

True West Theatre Intime

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True West was a challenge to me as a lighting designer. I feel most comfortable designing symbolic or minimalist lighting; here I was confronted with Sam Shepard's fanatic devotion to realism. This show closely followed on the heels of *Daughter of Survival*, as well, giving me little time in which to consult with the director or attend rehearsals. A last-minute set change further complicated the situation. Ultimately, both the costume designer and I designer the hyper-realistic show that Shepard calls for and our initial discussions with the director prepared us for; however, the director later decided that she wanted to "put her own mark on the production" and in consultation with the set designer constructed a abstract representation of a kitchen-turned-prison in which the action took place. Although we were given the revised set drawings, it was impossible to discern the concept change from the drawings alone, and the compressed technical schedule meant that we did not realize the discrepancy until the last dress rehearsal (the set itself was not completed until the day of the opening show). There were other technical hurdles to overcome – chief among them shiny white linoleum tiling the entire set and a ceiling overhead – and although ultimately I was satisfied with the way the design turned out, I believe I could have created a design much more in line with the revised production concept had I been better informed earlier in the process.

Technically, I saw this production as a challenge both in expressing a realistic lighting picture on-stage, and in overcoming the obstacles presented by the set design. The set was a 12 foot by 20 foot box, with a ceiling, and covered (floor, ceiling, and walls) with white linoleum. The set designer offered to shrink the ceiling so that I had a one foot perimeter around the top of the walls to light through, but I felt it would be more in tune with

the production concept to slice off a diagonal section of the corner, allowing the audience to see “outside” as well as allowing us to hang lights. So we hung a cyc around the edges and cut the corner off. The cyc needed to be hung close to the walls for proper sightlines (to prevent the audience from seeing the top of the cyc), so I originally planned on back-lighting the cyc. I could not get the color intensity I wanted that way, though, and the colors became muted when the cyc was back-lit. I wanted the cyc to glow during scene-changes, and the best I could get was a pale fill. I ended up draping the cyc diagonally away from the set, so it was still close to the walls at the top, and front-lighting the cyc from booms. Boom-mounted cyc-lights was only one of the insane hanging positions I utilized.

There are lots of shiny toasters on stage at the end of the play, so I tried the “strip light on the balcony” idea to add highlights to the reflective surfaces. I hung a row of par cans at the back of the house, just over the audience’s heads (low enough so the reflected light would be directed at the audience), and ran them very low, so they did not color the set or the actors. Magenta and amber worked well for me, although it took me a while to find the proper hanging positions. First couple of tries were too high; again, I had to invent new hanging positions to get the lights where I wanted them.

The only source of illumination on stage was a small window in the upstage corner of the set, and a candle used in the night scenes. Realistic lighting dictates that one should identify the “sources” in the scene, and then hang instruments to duplicate or reinforce them, but I couldn’t light the whole scene from the upstage window! To solve this, I added an imaginary window to the fourth wall, which became the key light for every scene. Mornings came in low through the window, afternoons higher (and on the other side, past the zenith), night streamed in lavender and low.

The lights hung around the edge of the ceiling were tricky, as well. I had to work closely with the set designer to install pipes around the edges of the ceiling framework, and the timing was critical, as the construction was such that the cycs needed to fly first, followed by the ceiling (with all my lights mounted), followed by the walls. The walls of the set could not be built until the ceiling was flown, which could not happen until the cycs were raised. Coordination saved the day.

Colors and levels were the next problem. Since the set was being gradually constructed throughout tech week, I found that the colors and levels kept changing as more and more of the reflective white linoleum was added. My first pass at color-selection was awful: my moonlight was far too green, and

didn't mix at all with my amber candlelight. Selecting a lavender-based palette helped immeasurably – but I couldn't make the set dark. The moonlit scenes looked like day-light because of the reflections from the white walls. On Jim Streeter's advice, I hung blue-gelled lamps focused to hit only the walls (not the actors), and used them in almost every cue to tone down the walls. Worked like a charm. Then, in one rehearsal, my afternoon and morning scenes suddenly improved dramatically. When I looked to find out why, I found that the sky-blue cyc lights were washing the ceiling since the wall was not yet present and the cyc had been rolled up to be out of the way of the builders. I knew my beautiful effect would go away as soon as the wall was properly in place, but I couldn't find another place to light the ceiling from, since the ceiling was about a foot above the proscenium arch (a consequence of the diagonal cuts was lifting the roof). I ultimately added floor mount 4.5x6" units simply to wash the roof, restoring the desired effect.

Surprisingly, I ended up with far more saturated colors than I expected to use, since the white floor and walls ate up whatever color I put on them. The candlelight especially surprised me on opening night, since after the floor was laid down, the saturated amber I had been using, which had looked great on a black floor, suddenly looked unsaturated and yellow – not nearly the same candlelit effect I had before. Every other color I used exhibited the same effect.

As I mentioned before, I was ultimately pleased with the lighting for the show, but I feel I would change things if I had known the more abstract concept for the show earlier on. I lit a very realistic show, but the set is only an abstraction of a kitchen, and the one small window was actually crucial for the prison-kitchen feeling the director was aiming at. (And I thought it merely poorly placed!). I would probably try for much more stylized, shadowy lighting, to better fit the prison feel, had I the chance. My "windows" on the fourth wall, though a perfect solution for a realistic show, go against the windowless, escape-less feeling the set designer was aiming for. At the very least, the "window" I added should have been much higher and smaller. It's ironic that I would have felt more comfortable with more stylized lighting in the first place, but I feel the opportunity to invest in a realistic design, however inappropriately, was educational and worthwhile.