theatrical scenery and set design—realism and imagination
The artist's brush often ends up repainting stage scenery many times in a season. Some local theatrical settings have truly been recycled so often that actors begin to recognize doors, props and other aspects of theatrical stagecraft on their stages, as well as on the stages of other companies.

In Mendocino County, there are regional, community, and educational theatre; opera, concert, and music festival events; shows in large and small venues, tents, indoor and outdoor amphitheatres, community halls and buildings, churches...

Anywhere that people can gather is an opportunity for performances, and many performances are enhanced by scene design. Productions in Mendocino, at the Helen Schoeni Theatre, for example, must make use of a stage with scenery of only a maximum height of 9 feet, 4 inches, due to apartments on the second floor of the building. Cotton Auditorium in Fort Bragg and the theatre on the Mendocino College Campus in Ukiah have “fly space.” That means scenery can be raised or lowered into position, provided a pulley system is available.

The compactness of size (like in The Schoeni) makes for an intimate setting and experience. No matter the size or distance from the viewer, the artists who design, build and paint sets provide both actors and audiences with a harmonious background.

Thirty years ago, walls of stage sets were built not unlike painters’ canvases. Literally. Canvas was stretched over a frame and painted, using a variety of techniques. “Splattering” is and was a method of coloring the “flat,” using multiple hues, one after the other, until the right color was achieved. Bear in mind that the painted surfaces would be lit by a multitude of color and intensity by the Lighting Designer.

At the Helen Schoeni Theatre, home to the Mendocino Theatre Company, flats are constructed in a similar
fashion, except that 1/8” veneer on a 1” x 2” frame, glued and screwed, is utilized in lieu of canvas. These are called “skins.” This eliminates time and space, as “sized” canvas needs to tighten and rolls of it have to be kept on hand. Due to the damp coastal climate, the majority of sets and backgrounds on the coast are rendered with skins instead of canvas. Repainting used flats is a common way for local and non-profit theatres to reduce their production budgets.

The great Herb Steiniger designed many shows in Mendocino and Fort Bragg, as did Horace Irwin. Horace recently told this author of a set design incorporating both old and new techniques. The stage was set for an older actor’s dressing room, with partial backstage scenery visible to the audience. _The Dresser_ had stage right (audience left) built up using wooden veneer flats as the dressing room, but on stage left (audience right), the backs of canvas flats were seen. Onto these “backstage” flats the audience could read “Lear, Act II, sce. 3” etc. In an engaging lighting design, shadows of Shakespearean “actors” fell on the canvas flats, as the dresser was assisting the actor. One year Horace designed five out of six shows in Mendocino for The Mendocino Theatre Company!

Herb Steiniger often designed sets and Horace engineered them. Both men designed for MTC and Gloriana Opera Company (now Gloriana Musical Theatre). Horace also designed for Fort Bragg High School and Mendocino Music Festival productions.

Today Diane Larson of Fort Bragg designs and paints sets for Gloriana Musical Theatre and Mendocino Theatre Company. As a founder of Performing Arts Production Alliance (PAPA), Diane was the first costume designer to use a hot glue gun in the fabrication of period footwear. For the production of Moliere’s _The Miser_, she glued leather scraps around the actor’s old sneakers! Nicole Allan has also designed and worked on productions for both companies, as has Larry Lawlor. Just recently Nicole designed the MTC _Deathtrap_ set, rivaling the _Deathtrap_ designed by Horace in the 1970’s. Both sets had to have an operating crossbow. Lee Edmundson, MTC Producing Director, charged Master Set Builder Ben Tuskes with the authentic reproduction. When Horace’s crossbow was built, the craftsman almost refused to have it used!

There are realistic sets (like _Deathtrap_) – even with running water! Impressionistic sets merely give one an idea of a place. The lights and sounds (and special effects, smoke, for example) enhance the atmosphere of the partial or broken look of this style of scene design.

Often an empty stage (as in Shakespeare’s time) will suffice. The designer incorporates the natural surroundings and some props to convey the director’s artistic vision. Here, the Sound Designer and Light Designer have a bigger load to carry. Perhaps their work is not fully appreciated in a realistic set depiction.

Old theatre conventions and superstitions never die. In the past, when scenery was similar to large canvas paintings in structure, flats were lashed together, rather than nailed in place. Today at MTC, thanks to designer Horace Irwin, drywall screws, drilled in with battery powered drivers, have replaced nails. Horace had an adage, “Don’t nail it. Screw it!” That method practically changed overnight how MTC sets could be put up and taken down quickly.

Getting back to old superstitions, Mervin Gilbert related to this author that the lashing together of flats with ropes was accomplished in the old days by former sailors, who whistled to each other in code, as certain jobs were performed. To this day, whistling on stage is verboten, due to some unknown whistler being taken for an onstage worker, signaling to drop a sandbag to the floor (then probably landing on his head). So it is bad luck to whistle on a stage.

Many Shakespeare scholars know of that “Scottish Play” (the one with a certain Lady wiping off blood, three witches, etc.), and, because of theatre superstition, will not mention its name (nor will I).

For some reason peacock feathers are unlucky to use in stage settings...

And remember, the next time you know a friend is putting on a show, do not wish them “Good Luck.” Rather tell him or her to “Break a Leg.”
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“Dancing Between Worlds,” a collaborative exhibit at the Mendocino Art Center featuring artists Thaïs Mazur and Yarrow Summers, came about as a result of what was initially just a coincidental juxtaposition of their artwork at other venues. These fortuitous arrangements led to the serendipitous discovery of a profound affinity and a shared artistic vision that culminated in a collaborative show. According to Yarrow Summers, “I noticed that Thaïs’ art and my paintings were often displayed together in group shows. Some people have thought that our work was done by the same artist. Even though Thaïs and I barely know each other, we seem to speak to a similar and familiar place within those who come in contact with our work. For years when I have seen her figures, I have been stopped by them. The tilt of the head, the strong feeling of gesture with only minimal reference to arms, hands, etc. Then I look at my own work and listen to what people say about it and I see that we have a similar way of expressing ourselves.”

On a grander scale, the two artists arrived at the convergence point of their shared vision by two very different routes, beginning at opposite ends of the country. Thaïs Mazur grew up in the San Francisco Bay Area, in an artistic family. Her father John Mazur, a major influence on her own work, is a painter and designer. Her recollections of childhood include many visits to art galleries and introductions to a number of major contemporary artists. Yarrow Summers comes from a family carving out a life on isolated Fisher Island off the coast of Connecticut. They kept bees and sold honey, and her father worked as a carpenter while her mother took in sewing. Her mother loved to paint and do crafts but rarely found the time. She did, however, teach Yarrow how to sew and, by the age of six, Yarrow was working with fabric remnants on the sewing machine. From that beginning came her lifelong interest in textile arts.
Both Thaïs and Yarrow went off to college, mindful of parental advice to learn something practical (that is, not art). Thaïs majored in journalism, Yarrow in speech pathology. But the artist within would not be denied, and both have pursued art-driven lives as adults. Thaïs followed passions in dancing and choreography as well as sculpture, starting her own major dance company in San Francisco. Yarrow made her way west to Big Sur, designing custom clothing and theatre costumes.

Along the way, both developed a consuming artistic interest in the human figure. Thaïs was strongly influenced by a visit to the Shona stone carvers in Zimbabwe in 1992. She lived and worked in a village of 92 African sculptors who saw each block of stone as an ancestor waiting to be released. They taught her to “listen to the stone,” and find the one that speaks to her. Yarrow’s interest in the human form came from her background as a costume designer, “cloaking the human figure,” and designing clothes to accentuate the form and movement of the body. Yarrow’s evocative paintings and Thaïs’ soulful sculptures share a unique perspective on the human figure.

Both artists found their way to Mendocino, and the Mendocino Art Center. Thaïs and her partner arrived looking for a more peaceful place to raise their child; Yarrow arrived looking for some artful place less expensive to live than Carmel and Big Sur. Both had pivotal introductions to Art Center staff when they first arrived. For Thaïs, it was with Tommy Brown, head of MAC’s sculpture program and foundry, and for Yarrow, it was an introduction to Lolli Jacobsen, head of the Textiles Department. Thaïs began teaching stone sculpture for MAC and also “Creative Healing Through Art” for the Cancer Resource Center. Yarrow embarked on a program of total immersion in art, first taking classes in fiber arts and then turning to acrylic painting as her primary medium in 2003. She credits artist/instructors Bob Rhoades and Bob Burridge with having the most influence on her own work. From Bob Burridge...
she learned to “see around” what is in front of you; to paint from imagination and pull out colors, shapes and imagery to create a uniquely expressive image. Yarrow does not look at photos, models, or still lifes while she paints; in fact, she doesn’t look at anything, just listens to a CD of mantras and starts painting, channeling a story which she feels as emotional and even heartbreaking as it comes into being. The paintings “tell of love, spiritual pursuit, personal journeys, moments of perfect peace, disappointment, loss, and finally, hope.”

Thaïs and Yarrow create what they refer to as “slow art” – art that invokes a deep inner reaction from the viewer, and speaks to the viewer as a narrative would. The artwork is a “portal” into the deep center where the individual viewer’s own story resides. Their artwork invites the viewer to step into the story – not the artist’s story, but the viewer’s. Their work reflects their mutual interest in art as ceremony, art as sacred, art as healing and spiritual in nature. Working in different media, coming from different life experiences, they have created a beautifully complementary artistic vision. Thaïs creates wooden altars and kinetic figurative sculptures of paper clay; Yarrow creates acrylic paintings of spiritual, shadowy images, strong on feelings and gesture, and “adornments,” her unique necklaces of glass tiles, carnelian, silver, and jade beads.

The exhibit is called “Dancing Between Worlds” because both artists see art as the bridge between inner and outer worlds. They invite the viewer to “journey with us to witness seen and unseen worlds, to dance between waking and dreaming worlds, to connect to that place that remembers, before breath, before touch, before the first glance.”

“Dancing Between Worlds” will be in the Nichols Gallery at the Mendocino Art Center from August 5 – 29. The reception for the artists is on Saturday, August 14, 5 to 8 pm.

Yarrow Summer’s work can be seen at the North Coast Artists Gallery in Fort Bragg.
The Mendocino Art Center has resurrected a very long-dormant tradition, and is hosting two weekends of artists’ open studio tours in September. Though many attempts have been made to pull this tour together in the past, it took the combined energies of artists Janis Porter, Sunshine Taylor, and Maeve Croghan to actually bring this exciting event to fruition. As many as forty of the north coast’s artists, including painters, fiber artists, sculptors, glass artists, jewelers, and ceramicists will be participating.

Artists from north of Caspar Creek to as far north as Westport will have their studios open on September 18 and 19; artists from south of Caspar to Elk will be open September 25 and 26. Studios are open from 11 am to 6 pm on both Saturday and Sunday. Because many artists along the coast are “off the beaten path,” there will be geographical clusters of artists exhibiting in combined studios for the convenience of tour-goers. Easily followed directional signage and a map of the studios will be provided for these self-guided tours, as well as a color pamphlet with images of the artists’ work and short biographical information about the artists.

Each artist will have a clean and lively studio, full of gallery-ready artwork for you to see – and buy! In addition, each participating artist will be featured in the Mendocino Art Center’s September Main Gallery exhibit. This will give you the opportunity to check out the artists and art work coming up on the open studio tours later in the month, and plan your weekends accordingly. The opening reception for that exhibit is Saturday, September 11th, from 5 pm – 8 pm.

This is a rare opportunity to observe the much-discussed species “Mendocino artist” in its native habitat, and in large numbers. Don’t miss out! Contact the Mendocino Art Center at 707 937-5818 for more information.
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