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Design and technical direction of The Dancing Donkey

Joseph David Weiss

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THE DESIGN AND TECHNICAL DIRECTION OF

THE DANCING DONKEY

by

Joseph David Weiss

B.A., Purdue University, 1962

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts

UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA

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Date

May 25, 1970
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION AND DEFINITION OF TERMS

The Dancing Donkey, a play for children by Erik Vos, was presented January 23, 24, and 25, 1970, at the University of Montana Theater by the University's Drama Department as a part of its children's theatre program. It is the purpose of this program to present at least one children's play a year as part of the Drama Department's major season. The direction of the play was undertaken by a graduate student, David Baney, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Master of Arts degree. To fulfill the requirements for the Master of Fine Arts degree in design and technical theatre, the design and technical direction of this production was undertaken by this author. As a record of the design, technical direction and production of The Dancing Donkey, this thesis may serve as an aid to those who have a general interest in these fields or a specific interest in design for children's theatre.

For the purposes of clarity and understanding, a short definition of terms follows.

Children's theatre... "includes both theatres in which adult actors play to child audiences and theatres in which the acting is done by children."¹ In this particular production the acting was

done by students of the University of Montana before audiences composed primarily of children.

The University Theater at the University of Montana is a thirteen hundred seat, proscenium-type theatre. Its proscenium opening is approximately thirty-seven feet six inches, and the stage has a depth of twenty-eight feet with nine feet of wing space on each side. The gridiron is fifty-five feet high; all lines are hemp with the exception of four which are counterweighted and which are used for lights and a movie screen.

The Director shapes the total production concept. "It is his responsibility to see that settings, costumes, props, and lighting are in accord with the acting and directing and that all express the idea of the play."\(^2\)

The Designer is usually responsible for the design of the scenery and/or the lighting and costumes. In this particular production the set and lighting design was done as a unit, and the costume design was handled by another individual.

The Technical Director is a person whose job seems to be confined to the non-professional theatre. "...the technical director is directly responsible for construction, execution of design, lighting, run of production, and for setting, shifting, striking, and disposing of scenery for each production."\(^3\) One important job of the Technical


Director which is often overlooked is that of coordination of the various aspects of the production, normally the Stage Manager's job in the professional theatre.

The **Stage Manager** holds a very important position once the show is in production. It is his responsibility to see that the show progresses satisfactorily. He is "...in complete charge of all performances after final dress rehearsals. The Stage Manager also calls all light, sound, and crew cues, checks entrances, holds the book, and keeps the show moving."^4

The **Choreographer** is responsible to the Director for the design and execution of dances. He also trains and rehearses the dancers and any actors who must dance.

The **Technician** is given the responsibility of executing the construction of the set from detailed drawings provided by the designer. "The effectiveness of the designer's plan depends upon how faithfully the technician follows his specification and dimensions."^5

The **Properties Master** is responsible to the Director and the Designer for the acquisition or construction of all properties essential for the production. It is also necessary for the Properties Master to provide for the care and proper placement of all objects considered properties during the production.

In the following chapters the attempt will be made to communicate the processes used to mount the production of *The Dancing Donkey* from

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the initial concepts through the design and technical direction to
the performances. The areas of costuming and make-up will not be
discussed except in relation to coordination and technical direction
where this author had responsibility. Since this writer had no
responsibility for and was not privy to the method used in the selection
of *The Dancing Donkey* as the play to be presented, there will be no
discussion of the Director's intentions other than those which
directly related to the design and technical direction of this pro-
duction.

Two factors which strongly affected the original design should be
noted here: the possibility of touring after the performances at the
University Theater and the tight scheduling of the use of the
theatre's facilities. (The proposed tour was later cancelled for the
lack of a sponsor.) The scheduled dates for the University production
were just three weeks after the opening of the school term and two
weeks before another production, requiring competition for work space.
It is hoped that the description of this particular creative process
will be a help to those who may face similar limitations.
CHAPTER II

PLAY ANALYSIS

The Dancing Donkey is a relatively simple show concerning a friar who owns a donkey that can dance. Two scoundrels, Ernie and Bill, contrive to steal this donkey, convinced he can make them rich. When the donkey refuses to dance for them, they decide to sell him back to the friar. When the friar discovers the plot, the scoundrels reform so they can marry their sweethearts, Amelia and Azelia, who come in and out of the action to create confusion and laughter. The show is essentially realistically based and without magic or supernatural elements.

The play has no great moral purpose and seems to be written for the enjoyment and pleasure it could instill in a child. (Perhaps a stronger case could be made for the play's moral theme; but, due to the great amount of action and stage business, this author felt that children in the audience would be more impressed by the fun and the moral would take second place.)

In discussing the play, its author, Erik Vos, states, "...try to create from the same roots as the commedia dell'arte did, without
pretention, rich and full of vitality, rich in sources from life experience. Therefore, the script was a scenario.

The script specified the place for the action as "...an open space flanked by an olive grove on one side (L), and a fig-grove on the other side (R). Somewhere among fig-trees flourishes a laden banana-tree with a wide trunk." Another tree (center) to which the friar tied the scoundrels had to be large and strong. It also required a bench in front of it. While the geographic location of the play is subtropical, the exact country is not specified. The lines within the script implied that there should be some bushes with flowers and thistles here and there about the set and that the trees would be spaced to allow the characters room to pass among them. Red dresses were required for the girls by the script; these dresses are surrendered to the scoundrels by the girls in order to save themselves from a "wild bull."

Since the play's author stated that the script was to be the basis for a creative process, and few specific needs were given, the design for the particular production developed primarily from discussions between the director and the designer.

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2 Vos, op. cit., p. 7.
Designing scenery for children's productions involves problems and solutions not common to those shows designed for adult audiences. Children, for the most part, have very active imaginations; and, often, a mere suggestion will suffice for a complex subject such as a tree or a hill. Because subtle colors and contrasts are often overlooked by children in their eagerness, colors can be bold and contrasts great. These precepts, along with the script, formed some of the bases for the developing scene design.

The first conferences with the director supplied many of the needs not detailed in the script. Primarily the director's thinking was that music, pantomime, and dance should be used throughout so that the audience could have as much fun as possible. To this end a sixth character was added (a troubador) to provide live music of his own adaption in accompaniment to the songs which were included in the script. The troubador was also to act as a Master of Ceremonies to introduce the play to the audience. To make the dance and pantomime more manageable, the director used a choreographer and divided the show into thirty-two parts or "bits," each being a portion of action, dance, pantomime, music, or some combination of these things.
Other conditions which the director specified were that the bench in front of the center tree be curved and that the period of the action should be 1830s. He felt that the costumes of this period fit his ideas and would work well in the scene where the girls surrender their dresses to the scoundrels who put them on.

It was apparent from the time the decision was made to produce a children's show that every phase from the design to the strike \(^1\) would have to be carefully planned in detail to avoid the confusion and problems bound to arise out of the tight scheduling of the University Theater and its shop facilities. The prospect of touring only added emphasis to the need for planning and organization in the design phase to insure that the component parts of the setting would travel well and assemble easily. It was fortunate that the designer and director had met before the production was chosen and had agreed upon the need for careful planning.

In addition to the tight scheduling, the designer felt a need to keep the technical costs of the production as low as possible in deference to the restriction "if it costs too much, we'll tell you." Being accustomed to working within limited budgets, he felt at ease in doing so. In the very early stages of design some thought was given to the materials on hand. The preceding show had used burlap.

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\(^1\)Strike: the act of removing all scenery and properties from the stage either temporarily or permanently.
tobacco cloth, and strips of one-half inch and one inch thick styrofoam. There were quantities of each left.

Some research was conducted on the properties of fig, olive, and banana trees. The fig and olive were found to be similar in outline, differing in leaf shape and fruit. Both types have heavy trunks and small-leaved foliage which spreads over a large area. Extremely old olive trees are generally very gnarled. The banana tree is distinctive because it carries only a few large leaves, often up to three feet wide and ten feet long, and because of its yellow fruit.

With the previous conditions in mind, the design of The Dancing Donkey was begun in early October, 1969, with a second thorough reading of the play. While the designer agreed with the director on the importance of action and fun in the show, the script did not detail much and seemed somewhat lifeless during reading. To keep the children in the theatre content for an hour would require a great deal of action, music, and dance.

Therefore, the initial scenic idea was to provide a simple but colorful background which would enhance the show and provide space for a lot of action. The period chosen for the play did not affect the style of the setting since it was a clearing between the trees. The colors were bold primaries and secondaries, chosen for their high contrast.

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2 Tobacco Cloth: a coarse type of cheese cloth used to cover tobacco plants as they are growing.

3 Styrofoam: a very lightweight, expanded plastic.
Both the director and designer decided that there should be an element of fantasy in the setting to further the possibility of visual interest and emphasize the whimsical nature of the play. To accomplish this, it was felt that the foliage and, to a degree, the trunk shapes could be generalized to the extent that there would be no specific olive or fig trees but that the trunk sizes, shapes, and outlines would differ. The fact that research disclosed the similarity of the shapes of the trees made this possible. It would also have been difficult to make separate fig and olive trees quickly and easily.

Early sketches based on the preceding ideas produced a setting with three trees placed at the sides and back of the stage in front of a sky-drop.4 It was felt that these early designs were somewhat foreboding because of foliage which hung nearly to the floor. The tree placement was also somewhat static. After a discussion with the director, it was decided to make the trees even less realistic by the use of color and texture in the trunks and foliage. This method of stylization developed from the viewing of children's books which were illustrated with trees, grass, and other objects textured with dashes of color or fabrics which enhanced the natural curves and characteristics of the objects. The books by Leo Lionni (see Bibliography) were especially useful in this respect.

The designer suggested the use of platforms to give variety to the visual picture and to allow the actors greater flexibility of movement. These platforms were to be used as hills or hillocks.

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4 Sky-drop: a fabric drop, painted light blue and hung and lit to resemble the sky.
which could be made to blend with the scenery. There was some debate concerning the advisability of using a forestage, but this idea was discarded on the basis of the difficulties of touring such an arrangement.

There was agreement on using a fully-opened proscenium to allow everyone in the audience to see and to eliminate possibly poor sight lines. Such an opening would also create fewer problems during the tour, eliminating the need for setting-up on exact marks. Because the smallest stage for the tour would have dimensions of fifteen feet in depth by thirty feet in width, the bulk of the setting's picture would have to be confined to these dimensions.

The sky-drop and background were also discussed. The idea of the sky-drop was acceptable. While the background could have been a hedge row, a line of hills, or a wall, the designer felt that a stone wall would be best because it would not be green and would, therefore, add contrast to the setting.

The final design incorporated the platforms, generalized tree shapes, stone wall, and sky-drop. The platforms were arranged in a triangle with a large one slightly left of up-center and in front of the large tree. A curved bench was placed on top of the platform. To give variety, two different step units and a ramp gave access to the top of it. Two small platforms were placed down-stage right and left with the right one further up-stage. These platforms were low, and no step units were necessary for them. To give variety and the feeling of progression in height, the platforms ranged from twelve inches to two feet.
The tree up-center was the largest and combined with the ramp
and large platform formed the focus of the setting. Down-stage left
was another, smaller, single tree. Down-stage right was a group of
trees to give balance to the set (see drawing #1).

The texture on the trees and platform was to be achieved by
mixing dashes of color as previously discussed. The setting in this
form (see appendix) was presented to the director on December 2, 1969,
and approved for construction. At this time the director asked if the
up-center platform could be constructed in some way which would allow
characters to hide underneath it (because this would give him a good
opportunity to add action). It was agreed that this could be done
without too much difficulty.

The exact depth of the playing area had not yet been set. The
director and designer examined the University Theater stage to get
the feeling of the depth. (Often the depth of a setting looks adequate
on a drawing; but, when the set is put on-stage, it can be too shallow.)
Ideally, the depth for the setting just described would have been
about twenty feet to give appropriate distances between platforms so
that actors crossing the set would not have to walk parallel to the
edge of the stage, making for static blocking. However, the limitations
of the stages on the proposed tour and the need in a children's play
to get and keep the actors near the audience required that this
distance be shortened to fifteen feet.

Drafting the construction drawings constituted the final stage
in the designing of the production. Since construction details could
not be drawn without knowledge of the materials to be used, these
were determined next. Having had earlier experience with cardboard tubing, the designer felt this would be an excellent and inexpensive means of constructing the trees. These tubes could be easily obtained and already had the desired round form. (Most scenery handbooks list more conventional ways of building up tree trunks, but it was felt that they are usually time consuming, expensive, and cumbersome.)

The foliage for the trees was, perhaps, the most difficult part of the scenery. The problems involved in touring to schools which did not have apparatus for flying foliage would have created an overwhelming job. For this reason, foliage borders were immediately eliminated. Foliage which could be supported by the trees themselves seemed the most satisfactory arrangement. Because of the availability of tobacco cloth and cheese cloth and the lightness of these materials, they were chosen by the designer as the materials to be used.

The remainder of the materials were those often used in scenery construction. Existing burlap and styrofoam would be used for covering and building up the platforms.

The problem of touring was always present. The whole setting (including lighting equipment) would have to fit into a U-Haul truck with a sixteen-foot bed. The trees were designed to come apart with the branches fitting together, somewhat in the manner of a mortise and tenon joint. The foliage would be draped over the branches, then taken off and folded for easy transport. The platform could be taken apart and folded or taken "as is." The major problem encountered was

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5Fly: to support scenery from above the stage using pipes, ropes, and pulleys.
how to anchor the trees on stage floors into which one could not
drive a nail. For this reason, a base which would not show any visible
form of support was devised using pipe flanges and plywood.

The construction drawings were begun on December 5, 1969, when
the design was finalized, and construction was begun on December 10.
CHAPTER IV
CONSTRUCTION AND PAINTING

The construction of the scenery for The Dancing Donkey was roughly divided into three phases due to the requirements of the director and the fact that the touring status was, as yet, unknown. The director requested the use of platforms, steps, and ramps as early as possible so that the actors could become accustomed to them. It was decided to first construct those items which would not have a more permanent type of construction if the show did not tour. Construction was begun in mid-December, immediately following the close of the previous show.

The small down-stage left and right platforms were easily constructed of 1x6\(^1\) frames with a 5/8" plywood top, legged to the proper heights. The up-center platform presented a construction problem. Because of its size (5' x 8' and 2' in height), it was first to be divided into two platforms four by five feet. For touring purposes it was felt that these units would truck more easily. The first thought was to build two parallels;\(^2\) but since the director had planned for the actors to crawl under it, this construction was

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\(^1\)Standard milled lumber sizes were used for all construction.

\(^2\)Parallel: a platform support which folds for ease of transport and storage.
unworkable because of the bracing method. Therefore, these platforms were built in the same manner as the down-stage platforms (see drawing #4). In use, the platforms were to be held together with "C" clamps to form the complete unit.

The next units to be constructed were the step units and ramp. These were built of 5/8" plywood with all joints glued and nailed (see drawing #4). Plywood was chosen for these units because of its relatively light weight. The ramp was strengthened with 2x4 stringers, supported by legs (see drawing #5), and pinned to the platform to hold it in place.

All platform units, steps, and ramp were then covered with a layer of rug padding and burlap. The padding was used to deaden sound and to act as a cushioning agent while the burlap was chosen to give texture to the surface when it was painted.

The ground row (wall) upstage was then built. This unit served as concealment for the lighting for the sky-drop and added a background for the setting. It was made of standard flats pulled from the University Drama Department's stock. The wall was built in two sections totalling forty-two feet long extending off-stage on both sides. Each section was made of a nine and a twelve foot long flat hinged together end to end. These two sections were then fastened together with a screen door spring and a stop cleat (see drawing #8).

The final scenery pieces built in the first stage were the clouds. These very simple units were frames of standard flat construction,
covered with Upson\textsuperscript{3} and cut to the desired cloud-like shape (see drawing #11). Screw eyes were put into the back of each of the frames to facilitate future rigging.

Thus, by December 25, 1969, the major units which the director had requested for rehearsal (and some minor pieces) were built. This left the construction of the trees and the painting of the set to be completed during and after the holiday break.

The building of the trees constituted the bulk of the second phase of construction. After the design had been finalized, a quantity of rug tubing was gathered (at no cost) from local carpet and furniture stores. These heavy cardboard tubes were from twelve to fifteen feet in length and approximately six inches in diameter. The designer felt that these would make excellent "building blocks" for the trees.

A major problem to be solved was how to form the rug tubes into the curving trunks and limbs which were desired. The most obvious method was to notch the tubes and bend them; however, because of the thickness of the tubing, it broke rather than bent. Hot water was used in an attempt to soften the cardboard. However, the breaking was still a problem, and it became apparent that to bend the tubes in this manner would be more time consuming than had previously been thought. The solution involved cutting the tubes into appropriate lengths and joining the pieces at the desired angles by using scrap 1x4 which was nailed together and slipped into the ends of the tubing (see drawings #13-15).

\footnote{Upson: a trade name for a soft, fibrous, lightweight material of a more sturdy form than cardboard.}
The tree construction began with the single tree for the down-left corner. It consisted of three rug tubes glued together and bound with tape up to approximately six feet where each tube was bent out at a different angle. Smaller "branches" were cut to three and four foot lengths from 1\(\frac{1}{4}\)" doweling and bamboo fishing poles. These were inserted into the sides and ends of the tubing and secured with glue and staples (see drawing #13).

The five trees for the stage-right group were made next. These were single tubes, bent several times each to conform to the shapes shown in the rendering. The limbs were also of 1\(\frac{1}{4}\)" doweling and bamboo, but they were placed only in the upper ends of the trunks.

To make the trees self-supporting and still movable for touring, it had been planned to mount pipe flanges on plywood bases for support. The tree trunks would be slipped over lengths of 1\(\frac{1}{4}\)" pipe screwed into the flanges. Accordingly, six flanges and six threaded pipes approximately three feet in length were assembled for this purpose.

The large up-center tree was the last scenery piece to be built. A variation on the rug tubing construction was used. A 5'6" box was made of 1x12s. The tubing was glued and bound to the box and nailed where possible (see drawing #15). The longest limbs were not fastened to the tree permanently until the final set-up because of the need to move it back and forth through the small passage-way from the scene shop to the stage.

It was during this phase (on December 30) that the plans for touring The Dancing Donkey were canceled. While the cancellation
allowed the construction to be more permanent, the scheduling of the University Theater demanded that the setting be removed from the stage at least once during the rehearsal period in deference to other events. The only changes, then, which developed from the cancellation of the tour involved the tree supports and the masking. With the exception of the banana tree which was pulled on-stage during the course of the play, the plywood/flange bases for the other trees were abandoned, and the flanges were fastened directly to the stage floor. Originally, the maximum height for the masking had been set at twelve feet to meet the requirements of the stages to be encountered on tour. Because the University Theater has a larger possible opening, the height was raised to eighteen feet, requiring masking flats of nineteen feet. Flats to meet this need were pulled from stock and set aside for painting.

By the opening of the Winter Quarter on January 5, 1970, all units had been built, leaving only the covering and painting to be completed before the scheduled set-up date of January 19. At this time the events which had been scheduled in the University Theater before January 14 were canceled, giving our production valuable stage time. While the stage was still committed to another group beginning January 15, it was decided to put all of the scenery on stage to give the director and cast full use of it until that time. Further construction and the painting would take place during the day to prevent interference with rehearsals during the evenings.

The last stage of the construction was the covering to give form and the painting. While the upper surfaces of the platform and
steps had already been covered with burlap, the sides had to be sloped to give the appearance of hills or mounds. Wood supports were added to the bases and sides of the three platforms and chicken wire was stapled over these supports (see drawing #7). Burlap was then formed over the chicken wire and held with glue and staples. The burlap was also sprayed with a solution of Elmer’s glue $^4$ and water to stiffen it. The down-stage edges of the step units were similarly treated. The lower edges of the ramp were flared at the bottom by using styrofoam covered with chicken wire and burlap (see drawing #7). The upper surfaces of all platforms, steps, and the ramps were painted with clear latex to strengthen the wearing properties of the burlap covering without making it brittle.

Two methods of covering were used for the trees. The stage-right grouping was covered with pieces of $\frac{1}{2}$" thick styrofoam covered with cheese cloth to make a good painting surface. These styrofoam pieces were stapled to the trees, overlapping like shingles to give the trunks a shaggy appearance. The stage-left tree was also covered in this manner except that the pieces were applied in a more even manner to give a smoother appearance.

The large center tree was covered with burlap which was stapled in folds to give the feeling of heavily creased bark. After the burlap was in place, it was also sprayed with a mixture of glue and water to make it hold its shape.

$^4$Elmer’s glue: a trade name for a poly-vinyl based glue.
The remaining scenery piece, the ground row, was to be painted to look like a stone wall. Three dimensional stones were glued to the upper edge of the flats and at random on the front surface. These stones were pieces of broken two inch styrofoam covered with cheese cloth (see drawing #9).

During the construction of the major set pieces flowers and bushes for the setting were also being built. Quantities of plastic flowers (in the stock of the Drama Department) and plastic greenery (purchased locally) were formed around drain plungers to make free-standing bushes (see drawing #12) and wound together to form the vines and other plants.

The curved bench (see drawing #16) for the top of the center platform was also made at this time from 3/8" plywood with 1/4" doweling for legs. Later it was permanently affixed to the platform because the great amount of action which took place over, under, and around it tended to dislodge it.

Painting began as soon as all units were covered. Casein paint\(^5\) was used throughout. A Hudson sprayer\(^6\), connected to an air compressor, was used for applying the base coat on all the pieces (except the flats) because of its speed and the ability to easily cover the rough surfaces of the trees and platforms. The basecoating took two afternoons. The

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\(^5\)Casein paint: a paint in which milk bases form the binder; the particular color names refer to Placo Caseins, supplied by Playhouse Colors of New York.

\(^6\)Hudson sprayer: a trade name for a pressurized tank-type sprayer designed for the application of insecticides but useful for scene painting.
platforms, steps, and ramp were painted first to allow drying time before the evening rehearsal. Because the painting was done on-stage, a large plastic drop cloth was used to prevent paint from adhering to the stage floor. The large tree was also sprayed on-stage while the smaller ones were taken into the paint shop.

The casein colors were mixed as closely as possible to those on the rendering, but some difficulty was met because the rendering had been done with water colors and acrylics7 and the differences of the media made exact matching difficult. The basic color mixture for the greens was two parts Scenic Green and one part Viridian Green; the shadow color was Fresco Deep Green; the highlight, Scenic Green lightened with white. The basic browns came from scraps from an earlier show, darkened with black and Burnt Umber and lightened with white and Raw Sienna to get the shades and tints desired.

The small stage-left tree and the group stage-right were textured by outlining the styrofoam pieces with the highlight brown and painting the shadowed areas with the darkened brown. The surface of each piece of bark was then dry-brushed8 with the highlight, shadow, green, red, and yellow to give further texture and more interest. The center tree was treated in a similar manner using the folds and creases of the burlap as the guides for the areas of shadow and highlight. The same colors were dry-brushed over the entire surface of this tree. The

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7Acrylic: a paint with a plastic resin base.
8Dry-brush: a painting technique in which the brush feels nearly dry to the touch and deposits very little paint on the surface being painted.
platforms were also painted in this manner although very little of the red and yellow was used. The stone wall was based in grey with the stones outlined in grey shadow and dry-brushed with both the shadow and highlight. Dry-brushing was used throughout as a texturing technique in order to have unity in the painting style. (The only pieces that were not treated in this manner were the side masking pieces which were painted and spattered in order to match the color and surface of the existing sky-drop.) The entire effect of this method of texturing was to heighten the fanciful feeling of the scenery.

The greenery for the tree tops was painted last because it was the most time and space consuming operation. First, eight pieces of fifty inch tobacco cloth, each twenty to thirty feet long, were cut and draped about the paint shop. These were sprayed, using the Hudson sprayer, with the basic green. After drying overnight, dark green, light green, red, and yellow were applied to the cloth in a similar manner. The drying time between each successive coat was about four hours, and care was taken as the paint was applied not to soak the cloth in order to prevent running. The leaves for the banana tree, made from corrugated cardboard (see drawing #14), were also painted the basic green and dry-brushed with the same colors as those used on the other foliage.

Thus, by the end of rehearsal on January 14 all set pieces were complete and ready to be struck to allow the Missoula Symphony the use of the stage until January 19 when The Dancing Donkey would be reset.

\[ ^2 \text{Spatter: a painting technique which involves shaking paint from a partially filled brush onto a surface.} \]
CHAPTER V

LIGHTING DESIGN AND EXECUTION

The lighting design grew out of and along with the scene design. The major difficulty encountered was the lack of specific lighting needs within the script. The set description mentioned the time as being "...a beautiful summer's day;"\(^1\) therefore, any shifts in the lighting and mood had to grow out of the conception of the play and setting itself.

Viewing of the early rehearsals and discussions with the director revealed that changes and shifts could be "woven in" around the divisions in action that the director had planned, including dim downs to show passage of time and tableau\(^2\) scenes. The designer wanted to use backlighting\(^3\) to give a warm feeling and to add a crispness to the action. The director wished to use a follow spot to accent the donkey when he danced and, thus, give him a particular uniqueness. The lighting concept was, therefore, to give the feeling of a warm, happy

\(^1\)Wos, op. cit., p. 7.

\(^2\)Tableau: a momentary pause in the action resembling a photograph and characterized in this production by a silhouetting of the actors.

\(^3\)Backlighting: lighting from pipes hung in the upstage areas and aimed downstage.
day punctuated with specific changes to reflect the movement of
the action in the play.

In the execution of this concept, the first consideration was
the possibility of touring. Because the number of instruments which
could be taken on such a tour would be severely limited, the follow
spot and the backlighting would have to be sacrificed for the University
production or a separate design for the tour would have to be developed.
Fortunately, the cancellation of the tour came before this decision
had to be made, and the lighting could be as complex as the designer
cared to make it. There were no particular budgetary limitations on
the lighting, and the entire lighting inventory of the University’s
Drama Department was at the designer’s disposal.

More discussion with the director and further viewing of the
rehearsals revealed patterns in the action and movement which called
for the stage to be divided into seven basic areas. These could be
lit singly or in combination and constituted the general visibility
light (see drawing #3). The down-stage platforms and the ramp were
each specially lit because of the action on them.

The backlighting was to be used to set the mood. This involved
colored light which would stream onto the stage from behind and between
the trees to emphasize both the shapes of the trees and the actors.
Lastly, the background was to be lit, undoubtedly using blue to give a
sky-like appearance.
The acting areas were each lit by two spotlights using the basic McCandless method. For this show, however, the designer established a dominant direction (based upon the action) from which to have the color come. The light from the stage-right instruments would imitate sunlight; that from the stage-left would provide fill light; the backlights would add clarity and mood.

The choice of color for the lighting was felt to be extremely important because it would give the feeling and result desired—that of a bright, happy day. The color of the acting areas was the most difficult to choose because of the dominance of green in the scenery and the importance of red in the costumes (see pages 31 and 32 of the script). The color chosen had to compliment both red and green as well as imitate sunlight.

The available color media was Brigham gelatine, so a search was begun with the color swatch book. Prior experience allowed the designer to limit the colors to the ranges of ambers, yellows, and straws. As a matter of method, all heavily saturated colors in these ranges were omitted because they transmit less light; the light needed on the

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4 McCandless method: a way of lighting based upon the work and writing of Stanley McCandless in which two instruments are placed at approximately forty-five degrees to each other for maximum effect.

5 Fill light: light used to soften shadows created by intense directional lighting.

6 Brigham gelatine: a particular brand of color media which is used to affect the color of the transmitted light.
acting areas was to be used for visibility more than mood. This
limited the available colors to the following:

- #50 - Light Lemon
- #51 - Medium Lemon
- #53 - Very Light Straw
- #54 - Light Straw
- #57 - Light Amber

To help in the final choice some testing was done. First, 7
spectral transmission curves for the colors were consulted. The
results of these findings tentatively eliminated the ambers (which
transmitted a lot of red which would have dulled the greens) and the
straws (which would have greyed the reds because of the high trans­
mission of green light). Since the lemons seemed to be the best choice,
samples of the scenery and costume colors were lit using the gelatine
samples and small-scale instruments (of the designer's manufacture).
The results were rewarding: the lemons seemed to work the best, enhancing
the green while not doing any damage to the reds of the costumes.
(Some light pinks and lavenders were also tested as a matter of
comparison, but, as expected, they greyed the scenery colors while
emphasizing the costume colors.)

Light Lemon (#50) was chosen for the acting area color and was to
be used in all instruments which came into the acting areas from the
stage-right direction. The stage-left instruments were left without

7Spectral transmission curves: graphs which are available for
some color media and which show the percentage of light transmitted
through the gelatine in respect to the colors present in light.
gelatine to provide fill light. Light Amber (#57) was chosen for the backlighting because of its rich, sunlight-like appearance. In this instance the predominance of red would have little effect on the looks of the scenery but would create a glow about the actors. Light Green (#47) was chosen to highlight the tops of the trees. Standard primary blue roundels in strip lights were used for lighting the sky-drop.

In the mind of the designer there was little choice in the type of lighting instruments to be used. Ellipsoidal spotlights would be used for all acting areas, special areas, and for the backlighting. These were chosen because of their high light output and for their good control of the shape of the beam. Several fresnels were also used to backlight the tops of the trees because of the wide, diffuse beams which they produce.

After the decisions on areas, gelatine, and instruments had been made, the design was put on paper; and the various necessary lighting plots were drawn up. These included the Light Plot (drawing #3) which gave the exact location of the instruments in addition to the circuit number and gelatine color for each, the Patch Plot (see Appendices) which specified the loading and circuiting for each dimmer in the University Theater's lighting system, and the Gel Plot which gave the color number, frame sizes, and the number of each type needed.

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8 Roundels: glass color filters available in an assortment of colors and most often used in borderlights.

9 Ellipsoidal spotlight: a spotlight which features an ellipsoidal reflector and framing devices which can be used to form a specifically shaped beam of light.

10 Fresnel: a lighting instrument which uses a lightweight lens (developed to withstand heat) and which gives a diffuse (or soft-edged) beam of light.
Another conference with the director set the exact places for
the cues and types of lighting changes. Essentially, there were three
types of changes: a dim down of all lights to allow emphasis of the follow
spot on the donkey, a dim down of all lights but those on the sky-drop
and a single area for the tableau effects, and a dim down of all but
the sky-drop lights to show a passage of time.

After the first technical rehearsal, two fresnels were hung to
supplement the top lighting for the trees to further enhance their
appearance. Two additional ellipsoidal spots were added (one for the
the ramp and one for the down-right platform) to emphasize characters in
these positions during the tableaux, and an ellipsoidal spot was added
to reinforce the lighting between the down-center and down-left areas
which had seemed dim compared to the rest of the stage.

A man made a mask to surround the light of the followspot,
which also allowed the cover to face away from the stage. After the
designer's final rehearsal, the mask was hung on the tree to maintain the
efficient use of the mask. The designer's final rehearsal consisted of
the technical director discussing the technical effects of the
scene. The mask was added to the followspot to create the
appearance of the followspot.

During the technical rehearsal, the followspot was placed in a
more visible area to make it easier for the director to observe the
position of the mask. The mask was added to the followspot to create the
appearance of the followspot.
The technical rehearsals were the phase when all the elements of the production came together for the first time. Although this author was not specifically responsible for some of these areas, as the technical director he was responsible for seeing that their progress was satisfactory and could be coordinated during the technical rehearsals.

The construction of the costumes was checked periodically for progress and/or problems and to confirm the colors to be used. One change which affected the scenery involved the addition of hooped skirts which made it necessary to spread the trees in the stage-right group apart to allow the girls to pass among them.

While it was the job of the properties master to construct or locate the necessary properties from the list given him by the designer, The Dancing Donkey required no elaborate or special things, and the director and designer were able to check the progress in this area without difficulty. (For any show which would require properties of special design or construction, the technical director or designer would exercise greater control in this area.)

Because the troubador supplied live music for the show, the areas of music, sound, and sound effects (over which the technical director would ordinarily have authority) were absent in this production.
Since it was the policy of the University Drama Department to require students in the make-up classes to assist with the make-up during a show, the technical director was able to turn this area over to the make-up instructor after informing her of the show's needs.

The stage manager, who also served the production as the choreographer, was very familiar with the production and quite competent in his work of maintaining an accurate working script and running the actual performances.

The technical direction also included the supervision of the construction phases which were discussed previously and which utilized people from the University's beginning stagecraft classes as well as those who expressed an interest in aiding the production. During this construction period an important step to the smooth operation of the technical rehearsals was taken when the rigging for the show was done. This included the hanging of all overhead masking, the sky-drop, and the lighting instruments. Because it had been determined that the hanging for The Dancing Donkey would not interfere with the symphony's concert, the rigging was done January 14.

Before the set-up date a rigging plan (see Appendix) was devised to allow the placement of the scenery pieces to proceed as smoothly as possible. On January 19 the scenery was placed on stage according to this plan. Only one problem was encountered; the sky-drop was three feet shorter than the inventory had specified. The height of the proscenium opening was lowered to offset this shortage. All lighting instruments were angled and gelled as the final step in the set-up.
At the first full technical rehearsal on January 19 all elements were used with the exception of make-up and the follow-spot which was not available until January 20. The lighting console operators had been introduced to the operation of the console prior to this rehearsal. An attempt was made not to interrupt the continuous action of the play and therefore allow the actors and technical personnel a rehearsal situation close to that of actual production.

Following the first technical rehearsal several things required some change. The draped foliage on the trees was rearranged to eliminate some overly saggy places. The texturing on the platforms was toned down because the highlight was too bright and attracted attention. The clouds were textured to give them more apparent dimension.

By the second technical rehearsal the set was ready, but some work on the lighting was called for. A few of the cues were dropped for lack of motivation. While the follow spot worked out well, a major communication problem developed between the stage manager's desk and the follow spot booth because of the intercom's weak power supply. A microphone and speaker arrangement finally overcame this problem.

The final two rehearsals and the four performances ran smoothly and without mishap. The only potential problem (the possibility that enthusiastic children who inspected the setting after the performance might damage it) was handled well by the stage manager and his assistants.

Immediately following the final performance, the strike was carried out according to the plan given in the appendices. No problem was
encountered; and, approximately one and one-half hours after the final curtain, the stage was swept and ready for use by the next production.
CONCLUSION AND CRITIQUE

Following the production no formal critique was held, but it seems fair to assume that, as far as the children were concerned, the show was a success. The crowds were quite large (the second largest in the history of children's productions by the Department of Drama) and several children admitted that they had seen the show more than once. From the designer’s viewpoint, while there were some difficulties which will be discussed later in this chapter, most ideas worked out well. The setting seemed to fulfill its purpose of providing a bright, colorful environment for the action. Although the scenery was realistically based, there was enough fantasy in the treatment of the elements to give uniqueness. By using materials on hand (which were not charged to the production), scenery and lighting costs were held below fifty dollars. Because of the good box office response, the income was adequate to cover all show costs. The crews all performed their duties well and cooperated with the director and designer in all areas.

On the other hand, the foliage on the trees did not perform as the designer had hoped. The texturing was not as evident as had been intended, and by the fourth performance the foliage was sagging badly. The remedy for the sagging seems to be additional support, either with
more limbs or with wires or strings between the ends of the limbs to
give a more rounded appearance. If the texturing colors had been brushed
on instead of sprayed, the style of painting on the foliage would have
more nearly approximated that of the rest of the set and would have
seemed more appropriate.

Some of the smaller elements of the setting also needed treatment
to maintain the continuity of style. In particular, the plastic foliage
should have been textured with the highlight and shadow colors to
accentuate their dimensions. The bench at the base of the large tree,
while strong enough to do its job, was visually weak and should have
been either more substantial or of a different style. The clouds
needed something additional or different to give them a three-dimensional
quality to blend with the rest of the setting; using cotton or muslin
to build up areas or making them of something transparent might have
accomplished this.

While the lighting of the production was effective, the designer
would have liked to have had further control over the instruments on
the right which simulated the sunlight. This would have heightened
the contrasts and interest. This effect could have been achieved by
controlling the instruments separately, but time limitations prevented
the designer from working this plan out completely.

While departures from the plans or adjustments in scheduling are
often necessary, the importance of planning is vital to the implementa-
tion of a smooth running production. This fact was reinforced in this
production. The author hopes that this thesis will demonstrate to
the reader the processes which were followed in the design and execution of this production of *The Dancing Donkey* and allow him to adapt them to other productions.
BIBLIOGRAPHY
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Shear, S. W. "Fig," *Colliers Encyclopedia,* 1968, Vol. 9.


Weiss, Joseph D. "Scale Lighting." West Lafayette, Indiana: Special Studies in Stage Lighting, Purdue University, 1961. (Mimeographed)
APPENDICES
TO: Production Staff of The Dancing Donkey

SUBJECT: Production Meetings

At this point it appears that tryouts for the show will be held just before Thanksgiving break. We will rehearse two weeks this quarter and two and one-half weeks the winter quarter. Because of the schedule and the conflict with the Repertory, it is to our advantage to complete as many technical aspects as possible prior to Christmas break. To facilitate this, I am calling for three production meetings to be held before casting. The meetings will be held on the following dates during workshop hours:

- Wednesday, November 5 (sketches due)
- Wednesday, November 12 (renderings due, music, dance routines due)
- Wednesday, November 19

1. The first meeting will be concerned with the style of the show and the unification of design. Preliminary sketches must be prepared at this time.

2. The second meeting will be concerned with the correction and modification of the designs as discussed in the first meeting. All renderings must be prepared at this time, and the dance routines and the music must also be prepared at this time.

3. The final meeting will be concerned with final approval of design for sets, costumes, music, and dance. The staff should be prepared to begin construction and rehearsal after this meeting. The following ideas should be incorporated in the planning of the preliminary work:

   a. The show will be set in the 1830s
   b. No specific location such as Missoula will be suggested for place
   c. The show is to be presented on the University stage
   d. A musical character may be added to the script. He will play the tunes for the show and converse with the audience prior to the show and during intermission.

David Haney
## Production Schedule for The Dancing Donkey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date &amp; Time</th>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Activity</th>
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<tr>
<td>Dec 10, 1969 thru Jan 5, 1970</td>
<td>University Theater and Shop</td>
<td>Construction of all units</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jan 6, 3:00 p.m.</td>
<td>U.T. Shop</td>
<td>Cover trees</td>
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<td>7:00 p.m.</td>
<td>U.T.</td>
<td>Rehearse Bits 1-16</td>
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<td>Jan 7, 3:00 p.m.</td>
<td>U.T. Shop</td>
<td>Cover trees</td>
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<td>U.T.</td>
<td>Rehearse Bits 17-32</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jan 8, 3:00 p.m.</td>
<td>U.T. Shop</td>
<td>Cover and paint</td>
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<td>7:00 p.m.</td>
<td>U.T.</td>
<td>Rehearse Bits 17-32</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jan 9, 3:00 p.m.</td>
<td>U.T. Shop</td>
<td>Paint trees</td>
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<td>7:00 p.m.</td>
<td>U.T.</td>
<td>Rehearse Bits 1-16</td>
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<td>Jan 10, 10:00 a.m.</td>
<td>U.T.</td>
<td>Rehearse Bits 17-32</td>
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<td>1:00 p.m.</td>
<td>U.T. &amp; U.T. Shop</td>
<td>Paint trees</td>
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<td>1:00 p.m.</td>
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<td>Rehearsal Hall</td>
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<td>Jan 19, 1:00 p.m.</td>
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<td>Set scenery, set lights</td>
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<td>Production and Strike</td>
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SCENERY CONSTRUCTION ASSIGNMENTS

DANCING DONKEY

Report to David Weiss IMMEDIATELY for assignment

2:00 p.m., January 7

Carol Combest
Rick Springer
Harry Gadbaw

COSTUME CONSTRUCTION - WINTER QUARTER

Report to Abby Amt IMMEDIATELY

Kathy Danzer
Patti Swoboda
Suzanne Kilian
Marilyn Meyers
Cathy Larish
Steve Libra
Nancy Nichols

SCENERY CONSTRUCTION

Report to Bob Cocetti

7:00 p.m., January 12

Fred Booth
Larry Nash
Bruce Olson
Ernest Williamson
Arthur Deschamps
Janet Mitchell
Bob Thornton
Dave Ferguson
Tom McLennon
Charles Benjamin
Colleen Brady
David Pichette
Two parasols for the girls
Two baskets of flowers for the girls
Bananas, both real and artificial
A long stick with a string and a banana
Bag for the Friar with cheese and wine bottle
Rag to tie donkey's mouth
Money bag and money (bills) for Friar
Thistles (on set)
Rope for the Friar
Bottle of smelling salts
Bottle of Eau-de-Cologne
Brandy bottle
SET-UP PLAN FOR THE DANCING DONKEY

1. Rig (January 14) borders, sky-drop, and lighting pipes.
2. Set all the platforms, steps, and ramp in place.
4. Set the ground row (wall) in place.
5. Set and wire the sky-drop footlights.
6. Drape the foliage on the trees.
7. Set the side masking pieces.
8. Rig and fly the clouds.
9. Trim the set (all greenery and flowers in place).
10. Adjust the overhead trim and side pieces to mask all backstage areas.
11. Angle and gel all lights.
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<td>(3B1-4) - R.G.B - 2,500 watts</td>
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**Upper numbers in large boxes are the circuit numbers plugged into the dimmer.**

**Lower numbers in large boxes is the load on the dimmer in watts.**
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<td>7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CARD NUMBER</td>
<td>Insert in scene #</td>
<td>Page Number - 3</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>3 3 3 3 3 3</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>8 3 8 3 8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Procedure (before the House opens):

1. Insure that the aisle and exit lights are on. The switches are in the box office.

2. Check all lights by bringing up each dimmer and insuring that the lights come on.

3. Insure that all preset cards are set properly.

4. Set up the lighting console as follows:
   a. Dimmer selector switches 1, 2, 3 at manual.
   b. Dimmer selector switches 4 through 30 at preset.
   c. All blackout switches on.
   d. The House Light selector on manual.
   e. Scene selector switches on.
   g. House Light dimmer set at 10.
   h. Dimmers 2 and 3 set at 10.

CUES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CUE NUMBER</th>
<th>ACTION</th>
<th>PAGE IN SCRIPT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>House Lights Out</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Scene Master 1 to 10</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Scene Master 1 to 3</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Scene Master 1 to 10</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Scene Master 2 to 10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Scene Master 1 to 0</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Scene Master 2 to 3</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CUE NUMBER</td>
<td>ACTION</td>
<td>PAGE IN SCRIPT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 6          | Scene Master 3 to 10  
Scene Master 2 to 10  
Scene Master 1 to 10  
(Movements follow the play's action)  
Scene Master 2 and 3 to 0  
Put card 4 in Scene 2  
Scene Master 2 to 10 | 13 |
| 7          | Scene Master 1 to 0  
Put card 10 in Scene 3 | 18 |
| 8          | Scene Master 1 to 10  
Scene Master 2 to 0  
Scene Master 3 to 10 | 18 |
| 9          | Scene Master 1 to 2  
Then Scene Master 3 to 0  
Put card 5 in Scene 3  
Scene Master 3 to 10 | 24, 25 |
| 10         | Scene Master 1 to 0  
Scene Master 1 to 10  
Scene Master 3 to 0  
Put card 7 in Scene 3 | 31 |
| 11         | Scene Master 1 to 2  
Put card 6 in Scene 2  
Scene Master 3 to 0  
Scene Master 3 to 10 | 40 |
| 12         | Scene Master 2 to 10  
Scene Master 3 to 10  
Scene Master 1 to 10  
Then Scene Master 2 and 3 to 0  
Put card 11 in Scene 3  
Scene Master 3 to 10 | 40 |
| 13         | Scene Master 1 to 0  
Scene Master 1 to 10  
Put card 8 in Scene 2  
Scene Master 2 to 10  
Scene Master 3 to 0 | 43 |
| 14         | Scene Master 1 to 0  
Put card 9 in Scene 3  
Scene Master 3 to 10 | 44 |
| 15         | Scene Master 1 to 0  
Scene Master 1 to 10  
Put card 10 in Scene 2  
Scene Master 2 to 10  
Scene Master 3 to 0 | 48 |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CUE NUMBER</th>
<th>ACTION</th>
<th>PAGE IN SCRIPT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Scene Master 1 to 10 Then Scene Master 2 to 0 Put card 9 in Scene 3</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Cross fade Scene Master to 6 50 Scene Master 3 to 10 Then House Lights up</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Shut Down Procedure:

a. When the House is clear shut down board by turning off all blackout switches.

b. Lock console and drawers.
STRIKE PLAN FOR THE DANCING DONKEY

1. While the house clears:
   a. Clear all cards from the light console; clean and lock console.
   b. Shut down follow spot; clean and lock booth.
   c. Strike all properties; disassemble and store in the properties storage room.
   d. Strike patch panel except for Dimmer #1.

2. Strike all trees to refuse area; save only doweling.

3. Strike all plastic greenery to greenery box in the properties room.

4. Strike all platforms, steps, and ramp:
   a. Scrap small platforms and ramp.
   b. Strip burlap, padding, and legs from center platforms and store with platform stock.
   c. Strike step units to loading dock.

5. Strike cyc footlights to the inner vault.

6. Strip styrofoam stones, jacks, and hardware from the ground row and store the flats in the racks.

7. Disassemble side masking units; store flats in flat racks and plugs with the touring stock.

8. Strike overhead rigging:
   a. Lower light pipes in to strike instruments to light storage room and cable to vault.
   b. Lower sky-drop and clouds in to scrap clouds and fold and put drop in storage.
   c. Fly all pipes out.

9. Sweep stage down.

10. Clean vault.
UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA
SCHOOL OF FINE ARTS
DEPARTMENT OF DRAMA—CHILDREN’S THEATER

presents

THE DANCING DONKEY
by ERIK VOS

UNIVERSITY THEATER
January 23, 24, 25, 1970

Directed by David Haney*
Scenery and Lighting by J. David Weiss*
Costumes by Patti Swoboda
Choreography by Richard Russell
Musical Director, Gerry Giss

CAST

Friar .......................................................... George D. Cowan
Arlecchino, the Dancing Donkey ................. David Ferguson
Billy Badd .................................................... David Pichette
Ernie Pugg .................................................... Mark McKeon
Amelia .......................................................... Patti Penner
Azella .......................................................... Claudia Haigler
Troubadour ................................................... Gerry Giss

Scene: A Clearing

PRODUCTION STAFF

Stage Manager ......................... Richard Russell
Scenery ................................... Thomas McLennon, Howard Mills, Rick Springer, Bruce Olson,
                                      Charlie Martin, Pat Murphy, Carol Combet, Harry Gadbow, Kay Weiss,
                                      Howard Weiss, Janet Mitchell, Linda Brinkerhoff, John Jungman, Warren Weiss
Costumes ................................ Linda Helding, Ginny Jaehn, Kathy Danzer, Peggy Dodson,
                                      Nancy Nichols, Cheryl Martin, Suzanne Kilian, Sharon Potmesil,
                                      Terry O’Farrell, Marion Meyer, Abigail Arnt
Lights ........................................ Pat DuBray, Carol Combet
Follow Spot ............................... Thomas McLennon
Properties .................................. Rick Springer
Publicity .................................. David Haney, Linda Atkinson, Frances Morrow
Make-up ..................................... Diane Tipton, Don Torgerson
Box Office ................................... Cecelia Bauer, Suzanne Cook
Posters ...................................... Cecelia Bauer, Suzanne Cook
Photographer ............................. Don Wright
Music Assistant ....................... Steve Riddle
House Manager .......................... Dale Haines

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*In partial fulfillment of requirements for the Master of Arts Degree.