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## ABSTRACT

### THE ROLE OF CONTEMPORARY SCENE BUILDING HOUSES FOR BROADWAY THEATRE

By

Jeffrey Collom

This study is concerned with the description of the scene building industry for the commercial Broadway theatre. Crucial to an understanding of production procedures for all the elements of a professional performance is a knowledge of the contributions of the individuals who build the scenery. The talents of these craftsmen are significant insofar as without them, the designer's plans would remain just that--plans. As important as these scene builders are to the production of plays in the commercial Broadway theatre, literature reveals little concerning their role.

This study identifies and offers the genesis of the most active members of the Theatrical Contractor's Association which was chartered in August, 1973. Because the literature provided so little upon which to create any description, each member scenic contractor in the Association was interviewed. Alphabetically, they are: Atlas Scenic Studio, Ltd. of Norwalk, Connecticut; Design Associates, Inc. of Lambertville, New Jersey; Feller Scenery

Studios, Inc. of Bronx, New York; Hart Scenic Studio of Edgewater, New Jersey; Lincoln Scenic Studios of New York, New York; Messmore and Damon Scenic Studios of New York, New York; National Scenery Studios of Springfield, Virginia; Nolan Scenic Studios of Brooklyn, New York; and Variety Scenic Studios of Long Island City, New York. In addition, Patrick Albert MacDonald, Jr. of the now defunct MacDonald Scenic Studio was interviewed.

The recorded, structured, question-and-answer interviews provide the basis for the descriptions. The purpose of the interviews is to explore the histories, business practices, and construction procedures of each studio, including the internal workings among scene building technicians and their concomitant association with the unions.

Because "Broadway" evolved out of the early economic centralization and decline of the stock system, examination is made of the causes, historically, which generated the inception of the scenic contractual process as it exists in the world of the contemporary Broadway theatre. Included also is a description of the production process with emphasis on the designer's role preliminary to his contact with scene building houses.

Histories of the main scene building houses for the Broadway commercial theatre are included. The history of the old MacDonald studio, long since closed, is included because this scenic studio is credited with being the first in New York City to give birth to the present contractual system.

Aspects of the contractual process which are integral to the workings of the scenic studios are illucidated. The procedural difficulties of bidding are also revealed as well as the problems which plague the scene building industry. These problems are seen to be primarily those of an economic nature. The payment system for services rendered is investigated as well as effects of escalating costs of materials.

The operations involved in the building of scenery, the sequence of construction, the facilities and personnel involved, and, again, the problems inherent in each are described.

The scenic production industry, as examined, is revealed to be somewhat tenuous in nature; the business is fraught with time pressures, economic fragility, and holds a precarious position as the number of Broadway productions has declined.

THE ROLE OF CONTEMPORARY SCENE BUILDING  
HOUSES FOR BROADWAY THEATRE

By

Jeffrey Collom

A DISSERTATION

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## INTRODUCTION

Many hundreds of thousands attend the theatre--theatre of widely divergent descriptions. However, even those individuals involved in both a professional and an educational capacity with the scenic elements of theatrical productions are very often unaware of the origin of scenery for the professional theatre. This study, therefore, examines the contemporary process of manufacturing the scenery for the Broadway theatre in New York City.

### Description of the Study

From the writer's investigations there is little contemporary or historical literature which gives emphasis to the system of building scenery for the Broadway professional theatre. Without these scene builders, however, the talents of the most notable scenic designers would never reach the most significant phase of application--the physical form of a full sized set upon the stage. The design would remain merely concepts committed only to sketches, ground plans, detail drawings, and elevations were the scenic builders not capable of effectively interpreting and transforming the scenic designer's esthetic concepts into the finished artistry witnessed by the Broadway theatre goer.

It is the intent of this study to identify and describe the crucial role of the scene builder of Broadway theatrical

production. The writer feels this is necessary because so very little is known of these masters of stagecraft, and, yet, these very scene builders, in many instances, must provide the proper definition to a designer's original idea in order mechanically to execute sets for the Broadway theatre.

Through examination of seven scene building houses in the East (only six of which are still functioning) which have contracted for construction of sets for Broadway productions, the writer hopes to reveal just how demanding the role of the scene builder really is and how, indeed, he functions under the limiting conditions inherent in his business. A singular critic shares this evaluation of the scene builder:

Ask Bobby Jones or Ray Sovey about "Berg," ask Don Oenslager about Adler, ask Jo Mielziner about Albie or the Weisses or Eddie Kook, and what each of those men has contributed to the careers of American designers. They will no doubt say that if Broadway has a worldwide reputation for excellence and smoothness in stage decoration a great share of the credit must go to these master craftsmen working with paint, light, cloth and wood. For no setting is so complicated, no effect so unorthodox or so tricky, no style of painting so bold or so careful, no mood so subtle that these men cannot execute what is demanded of them.<sup>1</sup>

While this study explores seven scene building studios, slightly greater emphasis is placed on the two leading houses of Feller Scenery Studios, Inc. and Nolan Scenic Studios inasmuch as they provide the most comprehensive information available on the subject of scenic contracting and construction for contemporary

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<sup>1</sup>Norris Houghton, "Credits," Theatre Arts, XXX (November, 1946), pp. 657-58.

Broadway theatre. In addition, they are the leading suppliers of scenery for the Broadway theatre. Descriptions of histories, production operations, contractual procedures, and economic practices are presented. Included also is a discussion of the former operation of MacDonald Scenic Studios. These comprise the major sections of this dissertation.

In summary, this dissertation proposes to illuminate the little known subject of contemporary scenic contracting for Broadway theatre and, in addition, to establish the credibility of the Broadway scenic builder more firmly.

#### Justification of the Study

Investigations by this writer have shown to yield little textual data as it applies to the subject of this dissertation. It would appear, therefore, that the history of the theatre has a gap, namely in the area of scenic construction and contracting processes for the professional Broadway theatre. There is, to date, no all-inclusive, single source that deals with the history, production procedures, and economic operations of the major contemporary scene building houses, the scenic construction studio. A few texts give scant mention to certain aspects of this subject, but even in combination these treatments are far afield of constituting a continuum of information with respect to the Broadway scenic construction business. For this reason and for reasons assumed from evidence gathered at personal interviews, the writer understands that little is known about this subject, not only by the

theatre-going public, but by many producers, directors, and actors engaged in the industry. It has been evident through the entire study that this area of theatre work is known only to those directly involved in the work of the scene building industry itself--yet it is a business critical to the very life of Broadway theatre and should be properly understood and appreciated by those of us concerned with theatre in its totality.

Since the character of Broadway theatre as an industry is so mercurial, the future of these scenic companies necessarily reflects this intrinsic climate of uncertainty. Corroborating this is the fact that fifteen years ago there were over thirty scenic contracting studios operating in and around the area of New York City.<sup>2</sup> Today there are only nine scenic studios functioning for the Broadway theatre and only five of these are in New York City proper, and fewer still have the operational magnitude to build a major multi-scene musical. One of the remaining studios, Variety Scenic Studios, has gone through bankruptcy on two occasions under different organizational names and has since begun business anew.<sup>3</sup>

Consequent to this information it appears especially important to capture and record the dynamics of these studios while they are active and flourishing, for certainly, the history of theatre is incomplete without a knowledge of the Broadway scenic contracting industry.

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<sup>2</sup>Patrick Mitchell, private telephone interview, Springfield, Va., February, 1975.

<sup>3</sup>Herb Lager, private interview, see Appendix A-5, p. 280.

Because this dissertation illuminates this little known subject, it, therefore, may be considered a primary source.

#### Method of Research

The writer personally interviewed the owner-managers of the scenic studios of the nine-member Theatrical Contractors Association.<sup>4</sup> The interviews were conducted between October, 1974 and March, 1975. All appointments with the studios were arranged by telephone several days or weeks in advance, and, with the exception of Albie MacDonald, interviews were conducted at the owners' places of business during regular working hours. The protracted meetings with Nolan Scenic Studios deviated from this pattern because they spanned an excess of six months. The retired Albie MacDonald's interview took place on a Sunday evening in December, 1974 and was an uninterrupted, three hour, parlor discussion which included Mrs. McDonald.

Although a preplanned outline which included a structured list of specific questions<sup>5</sup> had been prepared in advance and were the starting points for each individual interview, a certain degree of informality developed during the course of the interviews as each interviewee responded with varying interest to the topics. This was partially due to the idiosyncracies of each individual, but more often than not, however, exchanges had to be abbreviated due to the pressure of work activity.

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<sup>4</sup>Members of Theatrical Contractors Association, see Appendix B, p. 307.

<sup>5</sup>See Appendix C, p. 309.

Each of the studios reviewed in this dissertation was visited, photographs were taken at the sites,<sup>6</sup> and notes describing interiors and exteriors of the facilities were recorded. The owner and/or the partners of the operations were interviewed. In cases where shops had managers, they also were interviewed. The majority of interviews are transcribed in Appendix A. Three members of the Association were not taped and do not appear in Appendix A. Notes were taken during the interviews of James Hamilton of Design Associates, Inc. and Mario Berritto of Lincoln Scenic Studios and were not, therefore, transcribed. A telephone interview of Patrick Mitchell of the National Scenery Studios was sufficient to gather the necessary information in this instance.

The bulk of the material was obtained from owners, operators, and managers, but information was also gathered from foremen, leadmen, mechanics, scenic artists, and apprentices. These individuals discussed aspects of scene building ranging from contractual agreements, to construction problems, to union agreements. The business experience of these men extends from as little as four months to as much as forty years. Whenever possible, factual material pertaining to each man's speciality and the working background that brought him to this professional field was elicited. It is in this fashion that the particularity of the business of scenery production emerged.

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<sup>6</sup>See Appendix E, p. 339.

### Limitations of the Study

For definitive reasons, it is necessary to point out that these companies do engage in building sets for Broadway, but many also are involved with scenic construction not usually thought of as "on Broadway" in its strictest sense. The only scenic contractor who claims to be involved with Broadway scenery to the exclusion of all other types is Nolan Scenic Studios in Brooklyn. Feller Scenery Studios, Inc., however, depends for economic solvency on other endeavors normally considered to be "outside theatre." World's Fair pavillions, Disney World and Disneyland projects, and permanent built effects for outdoor amusement parks are some of these projects. This dissertation will not deal with this aspect of the scenic contracting industry. This study does subsume that such productions as ballet, opera, and musicals of all descriptions come under the definition of "Broadway" if these productions are presented in a theatre normally considered of major magnitude.

In view of this, defining the physical parameters of Broadway is requisite to this examination of the scenery makers behind the "Broadway scene." To most theatre goers, the theatre section is encompassed roughly by west 42nd Street on the south to Lincoln Center on the north, and from between Eighth and Nineth Avenues on the west to Radio City Music Hall and Rockefeller Plaza on the east.

It should be observed that the scenic building houses which serve this theatre area are not found within these boundaries. They range from as far north as Norwalk, Connecticut to as far

from the metropolitan New York City area as Springfield, Virginia and Lambertville, New Jersey. Scenic building houses can be large and impressive, or they can be small with dark, unnoticeable facades set in a row of warehouses. It is from these disparate sections that the scenery construction plants bring carpentry, metal working, mechanical operations, and scene painting together in one finished product.

This study makes brief mention of props, yet it is not the concern of this dissertation to explore this unique area of theatre production. In the main, props are the responsibility of the designer.<sup>7</sup> It is his decision as to whether the props are purchased or manufactured by the scene shop constructing the scenery. As such, there are no prop shops left in existence in New York City. There are two establishments from which props may be rented. These shops will repair or refurbish pieces, but they do not construct props per se. These establishments traffic, in the main, with television studios and will not be considered in this dissertation.

#### Definition of Terms

Several terms are endemic to a discussion of the business of scenic construction for the Broadway theatre. This section presents definitions for those terms.

Centralization.--This term labels the process in which professional theatrical activity became focused in major metropolitan

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<sup>7</sup>See Appendix D, p. 311.



areas. The Broadway theatre of New York City is the most widely known example of this phenomenon.

Combination System.--This concept refers to a system in which a professional show is produced in a metropolitan area with the understanding that a successful run will ultimately be toured. This system brings together the many divergent elements especially for opening an original production.

In-House.--In-house refers to that process in which the scenic elements of a production are manufactured within the confines of the physical structure wherein the play is presented.

Out-of-House.--Out-of-house, the operation prevalent in the contemporary Broadway combination system, describes the building of scenery by a scenic contracting studio, independent of and normally some distance from the particular theatre in which the play will open.

Scenic Contractor.--This term refers to those individuals involved in the contracting for and the construction of the theatrical scenery for the professional theatre of Broadway. The terms scene builder and scenic studio owner and/or operator are used synonymously with scenic contractor.

#### Organization of the Study

This study is divided into four main chapters. The first chapter is presented in two main sections. The first section deals with the advent of the contemporary scenic contractual process for the Broadway theatre and examines the historical conditions which

caused the emergence of this system. The second section explores the role of the designer in production planning and characterizes his relationship to the production of scenery by contractors.

Chapter Two gives the individual histories of each establishment as well as a description of the facilities. In all cases, the origin of development and the background of the owners are traced.

Chapter Three describes the many facets involved with scenic contracting. Some of these include the very important process of bidding, the studio-scene designer relationship, the unions and their members, and the relationship of the scenic studio owners to the two unions and their employees.

Chapter Four is a comprehensive view of the operations of the scenic studio houses. It deals with the construction of scenery and the personnel necessarily involved. Also discussed are the scenic studio's views of the business and some of the financial aspects involved in the bidding process.

There are five Appendices included. The first, Appendix A, contains the transcripts of the recorded interviews of the scenic studio owners. There are seven divisions, each giving the specific questions and answers exchanged between the writer and the affiliate of the particular scenic studio. Appendix B is a list of the current members of the Theatrical Contractors Association. Appendix C itemizes the questions asked of scenic builders. Appendix D is a copy of the current agreement between Local 829 and the League of New York Theatre Producers. Appendix E contains photographs of

the scene builders' studios--some exterior and some interiors. Included in this list is a photograph of Robert Edmond Jones' sixtieth birthday party (1947) with a key identifying the famous names surrounding him.

## CHAPTER I

### THE ADVENT OF CONTEMPORARY SCENIC CONTRACTING FOR BROADWAY AND THE ROLE OF THE DESIGNER IN THIS PRODUCTION SCHEME

An analytical description of scenic contractors for Broadway theatrical productions constitutes the purpose of this dissertation. Therefore, consideration of the circumstances surrounding the development of this contractual system is significant, and because scenic construction is but a part of an involved production process, its relationship to the other phases of production should also be explained. The purpose of this chapter is, therefore twofold: to explore the conditions which led to the advent of the present contractual process and to describe the pre-production procedures involving the designer which lead to his inevitable contact with the scenic contractors.

#### The Advent of the Contractual Process

This section explores the evolution of conditions in theatre in the United States which offered an environment for the emergence of the practice of contracting for scenery building, a system which is the prevailing process for mounting theatrical scenery in the Broadway commercial theatre. Investigation of the literature relevant to the history of the theatre in the United States reveals

a paucity of information regarding who specifically was involved in the scenic building operation. Therefore, any historical view preceding the turn of the century yields little information.

There is evidence, however, which would indicate that the contractual process for scenic building as known today began around the time of centralization (1880-1900).<sup>1</sup> Centralization is that process which localized the bulk of theatrical activity around the major metropolitan areas. Principal among these is the Broadway theatre of New York City which is the concern of this dissertation.

At this time the traveling "combination company" began to replace the local independent stock company. "Combination company" refers to the producer-formed organization created solely for the purpose of bringing together all of the disparate elements for a particular theatrical venture. For each new play a new organization is formed. The production is generally initiated in a metropolitan city and is subsequently toured.

Centralization led to the control of the theatre by "big business," that is, the theatrical syndicate, and later the Schubert brothers.<sup>2</sup> "Big business" refers to the commercial theatre of which the Broadway theatre is the clearest example. It is this type of commercial operation which eventually led to out-of-house scenery construction--that system in which the sets and, for the most part,

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<sup>1</sup>Fred Jacoby, private interview, see Appendix A-2, p. 181.

<sup>2</sup>Jack Poggi, Theatre in America. The Impact of Economic Forces, 1870-1967 (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1968), p. 3.

all production elements, are gathered together outside of and independent of any given theatre. In-house is the term signifying the mounting of the production elements from within the facility commonly used by the theatrical group or company. Educational Theatre, Repertory Theatre, and Community Theatre normally are all categorized as in-house operations. This does not preclude the fact that anyone may contract for scenery. As budgets for dramatic arts centers grow, the writer has perceived an increased use of scenic contractors' services. This is particularly true of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C. which contracts with National Scenery Studios Corporation of Springfield, Virginia, a member of the Scenic Contractors' Association.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, when considering the expansive realm of the educational theatre system in this country and the number of community theatres throughout the provincial sections of the United States, it is not difficult to surmise that, by and large, the majority of American theatrical activity is performed in-house, in contrast to the process known as out-of-house or contracting.

The stock system of the late nineteenth century was another in-house operation in which all scenic elements were completed within the facility of the existing theatre. The stock system was essentially localized. Each community had its permanent resident company, and the company became identified with a particular theatre. Each theatre was a separate entity having no connection with other theatres.

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<sup>3</sup>Members of Theatrical Contractors' Association, see Appendix B, p. 307.

This isolation caused theatre managements to be identified with their theatres and producing organizations. Producers owned or leased and exercised complete control of the theatre house and the company.<sup>4</sup> The traveling combination company, however, began to supplant this system. Thomas Gale Moore believes that:

With the spread of the railroad and the consequent rate reduction, mounting a production in New York . . . to tour became cheaper than having local companies produce their own shows. More and more touring companies steadily invaded the domain of waning stock.<sup>5</sup>

Coupled with this is the explanation of A. Nicholas Vardac.

The melodrama of the last half of the nineteenth century found its greatest audience among the lower classes of the larger cities. . . . The provincial "opera house," endeavoring, with its limited technical facilities, to entertain the bulk of the melodrama audience, was eventually to bear the brunt of the competitive force[s]. . . .<sup>6</sup>

These competitive forces were the combination system and the cinema in its embryonic form. There is an ". . . overall coincidence between the realistic-romantic theatrical cycle in the nineteenth century and the invention of the motion picture."<sup>7</sup> This created a demand on the part of the theatre goer for increased pictorial sensations on the stage. Because only large metropolitan theatres such as the Lyceum in New York City were sufficiently equipped and

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<sup>4</sup>Alfred L. Bernheim and Sara Harding, The Business of the Theatre (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1932), p. 32.

<sup>5</sup>Thomas Gale Moore, The Economics of the American Theatre (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1965), p. 13.

<sup>6</sup>A. Nicholas Vardac, Stage to Screen (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1949), pp. 1-2.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. XXIV.

staffed to manage the elaborate productions, centralization began to become apparent in the New York area.

The system of staging used in [provincial] theatres, as well as in the theatres of metropolitan centers, was essentially the same at the time of the cinema's arrival as it had been at mid-century.

. . . . . Road shows originating in New York would require stringent scenic alteration. . . . [Toward the end of the century scenic limitations existed in the majority of local theatres.] Road shows were often required to travel simply with their drops, using them in outlandish combinations with whatever wings and borders were available at each stand.<sup>8</sup>

There were other problems related to the visual elements of a production, causing a shift of audience interest away from the provincial stock playhouse.

What was most detrimental . . . was not the general inadequacy of staging facilities but the very artificiality of their conventions. Consider, for instance, in an era since heralded for the realism of its theatrical reforms, the persistence of staging methods hailing from Serlio, Sabbatine [1638], and the Italian Renaissance. . . . Theatrical illusion in the playhouses of the smaller cities and towns catering to the larger proportion of the national audience depended . . . upon the acceptance of two-dimensional wings painted to counterfeit, and arranged to fake, a three-dimensional stage picture.<sup>9</sup>

It is also known that in the later part of the nineteenth century managers and builders began to recognize New York as a particularly advantageous locale.<sup>10</sup> Of course, many performers and stars gravitated to the New York City area, not only because of theatrical employment opportunities, but because of other

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid., pp. 2, 4-5.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>10</sup>Mary C. Henderson, "The Theatre and the City: A Study of the Evolution of the Theatrical District in the Urbanization of New York City" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, 1972), p. 315.



theatrically related industries such as night clubs.<sup>11</sup> However, this does not give the entire answer as to why New York City became the focal point in the centralization process. To be considered also is the fact that New York had wealth, size, and immediate contact with the Old World. It had already become a principal city in terms of taste and fashion, as well as being America's financial center. All of these factors contributed to the centralization in New York of everything required to create a production--actors, money, designers--further weakening the stock system in the rest of the country.

Traveling stars also helped to destroy the stock system--making Broadway even more significant. Local stock organizations had little to offer by way of variation in talent or scenic spectacle.

Then came traveling combinations--new faces and figures, fresh scenery and costumes--diffusing the glamour of a New York run and a New York cast, for New York, by the time that the combination system first raised its head, had assumed undisputed sway as arbiter egalitarian. In the face of this competition the local stock companies gradually faded away.<sup>12</sup>

Related to this destruction of local independence was the ultimate separation of theatre management--that is, the actual day-to-day operation of a theatre facility or plant--from play producing. This separation occurred in the combination companies. This writer maintains that it was this separation of the producing organizations from theatre management which gave impetus to the contractual process found today.

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<sup>11</sup>Moore, op. cit., p. 4.

<sup>12</sup>Bernheim and Harding, op. cit., p. 34.

The combination company differed, therefore, from the stock system insofar as it was a system of theatrical presentation wherein a company or corporation was formed for a single play. When the play had finished its run of Broadway and its tour, the life of the organization was ended. The combination company's connection with the theatre in which it was to play was purely transitory and a matter of chance. The previously unified structure of the stock company was divided into theatre managers and play producers.<sup>13</sup> This new system brought about significant changes, not the least of which was the need to contract to have scenery built out of the theatre and subsequently transported from a scene building studio to the theatre booked for the opening performance.

Further evidence for this is found in the interviews with Albie MacDonald,<sup>14</sup> owner-operator of the defunct MacDonald Scenery Studio, Charles Bender,<sup>15</sup> owner-operator of Nolan Scenic Studios, Fred Jacoby,<sup>16</sup> the oldest active scenic artist, and Jo Mielziner.<sup>17</sup> These men support the information that theatre technicians and scenic artists originally worked back stage building scenery in theatre studios, and, if work stopped, they would move on to another

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>14</sup>Albie MacDonald, private interview, see Appendix A-1, pp. 115 & 138.

<sup>15</sup>Charles Bender, private interview, see Appendix A-2, p. 151.

<sup>16</sup>Fred Jacoby, op. cit., p. 181.

<sup>17</sup>Jo Mielziner, private telephone interview, New York, N.Y., January, 1975.

theatre. There is also a consensus among these men that Albert MacDonald's father, Patrick A. MacDonald, Sr., originally conceived the idea of contracting to do scenic building out of the theatre for a producer. His company, the first of such scenic studios, was incorporated in 1910. MacDonald further recalled that the approximate patterns of scenic contracting for the Broadway theatre were firmly established by 1915.<sup>18</sup>

As scenery construction rapidly became an out-of-theatre function, there were many different types of independent shops in operation. These "specialty outfits," as they were sometimes called, specialized in the areas of carpentry, painting, properties, drapery and/or upholstery, and metal work. This development accompanied a period of great activity which continued to increase until it peaked in the 1927-1928 season with 264 productions.<sup>19</sup> It was during this era of the Twenties that the carpenter shops and paint shops united under one roof. They were still separate companies, however, because each had to contract separately for the work. Shortly after this, the drapery studios, as well, disappeared, and the carpenters took over the sewing of drops and ground cloths. Soon the prop shops were replaced by the incorporation of specialized mechanics in the scene shops. This, of course, saved considerably on transportation costs and facilitated more direct control of the many facets of the production. The MacDonald Studio is also credited with incorporating

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<sup>18</sup>Albie MacDonald, op. cit., p. 115.

<sup>19</sup>Moore, op. cit., p. 5.

the scene painting aspects of scenery construction into its operation, thereby creating the one contract system which remains today.<sup>20</sup>

As has been stated, it was the novelty of the touring combination company which gradually caused the demise of the stock company. The new system was attacked by critics on the basis that it was a deterrent to the art of the theatre. It is not the purpose of this paper to explore this argument, however. The fact remains that the theatre goer preferred the new system. By and large, the audience reacts to novelty. "The audience will react to special effects almost as intensely as to anything an actor can do. . . ."<sup>21</sup> Harold Burris-Meyer and Edward C. Cole further state,

Aside from demands exerted by playwrights in their scene plots, designers and technicians have responded to technological developments in the world outside the theatre by using new materials and devices to achieve effects. The creative urge has often been happily coupled with the competitive drive for novelty to the ultimate benefit of the playwright, director, actor, and producer and to the edification of the theatre goer.<sup>22</sup>

It would appear, therefore, that it is the "effects" which keep the scenic studio shops active. If every show were not custom fitted with an attempt at some innovation or variation, the very specialized talents of the scenic contractors would soon be in small demand.

In light of the financial risks, this purely commercial venture, typified by Broadway, which is the home of the combination production--the organization which gathers together the various

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<sup>20</sup>Fred Jacoby, op. cit., p. 181.

<sup>21</sup>Burris-Meyer and Cole, op. cit., p. 7.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., p. 17.

elements of a production which for the most part are independent and only assembled for the particular play--is differentiated from non-pecuniary agencies such as dramatic arts centers funded by the city, state, or federal government.

It is this commercial system which employs hundreds of artisans operating within the theatrical industry and helps to insure the scenic contractors continued participation in Broadway production activities.

In order to offer significant background to the setting wherein the activities of the scenic contractors take place, the role of the designer is considered in the following section.

#### The Designer's Role in Production Planning

This section describes the normal circumstances surrounding the initiation of the scene building process. Implicit in the understanding of this scheme is that there are no hard and fast rules, but there are patterns which have emerged.

Of the people supporting the producer, the two principal figures are the director and the general manager. In the writer's investigations, the role of the general manager was revealed to be far more significant and pivotal in a production than is normally assumed. The general manager is in charge of all the business transactions and acts, in many cases, with total authority in representing the producer.

If the organization is extensive enough, one of the first steps a producer will take is to employ a general manager. Whenever

financially feasible, general managers are members of a permanent staff comprised of department managers, bookkeepers, and clerks. If, however, the producer is small or relatively unknown, he may serve as his own general manager or perhaps even as the director.<sup>23</sup>

The playwright's manuscript is the focal point. The playwright submits his work to a producer who, if interested in the play, moves to interest others in order to raise the necessary financial support. In some cases, the producer sees fit to generate the funding from within his own organization. In recent years, however, it is increasingly the case that production procedures are implemented before all of the monies are forthcoming, and the financial backing comes later and later. In some cases, it comes not at all.

In the current combination production, the producer and the playwright discuss general requirements. Frequently the general manager becomes inextricably involved at this point. At these initial meetings, the director and the scenic designer are selected. Upon agreement, the persons selected are approached with the offer and, if they accept, are enlisted in the production work.

Immediately upon accepting a show, a designer is required to sign a contract with a producer. This contract must be filed with the union, Local 829. The designer is required to have his initial fee before he reveals any drawings or submits requests for estimates of scenery costs at the bidding sessions.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup>Bernheim, op. cit., p. 110.

<sup>24</sup>Charles Bender, op. cit., p. 153.

The following minimum rates (fees) for Scenic Designer are effective July 1, 1975:

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|--|-------------------------|
| (1) 1st set  | \$2,500.00              |
| 2nd set  | 810.00                  |
| 3 through 6 each   | 630.00                  |
| each thereafter  | 400.00                  |
| (2) Unit Setting: . . . "the enclosing framework for a theatrical production which shall remain on stage for the entire performance. . . . If it is altered, each alteration shall be called phase." . . . |                         |
| Unit set and up to and including six phases  | \$4,750.00              |
| 7 through 12 phases  | 1,900.00                |
| 13 or more phases  | 1,850.00                |
| (3) Bare Stage:  | \$ 600.00 <sup>25</sup> |

At this juncture, however, there may be variations in the procedure. A designer may be approached by a producer or his manager before selecting a director, or, if a director has been chosen. The director then may approach a designer. The approach may simply be with the words, "Here's a script to read." At this point the producer may not know or may not wish to tell the designer or the director how much money is available to spend on the show.<sup>26</sup> In any event, once the designer's contract has been filed, the designer must proceed with his work.<sup>27</sup>

The designer and the director may confer alone, with the playwright, or with all members of the production staff. Some

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<sup>25</sup>"Agreement Between The League of New York Theatres and Producers, Inc. and United Scenic Artists, Local 829," see Appendix D, p. 317.

<sup>26</sup>Arnold Abramson, private interview, see Appendix A-2, p. 169.

<sup>27</sup>Appendix D, op. cit., p. 324.

significant questions which are important to the designing of a show may remain undefined upon acceptance of a script and, at times, may even remain unanswered as designing begins. Not infrequently a designer is not made aware of the budget within which he must design, the theatre or theatres in which the show will open, and, therefore, the facilities available in the particular theatre for which he is designing.

There are innumerable questions a designer must answer before making the first sketches. He must confer with not only the director but the costume designer, lighting designer, and any other special designer involved in the production. These conferences, ideally, should be attended by the producer, and/or the general manager, the playwright, and may also include the choreographer, conductor, and principal actors. These conferences serve to clarify interpretations and resolve differences of opinion which affect design.<sup>28</sup> Additional conferences with the director and other production supervisors are always necessary, as are subsequent revisions which are made until agreement is reached. Seldom is there immediate agreement. Often, a designer's ideas do not agree with those of the playwright or the director. Most unfortunately, many theatrical ventures have failed because,

For the sake of an appearance of harmony and accord, prominent and seemingly intelligent people will ignore what they know to be the basic differences of opinion and, as work progresses, set about to achieve their own objectives

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<sup>28</sup>Oscar G. Brockett, The Theatre (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1969), p. 447.



by underground methods. This practice is not native to theatre alone. . . .<sup>29</sup>

Many times a budget set by a producer or production manager bears little relationship to what the designer has created. It is impossible to ascertain with accuracy how producers arrive at costs. One hypothesis has been offered that an experienced producer determines cost by past shows. He may consider the cost of a one set show (a "one lunger") he previously produced and base his financial needs upon this comparison. If a producer fails to reveal to the designer an approximate range of expenditure projected, the designer must still proceed with the completion of the plans. Unfortunately, not until the show is presented for the bidding session does the production manager realize the designs are beyond the budget. Many times, scenic contractors readily sense, due to their experiences with this procedure, when a designer has exceeded the budget.<sup>30</sup>

It is desirable that an easy working relationship be established between a director and a designer who are working together on a production. Some directors give a designer great freedom, especially if they are familiar with his work. This generally results in approval of sketches at a very early stage. The director may welcome, if not solicit, suggestions from the designer with regard to the staging of the play. Other directors habitually

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<sup>29</sup>Burris-Meyer and Cole, op. cit., p. 45.

<sup>30</sup>Abramson, op. cit., p. 175.

give detailed instructions to their designers and make numerous suggestions for changes as the sketches and drawings are submitted.<sup>31</sup>

A little known fact about a designer's responsibility is that any expenses caused by errors or omissions in the plans must be paid by the designer. According to scenic studio owners, the reality of the situation is that this never happens. The responsibilities of the designer are stated in the "Agreement Between Local 829 and the League of New York Theatres and Producers."

(A) Scenic Designer: (designs the production and renders the following services in connection therewith):

1. To complete either a working model of the settings to scale or to complete color sketch models of the settings and necessary working drawings for constructing carpenter at the reasonable discretion of the Producer or his authorized representative.
2. To supply the contracting painter with color schemes or color sketches sufficient for the contracting painter.
3. To design or select or approve properties required for the production, including draperies and furniture.
4. To design and/or supervise special scenic effects for the production, including projections.
5. To supply specifications for the constructing carpenter, to supervise the building and painting of sets and the making of properties and, at the request of the Producer or his authorized representative, such estimates to be submitted to the Producer or his authorized representative at a specific time. If the Designer is required to participate in more than three estimating sessions of each class extra compensation shall be paid as provided in paragraph IV (A) hereinafter.
6. To be present at the initial pre-Broadway set-up and Broadway set-up days and dress rehearsals; to attend

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<sup>31</sup>David Welker, Theatrical Set Design: The Basic Techniques (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1969), p. 6.

the first public performance and opening out-of-town and the first public performance in New York and to conduct the scenic rehearsals therefore.<sup>32</sup>

In conjunction with these duties, the notable designer, Howard Bay, further illustrates the designer's involvement with the scenic contracting studios. Howard Bay appears to be the only designer/author who has chosen to make mention of this overlooked area. He notes that the designer's first contact with a scenic studio for any given production is the bidding session. The designer lays out drawings and/or models for analysis and estimate. Present at this session are the shop heads, each one "presumably a master carpenter, a crackerjack mechanic and a grand organizer."<sup>33</sup> Although Howard Bay feels that chargemen, scenic artists, and drapery men should be on hand, investigation reveals that this is never the case unless the owner is a chargeman, as is the case with Arnold Abramson of Nolan Scenic Studios. Peter Feller, owner, operator of Feller Scenery Studios defines the term "chargeman" as follows:

The chargeman is the head scenic artist . . . is your basic head painter. The term chargeman is a union term, equivalent to foreman in the mechanical unions. His function is more than that since he consults directly with the designer in terms of color, line, form, and material to be painted upon. He's the man of decision. He may say, "It's impossible to achieve that effect on this material," so we'll have to get that material.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup>Appendix D, op. cit., p. 308.

<sup>33</sup>Howard Bay, Stage Design (New York: Drama Books Specialists, 1974), p. 128.

<sup>34</sup>Peter Feller, private interview, see Appendix A-3, p. 167.

The responsibility of the designer involves imparting to the scenic studios any information relevant to construction: theatres booked, delivery dates, set-up time, weight tolerances needed for given units, information relevant to scene changes, information relevant to the theatres such as placement of switchboards and floor plans of back stage area, and, generally, any other information needed to be practical.<sup>35</sup>

Because the scenic designer's drawings most frequently display only what the finished settings should look like, the shops then proceed to seek information necessary to costing the various aspects of the design.

The meeting is adjourned; the shop pieces together an estimate composed in the usual manner of estimating man hours, materials, overhead and projet. Unlike the subjects of other estimates, no show is identical with any other show. P.S. There are no rich contractors. The estimate is presented to the management; they shout that they could build a house for that sum. The shop counters with, "Not delivered in New Haven in three weeks you couldn't!" And the whittling away at the extravagant designer starts. There are ways to cut back on costs, some logical and some illogical. In the commercial framework it is foolhardy to eliminate any mechanics that will ultimately pile on more expensive manpower in the theatre; a thousand-dollar saving in manufacture is eaten up in a few weeks of performances. The initial cost is not as vital as the operational costs--a maxim difficult to impress on neophyte producers of plays. Also time should not be wasted fuming about the justice of the union's arbitrary decrees on how many stagehands are required back-stage, right stage or left stage. The shop can come through with sensible shortcuts; doubling units with minor design modifications, trading in large framed units for soft hangings that are not only easier to produce but do not take time and stage floor space to assemble. Is your heart set on a cumbersome facade even though an entrance-way is all that actually performs in the action? In the conceptual period authors, producers, directors and oftentimes designers are more literal minded than the ultimate audience.

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<sup>35</sup> Bay, op. cit., p. 128.

The author fixed a complete, specific locale in his mind's eye but the spectator's attention seldom strays far beyond the atmosphere engendered by the items the actors cope with. Focus is dissipated by towering bulk lumbering on and off stage. Wouldn't a nice leaf pattern projected over that porch cancel out all the dead foliage? Isn't that elaborately modeled ground row rather corny--and distracting to boot? Will the audience appreciate your incorporation of genuine mahogany veneer thirty feet upstage of the curtain line? It all calms down; contracts are signed; there is even less time to knock out the production, and in the meantime the shop has taken on a thirty-six scene venture for the Alex Cohen office.<sup>36</sup>

In Broadway productions, complete sets of working drawings are seldom made. The requirements of scene shifting, transportation, speed of construction, and available materials have dictated the development of techniques of construction which are applicable, with minor variations, to most scenic requirements. A master scenic carpenter can construct most scenery directly from the designer's drawings. "Given a bare outline drawing of the scenery and a simple statement of its materials he can visualize the required divisions into standard pieces and the structural conformations of those pieces."<sup>37</sup> With a few pencil sketches and a few calculations, he can proceed to construct a set. Charles Bender of Nolan Scenic Studios revealed,

Very seldom do we distribute the designer's drawing to have it built. . . . I would say that ninety-five percent of the time we draw a show. Because when it comes to a flat, all we get is the outline. . . . The actual construction isn't drawn, so we have to draw the flat the way it actually breaks up, and where it's stiffened, and so on.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup>Bay, op. cit., p. 128.

<sup>37</sup>Burris-Meyer and Cole, op. cit., p. 79.

<sup>38</sup>Charles Bender, op. cit., p. 160.

Howard Bay speaks to the same point.

In the bustle of manufacturing working drawings and covering all work in progress the designer tends to lean too heavily on the scenic artist's expertise by sloughing paint elevations and other matter he dumps on the paint shop. Artists [in the scene shop] have covered up for designers on occasion but it's a chancy thing because the artist may gallop with many tasteful improvements if the sketch material isn't unified and frightfully clear. Raw research should not be handed over unless you desire an exact copy of such research. Retribution will be swift if a designer airily waves his hand accompanied with the line, "Oh, paint it sort of between Bonnard and maybe Turner, yes, Turner, but for the drawing follow this photo."<sup>39</sup>

Because a designer may do what Howard Bay has indicated, the writer perceives a kinship between scenic designers and scenic studio painters. To be sure, they both belong to the same union. As pointed out by Arnold Abramson of Nolan Scenic Studios, they were originally even more closely allied.

Well, many years ago, before there were designers as such . . . the shop supplied a service, building, designing, and painting. Designers worked for the shop. There were no such things as a designer. The shop supplied the scenery. There was a model room, and the people built models and painted. I believe one of the first designers as an individual was Robert Edmond Jones. And Lee Simonson.<sup>40</sup>

The advent of independent designers was a gradual process. At first, only the very well-known designers were independent. Although the well-known designer worked independently, many worked within the premises of the scenic contracting studio. Reference to this is made by Norris Houghton in a description of Robert Edmond Jones working in an upper room, overlooking the paint floor

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<sup>39</sup> Bay, op. cit., p. 129.

<sup>40</sup> Abramson, op. cit., p. 169.

of the old Bergman Studio on the 39th Street side of the site of the old Metropolitan Opera House.<sup>41</sup>

Fred Jacoby of Nolan Scenic Studios recalls:

Years ago, a designer was part of a scenic studio. We used to call them model men. We never used the designer's name at all at that particular time. But a designer is actually a freelance man who designed a show for some producer, should I say? Yes. He'd practically work on his own. And then the carpenter shop and the scenic studio would meet and put a bid on these shows. It was common. A lot of shops would be called in. Who, naturally, had the better price, got the job. But that was something new, completely. We never had designers years ago. What you call a designer today, years ago, he had to become a good painter first. And then he actually graduated himself to the model room. He actually had a collar and tie job after that. And they were terrific designers because they could paint. They wouldn't design anything that you couldn't point. Because they knew all the fundamentals to do for the painting.<sup>42</sup>

This relationship between designer and studio was advantageous to both inasmuch as each could predict performance procedures with greater accuracy due to the cohesive working arrangement. Aspects of this arrangement can be seen to this day. Indeed, this writer has been witness to this working relationship when visiting the various scenic studios involved in this study.<sup>43</sup> Some designers spend all day, every day, at the contractor's shop, until the set is complete. This seems to be more prevalent with designers who are not well enough established to have their own studio.

Continuation of this kinship between designer and contract studio is by no means to either's disadvantage. If a designer has

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<sup>41</sup>Norris Houghton, "Credits," Theatre Arts, XXX (Nov., 1946), p. 658.

<sup>42</sup>Jacoby, op. cit., p. 182.

<sup>43</sup>Leo Meyers, private interview, see Appendix A-4, p. 245.

been successful with a scenic studio, insofar as he finds his designs are interpreted to his satisfaction, he tries to direct the general manager toward this studio. Personal relationships frequently dictate to which scenic contracting studio a show will be granted.

But, still, every shop has its following of favorite designers, designers who like to work with particular people. It makes their life easy, especially in the scenic artist work. It makes their life easy in the sense that they don't have to be so specific. People understand each other. "I want this kind of treatment that we did on that show three years ago or three years ago on such and such a show." There are many other factors--personality--I think personality is maybe eighty percent of it, the reason why a designer likes to work with someone. Quality is important. For some of the designers quality is the eighty percent. In any case, every shop has a following. Otherwise, I could not exist.<sup>44</sup>

Thus the designer-contractor relationship has evolved into a reciprocal arrangement whose goals involve both the aesthetic and the economic in respect to the scenic elements of a production.

In summary, this section describes the relationship between the scenic designer and the scenic construction studio as it relates to the purpose of this paper. The scenic designer is the link between the producer and the scenic contractor, each an integral part of the production process.

This chapter has provided a framework within which is placed the scenic contractors' studios of the Broadway theatre. The distinction between in-house and out-of-house scenic construction has been examined, and the effects of centralization and the combination system have been explained. The role of the scene designer has also

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<sup>44</sup>Herb Lager, private interview, see Appendix A-5, p. 254.



been characterized as it related to the production of scenery by contractors.

The following chapter will describe the individual histories of the major Broadway scene building houses in preparation to the analysis of the contractual building process out-of-house.

## CHAPTER II

### HISTORIES OF THE MAJOR BROADWAY SCENE

#### BUILDING HOUSES

A comprehensive study of the current scene building studios includes the individual histories of each establishment. These accounts reveal not only the origins and development of each major studio but, in many instances, recreate the contributions they have made to the business of stagecraft.

While tracing the backgrounds of scenic building companies still in existence is essential to this work, inclusion of a famous, but defunct, studio is especially important inasmuch as this studio, MacDonald's, is acknowledged by those in the trade as a pioneer of technical theatre and was the dominant scene maker for some twenty-five years.

#### MacDonald Studio History

Albert (Albie) MacDonald, Jr. is included in this dissertation as an example of a studio operation which has closed. While functioning, it was considered to be the largest facility and capable of manufacturing the most complex scenic effects. Mr. MacDonald's father, Albert MacDonald, Sr. is also credited with being the first to contract for the construction of scenery as it is done today.

Patrick Albie MacDonald, Jr. was a pioneer of the Broadway scene construction industry and the man who made the MacDonald Studio famous in the New York Theatre for over a quarter of a century--from the 1930s until 1962, when Mr. MacDonald terminated his career.

His father, Patrick Albie MacDonald, Sr., first conceived the idea of contracting for scenic construction in lieu of the producer's building his own sets, as had been the practice. Theatrical producers not only constructed the scenery for their shows but painted them as well, using back areas of their theatre houses for this work.

Incorporated in 1910, the MacDonald Studio became the first professional scene building house to contract with Broadway producers for the construction of theatrical sets. MacDonald, Sr., with the assistance of MacDonald, Jr.'s older half brother, in expanding the business, moved from such sites as the stage of the renowned old Grand Opera House on 24th Street and a shop nearby on 25th Street. They settled the company into permanent residence in a four-floor building on 30th Street between 10th and 11th Avenues in the 1920s.<sup>1</sup>

Albie MacDonald, Jr., who had started working in the shop in 1915, became boss of the MacDonald Studio in 1932 and bought the business in 1947. He owned and operated it until his formal retirement fifteen years later.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Albie MacDonald, private interview, see Appendix A-1, p. 115.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 115.

Albie MacDonald's entry into the scene building industry was a natural result of general interest generated by his family who were all involved in theatre. Albie MacDonald brought his own particular involvement to the varied and challenging aspects of the process of constructing theatrical scenery:

I loved the theatre, and I loved the whole process of set construction, that is, except for the business end, the finances. I hated the contract process and the money collecting but I loved everything else. I worked as a carpenter for a few years, but I loved drafting the best. I enjoyed doping things out. I'd get thoroughly involved, carried away. Lots of times I'd stay up until 2:00 or 3:00 A.M. designing. My father and brothers would go out and work in the theatre, but I always stayed in the shop. . . . I loved the work, up until the end, when I lost interest.<sup>3</sup>

#### Description of Assignment Procedure

Some term definitions and brief explanations of processes may be useful here. Historically, the business of preparing scenery for the Broadway stage was divided among a number of individuals or organizations, each with special function or functions.

According to Bernheim, this was the general procedure: The producer and his art director or designer agreed upon the scenic art concept for their play and drew up some general plans describing their ideas. These concepts and plans then had to be translated into graphic form. The graphics was the job of either an independent scenic designer or a scenic studio (painting studio), which employed a scenic artist. The designer made sketches, scale drawings and models, which then went to the scene builder or construction company.

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 139.

There, sets were built from the drawings and models and then were shipped to the scenic studio to be painted. After painting, the builder removed the finished sets from the scenic studio, delivered them to the theatre, and assembled them on the stage.<sup>4</sup>

### Bidding

Following MacDonald's lead, other set builders began to enter the scenic contracting business. Competition for theatrical set construction was formalized in bidding sessions, where scenic contractors were invited by theatrical producers to bid for scene building contracts for specific shows.

In the late 1920s and early 1930s, sometimes five scene building shops were invited to attend bidding sessions, usually held in the designer's office, where the general manager (representing the producer, who rarely attended) and his scene designer explained the show and set to the bidders. According to Albie MacDonald:

The designer offered only a one-half inch scale elevation and ground plan and maybe details of molding, which was very little to go on.

The designers didn't know how to construct anything. The designer was only interested in the result. So, if there was a show, say, with a double turntable, I had to conceive it because the designer didn't know how to do it. In the bidding, I would think, "Now how can I do it?" If I was smarter, then I could figure it out and bid cheaper and get the contract.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Alfred L. Bernheim and Sara Harding, The Business of the Theatre (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1932), p. 138.

<sup>5</sup>MacDonald, op. cit., p. 120.

As the manager usually wanted bids the morning after the bidding session, MacDonald delegated the basic work to his assistant, then labored into the night on special and extra details.

Bids at that time consisted of one total figure covering the entire scene building job. This one-sum bid was beneficial to the builders, as it protected them financially from cuts and changes in the scenic plans made by managers and designers. "We used to be able to make money on cuts under the total figure bid, then they got smart and made us itemize."<sup>6</sup>

MacDonald's bidding formula was based on estimates of the square footage required for flats; his estimates included, also, costs of other materials, painting and labor and overhead, then he added thirty-five percent to these costs for his total bid figure. "I got thirty-five percent as a normal markup in a bid, which included profit and all costs."<sup>7</sup> (In the early days, painting was contracted separately to scenic studios. MacDonald was one of the first set builders to hire scenic artists and painters to do this work in his building shop. Other work, such as iron, metal and special crafts, was subcontracted. Again, MacDonald was first in bringing these trades and their craftsmen into his building shop.)

The builder's portion of the contract depended upon many factors, including the overall budget for the show, the producer's and designer's particular extravagances or frugalities concerning

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 120.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 141.

scenic art concepts and their execution, and the complexity of the sets. Most frequently, the criterion was the number of sets and their complexity. A one-set play with interior, double sliding door and cornices, for example, then would have costed out at \$1,250.00 in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Another one-set show with many more complexities such as Town House (1933) cost \$35,000.00. Rio Rita (a 1927 extravaganza), on the other hand, ran \$45,000.00 for scenery. According to MacDonald that particular show would cost \$175,000.00 to \$200,000.00 to build and paint today. Musicals--always more lavish and complicated than dramatic productions--could run as high as \$65,000.00 to \$75,000.00 at that time.

The business of sending sets out to scenic studios for painting was a troublesome financial problem.

I could make more money just building the sets, say for \$10,000.00, because if I bid that amount to the producer, it didn't scare him. The problem was that the painting bid had to be included, which added, say, another \$10,000.00, and this seemed like an awful lot of money to the producer.<sup>8</sup>

When MacDonald incorporated painters into his own shop, he, like other builders, was better able to absorb and control the previously separate and high painting costs into his operations and, consequently, into his bid estimates.

MacDonald's reputation grew to the extent that often a producer and his designer would approach him directly, rather than going through the formal bidding routine. This advantage naturally ensured a continuity of business with the same clients. MacDonald

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 140.

built all the shows for such designers and producers as Oenslager, Horn and Ziegfeld and later, built many shows for the brilliant designer, Jo Mielziner, as well as those of the famous Bel Geddes. One reason Mr. MacDonald continued to work chiefly for Broadway, even after the advent of television created an enormous amount of new volume, was his desire to retain his Broadway clientele, particularly those with whom he had a working association of long standing.

A singular disadvantage to having producers and designers bypass the bidding session was their use of MacDonald's favored status as leverage to force MacDonald to meet their special prices.

#### MacDonald's Contributions to Process

As a pioneer of the Broadway scene construction industry, undoubtedly MacDonald's major contributions to the advancement of the business and art of stagecraft were: consolidation and technical innovation.

In the early years of the industry, the processes of scene building (from bidding session to assemblage of final sets on the stage), were numerous, burdensome, and disparate. In the course of his career, MacDonald managed to consolidate the many physically disparate functions of set construction and its painting under one operation. In addition, he created some extremely important new techniques and devices, which simplified and streamlined both the construction of sets and their operation on the stage.



Working conditions were eased for all scene builders when scenic designers became independent of scenic studios and could provide more sophisticated construction plans for the builders in the form of blueprints. According to MacDonald, he was the first builder to convert the designer's blueprints into working drawings so they might more intelligently be followed by his men. (Later, this work was done by a layout man.)

The men in the MacDonald Studio consisted initially of basic carpenters and laborers but gradually included more and more craftsmen, tradesmen, and scenic artists and painters until, finally, all iron, metal, machine, and painting work was done on the premises. This consolidation was unprecedented: thus MacDonald was the first scenic contractor to oversee, in one shop, all the aspects of scene making--from designer's blueprints to the finished set for the Broadway stage. No work was jobbed out where before, all iron work, all cornice and jigsaw work, all non-routine machine work was let--and all painting was done by the scenic studios.

#### Facilities

The MacDonald Studio, located on Thirtieth Street between Tenth and Eleventh Avenues, consisted of a four-floor building and a painting studio down the block. Each of the four floors was relegated to a special function. The basement was for storage and the first floor for making flats. The middle floor of the studio was used for built work. A particularly challenging job done here was the construction of a seventeen foot mantel for the Mielziner

set of Your Obedient Husband, starring Frederic March. The top floor of the studio was used for sewing, making drops, and fitting scenes. The ceiling was high enough to accommodate large sets and the rigging required to assemble them, as well as drops as large as forty by forty-five feet. Scene painting was done in the separate studio down the street, which MacDonald acquired. This acquisition marked the final step in his consolidation of all the scene-making functions. He became, then, the first scenic contractor able to manufacture a completely finished product for delivery to the theatre.

#### Personnel

MacDonald employed 150 men during peak times: about seventy-five carpenters, mechanics, and laborers; and seventy-five scenic artists and painters. Two foremen supervised the flat and built scene operations. Carpenters, machinists, and mechanics did the skilled hand and machine work, including carving, iron and metal work. They operated the lathes, planes, shapers, and the various other machinery of which MacDonald was the first to establish in a scene building shop. The laborers painted some scenery, cut and sewed drops, and did other less skilled work. The scenic artists did the crucial, often highly technical and complex scene painting, assisted by painters of less skill and talent.

Business always got slow at the end of the year, before Christmas, and there was always a layoff of employees. Then around mid-January and the beginning of February, it started

to pick up. May was heavy, and then there was a lull in the summer.<sup>9</sup>

MacDonald instructed his men to strive for durability, as well as esthetics, in their work, as he was aware of the rough handling sets received when shipped around the country following the initial New York run. "Today," MacDonald comments, "they glue parts together, which is unnecessary and means they're likely to come undone."<sup>10</sup>

As with all scene builders, the inevitable problem of time even then was consummate. Rarely was there a realistic timetable for getting a job out properly. MacDonald accommodated this problem by assigning the most difficult tasks first and thus dealing with the overtime hours at the beginning of a project.

This way, at the end you had the easier stuff to do and maybe you could coast a little. If you let the hard work and the overtime go until the end, the guys were tired, they made errors, and it was just much worse all around. Besides, we didn't do one show at a time, so we always had the pressure of getting a set out to meet a deadline and to clear the shop for the next job . . . but we should have had more time.<sup>11</sup>

#### Scenic Designers

MacDonald's opinion is that scenic designers must be brought in at the outset of a theatrical production--as a part of the original group of producer, manager, director, stage manager--so that the time problem might be alleviated.

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 133.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 133.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 127.

Scenic designers also presented other problems:

They could drive you crazy. If they got you the job, they often expected extra stuff from you. One designer in particular was very demanding, impossible. I finally told him off. . . . I said, "Why don't you get Nolan, then!" He was a little easier to work with after that.<sup>12</sup>

Yet another theatrical tradition which created additional time and money problems was that of the manager's having responsibility for the scene building:

I never could understand why the producer would let the manager be in control, when the manager had no idea of what he was doing concerning scenery. The manager is gambling most of the time. How could they take such chances with people's money? It's so slipshod . . . the most slipshod business imaginable.<sup>13</sup>

#### MacDonald's Technical Contributions

As described, MacDonald made important contributions to the internal consolidation of working procedures. His technical innovations are perhaps even more noteworthy as they relate to the development of the creative role of the scenic houses.

1. Rear Fold Traveller. Designed for a Ziegfeld production, its function was to slide a curtain (with a Currier and Ives painting on it) off flatly without "bunching."<sup>14</sup>

2. Inside-Outside Turntable. This innovation was designed so that an outside turntable would move while the inside one did also. The outer table was constructed with a gear rack around it,

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 134.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 135.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 138.

and a pinion gear, plus a shaft that led to the machine that wound it up. The interior table was controlled by a man inside a screen who operated a hand winch.<sup>15</sup>

3. Pie-Shaped Turntable. Customarily when a turntable was used in a New York show, and subsequently the show went on the road, an advance man would have to precede the arrival of a show in order to set up the turntable because set-up was so time-consuming. MacDonald's pieshape turntable could be assembled in one hour. The construction consisted of four-foot square sections framed out of angle irons, each section with a groove in it. The circumference required sixteen sections. Each section was slipped into the angle iron frame and single-bolted on its outer edge.<sup>16</sup>

4. Sprocket Chain Wall. Created for If the Shoe Fits, the purpose was to be able to effect a look of pages turning in a book, and with each turn of the page (the new scene) such items as chairs, stoves "popped" out. MacDonald devised a two-foot elevation under which was installed the machinery. Each wall had a sprocket chain on its top and its bottom, the process of moving was along a gear back stage, down through a shaft where a man continually kept winding. Each "page" had a hook that clasped to the sprockets. The mechanical device was similar to "a bicycle chain lying down." Albie MacDonald won a Tony award for special effects for this innovation.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>Ibid., pp. 133 & 138.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 139.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 124.

5. Trial Set-Ups. The MacDonald Studio had a section removed from the roof to facilitate the building of scenes and rigging them within their own premises to ensure the proper fitting for the theatre before load out to the theatre.<sup>18</sup>

MacDonald's lean years were from 1929 to 1933, when he worked for one period of eighteen months only. His peak years with the burgeoning of television, facilities of television networks then were inadequate to house their production activities. Because of the fact that there were inadequate facilities at the outset, scenic houses subsequently were in constant demand to render these services.

MacDonald's retirement from the business was the result of a gradual accumulation of problems. Business had been declining, securing qualified help was increasingly difficult, costs were higher, the element of craftsmanship had deteriorated, and the business of bidding was becoming more devious.

The business wasn't on the level anymore, and this upset me a lot. Kickbacks started, and after the bid, cuts would come, . . . the designer would cut. . . . It got crooked; . . . the manager was a bad guy. . . . I had thought about closing for two years, then I did one last show in 1962, Night Life, starring Carol Lawrence, which didn't do very well.<sup>19</sup>

MacDonald's growing distaste for the business was compounded by a city ordinance requiring installation of a new and expensive sprinkler system, plus increases in rent.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., pp. 122-23.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 134.

The city got very hot on sprinkler systems, and we had a sprinkler system in the paint studio but not in the shop. The Fire Department came around and said I had to have a sprinkler system. So I had an engineer come in and analyze it, and he made up drawings and sent them down . . . and it would have cost me \$125,000 . . . and I said that's it.

I thought of moving back to New Jersey but you just wouldn't believe what it would have cost. . . . I would have had to rent, and they were asking \$1.50 a square foot in those days--I know it's more now--so you could have paid \$30,000 to \$35,000 a year rent just like that for nothing. I finally said the hell with it. . . . I was tired, and so, so discouraged at the way things change. And I quit.<sup>20</sup>

MacDonald did, however, continue to do independent projects related to his field of expertise: for example, he toured the last show he built, and just prior to his retirement he worked on exhibits and displays for the 1964 World's Fair in Flushing, New York.<sup>21</sup>

#### Nolan Scenic Studios

Still in existence is Nolan Scenic Studios, and it is widely considered to be the number two firm in the scenic contracting business. Nolan's is owned by Charles Bender, a carpenter-draftsman, and Arnold Abramson, a scenic artist.

Nolan Scenic Studios, 1163 Atlantic Avenue, is located in the heart of the Brooklyn ghetto (Bedford Stuyvesant) and is second in size to Feller Scenery Studios, Inc. It is on the site of the old Brooklyn Ice Palace which the writer recalled visiting as a child. Upon entering from a busy street through a very industrial looking portal (see photograph page 57), two defined main working

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<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 137.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 126.

areas, one for carpentry and the other for drop painting, are immediately apparent. Nolan has two offices diagonally opposite each other in this quonset-shaped structure. The office nearest the entrance is the center of the operation. It is on the second floor level overlooking the carpentry area; it also serves as the drafting room. The other office is a control area for the painting of drops. Nolan's is the least pretentious of the facilities visited. There are no secretaries, and the entire operation is handled by the two owners.

Historically, it has been a custom for carpenters to own scene building shops, bringing scenic artists into their employ when they consolidated all the scene manufacturing processes in their original operations. Abramson is probably one of the first scenic artist to co-own a scene building business. Bender is a carpenter.

According to Bender, Nolan Brothers (the original name) was established by Packy Nolan, who operated the studio with his son, from 1932 to 1938. Nolan, senior, had been guaranteed business, and thus established a shop and brought his son in with him. He worked intermittently for whoever had a show. In those days, one had to be established before a producer would call. Otherwise having discovered what Broadway show was imminent, the builder called on the producer and requested work for the upcoming production. At that time, the producers usually considered only two or three shops for bidding, based on prior knowledge of their specialties. Mr. Bender recalls, "You often got your workers when a competitor



laid them off. At that time, the men would run with their tool boxes to whatever show was in the works."<sup>22</sup>

After the senior Nolan died, the son, was the only one capable of running the business, which he did until 1956 when we moved here [1163 Atlantic Avenue, Brooklyn] and incorporated as Nolan Scenic Studios. Abramson and I became partners then, along with William Nolan and his wife . . . the other brother quit. William Nolan died seven years ago, and four and a half years ago Abramson and I bought out Nolan's wife . . . she had no part in the business anymore. Arnold and I did decide, though to keep the name of the firm.<sup>23</sup>

Mr. Bender was hired by Nolan senior in the early 1930s as an apprentice carpenter/mechanic. He has held a union card for forty years in IATSE, (International Alliance of Theatrical and Stage Employees). Mr. Bender's father also was in this business and Bender recalls a conversation with him about the influence of movies on Broadway.

My father thought that when the movies came in, it was the end of theatre and scene building as a business. I wasn't sure, especially about the talkies, but I really couldn't predict about the movies--or later, about TV--so I just kept going on.<sup>24</sup>

Fred Jacoby, Nolan Studio's oldest scenic artist, believes that television hurt indirectly the theatre much more than either talking or color movies. The television networks, for example, bought out many of the old scene building houses when their volume began to diminish.

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<sup>22</sup>Charles Bender, private interview, see Appendix A-2, p. 142.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., pp. 145-46.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p. 166.

His recollections of scenic houses and their work generally supports those of MacDonald.

Nolan's is the oldest in the business, and I've been around for a long time. I think the scene building operations are generally the same as they used to be, except that the type of built work has changed. . . . We do a lot more iron work than before, and so eventually, all the shops had to incorporate iron work as part of their operation. . . . All this was done within the unions, of course, within IATSE. . . . We were fairly busy over the years, though the business is seasonal, we had five very good years after World War II. . . . I remember we did three musicals at once onetime. . . . Call Me Mister was one of the fairly successful shows we did.<sup>25</sup>

Mr. Jacoby started in the scenic design business sixty years ago in 1914. He was paid \$5 for fifty-five hours of work. At that time, Primrose and Dockstatter and the minstrels were going out and the Grand Opera was the biggest house. He recalls that the scene building business began to peak in the 1920s, before the movies were so popular.

Our busiest season was in the twenties, with George White Scandals in big competition with the Ziegfeld Follies and about 250 Broadway shows a season. . . . Today, there are maybe fifty or sixty shows a season. . . . Back then, The New York Times carried a full page of ads for shows . . . today, it's down to one corner of a page . . . sometimes only thirty shows are listed.<sup>26</sup>

Mr. Jacoby, seventy-five years old, was at work when the scenic design studios were separate from the scene building houses.

Within the scenic design shops, everything was designed in the studio. The designer and modelman worked in the same room, though the shop was separate from the prop room. . . . There were many scenic studios in New York City in the thirties, all on the West Side . . . the Vail Shop was in the Grand Opera House, the big theatre on 23rd Street and Eight Avenue. . . .

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<sup>25</sup>Fred Jacoby, private interview, Appendix A-2, p. 179.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid.

They had the whole works in the back . . . all the paint frames were there. . . . Today, of course, we paint on the floor. . . . We also did Shubert's work. He had electric paint frames. . . . The Lyccum Theatre was another one which had paint frames and a studio to paint in the back of their theatre.<sup>27</sup>

In the thirties the scenic design studios began to dissolve because the scene building shops had started incorporating the painting functions within their own operations. The Yiddish Theatre downtown was the last to give up maintaining its own in-theatre workshop.

Arnold Abramson began to work for Nolan in the early 1930s as a scenic artist. In reviewing the business since then, he feels there is no historic progression, that it is a seasonal business, fluctuating between too much work and too little, although he believes Nolan's volume is sufficiently even. The chief detriment, of course, is the current inflation/recession.

Broadway is always the first to suffer. You figure that someone coming from out of the City to see a show is going to think twice about spending the kind of money it costs these days.<sup>28</sup>

### Feller Scenery Studios

Because it is currently spoken of as the largest scenic house in the United States, small wonder it was the most impressive site visited. Feller Scenery Studios, Inc. is located at 381 Canal Place in the warehouse district of the Bronx, New York. It is minutes from Manhattan via either the Madison Avenue or Third

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 180.

<sup>28</sup> Arnold Abramson, private interview, see Appendix A-2, p. 167.

Avenue Bridges which cross the Harlem River. Feller's facility adjoins a small fenced parking lot. The site of the working shops exceeds 80,000 square feet. Above and to one side of a large working area, resembling an arena more than a work shop, is a second floor office space which includes the drafting area and overlooks the vast facilities. The interview was held in Peter Feller's private office. During the same day, John Schwanke, General Manager, was also interviewed.

The owner, Peter Feller, began his career in 1935 at the age of sixteen as a mechanic and carpenter apprentice in the Vale Scenery Studio. His interest in scene building was stimulated by his father, who had been in the business in Vienna before emigrating to the United States. Young Feller's career started early as a result of the financial pressures of the Depression.

Mr. Feller gained extensive theatrical building experience in the army during World War II, when he travelled the world for five years as head technician for army productions, doing numerous and varied types of sets.

There followed then, five years of additional training and experience in New York City, where he was head carpenter for a number of producers, such as Leland Hayward, George Abbott, Feuer and Martin, Lindsay and Kraus.

In 1947 Mr. Feller opened the National Scenery Studio. He closed his shop three years later "due to personal reasons." Mr. Feller then returned to carpentry, working at night in theatres. Simultaneously, he arranged with David Steinberg, owner of the now

defunct Imperial Scenery Studio in Ft. Lee, New Jersey, to make drawings for his firm at home. Mr. Feller's retrospective on this venture is, "if you don't monitor your work, they'll change it."

Thus, he then became manager of Imperial Scenic Studio, a position he held for nine years, receiving a salary and a percentage of profits. In 1957, he left Imperial to start a concern of his own.

The small shop was located on Fifty-Third Street between Tenth and Eleventh Avenues, where he employed four carpenters and two artists. Today, reviewing his current problems as owner of the presently most successful firm in the industry, Mr. Feller says, "I wish I was still there."

With the expansion of his business, Feller looked for larger quarters, finding a location near Yankee Stadium owned by the City of New York, which provided 166,000 square feet of space. Feller began to win important contracts for projects for the World's Fair, including the Bell Telephone System ride, the Vatican Pavillion, the Protestant Pavillion, the Light and Power Show, the Walt Disney and the Pepsi Cola rides. These shows and installations, along with others, led to financial solvency.

With his reputation established, and with improved facilities Mr. Feller now assumed as many as seven or eight shows at a time. In 1970, the City having had recorded Feller's site as an empty warehouse, leased the property to an elevator parts company.

The City offered Mr. Feller other available sites, but 526,000 square feet near Pier 57 was the only plausible consideration.

As this location was too expensive for Feller to finance alone, he enlisted the interests of Nolan's and other scenic houses to negotiate its purchase together. Mayor Lindsay was interested in this prospect and encouraged efforts to help Feller. But complications with the Longshoremen halted the procedures permanently. Two months remained to find another location (his current site at 381 Canal Place in the Bronx). Having spent considerable money and time, in addition to being caught in the early 1970s recession, the situation according to Feller, "has put us behind the eight ball ever since."<sup>29</sup>

John Schwanke, General Manager of Feller Scenery Studios, Inc., informed the writer that Feller must do 1 1/2 million dollar's worth of business per year just to keep the doors open. But most of the time they operate "in the red because there are so many things that can't be pinned down."<sup>30</sup>

#### Hart Scenic Studios

Hart Scenic Studios has less than 20,000 square feet. It is located at 25-41 Dempsey Avenue, Edgewater, New Jersey, ten minutes south of the George Washington Bridge. The working area is sectioned into carpentry (also electrical and metal work shop) and built work, and set-ups and scenic drops. The second floor

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<sup>29</sup>Peter Feller, private interview, see Appendix A-3, p. 199.

<sup>30</sup>John Schwanke, private interview, see Appendix A-3, p. 224.

has offices in the front which overlook the building area. Mr. Hart's office is also his drafting room. The interview was conducted here with Mr. Hart and was concluded in one day.

The head of the Hart Scenic Studios, William Hart, considers himself third in the industry, following Feller and Nolan. This opinion is based on two factors: Hart's volume of business and his ability (along with that of Feller and Nolan only) to produce mechanical shows (specifically musicals).

Hart's brother-in-law was Albie MacDonald, who took Hart out of school at age seventeen to work in the MacDonald Studio. Although he attended Pratt Institute to study art and design at night, he apprenticed under MacDonald in the daytime. During his years at MacDonald's Hart advanced to foreman and eventually became MacDonald's partner. Hart says, "I learned how to draw from Albie, and I copied his style."

After leaving MacDonald's, Hart went on to work for Francis Messmore (of Messmore and Damon) in 1962, as a scenic artist, and after half a dozen years in that position, he established his own business. In 1968, he opened the Hart Scenic Studio in Edgewater, New Jersey, with his wife as partner.

Testimony to his educational and professional experience and the reputation he gained in the employ of MacDonald and Messmore is the fact that Hart managed to do \$350,000 of business in his first year of operation.

I take over what they [Feller and Nolan] can't handle.  
 . . . MacDonald was the biggest for years . . . then TV came

in . . . Albie stepped out and Nolan stepped in. But I'm third now, in terms of my volume of business.<sup>31</sup>

From this statement the writer infers that Feller and Nolan could become the only scenic studios if the Broadway theatrical industry were to shrink further. This is also possible insofar as should producers ultimately decide to use less scenery there will be insufficient work to be divided among the smaller studios.

#### Variety Scenic Studios

Variety Scenic Studios has its working offices at 25-19 Borden Avenue, Long Island City, Queens, New York. The main office comprises a reception area, Herb Lager's office and drafting room and a display room that exhibits Variety's innovative "soft scenery" (see photograph on page 57). "Soft scenery" is a design which is sewn into material on a machine and then stretched over wooden frames. Behind the office area is a large two-story shop (a portion of one floor is removed) for tall scenery set-ups. There is also a drapery room and a painting area. The first floor is the building area. While this physical description suggests Variety has an extensive establishment, in actuality, this studio can handle less than half of Feller's volume.

Herb Lager is one of the four equal owners of Variety Scenic Studios. He is general manager and a scenic artist as well. Mr. Lager had originally worked at such jobs as truck driver, waiter, and stevedore while attending college for a degree in

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<sup>31</sup>William Hart, private interview, see Appendix A-4, p. 229.



Plate I.--Variety Scenic Studios. Top: Herb Lager with his  
Volumaform Scenery. Nolan Scenic Studios. Bottom:  
Exterior View.



sociology, with engineering as a minor. His first full-time job was as a trucking supervisor for NBC. In that capacity, he gained his first experience in handling scenes.

In 1951, the height of the television boom in New York City, NBC bought the Warner Brothers Studio in Brooklyn and offered Lager the position of assistant scenery supervisor.

I know nothing about scenery, except how to truck it . . . and my supervisor didn't know anything either. . . . No one knew he'd been fired from CBS . . . , that's how busy and tired everybody was in TV. . . . All the estimating for the NBC shows was done in Brooklyn, and my supervisor just wasn't qualified to do it.

I was able to struggle better than he was. I was unsure of myself, very afraid, and I felt guilty about doing it. But then, there weren't too many people qualified to do it anyway. . . . Actually, I was officially head of the prop department. Brooklyn had twice the space of anything in New York, and we were doing sets from \$50,000 to \$70,000.<sup>32</sup>

Mr. Lager feels that learning to overestimate was a major contribution to his business acumen; moreover, he suggests that his childhood interest in model airplanes gave him a sufficient understanding of designer plans, and where he was technically untrained he nevertheless was able to "create innovative ideas."

Because of this success, Mr. Lager sought to establish his own business.

I found some other men. We had an idea, a lot of experience and good reputations. So we put up \$6,000 (\$1,000 a piece) and got started.<sup>33</sup>

The initial contract of the new company was with Bell Telephone.

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<sup>32</sup>Herb Lager, private interview, see Appendix A-5, p. 278.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., p. 279.

We costed their shows for a three-year period and came up with a \$9,000 average. Then we went to Bell and found they were doing sixteen shows the upcoming season . . . figured we were well covered on \$10,000 per show and offered them a \$160,000 blanket contract for the season. What we didn't count on was that they switched their designer . . . and he was heartless, unbelievable. So we lost \$42,000 on the contract, but it gave us our start.<sup>34</sup>

Mr. Lager's first shop had only 7,000 square feet. Lager, nevertheless, points out that although the Bell contract loss nearly bankrupted him he had acquired contacts and friends sufficient enough to allow his company, in one month, to move to a site with 32,000 square feet. Shortly he and his partners were doing well over \$1 million in business a year.

Actually, what we were doing was building toward our disaster. We were competing against the networks, especially NBC, and networks do have personalities and NBC hated me. Every show we did for them was a fight. . . . They made life as difficult as possible for us. We did Broadway shows for less than cost in order to get the business, and we were also competing against an independent house for the independent TV work. All our bidding was at very low cost . . . and the original \$6,000 startup money wasn't enough, really, so with all this added together, we finally went bankrupt.<sup>35</sup>

Lager discounts the "bankruptcy outcome," with the reasoning that it was merely technical because IRS took over the company's \$4,000 bank account. Mr. Lager dissolved the company and moved to a new one.

The new Lager company is the current Variety Scenic Studios, which Mr. Lager and three other partners started in 1970 in Long Island City. Lager is general manager. His three partners are

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<sup>34</sup>Ibid., p. 280.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., p. 281.

supervisors of construction, draperies, and scenic artistry, respectively.

Mr. Lager agrees that Feller is first in the industry and Nolan second, in terms of size, years in the business, and general experience. Contrary to Mr. Hart's self-designated third place rank, Mr. Lager feels that, "after [Feller and Nolan] it's hard to say. I think we're number three and sometimes first, for example, in draperies."

Whatever Variety's position in the industry, Lager is a man who "loves the theatre, nothing can match the business we're in." This attitude is reflected in the fact that he teaches at Pratt Institute: "I love teaching--there's always a relevancy of stagecraft for anyone in the theatre--and also, I'm good at teaching."

As discussed earlier in the introduction to this study, there were some subjects reticent to expose aspects of their businesses, and how they developed. This failure was true, even to the degree that some merely limned their histories. Francis Messmore was one of these; hence, the brevity of background material here.

#### Messmore and Damon Scenic Studios

Messmore and Damon Scenic Studios is located at 530 West Twenty-Eighth Street, New York City in the Manhattan warehouse district close to the Hudson River. The facilities were reminiscent of a trolley car terminal, with high ceilings and windowed walls. At the time of the interview there was little activity. Only a few

employees were at work on what appeared to be an outsized model of a cup or bowl. The interview with Mr. Messmore was brief.

After serving in the army, owner Francis Messmore of Messmore and Damon Scenic Studios at 530 West 28th Street, New York, New York, assumed the business his father had started in 1914. The time of Messmore's takeover was 1946.

Messmore's father had worked on the Panama Pacific Exhibition in 1915, after which time he went to California for extended "theatre experience," but he subsequently returned to New York and engaged in Broadway scenic work. Francis Messmore indicates, however, that the major portion of his father's work was devoted to "outdoor work," specifically parades, building floats and other similar work. Messmore Sr., was also involved in department store displays, particularly in creating Christmas extravaganzas. Apparently, the effect of "talking pictures" on the eminence of Broadway caused Messmore Sr. to seek work outside of legitimate theatre.

Before Francis Messmore became the head of his father's operation, he had worked as a stage hand. He worked for Albie MacDonald after MacDonald closed his shop and continued to do special projects, such as the World's Fair.

Mr. Messmore ranks Feller and Nolan first and second, suspects that Variety does as much work as Hart, yet concludes that the "numerical designation doesn't mean anything."

Atlas Scenic Studio, Lt'd.

Atlas Scenic Studio, Ltd. is less than an hour's drive from New York City, located at 10 Wall Street, Norwalk, Connecticut. The

facilities here are small in comparison with the formerly described studios (less than 10,000 square feet). There are two small offices on the ground floor. One is a combination reception/secretarial area; the other is Leo Meyers' office and drafting room. At the time of the interview, the studio was just completing work on the set of Don't Call Back. The interview with Mr. Meyers was concluded that day.

Leo Meyers, co-owner of Atlas Scenic Studio, Ltd., (the only other firm with the ownership combination of Nolan) shares his site at 10 Wall Street in Norwalk, Connecticut, with his partner who represents the carpentry aspect of the business.

Meyers started his career as "a kid in summer stock, painting and designing scenery." Prior to his entry into live theatre, he had studied in the theatre department at Carnegie Tech. He pursued his profession after his apprenticeship in summer stock, as a designer for regional theatres around this country and on Broadway and in Canada. It was during this course of experience with regional theatres, that he gradually became attracted to the idea of becoming a scenic contractor. At that time, he met his present partner, with whom he worked in theatre in Palm Beach.

The working relationship between the two men was successful, not only as a combination but in dealing "successfully with other people." The outcome of their association was the decision to create a partnership. After agreeing to the establishment of a contract service for scenery building, the next step, as Mr. Meyers

recounts it, was to seek out the area in which to settle, and to consider the scale of business in which they wished to engage.

Mr. Meyers and partner began their operation originally in a site other than Norwalk, but nearby. At the outset, they had no contract with any theatrical outfit. Yet they both felt, "we knew enough people in the industry . . . that we could get work. We weren't unknown to many designers, managers, and the like . . . we had worked with many of them."

Atlas Scenic Studio, Ltd., began in 1964 and moved to its present site in 1967. Mr. Meyers reports that both partners were financially involved in starting and extending the business. He declines to discuss whether or not there are, or have been, any other partners, saying he would "rather not go into all of that."

This chapter has provided a history of each of the scenic studios interviewed. Each interviewee recalled both biographical information relevant to his becoming involved in the industry and information both factual and anecdotal related to the development of each scene building house.

The following chapter further analyzes the data gathered from the interviews and presents a description of the contractual process.



### CHAPTER III

#### BIDDING, CONTRACTS, AND UNIONS IN THE SCENE BUILDING HOUSES

It has been observed that "waste, inefficiency and undue extravagance often run up costs without improving the production from the artistic standpoint, while lessening its chances of financial success."<sup>1</sup> This assessment, while expressed during the heyday of grand theatre, has almost surely not lost its relevance today. It appears that "personalities and pressure" combine to force this situation almost every time a producer contracts a scenic designer to draw plans, and a scene building house bids and receives the play assignment.

The problems are not simply just those of getting a play at the last minute and then having to deal with production at the scenic house while dealing with the frustration of a scenic designer. The intervention of union conflicts, materials' prices, poor communication between producer and scenic designer, failure of understanding between scenic designer and scene builder, and lack of information as to which theatre the play is assigned are only a few of the complexities.

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<sup>1</sup>Alfred L. Bernheim and Sara Harding, The Business of the Theatre (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1932), p. 138.

Bidding Sessions

Bidding sessions constitute the initial constraint. Peter Feller calls the business of bidding "the biggest crap shoot in the world." It is evident in the last few years that theatre money has become more and more difficult to raise for production. Because the funds are not in hand early enough, bidding sessions are arranged later and later, and production time is cut shorter and shorter (Securities and Exchange Commission regulations require that a producer cannot advance any money toward production until the entire sum is raised).<sup>2</sup> For reasons of time, certain shops (notably Feller's and Nolan's) know in advance that because of the extraordinary time factor they will get the job--not on the merits, necessarily, of a specific expertise, but due to the fact that only certain shops have the capacity to handle rush jobs.

Implicit among all houses is the understanding that most designers and producers prefer certain scenic studios over others, and that certain shows are automatically the property of these houses. Specifically, Jo Mielziner is known to work almost exclusively with Feller's (as is Boris Aronson). Nolan's claims Oliver Smith as an adherent. William Hart works consistently with Phillip Rose. Hart points out, "Every shop has its following. It's eighty percent personality in this business." An observation repeated among all houses in regard to assignment of sets is that if they are extravagant or complicated, "Feller's or Nolan's will get it."

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<sup>2</sup>Peter Feller, private interview, see Appendix A-3, p. 204.

Because such shops' specializations are known in this closely-knit, small trade, it follows that the practice of "upping the bid" may occur when one house knows that another house has a show "in the works" (or is about to be loaded out) at the time of bidding for a new show. For example, if shop "A" goes into a bidding session for show "Y" and is currently working on show "X" which must be delivered on the first of the month, shop "B" goes into the session knowing this because his bid on show "X" was unsuccessful. Shop "A" normally will have to submit a higher bid if show "Y" has a delivery date shortly after show "X," realizing his current responsibility. Shop "B" will, therefore, increase his bid, trying to still maintain the low bid, to establish a more comfortable profit margin. For this reason, as Peter Feller points out, "All bids are dangerous." Bids, of course, are not open, and one competitor has no way of knowing what his rival may submit in the way of prices.

Producers (and/or theatrical general managers) and scenic designers commonly demand itemized bids. An itemized bid, without question, requires more time to prepare. It also creates complications as to which scenes of effects must, if necessary, be eliminated. Peter Feller claims, "That on multi-set shows, because the budgets don't fit the show, the producer may have to cut scenes. If I were to give a lump sum bid I could eliminate anything." Single sum bidding is the normal procedure for one-set shows.

Each scenic house itemizes differently according to its house speciality or expertise, or to its own method of breaking

out costs. Thus, when the many bids are finally in, it is not rare for the general manager representing the producer to try to parcel out scene assignments according to the best price bid by the studios. In most cases, owners and managers of scenic studios refuse to work this way. They may, however, submit a reduced total figure bid. Or the scenic designer simply is forced to cut costly scenes--sometimes up to as much as one-third or one-half.

### The Process of Bidding

The steps involved in organizing a bidding session are relatively simple. Whatever scenic houses have been chosen to enter a bid are called by the producer's general manager, or by the scenic designer, and invited to appear at a designated place and time. Usually the meetings are held in the scenic designer's studio, the producer's home or office, or at the rehearsal hall.<sup>3</sup>

The smaller the show (and the requirements of the scene building) the more likely the smaller studios are to be called in. Charles Bender's view of this is, "If they call all the competition, then the callers aren't experienced in the business."<sup>4</sup> Herb Lager recollects his first entree into Broadway theatre: "The producer would only consider us if our price were lower. We lost money on our first two shows."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>MacDonald, op. cit., p. 120 (see infra, Feller, p. 205; Schwanke, p. 221; Messmore, p. 299).

<sup>4</sup>Bender, op. cit., p. 142.

<sup>5</sup>Lager, op. cit., p. 256.

At the bidding session the scenic designer presents the concept of the scenery and goes over the drawings he has made. Questions concerning the types of materials, and construction the designer has in mind are then posed by the bidding studios. Feller's general manager finds that this question period is subsequently dangerous, for many inquiries important to the drawing up of an intelligent bid are omitted. "In trying to control for extras," he says, "you have to be careful about getting it in the bid price originally."

A respectable amount of time in which to work out the figures on a bid for a show would be from three to four days. In this time the studio would be able to figure proper lengths of lumber, amounts of custom work to be undertaken, and quantities of paints and materials necessary to complete the sets without assuming profit loss. Herb Lager remarks, "You hope they give you enough time to give a fair estimate." But, in practice, pressures seem to be such that many studios are forced to phone in estimates to the producer in as little as one and a half days.

Once a scenic house's bid is accepted, a contract is drawn up. The producer then issues a check to the scene studio in the amount of one-third of the agreed upon total production figure. While Arnold S. Gillette believes, "The work of the technician cannot really begin until all the designer's plans are in his hands: sketches; ground plans; elevations; and detail drawings,"<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Arnold S. Gillette, Stage Scenery: Its Construction and Rigging (2nd ed.; New York: Harper & Row, 1972), p. 13.

this writer finds a keener insight into the role of the master scene carpenter, for example, is in Harold Burris-Meyer's position that with "a few pencil sketches and a few dimensions calculated on scraps of paper, he can proceed to construct the set."<sup>7</sup> In fact, in many cases, the actual inception of the real, finished plans occurs only when the scenic designer and the scenic studio agree upon the final drafts they have mutually worked out. If the detail work is within the original budget, the studio's purchasing agent orders the appropriate materials, and construction begins.

#### The Relationship Between Studio and Scenic Designer

It might be reasonable to assume the existence of conflict between two creative forces such as the scenic designer and the scenic studio. This problem appears, however, to have a broader base than merely opposition of talent and will. Many scenic studios cite problems such as a designer's misconceptions about the economics of actual construction, inability to understand what mechanics are involved in various aspects of building, outright attempts "to slip in extras" as John Schwanke, Peter Feller's General Manager, observes. Not the least time-and-money consuming aspect of the problem is simply that of pure whim.

Peter Feller recalls, to this point, a situation involving the production of The Ritz. The producer had requested an elaborate

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<sup>7</sup>Harold Burris-Meyer and Edward C. Coles, Scenery for the Theatre (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1966), p. 79.

one-set. Upon completion of the set, the producer insisted upon having it redone in its entirety. The re-working was completed in one day, but it consumed the efforts and union pay of ten men. The changes included new colors, additional carpets, a change in facings (because the producer objected to certain reflections from the lighting). Last minute alterations in this case amounted to \$12,000. This "eleventh hour" theatrical recreation speaks well to the "waste and undue extravagance" mentioned earlier.

Many studios feel that scenic designers do not oversee the scenery production as thoroughly as they might. Not a few suggest that younger, busier scenic designers are considerably delinquent in this area. Other scenic designers are considered to devote the appropriate amount of attention to ensure a mutually successful outcome. Apparently an optimal relationship is one in which there is direction and contact, but no interference, and no last minute changes.

John Schwanke emphasizes the abilities of all scenic houses' creative workers who are successfully able to undertake the confusing and complex proposition of translating the concept in the "scenic designer's mind, even though it's been transferred to paper, and then build a set." In specific, Mr. Feller says of his men and their work that they are uniquely and consistently able to "substitute imagination for money."

#### Problem of Payment

While "running up costs without improving the production from the artistic standpoint" is an essential contention of the

criticism cited, there is a more major problem of concern to the scenic studios. It is centered in the producer custom of "one-third" payments to the studios. The second "third" is paid out to these studios midway through the completion of the sets.

But the last payment has been, in too many instances, too long in coming, or simply, not forthcoming at all. Peter Feller says, "Getting paid is the most nagging problem of all," for producers, "May order extras without the money to pay you." Or as Feller's General Manager describes the situation, "We have to do everything in good faith . . . a show runs over because of what a producer or director wants and then they don't use the stuff, and they say they don't want to pay."

William Hart describes this consistent failure to pay as contributing to the formation of The Theatrical Contractors Association (see Appendix B for list of members). This group created their charter for basic economic protection. Prior to its inception, according to Hart, a studio commonly might never be paid its last third portion because no monies were forthcoming if a play was not a hit. In such cases, the producers and their affiliates had simply dissolved the corporation they had formed to finance the play in the first place. As a counteraction, the scenic studios have had to resort to using this owed payment "as a holdover--to force them [producers] to give you their new show."

Through this alliance, nine member houses are now able to wield some form of financial power against theatre producers, directors, and scenic designers. The members have conjoined to



decline a bidding session when they are aware a producer has failed to complete his payments on a former show. This action is taken on the premise that it will force producers to make good their debts.

Some houses take private measures to deal with the failure-to-pay problem. Peter Feller employs a full-time lawyer to sue producers for fees. Charles Bender feels he has little recourse in this situation. He uses a lawyer only if he senses he has a chance to reclaim some of these lost monies. His experience has been that the probabilities of recovering the failed payments are fifty-fifty. At the outside, after five years (if a show had not been a hit, but has sold music rights), then he may regain some portion but "it comes in dribs and drabs." Nevertheless, Charles Bender, for one, will deliver a show without final payment, simply, as he characterizes it, "because the sets are taking up space." The point Mr. Bender makes is that all seasoned scenic building companies are accustomed to the standard theatre apologies. "We know all the stories but we let the show go out."

History shows that Albie MacDonald foresaw this area of risk early: "The manager had no idea of what was going into the show." And the business of unfair or biased awarding of assignments embittered Albie deeply, most particularly the "kickback" procedures.

Francis Messmore, no longer so intimately involved in legitimate theatre, has a softer view of producer and affiliates. "I don't think the producer knowing about scene operation would change anything--he's busy getting money and may have the rug pulled out on him in the last minute."

In contrast to those who feel this pinch acutely where "third payment" is an issue, is the attitude of Leo Meyers. Invited to build the scenery for Don't Call Back, he had no notion as to whether there had been previous formal bidding sessions. According to him the show was brought together in a rush, and, although he has been at sessions where other companies competed, he has also participated alone on other occasions, solely with the producer and scenic designer. His view is that shows are "handled differently with different managers." A point for consideration is his approach to the business of billing: he is alert to the speed with which a show can fail and a producer can go bankrupt. For this reason, he expedites contract payments quickly and efficiently so that "everything is in order."

Otherwise you can be in tremendous trouble. . . . Extending credit is a shaky situation. It's a precarious business at best, even when all is going well. So it is very important to stay on top of that aspect. The important thing, of course, is to have clearcut agreements right from the beginning.<sup>8</sup>

It is clear that Mr. Meyers manages his operation scrupulously. His production outlay normally involves only two shows a month, a musical, and then a one-set. In such a fashion, he overcomes some of the counterproductive experiences encountered by the more "rushed" organizations which cater to the "rushed" nature of New York City theatre.

Mr. Meyers, when changes arise during construction of sets, attempts to develop the invoice before the show is shipped, so when

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<sup>8</sup>Leo Meyers, private interview, see Appendix A-6, p. 293.

the show is shipped, everything has been taken care of. Specifically, "changes are noted, changes agreed on with the manager. . . . If we see we have a need for a change, we notify the manager immediately and an agreement is reached."

### Unions

Two major unions in New York City are involved in the business of scene building: United Scenic Artists, Local 829 of the Brotherhood of Painters and Allied Trades; and the International Alliance of Theatrical and Stage Employees (IATSE), Locals One and Four, primarily.

Local 829 includes the scenic artists and painters, as well as scenic designers, costume designers and lighting designers, IATSE includes carpenters, mechanics, electricians, stage hands.

These union members comprise the work force of the scene building industry and are, therefore, a crucial factor in management considerations concerning all operations within their studios. Management must adhere closely, for the most part, to union regulations. They must also provide attractive working conditions--to say nothing of the nature of the work itself--to avoid losing some union members to competitors.

As explained and emphasized earlier in this study, the economics of the scene building business is precarious at best. This ever present reality obviously affects union members directly--not in terms of the money they earn, for that is scaled by their unions--but in terms of the fluctuating nature of their working

schedules. As Peter Feller says: "In considering the steadily increasing prices of Broadway shows one can't cut union wages, only the need for their services."

All the scene building owners interviewed commented on the need to cut back to skeletal staffs in slack seasons, in periods when their particular business is depressed or in times of general economic recession. Thus, except for the most valuable employees, most union members must expect to be unemployed for certain periods of time during the year. Some men can avoid this problem by moving to a more active shop, when their current employer has to reduce his staff. Others must simply accept the seasonal nature of their chosen careers. Since union wages, particularly for Local 829, are relatively high and since union members can generally find work outside of scenic building houses, their situation is, in the long run, not so untenable.

#### Scenic Studio Owners' Relationships With Their Employees

Many scenic artists (Local 829) and mechanics and carpenters (IATSE) are devoted to their work.

Most of my staff, oddly enough, are dedicated to their craft. Otherwise, they couldn't turn out the work they do. I'm proud of the product my men produce. Some craftsmen, like any other talented craftsmen, have many aptitudes, they can do more than one thing well. They may not want to, but, usually, they will.<sup>9</sup>

Mr. Messmore, quoted above, is not so felicitous in his regard for the younger men now entering the business. He views

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<sup>9</sup> Francis Messmore, private interview, see Appendix A-7, p. 299.

the younger generation as being attracted only to higher pay and shorter working hours. Implicit is his sentiment that younger people do not have the same esthetic interest in, and capacity for, the creative work as do the older men.

Charles Bender culls his men either from "these young men who go to Yale and Carnegie Tech and then pass the union exam" or from apprentices. He no longer trains men in his studio. The unions, of course, still train apprentices and they constitute a source of talent. Mr. Bender indicates, however, that this practice may in fact have a delimiting effect on access to potential ability, for unions are literally closed to new members unless all of their shop men have full employment. At Nolan's studio not everyone is a union member, but if one is not, the worker has a permit.

Mr. Bender expresses, too, dissatisfaction with some workers. He sees older painters, for instance, as being more productive than younger ones.

Herb Lager's attitude toward his long-time employees concurs with that of Francis Messmore. His people, to him, are devoted to the industry. IATSE members obviously can command higher wages in the housing industry, but Mr. Lager perceives his workers as being involved with shop work even to the exclusion of actual in-theatre work, although several work at both.<sup>10</sup>

Peter Feller's General Manager describes the employee situation in their shop as "one big family here. I'd say twenty

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<sup>10</sup>Lager, op. cit., p. 250.

percent of our men work because they like it; the rest do it for money. We have the best artistic talent in the world."

William Hart's chief concern about his people is their disregard for cost. "They don't steal; they're just careless and sloppy, so hardware--tools and screws and stuff--is a big waste. Our bigger problem, though, is getting the men to work more slowly so they'll reduce errors." Hart seems to make no distinction here between the old-time employees and the young men coming into the business.

#### Scenic Studios' Views of Unions as a Whole

All the owners of the six major scene building houses are members either of Local 829 or IATSE. As a result, while they have certain problems with the unions, they are also loyal and sometimes sympathetic to them.

In spite of this fact, however, Local 829 seems to create financial and psychological discomfort for all the studio owners, Local 829 pays its members considerably more than does IATSE. (Tables 1 and 2 show wage scales for Local 829 and for IATSE. Appendix D is a copy of a current agreement between Local 829 and the League of New York Theatres and Producers.)

Mr. Hart believes that scenic artists make too much money. It is true that they have a cost of living clause in their contract and, their salaries are increased every six months. The Brotherhood (Local 829) gets \$11.96 an hour plus double overtime and IATSE gets \$7.46 an hour and one and a half overtime. Mr. Hart feels that

these men do not "cooperate" in his lean times. He suggests a certain rigidity of regulations, such that if a worker other than a union man were to paint a set, the union would walk out, and that the theatre would not accept the work either. In short "the union doesn't give an inch." In contrast, he finds the carpenters (IATSE) are amenable.

Herb Lager views the scenic artists as extraordinarily influential.

The scenic artists have no power with the networks, but they have great power with us. We're weak compared to the networks, and we have to pay these people more than the networks do. As a result, the scenic artists make more money than they could anywhere else.<sup>11</sup>

Mr. Lager feels, as does Mr. Hart, that the carpenters work industriously. The problem of union rules plagues Mr. Lager as they regard the Local 829 members. He points out that, with building, some non-union or other union members could do the work well enough but that such is not the case with scenery painting. Local 829 will not tolerate any interchange of functions.

Charles Bender claims that a scenic artist makes approximately \$23,000 a year on an average, and that their group is less lenient than the mechanics. According to Peter Feller, some artists make thirty-five to forty thousand dollars a year, and carpenters normally make nine or ten thousand dollars a year less than scene painters (see Tables 1 and 2). Mechanics (carpenter's trade name) working in television are equivalent in pay to those

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<sup>11</sup>Lager, op. cit., pp. 257-58.

TABLE 1.--Wage Scales for United Scenic Artists Local 829 of the  
Brotherhood of Painters and Allied Trades.\*

	Old Rates (estimated)			New Rates (Sept. 6, 1974)		
	Weekly	Daily	Hourly	Weekly	Daily	Hourly
Scenic Designer	\$642.78	---	---	---	---	---
Chargeman (Scenic Artist)	\$566.35	\$113.27	\$16.18	---	---	\$18.35
Journeyman (Scenic Artist)	\$418.80	\$ 83.76	\$11.96	\$441.05	\$88.20	\$13.57
Shopman	\$190.32	---	---	\$200.42	---	---

\* All work a 6½ hour day, five days a week. These rates include six percent vacation pay and 8.64 percent cost of living increase every six months.



TABLE 2.--Wage Scales for Carpenters Union, Local 1 and 4 (IATSE).

Minimum Rates (1975 Figures)	
Carpenter (35 hour week)	\$7.46/hour plus 4 percent for vacation pay plus 4 percent retirement and welfare benefits
Foreman (35 hour week)	\$9.46/hour plus 4 percent for vacation pay plus 4 percent retirement and welfare benefits
Apprentice (35 hour week)	1st year - \$12.00/day 2nd year - \$16.00/day

working on Broadway. Only with the artists is the pay differential so remarkable. Artists have fixed hours for the day, cost of living increases, and a review every six months. Therefore, television is more attractive to the painters because the work is steady, and, quite commonly, it is twenty to thirty percent cheaper to paint a television show than to paint a Broadway show.

Peter Feller's union employees have discrete functions except for one overlap (in sculpturing).

Concerning relations between the two unions, one studio owner observes that these two unions on many occasions choose not to assist each other unless severely pressed for time, and usually only with the implication that their mutual help will not be reported to their respective unions.

Peter Feller sees painting as the single most expensive aspect of the business. He reiterates that their union contracts are the most expensive. A scenic painter makes \$10 to \$16 an hour--and certainly more yearly than a mechanic.

Leo Meyers faults Local 829 for requiring two artists (a Chargman and a Journeyman) on the premises at all times during working procedures. Mr. Meyers, nevertheless, reflects the general consensus of scene building owners in acknowledging that everyone must be a union member to work in a studio. Without exception, studio owners are union members, and quite fundamentally they "feel duty-bound" to uphold and oblige the union restrictives.

A singular union problem worthy of mention is the conflict of interest engendered by those shows that come here from abroad.

The original sets are shipped here. The unions resent this practice because, obviously, it deprives them of work. This resentment is exacerbated by the fact that such an arrangement is not reciprocal. Shows shipped abroad must have new sets made wherever they play. There have been efforts to rectify this inequity, but currently the situation is in stasis.<sup>12</sup>

Herb Lager describes the inequity as basically unfair. He feels foreign sets should come in, but that American plays should go out of our country, too, as originally conceived and built. If a set is of quality, and its intrinsic esthetics are key to the magic of the play's sense and mood, it is deleterious to tamper with any aspect of its special totality.

Mr. Messmore, who rebuilt sets for Sherlock Holmes, recalls that the reconstruction was undertaken for the physical reasons that the British sets did not meet New York City's fire regulations. Evidently this reason was the only justification for rebuilding.

The nine-member Theatrical Contractors Association mentioned earlier in this chapter figures importantly, if indirectly, in union business. In concert, the nine houses represent a formidable pressure when unions attempt to negotiate for increases. Charles Bender indicates that unions request a new and escalated contract every three years. Mr. Bender's position is that with their (the scenic builders) new alliance (established in August, 1973) the

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 268.

unions must now contend with the reality of a "very selective employer."<sup>13</sup>

This chapter has discussed the contractual system inherent today in the life of the contracting studios--and subsequently inherent to the commercial theatre of Broadway. The process of contracting has been shown to link, by definition, the producing organization and the unionized artisans of the scenic studios. Aspects of this system, the relationship between the scenic designer and the scenic studio, the relationship between the producing organization and the scenic studio, and the relationship between the studio employee and the scenic studio owner, have been explored.

Chapter IV more closely analyzes the operations relevant to the process of building scenery.

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<sup>13</sup>The "selective employer" is the nine-member Theatrical Contractors Association, see Appendix B, p. 307.

## CHAPTER IV

### SCENIC STUDIO OPERATIONS

The heart of the business of scene building is, simply, building scenes. Building procedures followed by each scenic house are similar, but all owners or managers interviewed spoke of the uniqueness or atypicality of almost each new building assignment. Particular abilities of each studio, space allowances of their facilities, number of employees are determinants, too, of the nature of their building assignments. The essential characteristic of every scenic studio's procedures is the tenuous economic situation: whether it be today's soaring prices for materials, overhead, union payroll, abbreviated time for production and load out, miscalculations engendered through the rush of last-minute bids, or the earlier mentioned producers' failure to pay the last third (and, in many cases for extra effects requested after the contract has been drawn).

#### Sequence of Construction

The building process is preceded by the scenic studio's analysis of the actual building production. Briefly, this review includes the number of sets required, the degree of complexity involved in the actual building, a fundamental scheme for shifting scenery, and a decision as to which scene should be built first.

The sequence of construction follows from the plan of first scene to be built. Some owners choose the most difficult scene. Normally the next part of the process would be construction of units that will be shifted by flying. Following this, is construction of settings scheduled for involved and time-consuming painting. Of course the more easily, rapidly built scenery is reserved for the last. Proper execution of all steps includes adequate time for trial setups of the scenery and subsequent adjustments in the rigging and stage hardware.

### Carpentry

Scene construction is chiefly a specialized type of joinery. The character and applications of scenery require a combination of artistic talent and thoroughgoing mechanical aptitude that "make scene construction a craft by itself with which the ordinary carpenter or cabinet maker is unfamiliar."<sup>1</sup>

The carpentry effects must be demountable and portable, yet, at the same time, show no evidence of joining. And not least of all, there cannot be re-fitting or re-cutting when the scenery reaches the stage.

### Scenic Artist

As discussed in Chapter IV, the scenic artist in the scenic studio commands a fee considerably greater than mechanics and carpenters. This differential can be attributed to the imposition of their

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<sup>1</sup>Burris-Meyer and Cole, op. cit., p. 88.

union's regulations, but it would surely be unrealistic to argue the extent of their contribution to the sense and mood their painting creates for the play. Stylizations, paint applications, varying uses of textural effects (muslin, velours, canvas, styro-foam), how color is to play in relation to lighting, techniques of brushing (such as dragging or scumbling) are fundamentally highly perfected "instruments" of the painter's craft. The synthesis, the brilliant coming together of all the elements, is the artistry.

Every scenic studio has an "artist" and a "carpenter." Without a perfect mesh of the two, a producer's directives, a scenic designer's concept remain abstract and inert. The act of coming to life takes place in the scenic studio.

#### Scenic Studio Facilities and Personnel

Feller Scenery Studios, Inc. occupies 83,000 square feet of area in a Bronx facility and must support an overhead of \$10,000 a week "simply to keep the doors open." At present, the Feller company has a base staff of twenty-eight which works fifty-two weeks a year--and an additional fifty to sixty people who are taken on during peak work times. As Feller's is the largest scene building house in the East; its hierarchy of workers appears to be more tightly defined and assigned than does that of other houses.

There are five foremen: one heads the metal shop, four others run the "building" of scenery. In addition, and paramount, is the Chargeman who is the Head Scenic Artist; he directs the

painting shop. Peter Feller explains that the term "chargeman" is a studio's name for the basic head painter (in union terms, this is the equivalent to the foreman who directs the functions of the "mechanics"). But, Mr. Feller points out, "A chargeman is more than a foreman," because he makes the critical decision about color, line, form, and material to be used in the creation of scenery.

In addition to the five foremen and the one chargeman, the Feller house has an office staff to handle union, state, and federal government paper work and billing. Another department, the Drafting Room, is operated by his nephew. Here, assignments for the breaking up of shows and of handing out to the working groups on the floor are given. It is the five key foremen, however, who organize these working groups that take on each show, for as "supervision is a problem . . . they take the load off [Peter Feller]." According to Peter Feller's general manager, John Schwanke, the studio does not employ a shop electrician but has on staff men to wire the lighting which is not part of the lighting design. This is lighting attached to the specific scenery for the show they are building. This might involve interior or exterior practical lights (sconces) attached to scenery walls, specialty lights as those found around the "Kit Kat Klub" arch for Cabaret, or the small lights used only for decoration as those lights on the bar of The Magic Show. Other specialized capacities are also found within the iron shop: welding, pipebending, molding, and finishing.



Nolan Scenic Studios occupies 32,000 square feet, and employs a staff ranging in number from fifteen to sixty. Charles Bender's partner, Arnold Abramson, is the charginan, and Mr. Bender is the builder. Among his employees are six leadmen. The Nolan Studio has an overlap in art and carpentry, particularly in the area of sculpture. Mr. Bender's opinion is that distinguishing between the abilities of carpenters and scenic artists is a pointless exercise as capabilities emerge according to the type of show his company is building. Mr. Bender is also the draftsman. He makes all working drawings for the men in his shop. The scales start at one-half inch to one foot, and range up to three inches to one foot. For this reason he feels that scenic designers cannot find fault in his company's workmanship, for even "molds are carefully turned on a lathe."

William Hart of Hart Scenic Studios operates in 22,000 square feet and employs twenty-three men. He has one charginan and two additional scenic artists. Mr. Hart is the foreman, and he breaks down the assignments and hands them out to the electrical, carpentry and iron shops. In addition to the shops, he employs four layout men.

At Variety Scenic Studios Herb Lager is one of four working owners. Mr. Lager is the General Manager-Supervisor of the shop. The three other partners control construction, draperies department, and scenic artist studio. The facilities occupy 27,000 square feet, not including a storage warehouse of 8,000 square feet. At present

Mr. Lager employs twenty-five to thirty people, some of whom are office staff.

Leo Meyers is his company's scenic artist and he shares an owner-operator relationship with his partner. His facilities occupy short of 10,000 square feet. His peak employment number is forty but can diminish to a skeletal crew of eight when business is slow. His company is divided into painting department, drapery department and his administration staff.

Francis Messmore of Messmore and Damon Scenic Studios (Damon is deceased) works directly from the plans given to him by scenic designers. Only occasionally does he make simple drawings, if necessary. At the present time he employs five men: two scenic artists, a chargeman, and an artist. Other men on his payroll are engaged in work not involving theatre.

#### Building Process in Scenic Studios

"The builders must devise the practical methods by which the artists' conceptions can be produced on the stage, and their experience is a valuable asset to the producer. No two jobs are exactly alike, and great ingenuity may be required to construct workable sets."<sup>2</sup> The ingenuity commences at the moment of agreement between scenic studio and the scenic designer. The studio purchases the appropriate materials, lumber, hardware, plastic, and paints. Drawings are gone over very carefully among the working members.

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<sup>2</sup>Alfred L. Bernheim and Sara Harding, The Business of the Theatre (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1932), p. 138.

Construction drawings are rendered by the foreman, the draftsman, or, in some instances, the layout men according to the particular assignments-structure of each scenic studio.

Details of the drawings, of course, depend upon the complication and exacting measurements of each design: some may be relatively simple, others quite intricate. Sets are then built to these specifications, after which, in rough structure (before the finished carpentry) they are pinned or hinged with hardware. The sets are then taken apart again and covered with fabric, then reassembled. It is not until this time that they are painted. Upon completion of the painting, there is the trial set-up, after which the sets are loaded out and transported by professional theatrical truckers to the theatre.

"When the scenery is delivered to the stage for rigging and shifting, scenery and property crews are brought in . . . a master carpenter travels with the show on tour and makes sure the scenery is kept in good condition."<sup>3</sup> In Peter Feller's operation the delivery and setting up is managed by one of his master carpenters who works with the theatre master carpenter. Mr. Feller notes that there are occasions when the producer's manager will seek Feller's recommendation for a theatre master carpenter.

Generally the actual in-theatre set-up takes one to two days; and one set requires the work of head carpenters, one head electrician, one head property man, and a crew of twenty men.

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<sup>3</sup>Oscar G. Brockett, The Theatre: An Introduction (2nd ed.; New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, Inc., 1969), p. 469.

William Hart of Hart Scenic Studios views his building process as distinct from his competitors. His system consists in taking a set, breaking it down into flats and platform. All measurements are then laid out on sheets, even to the extent that nails' and braces' positions are indicated. A layout man then lays out an entire show on a bench (after it has been drafted). A second man machines the work, a third man places it on a template. Following, it is hinged on a stage. At this point a builtman (cabinet maker specializing in ornate workmanship) adds cornices and other special carpentry effects. Then all the discrete pieces are assembled. The sets, now having been covered with fabric are ready for the artists' painting. Upon completion of the painting, the scenery is moved out for loading.

#### Scene Building Costs

In the early 1930s it was "estimated that from seventy-five to ninety percent of the sets used by first-class producers are specially made for each production and consist entirely of new materials."<sup>4</sup> Today's estimation might bring these percentages even higher according to the opinions of many builders since re-use of materials is rare. Herb Lager recalls an auction that brought only \$225 for \$60,000 worth of scenery. Infrequently are there areas vast enough for scenery storage.

Nolan's Charles Bender believes that because this business is primarily one of custom work, one must overbid for mistakes.

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<sup>4</sup>Bernheim and Harding, op. cit., p. 138.

William Hart sees every show as being new and different, so everything must be custom made. Albie MacDonald recalls that, "George Jenkins [a designer] used to be a nut on getting special materials. You wouldn't know the price of this but would have to get the bid together overnight." Francis Messmore argues for more control by producers over their scenic designers: "When plans are released to shops we can't say you [the scenic designer] don't need an Austrian drape." Leo Meyers of Atlas cautions against experimentation as it is extremely costly, and difficult to figure in estimating the production.

In addition to the impracticality of attempting to re-work custom sets for a new production, plus the storage problem, and general difficulties in determining the appropriate figures for custom detail, scenic houses are beset with other overcost outlays.

There is the basic skyrocketing material prices endemic to any industry in today's inflation. This factor is especially remarkable under the pressure of the fast bid system. Herb Lager points out that prices of materials go up between bids (so one has no financial point of reference from one bidding session to the next) and can even increase at the time the contract has been signed.

Another problem for many scenic houses is that they are not sufficiently capitalized to own special, automated machinery, particularly necessary to the production of musicals. Specifically, it is the electric winch which determines a scenic studio's ability to bid on certain types of musicals. This device automates the

shifting of much scenery and, thereby, eliminates the necessity of many stage hands.

Herb Lager of Variety Scenic Studios estimates that the cost exceeds \$3,000 to manufacture one electric winch. Peter Feller of Feller Scenery Studios, Inc. owns 150 electric winches of this type--Variety Scenic Studios owns only one. Thus, the smaller studios must rent this equipment at exorbitant prices or be forced not to bid on such shows.<sup>5</sup>

Then, too, all studios suffer attritional losses in expensive machines and tools such as carbide saws. Peter Feller comments that loss also is due to theft. Although his company employs the services of both a purchasing agent and a stockman who keep track of items headed out during dailywork routines, there is a two percent loss in material per year. Most other companies do not have even these safeguards.

#### Financial Aspects

Contrary to the implied profit capability of the preceding critique from the 1930s and a more recent statistic that "the largest single outlay in preparing for opening night--accounting for normally over twenty percent of the total--is the building and painting of scenery"<sup>6</sup> it may remain doubtful that such profits redound to the men in the business of building scenery for theatre.

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<sup>5</sup>Lager, op. cit., p. 263.

<sup>6</sup>Thomas Gale Moore, The Economics of The American Theatre (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1965), p. 51.

Feller's Scenic Studios and Nolan's are notable among those houses willing to discuss the financial aspects of the business. Feller's company estimate of the amount of business brought in per year is "over \$4,000,000--but we operate in the red because so many things can't be pinned down." The mark-up practice is ten percent, but as to actual yield, according to Peter Feller, "in this business you settle for five percent profit." His view is that if one makes one mistake and he loses, he cannot approach the producer with a cost override as one is able to do in many other businesses. In short, one is "stuck with his contract." Mr. Feller claims to have lost as much as \$15,000 to \$20,000 on mistakes made in a precarious bidding situation.

Charles Bender, on the other hand, costs his work on the basis of square footage for built sets. If he is dealing with platform building, he multiplies the surface area times its height. Mr. Bender projects his total volume at \$1,000,000 a year. Yet with general inflation, overhead, union scale, and elevated material costs, he emphasizes that the business "used to be money-making fifteen years ago. Now we're just existing--making a salary and that's it."

It is an interesting sidelight that Albie MacDonald, who was forced to close his shop, marked up all work thirty-five percent (a figure arrived at based on cost of rent, maintenance, materials, and quantities of paint, plus, of course, work hours). He says flatly he does not believe Peter Feller's figures, but is informed

that Charles Bender of Nolan's, does indeed charge by the square foot.

William Hart also charges the square foot breakdown for flatwork (this is "where you make your money"), but differentiates between it and built work such as cornices, furniture, windows, doors, and especially staircases. This kind of work is complicated, as he sees it, and therefore he figures his charges on the basis of time.

Francis Messmore, who positions his company as working quite apart from Broadway theatre, reveals little about his financial operations but asserts, "We're solvent, we run a tight ship," and that in planning his work he deals directly with the scenic artists' plans in order to save his company money.

Leo Meyers of Atlas and Herb Lager of Variety do not touch at all on their financial situations, outside of discussing the commonly shared problems of the scene building industry.

Clearly there is more to the question of profit margin than simply markup. As originally stated, to accommodate the demands of grand set building a studio must provide space, and space is overhead. But so is payroll, cost of materials, and the like. In the highly personalized and pressured business of scene building losses are incurred directly due to the outright peculiarities of the trade.

#### The Scenic Studios' View of the Business

John Schwanke of Feller's sees the business of theatre as living on pressure. One consequent of this environment is evidenced



in the coordination of the studio office with the men working on the floor. Schwanke estimates that with the tensions men work under, with differing personalities, and with the limited time that the studio usually has to build a show, a "slip of the tongue" might cost them \$1,000.

Generally the consensus among the heads of scene building studios is that the nature of the show to be built, and the talents of the men building it, are controlling factors in whether a company profits or loses. Charles Bender of Nolan's observes that, "the cheapest way to get a visual is with backdrops such as [is used] in a ballet; a piece of rag hanging with painting on it." His view is that the least costly way to achieve a built show is simply to use stock flats but that almost all, today, are built with cornices, stairways, and that these constructional appurtenances are, or can be, compounded by dimensional requirements.

Herb Lager feels that the three-year run of That Championship Season brought his sets undue attention simply because the play was successful rather than for the intrinsic esthetic value of the sets themselves. Francis Messmore prefers to find business outside traditional theatre, feeling that when "you get a Broadway show, it consumes you completely." And Leo Meyers cautions that the scenery depends on factors not always under ones control such as time, budget and workers.

In the case of Feller's operation, work embraces much more than scenery for Broadway productions. Built effects for outdoor amusement parks, pavillions for the World's Fair and Disneyland

projects are among some of their "outside theatre" work. And, of course, economics is the determinant of these ventures, too. In discussing his contracts for Disneyland productions, Peter Feller judges that it is "better to keep the doors open and lose \$1,000 a week than shut them and lose \$2,000;" and in connection with taking on a third theatrical set (as opposed to his stated optimum of two shows at a time), it is "better to take a show and lose money than pay overhead with the doors closed."

This chapter has focused upon the building of scenery and the problems which perennially plague the studio owners. Finally, a brief analysis of their business was offered by the various interviewees. The concluding chapter follows.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

This dissertation has examined the very important contributions of those scenic contractors for the Broadway theatre who comprise the continuing and unflagging force responsible for the building of the many varied and complex set designs for innumerable productions.

The writer has offered historical data which gave impetus to the inception of the contractual process for out-of-house scene building. Incorporated within the many descriptions are illustrations of the problems which have contributed to the shaping of the production procedures found in this little known area of the theatrical industry.

The role of the designer has also been characterized with reference to his involvement with the scenic contracting studios.

Owner's or operator's responses were dealt with as they related to some of the writer's many queries concerning the following personal areas: (1) his initial involvement in theatre and scenery building, (2) his own experiences relative to trends and economic conditions, and significant productions, (3) the skills imperative for success, and (4) the successes or failures within the functioning of his own business. They also responded

to questions relating to business: (1) the size of the studio, (2) the number of shows per year, (3) the amount of annual business, (4) the size of the enterprise, and (5) the number of employees, to mention a few.

The individual operations of six of the members of the Theatrical Contractors' Association have been investigated. Included additionally has been a description of the MacDonald Studio which no longer exists. Histories of each of these houses have been related. Included in the history was the origin of each studio and its chronological development. In the case of MacDonald Studio, significant contributions to the business of contracting for theatrical productions have been noted.

Included have been descriptions of the scenic studios and scenic studio personnel. The studio administrator's point of view was also considered with respect to the process of building the scenery, and the employment of carpenters and scenic artists.

A description of the two unions involved has been effected, and the relationship between studio owners and operators has also been explored with regard to the impressions of the members of the Theatrical Contractors' Association.

Illustrated in an earlier chapter is the atmosphere in which most of the processes of scenic contracting and building take place. The very crucial significance of the bidding session has been characterized in detail, and the risks inherent within this key step of the production and contracting process have been carefully examined.

The ambition of this dissertation is that the material contained herein bears significant evidence to this writer's observation that the men and women who have brought Broadway scenic production to a highly refined artistry are those people who have received the least recognition. A very specific case in support of this took place in 1947 on the production of If the Shoe Fits, based on the Cinderella story. Albie MacDonald developed the complex sprocket-chain mechanism which successfully changed the scenery, but it was the producer of the play, Leonard Sillman, who applied for and was granted the patent on the apparatus.<sup>1</sup>

Scenery is one of the few tangibles in theatre. Physical things are more easily criticized or attacked. By attacked is meant that a producer may feel money can be saved by deleting it. The producer may not bargain with the union as to the rate he is willing to pay for a specified number of stage hands, but he is able to dispense with their services by decreasing the complexity of the scenery. One of his more concrete alternatives is to simply use less scenery. He informs the designer that he feels all that scenery is not necessary for a particular effect. He uses his prerogative and decides, ". . . he can play it with a vignette set."<sup>2</sup>

Peter Feller of Feller's Scenic Studios, Inc. observes that it is difficult for theatre seats to bring in more money. Some observers feel the prices are keeping people from the theatre even

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<sup>1</sup>MacDonald, op. cit., pp. 123-24.

<sup>2</sup>Feller, op. cit., p. 209.

now. "Even a hit must run a year at capacity in order to return the original investment."<sup>3</sup> If the unions are not willing to cease escalating their wage scales, the only alternative is to cut the need for the services of the union's members--whatever form they may take--stage hands or scenic artists. "Nobody wants to stop doing shows, but they must be done differently."<sup>4</sup>

In view of this, the writer feels that the days of the grand spectacle are numbered. Increasingly, the "budget show" is becoming a sought-after theatrical business venture as opposed to a show requiring a great deal of financial backing. This significantly contributes to the increasing number of show-case productions, Off-Off Broadway, and, in the writer's experience, Dinner Theatre. These productions, scattered and transient as they are, are better able to escape the watchful eye of the unions and can mount a production on the proverbial shoe string.<sup>5</sup>

Of course the productions away from the mainstream of Broadway express absolutely no sympathy for the precarious business of scenic contracting. The scene building business for the Broadway theatre can be considered fragile in the sense that if a studio were to fail to successfully bid any Broadway shows for a period of time, activity would soon be halted, the doors would close, and bankruptcy would shortly ensue.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 208.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 209.

<sup>5</sup>Lager, op. cit., p. 266.

<sup>6</sup>Feller, op. cit., p. 217.

This is a pressure business. "Theatre lives on pressure."<sup>7</sup> This observation by Peter Feller of Feller's Scenery Studios, Inc. relates to yet another facet of the precarious nature of the scenic contracting business. He refers to the weak financial reference point which not only includes the increase of prices of material, a product of the recent inflationary spiraling of prices, but the guesswork about the types of material desirable and the invariable lack of time to compute with sufficient accuracy the scenery production costs. Prices of materials were increasing between the time of the bid and the time at which the contracting studios went out to buy the same material to build the show contracted. These are the economic conditions which force most scenic contractors into the position of having to take ". . . any kind of work in order to support theatre and continue in theatre."<sup>8</sup>

As has been demonstrated, the scenic studios are compelled to meet the exigencies characteristic of the industry of scenic building. Conflicts with unions, producers, and scenic designers, the pressure of due dates, the costs of materials, and the paucity of profits are highly charged deterrents to the practice of scene building. Notwithstanding the impediments of this business and the lack of renown experienced, the devotion to theatre prevails. The scenic studio owners, with few exceptions, respond to its challenge.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 212.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 207.

<sup>9</sup>Lager, op. cit., p. 277.

The outstanding characteristic of scenic studio work is perhaps the incomparable synthesis of original conceptualizing and their interpretive capabilities, such as described by Arnold Abramson of Nolan Scenic Studios.

With scenery you get a sketch. The designer may or may not be able to put on paper what he wants. You might get sketches with a lot of notes on the side, "Do this lighter or darker. Smooth or blend," whatever. There's much more freedom involved, much more interpretation, not all cut and dried. . . . It's a challenge . . . to work with a new designer because, at the beginning, you may or may not hit what he wants. He may or may not himself be able to put it on paper. He may not be able to explain it to you. . . . There are some designers who, without a good shop, doing a good job for them, would be lost.<sup>10</sup>

It is the writer's conviction that comprehension of the theatre in its artistic totality must include an understanding of the extensiveness of involvement and thoroughness of craftsmanship--the singular attributes of the scene building houses.

To this point, the writer suggests that so long as Broadway endures, so too will the scene building houses. Furthermore, it will be their continuously conscientious and critical work which, in the words of Robert Bergman, faithfully

unite on a hitherto empty stage and come alive in joining with the actor and the director, when you can see what is good and bad in what you have already done, when the refitting and the retouching and the restaging take place. That is when a production suffers its real birth pangs and that is when the excitement of the stage reaches its highest pitch.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Abramson, op. cit., p. 170.

<sup>11</sup> Norris Houghton, "Credits," Theatre Arts, XXX (Nov., 1946), p. 660.



Indeed, just as this dissertation reveals a body of information seldom studied before, the data presented suggests areas of research wherein future investigations should prove extremely fruitful.

Perhaps the least investigated and most expansive area left in the business of theatre is that of the theatrical unions. This writer finds they are the most secretive of unions. The constant concern of studio theatrical contractors and Broadway producers is the ever-increasing costs for man power which is decisively and irrevocably union authorized. The point has long since been reached at which there are only a select few employed and many more union members are on the ever increasing roles of the unemployed. Critical analysis of union activity and goals might reveal important information significant to the future of the scenic contractors and even commercial theatre.

Another area, perhaps more limited, is that of the bidding process, that is, competitive bidding on the part of scene builders in order to win a contract to build a show. In many instances, the bidding process is merely a charade, and the studio owner and operators know it. James Hamilton of Design Associates in Lambertville, New Jersey informed the writer in a personal interview that, due to his distance from Broadway, one of the first things he tries to determine when he is invited to submit a bid is whether or not the bid is "rigged."<sup>12</sup> Although unethical, this practice is more

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<sup>12</sup>James Hamilton, private interview, Lambertville, New Jersey, October, 1974.

common than most would imagine. The writer has been informed by three of the studio operators, all wishing to remain anonymous, and the retired Albie MacDonald that more often than not those attending the bidding session have an idea before hand if they are going to be granted the show. Despite this knowledge, they all have agreed--especially the largest studios--to attend these meetings. The writer's information reveals that this is in order to satisfy the legalistic implications surrounding these sessions. Former illegal activities surrounding the bidding session have caused investigation by the office of the New York State, Attorney General, L. Lefkowitz.

This area of research might seek to reveal those characteristics present which would force honest men to "rig" bids. A close analysis of producer-designer/scenic builder relationships may offer constructive criticism which could improve the contractual system.

A most pragmatic and well-focused area of research concerns the new type of soft scenery which is velcro material sewn in a skilled fashion and stretched over a wooden frame. The development has been pioneered by Variety Scenic Studio.<sup>13</sup> This area offers much in light of the rising costs of materials and transportation. Furthermore, as a significant, new contribution to the art of scenery construction, it is worthy of investigation.

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<sup>13</sup>See Appendix E, p. 339.

To be sure, a most expansive area, formerly investigated, and deserving of updating is the trend of Broadway's decreasing activity as concerns the number of productions per year. Brooks Atkinson states:

The number of ticket brokers was about two hundred in 1930, it was seventy-eight in 1967. Also the number of new productions continued to fall. In the first six months of the 1969-1970 season, there were only eleven productions, and of these only two were hits. In November--traditionally one of the high points of the season--ten of Broadway's thirty-six theatres were dark. Variety reported that Broadway was operating at 46.5 percent capacity.<sup>14</sup>

The talents of the Broadway director, the scene designer, and the producer are, by and large, all exceptional. But the writer wishes to express that, without the tireless, inspired, and ingenious productions by artists of the scenic studios, the Broadway theatre would not have that special splendor of visual mood. The fact that Broadway may be experiencing a downward turn has, in this writer's understanding, no effect whatever on the consistency of excellence provided by the masterful work of scene building companies. The total experience of bringing to oneness the "story" of the play, the actors' interpretative characterizations, and the audiences' responsive interactions occur not without the evocative force of sensitively executed sets. ". . . If Broadway has a world-wide reputation for excellence and smoothness in stage decoration a great share of the credit must go to these master craftsmen. . . ." <sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Brooks Atkinson, Broadway (New York: Macmillan & Company, 1970), p. 456.

<sup>15</sup> Houghton, op. cit., p. 657.

These are the artists who must take the scene designer's concepts and transform them into the artistry of the finished sets upon the theatre stage.

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## APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

TRANSCRIPTS OF INTERVIEWS WITH SCENE BUILDERS

## APPENDIX A - 1

Answering Questions - Mr. Albie MacDonald  
Interviewed By - J. Collom  
Date - Dec. 1974

MacDonald Scenic Studios  
35 Glenwood Avenue  
Leonia, New Jersey

Q. This is Patrick Albert MacDonald, formerly of MacDonald Scenic Studios. And everybody calls him Albie. This morning you told me about when MacDonald started. It started before the turn of the century?

A. Yes, that's right.

Q. And how far back do you go?

A. I remember going there as a boy on 38th Street, when I was a kid, maybe ten or eleven years old. You see, they were in 39th Street, and they were upstairs in a loft, but I only know this as history. But they kept getting bigger and bigger, and they had to move. They moved down to 30th Street between 10th and 11th Avenues.

Q. When?

A. They moved down there; they were incorporated in 1910. I was six. It was about 1916. I would say.

Q. And you took it over in 1928?

A. Myself? No, I went to work for them in 1924, and then I took over the place in 1947. But in 1932, I became the boss. In other words, I ran the place. And in 1947, my half brother who owned the place retired, and I bought the place from him.

Q. Was this a larger place than it is now?

A. Oh yes. We had four floors in the building.

Q. About how many square feet?

A. It was 100 by 75 times 4, about 30,000 square feet. And then later on, when we took on the paint studio, you know years ago, you built and you didn't paint. You built, and you shipped it out to a studio that painted. A place started out called Studio Alliance. And they got ahold of these designers and gave them office space free, and opened a studio. And then they drilled and painted and drilled into the producer's heads that they were saving them trucking.

Q. Where was this?

A. It was on 39th Street, between 8th and 9th. It was originally the New York Studio and, then, the Studio Alliance.

Q. You could just walk the scenery over?

A. Yes, but the Scenic Truckers wouldn't let you walk anything.

The way we started, years ago, each producer, Erlanger, Dillingham, they all had a theatre. And they had their own crew of technicians, a carpenter, electrician. And they built their own shows in the theatre in the off season. Now, the Lyceum Theatre over on 45th Street--which was Froman's Theatre,--Dan Froman, he was a big theatrical--they had paint frames in the back of the theatre. And they had bridges across, and you would tack the drops to the paint frame and then these artists worked on the bridges, and you raise and lower the paint frame. My father was the first one to start a contract shop. He worked for an actor. But at any rate, he got the idea of contracting for the scenery instead of having to do it in the theatres, having each producer do his own. So he was the first one to start a shop.

Q. When you started a shop, I was going to ask you about peak years. My history tells me that the twenties were busy years. Do you remember any outstanding years when you felt you had too much work?

A. Oh yes. That would be in the twenties. Because the Depression was in 1929, 1930, 1931, 1932. No, it was after that.

Q. What year did your father start the contracting business? Was this after you were in the business or before you were in the business?

A. No, this was before. See, he had the business, and then T. B. MacDonald, who was my half brother, worked for him. And then he took it over, and their original shop was in the Grand Opera House which was on 24th Street.

Q. They didn't have much room there?

A. For instance, in those days there was a lot of drops. And there was a lot of cutting of them, for foliage, and all that. They used to use the stage of the Grand Opera House during the day to lay out the drops and cut them on the floor, and the Opera House was on 24th Street and the shop was on 25th. It was in the same building.

Q. But they had designers doing this?

A. No. The scenic artists, the scenic studios had model makers, and everything was done with models.

Q. No blueprints or anything?

A. No there wasn't. There were no designers, as such. In other words, the director and the guy who wrote the thing would get together with the scenic studio, and they would go over it and when they would make models, painted and everthing else, and that's how you started in. Then, in later years, the designers started in.

Q. There were designers working at that time, but they were all working with--?

A. They were part of the scenery studio. But I'm not talking about Jo Mielziner; he came later.

Q. But there were guys around like Robert Edmund Jones, and Norman Bel Geddes, but they didn't work with the guys that started all this at the Grand Opera House?

A. No. In other words, after the designers started, then the scenic studios didn't do it anymore. It became blueprints, and the scenic studios, all they did was execute it, the designers sketches, and so on.

Q. Is there an approximate year that everything seemed to fall into the same pattern it's now in?

A. I would say around 1915.

Q. Do you remember the best of times and the worst of times?

A. Yes, the worst of times was 1929 to 1933. Our shop, we had nobody working, only myself, for almost eighteen months, we didn't turn a wheel. We had a place which you could eat off the floor.

Q. Did you find the peak years after the war?

A. Yes. In my estimation, as far as my place was concerned, the real peak years were when TV first started.

Q. You did work for the studios?

A. They had no facilities. And you could keep your place going twenty-four hours a day if you wanted to. They were begging you to do the work. And we were busy, busy for about three and one-half to four years

doing nothing but TV. We did CBS, and NBC. And it was just like a mill TV,--it still is. They'd keep using stuff over and over, and they add to, you know. And they would send down a truckload of stuff to us with drawings, how this is going to be used, and then a certain amount of it would be new. We'd have to build the new stuff and then send it down to the paint studio, paint it and out the door.

Q. Was this around the time you started your own place?

A. No, this was afterwards. I took over the operation in '47.

Q. TV wasn't really hot then. It didn't start until the '50's.

A. That's right, yes.

Q. I wanted to ask you what you felt were the most important landmark shows? Which made it look like you were going to be rich? Some guys have certain shows, like for Feller it was the World's Fair.

A. '39, that was. That's the old one, not this new one. That was '39. He didn't do anything in this one.

Q. I didn't realize he was talking about the old one.

A. Sure, he was talking about '39. I don't know what he did. I worked for General Motors then. They automated their whole exhibition.

Q. In '39?

A. No, in the last one. In '39 I did some stuff that didn't amount to anything.

Q. In other words, you don't single out any particular production?

A. The biggest, the one that gave me the most satisfaction, is The Great Waltz. That in it's day was like a \$450,000 production. Unheard of in those days.

Q. Is that what it cost?

A. Well, the entire production, costumes and everything. But nowadays, that doesn't mean a thing.

Q. Do you recall, off hand, some of the Broadway shows that you've done?

A. We did all of Max Gordon's work. He was a big producer. He produced--we did all of Dillingham's work; we did all of Ziegfeld's work. Max Gordon produced The Great Waltz, that's why his name came to mind.



We did a show called Lady in the Dark which was a beautiful thing. Gertrude Lawrence was in it. And it was a fantasy, and we did things in such a way that people appeared and disappeared.

Q. Did you ever keep a list of some of the shows that you did?

A. No, I don't have a list.

Q. Feller listed everything he did since 1962. He seems to be pretty recent.

A. He was in business once with a guy named Gebhardt, and I bought all his machinery. But he tried to buy it, but he didn't want to pay enough. He wasn't like me. I went over and paid them a good price. When I closed up I brought in the auctioneers. I didn't bother trying to sell it piece by piece.

Q. A good time then, was right around TV time. I wanted to ask you something about the process of your shop when you ran it. Just the mechanical and functional. Did you do anything in a specific order, or did you just jump on it and start working all at once?

A. It depended on the design. Many times, for instance, when they did The Great Waltz, they designed the second act first. And they even would design Act II, Scene III before Act I, Scene I.

Q. So you started working on it before the design was completed?

A. You had to, before they finished designing the whole show, many times. But if the design was complete, the first thing we did was start the layout for the men to start working on.

Q. Maybe we should start with a bid, and take it right through?

A. Well, of course, the first thing you did was bid on it. And sometimes they had five shops bid on it.

Q. When was this?

A. This was all the time. They still do it.

Q. When was this The Great Waltz?

A. That must have been 1936 or something in there. It played the Center Theatre.

Q. So we started with the bidding. I'm familiar with the process, but I thought you could illustrate it for me, anything unusual that you recall that happened?

A. Let me tell you from the start. When you went over to bid on a show, I don't care if it was Jo Mielziner or Donald Oenslager, all you got was a half-inch scale elevation of it, and the ground plan. If there was a lot of moldings and stuff, they gave you details of the molding. But you got a show, for instance, that had maybe a double turntable maybe, which you see a lot now, platforms coming in and platforms coming up and down. The designer didn't know what you were going to do. It was your conception of the thing. For instance, if she bid, he bid, and I bid, and I had a smarter way of doing it than you did, I could get the job and still give them what they wanted. In other words, a designer could come to us and say they want it to be done like this. All they wanted to know was was it going to come out like this? Was it going to fly out like that. When you were figuring on a show, you were thinking of how am I going to do this. And he was thinking how am I going to do this. And if I had a smarter idea than you, my bid would be cheaper. There was a lot of horsing around with the bids too.

Q. I've heard about rigging of bids. Where they know they're going to give it to one guy, but they go out to bid anyway, as a formality.

A. I talked about it. The designer called me, and if I knew he was going to give it to me I'd tell him it was OK.

Q. I don't blame you.

A. Then I'd also tell him that I'm going to also tell the producer. But it didn't make much difference. But the thing that galled me was, they'd want you to do it, right? And they'd get me to bid against you and then they'd make you meet my price. In other words, the designer is supposed to be a friend of yours, or the producer, but he wasn't doing you a damn bit of a favour. He'd get you to meet my price which was low, right? What the hell good was that?

Q. Some producers try to get one shop to do one part of the show and another to do another so they could get it cheaper that way. And Feller said he had that experience too. "One from column A, and one from column B." Now they're asking people to itemize. Instead of one bid, they want an itemization for a multi-scene show?

A. That's the way they do in musicals. But they had a reason for it, too, specially in musicals. They would give the thing to bid on, and you would bid on the whole kit and caboodle. Then they would take the lowest bid, and then they would cut the show. So they'd say to you, "How much if you don't do 'A'." So you bid \$500 for "A"; you'd say \$400. You could make money on the cuts. Then they got smart, and they made you put the price in letter by letter, scene by scene. Then if they want to cut it, which they always did, then you'd cut out "A" or cut out "B." So, in that respect, they had a point.

Q. A lot of people can't work that way because they know they can do one thing cheaper than anybody else, but another thing is going to cost them more?

A. Oh yeah, that's right. They would call me up and say you're going to do such and such a scene. I'd say no, I'm not. You can give that to somebody else. I'll take such and such, and so and so. But what the Theatre Guild used to do---They had a five scene show or a four scene show, and they'd have five or four bidders, and you'd bid each scene separately, and then they'd give him that scene and so on. They'd get the cheapest.

Q. They don't do that anymore though?

A. Well, we got together and wouldn't do it. We'd just refuse to bid on a show.

Q. These guys had no heart---The more I find out about it---

A. You know one thing about MacDonald, regardless of what you hear from anybody. It was strictly quality. Years ago, shows were built with the idea that when they closed in New York, they were going to go on the road. So there was much more touring than there is nowadays. If you want a show with a lot of different elevations, you had to build the under-structure so it folded up and the top came off so that you could troop them. Now they nail them up in big lumps and they ship by truck. We used to ship by train.

Q. It costs more now because the designers want to redesign? They don't want to just cut the package and ship it out.

A. The way we had to build them in the early days was so they could take them just as they were. There was no such thing as re-doing anything.

Q. When they tour a show nowadays, they have a bus and truck tour and a plane tour. Do they have two different sets of scenery?

A. Well, in that case, that's different.

Q. I want you to take your time and explain the process?

A. Well, if you got the show, you did the bidding and got the show, you write up a contract, get your first payment. But we had certain customers that we didn't have to do that with.

Q. Was there a certain amount that you had to get?

A. Well we always insisted on a third, and a third, and a third. A third to start, a third halfway, and a third before they took delivery. Unless it was one of our regular customers, they had to give it all before they took delivery. And as soon as we got the job, sometimes, we'd even call up from the street and say, "We got the job. Start doing so and so and so many platforms and start doing so many steps and so on, right away." And at our shop we used to take the prints that we got from the designer and make working drawings and give the men working drawings. Nobody else did that; they handed you the print and said, "Build this door."

Q. So you pioneered in that? They do it now?

A. We were the first shop to start an iron shop in connection with the scenery. We were the first shop to put in a lathe, the first shop to put in a shaper. As soon as the designers found that out, they started designing special molding. And as everybody else, if you had turnings, you had to send them out to somebody. Even when I first came in, they used to send out the cornices. Jigsaw work they used to send out. And we pioneered bringing that all into the business. We did it all ourselves. We even had a machinery shop, our own bandsaws, our own circular saws. We didn't have to send a darn thing out.

Q. Let's talk about the shop you started with.

A. Yeah, well, we had---It was on 30th Street between 10th and 11th Ave., four floors, and we had a basement where we stored stuff. Then, on the first floor, we did all the flat scenery. There isn't as much flat scenery done today. But, on the first floor, we did nothing but flat scenery. You had to make it in those days so it would fit in a car. A car door in those days was a little bit over six feet or 5'9". So we had to lay it out and build the flat scenery downstairs. Then there was in the middle floor. We did all the built stuff. And there was a lot of built stuff. We built a mantle for Mielziner one time that was 17' high. A mantle and over the mantle a big picture frame and then an entablature on top of that. And it was for a show called Your Obedient Husband. Frederick March and his wife was in it. This must a been twenty-five years ago, I guess.

Q. Was this all in wood by the way?

A. All out of wood, yeah. We had guys that could carve. Certain things we bought. I don't know if you've ever seen it, but there was a company that made metal mouldings and certain things like that we would buy, but mostly, we had guys that could carve and we did everything in pine, of course, and it was soft. So the built work was on the middle

floor, and, then, on the top floor, we had areas where we could lay out 45' x 30' drops. And batten them and cut them. If they happened to be foliage, cut them, and then we had to turn them over and put netting on them. Did you know that? And we had a sewing room upstairs. Another thing that we pioneered in, nobody ever set any scenes up cause nobody had any height. We cut a big hole in our roof on the top floor, and we built high enough so we could put scenes together up there and set them up. We built the hole like a penthouse with a roof on it. We did it ourselves. And we had a regular rigging up there. Not as elaborate as they did in the theatre, and, then, we used to fit things up in there. We only did it for our own benefit. That's how concerned we were to get the stuff in the theatre so that it was finished when it got into the theatre. We pioneered it. Then everybody else got hep to it, and then designers got help to it, and they would come down to your place and look at it and then you're in trouble. We only did it for our own benefit, actually.

Q. I wanted to ask you what designers you worked with?

A. I worked with Mielziner, Norman Bel Geddes, Donald Oenslager.

Q. Can you name a show or a particular year that you worked with them?

A. Well, Mielziner, we did alot of shows with him. He did stuff for Sam Harris. We did The Postman Always Rings Twice for him. Mielziner did Ethan Frome. And we did a musical called Jubilee for him, for Sam Harris.

Q. What about Bel Geddes? What did he do?

A. The first show we ever did for him was Dead End. At the Belasco Theatre.

Q. They filled the orchestra pit with water.

A. That was an effect. That was an effect that shimmered up on the top. There was no water there. Bel Geddes would have liked to have done that,--he was insane--but it was too impossible. They had a color wheel, and a light, and the water shimmered like the reflection of water on the dock, that's all.

A. He won a Tony for one show, he did. (MacDonald's wife speaking).

Q. What was the name of the show?

A. If the Shoe Fits.

Q. 1946, '47?

A. It must have been after '47. It was a modern version of Cinderella. And did you ever see those kids' pop-up books, like the stove and chairs would come out of the wall? What it was was two books set together like this, right? And the pages opened, and as the pages opened, a scene.

Q. Pops out of it?

A. Yes, stoves, chairs popped out of the wall. Now when that scene was over, it had to be like you were turning a page, so that went around, and turned and went offstage. And as that went off, the next page came down. Know what I mean?

Q. Yes. I don't know how you could do it.

A. They had an engineer design this thing to operate it, and nobody would take the job. Even Nolan Brothers, Willie Nolan, who was one of my competitors, and he called up the producer who was Leonard Sillman. He said, "Don't do the show. You're crazy because nobody's going to make it work." So I told Sillman I'd do the job if he'd let me do it my way. It was a couple of steps up to an elevation that was about two feet, and we had all the machinery under this elevation. And he had cables coming in, and all. And we did it very simply. We did it very very simply. And I said, "What I want to do, I'll do it so it's all up above the stage. So if anything ever happens that the thing don't operate, you can have somebody come and run it by hand." Well the way this engineer had it--I don't know what he paid him--is that if anything ever broke down, the show was over. We even designed the hooks and we put eyes on these pages so in case it ever did happen, they could reach down with these hooks and pull the pages down. And they had to go round. They had to come like this. The book was like that, see? A page opened up and a scene appeared, right? Some things out of this wall, some things out of this wall. And the same way, it was two books. Then this page would come out, and as that one came out, the other one would have to go around. So it ended up, when we got to the end, we had the big ballroom scene finale and that was a permanent set. That was there. When this final page opened up, it revealed the ballroom. But we had it so--and it was done just by a guy standing there doing this, just winding it up. And I don't know if I can make you understand this. We built a wall and we had a sprocket chain on the top and a sprocket chain on the bottom, and it went all through a gear backstage, down through a shaft where you wound it up, made the thing turn, just like a bicycle. Then each page we took and we made a hook that hooked on to the sprocket. It was like a bicycle chain lying down, except the chain was this big.

Q. Did you have to make the links?

A. This was when stuff was hard to get. No, we bought the links, but we had to really dig around to get it. And it worked like a charm.

Q. Was this all your idea?

A. Yeah, sure. That's what I got the Tony for.

Q. Were you the only bidder on this one?

A. The other guys wouldn't bid on it.

Q. So you got to call your own shots. Charge them what--

A. Well, it was the same old story. Sillman tried to hang us up in the end. He said, "I can't give you the last payment. You'll have to take notes on the box office." Which is a normal thing for them to ask you. But I said, "No good!" He said, "Well, supposing it doesn't work?" I said, "We did. We worked it in the shop." We operated the whole thing in the shop for him. I said, "That's what my contracts said." I couldn't be responsible for the trouping and whatever. He finally got the money up. But you know, he got a patent out on the thing. He wanted me to go in with him on it. He wanted me to make a model of it so he could sell it. I said, "OK, but it'll cost you around \$2400 to \$3000." He wouldn't spend the money. But he used it on TV a couple of times. He used it quite a few times.

Q. What's his name?

A. Sillman. Leonard Sillman. He did--what are these shows he does?--Oh God--He discovered Imogene Coca.

Q. I think you're one of the fortunate ones, that you retired. Some of these guys, like Jo Mielziner. He's what? 74?

A. Yeah. He's crazy. He's still working.

Q. And he told me he's working for minimum. And he said the scene painters, the old ones over at Fellers, make more money than he makes. With the overtime.

A. Even without their overtime. Some scandal.

Q. What is the scale? I don't even know.

A. I don't know either. Its probably \$11,000 or \$12,000 now, something like that, and double time for overtime. They don't work for time and a half.

Q. This is some of the stuff I wanted to find out from Bobby MacDonald, but he told me to talk to the president.

A. No, he could get you to see Willie Arne because he's got the guys working for him right now.

Q. Its a matter of public record?

A. I really don't know. When I was out at the Fair which was what '64 and '65, the scale then for the scenic artists was just short of nine dollars, and the chargeman got double which was \$18. And the overtime. There was nothing but overtime. We worked six hours and then from there on it was overtime. We used to work six hours and then six hours overtime. So the chargeman got \$108 just for those last six hours. Its a shame, too, because, some of them, they're not all artists. Some of them are just lousy brush hands. They prime and that. The reason the scale is so high, their work used to be so seasonal that they only would get maybe thirty weeks out of a year. But that isn't so any more. They're working all the time, but they're still getting this kind of money.

Q. I'd like to go back to the operation. Can you give me a rundown of the way you operated the place? In terms of what kind of machinery? Did you have foremen? Did you have it broken into departments?

A. Yes, we had nobody on the bottom floor, but that was just for storage. We had a foreman on the first floor which did all the flat scenery, and we had a foreman on the second floor who was in charge of the built work. And we had laborers working. They called them laborers. Actually they were guys that covered scenery and cut the drops. And you had what they called the boss laborer. He would be in charge of your laborers, and when you had scenery to cover, he would be there. When we had drops to be cut up on the fourth floor, he would be there. They called them laborers. They weren't carpenters; they covered the scenery. In other words, they did all the gluing down of the canvass, all the cutting of the drops. But they didn't use any of the machinery as far as the saws, the mortise and tenons, and things like that. In fact, their scale of pay was lower than the carpenters.

Q. You mention mortise and tenon joints. Some places don't want to do that anymore.

A. They don't want to do it anymore. And that's because of the unions. They won't do it because it takes so much time. See there again, the idea was to make the scenery durable when you travel. You might play New York for a year and a half, then close and go on the road and play three weeks in Chicago, two in Detroit. So that scenery kept bouncing in and out so it was made to last. And that was the reason for the mortise and tenons. You know what they do nowadays, I



don't understand it. On a piece of scenery there's what they call a corner block. It's a piece of plywood with nails. They glue them on. Now the whole idea with scenery is, if anything happens, you have to be able to fix it. You can't get at that corner. They're glued on. And there's no reason for it. We always nailed it and clinched the nails.

Q. About how many people did you have working altogether?

A. In peak times, we would have seventy-five carpenters, maybe. And this was before we had the paint studio. We had to get a paint studio to compete with these people, so we took a building right down the street which was 150 feet by 100 feet.

Q. I thought that was on the third floor?

A. In other words, before a drop is painted it has to be sewed, and they put a webbing on it with gromets.

Q. This was done on the third floor? But you didn't paint on that floor?

A. We had another building down the street.

Q. When did you start the paint studio?

A. 1940, 1942. No, it was after I took control, so it had to be '47 or '48.

Q. What were the months that you found the leanest?

A. It always got slow right at the end of the year, before Christmas. There was always a layoff around Christmas time. And it would be the middle of January, the start of February, when it started to pick up.

Q. What was the reason for this lull?

A. Don't ask me. And then in the summertime there was a little lull because nobody went to the theatre. But then in April, May you would go like hell because the season started in September.

Q. Could you give a ballpark figure on the price of shows and how it increased or decreased? One set versus musicals?

A. We did Life With Father. It was a one set show. Twelve hundred and fifty dollars for the set. And it was an interior, with double sliding door, morderings, cornice--designed by Stewart Chaney. That must have been '33, somewhere around there. And then we built a one set show called Town House for Max Gordon which cost \$35,000. And this was around twenty-five years later. But I would say, I

found out that we did a musical for Ziegfeld called Rio Rita, and the scenery cost \$44,000. This was before 1930, 1927. Now if we had to build that show today, in the first place they wouldn't go for the money. But, if you had to build that show today, the scenery would cost \$175,000 to \$200,000. That's how different it was.

Q. When you were operating in the late '50's, early '60's, what was the range?

A. A one set show was build for \$25,000 for building it, painting it, pretty elaborate. A musical would run \$65,000, \$70,000. Most shows now are stylized due to economics. A bedroom set is just an indication. It might be a bed pad and a foot board, something like that. Whereas, when I started, it was a bedroom. There were walls.

Q. What were some of the biggest problems you encountered building sets? Getting materials or getting help?

A. Well, different periods, getting help became a problem after TV started. And I didn't blame the men because they had a fifty-two week a year job, and security, and paid vacations which we couldn't give them. There was one time there the help got so bad, that we went to the union in a body and petitioned the union to take in some men.

Q. There were so few men?

A. Yes, almost all the young men I had went in the service. The war was on. I lost my men to the Army.

Q. Was this Korea or the Second World War?

A. The Second World War. And the union finally agreed to get some men in, and they set up a committee, and they called for applicants, anybody. It didn't make any difference. You didn't have to be an apprentice or anything. Well, they took in about forty-five men. And there were four shops. We got ten of those guys and we needed them for built work and the flat scenery. I put them upstairs, and it was a joy working with those fellows. They were indentured for five years. As soon as the five years were up, they went into television. So now, we're back where we started again. And one of the bad things is the men can work in the theatre and the shop. It's the same union. They worked days in the shop and nights in the theatres. And you had to be nice to them. They were so independent, they'd tell you to go to Hell. They had to work in the theatre, and if it came to a pinch, they could live on their theatre money. That had matinees on Wednesday, and they walked out, of the shop, and they went to their matinee.

Q. So how did they solve this problem, finally?

A. They solved it by taking in anybody. Like, for instance, you work in the Music Hall. If you work in the Music Hall, you're a non-union man. And after they work in the Music Hall so long, they have to be taken into the union. They don't take the guys in for the shops, they take them in for the theatres. The shops have to struggle. I don't know about Pete, I'm sure he must be struggling, Pete Feller, but I know Willie Hart, [Mrs. MacDonald's Brother] has a difficult time.

Q. His biggest problem is collecting money from the producers.

A. They all do it on credit. And I wouldn't do that. A producer like Billy Rose, he had to pay right on the line, or else he didn't get his scenery. Otherwise, he didn't give you the money. He'd find some reason that the scenery didn't work, and he wouldn't pay you. But there's more money involved now. We did alot more work then than now.

Q. You say alot more work, did you do mostly things for Broadway?

A. Yes.

Q. Did you supplement with anything else? Expositions?

A. Occasionally. Then when TV came along, I didn't do all the TV. I couldn't because I didn't want to loose my customers.

Q. Broadway. Does that include ballets, opera, anything?

A. Anything. The opera house has a special arrangement with the union that they do it themselves. Like the Metropolitan. Nobody can do that.

Q. Are there union members in there, though?

A. Oh yes, but they have a special arrangement with the union. They never have to borrow any extra man. They have a set amount of men. And no matter how big or how little the work, these fellows have to do it. The Metropolitan has some crazy designers. They're not very efficient, costs too high.

Q. Did you ever work with Howard Bay?

A. I always liked Howard Bay, he was kind of a controversial guy. If you told him you had to make a change in scenery, he would say, "Go ahead." If you went to Mielziner and said you'd like to make a change, he'd fight you every step of the way. I think the reason was Bay was too lazy. Mielziner always had an assistant, and he would tell him, this is the way it has to be, and there was no compromise. But then

what he would do,---I remember we were doing a show called Dark of the Moon and it had this big rock scene, a mountain, and people came up all over the mountain, and we had to form that and cover it. We made it out of a wood frame, wood armature, and we covered it with wire mesh, and we cut up all the old drops around, and dipped them in glue and pasted them on, and then we put a texture on. And George Jenkins was Mielziner's assistant, and he brought us down a little piece of stone he picked up from the railroad yard for a sample for the texture of this. And we just couldn't get it to suit him. So finally I said, "George, you better get Jo down here. This is going to go on for ever and ever." So this gives Mielziner a chance to play big guy, and say, "It's OK." Here's Jenkins, having been so insistent, he must have felt about that big.

Q. Ethan Frome?

A. Who was in that? Ruth Gordon, and there was one scene there called the church sociable, and it had the wall of a church. It didn't sit straight at the audience; it sat on an angle like that. And this was the entrance of the church.

Q. The corner?

A. Yes. And a step up to the doors of the church, and then in front of that was all snow, and trees. And we had to make the show. But this whole thing had to fly up in the air when the scene was over. The whole thing, the show, the trees, the church. The set went back about fifteen feet, probably thirty-six feet in width. You know how much it weighed? 6700 pounds. And we had to run cables down through the trees so that people wouldn't see them. And in the back of the church you could put cables because nobody could see them. And when it flew up, it had lights underneath for the next scene which was included in the platform. And a border had to drop down to hide the lights. And this is one of the things we did for Mielziner.

Q. A real magic act! Do you remember how much that cost, that one?

A. Yes, that was Ethan Frome. That today would cost \$25,000, more than that. It would cost \$35,000 by the time you got it painted. I think we did it for about \$16,000. But see, this was for Max Gordon, and nobody else could do his stuff but us. We used to tell him, "Don't let the designer run crazy." Because once they knew the show was on a cost plus, they went crazy. They put everything they could think of in it because they weren't confined. It was a bad thing. And in those days to keep things quite, nowadays everything sounds like it was on a railroad train, but our whole thing was to keep everything quite, like we'd do stuff for Lunt and Fontanne. If you made noise backstage,

murder. But nowadays, I worked a show, Sweet Charity, and they had stuff in that show that we wouldn't dare do, they had hooks that the audience saw that were functional, that had nothing to do with the set, right out in front of you. Big hinges that the people could see. I guess maybe TV has some affect on it.

Q. (Question lost on change of tape).

A. In a freight car the doors open on the side. In a baggage car, the door is on the end. It's a regular train, except there's no seats, and it's much longer than a regular train that we sit in. And the scenery had to be loaded in the end door. And the reason they had baggage cars was that drops were forty-five feet long. And you could never get a drop in the side door. You had to take them in through the end door of the train.

Q. So you had to load them, one at a time then? They had to be lined up in such a way so that you could separate the cars, and then connect them together after you loaded them?

A. And the yardmaster used to do that for you.

Q. So one show, you'd load six of these cars, and they were over forty-five feet long?

A. Yes. We used to have shows with sixty drops in them. Musical shows with sixty.

Q. What kind of a show was this?

A. Follies, any musical show. We did a show called Red Hot and Blue, and Oenslager designed it. It was all hanging pieces. There was nothing else in the show. We had fifty-nine hanging pieces.

Q. I wanted to ask you about the location. Did you find that tax or rent or costs were going so high?

A. No, we owned the building. We had tax problems, real estate tax.

Q. Was it a culmination of different reasons, or because you felt you had done enough that you wanted to retire, or mostly because the men weren't sticking around helping out?

A. Yes, it got to be a struggle. You had to fight to get the men. You had to fight to keep the men.

Q. And you needed more men than you had?

A. Yes.

Q. What happened? What let up to it? Was it an abrupt thing or could you see it on the horizon and plan for it?

A. I think the whole reason for it as far as I was concerned was TV. Getting their own facilities. They took all the help, all the painters and all the carpenters.

Q. Some designers say that nowadays the young men don't measure up to the old timers. Most of the old timers came from the other side, the great scene painters?

A. That's true. And there was another problem. We had Russian and German, and you had to be father confessor because nothing was too mean for them to do to each other. And there were very few really good American painters. You can't take a guy who is a seascape painter, landscape painter, and put him in to paint scenery. He's lost. It's not a matter of ability; it's a different technique altogether. If a scenery painter painted that ship, it would be almost the size of a ship. I think that most scenic painters were trained differently.

Q. Do they start out doing that?

A. Well, it's a family thing, came down from one to the other. And in Italy and England, I don't know whether they do it now, but they did when I was there, they didn't do it like they did it, they would take what we would get four weeks to paint doing everything else, they could take six months. Like in Russia, it's all under-written by the government. They do it all onstage. If they don't like it, they do it over again. But they seem to be more artistic.

Q. That time element. That amazed me, the amount of shows that you put out in a month. What's the least amount of time you ever had to do a show?

A. I did a show for the Air Force in seventeen days. The biggest show you've ever seen in your life. It was during the Second World War. And they had a civilian manager, Harry Horner designed it. He was Australian, a real artistic fellow. You know how I did it? Nolan did stuff for me, and there was a shop up the street. He did stuff for me. Another shop did stuff for me. And we only had seventeen days to get that whole show out. You never saw anything like it for size. It had barracks in it; it had the whole front of an airplane.

Q. Did you ever find working on a show that if you had too many, you might wind up having to pay overtime and loose money on it?

A. I tell you what I used to do. If I could see far enough ahead and got a show, I'd start knocking the Hell out of it in the beginning, and put the overtime in in the beginning. Get alot of it done as soon as I could, then maybe I could coast the rest of the way.

If you let it go to the end, the guys are dead. Two, three o'clock in the morning, everybody's making errors. That's the way I used to do it. But they don't do it now because they figure that maybe they'll get it done, and it never turns out that way. And another thing, when things are going really good, you always have other work. So you just couldn't stick with one show. Say, "I'll do this and then I'll work overtime." You had to get it out of the way. But I always tried to do the difficult stuff first. Do that first, and then coast in with the stuff, so when it got near the end, you had the easy stuff to do. There were always shows that had problems and difficulties, and I tried to get them out of the way first. We did a show called Lady in the Dark that had a double turntable, and we had another turntable inside of that. So, one went one way, and the other went the other way, and they did all kinds of tricks. And there was a basic set with a series of "S" shaped screens across it. And that's how they did all the fadeouts and things. One of the "S" shaped screens was on one table, and one of the performers was out there performing, and then we would just turn the one table and one set of screens would stay still, but the other set would come around and she'd disappear behind them. That was a tough show. And right away, I got on the turntables and the screens.

Q. Did you find that there were many modifications or changes?

A. That's one bad thing about this area where we put up the scenery. Up to that point, the designer never saw it until we got it through. And the directors, too, make changes. Sometimes it was impossible. You didn't have time and you had to tell them. I did a show, The Miracle Worker, George Jenkins designed it. The director was Arthur Penn, and he was sick in the hospital and we only had three weeks to do the whole thing. And Penn made radical changes in it. In that case, I got ahold of Joe Harris, who was the manager, and told him Arthur Penn wants this and that, and it's going to cost you such and such money, and he didn't believe. We were so far ahead with the thing. And the whole thing moved from one side to the other. One side was a railroad station, and the other side was a combination dining room and living room. And it had to be on wheels to roll. And he came along and said it was too high with the wheels on, and he wanted to cut it all down. We had it all finished. This was about 1960. And we had to put smaller wheels on it. We did a show at the Music Box called Annie Oakley designed by Jo Mielziner where we saw the gridiron start to separate from the walls of the stage, and they closed the show midweek.

Q. We were talking about how you wound up your business. Can you talk about those later years?

A. The main thing with me was I was getting fed up trying to operate.

Q. This was in '62.

A. Yes. Times weren't too good either.

Q. Why did you close?

A. One reason I closed was we weren't doing the business. There were four or five shops and there wasn't enough work to go around.

Q. There was one reason, the unrecorded reason. [Tape shut off]. And the other reason, was the cost of materials, the cost of space. I know help was a big reason. Did you find that bidding was getting more cutthroat?

A. Oh yes.

Q. It wasn't a gentlemanly thing anymore?

A. Oh no.

Q. The element of art was not as important as it used to be?

A. No. But then things got so bad as far as kickbacks. I don't know if anybody will tell you this or not. When they designed a show, there were four bidders, right? And they want you. And they gave you a different idea than they gave us. They'd give everybody the same set of prints, and they'd tell you this was built, this was painted, but the guy that was supposed to get the job, they would say, "Well you don't have to do that." And that would automatically raise the other guy's bid. A show is almost always too expensive. When you put your bid in, there have to be cuts made, so when the cuts came, the designer would cut less from you than he would from the guy he wanted. I got so that I hated to go because I know it was such a crooked thing. You could call it politics, yes.

Q. How did the situation get to that point? If you didn't play ball with them you couldn't get work? But this wasn't true in all cases, right? There must have been some people around who still operated above board.

A. Yes, but mostly the problem was the manager.

Q. But in other words, the producer had no knowledge of what was going on?

A. Lots of times he didn't, sometimes he did.

Q. I don't understand the rundown from producer to general manager, the hierarchy escapes me sometimes. We keep talking about



producer, but he's putting up the money. But there must be some producers who have more to do with this thing than the general managers, for instance. Some of these bidding sessions you would go to sometimes you would see the producer, correct or incorrect?

A. No, very rarely would you see the producer. The designer and sometimes the manager. And after you got the drawings and you made up your bid, then you would start to deal with the manager. Very rarely would you deal with the producer.

Q. The bidding session, they'd invite you to somebody's house or office?

A. We'd go to the designer's studio, and you'd write up your bid, and send it in.

Q. How much time would they give you?

A. Well, they always wanted it the next day. You'd be there 'til five o'clock at night, and they'd want the bids the next morning. And that's when I sat up 'til three o'clock in the morning.

Q. You had no help?

A. I did it. Any of the extra stuff I did myself. I had Mary's brother who has the shop; he was my assistant. I gave him alot of this stuff in the normal course of the day. But lots of times, take a guy like George Jenkins, he used to be a nut on getting special materials, special kinds of cloths for draperies. So how could you go home, and have a bid the next morning? You wouldn't know the price of the stuff. This would be stuff you never saw before, so you had to take a chance that you could keep it within a certain price. 75 percent of it was stabs in the dark. I could never understand why a producer could let a manager run that thing, a manager who had no more idea of what the show was physically than the guy on the street. They had no idea what they were getting. The chance that the producer took with the other guy. And it came down to people like me and Pete working the thing out for them somehow, some way. But there was no cut and dried thing, ever. Most of the time the manager was gambling with--unless the producer knew he had a hit and invested his own money--gambling with investors' money. How they could take such chances with other people's money. But somehow they got on, some way. And that's another thing. They'll let anybody bid on a show. You can be from so-and-so construction company and say, "Can I bid on the show?" And they'll say, "Yes." You might not know anything about it. It's done in such a slipshod manner.

Q. Could you predict an alternate way of doing it? For instance, do you think we should have funding from the State to allow more time?

A. I don't know where the funding would come, but you should have more time. When they're getting a company together, they get a manager and a director. And I say they should get the designer right away. What they do? They wait; there's five weeks left. That's when they hire the designer. And he's working under the gun. It's supposed to be saving them money, but they should be put in. He should be part of the original group that starts the show.

Q. Has anyone ever tried to explain why they bring the designer in so late and you guys get the bid so late, and then you have two or three days to assemble it? It gets trucked over, and put together onstage, and they start as soon as it's out together, right? They don't have that many rehearsals on it.

A. Yes. Listen, if the show's going to try out in Boston, it'll never see a stage until it gets to Boston. And they haul in on Saturday. They open the following Saturday, so they have a week to get that show on and rehearse the people and everything else. But the first thing they have to do is get the scenery and lights up.

Q. How much time do you have to set up?

A. If you haul in on a Saturday, they want to have a rehearsal on it Tuesday afternoon. And you're not sure yourself when you get in that theatre yourself, whether everything you thought is going to come out that way. It's such a gamble. The way it used to be, if you took a show out on tryout, they opened on Thursday, not Saturday. Now they've gotten two more days, Friday and Saturday. But then the show closed. The way it was years ago, the show closed Saturday night in Boston, and you're going to Philadelphia, you opened Monday night.

Q. What about union contracts? When you're working on Sundays, did the men get overtime, time and a half or double time?

A. Oh yes.

Q. What does golden overtime mean? I've heard that expression.

A. The only thing I know about is the transfer. If they don't get back to the barn by five o'clock, they get another two day's day.

Q. These are the men that haul the scenery? Excuse me, what was the name of the show you built and toured after the close.

A. Night Life was the name.

Q. You built it in your shop, and then you closed the shop and went out with it?

A. Yes. Sidney Kingsley wrote it and directed it, and I stayed with the show in Philadelphia and brought it into New York. And then we opened in a theatre on 47th Street. The show didn't run. It ran about six weeks in 1962.

Q. Was this a decision that you made, or was it something that came along?

A. No, Mr. Kingsley asked me to take it out. It was a tricky thing, and he knew I was going to close up the shop.

Q. He knew that this was your last show?

A. Yes. And he asked me if I'd stay with it.

Q. Can you tell me whether you forecasted the closing of your shop, or was it something you didn't forecast?

A. No, I was thinking about it for a year and a half, two years. But then downtown in New York they had some loft fires, warehouses burned, and the city got very hot on the sprinkler system. We had no sprinkler system. We had one in the paint studio but not in the shop, and the Fire Department came around and said we'd have to have a sprinkler system. So I had an engineer come in and analyze it, and we made up drawings and sent them to the Building Department and they OK'd the drawings, and it would have cost me \$125,000. And that was it. And I said, "That's it." If I had moved, you wouldn't believe what it would have cost to move, and then I would have had to rent, and in those days they were asking about \$1.50 per square foot, and I know it's more than that. You could pay rent; you could pay \$35,000 a year in rent just like that. And I was so discouraged at the way things changed.

Q. So there were several things, not just one thing that made up your mind? So what happened to that facility?

A. The building is torn down, and there's a drop there for trucks. But the competition was so--it was keen. But it was not on the level. I just couldn't see it.

Q. Did all of the people you employed disperse to other studios?

A. They had no problem. There were so many guys, I had Bobby MacDonald who you talked to. He was a shop man, he wouldn't come near the shop. (He is now a union official). Then I had Danny Walters who was married to Bobby's sister. He won't come near the shop; he works in the theatre.

Q. Then your entire family is all involved in theatre. Your brothers, your father?

A. Yes. My father used to drive a stagecoach from Albany to New York. The actor he worked for was one of the guys who used to drive, and he finally got a job in the theatre through this actor. And then he got so that he was the carpenter in the theatre. And working around in the theatre, my father and another fellow named Clause Hagan decided that why can't we get some of this work, and so they opened up a place, and they had alot of work. This was before I was born. And from that beginning, four shops started. For instance, the fellow who used to be my father's foreman, he opened up a shop. His name was George Vail, and then there was a fellow named O'Rourke, and he branched out and opened up a shop. And that's how it spread around.

Q. Tell me how everybody else got into it.

A. It's a matter of course. I went to work. My older brother Howie, who died, he was in the First World War and when he came out, he went to work in the shop. Then I had another brother Eddie. As soon as s he got old enough, he started to work in the shop. Soon as I got old enough, I worked in the shop. I only worked in the shop. They worked in the theatres. Both of them were road men. They loved to take out shows. But I stayed in the shop. I never worked in the theatre. My half brother owned the shop then. He was much older. You see my father was married twice. And all the boys now are in it.

Q. You mean sons of your brothers?

A. Yes. My son's not in it. [Break in tape]. This is what we call a rear-fold traveller. You've seen curtains. The reason we did it, Ziegfeld had a curtain with a Currier and Ives painting on it. And he wanted to picture to go off flat, instead of the thing bunching. It had to bunch offstage.

Q. What do you call that?

A. A rear-fold traveller. We designed it and got a patent on it. Now, of course, the patent ran out; everybody has it. We did things, like when a show had a turntable in it.

Q. I was going to ask you about the outside turntable, inside turntable. How did you get the outside one to turn?

A. We had a gear rack around it, and then we had a double gear into that, and a shaft that went off to a machine that wound it up. A pinion gear. And on the inside one, we had a guy inside of it, inside one of these screens that I was telling you about, see, that was done with cable. And he was in the screen all night with a hand

winch. A man was less expensive than the machine. Years ago, if you had a turntable in a show, when that show went on the road, you had to have an advance man to set it up. In other words, you had to bring two turntables. So when they moved from New York to Philadelphia, when they got there, the turntable was all in because it took so long. And we devised a way to put a whole turntable together in an hour, which was another thing we did that was copied. We tried to get a patent, but the patent lawyer said it couldn't be done. The table was round, and we took a four foot square section and we made a frame out of angle irons with the angles running out. And then we made pie-shaped sections with each one with a groove in it. And it would take sixteen sections to make the whole circumference. And we slipped this pie-shaped section into this angle iron frame, and you just had to put one bolt in. We left this angle iron frame open, and, when it was all done, we put a top in there. You just put one bolt in the flange of the angle iron, and you just kept slipping them in all the way around.

Q. So these pie-shaped sections like slices didn't have tops on them?

A. Yes, they had tops on them; they were all set. And what we did, they had a wood rib, we kept the outside rib in. You'd slide one section, slide another section, put one bolt in the outside edge. If you had sixteen, pie-shaped sections you'd put sixteen bolts and that's all. And angle iron frame, we had four angles and then we had a U-beam across that on which there was a pin. Then on the stage we had a plate with a bearing in it. And the first thing you did was bring out your 4 x 4 angle frame. The first thing you did was set your bearing on it, drop that in, and the pin goes in, and then start to put your sections in. We did away with all that extra work.

Q. What do you find yourself doing most of all in the shop?

A. Myself? I loved to draft. I loved to make the drawings, figure things out. Like shows that we got that were tricky, like tables come in at different angles. I used to make models of that for myself, and work them, and draw them up. As far as the finances, that used to kill me. I hated it. And her brother is the same way. He's got a shop, and he's just like me. I wanted the money, of course, but I wanted somebody else to collect.

Q. You were the idea man? You were the force being the thing?

A. Yes. When I first went to work for a guy, there was a little Englishman named Jack Howes who was the superintendent, I guess you'd call it. He made all the drawings. He figured out all the different things that had to be figured out. When I went to work in the shop as a carpenter for two or three years. And this Jack Howes told my

half brother that he needed an assistant. So my half brother put me in with Jack Howes. I learned alot of things from him. My brother, T.B. MacDonald, was well known, by everybody. Bernie MacDonald they called him. He did all the Follies. He was a very flamboyant guy, very outgoing. My half brother.

Q. No one has any projections for the future. Can you see anything on the horizon? What is going to happen to all this? The technical theatre.

A. I don't think it's all that bad. You take all these outlying theatres, there's alot of them around, and I don't think it's dead by any means.

Q. I don't either. But we started talking about the fact that there's not enough time, and they're trying to cut corners and they're cutting scenery, and some designers argue that producers are doing it with an axe instead of artistically.

A. That's true. I think it's going to stumble the way it always did. We had one time, when this thing came up about Studio Alliance starting a paint studio to save the producer the trucking. As I told you, we built it and then they had to truck it to a paint studio that had nothing to do with us. And so they started their own paint studio and sold the producers the idea they were going to save them the trucking. We analyzed one year back, and we came out with a figure that it was less than 1 percent of the cost of a play. For instance, you did a production that was \$60,000, and the trucking only cost \$600. We had a reputation for building; we were tops. We got shows without bids; we had plenty of customers, Dillingham, Ziegfeld, Erlanger, Max Gordon, Guthrie McClintock, Katherine Cornell, Gilbert Miller. We did their work without any question. But my argument was that I could make more money just building the stuff. Because if I built and painted, and I put a bid into you for \$10,000 to build a production, well alright, that's \$10,000. Now I put a bid in for \$20,000 which included the painting, see? And the producer says, "Gee, \$20,000." Where if I put a bid in for \$10,000, it wasn't such a shock to them, and then the other bid would come later, the painting. But it's backfired so bad; the designers come down and they kill you. This guy, I won't mention his name, but he does alot of Broadway productions, musicals, and if he don't like it, if somebody got the show over his head, man he would be down to that studio, I mean anybody's studio and he'd kill you, by demanding your time and slowing you down with consultations on wanting to see a finished drop, and so forth.

Q. Did you feel you had some particular talent to do this or did you come to some turning point? Was it a matter of making a living or loving the work?

A. First it was making a living, but then I got so that I loved doing a show. I figure out a show, build a show, get it out, get it in the theatre, and get it over. Then after I got it out, I lost interest in it. But I say, I should have had someone in the money department. I gave some credit, and I did get stung too, sometimes.

Q. You lost money on a show?

A. Maybe we lost money; maybe we didn't get the last payment.

Q. What was more frequent? You didn't get paid, or you made a mistake in bidding?

A. No, I never--that wasn't with me--I rarely made a mistake.

Q. While we're on the subject, what was the normal markup you tried to make?

A. 35 percent.

Q. Were you happy with 10 percent?

A. If it came down to a pinch, you were, yes. I'm not talking about --that includes profit and your cost of everything else. The way we used to figure, we figured out the material, then we'd figure out the painting then we added 35 percent to that. That was supposed to take care of whatever we needed.

Q. You mean labor?

A. Oh no, we'd figure out material, and we added the labor to it. That was included in it. 35 percent would be your rent, for your light for your profit and all that.

Q. How did you figure on it? How did you bid a show out?

A. I don't know about the other guys.

Q. Feller told me he adds up everything and then he adds 10 percent on the top. And he says lately he's lucky to make 5 percent in some cases.

A. If he does that, he's stupid. We had a formula, how much to charge per square foot for flatwork. And we had a formula like that for different paints. If the flat frames were so high, they were so much a

square foot. The higher they got, the more you had to charge for them. And you would know what decks cost, to deck over a stage. You never work on a stage floor. You bring in a deck, and you cover the stage with it, and it's about that thick. Because every show has grooves cut in it where these units work in and out, and on and off and there's a pin that goes down that guides it. And you can't cut holes in the stage floor. If this is a platform and it's got wheels on it, it has to go out straight like that. You have to have a guide down there like a fin on a boat, and you've got to have something to run it.

Q. How wide is that slot?

A. The slot is maybe three-eighths of an inch, just big enough to get a one-quarter iron in it. But you can't cut slots in the stage; they won't let you. All shows now, not all, maybe 75 percent, have cables running off, and they run in a groove, off to a pulley, and then maybe to a winch. And all of that has to be done in your place. Each unit has to have a cable, to pull it one way or the other. That's another thing. Every stage had traps in it. They don't anymore, but they used to bring in traps, and take the traps of the theatre up, bring in your own traps and cut all these grooves in them. But that was a job. So we conceived the idea of making the decks. We did a show called Alice in Wonderland. That was a real fantasy. We had platforms coming on and off. The curtain would open, and a platform would come out. In the same movement, you roll on the platform and open the curtain. Then when they came offstage they closed. When they came on, the movement of the platform would open the curtain. We had a panorama, and we had a 125 feet of goods, and people were supposed to be walking. But instead of that, the panorama was moving behind them.



## APPENDIX A - 2

Answering Questions - Mr. Charles Bender	Nolan Scenic Studios
Interviewed By - J. Collom	1163 Atlantic Ave.
Date - Nov., 1974	Brooklyn, N.Y.
	(Old Bklyn Ice Palace)

Q. Your experience is about forty years in the theatre?

A. Yes. I have a union card. Next year, it's forty years.

Q. Your name is?

A. Bender, Charles Bender.

Q. When you started, did you start out as a carpenter?

A. You start as an apprentice, usually, in this business.

Q. Not as a draftsman?

A. No, as an apprentice in a carpenter's shop. At that time, we had quite a few prop shops in existence. You could be an apprentice in a prop shop or an electric shop. There were three ways you could get a card.

Q. Do you have any idea how Nolan's got started?

A. Actually, the father of William P. Nolan, who established this business, went out and rented a shop for him, while he was on the road with a show. And when he returned to New York from the show, there was a shop established for him--rented tools in and everything else, and they said, "Well, we have a certain amount of Shubert's contracts, let's go." They had a certain guarantee of work, and that's how the shop was started. And when I first worked with Nolan, the whole business was a little bit touch and go. You'd work three weeks and then there would be another two weeks before another show would come in, and at that time, the men would run with their toolboxes to whoever had a show. If a competitor got a show, and he knew you were running out of work, he'd call that shop and say, "Who have you got working there?" and they'd give him the list of who was getting laid off, and he'd say, "Well, send me so and so," and he'd pick up the men that way.

Q. How did they get these shows? How did they get the work?

A. It was all bidding. Normally, you go in an office and the designer lays out the drawings and explains the whole thing.

Q. How would a person, back then, find out about this designer? You had to be established already or....

A. You had to be established, and they usually called you. If you weren't established, you'd have to run around to the offices of all the producers and say, "I'd like to be called in to the bid session for such and such show."

Q. How many places would be called to make a bid?

A. I would say it depended on who the producer was. An experienced producer knew what kind of work he could expect out of a certain shop. He would only call maybe two or three in. He would only consider two or three. There were other shops that didn't do the quality of work.

Q. Would they be called upon by the main shops to do lesser work?

A. No. In this business, it goes so fast and so quick, and you've got to keep up with changes. While they're in rehearsal, they decide that the entrances aren't big enough or acting areas aren't big enough, and you really have to be sitting on the job. You can't pass out part of the work.

Q. Would you talk more about bidding? Have you been in on a number of bidding sessions?

A. Well, the bid session is usually called at the producer's office; if not there, at the designer's studio. And normally you only see two other competitors. That's normal. On occasion, you'll meet alot more. Actually, there are only seven or eight that can be called in, and I can only remember about two occasions, where all the competition was there. We feel as though when they call all the competition, then they don't know, they're not experienced in the business, because there's such a wide range of what we turn out.

Q. There are only three places still operating now. Is that true?

A. No, you can go to eight places and get a bid, of which three are out of town. Willie Hart's in Jersey, and Imperial in Ft. Lee, We consider them local, because we all sit in on our bargaining sessions with the union together. That's Westchester County, Brooklyn, Queens--that's one local. Manhattan, Bronx, and Staten Island is another; and Hudson County and Essex County in New Jersey all bargain together. We all have the same wage scale and so forth.

Q. How do you make the bids?

A. Well, you go to an office or studio, and the drawings are laid out on a table, and, usually, there's some art work or sketches. They might only be 3/8 inch or 1/4 inch scale, but suggestive, and they talk about the detail of the work. If they don't have a sketch, they explain the amount of work. Say you're looking at a one-scene show. A lot of times, when you're looking at it, the drawings are marked, "For bid only." In other words, you don't draw them, you don't build from the drawings.

Q. What drawings do they do for the "bid only?"

A. A good ground plan, and the wall areas are pretty well defined. It'll be the detailing that might be missing. For instance, on a handrail, they'll have dotted lines indicating spindles, and they're either going to pick something out of stock, something that would be bought, or they're going to design something. And that is discussed--how much and how complicated they expect it to be, so you can be within line.

Q. In a bidding session, is there one that stands out in your mind that you did get, that there was a lot of competition for?

A. Not really, because usually in your experience, when you go in to bid on a big show, you know what your chances are of getting the show. You've either been doing work for this producer, or you know the designer wants to bring the show to your shop. And you've got to be in with the price. If it's very important to the designer that it comes to our shop, he'll try to get you--like, for instance, somebody comes in a couple of thousand dollars under your price, he talks to the producer, and then he talks to us, and sees that we'll meet the price and so forth to get the show in here. Sure, you get burned, not usually because of a producer or designer. It's just that they run out of money. We don't get burned by being forced to do work that we didn't figure on. The little times you might get burned on that, it's not bad. It's an item or a tool that got a lot more complicated than you saw it. But we're talking about the \$400--\$500, or \$600 area, not in the thousands.

Q. Let's go back and talk about the history you recall.

A. William P. Nolan, who was the only one of the Nolan Brothers when it started, was about the only one capable of running a shop. There was a brother, Richard, and his father,

who was known as Packy Nolan. They made the three brothers. In other words, it was two brothers and a father. That combination of the two brothers and the father operating the shop lasted about six or seven years. That was maybe 1932 to 1938. And then William P. Nolan took the business over, and it was William P. Nolan doing business as Nolan Brothers, and that's the way it remained until 1956, when they moved here, and they incorporated, and myself and Mr. Abramson became part of the firm. Now it's almost seven years ago that William P. Nolan died, and we've been running the business. We had a good introduction to running the business because, for four or five years, he let us make the decisions.

Q. The things that you did in the beginning, has it always been the same?

A. The operations are very much the same, except the type of building has changed an awful lot. There was a lot less iron work than we do today. A sill iron was about the only iron work they did in the shop. If there was iron work, there were several west-side ironworkers that did iron work for the theatrical business. You know this business moves fast. When you call a man in, you're not calling him in for a month or six weeks from now. You want him tomorrow or the day after. So a few of them knew the business, and they worked along with us that way. Eventually, all the shops were forced to put in some kind of an iron shop just to keep up. You couldn't control the job when it was six or eight blocks away from you, so all the major shops do their own iron work--within our own union framework, too--all within the stagehands' union.

Q. You mentioned something about the busiest times. The best times were right around the war...just after the war?

A. Yes, just after World War II, I would say, we had about five real good years.

Q. Do you remember what shows you did during that time?

A. I could do a little research. Call Me Mister comes to mind--the musical, a fairly successful musical. I'll look it up for you. As a matter of fact, we found ourselves at times with three musicals in the shop at one time. We tried to avoid it too, but at that time, we didn't have enough shops to absorb all the business that was around. I remember one occasion where we didn't have room to take a show, and they said, "Well, can't you get room any other place?" And there was one shop. When we had more shops, there was less work in the theatre.

Q. What period was that?

A. I would say from the late twenties right up until after World War II. There was no continuous work for any shop, because the summer period was always slow. And at that time you could count on all shops being fairly busy between September and December. And sometimes in December, there would be a five or six weeks slow period after the holidays, and then there'd be just a little spurt for the spring--very little--a musical and maybe five or six one-scene shows, and that was it.

Q. Did you get much work in the summer?

A. We really didn't do much of any type of work in the summer, until the Shakespeare Festival up at Stratford started. And then we'd start building that around April or May. We would deliver the last show the end of June, beginning of July. And that was the first introduction to any kind of summer work.

Q. In your opinion, how does your company rate in this business?

A. We're the oldest in the business. We have one competitor, Pete Feller. We find, very often, there's only two people called in to the bid sessions. Almost all the time, I see Feller.

Q. How many people do you have working now?

A. Normally, I would say a good crew in the carpenter shop is about thirty; in the paint shop, about ten. That's about what we can handle.

Q. You don't have exclusive men who do carpentry and metal work?

A. We have two or three of the men who do either carpenter work or metal work. In almost every show, there's work that requires the iron shop to be operated. I would say in a six-week show, the iron shop is operating at least one week.

Q. What if you started and had twelve weeks to do three musicals?

A. Do three musicals in the twelve weeks?

Q. Yes.

A. I would say yes, but then there would be some overtime involved. In other words, one of the shows--say the last one

you got, you'd have to figure overtime in getting it out--even though the overtime wasn't exclusively on this show, but just to keep the other ones moving. That often happens. It could happen right now. We have a show with a definite delivery for the 27th of December. And Mr. Edwards (Ben) .... that delivers a month later. And it's really more than a month's work, so if they give it to us, within the next week or so, we have to figure that we're going to put some overtime in right away to clean this one up and to keep that one moving.

Q. Can you tell me the designers that have worked with you?

A. Well, the designers that are active today, we've worked with over the years are Oliver Smith, Jo Mielziner, Don Oenslager, right now. I'm trying to think of the old ones who've been around.

Q. You've done all their shows?

A. No, and I don't think anybody has been exclusive with any one designer. We have done a great part of Oliver Smith's shows--80 percent or close to it--that he has designed for his company, American Ballet Theatre. He also designs in Europe. And we've done a lot of work with Rouben Ter-Arutunian lately.

Q. What about shows that come over from Europe? Do they bring a lot of scenery?

A. Sometimes all of it, and sometimes they'll bring the basic, like "great deck" or something like that. And we build it here. In other words, they figure it's cheaper than shipping, or they're worried there's going to be too much change to make the thing work here. They don't put in a deck floor, and we build the deck. That's happened quite often.

Q. What's been the worst time?

A. I would say the last six or seven years, really. The reason I would say is that all shops expanded when things were good and thought they'd have the volume to keep a big shop operating. Now you find out that the volume is going down, and your overhead is going up.

Q. I was talking to Hamilton. He was telling me that they're not making much money.

A. His business?

Q. Right.

A. You talk to any of the contractors, we're all the same way. Back a few years, we actually lost money.

Q. How does that happen? Can you describe the contract process? When you make a bid, do you sit down and decide on the amount\*\*\*\*or do you have a certain\*\*\*\*it might go over the maximum or the minimum....

A. No, we figure a show for a price we'd like to get it. In other words, it should be a profit-making bid. In any business that you do custom work, you're always open to mistakes. You give a man a job and he works for two days with the wrong measurements or something like that, and it has to be done over. And you can't figure all these things in. But I would say, normally, we put in a very honest bid. We don't go over a few thousand dollars. So if we cut back on a show--a request to get a little closer to a competitor--we feel as though it's really giving away money. In other words, we haven't stretched the price up, so we have leeway to cut. We put in a figure to get the job.

Q. Can you recall a show you lost on?

A. Didn't make money on?

Q. I just want an example, for instance\*\*\*\*

A. Well, we've had shows where we've made a lot of money--what I consider a lot of money. In getting that out, and getting out somebody else's show at the same time, you wind up starting to give your profit away, putting in overtime getting the other show out. So there's really no time when we can say we've made a killing. There's always something that knocks you down somewhere.

Q. In other words, you go through the operating capital very quickly?

A. Yes, and I'd say a place this size with the overhead--when you do eight to ten weeks with nothing in the place, that sets you back an awful lot. You might be profit-making for the year, and all you have to do is have a bad end of November and December, and then your overhead starts eating away at your profit. I think that's one of the worst problems in the business--the overhead we have to pay.

Q. How many square feet do you have here?

A. About 30,000.

Q. Does it go by square feet when you pay taxes?

A. No. We don't own the building. On a rental, it's usually by the square foot. That's a basic lease, but we have an escalator clause and, of course, we have to take into consideration tax increases. And we occupy the whole building, so the heat, and the water bills, and everything else is passed right along to us.

Q. I guess everybody here is a union member?

A. Not necessarily. If they're not a union member, they have a permit from the union.

Q. What happens when there's no shows in the shop?

A. We have to let them go. Now there is a certain amount of stock work, like battens for drops, making up lengths of stiffeners, jacks, things like that. And we might take two or three men and try to hold them. What we've done recently--you can see it's getting bad, and we don't know how long it's going to be--we go to a three, maybe a four day week just to keep the shop going and keep the men with some kind of work.

Q. Is there any retrieving scenery? Once it goes out of here, it's gone? Do they ever call you up and say, "Look, the show's over, we don't want it."

A. Well, on occasion, they do. Say, if you built a show with three or four nice portals, they might say, "Are you interested in taking back the velour?" And sometimes we are, sometimes we aren't.



Answering Questions - Mr. Charles Bender  
 Interviewed By - J. Collom  
 Date - Jan., 1975

Nolan Scenic Studios  
 1163 Atlantic Ave.  
 Brooklyn, N.Y.  
 (Old Bklyn. Ice Palace)

Q. Can you tell me the size of this place, square foot?

A. The place we're operating in at the moment is 22,500, and there is about another 10,000 square feet in the cellar, in the floor upstairs, and that little side building where we load in. So I'd say 32,000 to 33,000 square feet.

Q. How many people do you employ here?

A. It'll vary from fifteen to sixty.

Q. When you're doing a couple of shows at the same time, how many would you say you need?

A. Fortyfive to fiftyfive when we're doing a couple of shows.

Q. What is the volume of business you do in a year?

A. Approximately a million dollars.

Q. There are other outfits in the association that do that amount of business. And it seems Feller does twice that. Is that accurate?

A. A possibility, yes.

Q. I was under the impression you did more business than that.

A. No, we stay strictly to show business, on Broadway or what goes on at Lincoln Center, the ballet and opera. And Feller seems to go for Broadway and any other outside work that's available.

Q. Do you do TV shows once in awhile?

A. Haven't done any in years.

Q. Any exposition work?

A. Only if a theatrical designer happens to have it and we have an opportunity to bid on it. But to go out and look for it, no.

Q. How does this work with you and Arnold? Are you part owners? You mentioned you have a part of the business. Are you controlling or not controlling?

A. At the moment, we're fifty-fifty partners, and we own it.

Q. So there's no Nolan attached to it.

A. No. Mrs. Nolan is no longer holding any interest.

Q. Has this been a recent thing?

A. No, we started to buy her out around four and a half years ago. And she gave up her control of the business.

Q. So this is now your business even though you operate under the name Nolan?

A. That's right. It's incorporated un Nolan Scenery Studios and we continued it that way.

Q. One of you is a mechanic and the other is a scenic artist, is that accurate?

A. Yes, normally only one person runs it. I would say it has always been the builder who owns the shop, not the artist. Because that goes back to the days when we didn't have combined shops and studios. And when they finally were forced to combine it seemed that the carpenter shops absorbed the studios, and that's how most of the builders became shop owners even though it took in building and painting.

Q. My investigations have shown me that the mechanics union is a little more lenient than the United Scenic Artist's Union, 829. Is that correct?

A. That's correct. The reason we have the comparison is because of television. And in the mechanic's end, there isn't a big differential between the pay of television and the pay of television and the pay in a shop. But when it comes to the artist, it's a big differential. In other words, we have cost of living. We also have fixed hours that they can work in the day, without overtime. Whereas in television, it's an eight hour day, regardless of what eight hours; they don't have cost of living increases. I would say on the average it's twenty to thirty percent cheaper to paint in television than it is to paint for Broadway.

Q. How difficult is it to get into the mechanic's union?

A. It can vary a lot. You never know when they're going to open up the thing, and lately they've been drawing men who have worked as permit workers in the shop. They've had a good chance to look them over and know their ability, and when they open up the books, they usually open them to the men who have been covering their jurisdiction.

Q. How does a person get a permit?

A. When all the men in the local are employed, all the shop men, and there are no I. A. men available, then they open the books and a man gets a permit to go to work. And we usually draw them from the building trades.

Q. When you say, "I. A.," you mean?

A. I. A. T. S. E. In other words, the union man from an out-of-town local would still get a job before a man who belonged to the Brotherhood, let's say.

Q. Can you trace for me the process the show goes through contractually--the standard way, and then the ways it might be unconventionally? The process from the contract the union has with the producer, the scenic designer?

A. Well, that's how the show starts. The scenic designer gets a contract with the producer. It has to be filed at the scenic artist's union, and he's supposed to have his fee before he shows any drawings or gets any prices. Then when he has the show set, you'll either meet at the designer's studio or at the producer's office, even at rehearsal halls, things like that, and the show is explained to the contractors, and usually at that time they set a date when they expect the bids in. It varies with the size of the show, but it's usually within three or four days that they expect the prices.

Q. What would you say is the biggest problem that you encounter in this business?

A. At the moment? Collections. On money.

Q. Why is that?

A. It's hard to explain, but I guess the budgets aren't too realistic when they start off, and they run into problems

that can't be forseen, and they spend money a little faster than they should. So when it comes down to the lastpayment, you're usually left hanging for all or part of it.

Q. What's your recourse?

A. Not much, because we deal with limited partnerships and it's like a corporation going out of business. You can't really hold any individuals responsible for the money.

Q. Does this happen frequently?

A. Not too frequently, but recently, there's been a rash of it.

Q. Do you have lawyers working on it?

A. We do if we feel there's a chance. I would say in the normal procedure we stand a chance of getting about fifty percent of what's owed us over a period of three, four, sometimes as long as five years. Something will happen. The show might not have been a success, but they'll sell the music or something like that. And there'll be a little income and they'll give it to you in dribs and drabs so you might get fifty percent of your money.

Q. Why deliver a show without getting your money?

A. Well the show isn't worth anything to us after it's built. It's just taking up space and it's easier to have it sent out and hope they pay it.

Q. And they know that. But aren't you supposed to get a certain percentage of it before?

A. One third, one third, but at the last minute, they give an excuse. One partner isn't in town. They can't sign the check. The show is going out Friday, so you'll get the check Monday. Monday after Monday, we don't get the check. We know all the stories, but we still let them go out hoping that something will happen.

Q. This is a good way to go out of business in a hurry if it happens a lot?

A. It sure is.

Q. For instance, scene painters. How does Arnold bring them in and how does he train them?

A. There is no such thing. They used to have what they called students. And that system has died. Now it's an open test. Usually people go to school, Yale, Carnegie Tech., or some school that teaches theatrical arts and they take a test, and if they pass the test, they become full-fledged union members. They no longer train anybody in the studios. The shops still train apprentices. That's how we get our men.

Q. Do you find that the newer painters aren't as good as the older painters?

A. It varies, but I would say on the whole, the older painters seem to be more productive.

Q. Faster?

A. It seemed that they were all more or less of equal talent, and today the talent ranges quite a bit. But only certain people can work on certain stuff, and the simpler stuff, people who aren't as talented, and so forth. And it'll show up, the more talented people get the most work. But, on the whole, I remember in the studio that everybody seemed to know what they were doing all the time, more experienced people, everybody had put about twentyfive to thirty years in the business.

Q. In this shop do you have a chargeman, or is Arnold Abramson chargeman?

A. No, we have a chargeman besides Arnold.

Q. Would it be legitimate to have just Arnold as the chargeman since he belongs to the union?

A. It's a question. Some shops the boss considers himself a chargeman. But when I'm in the theatre, sometimes we're out all day, there's no chargeman in the shop. So there should be somebody appointed as chargeman for that day, or week, or whatever it might be. And when the boss goes on vacation there should be a chargeman, and we avoid that by having a chargeman on all the time.

Q. Do you have your mechanic shop broken down into foreman, or leadman, or something like that?

A. Well, not to the extent it used to be. We have more people on the payroll now receiving over the scale pay, and we consider them leadmen, and we give them the help. And we have six men like that. They're compensated for their talent by getting more money.

Q. What would you say was the most crucial element in the business that keeps you in the business? Let me change the question. It appears to me that this is a lot of work, and sometimes the rewards don't appear to be that great. Is it something you have to love or is it just a lucrative business?

A. I've seen the time when it was a money making business, pretty lucrative. That hasn't been the situation for close to fifteen years now. I would say for the past fifteen years we're all just existing, and the owners are making salaries, and that's it. What keeps you in business is your obligations. You have leases, and so forth, and you just hope that the next year is going to be better.

Q. The people that work for you, do most of them enjoy it, or is it just a job?

A. It varies, but I would say on the average, it's just a job. They leave us if something comes along that pays better. Mainly we get them over the wintertime because it's a lot better working indoors than outdoors. I've had a lot of people leave me when they could make another \$15 to \$20 a week somewhere else.

Q. What do they do on the outside?

A. Some go into construction, some have offers from another shop that'll put them in charge. It varies.

Q. Is the most important ability working in the shop that of a carpenter?

A. More than the scenic artist? I would say it is an equal thing. When it comes to complicated built work, it's an important thing. We'll say a one scene show, a big fancy interior, then it's more important in the carpentry department than the art department. But a big musical with a lot of drops, then the art department might be the shining star.

Q. Many different kinds of ability would include what, for instances?

A. In the construction end?

Q. It would include electrical knowledge too?

A. We were forced to take in all these branches. At one time the carpenter shop didn't even build props, there were outside prop shops and there were outside electric shops. But it meant the stuff had to be transported back and forth to get painted, and so forth. And the carpenter shops were forced to

become the studios and the electric shop and the iron shop and everything. And it's just fortunate that we found men who could fit into both the carpenters and ironworkers and carpenters and electricians. We do have one man with a special ability like in the iron shop, and one man to do the electric work, but he has other people he can depend on to help him.

Q. Do you find that if a man is good at one thing, he's good at a lot of different things?

A. Yes, on the average, if the man is mechanically inclined. He might not be interested in it, but he can do it.

Q. Do you have overlapping art and carpentry?

A. Oh yes, definitely. If it's sculpture or real complicated, like figures or animals, or intricate type of sculpture, we usually get a full size drawing from the artist. If it's a body form, we get a mannikin drawing, and the carpenter builds the armature and it'll be covered with forming wire and, from that point, the artists take over and do the modeling on top of everything.

Q. What's forming wire?

A. It's similar to screen wire only on a larger scale. With unwelded or not galvanized joints so the joints work easily and it can be formed over shapes without kinking.

Q. Not like chicken wire is it?

A. No. Chicken wire is galvanized and twisted. Forming board is square woven and not soldered or galvanized together, like a soft metal wire. Very expensive. If it requires hammering or stapling or anything like that, the carpentry department does it. The scenic artists only apply cloth and they do all that type of thing.

Q. They're not allowed to hammer or staple?

A. Not that they're not supposed to, they don't like it.

Q. What about the working relationship with the people of both unions?

A. They realize you can't do a show with all drops or at least they don't attempt to.

Q. The people I've talked to are not sure about the future. Pete Feller was closing down about three months ago.

A. We spoke to Pete recently and he's depending on the Centennial year to really be a boon to this business. I really don't see anything much happening for us, we've never really depended on anything on the outside. The World's Fair comes along; that's a windfall. We did do well in the last World's Fair here in New York, and we'll take stuff if it comes along and it's not too risky. The World's Fair stuff is pretty risky. We did lose money in some spots, but we made enough to compensate the loss and still show a profit. We did work for Chrysler and for Ford.

Q. How many shows do you do in a year?

A. Strictly as shows, I would say eighteen to twenty. Most of them being one-sceners.

Q. In other words, you're doing about two a month, almost.

A. Yes, but we do overlap. Sometimes we have three and four jobs in at one time. And they just have staggering delivery dates usually. Maybe two go out the same day.

Q. What's the most you can handle?

A. The most shows?

Q. Yes.

A. Well, that'll vary, but I would say if you had two musicals in the shop at the same time, you would be busy. And they would at least have to deliver like a week apart. No, maybe you could handle three or four one-scene shows, or a couple of multiple scene shows, combinations, easy enough. But it all depends on the amount of dollar work you have to turn out in a week. Normally, I would say we can turn out somewhere with a normal crew \$18 to \$20,000 worth of work a week. So you have to base that picture on what you can turn out.

Q. What does your overhead run you? What does it cost you to run this ship a week?

A. If you broke it down to a week, I would say very close to \$2,000 a week, the rent, the light, the heat, and the telephone.

Q. How would it be for salaries? When you're active?

A. \$7,500, \$8,000. Not too active. We've had payrolls up to \$26,000 and \$27,000 with the help and the overtime.



Q. So in other words you need about....

A. \$10,000 a week, yes.

Q. That's just to pay salaries?

A. Right. Without materials.

Q. What is your usual take on a show? What percentage do you hope to make?

A. Breaking down by shows, I can't tell you, but when we had what we consider a good profit-making year with money in the bank, the total take was six percent. Most operations are operating on ten percent and most of them are shooting for fifteen percent. And we think we were doing great with six percent.

Q. What shows do you prefer to see; what shows do you try to avoid? In other words, if you had enough work, what kind of show do you turn down?

A. Usually a very tricky show. In other words, something you really haven't done before, you really haven't got it all worked out in your mind, and, truthfully, the way we have to bid, it's strictly guess. Because until you make the working drawings and find out how much work there is in a thing, that's the only time you can formulate a real honest price. So we do a lot of guessing and hope that we do it within the price, when we give out the bid. But by the time you make the drawings, sometimes you know you have to lose money on it to get it to work. Those are the kind of shows you avoid, all types of shows, we'll say, with an extreme amount of built work. Mainly because you don't have that many men in the shop that are good at built work. And when you put everybody on the built work, there's always mistakes and stuff to be done over, and it's really hard to make money and turn out a good job with an extreme amount of built work.

Q. Looking out the window here, is that what you'd call built work, or is that a standard carpenter's job?

A. Well, that's standard. Oh, you're looking at the book-case?

Q. No, the thing on the table the fellow in the blue shirt is working on.

A. Oh yes, that's cornices, that's built work. That takes a certain amount of talent to be able to turn out in the time that money can be made on the thing.

Q. But you're not talking about that? You're talking about other kinds of built work?

A. Well, including that, I'm talking about circular stairs, mantles, fancy doors, things like that. Stuff you find in a home that is good and is complicated. With curved moldings, circular heads in the doors, stuff like that. It takes a certain talent, or a man with the experience to put it together. And you take the men that have normally built scenery, they're slow or they're sloppy at the job. And it has to be redone or reworked, and those are things to avoid.

Q. What about the business of the challenge? Or is it a matter of dollars and cents?

A. It becomes a matter of dollars and cents. You have to meet the payrolls, and that comes a little ahead of the challenge.

Q. May we discuss the process that you would normally use to do a show? Do you do everything simultaneously? In this shop?

A. Meaning like what?

Q. Do you start with built work or platforms?

A. If it's a matter of drawing a show up fast, you get the show, and it's a short time show, and you have something on in the shop. Let's say that you've got maybe two weeks after the show you just got. It delivers two weeks later. Then I usually take drawings home and draw a certain amount of flatwork and a certain amount of built work to get everybody started. And that means we'll take people off the show we were working on and get them started. If I can get at least one good day ahead of the shop, I can usually keep up with the drawings, and keep both the built work and the scenery going. And we hope that everything is finished simultaneously, and then we can set it up.

Q. With the drawings, how much of this drawing do you actually do? How much do you expect the designer to do?

A. Very seldom do we distribute the designer's drawing to have it built. Very seldom. Unless it's simple enough, or it's well dimensioned, or the way they want it built is all specified. Then we might send the drawing over to the men. I would say that ninety-five percent of the time we draw a show. Because when it comes to a flat, all we get is the outline, and then holes are pierced. The actual construction isn't drawn, so we have to draw the flat the way it actually breaks up, and where it's stiffened, and so on. And on built work, it's a matter

of breaking it up to troupe, or what would be the most sturdy. There's a lot of things like in a bid session, as I explained to you, that doesn't appear on the drawings. Like they'll explain the action around something, a handrail has to be extra strong because somebody is going to fall over it at this point, or some door gets an extra beating, and slamming, and so forth, and they talk about how to mount it so it doesn't shake the set. Things like that. That isn't always specified, so that would be incorporated in the drawings.

Q. I've been in other places, where I've noticed the designer doing drafting work right on the premises.

A. Well, we have it there, in that a lot of times you'll get a show without complete molding details and so forth. But sometimes it says details will follow. They follow when you're up to it. The designer comes here and does them right on your premises. And I find that because you can talk over some of the details and say, "This is really tough," and they'll say, "How would you like to do it?" and somewhere we meet in between, and do it where it's not too bad. I give a little, and the designer gives a little.

Q. It sounds as if it's really not such an impersonal visit?

A. Right. Of course, you get the confidence of these designers after awhile too. They know you're not going to give them anything bad, and not trying to stick them, and they usually can see your reasons for doing something.

Q. What about the designers? Do the younger people make more mistakes?

A. I say that if you get a young fellow out of school, he thinks he knows the business. If you built everything the way he's designed it, it wouldn't work. You have to get him in here and explain to him what's wrong, and why it should be done another way, and most of them want to learn, and they go along with you. That's how a lot of friendships started in this business. A lot of contractors didn't let a designer go wrong, caught him before, and explained to him what his problem was and what problem he was working himself into.

Q. Do you find that most of the time people working in this business are not really as responsive to people in show business, names of directors and authors, as people who are, for instance, academically involved with the theatre?

A. That's true. For myself, I don't follow authors or directors. My interest kind of stops when the show is built and delivered.

Q. You don't go to the theatre?

A. Very seldom.

Q. But you do know designers, though?

A. I know designers. I know some producers from having seen them.

Q. Recently, would you say there is a certain trend with certain designers doing most of the work? Is it a consistency now where some of the oldtimers aren't doing so much, and it's very difficult for them? I know some of the newer designers who are not getting any work at all.

A. Well, there's not that much work around, so I guess both the old designers and the newer designers are suffering. I can see it. You don't see the designers as many times a year as you used to. You don't go to the bid sessions as much. So both the new and the old really have to suffer because the volume isn't there. It's hard to say whether the older ones are losing it more to the newer ones. I really couldn't say.

Q. Have you seen any correlation between the current economic and world situation in this country, particularly, and this business?

A. Well, I would say that last year, we had a very good year, compared to five, six, seven years before--not only in volume, but in the steadiness of the work. So I would say, if we had as good a year this year, I'd be perfectly happy. Even though it wasn't a fatter year by far, it was nice steady work, and the volume was up \$200,000 from the year before.

Q. Is there any significance, to you, if a show stays or closes? If it's a hit and runs for a couple of years or closes in a couple of weeks?

A. Oh, we like to do a hit. We like to see a show run. I don't like to see it close, and get the stuff back. If they were all hits, we'd only need to build two or three shows a year, it seems. But on the whole, everybody likes to see a show run.

Q. Did they ever ask you to buy back scenery that you've built for a show?

A. Not a real producer who's been around. Maybe a young one, the first time around, things because it cost him \$20,000, it must be worth \$10,000 to me. Very, very seldom. Maybe if

you sell them some kind of mechanical device, there's components in it, like motors, and gears, and controls of different sorts. He might say, "Are you interested in that?" And we come to a price, and I buy it back just for parts, not for the unit as it is. But it's all standard parts, and I can re-do them into something else at some time. So that stuff has some value because it doesn't take up space, and you know it's a standard item and can be used. With scenery, no designer wants another designer's scenery, and the only outlet you have for some stuff is for photographers. They like a rental--there's a mantle sometimes, and so forth, but there's not enough of it to go into business, to bother warehousing the stuff.

Q. Supposing an enterprising person knew a show was closing, and this person said, "I'm going to go there, and see if they'll sell me some of this stuff, and take it back to my school," for instance, me. And cut it up and use it for something else and save myself a thousand dollars, if I can land it for a thousand.

A. Right. Well, I can understand. If our labor wasn't as expensive as it is, there's just some of the material in some of the shows that's worthwhile taking back. But when you consider I have to put the labor in just to strip it and everything else, I've gained nothing, and maybe even lost money on it for handling, and stripping, and putting the stuff away, and paying to throw out the junk part of the stuff. It doesn't pay. I might as well go out and buy new material. Sometimes, I'd even pay to get it delivered.

Q. Have you been offered the stuff?

A. Oh sure. We've been offered stuff, but it isn't worthwhile to bring the stuff in and pay the labor to take it apart. But, usually, you can't use 100 percent of the stuff. I'd say like maybe fifty percent of the material is reclaimable, which means the other fifty percent we have to pay to get carted away. So it's a losing proposition.

Q. In other words, very little of this you can actually salvage?

A. Unless it's mechanical components.

Q. Do you rent? For instance, Feller rents winches.

A. We have the same system. Winches, traveller tracks, turntables, portals, black velour portals. That's about the amount of stock you keep for rental.

Q. You say portals, you mean the pointed archways?

A. No, that's the frame for usually a one-scene show. The thing you set inside the proscenium arch--just masks--a false proscenium. It hides the wings on the side, and so forth.

Written Notes on Conversation with Charles Bender  
Nov., 1974

I asked Charles Bender how he would bid out a show after seeing the plans for it. He answered me by saying that almost all shows were priced out according to square foot. If it's a platform, he figures the square footage of the surface area of the platform times the height, and for flats or flat areas and walls, he also figures it by square foot. If a show is going into a place like Radio City Music Hall, it has to cost more, because you're filling up much more space.

In answer to the question, "What's the most expensive show you recall doing?" he cited My Fair Lady and The Sound of Music. He can't recall any show being bigger than those two. He said that by today's pricing standards, a show like My Fair Lady would probably cost around \$200,000 to build. Nowadays, shows are just beginning to reach, that is musicals, around \$100,000, according to Mr. Charles Bender.

All scene shops are doing their own properties nowadays. A designer does his own shopping for props that have to be purchased. The shops do, however, do painting, or resurfacing, or repainting of whatever the designer's instructions happen to be. Also, modifications are made when you add things or take things away.

In answer to what is sort of a minimum bid for a show, he said that more and more, a general manager will call up and say, "If I do a full deck with turntables, what am I talking about in dollars and cents?" That gives him a ballpark figure. Some general managers have an idea, but with inflation, they just check to see what they ask. A ballpark figure for a one-set show averages about \$18,000; \$15,000 minimum, up to \$40,000. A designer has a budget he has to meet. They used to do a lot of trick or forced perspective and because of the cost, they've sort of stopped doing that now. The drawings that Mr. Bender makes for the men in his shop are at a scale of one inch equals one foot, although they have three inches equals one foot.

They make just about everything. They very rarely go out and buy anything stock. That's because there's so much custom work, the shopping time to go out and purchase is almost impossible. They're very wary of bargains when they purchase materials. They try to buy the very best, because if they don't, they suffer in the long run.

In answer to the question about touring shows--the same set going to various theatres--Mr. Bender says they try very hard to build a show, so that it has clearance to go into the smallest proscenium opening. But then they also have a lot of research on hand. Records of all the different theatres, and sometimes they have to add on pieces or plugs to full up the space between the edges of the extremities of the set, in order to mask the wing area. They generally know what theatre it's going to open in out of town, so they can make allowances for it. When it comes back to New York, they have a choice of about two or three houses.

The only problem that he's made aware of with designers is that sometimes the designer isn't satisfied with the kind of detail work that they do, and if the designer is really concerned about the detail, he should give full-sized detail drawings. They have made things very carefully, made molds, turned things on a lathe that have been rejected by the designer, and they've had to do them over again.

In discussion of the unions, they say they have no real problem. They have a new contract to be negotiated every three years, and, occasionally, there is an ambiguous statement, kind of fuzzy, and may be interpreted one way--and the union says, "No, we meant something else." He also says--I think he says--that the International Alliance of Scenic Studios (scene builders) does the negotiating with the union. That's an interesting thing, I should pursue. So that means that when the union does try to get more money, you're dealing with a very selective kind of employer.

In discussing the history, Mr. Bender, who has been in the business forty years, said his father was in the business, also; that's how he got into the business. And when motion pictures came out, his father said that everyone felt that was going to be the end of the business. Mr. Bender says that he was in the business when talking pictures came out, and he felt for sure and for certain, that was going to be the end of the business. And then, of course, TV came along. They were again certain that that was going to be the end of show business--all legitimate theatre as they knew it. Bender can't make any predictions for the future based upon this concern about movies and TV, but he does feel that they'll probably just keep going on somehow, some way, in some form or other. The last few years, they're brancing out and doing other things--building acoustical shows and various things that aren't directly related to scenery.



Answering Questions -	Mr. Arnold Abramson	Nolan Scenic Studios
Interviewed By -	J. Collom	1163 Atlantic Ave.
Date -	March, 1975	Brooklyn, N.Y.

A. What do you want to know, how I got into the business?

Q. Yes, your background.

A. I studied to be a painter, and in the summer I'd go away to camp as a counsellor, but I'd build scenery there. It was a good way of getting away for the summer and doing scene painting. I never took it that seriously as a career. And when I was in college, I was at the Tyler School of Fine Arts, Temple University. And somebody my father knew at that time, Boris Aronson, was looking for an assistant to help him put together an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art. And I worked that summer with him, running errands, helping him make slides. And he was very discouraging, because that was just before television came into being really. And there was very little work. The season before, he did two bars, two very realistic bars, and that was all he did. And he advised me going to school to study architecture for five years, then decide if I wanted to be in the theatre. Which he never had done. This was a lot of eye wash really. So at that point, I was about eighteen or seventeen. It was very discouraging, so I gave up any thought of ever becoming involved in the theatre. And then television started, and there were just not enough scenic artists or designers to meet the demand television required.

Q. What year are we talking about?

A. What year? Late '40's, '48, '49, '50, somewhere in there. So then I found out that the union was giving exams, and I took the exam, and got in. Started painting scenery.

Q. Did you pass the exam with the first try?

A. No, I don't think I did. Cause when I first took it, I had no idea of what it was about. It was a combined exam, and I painted well enough, but I knew nothing about designing or lighting, the things that counted for a lot of points on the exam. But after I took the exam once, and I realized what it was about, and I studied and I was prepared well enough, I passed the exam. What happened at that time, they had a steward system

where anybody, not only young people who were unemployed, would put their name in at the union, and each week, each shop had a different shop steward, your name was drawn out of a hat, first come first served, and you were sent to a studio and worked for a week. I met different studios and they met me, and there were one or two that I started to work at more or less steadily. I was always, at that point, extra help, but I found two places I could more or less work at, and I learned. That's where I got my education, really. Both of them are out of business now. One was Dunkel's Studios; one was Triangle Scenery Studio. Triangle, at that time, was in the same building with Nolan's studio. Triangle did painting and Nolan built. They weren't combined then. And that's how I really got to know Willie Nolan.

Q. Two different operations, Triangle and Nolan?

A. Yes, they would go bid together on a show. Triangle would do the painting. He would actually subcontract it from Nolan. Nolan would get the contract. He'd look at a show and estimate, and then Nolan would use Triangle's price and get the job, and Triangle would paint it. And what happened, my fine art background stood me in good stead. The type of TV shows they were doing at that time, they were doing Your Show of Shows, there was a lot of painting where a fine art background was perfect. And that's how I broke in there, painting portraits, statues, all sorts of very representational scenery. It just fit me fine.

Q. What year would you say Triangle and Nolan were operating in the same building?

A. Nolan is in Brooklyn nineteen years, so I'd say twenty years ago. I don't know how long they'd been together before that. And actually before Triangle was with Nolan, Dunkel had been with Nolan. And they'd had a falling out, and he had the empty space, and Triangle moved in. Triangle was owned by a man called Gustave Wimetsall, who had come over with a man by the name of Joseph Urban many years before. And he came over with Joseph Urban, and two or three of his men also came over with Joseph Urban. They were all from Vienna, a mixture of Russian, German, Austrian, and they were great scenic artists. Just working there and watching other men of this caliber work was a great education and it's really where I learned an awful lot. Because when I started, I was really very green. I knew how to paint pictures but not scenery. What happened here with Nolan there, let's say we did Your Show of Shows every week. And Frederick Fox was the designer, and he, because it was a weekly deal, spent a lot of time at the shop. They built him a little studio downstairs, and he designed the show from there. He did all of his elevations there. And he came after awhile to depend on me to get

things done because the shop was also busy doing shows, and, to get the attention, he felt he could talk to one person and get through. Whereas Wimitsall, because of a language barrier, and just being involved with a lot of other things, just couldn't pay as much attention to Your Show of Shows as Freddy wanted, so I got very close with him. They then decided they wanted a man on touch up. They moved to a different theatre, and they needed the stage elevators taped up, the cracks on the stage, because they always shot from very high on that show, very prominent, so the touch up was going to be divided between myself and two older men at Triangle. I went the first week, came the second week, and they didn't have very much to do, and made a nice bit of change. And I got very close to Freddy. Then when Your Show of Shows became a color show it wasn't Your Show of Shows, it became Max Liebman Presents. Freddy was busy; he was involved with other shows. He had become involved with the Metropolitan Opera. He wanted somebody at the shop that he could depend on to carry through the show. He didn't want to deal with Wimitsall. Triangle had the job, but he wanted somebody in charge who he could talk to. So that became my job. I was... within Triangle... I was in charge of Max Liebman Presents, a color show. Then when Nolan had some work out at Flushing Amphitheatre, Elliott Murphy used to have a water show there in the summer, we needed somebody in charge out there, and I went. I was sort of the chargin' man within that setup. On anything that wasn't the normal run in the shop. Now when Nolan moved to Brooklyn, he wanted me to run this shop. He had his falling out with Wimitsall. They were always arguing with each other, and he decided he'd go with me, and that was it. I came here nineteen years ago.

Q. Do you see any change in the working relationship between the designer and the builder of the scenery? Do you see any development over what it was in the past?

A. Well, many years ago, before there were designers as such--this was way before my time--the shop supplied a service, building, designing, and painting. Designers worked for the shop. There were no such things as a designer. The shop supplied the scenery. There was a model room, and people built models and painted. I believe one of the first designers as an individual was Robert Edmund Jones. And Lee Simonson.

Q. What about Appia and Craig?

A. But that was more experimental philosophy. I don't know how much they were involved with commercial theatre. This was all theory. Jones was very real, and the work was produced. I've always worked with designers. There's never been a shop

designing something. I haven't really seen any change in philosophy or my dealing with them the last twenty-five years. It's always been the same.

Q. In the relation between the designer as conceptual artist and yourself as the person who executes this concept?

A. Well, I feel painting scenery is an interpretive art. Given the same sketch, to a degree, most shops will do a competent job, but, of course, there are finer points that will make one shop better or not as good as another shop, and this is interpretation. Two violinists given the same score, there's really less to guess about with notes than with a sketch, but yet you'll find two completely different interpretations of that same piece of music. With scenery, you get a sketch. The designer may or may not be able to put on paper what he wants. You might get sketches with a lot of notes on the side, "Do this darker or lighter. Smooth a blend," whatever. There's much more freedom involved, much more interpretation, not all cut and dried. And I find my job is easy when it comes to designers I've worked with before because I know the look that they're looking for, and you can approach it. But it's a challenge, and not always a welcome challenge to work with a new designer because, at the beginning, you may or may not hit what he wants. He may or may not himself be able to put it on paper. He may not be able to explain it to you. In many cases, you may be doing him tremendous help. There are some designers who, without a good shop, doing a good job for them, would be lost. They're at the mercy of the shop. Other designers are very strong, their personalities come through, and there's very little you can do except reproduce what they've done. There are finer points where you can miss it. Even though it looks like the sketch, it doesn't have the flavor. You've missed the taste of it. Some designers are nervous. You become a babysitter with them and hold their hands during the production.

Q. Does it matter if they're very experienced? The stronger ones should be experienced?

A. No, there are some new designers who are very self-assured, who come in like blazes. I don't say it's always based on knowledge or experience. They have the right to be assured and they are. You get older men who have been around for years, who are scared to death. But that's how people are.

Q. Are there differences between professional and educational theatre in the way you build and the materials used? You teach at NYU, don't you?

A. I also teach at Yale. Yale does many more productions. I would say the standard of building now is much better than it was a few years ago. The fellow who runs the shop now is much better than previous gentlemen we've had there. When I first got there, I'd call it jerrybuilt scenery. It was just nailed together, there was no support, the way they built platforms, I'd never walk on them. It was just a horror. And I always felt that as far as the technical end, construction, it was just a great waste of time as far as education went because the students were not learning. They might learn in a classroom this was the way it should be done. But in practice, they never did it that way because of the lack of knowledge, time, or the availability of moneys for material. It changed with the fellow in charge. They build very substantial scenery now. Sometimes they go the other way now. I think of scenery as something that troupes. This is my background. We build scenery, and it has to leave here and go out of town and come back. And that is much more difficult than building scenery for one spot that you build, put up, and it stays there and then it's torn down when the show's finished at the end of it. There's a whole art in making things come apart and go together. That's a technique in itself. What's happening at Yale now, they build things in a substantial way, more kind of house building. You knock it together and it doesn't have to unbolt or unhinge. They either do it at the Yale theatre or over at the repertory and they build right there and that's it. Even though it's not the kind of education I'd like to see these people getting, it's much better in quality than it was before. Before, it was just garbage and that's all.

Q. There must be a difference in materials. I wouldn't use the materials you use.

A. They're doing a show up at Yale now, A Midsummer Night's Dream, and the platforms they're building are out of two by six lumber, and it all shows. It's not something they're hiding. I think they're over-building now at Yale, but I prefer it to what they were doing before. I find the designers are very conscious of the materials, and, many times, they design to suit the material. Many times they don't design something and say, "This is what I want it to be." They know what they have and design it to suit that sort of thing. But it depends on the designer. They have at the moment one or two designers that are very talented. One is Tony Stragis who went to Brooklyn College and then went to Yale. He's the resident designer at the Rep. now. He's doing one show now using a lot of fiberglass panels that we use. I think I introduced Yale to it. And he's using some techniques that I told him about. This happens a lot of times up there. They don't know what to use so they'll ask me, and I don't know that what I tell them is the right thing but it's just things I've used and been successful with.

Q. What materials do you use that are different than the ones used traditionally?

A. Well, sheets of fiber-glass panels are very translucent. He's covering them with cheesecloth and then painting on one side--a battle scene very much like the Utterello with horses and knights. In one scene, they are frontwards and serve that way, and then they're taken up and put backwards, and they are foliage. And they work well. He's a very conscientious worker. And it shows. It's way, way above the normal college production.

Q. What thickness does he use?

A. Inch and an eighth. Because of height. And mortise and tenon isn't necessary anymore. We use metal staples and glue and corner blocks and that's just as strong. I find that designers are only concerned about what the appearance is at the end. They don't want a break at a point where it'll show and destroy the illusion. I once was back stage when they were reviving Lute Song at the City Centre. And that was the original production. Designed by Robert Edmond Jones. And I think it was built by Studio Alliance. Aside from Mortise and tenon, there used to be a technique where they would cover corner blocks with scrim to give them an added strength. This is sort of gilding the lily. Also Studio Alliance at that time did everything on a time/materials basis, so anything they could spend was more profit to them and they did a lot of unnecessary things just to make more money. And it was sort of silly. The back of the scenery in that production was much more interesting than the face.

Q. When you hire, what kind of skills do you look for?

What training?

A. I can only talk with expertise on the scenic artists, really. Drawing, not drafting, drawing and painting or sensitivity to an open mind toward the types of things we're doing. Because you got designers that are contemporary. Years ago there were a whole batch of scenic artists who were older, who had no familiarity with anything contemporary. You'd show it to them, and they'd snicker at it. They had to be pushed and coerced into doing things differently. Some of them had enough skill so they could adapt to it if they wanted to. So now we have a lot of young people who are adapted to it, and they are many times lacking the skill that the older men had, for conventional scene painting. But I prefer what we have now because these are skills that can be acquired. An attitude sometimes you can't acquire.

Q. Is there something innate that can't be acquired?

A. Certain skills can be acquired. When I say, "Old fashioned scenery," I mean lining and painting panels, and molding, and some ornament work. Sure, there are good scenic artists and not so good scenic artists. Some can draw but not as well as others. Yes, some can improve to a certain limit, but they'll never be as good as somebody else who does it naturally, or who enjoys it and does it well.

Q. How would a person get work if he had talent?

A. The way the test is given, now, at least what it has been --I don't know about the future--I found that a person with a general background in painting in a realistic sense, a realistic way of working, which is rare now among the current crop of students who are coming out of art schools, maybe it's returning to that trend now, I don't know. If he will adapt this realistic way of working towards scenery, in other words, towards architecture and maybe landscape, elements that we use in scenery, I think he should do well on this test. Whereas before, you needed much more background on lighting and design. And of course, within the scope of the union, you have people who work in the movies also, where you have to be a paper hanger, spackler, tape walls, and that becomes almost a house painting job. And within that field itself, there are people who work in the movies who do that well, who are very clever in devising textures to simulate old, broken-down walls, old wallpaper, cracks. And these become skills and almost an art form because you do have people who do it better. Those who do it very well are very good.

Q. Is there such a thing as a scene shop per se?

A. What do you mean by a scene shop?

Q. Just scenery for shows.

A. Right here at Nolan's, basically that's what we do. We do ballet and opera. Occasionally we'll get involved with a display job, occasionally with something out of our field, but I've always found that the source has always been from the theatre. One time we did a number of murals and interior work, both carpentry and painting for Longchamps restaurants, but that was only because Oliver Smith who was a theatrical designer was doing the design in those. And we went with him. He knew the particular skills we had, and he designed them into his design.

And we did them. Otherwise, we never would have done any restaurant work. So basically, we are a scene shop, yes.

Q. This would be the only one, is that correct? The only scene shop?

A. I don't know what the others do. I guess so. I know what you mean. I really don't know. I've never seen Hart. I've never seen Messmore, and you've seen more than I have, as far as that goes. I think the closest in ability is a shop like Feller's where we have the same, in many ways, capabilities. They have gotten themselves into a lot of other fields, but I don't know that it's been a successful thing doing it, as far as he's concerned.

Q. Do you recall some of the names of the studios?

A. Triangle, Dunkel, Chester Rakeman, Studio Alliance. The whole Studio Alliance crowd, including Pete Feller, became International Studios for awhile. They only lasted about two or three years. Then of course Variety has had about three or four names. Then there was a very big studio in New Jersey called Imperial Studios which is really Feller Studios now. That was run by a businessman named Dave Steinberg, and Pete Feller ran his carpentry shop. They had a parting of the ways, and Pete left, and it became Feller Studio.

Q. What do you think the function of a studio really is as you see it? Aside from making money?

A. Making money is a mute point, I don't know who really makes money. We go along and get the first payment on one show and that bails us out of the last show, and it just keeps on and on. I don't know any studio that really makes money commensurate with their size and with their responsibility. And I'd say the same thing with designers. Many of them don't make the money commensurate with their reputation and importance to a production. The purpose of a studio? To interpret designer's scenery. Within that, there's a lot of room as far as building and painting goes. We do, these might be old-fashioned figures, but for discussion let's say we do thirty, forty shows a year, or more or less. A designer might do two or three. In the process or working with many of the designers, you come in contact with many other ways of working possibly--many materials. Not that the designers bring this to you, but you're forced by the nature of the design to hunt down techniques and ways of working. And if the designer comes along and he's open-minded enough to accept what you have to offer, you can help him. Many come in with a



closed mind. This is what they want, and they possibly have been burnt someplace and they don't trust anybody. So they don't accept what you say; they want what they want. And sometimes you go along knowing that it's possibly not the best way of doing it, the use of materials or whatever, but you have to do it.

Q. You mentioned that the builders do many more shows than the designers per year, so, of course, they have more experience with materials. So it would behoove them to listen to you. What I've shown you is the salary scale. Is that accurate?

A. There might be another cost of living increase. If anything, it's higher.

Q. The thing I'm not clear about is how the manager works, the producer's manager works with you and the designer on a bidding session?

A. I'm not that clear either, except that I've found that many times a budget set by the producer or manager has no relation to what the designer has designed. You wonder who the hell came up with the budget. Has he ever discussed it with the designer? A producer wants to do a play. How they arrive at cost, I don't know. He has a certain amount of money, and from past experience he might say, "This is a one-scene show. I've spent this much before for a one-scene show, so and so put on this show for this amount of money," or whatever, and they arrive at a price. Now whether they tell the designer how much they want to spend, or they just give him freedom, say, "Read the script," and he gets together with the director, and they decide this is what is needed, and he does it. And then finds out to great shock and remorse that they're way over budget. I don't know. I don't know how they do it. I only know we go in and look at the show, and we give them a price and sometimes you just sense that it's way over what they're talking about.

Q. Do you have anything to do with the author? Does he ever attend these bidding sessions?

A. No, never. Many times, it's just the designer, not even the manager. Sometimes if the meeting is held at the producer's office, the producer might be there. But he never really says anything. They sort of walk around on the periphery. The manager will sit there and listen. It's usually the designer's show.

Q. What about changes? If the show goes up, and somebody doesn't like it, is it usually the author or the producer, instead of the director? Or is that a very rare thing?

A. I guess it could be. It's rare. Generally these things are thrashed out before we see the show. On a show we just did, Good Time Charley, there were some little profile pieces that the dancers carried around. They were to be flat with some sculpture on the face. And, because of the budget at first, and then it became apparent that the dancers could never handle them with the sculpture on the face, they were cut. They became only little profile pieces we just painted. But everybody seemed to be concerned with that because it seems they'd promised the author this is the way they would look. And they had to get the approval of the author first, even though they knew very well that they were going to do it. They felt they had to have him say so, that they were going to be cut and changed that way. But that's very rare. I've never really heard of that.

Q. What about projections for the future? Are things going to continue as they are? Will there always be a Broadway?

A. I don't know, I imagine there will be. New York City has changed a tremendous amount. And I think what has more to do with whether there'll be a Broadway than anything else will be the nature of the city. There'll always be show business of sorts, maybe it'll be in the other cities, but I think many of the other cities have the same problems we have in New York. On the other hand, New York still is the center for most entertainment, as far as fine arts go, painting and galleries, certainly the theatre now. Ballet--in New York City you have most of the major ballet companies in the country are based in New York. That's City Ballet, Ballet Theatre, Joffrey Ballet, Alvin Ailey, They're all here in New York City; this is their home. So in spite of the way the City's been going, it's still the artistic center of the country, maybe the world. It seems everybody wants to get to New York. That's the end result. Once you've made it here, you've made it. So that's probably it.

Q. Is this building industry for the Broadway theatre, would you call it a small industry?

A. I think it's a small industry. A lot of the shops that do build scenery cannot exist just building scenery. As you know, many of them do displays and other work. Sometimes I feel we should be doing some other little things akin to that to maintain ourselves, but we're almost exclusively scenery. I don't know why we don't get into other things. Possibly they can outbid us. They do things differently; maybe it's cheaper. I'm sure that is it. But maybe this is the only studio that does exist primarily on theatre. I'd like to think it is. I enjoy it. I would not personally want to be involved with what we call "schlock work." I wouldn't enjoy it. I'd get out of the business then .

Q. It's a matter of pride with you, pride in what you do? You say you're not in it for the money?

A. I'm in it for the money, sure, but I don't see why you can't have both. I like the idea that people feel when they have a show that is basically painting, or where painting is a very important element, many of them come here.

Q. What you're saying is that this industry is not a wide open industry. It's quite closed to the select people who have the talent to do it, and in order to continue to do it, you have to have more than just the talent. You have to have the desire and love of it?

A. I agree with that, it's also a small industry because the demand is very small. How many more shops could the demand support. It's having a hard time supporting the people who are in it now, and who know what they're doing. Certainly the volume is not there to support any more. This size--we're here. We have a tremendous space, and many times we're out of space. I wish I had more. But then again, then when it's slow, it's just lying there. It's all empty. But I guess there have to be a few places where you can do big ballets. And I guess that's us. When I say ballet, I mean opera, and things with a lot of big backdrops. And actually you can do very well financially handling those things. But you have to have a large shop to handle it. Other studios couldn't anticipate doing City Ballet or Ballet Theatre with forty by sixty drops doing three or four of them a week. They couldn't do it. They don't have the space. Many of them don't have the know-how either.

Q. How much space do you have on the paint floor? You say you do three or four large drops a week?

A. You can. If a drop is very detailed, you're not going to do it, but sometimes you can have. The back is eighty-five by approximately one hundred, and then I have another floor upstairs which is seventy-five by forty-five. So you can do a lot of volume. At one time, I had a lot. It was Three Men on a Horse, a revival of it. And in one week--and that was without the other floor, just the basic floor downstairs--in one week we did eleven drops. And they were not simple drops. It was a lot of work. I had a very big crew on, very well organized, and more than one drop came up a day. We had four down at once, and the crew kept moving around like an assembly line. But we got them out. The expensive part of painting scenery is to have adequate space to move around and lay down drops, and that's it.

Most places don't have the room to lay down part of the drop and pick it up and move it. And that we call "taking a bite" out of the drop. They can't fit it all in. We've done it. We've had a drop that was 300 feet long and I can not handle more than one hundred feet. So we very carefully had to do it so you couldn't see where the break was. You never saw 300 feet at once. It was on a roller and a set of spools that moved across the stage, off one roll and on to the other. The Met has a permanent installation like that. This was a portable one that Nolan adapted and re-designed. Set up, it was a show called Come Summer. Originally it was for a show called Chu Chem, a Chinese-Jewish show that Howard Bay designed. Oliver Smith used it for a ballet sequence in Come Summer. We had to take a bite, but normally we have enough space for that.

Q. \*\*\*\*\* (question inaudible)

A. Everything's on the floor.

Q. Do you find it better?

A. Better, no comparison. Let me first answer the other question. The other big expense is labor. The cost of a man is worth anything to facilitate the man getting the job done. Labor costs are so high that we push right along as we can.

Q. Are scene painters the highest paid?

A. I guess so. \*\*\*\*\*

Q. How much do scene painter get paid a year?

A. It varies, because they are also on per diem. They don't work through the week. A lot of them work most of the year, and some of them, I don't know... scenic artists... maybe \$22,000....

Q. Is that with overtime?

A. With overtime plus maybe eight to ten weeks off. I consider a good scenic artist worth it because he can "turn out." One who can work, who is talented, and who can work quickly will pay for himself many times over. Where you lose out is on the new people you might get, just learning, and they make mistakes or are just too slow. But many times you have to take really raw people just getting into the union.

Answering Questions - Mr. Fred Jacoby  
Interviewed By - J. Collom  
Date - Feb., 1975

Nolan Scenic Studios  
1163 Atlantic Ave.  
Brooklyn, N.Y.  
(Old Bklyn. Ice Palace)

Q. How did you get started in the business? What was your first contact?

A. In the first place, the school I went to, if you graduated from grade school, you accomplished something, because there was no other school in the town. A little town named Homestead, it's now North Bergen. And I graduated from school when I was thirteen years old, so I had to go one year to high school to be fourteen, so I could go to work.

Q. This was 1913?

A. Yes. Remember, I was born in 1900.

Q. Right.

A. So I know dates like nobody's business. I had to go to another town just to spend that one year, because in those days, if you were fourteen and didn't graduate, as long as you got working papers, you could go to work. So I went one year in high school in the town of Union Hill, for one year so I could be old enough to go to work. So to get a job, I had an uncle in the scenery business, Louis Kennel. And he needed a paint boy. So he gave me a job as a paint boy, working at the Grand Opera House.

Q. This was in 1914?

A. This was in 1914. I was fourteen years old then.

Q. And the Grand Opera House was the only place that had everything right there, the self-contained theatre?

A. No, not exactly. The Hippodrome Theatre had everything. Carpenter shop, paint shop, and theatre.

Q. Where were these located?

A. The Hippodrome, I believe, was on 6th Avenue and 44th Street. That even had a pool in the theatre. You could look up the records of the old Hippodrome, and it's quite interesting.

See, they gave you a show every year. And they worked on it during the summer months. They had all the scenery, and they had a designer, and scenic painters in the building. Even the carpenter shop, everything was done in the same. The Grand Opera House was practically the same thing, but the only thing is, where I worked, I worked for a firm that used to do all of Cohan and Harris' work. And I remember the first show that I worked on was Seven Keys to Bald Pate, and On Trial, those shows in those days. Cohan and Harris eventually split, and it was just Cohan. And Cohan--what's his name that actor that's playing now, that little fellow?

Q. Joel Gray?

A. Joel Gray, he did a show on George M. Cohan.

Q. So it was George M.?

A. Yes. That would give you the history of George M. Cohan. At any rate, at the Grand Opera House, the firm of Udit and Wickes, who had rented the paint frames there, they had also rented the paint frames in the Lyceum Theatre. And that was the firm there. But the carpenter shop was rented out to a firm by the name of George Vail. They built there.

Q. Where were these theatres?

A. The Lyceum was on 47th Street, or 46th Street, the Stage Door is on 47th Street or 46th Street. It's still going, the Lyceum. But the Grand Opera House has been torn down, and that was a very large theatre. That was on 23rd Street and Eight Avenue. And the Stage Door was on 24th Street, it went through the whole block. But that particular theatre had a Green Room, dressing rooms, a complete theatre. I've got a feeling that in Europe, that's the way theatres are today. I haven't visited any theatres, but I think that's the way. I happened to go to work for my uncle. My uncle was a top all-around scenic painter. Louis Kennel. That's my mother's maiden name. And I worked there about three years. And then I just simply free-lanced around, worked in the movies. The movies at that time were in Fort Lee.

Q. New Jersey?

A. Yes.

Q. You painted scenery for them?

A. Yes. Painted a bit then, we all do. There were also movie studios in New York. The old Edison Studio was uptown in the Bronx, I worked there. And I free-lanced around all over.

Q. And you've been in the business ever since?

A. I've been in the business since 1914. Outside of four years in the Army. But at that particular time, there were scenic studios all over the city. I'd say six or eight scenic studios all over the city. And they did Broadway shows. And there were big studios that did stock theatres, like New York Studios. Now the New York Studios and Lelash, I would say, were the first studios that had a carpenter shop and everything in the building without being in the theatre. Lelash and New York Studios. They furnished all the drapery. In fact, years ago, there was no drapery in the theatre. We painted the drapery. And you had street drops and oleo drops. To work in a studio like that, you actually had work all year around.

Q. When was this?

A. That was in the 20's, I would say. Well I don't know. It's before my time that Lelash was going.

Q. You started to tell me something about MacDonald. Albie MacDonald's father, was it?

A. Albie MacDonald's father, who was T. B. MacDonald, was actually the first carpenter shop that wasn't really in a theatre. Or a complete outfit--the only complete outfit was the stock studios. They actually had nothing to do with theatres, like productions or something. They just did stock for theatre. As the theatre was built, they would furnish all the drops, the street drops and the oleo drops, the fancy interiors, the street scene, everything. They would furnish. In other words, a theatre was complete with scenery.

Q. They had stock and they kept re-using it?

A. They stocked, they had for a theatre. Then, of course, they had stock companies. They had vaudeville. But vaudeville I guess was what kept them going at that time. Then after that, I can remember now for instance, you were talking about Albie MacDonald. MacDonald decided--he just had a carpenter shop located on 30th Street. And he and Frank Stevens, Frank Stevens was a drapery man, they decided to have a scenic studio of their own and have everything in one building. That wasn't the start

of things, but that was about the time that things combined for Broadway shows. Because it got so that a studio itself could not exist, but the combination of both, they could--financially wise.

Q. You mentioned drapery. Did they have separate paint studios?

A. Yes.

Q. Nolan's and Triangle were separate?

A. Nolan was never a scenic studio. Nolan was a carpenter shop. But when Triangle broke up, there was a Triangle Studio, Wimmetsall, and I forget the partner's name--Adler. They were the partners. When Mr. Adler died, Wimmetsall went to Nolan and formed a studio there in the same building. But they were two separate concerns. One was Triangle Studio; the other was Nolan.

Q. Did it happen before....

A. That happened about the time that MacDonald, Stevens.... It was actually after the War. Really it started after the War. There might have been some before that, but I don't think so. Now you take Bergman, for instance. Bergman had paint frames in--I think it was 46th or 47th Street. And there was a carpenter shop in the same building. And I think Vail moved from the Grand Opera House to that particular address. See, years back, there was a lot more painting done than building. There was no such thing as a built scenery. It was practically all painted on canvass. Once in awhile, you might have a built door. But they used to be old canvass doors. Just framed, and canvassed. And we would paint stuff like that. Even cornices. You never had a built cornice on an interior set. We painted those moldings on.

Q. When did you see the change?

A. Well that change gradually took place. The designers come along, a new field of designers. Now years ago, a designer was part of a scenic studio. We used to call them model men. We never used the designer name at all at that particular time. But a designer is actually a freelance man who designed a show for some producer, should I say? Yes. He'd practically work on his own. And then the carpenter shop and the scenic studio would meet and put a bid on these shows. It was common. A lot of shops would be called in. Who, naturally, had the better price, got the job. But that was something new, completely. We never had designers years ago. What you call a designer today, years ago, he had to become a good painter first. And



then he actually graduated himself to the model room. He actually had a collar and tie job after that. And they were terrific designers because they could paint. They wouldn't design anything that you couldn't paint. Because they knew all the fundamentals to do for painting scenery.

Q. Does that happen today?

A. It happens today too. Designers, very few of our designers can paint. They can't paint scenery. They are good designers, but to actually take a paintbrush and paint like a scene painter does, on the floor--most of the stuff is done on the floor now. Years ago, it was done on a paint frame. Designers are clever men, but they don't.... I would say 75 percent of them cannot paint scenery.

Q. What caused this transition from paint frame to the floor?

A. Well that was because of space. And I was brought up on paint frames. I couldn't realize how the devil you were going to paint scenery on the floor. Walk all over it and what not? I come to find out that you can paint scenery on the floor much better than on a paint frame. Especially translucencies. Now with the equipment we have, the paper we put on the floor and the starch you use to prepare a drop like that, and you paint with dye, and it's so much better than we had on the paint frame. A paint frame, just to do a dye job, you actually had to paint a drop upside down, if it was an exterior drop, to do the sky. Then when you were all through, then you turned it back up again. Because the spattering of the dark, the light never affected the dark. And if you were on a paint frame that you could get behind, you could do both sides at one time. Then it dried pretty good. Not as good as what we do on the floor.

Q. I've heard it said that scene painters have a secret that is their stock and trade. Is that true?

A. No, there's no secret. In fact, Lynn Pecktal is writing a book, which I more or less encouraged him to write this book, because the knowledge that I learned fortunately as a young fellow I want to get known because today you don't get that teaching. And that book'll be out... it was supposed to be May. But now it's about August. But it's a book on painting and design. Most people are interested in the painting angle, the fundamentals of painting.

Q. How do you spell his name?

A. P e c k t a l. You can talk to him.

Q. The reason I say this is because there are scenic studio owners and bosses who think there are things which are secret.

A. You're right, you're right. The only owners that we have now that can paint scenery is Arnold. And I think Variety has....

Q. Laver?

A. No, no. There's an Italian fellow works for him. He's his chargeman. But I think he has a piece of that business.

Q. Well he's the one who told me that those guys were very secretive.

A. No, no, whatever he knows, I taught him a lot here. And, in fact, when he went in business over there, I gave him a list of all the equipment he should have over there. Dante, Dante.

Q. Yes. Isn't he with Feller's?

A. No, I don't think he ever worked for Feller. There's a fellow in Connecticut. I forget his name, a scene painter. He can paint scenery. He's in charge.

Q. Leo Meyer.

A. Leo Meyer. He can paint.

Q. There's also Jim Hamilton, in South Jersey

A. I don't know if he's a painter or not.

Q. Is it true that the scenic painters, the chargemen, can make or break the business?

A. Make or break the business?

Q. They say that the painters may be the most important.

A. Well yes, it is. I wouldn't say it's the most important. Because, if you've got a show that is badly build--I'm talking about interior now--the painting can't help that any. But I guess the painting, that part of the business, is the tops because that's the way it started. You know the painter was strictly the boss of the show business. Today it's more or less equal between the carpenter shop and the painter. Some studios have a reputation of painting much better than other studios. This studio here has the reputation of painting the best scenery.

Arnold is a terrific painter. He's a terrific mural painter. He hasn't had the background in scenic painting that he would like to have, but he knows good scenery when he sees it, and that's the main part. And his crew is what makes this a good studio, not the chargeman. The chargeman is worth nothing if he doesn't have a good crew.

Q. As you see it, what are the main skills that a person would need to be a good scene painter?

A. A scene painter, the way we were years ago. In the first place, you have to have a sketch box. You go out and do realistic painting. Oil would be the easiest way. You've got to have a good background, or study perspective drawing, and, also, study the five orders of architecture. Now we have all these students come in here. Arnold has a class here. They don't know one molding from another. Now if they would really just study on their own, the five orders, they would know the proportions between moldings, and caps, and what not. Doric, Tuscan, Ionic, Composite, and Corinthian. And to me, I really get mad at teachers that are teaching these people, not telling them what is this stuff. I talked to these pupils here, and I asked them about it. They don't know what a sketch box is. Now the whole trick of outdoor sketching is squint very hard. Just take the masses, and that'll give you an idea of how to mix color. Because very few people really know how to mix color. Now we have dye mediums. Of course it's easier today; we have much more. Years ago, all we had was glue size but very good to mix colors. We had good real rich color, almost as good as what you buy for yourself for a pallet in a store. But now with the casein it makes it a lot easier. We had to worry, years ago, whether we had enough glue in the color or whether we had too much. Now this book that I'm telling you about, it'll have all the formulas in it which I had to know. Now, for instance, here are these drops you were looking at today. They're primed with a combination of size and starch, and tinted with casein. And that makes it easier; that's undertone. But you saw the drops laid in?

Q. Yes.

A. That's the undertone. And from there on top, they work casein on top of it. Now with casein, you don't have to worry whether you've got glue in or not; it's there. If you thin it down with water, it'll stick just the same.

Q. What about vinyl paints?

A. Vinyl is the same thing. Vinyl is a good paint. The difference between, vinyl dries darker. Casein dries lighter when it dries.

Q. You were talking about the sketch box. How did you get your main skill? Was it something you had inately, or did you acquire these skills after working for a scene shop?

A. That's right. 'Cause figure I'm only fourteen years old, I'm still a child, really. But no, the sketch.... I remember one time that we were.... See, years ago, you were busy. You worked Saturdays, Sundays. You worked a fifty hour week. Today we only work six and one half hours a day now. Which is fine because in New York, I would say, you can maybe count about thirty scene painters that are painting Broadway shows. That's all that's involved in the whole City of New York. I'm not counting television or movies, just scenic. Now years ago, there were a couple of hundred scene painters around.

Q. Can you mention some of the ones that are still painting that are the best, the old masters?

A. I would say that I'm the oldest of the old timers that worked in the old scenic studios. I think I'm the only one left. I don't know of anybody else that worked in scenic studios. As a paint boy, you started as a paint boy. See today, for God's sake, they want to start on top. The new people, they don't even know how to tack a drop on the floor. You know, with just a simple instruction, you know how to tack a drop on the floor. Because that's very important. Because if a drop don't hang right in the theatre, you're out of luck. Any basic crew of any theatre, take all those basic men, there's three or four in each studio, that's what you call the good painters. You take Feller's, there's three or four fellows over there. You can take this place right here. That crew that's working right now. Those are the men who are actually in demand.

Q. They are the best?

A. Not only the best. They make money for the fellow they're working for. After all, it's not an art studio, it's a business. You know, you can get the best painter in the world, and if he don't get it out in a hurry, it don't pay to have a fellow like that.

Q. In other words, the main studios here in the City have the best painters?

Q. I'll tell you who. I'll give you one name who I would say is the best scene painter and the best designer in the business. That's John William Keck. The muke is open?

Q. Yes.

A. Oh, it is open? OK. He's art director now of the Music Hall. Now Johnny, years back, when television was at it's height, you couldn't get any young people. All we had was the old timers who were working. He came to me for a job, and the only thing I asked him, I said I'm not interested in looking at portfolios, I'm interested in what a person did. He said he had worked in stock for five seasons. I said, "OK, Johnny, you come to work tomorrow morning."

Q. When was this?

A. This was in 1954. He had taken the test, the scenic artist test at the Metropolitan Opera House. There's a picture of that in that room upstairs. We had a lot of publicity on that. Newspapers publicized that quite a bit. And he was third high. We had about seventy-two applicants at that time. And what a sight it was to see him, to get on top of the Met and look down on that stage as all these projects developed from drawing to color and what not. Well anyway, that fellow came to work for me, and we have been together for nineteen years, never apart. That was about the best combination of any two people in this business. So as a basic painter, Johnny is a finished artist, real good. And his father is the famous Charles Keck, that did the Duffy statue. And Johnny is a sculptor. He's everything. I've never seen a fellow... I've seen clever young fellows... but never could touch this fellow.

Q. He's a young fellow?

A. When I was sixty, he was thirty. He is now forty-five years old. He's now at the Music Hall which is the top job in our business.

Q. Can you express the difficulties or lack of difficulties between the designer's work and the scene painter's concept of the work?

A. Well, no, no. The designer today, he's the boss of the show. Because we've got to follow his sketch. Sometimes he might have a problem that we might help him along. We try to better what he has. But the designer is the big man today. The painter is secondary.

Q. Years ago, it was the other way around?

A. Years ago, the other way around. The designer was also the painter. That's the difference.

Q. Someone said that years ago it took more time to become a good scene painter than it took to become a designer.

A. To my mind, now, a good designer has to be a good painter first.

Q. But it doesn't work in reverse? A painter doesn't have to be a good designer?

A. No, but he can be, very easily. But he don't care about design. He just wants to paint.

Q. Do you think people keep working in this business because of love, or because it's a good paying job?

A. Well, it's a job. You just don't get rich painting scenery because there's not enough work. Now for instance, I don't know what the average salary is. Our daily rate, our hourly rate is very high. But to my mind a carpenter who works steady all year around, he works in a shop or he works in a theatre, makes more money over the year than we do. And to be a good carpenter, it don't take much time to learn that business because that's more or less mechanical.

Q. It's hard to believe. On an hourly basis, don't chargemen make double what a carpenter makes?

A. Maybe more. I get chargeman pay myslef. At my age. Now I'm the only guy in this business that has a chargeman's salary and is not the chargeman of the studio. I am, in a sense, because I help Arnold. He's not here all the time.

Q. Who is the chargeman, Arnold?

A. Arnold is the chargeman, and I'm also the chargeman. A chargeman's rates today.... Our union, which is nice about our union....We ask more and we'll go on strike for 10 percent increase or something like that. We have a cost of living clause, and that takes care of that. And the cost of living this last year must have went up about 13 percent. And that's giving a chargeman's rate today on a daily scale is \$124 a day. That's not your take-home, remember. There are a lot of taxes being paid.

Q. Yes. In other words, they only bring you in when they want you to paint, but the carpenter's work goes on?

A. That's right. Now we did a show here, Rogers and Hart. I worked on a lot of Rogers and Hart when they first started. And I knew Hart. And he was quite a guy. And that show, we had one day's painting. Now the designer, David Jenkins, I think,

I'm not sure, I think he designed the show, the whole thing was designed to be built. The only thing we actually painted was the floor. They wanted a polished floor. I had one day's work, and so did Arnold have one day's work. And they must have been building for two or three weeks. It just shows you the difference in what money you make. Then again, you take for instance this shop here, you might have twenty or twenty-five men in the carpenter shop, and in the scenic studio we have six. That's all. There's so much more construction today than there was years ago. As I told you about moldings, moldings we always painted.

Q. Well, in most, even small studios, they tell me that they try not to bring in the painters until they need them because of the cost. Could be one of the reasons they don't do it?

A. The cheapest part of our particular business is the painters.

Q. And yet some owners claim it's the most expensive.

A. When you figure it on an hourly basis. Now the show that runs, if the show is not built properly and what not, they could hire more stagehands. That's all the same union, you see. See, once a show is built, that don't mean they're through with it. When we're through, we're fired, really.

Q. What about touching up when the show is put up?

A. That might be one day, and a touch up job is really half the time. You don't get paid for a touch up job, because they figure that's on the contract.

Q. Are you guaranteed a certain minimum?

A. No, no. We're strictly on a day basis. No minimum at all.

Q. In other words, they can't call you for half a day.

A. Well, yes. The way the rules used to be, the first day you can't work half a day. But you've got to finish a full day. Our union is a good union, because they're interested in keeping people in business. Now I know an old rule they had years ago, that if a producer owed a studio, any money that they hadn't paid on a show they did, we weren't allowed to work for that producer until he paid that fellow. I don't think that law would stand today, but the unions set it up that way.

Q. When you started, of course, there wasn't any union.

A. We had no union, we had what they called the United Scenic Artists Association. We had no wage scale; we had nothing.

Q. In other words, you just got together and decided?

A. Yes. They got together with--I forget the man's name again--but anyway, the bosses ought to have a union, so they got a union. If you mentioned union with those fellows years ago, they were insulted because they were no labor people. They were strictly artists. And then about 1919, then we formed a union and we had a wage scale. We had at that time, assistant paint boy and artist. The scale for an assistant then, at a forty-eight hour week, was \$30 a week. And the artist got \$42 a week, for a forty-eight hour week. I, at that time, was working as an assistant for \$14 a week, so I lost my job. So the contract was good for one year. So the following year they went out for a... they wanted a forty-four hour week, \$44 for an assistant, and \$66 for an artist. That was \$1.00 an hour for an assistant, \$1.50 for an artist. Well that strike lasted about nine or ten months. And finally we won out. And it was tough, because I knew one friend of mine had to sell his house. But anyway, it was very strange. We were doing a show here, Irene. It came back to me the first Irene I worked on. I freelanced around at that particular time. In fact, I was working for my uncle Louis, this Louis Kennel, I told you about that started me in the business. And I was on a touch-up job at that time and I stopped in the studio to see Leon Warren who was a friend of mine. And while I was in there, Mr. Harvey, who was the boss of the place then, asked me what I was doing. I says, "I'm on a touch-up job, I stopped in to see Leon Warren." He said to me, "Freddy, will you be through soon?" I says, "yeah." And he said, "When you're through, will you come to work for me Monday?" Now there from \$14 I got \$44. That was in 1919. That was the year of the strike. Well it might have been 1918 or something like that.

Q. They fired you because they didn't want to pay....

A. The jump from \$14 to \$30, I could understand, because I was a young kid, but they realized that I wasn't so bad after I worked with some other people. And I'll never forget that. I actually got to be a strong horse in that particular studio. That was Warden Harvey Studios. They were on 502 West 38th Street. They had six paint frames in there.

Q. Do you see any changes in what goes on now, habits, customs, designers, painters?

A. No. The difference is there's a lot more building done today than painting, a lot more. I would say on a contract between drapery, painting and building, building might take 50 percent of a contract price. The painting might be 25 percent and the drapery might be the other 25 percent or something like



that. That's the way scenery is designed, and that's the way they want it. Scenery today to be looks very good on stage.

Q. Do you think it looks better now than it did years ago?

A. Sometimes. The exterior stuff I don't think does look any better. Anything that was really painted on drops is no better than we had years ago. Absolutely no better. If it's as well. See, years ago, a good scene painter had to be a fellow that could paint anything you could see, realistically. That's why the designer years ago, he could stylize after he becomes a realistic painter. Most people, they stylize before they can do anything realistically. Well, you know that.

Q. How about materials?

A. Well years ago, materials... we painted on linen... the material was much better. Good Irish linen that came from England. And it was a full seventy-two inches wide. Today we work on muslin and duck, and there is no comparison.

Q. You use seamless scrim, I see.

A. Seamless scrim and seamless muslin. Seamless muslin we didn't have years ago. The designer had to kind of design to hide those seams. But we have a way now that I probably started myself. We use what we call narrow seams, that you can't see. I believe the wide muslin, which is not even good quality, it's generally thirty feet wide. It's seamless, costs about \$35 or \$50 a yard, but that's ten yards. See, years ago, we sewed narrower. Instead of sewing your seam three-quarter inches from the selvage edge, you sew it right on the selvage edge, and all you see is a fine line. Because the other way, it's the shadow that cause those wide things. That's something I started myself because I wanted to know if you could sew it that close. Frank Stevenson and Albie MacDonald, they were my bosses. He says, "Sure as long as it's on the=selvage edge, the strength is there. If there was no selvage edge, you couldn't do it, it would break apart."

Q. How about shows that you remember? The most outstanding things. If they became hits or not hits, you remember painting them. The most fantastic jobs, the ones you're the most proud of?

A. Right now, the show that stands out better than anything I know is My Fair Lady. Well designed, and well painted.

Q. Did you do most of the painting on that?

A. No. I was one of the crew that did most of the painting.

Q. It was a lot of painting?

A. Yes, a lot of painting. And that was designed by Oliver Smith. A beautiful show. To me, I would say that's the best show in my lifetime.

Q. This was when this studio was over in Manhattan?

A. The first one they did over there, but the second one they did here. We did about three or four of them. In fact, when I lost my job, when Albie MacDonald fired me, I came to work. See, Arnold used to work for me.

Q. Yes?

A. Oh yes. And I could have called Willie. Willie knew me for years, long before he knew Arnold. I'm talking about Willie Nolan. Willie Nolan, I would say he is the best carpenter in my lifetime. Because he would just live and eat scenery. Willie Nolan. I've know the best of them, but to me, he was tops. Anything tricky, Willie Nolan always got to do. Albie MacDonald couldn't touch Willie Nolan at all as far as the trick stuff was concerned. And the MacDonald shop used to be the number one shop. Well he let it go out of business completely. He never surrounded himself with good men under him, that's one thing that Willie did here. Willie had Charlie Bender, Arnold. He always had good men under him. Even this crew right here.

Q. You mentioned Arnold, could you mention something about Charlie Bender, the other man here? What is his skill, or stock and trade?

A. Charlie Bender is sort of a quiet guy. Socially, he just goes along. But Willie was quite a guy, socially and what not. But Willie taught Charlie practically everything he knew, and Charlie was that good a carpenter. He could take a hold of everything.

Q. So he was an expert carpenter?

A. Yes, a real expert. I would say today, Charlie, with Willie gone, is tops. As a layout man, how to construct scenery, whehter it's practical or not, if there is any problem he could always solve it. Better than anybody in the business.

Q. \*\*\*\*\* (question inaudible)

A. On built scenery, canvass covered scenery, that's what we call built scenery, we prepare that with what we call old-fashioned priming. I think we're the only studio that still works that way. That's glue-sized priming. We take regular glue and dilute it to a priming size. One glue to eight water. In other words, one quart of glue to eight quarts... no, it's ten quarts of water, that's what it is, ten to one. It all depends on how strong your glue is. And that forms our size.

Q. This is white glue now, not the old-fashioned....

A. No, we use the old scenic glue.

Q. Today?

A. Geletin glue. We're the only studio that uses it. And that gives you a... now for instance, we've got a light set. We'll prime it white. We'll use one of this particular size, this ten to one mixture, and one of whiting. In other words a quart of dry whiting to a quart of size. That's our white priming. And that you prime your stuff with first. And that stretches a canvass, gives you a wonderful undertone. If you want to tint it, you tint it. Then from there on we work with casein on top of it. Now on a drop, you use another trick way of laying a drop. And if there's a lot of paint, like for instance the drops you see laying on the floor now, we'll mix a twelve to one size to one batch of starch. That's a package. Approximately one pound of starch makes about four gallons of mixed starch. Now that formula there, all we do with that formula is tint that with casein, and we lay our drops in. Now if it's translucency, we just use plain starch. Then we use dyes on top of the starch.

Q. What about the different painted work, painting versus sculpting, carpenting, and things like that?

A. Well most of the stuff is done with caseines, and latex paints, and vinyl, and stuff like that. But you've got to prepare something first. That's the hardest job. And from there on, we have all the paints you buy today.

Q. Do you have specialists in sculpting and carving?

A. Well sculpting, there's very few sculptoring done. There is once in awhile. That's where Johnny Keck was terrific. We had a big... do you know that big statue in front of Columbia? He did a big life-sized one here. He did it in about four or five days.

Q. In other words, he worked in this studio here.

A. Oh yes.

Q. Is there anything special versus routine as far as the kind of painting that you do. Are both of these drops routine to you or all custom?

A. No, it's routine.

Q. So in other words, by now, there's very little that's different. If you need it done, there's very little that you cannot do.

A. Very little. We have our problems. The material that we paint on is not as good as it should be, and sometimes we'll have material that's too thin. We go to prime it... say for instance it's a drop... we go to prime it and it would stick to the paper. So we have forms that we keep air underneath it. We have an intake and an exhaust. We have a fan blowing air on the intake to keep that off.

Q. It just raises it that much?

A. Just enough that it won't stick to the paper.

Q. I notice that you're making cartoons on paper.

A. Those are pounces. That's the drawings that we make.

Q. I see. Then you....

A. Then you pounce that on...

Q. Punch the holes through....

A. Yes with the pricking wheels.

You have just heard Fred Jacoby, an employee scenic artist at Nolan Scenic Studio. He's 75 years old, and 's the oldest active scene painter in the business. He probably painted more Broadway shows than any man alive.

## APPENDIX A - 3

Answering Questions	- Mr. Pete Feller	Feller Scenery Studios
Interviewed By	- J. Collom	381 Canal Place
Date	- Dec. 1974	Bronx, New York

Q. The first question I'd like to ask is how all of this got started? This particular operation, is it something that you started, or did somebody else start it?

A. No, I started it. In fact there have been several starts. I started in this business at the age of 16. Reluctantly, there was the Depression, and this was the business my dad was in.

Q. Is your father a famous name in this business?

A. No people in our end of the business are famous. Fame starts with the designers and goes on up to the producers, actors, and writers. We're primarily unknown to the public.

Q. With people on the inside?

A. Well my dad's name is well known, and my older brother is well known also.

Q. What's your dad's name?

A. Peter Feller Senior. And my older brother, Fred, is 16 years older than I am. My dad worked in this business in Vienna, prior to coming to the states in 1900. I got out of high school at the age of 15, in 1936 or 1935. And there was no such thing as going on to college in those days. It was the heart of the Depression, and my dad thought I should be able to make a living. Eventually, I could have gone to college if I felt I wanted to, so I was apprenticed to another well known studio, Bayonne Scenery Studio and spent my early years there. I was pretty good at it. I was a mechanic, worked in the theatre as a carpenter in the shows, went into the Army in 1941, spent five years in the Army, but, again in the theatrical end of it. I was the head man in a show called This Is the Army which played the U.S., and then it toured. I was the head technician. We travelled seven freight car loads of scenery around the world, playing just about every country, participating in the "great event" and I got a great deal of experience there, and probably a much broader view than I would have gotten if I'd just stayed here in New York as a regular stage hand. Five years experience travelling around the world and doing sets under varying conditions gave me more experience than staying in New York as a local mechanic and stage hand.

When I got out, I went to work as the head carpenter for five firms at the same time: the original Playwrights Company, Leyland Hayward, George Abbot, Fuer and Martin and Lindsay and Crouse. So I sort of gave up the studios and spent all my time producing shows as a producing carpenter. There have always been problems in the shops between execution and deadlines and everything else, so I built up a reputation for coping with it, and I got the idea that while I'm not coping with other people's problems I'll start producing my own problems. So, I opened an original shop.

Q. When was this?

A. Oh, that was probably '47 or '48.

Q. What was it called?

A. It was called National Scenery Studios...141 Street and Lenox Avenue. I had a couple of partners. I was the distributor, distributing production work and then the partners were the business people. We had several very good years, and then, for one reason or another, it dissolved, and I went back to producing shows as producing carpenter.

Q. How long did this last?

A. I think it only lasted three years. It was sort of a personal situation that created the end of it. I went back to producing shows as a producing carpenter. I was very busy, and there was a big studio at that point located in Fort Lee, New Jersey called Imperial Scenic Studios.

Q. Is this still in operation?

A. No. They were having problems getting work. They had acquired a bad reputation, and so, when they bid on work, they didn't necessarily get it, even if they were low bid or whatever. So, the head man, a man named David Steinberg, the owner of the operation---I had been taking some shows out of there to go on the road--- asked me if I would come in and run the studio. I said, "No", but I would make the drawings for him if I could work at home because I was still working at night in the theatre as a carpenter. That worked fairly well for three of four months. I would make all the drawings, break the show up, and, once or twice a week, go in and check on the execution of it. But, after a while, I started to get frustrated because unless you are there, people change what you are doing. Eventually, I wound up in the studio, and I took over and ran it for him because he was really a businessman. He didn't have much of a theatre background. He'd gotten into the theatre through a drapery shop he owned. And that worked very well for nine years.

I was in on a salary-plus-a-percentage-of-profits basis. It worked very well for me. But somehow it seemed, the bigger we got, the more work we did, the less profit there was. So, after a period of about nine years, I decided I wanted to leave.

Q. Could you elaborate on that?

A. No, I don't care to. I left. It became public knowledge that I had left. I went back to work in the theatre, and some producers approached me, and so forth.

Q. What year was this?

A. I'd say about 1957. Couple of producers approached me who had difficult technical shows and were unhappy that I had left and wanted to know if I would go back into business. So, actually, I did. Not in this location. I started with no money. I got the down payments on two shows with which I rented equipment and a temporary shop on 53rd St. between 10th and 11th Avenues in which I did the first two shows. I was getting more and more pressure to do shows, so I moved to larger quarters up at Yankee Stadium.

Q. How many men did you start with at the 53rd St. shop?

A. About four carpenters and two artists. It was a small shop. And I wish I was still there. In any case, under the pressure, it was good times, a lot of shows being done. The World's Fair was about to be done which is what really put me on my feet. I moved to larger quarters, then this up to the old Con Edison plant at Yankee Stadium, between the stadium and the river. And with the pressure of work, grew bigger and bigger and, in that period, made some money, basically in view of the World's Fair. We did three large projects at the World's Fair plus doing shows as we went along.

Q. What projects did you do at the World's Fair?

A. We did the Bell Telephone System Ride, The Vatican Pavillion, including setting up of the Pieta when it came in. I did the Protestant Pavillion and did the Light and Power Show. And I installed all the Walt Disney rides out there and the Pepsi Cola one. We were happily ensconced there up until four and one-half years ago at which point the City, unaware of the fact that we were in there and had a lot of people working. They thought it was a warehouse--leased the property to an elevator parts manufacturer who was located in Harlem, they were about to tear down his building which he owned. They were going to tear it down to make a school.

Q. You say the growth of the organization forced you to move here? What prompted this location?

A. Well, simply in order to service as many as six or seven or eight shows at a time, you need a lot of square footage which in New York City costs a great deal of money.

Q. How does here compare to Manhattan?

A. This kind of space, at the time we were making our moves, was about double.

Q. Without asking you the cost of this location, how many square feet do you have?

A. 83,000. This is only one building. We have several buildings, all adjoining and all pass-through. The City, quite unconsciously, bought the property that we were in for the gentleman they were evicting. It created quite a furor because he employed twelve people and we employed one hundred twelve. Made aware of the problem, they offered us every kind of help, even to the extent of saying "Examine all the unused City properties, and if there is one suitable to your needs, we will make it available to you at regular rental rates." Which we did. We spent a year on it; we had a year's notice of eviction. The only property that would have been at all feasible was too big for us. It was a fantastic building which still exists at the foot of 15th Street and the Hudson River, Pier 57, the only pier like it of its kind. It's not built on pilings; it's built on sunken casings--casons, has three floors below water level. In any case, it was much too big for our purposes, and we were pretty much without hope. We got the idea that since it was so huge, since it was centrally located, since the City would make it available at a reasonable rental - reasonable per square foot. But if you're talking about 526,000 square feet, you're talking about alot of money. I approached some of the other shops, saying that there was no reason why we couldn't have a sort of centralized theatre city--a theatre shopping center.

Q. Do you mean shops in the City of New Jersey?

A. Scene shops, electric shops, sound shops, costume shop. We even had Joe Papp interested in possibly building a theatre in it because it had a huge room that was meant for a helicopter pad. He could put an outdoor theatre, and it was so big, we could have had a theatre inside. We approached TV networks with the idea of having a tape studio out of the far end away from the noise. All the studios and shops were very interested enough to make verbal commitments, including Nolan. It was a fabulous situation, and might have provided a marvelous answer to some of the theatre's problems, now, because old shows, at least selectively, could have been stored, with basic worthwhile equipment, and become a communal pool, which was the whole idea.



We proceeded to spend alot of money on architects and all that, and at the last possible moment, we were informed by the then Mayor Lindsay that, having encouraged us all the way through this, in other words we were put in direct touch with Marine Aviation Authority which had control of the piers--and still does--and remember this was about four and a half years ago, we were informed by Mayor Lindsay that it would create too many problems with the longshoremen's unions. The pier was dark and had been dark for over two years. It's still dark at this moment. So all plans went awry, and we were left with about two months to find a place to relocate and to move to. And this was at the height of the season. So, in desperation, I found this place which was totally empty. There was no electric in it. It had been empty for some time and had been ravaged. It was stripped of conduit, there was nothing here. In the course of two months, while building quite a few shows, we made our move from there to here, and I've been behind the eight ball ever since.

Q. What year was this?

A. Four and a half years ago.

Q. This is only four and a half years in this location. You say behind the eight ball?

A. Well, the cost of the move and rehabilitating the building. Coincidental with the attrition in the number of shows being done. We have been running, trying to catch up, ever since. Plus the fantastic inflationary costs of labor and material, we've just never been able to get back on the good footing since.

Q. Would you say that this is the time that has been the most difficult since you started this operation?

A. No, but two months ago was. I seriously contemplated closing the shop.

Q. For what reason?

A. Well, our overhead here, if I turn the key in the lock without anyone working, comes to slightly over \$10,000 a week. You don't make your margin of profit on a show based on, first of all, their ability to pay and, secondly, the competition. In this business you settle for 5% of profit. If you make one mistake on a show and loose, there is no going back like in various other forms of contracts and saying, "Oops, I have a cost override," or whatever, you are stuck with in your contract. There have been shows where we've lost \$15,000 and \$20,000. Based on our own mistakes and no one to blame. But it's very precarious in a bidding situation.

Q. You were talking about the margin of profit is so slight and how much you can loose.

A. You can, based on a couple of things. Now when you loose, you don't always loose because of a technical error. But let's say you have two shows in here. Figured normal operating procedure with straight time, things like that, and you take one more show, and the dates are fairly close together. You're forced into overtime, not just on the new show you've taken, but, in order to make all your completion dates, you're doing overtime on shows you figured as straight time. Most shows are figured at straight time. It's very rare when a producer will come in knowing that he's going to start out of straight time, although it has happened. Your logical answer to that would be, "Why do you take the third show?" And the answer is the fear syndrome which, if you don't take it, not what will happen, but let's say you've worked with specific designers and producers for years. Not that you automatically get to do their shows, but it becomes evident that they would prefer you, for whatever reason. The type of your work, perhaps the show has specific problems which you are supposed to be an expert in and they feel they get better service. You see, you can pay 2, 3, 4 thousand dollars more sometimes to one good competitor than another based on proven assumptions that let's say when it costs you \$15,000 to put a musical on in the theatre the first time from one place as opposed to \$7,000 from another place, the difference is inherent. Basically it's fear. Here is a designer I've worked with for many years. Here is a producer that I've worked with for many years. And I am saying to him, "No, I can't do that third show because I already have two shows." Suppose he goes somewhere else, and he loves the other place? We all live in one kind of fear or another in our business, and that is one of our big problems. So, frequently, we'll take a show knowing that we're not going to make money on it. Let's say that I cannot, since the producer comes to me and says he has six weeks to do the show. I already have enough work. He says to me, "I have six weeks to do this show." I can't say to him, "I have to do it on overtime. Therefore, I have to charge you more." So I do him on straight time too. Now there are certain alleviating factors which, once in awhile, come into play. If I have one show in here or five shows, my overhead doesn't really change. I'm paying the same amount of rent for my structure. I'm paying my same office staff. There's very little change in your phone and heat bills, that kind of thing. But, in general, you find you take a shellacking or break even. As I said, if I could make 5% on every show I do a year, I would be in clover.

Q. How many shows can you accommodate at one time?

A. The maximum we ever had was nine.

Q. And that's with alot of overtime?

A. That's killing yourself, and everybody involved. That's not a good policy. I've never done that since. I did it once.

Q. When was this?

A. I was at Yankee Stadium. We were involved with the World's Fair - and there was a sudden burst of shows all happening simultaneously. And I didn't feel I could say no.

Q. Can you tell me who you find yourself working for the most? Which designers?

A. There's no limit to that, if you're talking about designers who I feel would prefer me over other shops?

Q. I don't know if that's fair to ask that, but I'd like to know. Jo Mielziner speaks very highly of you.

Q. We'll, Jo I've worked with for thirty five years. Boris Aronson I've worked with for about the same amount of time. I'm about the oldest active one around who is operating a shop. Therefore, the older generation designers, I think most of them simply out of familiarity and performance records, prefer us. We have always made it a point to encourage the young ones as well. I think it would be a kind of rash thing to say who would prefer me.

Q. Would you say that you are number one in the field right now?

A. Why don't you just say that we're the biggest. Number one? Of course, I personally think so, but I'm sure that every shop in existence would think that they were the best.

Q. I don't agree.

A. Well, we're the biggest in size.

Q. How many people do you employ?

A. It's a total variable. In other words, all people working in theatre work by the day. We have a basic staff of about twenty-eight people, here fifty two weeks a year. Beyond that we have gone up as high as 160. Let's say when we're very busy today, we're eighty or ninety people. Supervision becomes a problem. I'm unusual in the fact that I do have five key men who have been with me since they were kids, and I now have their kids working for me. That's second, and in one or two cases, third generation people working for me. Those five key men can take a great load off - in terms of I couldn't personally handle eighty or ninety men and completely direct or draw for them or anything else. So I do have men who can take groups and, if necessary, do a whole show.

Q. Could you give me a quick breakdown of the hierarchy, how it works in here?

A. I have five foremen. I have myself. I own the business totally. I do all the bidding, all the estimating. I have an office staff which does the billing and all the many things one does for the unions, and the State, City, and Federal Governments, and payrolls, things like that. I have next in the hierarchy, again, nepotism, my nephew who runs the drafting room.

Q. What's his name?

A. Frederick Feller, son of my older brother. He runs the drafting room, breaking up the shows planning it out on the floor. He and I consult, then he and the draftsmen draw it up, break it up, make basic material and construction decisions and mechanical decisions, and then it goes down to the floor. I have five foremen. One who runs our metalworking shop, and four who run the building. Plus a chargeman who is the head of the paintshop.

Q. The chargeman?

A. The chargeman is the head scenic artist. The chargeman, per se, is your basic head painter. The term chargeman is a union term, equivalent to foreman in the mechanical unions. His function is more than that since he consults directly with the designer in terms of color, line, form material to be painted upon, things like that. Inherent in the name chargeman--it's basically more than a foreman--he's in total charge of the painting. And, being a mechanic myself, I've acquired, over the years quite, a bit of information, so I'm able to make judgements. But it's his word really in the end; he's the man of decision. I may not agree with it, I may have estimated doing it one way, and he may say, "It's impossible to achieve that effect on this material, so we'll have to get that material." In which case, I sometimes swallow it. Or, sometimes he has recommendations which turn out cheaper for me. I found that neither foreman nor chargeman have any clear idea of how long anything takes. Therefore, I must make all those decisions. I do all the bidding, and I don't have anybody. I don't call the chargeman in and say, "How much is this going to take to paint this drop?" or anything, because I've found that they always underestimate. A good mechanic or a good painter will look at something and say, "Oh, I can do that in five days." Well, their eyes are always bigger than their stomach, and I've found that they're not judges of time.

Q. Can you give me a breakdown of the areas in the shop?  
People specialize as carpenters, wood carvers, and  
scene painters, I'm sure, but do they overlap?

A. No. I employ two unions here, and there's no real overlapping except possibly in the sculptural area, where I have mechanics who are sculptors, as well as, scenic artists who are sculptors. We try to maintain a sort of 50-50 split in that area. There is no other overlapping really.

Q. What two unions are these?

A. This is United Scenic Artists, Local 829, and International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees which is Local 1. And they're both very jealous of their jurisdictions and their functions, and only in times of desperation will the artists allow the carpenters to give them any help at all, and the opposite. When they've been going for forty-eight hours and they're tired, if someone says, "Give me a hand," they may.

Q. Who works with metal and plastic?

A. Metal and plastics are encompassed by the Mechanics Union.

Q. Local 1?

A. Yes, right. Actually that's fairly recent in the business, I started with Steinberg in the very late '50's, because most metalwork which was used in the theatre, at least in the scenic end of theatre, had always been given out to metal shops. I found the problems growing in the sense that you had to make very specific drawings. It was impossible to keep track of what was going on in the iron shop that you had subcontracted to, that they had no understanding of theatre, and that primarily, like most business, they had no understanding of the very definite time limit that we folks are under in theatre. If we take a contract, and it says up there it's going to go out on January 24, it must go out on January 24. In most businesses they say, "Oops, it can't go out on January 24. It'll go out on February 6th," or whatever. They can do it, but since the theatre has been booked, they have been rehearsing a certain amount of time, you go back to the basic, "Why does the show have to go on? Because I've sold the God damn tickets." We're stuck in that situation, and when you subcontract work out in theatre, that's why we've gotten into so many diverse things. If you subcontract the work out, you are inevitably screwed, because the people, no matter how you lecture them, if you get their signature on a day, it doesn't really seem to have that same pressure that contractors in theatre have. They don't believe the day. Here we're dealing with two, highly skilled, custom crafts. We never do the same thing twice. We have not only the problems of execution, but the problems of breaking it down to travel. We sometimes have very intricate mechanical systems which are fine if you're going to build them into a building and leave them there.

But we have to build them to come apart and travel. There's all added problems. And no one else out of the theatre seems able to cope with that problem. In fact, it's been part of our livelihood that, occasionally, outside of theatre someone has a real time problem, and the people whose business it is servicing that phase won't take the job. We frequently get outside jobs where they have an unusual problem and an unusual time problem, and we will get that job.

Q. Outside jobs, you mean like decorating? Or doing interiors?

A. No. We have literally built theatres, built huge sculptures, the kind that go outside office buildings, thing like that. Things that are totally unrelated to theatre at all, except the crafts are related. The mechanic is a mechanic, and possibly our men think differently. I mean, after you've built one house, you can almost build any house. But if you have a very unusual house, you have to go searching for the right contractor for it.

Q. Is this a consistent thing, or just very infrequently?

A. It's consistent enough to be a pattern, yes. Inevitably, four or five times a year, somebody will come up with an unusual project not at all related to theatre. Like they just built a huge amusement park down in Jersey. The Great Adventure. All of which was really the work of other trades, other unions let's say who could very well build the roads and put in the electric and the air conditioning and build the basic structure themselves. The unusual parts of it, like a huge water wheel. Because first of all, the normal contractor doesn't want to do anything strange to him. He knows what he can do, and almost to the dollar what he can make on it. Anything outside their normal periphery he will avoid. But since we do that every day, no show is alike and some are highly unusual, since we do that every day, it doesn't really bother us that much. We're used to strange work, and we're used to gambling on our figures, and that is really what the theatre is all about.

Q. I'd like to ask you about bidding.

A. Well, bidding is the biggest crap shoot in the world. First of all, what's happened in the last few years as it gets harder and harder to raise money for productions, it's generally raised later and later. Well, a producer starting out to do a show can't spend any of the money until he has raised it all. That's sort of the laws of the S.E.C. So, where you used to have a couple of months to do a musical, and the designer would have a couple of months to design it prior to having to put it into work, the producer raises that last \$50,000 four weeks before the show's about to go out, the designer and the director come up with a concept, and there will be a bunch of rough sketches and ideas, and you literally start bidding on the show or even building on the show before you have your drawings.

It's based on your knowledge of the man, the requirements of the show, and your faith that everybody's going to do what they say they'll do.

Q. This is rare, isn't it?

A. No, it isn't rare at all.

Q. You have no drawings, no models?

A. A rough model, you see they don't even draw much until the director has approved it. So they'll whip out a model, or make some very loose free form sketches. By that point now, it's three weeks till the day the show goes out. So they start saying, "Well, we're going to lose a week on bidding." They look at it all, get whatever information they can, go home and cogitate a few days, put in a bid. We compare bids. We make our decisions. And now we're down to two weeks.

Q. You say once it goes out, exactly what do you mean?

A. When the show loads out. Every date up there is a load out date, that's the day the truck pulls up to the door and the show must go on that truck.

Q. You're saying that you have two weeks sometimes?

A. Frequently. Fiddler on the Roof was built in three. Zorba was built in two. Many shows are built in a week, which is the other reason you need a lot of space. Bidding in the sense that I think the two biggest shops are Nolan over in Brooklyn and ourselves. Sometimes I will walk into a bid session and look at it and hear the date it's supposed to go out and know whether I can forget the other four or five guys in on the bidding session because I know they simply wouldn't have the capacity. I wouldn't say skills. They would have the same skills, but they wouldn't have the capacity to turn it out in the time allotted. So now it's down to a bump head situation between two or three shops. In bidding, you also consider the fact that it's a very small business. Ok, Nolan walks in and he thinks, "That goes out on the 24th. I know Feller has a show in there that's going out on the 23rd." Because he had bid on that one, you see, and I (Feller) got it. He thinks, "Well, that's going to push his price up a little," and I can get it. I have the same kind of reactions. I know he's up to his ass, so maybe I'm going to bid another thousand bucks because that would be a safety cushion. All bids are dangerous. I've never seen a case, because there have been occasions where most people ask for itemized bids. Let's say you even have finished, complete. The total drawings aren't going to change.

Most people ask for itemized bids. Not on a one-setter, but on any multi-set shows because maybe their budget doesn't fit the show, and as they are already thinking ahead and saying, "Well, I may have to cut," they have to eliminate pieces, or eliminate a scene. I'll talk to a director, and he can stage that scene and this scene whatever. So they ask for itemized bids up front. If I just gave them a lump sum and they came back to me and say, "How much have I cut this?" I could say anything. And in a few cases I've seen the itemized bids of seven shops who may have been within a three or four thousand dollar range in their total, but no single itemized price matched. Because it's all in the eye of the beholder based on what you see on that drawing, and when you're bidding, you don't stop to break it down that selectively. You would say based on your experience, "This is so many man hours," and everybody experiences differently, everybody's capacities are different. So, I may come up with a three thousand dollar figure on an item, and somebody else comes up saying eight hundred, and someone else may come up with six thousand. It's based on the individual. In general, I have found, strangely enough that, you take them all together, the gross of everybody, it comes out being very close to being the same. In fact, I had one producer once who called up, commenting on that fact and said, "Well, I'm going to take one from column A, and one from column B, one from column C." And I said, "Well, forget it." Go anywhere you want, but my bid is based on the whole object. I may be very low. I may loose on one piece on the show and make on another. In the wind up, one washes the other out. So, in bidding, again, that's the other problem. If you go to any business with a custom product and ask them for a bid, you may get the bid in two weeks, four weeks. He puts three people in his estimating room to work figuring out every inch of material and every man hour and all that. We'll go down and look at a show on a Tuesday afternoon and they'll ask for the bids on a Thursday morning. Now the show may be a \$130,000 show. How are you going to accomplish this amount of work, especially when almost all bidding is done by the shop operator? In other words, in the case of Nolan, it would be Arnold and Charlie together. In my case, I'm alone. There are many hours in bidding. In my case, I've developed a formula which just about, almost exactly, averaged out. I figure hours, figure man time, both mechanical and paint-wise, and apply a percentage for material and it comes out within a couple of percentage points, almost, over the year, it comes out within a couple of percentage points. I have no time. If I were to take a sheaf of twenty-five drawings and want to break it down that specifically, every stick, every yard, every this or that, I would be doing nothing but that for a week and a half. But the producer wants the bid tomorrow morning. And strangely enough, the bid works out. Well, not always. There have been a few shows where I made probably more than I could wish for--very few. In most, where I thought I was going to get my 5%..I always mark it up 10%..I never get 10%. I don't think I've ever made 10% on a show. But shown where I'm hoping to wind up at 5%, I've made 1%. Shows I have lost money on.



Q. But you're still in business, so most of them must have come out well?

A. Last year, 50% of our work..Let's say we do any kind of work in order to be able to support theatre and continue in theatre. Last year, 50% of our income came from outside theatre and at the same time, two months ago, I was seriously considering closing the shop because we were running in the hole, and consistently running in the hole and there wasn't a great future ahead. In other words, only a couple of shows coming up seven shops scrambling for a couple of shows, you know your chances are very slim of getting any of them. I've done a great deal of work with Disney, both for California and for Florida, both their parks. I had been in Disney about three months ago. They're doing two huge Bicentennial parades, simultaneously. Two of every object --one for Florida, and one for California. I bid on it several months ago but have had no answers from them. In addition to which, they had twenty-seven bidders. It is not necessarily a theatrical thing, so I was one of the few union shops that were bidding--(You know Disney doesn't care)--which is already a kick in the pants if you're trying to bid competitively with non-union, and there were twenty-seven bidders. They had a convention of bidders in Dallas, Texas. Since I hadn't heard from them, I thought the whole project was dead, at least from what I was going to get, and I seriously began to think there was no future in it. If I got a Broadway show out of the two or three available, it wouldn't be enough to keep a shop this size going. Sort of trumpets blowing and flags flying. Disney arrived with not the entire parade but a substantial portion of it. In fact, it's got me nervous because it's the hardest portion of it. And that enabled me to see a future for the next three or four months. So, then, I started fighting for what shows were available too.

Q. This sounds like a hand to mouth existence then?

A. Exactly. I haven't drawn a salary in over two years. I live in the shop. It's not a sob story; it's just a hand to mouth existence.

Q. You live in the shop?

A. Yes, I've lived in the shop for three years.

Q. You mean you're not a rich man?

A. No. But I'm a good mechanic. I have a union card and can always make a living.

Q. Lets talk about the price of a show.

A. There's no such thing as a ball park figure on a show.

Q. Someone has said the average one set show costs about \$18,000. They very rarely do one for less than \$15,000.

A. I think they're wrong. I don't think you can say that. A guy could walk in tomorrow with a show that would cost \$5,000 or \$6,000, depending on the design or the requirements of the show. We can substitute imagination for money, too. They say, now, that the average musical costs \$100,000. Well, I just did one for Jo Mielziner that cost \$50,000. That was Miss Moffat, the Bette Davis show. Unfortunately, it failed and closed in Philadelphia. There is no average show. A one setter--I'm doing a one setter now that costs \$30,000. Next week I may do a one setter that costs \$8,000.

Q. Which show are you doing right now?

A. A Doll's House. The Liv Ulman A Doll's House. \$27,000. Depends on what it is. We have so many man hours, so much material. I've never seen two shows that matched. The only time you can do that is if you have a road company. Then you know to the dollar what it's going to cost. When I started, we did a musical for \$10,000, right? And now I've done musicals that cost \$160,000.

Q. Do you find a trend where the cost of scenery is expected to go down?

A. I don't find a trend, I see a necessity. There is no way that theatre seats can bring more. I already feel that they are keeping people from the theatre. If you gave a hit today and spend a lot of money on it you may have to run a year at capacity, which is almost an impossibility to return the original investment. Where can you cut? Very few places. The unions are not about to cut. The producer can cut their services, the need for their services. He can use the famous line, "We can use imagination instead of money." That can be done without damaging the production particularly. And producers, I'm sure, are giving that a great deal of thought. It can be eliminated. It might hurt the show a little, but it wouldn't keep the show from being done. Today, to do a big production, which is always a gamble, and the day you decide to do it, know you couldn't break even for a year, you're going to lose producers too, never mind backers. It's a pretty hopeless situation for them too. So, nobody wants to stop doing shows, but I think they just have to do them differently.

Q. That's where the scenery goes?

A. Scenery's one of the few things in theatre. You talk about showing the scenery, right? It's one of the few tangibles in theatre. You can carry it; you can sit on it; you can spit on it; you can climb it. There are very few other tangibles. That's why critics have such a big problem.

Lighting isn't that tangible. Sound is not tangible. What makes a show a hit or a failure? A fine performance? O.K. Good performances are barely tangible. Bad performances are always tangible, and fantastically good performances are always tangible. In between, it's not an obvious thing. Is the play well written or not? It's a very fine line. It's not all that obvious. Is it's success or failure due to the director? None of those things are tangibles that you can attack. You can attack physical things. By attack, I mean here is one thing where I may save money. I'm sure you can tell the playwright I'm going to give you 1½% instead of 2%, or the director, or the star, but in right up front savings where do you save? They don't know. You can't say to the musicians. "You're going to take less." But maybe they'll have eighteen men instead of twenty-seven. If you have a lot scenery, they can't say, "I'm gonna work this show with eight people," if there is so much scenery that it requires nineteen people. But they can say, "I can do without the scenery. I can play that scene. I can play it with vignette set. Do I need a full stage scene for it?" If I were a producer, that would be my problem.

Q. I guess you never think about the problem of building for different theatres? For instance, a show just got closed in Philadelphia. It was in a different theatre than they hoped it would wind up in. In other words, the size of the proscenium opening varies considerably, and the depth of the stage at times.

A. Obviously, because we try to be helpful, we always inquire as to the bookings a show may have. A show booked into the Forrest in Philadelphia, they don't get a booking from a New York theatre owner until the owner has seen it out of town and decides that he wants it. So you talk about possibilities; you try to make it conform.

Q. We were talking about the process. A show comes in and you try to build some of it right away so you can get the scene painters started. And you had the two unions, one is the United Scenic Artists one's Local 1, and there's very little overlapping except with the sculpting?

A. Well sculpting is basically in both unions as per past practice because it's always been so individual. Between the two unions. Both claim the right to do it, and there's a happy compromise and they both do it. That's the one overlap possibility.

Q. The process. You have a show and there are some materials you have on hand and others you have to go out and get. The first thing you build is what? Platforms or walls, flats?

A. Once I have my drawings, my shop is split up into departments. In other words, I have flat work which is scenery walls, be they canvass covered flats or built hard covers.

Q. No matter what they're made of?

A. Right, flat work. It's not a jurisdictional thing. It's a just I've separated the men with particular talents into different departments. I have what we call built work which is cabinet work, any dimensional material of any kind. And then I have a group who do mostly my platforms, my decks. So, if I have a musical with a combination of all three, generally, I start all three at once. I can't start one thing and then in a logical process finish the one thing and go to the next thing. We start let's say from 360 degrees around the project and attack it from all points.

Q. How many different departments do you have?

A. Five.

Q. What are these five areas?

A. Flatwork, buildwork, painting, platforms, decks, actually six,--mechanical and ironwork.

Q. What do you mean by mechanical?

A. Build the winches, building electronics. We never know when we put it together if that scenery is going to match that deck. Is that elevator frame I have these going to fit it? We do know based on our drawings. But I start the elevator cage and I start the elevator mechanics in another area and they come together.

Q. You mentioned that you had as little as a week. Is that about the minimum that you can take?

A. Well it's the minimum I'd be idiot enough to take. Again, that would depend on the show.

Q. Have you ever had three months?

A. How To Succeed in Business, road company.

Q. What's the average range of days?

A. Like again, there's no such average show. A one-setter I would feel very comfortable with in three weeks, a musical in six weeks. That's idyllic. More time is even more so.

Q. Do you see any particular trend in the type of scenery you're building as opposed to a few years back?

A. No.

Q. In the past years, historically there was alot more painted scenery. Now most of the scenery built is enviromental stuff?

A. That's not historically accurate. Let's say it comes in waves. I constantly expect a wave of painting to take the place of dimentional even though painting is very expensive at this point. We still have to paint the dimentional stuff. And that is based on the dollar situation. But, historically, the techniques were very limited. If you're going now back sixty or seventy years. The lighting was so limited that you didn't have to build a built cornice per se. And the plays were limited. You weren't into that much realism. When you really started getting into realism you can't let's say, play Eugene O'Neill in a painted drop. So the punishment fits the crime. You got into realism and you had to build it. You couldn't pretend that that was a built room with real books and all the other stuff. You had to build it. And as lighting got better and exposed more of it, you certainly had to. Plus competition with motion pictures where the scenery is very realistic. But I feel that this next wave is going to go to more and more painting, yes. Or at least should, even though painters are the most expensive single aspect of our business.

Q. Why is that?

A. Because of their being skilled artisans, their union contracts are the most expensive.

Q. Why is that?

A. Because of their being skilled artisans, their union contracts are the most expensive.

Q. How do they compare with Local 1, for instance? Salaries, for instance?

A. Well the difference depends on the man, the good men get even over scale. Both in the mechanical and in the painting end. But let's say that a scenic artist at the end of the year, has made \$10,000 to \$15,000 more than our best mechanic.

Q. What is the base?

A. I don't have that at my fingertips.

Q. Is there someone that can make \$30,000 to \$40,000 a year here?

A. Oh yes. And more.

Q. Which local do you belong to?

A. I belong to Local 1. No, I do see the first that they will have to. Even though the painters are expensive, if you build a piece and then paint it, you've added the building cost to the painting cost. If you're just doing a mere painted technique, and you're doing it on a drop, the finished item is going to cost the producer less. It would also reduce his lighting costs if you didn't want to overlight something so that all the realism was required and he might be able to do with less in the way of lighting.

Q. Do you prefer a particular type of show?

A. I love them all. I prefer the kind I can make money on. But its totally variable. I can do a huge musical and not make a dime and I can do a one-setter and make \$2,000.

Q. You'd have to make more than that?

A. You can't. People can't afford it.

Q. Do you do any designing here?

A. No. What we do have are draftsmen who are also designers. All designers don't have work. It's very sporadic. We have in all shops, since the designer is already conversant with the business and knows a great deal and sometimes its good for them, educationally from the technical end of it, frequently take an out-of-work designer and put him to work drafting. But you don't contract to design. It's a whole phase I don't want to get into and no shop does really.

Q. I thought there was more money in it. For instance, Disney has his own designers and they just give you the plans and you take the show from there.

A. Actually, they give us notes.

Q. Just notes, and you have to make the plans from there?

A. We draw them.

Q. If the maximum time to set up a show would be a week. Would you want more time?

A. I wouldn't want it. The producer certainly wouldn't want to. He's paying rent on the theatre. He has to rehearse and he has to open. Schedule wise I see no way for him to do that.

Q. If the theatre were dark could you get in early?

A. I have seen the same show take two days to put on and given enough time, take five days to put on. The work seems to expand to fit the time. Or contract. There has to be pressure. The theatre lives on pressure.

Q. Do you have any projections for the future?

A. With the diminishing amount of theatre and it becoming highly seasonal again, we have to take our same skills, crafts, space, equipment and diversify more, hopefully in fields that are possibly related to theatre. I could not operate this plant fifty-two weeks a year based on just what's happening in theatre, even if I got 90% of it, and I don't. So I have, over the last two years, diversified to that extent. I mean Disney after all. I mean, where Mickey Mouse is, is a whole different kind of situation. But their requirements fit in with our skills and our facilities. It provides three months of work for me that takes some of the pressure off here or off me to exist if theatre can't. I need the outside work to stay in business. If I don't get enough outside work, I'm going to be here to service theatre when it requires it. There is no season at which I'm not working but there are weeks here and there, scattered throughout the year when we're not working.

Q. Whats your leanest? Some shops say summer doesn't work out well?

A. Summer, so far, has worked out for us in that we've been fortunate enough to do most of the hits and when you have a hit and the say, "Well, I'm going to send out a road company in the fall." And they say, "When are you least busy?" And I say, "In the Summer." They will project doing that road company in my lean months, at which time, we do it just for costs to pay our overhead and stay alive. We have not had a lean summer yet. I anticipate one this coming summer because there don't seem to be that many hits or at least maybe I'm not doing them. More and more of the shows I do are road shows. I don't see any hits, so far. In the meantime, even when you have a hit, they can't start executing a road company until they've paid back the initial investments, so since it takes longer and longer to pay back the initial investment, the hit of this season I don't get to do till the summer after this.

Answering Questions - Mr. John Schwanke, Gen'l. Mgr.  
Interviewed By - J. Collom  
Date - Dec. 1974

Feller Scenery Studios  
381 Canal Place  
Bronx, New York

Q. Your name is John Schwanke and your position is?

A. General Manager.

Q. Tell me how you function here, your position here?

A. Well first of all, I'm Peter's assistant. Anything he can't do or doesn't have time to do, I do. Usually with conversations regarding the related matter. In terms of if we're bidding a show, he may give a price on the show, let's say \$30,000. Then the producer will come back and they'll say, "We can't spend that much," and the designer will start chopping away. And if he's out of town, if he isn't here, then I'll discuss it with them over the phone, then give the new prices per our conversation. If he's here, then I assist him just as I would normally in terms of taking down the number of hours that will be spent, in terms of estimating the job, and so forth. I help him out in any area, concerning bidding, building in the shop, in terms of small projects. Fred Feller, his nephew is the supervisor of the shop and he runs the shop. I take care of all the invoicing, do the cost accounting, make sure that all past debts are paid, as a matter of fact some debts that we've had outstanding for a year, or six months I've collected, that haven't been collected in the past. Sometimes we have to give people checks in terms of merchandise, blueprints back, drawings from the designers, in terms of what our artists will do in terms of painting the set. I handle all the PO's. I don't do the ordering; we have a purchasing agent by the name of Rick Basserap, but all the PO's cross my desk, and, of course, they have to for me to cost account a job. In other words, we bid a job at let's say \$30,000 and the I keep the hours the men spend on that job, the purchases, any cash disbursements that we might have to give out. I make all of Peter's appointments. I keep running talleys on all the shows, making sure of the bid price, making sure that we do pick up the checks when we're supposed to. And generally coordinating alot of the aspects of the office and of the shop even though I don't supervise the construction and building.

Q. Do you mind telling me something about your background?  
What brought you here?

A. I went to school for six years.



Q. Where?

A. Illinois State University. I was in education for quite a few years. I never taught, but I acted. And I was in a repertory theatre in Illinois on a two year program where we could receive half credit one year and half the next toward a master's. And the other half of the time was devoted to touring shows in a five county area. And I received a Master's from Illinois State University. I used to come into New York at Christmas and in six years I saw about 120 shows on and off Broadway. My life was totally dedicated to theatre. Afterwards, I went to California and a friend of mine was there, and we started working on the Disney on Parade shows. They are large arena shows that have toured all over the United States, Japan, South America, Australia. And he was an art director. And I hadn't limited my background just to acting.

Q. Who was the art director?

A. His name was Stephen Ehlers. And, fortunately, when I was in the educational theatre, in the learning process, if I didn't get a role in a show, I would stage manage or I would design the lighting. I was interested in all aspects. That stood me in good stead in California because he needed someone to assist him who knew the technical areas of theatre, and I assisted him for two "Disney on Parade" shows and then I became the technical coordinator on "Peter Pan", which was an offshot of the "Disney on Parade" shows. I also designed the lighting for that show. We needed to have the show built, and no one could build it, because it was so large. And so I said, "Let's check out Peter Feller." We had heard the name several times, and they had built a couple of our decks. So we set up a meeting and he came to California, and I had great respect for him right off the bat, and I knew this was a man I wanted to work for. We eventually came here and presented the entire show to him, all the drawings all the blueprints. And he gave us a price, and we had the show built here. About six months later we did the South American version of "Disney on Parade", and then I just came and did all the presenting to Peter and he gave a price and I called the Coast and they said, "OK go ahead." So I worked with him on that show also. And after I went back he kept calling California saying, "When are you coming to work for me?" About six months later I gave him a call and told him I was ready to come to work. This was about four months ago. And he told me he'd get back to me. When he didn't, I went to New York to ask him about it, arrived at 7:00 in the morning and by 11:00 that morning was sitting in this desk doing exactly what I'm doing now.

Q. In the time that you've been here, have you gotten a good orientation to what goes on downstairs?

A. I think I have. Of course I learn something new every day, often times many things.

Q. How many shows have you done in the past fourteen years?

A. Since 1962, over 1200 shows.

Q. Do you recall some of these names?

A. I have a list that I could give you a copy of.

Q. Do you have any idea of the amount of money you spend on materials on a weekly or monthly basis? Or do you go by show?

A. I could give you some estimate. We spend on lumber alone about \$500,000 a year. In purchasing lumber - 1x3's, 1x6's, 2x4's, 4x8 sheets of plywood, moldings.

Q. What is the thing you order the most of?

A. Plywood, I would say. Because of the decks and platforms that are usually in shows to give the different levels. And the next item that we order the most of is probably 2x4's.

Q. 3/4 ply?

A. 3/4, half inch, eighth inch, it just depends on what the people want. We're doing a show right now, A Doll's House and we're having alot of custom made lumber. In other words, big planks with beveled edges to give it a groove. A tongue-in-groove effect. And those are special orders, but we use everything.

Q. In the time that you've been here, what is the single most outstanding thing that impressed you the most about this place?

A. The knowledge that Peter Feller has about theatre.

Q. He's the one thing that holds this operation together, you would say?

A. No question about it. If there wasn't Peter Feller, there wouldn't be a shop like this. He has the contacts, the knowledge, the experience.

He also has the psychology to work with people who can sometimes be very difficult. He knows what to say at the right time and he knows how to get things done. I heard part of your taping in there when he was making some phone calls to the business manager for Local 1. So that we can combat this union problem where the trades want to get into the theatre, and we feel that it's something that strictly the theatre should do. Now if they were building a whole new interior for a theatre, that would be something else, but that isn't what applies. So this is why I wanted to work for him. I think I can gain more knowledge here from him than I could from anybody else.

Q. Do you consider this a fragile business in danger of not lasting?

A. Well I would have to say that I do only in terms of had we not gotten certain contracts at the end of December, we probably wouldn't be sitting here talking. We were going to close the shop and reorganize and open again. But it would have been on a much smaller level. We were in financial trouble and one of the reasons was because we had built a shop that theatre demanded. We got so many shows, we had to enlarge, had to put on more people, and, all of a sudden, theatre dried up for a couple of months. And when that happens and our livelihood comes from building shows, we're in danger of shutting the doors. Now we've started to expand into other areas, in terms of amusement parks. We've done quite a lot of work with Disneyland, Walt Disney World, and these areas are going to have to be expanded. Because theatre cannot sustain the size of our plant and operation.

Q. Do you by any chance have an inventory that you keep current?

A. Inventory in terms of what?

Q. Materials and equipment in the shop.

A. We really don't. It's something that since I've come to Feller Scenery that we're going to start doing, but we really don't, and we should.

Q. Do you have an itemization of what kind of machinery you have in the shop?

A. No.

Q. What happens if a machine disappears?

A. We have a stockroom where all the equipment in terms of drills, and handsaws, hand tools are checked out every day. We have a stockroom, one man that does nothing but receive and check out tools, equipment and hardware.

He also coordinates with me the drivers daily rounds, and some of the drivers may make as many as twenty stops a day just picking up materials, blueprints, checks and so forth.

Q. The stockman would dispense everything from nails to high power hand saws?

A. Right. And then he gives me a list of everything that's gone out. I did a study on it and I figure that we loose about 2% of material a year, and that represents probably about five or ten thousand dollars. Now I don't know how to stop it, but I think that if we let it go on as we have, we're better off than if we try to put a hard control on it. In a month, my thinking may change on that, but we have a very interesting policy here because we put alot of trust in the men. There are checks laying around, from time to time large amounts of money that comes through the office, and we have never had any problem with any of that missing. And theatre is kind of one big family. We have sons and their sons working down there, and we have to trust them. In terms of tools, we have lost a very minimum of them in the past.

Q. I have the impression that alot of people stay in this business more out of dedication than for the money. As evidenced by one case, the shop was about to close, money ran out, the men stayed on and finished the show for free just because they liked the boss. Do you think most people in the shop like it or is it just a job?

A. I think that maybe 20% do it because they like it. I think the others are interested in the monetary value. It's interesting that you say that because I don't know if the men here would stay on and work for nothing. They possibly would, but I don't think Peter Feller, as a man, would ask them to do that. I'd love to see that that happen if we ever got into that situation, and it probably would, but then again, I doubt if it would because Peter would neve expect that from his men.

Q. Do you work with designer yourself?

A. Oh yes. Every day one of them comes in, or I am called in to go over the prices on a show. A lot of times, designers, and I've worked both sides of the coin now, having worked the "Disney on Parade" shows and assisting as art director, you try to get as much as you can from a builder for the amount of money that you're paying. Sometimes it's a bit deceitful, but you try to slip in little things that you might have discussed but you never firmed up and its going to cost the builder money. Now it's strange because I work the other side. I've got to control, and I've got to watch that the designers don't do that, and, in fact, they don't do exactly what I had been guilty of in the past when I was assistant to an Art Director or a designer. I do talk to them each day.

I give them prices or I tell them, "Yes," they can have that or, "No," they can't have that. If there is something added that they absolutely need that was never discussed before or never frimed up on paper, then I'll call the general manager or producer and say, "Look they want this. Can they have it?" And he'll either say, "Yes", or "No", and then I make up an extra work order which is in addition to the bid price or the contract price and eventually collect that.

Q. Do you know how many machines you have in the shop?

A. I'm really not sure. We have about four table saws, we have two radial arm saws, about four drill presses, a buffalo machine (cutting machines for iron), four welders, two vacuum formers (4 x 8 foot size and 6 x 10 foot size), pipe bending machines, portable back saws, twenty hand drills, thing like that. They're things that we have to have so if we need them close so the man in charge of the stock room will call me up and say, "We need a drill." and I'll say, "What for?" and he'll tell me and we'll go ahead and get it.

Q. Do you have one man who does all the repair and maintenance?

A. We send it all out. If there is a breakdown of a table saw, we have an electrician come in, or if its something that we can do, we'll repair it ourselves.

Q. Do you have a shop electrician?

A. We don't have a man that just keeps up the maintenance. We have a man that comes in from outside that keeps up the building. We have lots of electricians that have to wire lighting for shows and things like that.

Q. Do you have people who do specialized work?

A. Yeah, our iron men. We have a breakdown in terms of welders, pipe benders, the carpenters. One man does all the flat sawing, and building. We have one man that does nothing but sculpting.

Q. Does the sculpter belong to the mechanics union?

A. I believe he belongs to the artist's union. I'm not sure. A foreman and his crew will just build flats. Another foreman and his crew does finishing work like mouldings, doors, windows. We have another man, as I said, who does the sculpting. He does all the forming and carving and the molds for all the fiber glass.

We have what Peter refers to as the Gremlins. They do all the labouring in terms of fiber glassing but there is only one man that does the sculpture. We have a crew that does nothing but unload trucks, and keeps the shop in shape in terms of cleaning up, the custodians.. So there is a breakdown. Then you have your artists that are extremely talented. Two or three of them are hung in galleries, their paintings all over Europe.

Q. Who are the two most outstanding?

A. One's name is Ewald Dajevskie and Rudolf Luchek.

Q. One of thre foremost designers complains that you don't find painters as competent as they used to be?

A. Well, I think that that's true. Sometimes we have to accept people because of the unions that may not be as competent, but, hopefully, they'll become as good one day. And that is a legitimate concern of the designer. However, we feel we have the best talent in terms of our artists of any studio in the world.

Q. Do newer designers visit you more frequently than the older ones?

A. They're here quite often.

Q. Mielziner says that if he likes a shop and trusts them, he can leave them alone for three or four days.

A. Well, that's probably true. And he and Peter have a good personal and professional relationship. Others like Howard Bay is very particular and supervises the painting very closely. He is down on the floor with the men making sure that it looks exactly the way he has pictured it. Another similar one is Donald Oenslager. The younger designers are concerned too, but they may have more than one show going and that limits the amount of times they can come here. For instance, Douglas Schmidt. We're doing a show for him called Salome right now, and he's got another show going at another studio called Kid Champion, so, even if he'd like to be up here as much as he wants, he can't be because he's got to split his time up because he's got more shows going. The older fellows, most of the time, have one show at a time and they're probably a little worried about job security. I guess.

Q. You've been to a bidding session?

A. Yes.

Q. Tell me what your first response was about it, and trace it for me until the time it leaves the shop.

A. We will be invited to bid on a show, get a telephone call, and set up the date that the show is going to be bid. We go down to, let's say, the Public Theatre. Joe Papp's, or we might go over to Hunt Soundheimer at New York City Opera, and the designer will be there with usually a model and the drawings of the show. And there will also be the other studios there, Nolans, Messmore and Damon, Variety Scenic. There are about six studios, and, except for us and Nolan, the others are small. But the show may be small, and it could be one that the other studios could handle. The designer will present this concept and go through the drawings. Questions are asked. "What kind of lumber do you want here? What kind of material do you want there?" Now he envisions it in terms of being painted, and then we come back and go through the process of trying to cost the show or how much it will cost us and put our mark up on it. Very difficult, because there are a lot of questions that probably don't get asked at that session that come up later. And, like I said before, when you're trying to control extras, or when the designer is trying to get a little bit more in than what you originally bid on, you've got to be very cautious and very careful, and that's where I control the show in terms of when Peter asks me, "Was this in our bid price? Did he have that item there?" And, a lot of the times, you'll find out that they didn't. So, once we put together our bid, then we will either call the bid in to the producer, or submit it in writing, and they will then give out the contract. However, a lot of times the bid price will be too much. Not just from us but from everybody, and the designer has to cut a certain amount of the show. He has to cut it down a third or cut it in half, or sometimes they even make it bigger, but that is a very rare occasion. Once we've formulated exactly what is in the show and what the price is going to be, I write the contract. And usually, I'll send out the contract the same day to the producer. He will then issue me a check. Because we base our price on the down payment, in other words, the contract price might be \$30,000, the down payment to start to buy materials would be \$10,000, halfway through the job we get another \$10,000, and then, upon completion of the job, when it goes out of the shop, we get the final \$10,000. After we have signed the contract and the producer has signed the contract and we receive the first check, we start with the designer building the scenery. Now there's a detailed process of the designer again going through with Peter and with Freddie Feller who's the supervisor of the shop exactly what he wants in his show for his drawings. A lot of the designers nowadays don't do complete blueprints of the show, and we will have to do some of the drafting of the show.

Once it's OK'd by the designer, and we feel that that was in our bid price, we start construction. The purchasing agent of course by this time has purchased the relevant materials. He's just one man that does all the purchasing. He contacts the lumberyards, the plastic manufacturers, the hardware people. He writes a purchase order with the name of the show on it and the number of the show, and then the materials are delivered. So, then, through the next two weeks, or three weeks, or however long we have to build the show, the designer, Pete Feller, and Freddie Feller are in constant communication, and the designers come up every other day, let's say, to make sure that things are progressing as smoothly as they possibly can. As a piece gets completed with the carpenters, let's say a platform, flat, or a unit that then has to be treated scenically, it goes to the artist, and they will then put on the detailed painting, whether it's lettering or a wash or a pastoral scene, something like that. And when that's completed, it's put aside until the day of load out. And when everything is together, hopefully that's the day the show loads out and it's put in a truck, a Clark transfer truck, usually, and shipped to the theatre.

Q. Then at the theatre?

A. We usually send one man to supervise, and he will work with the production carpenter, or it may even be a production carpenter. A lot of times producers ask us to recommend people, and having been in the business as long as Peter has, he knows most of the people who need work and would like to do a show. He'll call them and say, "Hey, we've just completed a show. The producers need someone. Are you interested?" And they'll say "yes" or "no", and we usually help out the producers in terms of their crew. So, then, the production carpenter, or one of our men from the shop, supervise it being put together which is usually a two day process in the theatre. And then they start rehearsals on it.

Q. How many men does it take to put together a one set show?

A. Depends on how large it is, but a one set, I would imagine, you'd have to have, approximately, your three heads. That's your carpenter, your electrician, and your property man. And then they have to have their second men, and then the crew to put it together, probably about twenty men to put a show together. The running of a show depends on how many units move, how much there is in terms of scene changes, and it can be as few as six men or as many as twenty, depending on the size of the show. We're working on a show right now called Chicago and I think they estimate about twenty men to run that show after it's finally put together.



Q. What do you think is the most nagging problem that you have to contend with?

A. Getting paid.

Q. From the producers?

A. That's right. Lots of times we've gone over in specific detail with the designer what he wants. There are always extras. There's extra hardware, there's extra pipe battons for the scrim or for the legs. There are strap hinges, or loose pin hinges to put the scenery together. There are extra nails that the carpenter wants. Extra paint that they might need.

Q. These are not considered in the bid on the initial contract?

A. Right, they're not in the contract price. The contract price is merely the amount of money that it's going to cost to build the show.

Q. Are producers aware of how much more? Do you give them a figure that could run beyond that to set it up?

A. No, usually we don't because, usually, it's not that much more. However, let's say we get into a situation with a show like the one we have now, The Ritz. It's a one setter, but it's a very elaborate one setter. The producer saw the show out of town. She wanted it completely repainted. So, that alone took ten men one day to repaint it. And it was completely repainted with completely different colors. They added carpeting; they changed metal facings to masonite facings because they were getting alot of reflection from the lighting, and something like that can get into many thousands. In fact, I think the extras on that show have amounted to over \$12,000 so far. Now, sometimes the producers will order all of these extras, and not have the money to pay you. You don't know that. You do the work assuming that it's in good faith and that they will pay you. You get a down payment, but they might not have the money or the balance due when you've completed your end of it. Then, sometimes they have to wait until the first week and settle the box office receipts which is done every Saturday night in all theatres, and they'll pay you after that. But if a show closes, you've got to sue them if they don't have the money or the producer doesn't have the money.

Q. That means legal fees and a percentage of your money is taken?

A. You might be interested to know that we have a lawyer full time that works for us.

And he's on a salary, and he handles things like that. He also has other responsibilities, but we do have counsel that is employed by us, and that takes care of matters like a show closing and the producers not having the money to pay the balance of the account.

Q. Can you estimate the amount of business you do in a year?

A. Well, we have to do over two and one-half million dollars a year just to keep the doors open. So it would be nice to say that we do three million dollars. But alot of times we operate in the red because there are so many things that can't be pinned down. It's a business that's creative; you're dealing with an artist who has a concept, for a set. There are alot of variables, and alot of times you don't know that what he had in the back of his mind wasn't what he told you at the beginning of the process of building. And, in the end, it costs you many thousand dollars more because he envisioned something different than what we did.

Q. Do you find that there are many mistakes made by designers?

A. I wouldn't say there are very many mistakes made by them, it's a matter of they either may not know what they want, and are bluffing in the beginning or they're trying to get something that's much more expensive than what the producers have in the budget for the scenery. Designers usually know what they want, and their knowledge will lend not only in the area of drawing and coming up with an idea, but what materials cost, what materials they want, and what's going to look good on the stage. But we do have a real problem in collecting some accounts. We have to do everything in good faith, and everything is a verbal except what you have in the contract. And alot of times shows run over because of extras again. And the producers will say, "Whatever the director wants, goes." So the director will keep adding, the producer says, "OK", and they may throw it all out when they come into New York from their previews on the road. And then they turn around and say, "We never even used that stuff. It's not even in the show." That's their problem, not ours. We did it because it was authorized either by a director or a producer.

Q. What about the manager. Is he allowed to authorize things like that?

A. Of course. The General Manager represents the producer, and most times, we only deal with the General Manager. It is seldom that we talk directly to the producer.



Q. In the shop, the building of scenery, is there one particular problem you find reoccurring?

A. I think that if there is one, it might be coordination between the office or the people in the office and the men on the floor. Now that's a bit ambiguous. To be more specific, in the tensions that we work under with personalities here, and the limited time that we usually have to build a show, a slip of the tongue might cost us \$1,000 because in the hurry up attitude, let's get it done because we're a week late already, as the supervisor of the shop might be explaining something to one of the carpenters on the floor. He may forget an item. Or they may misunderstand him and not ask him more specific questions, and go ahead and do it, and then we find out two days later that it could have been a forty-five degree angle instead of a sixty degree angle, and then we have to recut and rebuild, and that's always more expensive than if we could have done it right the first time. To really understand what goes on up here, you really have to be around for a few weeks to understand everything that happens, and how complex and confusing it can all be. You're walking always on the top of the fence, and you can go one way or the other. A lot of shows we make a great deal of money on, but a lot of shows we lose money on too. That's one of the things of being in the business. Without having hard and fast rules, and allowing people freedom you have to take the bad with the good.

Q. Have you had the feeling that when you went to a bidding session that perhaps there were too many people there and that you knew it would boil down to between two and possibly only one?

A. Of course. That goes without saying. Most of the time it's a formality to ask everybody. A lot of designers of designers know who they want to work with and some designers will only work with certain shops. There are designers that we work with that only want to work with us. And whether we've the low bid or the high bid, that doesn't necessarily mean that a shop is going to get it. Sometimes you may be \$5,000 more than another shop, and still get it, because the quality of the work you're going to turn out will be superior or the designer may have told the producer upon the signing of his contract that he wants to work with Feller Scenery Studios, or that he wants to work with Nolans, or whoever it may be. So, a lot of times, it is a formality to invite everyone, and there's a lot of confusion in the bidding sessions because it's usually in a room that can't accommodate everyone, and there are a lot of people talking, and one question overlaps another one, and a lot of times the designer is not sure of exactly what he wants and will ask the opinion of men such as Pete Feller or Charlie Bender from Nolan's, because they've had the experience and they know what'll work best.

Q. How many designers are you working with currently?

A. Right now we're working on a show called The Night That Made America Famous with Kurt Lundell. We're working on A Doll's House, with Santo LaQuasta. We're working on Salome, the opera with Douglas Schmidt. We're working on "America on Parade" for Disneyland and Walt Disney World with Peter Larkin. I think that wraps up who we're working with at the moment.

Q. Are you doing any other things besides the work for Broadway and Disney?

A. No, not at the moment.

Q. What about this Belasco renovation?

A. That's true, but we almost consider that a theatrical job. It's putting in some platforming for a dinner type theatre which the Belasco Theatre is going to be turned into. And then a show called the Rocky Horror Show is going to be presented there, which we put a bid price on, but we haven't heard yet.

Q. Pete told me that last year 50 percent of the work was not actually theatrical work. Do you have any idea what the work was?

A. He's right because last year we did Peter Pan which I was the technical coordinator for, at NBC. And that was an arena show. It was an arena where you would go to watch a hockey game.

Q. It was still a theatrical production?

A. It was theatrical in the sense that alot of the pieces were built as theatrical scenery. It's much bigger than any theatrical show that I've been involved with.

Q. You mean a spectacular.

A. Right. We had a pirate ship over forty feet long and forty feet high.

Q. Where was this by the way?

A. Peter Pan toured all over the United States.

Q. And they took this huge set with them?

A. Yes, we had when I was with the company ten, forty-five foot air ride trailers that pulled the show from town to town. And the show cost over a million dollars to produce in terms of the scenery, the costumes, the lighting. Everything was self-contained. The salaries, publicity, all areas.

Q. Did Disney produce it?

A. No, it was produced by NBC. NBC contacted Disney about six years ago. They had an idea for an arena show and they wanted to call it "Disney on Parade." Disney said fine, put together a proposal and get back to us, which they did, and Disney said fine, give us 50 percent of the gross to use our name and our characters and you can do it. So Disney contributed not one item, except for their name and their character costumes. However, we ended up having Disneyland and the studio in Burbank build alot of the things for us in terms of flying harnesses. I worked with a man there called Danny Lee who was a special effects man there in charge of all special effects, and they built alot of flying harnesses, and lots of other small items.

Q. What else did Feller do here besides that show. Last year?

A. Well, they did alot on the Great Adventure. And that's an amusement park in the south of Jersey, and they built some huge units for that. A large taco wagon, and a (conistauba) wagon, and an ice cream parlor. So when Pete says that 50 percent of the work was non-theatrical in terms of Broadway shows, he's absolutely right.

Q. What was the thing last Fall that happened to make things look brighter for the studio?

A. I don't know, to tell you the truth.

Q. You said you were thinking about closing the door.

A. Yes, we were. We didn't have any work. And then we got this new "America on Parade" for the Bicentennial, and we got five Broadway shows, and as long as you've got work, you can keep the doors open.

Q. You got five Broadway shows within a month?

A. Within a week. In fact, I wrote three of them the same day. The contract. So we went for about six weeks without getting a new job in the shop. We didn't know if we were going to go another six weeks, and if we would have, we couldn't have, if that makes any sense.

Q. Did you lay off people?

A. We laid off people that we lay off from time to time. Now our office staff we kept, and our heads on the floor, in other words the head of the carpenters, and so forth. We were down to a skeleton crew for about two weeks. And there again, I don't know if Peter pointed it out or not, it was better to keep the doors open and lose \$10,000 a week than it is to shut the doors and lose \$20,000 a week. Sometimes, in the past, he has taken a show that he knew he would lose money on, and let's say he took a \$30,000 show and he knew he would lose \$10,000 on it. Well it's better to have that cash flow coming through here than to not take the show and shut the doors and have to pay rent and electricity and telephones than to take it and just lose half of what you'd lose if you closed the doors down.

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APPENDIX A - 4

Answering Questions -	Mr. William Hart	Hart Scenic Studios
Interviewed By	- J. Collom	35-41 Dempsey Avenue
Date	- Jan. 1974	Edgewater, New Jersey

Q. Where do you want me to start? How I got into the business?

A. Yes.

A. My brother-in-law took me out of school when I was 16. Ever since I was 17 I've been working at this. I went to high school at night; then I went to Pratt Institute at night. And I grew up with Albie, and became his foreman when I was just a young fellow and stayed with him for twenty-seven years. And then they decided to tear the building down. I was a partner at that time; he gave up the building. This was in 1972. And he decided to retire at that point, so he gave up the building and I didn't have enough money at that point to carry it on. So I had to work for another fellow. I opened a scenic department for him. I stayed with him for about four years.

Q. Who?

A. Francis Messmore, New York. He was uptown, in Harlem at the time. And I worked with him for about four years and decided that I should do it for myself. So I came over here and opened this shop about six years ago.

Q. You mentioned Messmore. He's one of your competitors now?

A. Yes, on a small scale. Primarily, he does display work. He does a show every once in awhile. Of the three, Pete is the biggest, Peter Feller--as far as size and volume. And Nolan the second, and I consider myself one of the three. I sort of take what they can't handle. We do quite a volume in here; we make a living. Years ago, it was MacDonald, he was the biggest for years. Actually it wasn't Albie at the time. It was Bernie, his older brother. And then television came along, and Albie sort of stepped aside as far as the legitimate theatre went, and Nolan stepped in, and we were doing television, all kinds of television. He made a fortune on it. And Nolan stepped in, and took over the legitimate work, and Pete was working at the time for Steinberg. Pete went into business for himself I'd say in the late 50's. and he was doing all the shows--took the play away from Nolan. Steinberg didn't last a year after Pete left to go into business for himself.



Q. Can you characterize that? How can you do something like that?

A. Well actually Steinberg was in the drapery business, and he inherited the shop. He bought out his partner---then moved over to Jersey as drapery man, and I can't think of the name of the scenery man, but he took over the shop over there, and he wasn't doing too well until Pete came with him.

Q. When you rate yourself, do you go by size or volume of business?

A. I'd say volume.

Q. Because Design Associates has a shop that looks almost as big as this. If you go to a bidding session, who do you see there besides Nolan and Feller?

A. It's all according to who the producer is. Sometimes it's just the three of us.

Q. You do find that?

A. Quite often.

Q. How many was the most you've seen?

A. At one bidding session? Joe Papp, he calls everybody. He likes to spread the work out. A lot of his work comes from different sources. He's with the Vivian Beaumont Theatre, so I guess he's told to spread it out. He doesn't favor any one shop.

Q. Charlie Bender told me that if he sees a lot of people at the bidding session he feels that everybody's work is well enough known that if a designer needs a certain something for a particular find of show he doesn't need to call in more than three or four, and if he calls in eight, he doesn't think he knows what's going on.

A. Papp's shows are not too mechanical usually. And most anybody can do a straight show. It's when you get into mechanics, electric winches and things like that, then Pete, and Charlie and I sort of specialize in that. And we can handle it; the other shops can't. So if they have a mechanical show, they usually restrict it to the three of us. And Pete usually gets the job.

Q. Did you start working with Albie MacDonald before he took that business over? Working with him in that shop?

A. Yes. I worked for Bernie, his brother.

Q. So he took it over in the 40's?

A. Yes, and I was there since 1937.

Q. So you must have seen peak years and weak years. Did you work on the show he won the Tony for?

A. That was about Cinderella, called If the Shoe Fits.

Q. You worked with him right up to 1962 when the shop closed?

A. Yes.

Q. Was it difficult getting started, opening your own shop?

A. Yes, very difficult. Raising the money. I had lost quite a bit of money with MacDonald. But we managed to get it together, and we started off. Actually, we didn't start small. I had 22,000 square feet. I knew if I went in, I had to do it right. So we got the big building, and I went overboard. But it's paid off.

Q. And this has been six years, now? Has it been very busy right straight along?

A. We started off slow, I'd say the first year, if you want figures, we did about \$350,000. And now, over the years, we've grown to about a million.

Q. So you more than doubled your business then.

A. Almost tripled.

Q. Was there any point where you were really concerned about going out of business?

A. One year we were down to a couple of hundred dollars in the bank. But I never borrowed. Fortunately, I never had to. We only had a few hundred in the bank, but we had several thousand owed to us. It never bothered me for some reason or other. I just said, "It'll work out." And it did. I have a good crew now; I'm fairly well established.

Q. Did you have trouble getting a good crew together?

A. Yes. I changed several times, the foreman and stuff like this. Scenic artists were the biggest headache; now I have an excellent scenic artist---chargeman. My whole crew is good.

Q. Your chargeman, he is an excellent scenic artist but you have other scenic artists working for you?

A. Yes, I have two others with me right now.

Q. How many men do you have working for you?

A. Twenty-three.

Q. Do they keep pretty busy all year around?

A. Well---I keep on about---I keep a skeleton crew if I'm not too busy, I keep about eight or nine people. You have to do that to keep them on. If you let the good ones go, they'll just drift, go over to Feller or Nolan or somebody, and naturally, they'll take them.

Q. So that seems to be the most difficult thing, keeping good men?

A. That's true.

Q. What is your biggest problem in your operation?

A. As far as the men go?

Q. One guy will say keeping good men, another guy will say collecting money.

A. Collecting money is the biggest headache. Especially when you have a contract, and we usually try to collect in thirds, one-third on signing, one-third halfway, and one-third completion. But, where they get you is in the extras. If the show is out, and you send it out without collecting the extras, you don't stand much of a chance of getting the money unless the show is a hit. They just drift off, and, if the show closes, the corporation closes. There's a new corporation for each show. They're very careful about that. And you work with the same people all the time, but they form different companies. Sometimes, when a person owes you money, you use it as a holdover. If they do another show, you say, "You owe me X amount of money, Let me have the show." At least Pete works that way, and Charlie and with me, sometimes. But they work us against each other. We formed an association--I don't know if Pete told you about that--just to fight things like this. Now the idea of the association is, if somebody owes you money and he's doing a new show, we'll tell each other, "So and so owes us money."

So they more or less say, "Well, we won't bid on the show until you pay your debt." This was the original idea of the association. It doesn't quite work out that way, but we're trying. We're at least scaring the fellows into paying. We never did before. Somebody owed me - it goes into the thousand. Somebody owed me a few thousand dollars and started a new show. He wouldn't even call me in on the new show because he knew I'd be upset, and want to get my money. So he called the others in, and, like fools, they would go ahead and build the show. So they would get away with it. Some fellows would owe all of us money, and they'd keep getting away with this thing. We're tightening up now.

Q. The same people you were dealing with kept owing money?

A. More or less the same. Because it's a fairly close thing. They use the same managers over and over again, mostly the same producers. There's new producers coming in, of course, but over the years there's a group that do most of the work.

Q. Can you recall any of the names?

A. Names of producers? Well, one of the best, I just did Shenandoah for Philip Rose. He's quite dependable. You can get your money from him. And he uses the same manager. For years he had Wally Fried; now he has Helen Richards. But they're wonderful in paying the bills, even if the show doesn't go. Phil has a lot of pride. I don't want to mention the others by name. There are certain of them you just know that you're not going to get paid.

Q. What percentage of different kinds of work do you do, like 50% for Broadway, 50% something else?

A. Well my particular case, I do off Broadway. I consider Joe Papp off Broadway, although he does work for the Vivian Beaumont which is Broadway. And I do road companies, City Center Acting Company. I'm sending a show out today. They're in trouble; they owe us quite a bit of money. They're getting grants, and they complain they're going to pay you. Their bill right now is up to \$30,000. And I'm not that big; I can't carry so much. City Center is funded by Ford, New York State.

Q. The City Council on the Arts?

A. Right. And they have been promised the money. They're supposed to get over \$200,000 in February.

Q. How do they owe you this money?

A. Well, I do all their work. I say they've owed me about \$16,000 since last season. Those foundations, they promise but they don't give it out as quickly as they used to.

Q. What you've mentioned so far is almost all for theatrical performances. Do you do any other work besides?

A. Well I do work for J. C. Penny. They paid the rent for quite awhile. We did alot of work for them. Display work. Interiors. And television. I'm doing a big TV show right now. Oh, industrial shows-- I do the Millikin show every year. I do the Buick show every year, and Pontiac. They sort of take up the slack in the off season. And they're big. Like two years ago, I did four shows for Buick, four separate companies, and they played North, East, South and West, all at the same time. That added up to \$175,000 for four shows. That was pretty good. Millikin every year is getting bigger, or the prices are getting higher. Millikin is a breakfast show. It's a fabric house, and they put on a breakfast show at the Waldorf every year. They take people from the different musicals around town, and put on a fabulous musical show selling their products. They have designers use their material and design clothes. This is the only advertising that Millikin does, and they put into the show almost half a million dollars.

Q. Did you bid on Disney on Parade?

A. No, I didn't bid on that. Pete is doing alot of their work. He has a connection there, and he recommended that if they are going to have any work done in the East, he recommended they call Charlie Bender and me. I haven't heard anything yet, but I spoke to him a couple of weeks ago, and he said things were starting to happen.

Q. Do you ever take work from Feller or Nolan? Do they ever ask you to do anything?

A. Yes, once in awhile. We help out each other if we're busy. For instance, when Pete was doing Over Here with the Andrews Sisters, and he was pretty well tired up, so I built all the scenery for it, and he supplied the treadmills. We do some work together, ---separate contracts.

Q. In the case of the contract, he's got the bid, he makes the contract, he asks you to do something like that. How does that work?

A. Well then I would bid on it, and give him my bid, and he would hold the contract. This has happened several times too.

Q. In other words, subcontracting. He's dealing with the producer and the producer doesn't know who's doing the work. Does he make another contract with you?

A. Well, it doesn't happen too often, and they usually tell the producer that they're going to let the work out. Pete sometimes commits himself to too much work. He has friends, managers and producers, and sometimes he'll find himself doing three or four shows at one time. He's big, but if the shows are big enough, that's difficult to handle. So Charlie will help him out, or I'll help him out.

Q. Do you think he's afraid to say "no" because they won't ask him again when he needs the work?

A. Possibly.

Q. What about the contract where he asks you to do certain work. Do you have designers who balk at that?

A. Designers have their favorites, yes, definitely. And they might resent it a bit, but quite often for instance, with Over Here. Doug Schmidt designed it, now I've done alot of work with Doug, and he likes us. He likes the scenic artist, so he didn't resent it at all. It worked out just as well. As a matter of fact, it worked out better because, if you're busy, you don't give the same job as if you're not too busy. It happens once in awhile, and we're friendly. The three of us are quite friendly. If we go to the bidding sessions, we'll sometimes meet after to buy each other a drink. But when it comes to bidding, there's no friendship, unfortunately.

Q. Tell me about the bidding session, how do you get invited? Who would you see there with Papp, for instance.

A. Well, the manager, Andy Myhock is always there, and then you have the designer and possibly one of Andy's assistance. You never see Papp, I've yet to meet Papp. And I've been doing shows for them since Papp took over last year. As I said, most of the people in the business are called in on those sessions, and when we do bid, we don't have separate meetings. We all go at the same time, the designer explains the show, and we throw questions at him or her, and we all know what we're bidding on, so we all bid on the same thing. Most businesses, you put in separate bids, you have separate interviews, and so on. But I like it this way.

Q. Does everybody know everybody else's bid?

A. Oh, no. It's a closed bid in an envelope.

Q. Is it one thing, or do you have to itemize?

A. Usually they ask you to itemize, so they can cut things out if necessary. I always itemize.

Q. That if it's a one set show? What would you itemize?

A. A one set show is difficult. You just give a round figure. But then they might say how much does a portal cost? And you give them the cost on a new portal. Quite often--well I have stock portals. I have four or five stock portals. If they don't want to pay for a new one, you might get the job by renting them a portal, which is a saving of several hundred dollars.

Q. Do you store much stuff like that?

A. Not too much; I try not to. We have portals, and we have turntables. We have six turntables.

Q. What are the dimensions on them?

A. Well I have two twenty-two footers, and four fifteen footers. I use fifteen footers for the automobile shows.

Q. What would your rental be for a turntable? Would it be on a weekly basis?

A. Usually we try to get weekly.

Q. If I wanted to rent a turntable from you, what would it cost?

A. Well, I am going to rent a turntable to a group in Philadelphia, and I am charging them \$1500 for three weeks. Approximately, \$500 a week. But I have to set the whole thing up.

Q. You're doing all the work?

A. Yes.

Q. Is this an automatic turntable or manual?

A. It could be automatic. We could electrify it, or we can turn it by hand, manually, with a winch. In this particular case, they don't want any mechanics. They're just going to push it by hand.

Q. Back to the bidding session. When you go to the bidding session who might you find there typically?

A. Usually, it's Pete and Charlie and I. And sometimes they call in--I call them South Jersey--that's Hamilton. And there's another outfit on Long Island, Variety. Variety has been in and out of business about four or five times. And then there's Leo Meyer, in Connecticut. He used to be a scenic artist. He's worked here for me. He went up there to do the Shakespeare, in Stratford.

Q. You've mentioned six.

A. Well in the Association, I believe there's eight of us. There's one down in Washington. I can't think of their name, National. And then there's Hamilton, Leo is three. Variety is four. Then Pete, Charlie and I, and Messmore.

Q. Do you have a list of the Association? I would like to include that in a chapter to say there is an Association of eight members. Is this an informal thing, or do you have a written charter?

A. Oh, yes, we're incorporated. We have a lawyer. He doesn't do us much good, but we have one.

Q. To track down money, for instance?

A. Not only that. We had a problem with the scenic artists. They are making so much money that we hoped that they'd cooperate with us because we had a fairly lean year last year. And their salary goes up. They have a cost of living clause.

Q. Every six months?

A. Right, and it just got out of hand. Like last year, they had a 25 % raise.

Q. What would happen if you didn't comply with the union regulations about having two men paint something? What would happen if you painted something yourself?

A. They would pull the men out. They would strike against me. They just wouldn't work anymore. If the artist didn't paint it, they won't accept it in the theatre. It strictly has to be union.

Q. The United Scenic Artists Union seems to be a little more strict than the Mechanics Union.

A. Yes, definitely. They have all kinds of rules that they really live up to. They don't give an inch. They watch each other and make sure that they're all towing the line.

Q. The carpenters aren't that way, though.

A. No. For instance, I'm working within the jurisdiction of Local 642, and most of my men are Local 1 men. I'm a Local 1 man myself; that's New York. 642 is Bergen County, New Jersey. But they can't supply the help. They don't have that many mechanics, so they say hire whomever you can and get the job done.

Q. When you say mechanics, you mean the people who do this kind of work?

A. The carpenters, yes. Iron workers, so on.



Q. Do you find it takes a special kind of person to do the carpenter's work, or do you train him? Can you take a carpenter who builds houses and bring him into the scene shop?

A. Yes, we've had outside carpenters come in, brotherhood carpenters. We break them in, for instance, on platforms. We call them nailers. We show them what to do, and say go ahead and put nails, tell them how far apart, and so on. And, gradually, we break them in building scenery, and some of them turn out to be real good. We have several brotherhood carpenters downstairs right now, who have converted into scenery builders.

Q. You have Local 1 carpenters too?

A. Oh yes.

Q. When a person who comes over here to work for you and is a member of Local 1, does he ever go into this other union, Local 642?

A. Some of them had been members of the Jersey Union 642, and went over into New York to work and got Local 1 cards in New York. So they hold two cards.

Q. Is the rate better in one than the other?

A. No, we all have the same rate. Everybody in the Association pays the same rate.

Q. Is there a different kind of system in the Brotherhood Local in New Jersey and the mechanics union out of Manhattan?

A. The Brotherhood union are the display workers and house builders. The stagehands are the scenery builders. And you asked me if there are different categories or different specialists?

Q. Is the pay the same?

A. No, the Brotherhood gets much more money. They get about \$10 per hour, double time for overtime. We get a little less than that \$7 something, and time and a half for overtime.

Q. Do you have to pay them a different scale?

A. Oh no. If they work for us, they work under our jurisdiction. They get a permit. And they get their dues taken out, and we pay a pension on it and so on. And that money goes right down the drain because they didn't see it. But they don't last that long. But we do have a sort of specialists. I have certain fellows who can do the cabinet work, doors, windows, and trim. Others are good at platforms, and I have electrical workers. I have about four electricians downstairs right now, and I also have iron workers. But they're all working under our jurisdiction.

Q. While we're on the subject of the shop, can you give me a breakdown of how you have your shop organized? In other words, you get a show, bring it in, start working on it simultaneously, or do you do one particular piece of it first?

A. I keep the different departments busy, the electrical, the carpenters and the iron workers. And, usually, I'll take a day or so over what I'm figuring for the job to know just about who's going to do what. And we break it down. I have layout men, and I'll give the different layout men their particular jobs, and they take their little group and then they all work together at the end. I sort of coordinate the whole thing. I'm my own foreman.

Q. You don't have any other foreman in the shop?

A. No, not right now, I don't. And it's working out fine.

Q. Do you have key men or lead men?

A. Yes, I have layout men, I pay more, so they make almost as much money as the foreman. I have four layout men working for me. And each one of them takes three or four fellows, and they do their particular jobs, and they cooperate with each other, and they know how it's going to go together at the end. And it works out very well. I have my son working with me. Ken Hart he's my electrical genius. He's pretty good. I don't know where he picked it up, but he's good at it.

Q. What happens if you have no metalwork?

A. Chris, the guy I was just talking to, if we don't have any work for him, he comes out and pounds nails.

Q. So everybody can overlap? They're good at other things? I imagine you have to have many tools to do this kind of work? By tools I mean abilities. What do you have in the way of tools?

A. We supply all the electrical tools.

Q. Let's say you're building something that takes carving or sculpting. When do we call it a sculpture; when do we call it a woodcarving?

A. Well, we use that styrofoam quite a bit. What we'll do is build a piece, apply the styrofoam, and then the artist will take over and do the carving and whatever else has to do done. And then we will take it back again and cover it with scrim. Yes, we do operate together.

Q. In other words, there is a line drawn where the artist takes over?

A. Oh yes, definitely.

Q. And they know where it's supposed to be drawn?

A. You better believe it. They know all movements. But they don't do a full sized layout. This is how we usually start. They'll do a full sized layout on paper, and then the carpenter takes over and builds from there. We lay it out on the floor and build right up through the ground-work, and then when it's finished we send it back to the artist, and they take over the painting. And then the stagehands load it out.

Q. How long do you normally need to do a show?

A. Well for a musical show, four to six weeks is comfortable. A one set show, we always like to have about three weeks. Though, quite often, I'll get a call and they'll say, 'Well, you have two weeks to do it, and this is when you have to put in for overtime.'

Q. Do you do your own bid, or do you have someone do it for you?

A. I do it.

Q. What do you find is the most difficult thing to assess accurately?

A. Well built work is sort of difficult. You see flats you can build by square footage, and this is where you make the money on flats. And quite often in a built piece. For instance, with a stair unit, it's difficult to accurately pinpoint the price. You usually figure time, and then it's more or less guesswork.

Q. With furniture, where is the line drawn, the kind of furniture you can build and the kind you have to buy someplace else?

A. There's a prop department with every show. And if they can't prop it, if they want something special, and if they can't go to a prop house to rent it or buy it, then we have to build it.

Q. In other words, they know pretty much what they have to contract on to be built. Do you have to make all of your drawings?

A. I am unusual I guess, I do all of my own working models myself. Kenny helps me out.

Q. Your son?

A. Yes. But the other shops, like Pete must have about four or five draftsmen there who do his work, and I think Charlie has a draftsman there too for his layout work.

Q. I saw Charlie doing drafting himself.

A. Does he? He didn't used to do that. I really learned how to draw from Albie. He had me in the office working with him, and he showed me just how to do it. It's a little different from drafting, like for instance a house. When we were in school, we had to design and draft houses. Now scenery is different. We break it down into flats. We have our own system.

Q. Can you characterize it? When you say system, you break it down into flats and platforms?

A. I'll take a set, for instance we have a one-set show. I'll take all of the flats, all of the measurements, and just put it out on a sheet. I can show you that. And I show where the rails go. I show where the braces go. We give measurements naturally, and a layout man will take that drawing and lay the whole show out on the bench. I do it myself every once in awhile just to keep my hand in. And then he will give it to another man, and he will machine it, mortise and tenon, and so on. And then we give it to another man--I'm talking about flats now. And then we give it to another few men on the ten foots we call them. They're just big benches. They're twenty feet long and six feet wide, and they knock the flats together. And we'll take those flats and stand them up on my stage. We hinge them up on the stage (His stage) into the shape of the layout on the floor. Then the built men come along. In the meantime, they have been building the windows, the doors, the cornices, and so on, and they can make their cuts in the cornice right from the floor layout. So when the scenery gets up in the air, all this stuff falls right into place, and we hinge the doors and windows in the flats, put the cornices on, and put the wainscoting on, and then everybody sort of gets together to assemble.

Q. You were saying you did the drafting? I'm kind of interested in that myself.

A. Well, with experience, you know how to break a piece, where to break it, so it doesn't show the joints, because everything has to be broken down for trucking. You try to conceive the joints behind a piece of trim. There's different ways to do it. Sometimes you break it vertically, other times horizontally. Then you have to stiffen up the back and jack it. Experience teaches you alot. And Albie was very good, a very good draftsman. I guess I tried to copy his style. He taught me quite a bit. I knew ever since I was a kid that I wanted to do this. I really like what I do.

Q. What was one of the most important shows you did since you've been working in this shop?

A. Well, Shenandoah was a hit. You always like to see a hit. And last year, we did Over Here. That was quite a good show, mechanical, and it was a terrific paint job. We painted that whole show with spray guns. Very little brushing on it. Which was quite a big job because to spray, you have to mask in the areas you don't want to spray, and then spray the exposed area, and then cover that up and open the others up. It was quite a process, and we did a terrific job on it. And a couple of years ago, I did a show called The Incomparable Max. It had eleven electric winches in it. That was the most mechanical show we ever did. Shenandoah has six. I don't know if anybody explained to you how the winches work. One man can sit at a console, and he has controls. He has speed control.

Q. The size of a briefcase, the console?

A. Yes. I have one downstairs. I'll show you how it works. On the winches, you have a speed control. You use SCR drives. It's a special drive, and quite expensive.

Q. What does SCR mean?

A. That's the trade name. It's something that controls the voltage and so on in the motors. We use an AC motor, and SCR drive converts that motor, so that you can reverse it, and control the speed. AC motors only go one speed. This is Kenny's department, not mine. The old DC motors were controlled with a lever. We used to have DC motors at McDonald's. You'd take a hand on them, jump up from copper spot to copper, till you get up to the full speed. But it starts off slow and then it goes fast. Now when you plug in an AC motor, it starts up right away---at full speed. These controls control the speed that you can have. We can reverse them, and there's three controls. Forward, reverse, and the speed control. Now, one man can work all twelve winches. This means a saving for the producer. A regular stagehand gets about \$240 a week, so if you have twelve winches, they would demand that every winch is manned by a separate man.

Q. A regular stagehand, that's minimum?

A. That's their salary. Weekly salary. Now if one man can control several winches, he's saving the producer alot of money. We usually try to get a rental on the winches; we never sell them. The winches, the equipment with the motor, and the rigging, and so on runs up about \$3000 apiece. The producers have no use for them; we bring them back, and we convert them for another job.

Q. What does the winch do, specifically? Raising and lowering?

A. We have a ramp deck, and we put tracks in the deck, slots in the deck. And the rigging, the cable, and the shims are all under this deck. And it pulls units on and off, and up and down. We have one winch upstage; we have a three horse motor on that winch. The whole company gets on that platform. It's a church scene, and there's thirty-some-odd people on the platform. And it rides down on the ramp to come downstage, in front of the audience. And, as it comes down, the drops come in behind it and form a whole scene right in front of the people. But, you can imagine the weight of thirty five people. Figure an average of weight 150 pounds apiece, plus all the scenery. And we have have a special braking foot on that, just in case it decided to keep on going. There's a brake that seizes the winch, and it just stops it dead, at its limit. Usually you set the brake at the limit, but you set the limit switches just a little before the end. And that's another thing we have, limit switches. This one man at the console; he controls that too. All he has to do is set the speed, and set the limit switches. We can have four or five limits on one winch. But to have the piece stop in separate spots, he can set one, two, three, whatever one he wants. He just presses the button, presses the button to start the unit rolling, and it stops automatically.

Q. Do you have any problems since you're out of the theatre trucking the stuff and getting set up when you get over there? They don't give you much time, a couple days.

A. We usually sent the supervisor along, somebody who knows how to put it together. As far as trucking goes, there's theatrical truckers, the theatrical trucking union. They handle the scenery on the trucks. Alot of the stuff these days, instead of using the New York theatrical trucks, they use Overland trucks, so we don't have to handle it twice. They used to load it on to a truck, and they's take it to a railroad car, unload it, and you'd handle it four times. Now we back up the trucks right up into my building here, load up forty to forty-five foot trucks, and it's handled once--once here, and once at the destination. Years ago, they didn't have these Overlands, and that's the reason the stuff was broken into 5' 9", if you've heard the expression. That was the height of the railroad floor.

Q. How do you try to cut corners when you're trying to make money? Especially with materials going up higher and higher all the time?

A. You have to watch very closely. You have to supervise.

Q. To eliminate waste, you mean?

A. Yes, I'm always after them about wasted hardware and cutting into a full sheet of plywood when they need a small piece. I try to save some of the cutoffs, but you can't save it all, you can't possibly save it all. It kills me to throw out these pieces, especially when you're paying up to forty-five cents a square foot, in some cases.

Q. What do you lose most? Or don't you have any problem with things disappearing?

A. Hardware is a big waste around here. The men have, sort of, no regard for the cost of it, and they'll take. If they need a couple of screws, they'll go over and take a whole handful, and just throw the rest on the bench. And later, they'll sweep off the bench, and the hardware goes right onto the floor.

Q. So you don't see that there's any major problem there though?

A. Not if you watch them carefully. Like the layout men watch pretty carefully. And if you can eliminate mistakes, that's the biggest problem. I'd rather a man take a few more minutes to figure out a job and do it properly than to barge into it and get it all together and find it's three inches short. This is a problem. Some of the boys try too hard and work too fast, and you have to watch.

Q. What machinery wears out the fastest? What do you have to replace or repair the quickest?

A. Bandsaws. That's not the machine itself. You can't use a dull blade because it's liable to break, and God knows what would happen if it breaks. It whiplashes, you know. It flies all over the place. And I find another thing the boys don't have too much regard for are routerbits. The bits are small, I usually use carbide bits, and they run up to \$15, \$18 apiece. And I find they disappear quite a bit, and we all have the same problem. Years ago, a man could leave his tools, and the apprentice or the shop boy would gather them up, and he would get them when he came back off the road, maybe six months later. Today, the men are different, they don't have any regard for each other's tools. I don't think their stealing. It's just that they don't have regard for tools the way they used to. They put, for instance, a router bit in your pocket, and then go home with it. And then they get laid off and they say, "Oh well, he'll never miss it." But you do. And this is a big problem with all of us.

Q. Do you have just one man giving things out?

A. No, I don't do that. I should have a man like Pete (Feller) has a man. Terrific idea. I just don't have the facilities for that.

Q. How frequently do you have visitors like this?

A. Well, once during the building of a show, the director likes to look at it. And usually the producer will come along and see where his money has gone. In this case, its Mr. Rademeister. He is the East coast director of operations for ABC. He's coming over to look at it today. I think its out of curiosity because he's a pretty busy man. Then the director will be here. And the other producer, the originator of the show, he'll be up. And of course Cathy (Ankers) will be here.

Q. The designer?

A. Yes.

Q. How frequently does the designer come to look at the set?

A. Well, Cathy's here every day. She's here from nine in the morning till as late as she can stay. That's unusual because some of the designers have to prop their shows, have to go out and pick up different props. They have to take care of the electric and so on. They spend maybe three days a week. They'll come over and pay us a visit and see how things are going. If we have any problem, we call them and they come rushing over. But they like to watch carefully, and I like them to watch. I don't like to build a thing and then have them come over and say, "Well, that's not exactly what I had in mind." Then you have to change it. This is costly, too.

Q. Do you have designers that are more consistent in coming to visit you?

A. Yes. Some like to visit a lot and others you practically have to beg to come over. I don't want to mention names. Some of them are busy, and they have other jobs. Some may do two or three jobs at the same time, and they try to divide their time.

Q. Do you find there is a problem with designers sometimes not realizing the limits of construction?

A. Well, this sometimes happens. I wouldn't pinpoint anyone in particular. They all know what they are going to do. They let us know what they're going to do. They draw the sketches as you just saw Cathy's. They have a good idea of what's going on. Mostly they know what it's all about.



Q. Can you tell me about your projections for the future? Do you think the price is going to go up on scenery?

A. Naturally, every day.

Q. Could you tell me what the highest price ever was the lowest, here?

A. I guess the highest was up around a hundred and the lowest, well, you can build a one setter for \$12,000 to \$14,000. That's about average, but everything's different. Everything's costing money. There is no ball park figure.

Q. Can you give me a projection for the future? Do you think you'll be in this business ten years from now?

A. I hope so. I'd like to say yes. I don't know how. I couldn't tell you what next week is going to bring. We work, actually, from show to show.

Q. Somebody said that bidding was the biggest crap shoot in the world. Would you agree with that?

A. Absolutely. Its really a big gamble.

Q. Do you like that aspect of it?

A. I do, I do. I like the challenge.

Q. There isn't much security at all.

A. I've made a good living for a good many years. I'm not worried about it. Why worry?

Q. O.K. (laugh)

## APPENDIX A - 5

Answering Questions	- Mr. Herb Lager	Variety Scenic Studios
Interviewed By	- J. Collom	2519 Borden Avenue
Date	- Jan. 1975	Long Island City, Queens, N.Y.

Q. I could start by asking you how long you've been here at this location?

A. Most people in this business, almost without exception, came into the business through working in the business. Their fathers -- they worked as stagehands or they worked as scenic artists. Unlike those people, I had no training whatever in the scenery field. I was interested in labor relations, and just by sheer chance, I got a job at National Broadcasting Company in the trucking office, and found that I loved the business, and I was good at it. Completely foreign to my background, training of any kind. I worked at NBC for ten years.

Q. Doing what?

A. Well, scenery--well, first trucking supervisor, then supervisor of the property department, then scenic construction supervisor. After ten years, I left NBC with five key people that worked at NBC and started my own company.

Q. When was this, by the way?

A. 1960. That was called Allied Scenic Studios which lasted eighteen months, went bankrupt, started a new company called Mayflower, which lasted two years, went bankrupt, started a new company called City Scenic which went bankrupt, went to another company called Staging Scenery, which went bankrupt--my fourth.

Q. These were all your companies?

A. The first one was mine with five other partners, the other three I worked for somebody---Created the companies with somebody else's money and backing. This is Variety Scenery. It was formed four years ago with five working owners.

Q. You say working owners?

A. Working owners--the owners consisted of myself, who acts as general manager-supervisor of the shop, construction supervisor, supervisor of draperies, and supervisor of the scenic artist, two people in the scenic artist studio. Subsequent to that, one member was bought out, so there's now four owners.

Q. Equal owners?

A. Equal owners, all of whom work in the shop, all key people in the shop.

Q. You are?

A. Herb Lager is my name; Bob Hutchison is in charge of the shop; Joe Castauro is in charge of draperies; Dante LeBerri is scenic art charginan.

Q. And you're all Union members?

A. Yes.

Q. What is the division? Which union is where?

A. There are two unions in the shop, Local 4 of I.A.T.S.E., which covers the sonstruction shop and draperies. Local 4 covers Bklyn., Queens, as against Local 1, which covers the Bronx and Manhattan. Locals exist of the I.A.T.S.E. throughout the country, from New York to the West Coast, all over the country. And I.A.T.S.E. itself covers stagehands which is Local 4, the stagehand local. Local 1 is a stagehand local. Local 52 is a film local, and is a separate local, separate contract, separate conditions entirely from stagehands.

Q. I see. Local 1 is the stagehands that work Broadway. You can't get Local 4 in there?

A. The jurisdiction of the area is covered by Local 1. That is all business operation.

Q. Over in Brooklyn, then, in Nolan's shop, he has only Local 4?

A. But there's no restriction on who can work in what shop or what area.

Q. I see. You can have Local 1 and 4?

A. We have Local 1 over here; they have Local 4 people who work in New York. Being a member of the I.A. entitles you do work anywhere in the country.

Q. And 829?

A. 829 is the United Scenic Artists. They claim jurisdiction as far as their arms can reach, which is right down the East Coast, up to Chicago. However, the I.A., at least in our shop areas, anybody can work for, so long as they build scenery. It's really a practicing free and open shop. There's no restriction on hiring necessarily a non-union person. We have people who are non-union here, people from other locals of I.A. There's a recognition on the part of the union in these areas that the skill required in building scenery is so specialized that we cannot be held down to people that belong purely to the union. And the stagehand local which covers all aspects of the industry, which is theatre setting up--I mean the stagehand--those people do their thing which is setting up and running a show which is a different talent entirely than building is. So as I say, the union, at least in Local 4 has recognized this as the truth, and allowed us to hire anybody as long as he has skills.

Q. Is Local 4 larger than Local 1?

A. No. Local 4 is smaller.

Q. But Local 1 and Local 4 each would have more members than Local 829?

A. Local 829 is not I.A. 829 is affiliated with the International Brotherhood of Wallpaper Hangers and Painters which is another union. There's not any particular love lost between those two unions.

Q. You mean between the branch of the Brotherhood of Paperhangers and Painters and 829?

A. Because of the International as far as I'm concerned. On the West Coast for instance, the painters are I.A., not Brotherhood of Painters. Its a question of who grabbed what jurisdiction at what particular time, and it's more or less stayed the way it is, although there's probably some cooperation. There are other unions. There's a drapery union which we're not involved in since Local 4 covers everything in the shop including metal workers, electricians, and so forth. We have one union that does everything. By virtue of it being the theatre, the electricians do not get involved in electric work that we do in the theatre. That's the key to setting jurisdiction.

Q. You say the electricians. Do you mean the electricians? Do you mean the electricians that are hired by the house?

A. Electricians that work in the shop and that work in the theatre.

Q. Don't you get involved in the electrical work that you do for the set?

A. We do, but Local 4 or Local 1 or I.A. does electric work for the theatre whether it's in the shop or in the theatre. As against Local 3 which is not I.A. at all. Local 3 electricians, which do building work, and they are probably the strongest union in the country, is Local 3. But despite their strength, Local 3 recognizes the I.A.'s right to do electric work in the theatre. Because of the special nature and because of the jurisdiction.

Q. We were talking about your partners, the four member group. You've been that way for about four years?

A. Right. The drapery department came out of the upholstery trade. Upholstery and drapery trade came into this industry long after developed skills in that area. The head of the shop was an apprentice in the shop, and as it grew, we began building a theatre, a scenery building industry. Dante LeBeri the painter was a specialized house painter who gradually worked his way into scenery and is also a fine arts painter and sculptor, sells sculpture and paintings, had shows in Italy, is a very fine and talented skilled artist, and a very excellent scenic artist.

Q. I notice that you are working with drawings here. You had no background before you started this business, no background in painting, drawing and carpentry?

A. None whatever. The only background as applied, well all my background eventually applied when I started studying engineering, two years of engineering. Then I switched to Sociology. Engineering background comes in in terms of conception, in what I see in reading blueprints, designing mechanical devices, and so forth. Sociology has to do with dealing with people, I suppose.

Q. Could you characterize the people in this business?

A. I don't think the people in this business are different from anybody else. They live in a special environment. The scenery business is not like any other business in many many ways. Not the least of which is it's not steady. You're hired by the day. You may work for weeks or months, or you may work for two days on your night off. And people work in the shops not so much because of money. It's a combination of making money and also loving working th this kind of industry. There's nothing steady about this work. On the average, carpenters in this industry make much less than carpenters in the house building trades.

Partially because their rates are not even as high, but also because they don't work a full fifty-two weeks a year. That, I suppose, makes them have a special character above the average worker. But I think the element there is that everybody here does not want to be on a production line and do the same job over and over again. Everything we do here is different; every job is different; every job is a challenge, and I'm extending that thing to every man in this industry. Otherwise, he could be building house framing, I suppose. Constantly doing nailing and framing the rest of his life, and that could get rather boring --although it pays more.

Q. Men that work in the shop, although they belong to the same union as the men who work in the backstage area of theatre, are a different breed?

A. They are a different breed. For the simple reason that they like working in the shop as against working in the theatre.

Q. Some do both though?

A. Some do both.

Q. Is it more difficult in the shop?

A. It's not more difficult who enjoy doing it or can do it. People who work in the theatre generally speaking have it much easier. Once the show is running, set up, they may have one task to do in the show. A piece of scenery moving, a prop, and so forth. Obviously, the hours of work depend on the show's length, three hours a night. This gives them opportunities to work in the daytime in various areas.

Q. Those three hours, how do you get paid for those three hours? By the hour?

A. No, there's a contract. I'm not totally familiar with that contract. There's a special contract between stagehands and the theatre where they have different rules. I'm not qualified. I'd say--no, I'd be guessing, there's no point in it.

Q. Going back to your business, since you've been in this business, what do you notice is the biggest problem that you run into?

A. Well the biggest problem as a business is lack of steady work. The same problem faces each man who works here. It's reflected on the business.

You can be holding your own and doing well, and then when you slow down, it becomes very difficult to maintain the overhead and maintain people in the shop. The biggest problem is you work from show to show, from job to job. There's no production line here; there's no product that's being built that you could sell to the general public. Our customers are limited to people in the theatre, and basically, the high costs of materials and labor contribute to the difficulty in getting the normal markup that any business rightfully could supposedly demand. We're dealing with personalities, friends, and it's not a business. The total thing is not a business. There is not one scenic shop in this industry that really makes money. We're just lucky to survive. The story I told you about my own experience is only one of many in the last ten years - ten to fifteen years we've had. People like Imperial Scenic Studios, Chester Aikman Studios, T.V. MacDonald Studios, Wright and Wallace Studios, and a number of others who have come and gone, just indicating that it is difficult, and people who manage to survive, who've been in it the longest, hold on. The longer we stay in business, the more chance we have of survival.

Q. Is there a particular strength to being big or is that more risky? I should really start by asking you what proportion of work you manage to do in a year, and how many months work do you get with the past four years as an average. Do you close in the summertime, or do you ever close down?

A. We never close down totally. We cut down to skeleton crews keep our office running with a few people at least. Whether or not it pays to be big or small, is totally dependent on the circumstances at the time. It's very nice to be large because, in some ways, being large, you can be efficient. And that is you have space to spread out and to work. But, by the same token, that space costs a lot of money. When you're not busy, that space is a great weight on your shoulders. My opinion is to be medium-sized and compromise. There are times when it hurts you to be only medium-sized. For instance, if you have a show with a -- or a number of shows going out at the same time--the fact that you have limited space forces you to do one thing at a time, and sometimes forces you into overtime. A drop deck, for instance will hold two average sized Broadway drops or only one extra large television drop. Therefore, we can do only one drop at a time or two drops at a time, requiring doing it, striking it, starting over again. The same thing applies to set building, where we get the set built. Our set up space is limited. We have to do one set at a time.

At the moment we're building, aside from smaller things we're building two basic things, we're building a Broadway show called This Time Next Year and a television show called Beacon Hill. And they're both going in the same day. Now we can only set one show at a time. The Broadway show is a one set show; the television show has six sets. So, because of our limited space, we will have to struggle doing one set, painting and taking it down and setting up the others. We will manage in some sets to lay them down, then we struggle along in that area to work it out. We have other things that we're building that require set up space, all of which is a problem in not having enough space. But when these shows are over, and we have very little to do, then it's very nice to have a small space, and a small rental to pay. In the overall average, I think we're the right size.

Q. How many square feet of building space do you have here?

A. We have twenty-seven thousand square feet here, and a storage warehouse of eight thousand.

Q. About how many people do you employ?

A. It fluctuates a great deal. At the moment we have twenty-five to thirty, and that's including office people. But it fluctuates.

Q. What do you find yourself doing the most? What kind of work? TV, Broadway?

A. We're pretty well distributed between Broadway and TV. Film commercials, we do alot of those, industrials.

Q. Trade shows?

A. Yes. The nature of the business changes. At one time, when we first started, when I first started, it was 100 percent TV, because I came out of TV, and we all came out of TV. Contacts, knowledge, and so forth. It took many years to break into Broadway.

Q. How did you manage to break into Broadway?

A. It took a long time to even be allowed to bid.

Q. What signifies the right or not?

A. Generally speaking, designers or art directors have the control. There are a number of shops, as you know, and if three or four people bid on a show, that's really adequate in terms of getting a competitive price. And if they're four known shops, that seems to be enough. Nobody is particularly interested in allowing a new person to come in. It's dangerous. In terms of their financial status, in terms of the quality, art directors do not normally like to deal with people they do not know.



Q. What's an art director?

A. A scenic designer. In this industry, I'm using terms interchangeably. In the film industry, an art director is something else. In this industry, I think the scenic designer would like to be called art director, it's a nicer title. However, how we got into this is that a scenic designer who worked in television with us when we worked at NBC did a Broadway show. And he knew of us and our abilities from television and suggested we be allowed to bid. Now that doesn't mean that we get the show. Just allowed to bid, and from the producer's point of view, why should he take a chance on any other factor aside from the quality of the show? So he's interested of course. In order for us to make a long story short, in order for us to get into Broadway, the circumstances had to be right in terms of art director, and our price had to be very low. And as a matter of fact, our price was so low that we lost money on our first two shows. An absolute necessity to break in.

Q. Did you know you were going to have to lose money? Did you know you were going to be skin tight?

A. Yes. Of course it eventually forced us into bankruptcy.

Q. Oh, this was when you were not Variety?

A. Oh, no. By the time I reached Variety, we had a good reputation, and knew many, many more art directors, and people knew us from years of doing work for shows by this time. But, still, every shop has its following of favorite designers, designers who like to work with particular people. It makes their life easy, especially in the scenic artist work. It makes their life easy in the sense that they don't have to be so specific. People understand each other. "I want this kind of treatment that we did on that show three years ago or three years ago on such and such a show." There are many other factors--personality--I think personality is maybe 80 percent of it, the reason why a designer likes to work with someone. Quality is important. For some of the designers quality is the 80 percent. In any case, every shop has a following. Otherwise, I could not exist. You cannot advertise in this business unless you have a new idea, a product. Then you can advertise. But generally speaking, a theatre product you cannot advertise. You have to be known, and you can't even keep on top of everything that's happening in the industry. You can't find out, for instance, there's a show being planned three months from now, and then go after that show.

There's too much happening outside for you to keep track of it, number one and number two, the deciding factor ultimately if the show is being done and the right circumstances are there, you will be invited because you exist. They need you at that moment.

Q. But you're invited so late?

A. You're invited to bid when the plans are done, period.

Q. Can you tell me how this thing happens? A producer and an author get together and they have an idea for a show. Where do they go from there? How do they find a designer?

A. Generally speaking, the director is the key person in terms of getting a designer.

Q. They get the director first?

A. The director comes, assuming they've gotten that far. You have an author and a producer and money to do it, and so forth. The director is obviously a key to what's going to happen.

Q. Even if they change two or three times? Has that ever happened that they've started a design, and changed a director, and the new director makes so many changes that they have to call for a redesign?

A. Yes, but generally by the same designer. By that time it's too late to spend more money in a new designer. Designer's contracts would have to be duplicated, and it's just too much money. I do not know of a case where they've switched designers in midstream, but very often directors are switched.

Q. In any case, the director is the deciding factor? He picks the designer?

A. Yes. And obviously, a script read by a thousand people could be conceived in a thousand ways in terms of staging it, blocking it, what is the visual aspect of it, and what happens in terms of the totality of the play. And very often the director has an idea of how he wants it to look. It's vague. He cannot put it on paper; he cannot even visualize the total. It depends to such a great extent on the designer, to translate his vague thoughts into reality. And sometimes even he has no thoughts. He depends totally on the scenic designer to read the script and come up with a way of staging it.

This happens very often where the play is very unspecific, where the author doesn't say the scene is set in a livingroom in Boston, 1920. That's fairly specific. There are many variations on what the livingroom could look like, but it's still a simple problem. A play like Jimmy Shine, for instance, which is flashbacks, and different areas, is treated totally as an abstract entity. And the way the designer conceived the set actually determined how this play would be directed--emotion, people, what areas flashbacks would happen and so forth. And they're many plays like that. So a designer and director have to work together, have to understand each other or things never work out right. Of course, it starts out that way, but very often a director and a designer don't understand each other. Even though they've had good experiences before, each one is a new job. The Boom Boom Room, for instance, turned out to be a bummer. It was designed, the model was built, the director saw it, and it was completely built and onstage and the director says, "I hate it." And the set was completely torn down and rebuilt. After the second time rebuilding the set, the director was changed. The third time it was rebuilt, and there again, I did not see the play. I suspect it's kind of that kind of play which requires some kind of abstraction in terms of the symbolisms of the play. So it's difficult to conceive what the director had in mind for the play, or perhaps the director had one thing in mind and it didn't come out right. I don't really know. But what amazed me is when a model is made, and a director cannot see what's going to happen. That's why models are made in the first place. The respective producers, directors, and people who plan the work in the theatre, even business managers should take a course in stagecraft and learn how to read a set of drawings and plans.

Q. It wouldn't take long, would it?

A. Well, some people have the talent, and some people don't. You can study for years and still not know how to read a plan. But at least there's some basic knowledge, hopefully, that you know.

Q. I'd like to ask you trace, if you can, how you see bidding. What normally happens? For instance, if the show is designed, if it's got enough information to call in a bid. Can you trace that process for me?

A. From our point of view, we will receive a call from the designer or the producer's office inviting us to come to a bid. The producer's office or the designer's studio. Sometimes it's done separate.

Q. Each shop is invited separately?

A. Sometimes, sometimes they're invited together. More often they're invited together because it saves time for everybody, including the designer explaining his show. Generally speaking, there's a model set up for it. The designer will go through this show and indicate what he wants. Hopefully, you get as much information as you can at that stage to give a fair estimate. But, unfortunately, because of timing you practically never have paint sketches at that stage. And you then estimate the show. Estimating is a very interesting process in this industry because everything is new. It's a question of experience, intuition, inner knowledge of what's happening. You cannot figure, for instance, the lengths of lumber, the nails and hardware. You cannot go into that kind of detail because designer's drawings are really visual. They're not construction drawings. Construction drawings come later, after you're doing the show, and you then take the designer's conception and break it down into what you are going to use to make it, to achieve that particular effect. And sometimes you're designing as you're estimating. How will I approach this? Will I approach it in this particular way? And this is the cost. This is the difference that makes one shop cheaper than another because our rates are exactly the same, except the shops outside New York City. They have different I.A. rates, but even accounting for that, the rates are fairly uniform. So each shop has its own personality and the way they approach a particular problem and the way they do particular things. And sometimes one idea is better, and you do a job more cheaply. That's the simple, obvious example. Bidding against National Broadcasting Company on a television show called After The Fall. It was a very large show with thirty-four sets.

Q. You mean Miller's play?

A. Yes. The designer conceived this in a special kind of way. That is, all the scenery was cut from black velour, and all the architectural pieces were painted. There was approximately a thousand yards of velour, and the rate at the time was \$5 a yard. That's five thousand dollars worth of velour. We had been working with a different material than velour--one that is as good as good as velour, especially for television---Cost us half the price. So our estimate was only twenty-five hundred dollars in that small area of material. That's only an example of what is possible in terms of bidding. In N.B.C.'s case, they have a different contract from ours both in the I.A. and in the scenic art studio. That's a whole other story. Networks, NBC, CBS, ABC all negotiate together with both the I.A. and the Scenic Arts Studio. The I.A. contracts are fairly close with the independent shops, but the Scenic Artists are not. Networks have a favored contract with the Scenic Artists--favored in their conditions, and their rates of pay, and so forth. And it amounts to approximately half what we pay.

You know, it's astounding that the networks would pool so much money. They have, and we don't---that it's a question of force. We're weak when we go out to the Scenic Artists. Scenic Artists has struck the independant shops twice in my fourteen years in independant and threaten to strike every contract. In the networks, they have no power whatever because the networks could either paint the scenery themselves with their own supervisory personel, or put on some other programming, or whatever. In any case, the Scenic Artists have never struck the networks, and they seem to be powerless to improve their conditions substantially with the networks, where, with us, they have proved to have a lot of power. In any case, this all leads to the fact that when we bid against the networks, we're in a very weak position, that we do have to come up with some very fancy thinking to compete with them. On the other hand, the people that work here, mostly, are like our family and are very concerned about our situation. They're good, good people. We have better people than the networks do because we pay them more, and they naturally prefer working for higher pay. So the result is that, to some extent, we have possibilities of competing--that is, in the television field where we're competing against the networks. With the bidding, we have to establish a price which has all its factors that go into materials, labor, and whatever else is involved. Then it's simply a matter of phoning in your price. Very rarely are sealed bids used in this industry. They hardly matter because the ultimate determination is not necessarily on the basis of price. The show is awarded to some degree on price, to some degree on the scenic designers designs and the manager's feelings about who it is who he likes to work with, so that a few thousand dollar difference in a show is not necessarily a determining factor.

Q. I can detect here some difficulties might arise if you have to phone a bid in. Has it ever happened? That somebody will turn around and say to the person that they want, "Well so and so bid such and such a price. Can you use that price?"

A. Certainly.

Q. And that would happen, merely to say yes or no?

A. Certainly. The producer, for instance, may have had experience with one particular shop, and having given him the show, that was at a low price, and then having moved the show to Boston, for instance, finds that he has to spend X number of thousands of dollars to re-fit the show to make it work. So his ultimate position is that he's actually lost money by using that particular shop. There is an assumption that if he had given it to a different shop it would have been different or better. It's not necessarily so, but at least that's his experience. So, next time around, he considers that. "That particular shop was not too efficient last time around, so, even though he's a few thousand under, I don't think I'll give it to him."

I'll save money in the long run by spending more money now." That kind of situation exists. A designer is extremely important. No producer or director wants to have an unhappy designer, one that's constantly complaining or unhappy about where he's working, and so forth. So his feelings are given a lot of consideration as long as the price difference isn't too great. So yes, I would expect that this discussion is likely to happen. How about me going over my normal bidding? There's nothing normal. It could be the same day or the following day. It depends on how much time there is before loading out the show. That varies too, but mostly we have two weeks, three weeks, sometimes four weeks.

Q. Is there some particular Broadway show you have in mind that you can recall when you contracted the show and then how you built it? I'd like to ask you what you do first or if you do everything at once?

A. Well, we like to think that when we get a show we have a conference among partners to go on with the show and say, "Here are the problems" and discuss what is the best approach to achieving the problem. We don't always do this because of lack of time. Very often, while we are building a show, and all these partners and key people are involved in getting the last show out, I myself am busy getting and planning the new show, and there is really no time for these kind of conferences. But the times we do it, it's the most efficient and best way to do it. When we have a difference of opinion on how to approach a problem, we discuss it, which would be cheaper and so forth and decision are made on how to approach the entire show, parts of the show and so forth. And the plans are simply distributed, one to the shop, one to the Scenic Artist, special material required. We order them, we do our purchasing thing of going and trying to get the best price, and very often these are very special things that you design in your mind. You have to chase all over the world for these things.

Q. Does the designer dictate to you what kind of material to use and so forth?

A. Only sometimes, depending upon how important it is. The designer chose this piece of ceramic tile [Shows it to me].

Q. Does this have to be duplicated?

A. Well, I use this tile as an example of many things. What happens is a microcosim of the entire operation of building scenery. The designer picked this tile out because he wants to see it on his fireplace. The ceramic tile obviously has a tendency of breaking, especially in a touring show. So the shop supervisor rightfully says, "That's going to break."

It's not a good thing to use on this show." This is before seeing the tile itself. So the tile is now cut up into masonite squares, goes up to the scenic artist to be painted. Well, the tile sample comes in, and I look at it. There's 150 of those tiles to make, and to paint. It's going to cost us about \$600 to make 150 tiles. The tile only cost \$1.00 apiece to buy, so I'll take my chances on it breaking and replacing it, and, therefore, the switch is made at that point. No, we will not paint it, we will buy it. So we are now going to buy this tile instead of painting it. Decisions like that are always necessary, in terms of whether to buy or make. All we're concerned about is achieving an illusion.

Q. This ceramic tile, you wouldn't paint it by hand, would you? Wouldn't you silk screen it or something?

A. No, we would make stencils. There are five colors on this tile. The background aqua color would be laid in, a stencil for this color. And we would wind up after that with hand brushing, a totally useless waste of time because we would never, no matter how good the artists are, achieve the quality and dimension that this has achieved.

Q. I understand. So in other words, it's all custom? There are no standard procedures you would go through for each show?

A. No.

Q. Is there one thing that you try to get out of the way first, right away?

A. Well, what we try to do and look for is what is the most difficult painting in the show. We try to do those first to give the scenic artist as much time to do a different thing. That's the key. Because the scenic artist is so costly, we try to keep their overtime down. That would be the deciding factor in what we start first in the shop. That's one factor. The other factor is to keep the carpenters busy. We will start in, and certain people are good at building platforms. We're going to start building platforms, immediately, to keep people busy in the shop. It depends on the circumstances. If our iron shop is busy doing something else, then, that'll hold back the iron work on a new show. Or if the iron workers are not busy, we immediately put that into the works and keep them busy although the people have nothing to do with the finished product. There is no set rules. It depends totally on the circumstances in playing it by ear to make the right decision at the right time.

You have to do what's going to be set up first, clearing space in the proper area. And we have a number of departments. The drapery department would, immediately upon receiving the plans, start sewing up the draperies and the drops because they would go to painting. And, of course, the other psychological thing is to do the difficult things first. Get them out of the way. The most difficult things in the show. They take the longest, and there's the most chance of fouling up. And you give yourself more time for corrections. In any case, hopefully, you have enough men and enough facilities to get the whole show going at one time, which is not always possible. But, if you're making a decision, you're making it on those factors.

Q. Can you name a show that you consider a landmark show, that people were interested in, something you felt that people who worked on it were proud of?

A. The interesting thing about that question is that we speak on different levels. The inner group of the industry, that is the designers are one level, and we have had a show for instance, called Statis Quo Vadis which played one night in New York. Now, as a credit, it has very little value because practically nobody ever heard of the play. The reviews were terrible. But scenic designers are very much interested in their own business. They're very much into the theatre, and most scenic designers try to see every show there is. And scenic designers did see that particular show. The set was marvelous and those are the only people that know it. And to some degree they're the only people that count. And as a result of that particular set, we've done a number of others, other sets. However, in a show like That Championship Season, which we built, it was a nice set, well done, it was not spectacular. But the fact that it was known and ran for three years, as you said, we built "Championship": people who don't know what the set looked like say, "Oh, that's very impressive." It's the psychological factor. I don't think the set was that particularly good, however, it was a hit and a hit is what really counts. The original set was built for off Broadway, and then it was moved onto Broadway. The road company of That Championship Season was about three times better than the Broadway show.

Q. The set?

A. The set.

Q. Did you build that?

A. Yes. But it was built on a different basis, not as an off Broadway show. If you build a show that's a success, that has something in it. But the people who really know, the designers could see That Championship Season. "And look at that lousy paint job," or whatever they might say about it. That's what counts to them. In terms of the question, a television show called Wedding Band was a magnificent scenic triumph in terms of it being like a movie.



Realistic, and those people who saw the television version, including the designers, I'd say that was an outstanding work of ours. The Au Pair Man was another one, playing at the Vivian Beaumont Theatre. That had alot of trick effects, the set collapsing and so forth. Something that most people and most designers saw and were very impressed with, and people I haven't heard from in years call up and say, "I understand you built Au Pair Man. I just want to call and say how great it was." Designers are interested in their art, and each set is like a piece of sculpture. If it had that quality to inspire them to call, it had to be something special. Designers have decided that this is their livelihood, and their life, and they do spend time to go see plays to see what other designers are doing, out of interest, out of getting new ideas and growing.

Q. Have designers ever come and made a tour of your shop?

A. Rarely, unless they had nothing else to do. They're busy doing their own work, and most designers get around to all the shops, eventually. And when they come in to look at their own shop they get to see what you're doing for other people too. And they certainly almost always express interest in the scenery for other people in the shop, the plans, and so on. And there's a total give and take. These designers are brother members of the union, but also there's a dual thing that happens.

Q. Is there a grapevine that's pretty active between the studios? Do you know what Nolan is doing, does he know what you're doing?

A. It's not active in that sense. If you're bidding on a show and competing with let's say two other shops, it might be a prudent thing to find out what those other two shops are doing to help you determine your bid. If one of those other two shops bidding is working overtime on three other shows you think he's going to bid high on this new show. Or you might find the guy is doing nothing, and he's going to be looking for the show. So it gives you a basis of judging where you're at in terms of what kind of price you're going to pay.

Q. Is there any particular pattern? Is there one kind of group which would go for one kind of show, or is it just guesswork, you never know what's going to happen?

A. In general, musicals are different than dramatic shows. Musicals are much more difficult to do. They require more space, require a different set of knowledge and mechanics. Pete Feller and Nolan are both specialists in that field. Therefore, a producer doing a musical might not even bother inviting anyone else to bid. Just invite Pete Feller and Nolan and maybe one other person.

That would be a determining factor. By virtue of their space and their stock of mechanical devices, they're better qualified than anybody else to do musical shows. As an example, most action onstage, whether it be a wagon moving on and off, or a turntable turning, so forth, there's an electric winch, and the reason for an electric winch as against a hand winch is, obviously, stagehands time. Now this musical might have ten to fifteen winches. Each one of these winches cost about \$3,000 to make. The practice is not to sell the winch to the producer, but to rent it. If you happen to have 150 winches, like Pete Feller does, you're in a fairly good position to rent winches. He gets 150 winches by circumstance. Somewhere in the beginning, fifteen, twenty years ago economics determined that the electric winch, despite it's being costly, you could handle better, was ultimately more economical in terms of saving stagehands. At some point, the stagehands cost became higher than the cost of a moter, so somebody decided, "We're going to electrify our standard hand winches." And at the time, Pete Feller did the first show, and he had enough foresight to say, "I'm not selling these things. I'm renting them to the show." He probably charged exactly what it cost to make them, but then got them back, so he had fifteen winches. Then he rented them to a show, and then he did another show. He had another fifteen, and then another show. And, finally, Pete Feller would have four, five or six musicals of his, working on Broadway at the same time. And over the years, he built up to the point of having 150 winches. All of which says that he is probably the guy to go to unless Nolan has about twenty winches, maybe thirty winches. We are not the person to go to since we have one winch. It's really a simple fact. Some musicals don't have winches in them. It's a different kind of musical, so, of course, we could do that. The other factor is musicals generally have alot of drops. It's a question of floor space on that. To paint, as I pointed out earlier, we have space for one or two at most, and if there's twelve hangings on a show, it's going to take an awful long time for us to put out twelve hangings. Peter Feller could put down five at one time; he's in a better position. There are many many factors involved.

Q. Have you been around to the other scene shops?

A. Most of them,---not all.

Q. Is there a particular order, a pecking order?

A. I would say, yes. I would say that Pete Feller, because of the size of his plant, has years in the business, his reputation, and so forth, would be the prime scenic shop in the country. And I don't say that lightly. I mean in the country.

I would say that Nolan Scenery is probably second, again, because of length of time in the business, size, knowledge. From there on in, it gets very vague, in terms of who would be third. I feel that we're number three, but that's me saying it. It depends on your criteria. I think we're number one in some areas. For instance, we are the only shop that I know of that has a drapery shop, and perhaps each shop has a sewing machine. We have a drapery shop and an upholstery shop. And we have people here who are the best, the best in the country as far as I'm concerned. That is in devising ways of doing things with draperies. We have developed what we call, for instance, Velumaform, which is three dimensional scenery, purely out of fabric. It's a question of how well man conceived the sewing machine--what he can do with the sewing machine. I feel, in general, we are the best.

Q. This is an innovation exclusive with you?

A. Yes.

Q. Can you tell me how that works or is it a secret?

A. No secret about it. It's within the limitations of the method. We make three dimensional objects out of fabric with absolutely minimal kind of framing. It's done with a pattern, a pattern of sewing. It's very difficult to describe. You'll have to see it.

Q. In a relief, you mean, like a sculpting?

A. Like a sculpting. Columns for instance, a column is a cylinder. Now, if you take a plywood ring, top and bottom to form the diameter of a column, and just apply fabric around the perimeter of the plywood, and hang the two pieces of plywood, you have basically a cylinder. From that little concept, take off with variations in shapes.

Q. Do you have any problem collecting money? How do you accept your money, to what extent will you go?

A. Well, there again there's a general vague rule that we break. That is, especially on Broadway. The general contracts have to be paid on signing the agreement, partial payment, and then partial payment halfway through the building, and full payment before the show goes out of our shop. That is traditional. We always have contracts of that kind. That is, C.O.D., paid before the show is out. However, this does not account for many of the extras that happen.

The show goes either into a New York theatre, or out of town. And after setting up, we discover we need a new set, or all we need is drapery, making, or whatever, "Rush them," and at that stage, you're in rehearsal and that, again, is tradition. Send it out. These people are in trouble; they need it. Unless there is some known reason why you shouldn't. As a result of this, you send extra things to the show. It never makes it to New York, or it folds the first week, and you lose money. Those people you have a vivid memory of. Producers, business managers who have allowed you to get into this position, so you try not to let that happen again with those producers. There are other groups of repertory theatres who are in a different position than the normal producer who sets up shop for one show. The New York Shakespeare Festival, the Phoenix Theatre, for instance. We have contracts with all those people. But when that truck goes out and the money is not there, we let it go out. Because we know, like with the Shakespeare Festival, that they will send the money. We know that from experience. Sometimes we wait a long time. We are in such a close family business we cannot refuse. Television, very often we extend credit like any other business depending upon, again, who is the producer. If we happen to be working for a network, we extend credit. We do a lot of work for Channel 13.

Q. I want to ask you about the extras, how that works. If there has been some exotic effects ordered extra, and it's not in the contract, how do you get paid for them? What happens if the show folds after the first night? What's your next move?

A. Well if you send out extras and do not get paid before the show folds, you are in trouble.

Q. There is no money?

A. Generally speaking, there is no money. But if the business manager is really on top of it, he can sometimes get you part of the money. A lot of the decisions regarding what you're doing on this particular show is a feeling you get about what kind of show it is. It behooves you as an interested party to ask questions to whoever you can. How is the show going for instance when it's in rehearsal. Now if somebody says it's terrible or a disaster, and somebody calls you for extras, you can obviously be a little more careful in that case. Purely feeling, and very often you don't make the right decision. The show could be thought of as great, and be panned by the critics and die. But I must say, it does not happen very often.

Q. I sense it's the names of authors, producers and directors?

A. Personally, I'm not as well informed in that area as I might be. And even if I were, it might be more a hinderance than help. Because a guy's last success is no guarantee of a new success. Murray Schisgal who did Jimmy Shine proceeded to do alot of bombs after that. Its what he's got there that counts. The fact is the name involved is really meaningless. What does count is somebody's opinion that you respect. He says it's a good show or a bad show. So the best policy, obviously, would be to get paid up front.

Q. As a showgoer, can you make a prediction on the future of of the theatre?

A. Purely speculative, I don't pretend to be able to tell the future. I think the showcase is obviously becoming more and more important. A showcase where people can produce a show for next to nothing. More and more showcases are happening. I think Off Off Broadway is growing, and I think general theatre will always be here, but I think it's on a level, now, that probably will not increase.

Q. You said the theatre's going to be here because it always has been here. Does this give you a sense of security knowing this?

A. To some degree, but there will be a need for theatre, and, and therefore, a need for somebody like us in one area or another, maybe television, film, the theatre. It gives me that little hope that we have a place in society, and I like the place.

Q. Many people in this area seem to work in relative autonomy. Nobody really knows who built the sets; nobody knows how they were built. Do you think this is advantageous?

A. You say nobody knows? Who do you mean?

Q. It's an inner circle. The designers know, but in many cases the producers don't even know. They may know, but they don't even care. They don't know there are people involved who are not on stage, and, in my experience, that accounts for their ruthlessness with money. So, my question is, do you think it's an advantage to be known?

A. I think it would help us if we were more known, but I don't have a strong opinion about not getting recognition. I think the set is only part of the scene. If the set is beautiful and the play is rotten, it ultimately means nothing except as a temporary work of art that has no longevity. The nature of a set is that it's temporary, and ultimately it can contribut to the success of a play. But the degree in which it contributes is open to question. There are awards given to designers for expertise, but there are no awards I know of given to the best constructed set.

Q. There was one, once, Albie MacDonald got a Tony.

A. I don't remember that. Pete Feller was mentioned once, not as a shop but as an individual. However, the reviewers mention the set always, and they feel it's an important part of the play, like the costumes. It's usually a casual statement. "The set was great or adequate." And people do applaud sets. As I started to say, I don't have complaints. I think it would be nice if greater recognition was given to the art form than there is, but then again, I have to realize, or recognize the context in which it is. That is, we're executers of somebody's design rather than creators of that design. And how well it's executed, one never knows. How it would have looked if somebody else executed the same design. What subtle differences there might be.

Q. Don't you have to do the work with drawings, or is that very minimal?

A. It's minimal, but even if it were not minimal, it wouldn't matter to anybody. What ultimately matters is what it looks like. The scenery could be covered with cardboard.

Q. Do you find yourself advising designers?

A. Designers --very few designers have very much knowledge of materials and mechanics. Some do; most don't. They'll say, for instance, "I want this set to move on stage. Give me a wagon." How the wagon works, what's going to make it work, very few have any concept at all. The director says, "I want such and such to happen, kind of magical special effects. This is what I want." How to do it, very few designers have knowledge in that area. And you advise in that area, and if he chooses the wrong material to choose something, you might suggest something that would not only work better but might be cheaper. So you're constantly in the situation of advising and discussing.

Q. Talking about sets, I saw Sherlock Holmes, and it was applauded. I also know that it was brought over from England. You mentioned labor relations. How does that work? If you have American designer's unions building the shows, what happens when you bring a show over from Europe? For instance, a few years back, there was a raging controversy about a show, but Messmore told me that he had to rebuild a portion of it. Will this rebuilding satisfy something? Can it be satisfied?

A. I'm not knowledgeable in that area. I only think that, for one thing, a scenic designer has to be hired in this country, so he would act as supervisor in terms of setting it up.

Some designs may be brought over from England and executed here, but there would still be a company designer. As far as I know, the only determining factor in moving a show from one part of the world to the other would be the cost of shipment and the customs. The customs are very strict about it. And if the producer decides it's cheaper paying the shipping and the customs charges, he'll bring it in. There's no union law stopping it. The unions have tried, unsuccessfully, to stop it, but I don't see on what grounds they could. Nothing in the contracts stops it, but I do think the determining factor is purely economical.

Q. Do you have any feelings on that? Do you think they should be allowed to bring in whatever they want? If it's a European show?

A. My feeling is that they should be allowed to do it presuming that they agree with some of the codes, New York City codes are fireproofing, and so forth. If the show is built properly and not endangering anybody in any way, they should be allowed to do it, as we should be allowed to send our scenery overseas.

Q. But, in many cases, we're not. As a matter of fact, actors are allowed to act over here for a longer period of time than our actors are allowed over there. The show, for instance that is starring an entire cast I think after twelve months has to have an American cast. Is there any similar arrangement with scenery?

A. I really am not familiar with that aspect. My feeling is that there should be a totally free exchange. It just happens to be a peculiar product to ship around. If the set is well designed and well built in England and is a thing of beauty, why destroy it? Why try to duplicate it just because of some union problems?

Q. Since you've been in the business, has there been a particularly good time or bad time to work? Some have told me that this is the worst time. Other people say no, six months ago was the worst time.

A. It's purely a matter of circumstances. We're somewhat different, in the sense that we do television. If we were doing just one Broadway show, we would not be busy. The fact that we're doing a television show in conjunction, makes us busy. We're working on the future. As a matter of fact, the immediate future is determined more by what's happening in television than by what's happening on Broadway.

Q. May I ask how much business you do here?

A. We do approximately three quarters of a million or a million would be close.

Q. This is changing the subject entirely. In the shop, what is the minimum you have to have to work with, and I'll ask you in terms of tools, facility and in terms of working men and supervision? Let's start out with tools. What do you have to have? Sewing machines?

A. We have sewing machines, a great variety of sewing machines. In talking about what does a scenic shop need, what do we do? We do woodworking, painting, draperies and metal work. Starting with the woodworking, we don't do any fancy cabinet work, so therefore, minimum would be a table saw, cut-awl, radial saw and a band saw, basically are the tools you need. You can get more sophisticated and have mortise and tennon machinery, joining machinery, thickness planes, and so forth, but, basically, a band saw, a table saw, and a cut-awl, radial saw, plus a complement of drills and a portable jigsaw. To become more efficient, we have a compressor system, automatic staplers, nailers, and so forth. In the paint shop, we have brushes of various kinds, most of which are hand made to achieve certain effects. And there are tools, some of which are known, some of which are known, some of which are not known. They are scenic artist tools for achieving certain effects, rollers, rollers with pattern designs. And insecticide sprayers is an extremely important tool; it is used constantly. In the drapery shop we have sewing machines and all sorts of other little gimmicks, grommeting tools. In the metal shop we do welding of aluminum and steel, so we have welders to do that and metal cutting machines. Basically, that's what we need.

Q. In terms of the personnel, each member of your corporation, the owners, head certain departments as you explained it to me. Would they be considered foreman? And chargeman as well?

A. Yes. Chargeman, foremen.

Q. You say you have four. Is this the minimum you can work with, or could you run the whole operation yourself?

A. By contract, the first scenic artist in the building is the chargeman. It must be. It doesn't matter what his talent is. By contract he's a chargeman, and he receives a special rate of pay. You see, I visited a shop that only had one, and he was working. Are there limits to the things he can do?

A. Any rule can probably be broken, if the Scenic Artist union knows about it, they will not permit it.



Q. Well, he does certain things. But I was told if he had to paint anything that was big he wouldn't do it unless he had somebody helping him.

A. He's inaccurate in terms of his interpretation of the contract. I not only know this, but went through it two days ago. We had an experience where we had two men, the chargeman and one other man. The other man did not show up, and at ten o'clock we had a call. The other man called in sick, and we got a call from the union saying how come we did not call at ten o'clock in the morning to get another man? There was a whole hassle regarding that because they call in and ask who's working.

Q. Every day?

A. Yes, they not only call and ask who's working, but what you're working on. By asking what you're working on, they find out what's happening in the industry. "Is there a scenic designer on a show and why wasn't the show registered?" And their registering a show indicates that a certain percentage of dues from the scenic designer, contracts have to be written with the producers. And that's their policing method of daily phone calls to every shop in the area. So one does not want to lie. They don't call us, they call their own people, the chargemen or the shop steward. The second man would be the shop steward.

Q. The chargeman has to be a member of the shop. So you might have more cooperation with the union if you were a member?

A. Probably. As I see it, we're not unique. I think the people most competent in any area are the ones least concerned about union dues. The incompetent is always trying to protect himself through security, stick by the rules, I need another man and so forth. And I think that's probably true of every shop in the city. The basic chargeman is the best man available for that particular show. He's the most competent. And there's also the dual situation. He's working somewhat as manager and somewhat as union, so he has to balance one against the other. And some of those rules are unreasonable. When there's one man in the shop and he's painting a little sign, he knows it's unreasonable to ask his employer to hire an additional man to stand around and watch him do it.

So he's in a funny position. But the rules are the rules. The union couldn't care, especially at a time when there is really not that much work. There are people on a list, scenic artists who are out of work call the union and say I need work, and are put on a list. And, as that list grows, the union puts on the pressure, in terms of following the rules. If everybody's out, they couldn't care less.

Q. Do the owners have to be members of the union?

A. No.

Q. Can you do work?

A. If you're not a member of the union? You cannot paint scenery, for instance. In regard to building something, there again, it would depend on who's going to say anything. The shop steward, let's say. If you're abusing the privilege, and you're not paying dues or percentages, some shop stewards might call the union and say, "This guy is working on the floor. What is this?" And the union might take some action. I have never experienced this. I don't think there is any shop owner that I know of that is not a member of the union. Not any longer. There used to be.

Q. You're accurate there. Unless it's South Jersey?

A. He's a member of Scenic Artists. There's two partners there. One is a scenic designer; one is a businessman. And I don't think that business person does anything in the shop.

Q. Is there anything unique about you? I suppose, it's the drapery shop?

A. Well, I suppose, it's our personality. A personality starting with the fact there are four owners.

Q. Do you think you can do things faster, or do you need a certain amount of time? How much time do you need to do a show? What is the least amount of time you've done a show? Let's talk about a Broadway show now, a one set show.

A. I would say that two weeks to build a show is not unusual, but it's considered very little time by everybody. But we often get into the situation where we have no work and there are two shows bidding at the same time. If you get both shows, you would have to knowingly get both shows. You would have to build into the price some overtime because you require it for two shows. On the other hand, if you put that kind of overtime into the price, you might not get either one of them. So it often happens that you need one of them. You will put in a fairly low price and you will get one, fine, no problem.

Sometimes you get both of them. At that point, because of the shop, our shop's physical condition, we might have to literally build one, and when we finish start the other one. Not totally.

Q. You couldn't do two shows simultaneously in the shop.

A. We could build parts of two shows, but we could only set up one. That thing we talked about, That Championship Season was built in four days because we were doing a show called Ring Around the Bathtub which was a total disaster, and took more time on that show, because it went out four days before the other one. And we literally built That Championship Season starting Thursday morning and delivered it Monday. And whatever lack of quality was to some degree the speeding which we did up to the time we had to fluff off. But that's another reason why the road company was a better show. We had three months to do that. However, no apologies, it was not a bad job for four days.

Q. So what can be done for a musical. A ballpark figure could be six weeks?

A. That would be nice. Sometimes it's less, sometimes more.

Q. May I ask about the cost of things? If the show has a number of sets, can we get a grand figure, \$50,000, for instance. For a musical, \$100,000?

A. I say certainly \$100,000 for a musical is a nice average. And some are done for \$50,000 and \$60,000. I don't know if there is something like an average, but to be a producer and set a budget of \$30,000 for a musical would be unrealistic. I think \$75,000 to \$100,000 would be realistic. A one set dramatic play has to start at \$20,000.

Q. Do you happen to remember what it was for That Championship Season?

A. That was about \$26,000. The road company was somewhat more.

Q. \$26,000 and that was just a one set show. What drove the price over \$20,000?

A. The size, the step units, different levels, the height of the set. It was one set, but it was a fairly large one set, considering nothing moved.

Q. You mean the portals?

A. The number of portals too. No, not the portals. There was a ceiling on the show. It was one set which I think involved a number of sets, like going upstairs.

Q. It had an exterior?

A. Veronica's Room was another one setter which had twenty-two feet ceilings, very large. But it was a very Gothic, paneled kind of set.

Q. Do you have a particular kind of formula that you follow or do you sit down and plug it out?

A. It used to be before my time, painting was estimated in square footage, some kind of formula was figured for complicated drops. It seems to me impossible to work out. As you witnessed here, some little discussion here about the cost of something, a Phillip's scrim. I know the price today; I would not estimate tomorrow what it's going at because the price goes up.

Q. What kind of scrim is that?

A. It's a back scrim; it's a double layer of scrim, manufactured. So it does not have the same quality as a sea-through quality. It's almost opaque. But it's cheaper than seamless, and it comes thirty feet wide, so that's why people use it for cycloramas. As an example of that particular problem, I was estimating two drops, as part of two hour operas. Seamless drops. I was estimating, and, being aware of the problem, I called a company to find out what the price was. It was the day I was estimating. It was \$56.00 a yard. Then a week later, I got the job, and the price had gone up to \$75.00 a yard.

Q. Couldn't you tell them the price went up?

A. As it turned out, we did not do the show. At the last minute, there were other problems. This was for the Washington Opera Society. They decided to rent the scenery from the City Opera Company. I didn't pursue that particular problem. Seamless muslin is not made in this country. And you're subject to a thousand conditions, importing from Germany or Belgium, shipping is just one problem. There are not too many places you can buy seamless muslin. In any case, the price of cotton goods is going up, and so it's very difficult to run by any kind of formula.

There's formulas in sewing, like so many dollars in labor, per seam, even that is uncertain. You can learn a drop size, or a border, and look at it and say it's going to take so many hours to do this job. The scene formula is not something that I like to get into.

Q. So in other words you price everything out. Do you have assistants who do this, or do you do it alone?

A. I do it myself alone. In this case, Joe Castanno, for draperies, is putting his figures down. I do it; he does it. There's a big difference. Usually, I'm higher, in terms of man hours because most people don't estimate realistically. If you ask a carpenter how many hours it will take to build a bookcase, he'll tell you two hours. He's always wrong.

Q. You know it takes longer?

A. He forgets his coffee breaks. He forgets going to get the lumber.

Q. Pete Feller said the exact same thing.

A. It's true. There's a psychological factor also. He always wants to look good, understand that. It will take him so long to do it. That's not what you're after. But, on the other hand, you check and see. Perhaps you're low. Errors in estimating are easy, especially the drapery. That's my weakest area in the field because there's tricks of sewing draperies that he knows that I don't, or problems in sewing it that I don't.

Q. Well some people use a square foot formula on platforms for decks. Whatever material is on the wall, that's another price and in some cases, I'm told if it doesn't have any material, they just give the price by square foot.

A. Well I don't do that. I suppose, ultimately if you have enough experience with your own operation, and if you can go back and figure out what it cost you to do some of these different shows, that you could figure out the square footage of each show, and you could probably come up with a formula. But it's a very weak crutch as far as I'm concerned because the variations are what can kill you.

Q. Is there anything you avoid when you see it? In other words, you're invited to bid and you walk in and you see what kind of a show it is?

A. Oh, obviously there are shows you look at and you say, "This one's trouble. This one is going to be trouble for whoever does it."

It may be the nature of what's asked for. The Newhouse Theatre, they decided this year to build a basic set. They would just add props and small set pieces for their Shakespearian productions. The set, as planned, was to be made out of hardwood, boxed in with columns, and then there were two or three levels. And I loved it, I loved the challenge of it, and everybody else wanted to stay away from it.

Q. I want to ask you, you said hardwood? I know that's not pine.

A. In that case oak was asked for. The lengths and the widths required were not readily available. Hardwood is generally bought in random widths and random lengths and they have to be planed down. They're not dressed, like softwood are. You do not order a 1 x 6 piece of oak. A piece of oak is 7 inches wide; you trim it down. The amount of quantity required, the work required to put the oak together was unreasonable to me in terms of time and what the total set would cost. We could have bid on the show, but I felt it was costly, and whether I was right or wrong, was academic. The fact that somebody else bid lower, whether or not he lost money, I'll never know. It was my feeling when I looked at it that it was not the kind of show. I felt I could handle low because of the workload and so forth. A lot of times, whether you want to do a show or not depends exactly on what the physical condition of the show is. And whether or not it requires a lot of painting, and you're very busy painting, or vice versa. Sometimes you want a show badly because it's a lot of painting. They're so many factors and each day is another operation.

Q. What would you say is the most interesting aspect of this business to you?

A. The combination of the total challenge, total challenge like something new in terms of the set itself, in terms of the people involved in the dynamics of getting it done. Starting with the designer, the producer, the money, and the personality of the people you're working with, and each one is an independent soul who has his own idea of how to approach it. The whole thing.

Q. It sounds like you consider it glamorous. Well you said to me that people in this business are pretty much like all other people, so this means to me that you're not like anybody else. Most people are very security conscious. They don't like constant challenges, and they don't like this adventure constantly.

A. Well I guess I wasn't too clear about that. When I said most people in this business are like anybody else I meant that their motivations, and their problems and their egos are the same, but it's true that they're not like other people.

You have to really like this business to be in it. Certainly as a business man you would not invest the amount of time required for the returns that you're probably going to get out of this business. It's a very special thing. You don't make an inventory that you can sell anybody. If you happen to have a warehouse and build up a stock of scenery if you're going to sell it at auction, which happened to me, incidentally. We got \$225 for what amounted to about \$60,000 worth of scenery. The place was auctioned off by creditors to get what they could out of it.

Q. I thought you intended to buy it back yourself?

A. We bought what we needed to go on in the business, so we bought for \$100 things we could use. Because of the cost of handling it, what could we do? It's more of a burden than it's worth. It's a negative value. Outside of equipment, machinery that has a universal value. Most things you make have extremely limited value.

Q. This is the first time anybody told me they went bankrupt. Do you thin alot of people who started out as many times as you have might have quit?

A. I know of the only one that has shown that kind of perseverance. It's an asset, and I've come to the point where I'm not ashamed of it any longer. I used to be. It was very difficult to live with. I constantly failed, one time after another. So I've examined my own feeling about it, and let's say I've rationalized about it.

Q. You say you love the business, and that's probably the only reason that you stay in it. This a pressure business right? Constantly? What kind of rewards do you get? Is there a singular thing? Is there a point where you can say, "Ah-ha, I can relax now and take a vacation?"

A. The rewards are everywhere. First of all, I do earn a living. I survive, support a family, and so forth. And I've always done that despite my going out of business. I immediately started again, without a day off during all these crises that I've lived through. Second of all, it's the creative achievement. The value that has, how do you determine that? I love the theatre, and I love being involved in the theatre. I love actors and people in the theatre. They're special kinds of people. And I love the fact that I'm in it and part of it.

Q. Do you have friends in the theatre?

A. As a general group, I love theatre people better than any other group, better than bankers or accountants. They're generally more liberal, and better understanding of life and people.

Even though they're crazy. For anybody to be an actor and work two weeks and be off six months. But they're more interesting. Call it glamour, or call it whatever you like. There's something very exciting about a friend of yours being onstage. To be part of that world is interesting. I don't know of anything else that could match it. If I were an engineer in the space industry, I'd probably be working on one part, laboring over one little part. There are achievements I'll never know, but it's nothing compared to the total, creative, social rewards.

Q. Are there many people like this or this is the minority? I'm asking if most people are in it for the money? For instance, I had a fellow tell me he thinks 20 percent of the people who are in the shop are in there because they enjoy the work, the rest are in for the money.

A. I have not made an analysis of that, but I suspect that the percentage is off. I think, and we're talking about the talented people, that they could probably make a lot more if they had a steady job in a different industry. I think they like being in this kind of business. We're talking about the carpenters. The scenic artists do make enough money from this that they probably could not make anymore anywhere else. They're in it for the money. There are a percentage who are good and enjoy painting. The general run of scenic artists who schmear paint can't possibly enjoy that job. But they can't all be in it for the money. Percentage wise, in that area, I'd agree that percentage 20 percent are really good and enjoy what they do. The rest go from place to place, and it's just a job. It's better than painting houses because they get paid more. It's cleaner, and it's more prestigious. But in the carpentry I don't know. I suspect that the greater percentage like the diversity. And they also like the achievement, creativity---although very few of them actually go to the theatre to see say, "You know, I built that window," or, "I built that step unit. There's very few that are into that.

Q. If I can go back for a minute? It sounds like to me, when I asked you how you started all this that you started as a truck driver. Is that true? And then you became a prop man?

A. While I was going to school, I was a truck driver, and a stevedore, and a taxi driver, and a waiter, and so forth. So when I went to apply for a job at NBC, I really was applying for a job in their personnel office. And they had a job opening in their trucking office as a trucking supervisor. And my personal experience having driven a truck plus my educational experiences on the Labor Relations were ideal to be a trucking executive.



At that point, I really was just looking for a job to make enough money to survive and also with a promise that if a job opened in personnel I'd be called. And I was, as a matter of fact, after six months work. By that time, six months, I was more interested in what was happening in the studios of the television show than I was working in personnel. My whole attitude shifted. Also at that time, NBC brought Warner Bros. buildings out in Brooklyn and was opening a new operation and there was an opportunity there for me to go out to Brooklyn and start a new operation.

Q. Where was that?

A. It's the old Vitagraph Studios, on East 14th Street.

Q. That's pretty long ago, isn't it?

A. I'm talking about 1951. NBC first rented its facility, started an operation in Brooklyn, mainly for its large studio which was at that time the largest television studios in the country, owned by the Warner Bros. film studio. And there was a shop attached. There was an opportunity for me to go in there as an assistant scenery supervisor. And I knew nothing about scenery, whatever. All I knew was how to move it from one place to another in the truck. But as circumstances would have it, the supervisor of scenery knew even less than I did. Two blind people being led around by union people who did know. This could only happen in a network. Then also since it was so far removed and it was 1951 and the heyday of TV, of live television in New York--so busy that people didn't want to know about Brooklyn. So all the estimating was done in Brooklyn. It was a completely independent operation, and the supervisor had to do the estimating and he was just not qualified. At least I know he didn't have a feeling for a piece of wood. And I was looking over his shoulder watching him struggling, and I found that I could struggle more easily than he could, and I started estimating--totally unsure of myself--totally frightened of what I was doing and...

Q. Estimating the value of what you had in the shop?

A. No estimating shows. And the reason Brooklyn came into being in the first place was that at that time they were planning Max Leibman spectacles. And they were spectacular. There they had this gigantic studio..twice the size of anything in New York and Max Leibman was doing the setting for nine spectacles. The scenery was running \$50,000, \$60,000, \$70,000 which was a lot of money in those days.

Q. And you were estimating the cost of these?

A. Yes, and I didn't know what I was doing.

Q. This seems like a pretty chancy thing.

A. Nobody knew how to do it. And, furthermore, there weren't too many people qualified. But, in any case, there was a supervisor who came from CBS, who supposedly had experience in it. And they didn't even know that he was fired from CBS. That's how busy they were. In any case, my official job was head of the Prop Department, assistant to the supervisor. But it just became obvious that I had a feeling about working.

Q. So you were making things?

A. No, I was managing. In any case, I went through a lot of traumatic experiences in estimating, guilt in the fact that at least I was smart enough to do one thing, that is to overestimate instead of underestimate. That was the result of my fear of being wrong. But my guilt came in when I overestimated and forced the designer and everybody else to cut back the show. And I would sit there and say, "What am I doing? Am I forcing them into doing something I really shouldn't be doing?" But in any case, for some strange reason, I really wasn't that far off. I had a feeling for working. I can't tell you. I think it was a result of doing twenty years of model airplane work which I was heavily into. I was a compulsive model airplane builder, designer, and so forth. And reading the plans of model airplanes and putting them together was no different than putting certain aspects of scenery together only dealing with different people, different rates, and so forth. But it gave me that ability to look at plans, understand them. Maybe that's one of the reasons I was able to start doing intuitive things. Also I had ideas of my own, of how to do things. Being innovative, in the sense that since I had no experience of how things were done, I conceived ways of doing new things. People in the union say, "We've been doing this thing for 150 years this way. What are you talking about?" I say, "That's the way I estimate it. That's the way I want it built." I think it's a matter of strength of personality, confidence. Building enabled me to survive. And after a few years, I became I became very good at it. I'm very good at my job.

Q. I wanted to ask you about when you jumped from the studio with the four owners. What gave you the moxie to do it? Did you have any money, facility?

A. We had no money whatever. As a matter of fact, we put up \$1000 apiece, which meant \$6000.

What we did have was a good reputation for one thing, and skilled knowledge, and Personal relationship with vendors that we were dealing with at NBC. So we were able to get credit. But the primary thing we had was an idea which was an idea I conceived which turned out to be disasterous. But it was an idea.

Q. What year are we talking about?

A. 1960. But NBC was doing a show called "Bell Telephone Hour," a weekly series, musical variety kind of show. I conceived of an idea which was simply this. Over two years, three years, I figured out the cost of each of those shows and came up with an average of \$9,000 per show for the set. Some were eight some were twelve. It came out to this average of \$9,000. And I went to the Bell Telephone Hour and said, "I was thinking of opening my own company and I would like your contract." I would give them a blanket contract to do all their shows, the entire season for X dollars which for them meant no estimating required, no hassle, a fixed cost they could count on. It was very good for them. They had sixteen shows that first season. I gave them an estimate of \$160,000 for the sixteen shows. Figuring well I covered myself on \$1,000 additional average. A great idea. What I did not count on at the time was that they switched designers, and the designer was heartless. He was interested in only one thing, himself. And, in any case, there was some discussion about control, and in a vague sense I expected some kind of reasonable approach to the problem. But although they were paying an average of \$10,000 per set, they would not change their foremat. They would not ask me to build a \$50,000 set. And it was all agreed, and so forth. In any case we lost \$42,000 on that contract the first year.

Q. When you say lost, this is when you went bankrupt?

A. Well it was one of the particular factors toward our going bankrupt. The thing that made it possible to start the business was the Telephone contract which, of course, at the same time, was the thing that made us go out business, or contributed to it. We started with a small shop 7,000 square feet. We had alot of friends, people in television, and we all disliked the networks. The network is a very impersonal, cold kind of thing. It's much more pleasant to deal with people you know and you like. At any rate, our business was fantastic, absolutely fantastic. Within one month, we moved into a 30,000 square feet shop and sublet the first one. And we had shows and we were working. We thought we were going to lick the world because we were doing well over a million dollars worth of business a year.

What we were doing was building toward our disaster. We were also competing against networks, especially NBC who was, surprisingly, the network which does have a personality and had a great deal of hate for me personally for taking all these people out of there. Taking the one show away from them, and every show they did while we existed was a fight for them because we got in to bid on almost every show they did. So, since there was a great deal of hate, and it was their studios, they made life as difficult as possible for us. In any case, it was an exciting year and a half, and during that period I decided I wanted to expand my own personal horizons and work. There was the difficulty I described. We did Broadway shows for less than our cost to try to get into it. That also contributed to our demise, and we were also competing against another independent shop who had the independent television area sewed up until we came in. So we were competing with very low cost to build a company, to build a business. And starting out with \$1,000 apiece was just not enough to carry it. And if we had held out six months more, we would have been into the first World's Fair.

Q. You say you use vendors and then you go bankrupt. Do you have to change vendors? These purveyors of materials, I'm sure somebody gets hung up. Creditors?

A. We did not stick so very many people. Technically speaking, we do not go bankrupt. We assign the assets of the company to the creditors because I do not want to hurt anybody. And the reason we're forced into that is that the I.R.S. took our bank account for lack of payment of withholding. And it was only \$4,000. But it was enough for them to take all the money we had so we could make a payoff. And I decided to. I could have run out and borrowed the money, but I decided that it would be a better move to move on to another company.

Q. You teach at Pratt, part time?

A. Yes, I teach stagecraft.

Q. Are you an adjunct?

A. Yes, adjunct. I teach three different courses, all under one heading.

Q. How did you happen to get that job?

A. Pratt decided to expand their theatre department and, as a matter of fact, they are accredited in New York State as a Theatre major. In any case, they had a design course taught by a designer who was a friend, Peter Harvey.

He designed Black Picture Show, and he recommended me. And the head of the department, I suppose, had some young person in mind who would relate to young people, much younger than I am.

Q. Do you have a degree?

A. I have a degree in Sociology. I think, all they require is a degree, a college degree. In any case, I found, just like my beginning experience in estimating twenty four years ago that I was intuitively a good teacher and I loved the people that cared about it. I've had a marvelous three or four year relationship with Pratt and the people.

Q.(Question inaudible)

A. Yes, I would think so. One, is for the small percentage of students who go to college to be trained so that they can earn a living. Whether they be an accountant or something else. There are a small percentage of people who love the theatre, who want to be designers, be directors, or who want to be in the theatre to earn their living. Whether they are designers, directors, or actors, they have certain value in stagecraft in relation to where they're ultimately going to wind up. Those people who, as you pointed out, will be trained to be teachers to teach people to be trained to be teachers and so forth. Maybe, not unlike some other esoteric subject matter, you study philosophy so you can become a philosophy teacher, primarily, I suppose. And the other level are the people who just want to be there for some unknown reason, for therapy, in terms of working with their hands and enjoying the theatre. And there's a spinoff of a whole bunch of things. It can't even be defined what value that third group gets in terms of working with other people, the dynamics of working and accomplishing something. That I wouldn't even discuss, but at Pratt it was totally that third area of people to enjoy. That's why it was frustrating because nobody was really interested in what was happening. They couldn't care less how it was done and why. I was there for fun, and I don't object that I couldn't appreciate it at least as a total thing, if they're an adjunct to the other part of it.

## APPENDIX A - 6

Answering Questions -	Mr. Leo Meyers	Atlas Scenic Studio
Interviewed By	- J. Collom	10 Wall Street
Date	- Feb. 1975	Norwalk, Connecticut

Q. First, I'd like to ask you how you got started out here?

A. Started in the theatre or in this business?

Q. How you yourself got started and how you arrived here.

A. Alright. Its a long arduous story, I started as a kid in summer stock, painting and designing scenery. Studied at the theatre department at Carnegie Tech and went on from there to designing regional theatre all over the country and on Broadway and Canada, and I became interested in the notion of becoming a scenic contractor. During the process of all this regional work, I became associated with my present partner, Bob Hungerford. We met at the Westport Country Playhouse and then worked together after that in Palm Beach. We got the notion of beginning a contract service as a result of our having worked together successfully for other people. When that decision became solidified, it became a matter of seeking out an area and shaping the scale of the business that we wanted to operate and then seeking the right facility and the right location for it.

Q. Are you both members of 829?

A. No. I am. Bob is a member of I.A.T.S.E.

Q. This is only the second outfit that has this combination?

A. Nolan is the same. Yeah. In fact Arnold and I worked together in TV years back. But he didn't study at Carnegie Tech. This is not our first location. We began our business at another premise not too far from here. We sought out other real estate that would accomodate our needs. Found a building and put a shingle up. We didn't have a contract. We didn't know where we were going to get one, but both Bob and I felt we knew enough people in the industry that we could get work. We'd both worked with a number of managers, designers, and producers, and we were not unknowns.

Q. When you opened up, did you both have to put a certain amount of money, first?

A. Yes, yes, we did. We both naturally financed the operation.

Q. You had no other partners?

A. Well I'd rather not go into all that.

Q. Yours is a different kind of operation?

A. Totally, Yes. We are owner-operators.

Q. What was your biggest problem at the outset?

A. The irregularity of our market, the irregularity of the work flow. It's never seasonal, and you're overhead costs are not. They are continuing, and I think that is a general problem. Throughout our industry.

Q. Can you tell me what percentage of work you do for Broadway, and what percentage for other things?

A. Probably about 50% of our work is for New York, Broadway and the larger off Broadway productions, the Shakespeare Festival and something like that, probably 30% of our work is for national tour, and about 20% of our activity is small projects, display, and other assorted kinds of production, local theatres. But we do some contracting.

Q. About how many square feet operating space in this factory?

A. About 9000 or 9800, something like that.

Q. How many men do you employ?

A. When we're busy sometimes as many as forty people; when we're slow, we lay off people, and go to skeletal staff, of maybe eight people, according to the work load.

Q. Do you find an inconsistency of business from year to year?

A. From year to year? Well yes, but then that reflects on the business conditions in general. When there is a business slump we feel it. The recent economic slump did not hit the theatre badly, but, at other times, it has. The reason for it? I don't know.

Q. When did you open up here?

A. Eight years, seven years going into our eighth year. I'm here at this location five years.

Q. Do you have a particular year that was a good one or a bad one?

A. They vary, they really do. When you start a new business the first couple of years are your most difficult. You're constantly reinvesting in materials, equipment, but, as you move along, that of course diminishes a little bit. But of course there's always reinvesting, in the staff, the equipment, training. All that costs money.

Q. Was there ever a time when you thought you were going to close down?

A. Every other day. No. The important thing I think is to function and not have the irregularity throw you, to function with a little lower overhead so that you're not strangled.

Q. Do you find certain types of work is better for you than other types economically?

Q. Is Broadway the most lucrative?

A. Not necessarily. Knowing where you can find a profit is largely dependent on who the people are you're involved with, on how well designed and drafted the show is, how accurate all that kind of preliminary work is, how accurate the planning is, who you have to know then, among your own staff is the most capable and productive, and see that there's a minimum-minimal time and effort loss or waste. There is no time to make mistakes, and there is no margin for making mistakes. It also depends on the materials that are specified. Certain materials are foolproof, others are not. There are many things that we do in this business that require tremendous experimentation. Of course that's costly, and you've got to-if that kind of experimentation is required, you've got to figure for it, and estimate for it, and figure that right into your price.

Q. How many shows do you do simultaneously?

A. We don't like to do more than maybe two at a time. Our facility is not that large, and the confusion of the work being spread too thin becomes unprofitable. People make mistakes, and very often I'd rather just turn down the project.

Q. What is the show you're working on right now?

A. This is called Don't Call Back. The designer is Oliver Smith. It stars Arlene Francis. The producers are Charles Dowden and Slade Brown.



Q. Can you describe for me how you got this show?

A. I have designed productions for Mr. Bowden, and I've known Slade Brown for quite some time, in the industry, and we'd already done a number of shows for Oliver Smith. So it was very logical that they should come to us.

Q. They came to you.

A. Yes.

Q. There was no formal bidding session?

A. I'm not sure on that, I really don't know. There may have been. If there was one, I didn't know about it. I'm not sure. The show was done in a rush. And, sometimes when that happens, they may have felt that our price was legitimate, and they wanted to go with it.

Q. I guess I didn't understand what you were saying. In other words, you did submit a bid.

A. We certainly price our product before we go into contract.

Q. Was there a formal bidding session where a number of people were brought in?

A. I wasn't present at one, no.

Q. How would they know your prices if you didn't submit a bid?

A. We investigated the drawings and gave them a bid.

Q. Oh, I see.

A. And whether they went to other companies or not, I don't know.

Q. Is this the way most of your work is done? They call you?

A. Yes. But very often there is a bidding session, all the contractors are present, although sometimes they're not all at the particular bidding session. Some of them may be there, some of them may not, some may not be able to make it that particular day, or they'll go in later in the day. But that is handled differently with different managements.

Q. Do you find that being further from New York City that you're at any sort of a disadvantage?

A. Yes. It eliminates to a great extent television work which is right in New York. And usually they work very fast, and usually they shoot very quickly, commercials and that sort of stuff. We do very little of that. We have done feature films, feature videotape productions which have been done out here, but smaller, those quick ones we just can't service them because of the geographic problem.

Q. You do actual designing here or most of the work you do with drawings for designs?

A. Yes we've done some of them, in some cases. My people, our staff are all designers and artists and what have you.

Q. Do you know James Hamilton?

A. Yes.

Q. His operation, I would categorize is similar to yours.

A. Very much so. I think his building is bigger.

Q. He told me he can make more money in this business designing than building. May this be true? (for you)

A. That's hard to say. It all depends. That's very difficult to say.

Q. But in other words, you don't do as much design work as you do building?

A. No. I just don't have the time anymore to do it.

Q. How long have you been working on this show you're working on?

A. About two and a half weeks.

Q. Can you describe for me the process you go through after you get the show?

A. After we go to contract?

Q. Yes.

A. The first thing we do immediately is order materials, and then of course the drawings are gone over very carefully, and construction drawings are made by our foreman. Now, depending on the degree of detailed work on the drawings, the shop drawing--we usually---in tricky instances, do specific drawings of our own for our own men to follow. And then we put it to the work as soon as the drawings are done and the materials are in, we bring in our people and they begin.

Q. Since you are a member of 829, is it necessary for you to have two people from 829 here, a chargeman and journeyman?

A. Yes.

Q. Do you find there is less formality here in Connecticut than there would be in New York City proper as far as the union restrictions go?

A. No, it's the same. They come out and/or they call us. We get our regular call every Monday. We're very much in the mainstream of things.

Q. Is there a mechanic's union up here?

A. Well our members are all I.A.T.S.E. members. There's considerable theatre activity up here, that's why we're fortunate in having the people we have. There's Westport Country Playhouse; there's Stratford Shakespeare Festival, Hartford Stage, the theatre in New Haven, Bushnell; there's a large fine arts auditorium at Bridgeport. So, all of those are fields of endeavor for stagehands in this area. It gives us a labor pool, and it also provides work for three people who are here. It's not the wasteland a lot of people think it is. And the people are very knowledgeable, and there's plenty of real professional activities.

Q. Is it necessary for them to belong to the Union?

A. Yes.

Q. My question is because of this location is it necessary. Because there are people in New Jersey some people are working with non-union members?

A. Well both Bob and I are union members. We feel duty bound to hire union members.

Q. Do you have any shows that you recall that were particularly memorable shows that made you feel you were on your way, or got where you wanted to be?

A. I try to send out a very complete and very carefully developed project, so that could be very hard to say. There are so many factors that influence good work, and they're not always our attitude and under our control. They have to do with time, budget--many things.

Q. About how many shows a year do you do?

A. Again, that varies.

Q. Would you say two a month?

A. Yes, maybe two a month. Some of them are bigger; some of them are smaller. We'll do a musical then or then we'll do a one set show. We're not set up to do enormously large projects unless we have help from outside, because we do have a space problem.

Q. You can't do large drops?

A. We can't do large work, we can't do it alot, at the same time in this building. But that may or may not be in our favor, I don't know.

Q. Do you think you may expand?

A. I'm not particularly interested in expanding.

Q. Can you see yourself staying in this business?

A. Definitely. I've been in it now over twenty-five years. Why should I change? I don't know how to do anything else. It's not the easiest business in the world to function in. It really isn't. It's a very difficult field. And there is such competition that either you are dedicated to it or not.

Q. While we're on the subject, would you say that most of the people working for you here in the shop have a dedication or do they do it just for the money?

A. Most of them oddly enough, are really quite dedicated to their craft. Otherwise they couldn't turn out the work that they do. That sounds a little artsy-craftsy, but it's very true.

Q. It varies, that's why I asked.

A. I look at some of the work they turn out, and I'm very proud of it. Because it shows. To me it's the extra ingredient. What separates ordinary work from beautiful work is that you care. And the majority of my people care about what they do.

Q. Your staff seems to be younger than most. Is that true?

A. I don't know, it's been so long since I've worked in other studios, I don't know who's around anymore, but that may be the case. I really couldn't say since I haven't been in some of the other places.

Q. I was going to ask you if you'd tell me what you'd consider an average cost of a one set show?

A. It varies.

Q. What's the range then?

A. Low and high?

Q. Well you couldn't do a show for under \$15,000, could you?

A. It's possible. I can't do anything until it's designed and drafted and everything is specified, the material is specified.

Q. Let me ask you about the process you went through on this show.

A. Ok, there were shop drawings, and blood sweat & tears, and fabric ordering and lumber ordering and paint ordering, and what can I tell you? The show is built in its rough structure before the finished carpentry is done and it's put together and equipped with hardware, which is then taken apart and covered with fabric and reassembled and painted. We usually assemble first, we find it's more efficient. I think most of the studios work that way.

Q. Is there any particular problem that you have with this location-setting up for instance?

A. Living in New York and commuting. Getting up early.

Q. Do you live in New York?

A. I do. I drive out. But there's no problem with that except when the weather's bad. My partner lives out here, and most of our staff are local residents.

Q. To get back to the show. Do you have a similar process you go through with every show?

A. It depends on the show. We really look at the whole project and make decisions on how to proceed with it. Because again, sets vary so much, materials, sometimes we're held up with availability, we can't get a certain thing, and it's not going to be here until the very last minute. So on this show we had difficulty with one thing, and it was done on the set, although the process work we're going to redo something on it. And we didn't plan on it. But we have to do it.

Q. When does it have to go out?

A. It will be finished tomorrow.

Q. Where will it go?

A. The Helen Hayes Theatre. Without a road tour. They usually tour a little bit, but I don't think Arlene Francis is available to go out of town.

Q. Then it goes out tomorrow, when will it be set up?

A. It'll be set up on Thursday. It'll be loaded and shipped tomorrow afternoon.

Q. Set up in one day?

A. Oh yes. This is a one set show, it should go up in one day.

Q. Who will go with this show.

A. Well their master carpenter with the show has been out here for several days. The master carpenter is on salary with the producer before it goes into the theatre.

Q. Is that true with most shows?

A. Yes it is.

Q. I thought that it was a split.

A. The master carpenter and the electrician go on out because they have work to do. And the prop men.

Q. Do they come to work with you?

A. Yes, sometimes they spend quite a little time in the shop. while the show is being built so they're totally familiar with the set. Sometimes we send someone in but it's not always necessary. In order to make them feel more secure, if it's terribly complicated then we do. We usually have someone go but not always. Again, it depends on the set.

Q. Do you have only one Foreman?

A. At the moment, yes. But sometimes we have two.

Q. Can you give me a breakdown of the areas you have in the shop here?

A. Well there's the painting department, the carpentry department, the administration staff--.

Q. There's the painting department, carpentry department, and the administration office that's where you find most of the men out here. Do you have any specialists in metal?

A. Oh yes. Certain men are-have aptitudes in certain fields. We have wonderful men who do metal who are not as adept at carpentry and vice-versa. Some of our carpenters wouldn't want to touch a welder. In every field, a talented professional usually can do everything.

Q. I've spoken with other studios and they seem to average about a million dollars business, a little under, a little over, except for Feller, he does about three million. Where do you fall on that scale?

A. I'd rather not comment.

Q. Would you say that you're below the figure that most of them make?

A. No, I'd rather not say. I didn't know my competitors were so wealthy.

Q. You mean you don't make that kind of money?

A. This is not our whole operation. We have several other locations. We have storage-we will not store anything here. No room our rent is too high here. We need the space as work space as functional work space.

Q. This seems to be a very central location in the middle of town.

A. Yes, it is, but this is not particularly cheap real estate. And there is not room for dead storage.

Q. Would you care to tell me what your overhead is here?

A. Our overhead. No, I won't promise on that.

Q. Your rent or how about what it would cost you to open if you didn't do any work at all. To pay your staff.

A. No, I really don't wish to say.

Q. Some people say it's about \$2,000 a week.

A. I go into these things with my accountant or tax people, but I don't see the point of going over anything like that. I'm not even sure those people would know. But any business has to have a staff no matter how large or small. I mean we have a few key people who are on all year round even in the slow season here. Your telephone and your bookkeeping goes on. So it's a very difficult thing, we're constantly trying to find out what percentage of our activity our overhead really represents. In a business like ours, because there are tremendous areas of overlapping: when you're doing more than one project there's a great deal of stock supplies that end up going into a show, so sometimes it's very hard to get pinpointed a statement on the cost of certain things.

Q. What would you say is your largest problem?

A. Our largest problem? The coffee break. They take alot of time on a coffee break; and I'm dead serious.

Q. Do you have any trouble collecting money? From producers-

A. We try to be inordinately careful with that. But then we're in a field that exists on the surplus dollar. And one of the problems is the speed with which everything is done, and also the speed with which a show can fail and a producer can be bankrupt instantly. So it's very important to expedite contract payments and all that stuff quickly and efficiently and know that everything is in order. Otherwise we'd be in great trouble. We'd have tremendous trouble with extending credit for certain situations. And it is a precarious business at best. Even when all is going well. And it's so important to stay on top of it.

Q. Do you work on a 1/3, 1/3, 1/3 - basis?

A. Again, that varies.

Q. Would you ever deliver a show without receiving payment?

A. To my mother, but thatsabout all.



Q. What happens if they don't have the money? Do you keep the show?

A. We have an antique sale out on the street. Again it's a business where you're expenses are very realistic. You're dealing in long hours, and expensive man hours, because everybody's earning top dollar: you're dealing in equipment and supplies which are expensive, and in theatre work, the paint is the best paint you can buy, the best fabrics you can buy, the lumber is A#1. There's no cheap way out. So once again, with work costs what they are, you've got to stay on top of everything.

Q. Have you ever been in a situation where you did not receive payment?

A. A couple of instances where we've had certain difficulties or disputes. But that can happen in any business I guess. If there's a dispute, there's a way of settling anything.

Q. Do you have a lawyer?

A. A very good one. We're very well covered on that. But the important thing is to have a clearcut agreement right in the beginning.

Q. We were talking about disagreements, when you try to get these things ironed out. What about changes and additions?

A. Yes, in a situation like that we attempt to develop the invoice before the show is shipped. So that when the show leaves, everything has been taken care of.

Q. But what about changes? If the contractor changes his mind?

A. Oh, yes. They're notated. If there's a change on something, the producer or the manager is notified immediately. And there's an agreement.

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APPENDIX A - 7

Answering Questions - Mr. Francis Messmore  
Interviewed By - J. Collom  
Date - Dec. 1974

Messmore & Damon Scenic Studios  
530 West 28th Street  
New York, N. Y.

Q. I'm interested in the origins of Messmore.

A. My father started the business in 1914.

Q. And when did you take over the business?

A. After 5½ years in the Army, 1946.

Q. Has it been in this location since it started?

A. No. When I came back from the service, we were on 27th and 9th Avenue, we moved to 107th when the city took over the property, and then 5 years ago, the city took over that property, and we came back downtown.

Q. How many square feet do you have here?

A. 50,000. Completely, yes. 50,000 of manufacturing and warehouse space.

Q. How many employees?

A. Right now I don't think more than 15. It could go as high as 50 if we have alot of work.

Q. Can you tell me about the International Association of Scenic Builders, how many members there are, and is there a hierarchy?

A. There's only about a half a dozen --- there might be one or two more from out of the city.

Q. There's Feller, Nolan, Hart?

A. Variety. Lincoln Square Scenic, ourselves, then Atlas in Connecticut, and I can't think of their name down in Lambertville, then a company from Washington.

Q. Is this the body that negotiates contracts with the union.

A. Yes.

Q. Representatives from each one?

A. Yes.

Q. The demise of Broadway, what was that?

A. Talking pictures really hurt Broadway for a long time. Even today, there are nowhere near the volume of shows that were before talking pictures.

Q. The twenties?

A. Yes, and earlier than that.

Q. Would you venture a guess at what was the worst time since you've been in this business?

A. Personally? I don't know. I know these recessions come and go, but because we keep ourselves diversified; we're always able to keep moving. We take any kind of a job that we've equipped for, big or small. We don't turn our nose up at any job, regardless of the size.

Q. Department store window display and such?

A. No. Department stores have gone the way of the Broadway --- in the movies. Department store Christmas work is nil.

Q. They don't do it?

A. No. Very small.

Q. Could you characterize your operation here? Supposing you get a show to do, you get the bid.

A. Then we start building it.

Q. Do you do anything especially first?

A. The designer gives us plans. We work from his plans.

Q. Do you do everything simultaneously?

A. Oh no, you do the building first, then you do the painting. If you happen to have a drop to do, you get the fabric in and let the artist paint the drop while the show is being built.

Q. Do you have enough space to do drops? And setup?

A. Yes, sure. We do the Radio City Christmas show, and we'll be starting on the Easter show. But I'd say on an annual basis, we do more work for Radio City than anyone else. Not that it's that much.

Q. Can you tell me that percentage of the work you do is for Broadway?

A. Very small.

Q. Where do you find most of your work going?

A. We happen to do exhibit work, which is part of our field.

Q. That's your bread and butter?

A. Anything we can get is bread and butter.

Q. Are you invited to bid?

A. Yes, we bid on shows, we did - we rebuilt Sherlock Holmes, and we did the current show that's at the Circle in the Square, Where's Charley?, and we've been doing a series that are at the Walnut Street Theatre in Philadelphia. We've done two already, Misalliance and Ardelle. And there are two more to go, The Importance of Being Earnest and Long Day's Journey Into Night. Those will both be done in the course of the next three months. And we also do industrial shows; did one for IBM, and one for Johnson and Johnson, and we're doing one now for Xerox. We do industrial shows on a fairly regular basis, as often as they are required.

Q. Could you give me some history of how this business got started?

A. My father was a stagehand, and it seemed like a natural progression to start making things.

Q. Then he got a shop, and started contracting?

A. He started in California, at the time of the Panama Pacific Exposition in 1915. And that's when he really got serious about it. He organized this business here then he went out there and then they decided to settle here and continue.

Q. Did this start out as a larger operation doing more shows?

A. Well, you have to look at the history of Broadway. In the very early phases, he did some Broadway work, but he was more confined to outdoor celebrations and parades, floats, things like that. And with the demise of Broadway, he gave that up completely and went into department store Christmas displays.

Q. That's alot of scenery, alot of stage to fill.

A. Well it's mostly painting. They take stuff out of their warehouse. They have stuff that was built fifty years ago. And they bring it out and it gets changed.

Q. You repaint it right there? You don't have to bring it over here?

A. Both. We paint here and there.

Q. Can you cite a particular landmark show you're proud of?

A. Well, recently No No Nannette was a big hit.

Q. So you do do Broadway work?

A. We don't go out of our way for it.

Q. You don't particularly care for it?

A. No, because if you have a Broadway show, it consumes you completely. Everybody is paranoid about getting the job done. There's never enough time, and you go crazy.

Q. You mean the pressure is greater?

A. Yes.

Q. Time, they want it like yesterday?

A. Yes.

Q. How much time do they give you?

A. Well with Where's Charley? we have three weeks which wasn't enough time.

Q. How much can you handle simultaneously in this shop? Can you do three shows simultaneously?

A. One thing you've got to remember. A show takes up alot of floor space. Other shops have a better setup for doing more shows than we have. You have to work with what you have. If I had two shows to do at the same time, one would have to take precedence, but we'd be building pieces for the second one until the first went out, and we could put the second one together.

Q. Can you illustrate for me how the producer manages to get a designer and the designer happens to come to you?

A. Well there are X number of designers, but, like anything else, any producer has certain ones he favors for one reason or another. Maybe he likes the type of their work, maybe the character of that particular show he feels befits a certain designer and he tries to get the guy he feels can do the job for him. If I were a producer, I would also try to keep in mind a designer that's going to be reasonably careful with money because some designers have no concern with dollars and they design things way beyond reality. Once a show has been designed, the producer calls in a few bidders, and they bid on a show. The designer explains it to them. He's there. These sessions usually take place in the producer's office.

Q. There are probably builders that designers favor?

A. Oh yes, sure. That's always the case. All these personalities are involved.

Q. Is that a strong factor in this business?

A. Oh yes, I would think so. Again, we live in a world of people. Some people relate to people better than others do. So you can't divorce the world of scenery construction from the rest of the world. It's exactly the same. People have friends, and people have certain sources that they favor for one reason or another, and maybe they get better service. I know we have clients. I got a job Friday night; I did it Saturday. That's why these people come to me. They know no matter what happens, I'll get the job done. I'd have worked Sunday if I'd had to to get it done. So I think they're always many different factors that cause a person to go to a certain business, whatever they may be. I feel that sincerity and service are important.

Q. What are some problems that you encounter in your work?

A. The biggest problem is getting business. The second biggest problem is getting competent people to produce it. The younger generation, they just want to know how much they're going to get and can they go home, and how much overtime they can get.

Q. Can you project as to the reasons this is so?

A. I think they just have to grow up.

Q. Would you feel that this business is not that secure, that you're always in danger of closing the doors?

A. I don't worry about that because we're solid, and we're solid because we run a tight ship; we keep our eyes open for any kind of work we can get that fits in with our pattern of operation. Other companies in the theatrical field do solely theatrical work. And some of them even restrict it to solely television or the legitimate theatre which makes it even tougher on them. The smaller your field gets, the tougher it is to find work you can do. We did the Hawaii Kai Restaurant, which was a good sized job. Well, some of our competitors in the theatrical field wouldn't be bothered with a job like that. So I don't feel worried because we will take anything we can get.

Q. Is there some kind of an unspoken hierarchy which would prefer one studio over another and so on down the line?

A. I don't know. Because I know that we have designer friends that favor us, mainly on the basis of a personal relationship, and I'm sure that other shops have the same situation. Are you talking about the sequence of shops?

Q. Yes.

A. I think everybody generally regards Feller as a number one because mainly he confines himself almost exclusively to Broadway.

Q. Hart said he was number three. Do you agree?

A. He probably would be, I don't know if he is, because I think Variety does as much as he does. Nolan is two. He may be three, I don't know. He could be.

Q. Did you ever have any experience working with MacDonald's?

A. Oh yes, I know Albie very well. As a matter of fact, when he was at the World's Fair, I did alot of work for him. After he gave up his business.

Q. Would you say that this business is made up of people who know one another?

A. Oh sure. Everybody knows each other in this business.

Q. And yet it seems that people work in relative autonomy. The public doesn't know who you are. The public doesn't know how scenery gets built.

A. What difference does it make? It doesn't make any difference at all. Fine, you know where scenery is built, are you going to buy any? The people who should know, know. That's why they run trade shows, they want to get as many buyers as possible. They're lucky if they get maybe 25% buyers. By excluding the public, they at least have a reasonable ratio. The automobile shows, that's not a buyers show. The public goes in and they look and if 1% of those people are buyers, that's alot.

Q. If these scene shops were more appreciated, do you think you'd get more time to get out from the pressure of time, if a producer really knew what was involved?

A. No. Because producers have to raise money. And sometimes at the eleventh hour the rug is pulled out from under them, and the money that they had promised doesn't come through. Or, for some reason or other, they can't raise the money, you know, with the economy the way it is today, it's hard to get investors. So it's just a problem that has always been with us, getting investors and getting them ahead of time.

Q. Do you ever get more time than you really need on something?

A. No, even in this series we're doing in Philadelphia, they do one show after another. Now I'm waiting for the designs for the third one which will open in about three to four weeks. Now I'd like to have that show now, but I don't have the plans.

Q. You got the show but you don't have the plans?

A. Well, I got the four all together in one package. We are reusing things where we can, to cut down costs, and doing whatever we can to save them a dollar. But I have no plans for the third show. So I can't move till we get the plans.

Q. What happens to the scenery after the show has run?

A. If a show bombs on Broadway, they usually take it right to the dumps. Nobody wants it back because it's always built specially. Oh, if you had a scrim drop, a landscape drop, something that would have general use, and you don't need a big truck to take it, you might take that. If there are certain mechanical parts to it like winches, or electronic equipment to operate some machine or a turntable, that would remain yours because you wouldn't sell it in the first place. Right now, with Sherlock Holmes, we have a special piece of mechanical equipment which they've rented for the run of the show.



Q. You mentioned you rebuilt that. Wasn't that built in England?

A. It came over from England, and, aside from having bad construction, it didn't conform to our fire regulations. And then they had changes they wanted made in the set.

Q. They?

A. The producers. It was designed in England and played in England.

Q. How can the scenery be transported from England, but the actors after a year have to be replaced by American actors?

A. I think part of the answer was that it was rebuilt in an American shop.

Q. That satisfied it?

A. I would think so. I don't really know. If I were they, I'd say, "Look, I've spent a lot of money rebuilding this, and this is how we did it." And I think that would be the answer. They had to rebuild it anyway. They couldn't use it the way it was.

Q. So it was a necessity from a union contract point of view?

A. It was a necessity. I would say the unions look with more favor on it if the work is done here. I know we can't send stuff to England. It just doesn't happen. These things are usually reciprocal, like with the actors. I don't know how reciprocal it is, but that's the way it's supposed to be.

Q. Can you foresee any problem in the future with union scale, for instance?

A. We have a contract with the stagehand. I happen to be a member myself as most shop owners are. And that has another two years to run. You can only charge so much for a person to get in to see a show. But union scale keeps climbing and climbing. Well, I find that that's where a good designer can make a hell of a difference in a show. You know, in the final analysis, the shop only builds and paints what they're given to build and paint. And if the designer goes over the script carefully, weeds down, gets it to where there's enough there but not too much, and then starts developing his designs there. Don't make the painting too elaborate. Some of these designers come in with very elaborate painting, very elaborate draperies. It has to start with the producer who should control the designer. This doesn't always happen. When plans are finally released to shops, we can't say, "Well you don't need an Australian drapery. You don't need an ostrich plume curtain here or whatever." This is in the design, and it has to start before it gets to the shop.

Q. Do you have to do alot of drafting?

A. No.

Q. Do you make working drawings after you receive designs?

A. No, I work right from their plans. That's just another cost, needless. Oh, we make simple working drawings if necessary.

Q. Can you give me a quick breakdown of how the shop operates?

A. Well right now, we have a very small crew in the theatrical department. Right now I think I only have three men downstairs, and two scenic artists. The other men are not theatrical, you see. Other people working downstairs are doing different work.

Q. So there's a total of five?

A. Right now we have five.

Q. Two scenic artists, a chargeman, and an artist?

A. Right, and when work picks up, then we add more.

Q. What do they do when you don't have a show? Do they work on other things?

A. The TV keeps coming in on a fairly regular basis, but we can handle that with a small crew. It's very easy to load yourself up with help. We're fortunate in keeping good people; our location helps us too. We are convenient, being in the middle of Manhattan.

Q. Do you have any difficulty with material prices, the cost of things?

A. Oh everthing's going up.

Q. But that isn't the biggest problem.

A. No. Right now I think lumber is priced very good. The housing is off; that's the reason, and plywood is down. We always stock up on plywood; whenever I get a buy. I stock up on it. I have a big rack downstairs, I have about \$3,000-\$4,000 worth of plywood in the rack. But there's nothing worse than to be caught short and pay fifty cents square foot.

Q. What kind of wood do you use mainly?

A. Well, we use alot of fir and certain imported plywoods.

Q. These are thin?

A. No, eighth inch and also one-quarter inch. And then we buy three-quarter inch sheeting for cases. We use spruce lumber and pine limber both. For decking we use three-quarter plywood.

Q. Do you use masonite on that?

A. Sometimes, if they want it. Tempered masonite.

Q. Do you do any promotional advertising?

A. I advertise in the amusement business newspaper twice a year. See, we do some work for amusement parks too. And, from time to time, I take a spot ad in a certain periodical I advertise in. I do that mainly because these people are all over the country. We go to one convention a year, in November, for the amusement field.

Q. Do you do much work yourself?

A. No, I just try to make sure everybody does what they're supposed to.

Q. You feel you don't spend as much time on the floor as some of the others I've talked to?

A. No. What are you going to do with all of this after you got it? Oh, I'm going to publish it.

Q. In working with designers, do you find that they visit you frequently or leave you alone?

A. Well they have to because they want to be sure we're building it the way they want. And when the painting starts, they spend even more time because they want to be sure that the finish is in accord with what they had in mind.

Q. Can you make any projections for this business?

A. I couldn't because I'm not as akin to Broadway as Nolan or Feller would be.

Q. But you feel there'll always be a demand for your work?

A. Oh, I think there will. I think if they clean up Broadway that'll help some.

Q. How do you mean?

A. Well, until they get rid of these pornographic stores and theatres and everything down there, you're not going to get people to come into the city--like my sister-in-law used to come in once a month. They won't do it anymore. Ladies are afraid to come in alone because, you know, it's like a jungle.

Q. Do you think it's possible to clean it up?

A. Well, if they don't clean it up, it's going to die, I mean that's for sure, because you cannot have an atmosphere like you have on Broadway. My wife and I went to see a show, and we got out about ten-thirty, and the cops were chasing a couple of guys down the street, and they finally caught them, and it was a vicious thing to see. And they weren't chasing these characters because they wanted to run after somebody. They obviously did something. This is typical. I'm sure it's worse later at night. Stagehands will tell you stories. A friend of mine told me that at ten o'clock at night he was robbed at knife point on Thirty Six Street and 7th Ave. He had finished a show and was going out to Penn Station to go home. They took his ring, his watch. So I think you'll find that the pornographic atmosphere in that area attracts a lot of undesirable types. I think if they could have it some place else, these people would go elsewhere. As it is now, you have them going there and it's like having luxury apartments and slums side by side. And people that are going to spend \$15 for a theatre seat--\$30 for two--and then they're going to spend another \$20 for dinner. They don't need that kind of surrounding. They just won't go. Until the administration in the city wake up to the fact that they've got to clean up Broadway,---We had one of our men---our car was waiting outside the theatre and the superintendant was inside. Two guys jumped in and stole it.

Q. Can you see any changes ahead in the tools you use?

A. No, I don't see any great trend. I think you use what you need for the job. If you need metal for the job, you use metal; if you need wood, you use wood.

Q. Are they using less scenery?

A. It depends on the show. Take Sherlock Homes. You couldn't use less scenery on that and accomplish what you're doing.

Q. Could you have used more?

A. Well, not much more. There wasn't any more room. But then you take Where's Charley?, Circle in the Square---one set. So it depends on the show. You can't say let's use more or less scenery. You gotta see what the script is. If the script calls for eighteen different sets, then you gotta either change the script to cut the number of settings or have the settings. One or the other.

APPENDIX B

MEMBERS OF THEATRICAL CONTRACTORS ASSOCIATION

## APPENDIX B

## MEMBERS OF THEATRICAL CONTRACTORS ASSOCIATION

Atlas Scenic Studio, Ltd.  
10 Wall Street  
Norwalk, Conn. 06854  
(Leo Meyers)

Design Associates, Inc.  
South Union Street  
Lambertville, N.J. 08530  
(James Hamilton)

Feller Scenery Studios, Inc.  
381 Canal Place  
Bronx, N.Y. 10451  
(Peter Feller)

Hart Scenic Studio  
3541 Dempsey Avenue  
Edgewater, N.J. 07120  
(William Hart)

Lincoln Scenic Studios  
440 West 15 Street  
New York, N.Y. 10019  
(Mario Berritto)

Messmore and Damon Scenic Studios  
530 West 28 Street  
New York, N.Y. 10001  
(Francis Messmore)

National Scenery Studios  
6113 Hanover Avenue  
Springfield, Va. 22150  
(Patrick Mitchell)

Nolan Scenic Studios  
1163 Atlantic Avenue  
Brooklyn, N.Y. 11216  
(Charles Bender and Arnold Abramson)

Variety Scenic Studios  
2519 Borden Avenue  
Long Island City  
N.Y. 11101  
(Herb Lager)

## **APPENDIX C**

### **QUESTIONS ASKED OF SCENIC BUILDERS**



## APPENDIX C

## QUESTIONS ASKED OF SCENIC BUILDERS

How they began in the business.

How their business was started.

Most important shows.

Best times, worst times.

Trends they witnessed.

How they get a show.

Their view of bidding sessions.

Their operational process after getting a show.

How they contract.

Days and hours involved.

Costs of productions.

The nature of their work with designers.

Largest problems.

Their physical plant.

How much business per year.

Number of shows simultaneously.

Number of employees.

Square feet of work area.

What percentage of Broadway shows.

Amount of early business.

Overhead, payroll, etc.

How do they cost a show.

In-shop pecking order.

Union relationships.

What do they see in the future.

APPENDIX D

COPY OF CURRENT AGREEMENT BETWEEN LOCAL 829  
AND THE LEAGUE OF NEW YORK THEATRES  
AND PRODUCERS

APPENDIX D

AGREEMENT

between

THE LEAGUE OF NEW YORK THEATRES & PRODUCERS, INC.

and

UNITED SCENIC ARTISTS' LOCAL 829  
of the Brotherhood of Painters and Allied Trades, AFL-CIO

EFFECTIVE

July 1st, 1973 until June 30th, 1976

AGREEMENT made this 7 day of August, 1974 to be effective as of the 1st day of July, 1973 by and between the League of New York Theatres and Producers, Inc. (hereinafter called the "League") by and on behalf of its members and affiliates (hereinafter called the "Employer" and sometimes referred to herein as the "Producer or his authorized representative") and United Scenic Artists Local 829, Brotherhood of Painters and Allied Trades of America, AFL-CIO (hereinafter called the "Union") for and on behalf of its members now employed or hereafter to be employed by the Employer (hereinafter collectively designated as the "Employees" and sometimes referred to herein as the "Designer").

WITNESSETH:

WHEREAS, the Employer recognizes the Union aforesaid as the only Union representing its Employees, and agrees to deal collectively only with this Union;

NOW, THEREFORE, in consideration of the mutual covenants, promises and agreements herein contained the parties DO HEREBY AGREE AS FOLLOWS:

I. RECOGNITION

The Employer recognizes the Union as the only Union representing its Employees and agrees to deal collectively only with this Union for and on behalf of its Employees. The Employer agrees to recognize and deal with such representatives of the Union as the said Union may elect or appoint.

## II. SCOPE AND DEFINITION OF SERVICES

This Agreement applies and is limited in its application to Scenic Designers, Costume Designers and Lighting Designers, and Assistant Designers (hereinafter collectively called "Employees" and sometimes referred to herein as the "Designer" or "Assistant"), employed by or engaged in a theatrical production produced by the Employer. The work performed by the above-named Designers may include but is not limited to:

(A) Scenic Designer: (designs the production and renders the following services in connection therewith):

(1) To complete either a working model of the settings to scale or to complete color sketches or color sketch models of the settings and necessary working drawings for constructing carpenter at the reasonable discretion of the Producer or his authorized representative.

(2) To supply the contracting painter with color schemes or color sketches sufficient for the contracting painter.

(3) To design or select or approve properties required for the production, including draperies and furniture.

(4) To design and/or supervise special scenic effects for the production, including projections.

(5) To supply specifications for the constructing carpenter, to supervise the building and painting of sets and the making of properties and, at the request of the Producer or his authorized representative, discuss estimates for the same with contractors satisfactory to the Producer or his authorized representative, such estimates to be submitted to the Producer or his authorized representative at a specific time. If the Designer is required to participate in more than three estimating sessions of each class extra compensation shall be paid as provided in paragraph IV (A) hereinafter.

(6) To be present at the initial pre-Broadway set-up and Broadway set-up days and dress rehearsals; to attend the first public performance and opening out-of-town, and the first public performance in New York and to conduct the scenic rehearsals therefor.

**(B) Costume Designer:** (designs the costumes and renders the following services in connection therewith):

(1) To submit a costume plot of the production listing costume changes by scene for each character in the cast.

(2) To provide color sketches of all costumes designed for the production and any form of a visual representation for costumes selected for the production.

(3) To supply for the contracting costume shop complete color sketches, or outline sketches with color samples attached, including drawings or necessary descriptions of detail and its application, sufficient for the contracting costume shop.

(4) To participate in not more than three estimating sessions with costume shops of the Producer or his authorized representative's choice for the execution of the designs if so requested. If the designer is required to obtain more than three estimates for the same costumes, extra compensation shall be paid as provided in paragraph IV (B) hereinafter.

(5) To be responsible for the selection and coordination of all contemporary costumes worn in the production including selection from performer's personal wardrobe where such situation arises.

(6) To be responsible for the supervision of all necessary fittings and alterations of the costumes.

(7) To design, select and/or approve all costume accessories such as headgear, gloves, footwear, hose, purses, jewelry, umbrellas, canes, fans, bouquets, etc.

(8) To supervise and/or approve hair styling and selection of wigs, hairpieces, mustaches and beards.

(9) To be present at the initial pre-Broadway and Broadway dress rehearsals and the first out-of-town and New York openings of the production.

**(C) Lighting Designer:** (designs the lighting for the said production and renders the following services in connection therewith):

(1) To provide a full equipment list and light plot drawn to scale showing type and position of all instruments necessary to accomplish lighting design.

(2) To provide color plot and all necessary information required by contract electrician.

(3) To provide control plot showing allocation of instruments for lighting control.

(4) To supervise and plot special effects.

(5) To supply specifications and to obtain estimates for the same for the Producer or his authorized representative from contractors satisfactory to the Producer or his authorized representative, such estimates to be submitted to the Producer or his authorized representative at a specific time. If the Designer is required to obtain more than three estimates, extra compensation shall be paid, as provided in paragraph IV (C) hereinafter.

(6) To supervise hanging and focusing of the lighting equipment, and the setting up of all lighting cues.

(7) To be present at all pre-Broadway and Broadway set-up days and dress rehearsals; to attend the first public performance and opening out-of-town, and the first public performance in New York and to conduct the lighting rehearsals therefor.

(D) Assistants:

(1) Assistants to the Scenic Designer, Costume Designer and Lighting Designer shall be engaged by the Producer or his authorized representative at the request of the Designer subject to the approval of the Producer or his authorized representative, which approval shall not be unreasonably withheld. The work of the Assistant shall be to assist the Designer in the work of the Designer as set forth above. Said Assistant's terms and conditions of employment shall be governed by this Agreement.

(2) A separate agreement must be filed with and approved by the Union for each Assistant and required fees filed accordingly, including required Pension and Welfare payment.

### III. UNION SECURITY

It shall be a condition of employment that all Employees of the Employer covered by this Agreement who are members of the Union in good standing on the execution date of this Agreement shall remain members in good standing, and those Employees who are not members of the Union on the execution date of this Agreement shall make application for membership in the Union within thirty-one (31) days after the commencement of their employment.

In the event that such a person is already a member as aforesaid, or is subsequently accepted for membership, and fails to tender to the Union membership dues and reasonable initiation fees, set in accordance with past practice and uniformly required as a condition of membership, the Employer shall terminate his employment within seven (7) calendar days following the receipt of a written demand from the Union requesting termination; provided, however, that the required dues and initiation fees have not been tendered prior to or during the notice period.

The Union agrees that it will indemnify the Employer against any damages sustained by virtue of any action taken by the Employer, at the Union's request, pursuant to this paragraph.

### IV. MINIMUM RATES

Effective July 1, 1973 and each year of this Agreement thereafter, employees in all design categories employed by the Employer hereunder shall be paid not less than the following rates for dramatic and musical productions and for any other type of theatrical production other than so-called concert presentations, which shall be covered separately in subparagraph F of this paragraph IV.

#### (A) Scenic Designers:

##### (1)

	7/1/73	7/1/74	7/1/75
1st set	\$2,300.00	\$2,400.00	\$2,500.00
2nd set	745.00	775.00	810.00
3 through 6 each	580.00	600.00	630.00
each thereafter	370.00	385.00	400.00

(2) **Unit Settings:** In the case of a unit set, which is defined as "the enclosing framework for a theatrical production which shall remain on stage for the entire performance. It shall be so designed that it will be capable--with or without alteration--of providing a background for all actions, locales, times and other requirements of the production. If it is altered, each alteration shall be called a phase." The following flat rates apply:

	7/1/73	7/1/74	7/1/75
Unit set and up to and including six phases	\$4,250.00	\$4,500.00	\$4,750.00
7 through 12 phases	1,900.00	1,900.00	1,900.00
13 or more phases	1,850.00	1,850.00	1,850.00

(a) **Phase --** is the introduction of new scenic props, pieces, projections or aspects of a unit set to indicate changes in locale or time, where such changes significantly alter the stage picture previously seen.

(b) **Fluid Production --** is one in which changes in a unit set, particularly changes of projections or moving scenery, shall take place continuously or frequently throughout the action, or a segment of the action and it shall not be intended that each change is to indicate a change in time or locale but rather the continuous changes themselves shall be used to establish a mood for the action of the play. Each such change shall not be considered a phase.

(3) **Bare Stage:**

	7/1/73	7/1/74	7/1/75
	\$ 550.00	\$ 575.00	\$ 600.00

(4) **Flat Rate:** The Producer or his authorized representative and the Designer may agree upon, if they so desire, a flat rate for each show through the first paid public performance at no less than the following:

	7/1/73	7/1/74	7/1/75
	\$8,000.00	\$8,250.00	\$8,500.00

(5) Once a contract has been filed, additional work required above and beyond the terms of the filed contract shall be paid in accordance with the provisions of this Paragraph, except in instances of a flat fee in which event the flat fee shall prevail through the first paid public performance.



**(B) Costume Designers:****(1) Designed:**

	7/1/73	7/1/74	7/1/75
1 through 10	\$110.00 ea.	\$118.00 ea.	\$125.00 ea.
11 through 25	83.00 ea.	86.00 ea.	90.00 ea.
26 through 50	55.00 ea.	57.00 ea.	60.00 ea.
51 plus	38.00 ea.	40.00 ea.	42.00 ea.

**(2) Selected:** (defined as being a costume that is purchased, promoted, rented or chosen from the personal wardrobe of a performer and is used exactly as is except for normal alterations. Any alterations which entail change of style or silhouette or color shall re-classify the costume as "designed" and subject to the rates above).

	7/1/73	7/1/74	7/1/75
1 through 10	\$ 93.00 ea.	\$ 98.00 ea.	\$102.00 ea.
11 through 25	700.00 ea.	73.00 ea.	77.00 ea.
26 through 50	47.00 ea.	49.00 ea.	51.00 ea.
51 plus	33.00 ea.	35.00 ea.	37.00 ea.

**(3)** In the event a production includes both Designed and Selected costumes, the costume count shall begin with the Designed costumes irrespective of the sequential count.

**(4) (a)** In the even a Selected costume production requires Designed changes, those Designed changes shall be charged for at the rate schedule for Designed costumes commencing with the next highest Designed costume number.

**(b)** Any single complete costume which is a combination of Designed and Selected shall be charged at the Designed schedule rate.

**(c)** Once a sketch has been approved by the Producer or his authorized representative for a Designed costume, no credit shall be granted should that costume change from a Designed costume to a Selected costume or be eliminated from the production.

**(5) Minimum Guarantee --** the Producer or his authorized representative guarantees the Costume Designer for each show, the following minima (irrespective of the number of Designed or Selected costumes for the first ten or less costumes):

7/1/73	7/1/74	7/1/75
\$1,100.00	\$1,180.00	\$1,250.00

(6) Flat Rate -- the Producer or his authorized representative and the Designer may agree, if they so desire, upon a flat rate (including Design and/or Selected costumes) for each show through the first paid public performance at no less than the following:

7/1/73	7/1/74	7/1/75
\$7,500.00	\$7,750.00	\$8,000.00

(7) Repeats - a repeat is an absolute duplicate of the costume whether Designed or Selected. Repeat costumes shall be deemed separate costumes and are compensable at one-half (1/2) the applicable rate, depending on whether it is a Designed or Selected repeat.

(8) Costume Count -- each and every costume design for a production must bear the name of that production and a serial number, beginning with No. 1. After each design thus serially numbered shall have been approved by the Producer or his authorized representative (by signature or initial of either party) such design shall thereupon be considered definitely approved. In the event that at any time after a design so approved should be discarded by the Producer or his authorized representative for whatever reason, and a substitute design ordered by the Producer or his authorized representative, such a design automatically becomes a new design and consequently must bear its own new serial number, and must be approved in the same manner as hereinbefore stated; such additional serial numbers shall begin with the next consecutive number following the final number appearing in the production contract in the grand total item. The designer in such a case must be paid additional compensation for all costumes exceeding the number indicated in the grand total, at not less than the prevailing rate per costume, as set forth hereinabove.

(9) Complete and Partial Costumes

(a) Complete Costume -- a complete costume is defined as any garment and/or accessories which in and of themselves may be worn as a complete costume by an actor on the stage.

(b) Partial Costume -- a partial costume is defined as an alternate or supplementary portion of a previously established complete costume.

(c) In the event that a production requires partial costumes whether Designed or Selected, the Designer and the Producer or

**(D) Assistants:**

(1) All Assistants hired pursuant to the provisions of this Agreement shall be employed at not less than the following rates per week to be paid weekly:

	7/1/73	7/1/74	7/1/75
Scenery	\$310.00	\$320.00	\$325.00
Lighting	300.00	300.00	300.00
Costume	300.00	300.00	300.00

(2) If an Assistant is on the road for less than five (5) days he or she shall be paid for each day at a rate which is prorated at one-fifth (1/5) of his weekly salary plus the per diem set forth in paragraph (VI) (F).

**(E) Subsequent Use of Scenery, Costumes and Lighting Designs:**

(1) If the original scenery, costumes or lighting is reproduced using original designs or design concepts the Producer or his authorized representative shall pay the Designer not less than one-half (1/2) of the moneys due under the original contract of said Designer, and such additional moneys shall be set forth in a supplemental agreement filed with and approved by the Union.

(2) Where the fee is required in subparagraph (E) (1) above and where additional work is also required of the Designer to make the scenery, costumes or lighting available for such subsequent use, a fee of not less than \$125.00 per day shall be paid the Designer and the Producer or his authorized representative will agree upon the number of days required and a cash bond for such additional work will be deposited with the United Scenic Artists.

**(3) Original Designs Scenery, Costumes and Lighting:**

(a) If the original scenery, costumes or lighting is subsequently used by the Producer or his authorized representative without any changes, then there is no obligation to pay the Designer any additional moneys.

(b) If a road company should require any new or changed costumes, Selected or Designed, other than those used in the original production, the Costume Designer shall be paid for each new or changed costume, Selected or Designed, at not less than the prevailing Union rate per costume. The fee contained in paragraph (2) shall not be paid in such instances.

his authorized representative (together with the Union) shall attempt to fix the payment due. In no event shall the Designer receive less than one-half (1/2) of the applicable rate schedule of the complete costume to which this partial costume applies.

(10) Once a contract has been filed, additional work required above and beyond the terms of the filed contract shall be paid in accordance with the provisions of this Paragraph, except in instances of a flat fee in which event the flat fee shall prevail through the first paid public performance.

**(C) Lighting Designers:**

(1) For any type of production, the Lighting Designer shall be paid at one-half (1/2) the minimum rate of the Scenic Designer as provided herein, but not less than:

7/1/73	7/1/74	7/1/75
\$1,350.00	\$1,450.00	\$1,550.00

through the first paid public performance.

(2) Repertory -- For basic set-up and supervision of the first production the Designer shall be paid a minimum of:

7/1/73	7/1/74	7/1/75
\$2,000.00	\$2,250.00	\$2,550.00

For each additional show designed and supervised by the original Lighting Designer within the repertory set-up he shall be paid a minimum of:

7/1/73	7/1/74	7/1/75
\$700.00	\$800.00	\$850.00

For each additional show designed and supervised by a new Lighting Designer or Designers, such new Lighting Designer(s) shall be paid a minimum of:

7/1/73	7/1/74	7/1/75
\$1,350.00	\$1,450.00	\$1,550.00

(4) Should the subsequent production utilize new scenery, costumes or lighting without using the original designs or design concepts, then the Producer or his authorized representative and the Union agree that a new agreement will be entered into and filed with the Union in accordance with the terms of this Agreement.

(5) In case(s) where the Producer or his authorized representative sells, leases or licenses his rights to a production to other Producer(s) or his authorized representative(s) which specify the use of the Designer's original designs, it shall be understood that the original Producer or his authorized representative shall notify the Union and the Designer of such negotiations for sale, lease, or license, and at no time shall the use of the Designer's original designs be included in the negotiations for such productions without said notice.

(6) For a bus and truck tour which takes place subsequent to the first class production where the original designs are not utilized, the minimum rate shall be one-half (1/2) of the moneys due under the original contract of the Designer but three-quarters (3/4) of the otherwise applicable contract scale where there is a new Designer. A bus and truck tour is a tour which uses bus transportation for the cast and is a series of consecutive engagements most of which are less than one week in duration.

(F) Concert Presentations (effective July 1, 1974)

(1) This subparagraph (F) shall establish the terms and conditions that shall apply to concert presentations whether musical or dramatic. It is, however, understood that certain dramatic concert presentations shall not be covered by this paragraph while others shall be. By way of example, the parties agree that the productions of Darrow (Henry Fonda), Will Rogers U.S.A. etc. should not be covered by subparagraph (F), while the Hal Holbrook production of "Mark Twain" should be covered by subparagraph (F).

It is further understood that the number of persons in the concert presentation shall not be a factor in determining whether the provisions of this subparagraph apply to the presentation.

(2) This subparagraph shall apply only to concert presentations of five or more performances. Concert presentations of four or less performances shall not, in any way, be subject to any of the terms of this agreement, unless the Producer or his authorized representative agrees otherwise.

(3) No fee shall be required for draperies, unpainted scrims, bandstands or lecterns unless work therefor is actually required by a designer, in which event the fees provided in this subparagraph shall apply.

(4) When a concert presentation is brought to Broadway, it must be established that it is a bona fide pre-existing concert presentation in which event no fee shall be required under this Agreement. If any additional work is required a mutually negotiated fee shall be agreed upon.

However, if the concert presentation is prepared solely for the purpose of making its appearance on Broadway, or Broadway prior to a road show the provisions of this subparagraph shall apply.

(5) Where work is actually required in any design category, the following minimum fees shall be paid for that category:

(a) \$1,250 for concert presentations in the following theatres or in new or renovated theatres of comparable size: Broadway, 46th Street, Imperial, Lunt-Fontaine, Majestic, Mark-Hellinger, Minskoff, Palace, St. James, Shubert, Uris and Winter Garden;

(b) \$750 -- all other theatres.

(c) Pension and Welfare contributions shall be paid on all work performed.

(6) The parties agree to establish a standing committee to review on an ongoing basis the operation of this subparagraph (F).

(7) In the event of a disagreement over the interpretation or application of subparagraph (F), the parties agree to submit such disagreement to expedited final and binding arbitration in the manner hereafter described.

The following four arbitrators shall be appointed to hear and determine disputes arising under this subparagraph. Selection of the arbitrator shall be on a rotational basis. The arbitrators are: Meyer Drucker, Jesse Simons, Stanley Aiges and Daniel House.

Upon written notice from one party to the other the arbitrator next in line shall be notified of an existing disagreement. A hearing on the matter shall be conducted within 72 hours of such written notifications and an Award, without opinion, shall be rendered within 24 hours after said hearing. An opinion may be requested by either party, but said opinion may be rendered after the Award. In order to permit an expeditious handling of the matter, briefs shall not be filed.

(8) During the negotiations of this Agreement, the Union asserted that this subparagraph (F) should not apply to concert presentations that ran beyond a certain period of time. In such cases, the Union contended that the regular provisions of the Agreement should apply.

In settlement of this issue, the parties agreed that concert presentations of five or more performances should be accorded the special treatment provided by this subparagraph regardless of the length of run but only until June 30, 1975. If, prior to that date, the Union advises the League in writing that it wishes to reopen the agreement solely as to this issue, the League will reopen this matter for discussion. If the parties are unable to reach agreement on this issue, this issue alone shall be submitted to final and binding arbitration pursuant to the rules for labor arbitration of the American Arbitration Association.

If the Union does not so notify the League by June 30, 1975, this subject shall remain as is for the term of the Agreement.

## V. INDIVIDUAL AGREEMENTS

(A) An individual agreement must be signed by the Producer or his authorized representative and the Designers for Scenic Design, for Costume Design, for Lighting Design and for Assistant Designers.

(B) All individual agreements must be signed and filed in triplicate with the Union for approval after the Producer or his authorized agent and the Designer have executed same. THE DESIGNER SHALL REFRAIN FROM COMMENCING ANY WORK WHATSOEVER UNTIL SAID AGREEMENT HAS BEEN APPROVED IN WRITING BY THE UNION. NO AGREEMENT BETWEEN A DESIGNER AND THE PRODUCER OR HIS AUTHORIZED REPRESENTATIVE SHALL BECOME BINDING OR EFFECTIVE FOR ANY PURPOSE NOR SHALL THE DESIGNER BE BOUND OR LIABLE THEREUNDER UNTIL THE SAID AGREEMENT HAS BEEN SO APPROVED IN WRITING BY THE UNION. This paragraph shall apply only to persons who are members of the Union at the time of the execution of the individual agreement.

(C) In the event the Designer is not a member of the Union and has applied for membership therein, the Union (1) will not withhold approval of the agreement on the grounds of said Designer's non-membership, (2) will approve the agreement where the provisions of this Agreement are adhered to, and (3) will be deemed to have approved the agreement unless the Producer or his authorized representative receives written notice to the contrary within ten (10) days after the filing thereof.

## VI. PAYMENT

(A) At the time the separate production agreement is filed with the Union, the Producer or his authorized representative shall deposit with the Union a cash bond in an amount equal to the total amount payable to the Designer.

(B) The Union will pay from the bond to the Designer his moneys, which shall become due and payable, in the following manner:

(1) Not less than one-half (1/2) of the total payment on the execution and filing of the separate production agreement.

(2) One-half (1/2) of the balance due when the work enters the shop or three (3) weeks prior to the first scheduled performance, whichever is sooner.

(3) The balance shall be paid three (3) weeks subsequent to the first public performance or on the official New York opening, whichever occurs sooner.

(C) If the opening date of the production is postponed, the payments set forth in paragraph (B) hereinabove shall be made as therein provided with the same force and effect as if the production had been carried out and opened on the originally named date so long as the Designer shall have completed the necessary working drawings and color sketches or plots (sets, costumes or lighting). If the opening is postponed for four (4) weeks or more, the Designer shall perform the remaining services hereinbefore provided only so far as the Designer's contractual commitment permit.

(D) In the event the production is abandoned prior to the first public performance and the Designer shall have completed the necessary working drawings and color sketches or plots (sets, costumes or lighting) the Designer shall receive three-quarters (3/4) of the originally agreed upon payment.

(E) In the event the production is abandoned and the Designer has not completed the designs agreed upon, the Designer and the Producer or his authorized representative, shall attempt to fix the remaining payment due, but in no event shall the Designer receive less than one-half (1/2) of the originally agreed upon payment.





(F) The Producer or his authorized representative agrees to provide the Designer and Assistants, if any, with round trip transportation expenses on a first class air carrier or rail carrier whenever the Designer or Assistant is required by the Producer or his authorized representative to travel outside of New York City in connection with the services hereunder. The Producer or his authorized representative further agrees to pay to the Designer and/or Assistant not less than the sum of \$40.00 per day for living expenses for each and every day that the Designer and/or Assistant is required by the Producer or his authorized representative to be outside of New York City in connection with the production.

(G) The Producer or his authorized representative agrees to reimburse the Designer and Assistant(s), for all authorized out-of-pocket purchases made for the production, and for authorized work transportation involved in New York and out-of-town.

## VII. OTHER USE OF DESIGNS

(A) The Producer or his authorized representative shall not have the right to assign, lease, sell, license or otherwise use, directly or indirectly, any of the designs and/or settings, costumes or lighting for use in motion pictures, TV cassettes, television, live broadcasts, simulcast, tapes or film, film cassettes or any other use whatsoever, except as specified in this Agreement, without the prior written approval of the Designer and without negotiating with the Designer for such use.

(B) Where the designs in this Agreement and/or any settings or parts of settings, costumes or parts of costumes, or lighting are used for reproduction for television broadcasting (whether live, filmed or any other process) the Producer or his authorized representative shall agree that prior to such use he will deposit in the office of the United Scenic Artists a cash bond in a sum equal to the following amounts in full consideration for such use:

For any single use in any closed-circuit television or subscription television (whether by closed-circuit or air broadcast) the full amount of the Designer's fee for those designs actually used; in commercial (free air broadcast) television, one-half (1/2) of the Designer's payment for those designs actually used. The television rights granted under this provision are limited to a single broadcast and no rights are granted beyond this initial broadcast or showing nor is any right granted herein to reproduce said television broadcast or showing by means of kinescope, film, electronic tape or other means, except

upon written agreement with the Designer and upon payment of the moneys for each broadcast as provided herein. If used for promotional purposes and no one connected with production is paid, then no payment shall be made to the Designer.

#### VIII. ALTERATIONS

The Producer or his authorized representative shall not alter nor permit anyone to alter or make substitutions for the settings or properties or costumes or lighting plot or lighting cues after the official New York opening without the Designer's consent.

#### IX. MINIMUM DESIGNING PERIODS

Reasonable efforts will be exerted to conform to the following:

The Designer shall be allowed a minimum of six (6) weeks to design dramatic productions, ballets, night clubs, floor shows, etc., and he or she shall be allowed a minimum of eight (8) weeks to design musicals, revues, operas, operettas, circuses, spectacles and/or any other type of production requiring extensive work. This designing period shall precede the minimum period required by the building and painting contractor in the case of the Scenic Designer, the costumers to execute the Designer's designs in the case of the Costume Designer, and by the electrical contractor in the case of the Lighting Designer. The Producer or his authorized representative further agrees that a finished script shall be in the hands of the Designer before the designing period shall begin.

#### X. PERMISSIBLE FOREIGN IMPORTATIONS

The League and the Employer agree that it will not cause, allow nor permit any importation of scenery or scenic designs, lighting or lighting designs, or costumes or costume designs, except for permissible imported scenery, lighting and costumes and permissible imported designs as hereinafter defined.

##### (A) Supervisory Designers:

The Employer will engage Supervisory Designers under this Agreement for all permissible imported scenery, lighting and/or costumes or designs.

**(B) Permissible Imported Scenery, Lighting and Costumes:**

The following shall be deemed permissible imported scenery, lighting and costumes:

(1) Where the proposed American production is in essence an extension of the foreign production in that the production coming from abroad will be brought over following its foreign run similar to a touring attraction.

(2) Where scenery or costumes imported into the United States represent original and artistic work of scenic or costume designers or artists of important cultural value and incapable of being reproduced in American scenic studios or costume shops, in which event an exemption will be granted to import such scenery or costumes.

(3) Where the American Producer intends to produce a foreign play without bringing over the foreign cast of actors, director, etc. who were engaged in the foreign production, but nevertheless desires to import foreign scenery or properties and/or costumes used in foreign productions and where it can be clearly shown that the reproduction of the scenery would entail such extraordinary expenses as to render the American projected performance impractical from an economic standpoint. Under this exception, it should be clearly understood that a mere saving of money resulting from the use of the existing foreign scenery, properties and costumes is not alone a sufficient criterion. The determinative fact would be the extraordinary cost and expense involved in attempting to reproduce the foreign theatrical effects in this country. Factors to be taken into account are the nature of the production in terms of its commercial possibilities and whether the failure to grant exemption would act as a bar to any possibility of launching an American production by a recognized producer.

(4) Where the import is a permanent foreign company such as D'Oyly Carte, Kabuki or Royal Shakespeare Company.

**(C) Permissible Imported Designs:**

It is agreed that whenever a Producer or his authorized representative shall have acquired the rights to produce a foreign play, which play shall not have completed its foreign run more than two (2) years prior to the opening date of the American production, and where a Producer or his authorized representative also acquired in connection with said play the

original foreign-created designs, the Producer or his authorized representative may use said designs in the American production provided, however, that a Designer is engaged for supervision of said production, at not less than the minimum terms and conditions as set forth below. In such instances, the Producer or his authorized representative may give program and other credits in the following manner:

"Designed by" and  
 "American production supervised by"

In the event such foreign designs are implemented by changes in setting or require additional settings, such work will be charged for at the Union's regular per diem rates.

(D) Procedure for Importing Scenery, Costumes, Lighting or Designs:

The Producer or his authorized representative shall file with the Union not less than thirty (30) days prior to the first proposed date of shipment of such scenery, costumes, lighting and/or designs, written notice of intention to import such scenery, costumes, lighting and/or designs. The notice of intention to import shall contain the following information:

(a) The title of the theatrical production. If the foreign production had a different title than the title selected for the American production, the notice shall also contain the foreign title.

(b) The names of all individuals, co-partnerships or corporations financially interested in the American production.

(c) The names of all American and foreign Producers and their representatives interested in the production.

(d) A statement as to whether the American production is intended for a limited or unlimited engagement and the time and place contemplated for the American showing.

(e) The names of the foreign Designers and/or Scenic Artists.

(f) A description of the theatrical scenery, costumes and other effects intended to be imported from abroad.

(g) A statement of places where such production was presented abroad, together with opening and closing dates.

**(E) Rates:**

(1) The minimum rate for supervising of permissible imported scenery as hereinabove provided in paragraph X (B) shall be:

7/1/73	7/1/74	7/1/75
\$ 825.00	\$ 865.00	\$ 900.00

(2) The minimum rate for supervising of permissible imported scenic designs as hereinabove provided in paragraph X (C) shall be:

7/1/73	7/1/74	7/1/75
\$1,375.00	\$1,435.00	\$1,500.00

**(3) Lighting Design:**

The minimum rate for designing and supervising lighting of imported productions with permissible imported scenery and/or foreign created designs shall be as follows:

(a) With useable imported foreign light plot and layout

7/1/73	7/1/74	7/1/75
\$ 825.00	\$ 865.00	\$ 900.00

(b) When a new lighting design (plot, layout, etc.) is required the production shall be deemed a new production and the work shall be charged at not less than the minimum rate for an original American production as set forth in paragraph IV (C) of this Agreement.

**(4) Costumes:**

Minimum weekly rates for supervising imported productions shall be as follows:

(a) For importation of costumes in which actors other than the imported cast will appear:

7/1/73	7/1/74	7/1/75
\$ 385.00	\$ 400.00	\$ 420.00



(b) For importation of costume designs to be reproduced in the United States.

7/1/73	7/1/74	7/1/75
\$ 770.00	\$ 800.00	\$ 850.00

as a supervision fee for up to two weeks and \$125.00 per day thereafter.

(F) Objections to Importations:

In the Event the Union informs the Employer that it objects to any proposed importation, a dispute shall be deemed to exist between the parties to this Agreement with respect to the right of the said producer to import said scenery and such items shall not be imported for use in any theatrical production until said dispute shall have been determined by arbitration as provided in paragraph XIII of this Agreement. The Union agrees that it will not raise unreasonable objections to a proposed importation and that any objection will be based on alleged violation of this Agreement.

## XI. BILLING

The producer agrees to give the Designers billing on the theatre house boards, the theatre program and in the initial New York City display advertisements and in other subsequent New York City newspaper display ads of like content prior and subsequent to the New York opening. Moreover, billing shall also be given to the Designers on window cards and three (3) sheets where billing is given to any other creative participant in a production, other than the author, starring actors, directors, and star choreographers. Should the producer give billing to more than two (2) of the four (4) categories mentioned, billing must be given to the Designers in the case of musical productions. In dramatic productions the producer shall not give billing to more than two (2) of the aforesaid categories without giving billing to the Designers.

The size of billing and format shall be negotiated between the producer and the Designer, except that under no circumstances shall the billing be less than clearly legible in relation to the use of the medium. (The League and the Union will meet to establish acceptable and non-acceptable examples of legibility). The designers' credits shall be of equal size with each other and shall be grouped together and be placed in the traditional position in relation to the director or choreographer of a musical show and to the director of a dramatic show.



## XII. TRUST FUNDS

(A) The Producer or his authorized representative shall make the following contributions to the United Scenic Artists Pension and Welfare Funds:

7/1/73-6/30/74

8% of the contract fee but no more than  
\$700 for costume and lighting designers and  
\$750 for scenic designers.

7/1/74-6/30/75

9% of the contract fee but no more than  
\$700 for costume and lighting designers and  
\$750 for scenic designers.

7/1/75-6/30/76

10% of the contract fee but no more than  
\$700 for costume and lighting designers and  
\$750 for scenic designers.

The above amounts shall be the maximum contribution by the Producer or his authorized representative on behalf of the Producer's production and shall be allocated between the Funds as directed by the Trustees thereof.

(B) Said Trust Funds shall be separately and independently established under an Agreement and Declaration of Trust which the parties hereto shall enter into for such purpose. It is understood and agreed that such funds will be subject to all requirements of law and that the administration thereof will be by trustees, an equal number of whom shall be designated by contributing Employers' and Employees' representatives.

(C) The full pension and welfare contributions for Designers and Assistants shall be due and payable to the respective Funds upon the filing of the separate production agreements and the Employer shall complete and file a statement, on a form supplied by the Fund, which shall be simultaneously delivered to the Union.

(D) The apportionment of the payments for the purpose of providing the benefits hereinabove set forth shall be determined by trustees designated by the Union and the Employer, acting with the advice of an expert consultant. It is a condition of the contribution hereinabove set forth that the same shall be deductible as a business expense by the Employer under the provisions of the Internal Revenue Code as it now exists or hereinafter be amended.

### **XIII. ADJUSTMENT OF DISPUTES**

Adjustment of all complaints, disputes, controversies and grievances of any kind or nature arising between the Employer and the Union concerning the interpretation, operation, application or performance of the terms of this Agreement, or any complaint, dispute, controversy, or grievance involving a claimed breach of any of the terms or conditions of this Agreement, shall be undertaken in accordance with the following procedure:

(A) The matter shall first be discussed by representatives of the Employer and the Union business representatives; aggrieved Employees, if any, have the right to be present. If such dispute cannot be so adjusted by these persons, the matter shall be submitted to an arbitrator. This procedure is designed to facilitate orderly handling of grievances; however, failure to follow these steps shall not be grounds for denying the right to arbitrate.

(B) If the parties cannot agree on an arbitrator within three (3) days, the American Arbitration Association shall, in its own discretion, appoint an arbitrator within twenty-four (24) hours of notification to do so. The decision of the arbitrator shall be final and binding upon both parties and shall be fully enforceable. It is understood that the arbitrator shall not have the power to amend, modify, alter or subtract from this Agreement or any provision thereof. The arbitration shall be conducted in accordance with the labor arbitration rules of the American Arbitration Association.

(C) Should there be a dispute regarding a breach of contract on the part of the Designer and should arbitration proceedings be instituted, and notice thereof given to the Union prior to the payment by the Union to the Designer of any sums deposited with them as provided above, the Stock Bonding Department of the United Scenic Artists, at its office in the Borough of Manhattan, New York City, shall withhold any sums unpaid at the time of receipt of such notice.

However, under no circumstances may any claim be asserted against the Union, except for the unpaid portion of any sums deposited with the Union at the time of receipt of notice of the producer's intention to arbitrate a dispute involving a claim against the Designer for breach of contract.

(D) It is agreed that time is of the essence in any arbitration, and both parties will exert their best efforts to obtain a speedy decision.

(E) The cost of the arbitration shall be shared equally by both parties or in such other manner as the arbitrator may direct.

(F) Anything to the contrary notwithstanding any party to a dispute or complaint may waive the grievance and arbitration set forth above in either of the following circumstances:

(1) Whenever a violation of the provisions of Paragraph III of this Agreement shall be alleged; or

(2) Whenever a violation of the provisions of Paragraph XV (F) of this Agreement shall be alleged; or

(3) Whenever the provisions of Paragraph XIV are invoked.

(G) Upon any waiver as provided above, such dispute or complaint shall be referred to arbitration immediately in the following manner:

(1) Such dispute, complaint or grievance shall be asserted by notice in writing and shall be delivered to the other party either by hand, registered mail or telegram. A copy of such notice shall be sent simultaneously to the American Arbitration Association.

(2) The American Arbitration Association shall maintain a permanent panel of five arbitrators whose selection has been approved in advance by the parties to this Agreement. If the parties are unable to agree upon the selection of such arbitrators, the panel shall be appointed by the American Arbitration Association. If none of the arbitrators on such permanent panel are immediately available for such arbitration, the arbitrator, in such case, shall be appointed by the American Arbitration Association.

(3) Such dispute, complaint or grievance shall be submitted to arbitration within 24 hours after receipt of notice by the American Arbitration Association and the award shall be issued not later than 48 hours after the conclusion of the hearing.

(4) The award of the arbitrator shall be in writing and may be issued with or without opinion. If any party desires an opinion, one shall be issued, but its issuance shall not delay compliance with and enforcement of the award.

(5) The failure of any party to attend the arbitration hearing as scheduled and noticed by the American Arbitration Association, shall not delay said arbitration and the arbitrator is authorized to proceed to take evidence and issue an award as though such party were present.

(6) The award of the arbitrator shall be final and binding on all the parties. The cost of the arbitration shall be shared equally by the Employer and the Union.

#### XIV. DISCHARGE

(A) The Employer retains the right to discharge for just cause. In the event of a desire to discharge, the Employer shall notify the Union in writing in advance of such desire to discharge.

(B) In the event of a disagreement between the Union and the Employer as to the discharge, it shall be submitted to arbitration according to the provisions of this Agreement.

#### XV. GENERAL PROVISIONS

(A) The Designer and the Producer or his authorized representative may negotiate for any additional provision or payment of moneys providing that such provisions shall in no way lessen, abrogate, or contradict any of the terms herein. Such provisions shall be placed on a Rider to this Agreement and shall be deemed a part hereof.

(B) It is agreed that the obligations of the Designer and the Producer or his authorized representative are subject to delays due to strikes, accidents, acts of God, fire or other causes beyond the control of the Designer.

(C) It is agreed that neither the Designer nor the Producer or his authorized representative is responsible for damages resulting through failure or inability of contractors, builders or painters to carry out the execution of the designs and plans prepared by the Designer.

(D) It is agreed that the title to all drawings, designs and specifications prepared by the Designer under this Agreement shall at all times belong to and be the property of the Designer, who, however, may only use the same for exhibition or use other than sale for use in another production. The Producer or his authorized representative and the Designer may agree, if they so desire, to share in the proceeds of any sale of same to a gallery.

(E) The Designer agrees not to demand and/or accept any commissions, compensation, gift, remuneration or payment of any kind whatsoever from persons, firms or corporations employed or engaged in carrying out any work in connection with the said production, except if payable as hereinbefore provided, and such demand or acceptance shall constitute justifiable grounds for immediate discharge.

(F) During the term of this Agreement, neither party nor its members shall engage in any type of strike, picketing, slow-down or lockout against the other party or its members. Any violation of this provision shall be deemed to be material breach of the entire contract.

(G) It is agreed that the original Designer shall have the right of refusal for any subsequent reproduction of the compnay. The Designer shall be given a minimum of two weeks to decide.

#### XVI. NO DISCRIMINATION

The Employer shall not discriminate with regard to hiring or other conditions of employment because of race, age, sex, creed, color, national origin or union activities.

#### XVII. THE UNION AS PARTY AT INTEREST

The Union shall require its members to comply with the terms of this Agreement. The parties agree that the maintenance of a peaceable and constructive relationship between them and between the Employer and the Employees requires the establishment and cooperative use of the machinery provided for in this Agreement for the discussion and determination of grievances and disputes, and that it would detract from this relationship if individual Employees or groups of Employees would, either as such individuals or as groups, seek to interpret or enforce the Agreement on their own initiative or responsibility. No individual Designer may initiate any arbitration proceeding or move to confirm or vacate an award.

#### XVIII. SAVING CLAUSE

If any term, provision or condition of this Agreement is held to be unlawful, illegal or in violation of law in a final judgement, the parties will confer in an effort to agree upon suitable substitutions therefor, and if they fail to agree, the same shall be considered a grievance and submitted to arbitration in accordance with the arbitration provisions hereof. The arbitrator in such arbitration shall be instructed by the parties hereto that it is their intention that in such event the essence and spirit of the provisions so held illegal are desired to be re-

tained to the extent permitted by law. Therefore, if any of the provisions of this Agreement are adjudicated to be illegal, unlawful, or in violation of any existing law, no other portion, provision or article of this Agreement shall be invalidated nor shall such adjudication relieve either of the parties hereto from their rights and liabilities hereunder or limit the rights or liabilities of either of the parties hereto, except insofar as the same is made unlawful, illegal or in violation of the law.

#### XIX. SUCCESSORS & ASSIGNS

This Agreement shall be binding upon the successors and assigns of the Employer. In the event that the Employer should sell, assign, transfer, or otherwise dispose of his business, the Employer agrees to notify the Union of his intention to do so at least thirty (30) days prior to the said transfer or assignment; and the Employer further agrees not to sell, assign, or transfer such business unless and until the purchaser, assignee or transferee should first have accepted and assumed in writing all of the terms and provisions of this Agreement and shall have agreed to continue in full force and effect all existing rights and interests of the Employees.

#### XX. RELATED EMPLOYERS

This Agreement shall, with respect to the design work now or hereafter covered hereunder, be binding on the Employer and any Principal of the Employer and shall so continue, jointly or severally, to be binding, notwithstanding any modification, reorganization, merger, liquidation, insolvency proceeding or bulk sales of the Employer or the withdrawal by any Principal to continue business in the covered industry as Principal with a substantial interest or salary, "Principal" means any officer or director or a substantial stockholder of a corporate Employer or a partner of a partnership Employer, or a sole proprietorship.

#### XXI. MODIFICATION

It is specifically understood that this Agreement may not be modified without the joint consent of the Union and the Employer.

#### XXII. NOTICE

Any notice provided for in this Agreement shall be given to the Union at its headquarters, 1540 Broadway, New York City, and to the Employer at his place of business.

**XXIII. DURATION AND RENEWAL OF AGREEMENT**

**This Agreement shall continue in full force and effect until June 30, 1976, and shall automatically be renewed from year to year thereafter, unless notification be given in writing by either party to the other, by registered mail, at least sixty (60) days prior to the expiration of this Agreement, that changes in the Agreement is desired.**

APPENDIX E

PHOTOGRAPHS OF SCENE BUILDERS' STUDIOS



Plate II.--Hart Scenic Studios. Top: Exterior View. Atlas Scenic  
Studio, Ltd. Bottom: Exterior View.



Plate III.--Messmore and Damon Scenic Studios Main Shop Area.



Plate IV.--Hart Scenic Studio Carpentry Shop.



Plate V.--Nolan Scenic Studios Main Building Area.





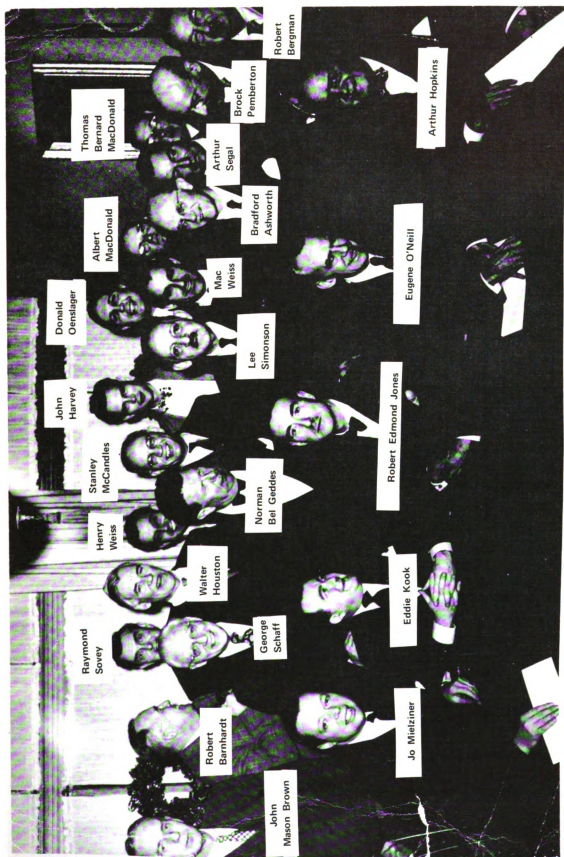
Plate VI.--Nolan Scenic Studios Drop Painting Area.



Plate VII.--Robert Edmond Jones' 60th Birthday Party, 1947.

## KEY TO GROUP PHOTOGRAPH

- |                        |                                      |
|------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 1. Jo Mielziner        | Scenic Designer                      |
| 2. Eddie Koole         | Lighting Designer                    |
| 3. Robert Edmond Jones | Scenic Designer                      |
| 4. Eugene O'Neill      | Playwright                           |
| 5. Arthur Hopkins      | Producer ( <u>Paths of Glory</u> )   |
| 6. John Mason Brown    | Associate of Eugene O'Neill          |
| 7. Robert Barnhardt    | Draftsman                            |
| 8. George Schaff       | Electrician                          |
| 9. Norman BelGeddes    | Scenic Designer                      |
| 10. Lee Simmson        | Scenic Designer                      |
| 11. Mac Weiss          | Drapery Manufacturer                 |
| 12. Arthur Segal       | Owner of Studio Alliance             |
| 13. Bradford Ashworth  | Producer                             |
| 14. Brock Pemberton    | Producer ( <u>Green Pastures</u> )   |
| 15. Robert Bergman     | Owner, Bergman Studios               |
| 16. Raymond Sovey      | Scenic Designer                      |
| 17. Walter Houston     | Actor                                |
| 18. Henry Weiss        | Drapery Builder (Mac Weiss' brother) |
| 19. Stanley McCandles  | Lighting Designer and consultant     |
| 20. John Harvey        | Assistant Designer to Mielziner      |
| 21. Donald Oenslager   | Scenic Designer                      |
| 22. Albert MacDonald   | Owner, MacDonald Studio              |
| 23. Bernard MacDonald  | Owner, MacDonald Studio              |





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