The Eccentric® Newspapers

Entertainment

Ethel Simmons

Thursday, June 28, 1990 O&E 10)50

'Suggestive realism'

Melinda Pacha creates clever set for JET drama

By Cathie Breidenbach
special writer

ON THE SET of "Slow Dance on the Killing Ground," cigarette butts lay scattered under the pay phone, factory grime coats the windows of the little Brooklyn store, and Elvis stares from a record jacket in the juke box.

Minute attention to multiple details recreates the aura of time and place — 1962 in a run-down factory district of Brooklyn — for the drama playing through Sunday at the Jewish Ensemble Theatre in West Bloomfield.

Scenic designer Melinda Pacha (pronounced Pay-shah) created the set for William Hanley's "Slow Dance." She describes her detailed style as "suggestive realism" — realistic because she strives for the truth that comes from accurate detail such as making certain the Marlboro Reds and Mars bars in the store's showcase really were sold in the early '60s and that the toaster and radio are of appropriate vintage — suggestive because, "Surfaces are painted and they look painted," and because the set partially lacks walls and ceilings.

Her sets are realistic but leave room for imagination, an essential part of the magic of theater. Audiences know the drama and set are pretend, yet they believe at the same time in their truth and reality.

PACHA EXPLAINS how a set works before the action even begins. "When people walk into the theater before the show and see the set, it should create a sense of anticipation, make them wonder 'Who lives in this space?' I envision audience members having time to slowly absorb the visual, to move into the mood, atmosphere and tone of the set."

Pacha, a tenured professor at the University of Detroit, begins her 10th season as resident scenic and costume designer for the university's Theatre Company. She also designs free-lance for other theaters including the Attic Theatre, Lansing's Boarshead Theatre and the new Jewish Ensemble Theatre.

A good set like the one she designed for JET goes beyond time and place to reflect the character of the people who live there. In the three-character play, "Slow Dance," the store and its adjacent living quarters belong to Glas, a German refugee as haunted by what he did during World War II as by what he failed to do.

DAN DEAN/staff photographer

Scenic designer Melinda Pacha has done sets for many theater groups in the Detroit area.

A grimy little store in Brooklyn, back in 1962, is the setting for William Hanley's play "Slow Dance on the Killing Ground," current production by the Jewish Ensemble Theatre at the Jewish Community Center in West Bloomfield.

After the design phase comes construction of a set and scavenging for props to bring the concept to reality.

Pacha says, "The work of a designer is to try to dig through the script to find what will lead to making decisions to underline the spoken words. The space is an outward manifestation of Glas. It must reflect him."

The play opens with Glas taking careful inventory of his store's stock. This man lives behind filthy windows and seldom sweeps his floor (remember the accumulated cigarette butts under the phone). How could a meticulous man ignore such dirt?

Pacha says that despite his orderly character, there are memories Glas cannot face, so he lets some things slide rather than take a thorough psychic inventory. The condition of his shop is an outward representation of the condition of his psyche.

THE WINDOWS are so grimy the characters can't see through them. Only the ominous, rotating blue light of a police car on the street outside cuts through the nearly opaque grime. The filthy windows cut off the outside world and create what Pacha calls a "cocooning effect" — an apt metaphor for what happens to three strangers one night inside the little store.

The windows close in the tense interior, separate it from the night and the "killing ground" outside and allow a subtle metamorphosis to take place as three unlikely and separate people touch one another's lives.

Something as minimal as coating doors and windows already dusty from storage in the U of D's drama department works on multiple levels in the production. The dirty glass places the play in a gritty, factory district. It reveals aspects of Glas' character and also amplifies the drama's mood and underscores its themes. Not bad for a little carefully cultivated dirt.

Explaining her philosophy of set design, Pacha says, "When you go back to the basics of what theater is, an actor speaking words, all the rest — sets, lights, costumes — are mere embellishment. They're really not needed, so you have to subjugate them to the play. The set helps create movement, spectacle, mood and character."

Before she begins designing a set so it will echo and underscore meaning and yet remain subjugated to the play, she reads the script and "listens to what the characters have to say about themselves and about each other," and she gets a feel for the mood and meaning of the play. She talks to the director and the lighting designer to see how they visualize the set because she says, "Making theater is a collaborative art. I can't do what I do in a void."

SOME SCRIPTS give ample stage directions, either written by the author or added in early productions. Others are bare bones, and she must totally imagine the set and visualize where action will take place. She says of her approach to design, "I try to present the director with as many visual options and movement possibilities as possible."

Part of those movement possibilities involve what some people call islands of action, areas on the set where particular actions will take place. Next she does a rendering of her design and usually builds a model. She says, "A good floor plan will almost block the show." Consequently, the set design must be complete before rehearsals begin.

From an artistic standpoint, she strives "to make it, the set, as visually interesting as possible." She chooses colors both for their psychological and mood implications and with an awareness for the way they work under lights. What pleases her about the "Slow Dance" set is the way the islands of action move inward, with both a physical and psychological progression, from the store with its public soda fountain and pay phone to Glas' private living quarters where a goldfish bowl sits on the chrome dinette table.

Pacha can philosophize at length on the single detail of why Glas keeps a pet goldfish. Glas, a man who has trouble communicating with the rest of the world, keeps a goldfish to talk to, plus the fish represents all he has in the world, his only remaining family.

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After the design phase comes construction of a set and scavenging for props to bring the concept to reality. Ordinarily, she says, "I decide what the set's going to look like. Then I farm it out to everyone else." At the new JET, "They're still working out the details of producing theater."

THAT MEANS there is no shop space or construction crew on hand, so Pacha and her husband, Blair Vaugh Anderson, built the set themselves. Anderson, lighting director for the play, recently finished his doctorate at Wayne State University, where he works as technical director at the Bonstelle Theatre. Pacha bills herself a passable carpenter and likes working with her hands, constructing the set, then painting the floor to simulate marble and the walls to look like paneling.

Pacha keeps busy "cranking out sets and costumes" for five shows at the Theatre Company. She says, "It's healthy for me to work in different spaces. It keeps me from getting in a rut."

She also is enthusiastic about supporting JET. "I'm glad to see a new theater and a new space. It offers another avenue for creative people — directors and artists. They — Evelyn Orbach and JET — have a commitment to spawning talent and I respect that."

The respect is mutual. Orbach, artistic director for JET and director of the current JET production which showcased Pacha's talents, says the scenic designer "has a fine eye for detail and feeling."

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