

Arts & Entertainment

Set designer brings abstract to stage

By Lise Olsen
Senior Reporter

Thomas Umfrid, the resident UNL theater designer, has designed and helped construct Shakespearean balconies, see-through walls, indestructible wicker furniture and Chinese temples.

He says he spends six or seven nights each week designing and helping to construct scenes.

His office speaks for him. "It's a mess," he says. "You should have warned me (about the photographer)."

Small scale models of some of the 60

sets he has constructed in the 10 years of his professional career are carefully stored on the shelves. In one corner, a filing cabinet bursts with drawings and paintings of scenes, stages and furniture. A large drafting table dominates the room.

On an adjacent desk sits a scale model of Umfrid's most recent effort: the eerie gray balcony scene from this year's University Theater production, "A Christmas Carol" — complete with mobile mini-shelves, chairs and tables made of toothpicks and graph paper.

Each of these models and sketches have been transformed by Umfrid, technical designers, stage crews and others

into full-sized scenes, props and backdrops.

At 34, Umfrid has designed scenes for operas, plays, musicals and dances in New York, New Mexico, Minnesota, California, Missouri, South Dakota, California, Michigan and the Netherlands.

Umfrid, an assistant professor, has been UNL's resident designer since 1979. He has designed 19 sets for the theater department and three for university operas.

He designed sets for all three university plays this year. For "A Stone's Throw," a play about a reclusive family, Umfrid designed a junk-filled house

with closed-circuit TV security and barbed wire barriers. For "Ghosts," the story of a woman's attempt to protect her late husband's reputation, Umfrid built a house dominated by the wicked man's portrait. He also cluttered the stage with dead leaves, symbolizing the widow's mental disarray.

Umfrid said he enjoys watching audiences struggle to understand the meaning of such bizarre stage elements.

"We try to give you abstracts," Umfrid said. "You, the audience member, can fill in with your experiences."

Umfrid has designed four different sets for University Theatre productions of "A Christmas Carol," which has been presented in 1979, 1982, 1983 and 1985. Because the script used this year focuses on Scrooge's psychological transformation, the set has a dreamlike quality, Umfrid said.

"Scenes are sharp in the middle and blurred at the edges," he said.

Umfrid spent last year working with world-renowned stage designer John Conklin in New York City on a grant from the National Institute for Music.

An elaborate "nightmarish" set which he designed in New York for Shostakovich's "The Nose" is Umfrid's favorite. "The Nose," which was performed by the Manhattan School of Music, is about a man's nightmare that his nose escapes his face and turns into a civil servant. The opera was originally censored by the Russian government and remains rare. The production was well-received by New York critics, Umfrid said.

Last year, Umfrid traveled with Conklin to design sets for the Netherlands Opera in Europe, the San Francisco Opera and Connecticut and Massachusetts operas.

When he builds a set, Umfrid said, he starts with the performer and works out. Umfrid said he researches the period of the pieces, reads the script closely and consults directors, actors, lighting experts and technicians as he designs.

"Theater is a very collaborative effort . . . A designer is not a person

who sits in an ivory tower and does pretty pictures," Umfrid said.

A set should help the actors define their roles, Umfrid said.

"A good stage design is a passive partner," he said. "The potential for all that acting has to be in the design."

A set should also be familiar with architectural history and current and historical events. UNL theater scenes are often conceived and built in four to six weeks, Umfrid said. Elaborate scenes can take years to perfect, he said. Basic set design depends on the size of the stage, the style of the piece and the dramatic form, Umfrid said.

"But once you know the rules, you can break them," Umfrid said. "There's no cookbook fashion recipe for designing a set."

Umfrid graduated from California State University-Long Beach in 1974. Back then, Umfrid said, he wanted to be a performer. He wanted to sing and dance.

"Then I started working backstage and discovered I had a flair for it," he said.

Umfrid took his newfound enthusiasm to the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis where he earned his master's degree. He often worked in Minneapolis's Guthrie Theatre.

When he graduated, Umfrid worked at the University of South Dakota. After two years he moved to Nebraska. But even after six years he doesn't call himself a "Nebraskan."

Umfrid said he's proud of UNL's university theater, although he, like other professors, worries about the University's ever-tightening budget.

Sometimes, he said, he wishes his work load was lighter.

Umfrid is scheduled to design four or five University productions next semester. He will also design a set for the New Mexico Repertory Theatre in February.

"That's too many," he said. "It puts a strain on my ability to be both an effective educator and practitioner of design, as well as maintain my professional profile on a national basis."



Dan Dulaney/Daily Nebraskan

Umfrid

Despite reputation of Grove, Waite draws a small crowd



Andrea Hoy/Daily Nebraskan

Waite shares the spotlight with his lead guitarist.

John Waite had an unusually hard time motivating the crowd gathered to see him Thursday at the Royal Grove.

Concert Review

Regardless of the types of national recording artists the Grove has booked since its renovation (B.T.O., John Cafferty and the Beaver Brown Band) the crowds have been one reason for the quality shows. When there is a packed house of excited fans, stadium fillers usually forget where they're playing and have fun.

This was not true Thursday night. Waite was the first national recording artist in a long time not to pack the house, and the absence was felt.

At first Waite did seem mildly interested, beginning the show with a fog entrance. But the excitement soon died. The small, predominately younger crowd seemed unfamiliar with the former Baby's first selections and even Waite's hits "Every Step of the Way" and "Missing You" only brought a small rise from the crowd.

—Review by Mark Davis, senior editor

Beantown's Del Fuegos 'set the whole house on fire'



David Creamer/Daily Nebraskan

Dan Zanes

Boston sent its musical A-team, The Del Fuegos, to Lincoln on Thursday night. The Del Fuegos are the best Beantown minstrels to hit the scene since The Standells wrote an ode to the Charles River called "Dirty Water" and wrapped it around the greatest fuzztone riff in history in the mid '60s.

Concert Review

After a garbled, generic dose of new wave power pop by Lincoln's Lunch Cats, The Del Fuegos, led by vocalist/guitarist Dan Zanes burst into "The Longest Day" from their 1984 debut LP of the same name.

Zanes, looking like a haggard Ishmael fresh from a whaling expedition, sings in a slightly nasal, whiskey tenor suitable for drunken shanties in any New Bedford saloon

while the band keel hauled the dance floor with the best from their two albums.

The Del Fuegos take their influences seriously.

Organ parts bubbled and popped around "Backseat Nothing," and power and pride reminiscent of The Standells charged "Our Town." A riff to rival "Louie Louie" chimes in on either side of the verses for "Nervous and Shaky."

The music comes in all hot and excited from the garage and sets the whole house on fire.

The dance floor was full. The band seemed happy.

If we're waiting for this when we wait for our men to come home from the sea, it's worth every minute.

Review by Charles Lieurance, senior reporter