5-1979

Emergence of Abstraction in American Scenic Design, 1900-1945

Jim Albert Hobbs

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May 30, 1979

Culminating Project

This paper is a study of the conceptual work of Lee Simonson and Jo Mielziner and the influence of Simonson's design upon Mielziner. Much of what these men did in developing a distinctive design style is shared by others -- Robert Edmond Jones, Cleon Throckmorton and Norman Bel-Geddes, to name only a few. This style is that of investing the "stage picture" with abstract qualities expressing the theme of the play being produced.

This expression is developed through the handling of mass, line and color (in the manner of painters, architects and sculptors) to create scenery and acting spaces. One additional element is added in the theater -- that of light. This new element was a recent theatrical acquisition which scenic designers seized upon at once and used as an intregal part of their design concept.

When one is to research scenic designs which were mounted fifty or so years ago, one must accept that many of the basic elements of that design will be missing. There is no gallery to walk through to study those designs. Stage scenery is large and has no value after the close of a production. The scenic pieces, and most importantly, the specific use of color, are lost. The scenic colors, and how they responded to tinted stage light, are also gone. How the set colors interreacted to costume colors is gone. The progression and orchestration of lighting is gone, save for specific effects which caught a reviewer's eye.

What remains are comments by the designers themselves and others, and photographs -- foreshortened, underlit and occasionally fuzzy -- to suggest what occurred.

Suffice it to say that this is no way to study the works of Caravaggio, Rembrandt, Vermeer or Cezanne, although the scenic designers had much in common with those masters. What does not exist is a way to experience the impact of these scenic designs, a way to grasp the fullness or the nuances; they are gone.

It is possible, however, to study the periods which preceded and surrounded these designers and to contrast their work with that of others. In this way, though we are dealing only in the most gross terms, the major impact of the emerging abstraction can be preceived.

To identify the scenic elements to be discussed in this paper, through a general look at leading scenic artists and their work during the first two decades of the Twentieth Century, this section will include a written discussion of pictorial material. It will establish and identify the specific scenic elements under discussion and follow a general progression of abstract ideas as they appear and evolve. The paper will deal specifically with Simonson and Mielziner and two closely related productions which they designed.

It is not within the scope of this paper to explore influence from abroad, though certainly it existed. Instead, it will confine the discussion to "serious drama" which was written, produced and designed in the United States.

Before the opening of the Twentieth Century, theater in the United States was limited by a play structure which was highly melodramatic, generally tailor-made for a specific actor, full of high-flown rhetorical language and high moral purpose. There was emerging a movement in playwriting which was slowly casting off these limitations, or at least handling them in a more naturalistic manner.

Clyde Fitch was one of the earliest of the playwrights who used a "naturalistic" story line and style of language in his plays. This emerging

naturalism resulted in an interest in realistic detail in the settings and costumes. The first scenic design under discussion, The Climbers, will show this transition in progress.

Realistic settings became an endemic part of the American theater, and David Belasco remains famous for his development of "realistic effects" to support his productions. The second and third scenic designs in this paper, Girl of the Golden West and The Easiest Way, will follow this development.

Other ideas were rapidly gaining a foothold in the theater. And as the concept of naturalistic plays with realistic settings was being refined, a totally new idea of using the abstract qualities of scenic design to contribute to the play's meaning began to emerge.

Once again, it was the playwright who led in opening new doors, but he quickly found support from scenic designers. Three productions of O'Neill's Bound East for Cardiff show the evolution of these ideas.

Finally, and this only covers a period of twenty-five years, scenic designers were reaching back to turn-of-the-Century design ideas of painting and simply suggesting settings. However, now they were able to use these ideas in furtherance of the abstract qualities of the play, with the scenery supporting and developing the playwright's thoughts.

The Climbers

Written and Directed: Clyde Fitch

Produced: Amelia Bingham

Bijou Theater, New York City

Opened January 21, 1901 - 163 Performances

To begin the 1900-1901 theatrical season, and the Twentieth Century, the most obvious choice is a production written by Clyde Fitch. Highly prolific, he had five productions in New York that season and five more on the road.[1] Fitch's success was directly responsible for the new interest which producers gave to American playwrights.[2]

Fitch exemplifies the commercialism of the period. Most of his plays were "star vehicles", written for specific actors. It is interesting to note that he became a millionaire through his play writing.[3] Throughout his career, he was accused of hasty writing and being careless rather than devoting the necessary time to producing a meaningful treatment of which many felt him capable.[4]

The Climbers opens with a funeral and at the final curtain, ends with a suicide. Interestingly, despite his other hits, Fitch had trouble finding a producer for The Climbers. However, he finally succeeded with Amelia Bingham, the actress standing stage left center in the photograph. The Climbers enjoyed a healthy New York run, noted above. The length of a play's New York run has extended dramatically over the last seven decades, a result of changing economic realities.

The Climbers, in attempting a "new truth" in language and story line, had created new demands for scenic expression. There was a blending of concepts

existing in the stage setting. The expanded use of "real" properties, such as the bar, statuary and practical curtains, was used to develop the action, but also to state the wealth and social position of the characters. This statement was further developed by the use of painted scenery. The painted molding, fluting, arches and columns are examples of this. Even more so is the painted arcade and stair rail which suggest a third dimension to the scenery in a rather casual way. Shadow and highlight are almost nonexistent in this painting. There is no attempt to give any real feeling of weight or material to the arcades. There is no embarrassment in placing the "practical" bar next to painted scenery. The stained glass windows, another suggesstion of wealth, are painted and opaque and treated in the same manner as the arcade. In concept, the only function of these pieces is to indicate something, and they have no further function.

The arrangement of furniture is another indication of this type of setting. The chairs, stage left, are an isolated island without any sense of how they would be used in the "real world".

The scenery states exactly what it must, bluntly and artlessly. This is not to imply without craft, for spacially the set is well designed and effective.

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1 Brockett, History of the Theater, (p. 515)

2 Morehouse, Matinee Tomorrow, (pp. 6-7)

3 Lewis, Stages, (p. 4 f.f.)

4 Morehouse, Matinee Tomorrow, (pp. 19-20)

THE CLIMBERS ACT III

1901

is blown through the chinks in the logs of the cabin. This snow effect took thirty-two trained men to achieve and is almost gratuitous to the story line.[5]

Morehouse quotes John Mason Brown: "In spite of Mr. Belasco's fidelity to realism and his fondness for truth, his first allegiance has been neither to truth nor realism, but to what he thought his audiences would accept as truth."[6]

The treatment of the painted planking in Act I gives pictorial support for the above statement. The space between planks has been exaggerated. In the ceiling, a "practical" beam runs diagonally across the painted support beams. (While it lacks architectural logic, it does support very colorful props.) The up-stage wall treatment is similar to the other, with a deer hide in complete contrast to the painting.

Examination of the painting shows skilled scenic work; for example, the gradations between the ceiling shadings and the wall shadings. The ability to create such strong lighting of the exterior (note the floor shadows parallel to the bar) and adequate interior lighting (the faces, the costumes and the clear readability of the stock in the up stage shelves) shows a masterful handling of the technical aspects of the production. Shadowless treatment of the backdrop in Act IV supports this. The blending of dimensional foliage and painted foliage and vistas is superb.

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1 Morehouse, Matinee Tomorrow, (p. 59)

2 Appelbaum, The New York Stage (notes, Museum of New York, New York)

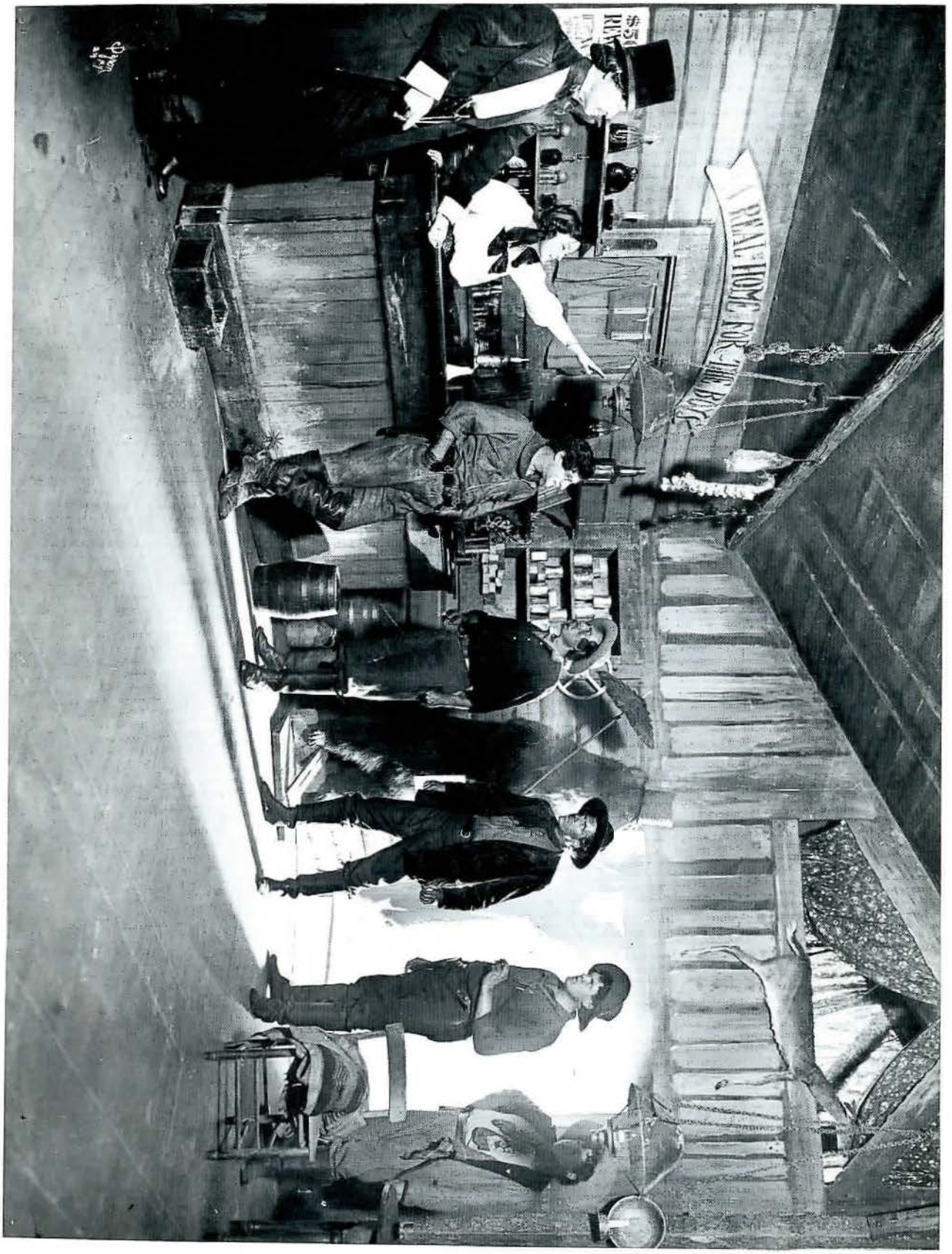
3 Beckerman and Siegman, On Stage, (p. 406)

4 Downer, Fifty Years of American Drama, (p. 23 f.f.)

5 Gorelik, New Theaters for Old, (p. 166)

6 Morehouse, Matinee Tomorrow, (p. 15)

GIRL OF THE GOLDEN WEST
ACT I



1905

GIRL OF THE GOLDEN WEST
ACT IV

1905

The Easiest Way

Written: Eugene Walter

Produced and Directed: David Belasco

Sets: Ernest Gros

Stuyvesant Theater, New York, January 1909 - 157 Performances

The Easiest Way evolved a scenic reputation which far outstrips other Belasco productions. Seen in its time as a play of power and boldness, it achieved critical and public success.[1] However, it is best remembered for Belcasco's purchase of a furnished boardinghouse room, including the wallpaper, which was used as the Act II setting.[2]

Eugene Walter was as devoted to realistic detail as Belasco. He included four pages of description of the Act II setting.[3] This same meticulousness to details extended to the script, where he felt that he was achieving a "photographic realism", and later critics agree that The Easiest Way was a gesture toward honest characterization, and only the morality of the day prevented full achievement of it. In its day, it was seen as a radical departure from conventional drama.[4]

The Act II setting, which is so often mentioned, is pictured here. Of particular note is the threadbare throw rug down stage of the headboard, the peeling wallpaper (especially above the bed), the washstand with its full complement of props, the crammed mirror frame and the working gaslight over the center table. The window drapes, doilies and table cover are authentic and, like the famous wallpaper and furnishings, were purchased from a boardinghouse. The wall to wall carpeting, though extremely large, seems to have the same design as the throw rug.

The costume and make-up of the house servant, stage right, are an odd touch and somewhat overdone, Lee Simonson notes.[6]

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1 Morehouse. Matinee Tomorrow, (p. 91)

2 Brockett. History of the Theater, (p. 514)

3 Downer. Fifty Years of American Drama, (p. 32)

4 Ibed. (p. 41 f.f.)

5 Geld. O'Neill, (p. 128)

6 Simonson. The Stage is Set, (p. 296)

THE EASIEST WAY
ACT II

The plays discussed so far cover the first decade of the Twentieth Century. The move toward a developed naturalism seems in many ways complete. With The Easiest Way, this is the path which drama was following. Musical theater, however, was lagging far behind. The Shubert brothers, for example, still maintained huge warehouses full of scenery and costumes which were mended, reshuffled and used time and again, almost indiscriminately.[1]

Naturalism, with its implications of "truth" and "realism" on stage, continued over the next decade, and the realism of stage settings became established as the keynote of American theater.[2]

Clearly, the scenery developed during this period served its function well. It remained for playwrights and directors to begin to explore new territory for scenic designers to follow.

It should be noted that the emergence of a new type of scenery was heralded by Harley Granville-Barker productions in 1915 for the New Stage Society.[3] Chief among these productions was Anatole France's The Man Who Married a Dumb Wife, designed by Robert Edmond Jones. This production and the fresh scenic concept, had an impact upon New York City theater goers.[4] For several reasons this production is not being used in this narrative beyond noting that a receptive audience for further scenic exploration existed as early as 1915.

Moving in a direct line of American playwrights, directors, producers and designers was the early work of Eugene O'Neill.

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1 Stagg. The Shubert Brothers, (p. 235)

2 Downer. Fifty Years of American Drama, (p. 42)

3 Brockett. History of the Theater, (p. 632)

4 Morehouse. Matinee Tomorrow, (p. 143)

Bound East For Cardiff

Written: Eugene O'Neill

First production: Provincetown Players

Provincetown Playhouse on the Wharf, Second Bill, Summer 1916

Second Production: Provincetown Players

Staged: Eugene O'Neill

Provincetown Playhouse (139 McDougall Street, New York City)

S. S. Glencarlin

Third Production: Provincetown Players

Directed:James Light

Designed: Cleon Throckmorton

Greenwich Village Theater, New York City, November 3, 1924

(Note: This third production included Bound East For Cardiff as the fourth of four episodes aboard the S. S. Glencarlin.)

Each scenic idea is included in this paper. Collectively, they show a development in scenic design concept. Several things should be kept in mind while comparing the photographs and rendering. While the Provincetown Players had very limited funds in 1916,[1] the problem of equipping the forecastle of a tramp steamer could not have been difficult in a fishing port such as Provincetown. However, the set is rigidly stark; there are no clusters of hanging raincoats, drying boots or the myriad of props which could have been used. Instead, nothing interferes with the story -- that of a seaman, Yank, who is talking to his frieds as he lies dying.

Specifically, the scene is deliberately cramped and stripped bare. In many ways the bareness of Yank's life is reflected by his surroundings. He

talks of wanting to buy a farm, but knows he will be buried at sea. Space will not open for him; he will die in a bunk that is almost coffin-like in size -- among identical bunks. These visual points are not lost as his mates drift in and out of the forecastle of the ship.

In the 1924 production, the scenic design is further developed. There is ample money for scenery, and, as a matter of fact, the S. S. Glencarlin was one of two O'Neill productions in New York City at the time.[2] However, the cramped, bare forecastle is unchanged. The curved hull creates a kind of proscenium arch, but only emphasizes crampedness. The only serious addition is that of a suggestion of metalwork, which further isolates Yank and has echoes of the design for O'Neill's Hairy Ape, also designed by C. Throckmorton with Robert Edmond Jones.[3] The scene has changed spacially by separating the bunks and by the use of an aisle, creating a foreshortened up stage wall. Yet this is only a change of means; the end effect remains the same.

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1 Deutsch and Hanau. The Provincetown, (pp. 11 and 12)

2 Gelb. O'Neill, (p. 567)

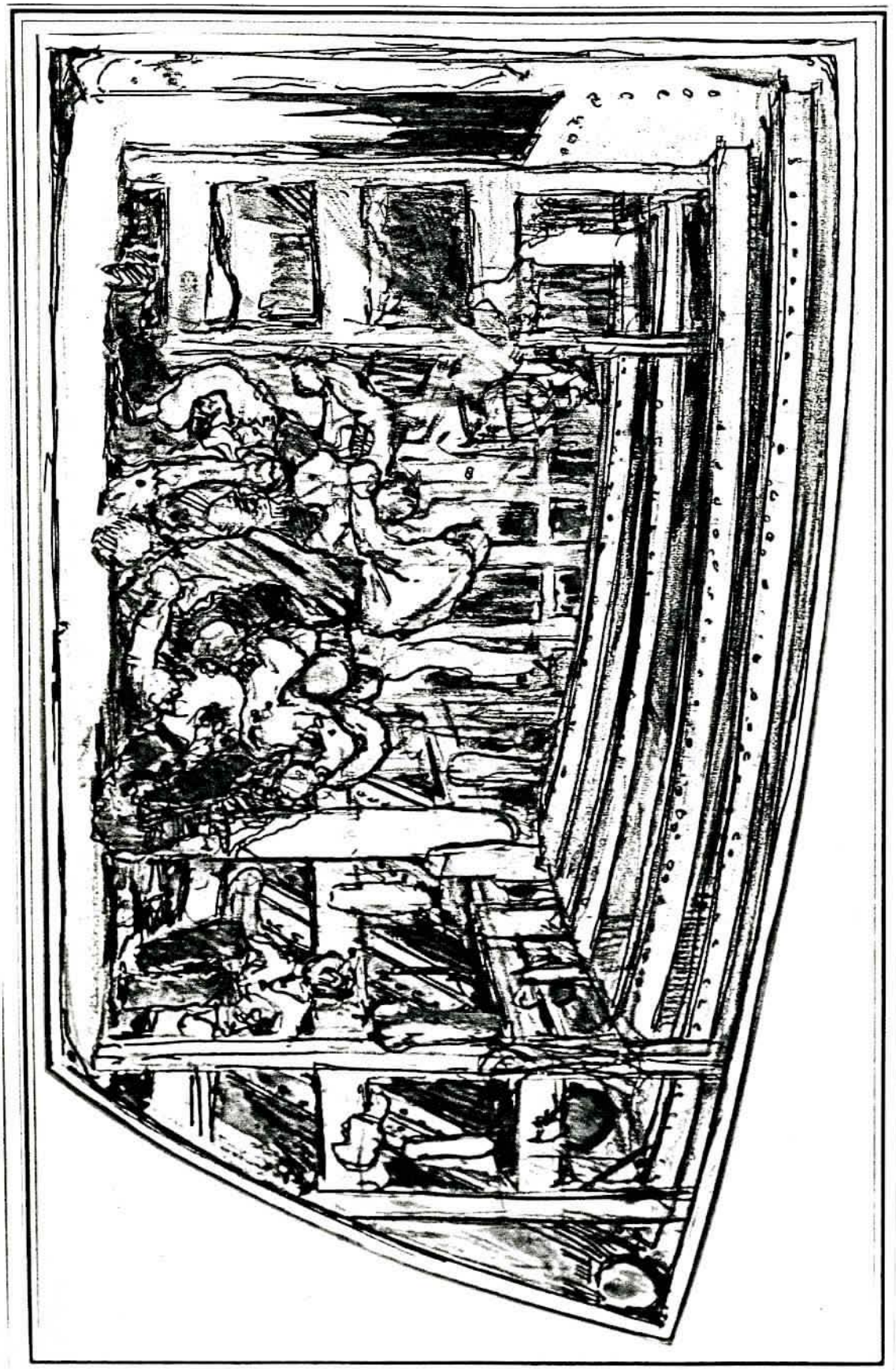
3 Provincetown Play Bill, Index B

PROVIDENCE TOWN

BOXING FOR CHARITY — 1915

BOUND EAST FOR CARDIFF

(SSC4, OF S.S. GLENCARLIN) N.Y.C.



The emphasis upon abstract rather than realistic scenic elements in Bound East reflects the transition which occurred toward the end of the second decade of the Twentieth Century.

There were many factors which contributed to this transition; World War I and an international involvement, as well as emerging playwrights at home. New production groups, such as the Washington Square Players, the Provincetown Players and, finally, the Theater Guild opened new horizons for the public as well as broader opportunities for playwrights, directors and designers.

The Theater Guild's first season production in 1919 of St. John Eruin's John Ferguson exemplified this new outlook. Lee Simonson notes that "Scenic designing is an intregal part of the values of a play....." and that the Theater Guild was engaged "in a nightly adventure of convincing an audience by the time the curtain fell of the importance of some theme that [might have] seemed remote or irrelevant when the curtain rose.". Further, he states that "most of my designing for the Theater Guild has necessarily been part of an effort to project ideas not already obvious to New York theater goers.".[1] The response to this idea can be seen by the fact that the success of John Ferguson paid the rent for the Guild's first season.[2]

Many productions followed John Ferguson at the Theater Guild and elsewhere which put into practice these ideas. Beyond the Horizon (1920), Emperor Jones (1920), Lilliom (1921) and He Who Gets Slapped (1922) are only a sample of theater being produced and accepted, if the length of their production runs is any indication -- 111 performances for Beyond the Horizon to 308 for He Who Gets Slapped.

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1 Simonson. The Stage is Set, (p. 105 f.f.)

2 Ibed. (p. 365)

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1 Simonson. The Stage is Set, (p. 105 f.f.)

2 Ibed. (p. 365)

The Great God Brown

Written: Eugene O'Neill

Produced: Kenneth MacGowan, Eugene O'Neill and Robert Edmond Jones

Directed and Designed: Robert Edmond Jones

Greenwich Village Theater, Opened January 23, 1926
271 Performances

O'Neill chose masks as a major method of expressing "those hidden profound conflicts of the mind".[1] As the play progressed, the masks changed according to changes within the characters. The abstract qualities of the change-revealing masks were used by the playwright to offer simultaneous insights into the characters. In contrast to this, he specifies, "The background [of the interior, Act I, Scene 2] is a painted backdrop on which the rear wall is painted with intolerable lifeless realistic detail of the stereotype paintings which usually adorn the sitting rooms of such houses.".[2]

This painted backdrop motif is used in all six settings, the flat, "lifeless" painted environments contrasting to the living emotions and complementing the stereo-typical lives.

The photograph, Act IV, Scene 2 of Brown's library, with painted books, vases and mirror reveals no attempt to paint realistically (note the treatment of the wallpaper and mirror) but to isolate and suggest wealth, shallowness and such. Contrasting this type of painting to The Climbers, painted twenty-five years earlier (see above), similar effects have come to mean entirely different things, where painted molding and detail are simply

used to tell the viewer that they are seeing characters in a wealthy home. Now the painting tells the spectator what this success "really means" and something of what this success has cost the character. There is the further effect of contrasting the living characters (sometimes hidden behind a mask, sometimes not) against the flat painted background, and giving more force to the meaning of the real needs and desires of the characters.

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1 Clark. Eugene O'Neill, (p. 103)

2 O'Neill. Great God Brown

GREAT GOD BROWN

GREAT GOD BROWN

The preceeding section followed a development of scenic ideas from a crude beginning at the turn of the Century through 1925. Over 2,000 productions were mounted during this time. The specific productions which are being discussed were selected for the aspects of design representing this period.

Scenery progressed from a "box set" designed to indicate time, place and social status, to revealing environmental settings which were exact embodiments of their "real life" counterparts, to making substantial contributions to the life of the play itself.

Two designers whose work evolved from the latter part of this period were Lee Simonson, whose design work began in 1919 with the Theater Guild (earlier designing was done with the Washington Square Players in 1915 but was interrupted by his service in World War I)[1] and Jo Mielziner, active from 1924, when he also began designing with the Theater Guild.[2]

The productions they designed were almost unbelievable, to some degree in quantity, but more in terms of productions which shaped the American theater from a period which ranged from the shows Heartbreak House (Simonson) to Arthur Miller's After the Fall (Mielziner).

The final part of this paper will be an examination of their work, emphasizing the abstract qualities which they used as an endemic part of their work.

Above, there has been an effort to show an orderliness in the progression of scenic design. However, in this section the effort will not be directed toward progression so much as a comparison of the design efforts of these two men. To effect this, it will be necessary to compare productions which were

designed many years apart under widely varying circumstances. The concern in this section of the paper will be with content more than with chronology.

In the last play discussed, O'Neill's Great God Brown, Robert Edmond Jones abandoned the closed set for a plain, painted background surrounded by a dark negative space, as opposed to the painted positive space. This void, which Jones uses in many designs -- Desire Under the Elms and Mourning Becomes Electra, to name only two -- is used to surround the setting almost as another proscenium arch. This concept seems to be a step beyond the traditional picture frame use of the proscenium and the box set. It remains for Simonson to begin to expand this void, not so much as stark contrasts between positive and negative space, but opening new spaces beyond and through the settings.

This is a scenic devise which both he and Mielziner used often in their work. It served to expand not the "real" on-stage space, but to give an illusion of an entire world onto which the set opened, with the characters in the play occupying a middle ground.

An interest in the treatment of space was shown as early as 1920 with the Provincetown Players constructing a curved plaster cyclorama (dome) for their production of O'Neill's Emperor Jones, designed by Cleon Throckmorton.[1] They were plagued with technical problems in this production, which Alexander Woollcott notes.[2] It should be noted that the effect they strove for was one of a forest which "surrounds" and "closes in upon" rather than one opening and expanding space.

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1 Pecktal. Designing and Painting For The Theater, (p. 229

2 Ibid. (p. 61)

3 Beckerman and Siegman. On Stage, (p. 13)

Heartbreak House

Written: George Bernard Shaw

Produced: The Theater Guild

Directed: Dudley Digges

Sets: Lee Simonson

Garrick Theater, New York City, November 20, 1920
125 Performances

The set, Act I and Act II, interior; Act III, exterior.

Shaw called for an interior setting which was to resemble the cabin of a ship overlooking a southern view of a garden -- the site of Act III.

The furnishings are shown as described by Shaw.[1] Simonson took no liberties with this in the setting.

Alexander Woollcott found the set "rich and beautiful" and wondered "if this did not chafe against the sparseness of the language".[2]

Simonson achieved the ship-like effect through a series of up-stage windows, imparting the sense of the stern of a large sailing ship, accenting this shape with curved moldings placed above and with an unpadded window seat below. The up-stage entrance, stage right, led, not to the garden but to the rest of the house. The furnishings were ship-like in their uncluttered arrangement, and seemed unpretentious and utilitarian. All of this is shown in the Act I photograph.

In Act II, the barrier effect of the up-stage wall becomes uppermost. One can sense the outside world, view it, discuss it, etc., but is clearly separated from it. The lighting, as shown, helps make this point. In visual terms, Simonson has followed the story line. Captain Shotover is aware of how

his life and the lives of his guests are shut off from the world. "Learn navigation", he advises, "then abandon it at your peril". The time of the play is just before the outbreak of World War I; just before the "real world" will force itself upon Heartbreak House.

Act III is the garden. It is here that the characters will listen to the concert of bombs as war begins. Once more, Simonson has used space and barriers to correspond with the story. The solid protection of the wall of the house has given way to a low finely built old garden wall, and beyond nothing stands to protect them.

These seem to be such simple devices - the straightforward presentation of the wall in Act I, the development of this concept through light in Act II, and then the lowering of the wall for Act III. Yet these devices combine to add great clarity to the text and give strength to the characters.

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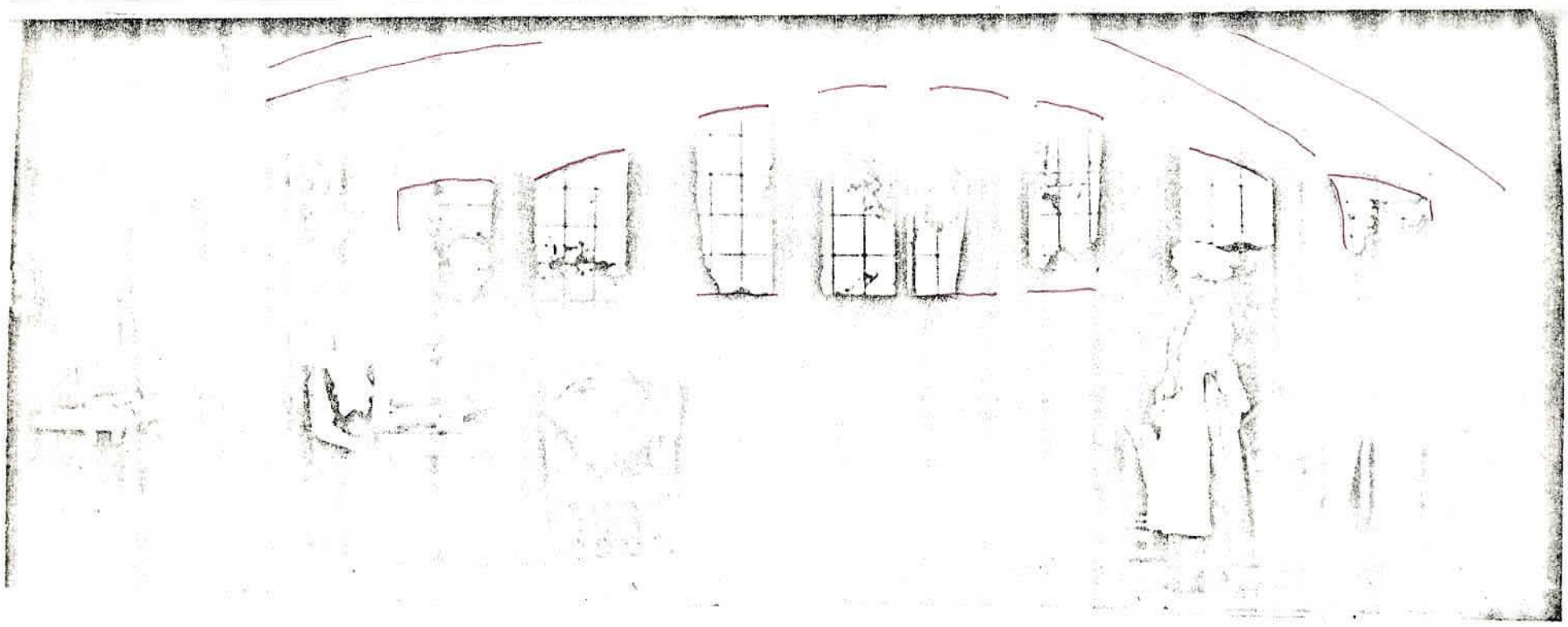
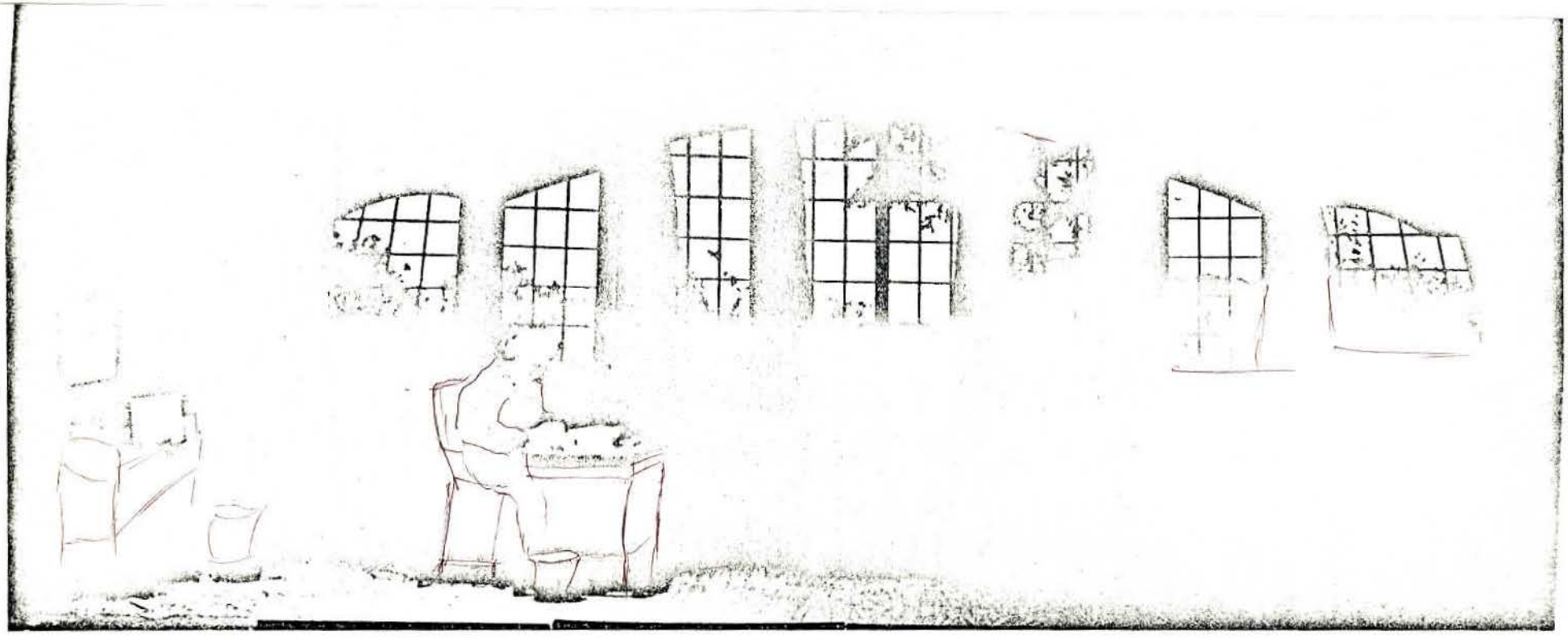
1 Shaw. Complete Plays, Vol. 1, (p. 444)

2 Beckerman and Siegman. On Stage, (p. 15)

HEART BREAK HOUSE
ACT I



HEARTBREAK HOUSE
ACT II



HEARTBREAK HOUSE

ACT III

The Glass Menagerie

Written: Tennessee Williams

Produced: Eddie Dowling and Louis J. Singer

Staged: Eddie Dowling and Margo Jones

Designed: Jo Mielziner

Playhouse Theater, New York City, March 31, 1945

As with Heartbreak House, The Glass Menagerie is a play with a single location, where the interior and exterior reveal different aspects of the play and characters. The location is that of the Wingfield ground-floor apartment in a tenement flanked by alleys. Two curtains are used: the first shows the exterior of the tenement; the second, the wall between the living room and the dining room, directly up-stage. Through lighting, these "walls" become transparent, and as Tom narrates the opening, slowly one is able to see the family in the dining room.

The exterior speaks volumes about the circumstances of the family, and sets up a shocking contrast as one begins to see and recognize the contents of the house.

Beyond the immediate exterior is the "real world", not nearly as accessible as that of Heartbreak House, but here it is seen (imagined really) as more promising and rewarding. Both plays deal with the world confined within the setting and the world beyond; both plays are concerned with what is being protected and what must be risked in order to participate in the "real world".

Technically, the transitions in The Glass Menagerie are more complicated than in Heartbreak House. However, it is still through the use of scenic pieces and lighting that one moves through the characters' world.

Tennessee Williams calls Glass Menagerie a memory play.[1] And Jo Mielziner says of his design, "My use of translucent and transparent scenic interior walls was not just another trick. It was a true reflection of the contemporary playwright's interest in -- and at times obsession with -- the exploration of the inner man. Williams was writing, not only a memory play but a play of influences that were not confined within the walls of a room.".[2]

During the opening scene, the facade of the tenement becomes transparent and finally disappears, allowing the audience to move slowly into the Wingfield family's life. There is something akin to the dissolve effect Belasco used in Act I of The Girl of the Golden West, discussed above. However, here what is revealed is synchronized with Tom's narrative opening speech. One moves back in time with him. During the play, lighting is used to move from interior to exterior and from past to present.

At the conclusion of the play, the transparent drop reappears and slowly becomes opaque, repeating the opening scene.

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1 Williams. The Glass Menagerie (Script), (p. 3)

2 Mielziner. Designing For The Theater, (p. 124)

GLASS
MENAGERIE

Liliom

Written: Ferenc Molnar

Produced: Theater Guild

Directed: Frank Reicher

Settings: Lee Simonson

Garrick Theater, April 20, 1921, 300 Performances

The settings for Liliom are full environments set against an open sky. The theater space has been expanded and opened. The reproductions include the amusement park (Liliom's courtship), the court room (Liliom in Heaven) and an exterior (Liliom's return to Earth).

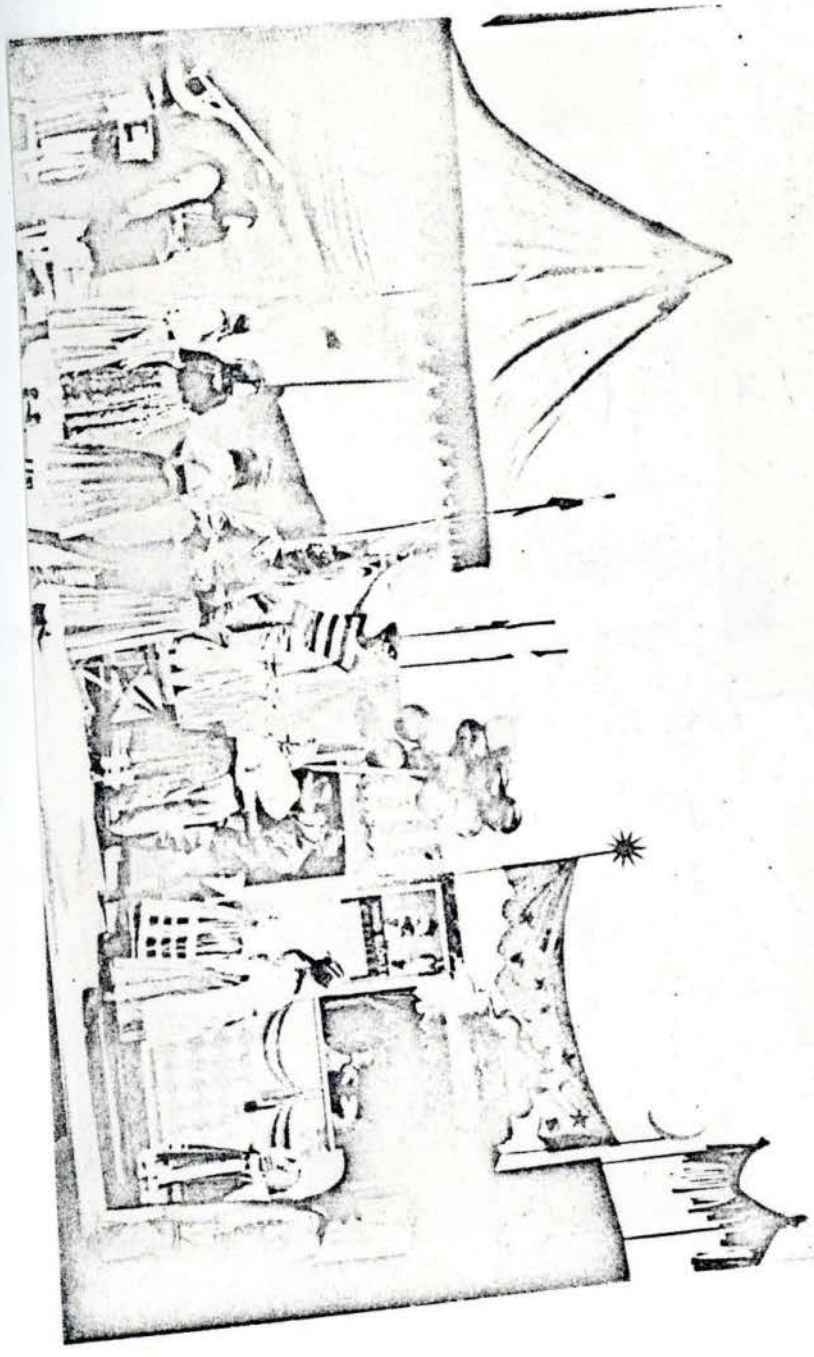
Detail has been omitted in favor of a light and fluid blending of spaces. The foreshortened tent canapy and skeletal outline of the ferris wheel give scale to the setting, as well as provide background in the sky.

The Heaven Liliom finds presents God as judge and Heaven as a court-room. The walls of the set are cut back to suggest everything necessary for a court, but to present it within the limitless expanses of Heaven. The exterior where Liliom sees his daughter reminds the audience that behind the roof of the house lies Heaven and the dual existence of Liliom.

In that same sense, the opening scene forecasts what will happen.

Lilliom is a large step in the direction of creating fluidity and openness with theater design. The simplicity of the settings allows for quick set changes and contributions to the playwright's freedom in developing new themes.

LIC10 M
SCI



Section
SC 3

SCR

Yellow Jack

Written: Sidney Howard (in collaboration with Paul de Kruif)

Produced and Directed: Guthrie McClintic

Set: Jo Mielziner

Martin Beck Theater, New York City, November 6, 1939
79 Performances

Miracle at Verdun

Written: H. Chlumberg

Designed: Lee Simonson

1931

The open staging was used in both of these productions to move quickly through time and location. Lee Simonson refers to this design concept as being "condensed and skeletonized".[1]

Each set is comprised of a series of platform risers and one additional unit. In Yellow Jacket, a play about Walter Reed and the discovery of the malaria vaccine, the topmost level is used as Reed's laboratory, with a revolving screen which turned down stage to reveal the laboratory and up stage to provide a back drop for other action. Additionally, the louvers in the screen could close to seal off entirely the sense of the lab.

This was produced as a "continuous action" play with brief scenes flowing into one another, the acting being in light and the rest of the stage in shadow or darkness. There are many possible areas for action to take place and easy access from place to place to facilitate the uninterrupted flow.

The photograph shows the revolve in the up-stage position with Dr. Reed working with his back to the audience. The first rendering shows the revolve open down stage.

A similar arrangement of levels was used by Simonson in Miracle at Verdun. A rolling unit is used stage right instead of the up stage revolve. This unit added the basic scenic element to each part.

Contrasting war, politics and the people caught between, Simonson uses a specific set of shapes to create a visual bond between the movements, or pieces, of the play, suggesting common denominators between the people, the diplomats, the victims and survivors.

Both set designs use few props to suggest location, relying upon the audience to enrich the scene through their own images.

The illustration suggests lighting ideas which both men used to develop viewers' moods throughout the play.

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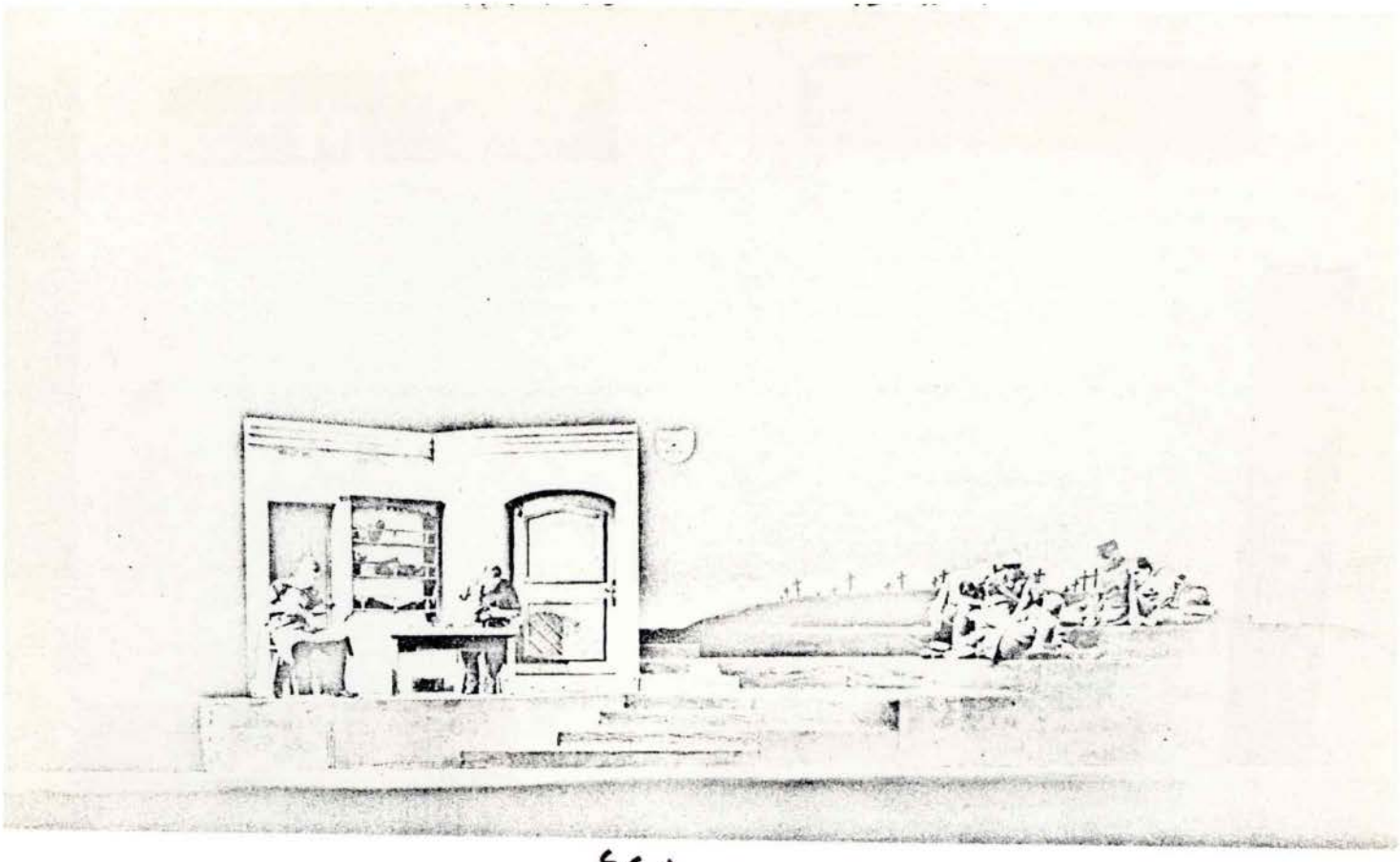
1 Simonson. The Stage is Set, (p. 123)

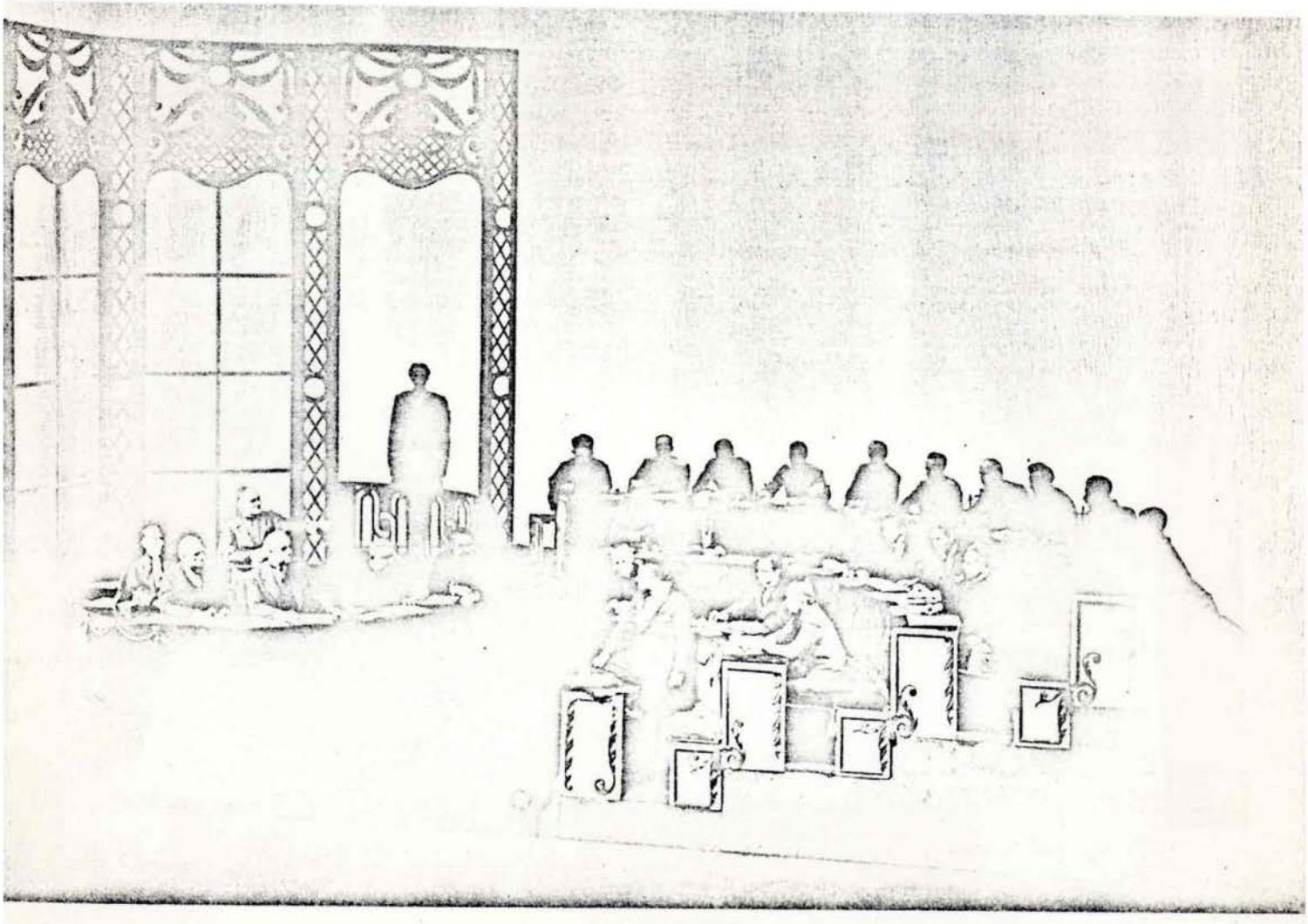
The use of theater space in the preceeding designs places the actors in a middle ground surrounded by a general openness. In Miracle at Verdun, Scene I and Scene II, the background becomes a sky, and in Scene II and Scene IV something not specific. In Yellow Jack the background maintains a yellow glow of varying intensity throughout the play. Again, it is non-specific space.

This handling of the background enriches the onstage scene. Sparse settings and props benefit from the contrast, and the actor dominates. By necessity, the action in this type of atmosphere is often confined to small acting areas and the actor is not allowed to become diminished against a vast open space.

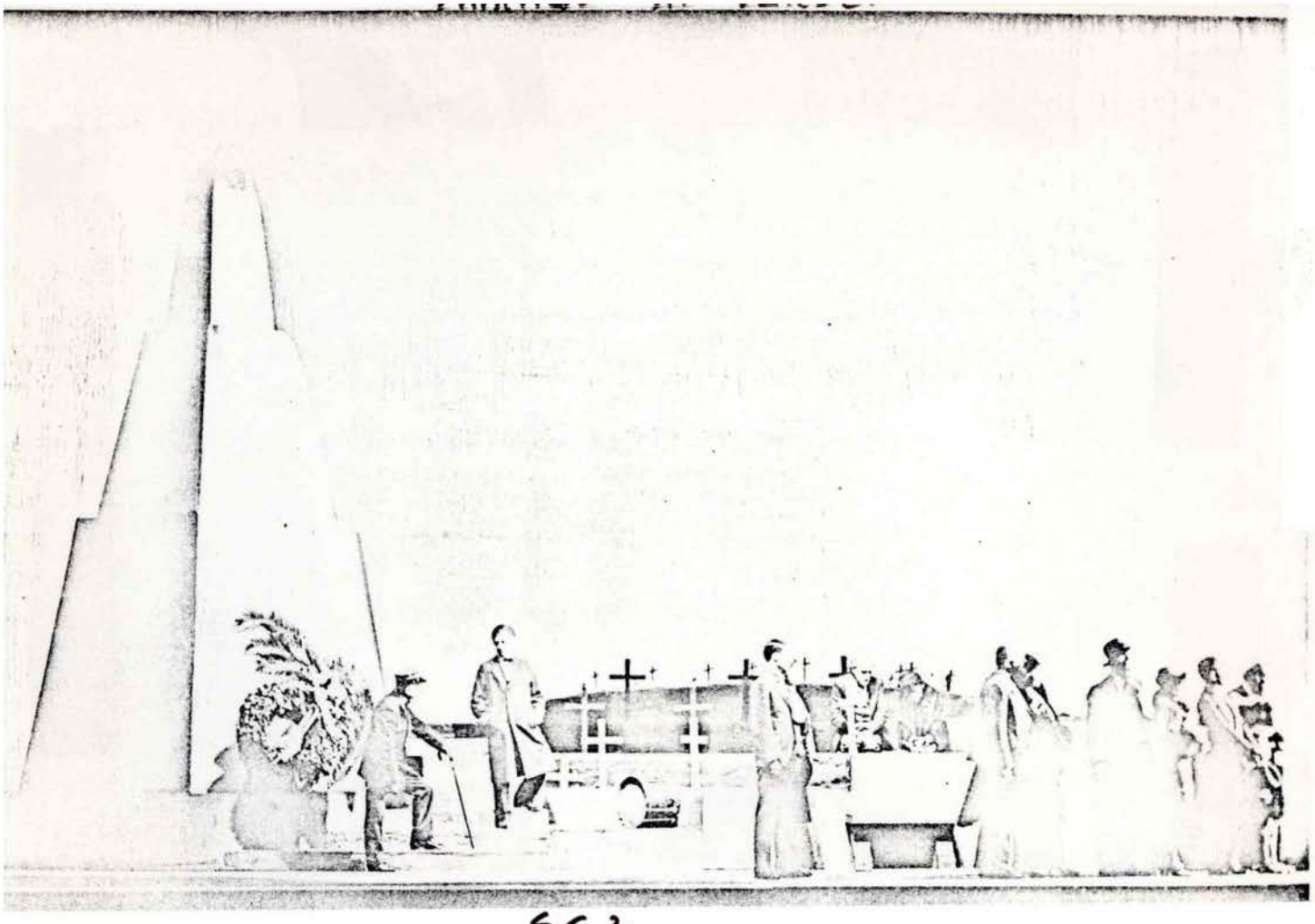
The next productions will deal with an expanded concept of space, but in reality revealing far less of the background.



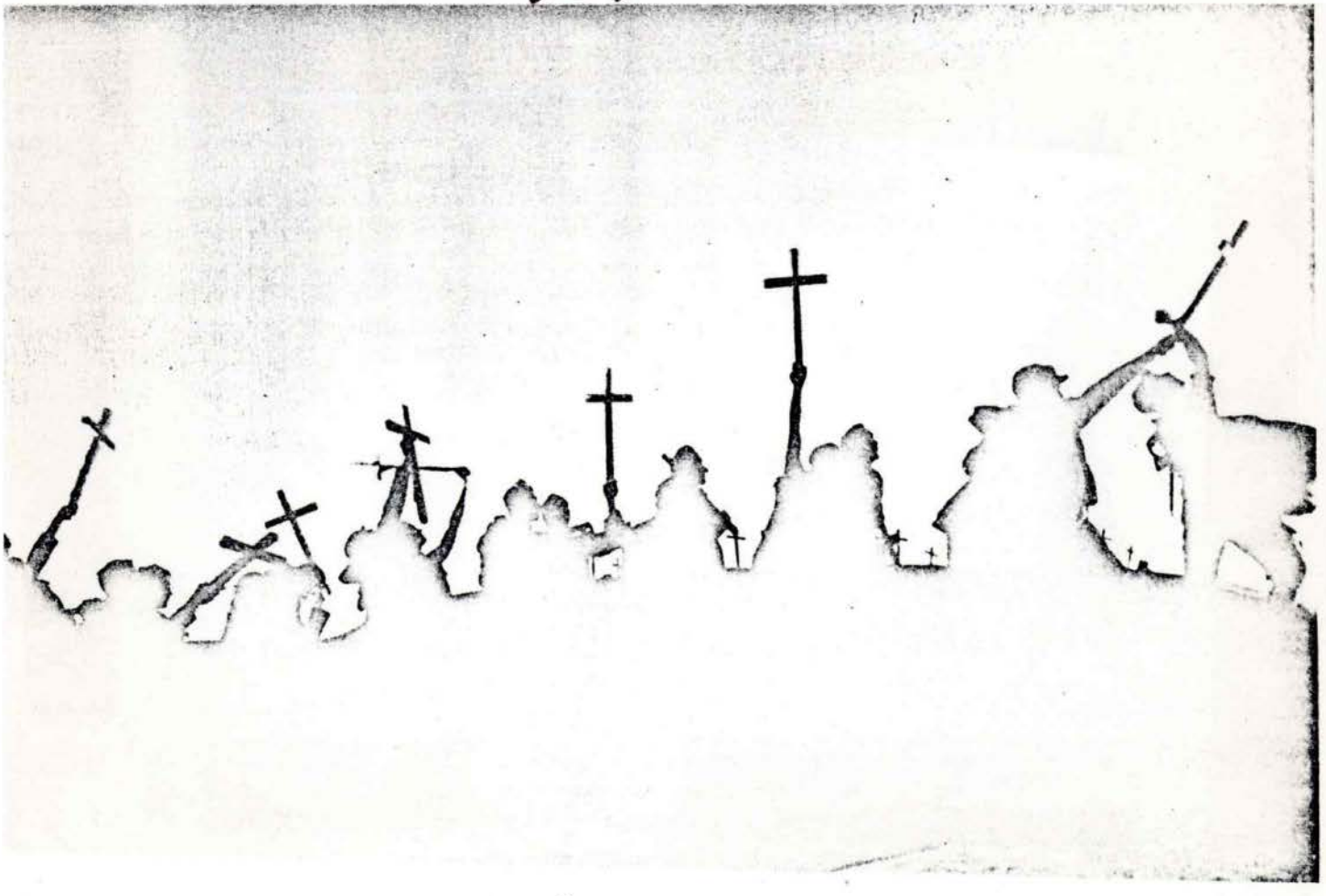
SC1



SC2



SC3



SC4

Hotel Universe

Written: Phillip Barry

Produced: Theater Guild

Director: Philip Moeller

Set: Lee Simonson

Martin Beck Theater, New York City, April 14, 1930,
81 Performances

Winterset

Written: Maxwell Anderson

Produced and Directed: Guthrie McClintic

Martin Beck Theater, New York City, September 25, 1935
195 Performances

These two designs present a final, and in a sense, absolute openness of space. About Hotel Universe, Simonson states, "Settings have become more than backgrounds for action. They are often so much a part of the play that the meaning of [the] dialogue depends upon them. Phillip Barry attempts to create a mood of mystic insight into life and death, and to express transcendant intuitions of their nature. But he does not attempt to do so by words alone. The particular shape of the terrace is almost as important as the words spoken on it, in fact prompts them, and serves as a symbolic *leit motif*.".[1] Though Simonson created a vista that hangs "over the edge of the world",[2] Mielziner found it necessary to convince the playwright of the necessity of opening up the space and scale for Winterset. However, he was

successful in making an enormous statement about the effect of environment upon his characters.

The vistas opened by Hotel Universe and Winterset are not far from the vistas behind the productions of the ancient Greeks, where Gods and men interacted.

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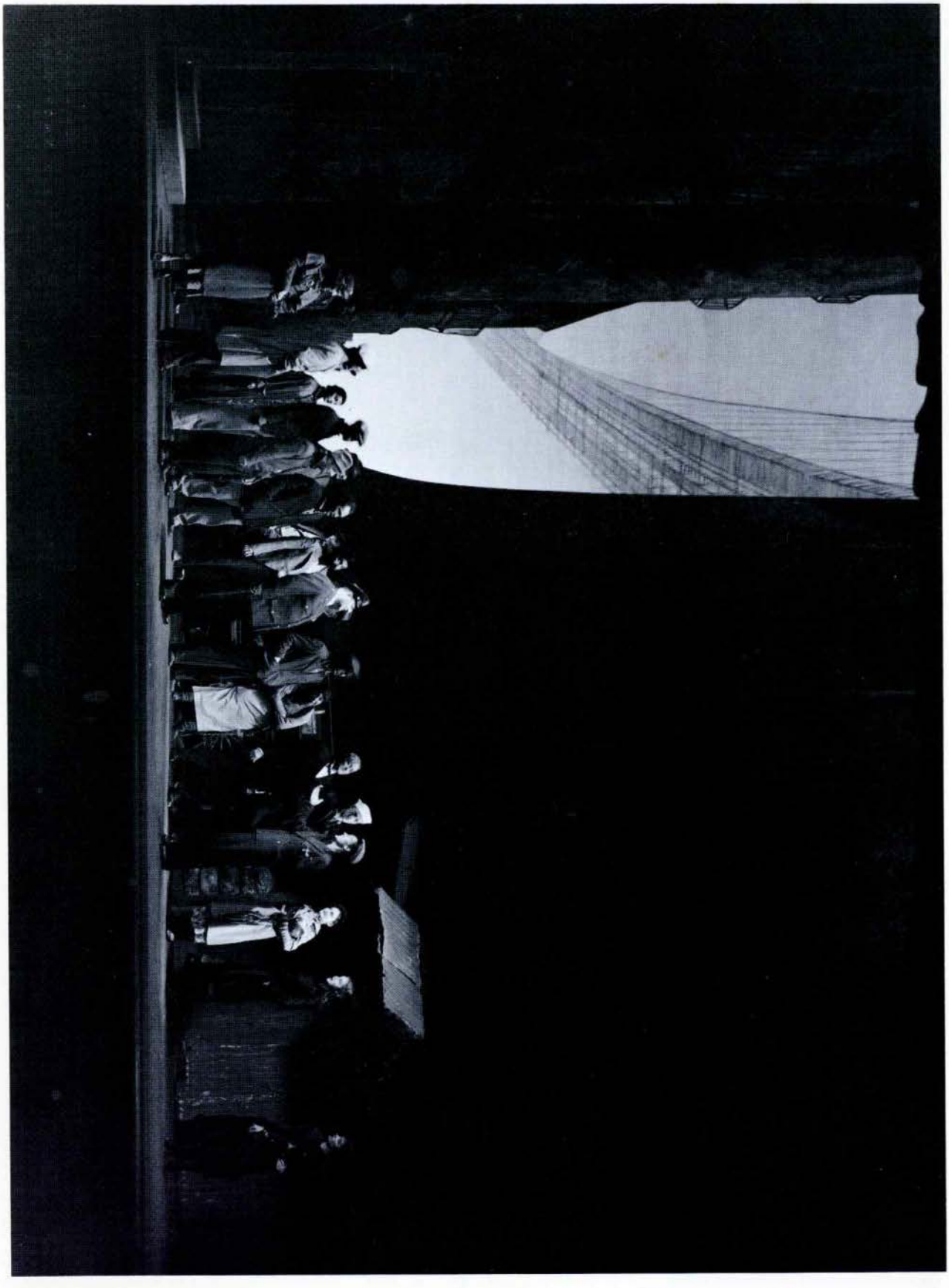
1 Simonson. The Stage is Set, (p. 111)

2 Mielziner. Designing for the Theater, (p. 68)

WINTER
ACT 2



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