

Arts & Entertainment  
Sunday June 6, 2004

## THEATER

## Brian Sidney Bembridge: Sets therapist

By Nina Metz  
Special to the Tribune

"I always get nervous this time of year," says Brian Sidney Bembridge, one of Chicago's busiest set designers. At the moment, he has yet to finalize his schedule for the 2004-05 theater season, and this brief period of limbo is somewhat disconcerting. Chances are, he needn't worry.

Over the past four years, Bembridge has established himself as one of the most in-demand set and lighting designers in town, creating sophisticated, often abstract theatrical environments with only small (if not minuscule) budgets at his disposal.

### Simultaneous productions

He is often hired to work on several productions simultaneously — a fact of life for freelance designers who must take on many projects to make a living. This has been a particularly busy time for Bembridge, whose designs are on display in three local productions: "The Shaggs: Philosophy of the World" at Lookingglass, "It's All True" at TimeLine and "Benefactors" at Writers' Theatre in Glencoe.

He also designed the transformative Russian bathhouse set for "The Pool of Bethesda," which wrapped up its run in late May.

"That's happened before, where I'm working on a couple shows at once," he says. "I've had a lot of late nights. It can be brain shattering. There's a lot of pressure because I'm building a physical reality that has to be safe for people to walk on."

Meeting with him in person, one is instantly struck by his personal style. He dresses with the same ingenuity that is evident in his scenic designs. From the blue pinstripe blazer over the rumpled dress shirt to the sand-colored boots sticking out from the flared bottoms of his jeans — even the sunglasses are

just so — it's a chic, thrown-together look that is a manifestation of Bembridge's attention to detail.

Earlier this month, Bembridge was in constant motion, splitting his time between the Lookingglass and TimeLine productions, both of which opened on the same night. "[TimeLine artistic director] P.J. Powers gave me my first job in Chicago," Bembridge says. "And Lookingglass is home for me."

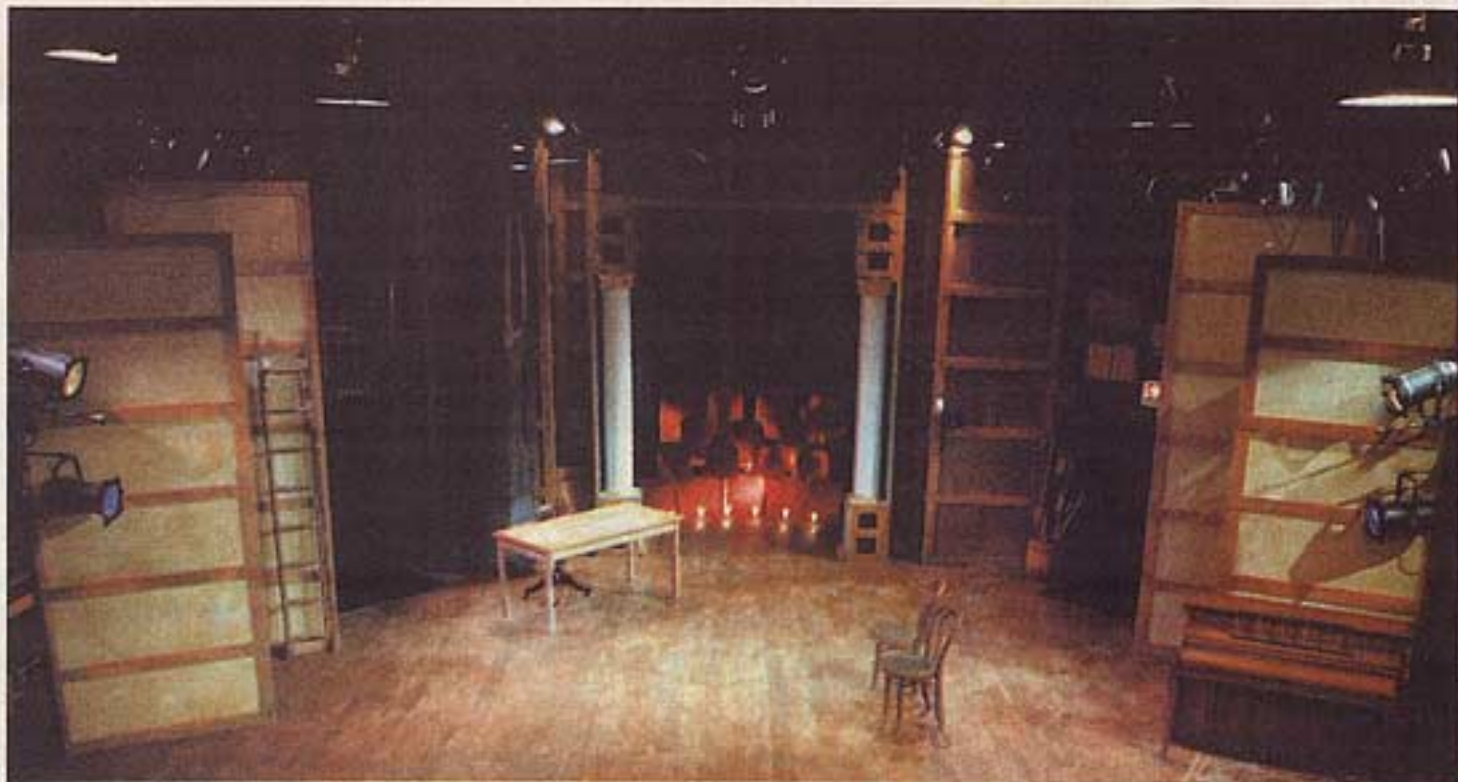
For "The Shaggs," the true-life story of a trio of sisters forced by their father to quit school and start a rock band, Bembridge, working with a budget estimated to be around \$7,000-\$10,000, created a house that looks as if it were built by a child.

If there is a musical equivalent to outsider art, The Shaggs are it. And so Bembridge and director John Langs — who have known each other since their undergraduate days at the North Carolina School of the Arts School of Design and Production — decided the set itself should look like a piece of outsider art. "His sets become another character in the play," Langs observes.

"The whole thing is forced perspective," Bembridge says, explaining the structure's funny angles. "It's supposed to look like a dollhouse. Or like it's cut out of paper."

Over at TimeLine, Bembridge's design for "It's All True" had to suggest the backstage of a Broadway theater. The play centers on Orson Welles and John Houseman, who, in 1937, attempt to override the government's shutdown of the Federal Theater Project and stage the controversial, pro-union musical "The Cradle Will Rock." "I read the script and came up with this idea for a reverse perspective," Bembridge says. The back wall of TimeLine's stage has been transformed to resemble a theater full of red velvet seats. The end result is uncanny, as if the





Tribune photo by E. Jason Wambigans

Brian Sidney Bembridge designed sets for "It's All True" (above), "The Shaggs" (below left) and "Benefactors" (below right).



Tribune photo by Alex Garcia



Bembridge is known for sophisticated sets on tight budgets.



Tribune photo by Alex Garcia

audience is looking in a mirror.

The budget was slightly more than \$1,500, most of which was spent on wood, which has become a signature for Bembridge.

"It's called Lauan," he says. "It's a type of plywood that is a cheap way to get a floorboard look. [Local theater director and actor] Bill Brown always jokes with me about it: 'Oh, look, another set covered in wood — it must be Brian's.'"

### Inspired by architecture

The minimalist, in-the-round scenic design Bembridge devised for "Benefactors" was inspired by architecture, which is a theme running through this story about two neighboring couples in London.

Originally, Gary Griffin, the local director known for his bare-bones revivals of Sond-

heim and classic musicals, was set to direct the production. (Writers' artistic director Michael Halberstam stepped in when Griffin became too busy.)

"Gary likes stripping things down," Bembridge says, "and we started talking about doing something that was beautiful but cold. That the set should look like an unfinished model."

Influenced by the spare lines of Mies van der Rohe, Bembridge envisioned a black, in-the-round setup, punctuated by a slab of wood (of course) and the brightness of a few aluminum chairs. The end result is elegant and simple. Again, the budget was in the low thousands.

Bembridge transformed the oddly shaped studio space at Live Bait Theater for the Umalenyay production of "The Pool of Bethesda." Bembridge built a

room-within-a-room to house the audience and the actors, creating a cozy playing area that suggested an old athletic club swimming pool or a sauna.

### Thoughts of tile

"When I read the script, I thought of tile," he says about the story of a dying physician that takes place in numerous locations: a doctor's surgery, a hospital room and a cemetery. Bembridge originally envisioned an all white tile room, "but then I thought the white was too cold, and I came up with the idea of wood." A steel banister enclosed the actors. "I wanted people to lean forward on the railings as they watched the show," he says, "like those old medical classrooms, those observation rooms where you can sit above and watch a surgery."

The final touch was a sunken pool in the middle of the floor. A light placed at the bottom reflected soothing, watery images on the walls of the space. It was the kind of set that left a lasting impression. Bembridge says his budget was close to the \$1,000 range, making his achievement all the more striking.

"I think there are a lot of companies that think, 'Oh, no, we can't afford you.' But that's not the case," he says. "I don't want to be rich. I just want to be making a living."

"The Shaggs," through June 13 at Lookingglass Theatre Company, 821 N. Michigan Ave.; 312-337-0665. "It's All True," through today at TimeLine Theatre, 615 W. Wellington Ave.; 312-409-8463. "Benefactors," through July 11 at Writers' Theatre, 664 Vernon Ave., Glencoe; 847-242-6000.