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Scenic Design for Seattle Pacific University Theatre's Production of Tony Kushner's The Illusion

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SCENIC DESIGN FOR
SEATTLE PACIFIC UNIVERSITY THEATRE’S PRODUCTION OF
TONY KUSHNER’S THE ILLUSION

by

Tucker Goodman

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ABSTRACT

This project is the scenic design for Seattle Pacific University Theatre’s mainstage production of *The Illusion*. As an aspiring scenic designer, I study the way that scenery works with the playwright’s written words and the director’s conceptual ideas in order to communicate the story of a play with an audience. The focus of this paper is on the relationship I see between faith and the scholastic pursuit of theatrical design. Theatrical productions are intended to be experienced in the theatre, and as such, they are bound by time. Though it is not possible to capture exactly how the set interacted with the cast, the audience, and the other design elements during performances, I have included appendices to this paper in order to provide the best possible approximation of the project. Included are a scenic breakdown; images of visual research, sketches, and the scale model of my design; technical drawings of the space; production photography of the performance; and a reflection on my design process. My senior project investigates this idea: How can I use my scenic design of *The Illusion* to illuminate the director’s concept and communicate the story of the script to the audience?

I have found that scenery is indeed a key element in theatrical storytelling that acts as a framework supporting the audience’s empathic relationship with the play. This concept of framework is essential to both theatre and religious experience, and these ideas are formally addressed in the faith and scholarship portion of this paper.
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I have been a Christian all my life. However, my definition of “Christian” has changed as I have grown. One of the simplest yet most applicable ideas I have learned at Seattle Pacific University is that we should be “reflective Christians.” I have embraced this idea that we should constantly question and challenge our faith in order to continue growing and maturing as Christians and humans. I strive to do this in both my faith and my scholarship, and my studies at SPU have helped me to continue this process. In this portion of my project, I will relate the formation of my faith, address the goals of my faith and their relationship to the goals of theatre, and synthesize the ideas of other prominent academic voices on these subjects.

First, I will provide a bit of background on the development of my faith. I was born into a Christian home. My parents were both raised in Christian homes as well—my great-grandpa Ezra Seymour was even a Methodist pastor who attended SPU. I grew up attending Sunday schools, youth groups, and church services while my parents raised my siblings and me based on relatively conservative morals and values. While I lived at home, my faith seemed academic in nature—I memorized verses, learned Bible stories, and read books about apologetics. To me, actions were either right or wrong, and morality was pleasantly black and white.

As I grew older, I slowly began to realize that the Christian faith is more than a rulebook; God is infinitely more complicated than that. I often felt a glimmer of the enormity of God during those cliché moments of illumination we often hear about: looking out over a rolling, forested hillside from the top of a mountain, or feeling the tide wash over my feet in the glow of the sunset. I also found I could connect with God through using my artistic talents: hearing the swell of the Wind Ensemble as I rolled my timpani mallets, or calling the perfect light cue from
the stage manager’s booth. These moments made me feel like I was closer to understanding who God is, and they made me feel that I had found my calling.

But entering the arts industry also raised difficult questions. This is now unsurprising to me, as I learned that one of the main goals of theatre and other artistic pursuits is to question. However, it was not just the stories that made me think twice. I found that simply being present in the theatre community prompted many questions that often related to my faith, and I did not always react in a very reflective way. For example, I first came across the debate of homosexuality when one of my Christian cast mates came out of the closet. Based on my conservative theology, I believed the Bible taught that homosexuality was sinful. How could he claim to be gay and Christian? After discussing the subject with one of my more liberal friends, I not only failed to win her over, but I also ended up questioning my own beliefs when she asked whether God—who “is love”—would really tell gay people that they may not love someone. As my worldview expanded, the comfortable, black-and-white code of morality I had subscribed to slowly began to turn an unsettling grey.

I slowly realized that the foundation of my faith was not as solid as I thought. My family moved to a different church around this time, further complicating matters. I still felt God’s presence—it is not as if the sun had stopped setting or music had lost its beauty. But I did not feel like I could articulate what I believed or why. Looking back, I see that I had settled into what made me comfortable rather than trying to grow and mature my faith. I decided I would seek to rebuild that foundation at SPU and started counting down the days until college.

When I finally started classes at SPU, I learned more about the global context of faith. I learned about other Christian traditions. I read Life of Pi, which emphasized the many core values of Christianity that other religions share. While I previously saw truth as exclusively
revealed in the Bible, I learned that Wesleyans also see truth illuminated by church tradition, vivified in personal experience, and confirmed by reason. These ideas filtered in slowly, expanding my view of what faith in God can look like. I did not just pluralistically adopt every faith variation I came across, but I have learned how important it is to truly consider and value other people’s beliefs rather than labeling, categorizing, and stereotyping. And I have learned that I can trust the Holy Spirit to guide me in this process.

Building this new faith framework has been heavily influenced by the idea of living as a reflective Christian. I have come to terms with the fact that I do not have all the answers. I live in the ambiguity of beliefs that are not necessarily concrete. But living in ambiguity is not the same as giving up. I have found one peg I know I can hang my hat on: I believe our purpose in life is to love God. Based on this foundational truth, I have found that the best way to show love for God is to love other people. As long as I am rooted in this goal to love, I am free to embrace the challenge to live a reflective life in the midst of ambiguity, constantly working towards a better understanding of what it means to truly and faithfully follow Christ to the best of my ability.

Enter Polanyi: Reflecting on Framework

One of the influential texts that has helped shape my worldview is *Personal Knowledge*, in which physical chemist Michael Polanyi explains his theory that subjective experience can lead to the greatest truth. He explores the concept building a framework from these subjective observations and then allowing it to slip out of focus. As I read Polanyi’s work, I found his description of personal knowledge very similar to acting teacher Uta Hagen’s philosophy of the actor’s art in her book *Respect for Acting*. Polanyi also explains the ties he sees between personal knowledge and theology, and I applied this to Thomas Aquinas and Augustine’s understanding
of the way we experience God. In this section, I will tie these authors’ opinions together to argue that both art and faith—fields that seem highly subjective—can provide a framework that leads to truth.

First, I will provide a short summary of Polanyi’s ideas. His ultimate goal in writing this book “is to achieve a frame of mind in which [he] may hold firmly to what [he] believe[s] to be true” (Polanyi 214). Contemporary science claims that impersonal knowledge—or knowledge based on completely objective observations and analysis—will lead to the truest results. Polanyi takes issue with this, claiming that it is impossible for an observer to remain completely objective since all information we take in passes through the filter of our minds. He argues that the twentieth century’s obsession with overcoming subjectivity clouds the simplicity of our individual interactions with the world and with God. Therefore, he asserts that personal knowledge—in which we acknowledge and embrace the subjectivity of our interpretation—will lead to a truer conception of the universe. We must build a framework based on the particulars we determine through subjective observation and allow this to inform our commitments to universal truth. Since Polanyi’s philosophy of observation comments on the way we learn and determine truth, Personal Knowledge has vast implications in not only scientific process but also, well, anything anyone believes to be true. As a theatre artist, I see a clear connection between Polanyi’s thoughts and my own life in his description of how we can find truth through framework when we experience art or worship God.

In acting, we attempt to embrace the paradox of preparing to be spontaneous. Uta Hagen defines acting as “living believably in imaginary circumstances.” This is the mantra by which actors work and perform. There is no pretending or “putting on” a character; rather, we are tasked with living the life of another human (or animal, or thing—some plays are rather abstract)
and responding spontaneously to that person’s circumstances in a believable way. The story and circumstances may not be real, but the characters created live and breathe within them. This makes the definition of these circumstances (or in acting terms, the “preparation” of the character) central to the goal of living believably. Hagen lists nine questions as essential to preparing a character: Who am I? What time is it? Where am I? What surrounds me? What are my relationships to the other characters? What are the given circumstances? What do I want? What is in my way? And most importantly, What do I do to get what I want? This simple formula is the first step in preparing to be spontaneous.

This process of preparation is, in Polanyi’s terms, a framework created to find a truthful character. He lists other examples of valid, articulate frameworks, including: “a theory, or a mathematical discovery, or a symphony” (Polanyi 195). Like the notes on the page of a symphony, an actor’s preparation forms the skeleton that will become the final product, and it is this skeleton that audience members use to interpret the character as well. Though audience members probably do not actively ask themselves Hagen’s nine questions (or pay attention to their mental process at all) as they experience the production, they will ultimately determine whether the actor is believable by answering the questions for themselves: Who is the character?, What time is the character living in?, Where is the character?, etc. This preparation creates a web of details connecting the character to the script and the design of the production. This compliments Polanyi’s theory that “visual and musical compositions are appreciated for the beauty of a set of complex relations embodied in them” (Polanyi 193). The framework of the nine questions creates boundaries and guides actors in determining their “imaginary circumstances.” This framework is also informed by the design elements of the production.
I see scenic design as a crucial part of the framework of each character and the story as a whole. Since I have argued that building a framework is an essential step before one can live into the characters, it follows that scenic design is a crucial part of creating each character in a production. Scenic designer and professor of theatre design Bruce Bergner puts it this way: “Actors depend on the appropriate arrangement of space and its physical obstacles to bring their characters to life… The space and the movement must coincide…” (17). He emphasizes that this relationship is reciprocal, that “space develops via an interaction with life. Living humans, even theatrical characters, adapt, reform, and transform the space. So, life defines space and life ensues and morphs into a dream realized. Therefore, space is a parent in the birthing of a dream realized” (30). I love Bergner’s claim that scenery and actors are equal participants in the art of theatre. In fact, he says the scenic design “engages in a dialogue with its inhabitants” (57). This personification of the stage space corroborates the idea that design provides a portion of the actors’ frameworks for understanding their characters.

Once an actor’s preparation has been established, the actor must recognize the character as a whole person rather than just amalgamations of answers. This takes time, contemplation, and rehearsal. So, how does Polanyi apply his framework? He says that a framework “will be used by dwelling in it, and this indwelling can be consciously experienced” (195). He uses the framework of “the major domain of established mathematics” as an example, saying that “the mathematician consciously dwells by losing himself in the contemplation of its greatness” (195). Similarly, as an actor dwells in preparation and recognizes the character as a whole person within the context of all the detailed information, the character spontaneously comes to life. Practically speaking, this means that the actor is able to react in the moment exactly how the character should react to each situation. Under this definition, acting is not a reproduction of a
predetermined formula, but spontaneous response rooted in the actor’s complex understanding of the character. Polanyi’s idea of *dwelling* in the *framework* directly parallels Hagen’s idea of “living believably in imaginary circumstances.”

Extending the framework metaphor beyond the work of the artist, Polanyi applies it to the audience. The central purpose of a play is to share a story with an audience, so it makes sense that the audience’s role would be integral to the formation of the characters. The actor, director, and designers work together on the preparation of each character, but I will maintain that each audience member forms a unique conception of each character. All forms of theatre ask the audience members to put themselves in the shoes of the characters onstage (metaphorically speaking, of course).

In *Personal Knowledge*, Polanyi refers to this phenomenon as contemplation. He says, “contemplation dissolves the screen, stops our movement through experience and pours us straight into experience; we cease to handle things and become immersed in them” (197). By identifying with the characters, the audience shares in their experiences as the play progresses. And Polanyi would agree that the audience members are not the only ones affected by this immersion. Rather, “as we lose ourselves in contemplation, we take on an impersonal life in the objects of our contemplation… the impersonality of intense contemplation consists in a complete participation of the person in that which he contemplates” (197). Any actor will agree that when an audience enters the theatre, the energy in the room changes, and it profoundly affects the process of creating character. More than just a personal experience, “contemplation of music and dramatic art aims… at enabling a person to *surrender* himself to works of art. This is neither to observe nor to handle them, but to *live in them*” (196, emphasis mine). As an audience surrenders
and lives in the story of a play, their participation specifies the characters beyond what the actor and director could do alone.

Bergner also writes about the interaction between audience and art. He claims that “the key feature of each moment is the relationship between the space and its inhabitants, its culture and the observers” (57). This nod to “the observers” brings the audience into his discussion on the role of scenery. As the audience watches the characters onstage, they are affected by the actors’ interpretations of the set. But Bergner claims that the audience members also use the scenery to create their own frameworks for understanding the production, meaning that the scenery affects them directly, moment by moment, based on their own observations.

Polanyi applies the idea of contemplative surrender not only to art, but also to worship. During worshipful contemplation,

The mystic seeks to relax the intellectual control which his powers of perception instinctively exercise over the scene confronting them. His fixed gaze no longer scans each object in its turn and his mind ceases to identify their particulars. The whole framework of intelligent understanding, by which he normally appraises his impressions, sinks into abeyance and uncovers a world experienced uncomprehendingly as a divine miracle (Polanyi 197).

This application of Polanyi’s idea of framework reminds me of Aquinas’ and Augustine’s teaching about God’s nature. Augustine said that the highest human knowledge about God is that we cannot know God. Since God is indefinable in human terms, Aquinas claimed that we must either talk about what God is not (apophatic naming), or talk about what God is by way of imagery and analogy (cataphatic naming). Since none of these methods are perfect, we must collect many imperfect names in order to create a subjective framework. This framework can
never be exactly correct, but will infinitely grow in complexity as we learn more about God. This is where Polanyi’s concept of worship comes in: as our framework for God’s nature gets infinitely complex, we reach a point where we must let the framework “sink into abeyance” so that we can simply revel in the divine miracle of God’s nature. Even though the particulars of the framework have informed our conception of God, they will cease to matter at that point.

Polanyi’s idea of reaching a state of calm beyond the particulars is also integral to Hagen’s acting method. Hagen valued detailed preparation, but she is also famous for using the phrase, “unclutter yourself.” Herein lies the true paradox of preparing to be spontaneous: it will do actors no good to try to remember all of the particulars once they hit the stage. Rather, the actors must “dwell in the framework” or “let the framework sink into abeyance” or “unclutter themselves.” All of these phrases get at the same concept: they will enable the actors to reach the big-picture state of calm that allows actors to live believably in imaginary circumstances, and I think Polanyi would agree that this results in the same state of mind we need to truly experience theatre or worship God.

Polanyi’s theory of personal knowledge supports the idea of living life as a reflective Christian and promotes an empathetic worldview. Polanyi claims that we cannot know things objectively. Though I believe that there is an absolute truth out there, I agree that it seems impossible for me to set aside my own filter of subjectivity. Therefore, I can search for that absolute truth by continuing to reflect on my beliefs in order to build a more accurate framework of my own personal knowledge of the world.

Finally, I argue that viewing the world through Polanyi’s terms encourages empathy. Since each person has a unique point of view, I argue that each framework should be shared. By experiencing another person’s framework, our own will grow more complex and multifaceted.
Theatre is a small-scale example of this phenomenon. When a team of individuals chooses one or two themes to illuminate in their production, the resulting performances bring to life an amalgamation of beliefs from the playwright, production team, cast, and crew. The resulting framework is communicated implicitly through the lens of the play itself—the characters, the design, and the execution. Then, the audience members reflect on their experience of the play and the production team’s intentions. As the audience empathizes and finds ways to identify with the story onstage, their own frameworks grow. This empathic relationship is important not only in interpreting theatrical performances, but also in searching for universal Truth. This process of empathetic reflection acknowledges that we cannot know everything alone; we live in ambiguity. But it also connects us to those around us and allows us to love others more fully, and that is a key aspect of what makes us human.

*Enter Farmer and L’Engle: Reflecting on Faith and Art*

While I have used Polanyi’s ideas to analogically connect my faith and my scholarship, I see faith *applied* to scholarship in Tracy Kidder’s *Mountains Beyond Mountains* and Madeleine L’Engle’s *Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith & Art*. These authors hold to very different beliefs, but I see a similarity between them in that they live out their faith in their work.

Dr. Paul Farmer, the subject of Kidder’s book, is an excellent example of a person who relaxes into life’s ambiguity, but is still driven by empathy. At times, his obligation to help the poor literally keeps him from sleeping at night. His calling to heal the less fortunate is evident in his philosophy that “God gives us humans everything we need to flourish, but he’s not the one who’s supposed to divvy up the loot. That charge was laid upon us” (Kidder 79). He faithfully accepts this charge not because of any religious obligation, but because of his empathy. In fact,
Farmer does not ascribe to any religion; he once told Kidder, “if I had to choose between liberation theology, or any ology, I would go with science as long as service to the poor went along with it. But I don’t have to make that choice, do I?” (86). In spite of the fact that he rejects organized religion, I see Farmer’s selfless and empathic actions as an example of Christ-like living. I am inspired by the idea that we can live out our calling to love others even without knowing all the answers in life: doing does not require knowing.

The faith and art connection is also the subject of Madeleine L’Engle’s book *Walking on Water*. Regarding her work as an artist, L’Engle shares a philosophy similar to Polanyi’s idea of losing oneself in contemplation:

> It is a frightening thing to open oneself to this strange and dark side of the divine; it means letting go our sane self-control, that control which gives us the illusion of safety. But safety is only an illusion, and letting it go is part of listening to the silence, and to the Spirit (15).

L’Engle’s “letting go” refers to giving into imagination, suspending disbelief, and allowing the Holy Spirit to do God’s work. She sees this as essential to both her faith and her art: “The artist, if he is not to forget how to listen, must retain the vision which includes angels and dragons and unicorns, and all the lovely creatures which our world would put in a box marked *Children Only*” (L’Engle 21). These creatures may not exist to me. I have never seen angels, dragons, or unicorns. But in order to truly listen, L’Engle argues that I must retain the mindset that all things are possible. It is in listening that we are able to think creatively. And creative thinking is necessary for both art and faith.

I agree with L’Engle—I live out this idea in my daily work in the theatre. True, I have never seen angels, dragons, or unicorns. Nor have I ever seen the Mississippi River. Nor have I
ever lived with autism, or suffered under Jim Crow laws, or what have you. Yet I know these experiences exist and are valid because others have shared them with me through theatre. I know that they can breathe truth into my life because I chose to listen, to dwell in the framework, to empathize with the characters onstage. And as L’Engle says, “it was through story that I was able to make some small sense of the confusions and complications of life” (52-3). Though I may never fully know anyone, this creative thinking allows me to begin to understand others. Each dragon presented to me will become a piece of my framework. And as I build and live into that framework, I can learn to love more completely.

Drawing on Farmer’s story and L’Engle’s philosophy of art, I see my theatre career as practically living out my commitment to love God and others. Plays make use of humanity’s capacity for empathy, relating the characters’ experiences to those of the audience. Through this act of empathy, audience members question not only the characters’ actions, but also their own. Theatre invites all its participants to see life from someone else’s perspective, allowing them to love others more fully.
APPENDIX A: THE ILLUSION SCENIC BREAKDOWN

This breakdown was written after I had read through the play once or twice, but before any design work or rehearsal had been done. Creating a scenic breakdown is an informal way for me to organize the basic plot of the play while also noting any scenic elements mentioned in the script or stage directions that I will potentially need to include in the set. I organize my scenic breakdowns by location since the set’s primary job is often to establish where the play is set. I also note potential thoughts about other design elements—for example, I noted the blackouts that are written into the stage directions, and I made suggestions for where sound cues could help cover transitions between locations. These decisions are up to the lighting and sound designers, but it’s important for me to organize my thoughts since I am free to weigh in with my opinions.

Page 1-3 CAVE

Start in darkness. We are in the cave of the magician Alcandre and his Amanuensis. Pridamant enters, strikes a match, and he finds the Amanuensis. Alcandre appears, and we learn that Pridamant wants to find his son. Alcandre casts a spell and...

Page 3-19 OUTSIDE THE GARDEN

Figures appear: Pridamant’s son, Calisto, and the son’s lover, Melibea. They are in the world of Illusion, although Pridamant interrupts a few times throughout, reminding us that this is actually all taking place in a cave. Calisto is behind a garden door and they can’t see each other. Calisto is trying to get into the garden, but Melibea won’t let him enter. The maid, Elicia, enters the garden as Melibea exits. She promises to help Calisto get to Melibea, but also loves him. Calisto delivers a small soliloquy about the moon. Pleribo enters and “fights” Calisto, but it’s not a crazy fight. Pleribo leaves and the girls return. Elicia gets Melibea to fall in love with Calisto. They panic because Melibea’s father is coming, and then…
**Page 19-21 CAVE**

The cave goes dark and is restored to its previous look (?). Perhaps some kind of sound covers this (?). The Amanuensis indicates the passage of time. Once Pridamant has established the fact that he is solely a spectator,…

**Page 21-38 LIMBO**

The second illusion commences. Matamore and his messenger Clindor talk about how Matamore loves and does not love Isabelle at the same time. They exit as Adraste and Isabelle enter, and Adraste tries to get Isabelle to say she loves him. Adraste runs away as Matamore and Clindor reenter. After some conversation with Matamore about pithy sayings, he leaves and Clindor charms Isabelle. She leaves to find her maid as Adraste enters and threatens Clindor. Clindor leaves as the maid Lyse enters and tells Adraste about the relationship between Clindor and Isabelle. Adraste leaves to interrupt the secret rendezvous between Clindor and Isabelle. Clindor enters and reveals to Lyse that he loves her for her beauty and Isabelle for her money. As Lyse vows to take her revenge, Pridamant threatens to leave. So (in spite of the fact that the illusion is taking place in the past) Alcandre causes Lyse to have a change of heart. Matamore enters, and Lyse sends him to interrupt the lovers before Adraste gets there in hopes that Matamore will be less dangerous. And the scene shifts to…

**Page 38-41 ARBOR**

The arbor. Isabelle and Clindor enter. Matamore enters, interrupts, and threatens Clindor with death. Then he agrees to give Isabelle to Clindor. Adraste enters; a huge sword fight between Adraste and Clindor breaks out as everyone else looks on. Clindor kills Adraste and tastes his blood before a blackout.

**Page 42-43 CAVE**
Lights come back up on Pridamant, Alcandre, and the Amanuensis. Alcandre explains that he is sending the Amanuensis into the illusion, and that it takes time. The Amanuensis disappears, and Alcandre bids everyone rest.

*Intermission CAVE*

The Amanuensis travels to the abyss. Alcandre and Pridamant rest. In the world of the Illusion, four days pass. Matamore hides in the attic with the rats and eats garbage.

*Page 44 CAVE*

Alcandre calls upon the *mysterium mechanicum* to set the scene. He briefly recaps the characters and hints at the imminent destruction of the son.

*Page 44-48 GERONTE’S HOUSE*

Lyse soliloquizes a bit as Matamore enters. He tells Lyse about his time in the attic and decides he would like to become a hermit in a cave on the moon. As Matamore and Lyse exit, Pridamant asks to see his son, but…

*Page 48-53 GERONTE’S HOUSE (Another room?)*

Isabelle and Geronte appear instead. Isabelle wants Geronte to release Clindor, but he is very angry with her for helping to cause Adraste’s death. Isabelle threatens suicide, but Geronte doesn’t care. Lyse enters as Geronte exits, and she tells Isabelle that she has the key to Clindor’s cell. When Isabelle promises to give all her father’s riches to Lyse, they run away to free Clindor.

*Page 53-56 JAIL*

Lights up on Clindor’s cell. Lyse and Isabelle enter at some point during Clindor’s soliloquy about his father, and they unlock his cell. They talk about their future plans and explain the money situation by telling Clindor an allegorical story… He chooses Isabelle even though
she has no money. They run out of the cell with Lyse straggling behind. We hear Geronte’s voice echoing through the cave as the lights fade.

*Page 56-57 CAVE*

Back in the cave, sans Alcandre. The Amanuensis (returned to his former self) again indicates passage of time. The Amanuensis explains how difficult it is to “cross the void” until Alcandre comes back and cuts him off (by stealing his tongue). The third vision begins.

*Page 58-66 FOREST*

Hippolyta and Clarina are wandering through the forest grove in hopes of running into the secret rendezvous of Hippolyta’s husband (Theogenes) and the princess. They discuss Theogenes’ unfaithfulness until he enters and they hide. Hippolyta catches him; they argue. Pridamant and Alcandre chat about how their lives of argument have tarnished them. Theogenes explains how he has lost the meaning for love. The Prince enters and kills Theogenes. Hippolyta faints, maybe dies. Chaos ensues and the curtain falls.

*Page 66-71 CAVE/THEATRE*

Pridamant rushes the curtain. He finds a tear on his cheek. Alcandre explains that illusions are meant to elicit tears. He tells Pridamant he can find his son in Paris, where he is an actor. As Alcandre explains that the art of love is the art of illusion, Pridamant decides he doesn’t like the idea of his son being an actor. Pridamant leaves and Alcandre tells the Amanuensis to shut out the lights. Matamore enters and then wanders towards the moon. The Amanuensis, left onstage, says, “Not in this life, but in the next,” whatever that might mean.

*End of play.*
APPENDIX B: IMAGES

One of the best ways to brainstorm theatrical design is through visual research. While reading books and searching online for visual representations of themes in the play, I collected pictures to create a bank of ideas. The first section of this appendix is a selection of images that helped me in my design process and contributed to the creation of the final design.

I have also included several thumbnail sketches of my design process. These sketches are ideas for set designs that provide a visual representation of a concept or idea for design. When I design, I use these sketches to brainstorm and compare ideas before I begin detailed technical drawings.

Following the sketches, I have included a final draft of the ground plan and section, photos of the set model I built, and photos of the final product showing the set with paint treatment and lighting. These photos were taken February 4, 2016.
ABOVE: This is an example of a 17th Century French scenic design. My design incorporated the minimal use of props and set pieces as well as the open, spacious feeling of this period. Scene from *The Imaginary Invalid* by Molière (Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris). Image printed in *Theatre for the Ages* by Cesare Molinari.

LEFT: In my design, I attempted to capture the grandeur and mystery of this cave. I felt the change in levels contributed to this emotional pull. Photograph by Craig Ferguson.

BELOW: Adolphe Appia’s scenic design for Orpheus, which features a similar grandeur and level changes.
This sketch was heavily based on research images of caves. The proscenium blends smooth, polished stone on the front face with rough organic edges on the inside rim, contrasting the world of the cave with the square and clean world of 17th Century French theatre.

This sketch, viewed straight on from the front of the stage, brought together elements from several research images.

These two sketches were different versions based on the cave photo by Ferguson. The left version is a very organic perspective drawing, and the right version is a much more angular ground plan view.

This third sketch based on the Ferguson photograph experimented with variations on step size and shapes, but focused on the same cave themes.
This is the first white model I built. I used this model to look at my first version of the set in 3D. This also gave me a better idea of how my sketches would look in the real theatre space.

Often, I collect research photos online on a Pinterest board. Pinterest provides an easy way to collect and share visual inspiration. This image, posted by Lauren Shahroody, shows many phases of the moon. These phases were used to inspire the shapes of the platforms in my final design.

This image is one of my later groundplan sketches (showing the stage from a top-down view). The purpose of this drawing was for me to see the potential platform area—the circle at the bottom of the image—roughly in scale within the theatre space. It features some of the theatre architecture, a black traveler/scrims, and a lineset for a possible moon and stars.
A later ground plan (top-down view) sketch of the downstage platforms inspired by moon shapes and curves. The levels incorporate the feeling of grandeur and mystery I saw in the Appia set and the original Ferguson cave photograph.

This is another sketch of a potential ground plan. The straight lines are stairs meant to define three different main playing areas, with potential curved, wedge-shaped ramps at the top of the drawing.

This is the final ground plan of the set’s downstage platforming, featuring several different playing spaces all in different shapes reminiscent of the moon’s phases. Each shape is a different level, with the tallest level in the upper left corner and the lowest level on the bottom of the drawing.
The final section and ground plan of the set in the theatre space. The rectangular platforms on the right provided an entrance down into the cave for Pridamante. During the rehearsal process, I added five candelabra and a star drop. Not printed to scale.
Elevations of the benches and candelabra. From left: the seat of the bench, a side view of the bench pedestal, side view of the candelabra, top view of the candelabra

Image of set model. Built to scale, with figures created from costume design renderings by designer Sarah Mosher.

A second image of the set model, this time showing the scrim effect revealing the upstage playing space.
ABOVE: The final product of the set, including benches and candelabra, under the preshow light cue. Photo credit: Jordan Gerow.

BELOW: This image shows the set under a light cue in the show with characters in costume.
This image shows the use of lighting to separate the stage into different playing spaces. The characters on the left side are in the cave, while the characters on the right side are in an illusion scene. This image also shows the use of the scrim as a surface for gobos, filling the stage with texture and establishing the location as “the cave.”

This image shows how the director was able to use the different levels to delineate different playing spaces; in this scene, the upper level has been established as a garden. Though there is no door or wall, it was made clear through the staging and dialogue that the character on the left is listening at the gate to the garden while the characters on the right are safely enclosed within the walls.

This image shows the set in a basic cave lighting look. The character on the right makes use of the neutral space outside of the moon shape, while the character on the left attempts to find him in the shadows.
This image features the costumes. The use of period costume pieces establishes the time period during which the play takes place. This allows the scenic design to focus on the abstraction of the cave rather than period architecture and trimmings. The clothes from this time period were both wide and tall, so the costumes filled what would otherwise be a very blank and empty space.

This image shows the use of the benches. As I was designing these benches, I had to keep in mind that the characters would be wearing large bum-rolls, which were worn by women in the mid-17th Century to create a wider silhouette.

In this image, the whole stage is lit in the same cave lighting look, unifying the set and dwarfing Pridamante as she discovers a tear alone onstage.
This image features one of the final looks of the show, when Matamore wandered through the house and then off the stage in search of the moon. The lighting designer used a gobo to put the texture of craters on the stage, effectively making the large circle of platforms into an abstract moon. I requested at an early production meeting that he would play up the moon-like look of the round platforming during this scene.

This image shows the scrim effect: Alcandre is on the platforms, and behind her the lighting reveals Pridamante (who is standing behind the scrim curtain). In most scenes, the audience could not see through the scrim curtain.

This image shows the use of one of the platforms further downstage. Alcandre used this platform to directly address the audience before intermission. The director staged it this way because that platform was in a very powerful position and was also much closer to the audience.
APPENDIX C: LEARNING LUNACY

Written after completing the design process and in partial fulfillment of TRE 4961: Theatre Senior Project
Advisor: Rick Lorig, M. F. A.

Lunatic: a person whose actions and manner are marked by extreme eccentricity or recklessness. Though I was originally unsure as to why, I find myself identifying with Matamore, whose character description simply reads, “the lunatic.” Though he seems to know his place when he first appears in The Illusion, we find out that he is lost. He searches for a role to play, a place to belong, and he finally decides to pack up and move to the moon. So, yes, he’s quite eccentric. I’ve used my time at SPU to find my place in the theatre world. Actor, stage manager, electrician… Perhaps I will return to these roles some day, but for now, I identify most as a designer—and apparently, a lunatic. But I think I can say with confidence that most designers must, at times, embrace eccentricity: it often takes eccentric and imaginative leaps to find the concept that tells the story truthfully. After designing The Illusion, I was excited (over the moon?) to find that designing sets satisfies my eccentric side. What follows is a reflection on my background in scenic design, related experience at SPU, and the learning process I experienced as I worked on this set.

My education as a designer started informally in my time at Liberty High School. I co-designed the set for my senior year musical production of Little Shop of Horrors. I was working with Patricia Leo, a crafty drama parent who fell into the role of scenic designer after several years of helping to build sets and props. Pat’s eccentricity was evident in her commitment to the artistic choices she made. Her signature ensemble makes this clear: leopard print glasses, a work apron she had personally trimmed with leopard print fabric, a leopard print headlamp—even her work tools were labeled with leopard print tape. In the same way, she committed to her designs,
never doing something halfway. She never had any formal training in theatre, but she amazed me with her artistic eye and exquisitely detailed set models. Together, we discussed the requirements of the *Little Shop* script, researched images from the time period, and built a model of our design. The show was a huge success, and to top it off, we won the 5th Avenue High School Musical Award for Outstanding Scenic Design.

Part of what I loved about the *Little Shop* process was that I got to learn by *doing*. Yes, listening to lectures and examining others’ work are valuable parts of the learning process, and they provide an important foundation. But a different kind of education occurs in actually acting as a character, calling a show, or focusing lights. As Pat and I worked side-by-side, I got to experience the way she chose shapes, colors, and themes. This hands-on experience inspired me to continue pursuing design.

As I joined the SPU theatre department, I was not sure what my future held—all I knew was that I wanted to “do theatre” professionally. As I was interested in scenery, I took professor Don Yanik’s scene design and technical drawing course during my sophomore year. Don, a bit eccentric in his own way, taught me the *theory* of design. During his lectures, he cemented the basic knowledge Pat had taught me, and he provided the theatrical jargon and drawing skills to go along with it. I learned how to communicate my vision to a director and production team. I also learned to appreciate Don’s own detail-oriented design style, including his passion for historically accurate trimmings, careful use of space, and clean lines. Most importantly, he taught me to “start with what you need.” Scenic design should not just look nice or edgy; its ultimate purpose is to serve the story.

I was able to apply what I learned in Don’s class when I took on the role of scenic designer for *Children of Eden* at KIDSTAGE. As I created my design, Don acted as my mentor.
He never told me what he thought I should do, but he was happy to tell me what I should not do. When I brought him my first sketches, he gave them a pensive little frown, shook his keys a few times as he thought of a response, and began picking apart the unnecessary or arbitrary choices I had made. As he pointed out the weaknesses in my work, I was reminded to make sure my drawings represented something I had specifically chosen based on the needs of the script (“Start with what you need”). So, I spent more time thinking and making changes. After many revisions, Don and I were both pleased with the results, and I decided I was competent enough to pursue more design work at SPU.

The following year, I asked to design the set and lights for SPU’s Student-Directed One-Acts. Though there had been no student scenic designers in my time at SPU, I wanted the opportunity to try something out in a new, more intimate venue on a small scale. The faculty allowed me and fellow student Jordan Gerow to co-design the set. We also had strong feelings about the concept of the production as a whole; we outlined a plan for how abstract design elements could connect the three shows together, pitched it carefully to the directors, and got our design approved.

Throughout this process, I appreciated the guidance we had from Design Supervisor Rick Lorig and Technical Director Jerry Collum, both professors in the department. Rick taught us new strategies for visual research, which was especially helpful with a set as abstract as ours became. He also taught us new paint techniques, as Jordan and I ended up painting most of the set on our own. Both Jerry and Rick questioned us occasionally about certain design elements as Don had done on Children of Eden. Based on their feedback, we cut a few extraneous parts of the design, but we were also able to justify the parts we felt were necessary. In the end, our
production team felt we had created a very cohesive show featuring a design that told a slightly different story than each play could have told alone.

After the success of the One-Acts, I began seriously considering what I wanted to do as a senior project. Since I had done quite a variety of work in the department, I didn’t see an obvious choice. I decided my senior project should show my proficiency in whatever area of theatre I planned to continue after graduation. I figured it was time to decide what I wanted to do with my life (as if it could ever be that simple).

In thinking about my future, I found myself reflecting on the fact that one of my favorite aspects of my work in the theatre department has been the opportunity to share what I know with others. This became especially evident to me when I was hired as Master Electrician and given the task of training new electricians. How to troubleshoot busted lighting equipment, how to properly hang and strike instruments, how to run a light board—I love when people are eager to learn about what I do, and I love being able to answer questions. Essentially, I discovered that I love to teach. Thanks to my job as Master Electrician, I had the experience I needed to know I wanted to become a college professor. After doing some research and talking to a few professors, I confirmed that I wanted to teach design and found out that theatre professors are required to hold an M. F. A. to teach at the college level.

Long-term goals established, I knew that I needed a challenging senior project that would not only demonstrate what I had learned at SPU but also form the foundation of my portfolio for grad school applications. I asked to design a set on my own. I upped the ante by asking to design a mainstage production in order to give myself the biggest challenge I could—bigger budget, bigger space, bigger challenge. To my pleasant surprise, the faculty almost immediately approved my request and assigned me to design the set for The Illusion.
The process began with reading the script. The first line of *The Illusion* is a stage direction that says simply, “A man alone in a dark cave.” The script allows for (well, it practically *praises*) theatrical convention, yet it barely breaks the fourth wall and only does so twice: once just before intermission and once just after. Thematically, the play argues for both the worth and futility of theatre without directly addressing it. So I had to create a theatrical cave.

In early October, I met with Andrew Ryder, director of the show, to talk about his take on the script. Andrew’s concept of the play revolved around the theme of love. The play mentions contrasting types of love. One grumpy parent in the script sees love as an obligation, describing it as cold, hard, white, and bone-like. But there are also young lovers who argue for the warm, sappy, and romantic type of love. Andrew and I also talked about several specific symbols mentioned in the script—a bubble, a teardrop, and the moon, to name a few. With Andrew’s concepts in mind, I returned to the drawing board to create a cave.

My first attempts at creating a realistic cave were not quite right. I sketched a few ideas and built a simple scale mockup of a model so I could see how one version of the set would work in 3D. Excited about the possibilities I had, I showed the model to Don. After considering the model, Don gave me a long list of notes to consider if I ended up going with this concept, but I could tell he did not feel I was finished brainstorming. I agreed, and went back to revamp my design.

As I reviewed my notes from my discussion with Andrew, I noticed that the moon was a big metaphor that tied the themes of the play together. I drew a connection between the moon and the play’s ideas about love—both can be cold, white, and bone-like or warm and romantic, depending on the situation. Like the moon, the characters in the play are stuck in a cyclical rotation. The moon appears to us to be a big disc in the sky, and circles are full of symbolism.
For example, when people sit in a circle, they can all make eye contact with each other, and this allows for emotional connection; many acting exercises begin with participants standing in a circle for this reason. I also looked to University of Colorado professor Bruce Bergner’s book *The Poetics of Stage Space* for his take on circles. He mentions that they are historically connected with storytelling—this recalls the idea of recounting the day’s activities around the table at dinner or telling ghost stories around a campfire. *The Illusion*’s plot revolves around the emotional connections possible through acting, and in this way it connects Bergner’s ideas and my own experience as a theatrical storyteller. Circles are also soft and feminine (Bergner), and Andrew had chosen to change three key male roles to females. Finally, Bergner points out that the moon and circles in general have the air of something magical—perfect for a play called *The Illusion*. The list of moonlike qualities of the play could go on and on, but the point is that I had found a solid abstract concept on which to build my design.

I began sketching new ideas, bouncing them off my variety of mentors and supervisors. I went through several versions of moon-based sets, all featuring platforms of various levels. None of these seemed quite right, but at one point I showed my favorite one to Don. He confirmed that I was on the right track, but I needed to keep thinking. Finally, I came up with a new idea: one giant circular platform broken up into different pieces shaped like different phases of the moon. I knew this version of the set was the one I wanted.

At that point, it was difficult to say exactly what made this version of the ground plan “correct,” but somehow I felt more comfortable with it than with any other sketch. Part of it was the lack of straight lines—since every line was curved, the whole set ended up with a graceful flow that drew the eye around in circles. In fact, this was one of the most common responses I received after the show opened: the flow kept the actors moving and drew the audience’s eye
along with them. The different heights of the platforms allowed Andrew to show power struggles and defined separate playing spaces for scenes in multiple locations. There were almost no props in the entire production, and no set pieces were ever moved; this clean and simple presentation—inspired by 1600s French theatre—kept the play moving and allowed the audience to focus on the actors’ storytelling. Finally, the large size and unified look of the platforming seemed to evoke the grandeur and mystery of a cave, which satisfied the needs of the script.

From that point on, I focused on collaboration. I knew the basic ground plan of my design, but in order to determine the particulars, I needed to confer with my mentors. Jerry and I worked on determining how tall each of the platforms should be, and as a part of this discussion, Jerry approved the use of a raked platform that wound down into the pit, allowing Matamore to step off the stage, cross through the pit and exit out the vomitoriums. Rick, Sarah, and I worked on determining the color and paint treatment for the set, discussing various techniques and whether the soap-bubble-inspired colors I selected would work with the costumes. I worked with our lighting designer, Gregg Essex, to add practicals: a star drop and candelabra that provided a little magical ambience for the show as well as business for the Amanuensis. I also spoke with Gregg and Andrew about how I expected lighting to be able to establish the locations of the various illusion scenes in the play since the set was essentially one big circle of limbo space.

Now, this concept drew on the simplicity of the 17th Century research I had done, but otherwise had no connection to the time period. In order to ensure that the time of the play was established, our team relied on the costuming. Costumes during this period were huge—women wore large bum rolls, men wore wide pumpkin pants, both men and women wore heels, and tall hats were not uncommon either. The costumes Sarah designed would not only make the time period clear to the audience, but would also visually fill the theatre with their sheer volume and
fla$h)y trim. This left me free to create a set that was essentially a blank void to be filled by the characters’ costumes.

As the cast rehearsed the play, I continued to use the costume choices to help me make decisions. I received a request from Andrew: Pridamante and Alcandre needed a place where they could sit during the illusion scenes. Given that Alcandre had a corset on, she could not sit on the low steps of the stage—not only would she be very uncomfortable, she would never be able to stand back up gracefully. I decided to create benches that were permanent features of the cave. They needed to be high enough that it would not be awkward for Alcandre to sit on them, but they also had to be wide enough to accommodate Pridamante’s bum roll. Because Sarah used period clothing elements, the costume design directly influenced the shape and size of the benches.

During this phase, I also helped build the set. I built quite a few of the platforms we needed to complete the set, and I also built all of the candelabra. Needless to say, I learned quite a bit about platform construction, and I was pleased with the designs I provided for the build team. I found out that platforms raked on a curve are indeed a bit challenging to build, but definitely worth it in the end. My drawings were specific enough to guide the process and produce a quality set.

After the set was built and covered, I gave consistent feedback to Mariah DeLong-Wright (our paint charge) and her paint crew. They experimented with a couple of different colors and techniques, and had me approve everything before they put any paint down on the actual set. At the end of the painting process, we were pretty happy with the subtle blend of texture and color, and the seal coat was applied.
In tech rehearsals, I finally saw the set under lights. While the lighting shaped the actors and the set beautifully, it unfortunately washed out almost all of the layers of paint texture on the floor. Since the set and lights still looked beautiful, I was not too worried about the loss of color. But I did feel that I could have asked for more defined texture and bolder colors had I known the lights would wash everything out. I now know for future designs that the texture on the floor can be much stronger without drawing too much focus, especially when the lighting design makes use of highly saturated colors.

When the show finally opened, I was very pleased with the results. I liked the way it looked, and the scale felt right to me. It seemed to complement the theatre’s negative space, and it provided a variety of powerful positions for the actors to use. It was appropriately theatrical and abstract, but still felt like a cave. I got quite a few compliments on the set, saying it seemed to have a motion of its own. I was also awarded with a Certificate of Merit by the Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival responder who came to comment on the show. Most importantly, I felt that the set both communicated Andrew’s concept and told the story of The Illusion.

In spite of the fact that I had already designed or co-designed three sets, this was a huge learning process for me. From the technical side, I got to learn how to digitally draft ground plans and elevations in 2D and 3D, practice color rendering digitally as well as with watercolors, and build models. From a teamwork standpoint, I was able to collaborate with my fellow designers, allowing the lighting to establish locations and the costumes to fill the space with color and period decoration. From an artistic standpoint, I got to try something a bit eccentric by building a design on a completely abstract concept. All of these experiences will apply to design work I do in the future, and have made me a more competent scenic designer.
Perhaps the most directly applicable theological aspect of this project has been the community-driven design process. I can confidently say that I could not have come up with the same final product without the input of my mentors and the production team. I see the theatrical community as a good example of the kind of community promoted in Christian theology. We are there to build one another up and to be good stewards of the different spiritual gifts God has given each one of us. It is only in using our unique talents on a common goal that a theatrical production can come together—no single person can assemble an artwork of this scale alone. This is why tech rehearsals are always my favorite part of a production: the sound cues finally play as the cast enters the world of the set in their costumes and under the lights, and we experience everyone’s work together for the first time.

I am extremely grateful for the experiences I have had here in SPU’s theatre department. I found out after the show had closed that I was the first student to design a set in over fifty years. I have been blessed to attend a school with a faculty who not only believes in me, but also challenges students and allows students to challenge themselves. I love this about the SPU theatre department, and I feel this has been a consistent theme throughout my time here. I am excited to take what I have learned and apply it all towards grad school. I hope that I will be able to carry on the legacy of inspiring students to tell stories—even if requires a leap of eccentricity.
Works Cited


