



stage

WITH HEDY WEISS

SET BY DESIGN



BRIAN SIDNEY BEMBRIDGE — THEATER'S 'ARCHITECT-POET'

Brian Sidney Bembridge grew up in Londonderry, N.H., where his mother started a community theater. He remembers helping to build the sets for the company's second show — John Guare's "The House of Blue Leaves" — in the family's garage. He now designs sets and lighting for a living. And chances are, if you've been to the theater in Chicago in recent years (whether to see "Hard Times" or "The Shaggs" at Lookingglass Theatre or "Seagull" at Writers' Theatre), Bembridge created the physical world in which you've spent some time. He is part architect, part poet.

This year alone, Bembridge worked on 20 productions (on four of which he designed sets and lighting). And next year's lineup already includes

work on John Kolvenbach's "Love Song" (his first mainstage show at Steppenwolf), "Three Sisters" (at Strawdog), "Barefoot in the Park" (at Drury Lane Oakbrook Terrace), and more.

A graduate of the North Carolina School of Arts ("I acted, but I would never say I was an actor," he quipped), Bembridge, now 32, moved to Chicago in 1997 with his ex-wife, a dancer.

"I didn't want to get into the design business by assisting, and I was told that in Chicago you could find opportunities to work right away, and grow in the process," he recalled. "It took two years until someone really looked."

Here Bembridge talks about the design process for four recent shows, all but one of which is still playing on a local stage:



'MARTIN FUREY'S SHOT' (TimeLine Theatre)

Maureen Gallagher's new drama about a photojournalist, set in the townships of South Africa. (Budget: \$1,200). The set had to give the feel of the ramshackle township buildings constructed of recycled materials, as well as various outdoor scenes where demonstrations took place. And it had to suggest a Chicago apartment, as well. In addition, it had to serve as a rough screen upon which photographs of war and chaos could be projected.

"I always had a big curved wall in mind for the backdrop, and I originally thought we'd cover it with a patchwork of sheets of all different textures. But the director, Anna Bahow, thought the fabric looked more South American than South African. Eventually I found an image of a slatted window made from an Africola soda crate and I collaged some things together on the computer, projected them onto boards and painted a huge billboard that I chopped up and turned into a dirty floor. Then it was off to Menard's where I bought all kinds of wood, and pegboard, and some corrugated plastic that we made look like metal. And with that, and some stuff found in TimeLine's storage room, we created a big wall.

The distressed chairs? We found a rusty old 1950s yellow vinyl one near Writers' Theatre in Glencoe; it just happened to be trash day there."

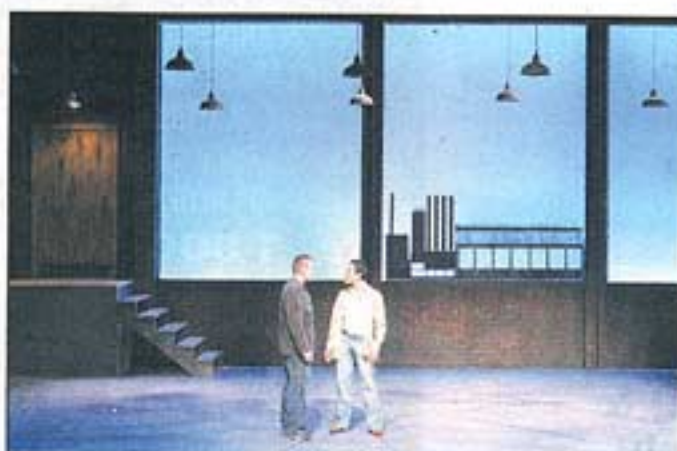


'LIVING OUT' (A collaboration between American Theater Company and Teatro Vista)

Lisa Loomer's play, is set in Los Angeles, and concerns the relationship between a Latino nanny and her employers. (Budget: \$1,200). The set had to suggest interiors and exteriors in L.A., as well as the home of a yuppie couple, and of the nanny and her husband.

"I wanted to suggest the sky and water of both Los Angeles and Mexico. I came up with the idea of blue walls with bird stencils — inspired by the work of installation artist Sandy Skoglund who created these surreal, brightly colored environments in the 1980s. I also flipped through the latest design magazines to see what's trendy at the moment — and stenciling was in.

The challenge was to create both an Anglo and a Latino living environment, and we did that mainly through light, keeping a single set in place throughout. We built the realistic kitchen set ourselves, using countertops and a sink donated from a store near the theater, plus some blue linoleum for the kitchen floor, and nubby green carpeting donated by the architectural firm where [director] Cecilie Keenan works. We borrowed a couch from Steppenwolf."



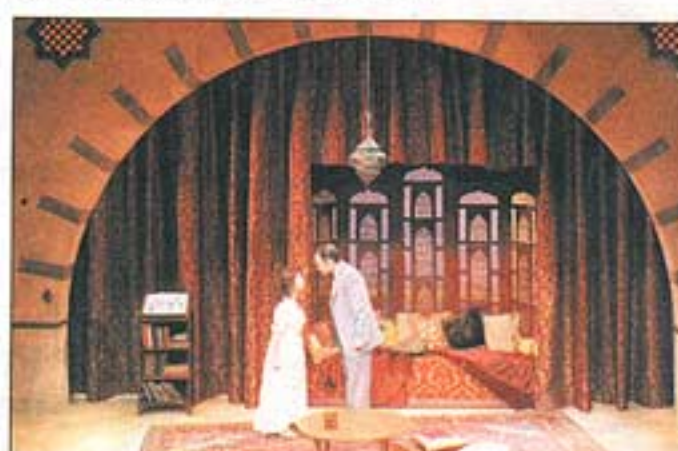
'THE FULL MONTY' (Drury Lane Water Tower Place)

The David Yazbek musical tells the story of unemployed steel workers in Buffalo, N.Y. (Budget: Not divulged). This set had to suggest everything from the world of the steel mills to a living room and contrasting bedrooms, as well as a nightclub and its men's room (stalls, urinals, a back window and all).

"I had the biggest budget I've ever had to work with, but we needed it — even to get a red Ford Fiesta on stage. And the theater is laid out in a way that presents many challenges for a complicated set.

From the start, [director] Jim Corti wanted a kind of installation, with less punchy colors than the Broadway original. We knew that no matter what the scene, we had to stay in the world of the mill. I looked at a lot of books with photographs of the Bethlehem steel works and originally built a model that had all the pipes and machinery but was completely white, yet covered in grime. But it didn't feel right so we went back to a dirty, gritty, brown metal corroded world.

And that window with the bright blue sky, floating clouds and the model of the mill? It's all done with a special lighting technique."



'ARMS AND THE MAN' (Writer's Theatre)

George Bernard Shaw's romantic comedy is set in a fantasy version of Bulgaria. (Budget: \$10,000).

"I love working with [director] Bill Brown. Our design meetings are always over breakfast or some kind of food, and we start off talking about life before turning to the play. And like TimeLine, Writers' Theatre is just kind of family.

Shaw set his play in Bulgaria because he thought of the place as some kind of fairy tale kingdom, and we came up with a set that was a kind of bohemian collage of East and West, with a lot of influence from Islamic architecture and the Ottoman Empire. Bill also wanted something that would suggest every girl's fantasy world — a kind of blue-white world (not shown). And the result is almost an opera version of the play. Much of it was inspired by a single picture brought in by [costume designer] Rachel Healy — of a balcony with arches in that black-and-white stripe pattern you see at the Alhambra. We use a laundry line for curtains. And there's a wall with cutouts that, with the help of lighting, suggests a snow scene."