

SOONER SPOTLIGHT ● RAY LARSON

"I've been too busy to look for another job," is Ray Larson's good-natured quip when he is asked how the OU School of Drama has managed to hold such a gifted stage designer for the past 30 years. "I've always had one show in the shop, one onstage and one on the drawing board."

"Busy" is certainly an operative word in his job description. The versatile OU drama professor has designed nearly 150 plays, musicals, ballets and operas for the stages of the Rupel J. Jones Theater and Holmberg Hall Auditorium as well as portable sets for OU actors who toured the Far East and Germany under the auspices of the USO. The Larson touch also has been applied to events elsewhere on campus and throughout Norman. His Oklahoma production total nears 200 when designs for Oklahoma City arts organizations are added.

"At times I have been responsible for the total season at OU and both the Lyric Theater and Oklahoma Theater Center in Oklahoma City," Larson recalls. "I have done as many as 15 productions in one year, and there have been several seasons when I have done at least 12."

Larson's career locale was not anticipated when he completed his military career at Fort Sill in 1947 and returned to his native California to earn bachelor and master of arts degrees in drama with design emphasis.

"When I left Lawton, I thought 'I'm leaving Oklahoma, and I'll never be back,'" Larson says. "However, when I finished college, I had two job opportunities—to be technical director at Berkeley or staff artist at KWTW Channel 9 in Oklahoma City. Like most kids, I wanted to leave home, and Los Angeles and Hollywood were home to me. As a designer and technician, I had already had access to the prop departments at MGM and Paramount.

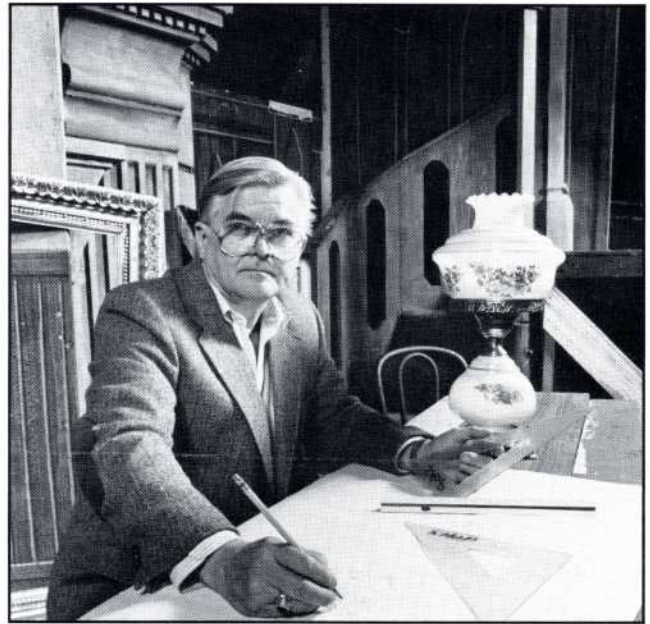
"So, I took the job at KWTW, then left after a year to be the art director at KWXT-TV in Waco, Texas. I was the art department in Waco at that time, building all the sets and handling the advertising. I didn't really choose 'theater' over 'television' so much as I chose a \$1,000 raise when I was offered a position as technical director at OU in 1956."

The new job came shortly before his marriage to Gloria Hernandez of Waco. Her own sense of style and design has moved her from costume assistant at OU to ownership of Norman's chic Passing Parade clothing store.

"I like variety," Larson admits. "I like working with different theater shapes and different directors. This is one of the advantages I have had here at OU. The theater season must be balanced with different styles and periods to give the students varied experiences over their academic careers. Plays must be balanced also as to whether they are heavy scenically or with costumes.

"I try to vary my materials. Sometimes I do 'painterly' things with canvas in two dimensions. Other times I do three-dimensional things with styrofoam, plastic, metal and pipe. When I have my initial meeting with a director, we decide whether the production will be traditional, updated or stylized. It's interesting — I have done several plays or ballets two or three times in different versions."

The technical side of OU's theater program gets consistently high praise from guest directors and actors for its professionalism and creativity. Larson keeps up-to-date by subscribing to all the technical manuals available and view-



ing as much professional theater as he can.

During his most recent sabbatical, he lived in the Players Club in New York and viewed some 50 productions. While on sabbatical in 1967, he and Gloria viewed some 60 theatrical productions from Stockholm to Morocco and visited art museums and state apartments. His office is stacked floor to ceiling with reference books and slide files for future work. Horizontal files are full of working drawings for past sets, and cabinets are crammed with reviews and other information on each production.

Despite his dedication to authenticity when realistic sets are required, Larson's heart seems to be in the sets that call for pure imagination, such as "The Master Builder," which consisted of oversized blocks. His "Richard III" set featured an eight-foot crown suspended over the stage, which was lowered as each murder brought Richard nearer the throne.

For "The Royal Hunt of the Sun" Larson covered large steps in black felt to symbolize the Andes Mountains that Pizarro's soldiers climbed to reach Peru. A large emblem resembling a silver Spanish medallion in the first act opened to a 24-foot sun in the second act. That set, like the design for "Working," another favorite, "reached out into the audience to involve people."

Although Larson's sets have made his reputation among theater-goers, his teaching ability and dedication to campus and community service have earned him another kind of esteem from his colleagues.

"Ray is one of the first faculty members that past students inquire about and want to see when they return to the campus," says Greg Kunesh, director of the School of Drama. "He has taught design and technical practices to literally thousands of students. In addition to the visual impact that he has stamped on productions here, his previous students, scattered throughout the country in all levels of the theater, are making a tremendous statement about the quality of education, artistry and work ethic that is found at OU."

—PAULA BAKER