

CREATION DESPITE IT ALL:  
A SCENIC DESIGN FOR *MR. BURNS, A POST-ELECTRIC PLAY*

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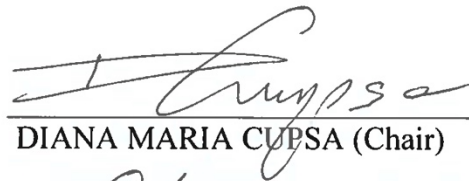
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

BY



Kaeanne R. Louks

APPROVED:



DIANA MARIA CUPSA (Chair) Ph.D.



VLAD GHINEA M.F.A.



VICTOR HOLT CAMP Ph.D.



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## INTRODUCTION

*Mr. Burns, a Post-Electric Play* is a dark comedy play written by Anne Washburn with a score composed by Michael Friedman. This three-act “play with music” first premiered in May of 2012 in Washington, D.C. at the Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company. It received a Drama League Award nomination for Outstanding Production. Washburn first conceptualized the idea for *Mr. Burns* several years prior to writing the show. Originally, she wanted to “take a TV show...push it past the apocalypse and see what happened”<sup>1</sup>, with *Friends*, *Cheers*, and even *M\*A\*S\*H\** in the running for the TV show in question. The story serves as an exultation of the art of storytelling. Through the lens of a post-apocalyptic timeline, the audience experiences the mutation of today’s popular culture icons as they transform into the mythos of a derelict future.

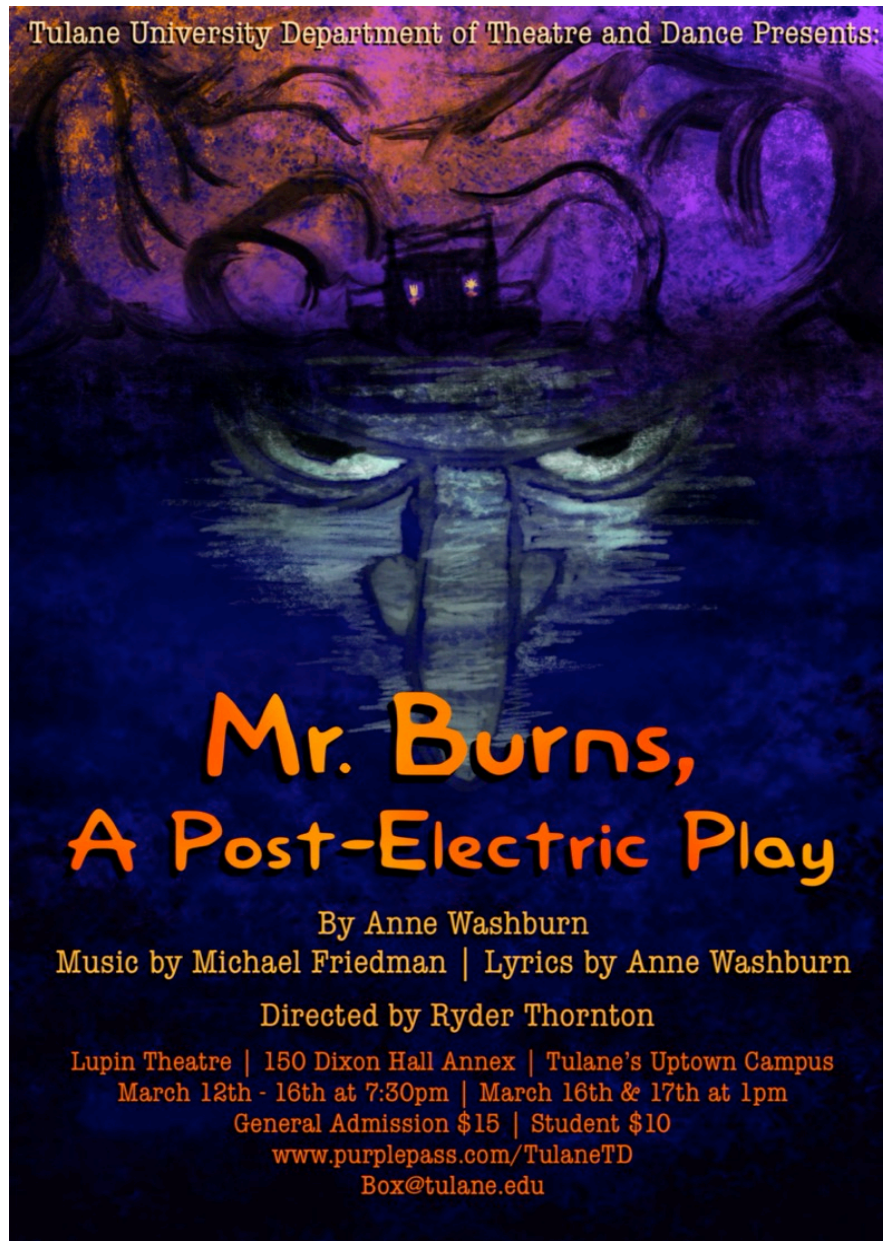
*Mr. Burns* premiered at Tulane University’s Lupin Theater as a part of the Department of Theatre and Dance’s 2023-2024 season. It opened in March of 2024 and ran for six days, totaling in seven successful performances that were sold-out—or nearly sold-out—every show. Clocking in at a two hour and forty minute runtime, our production included two fifteen-minute intermissions to allow for the massive scenic and costume change needs between each act.

This staging could not have been as efficacious as it was without the production team behind it. Dr. Ryder Thornton directed the play with musical direction by Peter J. Bowling. MFA candidate Maya Tawatao designed the costumes and masks, and

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<sup>1</sup> Del Signore, John. “Excellent: Playwright Anne Washburn Talks *Mr. Burns, a Post-Electric Play*.” *Gothamist*, 27 Sept. 2013, [web.archive.org/web/20150509152002/gothamist.com/2013/09/27/anne\\_washburn.php](http://web.archive.org/web/20150509152002/gothamist.com/2013/09/27/anne_washburn.php).

Professor Rachel Levy designed the lighting. Destany Gorham admirably stepped up and into the role of production stage manager at the eleventh hour. I worked as the scenic, props, and poster designer for the production, but my designs would be nothing without the support of Professor Vlad Ghinea as the technical director, George Johnson as the scene shop supervisor, and my incredible over-hire carpenters.



*Figure 1: Louks, Kaeanne. "Mr. Burns, a Post-Electric Play Poster." Tulane University Department of Theatre and Dance. The Albert Lupin Memorial Theatre, New Orleans, Louisiana. March 2024. Poster.*

## CHAPTER ONE: CONTEXT

### 1. Exploring the World of the Play

Our interpretation of the play begins soon after a societal collapse due to an unspecified apocalypse. Six survivors huddle near a campfire and distract themselves from their dire circumstances by attempting to recount episodes of the TV show *The Simpsons*, an American cultural icon that carries throughout the course of the piece. *The Simpsons* is an American sitcom that began as a cartoon short in 1987, but by December 17<sup>th</sup>, 1989 it premiered as a Christmas TV special. By 1990, it began regularly airing on Fox (McNamee, “The Simpsons, 2024).

The show centers around the family unit of Homer Simpson, a bumbling father dedicated to beer that seems incompetent even when on his best behavior. His wife, Marge Simpson, is a homemaker and the glue that holds the family together. They have three children, Lisa Simpson, a genius and saxophonist, Bart Simpson, a prankster and troublemaker extraordinaire, and Maggie Simpson, the baby of the family. *The Simpsons* is a caricature of a dysfunctional family in the modern era, showcasing their negative qualities yet tempering them with redemption and humor that endears them to the audience world-round.

“Cape Feare” is the specific episode of *The Simpsons* that the rag-tag group endeavors to recall. It parodies the 1962 film *Cape Fear* as well as its 1991 remake of the same title. The films themselves are based on John D. MacDonald’s 1957 novel *The Executioners*<sup>2</sup> and contain allusions to various other media, such as Alfred Hitchcock’s 1960 horror film *Psycho* and the 1955 noir thriller *The Night of the Hunter*, the latter of which is referenced in the first act of the play.



Figure 2: Moser, Joey. “‘Cape Fear’ Made Me Appreciate the Simpsons More.” *MovieMoJoe*, 20 Aug. 2013, [moviemojoe.blogspot.com/2013/08/cape-fear-made-me-appreciate-simpsons.html](http://moviemojoe.blogspot.com/2013/08/cape-fear-made-me-appreciate-simpsons.html). Comparison shots of *The Simpsons* “Cape Feare” and the 1991 film *Cape Fear*.

<sup>2</sup> Macdonald, John D. *Cape Fear: A Novel (Formerly Titled the Executioners)*. Robbinsdale, Minnesota: Fawcett Publications, 2006. ISBN 0449131904.

The story of *Cape Fear* centers on a violent convicted rapist named Max Cady and his relentless thirst for revenge against the public defender he faults for his sentence of fourteen years in prison. Cady terrorizes the public defender and his family, poisoning their dog and raping and murdering various people along the way. The family flees to their houseboat docked along the Cape Fear River, the villain hiding underneath the car to follow them on their journey. The story culminates in a dramatic fight on the houseboat during a fierce thunderstorm, resulting in Cady becoming horrifically burned. In the end, Cady drowns and all three family members survive.

In the first act of *Mr. Burns*, the atmosphere is grim as their efforts to remain lighthearted shatter the second a noise is heard off-stage. Two lookouts sit on the periphery of the group, Colleen and Sam, and they serve as a constant reminder that the world the characters find themselves in is not safe. The only light in the hazy wooded scene emanates from a campfire in the center of the stage, adding to the underlying fear coursing through the act. The tension reaches a peak with the entrance of Gibson, a fellow survivor drawn to the storytelling of Matt, Jenny and Maria. Weapons are drawn, a backpack and body are searched, and in the end, Gibson tentatively joins up with the group. He provides extra insight into the “Cape Feare” episode, reminding them of specific lines and songs and breaking the tension completely between the strangers. The first act ends with Gibson’s sung rendition of “Three Little Maids from School Are We”, a song from Gilbert and Sullivan’s comedic opera *The Mikado*<sup>3</sup>, and solidifying his new place amidst the group.

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<sup>3</sup> Sullivan, Arthur, et al. *The Mikado*. Koch International, 1994.

Time skips seven years in the future, and with it we are in an entirely different location. A derelict warehouse in Oklahoma, with sunlight pouring in through broken and smudged windows the only major light source. An acting troupe composed of our act one survivors, plus a new character, Quincy, travels across the country performing episodes of *The Simpsons*. It is evident that performing is how they survive in this new post-electric society, and if they perform poorly, they don't eat.

The group is in the middle of rehearsing a "commercial", one of their troupe's special hooks to draw audiences in with nostalgic memories of the capitalistic times of the past. They rehearse snippets of one of their *Simpsons* episodes, "Cape Feare" as well as musical numbers that include dance sequences and a car they have crafted from real car parts and wood. Their work is good, but holds a roughness to it belying the group's lack of theatrical roots. The audience is reminded of the harshness of the characters' new world through panicked moments discussing the failing nuclear power plants and the toxicity threatening the environment, as well as the violence brought on by desperation of other survivors.

Gibson spirals into a breakdown as he struggles to calculate the likelihood of nuclear fallout having irrevocable consequences on their health and lives. His panic borders on desperation and violence as he pulls out his gun and gestures wildly with it. Everyone raises in alarm with him, eyes on the gun and panic on their tongues, until Sam breaks through to Gibson with an odd, forehead touching embrace and firm words. It is then revealed that Jenny has been receiving threats from other survivors during her work with "The Booth". "The Booth" is an invention of the characters to get remembered lines from *Simpsons* episodes that will bolster their scripts. The people that come to this booth



are paid if their lines get bought, but Jenny describes an encounter with a particularly aggressive person that is adamant that the troupe stole his line and refused to pay him for it. She wants to shut the booth down, and everyone breaks out into an argument insisting on the benefits outweighing the risks of it.

There's an undercurrent of resentment brewing amongst the group, namely emanating from Quincy, a new character introduced in the second act. It comes to a head in a loud argument between Maria and Quincy regarding the need for creating meaning in their work, with Quincy taking the stance that meaningless entertainment is the harder and nobler route to take when portraying cartoons. Quincy all but tells Maria to leave the group if she disagrees, as she is the weakest link in Quincy's eyes and could find meaning in a drama-focused theater troupe rather than theirs. This hurtful interaction never receives a chance for apologies, as not too long after, the theater is broken into by a company of marauders, each with a weapon trained on the stage. Threats are made, Maria is shot in the back, and a firefight breaks out, resulting in Colleen also taking a bullet to her back and collapsing on top of Quincy. A blackout snaps into place, and the marauders storm the stage, ringing in a bleak end to the act and an unknown fate befalling the rest of the group.

The final act catapults us seventy-five years after the second act, a total of eighty-two years into this post-apocalyptic future. The stage is transformed into The Simpsons Theater, which is celebrating its fiftieth year in operation with a musical production of *Cape Feare*. Actors in costume muse about the stage before the actors playing Edna Krabappel and Troy McClure welcome the audience to the show. The feelings of danger and fear have no place in this play within a play we find ourselves. Society has evolved,

mutated as generations have grown up without electricity or experiencing what exactly the TV show *The Simpsons* was like. Candles flicker downstage left and right, providing light to the stage and ambience to the epic drama about to commence.

In the new time-morphed version of *Cape Feare*, all of Springfield's civilians have perished in a nuclear power disaster spurred on by the character of Mr. Burns. Only one family, the Simpsons, thought to flee and survived. A houseboat is revealed onstage, the family's new home far away from their town of Springfield. The flats in the background depict an eerie painted landscape reminiscent of act two's interpretation of "Terror River". The civilians of Springfield act as ghosts of their former selves, introducing the horror villain Mr. Burns, who has become the main antagonist of the episode as opposed to Sideshow Bob in the original version, further illustrating how time has distorted the story. The Simpsons family is captured by Mr. Burns and his two lackeys, Itchy and Scratchy.

Mr. Burns is much more threatening than Sideshow Bob had been, focusing in one by one on the various family members to torment as he sings. They are all murdered until only Bart Simpson remains, having been helpless to stop even one death. Baby Maggie is the last to die, her presence having been hidden inside the houseboat until suddenly her cries ring out into the night. With one loud slam, the crying stops, and Bart is alone. Mr. Burns taunts the last survivor, gives him a sword and demands a swordfight. Bart wants to die, having lost hope with the abrupt end to his baby sister's cries. Now as ghosts, his family encourages him to find hope despite feeling like it is gone, to carry on despite it all.

The swordfight ends with Mr. Burns' demise, Itchy and Scratchy having perished earlier due to their own incompetence, leaving Bart Simpson the sole survivor of one horrific day. He sings of potential futures, of discarding fear, and how "love never dies in memory" (Washburn, "Mr. Burns", p. 126). During this final song, lightbulbs previously hidden about the set begin to spark to life, illuminating the houseboat, the side walls, and in the end the entirety of the stage. Chandeliers descend, blazing with light, and finally a whole pipe filled with Fresnel lighting instruments come alive in a spectacle of electricity. It is revealed that the actor playing Mr. Burns powers it all on a bicycle, and as he slows, the lights dim down into a blackout, ending the show in a dazzlement of innovation.

## 2. The Playwright and the Play



Figure 3: Will, Victoria. (2016, April 6). "A post-apocalyptic campfire tale, featuring Bart and Homer. Boston Globe <https://www.bostonglobe.com/arts/theater-art/2016/04/06/post-apocalyptic-campfire-tale-featuring-bart-and-homer/PuKZaxXsHP73IPbOD005xL/story.html>. Image of Anne Washburn.

In the early 2000s, Anne Washburn wondered what it would be like if a TV show were pushed past the fall of civilization and how its cultural iconography would change and survive. In 2008, an investigative theatre group based in New York City called The Civilians commissioned Washburn to explore her idea further. Initially, she considered a number of other sitcoms, with *Friends*, *Seinfeld* and *Cheers* all in the running as they were actively in TV syndication at the time<sup>4</sup>. *The Simpsons* became the TV show of choice thanks to its reputation as one of the longest-running American sitcoms, a standing it holds to this day. Coincidentally, yet unintentionally, *The Simpsons* was the only show to focus on family and community, an aspect that tied in well to a post-apocalypse where the characters have lost everything.

In a bank vault deep below Wall Street, Washburn gathered a group of actors to workshop the first act of the play. They spent a week in the vault spit-balling ideas. No cellular service reached in the small room they worked in<sup>5</sup>, and they were prohibited from watching any *Simpsons* episodes in order to produce an authentic recollection process. This week of workshopping resulted in act one of *Mr. Burns*, after some editing and tweaking by Washburn. The only reason “Cape Feare” became the episode central to the plot of the play was due to it being the one the actors recalled the most. Washburn came to realize how perfect the episode was for the story she wanted to tell, as it is a “grim, deep old story of family versus chaos...making it hilarious is awful and wonderful and opens up a lot of possibilities” (Concord Theatricals, 2013).

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<sup>4</sup> Concord Theatricals. “Mr. Burns Turns 10: An interview with playwright Anne Washburn.” *Breaking Character*, 14 Sept. 2023, <https://breakingcharacter.com/mr-burns-interview-with-anne-washburn/>.

<sup>5</sup> Playwrights Horizon. “Interview with Anne Washburn on Mr. Burns, a Post-Electric Play.” *Playwrights Horizon*, YouTube, 30 Aug. 2013, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=dR01Ez6kFZw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dR01Ez6kFZw).

In the wake of 9/11, Washburn's world as well as many other Americans' shifted off its axis, and it felt as though a new world arose in its place. This traumatic incident and others of the past inspired Washburn to cultivate *Mr. Burns*. Similar to how the survivors in act one and two used popular stories to process their feelings and traumas, Washburn reflects on writing the piece as partially her way of working through her own. Witnessing how others worked through the group crisis in New York, she found the "etiquette" people adapted to interesting. "People instantly cottoned onto ways of behaving or way of giving information, and everybody did it very quickly...I'd never seen the formation of...group process happen that quickly" (Grady, "Recreating the Simpsons", 2022).

Washburn wrote *Mr. Burns* roughly ten years following the American tragedy, but in 2013 she spoke on how the experiences of one group become absorbed by subsequent generations, adapting and changing over time. Inspiration came from the stories descended from Holocaust survivors. Washburn said, "...it wasn't until the '70s that people finally started to talk about the Holocaust...it was the descendants of the survivors who wanted to talk, wanted to know..." (O'Hara, "The Electric Mr. Burns", 2013).

Such a perspective resonates with the world the audience finds in the third act of the play. It is now eighty-two years into the apocalypse. Generations after the fall of civilization as we know it, and the episode of "Cape Feare" has evolved to include the destruction and death caused by nuclear power plants failing and the entire communities lost to the radiation poisoning. The original plot of Bart and his family going into witness protection to hide from Sideshow Bob no longer exists, replaced by the decimation of the

town of Springfield. Echoes of tragedy ring within the world of the play, incorporated into a new mythos surrounding cartoon characters of a world barely remembered.

Washburn wanted the final act to be colossal in comparison to the prior two, as the people within the play would not be held back artistically in ways we are held in our world. To get to that titanic shift, a certain sense of naturalism, or realism, needed to be felt within the first two acts.

The second act develops further into that idea, needing that desperate reach for nostalgia that audiences would connect with through realism. Washburn states, "...the commercials are at once very comforting—full of long-lost goods and services—and also the place where they're starting to experiment with form..." (Concord Theatricals, "Mr. Burns Turns 10", 2023). The first taste of what theatre and storytelling will metamorphose into begins in the second act with the theater troupe. Creation is seen in the form of how they set up their commercial's living room, the found parts they scrap together to build a car, their *Simpsons* costumes constructed from found objects and old clothing. Each act builds upon the last in terms of expanding into the art of creation, climaxing in the third act's reveal of the giant houseboat and fantastical interpretation of the *Simpsons* characters.

## CHAPTER TWO: CONCEPT

### **1. Research Imagery**

Discussions about the scenic design began around November of 2023, just before the winter break. The director, Dr. Ryder Thornton, and I sat down and chatted through preliminary concepts we wanted to cover. The seating arrangement style was up for debate, with proscenium, thrust and alleyway contending for the eventual winner. Realism in act one and act two were important in order to set up the marvel that act three was to become. At its core, Dr. Thornton described the design to be a, “dingy world brightened by the human creatives inhabiting it” and “gritty and crumbling” (Thornton, Nov. 2023). I took those words and ran with them.

Several images helped me visualize versions of the world we were aiming to create. Most of my professors have told me that searching out these images is the first step a designer should take in concept creation, but my brain has never worked that way. Instead, my imagination runs wild, and I put pencil to paper to articulate what I mentally visualize. Below are a select few of the images that influenced my design.



*Figure 4 Franczak, Michal. "How to save your city's abandoned factory." Hub, 4 July 2022, <https://hubin-project.eu/how-to-save-your-citys-abandoned-factory/>Act two inspiration.*



*Figure 5: Istvan, Szantai. "Old Industrial Building Stock Photo 104705240." Shutterstock, 9 June 2012, [www.shutterstock.com/image-photo/old-industrial-building-104705240](http://www.shutterstock.com/image-photo/old-industrial-building-104705240). Act two inspiration.*





*Figure 6: Beukelman, Patrick. "Povel II / Norgatex Textile Spinning and Twisting Nordhorn – Germany." URBANEXPLORATION.NL, 12 Mar. 2012, [urbanexploration.nl/norgatex.php](http://urbanexploration.nl/norgatex.php). Act two window inspiration.*

Figures 4-6 depict various abandoned warehouses complete with rubble, trash and broken glass. The metal tresses in Figure 4 provided food for thought in terms of the cold, barren feeling evoked from spindly architecture. The variety of window sizes and shapes in all three of the above figures proved beneficial when determining the dimensions of act two's walls and windows. The broken glass of Figure 6's range of windows coupled with the yellowed tinting in Figure 5's steered me closer in the direction the final design took.



*Figure 7: Conema, Andres. "Flames of a Campfire at Night, Etc." Alamy, 18 Jan. 2020, [www.alamy.com/flames-of-a-campfire-at-night-in-a-dark-spooky-forest-surrounded-by-stones-shaping-strong-shadows-image384980982.html](http://www.alamy.com/flames-of-a-campfire-at-night-in-a-dark-spooky-forest-surrounded-by-stones-shaping-strong-shadows-image384980982.html). Act one inspiration.*



*Figure 8: Somerville, Andy. "How to Build a Perfect Campfire – Part 1." Kilimanjaro Gear, Kilimanjaro Gear, 1 Feb. 2018, [www.kilimanjargear.com/blogs/news/how-to-build-a-perfect-campfire-part-1](http://www.kilimanjargear.com/blogs/news/how-to-build-a-perfect-campfire-part-1). Act one inspiration.*

Figures 7 and 8 contain two different campfire scenes. In Figure 7, what the viewer can see of the tree and brush appears ominous, twisting and reaching into darkness, where anything can lurk. The presence of camaraderie in Figure 8 warms up what could be a similar feeling experienced with Figure 7.



*Figure 9: Tree. "Scary Image with Trees and Sunlight Background, Picture of Spooky Trees, Spooky, Tree Background Image and Wallpaper for Free Download." Pngtree, 2024, [pngtree.com/freebackground/scary-image-with-trees-and-sunlight\\_3154080.html](https://pngtree.com/freebackground/scary-image-with-trees-and-sunlight_3154080.html). Terror River trees inspiration.*



*Figure 10: Caetano, Carlos. "Centenarian Tree with Large Trunk and Big Roots above the Ground." Adobe Stock, [stock.adobe.com/search?k=big%2Btree%2Bwith%2Broots&asset\\_id=10128552](https://stock.adobe.com/search?k=big%2Btree%2Bwith%2Broots&asset_id=10128552). Terror River trees inspiration.*

Figures 9 and 10 show two different aesthetics when it comes to tree shapes. The jagged out-jutting branches in Figure 9 embody the menacing aura the character of Bart Simpson feels in the world of act three. On the other hand, the smooth, ever-expanding root system shown in Figure 10 evokes the feeling of reaching out for something, anything, everything to hold onto, another feeling Bart Simpson struggles with. A marriage of the two images led me closer to the final look of the "Terror River" trees.



Figure 11: Christopher, Matthew. "The Victory Theatre." *Abandoned America*, 20 April 2022, <https://www.abandonedamerica.us/the-victory-theatre>. Act three inspiration.



Figure 12: Groening, Matt. *The Simpsons*, Fox, 1989. Act three inspiration.



Figure 13: Groening, Matt. "The Simpsons Character Line-Up." Fox, 17 Oct. 2015, <https://www.foxflash.com/shows/the-simpsons/>. Act three inspiration.

Figure 11 is a photo of the Victory Theater, built in Holyoke, Massachusetts in 1920. Abandoned in 1979 due to the town's economic collapse, the theater was left to rot, providing interesting research inspiration for yours truly. With act three's location of an abandoned-theater-turned-usable-again in a post-apocalyptic future, the decaying imagery therein fed the fuels of the imaginary fire in my head.

Figures 12 and 13 are both taken from the catalyst of *Mr. Burns*, the TV show *The Simpsons*. Act three needed some sort of allusion to the original source material. Whether it be impressions of character silhouettes or the wispy reminder of the clouds parting from the show's opening credits, depended on the trajectory of the overall scenic design.

## 2. Preliminary Concepts

Following Dr. Thornton and my beginning meetings, pencil met paper and ideas flowed from its tip. I churned out countless different concepts, cannibalized one or two into new, improved versions, and discarded several entirely. Our department's mainstage theater, the Albert Lupin Memorial Experimental Theatre in the Elleonora P. McWilliams Hall on Tulane University's Uptown campus, was selected as the venue. The Lupin Theatre is referred to as a "black box theater", or a performance space that is simple in design, typically resembling a box in the fact that it's square in shape. The floor is open, flat—or in New Orleans' case, as flat as the shifting foundation permits—allowing for any number of seating configurations (McMahon, "What is a Black Box Theater?", 2024).

The Lupin Theatre measures out to approximately forty-four by forty-nine feet wide, a limiting factor in any design set in its space as the designer has to account for seating in addition to stage-space. It contains a crane rail that operates on an electrified track moving from one side of the space to the other. The crane rail is used to hang lighting instruments from the lighting grid, although we utilize it for hanging scenic elements from the grid as well, something that became vital for the setting and resetting of a scrim in the final design.

It can also be seen as a limiting factor in a scenic design, due to the bottom of it being approximately fourteen-foot-six-inches from the floor of the theater. If the lighting team wants to use the crane rail to access lights at any point during the rehearsal or performance process, then most scenery needs to be less than fourteen-foot-six-inches in

height. This rule is not mandatory, as scenic elements near the Zimpel Street wall can exceed the height limit due to the crane rail not fully reaching there. It is a negotiation between lighting and scenic to determine if the rule can be broken elsewhere, as the grid can still be reached via ladders or manlifts.

In the end, three concepts stood out on top of the others, and they received the honor of being presented to the director. Two were drawn with proscenium-style seating in mind, whereas the third was drawn with an alleyway (or transverse) configuration. The exploration of size and scale influenced all three of the preliminary designs.

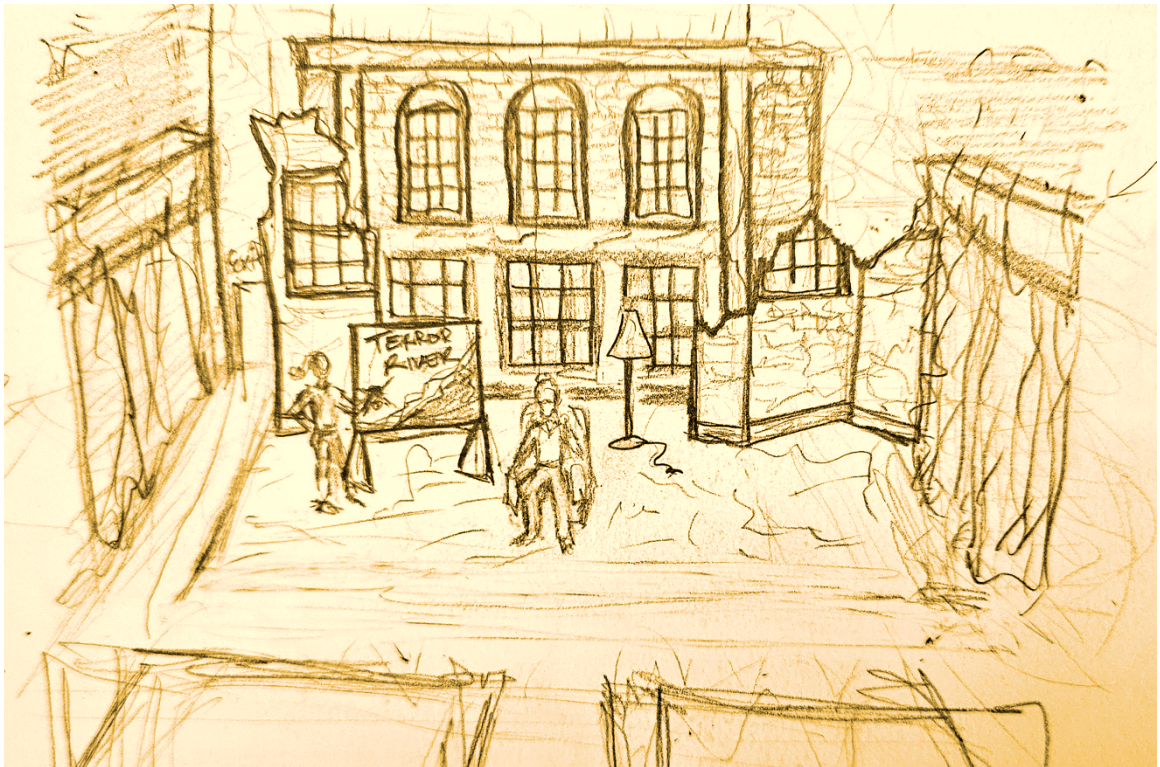


*Figure 14: Louks, Kaeanne. Concept One, Act One. Scenic concept sketch of a clearing in the woods, complete with collapsible two-dimensional trees hung from the lighting grid, bushes, and a campfire. Proscenium style seating with one vomitorium splitting the seating bank peek from the bottom edge of the drawing. 2024, Tulane University.*

In act one of Concept One, four collapsible tree silhouettes hang from the grid upstage, ranging from fourteen to seventeen-feet in height. They are both detachable and collapsible, but two-dimensional. The director mentioned wanting the characters to feel



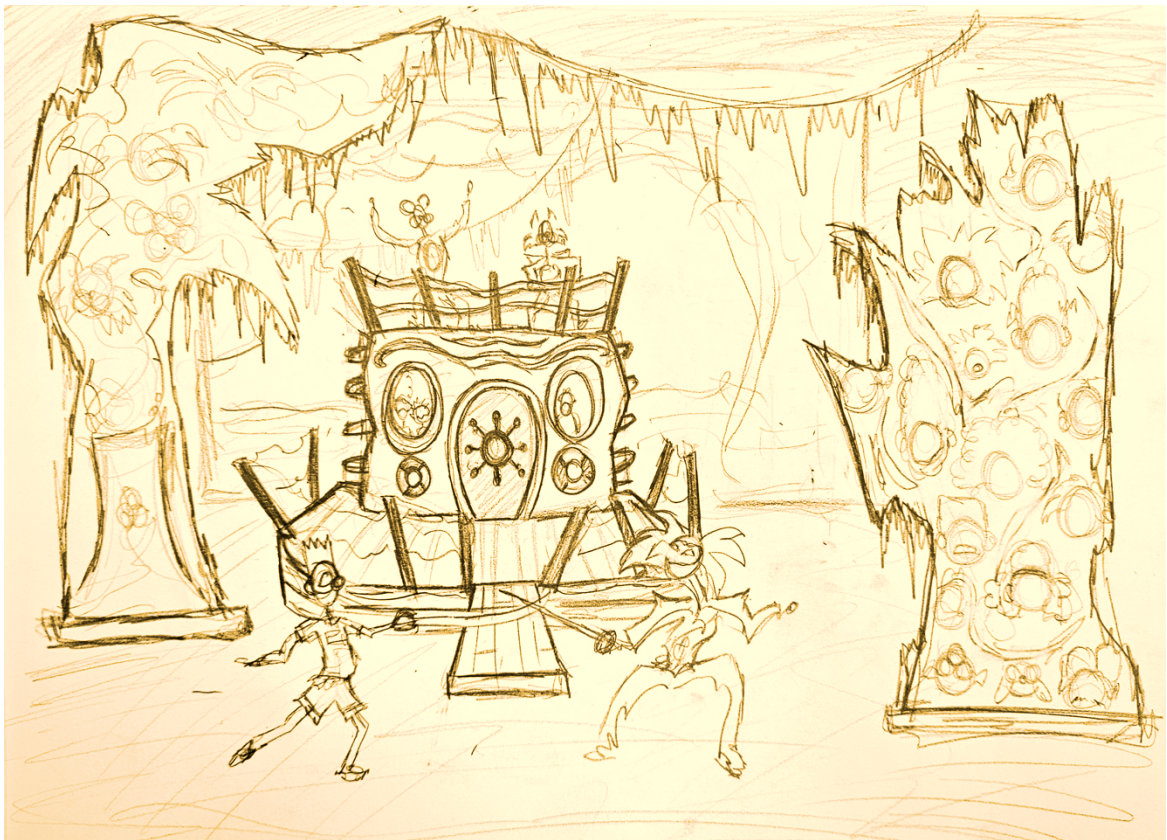
like they were deep in the woods, where trees grow tall and bushes are scattered along the forest floor. Miscellaneous greenery crawls up the stage left and right walls of the theater, obscuring the black concrete blocks associated with the Lupin Theatre. A scenic drop with the painting of trees expanding into the distance hangs upstage of the trees, adding a feeling of depth where there is no actual one (Figure 14). The seating configuration is proscenium with a single vomitorium, or splitting aisle, coming up the center of the seating risers.



*Figure 15: Louks, Kaeanne. Concept One, Act Two. Scenic concept sketch of broken-down warehouse space, showing a potential furniture configuration for the interrogation scene. 2024, Tulane University.*

In act two of Concept One, the trees and previous scenic drop are released from the grid, and a new scenic drop is revealed. A warehouse wall is painted upon it, with cutout window panes faced with muslin fabric allow light to stream through. From behind

the stage left greenery, a foldable wall flat is pulled out. It is damaged, and unfolds into three sections that can either remain in an accordion-style look, or be pulled straight to make one surface. Broken windows sit atop the middle section of the wall while the rest of it appear crumbling. Another chunk of wall resides stage right with another section of windows (Figure 15). Actors are able to enter from the scenic construction shop without being seen from the audience, but more importantly, revealed scenic elements are able to come through as well, such as a car built from found objects such as milk crates or suitcases.



*Figure 16: Louks, Kaeanne. Concept One, Act Three. Scenic concept sketch of the houseboat on "Terror River". Jagged structures stand on stage left and right, dripping moss and grime. 2024, Tulane University.*

In act three of Concept One, much of the stage space has changed. A third and final scenic drop hangs upstage, this time a stylized painting of the “Terror River” landscape alluded to in the commercial scene in act two. Two jagged structures reminiscent of Bart Simpson’s and Mr. Burns’ head shapes fill the space. Perhaps they are remnants of a proscenium arch, perhaps they are fabrications of the new world. Outlines of *The Simpsons* characters stare out from one structure, while the other depicts a nuclear power plant and the villains of the mythological “Cape Feare” show.

The houseboat is curvaceous, almost a character all its own as it appears to have facial features. Rounded pipes on the sides serve as ladders to the upper deck, which has functional, if precarious looking, railings. The lower deck has cattywampus pipes meant for railings, but no chain or metal connects them. Strings of moss droop from the grid, adding texture to the upper third of the stage (Figure 16).



Figure 17: Louks, Kaeanne. *Concept Two, Act One*. Scenic concept sketch of the woods, set in an alleyway configuration with audience on either side of the stage. 2024, Tulane University.

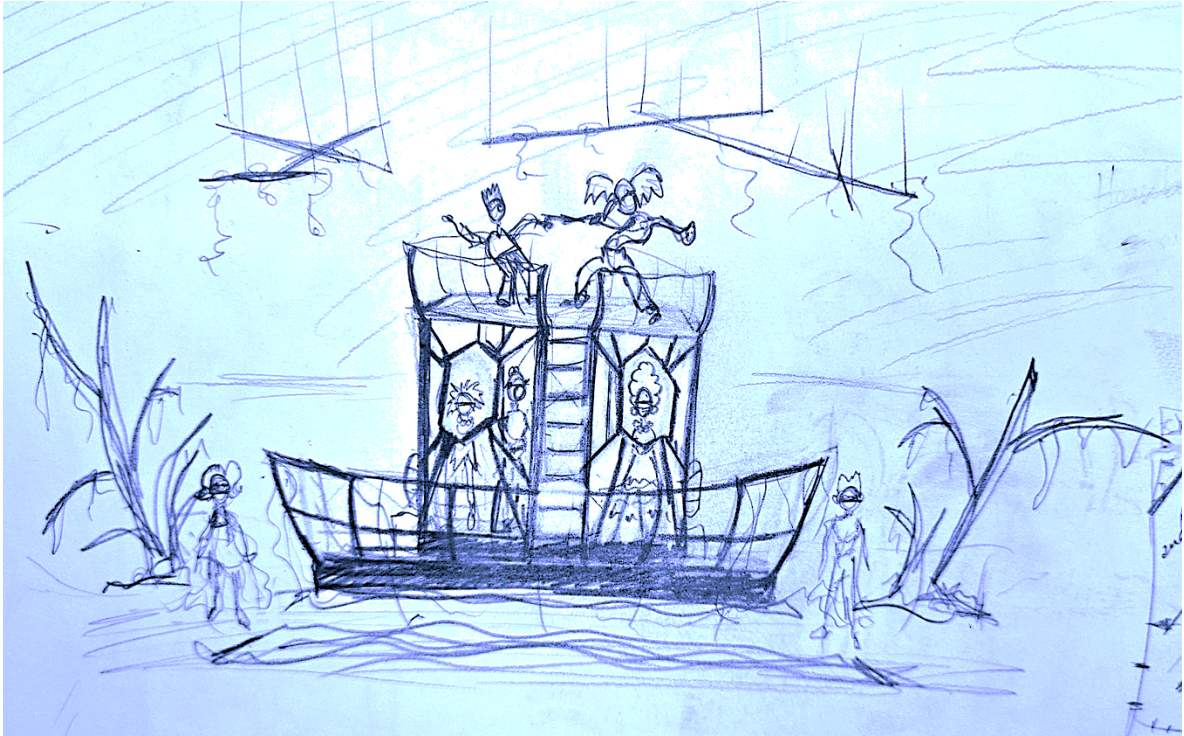
For Concept Two, I tested out an alleyway configuration for the audience, meaning that they existed on either side of the stage. In this instance, they were also on a diagonal across the Lupin Theatre. In act one, the campfire is a bundle of logs surrounded by a ring of rocks, and heavy mounds of bushes clutter the far extremes of the stage. An old couch in decent condition, dining room chair and barstool act as seating for the actors (Figure 17). These groupings of greenery conceal the larger structures of act two (Figure 18).larger structures of act two (Figure 18).



*Figure 18: Louks, Kaeanne. Concept Two, Act Two. Scenic concept sketch of the warehouse, set in an alleyway configuration with audience on either side of the stage. 2024, Tulane University.*

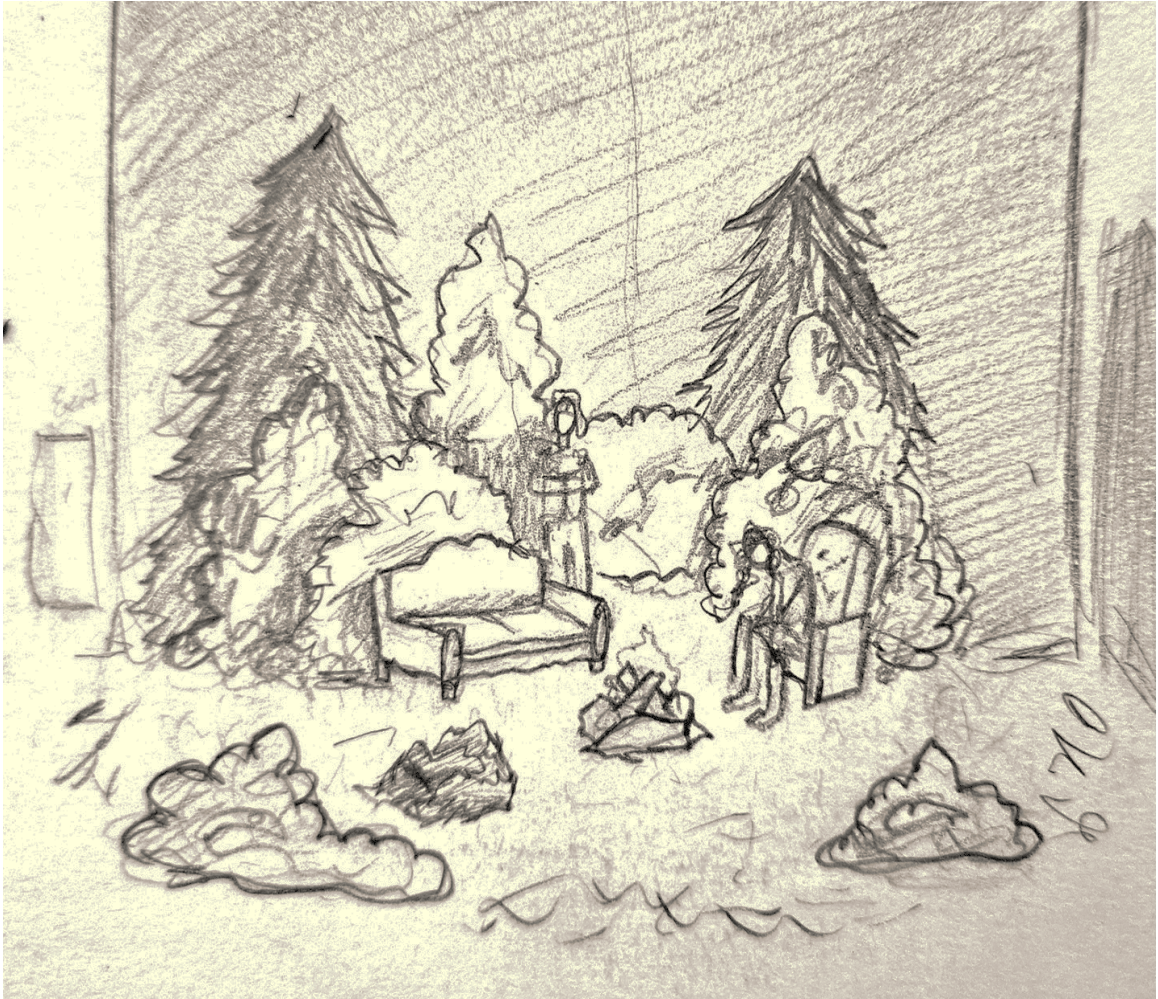
In act two of Concept Two, broken chunks of wall and debris litter the boundaries of the stage. Partial window frames erupt from one extreme side of the stage as well as from the broken chunks of wall. The other extreme side of the stage has fully formed window frames and a near-completed section of wall, but the glass is broken and the wall

deteriorates. Several gaps lie in the shorter portions of walls, allowing larger scenic elements to traverse in and out of the “rehearsal space” the characters use in act two (Figure 18).



*Figure 19: Louks, Kaeanne. Concept Two, Act Three. Scenic concept sketch of the houseboat and “Terror River”, set in an alleyway configuration with audience on either side of the stage. 2024, Tulane University.*

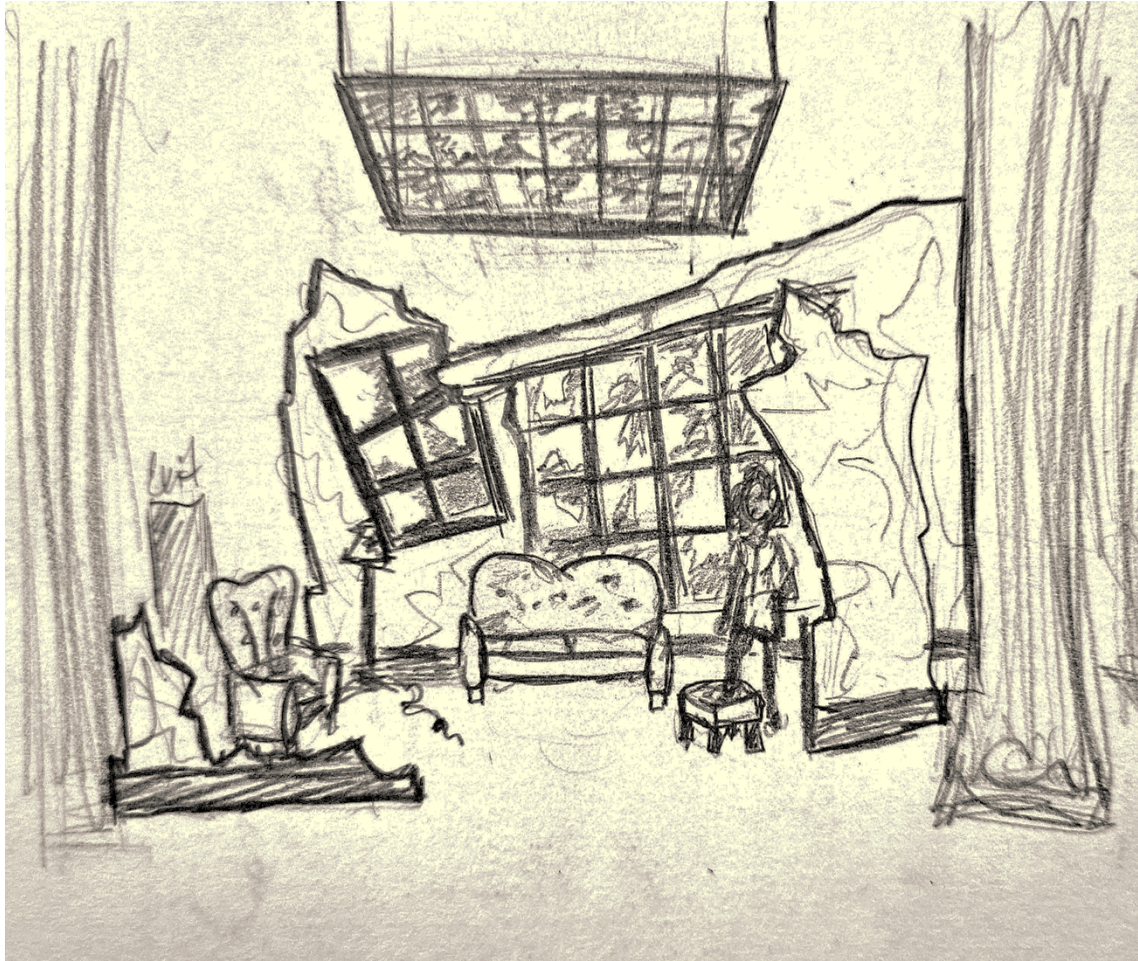
In the final act of Concept Two, the scenic centerpiece of the houseboat became a sharp, spindly and see-through metal structure calling back to the jagged window frames of act two. Abstract lengths of metal lower from the grid in chaotic crisscrossing shapes to balance out the composition of the scene. Scraps of fabric alluding to moss or other straggly flora hand from the metal in the air as well as the metal gestures of trees on the extreme sides of the set. Longer lengths of fabric lie on either audience-side of the houseboat, ready to be used by actors to imitate water (Figure 19).



*Figure 20: Louks, Kaeanne. Concept Three, Act One. Scenic concept sketch of the woods, with two two-dimensional trees and three bushes and a log. Set in a proscenium configuration with space on either side of the seating for audience and actor entrances. 2024, Tulane University.*

Concept Three's act one feels like a scaled back version of Concept One. Two free-standing, two-dimensional trees painted realistically rest upstage in front of a dark curtain. Technically, they could still be hung from the grid, but with their reduced heights it is less practical. Five three-dimensional bushes obscure the edges of the trees, with two smaller shrubs occupying downstage close to the audience. A campfire sits centerstage

with larger rocks encasing the logs, concealing the lighting instruments within. An old-fashioned couch and arm chair are the only human-made objects for sitting (Figure 20).



*Figure 21: Louks, Kaeanne. Concept Three, Act Two. Scenic concept sketch of the warehouse, with several broken walls and a busted skylight overhead. Set in a proscenium configuration with space on either side of the seating for audience and actor entrances. 2024, Tulane University.*

Act two of Concept Three reveals what was hidden behind the upstage curtain in act one. Broken portions of wall with slanting, broken windows fill the space. There are four wall sections in total, varying wildly in size and shape. The back-wall slants upwards on the stage left side, bringing a feeling of warped perception to the design. Subtly, it is

seen that the back wall is two sections that can pull apart, revealing the car or whatever else hiding behind it. A skylight hangs overhead, shattered glass clinging to the metal frame. Light can pass through all window structures without showing the true light source (Figure 21). There is a sense of feeling off-kilter in this concept, edging away from the realism Dr. Thornton searched for in act two.



*Figure 22: Louks, Kaeanne. Concept Three, Act Three. Scenic concept sketch of the houseboat, with a makeshift proscenium littered with The Simpsons imagery. Set in a proscenium configuration with space on either side of the seating for audience and actor entrances. 2024, Tulane University.*



For act three of Concept Three, the space undergoes a major change. A makeshift, ragged proscenium arch frames the houseboat. Perhaps a curtain tracks along the back of the arch, allowing for a dramatic reveal of the houseboat during the opening song. *The Simpsons* imagery colors the arch in styles suggestive of graffiti or cave art. Over the center, “The Simpson Theater” can be seen in crude handwriting. The houseboat’s upper deck has an extreme rake, and the house portion of the boat holds an unusual shape. Two lighting instruments hang over the door of the houseboat, and bulbs wrap around the facing and atop the lower deck’s pipes. A dark curtain blacks out the back of the Lupin Theatre, hiding the familiar architecture from the audience. Two ships ladders reach toward the upper deck, limiting space on the lower deck (Figure 22).

### **3. Director Feedback and the Final Concept**

Dr. Thornton resonated most with Concept Three, but urged me to find more realistic ways to illustrate the warehouse in act two. Concept Two intrigued him, but upon further reflection he determined that an alleyway configuration would be difficult to portray the play. Scenic drops were too unrealistic for the world he envisioned for acts one and two, however he was open to one existing within the creative explosion that was act three. The proscenium arch of Concept Three excited the director, however my technical director, Professor Vlad Ghinea, reminded me how difficult it would be to make it appear on stage in a theater without a fly system, and the idea had to be let go. With every meeting, the director mentioned needing more scenic elements with every scene.

We then came to the realization that we needed to cut down on the number of scenic elements within the design rather than add more. Our scene shop was the least

populated it had ever been, meaning there were very few hands available to build anything, let alone paint it afterward. The latter part of that sentence became particularly evident the deeper we got into the final build process, but that comes later. We had money in our budget to hire outside workers to build and paint, but good workers around the city were also in short supply. Time was also not on our side, and with my roles stretching beyond scenic designer, I, too, was spread thinner than planned. I took all of this into consideration as I sketched out the final concept.



*Figure 23: Louks, Kaeanne. Final Concept, Act One. Scenic concept sketch of the woods, with two two-dimensional, free-standing trees, three three-dimensional bushes, one log, and a couple rocks. A lawn chair and antique couch sit around a firepit. Set in a proscenium configuration with space on either side of the seating for audience and actor entrances. 2024, Tulane University.*

Act one's concept is a pared down version of Concept Three's. The two free-standing trees carried through to this iteration, still two-dimensional and no longer

considered hangable from the grid. Due to their distance from the campfire, which was to be the only source of light on stage, painting them realistically became slightly less important, but still a part of the plans. The number of realistic bushes shrank from seven to three. Two small rocks and half a log were added in their places, acting as extra seating areas. A metal ring encircled the firepit, obscuring the potential lighting instruments within from the eyes of the audience. An antique couch and scruffy lawn chair became the only man-made seating options. On the stage right and left, black curtains obscured the walls of the Lupin Theatre, blending into the background once the show lights were on. A black sharkstooth scrim hung upstage of the trees, hiding the set of act two that waited just beyond (Figure 23).

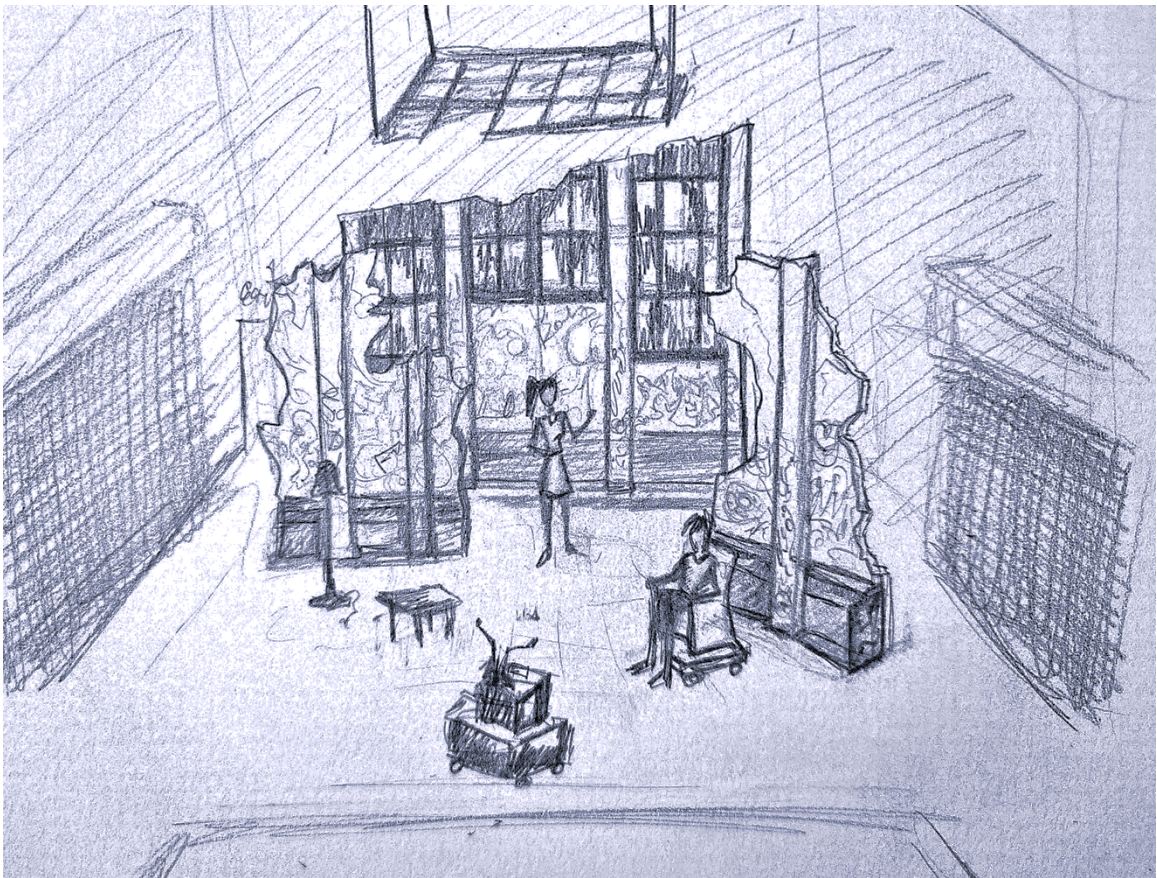


Figure 24: Louks, Kaeanne. *Final Concept, Act Two*. Scenic concept sketch of the warehouse, graffiti littered and crumbling. Set in a proscenium configuration with space on either side of the seating for audience and actor entrances. 2024, Tulane University.

The black sharktooth scrim gets dropped from the grid to reveal act two's scenery set in place behind. Two moveable flats reside around the middle of the stage, appearing as though they are crumbling with their unique shape. If needed, they can be moved downstage of where the scrim had been to allow for a deeper "backstage" area for the characters. Columns fill in the faces of the flats, a chance for a hidden support structure to hide within to stabilize them. Upstage, two larger flats meet flushly together, appearing as though it is one large wall. It is an echo of Concept Three's act two, made less stylized in perspective than the earlier iteration.

Dingy, broken windows stretch towards the tops of the flats, reaching towards the hanging skylight overhead. The skylight is dilapidated and dangerous-looking, appearing as though it could cave-in at any moment. Graffiti splashes all over the built flats, alluding to the disrepair the location has fallen into even before the apocalypse. The black masking curtains remain stage right and left, continuing to hide the Lupin walls. An armchair on castors is positioned to face a shell of a tube TV on a rolling TV stand, a candle flickering within the TV (Figure 24).



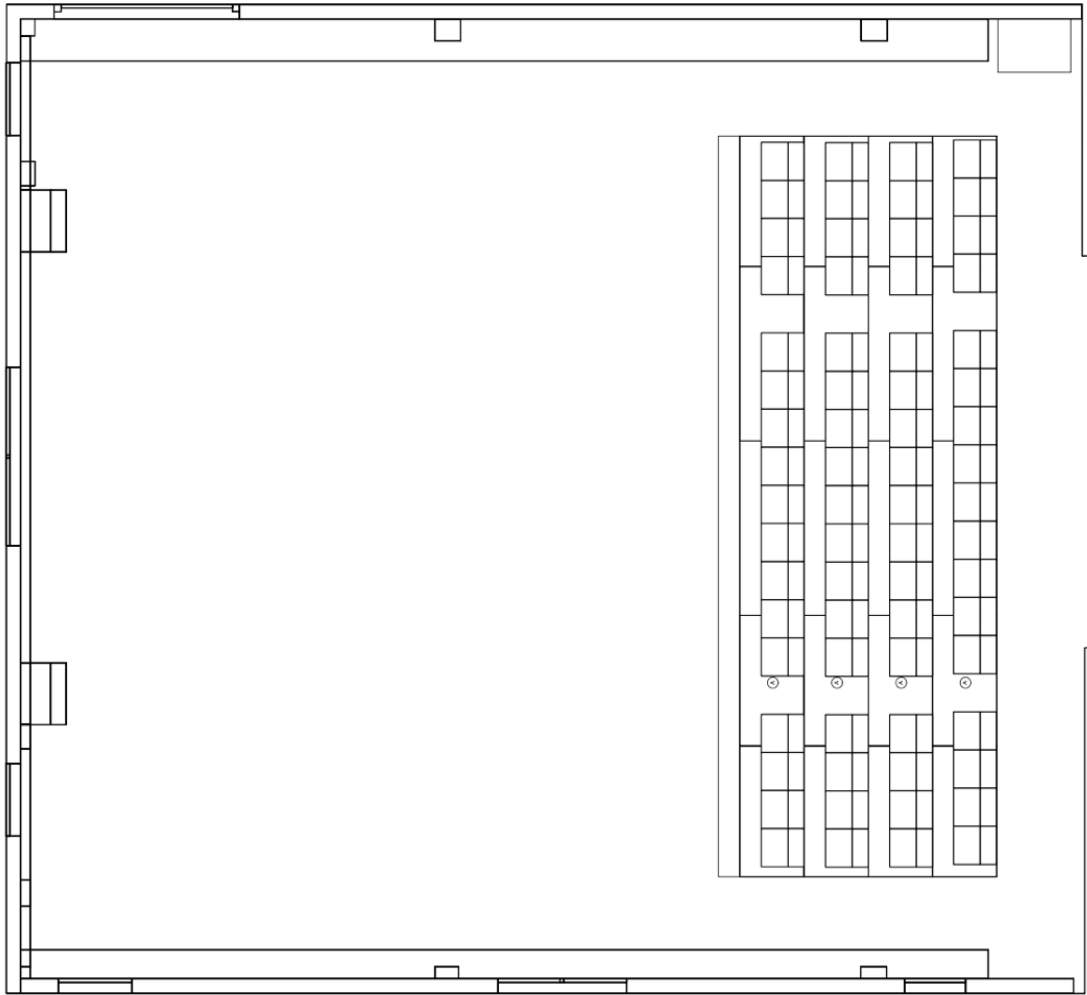
*Figure 25: Louks, Kaeanne. Final Concept, Act Three. Scenic concept sketch of the houseboat, with murals on the Lupin walls stage right and left with Simpsons imagery. Set in a proscenium configuration with space on either side of the seating for audience and actor entrances. 2024, Tulane University.*

For the final act, the stage right and left masking is removed, revealing murals painted directly onto the Lupin Theatre's wall. Red curtains appear on the downstage side of the murals, alluding to the grand drape many proscenium theaters open at the beginning of a show. On a background of blue, clouds similar to *The Simpsons'* opening credits (Figure 12) fill out the space behind graffiti versions of *Simpsons* silhouettes. A banner border unrolls from overhead, hanging from the grid and depicting *The Simpsons* style of nuclear power plants and the noxious fumes emitting from them. The wall flats from act two have rotated around, revealing wretched, gnarled trees and skylines to represent the land of "Terror River".

The houseboat is smaller than previously concepts due to the constraints of coming in from the scene shop, and the rake on its upper deck is less extreme compared to Concept Three's. The safety of the actors' ankles took precedence over extreme design aesthetics. A piano rests downstage left along with candelabras of various heights and trays of candles. Two chandeliers hang from the lighting grid (Figure 25). Dr. Thornton accepted the Final Concept with the understanding that some things were subject to change or removal from the realized design depending on what we could accomplish in our shop in the time allotted. Flexibility is important to me when it comes to designs, as any number of obstacles can appear during a building and rehearsal process. Without flexibility, the production can only bend so far before it breaks.

#### **4. Final Design**

The final design ended up very similar to the final concept sketches. The dimensions of some scenic elements were adjusted to reflect the needs dictated by a small black box theater like the Lupin. Placements of scenery changed as well, especially within act one's setup to reflect the shallowness of the acting area. Dr. Thornton and Dr. Diana Maria Cupsa, my scenic advisor, approved the final design on January 26<sup>th</sup>, 2024. From there, the building process truly began.



*Figure 26: Louks, Kaeanne. Seating configuration for Mr. Burns. 2024, Tulane University.*

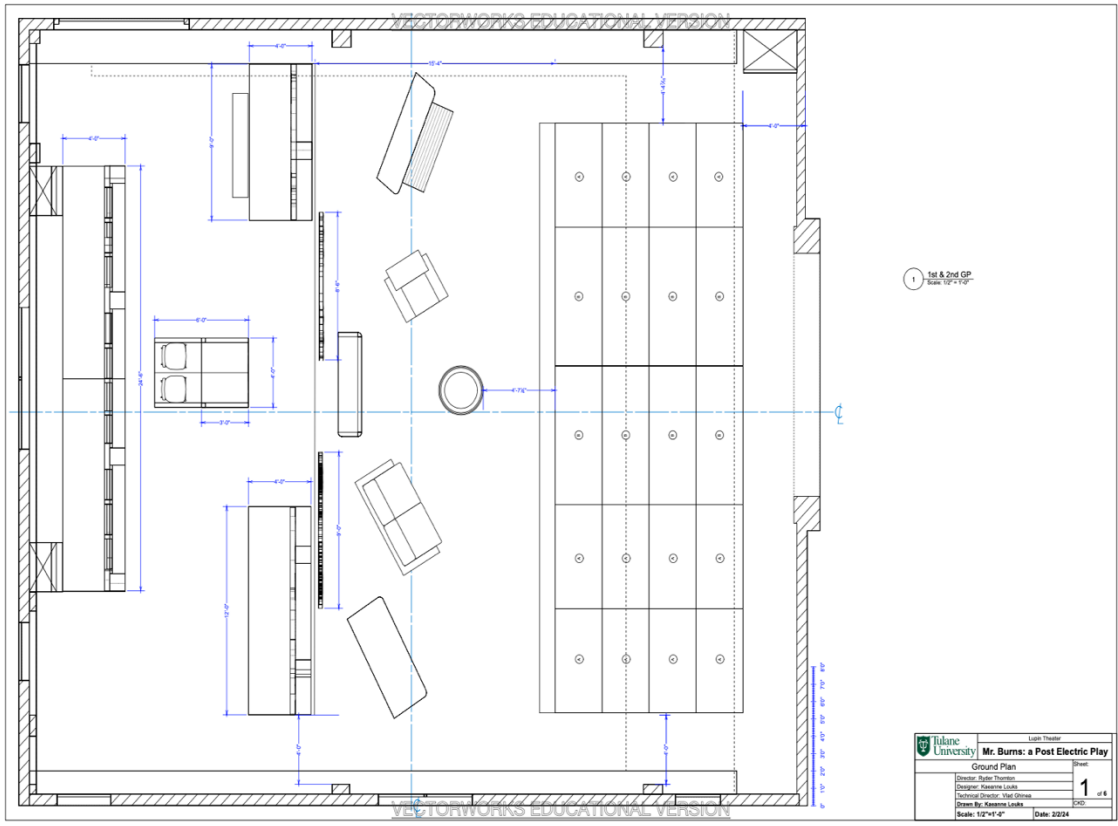


Figure 27: Louks, Kaeanne. Architectural ground plan for acts one and two. 2024, Tulane University.

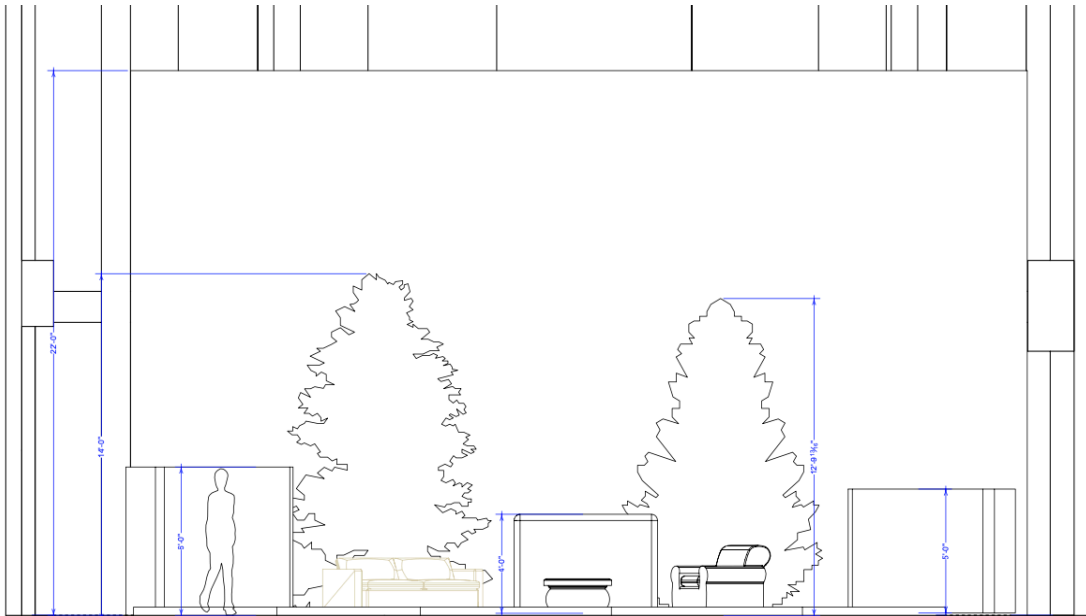


Figure 28: Louks, Kaeanne. Architectural front elevation for acts one. 2024, Tulane University.

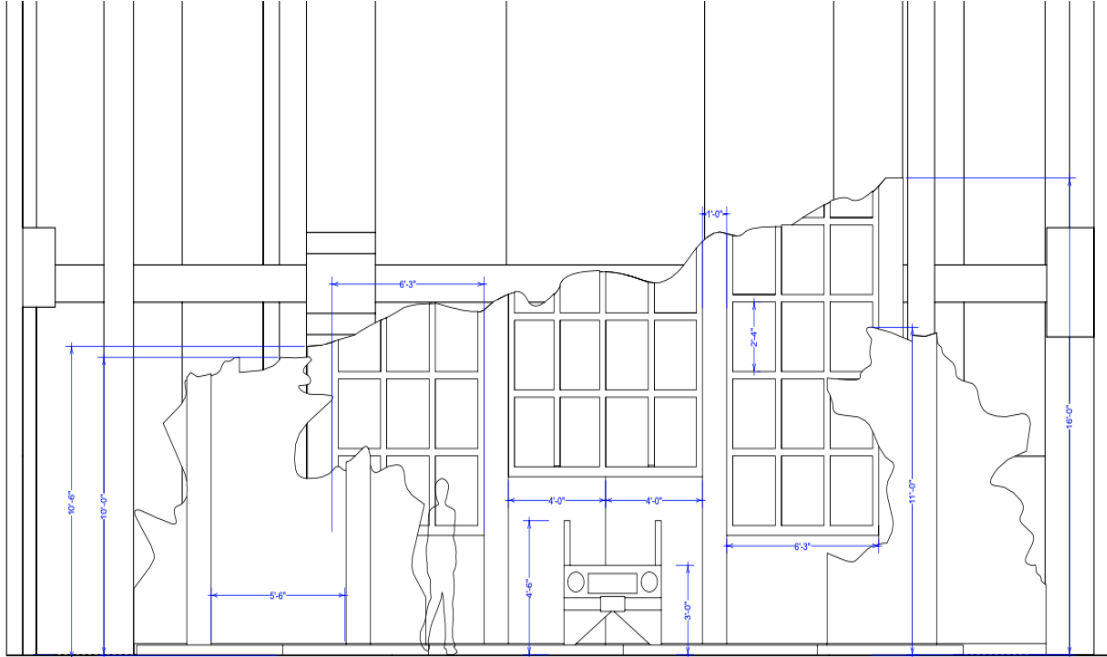




*Figure 29: Louks, Kaeanne. Digital rendering for act one. 2024, Tulane University.*

With act two, I made the decision to cut the skylight from the design (Figure 30). As our lighting designer, Professor Rachel Levy, reasoned, the same effect I was looking for from the skylight could be achieved with gobos from her lighting instruments. The only thing that couldn't be replicated would be the impressions of broken glass, but that fell low on the priority list of aesthetic decisions.

Dr. Thornton insisted the car needed to be made from real car parts for the second half of the act, and ultimately, he, along with a few others, were tasked with finding suitable parts within our budget range. More on that topic is discussed later in this paper. I reduced the amount of graffiti on the walls of the warehouse, knowing that if time became too tight down the line, it would be scrapped from the design along with the pink paintwork used to "hide it" in the world of the characters (Figure 31).



*Figure 30: Louks, Kaeanne. Architectural front elevation for act two. 2024, Tulane University.*



*Figure 31: Louks, Kaeanne. Digital rendering for act two of the car scene. 2024, Tulane University.*

Most, if not all, of the final concept's version of act three carried through to the final design. All the moveable flats still rotated to reveal the foreboding trees of "Terror River". The rake, or slant, of the houseboat's upper deck did decrease significantly for the safety of actors' ankles. The lower deck did transform drastically. Instead of a six-inch tall, four-foot wide detachable wagon, the lower deck raised to two-feet in height, and the houseboat all became one giant wagon with a total width of six feet (Figure 32). No longer was there a protrusion out into the "water" that surrounded the structure.

Due to the limited width of the new wagon, the facing of the house portion became simplified, with lightbulbs only existing on top of the pipes of the lower deck's railing. The murals on the Lupin walls remained as well as the two hanging chandeliers, but although it is depicted in the final drafting and design, we cut the banner/border from the realized production to save time (Figures 31-34). Candelabras were up for debate concerning size and placement and would come later in the process. Instruments of indeterminate type were mentioned as needing space of the stage, but by the time the final design was approved, I had not been made aware of what they were.

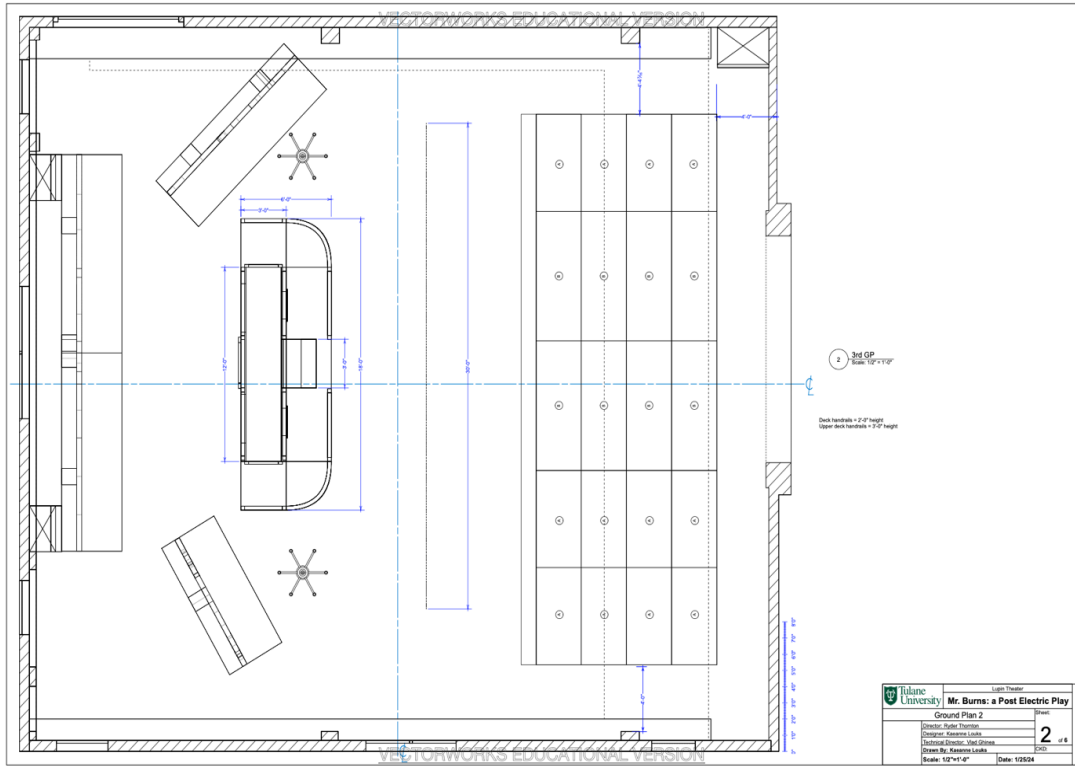


Figure 32: Louks, Kaeanne. Architectural ground plan for act three. 2024, Tulane University

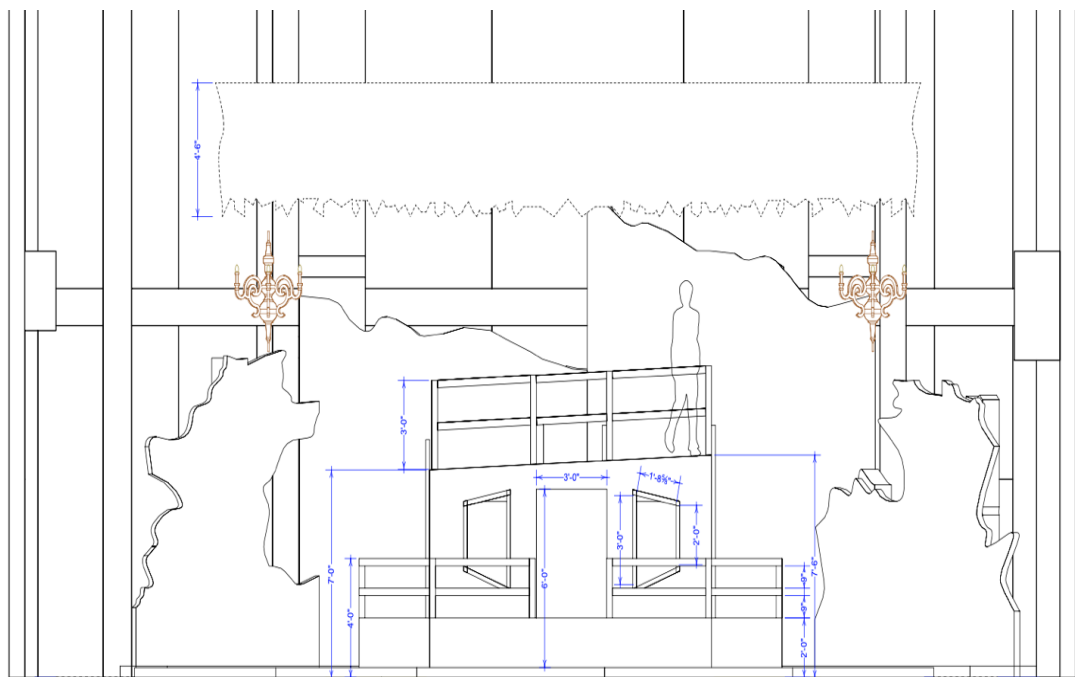
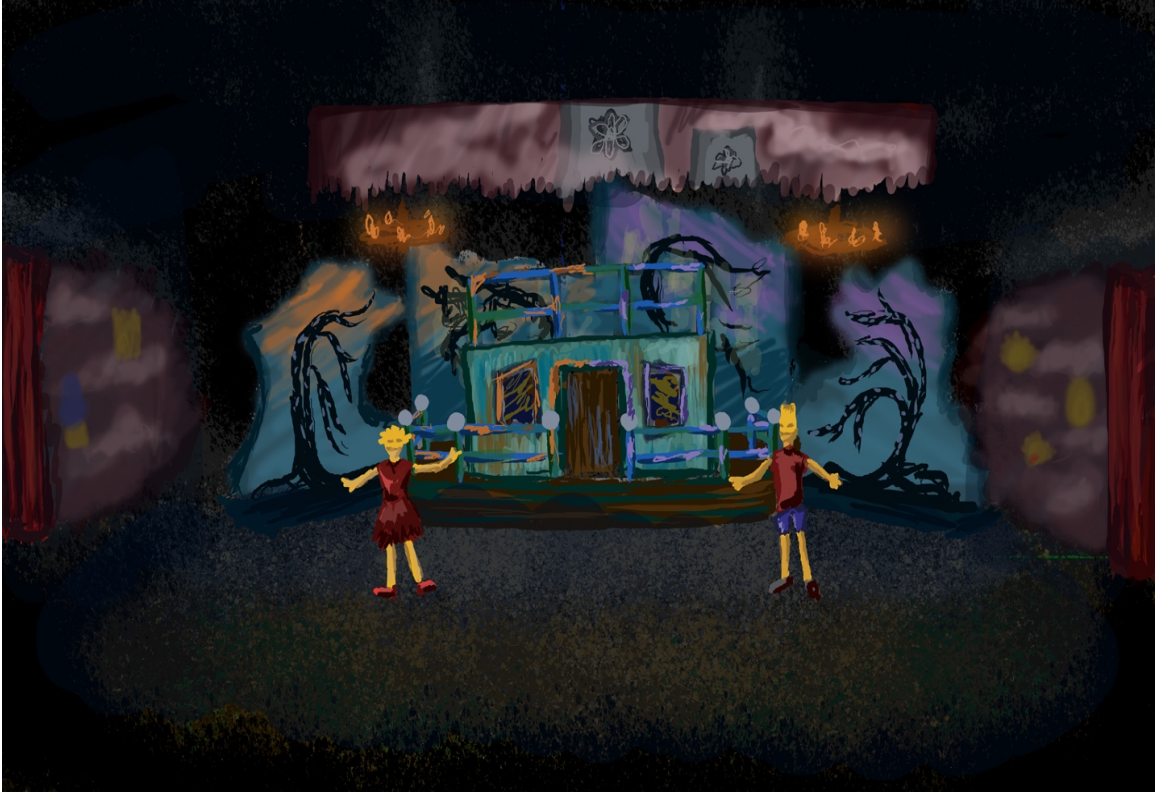


Figure 33: Louks, Kaeanne. Architectural front elevation for act three. 2024, Tulane University.



*Figure 34: Louks, Kaeanne. Digital rendering for act three. 2024, Tulane University.*

### CHAPTER THREE: CONSTRUCTION

We began construction as soon as possible in late January. With only six weeks to build before tech week, we needed every minute and every hand we could get. This academic year there were no first-year graduate students to rely upon in the shop for labor, and the undergraduate students taking the scene shop practicum course were few and far between. We were also missing the other scenic design MFA candidate grad student, Ali Robinson, as she was participating in an internship elsewhere for the semester.

Ultimately, we were able to hire four carpenters outside of Tulane to come in and tackle the massive undertaking that is *Mr. Burns*. Those four, in addition to our scene shop supervisor, George Johnson, and myself were the main driving force constructing and painting all the set. Once we were approaching tech week, we added another week of over-hire labor to the schedule to get everything built before the first day of tech. A few undergraduate students devoted a couple hours a week towards the project, and Vlad Ghinea, the technical director, stepped in when we required his expertise. This show would not have reached its end goal without every one of their support, and that cannot be stressed enough.

The four wagons supporting the moveable wall flats were the first to be built to allow the actors to get used to the footprint each wall flat would have in the rehearsal

space, the Lupin Theatre. Three were identical four-foot by twelve-foot platforms, with the last measuring in at four-foot by nine-foot. All were equipped with multi-directional castors to allow movement in any direction. Next came the largest wagon in the show, the six-foot by eighteen-foot base of the houseboat, the centerpiece of act three, and the one carrying the most weight out of all the wagons. We pulled various sized platforms from the shop's stock and bolted them together before attaching around a dozen multi-directional castors. The amount of weight bearing down on the houseboat wagon meant that it did not need wagon locks to prevent its unwanted movement, as it took a great amount of force to maneuver the behemoth. However, the other four wagons did need wagon locks, and they were installed before we gave them to the actors.

The houseboat became the main focus for the next few days of the build. A large portion of the action of act three occurs on or within the houseboat, and the sooner it entered rehearsals the more comfortable actors could become with the specific dimensions and intricacies of the structure. The outer deck stood at two-foot-tall, leaving the "interior" of the houseboat to remain at the six-inch rise of the base wagon. A single step allowed an easy transition from the interior of the houseboat to the outer deck. We installed masonite facing on the lid, or top, of the outer deck along with the front of the houseboat, hiding the inner support structure and providing a paintable surface for later. We were able to utilize scrap pieces of masonite from previous Tulane productions, letting the construction cost to remain low. The masonite allowed a smooth and sturdy wrap around the deck's rounded corners. Any overhang of material was either routed or sawed off with a cordless router or hand saw, respectively.

Using more platforms from our stock, the carpenters built up the base structure of the house part of the houseboat. The upper deck contained a slant, or rake, in its design, with one end standing at seven-feet and the other at seven-foot-six-inches in the original drafting. We did field measurements of the scene shop door and determined that we could add another foot of height to the upper deck, so we did. The stock platforms were attached with this information in mind, resulting in special angles being cut to accommodate the rake (Figure 35).



*Figure 35: Louks, Kaeanne. Image of the outer deck post-facing and installation of house's base structure from stock platforms in the scene shop. 2024, Tulane University.*

Once the base structure was installed, we secured lauan plywood facing to the front and sides of the house portion, and more masonite facing to the top of the upper deck. The audience never saw the backside of the houseboat, so it did not need to be faced. Soon after, I picked out a door from the department's uptown storage building and



measured out the holes for the window openings. We covered the door with more lauan to create a smooth surface as opposed to the detailed molding of the door underneath, as well as some damage to the door's base. Keith Tujague, one of our carpenters and eventual Deck Captain for the performances of the show, mounted the door while George Johnson cut out the window openings.

Wooden ships ladders adorned the stage right and left sides of the house portion of the houseboat. We modified a decades-old ladder from deep in our stock and built a new duplicate version to match. Their upper hand rails were cut and reattached with locking-pin hinges, allowing them to be removeable due to the specific needs of the moving set piece.

As the houseboat is only allowed to be seen in the third act, having such a large scenic element meant it needed to come onto the stage from the scene shop, where we stored it. The largest obstacle with the movement of locations lies with the dimensions of the doorway leading to and from the theater. It is just shy of nine-feet in useable height with roughly eight-feet in width, however, that doesn't account for the fact that the doors cannot open fully due to their location within the scene shop. The crash bars on the doors eat into the door opening, meaning that with the houseboat newly clocking in at eight-foot-six inches high—not accounting for extra elements on the upper deck—and a little over six-foot-wide, the houseboat pushed the limit in terms of size.

We borrowed six three-foot long pipes from Tulane's Music Department, courtesy of their production manager Michael Batt, to use for the houseboat's railings. We ended up cutting fourteen more from our own stock. We bolted twelve Kee Klamp standard railing flanges to the perimeter of the outer deck, then inserted and secured

twelve of our pipes afterward. Lengths of chain, a majority of which also came to us with the blessing of Michael Batt, spanned along the tops and mid-sections of the pipes, leaving a gap directly in front of the houseboat's door.

On the upper deck, we placed two twelve-foot two-by-fours, each with four Kee Klamp standard railing flanges. They laid along the upstage and downstage sides of the upper deck. We screwed on hinges and added the pipes before realizing the plan to fold down the railings onto each other wouldn't work without notches cut into the two-by-fours. We marked out where exactly the pipes hit on either plank of wood, and then took them off. Once the curved semi-circles were jigsaw-cut from the two-by-fours, they were reinstalled and fitted with pipes.

More length of chain came from our own shop's dwindling supply, but with enough quick links we were able to get enough to span the length from pipe to pipe. Eight locking-pin hinges held the railings upright, four each on the upstage and downstage sides of the houseboat. When the locking-pins were disengaged, the railings folded inward and nestled within each other, allowing the houseboat safe passage to and from the theater.

As the primary scenic artist working on this production, once the construction on the houseboat completed, I got to work painting it. It took roughly fifteen hours to paint it over the span of a few days, with touch-ups happening throughout the build process. The base coat on the house portion became an electric robin's eggshell blue made from the dregs of our cans of sky blue and lemon yellow, meaning I had a limited amount to work with. It became dulled with stains of burnt umber and raw sienna soon after (Figure 37).

Parts of ultramarine blue and black came together to get the nearly Prussian blue color for the lids of the outer and upper decks. Burnt umber, chrome oxide green and several shades of blue smattered the facing of the outer deck. The pipes and chains were dry brushed with pthalo blue as a base addition to dull the shine of their metal. Accents of orange and purple touched nearly every inch of the houseboat, surrounding the window openings and door. Orange remained on the stage right side of the boat to align with the stage right flats, whereas purple stayed on the other side. The ladders, pipes, and chains all received dry-brushing treatments of the two accent colors in multiple shades (Figure 38). The final act of painting on the houseboat was to seal the tops of the upper and outer decks to protect the paint from the scuffing shoes of actors.

After painting on the houseboat wrapped, the electrician crew came in and wired twelve lightbulbs and sockets into the outer deck's pipes. Black duvetyn fabric hung on the back of the houseboat to cover the upstage door openings. Eventually, antique gold, polyester dupioni fabric curtains were installed in the window openings along with coat hooks found in our stock to hold the curtains back (Figure 39).



*Figure 36: Louks, Kaeanne. Image of the faced houseboat in the Lupin Theatre, complete with door, window openings with frames, ladders, and most of the railings. In the background, the doorway between the scene shop and the theater can be seen. 2024, Tulane University.*



*Figure 37: Louks, Kaeanne. Image of the semi-painted houseboat in the scene shop. 2024, Tulane University.*



*Figure 38: Louks, Kaeanne. Image of the painted houseboat in the Lupin Theatre. 2024, Tulane University.*



*Figure 39: Louks, Kaeanne. Image of the painted houseboat during lightbulb installation in the Lupin Theatre. Antique gold curtains are shown in the open and closed positions. 2024, Tulane University.*

We built the base of the car wagon for act two out of stock platforms and two-by-fours. We equipped multi-directional castors for ease of movement, and left an opening left underneath for an actor to “hide”. We referred to it as the bones of the car to come. It remained that way for several weeks to use during rehearsal.

The director of the production, Dr. Ryder Thornton, scouted out several cars at a local scrapyard for us to pull apart for our fake car needs (Figures 40 and 41). Once the two of us decided to go with the off-white Mini Cooper, Professor Ghinea and Dr. Thornton traveled to the scrapyard to take the car’s hood, headlights, bumper, grille rearview mirrors and various other pieces and parts. One of our carpenters, Keith Tujague, took on the seemingly impossible task of the car wagon’s assembly.

The original platform base required shortening to accommodate the specifications of the car’s hood. Stabilization became necessary for in between the wooden base and the hood, as we were informed an actor would be dancing on top of it. So, Mr. Tujague filled it in with a variety of wood scraps until it no longer bowed or buckled under weight. A work-study undergraduate student stapled a black, duvetyn fabric skirt where the grille had once been to hide the hollow underbelly, while a practicum undergraduate student painted the wooden parts of the wagon black (Figures 42 and 43).



*Figure 40: Thornton, Ryder. Image of scrapped Mini Cooper at scrapyard lot, missing grille. 2024, Pull-A-Part Scrapyard.*



*Figure 41: Thornton, Ryder. Image of Mini Cooper bumper and grille inside scrapped car. 2024, Pull-A-Part Scrapyard.*



*Figure 42: Louks, Kaeanne. Image of front view of car wagon with hood, headlights, bumper, and black duvetyn skirt. 2024, Tulane University.*



*Figure 43: Louks, Kaeanne. Image of side view of car wagon with hood, headlights, bumper, and black duvetyn skirt. 2024, Tulane University.*



In total, there were four wall flats of varying heights and widths, each with a designated name to help differentiate between them all. Skinny and Stout are the shorter set of flats that primarily live downstage of the other two flats, Itchy and Scratchy. All flats were built with double-sidedness in mind, one side for act two and the other for act three.

We used flats from our stock for the bases of Itchy and Scratchy, allowing for a quicker build time (Figure 44). Scratchy was the tallest of all the moving flats, reaching sixteen-feet tall on one side and roughly twelve-feet on the other. Itchy was the second tallest, continuing from the roughly twelve-foot edge of Scratchy and ending around ten-and-a-half-feet tall. We reminded ourselves which one was which by claiming that Scratchy scratched the ceiling with its towering height, and Itchy was therefore the other one. The backsides of the two flats were skinned with sheets and scraps of lauan plywood.

Skinny and Stout were constructed from both stock and new material, starting as several flats screwed together before I measured out and marked their unique outlines for cutting. Once cut, smaller blocks of wood were stapled along the organic edges of the flat in preparation for their covering. They were then skinned with sheets of lauan plywood on the back, and the new edges were covered in strips of chipboard stapled to the small blocks of wood to make a smooth surface. Skinny had the smallest width of nine feet, stretching up to eleven-foot at its highest point. Stout continued the tradition started by Itchy and Scratchy of being twelve-feet wide, but it had the shortest height of ten-foot tall.

For the act two side of all the flats, we built hollow columns made of blue XPS foam on three sides and several one-by-two wooden support squares. We found two twenty-four-foot columns gathering dust in our stock and cut them up to be used throughout the needs of the four flats. The remaining columns were built from stock XPS foam and scrap wood. One column on Scratchy had a dramatic cut into the top of it to follow the breakaway line of the flat's upper edge. We filled it in with Great Stuff expanding foam and chunks of XPS foam. A "rubble"-like surface was the intent of filling the cut, but due to a misunderstanding it became sanded to a smooth finish.

For the four sizeable window portions of Itchy and Scratchy, we married long stretches of one-by-four planks of wood with glue and staples. These acted as the mullion and muntin for the faux windows. One of the stretches was three windows wide, whereas the other was only two. This helped me distinguish which was which for my next task. Once the one-by-fours were set, I split each section in two by marking them to follow the "jagged" edges from my model drafting. Those marks were cut with a jigsaw, and then sheets of lauan plywood were laid out for me to mark out the "broken windowpane" areas for further jigsawing. Carpenters stretched yards of unbleached muslin fabric in between the one-by-four frames and the cut lauan plywood, stapling and gluing as they went to secure the fabric and insure its tautness. They were then installed on top of the base stock flats (Figure 45).



*Figure 44: Louks, Kaeanne. Image of Scratchy's base stock flats and tallest column installation. Remaining dusty stock columns lie on the stage floor. 2024, Tulane University.*



*Figure 45: Louks, Kaeanne. Image of Scratchy's assembled window section, its installation, and the foam columns that border it. 2024, Tulane University.*

Painting occurred after construction completed on all sections of the walls. The base paint on the stock flats from previous productions provided the perfect jumping-off point for the molded-green look of the end goal. A myriad of brown shades ranging from taupe to blackened burnt umber were spread on with a chip brush and stamped with a sea sponge to diffuse and provide texture. A sickly shade of pale green served as the primary coloring underneath the brown treatments, with the occasional sponging of raw sienna to bring some bacterial warmth to the walls (Figures 46, 47 and 48).

The window frames, or the mullion and muntin boards, received a solid coat of blackened burnt umber. I used a glaze of raw sienna concocted from a brew of approximately four-parts water and one-part paint over the stretched muslin fabric layer, dipping my chip paintbrushes into another bucket of water to thin the glaze further as needed. Once the pigment touched the muslin fabric, it did not budge, so too much raw sienna created visible brushstrokes and uniformity that contrasted with the smooth-planed goal. A damp washrag stayed close by to clean up all dribbled paint. Since the lauan plywood “broken window” edges existed behind the muslin, I enhanced their shape with watered-down containers of dark burnt umber and raw sienna, blending the two colors into each other with a chip brush (Figure 46).



*Figure 46: Louks, Kaeanne. Image of Itchy and Scratchy painted. Base flats shown display sponging and brushing “moldy” look. Window treatment shows unpainted, glazed, and shape-enhancing paintwork. Twelve-foot ladder for scale. 2024, Tulane University.*



*Figures 47 & 48: Tawatao, Maya. Collage of Skinny and Stout painted during a designer’s run. Base flats shown display sponging and brushing “moldy” look. 2024, Tulane University.*

On the act three side of all four flats, I painted a landscape reminiscent of the chalk drawing I drew on act two's chalkboard of "Terror River". Gradient skies of blue and purple were painted on Scratchy and Stout, whereas Itchy and Skinny portrayed a ruddy sunset of orange to blue. Windswept, spindly trees reached towards center stage, painted using a wet blending technique of the blackened ultramarine blue and either purple and orange for highlights, respectively. I began on Stout's tree first, sketching out every branch with a single stick of charcoal before going in with the paint (Figure 49). Skinny came next (Figures 50 and 51), followed by Scratchy and finally Itchy (Figure 52).

Painting Itchy and Scratchy proved slightly complicated, due to needing to work on the twelve-foot ladder that barely fit onto the two flats' wagons. Locking the wagons was vital to my safety on the ladder. By pressing the two flats together before locking in place, I was able to straddle them with my ladder to get to hard to reach areas.



*Figure 49: Louks, Kaeanne. Collage of Stout's transformation into the tree. The top right image depicts the faint charcoal sketch before I started painting the tree. 2024, Tulane University.*



*Figure 50: Louks, Kaeanne. Collage of Skinny's transformation into the tree, starting with the first blue background color. 2024, Tulane University.*



*Figure 51: Louks, Kaeanne. Image of Skinny and Stout finished. Itchy and Scratchy backgrounds started. 2024, Tulane University.*



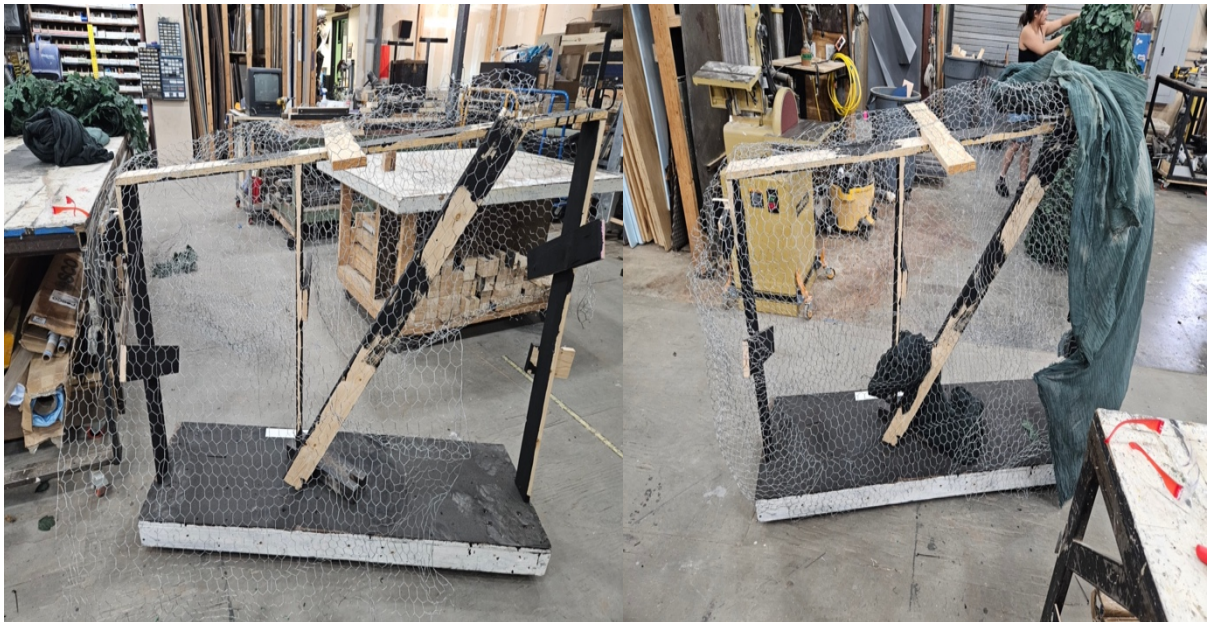


*Figure 52: Louks, Kaeanne. Image of Itchy and Scratchy finished. Featured also are the finished Skinny and Stout. 2024, Tulane University.*

Creating a realistic looking bush is not an easy feat. We had to build three of them. All received names from the carpenters that helped bring them to life. The smallest, Jeremiah, was roughly five-feet wide, eighteen-inches deep, and four-feet tall. The middle-sized one was Claranette, who was five-foot-six-inches wide, eighteen-inches deep, and five-feet tall. The biggest and most unwieldy was Wallthur, a six-foot wide, six-foot tall and eighteen-inches deep giant.

All began on custom-built wagons made of platforms and castors. An internal wooden support structure made of scrap one-by-fours reinforced the metal chicken wire mesh used to achieve the bush-like shape (Figure 53). The metal chicken wire was stapled to the wagon and along the inner structure to keep it in place, and each new section had to be hand twisted to intertwine with the last section to create a seamless curve to the mesh.

A layer of hand-dyed, green cotton gauze fabric covered the chicken wire, tacked on to the mesh with small knots of brown silamide thread borrowed from the costume shop (Figure 54). The final layer consisted of rolls of plastic greenery attached to a green grid. We pierced the fabric layer with black zip ties to secure the greenery down, following the convexity and concavity of the chicken wire's topography (Figure 55). The final step, besides adding stage weights to Wallthur and Claranette's wagons to prevent the bushes from tipping over, was to paint highlights and shadows onto the leaves. I mixed up lighter and darker values of warm-toned greens to help the individual leaves pop in color, breaking up the monotony of the plastic greenery's solid tone and dulling some of the plastic sheen.



*Figures 53 & 54: Louks, Kaeanne. Images of Jeremiah the bush. The left image shows the wagon, internal wooden support structure and beginnings of chicken wire application. The right image shows the beginning of the fabric layer. 2024, Tulane University.*



*Figure 55: Louks, Kaeanne. Image of the greenery application to Wallthur the bush. To the right in the image are the wire skeletons of Jeremiah and Claranette. 2024, Tulane University.*

There were three kabuki drop systems in total utilized in this production. Two thirteen-foot systems hung from John Hangers—custom metal pipe contraptions made specifically for the Lupin Theatre—over murals on either side of the stage, and one forty-foot system rigged from the lighting grid overhead. Mr. Johnson took the lead on building and installing them with the help of Mr. Tujague and Professor Ghinea. They were painted black, and four panels of black curtain drapes were split between the two thirteen-foot systems (Figure 56). We set a nineteen-by-thirty-six-foot sharkstooth scrim on the one hung from the grid. Over the teching process, we would come to find out that the grid-hung system was troublesome to work indeed.

We crafted two, two-dimensional trees out of several stock flats screwed together for act one. Using the matboard ½” scale trees from my model, the team set up an overhead projector to project their shadows. With ladders and permanent markers, they

traced the outlines of the trees and cut them out using a jigsaw. The team base painted them black in preparation of the final paint job. Mr. Johnson rigged them with an older style of removable jacks (Figure 58). An undergraduate practicum student used my model pieces as a guide to the final paint treatment (Figure 57).

For act one, many of the scenic elements were pulled from the Theatre and Dance Department's uptown storage building. In total, we pulled a boulder, three rocks, a lawn chair and a red couch that ended up in the production. Additionally, I found an old pillar made from a cardboard tube that we used to create the appearance of a fallen log. Professor Ghinea, with the help of a work study undergraduate student, fortified the tube to withstand jumping and standing without caving or rolling away. One of our carpenters, Hannah Landrum, took on the task of painting the bark and rings within the trunk. A working tube TV/VCR combo came from an upstairs storage room to use during pre-show (Figure 59). Mr. Johnson and I painted the rocks to fit in the grey/beige tones of the floor paintwork.

The campfire pit in the center of the stage came from a fifty-five-gallon steel drum Mr. Johnson sourced and cut in half. He then cut out a three-quarter inch thick circle of plywood and fitted it into the bottom of the drum to act as a base for all the lighting instruments to be added onto. Landrum painted the plywood black to make it disappear to the audience. Up in our props storage, I sourced chicken wire and muslin tree branches from a previous show of mine to cut into smaller logs and fill the pit. Electricians installed wireless lightbulbs, thus finishing the firepit (Figure 56).



*Figure 56: Louks, Kaeanne. Image of the setup for act one. To the right, black curtains are set in the stage left Kabuki Drop system. Below them stands Wallthur the bush and the log. Center stage holds the firepit, TV, Jeremiah the bush, several rocks, the lawn chair and couch. On stage right, a portion of the Kabuki Drop system can be seen along with Claranette the bush and a boulder. 2024, Tulane University.*



*Figure 57: Louks, Kaeanne. Image of the setup for act one plus the painted trees. 2024, Tulane University.*



*Figures 58 & 59: Louks, Kaeanne. Left image is of the removeable jack on the backside of one of the trees. Right image is the TV used for pre-show during a cue. 2024, Tulane University.*

For act two, we sourced a few pieces of furniture from our uptown storage building or around the McWilliams building, and one special piece came to us courtesy of the side of the road. Most other furniture pieces were bought and distressed with sandpaper and paint. For the commercial scenes (Figure 60), we pulled an end table and the outer shell of a tube TV from uptown storage, and a large rotating chalkboard from the halls of McWilliams (Figure 61). Mr. Johnson picked up and cleaned a modern-made vintage armchair, which he then welded steel bars underneath to put it on castors. We built a crate on castors from our stock of one-by-four wood planks and two types of plywood, then stained it with Thompsons' water seal stain. I ordered an area rug and a standing lamp, which I distressed with raw sienna glazes and spattered with blackened burnt umber mixed with water.



*Figure 60: Louks, Kaeanne. Image of act two commercial setup during a technical rehearsal. 2024, Tulane University.*



*Figure 61: Louks, Kaeanne. Image of top of the act two commercial setup without actors, but with the rotating chalkboard. 2024, Tulane University.*

For act three, we needed very little in terms of furniture. We put castors on a black rehearsal block, nicknamed the “H.M.S. Pinafore”. Had there been more time, the sides of the rehearsal block would have included calligraphed writing of the title along with the Union Jack, the flag of England. The houseboat and flats took up most of the stage, and the downstage left and right portions were filled with instruments and candles (Figure 62).

Behind the Kabuki Drop systems rested the final build, murals painted on sheets of lauan plywood. Due to time and its ever-limited quantity, the murals did not depict the various shapes of the *Simpsons* characters’ heads. Thanks to the help of my mentor, Dr. Diana Maria Cupsa, and my carpenter team, the murals got done. Dr. Cupsa painted fire



red curtains on the downstage side of the lauan sheets. A few of my carpenters and myself scumbled three shades of pthalo blue for the background, allowing Dr. Cupsa to follow along behind us and mark out cloud shapes. Dr. Cupsa and I painted the clouds off and on throughout the build process (Figure 63).



*Figure 62: Louks, Kaeanne. Collage of stage right and left musical instrument areas with candles. 2024, Tulane University.*



*Figure 63: Louks, Kaeanne. Collage of stage right and left murals, respectively. 2024, Tulane University.*

## CHAPTER FOUR: REALIZED PRODUCTION

*Mr. Burns, a Post-Electric Play* ran Tuesday, March 12<sup>th</sup> through Sunday, March 17<sup>th</sup>, 2024. We gained a new stage manager, Destany Gorham, at the start of tech, mere hours before it was to begin. It is not an exaggeration to say that without them, this show would not have happened. Bruce France shot professional photos on final dress rehearsal, but designers took their own photos throughout the process. One of the few regrets I have is not taking more photos while I could, specifically of act one.

The need to adapt and change the design happened as tech drew nearer. As mentioned previously throughout this thesis, several scenic elements were cut or adjusted the more time became a dwindling resource. The painted banner for act three got removed from the design early in the construction process once the true scope of the build came to light. The warehouse walls lost their graffiti and pink patchwork paint job. The murals on the stage right and left walls of the Lupin Theatre lost their *Simpsons* character silhouettes in favor of more defined clouds. Despite all of that, the show was a success, and the overall design did not suffer from the changes.

Dr. Thornton insisted on the audience seeing as little lighting fixtures as possible due to the lack of electricity in the world of the play. Due to that, the first act became incredibly dark, limiting the amount of scenery captured in photographs. The centerpiece of the first act, the firepit, shined both literally and metaphorically during the show

(Figure 64). Due to the size of the removable jacks on the backs of the trees, they were relegated to behind the sharkstooth scrim, which had been visible earlier in the tech process, but they became non-existent in the final lighting look. While that seemed to make the trees obsolete, they served a new purpose. While the detailed paintwork could no longer be seen, the sheer size of the trees helped cloak the shapes of Skinny and Stout, the smaller movable flats.



*Figure 64: France, Bruce. Collage of the firepit during Maria's monologue. 2024, Bruce France Media.*



*Figure 65: France, Bruce. Wide view of act one setup with ASL interpreters. 2024, Bruce France Media.*

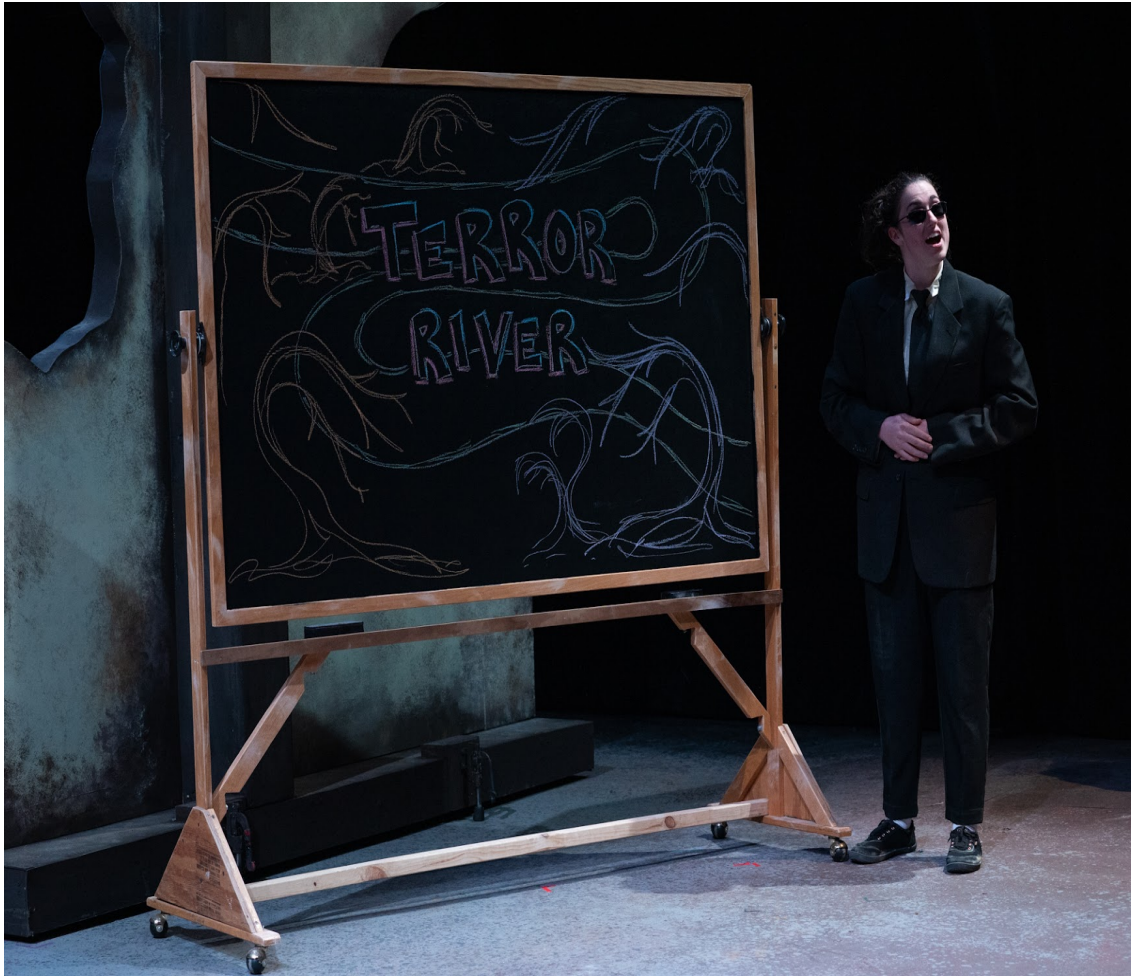
Act two saw the reveal of the entire stage—sans side walls—and with it, the painted floor. The floor’s paint treatment became one of the challenges that I had to learn to let go of my regrets over. Due to the needs of rehearsals and tech, I had one day to paint the entirety of the floor. Our costume designer, fellow MFA candidate Maya Tawatao, volunteered an hour and a half of her time to the endeavor, of which I am ceaselessly indebted to her for. Otherwise, I painted all of it alone. I used a roller for base colors—of which we were practically out of—and got to work flogging, brushing, and, for most of the time, spattering the floor.

By the end of the day, the floor still had puddles of wet spattered paint, meaning I could not do a sealing coat over top until it dried. Thankfully, the many castors rolling along the paint did very little damage to the floor (Figure 66). The run crew had to be reminded not to drag non-rolling items along the floor, as that did hurt the paint job.



*Figure 66: Louks, Kaeanne. Wide view of act two setup at the top of the scene, showcasing the painted floor. 2024, Tulane University.*

Compared to act one, the lighting in act two was much brighter, allowing all scenic elements to be seen in their entirety. The grungy paintwork on the floor complimented the decrepit spongework on the walls, lending itself to an overall compositional feeling of a dirty, possibly molding, warehouse. Light easily penetrated the glazed muslin fabric of the windows, elevating the shifting mood of the scene as night drew nearer (Figures 68 and 69). Skinny and Stout hid all the needed scenic elements for the act, including the giant rotating chalkboard and the car (Figures 66, 67 and 69)



*Figure 67: France, Bruce. Terror River chalkboard drawing in act two. 2024, Bruce France Media*



*Figure 68: Louks, Kaeanne. Sun setting near the end of act two. 2024, Tulane University.*



*Figure 69: France, Bruce. Sun setting in act two. 2024, Bruce France Media.*

Scenically, the most expressive use of color came with the scenery in act three. Oranges and purples and blues dominated the stage. I painted most of the colors brighter than the somber mood of the act called for in anticipation of a darker lighting design. I am thankful that I did. The houseboat stood out as the lightest element on the stage, helping it to maintain its role as the focal point of the scene. Despite the low lighting, candles flickered about the downstage area on stage left and right, brightening the general look. The smooth yet menacing trees painted on the moveable flats all reached inward towards the houseboat, raised up on their roots as if to tear themselves from the ground to reach their goals (Figure 70 and 72).



*Figure 70: Louks, Kaeanne. The dead Simpsons family urges on the battling Bart against Mr. Burns. Candles flicker in the background. 2024, Tulane University.*





*Figure 71: France, Bruce. Bart and Mr. Burns battle on the upper deck of the houseboat. 2024, Bruce France Media.*



*Figure 72: France, Bruce. Candles glow beside instruments while the Simpsons family is bound and gagged on the houseboat. 2024, Bruce France Media.*



*Figure 73: France, Bruce. Electricity returns for a moment. 2024, Bruce France Media.*



*Figure 74: France, Bruce. The reveal of how the electricity is powered. 2024, Bruce France Media.*



*Figure 75: France, Bruce. The moment before act three begins. The houseboat, enshrouded. 2024, Bruce France Media.*

## CHAPTER FIVE: RUMINATION

*Mr. Burns, a Post-Electric Play* is an ambitious script to take on. Our interpretation of the piece grew in both size and spectacle for each act, pushing our fabrication shops to their limits to achieve the collective's vision. As the sole graduate student in the scene shop for this production, I felt the strain of limited labor to help with the massive needs of the show. The need for skilled scenic painters in the theater realm had never been more obvious to me than after working on this show. Despite the long days and nights spent getting covered in sawdust and spattering paint all over the place, I don't regret a single moment. *Mr. Burns* truly felt like the ultimate culmination of my education at Tulane University.

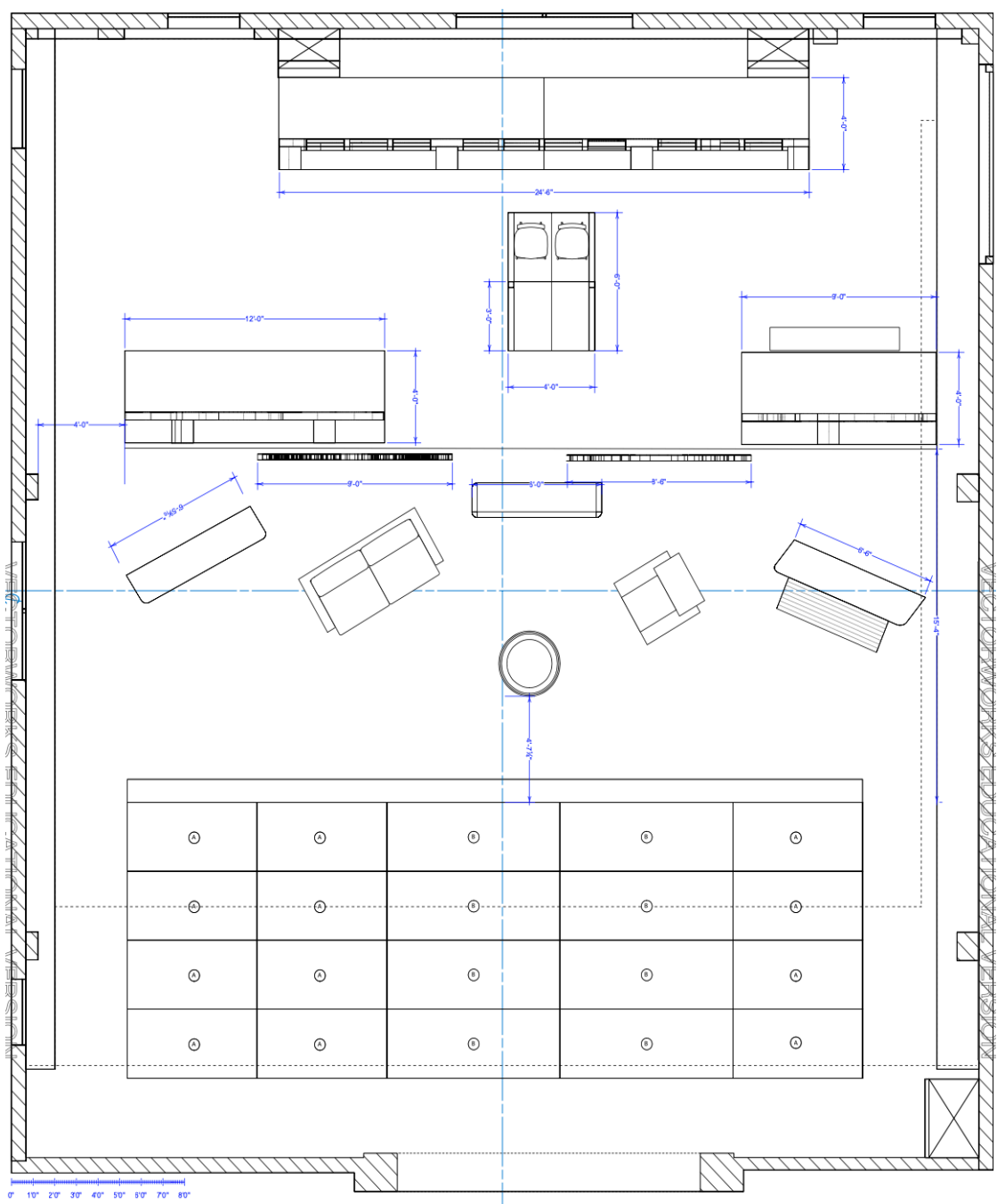
Collaboration is the heart of theater as an art form, and I was privileged with a talented design team that worked very well together. Constant contact with the costume designer, Maya, proved beneficial to the overall cohesion of the piece. We frequently discovered how much we were on the same page through various happenstance design decisions that complimented the other design field harmoniously, if unintentionally. As the props designer as well as the scenic designer, I collaborated often with Maya to make sure some of the "prop-stume" pieces aligned with both of our worlds.

The lighting designer, Professor Levy, and I cooperated frequently to integrate lighting within various scenic elements throughout the show. Brainstorming ways to

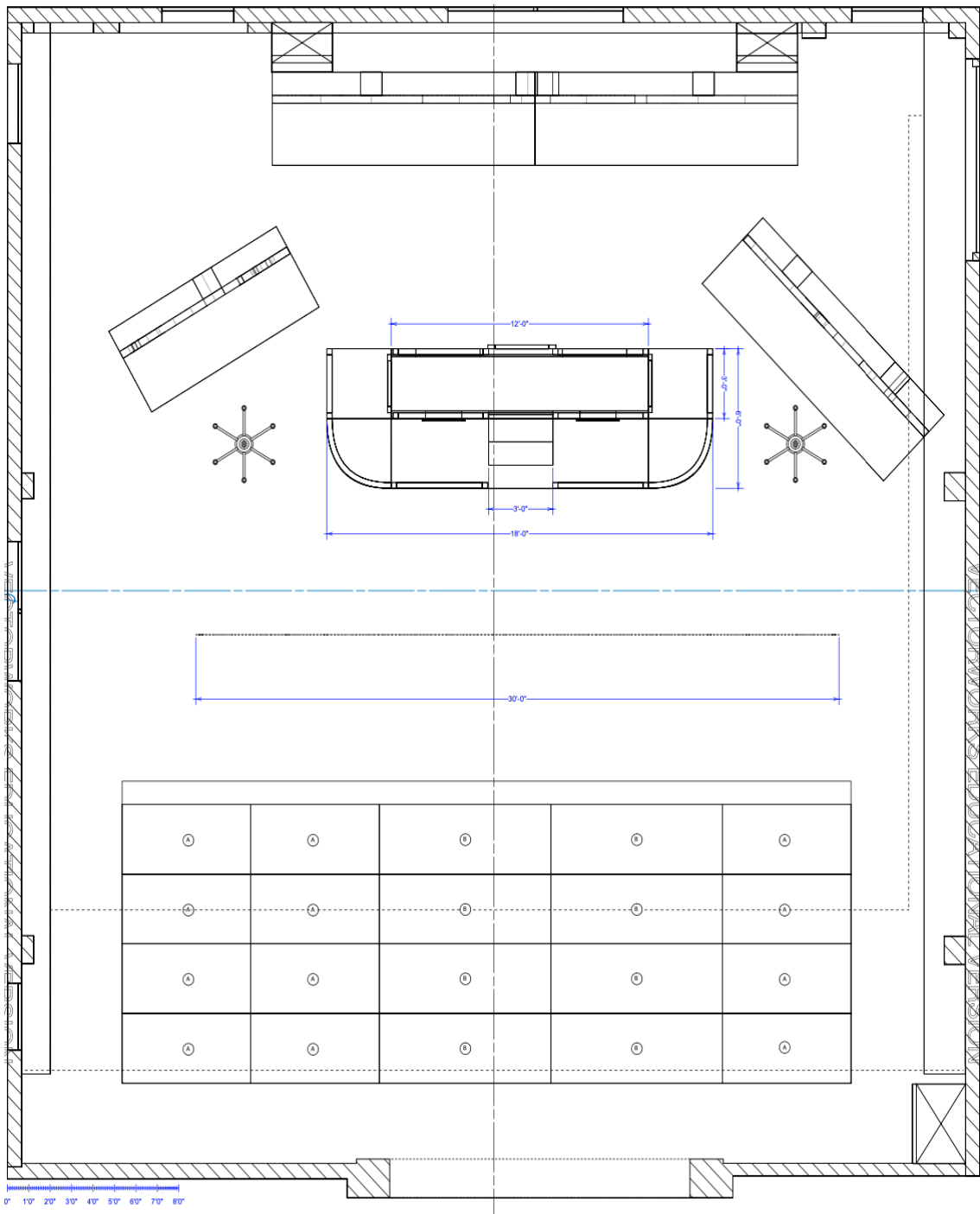
reveal the rudimentary use of electricity in act three proved challenging in a world that has gone eighty-two years without. Ideas that seemed charming in the mindscape compromised the integrity of my design once seen in the physical world, and we had to pivot several times before landing on the final look. I cannot thank Professor Levy enough for her patience and willingness to compromise on the matter. The resulting spectacle dazzled audiences and instilled a sense of awe at the innovation represented by the characters within the play.

After all the troubleshooting we did, there are a few ideas in hindsight that we could have improved or pursued with more time on our side. Yet, that is the beauty of theater. It is ephemeral. It is fleeting. We learn from our creations to make our next design even better. Despite it all.

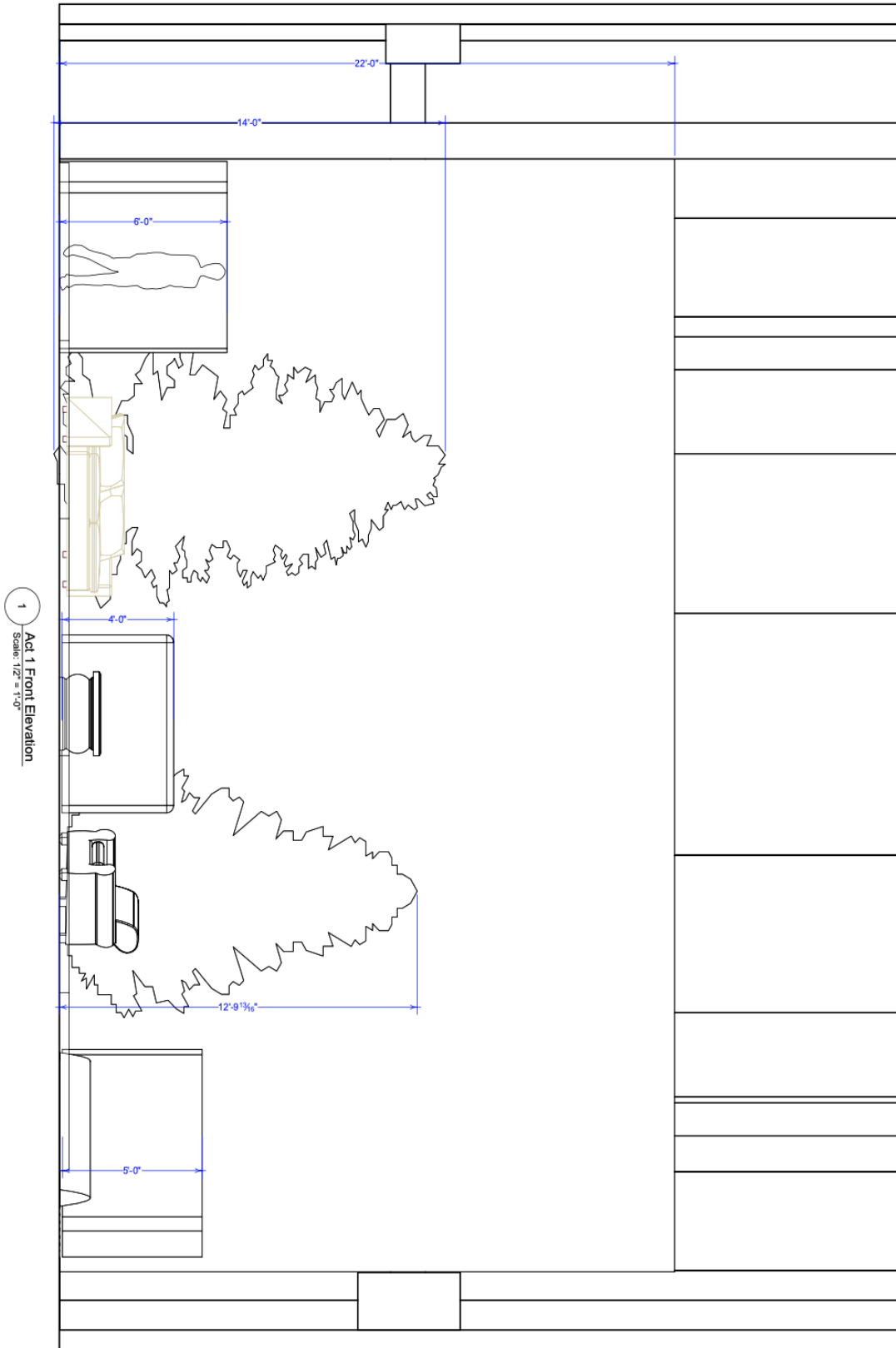
APPENDIX



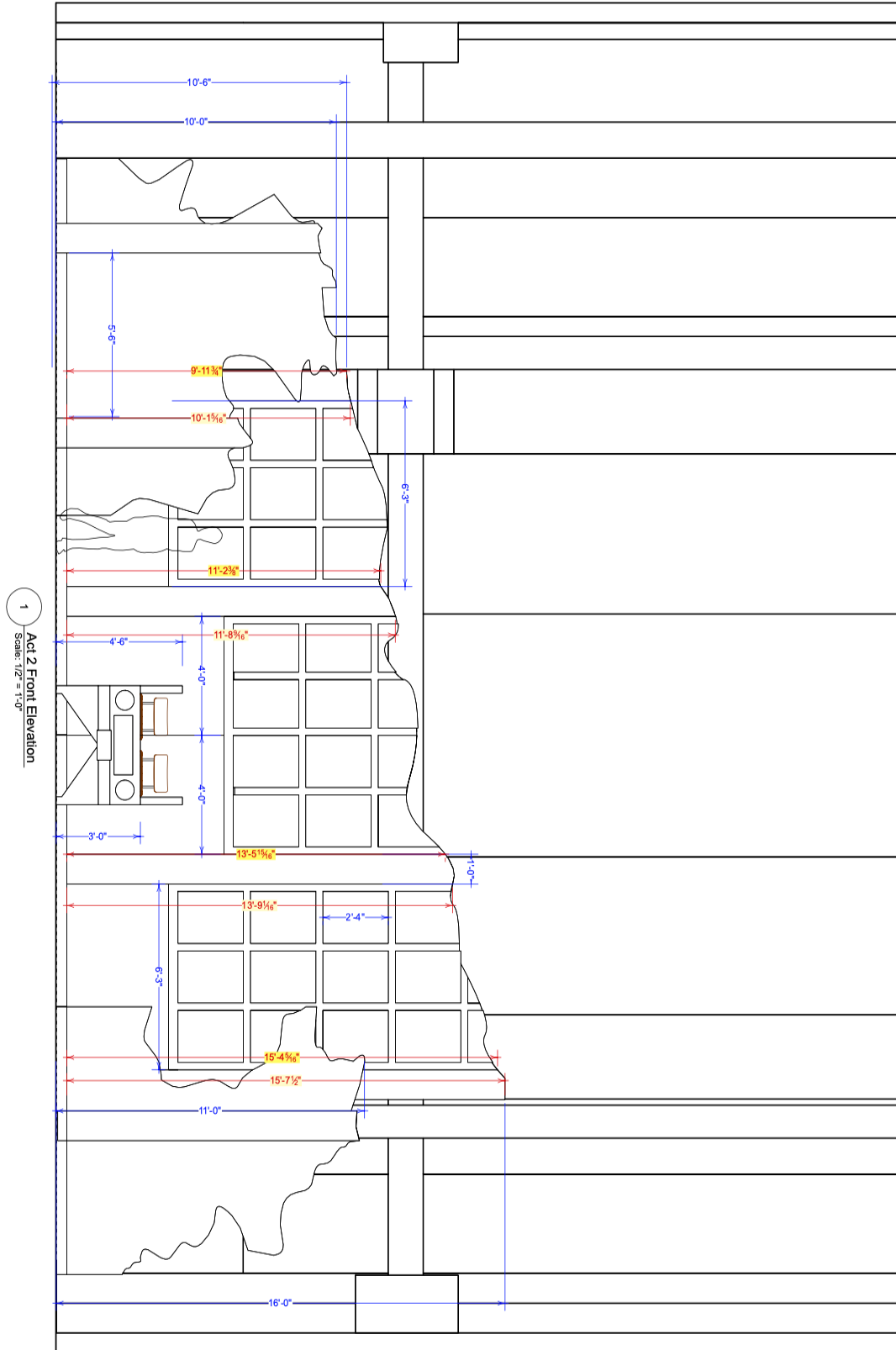
1  
1st & 2nd GP  
Scale: 1/2" = 1'-0"

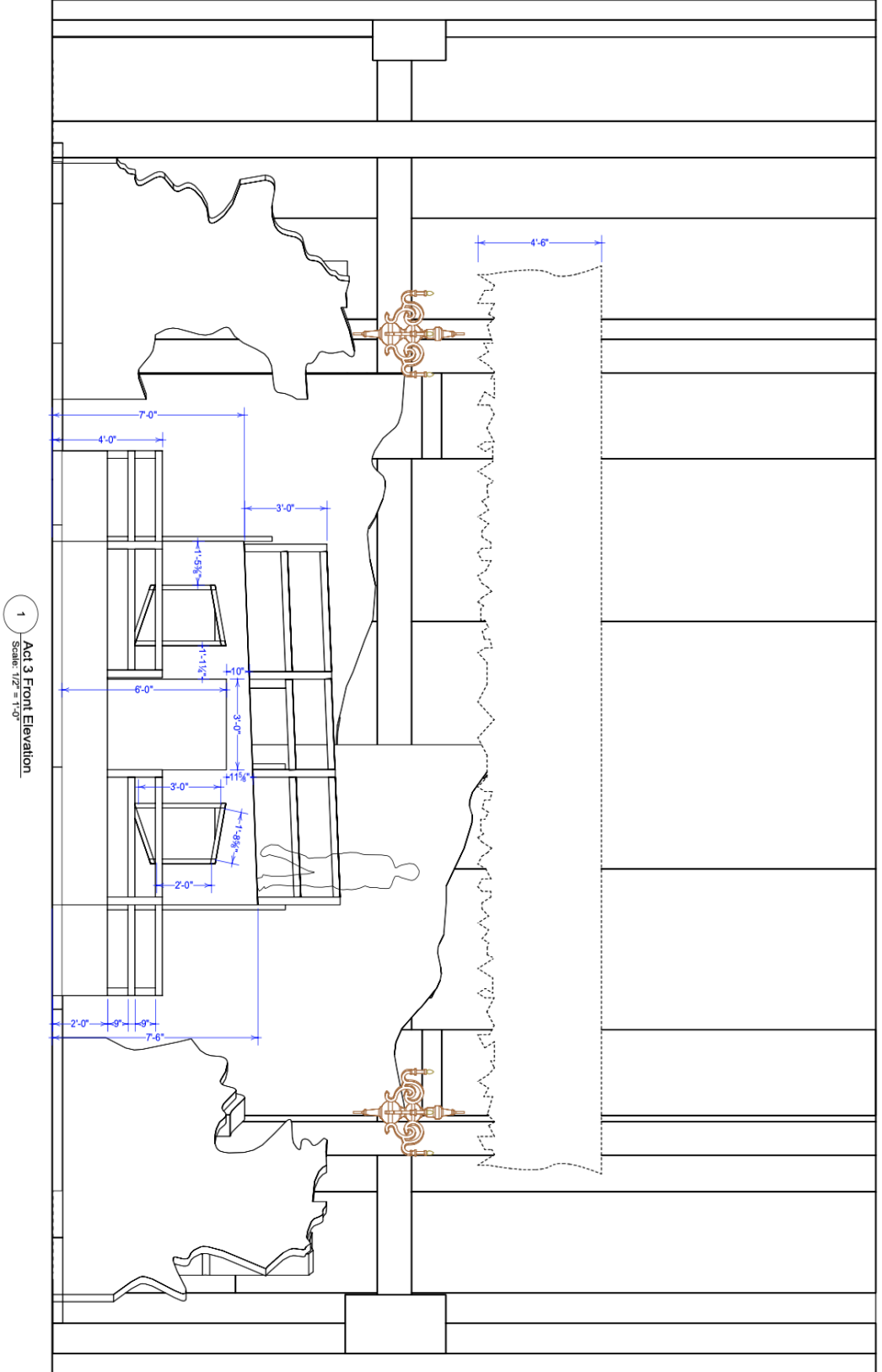


2  
3rd GP  
Scale: 1/2" = 1'-0"

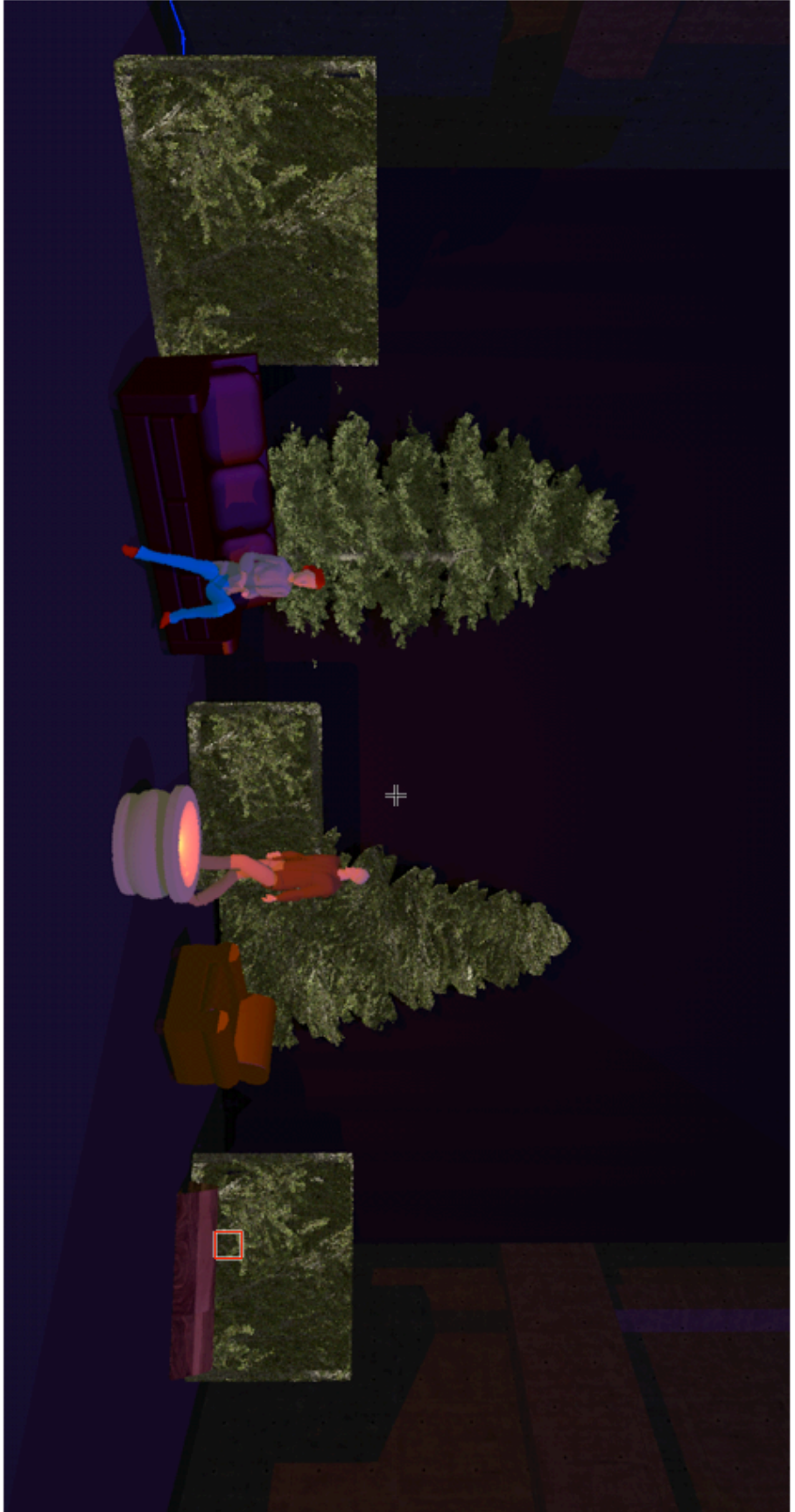








1 Act 3 Front Elevation  
Scale: 1/2" = 1'-0"



1 Arch 1 Digital Model  
scene: 1.jpg



1 Act 2 Digital Model  
Scene 1 of 14



1 Act 3 Digital Model  
scene 1-1-9

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## BIOGRAPHY

Kaeanne Louks grew up around the cornfields of Iowa and the towering trees of the Olympic Peninsula, graduating with her BA in Biology and Theatre from Central College in 2021. Currently, she is an MFA candidate in Scenic and Costume Design at Tulane University. While at Tulane, she has designed the sets for *Our Dear Dead Drug Lord*, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, *Crumbs from the Table of Joy*, *The 25<sup>th</sup> Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee*, *Mr. Burns, a Post-Electric Play*, and co-scenic designed *Odyssey*. Additionally, she has designed the costumes for *Dance Nation* and *Organic Matter*. She also designed and crafted props for countless Tulane productions, as well as designed projections for *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. During her summers, Kaeanne has worked as a props and puppetry designer for the NOLA Shakespeare Festival and as a scenic carpenter, painter and now designer for the Summer Lyric Musical Festival.