

He Sets the Stage

the set's the thing with
scenic designer Ray Larson

By CHARLES LONG
Photos by John Yack

CAN YOU imagine how Hamlet would look sitting in a modern living room pondering his thoughts over a cup of coffee or what impression Billie Dawn (the dumb blonde of Garson Kanin's *Born Yesterday*) would make if she spoke from Juliet's balcony?

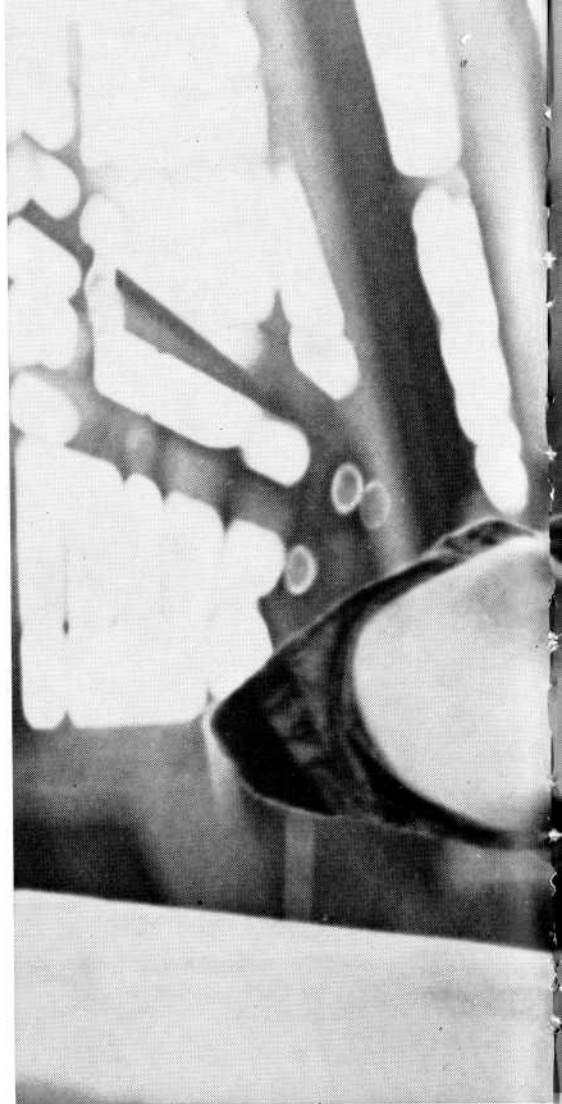
These two scenes may never occur, even in the most avant-garde of experimental theaters. They do, however, point out the significance a stage setting has on the effect of a play.

The playwright is limited in the ways he may communicate with an audience. He can reach them in only two of the five senses, seeing and hearing. (Although some plays purportedly have smelled.) What a character *says*—what the audience *hears*—is of foremost importance, but how the character and his surroundings *look*—what the audience *sees*—is of great importance, also. The scenic designer has the task, a difficult one most of the time, of seeing that the playwright and the director are successful in speaking visually with

the audience. He does so through the use of sets and scenery—flats, drops, platforms, balconies or whatever is necessary to get the message across. There is another requirement. The designer must be subtle in his scenery and setery. He must not overpower. He should suggest rather than shout.

O.U.'s power of suggestion in scenic design comes from Raymond D. Larson, assistant professor of drama, whose craftsmanship is among the best to adorn the Holmberg Hall stage. With a full schedule of major fine arts events facing him each year, Larson must have the knack to get things of quality done in a hurry. He does. For the recent University Playhouse production of the hit musical, *Wonderful Town*, he conceived and delivered seven sets in four weeks.

Larson is a young man with a wide range of theatrical experiences already under his belt. He came to the University in 1956 and has been in full command of scenic design work for the past three years.





Larson first became interested in his current work as an architecture and industrial design student at the University of Southern California, where he received both his bachelor's and master's degrees. Before coming to O.U., he was a scenic artist at KWTU in Oklahoma City and KWTX in Waco, Texas.

In addition to designing about ten shows each year at O.U., Larson also does work for the Oklahoma City Scenic Company and designs sets for various high school plays throughout the state. He recently completed scenic designs for the *Nutcracker Suite* Christmas ballet performance presented by the Oklahoma City Science and Arts Foundation.

When the school year ends, Larson will go to the West Coast to begin his third summer stock season with the La Jolla, California, theater company. Last summer, he designed sets for five plays which starred such notable actors and actresses as Howard Duff, MacDonald Carey, Tallulah Bankhead and Ginger Rogers. According to

Larson, summer stock offers a unique challenge to the set designer.

"At La Jolla, we would normally close a show on a Saturday night and set up another at 4 a.m. the next day, then rehearse that afternoon and evening. Each of the five plays normally ran for two weeks. Of course, I'm not involved with teaching class, but I am involved with a tight schedule."

Among the plays that Larson has designed in California are *Miracle Worker*, *Best Man*, *Write Me A Murder*, *Critic's Choice*, *Little Mary Sunshine*, *Come Blow Your Horn*, *A Calculated Risk*, *Fallen Angels*, *A More Perfect Union*, a new play with Ginger Rogers, and *Here Today* with Tallulah Bankhead.

Whether it's a dramatic play, opera, ballet or musical comedy, every Larson set is a carefully woven piece, integrally related to the full scope of a production. Naturally, he enjoys favorable press reviews and audience responses, but Larson never wants his work to highlight a show

or to steal from performers. Each set should be keyed to both the effective and incidental support of acting, act as reinforcement for the illusion produced by words, be noticeably picturesque yet secondary to the action of a production.

"A set must be necessarily constructed to be an integral part of a play, but it should never distract from the actors," Larson says. "By setting a mood, it gets its message across to an audience."

At Holmberg, as in any theater, each stage presentation requires new ideas and plans. Larson never looks at a previous production of a play until he has designed it himself, put down on paper his own ideas.

"Of course, the first thing I do is read the script involved and perhaps listen to a record of the music, if there is any, to get a feeling of the mood and style of the show. After arriving at some sort of style of my own, I then draw out a few rough sketches."

The official work begins after a con-

Continued

HE SETS THE STAGE

a stage crew has to be content instead of applause in working

ference with the director and other technical directors (makeup men and costume designers) involved in the play. Through that meeting, a definite style is set, and Larson immediately begins detailed research into his specifics of the play, the architecture.

The scheme of blocking out the various spacial relationships of scenery with the actors can be extremely difficult, especially when dealing with a large cast. Such was the case with *Wonderful Town* where some 65 to 85 people were constantly running on and off stage with the shifting of scenery.

The elevations (stage picture) and other three-dimensional units of production must be carefully arranged in accordance with the amount of space on stage. For example, with theaters-in-the-round, a set designer is concerned with a limited use of scenery and properties so as not to block the view of actors from the audience.

Following the formation of the set's

basic picture through detailed drawings, the scenic crew then is ready to begin construction of the flats, platforms and painted drops. Materials are acquired from O.U.'s Physical Plant, and students from Drama 9 and 10 classes commute to Building 1914 at the North Campus. In this small and unattractive frame shelter (an old Navy Base leftover), the sweat and strain get under way. Larson and his students work from one to five each afternoon until the job is completed.

The students who work under him know that they must make personal sacrifices in order to be on a set crew. While they are splashing paint on canvas, there are other campus activities going on. When the crew was rigging the *Wonderful Town* sets in Holmberg, the remainder of the campus populace sat in Memorial Stadium, watching the Sooners defeat Colorado in the Homecoming game.

"We are always rushed to meet dead-



Larson stirs a little of his magic to produce a colorful array of scenes for *Wonderful Town*.

School of Drama Schedule for Second Semester

January 30	Bill of One-Act Plays, Studio Theater, 8:00 p.m.
February 5-7	University Playhouse Production, <i>Five Finger Exercise</i> by Peter Shaffer, directed by Dr. Nat Eek, Holmberg Hall Auditorium, 8:15 p.m.
February 13	Bill of One-Act Plays, Studio Theater, 8:00 p.m.
February 20	Graduate Production, <i>Time Limit</i> by Henry Denker and Ralph Berkey, directed by Bill Morrison, Studio Theater, 8:00 p.m.
February 28-29	Graduate Children's Production, <i>The Brave Little Tailor</i> , directed by Judy Levine, Studio Theater.
March 5	Bill of One-Act Plays, Studio Theater, 8:00 p.m.
March 11-13	University Playhouse Production, <i>Othello</i> by William Shakespeare, directed by Dr. Carl B. Cass, Holmberg Hall Auditorium, 8:15 p.m.
March 19	Graduate Production, Studio Theater, 8:00 p.m.
April 3	Orchesis Recital, directed by Helen Gregory, Holmberg Hall Auditorium, 8:15 p.m.
April 8-11	Graduate Production, <i>Desire Under the Elms</i> by Eugene O'Neill, directed by Sandra Lain, Studio Theater, 8:00 p.m.
April 30-May 1	An Evening of Ballet, featuring Yvonne Chouteau and Miguel Terekhov, Holmberg Hall Auditorium, 8:15 p.m.
May 6-8	University Playhouse Production, <i>Come Blow Your Horn</i> by Neil Simon, directed by Charles C. Suggs, Holmberg Hall Auditorium, 8:15 p.m.
May 14	Bill of One-Act Plays, Studio Theater, 8:00 p.m.

with anonymity behind the scenes

lines, usually a period of three weeks," Larson says. "We move all of the sets into Holmberg on a weekend, about a week and a half before opening night, so that the cast can come in on a Sunday and begin rehearsals. The tedious work is when we rig all the scenery to make sure it works.

"Also, we are responsible for the storage of sets. Sometimes, we find it necessary to open the back door and store scenery outside. And hope it doesn't rain. We have even used moving vans to store sets."

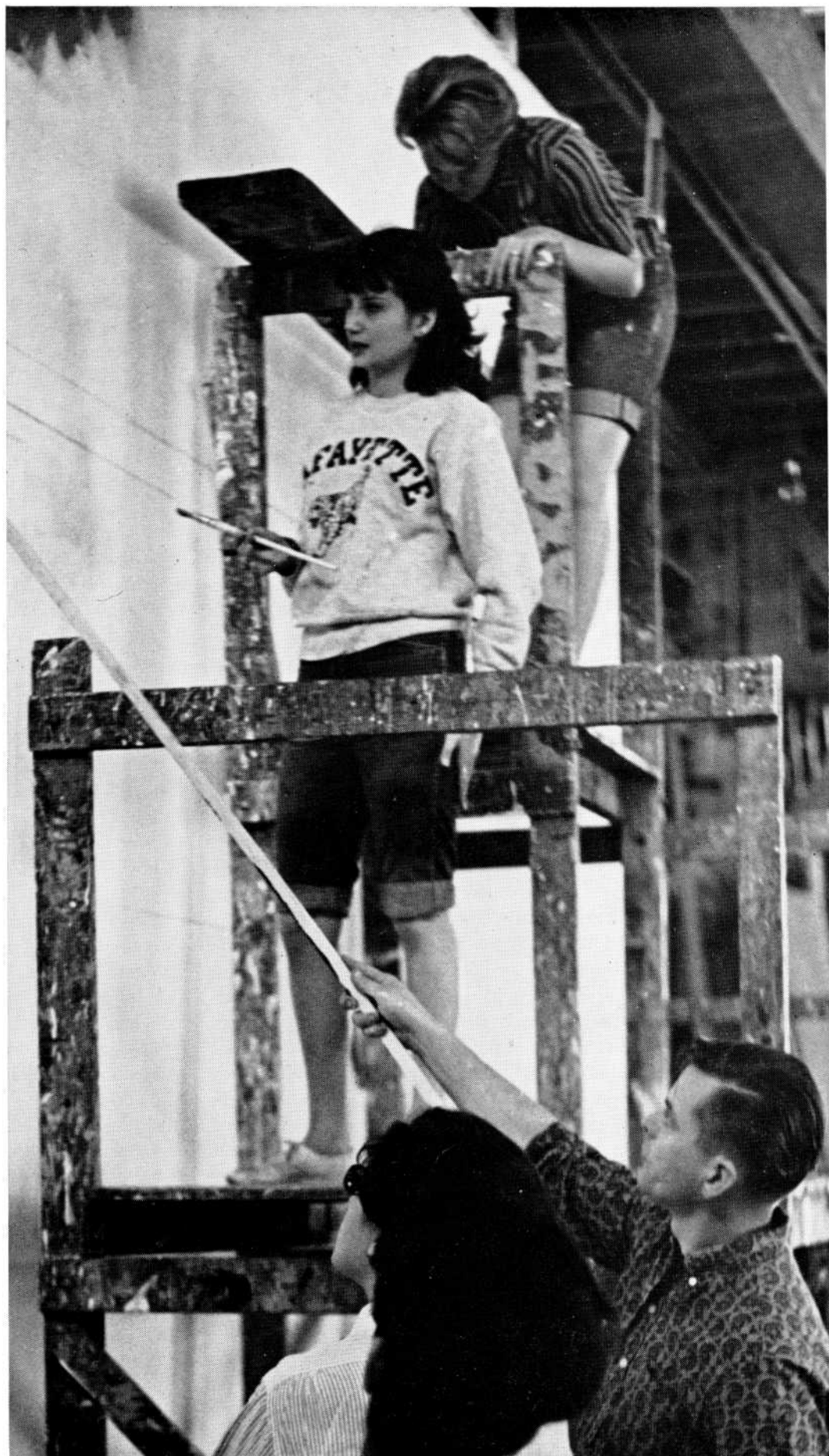
When Larson and his crew move into Holmberg, their part of the show must be completely ready to go. There are no dress rehearsals for the set designer, no return to the North Campus to reconstruct sets.

The theater holds little glamor for members of the scenic crew. They receive no curtain calls or press interviews. On the same night as the closing performance (while the actors more than likely are celebrating) the backstage workers strike the set and haul it like so much lumber back to Building 1914.

The play is over, but just around the corner is a ballet or opera performance, so Larson normally finds himself designing one set while building another. He enjoys working with the more theatrical sets, where false senses of depth are created through the use of shades and shadows. Musicals, with their regular interior box-type sets, require more actual scenery.

"A set designer must be accurate in creating a realistic set," he says. "On the other hand, with a theatrical set he can be more creative as long as he follows through with a particular style or mode of presentation. His set should look natural, but still can be as theatrical as the show will permit."

So as the scene changes from *Wonderful Town* to a University Playhouse production of *Five Finger Exercise* (February 5-7), Ray Larson and his helpers continue their rapid production cycle. And with some new rolls of canvas, a hammer and a few nails and another supply of paint, the stage will soon be set for audiences who appreciate the power of suggestion that speaks so well to them.



Behind the glamor of grease paint is a large amount of unglamorous elbow grease. Larson and his scenic crews worked long hours behind the scenes on sets for the production of *Wonderful Town*.