

The Diary of a Young Designer

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Litsey/Flowers

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Over the past four years here, I have been given many opportunities to explore every aspect of my passion, the theatre. After exploring every aspect of theatre available to me in an academic setting at Birmingham-Southern College, I decided that design is what interested me the most in theatre. I have been designing shows at BSC for three years now, and I have felt a great sense of pride for all of the shows that I have designed, but the show that I have been the most proud of is my scenic design for *The Diary of Anne Frank*~ which was also my senior project. The time I spent researching and long hours I spent in the design room to create the world of Anne Frank tested all of my skills that I have learned here as not only a designer, but also as an actor, a director, and a stage manager. As a designer, I plan to develop my skills in graduate school; even though I have learned so much here as a designer, I know that there are still many things that I do not know about my art form.

When I came to Birmingham-Southern, I had no interest in designing for the stage; I never even considered it as an option because I thought I would not be capable of designing sets or lights that would ever do a play justice or look anything like some of the designs that I had seen in my lifetime. However, after taking my first design class I found out that not only did I have the skills and talent to undertake such challenges, but I had a passion for design as well. I was always afraid that after I graduated college with a major in theatre that I would enter the "real world" and realize that my only skill was theatre; that I would leave and realize that I never developed a focus in my life. After four years here however, I found my focus and an even deeper passion in theatre that is design. In my years here as a designer, with particular focus on my scenic design for *The Diary of Anne Frank*, I have learned that communication is the most important skill a

designer can have. A designer must be able to communicate to the audience with their design to establish an environment, enhance the audiences' aesthetic pleasure, and reinforce the play's meaning to the audience and the actors. An open line of communication must be established from the beginning between every member on a production team so that the play can be fully developed for the audience.

Communication is the centerpiece of good theatre. Without communication between production members, it is nearly impossible to create a cohesive production.

Today, audiences talk about going to see a play, not hear the play. When I am reading a play to myself my imagination helps to create that play's world. As a reader, I am given only what the playwright suggests in the script, but as a designer, I am able to take advantage of my imagination to create an actual world for the actors in the play to work with. I remember being interested in the scenic designs whenever I went to see a play myself wondering how the designer ever came up with a particular set, or how he or she created onstage what was imagined in his or her head. When I began here as a freshman I remember wanting to take the light design class that was offered so that I could get that credit out of the way. No such luck; I was hooked by the second week of class. It was hard work trying to analyze the plays and choosing the correct color balance to enhance the scenes in the play, not to mention hand drafting the little lighting instruments with the stencil. It was fun work because I was able to use what I was learning about the plays and getting to add my own personality to them, much like actors bring their own personal experiences to their characters' lives. I became so intrigued with lighting design that I signed up for the set design class to find out if there were other areas of theatre and design in which I had talent.

The first day of Matthew Mielke's set design class was not what I had hoped it would be. When the syllabus was handed out I realized that I was going to have to learn how to do front and rear elevations, ground plans, and even build those super small to-scale models of whatever I came up with as my scenic design. The first word that popped in my head was minimalism. I thought, "This class seems pretty difficult. The fewer set pieces I have, the fewer amounts of drafting and model working I have to do." My book in that class defines a scenic designer as a "person responsible for the visual appearance and function of scenic and property elements used in the production" (Gillette 11). J. Michael Gillette, the author of the book and a scenic designer himself, obviously wanted to use the broadest definition to describe a scenic designer so as not to scare away anyone who might be considering a career in scenic design. A scenic designer, I have come to realize in my four years here, is a collaborator, a communicator, an artist, and at times a workaholic or perfectionist. My first designs at Birmingham-Southern were lighting designs. Now that I have finished my work here as a set designer looking back I realized how important it was for me to have had my first designs be for lighting; they allowed me to explore yet another aspect of theatre before turning to set design. I think that as a scenic designer it is important to understand almost all of the different jobs in theatre so that you can fully realize the potential and problems of each design.

My junior year I was given the opportunity to design the set for a musical called *The Spitfire Grill*, which was performed in our Theatre One space. This forced me to re-read my text book from class and actually apply everything that I learned in class to a play that would actually be performed. Since none of the plays that I designed for the class were ever realized I was more nervous than excited about the chance to design. I

wanted to impress everyone with an amazing design that enveloped the thoughts and feelings of the characters with the spirit and theme of the play, but I felt like even after taking the class I had no idea how to do that. I referred back to my textbook and I was pleased to find my handy seven-step process to designing a show.

The first step is commitment. This step involves realizing that you are committing enough of your time and hard work to design the best possible show. The second step is analysis. This step involves questioning the director or other members of the design team in order to help troubleshoot and identify areas that will require further research or be challenging when designing the show. Analysis also requires three readings of the play; the play is read with a specific goal in mind each time. Research is the fourth step in the process; this step helps designers to understand the historical background of the play. This step also includes color choices and research of previous productions. Incubation is the next step and to me it is extremely important. Incubation allows the designer time to step back from the design and let his or her mind "sort through the information gathered in the previous steps." This is particularly helpful when you are unable to find the solution to a particular problem; stepping back from the problem sometimes helps the answer to the problem become clearer. The fifth step is selection. This step is when the all of the data accumulated is sifted through and a production concept is decided on. The next step is implementation when the designer "produces all drawings, models, plans, and instructions necessary to construct the scenic, lighting, costume, and sound designs." Finally, evaluation, the last step in the process, happens within each step of the process and once the design project is completed. It is important to look objectively at the "interchanges and communication process that took

place inside and outside the various production conferences to see if they can improve the communication the next time around." When I was just beginning to learn about scenic design these steps helped me to understand the process that I should be going through as a designer each time I begin to design a show. When evaluating each of the steps, I realized that all of them rely heavily on communication (Gillette 20-32).

Commitment and communication is extremely important for designers. My junior year when I". designed for *The Spitfire Grill*, I was told at the beginning of the process that the department schedule would only allow one and a half weeks for whatever I designed to be built. If the director and technical director had not communicated the time restraints that I would be facing in the future, I might have wasted time envisioning a much larger or more difficult set to build. I was able to narrow my design to a unit set that served as a multi-functional space even though the play that called for a grill, a porch, a street, and woods. I never would have thought of a unit set if I had not have been limited on time. I knew that my commitment on this project would be extremely important during the whole semester as well as those specific weeks in regards to the building of the set.

For my senior project, I was asked at the end of my junior year, just after I finished *The Spitfire Grill*, to design the set for the Mainstage production of *The Diary of Anne Frank*. I was nervous, and it took me a few days to accept the job for fear of failing everyone in the department. I was also extremely afraid that such a huge design would be too much of a commitment for me during my senior year, but I was ready for a challenge. After I accepted, I was told that I would have to begin the first four steps of the design process that summer. For me, that meant that I would have to spend a good portion of my summer vacation in the library researching Amsterdam, W odd War II, and

all of the people hidden away in the secret annex and analyzing the play. Matthew Mielke, my mentor and teacher, as well as a designer, communicated to me that it was important for me not to move onto the next step in the process, selection, until I came back to school, so that I did not trap myself into one type of design for the show. As a designer, it is sometimes easy to visualize how the set of the show should be designed before there are design meetings with the director, other designers, and technical director. If you do not go into the first design meeting being open to all ideas then the importance of the director's ideas and other collaborators thoughts are null. Had Professor Mielke not told me this, I would have come back from summer vacation ready with sketches and drawings to show the director and other designers without ever having met with them. By not moving on to the next step I was able to have adequate incubation time in my process to allow all of the information that I had been gathering to sink in.

The fifth step in the design process of selection is when good communication can help to form a complete production concept or poor communication can cause the design of the show to not be congruent with the other aspects of the play. After all of my research and readings of the play are finished I sit down with the director and other designers to talk about the production concept of the show. Gillette says that selection is "the step in the design process in which you sift through all of the data you've accumulated and decide on your specific design concept" (Gillette 25). The design concept for *The Spitfire Grill* seemed to be a lot easier for me to pinpoint; first, because the theme of the play was so evident to me, and second, the director and I both had the same thoughts about the concept going into the process. Michael Flowers, the director, and I discussed how important the theme of hope was within the show and within each of

the characters' lives. With my research that I had done in preparation for this meeting I knew that I wanted to have a set that was very earthy and wooden, as well as a set that could be very versatile. After our initial production meeting I began making thumbnail sketches of some ideas that I had as well as different color schemes that I thought would work well. Communication between the director and me was very open in my design experience with *The Spitfire Grill*. I was able to get constructive feedback from the director and technical director to help channel my different ideas and thoughts into a final ground plan for the show.

My first design meeting, when I began working on *The Diary of Anne Frank*, was also with the director, Alan Litsey, and the other designers involved with the show. I reported to them all of the research that I had been working on all summer and was excited to find out how we would be performing this play. Since this play is based on actual historical events, I had been wondering if we were going to choose a production concept that was more realistic or branch out into impressionism or choose to do something abstract. I wondered this because I had never narrowed down my own opinion of how the show should be designed since over the summer I had tried to keep an open mind about how the design for the show should be done. I was able to absorb all that was discussed in our initial meeting and we decided on a particular style in which we wanted to design the show. We decided that we wanted to break away from realism and concentrate on Anne's world as one that could disintegrate at any time. When it was time to start the next step, selection, Dr. Litsey was extremely helpful by giving me a book of art by Beckmann that he found engaging and poignant to Anne's world (See fig 1).

Once I received this book of art, I began more research of German art movements and architectures (See fig 2). The process of selection for *The Diary of Anne Frank* was a much longer process than that of *The Spitfire Grill* because I was not limited creatively in the "look" of the design. I was nervous because I was having trouble deciding on a specific look that I wanted the design to take on, and it seemed that it was taking me longer than usual to come to a conclusion. *The Spitfire Grill* design lent itself to a much more limited design because of the small playing space and setting requirements established in the play. *The Diary of Anne Frank* however, was very specific on when and where the play was set, and as a designer, I wanted to uphold the integrity of the play by adhering to those guidelines, but I did not want to limit myself creatively.

As a student receiving an art minor, I am familiar with the term composition defined by Gillette as an "arrangement of parts to create a whole" (Gillette 563). In my scenic design class the term composition began to include for me all of the elements of design such as line, shape, color, texture, and mass. These design elements are my palette for communicating to the audience; with every choice I make as a designer on all of the different elements, I am able to communicate to the audience and generate a response from them whether it is positive or negative, happy or sad. After examining the different emotional responses that an audience might feel after watching *The Diary of Anne Frank* and after examining my own feelings after reading the play, I began to figure out the right texture that would invoke a specific emotional response tied to memory. After deciding that, I came to the conclusion that wooden materials would invoke these feelings better than say metallic materials which reflect or are cold to the touch. Wood, to me, is a material that captures things that happened in the past and stores those

memories for those in the future. Wood can also be painted; with paint, I was also able to explore color and the different emotions that colors have on an audience.

Color "is one of the most important and complex of the design elements. It generates complex responses in the viewer based on psychological and cultural reactions" (Gillette 71). In *The Spitfire Grill* for example, I knew that I wanted to create a world that appeared to be dilapidated and run-down with despair, but which had the ability to change into a world that had hope and new life. Again, I used wood as my material, but I chose a color palette that was very warm and inviting but it also had patches of cool browns and yellows. When choosing my color palette it is hard for me not to think as a lighting designer as well. As a set designer, I enjoy choosing colors that a lighting designer can use to enhance the scenic design and the feelings of the play or the scene. As a lighting designer, I like to be able to add to the mood of a scene by enhancing the color palette that is found in the set. If a set was painted without the lighting designer in mind, I think that the designs would work against each other because it is hard to enhance a mood without colors on a set to draw from. In regards to *The Diary of Anne Frank*, I wanted to express the warmth that the families brought to the annex, but not forget the lack of hope and despair that the rest of the world was feeling on the outside. To express this I decided to have a base color of brown because it is a neutral color, and add to it a cool blue and a warm red (See Fig 3). Communicating to the audience with color is possibly the strongest way a creating a mood or feeling for that show.

After I have chosen particular elements of design that I want to enhance in the scenic design I finally begin working on the sixth step in the design process, implementation. When developing the ground plan for *The Spitfire Grill* I found it easy,

but time consuming, to draw out different layouts of how a grill might look if placed in Theatre One. It is most helpful when I am able to collaborate with the director on a ground plan because it is important to design a plan that: "is organically part of the play and the action, demonstrates the play's psychological areas and conflicts, helps to bring the characters to life, and represents the environment, communicates the mood or atmosphere..." (Catron 233). Michael Flowers, the director, was able to communicate to me that he wanted a fluid ground plan that could be used for all of the different settings that were required within the play. When I was working on the ground plan for *The Diary of Anne Frank*, I felt compelled to try to stay truthful to the actual annex in which the Franks and VanDaans lived for two years; working to "recreate" the actual size and flow of the annex house was a very daunting task to me. I remember becoming frustrated because I knew that I wanted to place the bedrooms of Anne Frank and Peter (her love interest) across the stage from each other. I wanted them separated by the living room because there was a particular part in the play that seemed to call for the image of Anne walking across the other members of the house to go on her date, but to do so I knew that I would have to diverge from the actual look of the annex. I knew that I would have to choose between my idea of having the rooms of the annex set up the same as they are in the house in Amsterdam, or my artistic idea of how I thought the set could enhance the play. I ultimately chose to go with my latter choice because I knew that it would enhance the play more and it would not diverge much from the real annex itself. Once I knew that I wanted those two rooms across from each other I began developing different placements on the stage of how the platforms could be arranged. I began coming up with so many of them that I lost track of my original idea of sticking to the flow of the actual

annex. I asked Matthew Mielke for help and he taught me something that I would never forget... flow chart. Those two words helped me to create the ground plan that I eventually used in my final design because I was able to use the look that I wanted with the two rooms across from each other and still have the flow from room to room of the real annex. In addition, by collaborating with Alan Litsey I was able to develop a world that would reinforce the theme of hope in the play without ignoring the encroaching world that' would eventually set upon the characters. When we discussed this juxtaposition of themes, we wanted to be able to portray the first question I thought of was, "How am I going to be able to design a set that is trying to display stability *and* instability?" The image that kept penetrating my mind was ultimately the idea that I implemented. I imagined a house that you knew was safe to walk into, but at the same time, if it was touched or hit in a weak place could collapse. I decided that the best way to create that look was with horizontal wooden slats that looked as if they had been pulled down, or broken. By making the walls in this manner, I thought that it created the illusion of a stable wall, but had the look of a wall that if touched wrong would collapse. I was able to create a design that included an illusion of stability of life while also including a world of disintegration. When I feel I am able to communicate to the audience via my designs the play's meanings or themes, and I am able to create an atmosphere that helps to enhance the audience's experience when watching the play, I feel a sense of accomplishment as a designer. I know that my research and the intense planning of my design have added to the fluidity of the performance.

When I go to watch a play, the first thing that catches my eye is the scenic design. Many times scenic designers design sets or lights that hold the audience's attention. I

have not designed for a play where I have found it necessary to hold the audience's attention with my set design. I enjoy designs that compliment the words of the play and the actors on the stage. I also enjoy creating designs that spark the audiences imagination when they enter the theatre and first lay eyes on my designs, but once the lights come up I relish taking a back seat as a designer by having my designs simply become the world of that particular play in a particular moment. I want my designs to contribute to the audience's experience of going to see a play; I dislike it when I go and see a play and the set design distracts me from what is happening with the characters onstage. In directing class with Alan Litsey, I learned that levels are important for blocking dynamic scenes; I also learned this in set design with Matthew Mielke. Levels can be "major contributors to effective blocking and composition" and levels are another element of design that are extremely important to me right now in my own designs because of their effectiveness to create different playing spaces and allow for different character compositions (Catron 244). In *The Diary of Anne Frank*, I used different platform levels to create delineation in the characters' bedrooms and also add a vertical element of composition to stage floor. By creating such platforms, I realized once the set was built that I had prevented some of the audience members from being able to see the stage picture clearly. In reflection, I wish that I had given more thought to the issue of sight lines when implementing my design. When I began my ground plans and model working, I did not thoroughly think through my choices of placing such tall platforms with furniture on them so far down stage. Once construction began on the set, we slowly realized the problem that audience members would have if they were sitting on any of the first four rows house left or house right. Through communication, we were able to find a solution to the sight line problems

my design created, and we decided to rope off most of those seats so that audience members would have a good view of the performance. I am glad that the problem that time was easily fixable, but I have learned that checking for sight line problems is part of my trouble shooting process now.

In my future, I hope to continue my process as a designer. I feel that I still have so much to learn and many more mistakes for which to learn. I would like to look back on all of the shows that I design and know that as I developed into a more mature and developed designer, so did my designs. I feel that the two designs that I have created were the best that I could do at the time, but I feel that I have many more ideas that I would like to explore for many other shows. In both of my designs, I used wood as the main texture, and in the future, I would like to explore more textures such as metal or even plastic. I would like to look back on my designs and know that I was committed to each one and see that each one of them was different from the next in some way. I feel confident that I have been given the abilities to achieve my goals for the future, but I know that to do so I will have to practice my craft, and remember to keep an open mind for each new project.

Being an accomplished designer in an academic setting in which I am allowed to make mistakes, so long as I learn from them, has helped me to realize that I have the ability to continue working beyond college as a designer. I have also learned that communication within the theatre department and between the production team is very positive and open, and because of that, I am able to take away from each of my design experiences new skills and new tools that I can use when I graduate. Communicating to others and having others communicate with me, as the designer, is the key to having a

successful design. After four years studying theatre at Birmingham-Southern College, I have been taught the skills that every designer needs to know in order to have a successful composition and well-planned design. Without communication between the director and the designer, it is nearly impossible to create a world onstage that is in harmony with the playwright, the director, and the other designers. As a scenic designer, I feel that it is my job to enhance and communicate through my designs the feelings and thoughts of the play. It is important for me to understand what the play and the director communicates to me so that I can use my design to enrich characterization by establishing an environment for the characters and the audience. I know that I have much more to learn in my process as a designer, but I am pleased with the knowledge that I have been given as a designer because I have discovered another way of telling the playwright's story other than acting.

Works Cited

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Gillette, J. Michael. Theatrical Design and Production. 4th ed. Mountain View:

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Figure 1

The Night 1918-1919

Beckmann

This painting helped me to decide that I wanted my scenic design to have angles that were slightly bent or skewed. By creating all of my platforms and walls with no right angles, I was hoping to communicate to the audience a feeling of uneasiness.

**Figure 2**

Hysolar Reasearch Building at Stuggart, Germany, 1986-1987

Gunter Behnisch

This German architecture inspired me because to me, it reflects my idea of having a building that is stable, but at the same time looks like it could come crashing down. I also really enjoy the angularity of the walls and the disorder that they create.

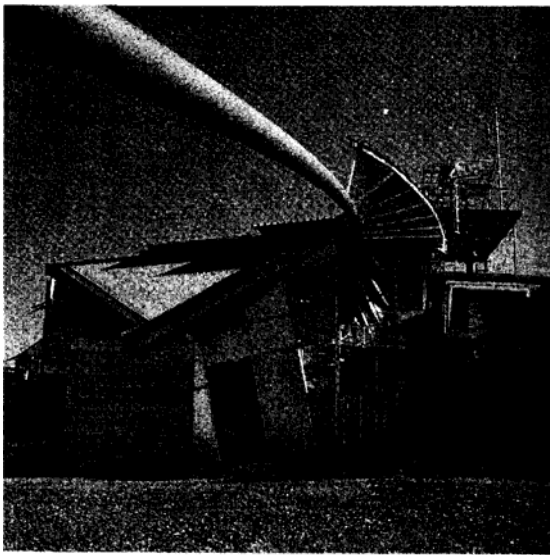


Figure 3

Motive Forces of the Earth (Autumn Mood), 1944

Fritz Winter

I was inspired by the earthy colors of this painting because they are really warm and inviting, but the cool figure in the center that draws my eye adds some coolness and uneasiness to the painting.

