

Learned Ladies - An Education Through Design

by

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Abstract

Learned Ladies opened on February 7, 2008 and ran until February 16th, 2008 at the Frederic Wood Theatre. It was directed by Patrick Gauthier, with scenery by Stephania Schwartz, costumes by Carmen Alatorre, Lighting by Kristen Robinson, and sound by Craig Alfredson, Patrick Caracas, and James Chen.

Designing the production of “Learned Ladies” for the Frederic Wood Theatre was a true education in design. Not only did the production provide the artistic challenge of bringing an antiquated play to modern audiences, it also provided the technical challenge of designing a set that worked harmoniously with over-the-top costumes and video technology. The designers of the show were asked to create a look that married the lines of the historic period and the palette of today’s. Furthermore, due to the static nature of the scenes, the director, Patrick Gauthier, gave me the task of creating a playground for the actors to physically express themselves beyond the confines of the text. He was also keen to use my initial suggestion of having the actors use projected slides in a gilded frame as a “television” of sorts, with changing ”channels” reflecting the mood. This frame would also aid in the opening “dumb show” as a bearer of text and titles, and continue to announce the different acts throughout the show. The set itself needed to appear large and as expansive as a real Salon would have at the time; this was accomplished by opening up the stage to almost its full depth. A sense of height was conveyed by hanging long sheer curtain panels. Furniture was modified to give a period line with modern fabrics that complimented the curtains and floor. The final touch entailed creating large stacks of loose and fixed books that the actors could run around, sit on, and throw. The excess of books littering the stage was meant to be a visual statement of play’s theme about the abuse and misuse of education. Overall, the set succeeded in being a battleground for the sexes as the story unfolded.

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Chapter 1

History

Learned Ladies is a Pandora's box of a play. Once aired onstage, a multitude of paradoxes comes tumbling out. Here exists a play that was written to ridicule the rash of "salons" that had sprung up in France. These were less concerned with actual intellectual discourse, and more concerned with imitating the social exclusivity of the real salons. However, to the uninformed viewer it can seem that Molière is against women's education, which is not the case at all. Some may argue that the heroine is a lady who eschews books for the pursuit of love and domestic bliss. It could seem anti-feminist that the learned ladies are humbled, the lovers re-united, and the somewhat dumb husband triumphant at the end of the play. Have women's rights been trampled? Or is it a victory for the truly learned ladies who are in the audience?

Molière was fortunate to live in a time when women had increasing power, and he capitalized on this in his writings. One notable 17th century example of a powerful intellectual woman was Queen Christina of Sweden. The only child and heir to the throne, she was raised as a prince, becoming highly educated, schooled in the manly arts of fencing, shooting, and horseback-riding. She even took to wearing masculine dress on occasion. Her language skills were formidable- in addition to Latin and Greek, she spoke Swedish, French, and Italian. Visiting diplomats were impressed by her conversational skills. Christina was eventually crowned King, per her father's last instructions, and became known as the "Girl King". She later visited France and caused quite a sensation with her unfeminine behavior. Her influence, a kind of pre-cursor to "girl power", had quite an impact on the upper class women of France.

Meanwhile, in Paris, a great literary salon was thriving at the "Hotel de Rambouillet". It was the inspiration of Catherine de Vivonne, the Marquise de Rambouillet. What had begun as a simple renovation of rooms to a more intimate space for entertaining metamorphosized into exclusive and notable gatherings for nobles and literati alike. Repelled by the superficial and rough society at court, the Marquise strove to create an atmosphere of intellectual discussion rather than idle gossip. Her fetes

became known for the great literary works and other advancements that the salon inspired. A visit from the Queen Mother, who flattered the Marquise by copying the salon design in her own residence, cemented the Hotel's fame.

Naturally, the very same people who were excluded from the Hotel de Rambouillet were envious enough to create their own pseudo-intellectual salons. Molière first satirized these imitations in his play "Les Precieuses Ridicules". Having found a winning theme, he carried it over to "Les Femmes Savantes".

Chapter 2

Research

The theme of imitation as a substitute for the actual was carried on in LFS, as the ladies- Belise, Armande, and Philaminte try to have their own salon. The design for the set therefore would be the ladies' interpretation of what a salon should look like, filtered by their limitations.

Molière was known for his one room sets adorned with the essentials of just furniture and props. This simple concept manifests itself as a unified theme in other plays of his, such as “Le Misanthrope” and “Tartuffe”. References to the setting within the play are few. Act 2, Scene 1 has Chrysale mentioning a telescope; Act 3, Scene 2 has Lepine falling for a chair; Act 4, Scene 4 has Julien entering with a pile of books; Act 5, Scene 3, indicates that the Notary needs paper, a pen, and a writing table: and finally, Act 5, Scene 4, requires letters for Ariste to carry and distribute.

My original concept was that the set should be one great room done in the fashion of a salon in the house of Chrysale and Philaminte. I imagine that the ladies would have tried to copy the salon of the Hotel Rambouillet, as it was quite famous. It was said to be so lovely that even the Queen Mother had paid a visit and insisted that her architects make her a version of it. For the set of LSF, I adapted a description of the Hotel Rambouillet, with its oversized accoutrements. Floor to ceiling panel curtains were hung, in a bright color. The floor looked like weathered, water colored, wood paneling, with thick rugs strewn throughout. Furniture was be done in the appropriate style of Louis the XIV, but with modern colors that coordinate with the curtains. There was one love-seat, one chaise, and two chairs. Tall piles of books were artfully but uselessly arranged around the stage. A writing table was placed downstage. As palms were in vogue in the salons, there were a number of them scattered amongst the furniture. The telescope mentioned in Act 2 was brought onstage for Act 3, and an astrological globe sat on the writing desk. Finally, above the fireplace was a projection screen for various slides that the actors could control.

It was my goal with the set design to create not just a striking (if somewhat

pompous) picture, but a space where the actors can utilize the various props to further describe the text. For example, subtext can be expressed with the projection slides that can be switched by a remote held by the actors; Philaminte can change it to an elegant painting when Trissotin is expected to call, Chrysale can change it to a picture of a dog, a manly hunting scene, or food; Martine can in turn switch it to a pastoral scene of chickens, Armande can change it back to a definition of a word, or a poem, and so on. The canvas can be used for power play, especially relative to Chrysale, who has little control over the furnishings of the house. His position is also indicated by the number of available seats-when all the ladies are present, he must opt to stand or sit on a pile of books. After the critical turning point of Act 2, Scene 9, Chrysale can start to manipulate or even remove fussy objects from the stage, such as the plants, scientific objects, etc. The Salon is the Battleground for the Sexes, and can reflect its state accordingly.

Chapter 3

The Story

Learned Ladies is a true comedy, with no character spared the sharp wit of the writer. Here is a topsy-turvy world unlike those one commonly sees onstage. The head of the household is now the woman, and the man of the manor cringes in the background. Basic domestic concerns such as efficient cooks and staff take a back seat to grammar lessons. Money is lavished on scientific gadgets rather than softer, womanly house accoutrements. Gender roles are clearly out of whack, and are not restored until the end, where women and men band together to restore balance.

The play opens with two sisters, Henriette and Armande, discussing Henriette's desire to marry Armande's former suitor, Clitandre. Armande rejects Henriette's decision to wed as being old-fashioned and uneducated. She has been coached by her mother, Philamente, and aunt, Belise that domestic duties should be tossed aside for the higher pursuit of education. This philosophy has created a kind of chaos where the servants are told to focus more on improving their grammar than cleaning and cooking. Philamente has gone so far as to take over the head role of the household, leaving the husband, Chrysale, cringing in the background. In an unfortunate twist, Philamente has contrived her own marriage plans for Henriette. She has chosen Trissotin, one of her "academic" companions- a scholarly fraud that foists wretched poetry on the "learned" ladies in their literary salon. It is immediately evident that he wishes to marry Henriette only for her money. Unfortunately, this choice is also supported by Armande, Henriette's sister, and their aunt, Belise. Henriette revolts, enlisting the help of her uncle, Ariste. Meanwhile, Chrysale struggles to regain control after his wife dismisses one of their most reliable servants, Martine, because of her poor grammar. He supports the young lovers and vows to have the marriage take place. Both he and Philamente arrange for a notary to witness Henriette's marriage to the groom of their choosing. At the last moment, Ariste steps in with a letter from the family lawyer suggesting that their entire fortune has been lost. This news causes Trissotin to flee, exposing him as a fraud. Ariste reveals that the letter was only a

Chapter 3. The Story

ruse to expose Trissotin's hypocrisy, and that the family's finances are safe. The play concludes with the happy marriage of Henriette and Clitandre.

Chapter 4

Conclusion

The journey of a thesis is a landmark in every graduate student's life, and offers the greatest potential for learning. I chose to step outside my usual comfortable boundaries of the world of film to experience the process of set design. It was a chance to build upon all that I had learned from Robert Gardiner's Set Design class the prior year. I welcomed the task of doing research on the period of the play, and tailoring a design from my findings. But beyond the educational trappings of these reasonings, there was, of course, a more selfish one. The director, Patrick Gauthier, had me caught up in his own enthusiasm. I will repeat the play's text he repeated to me, and in his notes in the program: "We've many pseudo-wits and polished frauds, Whose cleverness the time's bad taste applauds." There is the heart of it- *Ladies* is still a relevant play for today's audiences, and therefore worth doing. When watching the careful lancing of the pompous ladies and slick tricksters onstage, one can fill in the blanks of a hundred personalities today that litter our media. This relevance inspired me to create a design that would reflect the wise sentiments of the play while still celebrating the playfulness and fun that the writer intended. Patrick matched my passion for this from the first moment. While wrangling with a few small details (He wanted stairs and second floor onstage, I did not) we came to agree on a design that would hopefully make both of us happy.

Throughout the process, some details would change (the size of book stacks, the omission of chandeliers, etc.) but I was pleased to find that overall he supported my choices and was in agreement with them. I do wish I had more time to explore making the "picture frame art" more active, like actual film reels, than static slides, but the time frame did not allow it. I also wished I had forced more collaboration from the Lightning Designer, who was maddeningly absent for most of the process. But my interactions with the costume designer, Carmen Alatorre, were very productive, and we tried our best to make a complimentary set and costume design. She included some nice subtle touches, like having the husband, Chrysale, wear a similar blue to

my set in order to highlight the fact that he was trying to blend in, or camouflage himself with his surroundings to hide from his wife.

In conclusion, the process was a tremendous learning experience. While I would love to go back and re-do it with all the knowledge I have now on how to design, how to deal with other strong, conflicting personalities, and how to manage time, I know that is not possible. So I will be content with being somewhere in the middle- not wholly, naively, pleased, but not overly critical, either. There lies my conclusion, in the light of this learning experience.

4.1 Photographs and Technical Drawings

The photographs in this section were taken by Stephania Schwartz during the closing performance of Learned Ladies at the Frederic Wood Theater. Technical drawings are shown in Figures 4.6, 4.7 and 4.8.



Figure 4.1: View of completed set



Figure 4.2: Detail of Furniture



Figure 4.3: Detail of Chaise



Figure 4.4: Detail of Fireplace and Trunk



Figure 4.5: Rendering

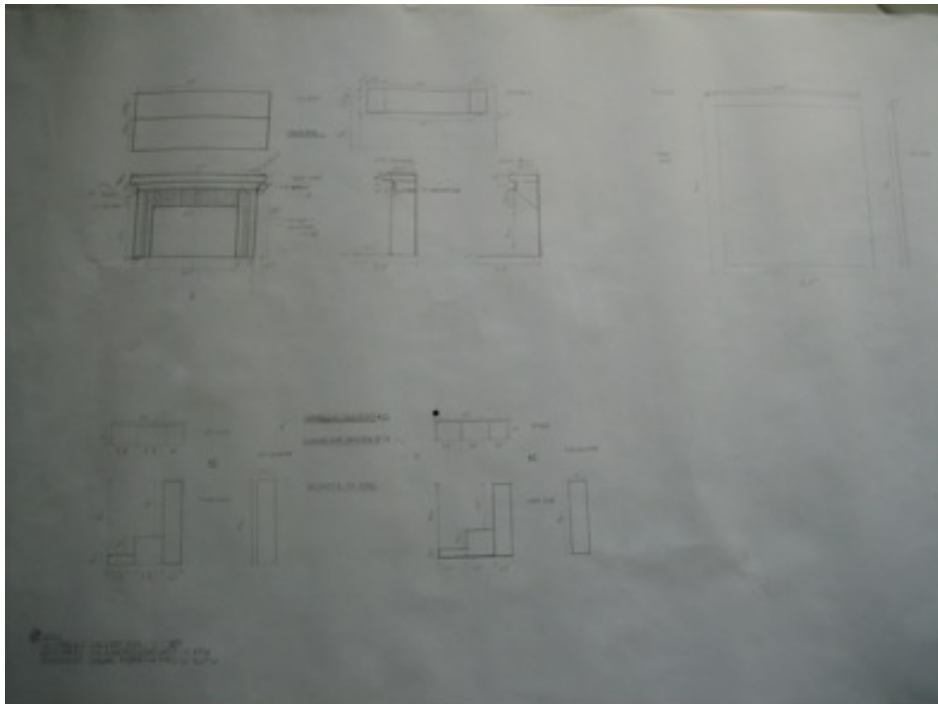


Figure 4.6: Fireplace

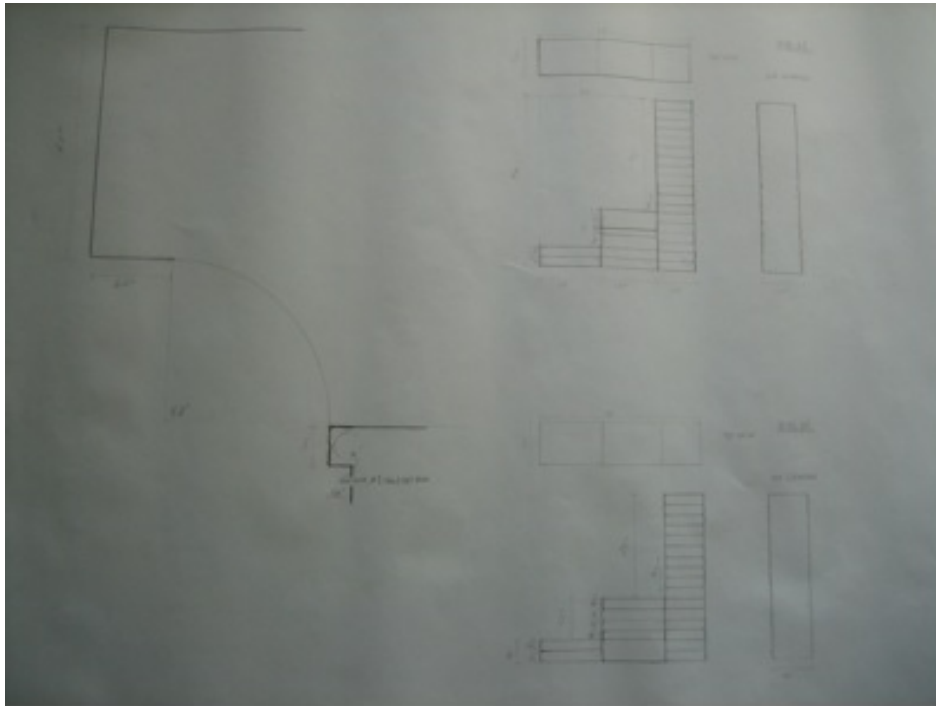


Figure 4.7: Bookshelves

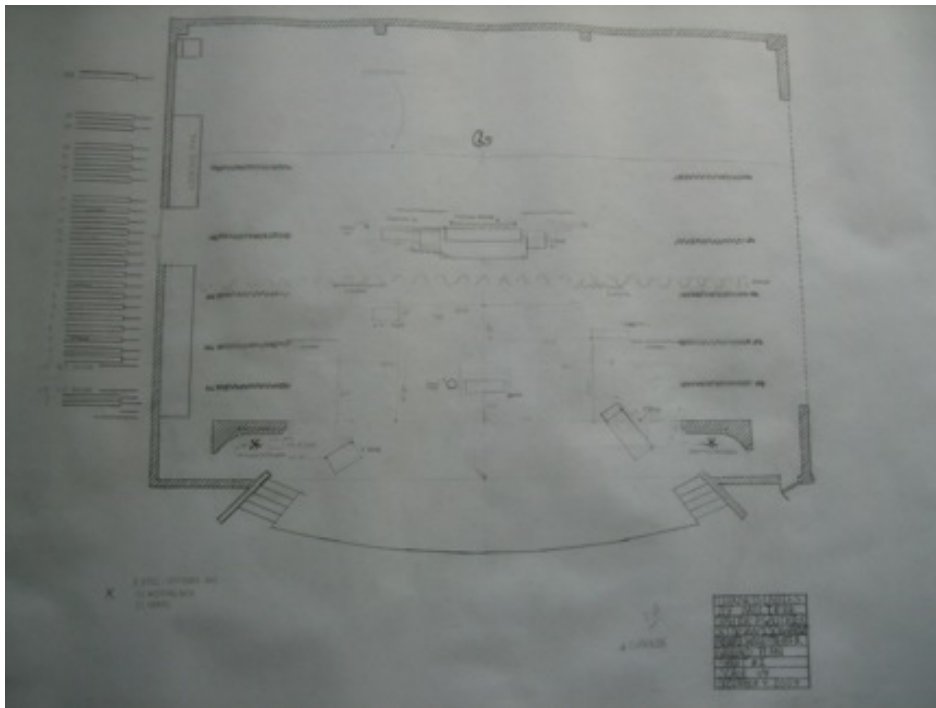


Figure 4.8: Ground Plan

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Appendix A

Props List for Learned Ladies

Version One

November 5, 2007

Four Chairs, Two with armrests, Two without. Re-upholstered (color swatch pending) and gilded

One Gyroscope

One Telescope on Tripod, Gilded or Bronze

Two Palm Trees

Two Separate Potted (Yellow) Orchids in Gilded Containers

One long bench, in lieu of Couch

One Settee (Chaise) re-upholstered and gilded

One China Dog, White and Blue

Two Large Oriental Rugs, Color and Size TBD, but approx. 6ft long each

Four Chandeliers, Gilded

One small end table, gilded

One Large Candelabra, gold/gilded

Books- piles of, and single- leather, gilded, etc-amount, size, TBD

One small writing desk, gold or gilded with black, no natural wood.

One large gilded picture frame for projection screen, size TBD

Eight Curtains, various lengths, TBD

One Feather Quill

One Inkwell

One piece Parchment Paper

One "letter" in parchment paper, sealed with sealing wax