

PALGRAVE STUDIES IN THEATRE AND PERFORMANCE HISTORY is a series devoted to the best of theatre/performance scholarship currently available, accessible and free of jargon. It strives to include a wide range of topics, from the more traditional to those performance forms that in recent years have helped broaden the understanding of what theatre as a category might include (from variety forms as diverse as the circus and burlesque to street buskers, stage magic, and musical theatre, among many others). Although historical, critical, or analytical studies are of special interest, more theoretical projects, if not the dominant thrust of a study, but utilized as important underpinning or as a historiographical or analytical method of exploration, are also of interest. Textual studies of drama or other types of less traditional performance texts are also germane to the series if placed in their cultural, historical, social, or political and economic context. There is no geographical focus for this series and works of excellence of a diverse and international nature, including comparative studies, are sought.

The editor of the series is Don B. Wilmeth (EMERITUS, Brown University), PhD, University of Illinois, who brings to the series over a dozen years as editor of a book series on American theatre and drama, in addition to his own extensive experience as an editor of books and journals. He is the author of several award-winning books and has received numerous career achievement awards, including one for sustained excellence in editing from the Association for Theatre in Higher Education.

Also in the series:

- Undressed for Success* by Brenda Foley  
*Theatre, Performance, and the Historical Avant-garde* by Günter Berghaus  
*Theatre, Politics, and Markets in Fin-de-Siècle Paris* by Sally Charnow  
*Ghosts of Theatre and Cinema in the Brain* by Mark Pizzato  
*Moscow Theatres for Young People* by Manon van de Water  
*Absence and Memory in Colonial American Theatre* by Odai Johnson  
*Vaudeville Wars: How the Keith-Albee and Orpheum Circuits Controlled the Big-Time and Its Performers* by Arthur Frank Wertheim  
*Performance and Femininity in Eighteenth-Century German Women's Writing* by Wendy Arons  
*Operatic China: Staging Chinese Identity across the Pacific* by Daphne P. Lei  
*Transatlantic Stage Stars in Vaudeville and Variety: Celebrity Turns* by Leigh Woods  
*Interrogating America through Theatre and Performance* edited by William W. Demastes and Iris Smith Fischer  
*Plays in American Periodicals, 1890–1918* by Susan Harris Smith  
*Representation and Identity from Versailles to the Present: The Performing Subject* by Alan Sikes  
*Directors and the New Musical Drama: British and American Musical Theatre in the 1980s and 90s* by Miranda Lundskaer-Nielsen  
*Beyond the Golden Door: Jewish-American Drama and Jewish-American Experience* by Julius Novick  
*American Puppet Modernism: Essays on the Material World in Performance* by John Bell

- On the Uses of the Fantastic in Modern Theatre: Cocteau, Oedipus, and the Monster* by Irene Eynat-Confino
- Staging Stigma: A Critical Examination of the American Freak Show*  
by Michael M. Chemers, foreword by Jim Ferris
- Performing Magic on the Western Stage: From the Eighteenth-Century to the Present* edited by Francesca Coppa, Larry Hass, and James Peck, foreword by Eugene Burger
- Memory in Play: From Aeschylus to Sam Shepard* by Attilio Favorini
- Danjūrō's Girls: Women on the Kabuki Stage* by Loren Edelson
- Mendel's Theatre: Heredity, Eugenics, and Early Twentieth-Century American Drama*  
by Tamsen Wolff
- Theatre and Religion on Krishna's Stage: Performing in Vrindavan*  
by David V. Mason
- Rogue Performances: Staging the Underclasses in Early American Theatre Culture*  
by Peter P. Reed
- Broadway and Corporate Capitalism: The Rise of the Professional-Managerial Class, 1900–1920* by Michael Schwartz
- Lady Macbeth in America: From the Stage to the White House* by Gay Smith
- Performing Bodies in Pain: Medieval and Post-Modern Martyrs, Mystics, and Artists* by Marla Carlson
- Early-Twentieth-Century Frontier Dramas on Broadway: Situating the Western Experience in Performing Arts* by Richard Wattenberg
- Staging the People: Community and Identity in the Federal Theatre Project*  
by Elizabeth A. Osborne
- Russian Culture and Theatrical Performance in America, 1891–1933*  
by Valleri J. Hohman
- Baggy Pants Comedy: Burlesque and the Oral Tradition* by Andrew Davis
- Transposing Broadway: Jews, Assimilation, and the American Musical*  
by Stuart J. Hecht
- The Drama of Marriage: Gay Playwrights/Straight Unions from Oscar Wilde to the Present* by John M. Clum
- Mei Lanfang and the Twentieth-Century International Stage: Chinese Theatre Placed and Displaced* by Min Tian
- Hijikata Tatsumi and Butoh: Dancing in a Pool of Gray Grits* by Bruce Baird
- Staging Holocaust Resistance* by Gene A. Plunka
- Acts of Manhood: The Performance of Masculinity on the American Stage, 1828–1865* by Karl M. Kippola
- Loss and Cultural Remains in Performance: The Ghosts of the Franklin Expedition* by Heather Davis-Fisch
- Uncle Tom's Cabin on the American Stage and Screen* by John W. Frick
- Theatre, Youth, and Culture: A Critical and Historical Exploration*  
by Manon van de Water
- Stage Designers in Early Twentieth-Century America: Artists, Activists, Cultural Critics* by Christin Essin

Stage Designers in Early  
Twentieth-Century America

Artists, Activists, Cultural Critics

*Christin Essin*

palgrave  
macmillan



STAGE DESIGNERS IN EARLY TWENTIETH-CENTURY AMERICA

Copyright © Christin Essin, 2012.

Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 2012 978-0-230-11507-1

All rights reserved.

First published in 2012 by

PALGRAVE MACMILLAN®

in the United States—a division of St. Martin's Press LLC,

175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

Where this book is distributed in the UK, Europe and the rest of the world, this is by Palgrave Macmillan, a division of Macmillan Publishers Limited, registered in England, company number 785998, of Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS.

Palgrave Macmillan is the global academic imprint of the above companies and has companies and representatives throughout the world.

Palgrave® and Macmillan® are registered trademarks in the United States, the United Kingdom, Europe and other countries.

ISBN 978-1-349-29639-2

ISBN 978-1-137-10839-5 (eBook)

DOI 10.1057/9781137108395

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available from the Library of Congress.

A catalogue record of the book is available from the British Library.

Design by Newgen Imaging Systems (P) Ltd., Chennai, India.

First edition: December 2012

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Transferred to Digital Printing in 2013

*To my family, Emmett, Sally, Matt, Cathy, and Evan*

# Contents

<i>List of Illustrations</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xi
<b>Introduction: Design as Cultural History</b>	<b>1</b>
Design Genealogies	2
American Modern Design and Designers	7
Scenographic Culture	12
<b>1. The Designer as Author</b>	<b>17</b>
Scenographic Authorship	19
<i>Theatre Arts Magazine</i>	23
<i>The Divine Comedy</i>	30
Continental Stagecraft	34
The Stage Is Set	39
Aline Bernstein's Authorship	42
<b>2. The Designer as Cultural Critic</b>	<b>51</b>
Scenographic Criticism	52
Commerce and the Modern City: Belasco and Jones	56
Social Crisis and the Modern Slum: Bel Geddes and Bay	66
Containment and the Modern Suburb: Gorelik and Mielziner	78
<b>3. The Designer as Activist</b>	<b>93</b>
Scenographic Activism	95
Jones and the Paterson Strike Pageant	99
Bernstein, the Neighborhood Playhouse, and the USAA	107
Bay and the Federal Theatre Project	116
<b>4. The Designer as Entrepreneur</b>	<b>131</b>
Scenographic Entrepreneurship	132
Urban, the Ziegfeld Stage, and Domestic Modernity	137
Bel Geddes, Streamlined Efficiency, and Spectacular Modernity	149

<b>5. The Designer as Global Cartographer</b>	<b>167</b>
Scenographic Cartography	170
Bel Geddes's Cartography of the Pacific Theatre	172
Mielziner's Cartography of Asian Tourism	180
Aronson's Cartography of Eastern Europe	190
Roads Less Traveled and Some Concluding Remarks	197
<i>Notes</i>	201
<i>Bibliography</i>	239
<i>Index</i>	255

# Illustrations

1.1	Norman Bel Geddes's model for <i>The Divine Comedy</i>	32
1.2	Robert Edmond Jones's design sketch of Leopold Jessner's production of <i>Othello</i>	37
2.1	David Belasco's Childs Restaurant setting for <i>The Governor's Lady</i>	56
2.2	Robert Edmond Jones's design sketch for <i>The Man Who Married a Dumb Wife</i>	63
2.3	Production photograph with cast of <i>Dead End</i> , featuring Norman Bel Geddes's design	70
2.4	Production photograph with cast of <i>One-Third of a Nation</i> , featuring Howard Bay's Broadway design	75
2.5	Max Gorelik's design sketch for <i>All My Sons</i>	84
2.6	Jo Mielziner's design sketch for <i>Death of a Salesman</i>	87
3.1	Robert Edmond Jones's poster design for the Paterson Strike Pageant	94
3.2	Government employed stagehand at the Adelphi Theatre preparing for <i>One-Third of a Nation</i>	121
3.3	Production photograph with cast on Hermanson's stage for <i>Injunction Granted</i>	124
3.4	Actor Robert Noack as the Electrician in <i>Power</i>	127
4.1	Joseph Urban's interior design sketch for the Wormser girl's room	146
4.2	Joseph Urban's design sketch for Bedell Department Store's millenary display	147
4.3	Norman Bel Geddes's design sketch for <i>The Miracle</i>	151
4.4	Photograph of Norman Bel Geddes's and General Motor's attraction <i>Futurama</i>	162
5.1	Photograph of Norman Bel Geddes's employees staging naval war models	168
5.2	Photograph of Norman Bel Geddes's model for the Battle of Midway	169



x *Illustrations*

5.3	Production photograph of <i>The King and I</i> , featuring Jo Mielziner's map design	186
5.4	Boris Aronson's design sketch for the wedding scene in <i>Fiddler on the Roof</i>	195

# Acknowledgments

There are many individuals who I would like to thank for their support and guidance from the genesis of my research project to its culmination in this publication.

A number of research librarians and archivists made my search for information more productive. Helen Baer at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas initially helped me navigate the Norman Bel Geddes Theater and Industrial Design Papers during my dissertation research and has remained a valuable resource as I've moved to different institutions. Jennifer Lee at Columbia University's Special Collections gave me insight into the Joseph Urban Collection, and Betty Falsey offered kind and useful assistance at the Harvard Theatre Collection as did the staff at the Billy Rose Theatre Collection at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, the Library of Congress, and the National Archives and Records Administration. Thanks also to Ann Fletcher and Ron Naversen at Southern Illinois University for helping me obtain a copy of Max Gorelik's unpublished manuscript, and Heather Nathans and Ashley Derr for housing me during my weeks of research in the Washington DC area.

My colleagues at Vanderbilt University were incredibly supportive this past year as I joined their ranks and completed my manuscript. Jon and Terry Hallquist, Alexandra Sargent, Matthew Stratton, Amanda Sweger, and Laura Hynek made me feel welcomed into the community. Special thanks to Leah Lowe for reading multiple chapter drafts and providing generous insights; she is an amazing friend and colleague. Thanks also to Phillip Franck, whose design insights and enthusiasm for my research is an amazing gift; to Bettina Warnke and Rebekah Maggor for their writing group feedback; and to my student Kelsey Matherne for helping me review my bibliography.

While at the University of Arizona, my colleagues Clare P. Rowe and Peter Beudert read early chapter drafts and my proposal; I can't thank them enough for their interest and insights as working designers. Deanna

Fitzgerald, Carrie Cole, and Jenny Goelz were also tremendously supportive colleagues, and Rohan MacDonald a supportive friend. My students at Arizona were some of the best I'll encounter during my career, and their curiosity about my process as a historian kept me energized as a writer; special thanks to Kevin Becerra, Daniel Thomson, Jenny Wise, Sasha Piton, Rachel Lacy, Christopher Pankratz, Stephanie Berman, Amanda Adler, Kaylee Gutierrez, Laura Farrell-Wortman, Jon Crider, Heidi Barker, Jessica Stennett, and Nikko Kimzin.

John Fletcher, in addition to reading early drafts of my proposal, offered his friendship to a visiting professor, making my year at Louisiana State University amazingly productive. Thanks to my other colleagues in the Theory and Criticism Focus Group of the Association for Theatre in Higher Education (ATHE) who offered feedback on conference papers, including Kelly Howe, Rebecca Hewett, Alan Sikes, Jay Gipson-King, Sharon Green, Clare Croft, and Tamara Smith; also to my ATHE colleagues Henry Bial and Bill Doan for their professional advice. Thanks to my colleagues from the American Society of Theatre Research, including Chase Bringardner, Monica Stufft, and Stephen Di Benedetto, who helped me organize working groups, and D. J. Hopkins, Kim Solga, Roberta Barker, Joshua Abrams, Jennifer Parker-Starbuck, Katherine Mezur, Tamara Underiner, and Sonja Kuflinec for including me in their working sessions.

My sincere thanks to my professors at Wake Forest University who early on influenced my study of theatre design and continue to show interest in my career: Harold Tedford, John E. R. Friedenberg, Mary Wayne, Jon Christman, and Donald Wolfe. At Northwestern University, Virgil Johnson stimulated my interest in design history and aesthetics, and Mary Trotter's classes were instrumental in helping me see myself as a theatre scholar. I was fortunate to be a graduate student in Oscar G. Brockett's final years as a professor at the University of Texas at Austin, particularly when he was writing his design history. Jill Dolan and Stacy Wolf were exceptional mentors and dissertation committee members; through their course assignments, writing feedback, and office hour meetings, I learned to think like a scholar/citizen/artist and a teacher. Thanks to Linda Henderson and Arnold Aronson for serving on my dissertation committee. Charlotte Canning served as my dissertation supervisor and is, by any and all standards I can imagine, awesome. Her guidance was instrumental to my development as a historian, and her continued mentorship in the early years of my career has meant the world to me.

Many of my graduate student colleagues have also provided much appreciated support. Jessica Hester brought me to SUNY-Oswego for a lecture

that helped me shape my research on Norman Bel Geddes's war models. Olivia Whitmer, Bradley Griffin, Meg Savalonis, Paul Bonin-Rodriguez, Amy Steiger, Zachary Dorsey, Jenny Kokai, and Shannon Baley read drafts of early research. Susanne Shawyer conducted proxy research and helped me with my editing process; she is one of the few people I trust to give me accurate, honest feedback, and this book is better because of her. Chase Bringardner read chapters, offered wisdom, and provided infinite laughter and support.

My family is wonderful. Thanks to Matt, Cathy, and Evan Essin for their love; they are an excellent cheering section. My father Emmett M. Essin and mother Sally Goodman Essin have given me strength, love, respect, and support, always and without reservation. I can't count the number of times they've picked me up, and they have my love and gratitude in return. Thank you.