



Scenic Design for *The Verge*: Capturing Discomfort and Destruction Onstage

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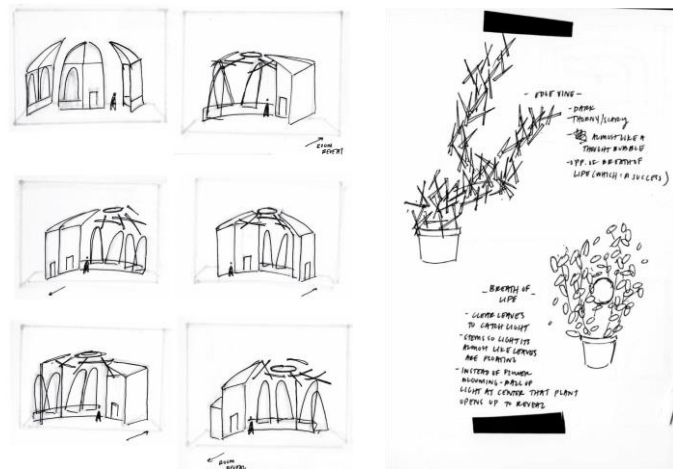
Abstract

Scenic designers often want designs to set the audience up for understanding once the set is revealed. However, as shown in the design of *The Verge*, making an audience slightly uncomfortable is another way to immerse them in the work.

As theatre designers, we are building an entire world onstage from a few lines provided by the script (some playwrights providing more than others) and conceptual ideas from the director. As scenic designers specifically, we're creating a canvas for actors to tell a story. We can find different ways for the audience to experience and engage with the story happening onstage through design devices like altering and warping the audience's perspective of what they see and using material and symbolic cues to give the audience some pieces of a puzzle that will be solved throughout the performance.

The Verge, written by Susan Glaspell, is an expressionist piece set in 1921 in a greenhouse and tells the story of a main character named Claire who is trying to create two plants that have never existed before. During her botanical experiments, three men —her friend Tom, husband Harry, and her lover named Dick — get in the way and interrupt her work. Claire descends into madness (destructive madness or genius — it's up to the audience to decide) after they each attempt to trap her into relationships and expectations she does not want. While Susan Glaspell does give some specific details about the setting for this play, director Andrea Gunoe took the direction of abstracting the world of the play and moving towards non-realism. This allowed the set to shift from requiring complete historical accuracy and detail to being able to incorporate even more symbolic and thematic spatial elements.

Andrea and I wanted to capture the themes of dualities: madness versus genius, creation versus destruction, and beauty versus the grotesque. During the iterative design phase, I quickly settled on a round spatial form reminiscent of a 1920's Victorian-style greenhouse, and then iterated different levels of distortion and destruction.



Initial sketches of the set and two main props — the Edge Vine and Breath of Life, the two plants Claire creates — for The Verge.



Photos of the laser cut quarter-scale model for The Verge.

As scenic designers, we often want designs to set the audience up for understanding once the set is revealed but making an audience slightly uncomfortable is another way to immerse them in the work. By distorting the frames and mullions of the windows of the greenhouse to varying degrees, through the design, I started to capture the discomfort and confusion the main character was experiencing. Fragments of the roof levitating over the stage signified the internal destruction of the main character while she is working on her creation (creation versus destruction). For the audience viewing the set, one glance would orient them and let them know that they are inside of a space, but intentionally they would feel that something is slightly off, pushing them to be further invested in the story to find out exactly what that is. I wanted them to view the setting from Claire's perspective, where her surroundings become deformed and slightly frightening as she descends into madness.

For the materiality of the set, the windows are welded metal treated with rust set in a stone concrete base. These cold, hard materials were chosen to contrast with the liveliness of the green plants in the greenhouse.





Photos of the greenhouse in The Verge.

The fragmented expressionist painting of the sky in the background is an iteration of a traditional drop and continues the abstraction and distortion of reality in the set. The duality of beauty versus the grotesque can be seen here, as these drops also serve as canvases to catch shadows created by lighting designer Michael Russo, resulting in a hauntingly beautiful dreamlike scene for the climax of the play — Claire murdering her friend Tom. The play ends with Claire standing over Tom's body and cradling her plant named the 'Breath of Life'. Her face is illuminated by the glow of the plant and the stage fades to black with the set disappearing behind her, leaving her all alone.



Claire, positioned over a trap door, strangling her friend Tom.