American summer stock theatre became popular after World War II. By the 1960s, the tradition of a summer theatre season in resort areas and vacation hotspots was already well established, providing employment opportunities for theatre practitioners and entertainment for off-season theatergoers. For many years, summer theatre companies have served as “proving grounds” for new scenic designers eager to develop their careers. Summer stock theatre poses special challenges for the scenic designer, including the fast-paced nature and limited resources of a multi-production summer season. For many design professionals, the opportunity to work in excellent locations with energetic colleagues far outweighs the inconveniences and challenges of summer stock theatre: available space, travel distances, weather issues, less-experienced staff, in many cases, and very short turnaround times for construction and painting.

Scenic designers are often trained to temporarily ignore budget and resource issues when approaching a text, first letting creativity rather than practicality guide their vision. Designers may become accustomed to well-staffed production shops with generous budgets effortlessly realizing everything included in a scenic design. When designing for summer stock theatre, it is best to consider the unavoidable limitations imposed on the production team. Production Manager Shaminda Amarakoon of Merry-Go-Round Playhouse in New York says, “While I never feel designers should limit themselves at the beginning of their design process, I do believe that having an understanding of a theatre’s technical capabilities before finishing the designs is important to an efficient technical process.” Amarakoon advises the scenic designer to become familiar with experience levels of the theatre’s technical staff, as well as the company’s inventory and stock items. He suggests new designers send concept materials to the production manager or technical director long before the established design deadlines to get feedback before committing to an overly ambitious design.

Brett Henry, technical director at the University of Minnesota agrees. Every summer, he works with the U of M Showboat Players to produce an interactive, vaudeville-style show aboard the Minnesota Centennial Showboat on the Mississippi River. “Working on our boat, the smallness of the space affects the design in a big way,” says Henry. “A standard-sized couch is huge on our stage. We have to look for furniture that is ¾ scale.”

**Work With Your Crew**

Human resources will also impact execution of the design vision. Scenic designers fresh out of school may be accustomed to a professionally managed scene shop and paint team. Most summer stock theatre depends on the efforts of eager but often unskilled interns and young technicians, and the inevitable trial-and-error approach to technical solutions combined with frequent “how to” sessions will result in a less-efficient construction and finish process. In summer stock theatre, it is not uncommon for scenic designer contracts to include several days of hands-on work by the designer, and those who are accustomed to transferring responsibility to a scenic charge artist may be surprised to learn that the designer is sometimes more than an honored guest during tech week. Some theatres depend on the scenic designer’s finish painting skills or properties design experience to bring the production to life by opening night.

Certain building materials are often less available in more isolated summer theatre locations and supplies can be expensive due to transportation costs in rural areas. Designers who
are accustomed to using plastics, Vacuform materials and even some fairly common building materials, such as medium density fiberboard, may have to think in terms of basic board lumber and plywood instead.

In many cases, a summer stock theatre must rely on creative solutions for workspace. Scenery construction for the Star Players in Massachusetts takes place in two separate shops, a large barn approximately two miles away from the theatre and a smaller space adjacent to the stage. Star Players Scenic Designer Joel Thayer must consider how and where his design elements can be assembled, painted and installed before he begins to conceptualize his approach to the text. Sometimes two productions are under construction while a third is on stage. It’s no different in Minnesota.

“Once we have moved down to the boat it starts to get cramped,” says Showboat’s Henry. “We set up a small area on the stern where we can cut and do some rough carpentry without covering the space in sawdust.” Although the transportability and storability strategies involved in design execution are the responsibility of the technical director, a good scenic designer will consider these issues when planning for a production.

Summer Goes By Quickly

The rapid turnaround time for summer stock theatre can also influence what design concepts can be effectively realized, and advance consultation with the technical director is critical. “In summer stock, the build phase will typically be one to three weeks,” says Amarakoon. “with at most a two-day load-in.” Can the design be constructed in sections that will fit through doors and on the truck? Can the crew navigate stairs or other obstacles with the scenery pieces? Can the engineering requirements for your load-bearing structures be met within the construction time available? Will the time available for load-in be adequate to thoroughly assemble, fine-tune and finish your design?

The weather plays a part in summer stock design execution, especially for theatres using outdoor workspaces by necessity. Regional humidity will effect the drying time of paint and adhesives, sometimes delaying the entire build schedule, and rain can hinder scenery transportation plans between the shop and the theatre. Weather sometimes combines with workspace weaknesses to adversely affect production, and many summer stock veterans can recount tales of sudden roof leaks or even minor flooding causing all work to stop as the half-finished scenery is moved to safer locations. Some summer theatres take advantage of generally good weather and perform second-stage or even mainstage productions in outdoor arenas. Consider the adjustments including weatherproof materials and finishes that might be necessary for an outdoor scenic design. Although a brief rain shower earlier in the day might not result in a performance cancellation, your scenery may need to include slip-resistant stair treads or other accommodations for post-rain conditions.

Know Your Limits

When designing for summer stock theatre, Scenic Designer Russell Parkman thinks in terms of reducing the total amount of scenery rather than compromise on the finished product’s quality. Parkman’s work is frequently produced by Weston Playhouse Theatre Company in Vermont. “The fact that Weston does not have a fly loft has also been a limitation that I have used to my advantage, by not spending all my time painting drops or trying to evoke illusionistic locations,” says Parkman.

“I treat the Weston space more sculpturally.” Parkman also suggests rethinking traditional approaches to large-scale productions such as musicals. “I often try to do the big musicals in a unit or single adaptable set,” he says. “One certainly has to be flexible and every inch counts on a small set.” Recognizing that the whole is sometimes greater than the sum of its parts, Parkman also notes how collaboration with other designers can make a difference in summer stock theatre. “Obviously, it helps to have a top-notch lighting designer,” he states.

When evaluating designs for production, technical managers will often cite the “Golden Triangle” rule, which says only two of the following three goals can be achieved: good, fast and cheap. This Golden Triangle adage applies to almost any theatre production work, but is especially valuable when dealing with the special limitations of summer theatre. If a design must be built quickly, which is often the case in summer stock theatre, it will either cost more money or lack a certain level of finish quality. Working in cooperation with colleagues, including the artistic director, fellow designers and technicians, a summer theatre scenic designer can find the balance between ideal artistic vision and available resources.

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