Design and technical direction of The Adventures of Tom Sawyer

Donald Edward Thomson

The University of Montana

1966

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THE DESIGN AND TECHNICAL DIRECTION OF
THE ADVENTURES OF TOM SAWYER

by

DONALD E. THOMSON
B.F.A. DRAKE UNIVERSITY, 1963

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requirements for the degree of

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1966

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I wish to express my sincere appreciation for the friendly aid, patient encouragement, and helpful suggestions of Richard H. James in the preparation of this thesis.

Thanks are also due to Dr. Firman H. Brown and Larry Borsness for their cooperative encouragement and help with special portions of the thesis.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Recent years have witnessed an increased interest in plays both for children and about children. In the United States, Children's Theater seems to have become an integral part of our national entertainment, creating interest in the Dramatic Arts and giving delight to youngsters everywhere.

The Junior League was a pioneer in this field, and today many university, college and high school troupes tour regularly in productions of Fairy Tales, Folk Dramas and other suitable and appealing plays.¹

More than ever before we are faced with the need for developing creative and original thoughts in the arts as well as the sciences. And nowhere is there a better opportunity to begin than with children. A child reading a book, watching a movie, or seeing a play in the theater is not a passive individual, but is involved very deeply in whichever of these he happens to be doing. Children's Theater can be a major art medium to aid in the development of creative and original thought.

For centuries, human beings have loved to act, and particularly do children dramatize much of the life they

of either the costumes or make-up.

production and does not include the design and execution

The thesis is limited to the above facets of

concerning their execution.

sound and include discussions

The following pages include designs for all of the

Adventure of Tom Sawyer by Mark Twain & Chiropractic.

major direction of the children's theatre play. This

thesis is concerned with the design and tech-

arte.

Imaginativeness and increase their interest in the dramatic

area a theater program that helps to stimulate their

master production; it also offers the student the

open for a graduate student to design a

of the department to take part in a master production and

production each year. This enables the younger actors

there has been at least one major children's theatre

production at the University of Montana Department of Drama.

The University of Montana Department of Drama

encourages a child's imagination.

to dramatize from the scene of storytelling and

the opportunity to see such introductory play transferred

spread every hour of the day in superintendent's dramatized play.

see around them. Like their adult counterparts, children
Before any study of Children's Theater is begun, there must be a clarification of terms, for there are many technical terms which are not easily understood. Below is a definition of some of these terms.

Children's Theater - a public performance of a play for the entertainment of a juvenile audience, using a cast composed of children or adults or a mixture of children and adults.

Designer - the person who combines the mechanical limitations of a given stage, the plausibility of a given solution, and the suggested ideas of a playwright, into an integrated whole.

Technical Director - person directly responsible for the construction, set-up on stage, scene shifting, run of the production, striking and disposition of scenery for an entire production. In this instance, the technical director also did the scenery design, painting, and lighting.
CHAPTER II

ANALYSIS OF THE PLAY

The simplest description of The Adventures of Tom Sawyer would be to call it the supreme story of boyhood. It might even be called the supreme American morality play of youth, "Everyboy." The characters of the play are important not only for how they appear on stage, but also for their symbolic meaning. The "eternal boy" is present in all of them.

Mark Twain's The Adventures of Tom Sawyer first appeared in 1875. In this book he set out to portray boys as they really were. For this purpose he chose the leader of a small group of boys. I feel that Charlotte B. Chorpenning chose this story to dramatize because she wanted a theme of universal appeal, a popular piece to work from and something which would have more significance to "older" children who quite often tend to be forgotten by writers of Children's Theater.

This epic of boyhood is filled with incidents which are so familiar and intimate to our experience that their importance becomes easily forgotten. But once recalled, Tom Sawyer's "black avengers," his rituals and taboos, his expeditions for glory or adventure, his

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searching for buried treasure, and even his terror are for most children, eternal.

If the term melodrama is to be applied here, it must be used with a great deal of caution. Many of the things which seem melodramatic to us were very common things to the people of that time. Buried treasure was, the topic of many conversations of the local gentry; half-breeds were common and suspected of crime or wrong-doings without so much as a second thought. The belief in witches, ghosts, formulas and rituals also was very much in fashion and faith in such things was common to everyone.3

Fishing and swimming were chief pastimes to boys looking for adventure and each group of boys always had a leader. Tom Sawyer is a fairly small boy of about 12 or 13 and he was the leader of a somewhat shabby band of other boys the same age. All of the boys were always ready to listen to him. They would even stop fishing to do that and to follow his projects. They looked to him for ideas and organization, whether the undertaking was to be real or make-believe. When they finally became real raiders, Tom Sawyer was chief, for he loved the glory of leadership. His permanent dream, like so many boys, was to be a pirate, or bandit or someone of great impo-

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tance where his word would be law.

Deep down in The Adventures of Tom Sawyer, there exists better than in any other novel, the nostalgia of childhood. But the locale, however, is not "never-never land" but America.² It is very capable of violence and terror. The episodes revolve around body snatching, murder, robbery, and revenge. The story is desperately episodic. The parts within the show, the whitewashing incident, the graveyard horror, the adventure in the haunted island house and the funeral remain foremost in our memory. All are colored by Mark Twain's sensitive understanding of adolescence. Miss Chorpenning rightly has chosen these action incidents for the scenes in her play. In such selection she underscores the seriousness of childhood and the innocence of youth.

²Ibid., p. 37.
CHAPTER III

THE PRODUCTION APPROACH

The director, the designer and the costumer must read the script very carefully before the first production conference. This first conference should concern itself with an over-all discussion of the play.

Meaning is the first element of the script to consider because it is, possibly, the hardest to pin down. The main problem in trying to arrive at the meaning is to decide what the author is trying to say and how it is to be expressed. From that point the mood or moods of the play should be determined. Finally, the problem of style should be settled. Is the play to be set in wing and drops, in space staging techniques, in modern realism, in selective realism or in fragmentary sets? The director, designer and costumer must evaluate the play and choose that style which best satisfies esthetic and technical demands. After several production conferences, it was decided that the overall approach to be taken for this production would be one of simplified realism. This style was chosen because the play deals with realistic emotions based on symbols of realism, earth and "earthy" characters. In each scene, elements were chosen which best represented the locale itself.

The keynote of the approach to the production
aspects of Children's Theater is imagination. The director, designer and costumer can and should give free reign to their imaginations, for children are delighted with, and are therefore captured by bold, gay, colorful movement; voices, settings and costumes. Suggestion and stylization, not realism, should be the guidelines.

I feel that the director, designer and costumer must be able to "see through the eyes" of the children and imagine what they as an audience will accept as authentic. These three people must decide what will delight the children most in the visual and oral aspects of the production.

Most Children's Theater scripts (The Adventures of Tom Sawyer is no exception) requires several settings, for the child is enthralled with scene changes. Conditioned by the motion pictures and television, the child expects the settings to follow one another with lightning-like rapidity.6

Physical aspects affect the behavior of child audiences as well as their interest in the play. The major consideration in this particular play with its four different sets was the "waits" between the scenery changes which could have given rise to serious audience


problems. If "waits" between scenes are very short, there is seldom a problem at all. With only a few moments to relax, there will be a minimum of restlessness and consequently no disturbance. Winifred Ward has said: "This matter of 'waits' between scenes is one which every Children's Theatre would do well to consider when designing its plays, for quick changes make the audience happier, probably, than elaborate scenery."  

The original plan was to design each scene as an independent set. However, when a running sequence\(^8\) was organized, it was obvious that complete independent sets were not practical. The shifting time would have been so long that the play would have suffered.

Children demand a foundation in the familiar but are delighted with the new and different; it is therefore, up to the director, the designer and costumer to determine degree in both areas. Since the story is a traditional one, it was felt that the children would want the scenes reproduced as nearly as possible to their original conception. But also because of the vivid imagination of most children, it was felt that here was an excellent opportunity to experiment with new and unusual settings.

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\(^7\)Ibid., p. 187.

\(^8\)Running Sequence - the order in which the sets follow each other within a play.
As a result of these considerations - the problem of "waits" and the desire for imaginative response to scenery design - the style of the production was established as simplified realism. In addition, the play was divided into two distinct categories according to the type of action and mood that the particular scene called for; Acts One and Four were designated as comedy scenes, and designed more realistically than Acts Two and Three, which were designated as mystery-adventure scenes and designed in simplified realism, leaving several things to the imagination.

With the foregoing considerations, both as a guide and a limitation, the basic plan of the design evolved.

SETTING

Act One: A backstreet running between Aunt Polly's house and the Thatcher home. The time is a bright, sunny Saturday morning⁹ (See Drawings 1, 6 and 7).

The Act One set, just as the other three sets, was an exterior which in itself presented a problem: how to make two simplified houses which could be shifted very fast and still be believable. Along with these two houses were two fences and several prop set pieces which were

needed to round out the back street effect. The Thatcher
tongue needed a practical\textsuperscript{10} gate and Aunt Folly's house
needed a practical door and a practical window. Since it
was not necessary for either of the houses to be seen in
its entirety, they were designed with only those portions
necessary for stage business. An entirely different view
of the same structure when revolved, revealed a different
scene.\textsuperscript{11} At the top of each structure was a roof covering
only that portion visible to the audience.

These structures were made from sixteen-foot flats,
some taken from stock and some had to be built. They were
then hinged with four back-flap hinges\textsuperscript{12} at each flat
joint. Cross braces were nailed at the top and bottom
and internally to provide rigidity. At each corner where
there was likely to be stress, and which would probably
carry the weight of the entire structure, was placed a
heavy-duty, rubber wheel caster, which was moveable in
any direction. The cracks left by joining the flats

\textsuperscript{10}\textit{Practical} - workable.

\textsuperscript{11}Aunt Folly's house when revolved, became a side
view of the same house with French doors opening onto a
yard behind the church. The Thatcher home when revolved,
became a rear view of the church (Act Four).

\textsuperscript{12}\textit{Back-flap Hinges} - hinges designed especially
for joining flats. There are two types, removable pin
or tight pin.
were then covered by a "dutchman," the door frame and screen door were then put in place, the flower box with its artificial flowers was mounted in place and the practical window was nailed in.

The practical gate enclosing the Thatcher yard was solved by mounting the gate itself on the wall of the house and having it latch to the fence when the house was in its position on the stage. Thus the gate moved on and off with the house and was mounted solidly which helped to support the rest of the fence. Also attached to the Thatcher house was a trellis with artificial flowers stapled to it. It was used to add more color to the set, help with the realistic effect, and help balance it with the other side of the stage.

The fences were built in one piece and were supported by jacks attached on the rear. The Thatcher fence was constructed from one inch by three inch pine boards, cut on one side near the top to form pickets, and attached six inches from the top and evenly on the bottom to one by three supports. Aunt Polly's fence was constructed in the same manner but of one inch by six inch lumber instead

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13 Dutchman - a strip of muslin 5" wide that is glued and tacked over the hinges and crack formed when two flats are hinged together.

14 Jacks - a triangular frame of 1" by 3" placed on the back of scenery to brace it. It is hinged so as to fold parallel with the scenery as an aid in shifting and storage.
of one by three. A draw knife was used on the edge of these boards to give them a rough hewn texture and provide cracks in the fence.

The "whitewashed fence" was touched-up after each performance with dark grey paint in order to have the boys actually paint the fence during performance.

The final unit to complete the set was a paper mâché unit downstage\(^{15}\) forming one tree trunk at either side and a foliage border overhead. This helped create the exterior mood desired and also solved most of the overhead masking problems.

The sky cyclorama\(^{16}\) was used upstage and lighting effects helped to establish the time of day.

Act Two: Just outside the graveyard. The time is nearly "midnight exact"\(^{17}\) (See Drawings 2 and 13).

The graveyard was one of the mystery-adventure scenes within the play. This set took the longest to shift because it had so many separate set pieces. In order to help simplify some of the shifting problems

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\(^{15}\) Downstage - for convenience in direction, lighting, and placement of furniture, stages are usually divided into several areas: Downright, Downcenter, Down-left, Upright, Upcenter, and Upleft. Consequently, the "Downstage" portion of a stage is one of the three areas nearest the audience.

\(^{16}\) Cyclorama - a backdrop of permanent or temporary nature used to simulate the sky.

\(^{17}\) Chorpenning, op. cit., p. 28.
and at the same time provide a place for the boys to hide from Injun Joe during the murder, a huge paper masché cave-like false proscenium\textsuperscript{18} was constructed. This had a small opening in the stage right portion of it which let the boys crawl through it onto the apron, thus hiding from Injun Joe but still able to be seen clearly by the audience at all times. This structure then conveyed the feeling that the audience was within the cave looking out onto the mysterious graveyard. It could be flown up out of sight when the set was not in use, thus shortening the shifting time. When it was in position on the stage, it solved most of the overhead and frontal masking problems.

The old dead tree was taken from stock and, for two reasons, was flown. First, if flown, it would speed up the shift and solve a storage problem and second, flying it was the best way to support it.

The gravestones were made from one-fourth inch plywood. Thickness pieces were made from one by four pine and glued and nailed on at each side. This added depth to the stones and also helped to support them.

The graveyard fence was made in five foot sections which were hinged together. They were constructed from one by one pieces with diamond shaped tops glued and nailed to each and held together with two five foot sections of

\textsuperscript{18}False Proscenium - an inner frame set upstage of the curtain for the purpose of narrowing the proscenium.
the second was how to create the illusion of an image on
the screen. The third, again, was the sunlight problem and
the set had two major problems which had to be
the next morning (see Dreams 7 and 8).
not three Jackson’s Reiden. The time is early.
the next week later, in the morning. So the only chance was in the
down two of the set was the same set only one
least exact. 19
the meteorites, the release of being in a sprayed of earth with appropriate lightening effects, needed to carry out the
The AprèsMM was again needed as a background and
spread downwards.
was also used for some important business, so it was
the stamping the blackout to fill the occasion. The stamp
stuck by cutting a hole in the back of a stock stamp and
the problem of where to make the junction, the foot was
of the gate in and out of the sprayed
through without knuckling it over and solving the problem
were kept apart enough to allow the wheellator to pass
at an interesting shape. The two sections of the fence
be amended. This helped it to support sheet and slide
one by one. The hinges allowed each section of the fence
the stage.

Since this set was to be the second of the mystery-adventure sequence, the simplified realism concept worked best again. It was decided that the scenery should be set in the center of the stage with space around it in order to create the illusion of the island. With only a small portion of the stage being used for scenery and the acting confined to an even smaller area, the simplified island seemed to work best.

The fireplace was pulled from stock and the mantle was reworked to form a sliding panel in which the treasure could be hidden. Casters were mounted on the bottom to help speed up the shift time. A giant chimney was added to give the finishing touches to what was once an elegant hunter's lodge.

The charred remains of the building were built from stock flats with irregular pieces fastened on the side to give the burned effect. These in turn were fastened to a structure which was six feet high. This structure was made from a six foot by eight foot stock platform with casters bolted on at each corner and a four by four foot stock platform on legs on top of the six by eight platform.

A crude ladder ran from the four by four to the six by eight. This gave Tom and Joe a way to the upper level in order to hide from Injun Joe and Hooper. Underneath the four by four platform was a perfect place to conceal
Injun Joe and Hooper at the rise of the curtain. Vines and weeds were stapled on the support braces and at various other places to add to the realistic element, while trash and old rags were piled under the upper level which Hooper and Injun Joe used to cover themselves. The broken step which kept Injun Joe from climbing to the second level was solved by using a bolt in one of the rungs of the ladder. The bolt had a string attached to it and the moment before Injun Joe touched the step, Hooper pulled the bolt out, causing the rung to "break" and Injun Joe to fall to the ground.

The cyclorama was again used for the background and the tree unit from Act One was used to create the exterior image.

Act Four: The back yard between Aunt Polly’s house and the community church²¹ (See Drawings 4, 6 and 7).

This act was designated as the other one of the comedy acts and is the set for the "would be" funeral.

The set is much the same as the Act One set except the houses have changed sides on the stage and the Thatcher house has become a church. The problems here were again shift problems and leaving enough room on the stage for twenty people. The shift solution was explained in the Act One description, but the problem of room was

²¹Act Four was changed from Aunt Polly’s bedroom to Aunt Polly’s back yard to simplify shift time.
In order to adapt flexibility in time of change, a set was built for each piece of scenery and each property to be used for each piece of scenery and later property pieces. A definite area was found that there was ample room to set the stage. After all the sets were built and on stage, it was

for some changes.

the act one set and thus they could merely be rotated and shifted into place by making those with the back portion of the set. The set was placed in the center of the stage. The set was placed in the center of the stage as a

Expanse of the people.

showed and it was overcome throughout the mounting and the mood desired was one of comedy rather than

or it helped to provide the funereal atmosphere.

a piece of cloth with a large bowknot attached on the top behind which the boys could hide. A pedestal draped with tulle faced the church window, which was protracted, and for people to sit on during the minister’s sermon.

benches were set up on the center stage portion.

allow free movement of the crowd on stage. It was found that the place

an entirely different thing.
LIGHTING

The lighting was designed with three purposes in mind: (1), to furnish general illumination; (2), to set the time of day; (3), to assist in creating the prevailing mood of the various scenes and act divisions within the play.

A lighting plot was prepared showing the placement of the various light instruments on the stage and in the house (see Drawing 17). The plot detailed the size and type of instrument to be used and the color media for each instrument. The connections listed for these instruments conform to the wiring plan at the University of Montana Theater.

Preliminary conferences and discussions had separated the play into two separate divisions, both of which were completely different from each other. This in turn caused complications in the lighting because of the different lighting requirements of the four exterior sets.

Act One was a back alley between two houses. The mood was to be light, gay and humorous. With the use of amber and lavender color media, the bright sunny morning atmosphere could be provided and at the same time could afford good illumination. These colors seemed to compliment both the costumes and the scenery. The color mixture on the sky cyclorama was keyed to the time of day.
which helped in the creation of the sunny morning.

Act Two, on the other hand, was set in the graveyard at nearly midnight. This required an entirely different mood with totally different lighting. With the use of subdued colors and side lights for interest, the moonlit graveyard had enough visibility for the actors to be seen by the audience but still enough shadows to form the element of mystery and intrigue which was desired. The sky cyclorama was again used to good advantage by isolating the graveyard and giving it a somewhat lonely feeling. The blue lights on the sky cyclorama gave it a foggy, haze-like appearance.

The second scene of Act Two was again played in the graveyard. The time was the next morning at sunrise. The same basic general illumination was used as in Act One.

The Third Act was set on Jackson's Island. The time was early the following morning. Because of this particular hour, there was a good chance to experiment with rich sunrise colors both on the stage and on the sky cyclorama. Side lights were the most valuable, because of their angle, and they helped to give the direction of the "sunrise." The acting was confined to a small area and this also helped to achieve the desired effect. The mood which was intended, was not one of realism so much as one of suspense and interest. While this was desirable, the problem of visibility almost made it impossible, and
so in the end, some of the mood was sacrificed to provide visibility.

Act Four - the funeral - under normal circumstances, would require lighting to help create mood. But because this act was played as a comedy, rather than for the solemn effect of a funeral, the lighting could be bright and gay to help create a bright, sunny mid-afternoon.

Basically the same lighting plot was used again as in Act One only with several different instruments. The boys who hid in the church window had enough light on their faces to capture their expressions, but not so much as to be distracting. The general illumination of the rest of the stage gave good visibility for the crowd scenes which dominated the fourth act.

This act had no special effects to worry about so general illumination was sufficient for the mood. The color media used worked well with the previous scenes. (See Appendix II and Drawing #17)

**MUSIC AND SOUND**

Because this play was dramatized from a familiar story, it was felt that the music should be from the era in which the story was written: The Riverboat Era. Stephen Foster's "Ring de Banjo" was used as the overall theme and bridge music between the acts. A suitable recording was obtained and rather than tape it, it was
played from the recording. The other sound cues were all done manually. For example, Becky's piano practice was done on a piano off stage right. The guns which were used held blank cartridges and the thunder was achieved by putting a small portion of buckshot into an inflated balloon and hitting it against a live microphone. In the last act, rather than using the organ, it was decided to use a chorus of four men singing "In the Sweet Bye and Bye" and "Praise God From Whom All Blessings Flow," in a barber shop quartet manner.

Because of the relatively few number of sound cues for this show, it proved much more expedient to use the cues live rather than from a tape recorder.

**PROPERTIES**

The design and use of stage properties was developed as an integral part of the design of the total production. The itemized list given at the back of the play book was the first source of property needs for the play. Additional requirements were found by reading the dialogue and studying the stage business.

A property list was prepared showing which props were to be used by which character in each act or scene (See Appendix I).

A property plot was also used to show the location of prop pieces used in each scene of each act.
APPENDIX I

PROPERTY LIST

Act One: Tom - jam on hands, glass doorknob

Aunt Polly - switch, wooden bowl with doughnuts

Sid - sucker, pail with four brushes

Joe - red apple

Huck - dead cat, key, marble, fish line

Becky - pencil and paper, flower

On Stage - bench, wheelbarrow, barrel

Act Two (Scene One): Tom - pick, bucket of coals, bundle of provisions, string, watch, paper and chalk, needle

Huck - dead cat

Nuff - wheel barrow with corpse, knife and sheath, handkerchief

Injun Joe - knife and sheath

Robinson - stick, shovel

Act Two (Scene Two): Tom - pick, string attached to tree

Injun Joe - knife

Hooper - matches ("Lucifer")

Townsperson - rope with hangman's noose

Sheriff - practical gun and holster

Widow Douglas - Bible

On Stage - bag of money in stump
Act Three: Tom - turtle eggs, note
Injun Joe - package of bread and cheese
Joe - four fish, two bamboo fish poles

On Stage - Time, blankets and piles of junk under platform

Act Four: Boys - treasure in burlap sacks (two)
Tom - doorknob
Minister - handkerchief
Injun Joe - knife
Muff - handouffs

On Stage - gifts of food, large bouquet of flowers, stand with black drape
## ERSITY THEATER - PRODUCTION - THE ADVENTURES OF TOM SAWYER

### Set-Up Chart

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<td>1B4</td>
<td>1B3</td>
<td>1E2</td>
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</table>

### Equipment Loads

| 5) | - 1,000 watts |
| 17) | - 750 watts |
| +) | W.R.G. - 1,300 watts |
| (1B1-4) | - 2,100 watts |
| (2B1-4) | - 2,250 watts |
| (Old) | - 1,800 watts |
| White | - 1,350 watts |
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Books As Reference Material


Chorpenning, Charlotte B. **Twenty-One Years With Children's Theatre.** Anchorage, Kentucky: Children's Theatre Press, Inc., 1954.


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Articles and Periodicals As Source Material
