SET DESIGN FOR MARY ZIMMERMAN’S “THE ARABIAN NIGHTS”

by

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Abstract

*The Arabian Nights* by Mary Zimmerman, originally written in 1991, was presented at the 400-seat Frederic Wood Theatre at the University of British Columbia in Spring 2016. It ran from March 17 to April 2 and was directed by Evan Frayne. Lighting design was by Sophie Yufei Tang and costume design by Nicole Bairstow. *The Arabian Nights* was the last production of the UBC Theatre and Film Department’s 2015/2016 season. This thesis report documents the set design process for this production from conceptual to realized design and analyses the relationship between scenery movement and storytelling.
Preface

As the set designer for *The Arabian Nights*, I prepared the design sketches, the preliminary and final designer construction drawings, the white and final physical models, and the research and reference documents that were used to build the show, as shown in Figure 2 – 29 and 41 – 42, and Appendix A and C. The pricing estimation document shown in Appendix B was made with the help of my assistants Courtney Verwold and Gwendolyn Loi.

Scenery was constructed by Technical Director Keith Smith and Head Carpenter Jim Fergusson; scenic painting was done by Head Painter Lorraine West; properties were either purchased or were constructed and/or altered by Property Master Lynn Burton, assisted by myself and the UBC Theatre 299/399 production students. Figure 1 is courtesy of UBC Theatre and Film Department; show photos shown in Figure 30 – 40 and Appendix D are reprinted with permission of Javier R. Sotres Photography and Emily Cooper.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

The Arabian Nights was my second set design produced at the Frederic Wood Theatre, following Eurydice by Sarah Ruhl, which ran from January 21- February 6, 2016. In 1991, American playwright Mary Zimmerman adapted the framing story from The Book of the Thousand Nights and One Night. Director Evan Frayne (MFA Directing) selected this play specifically because he wanted to challenge himself with a non-Western story.

1.1 Venue

The Frederic Wood Theatre at the University of British Columbia campus was chosen as the venue for this production. The 400-seat proscenium theatre was built in 1960s. It is also the home of the UBC Theatre Program’s season of productions, and is the heart of the Department.
The stage is fully equipped with a built-in revolve, traps, and professional lighting (including a LX bridge), sound, and fly systems (25 linesets.) The stage has a removable orchestra pit and a proscenium opening of 40’w x 16’h.

1.2 Plot

The play follows the framing tale of the *The Book of the Thousand Nights and One Night*, which starts with the king, Shahryar, discovering his wife’s infidelity and having her executed. He then declares all women to be unfaithful, and begins to marry a succession of virgins, executing each one the morning after the wedding. Eventually the wazir cannot find any more virgins. Shahryar demands that the wazir bring his daughters Scheherazade and Dunyazade to be the next chosen brides. Scheherazade devises a plan to tell a cliffhanging tale that requires continuation the next evening, and the king postpones her execution in order to hear the conclusion of the story. The next night, as soon as she finishes the tale, she begins a new one and the king, eager to hear the conclusion, postpones her execution once again. So it goes on for one thousand and one nights. In the play, the stories of “The Perfect Love,” “The Perfidy of Wives,” “Sympathy the Learned,” “The Mock Khalifah,” “The Confusion of Stories,” and “The Forgotten Melody” are enacted by the chorus. Scheherazade slowly heals king Shahryar’s broken heart through these stories, and restores his humanity at the end. The playwright specifies that the final scene ends with the wail of air raid sirens in modern Baghdad.
Chapter 2: Design Process

2.1 Script Analysis

The two-act play was written in the shadow of the first Gulf War. Instead of retelling the famous stories about “Aladdin” and “Sinbad,” Zimmerman deliberately left out those stories that Western audiences know the best. This version of The Arabian Nights focuses on the frame story itself and the effects the stories that follow have on the protagonists. The narrative is a cycle of stories-within-stories that are held together by the frame narrative of clever Scheherezade and despotic Shahryar, which creates layers of meaning within the text. The transformative power of the storytelling is obvious: Scheherezade spins a web of stories that not only catches Shahryar’s attention and delays her execution, but also transforms Shahryar from a coldhearted tyrant to a compassionate husband and ruler.

The play balances comedy with tragedy and discusses moral truth through storytelling by individual characters. ACT I is entertaining and, following intermission, ACT II is rather serious, especially in the final scene where the sound of an air-raid siren is heard at the end of the play. Zimmerman wanted to pull the audience from the fairytale stories back to our present Middle East crisis, to send a message that, politics aside, we are all very much the same.

2.1.1 Controversy

This section aims to briefly address some of the play’s past controversy and how this controversy affected this particular production. The play has been the subject of some disagreement about appropriate representation of culture and ethnicity. Jamil Khoury, the founding Artistic Director
of Silk Road Rising, a theatre company located in Chicago, once publicly accused the playwright Mary Zimmerman of misrepresentation, not only in *The Arabian Nights*, but in most of her plays. According to Khoury, Zimmerman represents Asian and Middle Eastern people as exotic, playful, and mysterious assemblies of colorful textiles, choreographed movements, and sensualized fables, rather than as “real” people. Not people you’d have lunch with, but amusing and titillating gilded objects, to be enjoyed vicariously and from ample distance. (Khoury 2013)

For our production, concerns over the lack of representation of different ethnicities in the cast were raised via social media. Director Evan Frayne, Costume Designer Nicole Bairstow, and I consulted the UBC Equity and Inclusion Office about intercultural theatre and presentation of the material in the play during the early design stages. A meeting has been held on January 18, 2016 to invite students to a public community feedback forum to discuss the production, and to listen to any questions and concerns they may have had.

2.2 Design Concept

Because of the nested story structure in the play, the initial design concept was to create a space where stories unfold and magic happens. “Unfolding” was a key element at the beginning. However, after several meetings with the director, we took the design in a different direction. Evan wanted the stage to be practical and transformable but without large architectural elements; he wanted the space to be as open as possible to provide enough acting space for sixteen actors and allow the focus to remain on them and their performances.
A “sandbox” idea was then introduced, which allowed the actors to interact and utilize small set pieces to set up different scenes on stage; the scene would change while they spoke and storytelling would involve moving the set pieces. This type of scene changing helped to strengthen the idea that the characters were the story creators themselves. We decided that the mobile set pieces would be lightweight furniture and floor cushions, which would be easy enough to move around during scene changes.
Figure 4. Preliminary design sketches and rough models - version 2

Since Scheherezade tells the stories in the King’s bedroom, an intimate relationship between the actors and the audience is important for conveying the mood of the play. As stated in the script, the play is best presented in a thrust theatre with the audience on three sides looking down on the playing area. Although this production was to be presented at a proscenium theatre, both the director and I felt the need to reduce the sense of distance between the actors and the audience. An idea of “extended cycloramas,” which look like a mini thrust, was introduced as the major scenic element, to highlight the playing area while inviting the audience into the story. However, as much as we wanted a narrow “mini thrust” that would be more interesting and visually appealing, we had to settle for a wider one. All the performers remained in full view of the audience throughout the play, joining the action of the “main story” as needed without ever leaving the stage. Therefore, it is important for the set to provide an open and flexible playing area for large scenes and for performer movement.
Another major set design idea for this production was flying elements. The actions in the script are continuous and very smooth; scenes and locations tend to overlap and dissolve into one another with subtle indication. The idea was to have a considerable number of hanging lanterns flying in and out to compose different silhouettes that would help establish location and mood for different scenes while a transition was taking place.
2.3 Refining Design

Once the preliminary design was confirmed, details of individual set elements had to be worked on – the style and details of mobile furniture, the style, number, and arrangements of lanterns for different positions, and the paint treatment of the curved wall and mini thrust.
Floor cushions and short tables with carved details were designed to serve the stage directions’ requirements. Two “palanquins” were especially designed to mimic boats; they would be used to lift up actors during a scene, because two sailing boats were described in the script.

Fifteen lanterns on five battens were used to achieve different lantern silhouettes. Two of them were detachable to create an opportunity for the actors to interact with the set directly and also provide extra options for the director. Because of the limited number of linesets and the nature of the theatre, we could not move the lanterns as far downstage as we desired; all the lanterns were located either mid stage or upstage.
Figure 10. Rough ground plan and centerline section of flying lanterns
Figure 11. Front elevations of different flying lanterns’ positions
The “extended cyclorama” was constructed as a 24’ wall with a curved section on the bottom to transition smoothly into the floor and a matched width painted on the floor to define the space. Despite the elegant shape of Islamic calligraphy patterns, they were avoided in this production as it is considered offensive to use them on the floor. Simplified painted versions of Arabic
geometric patterns were used to treat the curved wall and the floor’s surface to establish an abstract indication of location and period.

Different layouts of the mobile furniture were suggested to the director for a few major scene changes; however, all of these were cut right before rehearsals started. The director worried that the action of moving set pieces would dominate the performance. He wanted the audience to focus on the acting itself and was confident that lighting would be sufficient to distinguish between scenes. This decision was changed again during technical rehearsal as the director saw some need to do minimal movement of the furniture.

Figure 13. Different layouts of mobile furniture
Figure 14. Different layouts of mobile furniture

Figure 15. Quick sketches on different options for the furniture to be set assign on the storytelling space
A light color for the wall and floor was originally discussed. Many Middle Eastern mosques have white wall with vivid blue patterns as accents. The director was worried that the light wall and floor would draw too much attention to the set rather than the performers. A dark violet-blue color was used instead, which worked well with the different hues and tones of the cushions and costumes.
2.4 Execution

Once the final design was approved by all parties, the building process could begin.

2.4.1 Set Construction

The set was constructed by Technical Director Keith Smith and Head Carpenter Jim Ferguson, assisted by UBC Theatre 299/399 production students. The back wall was assembled from eleven 4’x8’ studio flats and three 4’x8’ sheets of rubber board (for the curved portion). As suggested by the Technical Director, the pattern size on the wall and the floor was adjusted from 3’x3’ to 4’x4’ to help hide the seam lines between flats. Carved furniture pieces were cut with a
router and a pre-made guide template. A 1/8” half-round router bit was used to smooth the edges of the carved details to achieve a delicate and refined look for the furniture. Eight hundred feet of zip cord and fifteen lamp sockets were purchased to wire all fifteen lanterns on five battens.

![Figure 18. Four finished tables before paint](image)

### 2.4.2 Property Construction

All eight 4’x4’ floor cushions and six smaller cushions (ranging in size from 16”x18” to 21”x21”) were made from scratch. Property Master Lynn Burton and I made two fabric shopping trips to fabric stores suggested by Costume Designer Nicole Bairstow. Since the cushions and the costumes were all various hues of blue, Nicole and I communicated to make sure we did not purchase the same or similar fabrics, providing enough colour variation on stage and enough distinction between costumes and props. Five lanterns that were in stock were suitable to be used in this production, six lanterns were purchased from a local store, and four lanterns were ordered from an online store. Repainting or paint touch–ups and gel for the glass were needed on all lanterns.
2.4.3 Scenic Painting

Scenic art played a very important role in this production. The paint treatment of the wall and the floor was crucial for giving definition to the space. Thinned glaze was painted on the entire “extended cyclorama” surface, and semi-gloss applied only on the geometric patterns, to highlight the patterns in a subtle way and to enrich the overall feeling of the palace. Stencils were made from ABS sheets with a jigsaw, and were used to paint both the pattern color and the gloss finish. The method of projecting the patterns on the ABS sheets for markings was initially
employed. We used both the opaque and overhead projections but neither were satisfactory. We faced the challenges of coping with keystoneing and edge distortions and it was very time consuming. Technical Production Advisor Bradley Powers suggested printing full scale patterns out and applying them to the sheets instead. It was a more efficient way to reproduce the patterns. The curved wall was painted with less glossiness than the floor to reduce reflection from the stage lights.

Figure 21. Research images of paint finishes

Figure 22. Finish painted wall and floor with desired glossiness on patterns
Figure 23. Stencils made from ABS sheets

Figure 24. Paint floor samples
Figure 25. Wall and floor painting in progress

Figure 26. Finished painted curved wall and mini thrust
Painting a marquetry effect on the table tops unified them with the detail of the side panels. The sides were painted in bronze gold with a hint of green to tie in with the lanterns’ treatment.

Figure 27. Paint elevation for table tops and side panels

Figure 28. Four furnished tables with closeup details
Technical Rehearsals

Technical rehearsals are the first time the show is rehearsed in the venue with the technical elements (set, lighting, and sound) and the actors. It gives designers the opportunity to see how their designs will work together and whether changes needed to be made. For “The Arabian Nights,” I had designed twelve different lantern positions before the technical rehearsal. The first day of testing out the different fly cues in the real space went smoothly. The moving speed and flying order of the lanterns were refined during cue to cue, and three more positions were added at the end; as well, the lighting effects for the lanterns were discussed with Lighting Designer Sophie Yufei Tang and things worked out smoothly.
Chapter 3: Design Analysis

The flying lanterns and patterned wall and floor were the major elements in this open space set design. While the set provided an open and flexible playing space for large scenes and performer movement, patterns played an important role in defining the particular storytelling space and in providing abstract indication of the period and location. Different flying positions for the lanterns helped establish locations and strengthen the storytelling, which worked well with the lighting to establish mood and texture.

Figure 29. “Magic Sheet” for flying lanterns
3.1 Establish locations

Different lantern positions helped establish location and tell the story.

Figure 30. The camel ride in the dessert to the king Shahryar’s palace. Reprinted with permission of Javier R. Sotres Photography.

Figure 31. King Shahryar’s palace where he killed his cheating wife. Reprinted with permission of Javier R. Sotres Photography.
Figure 32. “The Mock Khalifah” story. River of the gentle Tigris with two sailing boats. Reprinted with permission of Javier R. Sotres Photography.

Figure 33. “The Forgotten Melody” story: Ishak of Mosul listens to the forgotten melody by a river in Basrah at night. Reprinted with permission of Javier R. Sotres Photography.
3.2 Establish Mood and Texture

The set worked well with the lighting to establish mood and texture.

Figure 34. Preset - a mysterious mood was set at the top of the show, preparing the set to “unfold.” Reprinted with permission of Emily Cooper.

Figure 35. The lanterns rose slowly while the company entered the stage to set up the opening scene. The rise of the lanterns was like the rise of a curtain as a prologue to an evening filed with stories. Reprinted with permission of Javier R. Sotres Photograph.
Figure 36. Last Scene. A haunting lighting effect with lanterns just above the actors for the ending. Reprinted with permission of Emily Cooper.
Figure 37. Last Scene. The lights lingered for three seconds before the stage went all black, helping to establish and prolong the uneasy and disturbing atmosphere. Reprinted with permission of Emily Cooper.
3.3 Open and Flexible Playing Space

The set provided an open and flexible playing space for large scenes and performer movement.

Figure 38. “Family Dance” story. Most of the actors were dancing and jumping in this scene. Reprinted with permission of Javier R. Sotres Photography.

Figure 39. “The Dream” story. Twelve actors were lying and rolling on the ground to take turns to “wake up” and tell stories. Reprinted with permission of Javier R. Sotres Photography.
3.4 Strengthen the Storytelling Power

Some movements of the lanterns echo with the lines in the script to strengthen the storytelling.

Figure 40. The end of “The Confusion of Stories.” Six stories were being told and performed simultaneously. Lights of the lanterns were flicking during this scene to indicate the span of time and the number of stories that Scheherzade tells. Reprinted with permission of Javier R. Sotres Photography.

Figure 41. The end of the “Perfect Love” story. The Lanterns were slowly flying out while Scheherzde said “They lived together in all delight...until they were visited by the destroyer of joy, the separator of friends, and died.” Only three lanterns were left alone at this moment as the wazir stood with a shroud.
Figure 42. Scheherazade was counting off the nights until they got to the one thousand and one nights. The Lanterns started flying out while Shahryar said “Scheherazade, marvelous girl, you have lifted the veil from my heart.”
Chapter 4: Conclusion

The play of *The Arabian Nights* is not a happy fairytale story; it is a piece of work with serious themes. Given the past controversy about this play, and the current intensity between the Middle East and the Western world, there was always some level of pressure during the production process, even in a university setting. I personally consulted all my friends with Islamic backgrounds to listen to as many opinions as possible before staging the production. The whole process has been an extremely rewarding experience and has added a layer of depth to the academic aspect of this production.

Overall, the set worked successfully in placing *The Arabian Nights* within the proscenium. Creating a layout of mini thrust, avoiding large architectural elements, and giving abstract indications of the period and location by patterns and lantern movement all worked well with the philosophy of the play. I believe the play is a respectful representation of a culture, and the assimilation of people from many nations and ethnicities, and I think the set was a successful physical expression of these themes.
Bibliography


Appendices

Appendix A - Fly Cue Sheets

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<td>3'</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Batten 2</td>
<td>3'</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Batten 3</td>
<td>3 1/2'</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Batten 4</td>
<td>6'</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Fly Order:** Batten 1 - 2B3 - 1 - 5

Finish moving before Perfect Love and her dancers enter USC start dancing
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8:27</td>
<td>Line: “When I heard...”</td>
<td>Out of batter 2, in batter 4; out of batter 2, out of batter 1; medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7:48</td>
<td>Finger cymbals ring</td>
<td>In batter 2; 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7:49</td>
<td>Overpassa:</td>
<td>Out of batter 2, in batter 1; 14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7:49</td>
<td>After the first bit of the</td>
<td>Out of batter 4, in batter 5; 14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7:55</td>
<td>Moment before the</td>
<td>In batter 1; 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7:55</td>
<td>After tempos are</td>
<td>Out of batter 2, in batter 3; 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8:16</td>
<td>Fly out; cymbals</td>
<td>Out of batter 2, in batter 3; 10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Fly Order:**
- Batter 5: 4 – 6 – 2 – 2
- Batter 3: 5 – 2 – 2 – 3
- Batter 1: 9 – 9 – 2 – 2

Additional Notes:
- Want to add this cue back, will check with Sean tomorrow.
- Finish moving when the cymbals ring, before line: “...and first sight had come...”
- Fly at the same time.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ACT</th>
<th>SCENE</th>
<th>DESCRIPTION</th>
<th>DURATION</th>
<th>BEAT</th>
<th>10</th>
<th>13</th>
<th>16</th>
<th>FLY ORDER</th>
<th>REMARKS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 12  | 90    | When Ardash | IN: BATTEN 2  
BATTEN 4  
BATTEN 5 | 8' | Medium | L:1 | | 10 | 13 | 16 | 2 - 4 - 5 | Move this cue to p.95 magnificent hall? |
| 12  | 109   | Chorus: But when the | OUT: BATTEN 3 | 12' | Medium | | | 11 | | | | Want to add this cue, will check with Evan tomorrow, L3 52 |
| 13  | 122   | Last 3 count of the | OUT: BATTEN 2  
BATTEN 4  
BATTEN 5 | 14' | Quick | | | 10 | 11, 13 | 2 - 4 - 3 | |
| 14  | 130   | Sound of air raid | IN: BATTEN 3, 4  
BATTEN 2, 5 | 5' | Very slow | | | 10, 11, 13, 16 | 284 - 285 | |
| 15  | N/A   | After stage lights out | OUT: BATTEN 2  
BATTEN 4  
BATTEN 5 | 17' | Very quick | | | 10 | 13 | 16 | |

CURTAIN
**Appendix B - Pricing Estimation Document**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Price</th>
<th>QTY</th>
<th>Size</th>
<th>Note</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **USD 12.07** | x2 | 4” x 4 1/2” x 18” H | 1. Materials: Metal frame with glass  
2. Usually ships the next business day (order by Tuesday, up to 3 weeks for delivery - which makes it around the 8th of March)  
Shipment to Canada  
Delivered by Canada Post is available for orders shipping to Canada. |
| **USD 9.82** | x2 | 4 3/4” x 4 1/4” x 15” H | 3. Purchase links:  
http://www.eastwindgifts.com/10815429.html  
http://www.eastwindgifts.com/16405.html |
| **TOTAL: USD 43.75, no shipping** | **CAD 102** | | |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Per 1 (in store)</th>
<th>Price</th>
<th>QTY</th>
<th>Size</th>
<th>Note</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>CAD 120</strong></td>
<td>X1</td>
<td>10.5” W x 10.5” D x 23.5” H</td>
<td>Materials: Carbon steel, glass, acrylic gems</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CAD 65</strong></td>
<td>X2</td>
<td>7.87” Dia x 16.93” H</td>
<td>Materials: Carbon steel, glass, acrylic gems</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CAD 25</strong></td>
<td>X2</td>
<td>7.48” W x 7.48” D x 19.50” H</td>
<td>Materials: Iron, glass, plastic beads</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CAD 273</strong></td>
<td><strong>CAD 30 (tax incl.) - 10% COUPON DISCOUNT</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL:</strong></td>
<td><strong>CAD 288</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**GRAND TOTAL:** **CAD 370**  
**CAD 20 over budget**  
9 lanterns in total (instead of 7)  
I prefer the number combination of these to-be-purchased lanterns and the ones that we have in stock, but that's absolutely fine too if it's better to stay within the budget and stick with 7 lanterns. I will then cut two from the list both.