Labor Play" 67.

factory; without their labor, it would continue to lie dormant. Indeed the "dead" factory, a constant presence throughout the remaining performance, reminded the audience that the actual silk mills stood inoperative in Paterson while the strikers performed in New York. Jones's design, therefore, functioned as a type of visual dramaturgy, reinforcing the striker's positions in their fight against the mill owners.

Jones strategically used the IWW trademark color red to accentuate the striker's allegiance to the union; aesthetically, the color also provided contrast with the monochromatic shades of the backdrops. At the end of each episode, a red curtain descended; "strike children" wore red sashes as they left their mothers to be housed with New York families for the duration of the strike; and, mourners at Modestino's funeral threw red carnations and ribbons onto the casket.[73] The *Tribune* review commented that the accumulation of carnations in the funeral scene became a "crimson symbol of the worker's blood."[74] In fact, Jones's color scheme—the use of monochromatics as a basis for the setting and flashes of primary color to accentuate key characters and moments— predates his same innovative treatment for the *Dumb Wife* design.

The same New Stagecraft techniques that gained Jones critical praise two years later were the same that reviewers of the pageant also commended. A *Tribune* commentary published two days after the Pageant described the design as having "a startling touch of ultra modernity—or rather of futurism," that gave the performance validity as an artistic expression and not just a political rally.[75] The same critic noted, somewhat regretfully: "The IWW has not been highly regarded hereabouts as an organization endowed with brains or imagination. Yet the very effective appeal to public

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[73] McDermott 204.
[74] "Strike Realism Staged in Pageant" 4.
[75] "A New Way to Make Use of Strikes," *New York Tribune*, 9 June 1913: 6.

interest made by the spectacle at the Garden stamps the IWW leaders as agitators of large resources and original talent."[76] As a recruited "talent," Jones used modern design to identify the Pageant as an avant-garde performance and, in the process, characterized the IWW as an up-to-date organization with a forward-thinking cultural perspective.

The *Tribune*'s "ultra-modernity" comment, argues art historian Linda Nochlin, explicitly referenced the European modern art exhibited the same year at the Armory Show. The exhibition had catalyzed a public debate about modern art, and the Pageant staging offered critics another opportunity to discuss its aesthetic value. Nochlin writes: "Almost all the eye-witness accounts of the Paterson Strike Pageant praised it for its simplicity, its esthetic innovations and its dramatic as well as political effectiveness. It had evidently been a highly emotional theatrical experience combining stark realism and daring stylization."[77] Jones's design lies at the center of these critiques, both in his application of modern aesthetics to the Pageant's scenery and in his innovative staging that brought a realism of the strike experience to the spectators. "Ultra-modern," from this perspective, indicates not only the scenery's formal aesthetics, but the heightened subjectivity brought about by the overall design experience. Jones provided a stage upon which the Paterson strikers and the IWW could shape a positive identity outside the industry bias of the New York press. By giving the performance a polished, professional quality, the design lent credibility to the striker's message and insured appropriate press coverage. Reviewers, despite their feeling toward the IWW, could not help but recognize the technical skills and artistic innovations demonstrated by the performance.

Although both contemporary critics and later historians generally agree that the

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[76] Ibid. 6.
[77] Nochlin 66.

event was an aesthetic and dramatic success, there is a debate as to whether it helped the

Paterson workers. Their strike against the mills ultimately failed and when the Pageant's

financial statements came out, the strikers discovered that the event lost money; major

costs contributing to this loss was the price of the venue ($1000), the scenery ($750), and

the publicity materials ($1000).[78] Accusations of mismanagement followed, including an

account by one striker revealing that even though 15,000 programs had been printed, no

one had arranged for them to be sold. Some were sold to spectators, but more than

10,000 programs were later disposed of or sold as waste paper.[79]

The most damning accusation came from IWW leader Elizabeth Gurley Flynn

who claimed that the Pageant had been "disastrous to solidarity," serving as a distraction

to the actual strike and a source of jealousy between strikers who went to New York and

those who stayed on the strike line.[80] In a lecture the following year, Flynn said, "Bread

was the need of the hour, and bread was not forthcoming even from the most beautiful

and realistic example of art that has been put on the stage in the last half century."[81] Such

comments revealed the discrepancy between the practical objectives of striker population

and the idealistic agenda of the Village artists, but also miscommunication between the

groups about the ultimate goal of the performance. Strike historian Steve Golin argues

that the Pageant was never intended to raise money but specifically organized to gain

media coverage for the strikers and build solidarity with New York union workers. For

example, accusations that the performance lost money do not recognize how many union

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[78] Tripp 142.

[79] Ibid. 151.

[80] Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, *The Rebel Girl: An Autobiography, My First Life (1906-1926)* (New York: International Publishers, 1973) 169.

[81] Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, "The Truth About the Paterson Strike," address, New York Civic Club Forum, 31 January 1914, reprinted in *The Drama Review* 51 (Summer 1971): 70.

workers were given free admission.[82] Some accounts reveal that Village organizers held

an emergency meeting ten days before the event to announce the probability of financial

losses, but the union representatives and New York workers present insisted that

preparations continue.[83] It seems unlikely, however, that this decision filtered down to

the thousands of hungry Paterson strikers who had given up their children to continue

strike activities. Thus, while many believed that the pageant made a powerful statement

on behalf of American workers, the strikers who had invested in rehearsals and

preparations were left with little to show for their efforts. The stage had given them a

space to air grievances, but had not produced the revolution they had imagined.

The debate surrounding the success of the Pageant has, by extension, prompted

questions about the dedication of Villagers to the labor cause, or at least their ability to

follow through on the radical ideas generated by their discussions. Reed, Dodge, and

Jones's commitment to the outcome of the strike has been questioned based on their hasty

departure for Europe a week after the performance. Theatre historian Steve Wilmer notes

that when the organizers announced the financial loss to strikers "they were clearly

despondent and refused to join [Reed] in song. . . They were further disappointed when,

dressed in new clothes, he announced that he was departing the next day for a summer

vacation in Europe while they were left to carry on the strike with little food or other

provisions."[84] In accounts of Jones's career, certainly, this exit has allowed scholars to

claim his likely ambivalence toward the event's radical politics. Before he departed,

however, Jones related his enthusiasm about the performance in a letter to a friend: "The

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[82] Steve Golin, *The Fragile Bridge: Paterson Silk Strike 1913* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1988) 173.

[83] Ibid. 161

[84] Wilmer 122.

striker's pageant at Madison Square Garden was an enormous success—nothing like it has ever been done here . . . we all got much glory. A wonderfully worth while thing to do."[85] As a statement of political belief, it pales next to Reed's manifestos published in *The Masses*, but it still reveals Jones's dedication to the project, countering accusations that Reed and Dodge railroaded him into it. But ultimately, his artistry revealed his commitment more than his words. The Pageant staging, as well as the program/poster illustration, demonstrates Jones's deep understanding of the strikers' struggle—their oppressive working conditions, insistence on basic rights, and desire to build solidarity and a united working class front. Jones' gave the strikers and the IWW the tools of modern design as a way to take control of their public image and present their case against industry forces.

Histories that only interpret the Pageant's success in financial terms minimize its broader cultural impact. The performance failed to raise funds, but it did accomplish its original goal—getting the New York press to cover the Paterson conflict. Golin states: "On Sunday, June 8, hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers read about the key events of the strike in detail in their newspapers. On Monday, Haywood announced that the newspapers had been saying that the Paterson strike was broken, but now the Pageant had shown the people of New York the truth."[86] The presence of a thousand strikers on stage demanding recognition of their rights counteracted reports of their demoralization. But the artistic quality of the Pageant, particularly its use of the same modern aesthetics that had created such a stir at the Armory exhibition, ensured even further press exposure and

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[85] Robert Edmond Jones, undated letter in a series addressed to Florence Waters Wescott, bMS Thr 32, Harvard Theatre Collection, Harvard University (hereafter Harvard Collection).
[86] Golin 160.

an active public dialogue. Jones's modern design was an essential element to this publicity strategy, as well as major contribution to the striker's political message.

It is possible that Jones was ambivalent about the political motives behind the strike, and it is certain that he never contributed his artistic skills to another IWW event. Nevertheless, his Paterson involvement gives evidence of the role modern design played in early twentieth century labor politics. The visual language of modern design was used not only to engage abstract ideas but to promote concrete social agendas. Jones's visual dramaturgy provided inspiration for many reformers of the American theatre, including groups like the Provincetown Players that formed in the years immediately following the Pageant. Jones demonstrated the power of theatrical staging to construct alternative interpretations of the modern landscape; his visual interpretation of the Paterson mill showed audiences how industry forces oppressed working-class citizens. But the design also showed that, gone unchecked, these same forces can produce a rebellious and united worker's community. Through his staging which unified performers and spectators, Jones helped Pageant organizers form an even larger community of workers within Madison Square Garden, extending their influence past the stage and into the city itself.

Staging the Village Landscape

Jones left for Europe in June, 1913, traveling to Paris, Florence, and Berlin, returned in September, 1914 (after the outbreak of the war) with a resolve to apply the New Stagecraft to the American stage. Although his European trip functioned as a key moment in his artistic development, his New York homecoming did not constitute a break from the Village community, as some histories imply. His Village contacts, in fact,

had financially supported this trip; led by Dodge, they formed the "Robert E. Jones Development Company," a fund that kept him afloat while studying at Reinhart's theatre.[87] When he returned, Jones took up residence in Dodge's apartment, locating himself back in the center of the Village landscape. Young "Bobby" became "Robert" and began to demonstrate a new found focus and determination. Within a few months, Jones would find Broadway success with *Dumb Wife*, but he also became a more viable part of Village culture, motivated to take a leadership role in a series of theatrical endeavors and give back to those who had supported him spiritually and financially.

The Village of Jones's homecoming was larger and more vibrant than the one he left. 1915 was not just a good year in Jones' career, but a watershed year in American culture, a moment that encouraged the cross-fertilization of ideas among modern progressives determined to define "the New Politics, the New Woman, the New Psychology, the New Art, and the New Theatre."[88] While the war raged in Europe, New York emerged as a center of artistic production, rivaling Paris and other European capitals of art; the transatlantic exchanges that had begun when Americans visited the Continent now shifted as European modern artists came to New York.[89] Jones was on both ends of this cultural exchange, gaining New Stagecraft knowledge from European theatres but also helping develop New York's own vibrant cultural landscape.

Jones re-established his connections with the Liberal Club when he returned from Berlin, and soon after Albert Boni encouraged him to start a theatre in his bookstore. The

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[87] Luhan Dodge 214.
[88] Adele Heller and Lois Rudnick, eds., *1915, The Cultural Moment*: *The New Politics, the New Women, the New Psychology, the New Art & the New Theatre in America* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers UP, 1991) 1.
[89] Wanda Corn, *The Great American Thing: Modern Art and National Identity, 1915-1935* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1999) xvi.

Boni bookshop was a focal point for Village activities, a place appreciated for its wide

assortment of books, comfortable chairs, and warm fire.[90] During one gathering,

someone asked Jones if he thought a physical theatre structure was necessary to produce

a play; he responded by placing a small platform in the shop's backroom, thus

transforming the space into an intimate performance venue.[91] His setting for the first

production, Lord Dunsany's *The Glittering Gate* (1914), consisted of a simple curtained

backdrop and a collection of found objects.[92] Jones served as the first director for the

newly formed Washington Square Players, a group which brought together other

theatrically-inclined Liberal Club members and neighborhood artists interested in

producing American and European plays neglected by commercial stages. Like those

who had organized the Paterson Pageant, this group infused their theatrical work with the

Village's cultural politics. But rather than dedicate their energies towards a one-time

performance event, they created an ongoing production company.

Jones undoubtedly grew as an artist through his experiences with the Washington

Square Players. He learned to do more with less and discovered the aesthetic possibilities

of minimal staging, a lesson he applied throughout his career.[93] Jones's simple stages

and artful settings helped the community realize the potential of theatre as a modern

mode of conversation, even a fitting extension to their self-consciously dramatic lifestyle.

Thus, under his early leadership, theatre became an ongoing form of Village discourse.

Paired down to basic components and freed from the material excess of the commercial

theatre, Jones's stage gave the Villagers a means to fully embody their intellectual

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[90] Constance D'arcy MacKay, *The Little Theatre in the United States* (New York: Henry Holt, 1917) 27-28.
[91] Sarlos 12.
[92] Folpe 260.
[93] Feinsod, *The Simple Stage* 143.

dialogues and radical politics. Once the Washington Square Players moved to the

Bandbox Theatre on Fifty-Seventh Street in 1915, their audience quickly grew from a

band of insiders to include critics, socialites, and uptowners eager to comment on the

latest modern experiment, extending the Village discourse beyond the neighborhood's

geographical boundaries. The Washington Square Players soon became an example for

other Little Theatres producing experimental and non-commercial performance.

Heralded in publications like *Theatre Arts Magazine*, their productions continued to

stimulate a nationwide dialogue about their progressive ideals.

In addition to his developmental contributions to the Washington Square Players,

Jones played a significant role in the founding of the Provincetown Players. As one of

the earliest successful Little Theatres in America, the Provincetown Players gained

recognition for stimulating the growth of native playwrights and sustaining a non-

commercial model of theatre production. Theatre historians have documented Jones's

work with this producing organization more extensively than some of his other Village

activities; because both he and his collaborator, playwright Eugene O'Neill, became

leaders in their respective fields, these early summers in Massachusetts provide important

background information about their theatre training.

The small Cape Code village of Provincetown was the "official summer home" of

Greenwich Village bohemia; the town first gained a reputation as an art colony in 1899

when painter Charles Webster Hawthorne founded the Cape Cod School of Art.[94] During

the summer of 1915 when the company formed, Jones mixed with a variety of artists and

intellectuals, including old friends Reed and Dodge, labor journalist Mary Heaton Vorse,

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[94] Karen Christel Krahulik, *Provincetown: From Pilgrim Landing to Gay Resort* (New York: New York UP, 2005) 69.

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The Masses editors Floyd Dell and Max Eastman, painters Marsden Hartley, Charles

Demuth, and William Zorach, novelists Hutchins Hapgood, Neith Boyce, Susan Glaspell,

and her husband, George Cram "Jig" Cook. Jones stayed in a cottage with Reed,

Demuth, and Hartley;[95] Reed had recently returned from Mexico and was making a

name for himself nationally as war correspondent. Demuth and Hartley, like Jones, had

returned from Europe at the onset of the war. Both Jones and Demuth reportedly stood

out in Provincetown for their fanciful clothing.[96] All three men closeted their

homosexuality to some extent, but found the Village and Provincetown communities

more accepting of non-conventional behavior.

     Many of the Provincetowners were also members of the Liberal Club, and their

conversations on art and politics traveled with them from their haunts on Washington

Square to the dunes of the Cape. Theatre was at the forefront of their discussions that

summer. Jones wrote in a letter to a friend: "The town is mad over the experimental

theatre. We recently heard six one-acters read at one fell swoop. Nearly passed out.

And they will all have to be acted or their authors will know the reason why. Yes,

indeedy."[97] In his memoir, Hapgood notes that the group's theatrical experiments were

"a delightful change from the preoccupation of the War . . . and also from the

meaningless theatricalism of the Broadway theatres."[98] The Provincetown artists

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[95] Sarlos, 10. Jones also mentions these housing arrangements in an undated letter in a series addressed to Florence Waters Wescott, bMS Thr 32, Harvard Collection.
    Jones' acquaintance with Hartley brought him into contact with Alfred Stieglitz's circle of artists; Hartley had his first show at 291 in 1909. Abraham A. Davidson, *Early American Modernist Painting 1910-1935* (New York: Da Capo, 1994) 13. Demuth regularly associated with the Arensberg Circle, a group of artists who met at the salon organized by Walter Conrad Arensberg. The circle served as "the focal point of New York Dada," hosting émigré artists such as Marcel Duchamp and Francis Picabia (74).
[96] Murphy 53.
[97] Robert Edmond Jones, undated letter in a series addressed to Florence Waters Wescott, bMS Thr 32, Harvard Collection.
[98] Hutchins Hapgood, *A Victorian in the Modern World* (New York: Harcourt, 1939) 394.

envisioned a theatre that served a vital function to American culture, bringing citizens together and engaging them in social issues. Encouraged by Cook, a former classics professor, the group looked to ancient Greece for a historical model of community performance, a theatre that produced a drama expressive of their native experiences and public history. Their quest for a native drama led them to write and produce plays highlighting their distinct perspectives and interpretations of modern American culture. The first two plays they produced, *Constancy*, or *The Faithful Lover* by Neith Boyce and *Suppressed Desires* by Susan Glaspell, explored their own modern lives and interests; the first satirized the love affair between Reed and Dodge and the second the community's obsession with psychoanalysis. As Cheryl Black indicates, for the Provincetowners "the personal was always political, and individual regeneration was a prerequisite to social regeneration."[99] Their performances recontextualized the same intellectual dialogue in which they had engaged at various locations within Greenwich Village, opening it up first to their own scrutiny and, eventually, to that of public audiences.

The group gathered in Provincetown during 1915 looked not only to ancient performance, but also considered how politically-minded performances such as the Paterson Strike Pageant could stimulate "America's spiritual and social regeneration."[100] Jones had played a prominent role in the Pageant; indeed, most first-hand accounts of the performance specifically praised his innovative staging. From this experience, Jones gained further status within the community, evolving from newcomer artist to respected collaborator. His successful Paterson design gave him as much credibility as the

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[99] Black 2.
[100] Ibid. 2. Sarlos also mentions the Paterson Strike Pageant as one of the key cultural events in 1913, along with the Armory Show and the second American tour of the Irish Players (3).

knowledge he gained in Europe. The later connected him to the theory and aesthetics of modernism, but the former to the group's social politics.

Similar to his work at the Boni bookshop, Jones staged *Constancy* and *Suppressed Desires* with an imaginative approach to performance space that eliminated the need for conventional theatrical settings or even a designated stage. The often repeated legend of the Provincetown Players' first performance at the Boyce/Hapgood cottage has Jones making the scenery from sofa cushions; the story, though likely exaggerated, gestures towards the designer's efficient use of available materials.[101] Susan Glaspell remembers the designer's improvised methods: "Bobby Jones was there and helped us with the sets. He liked doing it, because we had no lighting equipment, but just put a candle here and a lamp there."[102] Jones helped the group transform the everyday into the theatrical. He did this not only with objects such as candles and lamps, but also by converting the domestic space of the Hapgood cottage into a place for performance. For Boyce's play, the audience sat facing the outside veranda and watched the performers with the ocean as their backdrop; then, the audience turned their chairs around to watch Glaspell's piece through a broad, interior doorway.[103] Rather than change settings between the one-acts, Jones altered the perspective of the audience and drew attention to the location itself rather than hiding it behind representational scenery.

The evening was so successful that the group converted a fish house on the wharf owed by Mary Heaton Vorse into a small theatre so they could perform for regular

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[101] Deutsch and Hanau, 7.
[102] Susan Glaspell, *Road to the Temple* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1927) 193. Also quoted in J. Ellen Gainor, *Susan Glaspell in Context: American Theatre, Culture, and Politics 1915-48* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2001) 22.
[103] Feinsod, *The Simple Stage*, 144. Deutsch and Hanau's Provincetown history indicates the same arrangement, but Sarlos reports that for Glaspell's play, the audience moved their chairs out onto the veranda to look back through the window into the living room (15).

audiences; they eventually brought their work to Greenwich Village, performing in a

small theatre on Macdougal Street. But this first performance of the Provincetown

Players at the Hapgood cottage occupies a special place in the company's cultural

memory, providing an appropriate beginning for a group devoted to a theatre of ideas and

irreverent of tradition. J. Ellen Gainor argues that the intimate staging exemplified their

"creative milieu" and desire to investigate "issues close to their lives and experience,

whether personal, political, artistic, or social. . . .They wrote and produced their work by

and for one another, first within their close circle and later for an expanded community of

like-minded individuals."[104] Jones's choice to accentuate details of the actual cottage

location suited Glaspell and Boyce's plays; just as they critiqued the community's own

experiences, Jones's staging critiqued the places they lived. With this first performance,

the Provincetowners revealed sensitivity to the places that brought them together as a

community. With Jones's help, their home not only became a theatre, but theatre became

their home. Even as they moved to different venues, their stage provided a material and

discursive space where Villagers could gather and exchange ideas.

While Jones helped found the Provincetown Players, his continued association

with the company was sporadic. With his high-profile *Dumb Wife* success, other

Broadway opportunities opened up for Jones, particularly with director Arthur Hopkins.

His absence gave work to other young designers in the Village, such as Lee Simonson

with the Washington Square Players and Cleon Throckmorton with the Provincetown

Players.[105] Others become associated with these companies while Jones continued to

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[104] Gainor, 23.

[105] Cheryl Black argues that Jones and Throckmortons's association with the Provincetown
Players obscures the work of many of the women designers in the company (113). Her chapter is one of
the few pieces of scholarship about women and design in the American theatre.

gain recognition in the commercial theatre, slowly distancing him from the activities of his Village associates. Thus, for later historians, the *Dumb Wife* design becomes the launching point of his professional career.

From a different chronological perspective, however, the performance serves as a culmination of Jones's early period of artistic discovery, a *result* of his experimental Village work rather than an origin of something new. Jones went to Broadway, but he brought the Village with him, putting the experimental New Stagecraft into practice within a commercial landscape. Jones's *Dumb Wife* design introduced the New Stagecraft to spectators who never had traveled to the theatre events around Washington Square. Like other Village artists who found a place for modern art in uptown galleries, Jones opened up a new marketplace for avant-garde cultural expressions. Viewed from the frame of Jones's bohemian associations, his *Dumb Wife* stage design reveals the same sensitivity to location and dedication to minimal staging as his experimentations at the Boni bookshop or Hapgood cottage. A reconsideration of the social context of the performance and reception it received from New York audiences broadens an understanding of the design; its modern aesthetics were more than merely innovative but underscored the play's satiric critique of modern consumer society.

The Man Who Married a Dumb Wife

Almost two years previous to his *Dumb Wife* commission, Jones's involvement with the Paterson Strike Pageant gave him the opportunity to bring modern design uptown to Madison Square Garden. But because the Pageant spectators were primarily working class laborers, *Dumb Wife* proved his first presentation of the New Stagecraft to

a mainstream Broadway audience. Jones's *Dumb Wife* design demonstrates the

distribution of the Village brand of modernism beyond the geographical heart of the

Village neighborhood; just as modern painters began displaying their work in uptown

galleries and modern writers submitting their poems for more conventional publications,

modern designers found a place on commercial stages. What was once radical turned

fashionable and, potentially, profitable, as American bohemia continued to expand.

During the same time Jones created theatre offering an experimental alternative to

Broadway, he also took advantage of a cultural market place that required the latest styles

and innovative offerings. Village artists who distinguished themselves through scorn for

the bourgeois conventions and the quest for material success now found commercial

profit and even celebrity by adapting their work to public audiences. Jones's *Dumb Wife*

design eventually launched him into a celebrity-like status; although he did not gain the

same level of recognition as other artists in his social circle, he became a prominent name

in American theatre. Similarly, *Dumb Wife* assumed such a high-profile status that

theatre history forgets everything else about the performance, even that it only served as

an opening act for the main event of the evening, the American premiere of George

Bernard Shaw's *Androcles and the Lion*. Jones's design was only one component of an

evening of performance showing New Yorkers that theatrical modernism did not have to

be a "bitter pill." The evening's bill offered them an elevated yet entertaining alternative

to currently Broadway offerings; adapted for the commercial stage, Jones's stage

modernism was non-confrontational, reaching out to a wide range of spectators.

Jones's commission to design *Dumb Wife* arose from his Village circle of

contacts; Emily Hapgood, sister in-law to Provincetowner Hutchins Hapgood, was the

president of the New York Stage Society and engaged the designer upon his return from Europe.[106] The Society almost cancelled the production when English director and Continental Stagecraft advocate Granville Barker accepted their invitation to join the season, but when Barker saw Jones's preliminary designs for *Dumb Wife*, he decided to include the piece as an opening for *Androcles and the Lion*.[107] Jones's artistry helped Barker reconsider the play as an innovative performance, worthy of his reputation as a modern innovator. For Jones, this affiliation with Barker only strengthened his entrenchment as the leader of the New Stagecraft movement.

On January 27th, 1915, Barker's bill of *Androcles* and *Dumb Wife* opened at Wallack's Theatre. Though Jones's designs motivated Barker's decision to include the *Dumb Wife*, the play also complemented the Shaw piece, creating an evening of theatre to spark the audience's sense of wonder and imagination. In an interview with the popular magazine *Theatre*, Barker outlined his belief that contemporary audiences needed an "education of [their] imaginative faculty. . . . No one is anything without imagination, and for those in whom this god-like quality lies dormant the stage is the best thing to wake it up."[108] Written in 1908 by Anatole France, a leading French political satirist, *Dumb Wife* is a farcical comedy set on a Medieval European street. Similar to *Androcles*, a fable of Christian martyrdom set in ancient Rome, the drama rejects the gritty details of stage realism to stage a fanciful portrayal of the past. Audience members familiar with France's socialist politics might have noted the contemporary relevance to the themes depicted in the play, but the modern aesthetics of Jones's design accentuated these

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[106] Larson writes that Jones was a regular guest at weekend gatherings at the Hapgood's out-of-town residence at Dobbs Ferry. *Scene Design in the American Theatre from 1915-1960*, 54.

[107] Ruth Gotthold, "New Scenic Art of the Theatre," *Theatre Magazine* 21 (May 1915): 248.

[108] "Granville Barker May Head the New Theatre Here," *Theatre Magazine* 21 (Feb. 1915): 63.

connections even further; his simplification of the medieval period elements into distinctive lines, geometric shapes, and swaths of pure color signaled the audience to experience the play not as historical reality but as a fable intended for their modern eyes.

Typical analyses of Jones's design itemize its formal elements—the unit setting in monochromatic shades of black, white, and gray that contrasted with the costumes in bold primary and secondary colors and the inventive stage-within-a-stage composition revealing the interior activities of residence as the same time as the street activities below. These critiques neglect the play itself, including how these design elements complemented its themes, characters, and plot points. The erasure of dramatic context is curious since New Stagecraft advocates fervently insisted that designers paid careful attention to dramatic texts so their staging did not eclipse its essential character. Most histories assume the play to be irrelevant, a light-hearted farce whose frivolous tone and subject matter fail to communicate the seriousness of New Stagecraft objectives.[109] But audiences who saw *Dumb Wife* as part of a double bill with *Androcles*, whose biting social critique could not be tamed even by the whimsy of a lion running about the stage, would have more likely recognized the cultural commentary of the piece. France's satiric look at medieval domestic and professional life offered a rich critique of modern capitalism and consumer culture. Audiences saw more than just simplified lines and primary colors on the Parisian street setting that Jones designed; they saw a landscape that ridiculed the pretensions of professionalism and corruption of capitalism, a parody implicating the consumer excesses of their own modern streets.

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[109] Gainor makes a similar argument in her study of Susan Glaspell, noting that that literary criticism has been "lightly dismissive" of the first offering of the Provincetown Players, Glaspell's *Suppressed Desires*, because it was a comic farce (21). The play's satiric investigation of the Greenwich Village fascination with psychology, however, informs the broader social context of the group.

Like much of France's writing during this same period, *The Man Who Married a Dumb Wife* (*La Comedie de celui qui espousa une femme muette*), explores the medieval literature of François Rabelais, a Franciscan monk writing during the French Renaissance; France originally wrote the play to serve as an entertainment for a meeting of the "Society of Rabelaisian Studies."[110] The story originates from Rabelais' description of a medieval performance he attended as a student, and was also used by Moliere in *Doctor by Compulsion*, also known as *The Doctor in Spite of Himself* or *The Mock Doctor*. In France's 1908 version, Parisian judge Leonard Botal marries his wife Catherine for her beauty and substantial dowry, not realizing until later that her inability to speak would be detrimental to his business; if she could speak, he speculates, she would provide him with more income, being able to secure the proper gifts from visiting lawyers seeking favorable rulings. One such visiting lawyer recommends a doctor who can cure Botel's wife; ensuing scenes with the doctor, surgeon, and apothecary satirize the corruptions of the medical profession, just as previous scenes ridicule the profession of law. When the doctor cures Catherine, her overflowing diatribes on ladies' fashions, neighborhood gossip, and household details drive her husband mad. Botal demands a cure from the cure and is told that the only feasible resolution is to make him deaf. Once "cured," Botal finds temporary bliss, only to be attacked by his wife, upset that he can no longer hear her. The play ends as the madness spreads from wife to husband and then to all the characters on stage who join in a final, nonsensical song and dance.

The play's comedy drew on the cliché of the loquacious wife. It is not *what* Catherine says the drives Botel mad, but merely her relentless flow of dialogue. Her

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[110] Curtis Hidden Page, "Introduction," *The Man Who Married a Dumb Wife* by Anatole France (New York: John Lane, 1915) 7.

monologues, however, contain important references to the consumer landscape in which they live. Catherine berates her husband for working so hard he makes himself sick. She informs him about the high cost of living and entertaining his professional colleagues, the rising prices of caterers, cake-shops, and grocers, and the fashion trends between the ladies in town verses the ladies at court. Finally, she mocks the middle-classes who dress above their station and the pretensions of lawyer's wives who equate their social status with the quality of bribe they can offer. Botal never responds directly to the content of Catherine's speech, only its outward vocal effect. It is ironic, therefore, that theatre historians forget the dramatic content of *Dumb Wife* and only remember the outward visual effect of Jones's design. A recovery of the dramatic content, particularly Catherine's capitalist critique, reveals the cultural commentary of Jones's design.

The majority of the action takes place in Botal's study and the street outside his residence. Jones's staging included an open window to Botal's study in the residence wall, creating a second proscenium through which audiences could view the domestic scenes between husband and wife [see fig. 2.3]. (Jones had established a similar perspective in Provincetown when spectators looked voyeuristically through the porch window to observe the couple in Glaspell's play.) Outside Botal's study, the residential street contained the comings and goings of vendors selling birdseed, watercress, candles, and other household products. Jones's arrangement revealed the interconnectedness between domestic and commercial space within this early service-oriented, consumer landscape;[111] the movement between spaces is constant as Catherine buys household items from street vendors and Botal engages in business negotiations in his study.

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[111] Don Slater writes that the "core institutions, infrastructures and practices of consumer culture originated in the early modern period." *Consumer Culture and Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 1997) 9.

Jones acknowledged the medieval time period, but through simplified shapes and contours rather than explicit details. He exaggerated the costumes with bold lines and colors, giving each character a comical hat and garment accentuating the excesses of their personality [see fig. 2.4]. The bright colors created a decorative effect against the monochromatic scenery, drawing attention to the performers and their activities. Similar to modern paintings Jones had encountered through his Harvard studies, European travels, and Village associations, the set created a simple, black and white, asymmetrical composition of squares and rectangles: a white background with black lines around the tall door with transom, a small double-paned window, and the large study opening. The color scheme was comparable, in fact, to the Paterson Strike Pageant design, which also used a monochromatic backdrop with flashes of primary color to accentuate the drama. Although the social politics of *Dumb Wife* were more subdued than the Pageant's activist intent, the modern aesthetic still communicated a break from tradition and conveyed France's socialism more effectively than could have the details of stage realism. Stripped of its literalness and specific historical detail, the fanciful setting encouraged audiences to see Botal's story as modern fable. Indeed, the comedy of the play depended on the audience identifying the similarity between Catherine's diatribes about the fashion trends and consumer excesses of housewives and their contemporary equivalent.

The modern aesthetics of the *Dumb Wife* design contained a residue of Jones's previous (and continuing) associations with the "movers and shakers" of Greenwich Village. The production's satire of consumer culture differed from the activist politics of a performance like the Paterson Strike Pageant, softening the previous radical character of modern design into a something more fashionable. Its primary activism was geared

toward the development of elevated entertainment, an alternative to current Broadway offerings. Just as Jones's Village theatre experimentations showed Little Theatres how to create quality artistic expressions out of minimal resources, the *Dumb Wife* design demonstrated how they could use the same approach to produce a popular success. The New Stagecraft was not just about making the most of limited resources, but making the most out of dramatic texts through an artful approach. Critics noted: "the plays are neither pretentious or precious. They are simply good fun, well done. Mr. Barker is welcome to New York."[112] After the underwhelming public response to the Stage Society's previous "art theatre" experimentations, *Androcles* and *Dumb Wife* proved that an elevated performance offering did not have to sacrifice entertainment value.

Positioned as the culmination to Jones's early career rather than the beginning, the *Dumb Wife* exemplifies the changes occurring within Greenwich Village bohemia. Jones expanded the Village landscape when he relocated modern staging practices to Broadway, translating the ideas of the avant-garde for a popular audience. While some would criticize this type of commercial art as a watered down or distorted representation of their political activism, others sympathetic to the desire to professionalize believed building a public audience for modern theatre was its own sort of activism. If they were to build a national art theatre that made a significant contribution to American civic life, Jones reasoned, they must reach the public by using the "idiom[s] of their own time."[113]

Jones was far from alone in his professional aspirations; during this same time (1915-1916), many artists profited from the increasing popularity and marketability of modern art. Greenwich Village began to change as well, particularly as more newcomers

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[112] "Barker's Season Happily Launched," *New York Times*, 28 January 1915, sec. 9:3.
[113] Jones, "Lecture 1," MS 51, Harvard Collection. The opening quotation for this chapter came from the same lecture, undated.

migrated to the neighborhood, some to join the bohemians and others to "gawk at them" or to "profit from marketing bohemianism to tourists and pretenders." It was this period of "faux bohemia," McFarland writes, "that solidified the Village's popular reputation as a playground for unconventional spirits."[114] Thus, just as Jones's appearance in the Village coincided with a phase of artistic intensity that gave bohemian New York a geographical center, his shift toward professionalism happened at the moment when the market was "eager for cultural products bearing bohemia's imprint."[115] Years later, Jones commented on this phenomenon and his regret that the New Stagecraft, which he had hoped would provide the foundation for a national art theatre, had been only a trend: "the movement is over and done and one reason why it is over and done now is that in some way stage designing became fashionable. Everybody began to talk about stage designs and about the man who made them instead of saying how good the plays were and how well they were acted."[116] Jones seemed to acknowledge his role in the movement's demise; in their rush to publicize the New Stagecraft, critic friends Moderwell and Macgowan had made *him* the story instead of the performance. Jones became a celebrity designer, the youth who made a smash success on his first Broadway production, and the *Dumb Wife*, regrettably, became an image with no content other than its formal elements.

Jones worked as professional theatre artist until the early 1950s, gaining both critical and commercial success not only on the Broadway stage but also designing operas in Chicago and Philadelphia and directing for smaller theatre organizations such

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[114] McFarland 191.
[115] Stansell 18.
[116] Jones, miscellaneous notes, MS Thr 201.12, Folder 35, Harvard Collection. These notes are not dated, but many of the lecture manuscripts in related folders are dated between 1949 and 1952.

as the Experimental Theatre Company. When others from his generation, such as

Norman Bel Geddes, left the theatre for industrial design, film, and television, Jones

remained dedicated to the theatre practices that he had learned within the Village

community. He also increasingly communicated his vision of a modern American theatre

in a series of public lectures and published articles. In 1940, Jones traveled the country

on a lecture circuit, speaking to students at a number of colleges and universities about

his professional experiences and, more significantly, his projections for a future theatre

that captured the modern spirit of the nation.[117] Now a revered statesman of the

American stage, Jones infused his comments with musings on the current state of theatre

and advice to a young generation of artists.   Just as Percy MacKaye had once encouraged

him with ideas of civic theatre, Jones urged his student audiences to create a "new and

vital form of theatrical expression" that connected with contemporary spectators.[118]

These lectures, many of which Jones compiled in *The Dramatic Imagination*

(1941), revealed the designer's continued allegiance to a theatre that addressed modern

audiences through modern idioms. To "*be aware of the Now*," Jones wrote, should be the

primary aim of all theatre artists.[119] He encouraged students to continue the work that his

contemporaries initiated: building a theatre that left behind past conventions to embody

the spirit of modern living. Americans, Jones insisted, needed a theatre that captured the

vitality of the world around them, what he referred to as the "dramatic imagination": "We

must learn to feel the drive and beat of the dramatic imagination in its home. We must

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[117] Ralph Pendleton, ed. *The Theatre of Robert Edmond Jones* (Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 1958) 178. Jones's lectures now reside at the Harvard Collection.
[118] Jones, "Lecture #2," MS Thr 201.12, Folder 33, Harvard Collection.
[119] Jones, *The Dramatic Imagination* (New York: Theatre Arts, 1941) 40.

take the little gift we have into the hall of the gods."[120] What the modern theatre needed most were young artists intuitive enough to sense the modern spirit driving American culture and capture this spirit in their artistry.

Jones's *The Dramatic Imagination* is now standard reading material for novice stage designers, offering wisdom, inspiration, and a philosophy of theatre art for application to contemporary work. But just as his designs are regularly taken out of context to study their aesthetic components, his writing often stands above its historical moment, treated by many as a universal approach to theatrical design. Jones's philosophies, however, grew out of Greenwich Village bohemia, and as such are evidence of the artistic and activist idealism of that community. Long before he committed these thoughts to writing, he practiced them in the backroom of the Boni bookstore, on the Hapgood porch in Provincetown, in Madison Square Garden, and on the well-worn stages of Broadway. Jones's designs characterized the underlying rhythms of modern life, giving expression to landscapes more sensed than seen. For Jones, the "dramatic imagination" was more than just the belief that spectators could see more beauty in their mind's eye than they could see on the literal stage. It was the invention of a visual language that captured the essence of modern life, applied within the American theatre but with repercussions well beyond the physical stage.

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[120] Ibid. 91.
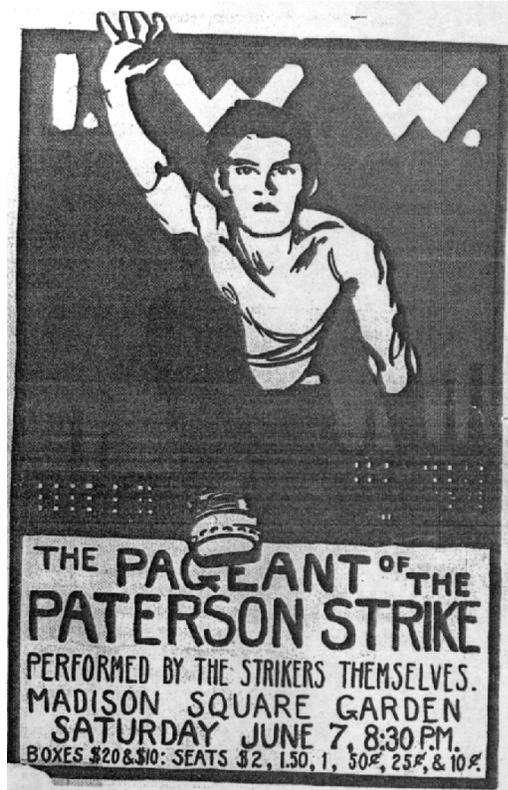
Figure 2.1: Jones's illustration for the I.W.W. pageant poster (1913). (Tamiment Library, New York University)

Figure 2.2: Photograph of the Paterson Strike Pageant. (*International Socialist Review*, July 1913)
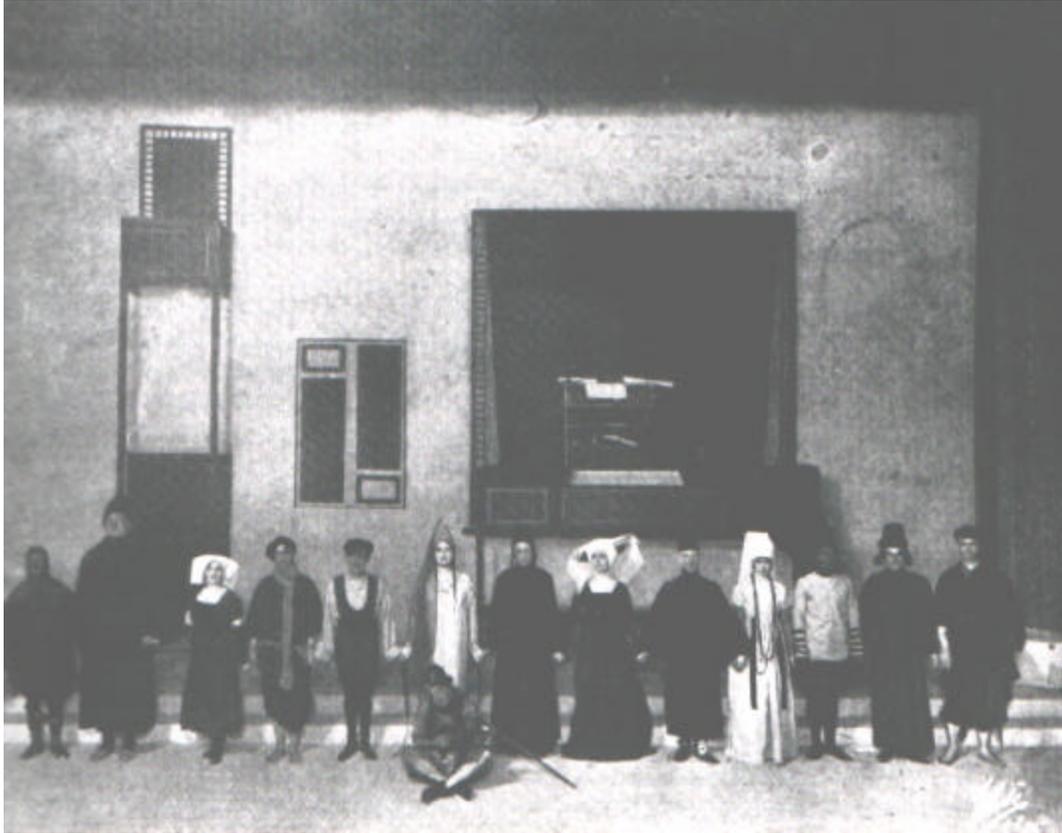
Figure 2.3: Jones's setting for *The Man Who Married a Dumb Wife* (1915).

Figure 2.4: Jones's costumes for *The Man Who Married a Dumb Wife.* (*Theatre Magazine*, March 1915. Photo by White)

Chapter Three:
Dramatizing the Future: Norman Bel Geddes and the Industrialization of American Modern Design

"My stomach tightened and my heart beat as we prepared for the exhibit. We ran and took seats, each of us in a chair with high sides and loudspeakers built into them, they faced the same direction and were on a track. The lights went down. Music played and the chairs lurched and began to move sideways. In front of us the whole world lit up . . . the most fantastic sight I have ever seen, an entire city of the future. . . ."

E. L. Doctorow, *World's Fair*

In the final chapters of his novel *World's Fair*, E. L. Doctorow chronicles nine-year old Edgar's visit to the New York World's Fair (1939-1940), marking the experience as the pinnacle event in his young life.[1] For Edgar, a Jewish boy growing up in New York City during the 1930s, the fair's futuristic setting was a fantasy world completely unlike the reality of his Bronx neighborhood. Doctorow's detailed descriptions convey Edgar's amazement over the vast scale and vibrancy of the fair's whimsical dreamscape, especially his ride on the *Futurama* attraction. Sponsored by the automotive company General Motors (GM) and created by the theatre and industrial designer Norman Bel Geddes, *Futurama* took fairgoers on a simulated journey through a future American landscape dominated by a streamlined, super-highway system. Fairgoers were enthralled by the innovative format that placed them in individual vehicles, moved them through the exhibit on a conveyor system, and provided coordinated audio commentary.[2] Unlike other exhibits that merely showed them the future, *Futurama* created a real-time sensory experience that allowed them to *feel* what it

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[1] E. L. Doctorow, *World's Fair* (New York: Random House, 1985). The author's full name is Edgar Lawrence Doctorow (1931-), and it is generally acknowledged that Edgar's childhood memories of the fair are Doctorow's own. *World's Fair* won the 1986 National Book Award.

[2] Although amusement parks had fun house "dark rides," *Futurama* was the first information-oriented exhibit to use this type of design. Bel Geddes updated the technology, coordinating audio tracks and engineering ride vehicles to rotate and focus the spectator's attention. Christopher Innes, *Designing Modern America: Broadway to Main Street* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2005) 141.

would be like to live in a world dedicated to automotive travel. Its emphasis on visual stimulation and movement increased fairgoers' emotional engagement, communicating the exhilaration of highway travel and, by extension, automobile ownership.

Reading Doctorow's description of *Futurama*, I was reminded of experiences from my own childhood when my parents took me to Epcot, the newest theme park at Walt Disney World.[3] As opposed to Edgar's quick subway journey from Bronx to Queens to attend the World's Fair, my trip to Epcot included a long drive from the mountains of east Tennessee to Orlando, Florida. After stretches of nondescript interstate highway, the colorful theme park was a visual feast. What I remember most vividly is the blissful feeling of complete immersion in a fantasy world. Disney "Imagineers" (their term for designers) had planned not only every visual detail, but also special conveyance systems to facilitate my movement through each attraction—ride vehicles glided at an easy pace, seats automatically turned to focus my attention, and music emanated from headrests, providing the perfect accompaniment for the journey. It was a meticulously precise world of visual, auditory, and sensory stimulation, producing feelings of excitement that were the direct antithesis of my hours of boredom on the highway.

In retrospect, I realize the irony of my response to these seemingly opposite environments. Physically, my body was seated in the same position and subjected to the same sensations in both the highway "reality" and theme park "fantasy." Designers had shaped both environments, yet the Epcot attractions captured my full attention, producing intense emotions by focusing my visual scope and applying a narrative framework to

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[3] The Imagineers, *The Imagineering Field Guild to Epcot at Walt Disney World: An Imagineer's-Eye Tour* (New York: Disney Enterprises, 2006) 30. Epcot was first advertised as a "permanent World's Fair" offering "Future World" exhibitions and a "World Showcase" of international pavilions. The acronym "EPCOT" stands for "Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow," based on Walt Disney's plans for a future community development project in central Florida.

what I saw. The tedium of highway travel paled by comparison. Similarly, Edgar's excitement over *Futurama* contrasted with the mundane activities of his everyday life, including his subway ride to the fair. However, the difference between our experiences is crucial. For fairgoers in 1939, the concept of near universal car ownership and multi-lane interstate highways stretching across the nation was still a fantasy, allowing corporations like GM to advertise the experience as an exhilarating, liberating embodiment of future progress. But by the time I made my journey in the mid-1980s, this future was a reality, ordinary rather than exhilarating, at times efficient but far from libratory; the spread of automobile culture had transformed the national landscape, a condition that benefited GM as much or more than everyday Americans.

Futurama, in fact, was more than just an entertaining attraction, but part of a nuanced public relations campaign launched by GM during the late 1930s. Bel Geddes was the first to use modern theatrical design to dramatize the products of modern industry; automobiles, not actors, were the stars of *Futurama*. With the attraction, he showed GM how to move beyond a public message of "buy our product" to "share our future," showing Americans a utopic landscape built through free enterprise, bestowing comfort, security, and efficiency to those willing to purchase GM products.[4] Audiences responded so enthusiastically to *Futurama* that it became the most widely attended attraction of the New York World's Fair. Since then, it has dominated the fair's history, serving as an iconic example of how corporations used theatrical exhibitions to confront Depression-era antagonisms and convince Americans of their commitment to the nation's social wellbeing. *Futurama*'s success, in fact, prompted other industry executives to use

[4] "Sound Chair Script" from "Highways and Horizons" proposal, 3 April 1939, Job 381, Box 019b, Folder 381.19, Norman Bel Geddes Collection (hereafter Bel Geddes Papers), Theatre Arts Collection, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin.

Bel Geddes's design techniques to develop more nuanced public relations strategies. Bel Geddes's influence lives on in places like Epcot that continue to construct benevolent identities for various American corporations, as well as other themed environments—shopping malls, airports, restaurants, and hotels—that create entertaining visual narratives to attract consumers. Thus, his design career stands at a crucial intersection of the histories of American modernism and modernity, revealing the ways in which corporate leaders and designers collaborated to persuade Americans to embrace the modern consumer marketplace and their role as active consumers.

This chapter examines a selection of designs from the prolific career of Norman Bel Geddes, starting in 1921 with *The Divine Comedy* and ending in 1939 with *Futurama*, his pinnacle public success. During this period, he established his reputation as an innovator in both theatre and industry, not only as an early proponent of the New Stagecraft but also a leader in the nascent field of industrial design. By analyzing designs that bridge both his professional disciplines, I trace the crossing paths of influence within Bel Geddes's career, intentionally blurring lines between design for entertainment and design for everyday living. His belief that modern artists should promote social as well as aesthetic ideals led him to create scenic designs that expanded the cultural relevance of modernism in the American theatre and industry designs that used theatrical techniques to dramatize the experience of American modernity. The designs included for analysis, therefore, demonstrate Bel Geddes's dedication to modern design as a transformative force in American culture, helping citizens adapt to modern landscapes and adopt modern lifestyles. Throughout, I demonstrate how Bel Geddes's application of the New

Stagecraft techniques to develop and promote industry products reveals the forces of mass production and mass consumption that shaped early twentieth century America.

Beginning with his work on *The Divine Comedy* (1921) and *The Miracle* (1924), I situate Bel Geddes within the New Stagecraft and theatre reform movement, exploring how his expansion of New Stagecraft theory from the stage to the entire performance space helped him understand the potential advantages of modern design to everyday living. His early success in the theatre, in fact, led to his first industry commissions. In the following section, I examine Bel Geddes's redesign of New York City's Franklin Simon's department store windows (1927) and his designs for streamlined consumer products during the 1930s such as all-white kitchen stoves and sleek, aerodynamic automobiles. The overwhelming popularity of these displays and products among customers signaled not only a new level of public acceptance of the aesthetics of modern art but also the increased influence of designers within America's consumer landscapes.

With his participation in the 1939-1940 New York World's Fair, Bel Geddes took full advantage of his combined skills from theatre and industry; his *Futurama* design, therefore, serves as the final and primary case study for this chapter. With *Futurama*,[5] he reached his largest audience, taking the modern aesthetics of the New Stagecraft to a new level of public visibility and creating a new breed of design-centered, commercial entertainment. With both its depiction of a future American landscape and innovative format that challenged conventional spectatorship, Bel Geddes's performance captured the spirit of modernity as much, or even more, than the simplified stage designs of his New Stagecraft colleagues. I argue that Bel Geddes's attraction did not just envision the

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[5] The inconsistency with which the design is punctuated (*Futurama*, the "futurama", Futurama) points to uncertainty among historians about its categorization. I use italics to indicate *Futurama* as a title of a performance, placing it in a similar category as other modern dramas of the period.

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growth of a national super-highway system, but raised awareness around highway expansion, creating an atmosphere of public acceptance for the massive government-funded/corporate-sanctioned infrastructure projects that followed World War II. *Futurama*, therefore, provides a significant example of the material impact of theatrical design within the changing landscapes and geographies of American modernity.

Norman Bel Geddes's Alternate Trajectory for New Stagecraft Design

While Bel Geddes embraced the same theories and aesthetics of stage modernism, his design career differs significantly from the New Stagecraft ideal that critics such as Hiram Kelly Moderwell and Kenneth Macgowan framed around Robert Edmond Jones's career. A self-taught Midwesterner, Bel Geddes lacked a Harvard pedigree and East coast connections. He also seemingly lacked Jones's sense of practicality for applying modern design; while *The Divine Comedy* and *The Miracle* played a major role in establishing his New Stagecraft credentials, they also gained him a reputation as a visionary who could imagine only in large-scale spectacle.[6] But it was Bel Geddes's professional shift to industrial design during the late 1920s that distanced him from the New Stagecraft in the eyes of his theatre colleagues and critics who saw his move as a betrayal of the founding ideals of a movement championing artistry free from market forces. Although many progressives embraced Jones's Broadway designs as an attempt to reform the commercial theatre, fewer showed enthusiasm for Bel Geddes's efforts to enhance the aesthetic value of everyday commercial products. Politically, Jones's early

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[6] Fredrick J. Hunter notes: "It was charged by some at that time, that he turned to industrial design because he had been unable to turn out successful as well as practical designs for the theatre." *Catalog of the Norman Bel Geddes Theatre Collection: Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1973) 10.

connections to labor activists could be rationalized or concealed, but Bel Geddes's open

partnership with corporate executives indicated an inexcusable alliance with conservative

forces that opposed the non-conventional viewpoints of modern artists.[7]

A few progressive critics such as Sheldon Cheney, however, recognized Bel

Geddes's industry work as an extension of the principles of modernism guiding artistic

movement like the New Stagecraft. A long-time supporter of Bel Geddes, Cheney

argued that the advent of industrial design marked an important stage in the "evolution"

of art in the age of mechanization and mass production.[8] Modern designers had begun to

create simple, beautiful, and efficient products, eliminating the surface decoration of past

product designs to uncover the simple, basic forms suggested by the function of products.

When Bel Geddes published *Horizons* in 1932, establishing him as one of the foremost

American industrial designers,[9] he argued that his career shift was a "natural evolution,"

a continuation of his exploration of modernism and an extension of his desire to express

the sensibilities of the modern era in every facet of American culture.[10] By joining

industry forces, he wanted to apply modern design to the practices of everyday

Americans, helping them adjust to changes awaiting them in the twentieth century.

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[7] Innes argues that Bel Geddes, in fact, leaned to the political left and was a committed pacifist and environmentalist (24).

[8] Sheldon Cheney and Martha Candler Cheney, *Art and the Machine* (New York: Wittlesey House, 1936) vii-viii. Martha Candler, Cheney's second wife, was also an art critic. Their book specifically concentrates on American industrial design, although it acknowledges that similar artistry was prevalent in Europe. The "form follows function" design philosophy they explore echoes the theories of German Bauhaus designers. Operating from 1919 to 1933, the Bauhaus school combined a mix of socialist politics, avant-garde artistry, and modern design principles. The school was later closed by the Nazi government, and many artists such as Laszlo Moholy-Nagy and Mies van der Rohe emigrated to the United States, locating in Chicago at the Illinois Institute of Technology. There is no specific evidence connecting Bel Geddes's industrial work to Bauhaus design theory or its artists.

[9] Norman Bel Geddes, *Horizons* (Boston: Little Brown, 1932). *Horizons* was widely distributed and helped popularize the concepts of "streamlining" during the 1930s. Tony Fry notes that the term "streamlining" entered the English language just prior to World War I. *A New Design Philosophy: An Introduction to Defuturing* (Sydney: U of South Wales P, 1999) 112.

[10] Bel Geddes, *Horizons* 6.

Bel Geddes's divergent career path, thus, provides an alternate trajectory of the New Stagecraft beyond the theatrical stage. While Jones advocated design that brought the "dramatic imagination," or the spirit of modernity, into the theatre, Bel Geddes saw design as a means to make the modern world more dramatic. His primary success in industry, in fact, came from his ability to imbue commercial products and consumer environments with theatricality and dramatic narratives. For Bel Geddes, the "dramatic imagination" was a theatrical language that, when applied to industry endeavors, could convey the excitement of this new era of modernity to the American public. *Futurama*, for example, was not just a demonstration of a super-highway system; it was a design-centered performance about a prosperous American future shaped by capitalist enterprise. It transformed spectators' understanding of automobiles; they were more than just products, but the means for their entry into a modern American lifestyle. Recognizing the public relations value of this approach, corporations increasingly employed designers to help them dramatize their message of modern progress to consumers, a process that continues in today's commercial landscapes and entertainment destinations like Epcot.

But despite the broad cultural influence of Bel Geddes's designs and his celebrity status among contemporaries, his work is relatively unknown today. His name garners some interest at on-line auction sites like Ebay for collectors hoping to purchase his streamlined products. Popular accounts of the New York World's Fair constantly reference *Futurama*, but Bel Geddes no longer has the same name-recognition as artists such as Walt Disney who manufactured the same type of design-centered entertainment for theme parks. Within the theatre, Bel Geddes's innovative techniques, particularly in

stage lighting, are still practiced by current designers and technicians, but few are aware of the history linking their work back to his early experiments.[11]

Even within theatre history, scholars are hesitant to quantify Bel Geddes's influence. While he is regularly listed among prominent New Stagecraft artists, others such as Jones and Mielziner receive more critical attention. Because he shifted his professional emphasis toward industrial design, some argue that his impact was "negligible."[12] Furthermore, Bel Geddes's theatrical work often defies New Stagecraft categorization; his designs fluctuated from stark abstraction, seen in productions such as *Hamlet* (1931), to Belasco-esque realism, exemplified by his faithful reproduction of the New York City waterfront in *Dead End* (1935). He also failed to adopt the same self-effacing attitude of other New Stagecraft colleagues; many believed he was too egotistical to play a supportive role to the dramatic text and that his designs drew too much attention to themselves, overpowering other production elements.[13]

Undeniably, Bel Geddes was not content to stand in the background, as evidenced by a series of spectacular projects/events that maximized his public exposure during the 1920s and thirties. He used talents as a master showman and self-promoter to create a bridge between his work for theatre and industry, arguing that designers should not play a supportive role in either field but rather set a course for others to follow. As modern artists, designers not only had the ability to work with the materials of their own time to

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[11] See George E. Bogusch's article, "Norman Bel Geddes and the Art of Modern Theatrical Lighting," *Educational Theatre Journal* 24 (1972): 415-29.

[12] Orville Larson, *Scene Design in the American Theatre from 1915 to 1960*, (Fayetteville: U of Arkansas P, 1989) 178. Larson argues that Bel Geddes lacked continuity, produced a comparatively few theatre designs, and failed to leave behind any significant philosophical writings.

[13] In a 1978 lecture given by Milla Davenport, a colleague of Jones's, she notes, "Bel Geddes with crass and vulgar vanity knocked everything else out as he overwhelmed with beauty. He was splendid with big pageants in large spaces, but God help a modest little play sunk by that show-off." "Robert Edmond Jones and Friends," *Theatre Design and Technology* 14 (Winter 1978): 14.

express the sensibilities of their contemporaries but also an obligation to raise the

standard of everyday life. In *Horizons*, he outlined designers' various responsibilities and

design's potential as a positive cultural force:

> "Design in social structure to insure the organization of people, work,
> wealth, leisure. Design in machines that shall improve working conditions
> by eliminating drudgery. Design in all objects of daily use that shall make
> them economical, durable, convenient, congenial to every one. Design in
> the arts, painting, sculpture, music, literature, and architecture that shall
> inspire the new era."[14]

Bel Geddes's inclusive definition of design intersects previous divisions between artistry

(modernism) and industry (modernity), challenging the assumption that modern artists

must necessarily work autonomous from market forces. Rather than isolate themselves

from dominant society, he argued, they needed to assert themselves as public leaders with

a commitment to civic endeavors. To affect systematic change, modern artists had to

expand their social involvement beyond political activism of groups like the Greenwich

Villagers, and build strategic collaborations with corporations.

Bel Geddes's arguments for the industrial applications of modern art demonstrate

ideologies of rationalization that justified the co-option of various resources, including

artists, in the name of modern progress. Theorists like Max Weber (1864-1920)

identified corporate bureaucracies as a pervasive force, alongside nationalism, religion,

and the military, that would increasingly infiltrate the lives of modern citizens.[15]

American corporations during the early twentieth century rationalized their business

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[14] Bel Geddes, *Horizons* 4-5.
[15] See Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 3rd Roxbury ed., trans. Stephen Kalberg (1904-1905; Los Angeles: Roxbury, 2002).

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practices through an ideology of technological progress, attempting to convince the

public that the changes occurring around them would lead to a better national future.

Design was part of their strategy: "those with power and influence realized that they had

to domesticate the disruptive experience of modernity. They had to persuade ambivalent

populations that new modes of living retained or promoted traditional values."[16]

Collaborating with artists like Bel Geddes, industry developed products that encouraged

Americans to embrace processes of modernization; through the purchase of streamlined

appliances, furniture, and automobiles, they could begin to identify as modern citizens.

Bel Geddes internalized this same corporate ideology in *Horizons*, insisting that the

corporate alliances he created was not "selling out" but following the path forward

toward the "horizon" of a new era of American progress and renaissance of national arts.

Because Bel Geddes refused to acknowledge boundaries between theatre and

industry, charting a new course for modern design, his career has been chronicled

differently than other designers. Both theatre scholars and design historians have tended

to document Bel Geddes's work in articles and book chapters that examine specific

designs or narrow periods of his career.   Christopher Innes's *Designing Modern

America: Broadway to Main Street* (2005) breaks this trend, exploring a broad spectrum

of Bel Geddes's designs and uncovering some of the historical circumstances that

brought together theatre artists and industry executives during the early twentieth century.

Innes argues that because American design emerged "out of the popular entertainment

world of theater, rather than from the rarefied atmosphere of ateliers and art galleries," it

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[16] Jeffrey L. Meikle, "Domesticating Modernity: Ambivalence and Appropriation, 1920-40," *Designing Modernity: The Arts of Reform and Persuasion 1885-1945*, ed. Wendy Kaplan (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1995) 143.

had more popular appeal than high-end European Art Deco or Bauhaus-inspired design.[17]

His emphasis on the theatre as a realm of popular entertainment, however, minimizes the

serious artistic agendas of a reform movement like the New Stagecraft.

As a pioneer of the field, Bel Geddes's career is also well documented in histories

of industrial design. Design historian Jeffrey Meikle has documented his influence, in

addition to other designers like Walter Dorwin Teague and Raymond Loewy, in

Twentieth Century Limited (1979) and a series of articles that followed. Meikle writes:

"By popularizing streamlining when only a few engineers were considering its functional

use, [Bel Geddes] made possible the design style of the thirties. His career has more

immediate professional and cultural impact than those more practical colleagues."[18]

Design scholarship, in fact, regularly refers to *Futurama* to exemplify his broad cultural

influence, and histories of the New York World's Fair consistently include details of the

design. But Bel Geddes's theatrical background and skills in building performance also

set him apart from other colleagues and business leaders who were wary of this "P. T.

Barnum" of industrial design.[19] His tendency to build in large scales and create futuristic

designs that completely disregarded established conventions fostered the impression of

Bel Geddes as a visionary who appealed more to the public's imagination than to

practical considerations of industry executives.

His application of theatrical techniques to industry design, however, was different

from P.T. Barnum's flashy spectacle and hokum; significantly, Bel Geddes used the

principles he studied as a New Stagecraft artist. Although many theatre professionals

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[17] Innes 13.

[18] Jeffrey L. Meikle, *Twentieth Century Limited: Industrial Design in America, 1925-1939*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2001) 48.

[19] Ibid. 48.

preceded his foray into the commercial sector, using their talents to illustrate posters or construct glitzy show windows, Bel Geddes's designs were the first to apply the theories and aesthetics of modernism. His popular success reveals shifting public perceptions of modern art during the 1920s and 1930s; these designs were no longer the experiments of bohemians living in Greenwich Village, but the fashionable products of respectable artists sensitive to the rhythms of modern living. Bel Geddes took a previously elitist style of art, made it a symbol of modern American progress, and then brought it into Americans' homes, their places of work, and the streets they traversed in between. He achieved this through the skillful dramatization of industry endeavors, producing narrative-driven designs that told a triumphant story of American modernity. Even as he sought new work in industry, Bel Geddes held on to his New Stagecraft roots, leaving the imprint of this artistic movement on the everyday landscapes of American modernity.

Challenging the New Stagecraft: *The Divine Comedy* and *The Miracle*

Born Norman Melancton Geddes in 1893 in Adrian, Michigan, Bel Geddes was a rebellious youth from an upper-middle class background with an intermittent arts education. Although he spent time at both the Cleveland Institute of Art and the Art Institute of Chicago, biographers largely describe him as "self-taught" or as a "self-made man,"[20] emphasizing his individuality. Bel Geddes began his professional career designing posters for a Detroit advertising firm in 1914. Through this work, he met Aline Barnsdall, an arts patron and advocate of the Little Theatre movement who persuaded

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[20] Hunter, *Catalog* 1-3.

him to follow her to Los Angeles to establish an experimental theatre.[21] Before moving,

he married his first wife, Belle Schneider; together they published a private magazine, *IN

WHICH* (1915), under the cosign Norman-Bel Geddes. After their divorce in the mid-

1920s, he kept the name as his professional moniker, dropping the hyphen.[22]

Bel Geddes arrived in Los Angeles in 1916 and applied New Stagecraft design to

Barnsdall's productions. His early work was contemporaneous with Jones's beginning

Broadway success, and in the summer of 1918 the two designers worked together at a

Milwaukee theatre.[23] Bel Geddes moved to New York City the same year, leaving Los

Angeles after Barnsdall's theatre failed to materialize.[24] Within two years, he secured a

number of commissions, working for the Chicago Opera Association, the Metropolitan

Opera Company, and designing the Broadway musical comedy *Erminie* (1920). His

designs garnered the attention of Cheney, then editor of *Theatre Arts Magazine*, who

included an article about Bel Geddes in the May 1919 edition.[25] The designer quickly

established himself as an up-and-comer in the New Stagecraft movement.

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[21] Through Aline Barnsdall, Bel Geddes came into contact with many leaders in the modern arts, including Frank Lloyd Wright and Ruth St. Dennis. Barnsdall also associated with artists and activists in the Greenwich Village circle, such as Emma Goldman, Margaret Sanger, and Margaret Anderson. *Miracle in the Evening: An Autobiography*, ed. William Kelley (New York: Doubleday, 1960) 174. Bel Geddes's autobiography was published posthumously after his death in 1958. It only covers his career up to 1925.

[22] Jennifer Davis Roberts, *Norman Bel Geddes: An Exhibition of Theatrical and Industrial Designs*, Exhibition catalog (Michener Galleries, Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin, 10 June-22 July 1979) 7.   Some scholars shorten his name to "Geddes," but the majority use "Bel Geddes." I prefer the later because it reinforces Belle's significant influence on Bel Geddes's career.

Norman and Belle's daughter, Barbara Bel Geddes, gained fame as a film, television, and Broadway actress, particularly for roles such as Maggie in Tennessee Williams's *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* and Miss Ellie on the television program *Dallas.*

[23] Bogusch argues that Jones and Bel Geddes's association in Milwaukee was mutually beneficial, with Jones influencing Bel Geddes's techniques in painting and Bel Geddes teaching Jones how to more effectively employ stage lighting (417).

[24] Hunter, *Catalog* 4. One reason for the project's failure was the failure to receive an adequate design for the theatre building from the intended architect, Frank Lloyd Wright. Bel Geddes became increasingly frustrated with Wright because of his failure to consider the interior workings of the theatre.

[25] Bruce Bliven, "Norman-Bel Geddes: His Art and Ideas," *Theatre Arts Magazine* 3 (July 1919): 179-90. In a previous issue, Cheney included an essay by Bel Geddes titled "Theatre of the Future," 3 (April 1919): 123-25.

In his autobiography, *Miracle in the Evening* (1960, published posthumously),

Bel Geddes describes this period in lively detail, outlining the excitement and irreverence

of the "Roaring Twenties" in New York City. During the 1920s, the arts and literary

scene slowly moved uptown from Greenwich Village to midtown Manhattan, and Bel

Geddes mixed with famous theatre and literary personalities at the Coffee House Club

and the Algonquin hotel, site of the legendary "Algonquin Round Table" luncheons.[26]

Like Jones and other successful modern artists, he became adept at negotiating social

gatherings that brought them together with New York high society, using the events to

build a "man about town" status and a network of professional associates.

As well as documenting his early years in the theatre, Bel Geddes's

autobiography reveals his self-assured personality and proficiency at self-promotion,

including exhaustive lists of celebrity friends and excerpts of favorable reviews. He was

increasingly conscious of the need to control his public image, and after his success with

Erminie, he was afraid theatre producers might only identify him with musical comedies.

Since none were offering him serious dramas, Bel Geddes determined to devote his

energy to adapting Dante's epic poem *The Divine Comedy* for a large-scale pageant.[27]

The project not only filled his time, but also freed him to work without limitations.

Developed on his draft board without the restrictions of a budget or a specific

performance venue, the production represented an imaginary ideal, expressing Bel

Geddes's fundamental beliefs about devising theatre for modern audiences.

Bel Geddes did not just create stage designs for *The Divine Comedy*, but used

design as a means to envision the whole production. He developed the written text and

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[26] Bel Geddes, *Miracle in the Evening* 221; 234. Also, Oliver E. Allen, *New York, New York: A History of the World's Most Exhilarating and Challenging City* (New York: Atheneum, 1990) 261.

[27] Bel Geddes, *Miracle in the Evening* 247-248.

visual components simultaneously, designing a completely original space to house the event, adapting the script for over five hundred performers, and creating detailed plans for lighting, costumes (including masks), and sound orchestration. To document the production, Bel Geddes formulated a "score," similar to that of an orchestra composer, synchronizing the production elements in quarter-minute increments; he also developed a series of renderings to illustrate the performance sequentially.[28] Finally, he constructed an elaborate scale model of the design and commissioned the renowned photographer Francis Bruguière to create a series of model images, complete with lighting effects. By overseeing each detail, he envisioned the performance as a complete articulation of New Stagecraft philosophy, an endeavor dedicated to a single, unified artistic vision.

With *The Divine Comedy*, in fact, Bel Geddes assumed the roles of director and designer. By consolidating these responsibilities, he paid homage to Edward Gordon Craig. Bel Geddes was first introduced to Craig's theories through Hiram Kelly Moderwell's *The Theatre of To-day* (1914), the book which familiarized many Americans with modern developments in European theatre.[29] Moderwell described Craig's advice to theatre artists: "Work as a true artist works, letting no detail slip from your attention. Plan every line, every curve, every tiny fold of a curtain, according to your firm design."[30] With *The Divine Comedy*, Bel Geddes hoped to realize this artistic ideal. Indeed, similar to Jones's Craig-inspired design for the Paterson Strike Pageant, Bel Geddes used his staging to coordinate the movement of thousands of performers. As critic Norris Houghton later remarked, Bel Geddes's theatre work demonstrated how "the

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[28] Ibid. 249-251. Fredrick J. Hunter also describes Bel Geddes's working process in "Norman Bel Geddes' Conception of Dante's 'Divine Comedy'," *Educational Theatre Journal* 18 (1966): 240-46.
[29] Roberts 8.
[30] Hiram Kelly Moderwell, *Theatre of To-day* (New York: John Lane, 1914) 119.

art of design and the art of direction are inextricably part of one scenic pattern."[31]   His designs characterized the New Stagecraft as not just a set of formal aesthetics but a strategy for organizing and arranging a performance.

When Bel Geddes brought *The Divine Comedy* to the attention of New Stagecraft colleagues and critics, they were keenly interested in his arrangement of the performance space. He designed a massive, round stage containing a series of steps and platforms circled on three sides by audience seating; a backdrop behind the stage provided a neutral surface for lighting effects. In his autobiography, Bel Geddes describes the emotional intensity of the moment he first envisioned the design, remembering the day he stared so intently at a bare wall that it suddenly revealed a pulsating energy spiraling into a "fiery corkscrew. . . .The harder I stared, the hotter it would burn."[32] He then fell headlong into his bookshelf and picked up a copy of Dante's *The Divine Comedy*; the spiral became the central image for the design, encompassing both the actors and the audience. The overall impression of Bel Geddes's stage was a "gigantic and adroitly curing diabolical pit of many levels," representing the varying depths of Dante's paradise, purgatory, and hell.[33] [see fig. 3.1] It also purposefully evoked the semi-circular auditorium of ancient Greek theatres. Bel Geddes wanted the performance to recreate the theatres of the past that engaged important civic issues and inspire audiences toward greatness;[34] *The Divine Comedy* did not imitate Greek theatre architecture but rather followed its civic example within a space built with modern materials to capture the sensibility of the modern era.

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[31] Norris Houghton, "The Designer Sets the Stage: I, Norman Bel Geddes; II, Vincente Minnelli," *Theatre Arts Monthly* 20 (October 1936): 776.
[32] Bel Geddes, *Miracle in the Evening* 248.
[33] Kenneth Macgowan, "The Next Theatre," *Theatre Arts Magazine* 5 (October 1921): 310.
[34] Bel Geddes, *Horizons* 156.   As noted in the previous chapter, references to the Greek theatre were common among New Stagecraft artists and other theatre reformers during the period.

New Stagecraft critics like Cheney and Kenneth Macgowan recognized Bel

Geddes's design as a significant alternative to contemporary proscenium stages and

began promoting it in *Theatre Arts Magazine*. In the October 1921 issue, Macgowan

featured Bel Geddes's renderings in an article titled "The Next Theatre," highlighting the

design as an example of an architectural structure that could free modern artists from the

limitations of proscenium playhouses.[35] The difficulty in establishing an avant-garde

theatre within dated architectural structures was a reoccurring theme among many early

twentieth century European and American artists. They argued the need for a space that

re-defined the relationship between performers and spectators and spoke directly to the

sensibilities of modern audiences.[36] Playwrights, directors, and designers, once liberated

from the proscenium, would break from the past and create meaningful artistic

expressions that served a broader civic function than merely entertainment.

Even before *The Divine Comedy*, Bel Geddes gained a reputation for proposing

experimental theatre architecture; in 1915, he published designs for alternative

performance space in his self-published *INWHICH* magazine.[37] Indeed, his innovative

application of New Stagecraft principles to the entire theatre structure is what initially set

him apart from other theatre designers. Design should not play a supportive function, he

insisted, but be integral to the complete conception of modern performance. With *The

Divine Comedy*, he delineated the difference between "scenery," something created for a

pre-existing stage space, and "design" that re-imagined performance space. In fact, Bel

Geddes argued that designs that embodied the central idea of the dramatic text in the

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[35] Macgowan 300.
[36] Walter René Fuerst and Samuel J. Hume, *Twentieth-Century Stage Decoration* (1929; New York: Dover, 1967) 116.
[37] Roberts 17.

structure of the performance space eliminated the need for scenery.[38] In such a space,

actors would become the primary focus of the performance, with their choreographed

movement and lighting effects providing the only other necessary elements.

In 1922, Cheney selected *The Divine Comedy* design to comprise the bulk of the

American submission for the International Exhibition of Theatrical Art held in

Amsterdam. Instead of displaying his renderings, Bel Geddes submitted the series of

model photographs taken by Francis Bruguière, believing they better communicated

complete scope of the design. The goal of the exhibition, as Cheney wrote in his review

of the event, was less about showcasing New Stagecraft progress, which other exhibits

had accomplished, but about "the development of entirely new conceptions of theatre art

as a whole."[39] Cheney included *The Divine Comedy* project because it demonstrated a

desire to build on the previous successes of the New Stagecraft toward considering

design as part of an entire production strategy.

By including Bel Geddes in the Amsterdam exhibition, Cheney ushered him into

a select crowd, assuring that his work would be seen by the leading international theatre

artists. As Larson later notes, "[t]he exhibition did more to enhance Bel Geddes'

reputation as one of the great leaders of the new stagecraft movement in this country than

anything before or after."[40] But it also labeled him as a visionary, someone whose ideas

were better suited to the drafting board than an actual stage; in this regard, *The Divine*

Comedy placed Bel Geddes in a similar category with Craig (who reportedly praised the

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[38] Norman Bel Geddes, *A Project for a Theatrical Presentation of The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri* (New York: Theatre Arts, 1924) 13.

[39] Sheldon Cheney, "The International Exhibition in Amsterdam," *Theatre Arts Magazine* 6 (April 1922): 140.

[40] Larson 68.

design in a letter to a mutual friend.)[41] Although Craig's theories had inspired young

designers like Jones and Bel Geddes, a growing number of American theatre artists began

to question if they were practical or even attainable. Seeing the massive scale of *The*

Divine Comedy, some cast doubt on Bel Geddes's ability to produce the project.

Aware of the criticisms of impracticality being levied against him, Bel Geddes

took steps to assure people of the project's feasibility.   In 1924, Bel Geddes published

the model photographs in a book outlining the specifics of the production. He wrote: "So

many well meaning critics have told me that my drawings and even my model were

interesting but that the production could not be realized in a practical sense, that I have

proceeded with the cooperation of my pupils and Mr. Francis Bruguière to illustrate, in

the most graphic way I know, that it can be realized."[42] Bel Geddes used his model as

evidence that his overall design was attainable; unlike his renderings which only captured

the mood and atmosphere of the performance, his model was precise enough to use as a

working plan for construction. He also stressed that he could adapt the design to existing

locations such as Madison Square Garden or the Chicago Coliseum.[43] But, despite his

persistent claims of the production's feasibility, no producers came forward with funding.

What had incited so much interest in *The Divine Comedy*—Bel Geddes's rejection of the

proscenium and desire to re-envision theatrical space—would also be a key reason for its

failure to achieve a full production. Developed with no limitations, the design had freed

Bel Geddes's imagination but had never convinced producers of its viability.

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[41] Geddes, *Miracle in the Evening* 252.

[42] Bel Geddes, *A Project for a Theatrical Presentation of The Divine Comedy* 22.

[43] Ibid. 14. Macgowan notes there were plans to present *The Divine Comedy* at Madison Square Garden to celebrate the six hundredth anniversary of Dante's death (310), but this performance never materialized. Bel Geddes's plans resurfaced when he was engaged to coordinate performances for the 1933 Chicago World's Fair, but fell through again when cutbacks were made due to the Depression.

After spending two years promoting *The Divine Comedy*, trying but failing to find someone willing to invest in the construction of an architectural structure to house a single production, Bel Geddes set it aside. "I was on a promotional treadmill—meeting people, discussing details with committees, attending dinners, delivering speeches . . . getting precisely nowhere, except into debt. I finally called a halt and contented myself with thinking that, at least, the project created more interest than anything else I had ever done."[44] Indeed, the project catapulted him to international prominence, in much the same way as Craig's theoretical renderings generated his identity as a revolutionary designer. While many critics and historians labeled the project a failure because it was never produced, it did materialize as a central development in the New Stagecraft movement. *The Divine Comedy* photographs and renderings gained significant public exposure, seen not only in exhibitions but also published throughout the 1920s in professional journals and popular magazines.[45] As a reoccurring feature in New Stagecraft discourse, *The Divine Comedy* became one of the most influential designs of that time, prompting many theatre artists to re-imagine the possibilities of modern performance. Bel Geddes's spiral-shaped pit enveloping the whole performance demonstrated how design itself could embody a dramatic narrative, not just support it. Indeed, *The Divine Comedy* represented the potential of design as a driving force behind a performance, an idea that echoed Craig's theories but also foreshadowed Bel Geddes's industrial design approach.

The skills he developed through his early experimentations prepared him to expand his artistry outside the theatre. With *The Divine Comedy*, Bel Geddes trained

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[44] Geddes, *Miracle in the Evening* 252.
[45] Innes 30.

himself to design beyond limitations or restrictions, a skill that eventually helped him re-envision outdated manufacturing processes and industry products.   He also showed aptitude for large scale planning; Bel Geddes's attention to intricate details revealed exceptional managerial skills.   Most of all, his proficiency in large-scale model building would be vital to subsequent industry projects. Bel Geddes continued to use models rather than renderings in presentations to corporate executives, individuals who were more responsive to construction practicalities rather than evocative images. His models articulated more than just artistic conception, but meticulous and comprehensive plans for implementation.   They also revealed how modern aesthetics could be pulled out of a two dimensional frame and constructed in three dimensional space.

Before applying himself to industry endeavors, however, Bel Geddes's had the opportunity to demonstrate his design approach on another large-scale theatre project. His plans for *The Divine Comedy* drew the attention of Max Reinhardt, the renowned German director with whom Jones had studied. Reinhardt saw Bel Geddes's photographs at the Amsterdam exhibition and asked him to design his upcoming New York production of *The Miracle* at the Century Theatre.[46] A pantomime written by Karl Vollmoeller, *The Miracle* told the story of a Catholic nun's wayward journey and miraculous return to salvation. Because Reinhardt had staged previous productions in large auditoriums similar to Madison Square Garden, Bel Geddes's first difficulty was deciding "how to adapt a large, circus-type production to a theater proscenium" like that at the Century Theatre.[47] Unlike *The Divine Comedy*, he did not have the luxury to design a whole new space. So he decided to cover the existing one instead.

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[46] Geddes, *Miracle in the Evening* 269.
[47] Ibid. 274.

Bel Geddes proposed a design that encased the existing interior architecture, constructing the semblance of a medieval cathedral over the stage and auditorium. He eliminated the conventional trappings of the proscenium stage, including the curtain, concealing everything behind simulated stone walls, Gothic arches, and stained glass windows [see fig. 3.2]. In *Horizons*, Bel Geddes described the spatial layout: "The large proscenium . . . was thrown open to its full width and height. The stage became the apse and the auditorium itself took on the appearance of a transept. As you entered the rear of the auditorium, you had the sense of standing in the nave and looking through the transept into the apse."[48] Bel Geddes did not break from the basic spatial relationship of a proscenium theatre; spectators still sat facing the central performance area. Bel Geddes' radical gesture, thus, was not in altering this traditional arrangement, but in reminding audiences of its historical significance; the Roman Catholic design of an intersecting nave and transept forming the Latin cross had served as a space for theatrical performance for centuries. The overall design, like *The Divine Comedy*'s evocation of Greek theatres, implied that the performance exceeded mere entertainment to provide audiences a more meaningful civic or religious experience.

In addition to covering the stage and auditorium, Bel Geddes replaced existing seating with church pews and carefully controlled the lighting to recreate the atmosphere of a twelfth century cathedral.[49] Again, he oversaw a myriad of details to produce the total effect: directed light through stained glass windows, accompanying church bells and organ music, and even theatre ushers costumed as Catholic nuns.[50] His objective was to

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[48] Bel Geddes, *Horizons* 182.
[49] Church pews were not historically accurate, as twelfth century worshipers would have stood in a cathedral; for an early twentieth century audience, however, the pews set a suitable religious tone.
[50] Innes 68.

convince spectators, from the moment they walked into the theatre until the moment they left, that they had entered a world existing in a different time and place.

Bel Geddes's design proved, even more effectively than *The Divine Comedy*, the narrative potential of design. His cathedral enveloped audiences in the dramatic story of *The Miracle*, giving them visual and spatial clues about how to interpret the pantomime. The design not only reinforced the story of the dramatic characters, but also cast the spectators in a role as church-goers: "I wanted the members of the audience to feel that they were in a church, at a service and not at a show. They must enter a dimly lightened church as they would have done to see *The Miracle* in the twelfth century."[51] Even though the spectators' bodies were in the same physical position as they would be if they sat in auditorium chairs, the cathedral design encouraged them to feel more actively involved in the performance. Bel Geddes created a distinctive experience that audiences could not encounter at other Broadway theatres. Neither could they find the same atmosphere anywhere else in New York because the specificity of Bel Geddes's total design—scenery, lighting, and costumes—visually recreated the medieval time period.

When *The Miracle* opened in 1924, it was immensely popular, running for two seasons in New York and producing a national tour.[52] Critics hailed it as a theatrical performance in a league of its own, a massive and remarkable event. Although Reinhardt was recognized for his direction, many reviewers concentrated on the remarkable talent of the young American designer and his extraordinary feat in transforming the Century Theatre. Macgowan reviewed the production for *Theatre Arts Monthly*, noting that one of Reinhardt's greatest triumphs was that "he has liberated Geddes' remarkable talents

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[51] Bel Geddes, *Miracle in the Evening* 274.
[52] Morris Gest contracted Bel Geddes's to re-design the cathedral architecture for touring theatres so audiences could have a similar experience. *Miracle in the Evening* 303-304.

and given them a scope which no American producer dared to conceive."[53] Bel Geddes

received attention not just from theatre critics, but also reviewers from other fields.

Claude Bragdon, an architect and designer with New Stagecraft ties, wrote a feature

article for *The Architectural Record* showcasing Bel Geddes's achievement; *Scientific*

American published an article outlining the detailed mechanics of the scenery.[54] *The*

Miracle program also highlighted Bel Geddes's technical achievements; as audiences sat

in pews waiting for the performance to begin, they read facts about the design's

construction—the amount of shop space needed to build scenery, the caravan of trucks

needed to transport it, and the record number of electrical equipment needed for

lighting.[55] Similar to press he received for *The Divine Comedy*, these accounts identified

Bel Geddes as a masterful planner, not just an innovative artist but someone able to

conceptualize and, in this case, follow through on a complex, large-scale project.

While some reviews reiterated these details, others emphasized the overpowering

emotional effects of Bel Geddes's design and how it produced feelings of audience

involvement. Bel Geddes, they argued, created more than just a stage design; he used

design to transform the performance into an event. Bragdon noted that the staging would

be remembered not just for its technical innovations but for "the over-arching and

enveloping beauty of the permanent setting, which, uniting stage and auditorium, actor

and audience, induces an unaccustomed mood in the spectator."[56] Reviewer Alan Dale

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[53] Kenneth Macgowan, "A Mystical Month on Broadway," *Theatre Arts Monthly* 8 (March 1924): 148.

[54] Claude Bragdon, "A Theatre Transformed: Being a Description of the Permanent Setting by Norman-Bel Geddes for Max Reinhardt's Spectacle, *The Miracle*," *The Architectural Record* (April 1924): 393; Albert A. Hopkins, "A Theatre without a Stage," *Scientific American* (April 1924): no page numbers. Included in clippings from Bel Geddes Papers, Job 85, Box 94, Folder i2-3.

[55] *F. Ray Comstock and Morris Gest Present for the First Time in America the Stupendous Spectacular Pantomime The Miracle*, souvenir program, ed. Oliver M. Sayler, 1924.

[56] Bragdon 397.

described his own response to Bel Geddes's design in an attempt to communicate its transformative effect: "Who was I, and where was I? I distinctly remembered entering the Century Theatre. Yet something strange had happened. I saw my foolish dinner clothes; I beheld the people around me looking frighteningly anachronistic. I wasn't in the huge theatre I had once known. I was in a marvelous Cathedral."[57] Dale's review continued to describe the details that led to his disorienting experience, suggestive of how Bel Geddes's design momentarily persuaded spectators that they had traveled to a different time and space. These reviews portrayed the performance as a transformative experience and prepared audiences for an altogether different night at the theatre.

Realizing the advantages of Bel Geddes's positive reviews, producers included quotations from critics around the country in the souvenir program. Writing for the *Cincinnati Enquirer*, William Smith Goldenberg praised the design's ability to induce spiritual feelings: "It grips the fancy, it stirs the emotions, it staggers the imagination, it sways the sentiments, it rouses the religious instinct common in all mankind."[58] Virginia Dale from the *Chicago Daily Journal* was even more overt in describing the ecstatic fervor created by the performance: "There is a strange, fierce energy about it that metamorphoses the spectator into a participant . . . The enchantment of 'The Miracle' is like nothing else in the theatre. It is so big, so tremendous, both in emotion and spectacle, that it seems to begin where the greatest thing you have ever seen before has topped its crescendo."[59] According to reviewers, Bel Geddes's design produced seemingly genuine and powerful feelings of spirituality from spectators. Its emotional impact was further substantiated by reports of souvenir hunters "chipping pieces of wood

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[57] Quoted in *Miracle in the Evening* (299).
[58] Quoted in souvenir program.
[59] Ibid.

from pews and walls" of the setting during the final nights of the production run.[60] For

these spectators, the feelings aroused by the performance were connected to the space

itself; because they came into physical contact with the scenery, it became something

different from the settings they had seen only at a distance.

The Miracle cemented Bel Geddes's success in New York, but also brought

considerable attention to theatrical design in general, particularly the New Stagecraft.

His innovative design exceeded anything previously seen on Broadway, leaving

audiences excited to see what the designer would do next. But in the years following *The*

Miracle's success, some New Stagecraft critics revealed unease with the overwhelming

scale and spectacle of Bel Geddes's design. Cheney, who had aggressively promoted *The*

Divine Comedy, remarked that *The Miracle* "partook of the nature of an individual stunt

rather than an epoch-making event on the road to the future."[61] Having led the attack

against "Belascoism" ten years earlier, he objected to *The Miracle*'s detailed realism and

period treatment. While Bel Geddes's *The Divine Comedy* had advanced the theories of

the New Stagecraft, Cheney's criticism suggested, *The Miracle* merely co-opted its

techniques for Broadway. Even though his earlier design had a similarly massive scale,

its modern aesthetic and ground-breaking architectural arrangement drew emphasis to the

central themes of the performance; conversely, *The Miracle*'s spectacular cathedral

environment merely distracted audiences. Like Belasco's "stunt" with *The Governor's*

Lady, the design so fully captured the spectators' attention that they were unable to

appreciate (or recognize the inadequacies of) the dramatic text.

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[60] Roberts 12. Also, *Miracle in the Evening* 302.
[61] Sheldon Cheney, *Stage Decoration* (New York: John Day, 1928) 119.

Bel Geddes's New Stagecraft colleagues used the success of *The Miracle* as an opportunity to restate their preference toward a simplified design aesthetic. The public, however, also made their opinion known; they claimed to have felt an intensity of emotion absent from other Broadway performances. Bel Geddes's design had not distracted them, as Cheney's critique suggested, but fully connected them to the religious themes of the dramatic text. Business and industry leaders took notice of the public's excitement over *The Miracle*; Bel Geddes claimed that the performance initiated a nation-wide trend during the 1920s to build movie theatres and restaurants in the style of "cathedrals, Chinese pagodas, Egyptian temples, Spanish courtyards and the like."[62] He decried these imitations as insincere and undignified, a mere application of surface ornamentation with no connection to the needs of the space; true design, he insisted, developed organically as a "direct expression of the functional requirements of the problem."[63] With these statements, Bel Geddes continued to argue for the appropriateness of his design for *The Miracle* because, rather than being purely decorative, it grew out of the spectacular nature of the pantomime.

By watching the missteps of others trying to recreate his success, Bel Geddes also recognized the potential for applying his design principles to commercial settings outside the theatre. He traded on his ability to please a crowd, convincing industry leaders that his designs would draw consumers to their products. But his reputation as an impractical visionary who often designed beyond the limits of financial feasibility followed Bel Geddes to his industry work. His large-scale tendencies made him a potential liability; just as he became known as the man who was given a stage and built a cathedral, Bel

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[62] Bel Geddes, *Horizons* 184.
[63] Ibid. 18.

Geddes also became the man hired to design one product and ended up re-designing the company's factory. But corporations repeatedly turned to him to generate interest in their products, and with an ever-widening variety of designs, he proved his ability to transform the ordinary into the dramatic and the everyday into a thrilling occasion.

Industrializing the New Stagecraft

Although Bel Geddes periodically returned to the professional theatre to design, direct, and produce, after 1927 he primarily focused on industrial design. He explained his "departure" from the theatre in *Horizons*, expressing his frustration at the slow growth of the American theatre to adapt to modern innovations, even remarking on the "lack of courage among many of my colleague designers" to fully commit to the modern theatre that New Stagecraft theories had initially imagined.[64] The New Stagecraft had emerged as a response to the perceived limitations of the commercial theatre, but Bel Geddes argued that the movement produced its own limitations by failing to commit to large-scale projects that would realize the potential of their revolutionary theories. He hoped to acquire greater artistic freedom working in industry, "the driving force of this age," because business leaders would have the desire, commitment, and financial resources to bring about the innovations he envisioned.[65]

More than satisfying his own artistic needs, however, Bel Geddes argued that by shifting his design skills to industry, he could better serve the public, raising their everyday standards by giving them access to durable and beautiful consumer products. As a designer, he had the ability to harness technology and make it serve the needs of the

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[64] Ibid. 5-6.
[65] Ibid. 5-6

Americans. He shared this conviction with other designers such as Walter Dorwin

Teague, Raymond Loewy, and Henry Dreyfuss.[66] Within design history, these men are

known as the pioneers of industrial design, building the field from a shared philosophy of

social responsibility. Scholars, however, debate if it was possible for them to

simultaneously serve the interests of the public and the corporations that employed them.

Design historians such as Jeffrey L. Meikle and Tony Fry examine the idealism of

industrial designers against the economic circumstances of the late 1920s and early

1930s. Industrial design, according to Fry, emerged coexistent with the rise of American

consumer society and "was not driven by idealism but rather by immediate economic

imperatives."[67]   During this time, manufacturers were competing in a saturated market;

the innovative designs of artists like Bel Geddes helped distinguish their goods from

other competitors. Meikle argues that the streamlined styles of designers, as well as the

use of materials such as glass and steel, also allowed manufacturers to assert themselves

as up-to-date and receptive to the needs of modern Americans.[68] Design thus became a

crucial strategy in both the product development and public relations of corporations; by

hiring an industrial designer, they could respond to the current desires of American

consumers and, even more determinedly, shape their desire for new products.

During the 1920s, industry also realized the growing importance of visual images

in the consumer marketplace; leaders in the growing field of advertising argued that

images were particularly effective at bypassing the critical-thinking processes of

consumers; Earnest Elmo Calkins even argued that the abstract images of modern artists

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[66] Teague and Loewy came to industrial design from the world of commercial illustration.
Dreyfus, however, was another designer with a theatrical background, and, in fact, was a student of the
scene design class Bel Geddes taught out of his studio during the early 1920s.
[67] Fry 113.
[68] Meikle, *Twentieth Century Limited* 39.

were more persuasive than realistic ones because they tapped into subjective life of

consumers, engaging their imagination.[69] A New Stagecraft artist such as Bel Geddes,

therefore, was an ideal recruit for the commercial sector, proficient in the aesthetics of

modernism and a master at theatricality. His designs for consumer products and

environments not only looked modern but effectively dramatized modern American life.

Bel Geddes' window displays for the Franklin Simon & Company department

store (1927) were his first ventures in commercial design. While previous artists noted

similarities between store windows and theatrical stages, most notably L. Frank Baum

who published a journal aptly named *The Show Window* (1897),[70] Bel Geddes' distinctive

contribution was applying the theories of modern design. He stated in an interview:

> When I came from the theatre to this problem of display, I brought to it the
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> conviction that the store window is really a sort of stage on which the
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> merchant presents his actors, his representative pieces of merchandise, and
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> that the rules that apply to the stage are all true here. My fourteen years of
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> experience in the creation of theatrical productions have taught me how, in
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> designing a setting with the required atmosphere, to bring out at the same
>
> time its most important element—the actor.[71]

Bel Geddes's emphasis on bringing focus to "the actor"—in this case, the consumer

product—repeated one of the fundamental design principles of the New Stagecraft. He

compared the cluttered displays he saw in conventional store windows to the excessive

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[69] Stuart Ewen, *PR! A Social History of Spin* (New York: Basic, 1996) 210.

[70] William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York: Vintage, 1994) 56. Baum is best known for his children's novel *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900).

[71] Bel Geddes, "All of Window Is a Stage—The Merchandise Merely Players, Says Norman Bel Geddes," *Retail Ledger*, April 1929, Job 134, Box 7, Folder 134.4, Bel Geddes Papers.

decoration of stage realism. By paring down these displays with simplified backgrounds

and geometric display units—similar to the platforms and steps of minimalist scenery—

department stores would more effectively draw the consumer's eyes to their merchandise.

Bel Geddes gained the commission for the Franklin Simon & Co. windows after

George Simon had admired his Broadway design for *Arabesque* (1926), a musical play

about the Middle East.[72] George was the son of Franklin Simon, the store's founder who

gained fame in the retail industry for moving to the area of Fifth Avenue north of Thirty-

Fourth Street, thus initiating the growth of the vicinity as a fashionable shopping

district.[73] After a walk down Fifth Avenue, Bel Geddes determined that existing store

windows had no visual focus because they attempted to display too many products. His

strategy was to simplify these displays; instead of showing consumers an array of

merchandise, Bel Geddes designed his windows to draw focus to select products that

epitomized the store's image as a purveyor of high-end fashion.

Bel Geddes's first window design featured three items of merchandise—a hat, a

scarf, and a purse. He arranged them on and around a metal bust, an elongated,

abstracted silhouette of a female face, and placed the bust among a collection of inverted

three-dimensional triangles. Strong directional lighting cast against the arrangement

created interesting shadows on the simple backdrop with horizontal curves [see fig.

3.3].[74] Other windows used similar backdrops but varied the geometric patterns with

different products and display units. Throughout, Bel Geddes exchanged realistic-looking

mannequins with more expressionistic forms, placing them among a number of

interchangeable units and backdrops; his system eliminated the need for additional

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[72] Bel Geddes also produced and directed *Arabesque*; it only ran for 23 performances.
[73] "Franklin Simon & Co, 16 W. 38th Street," (2003) <http://www.14to42.new/38street1.5.html.>
[74] M. K. Wisehart, July 1931, no source listed, Job 134, Box 7, Folder 134.4, Bel Geddes Papers.

ornamentation. The design "impose[d] on the window dresser the necessity of composing the objects of sale themselves into three dimensional patterns of the utmost pictorial value—to tie up the merchandise and background so organically that they compose into a single artistic entity."[75] Combining simple but elegant forms with dramatic lighting, Bel Geddes created a minimalist environment that threw visual focus on the merchandise. His Franklin Simon displays were complete statements of modern design, combining the aesthetics of modernism with the most recent theories of advertising to create public interest around the latest consumer products.

Once revealed, Bel Geddes' windows caused a stir among Fifth Avenue shoppers who crowded around the store. Other stores quickly followed his trend, and Bel Geddes' reputation grew within the retail and fashion industry. Retail trade journals and popular magazines such as *Women's Wear Daily* and *Town and Country* featured the windows, highlighting the designer's theatrical background. The reviews characterize Bel Geddes as a trend-setter, an artist alive to the currents of public opinion and modern sensibilities. *Town and Country* presented the windows as the latest example of how "the theatre and its arts" are "shaping the dictates of style" and remarks that Bel Geddes's designs "show a reserve which it admirable for their display purpose, and yet have the sweep and verve which characterize his work in the theatre"[76] Significantly, it is his combination of modern aesthetics ("reserve") and theatricality ("sweep and verve") that created such popular interest around the displays.

Thus, Bel Geddes's success came not just from his application of theatrical techniques, but specifically New Stagecraft design. The public excitement around his

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[75]Bel Geddes, Letter to Mr. Adam Gimbel, Saks & Company, New York (18 April, 1927), Job 134, Box 7, Folder 134.1, Bel Geddes Papers.
[76] *Town and Country*, no author or date listed, Job 134, Box 7, Folder 134.1, Bel Geddes Papers.

window displays, as well as declarations by fashion critics that they represented the height of elegance, signified a mainstream acceptance of the aesthetics of modernism, though not necessarily the avant-garde theories that had given rise to its movements. Bel Geddes was one of a growing number of artists to commercialize the aesthetic, and his success points toward a larger shift in public perceptions of what constituted modern art or modern living. As commercial artists and industrial designers spread the clean lines and geometric shapes of modernism across America's consumer landscapes, "modern" increasingly became a term to denote something fashionable rather than radical. As a theatre artist, Bel Geddes also understood the capability of design to shape a character's identity; his windows reinforced the image of Franklin Simon as a "modern" purveyor of cutting-edge fashion. Even further, by purchasing showcased merchandise, the store's customers could assume a similarly chic persona. Bel Geddes's application of the New Stagecraft for merchandising had implications in the world of theatre as well. Theatrical modernism had begun in places like Greenwich Village as part of an effort to reform the theatre into a serious artistic enterprise, autonomous from commercial forces. But co-opted to display consumer products, the New Stagecraft became little more than the next fashion trend, emptied of its original theoretical objectives or intellectual significance.

After his Franklin Simon experience, Bel Geddes realized that the skills he used to re-envision commercial environments could help him re-design consumer products. In 1928, Frances Resor Waite, manager of the Franklin Simon window installations and soon-to-be his second wife, introduced Bel Geddes to Stanley Resor, her uncle and president of the J. Walter Thompson advertising agency.[77] J. Walter Thompson was a leader in the burgeoning field, specifically guiding trends in measuring public opinion

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[77] Meikle, *Twentieth Century Limited* 51.

during the 1920s and 1930s.[78] Though the agency, Bel Geddes secured a variety of new

commissions. The following year, he designed a streamlined counter scale for the Toledo

Scale company and a collection of sleek metal furniture for Simmons. By the early

1930s, he worked for corporations such as General Electric, Electrolux, and Standard Gas

Equipment designing appliances like kitchen stoves and refrigerators.

The all-white stove Bel Geddes designed for Standard Gas was particularly

successful; it was the first stove design to streamline both the manufacturing process—

standardizing parts for use in all models—and the appliance's overall appearance.

Constructed from sheet metal, covered in white enamel, and finished with rounded edges,

the stove was beautiful to look at and easy to clean [see fig. 3.4]. Bel Geddes's design

did more than re-imagine the appearance of the appliance, but capitalized on advanced

technology and construction materials to provide a product that would not have been

possible in previous decades. The design combined the aesthetics of modernism with the

processes of modernization to invent a truly contemporary product. The stove doubled

Standard Gas's sales, forcing competitors to redesign their products in a similar fashion.[79]

Bel Geddes's product designs had started to make a public impact when he

released *Horizons* (1932); the publication catapulted him to the top of the industrial

design profession. While aerodynamics engineers had developed the scientific principles

of streamlining, *Horizons* popularized these ideas to the public through charts illustrating

air flow and resistance as well as photographs of his own designs.   As a style,

streamlining replaced the applied decorative motifs of Art Deco; it emphasized speed and

efficiency, and rediscovered the beauty inherent in forms built according to function. Bel

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[78] Ewen 182

[79] Arthur J. Pulos, "Dynamic Showman," *Industrial Design* 17 (July-August 1970): 64.

Geddes, in addition to illustrations of streamlined furniture and kitchen appliances, included renderings of futuristic transportation vehicles—teardrop shaped cars, aerodynamic trains, and ultramodern luxury ocean liners [see fig. 3.5]. Like his draft-board experiments with *The Divine Comedy*, these designs were ideal depictions, created according to the principles of streamlining rather than existing practices or specifications of manufacturers. Meikle notes that these designs kept Bel Geddes's office staff busy producing drawings and models in the years immediately following the stock market crash of 1929 when commissions were fewer.[80] But they were also created with an eye toward future business; Bel Geddes sent copies of *Horizons* to automotive and railway executives, eventually securing him commissions within the transportation industry.[81]

Among the general public, these transportation designs generated the most interest. Many saw the images republished in newspapers and magazines; as one historian notes, Bel Geddes's "prophetic imagination struck a responsive chord in a public anxiously looking toward the better environment that was promised by an enlightened technology."[82] Bel Geddes's timing with the publication was significant; in 1932, the American economy was in crisis following record numbers of bank and business closures, property foreclosures, and devastating poverty among the unemployed. Many citizens felt antagonism toward corporations, accusing them of having caused the crisis through over-production; industry leaders, however, made a case for under-consumption and market under-development as the source of the problem. As Fry notes,

[80] Meikle, *Twentieth Century Limited* 144.
[81] Jeffrey L. Meikle, *Design in the USA* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005) 116.
[82] Pulos 61.

when the "later argument won the day," corporations began to hire industrial designers to redesign consumer products in an effort to stimulate the market economy.[83]

A 1934 article for the business magazine *Fortune* attempted to shed light on the new industrial design profession and its role in the Depression economy. The author profiled a number of leading designers, including Bel Geddes, evaluating the effectiveness of their different working methods. His description of "bomb-thrower" Bel Geddes implied uneasiness among the business community with the designer's dedication to reform and willingness to bankrupt companies for the sake of streamlined efficiency: "Geddes' ideas, founded on engineering principles and framed to fit the popular imagination, can destroy plants by making them obsolete as surely as would a ton of dynamite. If obsolescence is indeed a cost, then, Geddes boasts, he will have cost American industry far more than a billion dollars by the time he is through."[84] With its "bomb-throwing" and "dynamite" references, the article summoned up, humorously or not, the image of a radical activist, someone with closer ties to the Greenwich Village bohemians of the previous decade than contemporary business leaders. Lingering associations of radicalism, the article suggested, were still present in the aesthetics of modernism despite attempts to appropriate the style for mainstream consumption. The author also made clear that Bel Geddes' appeal to the "popular imagination" came with a hefty price tag for industry. Industry had failed consumers, Bel Geddes argued, forcing them to "buy below their taste."[85] By publicizing his un-repentance about the extravagant costs to corporations, he marked himself as a social advocate forcing industry to revise its standard practices to make up for past transgressions.

[83] Fry 113.
[84] "Both Fish and Fowl," *Fortune* 9 (February 1934): 90.
[85] Bel Geddes, Horizons 13.

Bel Geddes contracted himself to corporate America, but publicly he insisted that he worked for everyday people, designing a better, more prosperous future. In *Horizons*, he recognized the economic struggles facing the nation, but assured people that modern technology and design innovation would be their salvation. The historian looking back on the 1930s, Bel Geddes argued, "will see it as a period of criticism, unrest, and dissatisfaction to the point of disillusion—when new aims were being sought and new beginnings were astir. Doubtless he will ponder that, in the midst of a world-wide melancholy owing to an economic depression, a new age dawned with invigorating conceptions and the horizon lifted."[86] Bel Geddes's optimistic image of the future, however, would not materialize as he predicted. His streamlined style of design would be a fashion that came and went, and America would not fully recover from the Depression until its entry into World War II and mobilization around the war effort.

But during the darkest moments of the economic crisis, Bel Geddes offered a powerful message of reassurance. As indicated by the title of his book, his designs symbolized the "horizon" from which Americans could see the dawning of a "new age." Since the perspective renderings of sixteenth century Renaissance artists, the horizon had played a central role in creating the illusion of three-dimensionality for theatrical stages; with his persistent use of the horizon metaphor, Bel Geddes suggested that the modern age represented a new renaissance of the arts. Bel Geddes continued to draw on the idea of "horizons" in promotional activities, nowhere more prominently than his *Highways and Horizons* exhibit for GM at the 1939-40 New York World's Fair. Bel Geddes brought the horizon to life in the exhibit's showcase attraction, *Futurama*. Fairgoers literally saw the dawn of a new day as their sound-chairs moved into the attraction and

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[86] Ibid. 3

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lights came up over his model to reveal the miniature landscape of highways and automobiles. It was an image of America's future designed by Bel Geddes but also shaped by the corporate interests. The most popular attraction at the fair, *Futurama* was a design-centered dramatization of American modernity, representing the next stage in modern entertainment: a performance that placed consumer products center stage.

Bel Geddes and General Motor's *Futurama*

Bel Geddes gradually built a working relationship with the automotive and oil industry during the 1930s, securing commissions with corporations like Chrysler, Buick, Goodyear, Firestone, Sunoco and Shell. Before approaching GM with his designs for *Futurama*, he worked out his ideas about highway planning for a 1937 Shell advertising campaign (acquired through the J. Walter Thompson agency).[87] A proficient model builder, Bel Geddes created a small-scale "city of tomorrow" illustrating the latest theories in urban development, particularly those of French architect Le Corbusier.[88] The model forecast a generic American metropolis twenty years in the future, devoting special attention to automotive mobility around the city; it was so precise that close-up photographs appeared to represent a full-scale future landscape. Shell distributed the photographs widely, and the model appeared in newspapers and magazines, and was even presented at a National Planning Conference by a delegate of the Harvard Traffic Research Group.[89] Bel Geddes's innovative design for Shell generated interest among

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[87] Roland Marchand, "The Designers Go to the Fair II: Norman Bel Geddes, The General Motors 'Futurama,' and the Visit to the Factory Transformed," *Design Issues* 8:2 (1992): 26. For information on the Shell campaign, see Meikle's *The City of Tomorrow: Model 1937* (London: Pentagram Design, 1984).

[88] Bel Geddes's well-worn copy of Le Corbusier's *Towards a New Architecture* was included at part of the Harry Ransom Humanities Center's 2004 exhibit "Make It New: The Rise of Modernism," alongside photographs of his *Futurama* exhibit. The exhibit ran from 21 October 2004 to 7 March 2004.

[89] Innes 175.

both experts and the public, anticipating the type of favorable response he received two

years later with his larger, more elaborate *Futurama* model.

Shell's association with Bel Geddes was part of a calculated public relations

strategy; rather than traditional advertising that attempted to persuade consumers to

purchase their brand of gasoline, the model campaign promoted an image of Shell as a

benevolent company interested in America's future. In his history of public relations,

Stuart Ewen examines the efforts of industry leaders after 1935 to combat President

Roosevelt's successful promotion of New Deal social programs and Depression-era

perceptions of corporate America as greedy and arrogant. Roosevelt was a "master at

public relations," argues Ewen, using his office to publicize the New Deal through his

famous "fire-side chats" as well as funding Farm Security Administration (FSA)

photographers and Federal Theatre Project performances, initiatives that brought the New

Deal directly to the American people, bypassing corporate-controlled mass media.[90]

Corporations recognized they had lost the support of the American public and needed to

come together as a united front; the automotive industry, in particular, needed to improve

their public image after a series of union strikes in 1936 at plants owned by Firestone and

GM.[91] To subdue Roosevelt's publicity apparatus, industry leaders decided to "claim the

social values of the New Deal as their own" and "provide tangible evidence for, the

argument that corporate America—not the government—was the surest route to

safeguarding the general well-being of society."[92] Industry turned to designers to provide

this evidence to Americans. Through spectacular designs like the Shell campaign and

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[90] Ewen 241; 263.
[91] Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States, 1492-Present*, Revised and updated ed. (1980; New York: Harper, 1995) 390-391.
[92] Ewen 296.

Futurama attraction, Bel Geddes helped the automotive and oil industry convince the public of their commitment to the betterment of American society.

The 1939-1940 New York World's Fair, sponsored by industry leaders under a non-profit structure, gave corporations a stage to present their case to the public. The fair's theme –"Building the World of Tomorrow with the Tools of Today"—focused on industry's ability to use modern technology to improve the lives of Americans, a welcome message to those struggling through the Depression economy and facing an uncertain future with an escalating war in Europe. As Ewen notes, the fair organizers co-opted "the New Deal's sociological symbolism . . . the people, the farmer, the worker, the consumer, the greater good, economic democracy" and presented the event as a gift to the nation, in dedication to their struggles and continued hard work.[93] Business leaders assumed roles as social advocates, dedicating themselves to producing better products, and cast Americans as consumers, emphasizing their contribution to economic recovery through the purchase of new products. Free-enterprise was at the heart of American democracy, they argued, making consumption quintessentially patriotic.

At a time when Roosevelt was still putting people to work through the Works Progress Administration, the World's Fair also helped corporations suggest how they offered a better solution to unemployment. Organizers emphasized the huge number of men they had hired to transform the Flushing Meadows site from a contaminated dump to a safe, inhabitable fair ground. The *Official Guide Book* included photographs of smiling construction workers and glowing tributes to "the many men, celebrated and obscure,

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[93] Ibid. 322-325.

who actually built" the exhibits.[94] These images seemingly contradicted the photographs

of despondent, poverty-stricken Americans captured by FSA photographs, symbolizing a

nation ready to put its muscles (literal and figurative) back to productive use.

Industrial designers—the "minds" behind the "muscle"—were the most

celebrated heroes of the fair. "The true poets of the twentieth century," claimed the guide

book, "are the designers, the architects and the engineers who glimpse some inner vision,

create some beautiful figment of the imagination and then translate it into valid actuality

for the world to enjoy."[95] Whereas New Deal artists relied on an aesthetic of social

realism to tell their stories, these corporate-sponsored designers took advantage of the

subjective qualities of modernism, sparking fairgoers' imaginations with images of a

clean, efficient, streamlined American future. Corporations took a backseat in fair

publicity, encouraging designers like Bel Geddes to take center stage.[96] By advertising

the exhibits as products of the designer's imagination, industry leaders like GM fashioned

themselves as benevolent, modern-day arts patrons, playing down their self-interested

involvement. This strategy meant that designers, rather than corporations, were credited

for suggesting the allocation of government funds and resources for public projects like

road building. With Bel Geddes's name attached to their exhibit, GM could claim that

their interest in highway expansion was less about profits and more about stimulating the

economy and ensuring long-term national progress.

When Bel Geddes originally approached GM to sponsor his design, the company

had already planned to exhibit a mock-up of their factory assembly line. Executives were

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[94] *Official Guide Book: New York World's Fair, 1939* (New York: Exposition Publications, 1939) 18-19.
[95] Ibid. 19.
[96] Christine Grace O'Malley, "The "Design Decade" and Beyond: American Industrial Designers and the Evolution of the Consumer Landscape from the 1930s to the 1950s," diss. U of Virginia, 2002, 120.

not immediately responsive to Bel Geddes's large-scale, expensive proposal, but he persuaded them that a public message of "share our world" rather than merely "tour our factory" could produce long-term public relations benefits.[97]   In a presentation to GM executives, Bel Geddes promoted the advantages of his design:

> In sponsoring this exhibit at the World's Fair, General Motors would bring to the public for the first time a highly dramatic and educational projection of one of the most important and widely discussed topics of today. To actually create such an exhibit, for the public to *see and understand* is the next step forward in the achievement of a plan which heretofore has only been seen and understood by traffic authorities and a relatively small group of forward-looking industrialists and Government officials. . . The exhibit will show: *1. That the motor car industry has not yet reached its peak, but has an enormous potential future, providing: 2. that adequate highways are developed to afford maximum motor car use. 3. That estimates show a demand for one hundred billion more car miles of travel than is possible at the present time in the United States. 4. That meeting this demand would enormously increase motor car usage and sales. 5. That safety on highways can be greatly advanced.*[98]

The proposal starts by describing the public's benefit from the design, but forcefully insists that the exhibit would produce "enormous" financial dividends by convincing consumers to embrace a future landscape reliant on automotive transportation. GM

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[97] Marchand 25.

[98] "A Panoramic Presentation of Possible Future Solutions For Present-Day Traffic Problems, allied with the theme of the World's Fair, Building the World of Tomorrow," Job 381, Box 019a, Folder 381.3, Bel Geddes Papers. All of the words in italics have been changed from original all-caps.

would be selling more than just cars, but the potential importance of cars in the everyday lives of American consumers.

With his proposal, and other public statements about *Futurama*, Bel Geddes revealed his proficiency not just as a designer but also a public relations strategist. In *Magic Motorways* (1940), published in response to *Futurama*'s popularity, he argues that design is a powerful tool of persuasion: "Masses of people can never find a solution to a problem until they are shown the way . . . until mass opinion is crystallized, brought into focus and made articulate, it amounts to nothing but vague grumbling. One of the best ways to make a solution understandable to everybody is to make it visual, to dramatize it."[99] Bel Geddes's comments echo those of Walter Lippman, a pioneer of public relations, whose theories on "manufacturing consent" had influenced civic and business leaders since the 1920s. In *Public Opinion* (1922), Lippman argued that modern citizens processed information differently than previous generations because mass media—newspapers, radio, and film—necessarily distilled world events into select images, or stereotypes. "Real space, real time, real numbers, real connections, real weights are lost" as "dimensions of action are clipped and frozen in the stereotype."[100] Images and symbols, therefore, more effectively mobilized public opinion than reasoned speech.

As both a theatre artist and industrial designer, Bel Geddes understood the power of visual images to both convey dramatic narratives and sway audiences toward certain interpretations. With his New Stagecraft background in particular, he had applied design as a central narrative component, shaping the spectator's understanding of the dramatic text. *Futurama*, Bel Geddes insisted, was the type of visual presentation that could

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[99] Norman Bel Geddes, *Magic Motorways* (New York: Random House, 1940) 4.
[100] Walter Lippman, *Public Opinion* (1922; New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997) 100.

manufacture consent among the American public for a transnational highway project. Through their encounter with the attraction, fairgoers would better understand the benefits of automobile travel, share their experience with others, and generate a receptive atmosphere to help the idea become a reality.

Bel Geddes ultimately persuaded GM executives to accept his proposal, and he was contracted to oversee the design for the entire exhibit building. Though initially nervous with tight construction schedules and escalating costs, they only had praise for the designer when *Futurama* opened, gaining far more publicity than anticipated. Fairgoers waited longer in lines for *Futurama* than any other attraction, with thousands wrapping themselves around the white, streamlined building; Bel Geddes, in fact, designed the building to showcase the lines of people waiting on curvilinear ramps. [see fig. 3.6].[101] As design historian Roland Marchand remarks: "At a world's fair at which industrial exhibits (for the first time) outpulled the amusement zone attractions, GM's Futurama reined supreme."[102] Industrials designers, Bel Geddes in particular, had turned themes of modern progress into popular entertainment, creating public excitement around the growth of American consumer culture.

What made Bel Geddes's exhibit distinct from other corporate offerings was its inventive method of presentation. *Futurama* did not just illustrate a model of a highway system, but rather used design to narrate a story about national progress through advancements in transportation. The attraction engaged both minds and bodies; Bel Geddes's performance encapsulated the fair's themes of modernity and progress not only

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[101] Photograph captions, Job 381, Box 019a, Folder 381.4, Bel Geddes Collection. Bel Geddes constructed the building in collaboration with architect Albert Kahn.

[102] Marchand 24. Final costs for the *Highways and Horizon*'s exhibit, including *Futurama*, were triple Bel Geddes's initial estimate (24).

in its subject matter but also in its technologically-advanced "Carry-go-Round" conveyor system. One by one, fairgoers climbed into traveling box-seats moving slowly through rooms containing animated models of a streamlined highway system. A speaker located just behind their ears piped in music and narration, giving each fairgoer a personally guided tour: "Come tour the future with General Motors! A transcontinental ride through America in 1960. What will we see? What changes will transpire? This magic Aladdin-like flight of fancy is Norman Bel Geddes [sic] conception of the many wonders that may develop in the not-too-distant future."[103] After outlining the problems of traffic gridlock that would only worsen if current road systems were neglected, fairgoers entered a darkened tunnel and heard: "Since the beginning of civilization, transportation has been the key to Man's progress, his prosperity, his happiness . . . Twenty years have passed since 1939. What wondrous changes and improvements have developed in our national highways."[104] Lights slowly rose as passengers, now transformed into time-travelers, moved into the model room and saw their first glimpse of Bel Geddes's vast landscape.

The performance positioned automobile travel as the next step in the nation's civilizing process. By 1939, Americans had begun to rely on automobiles; although early models had been unpredictable, industry leaders, urged by competition, had developed consistently safer and more dependable cars. What impeded progress (i.e. future sales), argued GM, was the poor state of national roads. *Futurama* posed a systematic solution directing government-financed construction to serve the interests of corporations who, in turn, would serve the needs of Americans; indeed, it was an arrangement predicting the allocation of highway funding in the 1950s for Dwight D. Eisenhower's national defense

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[103] "Sound Chair Script." The sound script was generated by Bel Geddes's design studio; no specific author is credited.
[104] Ibid.

legislation. Assumed but unspoken was GM's characterization of "Americans" as, more specifically, "American consumers." If spectators wanted to participate in this future landscape, they would need to purchase an automobile, ideally a GM product.

As the performance continued, spectators watched a farm truck move from a driveway through a series of primary and secondary roads feeding a super-highway. "By means of Motorways of this type," the voice explained, "convenience and necessities are brought to the farmer's door and he in turn has secured access of broad, outlying markets."[105] The narrative focused on the land's commercial potential; farms were not idyllic pastoral settings but productive locations, and farmers, as well as supplying markets, were also consumers. As the journey continued to various locations—mountain regions, suburban neighborhoods, urban centers—the emphasis in each landscape was how this super-highway system contributed to the productivity and convenience of America's future (consumer) populations.

Futurama's elaborate, animated model, advertised as "the largest and most lifelike model ever constructed," was unlike anything the public had seen.[106] Bel Geddes's model building skills were put to spectacular effect [see fig. 3.7]. Although the spoken script emanating from each headrest created a cohesive narrative, the *Futurama* model was the central expression of the performance. Audiences were enthralled by its sheer scale and meticulous detail; the model covered over 35,000 square feet and contained "500,000 individually designed houses and buildings, over 1,000,000 trees and shrubs of eighteen species and 50,000 scale model vehicles."[107] Super-highways with

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[105] Ibid.

[106] "Press release, April 29th, 1939," Job 381, Box 019b, Folder 381.17, Bel Geddes Papers.

[107] "General Motors Exhibit Building: New York World's Fair—Highways and Horizons," Exhibit brochure, General Motors, 1939, Center for American History, The University of Texas at Austin.

one-directional, multi-level lanes maintaining consistent speeds of fifty, seventy-five, and one hundred miles an hour efficiently moved the animated vehicles between different locations [see fig. 3.8]. Bel Geddes varied the scale of buildings, roads, and even the speed of cars so that spectators felt as through they had moved in for close-up views and then back out again to examine the landscape at a distance. Watching the easy flow of traffic, spectators saw how future citizen/consumers would maximize their work days and quickly leave the city to tour quaint mountain retreats or regional amusement parks.

Similar to the Shell campaign, Bel Geddes's model was so detailed and precise that close-up photographs looked like full-scale representations of a future landscape. Publicity photographs were accompanied by captions reminding people that they were looking at a model, including facts about its design and construction.[108] Bel Geddes also released photographs showing workers constructing the *Futurama* model; the juxtaposition between the human scale of the workers and the miniature scale of the model helped viewers grasp the immensity of the project and even supported the fair's message about corporations putting Americans back to work. [see fig. 3.9]. For Americans who only saw the photographs printed in news sources, they provided a visual reference from which to understand the attraction's enormous scale.

As a visually-oriented performance, in fact, *Futurama* adapted easily to mass media distribution; while photographs could not recreate the entire sensory experience, they still communicated the attraction's fundamental ideas about highway expansion. By placing design at the center the performance, reversing the usual relationship of visual elements supporting written text, Bel Geddes proved design's capability as a primary

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[108] Press Release "Spectacular View in the World of the Future," Job 381, Box 019b, Folder 381.17, Bel Geddes Papers.

dramatic narrative. Craig proposed a similar concept in his essay "The Actor and the Uber-marrionette," (1908). He wrote, "Art arrives only by design. Therefore in order to make any work of art it is clear we may only work in those materials with which we can calculate."[109] Although New Stagecraft designers had emulated Craig's modern aesthetic, most felt his suggestion to replace actors with life-sized puppets took his theories too far afield from conventional theatre practice. With *Futurama*, however, Bel Geddes found a practical application for Craig's theory: the consumer product became the inanimate substitute for the live actor. As the designer, he had complete control over the materials, colors, and direction of the performance.

Bel Geddes, however, did more than just create a visual spectacle. Audiences were impressed by his model's massive size and elaborate detail, but it was the moving "Carry-go-Round" format that created the overwhelming public enthusiasm for the exhibit. The conveyor system produced physical sensations of movement, simulating real-time automated travel. Thus, while the scale model allowed audiences to *see* the changes they might experience in the future, the conveyor system allowed them to *feel* what it would be like to live in 1960. Even though the exhibit design created an aerial view, suggesting the perspective seen from an airplane rather than an automobile, it still simulated the experience of modern, mobile citizenship, something that spectators could replicate by owning an automobile. The glass wall separating them from the model could be replaced with a car windshield, transforming real landscapes into the next spectacle.

By breaking the fourth wall and literally moving them inside his design, *Futurama* helped spectators perform their roles as modern, mobile citizens, i.e. car owners. Partitions between the box-seats also helped simulate the driving experience.

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[109] Edward Gordon Craig, "The Actor and the Uber-marionette," *The Mask* 1.2 (1908): 3.

Unlike a traditional theatre auditorium where spectators see their proximity to other audience members, the isolation of the *Futurama* seats reinforced each passenger's individuality, signaling a difference from communal modes of transportation, such as trains, to modes where passengers have privacy and personal agency. The continuously-running exhibition format also simulated freedom of time and mobility; fairgoers did not adhere to a set schedule, as they would for the opening curtain at a theatre or departure time for a train. *Futurama* literally placed fairgoers in the driver's seat; they could decide when they wanted their experience to begin, modeling the type of autonomy car owners have when deciding travel times.

The exhibit, however, only simulated this agency. In actuality, *Futurama* mass-produced the same experience for each fairgoer. It was an assembly-line theatre (appropriate for an automotive company) presenting audiences with a distinctly modern perspective. The spectators' view from the box-seats, in fact, was similar to the perspective Michel De Certeau depicted in his essay "Walking in the City" (1984). Describing his view from a skyscraper, he theorizes the difference between seeing a landscape instantaneously versus that which can only be known through "walking." From atop this building, he reads New York City as a configuration of positions, a setting of buildings, streets, and cars. He argues, however, that the everyday reality of a place is better understood by a person walking through its streets, accessing multiple views and interpretations.[110] Similar to skyscrapers, cars and airplanes distance people from the landscape, shaping their perception of the world. By simulating the viewpoint from these modern modes of transportation, Bel Geddes erased the specifics of everyday living to produce a single, or master, picture of an ideal world built by industry. Fairgoers could

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[110] Michel De Certeau, *The Practices of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1984) 117.

feel that the future had good things in store because as long as they retained their status as

mobile citizen/consumers they would have continued access to this perspective.

Even when *Futurama* offered spectators the opportunity to walk the streets of this

setting, the design's consumer context limited interpretations outside of GM's conception

of the future. The attraction culminated as the box seats move toward a city intersection.

The scale expanded, bringing them closer and closer until spectators suddenly realized

that they had reached a full-scale intersection, the location of the remaining GM pavilion.

"*All eyes to the Future*!" the voice proclaimed as they disembarked in a streamlined,

consumer-oriented environment of automotive and household appliance showrooms [see

fig. 3.10]. The character Edgar from Doctorow's novel describes this final moment:

> with your I HAVE SEEN THE FUTURE button in your hand you came
>
> out into the sun and you were standing on precisely the corner you had just
>
> seen, the future was right where you were standing and what was small
>
> had become big. . . .That dazzled me. Perhaps it might only have been the
>
> sudden passage from darkness to daylight, but I actually wobbled on my
>
> feet. I had the feeling that I too had changed size, and it only lasted a
>
> moment but it was quite strange.[111]

This passage indicates how the exhibit's use of physical movement produced moments of

intense feeling and simulated experience. Beyond merely showing the future, as the

souvenir buttons assertively declared, *Futurama* encouraged spectators to truly believe

that they had been transported into this future.

Thus, even after the audience left the comfort of their box seats, the performance

continued. *Futurama* only introduced them to the GM experience, an opening narrative

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[111] Doctorow 253.

shaping their reception of the remaining exhibit. Once fairgoers entered the full-scale

intersection, they rehearsed their impending roles as modern consumers, shopping in the

showrooms for a new GM car or General Electric appliance. Geographer David Harvey

identifies this type of experience as spatial play, an opportunity to rehearse alternatives to

current social and spatial realities.[112] *Futurama* offered audiences an opportunity to

"play," to engage with a landscape that currently existed in a temporary space but could

potentially become their future. Their imaginings, however, were not free-floating, but

guided by GM's agenda. *Futurama*'s simulation of modern, mobile citizenship promoted

a future in which automobiles provided the only means for full participation. While the

attraction encouraged fairgoers to feel a sense of agency in their roles as consumers, it

was ultimately a role that served GM's interests. With Bel Geddes' help, they presented

a world in which Americans became perpetual spectator/consumers who observe/buy

rather than participate and allowed motion/consumption to replace experience.

Bel Geddes, however, insisted that the exhibit's true achievement was not its

ability to sell cars but to propose solutions to the nation's transportation dilemma.

Futurama , he insisted, offered an answer to the "narrow, congested bottle necks,

dangerous night driving, annoying policemen's whistles, honking horns, blinking traffic

lights, confusing highway signs, and irritating traffic regulations."[113] As mentioned in his

proposal to GM, he emphasized that his concentration was on not only expanding

highways but also maximizing the safety of future motorways while maintaining speed

and efficiency. In correspondence with the National Roadside Council, Bel Geddes also

discussed his battles with GM to keep billboards off his model landscape, indicating a

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[112] David Harvey, *Spaces of Hope* (Berkeley, U of California P, 2000) 161.
[113] Bel Geddes, *Magic Motorways* 4.

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reluctance to place commercial concerns over the integrity of his design.[114] Bel Geddes and GM, in fact, were not consistent in their public statements; despite GM's contention that the exhibit was only a dramatization of future possibilities, Bel Geddes continually insisted that his design could serve as a blueprint for actual construction.

Despite his best efforts, including a trip to the Roosevelt White House to promote his ideas,[115] *Futurama* was never implemented as a model for construction. With the America's entry into World War II in 1941, the nation mobilized around military efforts, suspending plans for highway expansion until the Eisenhower administration in the 1950s. Legislation in 1952 allocated some government funds for road projects, but the 1956 Federal Aid Highway Act (also known as the National Interstate and Defense Highways Act) accelerated construction. Bel Geddes was not included in these projects, but he insisted that the ideas he developed in *Futurama* had influenced them.[116] Whether or not highway designers replicated elements of Bel Geddes's designs, *Futurama* undoubtedly raised public awareness about road development. As fair historian Paul Mason Fotsch writes, the attraction's popularity "provides an excellent clue as to why after World War II there was such tremendous support for construction of a federal highway system."[117] Reaching millions at the fair and in the popular press, *Futurama* generated dialogues about highway planning, provided an impetus for implementation, and deflected resistance to the significant changes that would result in the ensuing years.

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[114] Bel Geddes, letter, 30 October, 1939, Job 381, Box 019d, Folder 381.43, Bel Geddes Papers.

[115] Meikle, *Twentieth Century Limited* 208.

[116] Bel Geddes kept a folder labeled "Traffic Development as a Result of Futurama" in his office files, including artic les about recent highway construction and publications by the automotive industry that promoted his ideas. Job 381, Box 025, Folder 411, Bel Geddes Collection. Innes also suggests that Bel Geddes's designs influenced the Pennsylvania Turnpike, the superhighway "dubbed 'the magic motorway' after the title of Bel Geddes' book on highway design" (146-147).

[117] Paul Mason Fotsch, "The Building of a Superhighway Future as the New York World's Fair," *Cultural Critique* 48.1 (2001): 92.

In other words, *Futurama*'s primary success was not as a construction "blueprint" but as a theatrical performance, a cultural event that captured the nation's collective imagination during this moment in American modernity. Soon after the fair's opening, *Theatre Arts Monthly* sent Morton Eustis to review its performances. Writing for a journal known for its advancement of New Stagecraft designers, it is not surprising that he makes particular note of Bel Geddes's work: "When you look at Norman Bel Geddes' General Motors Building you see at once that a theatre imagination has been at work to dramatize the industry which, more than any other, has changed the drama of twentieth-century life . . . Futurama—the smash hit of the fair—is by far the most dramatic of all the panoramic exhibits in the World of Tomorrow."[118] Eustis recognized the designer's skills as a visual dramatist, as an artist who expressed the modern experience of automotive travel through the ideal combination of modern materials and aesthetics.

Had Bel Geddes not been involved in an experimental movement like the New Stagecraft, he might have been content to place fairgoers in an auditorium and show them a presentation about the future of American highways, similar to many less successful fair exhibits. But even as a theatre designer, Bel Geddes had rejected the proscenium in favor of building spaces to meet the specific needs of a dramatic text, spaces that also increased spectators' sense of physical embodiment and emotional investment in a performance. His reconfiguration of the viewing experience for *Futurama* generated public excitement about this new type of performance that simulated the physical sensations of riding, flying, or walking in a future world. But by creating a performance exclusively around the principles of design, thus realizing Craig's vision of a controlled

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[118] Morton Eustis, "Big Show in Flushing Meadows," *Theatre Arts Monthly* 23 (August 1939): 568.

artistic experience, Bel Geddes also gave corporations a stage from which to promote

their products and construct benevolent identities, convincing Americans to embrace their

roles as modern consumers.

Futurama was far from Bel Geddes last project, but it was his most recognized

and discussed design. The attraction dominates the collective memory of the 1939-1940

World's Fair, entering the American consciousness at a transitional moment, in between

the hardships of the Depression and the nation's entry into World War II. Bel Geddes

and GM's plans were put on hold, but following the war, corporations benefited greatly

from the nation's booming economy. After reallocating equipment and resources from

the war effort, government and industry focused on building a vibrant consumer

marketplace. They not only constructed highways, but also increased production on new

suburban homes, shopping centers, and household appliances. The landscape of

American postwar modernity, however, offered further challenges; just as Bel Geddes's

Futurama exemplified the 1930s pursuit for streamlined efficiency and economic

security, Jo Mielziner's design for *Death of a Salesman* would demonstrate the next

generation's struggle to adapt to overbearing forces of an expansive consumer economy.

Sixty years later, *Futurama*'s influences still resonate in the practices of American

corporations. Bel Geddes' ability to create compelling dramatic narratives that imbued

consumer products with emotional attributes survives in a wide range of commercial

venues that engage in "retail theatre."[119] Cultural critic Alan Bryman refers to this

phenomenon as "Disneyization," tracing the spread of narrative design, or "theming,"

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[119] Maurya Wickstrom, "Commodities, Mimesis, and *The Lion King*: Retail Theatre for the 1990's," *Theatre Journal* 51.3 (1999): 285.

from Disney theme parks to a range of consumer spaces.[120] The legacy of Bel Geddes's

designs, however, exists not just in retail centers and theme parks but in the larger

landscape of highway culture, the repetition of homogenized environments that distribute

Wal-Mart's, Pizza Huts, and Starbucks across the nation. Years before its construction,

Bel Geddes popularized this landscape as an image of American progress; what was once

an innovative idea presented in miniature is now a full-scale reality.

When I first encountered *Futurama*, I was reminded of early experiences in theme

parks, but now recognize that long before I reached the attractions of Epcot, I was

exposed to Bel Geddes's influences on the boring stretches of highway in-between

Tennessee and Orlando. These days, I am a more frequent highway traveler because I

live in the type of suburb predicted by *Futurama*. Highways, however, are not the

efficient transportation system represented in Bel Geddes's model. Car sales have

consistently outpaced highway construction, a circumstance that continues to benefit

corporations like GM and Shell Oil while stranding Americans on congested motorways.

As gas prices continue to rise during the summer of 2006, I cannot help feel a degree of

resentment toward Bel Geddes, GM, and the plan they visualized over sixty years ago.

But I also cannot deny the sustained cultural impact of their design collaboration. In

tracing the affective influences of Bel Geddes's designs, from *The Miracle* to *Futurama*,

I understand how modern design increasingly has functioned as a tool of persuasion,

bypassing reason to tap into the subjective world of emotions. Appropriated for the

consumer marketplace, modern design is a dynamic force, compelling people to engage

in corporate narratives and comply with the future changes they suggest.

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[120] See Alan Bryman, *The Disneyization of Society* (London: Sage, 2004).
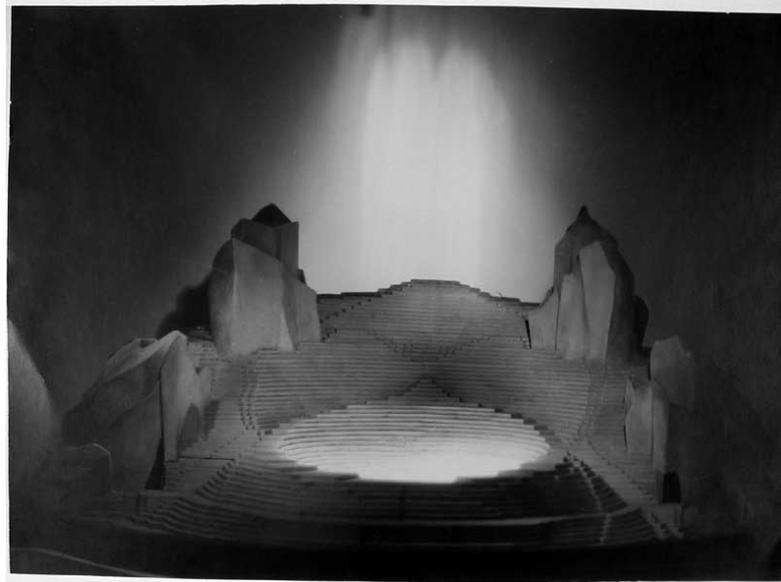
Figure 3.1: Photograph of Bel Geddes's model for *The Divine Comedy* (1921).
(Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin.
Courtesy of the estate of Edith Lutyens Bel Geddes)
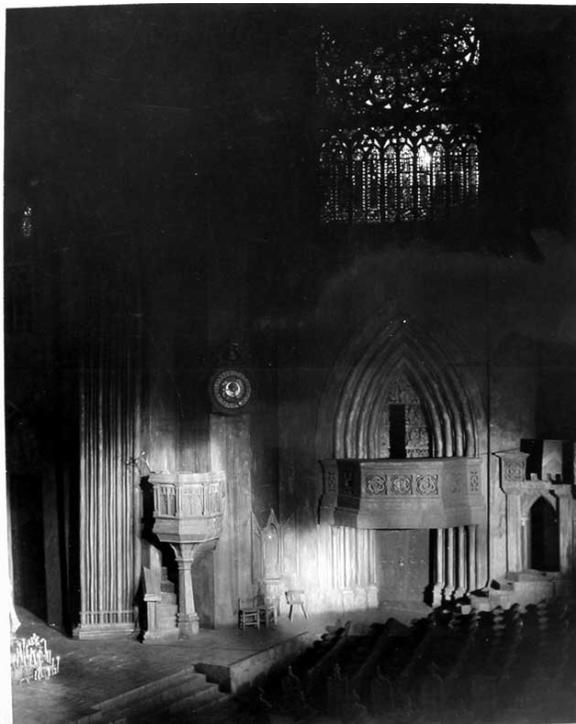
Figure 3.2: Production photograph of *The Miracle*, side view of auditorium
(1923). (Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin.
Courtesy of the estate of Edith Lutyens Bel Geddes)

Figure 3.3: Bel Geddes's Franklin Simon & Co. display window (1927). (Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin. Courtesy of the estate of Edith Lutyens Bel Geddes)
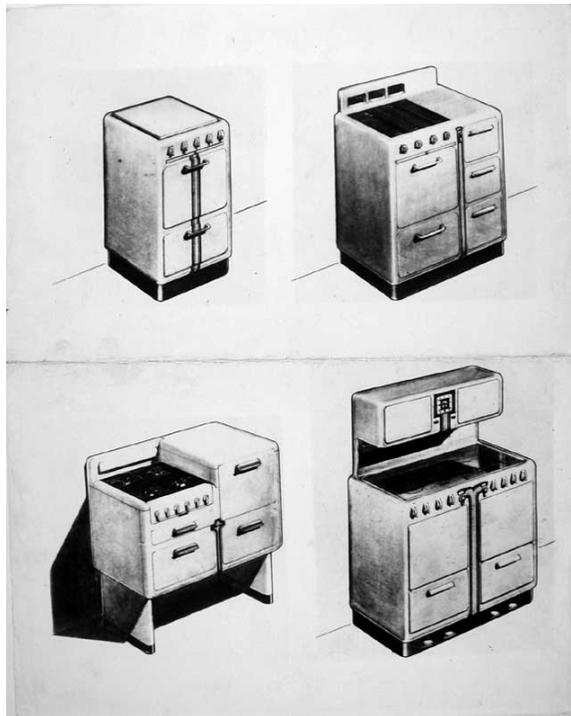
Figure 3.4: Bel Geddes's all-white stove designs. (Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin. Courtesy of the estate of Edith Lutyens Bel Geddes)

Figure 3.5: Bel Geddes's rendering for a streamlined automobile design. (Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin. Courtesy of the estate of Edith Lutyens Bel Geddes)

Figure 3.6: General Motors exhibit building, New York World's Fair 1939-1940. (Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin. Courtesy of the estate of Edith Lutyens Bel Geddes)

Figure 3.7: Bel Geddes and employees with section of *Futurama* model. (Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin. Courtesy of the estate of Edith Lutyens Bel Geddes)


Figure 3.8: *Futurama* spectators looking down at Bel Geddes's model. (Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin. Courtesy of the estate of Edith Lutyens Bel Geddes)
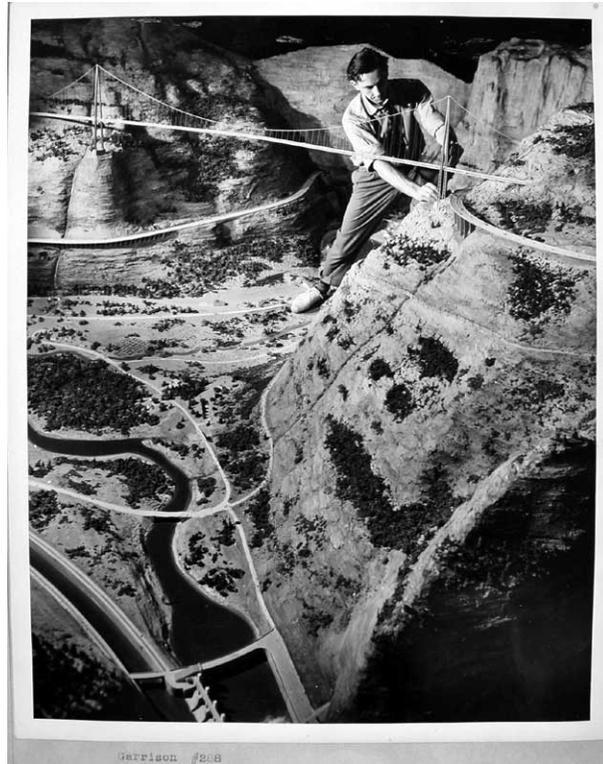
Figure 3.9: Construction on the *Futurama* model. (Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin. Courtesy of the estate of Edith Lutyens Bel Geddes)

Figure 3.10: Full scale intersection in General Motors exhibition building. (Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin. Courtesy of the estate of Edith Lutyens Bel Geddes)

Chapter Four:
Jo Mielziner's Selective Representations of American Modernity

"The theatre is truly the home of magic, of illusion and of wonder. . . It is not and should not be the real world. It simulates, it heightens, it transposes—and how many spectators would it have if it did not?"

-Jo Mielziner, *Designing for the Theatre*

During my senior year as an undergraduate at Wake Forest University, I asked to design the lights for a production of Tennessee William's *Night of the Iguana*. For three years, I had learned design techniques in the university theatre, a space designed by the renowned Broadway artist Joseph "Jo" Mielziner, discovering alongside my colleagues the techniques to transform the stage into a place of "magic," "illusion," and "wonder." Our professors occasionally reminded us of how Mielziner's space influenced our practice; we focused lights on structures he positioned, flew scenery on the counterweight system he recommended, and designed staging according to sightlines he set. He had insisted that the theatre maximize student-usability,[1] and I was a beneficiary from his careful planning. Mielziner's presence was constant but largely unconscious, guiding my learning process and desire to "stimulate" and "heighten" the spectators' experience.

A few weeks before the opening of *Night of the Iguana*, I stood backstage, flipping through envelopes containing the school's selection of gobos (metal cutouts placed inside lighting instruments to produce various patterns of light) until I found one labeled "Jungle Leaf," manufactured by Rosco Laboratories [see fig. 4.1]. The pattern's tangle of tropical leaves provided the perfect complement to the setting of Williams's play, accentuating the exoticism of the lush Mexican rain forest. A series of strategically

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[1] Mary Henderson calls Mielziner's plans for the Wake Forest University Theatre his "greatest achievement and his finest legacy in theatre design," emphasizing the design's student-friendly features *Mielziner: Master of Modern Stage Design* (New York: Watson-Guptill, 2001) 275.

placed gobos would create the illusion of sun shimmering through abundant foliage, evocative of the jungle's tropical heat and untamed landscape.

After consulting the Rosco catalog, I saw Mielziner's name listed as the designer of "Jungle Leaf." Suddenly, my selection seemed fated, an ideal choice for a Mielziner-designed stage, and I wondered if the pattern was a remnant of his work on the Broadway production *South Pacific* (1949), part of his strategy for visualizing the island's tropical location. Had he used the same image on the Broadway stage? Was I holding a piece of Mielziner's original design in my hand? I returned to these questions during subsequent research on *South Pacific*, contacting Rosco for further information; unfortunately the company has no accessible records of their contract with Mielziner.[2] Correspondence with Ming Cho Lee, one of the designer's apprentices during the 1950s, uncovered no specific information about the gobo, although he emphasized Mielziner's role in the innovations of lighting technology during the period. Mielziner was one of the first to create lighting patterns on glass plates placed in front of projectors, and later pioneered efforts to replace projectors with gobo images thrown from controlled lighting instruments, or "lekos."[3]

Although I could not confirm *South Pacific* as a source for the "Jungle Leaf" design, I became increasingly interested in how my previous use of the gobo for *Night of the Iguana* participated in a process of image recycling. Certainly, Williams's play and Rodgers and Hammerstein's musical occupy unrelated positions in the canon of

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[2] Joshua Alemany, Telephone interview. 28 July 2006. Alemany, a project manager for Rosco, speculated that the company began distributing the "Jungle Leaf" gobo in the early 1970s. The gobo is still listed in their current catalogue: http://www.rosco.com/us/gobocatalog/gobos/pages/77731.html.

[3] Ming Cho Lee, "Jo Mielziner," E-mail correspondence, 26 August 2006. Lee worked with Mielziner after his design for *South Pacific*. A few of the sketches used to create glass slides for lighting projections are archived with Mielziner's designs for *South Pacific*, but it is unclear whether these were used as a template for later designs. "Mielziner (Jo) Designs, 1903-1976," Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library of the Performing Arts (hereafter Mielziner Designs).

American drama, but they possess a strong visual connection in the reoccurrence of the jungle motif. Through the eyes of a designer, their formal differences as texts are less important than their similarities as narratives set in an exotic, tropical landscape.

Thus, my dual experience as a designer, inheriting the legacy of Mielziner's material practices, and as a historian, tracing the cultural implications of that legacy, increased my awareness of a significant cultural undercurrent in American theatre; during the middle decades of the twentieth century, the jungle was a necessary backdrop for the stories produced on American stages. With a postwar foreign policy directing military and financial resources toward places such as Asia and Latin America, the image of the jungle entered the American consciousness. As cultural historian Christina Klein argues, the late 1940s and 1950s saw a dramatic increase in the cultural production and consumption of stories set in landscapes like Asia and the Pacific islands.[4] Jungle settings needed to be reproduced with such regularity that the theatre industry mass produced tools for this process. By contracting Mielziner to design a standard jungle leaf gobo, Rosco helped producers create the illusion of a tropical environment for a variety of performances. Projected through a lighting instrument, the gobo creates an understated, almost imperceptible image; yet, even in its ephemerality, the light gives visual shape to the environment. Thus, the repetition of the pattern on American stages disseminated the jungle as a cultural icon.

As a student designer, I was unaware of my involvement in this process of cultural reproduction, assuming that Mielziner's bare stage and jungle leaf gobo were merely the neutral tools with which I constructed my design. Through my recent

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[4] Christina Klein, *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945-1961* (Berkeley: U of California P, 2003) 4.

reinvestigation of Mielziner's career, however, I see my design as part of an ongoing process of image creation, reproduction, and distribution beginning decades before my contribution. As a widely influential Broadway artist during the mid-twentieth century, Mielziner created designs that not only gave expression to social, political, and economic ideas circulating during the moment of production, but also participated in the technologies of image reproduction and consumption that mark this period of American visual culture. Mielziner generated design images deemed so necessary to illustrating the dramas of American life that they became a standard feature of the theatre's vocabulary. Even further, his scenic images generated such popular interest that they often reappeared in the consumer marketplace. Both on stage and off, Mielziner's designs became desirable commodities, created, duplicated, and sold as icons of American modernity.

The following chapter examines Jo Mielziner's Broadway designs for *Death of a Salesman* (1949), *South Pacific* (1949), and *The King and I* (1951). The years under investigation (1949-1951) are more concentrated than the roughly ten or twenty years covered in previous chapters. Instead of mapping crossing influences between designers and broad cultural movements, such as the interactions between Robert Edmond Jones and Greenwich Village bohemia or Norman Bel Geddes and corporate America, this chapter focuses in on a high point in Mielziner's career. These years mark the moment when critics singled him out as America's foremost theatrical designer, an artist whose staging appeared ideally suited to the expressions of contemporary performance. Building from accounts that emphasize Mielziner's collaborative excellence and insightful readings of dramatic texts, I argue that his critical and popular success at this

moment also depended on his perceptive visual analyses of postwar culture. Beyond merely illustrating the milieus of dramatic characters, Mielziner's staging characterized the experiences of American postwar modernity, capturing the perspectives of citizens adapting to a growing consumer economy and expansive foreign policy. I argue that seemingly dissimilar images like Willy Loman's skeletal house and the blowing palm trees of Bali Ha'i are linked as cultural icons, representing a shift away from the turmoil of previous decades and toward aspirations of economic security and national dominance.

With each production selected for analysis, I demonstrate how Mielziner's "selective realism"—a style that bridged aesthetics of theatrical realism and modernism by placing specific, literal objects within poetic, expressionistic environments—critiqued processes of modernization such a suburbanization, consumerism, and American imperialism. I draw strategic connections between Mielziner's aesthetic choices and the social, economic, and political ideologies of postwar culture to uncover the iconic status of his designs. Because his *Salesman* design has received considerable critical attention, it provides a fitting example to explore selective realism as a type of cultural criticism. Similar to Jones's critique in the *Dumb Wife,* Mielziner's *Salesman* revealed a consumer landscape structuring the lives of everyday citizens. His staging reinterpreted American domesticity, where the walls of urban homes bleed into surrounding buildings and kitchen appliances become wholly symbolic of the American dream. Just as Bel Geddes' product designs a decade before characterized the nation's drive for technological progress, *Salesman* transformed appliances into flashes of realism in an otherwise abstract world, revealing the potentially destructive consequences of the postwar consumer lifestyle.

Following *Salesman*, the chapter turns to Mielziner's selective realism for the musicals *South Pacific* and *The King and I*, examining how his visual juxtaposition of East/West design elements expressed the cultural tensions engendered by global processes of modernization during the postwar era. I also draw attention to the legal negotiations surrounding the commercial replication of his designs. Mielziner's ability to crystallize the cultural moment with iconic images generated a demand for his designs in the consumer marketplace. By asserting ownership over his designs, particularly when they were replicated on film or as merchandise, he helped theatrical designers gain the same legitimacy and protection in the marketplace as industrial designers like Bel Geddes. Even further, the circulation of Mielziner's designs beyond the stage secured their status as cultural icons, images that continue to endure in the American consciousness and reinforce the perspectives and preoccupations of postwar Americans.

Jo Mielziner's Iconic Designs of American Modernity

Mielziner has long received attention from critics and historians interested in illuminating the "golden age" of Broadway theatre during the middle years of the twentieth century. His designs dominated New York stages during the 1940s and 1950s and his associations with critically acclaimed playwrights and directors further secured his reputation as a leader in the American theatre. Alongside Jones, Mielziner achieved a hero-like status within American design history, celebrated for his longevity in the New York theatre and exceptional skills interpreting dramatic texts. If Jones "gave the impetus for change in scenic art in America," as theatre historian Mary Henderson argues, Mielziner took design to the next level, making "scenery interact with the script

and the actors as no one before him had done."[5] For productions like *Death of a Salesman*, *South Pacific*, and *The King and I*, Mielziner played a major role in the development process; his scenic renderings inspired lyrics from Oscar Hammerstein II, his staging stimulated new choreography from Jerome Robbins, and his design solutions prompted directors like Elia Kazan to re-envision their entire production strategy. Mielziner's designs, in other words, became inseparable from the dramatic texts they inspired and interpreted. Contemporary critics, as well as later theatre historians, recognized that such intimate collaborations precluded an analysis of individual production elements;[6] Mielziner's contributions were not merely supplementary but vital to the larger performance strategy.

His designs, indeed, were so successful in capturing the meaning and tone of these dramatic texts that neither critics nor audiences could imagine alternative scenic interpretations. The *Salesman* character Willy Loman seemed incomplete without his skeletal house, and similarly *South Pacific*'s Bloody Mary without the mystical islands of Bali Ha'i and *The King and I*'s Anna Leonowens without the exotic Bangkok palace. As one colleague later remarked, Mielziner's ability to "[zero] in so immaculately on the author's intentions" created a design precedent that subsequent productions of the same dramatic text would have to acknowledge.[7]

But despite the persistent echoes of Mielziner's original designs on American stages, his visual interpretations of dramatic texts were products of a specific moment in

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[5] Henderson, *Mielziner* 303.

[6] Ronn Smith, "American Theatre Design Since 1945," *The Cambridge History of American Theatre, Volume Three: Post-World War II to the 1990s*, eds. Don B. Wilmeth and Christopher Bigsby (New York: Cambridge UP, 1998) 516.

[7] Tony Walton, "Mesmerized by Mielziner: A Designer's Thank-You," *American Theatre* 14.4 (1997): 39.

postwar American culture, and his overwhelming success reflected not only postwar

politics but also the economic realities of the entertainment industry. During the late

1940s and early 1950s, Broadway theatres were competing with the products of imaging

technologies like television and motion pictures and, at the same time, using these

technologies to reach a wider American audience. As theatre historian Stacy Wolf notes

in *A Problem Like Maria*, Broadway theatre during the 1950s operated across multiple

entertainment markets, co-opting media like television to promote their performances.[8]

Indeed, the growing proliferation of electronic entertainment contrasted significantly with

the decreased number of operating Broadway theatres, a phenomenon that had begun

during the Depression but continued during the postwar era. As ticket prices rose,

adjusting to soaring production costs, Broadway theatres were increasingly inaccessible

to working-class audiences and became perceived as elitist in comparison to more

democratic performance mediums like radio, television, and film.[9] Those purchasing a

Broadway ticket, therefore, expected something distinctive from other entertainment

offerings. Mielziner's designs helped Broadway producers compete in this new market

of higher expectations and image saturation; they raised the bar for theatrical staging,

providing Broadway audiences with a stimulating visual experience, but also helped

producers participate in a number of mass-market ventures.

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[8]Stacy Wolf's *A Problem Like Maria: Gender and Sexuality in the American Musical* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2002). Wolf's study notes that Broadway musicals became a regular feature of 1950s America popular culture, available to mass audiences through various television appearances of well-known performers and the purchase of cast recordings on new long-playing albums (8).

American television broadcasting began in 1939, but accelerated significantly after the war. Starting in 1946, television sets became widely available to the American public, and broadcasting continued to grow to meet the demand of new markets. Phillip Auslander, *Liveness*: *Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1999) 14.

[9] Bruce McConachie, *American Theatre in the Culture of the Cold War: Producing and Contesting Containment, 1947-1962* (Iowa City: U of Iowa, 2003) 1.

Thus, Mielziner's designs during this period, both on and off the stage, demonstrate Broadway's growing reliance on design to develop and promote its productions. Enthusiastic audience response helped make his designs valuable commodities; Mielziner's images from musicals in particular were reproduced in various commercial contexts—production advertising, fashion merchandising, and even motion pictures. These reproduced images not only disseminated his designs across a broad cross-section of Americans, but also helped create a sense of aura around Mielziner's original design. As Walter Benjamin argued in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," mediated image technology like photography and film altered modern subjects' viewing practices; original images like paintings (or theatre designs) maintained an aura of authenticity, but reproductions of the same images had the ability to "reactivate the object" in a variety of situations and locations.[10] Like the mass-distributed cast recording albums that allowed audiences to listen to Broadway musicals in their homes, the reproductions of Mielziner's designs on women's scarves or home décor products also helped spectators "reactivate" the original Broadway experience.

Mielziner's original designs, however, also contained elements that replicated the aesthetics of film, revealing the influence of mediated technologies on his artistry. Many critics and historians have described his designs as "cinematic" because they helped theatrical productions quickly transition from scene to scene without breaks in the action. Mielziner biographer Henderson details many of his cinematic techniques, including the deft movement of scenery on turntables or sliding wagons or his use of scrim-covered

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[10] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (1955; New York: Schocken, 1969) 220-221.

scenic elements revealed background images when projected with light.[11] In a 1951

interview for *New York Times Magazine*, Mielziner discussed the effects of entertainment

technologies on the expectations of postwar spectators. Contemporary audiences, he

remarked, had become accustomed to a faster pace of life: "Twenty-five years ago . . .

audiences would all sit patiently for two or three minutes before a lowered curtain,

accepting over-long scenic changes. But radio, TV and movies have quickened the pace

of storytelling"[12] Thus, Mielziner increasingly looked for production techniques and

design strategies that would maximize the efficiency of his staging.

      Yet, while Mielziner strove to match the tempo of cinematic storytelling, his

staging was distinctive from the mediated images audiences encountered. His style of

selective realism was more discriminating than a camera lens; his designs did not fully

reject the realistic aesthetic popularized by film, but rather drew focus to certain realistic

objects by placing them within abstracted, expressionistic landscapes communicating the

emotional quality of dramatic texts. In this regard, Mielziner's designs did more than

illustrate the landscapes of postwar America, but significantly captured the subjectivity of

people living within those landscapes. His designs visualized modern life and moved at a

modern pace, both crystallizing and critiquing the cultural moment.

      Close study of Mielziner's career, therefore, reveals a shift in the visual character

of Broadway theatre during the middle of the twentieth century. Visual culture

scholarship tends to overlook this shift because of the ascendance of television and

popularity of motion pictures at the same time. At a time when images increasingly

dominated popular culture, Mielziner emerged as an artist with the talent to create

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[11] Henderson, *Mielziner* 302.
[12] Alice Louchheim, "Script to Stage: Case History of a Set," *New York Times Magazine* 19 Dec. 1951: 24.

evocative visual narratives, thus helping Broadway compete within shifting markets of mainstream entertainment. His overwhelming success gave the theatrical design a new level of autonomy; design became recognized as a visual language connected to dramatic texts but also separately useful and reproducible beyond the original performance.

In using the term "iconic" to describe Mielziner's designs, I purposefully call attention to their symbolic meanings for audiences during American postwar modernity. Scholars of visual culture define icons as images perceived to represent people's shared ideas and sentiments during a particular historical moment; furthermore, within cultures of modernity, icons become forged through the "endless reproducibility" of mass production and consumption.[13] Indeed, the transformation of Mielziner's stage images into commercial products further demonstrates the processes of consumerism that co-opted the aesthetics of modernism to sell merchandise to the American public. In *Consumer Culture and Modernity*, Don Slater writes: "Consumer culture is about continuous self-creation through the accessibility of things which are themselves presented as new, modish, faddish, or fashionable, always improved and improving."[14] Similar to Bel Geddes's industrial designs, Mielziner's theatre designs were put to productive use within the consumer economy. During the postwar period, he introduced the newest "fashion" in theatrical staging, an aesthetic combination of realism and expressionism that rationalized modern art for mainstream consumption.

Of the productions selected, Mielziner's design for *Salesman* has received the most attention from critics and scholars. Like Jones's work on *Dumb Wife*, this production represents a landmark in the history of American design. Henderson argues:

[13] Marita Stuken and Lisa Cartwright, *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001) 36-37.

[14] Don Slater, *Consumer Culture and Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997) 10.

"The movement toward weaving the scenery into the fabric of the play reached its apogee in *Death of a Salesman*. Unlike Robert Edmond Jones's seminal setting for *The Man Who Married a Dumb Wife*, a play that is remembered chiefly for his set, the setting for *Salesman* inextricably became the play and the play became the setting."[15] Henderson's comparison reasserts the designers' genealogical connection; Mielziner briefly served as Jones's apprentice and claimed this training as crucial to his artistic development. Mielziner not only inherited Jones's New Stagecraft legacy, her critique suggests, but surpassed his mentor, producing a design that complemented a dramatic text without overshadowing it. Mielziner's substantial contributions in producing a canonical masterpiece of American drama become evidence of the designer's rise to equal status within a production's artistic team.

Mielziner's work on *Salesman* also becomes the foremost example used by design historians to discuss his hallmark style of selective realism. His designs offered an aesthetic compromise between the stark abstraction of the early New Stagecraft and the literal Belasco-esque realism that provoked the movement's rebellion. In the previously quoted 1951 *New York Times Magazine* interview, the phrase "selective realism" is used to describe Mielziner's "reduction of everything to the simplest possible terms."[16] When interpreting a dramatic text, he selected elements which most effectively conveyed the text's central themes and brought them into focus by omitting superfluous details. Realistic objects grounded the characters' actions and location, but their placement within poetic or atmospheric backgrounds magnified the characters' subjective experiences.

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[15] Henderson, *Mielziner* 172.
[16] Louchheim 24. In a short article Mielziner wrote for the New York Times in 1939, he referred to his design style as "concentrated realism." Jo Mielziner, "Scenery in This Play?," *New York Times* 22 Oct. 1939: Art Section 1.

Some design historians like Ronn Smith and Arnold Aronson have described Mielziner's style as "theatrical realism" or "poetic realism," phrases also used to express the lyricism of Miller and Williams' dramas during this period.[17] Such designations align the designer with the foremost playwrights of the post-war period, legitimizing his position as a leading artist in the American theatre. This study uses the phrase "selective realism" because it more specifically distinguishes Mielziner's design contribution. The term "selective" emphasizes the designer's active engagement in a type of visual criticism. Mielziner purposefully *selected* specific realistic objects and emphasized their significance by placing them within more ambiguous, expressionistic backgrounds. His selective realism, therefore, was more than just a refinement of New Stagecraft aesthetics but a style with social and political implications, revealing Americans' perceptions of themselves and the world in which they lived during the mid-twentieth century.

Critical analysis of his selective realism is almost exclusively confined to Mielziner's designs for productions such as *Salesman* or Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire*. But Mielziner used many of the same techniques for musicals as he did for legitimate dramas, including the visual magnification of select realistic elements within poetic backgrounds. Indeed, far from limiting his selective realism to legitimate dramas, Mielziner developed the style on the musical stage during the 1930s. As he writes in his memoir, "the metamorphosis" that occurred in his later designs for Miller's and Williams's plays was the "result of the earlier simplification of sets for musicals."[18] Mielziner increasingly found new ways to eliminate scenic elements, thus minimizing

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[17] Smith 516; Arnold Aronson, "American Theatre in Context: 1945-Present," *The Cambridge History of American Theatre, Vol. 3* 96.

[18] Jo Mielziner, *Designing for the Theatre: A Memoir and a Portfolio* (New York: Atheneum, 1965) 216.

time between scene shifts. In addition to using established vaudeville conventions like scenes "in one," drop curtains that hid shifting scenery while actors played scenes downstage, Mielziner developed new techniques such as the "rear fold traveler," a slow-moving curtain that tracked across the stage while stagehands set the next scene.[19] He also used scrim to cover these curtains; when lit from the front, they hid the shift happening behind, but once the stage was set, rear illumination revealed the next scene.

Mielziner's selective realism, therefore, took shape on the musical stage. Years before working with Miller and Williams, he had begun to develop new staging techniques and think critically about a process of selecting key components to best communicate the central themes of a production and drawing emphasis to those themes through a strategic blend of realistic and abstract aesthetics. One of the difficulties in applying the phrase "selective realism" to Mielziner's musical designs lies in the self-conscious, presentational nature of the musical genre. As musical scholar Richard Kislan writes: "Effective musical theatre design bypasses reality" because its ultimate goal is to draw focus to "the singing, moving, dancing actor."[20] Undeniably, Mielziner's designs for musicals demonstrate aesthetic differences from those for legitimate plays, principally in their bold colors and exaggerated shapes. These designs, however, still demonstrate his selection of literal elements that authenticate time and place and expressionistic backgrounds that communicate the characters' subjectivity, choices that continued to reflect back on perspectives of postwar American culture.

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[19] Mary Henderson, "Post Mielzinerism, or What If," *Theatre Design and Technology* 37.3 (2001): 19.

[19] Mielziner, *Designing for the Theatre* 216.

[20] Richard Kislan, *The Musical: A Look at the American Musical Theatre* (New York: Applause, 1995) 251.

Mielziner recognized the musical stage as a legitimate challenge for theatrical designers, and he argued that within the twentieth century musicals had offered a more "progressive, imaginative and original" performance experience than many of its dramas. "Musicals have inspired experimental, expressive means where actors, music, lyrics, book and dancing all move together."[21] Indeed, with their emphasis on quick, unified movement, musicals encapsulate the rapid speed and efficiency of modern American living, and Mielziner understood the need for scenery to keep up with their brisk narrative pace. Choreographers such as Agnes de Mille and Jerome Robbins had also expanded the role of dance in musicals during the 1940s and fifties, a development that necessitated an open, adaptable stage providing dancers with ample space for large-scale production numbers.[22] As a result, Mielziner created designs that not only moved quickly but also eliminated unnecessary clutter, expressing the narrative qualities of the musical with minimal but vibrant details. With both his innovative staging techniques and selectively realistic style, Mielziner freed musicals from previously rigid formats to visually and spatially express the quick tempos and fluid places of American modernity.

Thus, Mielziner's preeminence as a Broadway designer during the postwar era occurred through a combination of keen skills of dramatic analysis, savvy business acumen, and a realization of the interpretive strength of theatrical design to visualize the narratives of American culture. Ultimately, he initiated a new vocabulary of theatrical design during the postwar era and redefined spectators' expectations of the Broadway stage; his success not only motivated other designers to adopt his techniques, but also stimulated contemporary playwrights, lyricists, and composers to explore new ways of

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[21] Louchheim 24.
[22] Henderson, *Mielziner* 156-57.

writing for the stage. Furthermore, Mielziner obtained financial control over his artistry,

signaling the increased power of the visual image in the postwar American consumer

economy and influence of theatrical design in shaping the consumer landscape. In this

way, his commercial negotiations connect him to Bel Geddes's career in industry.[23] But

unlike Bel Geddes, Mielziner spent the bulk of his career working in the New York

theatre, bridging the artistic traditions of New Stagecraft predecessors like Jones with the

commercial obligations of Broadway.

Selective Realism as Cultural Criticism: *Death of a Salesman*

Jo Mielziner was born in 1901, the son of Leo and Ella, two American artists

living in Paris. The Mielziners moved to New York City in 1909, and, for the most part,

Jo remained a resident of the city until his death in 1976. Jo initially thought to follow in

the footsteps of his father and become a painter, but later shifted his interest from studio

art to stage design. In an article Mielziner wrote titled "Death of a Painter," he explained

this shift and his realization that "the art of scenic design was a field rich in expression

and emotionally satisfying," particularly because designers worked in both visual images

and "the fourth dimension of time-space."[24] Prompted by his older brother, actor

Kenneth MacKenna (originally Leo Mielziner, Jr.), Jo became an apprentice at the

Bonstelle Stock Company in Detroit (1921), Joseph Urban's scenic studio (1922), and the

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[23] Mielziner did participate in quite a few industrial design ventures, as evidenced by the collection of projects in his archive. "Mielziner (Jo) Papers, 1903-1976,"Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library of the Performing Arts (hereafter Mielziner Papers). Henry Dreyfus, a leading industrial designer, brought Mielziner a number of projects, including a exhibit design for the AT&T Pavilion at the 1964/65 New York World's Fair. Mielziner's "From Drumbeat to Telstar" incorporated ride technology that Bel Geddes had originated with *Futurama*; however, it did not receive as much attention as the exhibits designed by Walt Disney like Pepsi-Cola's *It's a Small World* and General Electric's *Carousel of Progress*.

[24] Jo Mielziner, "Death of a Painter," *American Artist* 13.9 (1949): 35. Appearing on the heels of Mielziner's success with *Salesman* and *South Pacific* in 1949, this article is one of many that helped Mielziner gained prominence as a public figure in the arts.

Theatre Guild in New York (1923), where he assisted Lee Simonson.[25] Two years later,

Mielziner spent five months working for Robert Edmond Jones, thus receiving his

earliest theatre training from the hands of New Stagecraft pioneers.

In this memoir, Mielziner gives tribute to these influences, noting how individuals

like Jones left a "lasting effect on my work both technically and creatively."[26] He

received his first Broadway credit when Simonson asked him to design Ferenc Molnár's

The Guardsmen (1924) for the Theatre Guild, a surprise hit staring Alfred Lunt and Lynn

Fontanne that moved to the Booth Theatre.[27] But it was not until his design for Maxwell

Anderson's *Winterset* (1935) that he reached the same artistic status as his New

Stagecraft mentors. His reputation continued to grow throughout the 1930s; Mielziner

established himself as a leader in the field who, capitalizing from the advances of those

who preceded him, continued to strengthen the collaborative role of designers and

promote their contributions as vital to the development of dramatic texts.

Mielziner's career advanced even further in the 1940s and 50s, a period many

refer to a "golden age" in American theatre, when he collaborated with major playwrights

such as Williams and Miller and musical theatre giants Rodgers and Hammerstein.

Within theatre history, his design for Miller's *Death of a Salesman* serves not only as the

highpoint of his career but also the pinnacle success or, as Henderson contends, the

"apogee" of the New Stagecraft movement. The abundance of artifacts from the

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[25] Both Simonson and Urban were early New Stagecraft proponents. Urban moved to America
from Vienna, Austria, and his designs for the Boston Opera (beginning in 1912) introduced American
spectators to European modern design. Urban's design aesthetic, Arnold Aronson notes, was more
painterly and colorful than other New Stagecraft artists like Jones and Simonson who preferred a
monochromatic palette. *Looking into the Abyss: Essays on Scenography* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P,
2005) 150. Simonson, like Jones, was an early designer for the Washington Square Players and later
became a board member and principal designer for the Theatre Guild.

[26] Mielziner, *Designing for the Theatre* 3.

[27] Henderson, *Mielziner* 51-52. The same performance also launched Lunt and Fontanne's career.

design—scenic renderings, production photographs, reproduced sketches for play anthologies—helps secure its place within theatre history. Henderson interprets this abundance of evidence as a sign of the designer's intuitive nature: "As if he knew beforehand that he was working on a landmark production, he preserved every shred of paper on which he had sketched his preliminary ideas for the scenery."[28] While Mielziner was certainly a discerning critic of dramatic texts, it is also important to recognize his active role in preserving and promoting the design. *Salesman* holds the central position in his career history because he placed it there. He constantly held up the design as representative of his collaborative and artistic approach. His day-by-day account of *Salesman*, in fact, encompasses the majority of his memoir, providing a behind-the-scenes, case study of a successful design in the making.[29] Through his careful articulation of the design's contribution, *Salesman* became more than just a cornerstone in the canon of American drama; it became a masterwork of theatrical collaboration.

Mielziner was brought onto *Salesman* by producer Kermit Bloomgarden who needed an experienced designer to offer a "scenic solution" to Miller's manuscript; the initial draft contained over forty scenes fluctuating between the past and present life of Willy Loman, a salesman struggling to understand his failures both at work and home. Mielziner's answer to Miller's episodic plot structure was to design a permanent unit setting—the Loman house—to visually frame all the scenes. Mielziner stated that "the most important visual symbol of the play—the real background of the story—was the Salesman's house. Therefore, why should that house not be the main set, with all the

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[28] Henderson, *Mielziner* 302.
[29] Mielziner, *Designing for the Theatre* 25-63. Mielziner also wrote about *Salesman* in the "Death of a Painter" article, using the production as an example of the complexity of the stage designer's job and another reason why the theatre lured him away from a career as a studio painter.

other scenes—the corner of a grave stone, a hotel room in Boston, the corner of a business office, a lawyer's consultation room, and so on—played on a forestage?"[30] Mielziner created a skeletal outline of a typical suburban home, using cutouts to suggest its roof and gables and covering its walls with scrim so audiences could see the backdrop of apartment buildings overrunning the neighborhood [see fig. 4.2]. When lit from behind, the walls faded, revealing the gloomy city landscape of Willy's present. During flashbacks to his past, leaf projections erased the buildings, transforming the house into the sun-blessed, idyllic place of Willy's memory. Mielziner's carefully controlled lighting, designed in collaboration with Edward Kook, created smooth transitions from one scene to the next, as well as isolating the scenes occurring in varying locations.

Both Miller and Kazan recognized Mielziner's significant influence in the development and production of *Salesman*. In his autobiography, Kazan wrote: "Both Miller and I were praised for what Jo had conceived," noting how the design supported the text's fluidity of time and flashback sequences.[31] Subsequent drafts of Miller's script reflected Mielziner's design contribution, particularly his stage directions describing Willy's "fragile-seeming home" and the "angry glow of orange" from the "solid vault of apartment houses."[32] These poetic phrases perfectly exemplify Mielziner's scenic renderings, leaving little doubt that the written and visual texts are at once mutually complementary and dependent. Indeed, the frequent inclusion of images illustrating Mielziner's design in published editions of the play further recognizes its vital

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[30] Mielziner, *Designing for the Theatre* 25-26.

[31] Elia Kazan, *A Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988) 361. Kazan further states: "the stage direction in the original manuscript that Art gave me to read directly he'd finished it does not mention a home as a scenic element. . . Although the spectral home is a directorial vision, it was not my idea any more than it was Art's. It was urged on us by the scenic designer, Jo Mielziner" (361).

[32] Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman* (New York: Viking Press, 1981) 11. In his autobiography *Timebends* (New York: Grove Press, 1987), Miller mentions the importance of Mielziner's work, noting how his designs liberated playwrights to create more fluid stage compositions (182).

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contribution. In letters between Miller, Mielziner, Prentice-Hall publishers, the playwright requested that printed editions of *Salesman* include a series of modified drawings to be used by amateur producers, remarking that he preferred to see Mielziner's setting "reproduced than that the unaccountable imaginations of unknown and distant parties by given free play."[33] By encouraging future adherence to Mielziner's original concept, Miller acknowledged his play's dependency on the design. The ideas that he wanted communicated by the script were indelibly linked to Mielziner's scenic images.

His design, therefore, was more than just a "scenic solution" to the complexities of Miller's play, but a primary impulse behind its dramatic shape. Mielziner's staging reiterated and refined Miller's critique of American capitalism,[34] creating iconic images that have become inseparable from the play's cultural meanings. Practically, he provided a stage representing multiple times and locations without distracting or lengthy scene shifts; symbolically, he captured the fractured sensibilities and perspectives of the postwar era. As an icon of American modernity, Willy Loman's skeletal house was an image of domestic instability, countering contemporary postwar rhetoric of the "home" as a place of security, abundance, and fulfillment.[35] Far from steady or dependable, the Loman's home is merely an outline, present at one moment, disintegrating the next. Mielziner's staging created a complex relationship between the house and the surrounding city, communicating the swift changes endemic to modern landscapes.

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[33] Arthur Miller, Letter to Jo Mielziner (22 February 1949), Box 31, Folder 1, Mielziner Papers.

[34] My analysis of Mielziner's design participates within a large body of dramatic criticism devoted to *Salesman*. Within this scholarship, there is a division between those who analyze the play ahistorially, exploring the universal qualities of Willy's character, and those applying a cultural critique, asking how Willy represents the postwar struggle to achieve an American ideal shaped by capitalism. Karl Harshbarger outlines these two streams of criticism in the introduction of *The Burning Jungle: An Analysis of Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman* (Washington D.C.: UP of America, 1979) 2. My study is in closest conversation with other social, political, and economic interpretations of the play.

[35] Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic, 1988) 3.

With his interpretation of Willy's house as the "most important visual symbol" of Miller's text, Mielziner revealed his techniques of selective realism as a process of critical analysis. By selecting the house as the visual frame for Willy's life, Mielziner engaged in an insightful critique of the social and psychological effects created by the material circumstances of American domesticity. Reviewer Brooks Atkinson even referred to *Salesman* as a "suburban epic," reinforcing Mielziner's visual context and its relevance to the contemporary moment.[36] During a period when suburban neighborhoods and family home ownership became symbolic of postwar renewal and middle-class prosperity, the *Salesman* house denaturalized this idyllic image. The open, sunny suburb of Willy's past gives way to the shadow-filled, overdeveloped urban neighborhood of his declining years. Mielziner's design characterized urban growth as a detrimental rather than progressive force; Willy's spectral house illustrated the situation of many lower income American families in the postwar generation, struggling to adapt to changes occurring in their local landscapes. As a visual icon, the house symbolizes more than just Willy's struggle but the economic reality of many Americans and the interconnectedness between systems of capitalism and landscapes of domesticity.

From this perspective, Mielziner's *Salesman* house continues the cultural critique of Jones's staging for the *Dumb Wife*, with both designs illustrating the effects of an urban economy on the domestic places and activities of its inhabitants. But whereas Jones created an allegorical landscape of consumerism, Mielziner's design was in dialogue with themes of containment focused on the home during the early years of the Cold War. Cultural historian Elaine Tyler May argues that rhetoric around domesticity

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[36] Brooks Atkinson, "'*Death of a Salesman*,' a New Drama by Arthur Miller, Has Premiere at the Morosco," *The New York Times* 11 February 1949.

supported the era's conservative politics: "amid a world of uncertainties brought about by World War II and its aftermath, the home seemed to offer a secure nest removed from the dangers of the outside world."[37] The home became a useful place to reinforce traditional gender roles and bolster the consumer economy. Industry forces that had previous supported the war effort now reallocated resources to manufacture products such as kitchen appliances, automobiles, and suburban homes. As May argues, the "suburban ideal of homeownership would diffuse two potentially disruptive forces: women and workers. In appliance-laden houses across the country, working-class as well as business-class breadwinners could fulfill the new American work-to-consume ethic."[38] By pressing women out of the workforce and into the home, conservative political interests reduced the percentage of unemployed men and weakened labor unions. The containment policies of the Truman administration found less challenge from Americans benefiting a booming economy that magnified their power as consumers/homeowners.

In the original *Salesman* production, Lomans' status as homeowners was continually reinforced by Mielziner's design, specifically the skeletal house framing each scene. But the staging deconstructed contemporary rhetoric of domestic bliss, providing a poignant critique of postwar ideology. While more affluent families were moving to newer suburbs, Willy and his wife Linda were trapped in a decaying house, increasingly surrounded by dingy apartment buildings blocking the sun from their once-thriving garden. In the scenes set in the present, the house showed signs of decay with holes in the outdoor trellis and a dead tree in the yard. The design's diagonal lines from the roof and gables pull visual focus up toward the apartment building background, a semi-

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[37] May 3.
[38] Ibid. 164.

abstract mixture low lying fences with broken pickets and a vertical jumble of fire-escapes. The backdrop reminded spectators of the damaging influence of the urban sprawl, the way in which it relentlessly suffocated the Loman's house. The sudden shifts to Willy's past, using lighting projections to erase the gloom and decay, offered a visual juxtaposition to his present situation. The fluid shifts from the cheerful suburban stereotype to the Loman's gritty present reality represented the continual flux of economic forces beyond their control; American families, the image suggested, could not fully guarantee their security in the constantly changing landscapes of modernity.

These themes of impermanence and uncertainty, articulated persuasively by Mielziner's design, expressed a hold-over mentality from the Depression. In a 1995 BBC interview, Miller stated that the production explored the consequences of "what happens when everybody has a refrigerator and a car. I wrote *Salesman* at the beginning of the greatest boom in world history but I felt that the reality was Depression, the whole thing coming down in a heap of ashes."[39] Many postwar Americans feared that overproduction by industry forces could lead to a saturated market and another Depression. Indeed, the streamlined products that Bel Geddes and his industry colleagues imagined would liberate American consumers had become merely another sales technique; with companies producing more products in "newer" styles, the nation's economic stability depended on increased consumption by its citizens. The months preceding and following *Salesman*'s Broadway premiere was also a time of political uncertainty; before the February 1949 opening, the U.S. government had engaged in a series of military operations to contain Russian Communism, providing aid to Greece during its civil war

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[39] Quoted by Christopher Bigsby, "Introduction," *The Cambridge Companion to Arthur Miller*, ed. Christopher Bisgby (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997) 3.

and airlifting supplies to civilians in Berlin after the Soviets blockaded the city. Cold

War tensions continued with the fall of China to Communist forces in August, 1949 and

the announcement of a Soviet atomic bomb the following month; another increase in U.S.

military action would demand substantial financial resources, potentially plunging the

nation back into economic difficulty.[40] *Salesman* reminded spectators that their current

peace and prosperity could be fleeting; in a consumer-driven culture, one family's

happiness and security depended on their ability to pay bills and purchase goods. Willy's

failure to achieve the "American dream" is a result not just in his inability to *sell* products

but also, significantly, *buy* products.

The selective realism of Mielziner's design accentuates Willy's failure as a

consumer, particularly in the interior spaces of the house. The dingy kitchen, occupying

center stage, contained a series of realistic details, including a table and chairs, a

refrigerator, a telephone, and a hot water heater (behind a curtain but visible when lit

from behind). These appliances provided the actors with practical stage business,[41] but

they also demonstrate the Loman's financial state. In his production notes, Mielziner

specifies the need for an older model icebox, purposefully rejecting the type of

streamlined style of appliances designed by Bel Geddes.[42] Far from a symbol of modern

progress, this refrigerator was hopelessly outdated and, unfortunately, broken, as Linda

reminded Willy. As one of the few realistic items included, the refrigerator takes on

symbolic meaning, representing the plight of low-income families in the postwar

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[40] Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United Stages 1492-Present*, revised and updated ed. (1980; New York: Harper, 1995) 421.

[41] Kazan requested that Mielziner include an "ice-box" to provide some "casual business in the kitchen." Letter to Jo Mielziner (4 November, 1948), p.2, Box 31, Folder 1, Mielziner Papers.

[42] In a letter dated 8 December 1948, Mielziner received a photograph of the 1934 single door refrigerator from the publicity department of General Electric. Box 31, Folder 1, Mielziner Papers.

consumer economy. If consumers gain both their public and private identity from the goods they purchase, then Willy becomes as broken and ineffectual as the appliance he cannot afford to replace. In a wholly realistic setting, the refrigerator would be just one more detail lending authenticity to the entire location; on Mielziner's stage, however, the same property serves as an effective critique of consumer capitalism.

The Loman's inability to purchase the latest commercial products keeps them from successfully participating within the modern definition of American consumer citizenship. Through the Loman's kitchen, the audience sees their failure to meet the standard norm of a middle-class American lifestyle. Willy's professional breakdown has a direct impact on his private life, decreasing his power as a consumer which, in turn, shapes his negative self-perception. Cultural critic Don Slater argues that

> consumer culture is bound up with the *idea* of modernity, of modern experience and of modern subjects. In so far as 'the modern' constitutes itself around a sense of the world experienced by a social actor who is deemed individually free and rational . . . then the figure of the consumer and the experience of consumerism is both exemplary of the new world and integral to its thinking. [43]

Corporate forces had succeeded in convincing mainstream Americans that the postwar magnification of the consumer economy was a sign of national recovery and progress, a message that Bel Geddes had helped them communicate with performances like *Futurama*. Willy Loman has internalized this corporate ideology. He interprets his circumstances as a result of his own free actions, his inability to be like his brother Ben or the successful salesman at his company. Mielziner's design, however, offers an

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[43] Slater 9.

alternative interpretation. The urban sprawl is a force beyond their control, seeping through their walls and crushing their happiness. Mielziner placed the abstract city, the transparent house, and the literal refrigerator in a symbiotic relationship, magnifying the way in which everyday environments exert pressure on their inhabitants.

Most critiques of the *Salesman* staging interpret it as a reflection of Willy's fragile psyche, but the design also communicates cultural perspectives beyond the main character's white, male, middle-class identity. According to Linda Kintz, the *Salesman* stage "formally comments on the race, class, and gender issues that are not always overt in the content of the play. . . Willy's downward movement is apparent in his inability to move with much of the white middle class to the suburbs, a move that accelerated after the war as the cities were increasingly abandoned by whites to people of color and the poor."[44] Kintz's analysis interprets the stage design as an image illuminating a transitional urban landscape that affected varying social groups in different ways. In terms of gender, the design comments on Linda Loman's circumstances as a woman trapped within the domestic sphere.[45] Interpreted as the "Loman's house," instead of just "Willy's home," the design represents the cultural forces restraining women to their role as homemakers during the period. As May argues, the "acquiescence of women to their domestic roles makes sense if one keeps in mind the constraints they faced," including decreased employment after the war and social pressure to embrace the responsibilities of

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[44] Linda Kintz, "The Sociosymbolic Work of Family in Death of a Salesman," *Approaches to Teaching Miller's Death of a Salesman*, (New York: MLA, 1995) 103-104.

[45] Feminist interpretations of *Salesman* have criticized the relative weakness of Linda's character compared to Willy. See Charlotte Canning, "Is This a Play About Women?: A Feminist Reading of *Death of a Salesman*," *The Achievement of Arthur Miller: New Essays*, ed. Steven R. Centola (Dallas: Contemporary Research Press, 1995) and Jan Balakian, "Beyond the Male Locker Room: *Death of a Salesman* from a Feminist Perspective," *Approaches to Teaching Miller's Death of a Salesman*.

motherhood.[46] Mielziner's staging showed Linda trapped within an unstable home;

dependent on Willy as the breadwinner, Linda can do little except help him maintain his

dignity and keep a household afloat with the few appliances still running.

At the end of *Salesman,* Linda and her sons Biff and Happy moved downstage

from the kitchen to stand on the stage apron over Willy's grave. With the outline of the

house glowing behind them, Linda announces that she has made the last mortgage

payment. Biff eulogizes his father, stating that "there's more of him in that front stoop

than in all the sales he ever made."[47] But in this last image, the house encompasses the

whole family, representing more than merely Willy's life. Through Mielziner's design,

Salesman became a "suburban epic," a play that widened its critique of American

capitalism beyond the professional aspirations of salesmen to the geographies they

inhabited. The selectively realistic poetics of Mielziner's stage transformed a tragedy of

an American character into a tragedy of the American landscape.

Cultural Criticism and Commodities: *South Pacific* and *The King and I*

Although Mielziner's *Salesman* collaboration with Miller and Kazan occupies the

foremost position in his biography, he achieved greater public prominence and financial

compensation from his collaborations in the musical theatre, particularly with writers and

producers Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II. Many American designers who

preceded Mielziner were careful about taking work for the musical stage, not wanting to

be pigeonholed as "decorators" of light entertainment. Aronson argues that Joseph

Urban, for example, never received his fair due as a New Stagecraft artist because he

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[46] May 56.
[47] Miller, *Death of a Salesman* 138.

become so intimately associated with his designs for the Ziegfeld Follies.[48] Mielziner,

however, successfully bridged genres; in a 1937 article for *Theatre Arts Monthly*, Norris

Houghton distinguishes him as "one of the few artists who design both for drama and for

musicals and he sees no reason why more designers should not be able to work in both

fields. He finds the technique very much the same. 'One uses a different palette,

perhaps, sharper, bolder colors for the musical show, but that's about all.'"[49] Thus,

Mielziner used the same dramaturgical approach on the musical stage as he did for

legitimate dramas like *Salesman*; indeed, he first developed his trademark "cinematic"

techniques and style of selective realism on the musical stage, as noted previously.

Mielziner began designing Broadway musicals in 1931 with *Of Thee I Sing*, a

Depression-era satire of American culture and the first musical to win a Pulitzer Prize.

During the 1930s, he also began a working relationship with Rodgers, designing a

number of musicals that he wrote with lyricist Lorenz Hart such as *On Your Toes* (1936),

I Married an Angel (1938) and *Pal Joey* (1940). These last designs in particular gained

critical attention for their aesthetic simplicity and elimination of non-essentials that

helped the musicals maintain a quick tempo and continuous flow between each scene.[50]

Mielziner began his successful collaboration with Rodgers and Hammerstein in 1945 for

the Broadway production of *Carousel*, followed by *Allegro* (1947), *South Pacific* (1949),

and *The King and I* (1951). Establishing a solid relationship with the musical team, the

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[48] Aronson, *Looking into the Abyss* 134. Aronson notes that Joseph Urban's designs, particularly those for the *Follies*, "laid the groundwork for Broadway musicals for the rest of the century and for the Hollywood musicals of the 1930s and the extravaganzas of Busby Berkeley" (156).

[49] Norris Houghton, "The Designer Sets the Stage: VII, Jo Mielziner; VIII Aline Bernstein," *Theatre Arts Monthly* 21 (Feb. 1937): 118.

[50] Orville K. Larson, *Scene Design in the American Theatre from 1915-1960* (Fayetteville: U of Arkansas P, 1989) 157.

designer created staging for their productions that captured the central themes embodied in their book, music, and lyrics.

Mielziner's style of selective realism, in fact, was well suited to Rodgers and Hammerstein's integrated musical plays. Musical theatre scholars have written extensively about the story-driven techniques of Rodgers and Hammerstein, their synthesis of production elements—song, dance, and dialogue—to forward the narrative content of the musical.[51] Beginning with their first collaboration, *Oklahoma!* (1943),[52] critics and audiences applauded the team's ability to harness the musical format to tell stories that embodied the American experience, engaging serious, contemporary issues. Cultural historian Christina Klein writes: "Many contemporaries saw Rodgers and Hammerstein's musicals as expressions of an authentically American national identity, a form of modern folk culture that formed an integral part of the nation's 'cultural heritage.'"[53] Mielziner's designs supported the team's cultural themes and narrative objectives, with hints of realism to authenticate the characters and location and atmospheric backgrounds to accentuate Hammerstein's poetic lyrics and Rodger's romantic melodies. For both *South Pacific* and *The King and I*, Mielziner used the free-flowing, fast paced techniques he had developed previously and selected key visual elements to communicate the exoticism of the Bali Ha'i and Bangkok. His juxtaposition of realistic objects within abstracted, expressionistic backdrops fulfilled the audience's simultaneous desire for both authentic and romantic depictions of these Eastern cultures.

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[51] See Kislan's *The Musical*; Fredrick Nolan, *The Sound of their Music: The Story of Rodgers & Hammerstein* (New York: Applause, 2002); Gerald Mast, *Can't Help Singin': The American Musical on Stage and Screen* (Woodstock: Overlook, 1995).

[52] The original Broadway production of *Oklahoma!* was designed by Lemuel Ayres. Mielziner spent 1943 and 1944 working in the U.S. military as a commissioned officer in the camouflage corps.

[53] Klein 160.

With these musicals, therefore, Mielziner's design images moved beyond depictions of America's cityscapes to visualize less familiar, Eastern locales. Scholarship surrounding *South Pacific* and *The King and I* has emphasized the exotic locations of the musical texts, although Mielziner remains largely unnamed as the designer who generated specific images of these landscapes. Historians such as Andrea Most, Bruce McConachie, and Christina Klein have uncovered the musical's cultural meanings, particularly how they reveal the foreign and domestic ideologies of postwar America.[54] Americans became increasingly aware of their nation's increased power in international affairs, including the U.S. occupation of Japan (1945-1952), contribution to the Korean War (1950-1953), and alliances with Southeast Asian countries like the Philippines, South Vietnam, and Thailand. Amidst Cold War tensions and China's fall to Communism, the U.S. sought to maintain power in Japan and strategic Pacific islands and decolonialize previously occupied Asian countries to support the establishment of non-Communist governments.[55] Rodgers and Hammerstein's musicals tapped into contemporary interest about America's engagement in Eastern landscapes and, significantly, Mielziner's designs helped shape the public's perception of these relatively unfamiliar geographies.

Mielziner's involvement in *South Pacific*, interestingly, preceded that of Rodgers and Hammerstein. Plans to use James Michener's new novel, *Tales of the South Pacific*, as a source for a new musical began during a conversation between the designer, his

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[54] In addition to Klein's book, see Andrea Most, "'You've Got to Be Carefully Taught': The Politics of Race in Rodgers and Hammerstein's South Pacific," *Theatre Journal* 52.3 (2000): 307-337 and Bruce McConachie, "The 'Oriental' Musicals of Rodgers and Hammerstein and the U.S. War in Southeast Asia," *Staging Difference: Cultural Pluralism in American Theatre and Drama*, ed. Marc Maufort (New York: P. Lang, 1995) 57-74.
[55] Michael Schaller, *The American Occupation of Japan: The Origins of the Cold War in Asia* (New York: Oxford UP, 1985) 53; 152.

brother Kenneth MacKenna, and director Joshua Logan. The trio and their wives were on

their way to the opening night party for *Mister Roberts*, a comedy directed by Logan and

designed by Mielziner about the inhabitants of an American Navy supply ship during

World War II. With the Pacific theatre fresh in everyone's mind, MacKenna suggested

that Logan read Michener's book.[56] Logan then approached Rodgers and Hammerstein;

as a team, the three wove together two of Michener's short stories depicting the romantic

adventures of American service men and women stationed in the Pacific—"Our

Heroine," a love story between nurse Nellie Forbush and French plantation owner Emile

De Becque, and "Fo' Dolla," a more tragic love story about a Lieutenant Joe Cable and

Liat, a native of the South Seas Islands.

Logan's dogged but successful efforts to secure a coauthor credit for *South*

Pacific, first convincing Hammerstein to officially recognize his contribution and later

the Pulitzer committee when they neglected to include his name with the prize, speaks to

the collaborative processes of the musical's development.[57] The director wrote an article

included in *South Pacific*'s souvenir program (reprinted from the *New York Times*)

emphasizing how collaboration shaped the musical's text, using Mielziner's contributions

as an example of the symbiotic nature of production team. He started by quoting

Hammerstein's lyrics: "Bali Ha'i may I call you/ Any night, any day—/ In your heart

you'll hear it call you,/ 'Come away, come away." Logan launches into a story about the

meeting when Mielziner first heard Rodgers' melody for Bali Ha'i, a song with rhythms

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[56] Mielziner, *Designing for the Theatre* 45. MacKenna worked in the literary department of a Hollywood film studio, and had recently acquired an advance copy of Michener's book. Phillip Beidler, "*South Pacific* and American Remembering; or, 'Josh, We're Going to Buy This Son of a Bitch!,'" *Journal of American Studies* 27.2 (1993): 212.

[57] Nolan 182; 195.

and chord progressions meant to suggest the exotic atmosphere of the South Pacific.[58] The designer excitedly returned to his studio and painted a sketch of Bali Ha'i, the basis for one of the production's scenic backdrops. "As he painted this little sketch he became dissatisfied, feeling that the island did not have enough mystery about it and then dipping his brush into some water, he blurred the top of the island, making it look as though it were surrounded by mist." Hammerstein was quickly summoned to the studio, "and when he saw Jo's drawing he thought of an additional lyric for the song: 'Someday you'll see me,/ Floatin' in de sunshine—/ My head stickin' out/ From a low flyin' cloud.'"[59] Logan's story illustrated the influence of Mielziner's design the lyric's poetic imagery, creating a seamlessly integrated impression of the exoticism of Bali Ha'i.

In addition to documenting the production team's collaborative nature, however, Logan's story also conveyed their perspective toward the type of Eastern landscape they wanted to represent. Mielziner's blurring of the painting was more than just an aesthetic choice, but one that accentuated the "mystery" of the island. Their image of the South Pacific replicated their own point of view as cultural outsiders, Westerners creating a performance about the East for Western audiences. It also recreated the perspective of the musical's American characters, such as Nellie Forbush and Joe Cable, foreigners who find love in an unfamiliar landscape. Most argues that *South Pacific* "used the theatre itself to establish American hegemony. By importing familiar conventions of the Broadway musical . . . into an exotic space, they quickly asserted the Americanness of

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[58] Wolf 28.

[59] Joshua Logan, "New Tales of 'South Pacific'" *South Pacific* Souvenir Program (New York: Al Greenstone, 1949) Box 21, Souvenir Playbills and Programs Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin.

the landscape."[60] Mielziner's swaying palm trees and bamboo huts provided the ideal romantic backdrop for Nellie and Joe, privileging their mystical impression of the South Pacific rather than the everyday experiences of natives [see fig. 4.3]. Mielziner's island is not a home to the natives but a destination for Americans, a place to find love and, in the process, learn racial tolerance.[61] The design was not a desolate war-torn location, but a place of beauty and romance where Americans could live in harmony with natives who were eager to participate in the civilizing processes of Western modernity.

Throughout the musical, Mielziner's staging created a visual juxtaposition between the two cultures inhabiting the island, contrasting the textures and colors of metallic military huts and construction equipment with the lush foliage of the native landscape. The selective emphasis Mielziner gave to camouflage hanging over corrugated steel and machinery accentuated the American occupation of the island, while atmospheric elements like the tangle of tropical trees and jungle leaf lighting projections continued to support the romantic tone of the musical. He created the military machinery from authentic source material; in a letter to the War Department, Mielziner requested photographs of equipment (earth movers, generator trucks, etc.) used by engineers to clear jungles and create airstrips. He still had military contacts from his service in the Army camouflage corps during World War II.[62] Mielziner explained that his "desire to get authentic source material is based on the fact that even a free and romantic treatment is achieved well only when it is based on thorough knowledge of actual conditions and

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[60] Most 319.

[61] Stacy Wolf writes: "Rodgers and Hammerstein's musicals insistently connect romance to social concerns, as their musicals, by way of the heterosexual couple, always argue for social tolerance" (31).

[62] Ronald Arthur Naverson, "The Scenographer as Camoufleur," diss., Southern Illinois U, 1989, 55. Mielziner was assigned to both U.S. bases and war locations in Europe.

actual equipment."[63] The authenticity of the machinery (as well as his expertly rendered

camouflage) indicated to the audience that they could trust Mielziner's representation of

the exotic landscape. Indeed, many contemporary audience members for *South Pacific*

had likely served in the U.S. military during the recent war, having first-hand experience

with this type of machinery. Mielziner's efforts to include authentic realistic elements,

therefore, could have been instantly recognizable by these spectators.

In scenes involving the strategic planning of American officers, Mielziner showed

the military equipment on a beach clearing with jungle foliage to each side [see fig.

4.4].[64] The visual contradiction—the sleek, modern mechanics of the occupiers verses

the untamed, earthy colors and natural landscape of the natives—reinforced Americans'

perceived difference between the two cultures. Mielziner's image conveyed the

military's considerable visibility on the island and its power to reshape the natural

landscape through modernizing forces. The ordered arrangement of equipment offset the

natural disarray of the jungle, asserting the Americans' role as civilizing agents; the

destruction of the natural landscape, the image suggested, was both necessary and good, a

progressive force of Western civilization.

In his critique of Rodgers and Hammerstein's "oriental" musicals, including

South Pacific and *The King and I*, McConachie argues that these productions helped

postwar Americans "believe in their status as an exceptional people. [They] provided this

reassurance, justifying the American empire in the East on humanitarian as well as

political grounds."[65] Assuming America healed its own racial differences, the musical

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[63] Mielziner, Letter to Lee J. Eaton, Camouflage Branch, Office of the Chief of Engineers, War Department, Washington D.C. (11 January 1949), Box 52, Folder 8, Mielziner Papers.

[64] "Cut and Net Drop- Beach #1," color sketch, Box 106, Mielziner Designs.

[65] McConachie, "The 'Oriental' Musicals'" 70.

argued, it could also secure its role as the primary civilizing agent in the region. For

Klein, *South Pacific*'s message of racial tolerance, seen in Joe's love for Liat and Nellie's

eventual acceptance of Emile's mixed-race children, persuaded Americans that they

could "move into the Pacific with a clean conscience," with expansion into new

territories and access to its natural resources being the "reward for overcoming racism."[66]

Mielziner's design supported the musical's undercurrents of American hegemony,

creating an image of an exotic but tamed landscape. Moving effortlessly from one scene

to the next, the scenery showed the island, under the influence of the American military,

as an efficient, productive space. The natives, similar to the landscape, were also

employed efficiently, transformed into service providers for the occupying powers.

Mielziner's tropical island, visibly controlled by Western forces and serviced by

the native population, represented the ideal tourist location—an exotic place to escape the

monotony of the suburbs but also a destination made safe by American intervention. For

audiences eager to become global tourists in the geographies controlled by American

forces, the design validated the Polynesian Islands as an attractive location.[67] The

tourism industry, in fact, was quick to realize the potential commercial advantages of

Mielziner's designs; British Overseas Airways arranged to have three of his color

sketches displayed in their office windows to advertise trips to the South Pacific.[68]

A variety of companies, eager to profit from the overwhelming success of *South

Pacific*, began to contact the producers about manufacturing consumer merchandise

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[66] Klein 164.

[67] Klein's study situates Michener's stories as part of an explosion of travel writing about Asia that occurred during the 1950s, thus reflecting the "postwar emergence of mass global tourism." The tourism market was stimulated not only by the opening up of Eastern territory to American travelers but also the booming U.S. economy that allowed consumers to use more income for leisure activities (102-104). Beidler argues that the 1958 film further promoted the South Pacific as a tourist destination (219).

[68] Box 52, Folder 8, Mielziner Papers.

related to the musical. The cast recording, made possible with the advent of the long-

playing album, was a national bestseller, and a line of daily hair care products capitalized

on the novelty of Mary Martin washing her hair on stage each night.[69] In addition to this

merchandise, a line of the *South Pacific*-inspired scarves were sold at fashionable

department stores. The scarves replicated elements of Mielziner's scenic design,

displaying the same bright, tropical colors seen on stage; the product also borrowed from

the production's costumes created by Motley, the design team including Margaret and

Sophie Harris and Elizabeth Montgomery. An advertisement included in the *New York*

Times Magazine shows five different silk scarves manufactured by Cohama Fabrics, each

depicting various musical numbers—"Younger than Springtime," "Bali Hai," "A

Wonderful Guy," "Honey Bun," and "Some Enchanted Evening" [see fig. 4.5].[70] The ad

featured a scarf tied elegantly around the neck of Mary Martin with her fashionable short

hairstyle and sailor's cap from the "Honey Bun" production number.

Scholars such as Most and Phillip Beidler cite the explosion of souvenir

merchandise relating to the musical as evidence of its wide-spread popular influence. As

Most notes: "[i]ts songs played in American living rooms, its fashions directed American

women's tastes, and its political ideology helped shape American popular opinion."[71]

Neither scholar specifically mentions the production's designs as part of this

phenomenon, but the producers' promotion of the musical through its visual images is

significant. In merchandising Mielziner and Motley's designs, the producers

acknowledged the popularity of these images among audiences. As cultural critic Alan

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[69] Beidler 216-217.
[70] Cohama Advertisement, *New York Times Magazine* (30 October 1949): 3, Box 52, Folder 8, Mielziner Papers.
[71] Most 311.

Bryman maintains, the "key principle behind merchandising is a simple one of extracting further revenue from an image that has already attracted people."[72] In a vigorous postwar economy increasingly reliant on visual images to attract consumers, Mielziner and Motley's designs became valuable commodities.

The Cohama merchandise also provided the designers with an opportunity to assert their partial ownership over their staging and costumes for the production. When Mielziner saw his designs reproduced in the scarf advertisement, a letter was drafted on behalf of himself and Motley defending their right to receive a portion of the proceeds.[73] He eventually secured a proprietary claim on his design, receiving $2250 as a share of the producer's sell of advertising rights. In paying Mielziner for the use of his design beyond the stage performance, the producers acknowledged its considerable potential to sell *South Pacific* to the public. Seen on the Broadway stage as well as mass reproduced as a consumer product,[74] the design reached an even wider range of Americans, shaping their impressions of a landscape gradually dominating national politics.

Rodgers and Hammerstein's next musical endeavor, *The King and I* (1951) capitalized on the popular success of *South Pacific*, presenting American audiences with another Western encounter of the exotic East. Again, they asked Mielziner to join their production team, confident that his design would communicate the musical's clash of cultures theme. Similar to their adaptation of Michener's novel, they took the storyline for this production from a literary source: Margaret Landon's *Anna and the King of*

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[72] Alan Bryman, *The Disneyization of Society* (London: Sage, 2004) 80.

[73] Letter from the law offices of M.S. & I.S. Isaacs to Jo Mielziner (1 November 1949), Box 52, Folder 8, Mielziner Papers.

[74] I was unable to find specific information about the sale of these scarves to postwar consumers. No longer in operation, Cohama was a manufacturer of print fabrics, including a number of tropical and Hawaiian prints that were popular during the 1950s. Occasionally, the *South Pacific* scarves will appear as products on Ebay for prices ranging from five to thirty-five dollars, suggesting that they had a reasonably sizable distribution.

Siam.[75] Published in 1944, Landon's novel became a bestseller and later the source for a 1946 non-musical film with the same title. The story follows the experiences of British school teacher Anna Leonowens as she attempts to modernize the traditional court of Siam by introducing Western concepts of science, geography, and etiquette to the King, his children, and his wives.

The popularity of the novel, film, and Rodgers and Hammerstein's musical, Klein argues, "coincided with the increased geopolitical importance of Thailand to the United States. . . . Alone among its neighbors, Thailand had remained free from European colonial domination, which meant the Thai people did not harbor the anti-Western sentiments that hampered U.S. dealings with other nations in the region."[76] Thus, even though the story is set during later half of the nineteenth century with a British heroine, it engages the concerns of contemporary American foreign relations and connects them to past narratives of Western imperialism. The use of Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* for the act two ballet, for example, served as a direct reference to American history and a reminder of the nation's allegiance to and promotion of Western perceptions of freedom and equality. Despite the nineteenth century period details, the Bangkok represented on stage originated from a twentieth century perspective, thus reflective of the global changes happening during the era of postwar modernity.

Rodgers and Hammerstein's production team re-established and refined the "East-meets-West" theme that had charmed American audiences in *South Pacific*, and Mielziner, once again, used his style of selective realism to blend the exotic and familiar,

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[75] Landon based her novel both on her own experiences working as a teacher in Siam and on the autobiographies of Anna Leonowen, *The English Governess in the Siamese Court* (1870) and *The Romance of the Harem* (1872). Sheng-mei Ma, "Rodgers and Hammerstein's 'Chopsticks' Musicals," *Literature Film Quarterly*, 31.1 (2003): 17.

[76] Klein 197.

creating stage images that eased American audiences into a strange but exciting cultural landscape. The King of Siam's palace served as the primary setting for the musical; Mielziner designed various scenic elements and backdrops to represent different palace locations, such as the King's study, Anna's bedroom, and the school room, and created a series of travelers to ease the flow of transitions between scenes. Unlike the deep, earthly colors of *South Pacific*, *The King and I* used a lighter, more subtle color palette (pale blue, blush pink, and lavender). The backdrops of Royal Bangkok trees and temples on the horizon heightened the landscape's exoticism [see fig. 4.6]. For each scene, Mielziner juxtaposed elements representing both East and West, a visual reminder of the struggle between the King and Anna to understand one another. Amidst the atmospheric backdrops of the East, Mielziner placed specific realistic objects to reflect both Anna's British upbringing and the King's growing interest in the West. Set within the more expressionistic Eastern frame of the stage, the realistic objects—a world map, an astral globe, a model locomotive—appeared as shining exemplars of Western modernity.

Anna's school room is one of the first locations where Mielziner's design visualized the East-West clash of ideas. During her first lesson, Anna presents her students with two geographical maps portraying different perspectives of the world. First, she shows them a twenty five year old map of Siam representing the nation as a large, centrally-positioned, red land mass that out-sizes, thus overpowers, the other countries depicted like Burma [see fig. 4.7]. Anna covers this interpretation with a new map that has just arrived from England; Siam is now a white, much smaller land mass, and England assumes the central position. When the oldest prince complains ("Siam not so small!"), Anna replies that England was even smaller, implying that, in determining

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international power, size does not matter. Britain's authority is written into frame of the map, and Siam's diminished size and symbolic color change from red to white signified the domination of Western over Eastern ideologies.

For McConachie, Anna's lesson in "geopolitics" presented the map as an "objective reality," the product of the West's "superior civilization."[77] As a visual frame for the following production number, "Getting to Know You," the map provided audiences with a constant reminder of Western imperial force. According to Klein, who opens her book with a description of this scene, the opening-night Broadway audience broke into applause after the number, suggesting their response revealed not only their appreciation of the cast's performance but also their acceptance of the cultural message embodied in the production number.[78] Indeed, Klein draws a comparison between Anna's lesson and postwar education initiatives such as the Fulbright exchange program which brought many American teachers to Asian countries.[79] The phrase "getting to know you" served as an efficient catch-phrase, signifying the contemporary belief that different cultures only needed to become better acquainted with one another to be reminded of their commonalities. Anna and the children's exchange through song and dance implied that political, racial, and ethnic differences could be bridged through familiarity and desire for knowledge. Mielziner's map standing resolutely in the background, however, demanded that this cultural exchange occur within a space marking the West as the presiding authority.

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[77] McConachie, *American Theatre in the Culture of the Cold War* 155.
[78] Klein 2. McConachie's article "The 'Oriental' Musicals" also begins with a description of the scene in Anna's classroom.
[79] Klein 199.

In creating the British map for Anna's lesson, Mielziner met with cartographer

Richard Harrison to learn about the geographical information available to the Siamese

during the mid-nineteenth century and the type of world maps produced by the British at

the same time. After consulting a number of maps suggested by Harrison, he ultimately

decided to use an American map from the period, shifting the positioning so that Britain

instead of the United States would appear at the center.[80] Mielziner relied on the familiar

conventions of U.S. maps to connect with American audiences. But, with this choice, he

also asserted a U.S. frame of reference, signifying the ascendant power of the nation in

the shifting global politics of the postwar era.

With America's growing influence in the regions of Asia, places like Thailand

opened as a desirable tourist destination. Mass international tourism became available to

Americans during the 1920s, but increased significantly during the 1950s with the

thriving U.S. economy.[81] Mielziner, in fact, had taken a vacation in Bangkok in 1933 and

based many of the design elements for *The King and I* on his experience as a tourist. In

his memoir, he states that "residue" from these travels were more valuable to him than

research photographs of Thailand.[82] Henderson describes Mielziner's visit to

Bangkok's Royal Palace: "Expecting to find beautiful Oriental décor and furniture, Jo

had been appalled by the ornate Victorian furniture and chandeliers and the other

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[80] In researching the map design, Mielziner requested a volume of *Geographical Journal*, indicating information on London in 1898. "Public Library" (list of research for *The King and I* on notebook paper), Box 39, Folder 10, Mielziner papers. He also obtained a copy of a map from the American Geographical Society, titled "Colton's Map of the World." Box 64, Mielziner Designs.
   Mielziner discussed his design process for the maps in a deposition for his trial to claim proprietary rights for the use of his designs in the film version of *The King and I*. "Supreme Court of the State of New York, County of New York, Jo Mielziner, Plaintiff, against, Richard Rodgers & Oscar Hammerstein, 2nd..defendents. May 20th, 1958. Examination before Trial of Jo Mielziner taken by the defendants, at the offices of Messrs. Dwight, Royall, Harris, Kiegel & Caskey, 100 Broadway, New York, N.Y.", 74, Box 39, Folder 14, Mielziner Papers (hereafter Trail Examination).
   [81] Klein 103-104.
   [82] Mielziner, *Designing for the Theatre* 20-21.

Western European trappings in the palace."[83] Mielziner's disappointment reveals his

longing to experience something out-of-the-ordinary, the exoticism of the East rather than

the usual "ornate trappings" of Western culture. Mielziner used this memory as the

foundation for his design of the King's palace, creating poetic backdrops that fulfilled his

desire for the exoticism and selecting realistic objects that communicated the palace's

mimicry of Western décor.

In elevating the importance of his memories over photographs or other visual

research on Bangkok, Mielziner recreated his journey of cultural discovery for the

audience. Having first experienced the landscape as a tourist, his design recreated his

impressions as a foreigner coming into contact with an unfamiliar culture. In that respect,

his perspective was similar to Anna's, newly arrived to Siam, trying to negotiate all that

was similar or different from her usual surroundings. Mielziner's design became a

memory-scape, a blending of vague background elements and a few clearly defined

details. His selective realism, in this case, functioned like a tourist's snapshot, carefully

framed to include what is most quaint or visually appealing about the culture. The details

reveal the foreigner's experience of the landscape, not that of the native inhabitants.

Of all the palace settings, Mielziner's design for the king's study best captured the

impression of his memory. Through selective realism, he accentuated a variety of objects

within the exotic background atmosphere to establish the King's interest in Western

knowledge. He placed a model locomotive on Asian-inspired book shelves and an

oversized astral globe and collection of books in an alcove overlooking the Eastern

temples. [see fig. 4.8] Other decorative pieces included English china mixed with Asian

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[83] Henderson, *Mielziner* 188.

silks and fans, carved jeweled chests, and boxes of tea and spices.[84]   As he had with

South Pacific, Mielziner captured enough detail with select elements to convey a sense of

cultural authenticity; audiences could see the accuracy of familiar objects—maps, globes,

model trains—and thus assume the same of less recognizable Eastern elements.

Some postwar spectators, however, may have noticed similarities between the

King's exotic Bangkok palace and their everyday domestic environments. According to

McConachie's critique of the Broadway production, Mielziner's design layout resembled

a typical suburban ranch house, complete with "window walls" allowing a picturesque

view of the outdoors. "Spectators looking at *The King and I* saw an exotic suburbia with

natural and constructed forms harmoniously flowing together."[85] With its visual

suggestion of a suburban home, Mielziner's design complement's the musical's ideology

of domesticity. One of Anna and the King's first conflicts is over Anna's desire to live in

her own residence, separate from the other King's wives and, thus, protected from any

hint of impropriety. Klein argues: "Anna's use of the Victorian domestic ideal to carry

her political views resonates with the postwar reaffirmation of domesticity and the

widespread use of the home as a vehicle of political meaning."[86] From this perspective,

Mielziner's design for *The King and I* engages some of the same themes of suburbia as

his earlier work on *Salesman*. Combining the exotic with the familiar, the King's palace

becomes an ideal setting for Americans eager to explore a new culture but from a

viewpoint suggesting the same comforts as their suburban home.

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[84] Trial Examination 57.

[85] McConachie, *American Theatre in the Culture of the Cold War* 170.

[86] Christina Klein, "Cold War Orientalism: Musicals, Travel Narratives, and Middlebrow Culture in Postwar America," diss., Yale U, 1997, 229. Klein's book, *Cold War Orientalism*, does not include this quotation about the musical's rhetoric of home.

Even if spectators missed the visual references to suburbia in Mielziner's design, commercial interests recognized its potential adaptation to suburban home décor. A wallpaper company, Murals, Inc., contacted Mielziner to inquire about using his design for a mural. His previous legal negations with *South Pacific* informed his strategy, and he worked carefully with lawyers to determine his rights in adapting his work for commercial use.[87] Realizing he did not have exclusive ownership over his designs for the Broadway production, Mielziner commissioned his assistant, Leonard Haber, to create a visual adaptation of *The King and I* backdrops for the mural. In a memo to Haber, the designer explained the need for adaptation and special wording in the promotional materials; he could use the title of the musical as part of a factual statement ("Jo Mielziner, the set designer who created the sets for *The King and I*"), but needed to re-title the mural design.[88] Murals, Inc., therefore, promoted the design as "Thailand," relying on Mielziner's name recognition and Broadway credits to establish *The King and I* as the original source of the image, a savvy marketing strategy considering the musical's overwhelming popularity.

The "Thailand" brochure included a photograph of Mielziner underneath the mural which closely replicated of the scenic backdrop from the King's study with Asian-inspired architectural features, distant temples on the horizon, and a scattering of Royal Bangkok trees [see fig. 4.9]. Beyond crediting Mielziner for his work on *The King and I*, the brochure described the "Parisian born" artist as "the world's most famous stage designer."[89] While subjective, the designation revealed Mielziner's increased public

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[87] Mielziner, Letter to Ben Schankman of Paul, Weiss, Rifkind, Warton & Garrison (11 February 1952), Box 64, Folder 24, Mielziner Papers.
[88] Mielziner, Memo to Leonard Haber (no date), Box 64, Folder 24, Mielziner papers.
[89] Murals Inc., "Thailand," promotional brochure, Box 64, Folder 24, Mielziner papers.

prominence since his recent design successes. The company also played up his

"Parisian" beginnings to portray Mielziner as fashionable, a taste-maker whose mural

would complement any stylish home.[90] Thus, trading on his popularity among

Broadway's middle-class audiences, Mielziner was able to market his design style as a

commodity.[91] Even if he did not have full ownership over his production designs, being

one of many collaborators, he was able to sell his design aesthetic independent from the

performances themselves, thus achieving a new level of financial autonomy as a

theatrical designer.

Having gained experience negotiating his intellectual property rights, Mielziner

took notice when elements of his original stage designs appeared in the 1956 film version

of *The King and I* without his authorization. He took Rodgers and Hammerstein to court,

arguing that properties used for the King's study, Anna's schoolroom, and the ballet of

Uncle Tom's Cabin copied those used in the Broadway production. In a deposition,

lawyers asked Mielziner a series of questions requiring him to outline his specific

contributions to the musical's development. He went into great detail about his initial

design process for the replicated items—his research in cartography for the two

classroom maps, his collaborations with the property master in making the astral globe

and model locomotive for the King's study, and his discussions with choreographer

Jerome Robbins in developing the lightweight, portable cabins for the ballet. Mielziner

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[90] During the postwar era, Paris reasserted its status as the center of fashion, particularly in 1947 with the Christian Dior's launch of the "New Look," a style of women's clothing defined by its luxurious and generously cut-fabrics, a reaction against wartime shortages.

[91] Mielziner's scenic images were not the only designs from *The King and I* that led to commercial opportunities. The elegant Thai silk costumes designed by Irene Sharaff initiated a fashion trend. Klein's book *Cold War Orientalism* includes a discussion of Jim Thompson, the American owner of a Thai silk company who supplied Sharaff with fabric for the production. When Sharaff credited Thompson in the musical's program, his business increased substantially (219-220). Klein's emphasizes Thompson's role in U.S./Thai relations during the postwar period. It is unclear if Sharaff benefited financially from this arrangement.

specifically argued that the juxtaposition of East/West aesthetics and artifacts in the King's study played a significant role in the production:

> the most important contribution required of me in designing *The King and I* was to get an idea for the king's study, which would serve to dramatize what kind of man this king was, what his background was, and what his interest was. It was the setting, in which it was my job to establish in that fleeting moment in which the curtain goes up, things which no writer or lyricist can possibly do in that space of time.[92]

The resulting design, Mielziner insisted, provided the production with something distinctive, something that existed separate from the musical text that Rodgers and Hammerstein sold to Twentieth-Century Fox.

In order to establish his rights over his design, Mielziner created a legal understanding of design as a product, but not necessarily a material good. In a deposition taken by Rodgers and Hammerstein's lawyer, Mr. Koegel, Mielziner outlines his responsibilities as a designer for a new musical, defining design as a series of inventive ideas rather than something physical:

> Koegel: What do you call "designs?"
>
> Mielziner: What comes out of designing.
>
> Koegel: The physical things which are visual to the eye?
>
> Mielziner: I don't think it is physical. I think it is the arrangement, the use. I don't think you create physical things. It is an organic plan, an idea, a scheme. I don't think it is physical. You use physical things.

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[92] Trail Examination 53-54.

Koegel: Would you say it would be true that "designs" would encompass other items?

Mielziner: Partly, but other things which are not physical; moods of lighting, which you cannot pick up and ship somewhere, and you cannot break it. It is creative concept.[93]

In creating an understanding of design as a "creative concept" rather than a material product, Mielziner protected his rights regarding the replication of his stage images within another context. Thus, even though the studio constructed new properties for the film, they still duplicated the initial creative contribution of Mielziner's Broadway design, thus owed him some degree of financial compensation.

Mielziner's attempts were ultimately successful, and he collected $8500 after the settlement of legal fees.[94] The outcome reinforced Mielziner's definition of design as a collection of ideas rather than physical objects, placing it in a category of protected intellectual property and, therefore, in conversation with other copyrighted and trademarked products in the increasingly image-driven consumer economy. Modern concepts of intellectual property had developed alongside capitalism and adapted to new technologies of reproduction; copyright laws initially protected writers in the publishing industry but gradually expanded to include artists whose work could be reproduced in other mediums like photography, textiles, motion pictures, or television.[95] The 1940s and

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[93] Ibid. 47.

[94] Letter dated 24 December, 1958, Box 39, Folder 14, Mielziner Papers. This same folder includes a letter from Richard Rodgers dated 23 May 1957 in which he expressed his regret that Mielziner felt he was treated unfairly and that the case would have "no bearing on our personal relationship." However, it likely affected their professional relationship, since Mielziner, after designing all of Rodgers and Hammerstein's musicals except *Oklahoma!* was not contracted for either of their remaining collaborations, *Flower Drum Song* (1958) or *The Sound of Music* (1959).

[95] For detailed information see Carla Hess's article "The Rise of Intellectual Property, 700 B.C.-A.D. 2000: An Idea in the Balance," *Daedalus* 131.2 (2002): 26-45.

fifties, in fact, saw a number of legal cases asserting copyright control over the commercial reproduction of images.[96] Through his court case against Rodgers and Hammerstein, as well as his negotiations over merchandise associated with *The King and I* and *South Pacific*, Mielziner gained the same legitimacy and protection for his theatrical designs as industrial designers like Bel Geddes had for their commercial products. By claiming legal rights over his designs as intellectual property, he also formalized the professional nature of theatrical design and its relationship to the play/musical text.

Although Mielziner's lawsuit against Rodgers and Hammerstein did not set a legal precedent,[97] it did set a theatrical one; his financial procurement for the unauthorized use of his stage images influenced expectations within the Broadway business community. His status as the preeminent designer on the Broadway stage during the postwar era (and arguably beyond) placed him in a strong negotiating position, and his success paved the way for the next generation of designers. The decisions resulting from recent lawsuits involving copyrights for theatrical designs echo Mielziner's earlier victories. Current Broadway artists can only establish ownership of a design outside their contracts for the original production. Although they receive royalties for their stage designs, per their United Scenic Artists union contracts, they cannot claim ownership of this work because the performance is legally classified as a collective work.

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[96] See Melville B. Nimmer, Nimmer on Copyright: A Treatise on the Law of Literary, Musical and Artistic Property, and the Protection of Ideas (1963; New York: Matthew Bender, 1976).

[97] There is no mention of the Jo Mielziner v. Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein, 2nd in other case decisions or law review articles. Given the public prominence of both the plaintiff and defendants, it is likely that the case would have generated further interest if its decision had been published. Additionally, the New York Supreme Court is a trial court, not an appellate court, so it is unlikely that the judge would have written an opinion. I would like to thank April B. Chandler for helping me navigate my search for information regarding the case.

If, however, an artist's designs appear as part of a "tangible fixation of a work," such as a film, video recording, or merchandise, they can assert a copyright claim.[98]

Mielziner's early negotiation with producers over the replication of his stage images clarifies this current understanding of designers' legal rights, but also situates the basis of these rights within the practices of America's postwar consumer economy and entertainment culture. As visual texts, Mielziner's designs could participate in the commercial market separate from the musical texts that inspired them, moving off the stage and into realms of print culture, film, and product merchandising. Producers saw his designs as a bankable commodity, and Mielziner was savvy enough to defend his rights for a piece of the profits. His designs became iconic because they not only offered poignant insights into postwar America but also participated in the processes of mass production, image duplication, and mass consumption that mark the cultural moment.

Mielziner remained a much sought after Broadway designer throughout the 1950s and sixties, contributing designs for musicals as well as continuing his collaborations with playwrights such as Miller and Williams. In the 1970s, he also worked in theatre architecture, acting as a consultant on building projects such as the Power Center at the

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[98] Jeffrey M. Dine, "Are the *Cats* Out of the Bag?," original published in *Entertainment and Sports Lawyer*, 19.2-3 (2001), USA 829: Designers and Artists for the Entertainment Industry, <http://www.usa829.org/USA/copyright_article.htm>. The United Scenic Artists website posted this article to help designers understand their rights regarding their intellectual property. The article primarily outlines a 1999 case including Candace Carell, the make-up designer for the Broadway musical *Cats*, in which she insisted that her designs had been reproduced in a video and coloring/activity book. Carell did not receive any financial remuneration because her filing exceeded the three-year statute of limitation on copyright claims, but the case did produce a thirty-page decision supporting a designer's right to copyright designs reproduced beyond the producers' initial contractual obligations.

The USA website has also posted information about a 1997 lawsuit brought by set designer Loy Arcenas against the Caldwell Playhouse, in Boca Raton Florida. Arcenas claimed that the playhouse had copied his original Broadway design for *Love! Valor! Compassion!* Arcenas and the playhouse reached a settlement, but the judge's early ruling against the playhouse's attempt to dismiss the case reinforced the rights of theatrical artists to establish copyrights on their designs.

University of Michigan, the Krannert Center at the University of Illinois, and the Wake

Forest University Theatre. Mielziner's influence, however, extended beyond these local

stages and Broadway; his business relationships crossed the entire industry, transforming

the everyday practices of American theatre artists. His design styles and approaches,

emulated by many, prompted the development of new painting techniques, improved

stage technology, and more precise lighting equipment. Mielziner's career provides a

crucial link in the genealogy of American design, connecting many theatre artists back to

the practices of the New Stagecraft.

While this is only one of many genealogical lines that can be traced within the

design profession, this was the connection point I inherited as a student designer at Wake

Forest, learning my craft on Mielziner's stage and using the resources produced by his

precedent-setting practices. I began this chapter with a search for the origin of

Mielziner's "Jungle Leaf" gobo, hoping to connect my first design experience with his

Broadway design for *South Pacific*. The link I discovered, however, was not as direct as

I anticipated. "Jungle Leaf" is an original Mielziner design with a title that allowed the

designer to claim exclusive ownership, a valuable lesson he had learned from previous

commercial negotiations. But promoted and sold under Mielziner's name, the gobo

intentionally evokes memories of *South Pacific*, particularly because the Broadway

design reached such an iconic status. Two titles legally separate the designs, but they are

aesthetically linked through Mielziner's artistry and culturally linked through their shared

jungle motif. The repetition of both designs, on theatrical stages and in the consumer

marketplace, continues to reinforce Mielziner's jungle as a cultural icon, an image that

through steady circulation has contributed to America's fascination with the exotic

landscapes beyond its borders. It is a design that truly embraces the term "modern"—embodying the aesthetics of modernism, reflecting the politics of modernity, and participating in the processes of modernization that increase its circulation to a wide range of modern audiences.

There is a sense of nostalgia that permeates Mielziner's designs. It is created partially from memories of postwar culture that highlight the romance of Bali Ha'i and Bangkok, not the disastrous consequences of the nation's imperialist interventions in Asia. It also emerges from the celebration of *Salesman* as an American masterpiece without an acknowledgment of its pointed critique of the destructive forces of urban decline and consumerism. But the glow surrounding Mielziner's career, particularly his postwar designs, also stems from nostalgia for a "golden age" of American theatre, before New York City's decentralization and before the avant-garde designs of Ming Cho Lee and European scenographers like Joseph Svoboda created new expectations for the theatrical stage. The dominant image of Mielziner in both theatre histories and the stories that still circulate among theatre professionals is that of the "selfless" designer, interested only in serving dramatic texts rather than individual desires or personal politics. But Mielziner did more than merely visually interpret plays and musicals; intentional or not, he interpreted the cultural moment. As iconic images that crystallized the interests and concerns of postwar audiences, Mielziner's designs revealed the landscapes of American life and the processes of modernization that continued to transform them.

Figure 4.1: "Jungle Leaf" gobo, designed by Mielziner and manufactured by Rosco Laboratories, Inc. (Courtesy of Rosco Laboratories, Inc.)
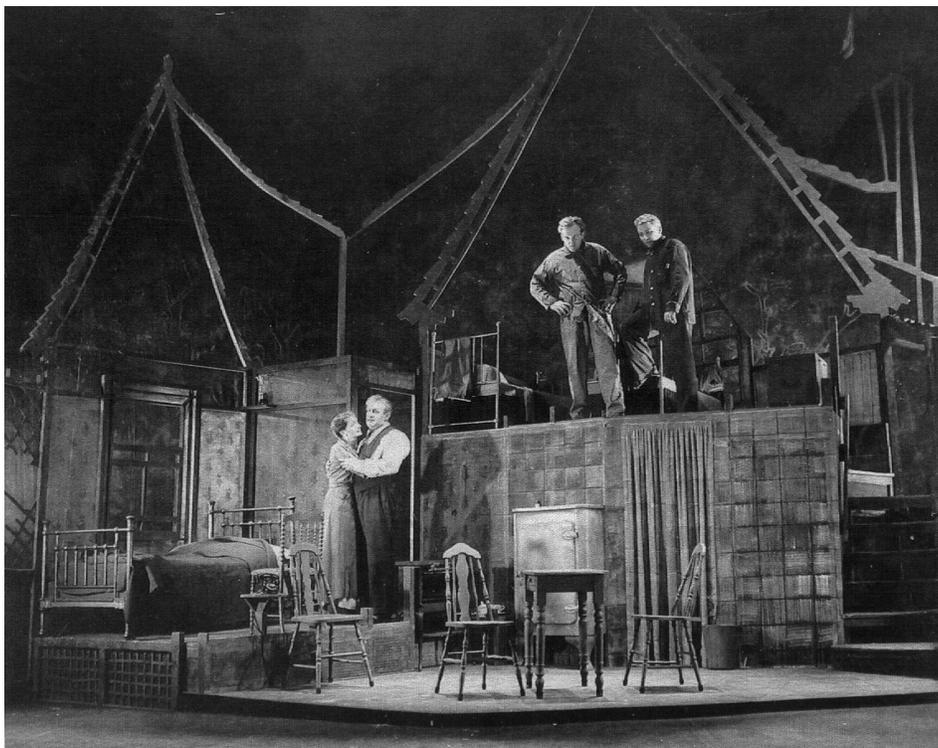

Figure 4.2: Mielziner's design for *Death of a Salesman* (1949). (Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin)

Figure 4.3: Actress Mary Martin against Mielziner's *South Pacific* backdrop (1949). (Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin)

Figure 4.4: *South Pacific* officers with military equipment and island backdrop. (Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin)

Figure 4.5: Cohama Scarf advertisement using *South Pacific* designs. (Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Lenox and Tilden Foundations)


Figure 4.6: *The King and I* production photograph with Royal Tree backdrop (1951). (Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin)

Figure 4.7: *The King and I* production photograph with map of Siam. (Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin)

Figure 4.8: *The King and I* production photograph of the King's study, including model train and astral globe. (Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin)
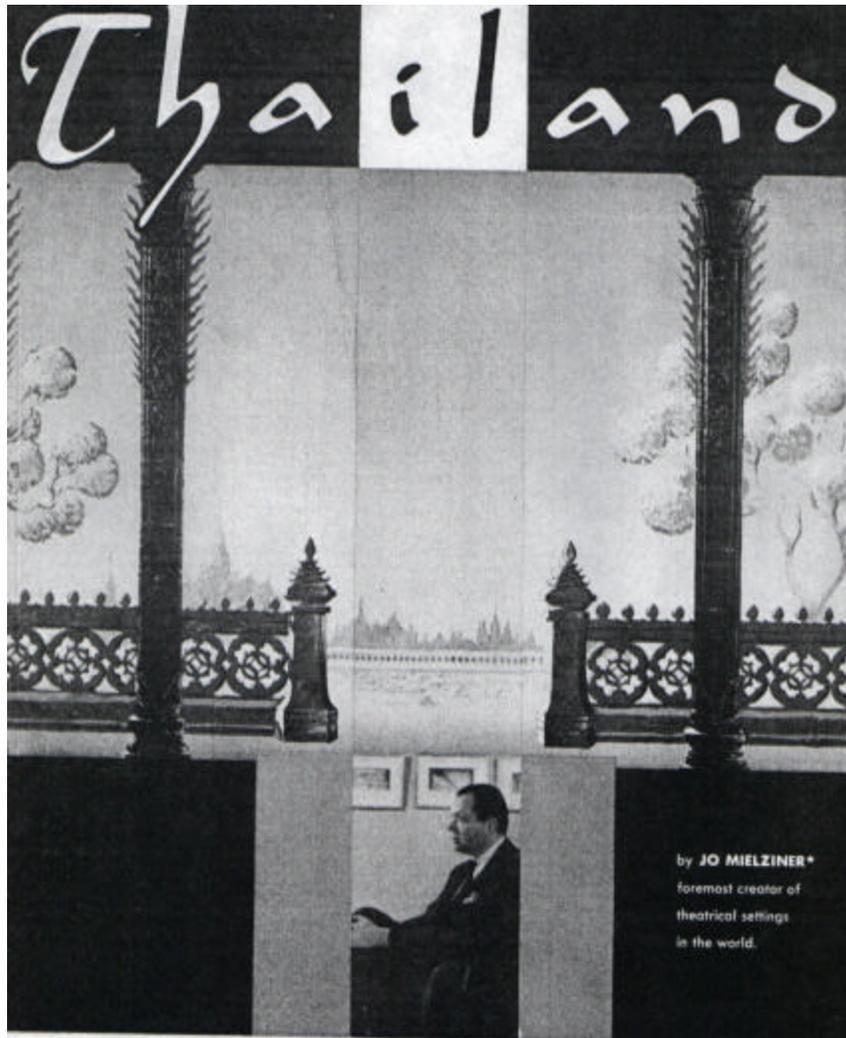
Figure 4.9: Brochure for Murals, Inc. "Thailand" mural, designed by Mielziner. (Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Lenox and Tilden Foundations)

Conclusion:
Cultural Legacies of Modern American Design

During the summer of 2003, the Association for Theatre in Higher Education held its annual conference at the Marriot Marquis hotel located in the commercial heart of New York City, Times Square. While attending a session titled "Re-imagining American Design History,"[1] I listened to a series of panelists discuss the work of theatrical designers, including Robert Edmond Jones and Jo Mielziner. I occasionally gazed out the fourth floor window above West Forty-Fifth Street near Broadway, vaguely distracted by Times Square's visual spectacle. The session discussion alternated between arguments for historicizing the material practices of designers and continuing strategies for recuperating their contributions to the American theatre. After a presentation on Mielziner's collaboration with Elia Kazan and Tennessee William on *A Streetcar Named Desire*, one attendee nostalgically asked how theatre educators could inspire today's design students to create the same type of evocative staging that had emerged during this "golden era" of theatre. How could we instill them with Mielziner's passion for the theatre and keep them from migrating to other commercial opportunities? With this last question, he gestured to the window overlooking the visual commotion of Times Square, suggesting that this exaggerated landscape perfectly exemplified the kind of tasteless commercialism currently draining the theatre of its artistic talent.

With this gesture, the Times Square neighborhood came into focus, no longer a vague distraction outside the window but a geographic location with cultural significance, and I was reminded of another one of Mielziner's Broadway designs: *Guys and Dolls*

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[1] "Re-imagining American Design History," panel including Robert Knopf, Anthony Hostetter, Stephen Di Benedetto, Anne Fletcher, Julia Listengarten, and Scott Dahl, conference for the Association for Theatre in Higher Education, Marriot Marquis, New York City, 3 Aug. 2003.

(1950).[2] The images of Mielziner's vibrant cityscape were still fresh in my mind having

examined them earlier that week in the Billy Rose Theatre Collection at the New York

Public Library for the Performing Arts, and now I was sitting mere steps away from the

Forty-Sixth Street Theatre (now the Richard Rodgers Theatre) where the musical

premiered. Mielziner's design captured the spectacular commercialism of Times Square

and its surrounding streets. Using a brash combination of day-glow colors, he rendered

the neighborhood's gaudy visual character, accentuating each building with golden

marquee lights and brilliant neon signage.[3] Mielziner's tribute to Times Square's

frenzied mish-mash of colorful electrified signs and advertising billboards reinforced its

iconic status as a New York landmark dedicated to consumer culture.

The Times Square of 2003 contained echoes of Mielziner's design; indeed, the

vibrant playground of urban tourism that I saw outside the Marriot window was closer to

Mielziner's images than the actual 1950 Times Square encountered by *Guys and Dolls*

audiences when they exited the Forty-Sixth Street Theatre. Economic hardship during

the 1930s had forced the closure of many Broadway theatres and restaurants, and the area

had evolved from a legitimate theatre district into a "less genteel" neighborhood hosting

arcades and movie houses; by the 1940s, the area declined further, gaining a reputation

for prostitution and drug-dealing.[4] Times Square's redevelopment began during the

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[2] The original Broadway production of *Guys and Dolls* was directed by George S. Kaufman, with songs and lyrics by Frank Loesser and book by Jo Swerling and Abe Burrows. The producers developed the musical from the Broadway stories of journalist Damon Runyon, originally published in magazines like *Colliers*, *Cosmopolitan*, and *Saturday Evening Post* during the 1920's and thirties.

[3] An early research list indicates Mielziner's initial impulse to give primary emphasis to signage, requesting his assistant to obtain literature from Broadway sign companies. "Guys and Dolls Research List," (22 February, 1950), Box 35, Folder 7, "Mielziner, (Jo) Papers, 1903-1976," Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library for the Performance Arts.

[4] Brooks McNamara, "The Entertainment District at the End of the 1930s," *Inventing Times Square: Commerce and Culture at the Crossroads of the World*, ed. William R. Taylor (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1991) 179-181.

1970s, initiated through partnerships between city officials and corporate investors who hoped to raise midtown Manhattan real estate prices by closing pawn shops and peep shows and making the neighborhood safe for consumers and tourists whose buying practices supported the investors' commercial objectives.[5] The redevelopers drew from neighborhood's history as a theatre district, capturing its iconic past in the designs of new businesses, electric signs, and advertising billboards.[6] Today, Times Square is as much a stage design as Mielziner's original setting for *Guys and Dolls*, constantly used as a backdrop for tourist photographs and television programming for network studios.

The persistent recycling of this nostalgic image, beginning with Mielziner's design and continuing into the twenty-first century, points to the capacity of design to shape material landscapes of consumption and influence their cultural understandings. This process of image replication also implicates early twentieth-century theatrical designers like Mielziner in the development of America's consumer culture, challenging the assumption that their artistic integrity or "passion for the theatre" kept them from participating in the same commercial forces that created Times Square. When the panel attendee gestured out the Marriot window, he was referencing part of the New Stagecraft legacy. Times Square, in fact, is a fitting place to reflect back on the legacy of these designers; the neighborhood continues to serve as the center of New York's commercial theatre district and many Broadways artists carry on theories and practices that began with the New Stagecraft. But the location also gives substantial evidence of how theatrical designers have transformed America's urban landscapes by dramatizing consumerism; the "retail theatre" and vulgar commercialism of Times Square is often

[5] Sharon Zukin, *The Culture of Cities* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1995) 28.
[6] Maurya Wickstrom, "Commodities, Mimesis, and *The Lion King*: Retail Theatre for the 1990s," *Theatre Journal* 51:3 (1999): 286.

denigrated as inauthentic to the sophistication of New York culture (suitable only for tourists), but in fact the location reveals a history of cultural production at the heart of the modern city's development.

Beginning with Belasco's use of realism to dramatize processes of standardization and continuing with Jones's shift from Greenwich Village to Broadway, Bel Geddes's designs for consumer products, and Mielziner's creation of musical merchandising, designers have played a delicate balancing act between asserting their credibility as modern artists and participating within the commercial processes of American modernity. As such, the history of American design is inextricably connected to the history of the American market economy. The tendency to erase designers' commercial endeavors and business negotiations stems from a fear of undermining their status as nonconformist, autonomous artists with distinct individual styles, a fundamental philosophical attribute of modernism. Yet these connection points between design and the market, between the theatrical and the everyday, reveal design as a powerful force in American culture.

Today's students of theatrical design are as likely to migrate to commercial opportunities as their predecessors, and they need to understand not only their own genealogical connections to past designers but also the broader cultural practices which they have inherited. An American design history that teaches them this perspective also helps them acknowledge that the images they create on contemporary stages have social, economic, and political implications and that their artistry not only interprets dramatic texts but also the cultural landscapes that surround them. By studying the designs of artists like Belasco, Jones, Bel Geddes, and Mielziner as visual texts that offer a critique of their cultural moment, current designers can examine how their own work provokes

civic dialogues, shapes people's collective identity, and challenges assumed knowledge. Their designs are neither apolitical nor ahistorical; beyond the collection of formal components they arrange to support the ideas of their production colleagues, their designs significantly engage questions about the perspectives and landscapes experienced by contemporary American citizens.

Throughout this dissertation, I have traced a genealogy of American theatrical design, following the rupture from stage realism to theatrical modernism and the designs of well-known artists who established many of the practices of theatrical production that continue in the work of current artists. I worked backward from my own experiences as a student designer, locating my apprenticeship within this history of material practices. Although my analysis has challenged the assumed significance and meanings of these designs, I only examined artists whose careers constitute the dominant narratives of American design history, pursuing one of several genealogical lines. Thus, there are many names missing from this study, and many paths not followed. Within the same years of investigation, for example, Joseph Urban re-imagined the possibilities of the musical stage with his designs for the Zeigfeld Follies (1915-1931); Lee Simonson maximized the artistic and political objectives of progressive theatres companies like the Theatre Guild during the 1920s; Aline Bernstein redefined expectations with her modern-dress *Hamlet* (1925) and experimental collaborations with Eva le Gallienne at the Civic Repertory Company (1926-1933); and Howard Bay politicized the productions of the Federal Theatre Project with designs like *One Third of a Nation* (1939). The inclusion of any of these designers, or the host of artists left unnamed, would uncover additional

intersections between the aesthetics of modern design and the landscapes of American modernity, providing new trajectories for cultural analysis.

To create a more comprehensive cultural history of American design, theatre scholars need to identify and follow various genealogical paths. By selecting and reiterating a single point of origin—Jones's *The Man Who Married a Dumb Wife*—design historians have limited their criteria for evaluation and inclusion to American artists who advocated and practiced New Stagecraft design. The movement undeniably signaled a rupture between the theories and aesthetics of theatrical realism and modernism, and this project, with the exception of Belasco's *The Governor's Lady*, examined designs that resulted from this artistic shift. This exception, however, is crucial; theorized as an alternative point of origin, this design provided the foundation for an analysis of modern design as a culturally significant, embodied practice developing out of a particular historical moment and geography. By selecting and evaluating designs according to their social, economic, and political significance rather than their aesthetic excellence, I pursued alternate trajectories from previous scholarship, identifying previously neglected artifacts as evidence of cultural trends and relying on interdisciplinary sources to contextualize my findings. These same methodologies can be useful in recuperating designers and productions that have not experienced the same level of exposure within theatre history, further asserting the significance of visual artistry and material staging to contemporary understandings of American performance.

There are limitations, however, to the methodologies I employed in this dissertation. Each of the designers examined found considerable success in commercial theatre and industry, leaving behind a significant trail of business negotiations—Jones's

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speeches to students about future of the modern theatre arose from his contracts with a
lecture circuit, Bel Geddes's *Futurama* design arose from his collaboration with major
corporations, and Mielziner's replication of theatrical designs for commercial
merchandising arose from his assertions of legal ownership over his work. Designers
who have not reached the same level of professional success or who chose to remain
outside commercial structures of theatre, designing for amateur and community-based
performance, often engage different practices and leave behind different artifacts. Many
of Jones's early experiences in Greenwich Village, for example, remain uncovered;
indeed, it is doubtful that even the limited evidence of his collaborations with the
Washington Square Players and Provincetown Players would have been recorded had he
not achieved later commercial success. Thus, theatre history has yet to uncover the
material practices of many designers, particularly the work of women and minorities
denied similar educational opportunities, social connections, and class advantages.[7]
Their contributions, however, are vital to the establishment of a more comprehensive
cultural history of American design; through a dedication to investigating alternate
genealogies and analyzing a variety of design artifacts, historians can begin to uncover
the traces of their artistry, thus furthering understandings of designers' contributions to
American's perceptions of their various cultural landscapes.

Changes in American theatre since the 1950s also require consideration for
recuperating a diverse range of theatrical design, including further examinations of
postmodern artistry. Designers such as Ming Cho Lee, John Conklin, and Robert Israel

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[7] Some notable exceptions include Cheryl Black's chapter on women designers in *The Women of Provincetown, 1915-1922* (Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 2002) and Kathy A. Perkins's important recovery of designers like Meta Warrick Fuller in "The Genius of Meta Warrick Fuller," *Black American Literature Forum* 24.1 (1990): 65-72, and Perry Watkins in "Black Backstage Workers, 1900-1969," *Black American Literature Forum* 16.4 (1982): 160-63.

increasingly challenged the unified statements of theatrical modernism by creating

dissonant visual juxtapositions, experimenting with new materials and techniques of

collage, and interrupting assumptions of universal spectatorship to acknowledge multiple

cultural perspectives.[8] But in addition to locating the aesthetic differences between

theatrical modernism and postmodernism, a cultural analysis can reveal the historical

circumstances that encouraged these artists to adopt new techniques. Postmodern staging

arose as a reaction against not only the modernism of artists like Jones, Bel Geddes, and

Mielziner, but also the processes of modernization (capitalism, rationalization,

standardization) and practices of consumer culture that these same artists participated

within and critiqued with their designs.

The decentralization of Broadway has altered the design profession significantly

since the 1950s, beginning with the growth off-Broadway and continuing beyond the

geography of New York City with regional theatres and a variety of non-profit venues

across the nation.   While New York still functions as a major center for theatrical

production, designers increasingly work outside the city, developing a broader range of

collaborative associations and gaining exposure to a multiple local communities and

geographies. The landscapes of American culture have also changed substantially,

prompting designers to critique these differences. Modern cities like New York are no

longer representative of the national experience, a decline that Mielziner captured with

his *Death of a Salesman* design; rather, the type of suburban neighborhoods and highway

development that Bel Geddes anticipated in *Futurama* now encroach on the lives of the

majority of Americans, redefining their everyday perceptions. Today's audiences, for

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[8] Arnold Aronson writes: ""postmodern design is a dissonant reminder that no single point of view
is possible, even within a single image." *Looking into the Abyss: Essays on Scenography* (Ann Arbor: U of
Michigan P, 2005) 14.

instance, would not react to an authentic replica of a chain restaurant on a theatrical stage in the same way Belasco's spectators did in 1912; the novelty of commercial standardization has long since worn off as citizens negotiate a national landscape with fewer and fewer locally distinct experiences. The visual and spatial expressions of contemporary designers reflect these experiences; a critical framework for examining the cultural significance of material staging can help scholars include the work of designers within their current accounts of performance, recording their artistry for the next generation of historians just as critics like Sheldon Cheney and Kenneth Macgowan did for the New Stagecraft.

I started this dissertation in Austin, Texas, sitting in a Starbucks and reflecting on processes of standardization that connect my everyday life to a theatrical production that happened close to a hundred years ago. I concluded in Times Square, a place that once held a Childs Restaurant and currently holds a Starbucks, as well as many other chain establishments. Throughout, I have located myself in relation to the cultural legacies of modern design, not only as a historian but also a practitioner, spectator, and citizen. Indeed, it is through this embodied theorization that I began to understand and uncover the cultural implications of modern design and its pervasive presence within the American landscape. The formal aesthetics and subjective expressions of modern designers, intentionally or not, helped shape today's reality, influencing perceptions, changing expectations and values, and directing the behaviors of Americans. Design is not merely decorative, as New Stagecraft proponents argued; it is dynamic, persuasive, and fundamentally shifts understandings of future possibilities.

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Unpublished Materials:

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VITA

Christin Essin Yannacci was born in Johnson City, Tennessee on May 25, 1971, the daughter of Sally Goodman Essin and Emmett M. Essin, III. She received her Bachelor of Arts degree from Wake Forest University in 1993. During the following three years, she worked as a professional theatre technician and designer before starting her graduate studies in the fall of 1996. In 1998, she received her Master of Arts degree from Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois. She spent the next two years in State College, Pennsylvania working for a variety of arts organizations including the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts. In August 2000, she entered the Graduate School of The University of Texas at Austin.

Permanent Address: 14215 Anita Marie Lane, Austin, Texas 78728

This dissertation was typed by the author.