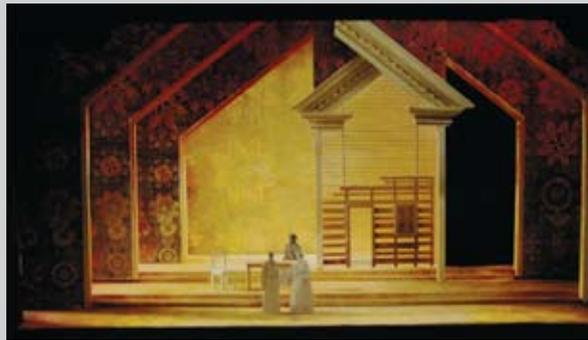


Revolutions

1960–2008

ALEXIS GREENE

Marjorie Bradley Kellogg: “For the women of my generation who were interested in designing scenery, the flowering of the not-for-profit theater movement was a godsend. In the late 1960s Broadway was run by an older generation and was still pretty much an exclusive men’s club. Suddenly, there were these smaller theaters springing up, in reaction to Broadway: Off-Broadway certainly, but also in cities where the only theater available had been road shows from New York. Perhaps because the financial stakes were lower, perhaps because these theaters honored a different, more contemporary standard, or maybe because the established designers had little interest in working for reduced fees—for whatever reason, the not-for-profits were happy to hire women to design their scenery. That is how several of us got our start, learned the business, built long-term creative relationships, and got the serious design experience we needed.”



86. Marjorie Bradley Kellogg’s scene design for the opera *Margaret Garner* utilizes simple shaker-like framing with American quilting and other folk patterns to suggest this powerful American story based on the life of the runaway slave. The English libretto is by Toni Morrison and is a study of freedom and community relationships. The artist had to be aware of the need for space since the cast was almost one-hundred strong. Michigan Opera Theatre at the Detroit Opera House (2005).

Change. It seemed to be everywhere in 1960. The new president, John F. Kennedy, called for a United States of America that was fearless, adventurous, and cultured. A new generation of artists, scientists, and political activists responded affirmatively, stimulated by financial and political support that Kennedy had only partly envisioned.

Change came to live performance. The National Endowment for the Arts opened its doors in 1965, and not-for-profit theater, dance, and opera companies, supported now by steady government funding as well as private gifts, came into being and thrived.

The not-for-profit arts movement coincided with the Women’s Movement. Around the country flourished theaters and performance groups dedicated to work by, for, and about women. The Women’s Project, Spiderwoman Theater, At the Foot of the Mountain and numerous other companies drew young designers into their orbit.

Similarly the Black Arts Movement of the 1970s brought several women into design. Women of color had rarely penetrated the world of mainstream design during the first half of the twentieth century. Now, as the lighting designer and theater historian Kathy A. Perkins has written, there were Judy Dearing (1940–1995) and costume and set designer Myrna Colley-Lee, both of whom worked for the Negro Ensemble Company in its early years. Dearing and Colley-Lee later designed costumes on Broadway and in the regions, as did the lighting designer Shirley Prendergast. Behind them came a younger generation that included the scene designer Pamela Peniston, and the costume designers Toni-Leslie James and Ruth Carter, all of whom ranged among dance, opera, and theater. Women exercising their skill in a variety of art forms—a trend that had emerged before 1960—continued in force.

Among Kennedy’s legacies, the space program led to advances in computer technology, whose effects on performance have been vast. Digital technology has revolutionized stage lighting: today’s lighting designer commands instantaneous gradations of brightness, color, and motion.

Technology has altered the very manner of creation. If the designer wishes, she can exchange her pencil for a stylus and fashion a lighting plot, costumes, or scenery on a computer screen. As for projections, they have become a valuable and routine part of the *mise en scène*. Projection designers such as Wendall K. Harrington have invented a new discipline.

Regressive social attitudes linger, however, lagging behind technological and cultural change. Despite the hundreds of not-for-profit arts organizations that now exist around the country, women remain under-represented as scene designers. Broadway is especially culpable. Heidi Ettinger, the first woman to win a Tony Award® for scene design, for the musical *Big River* in 1985, cites the erroneous perception that “women are comfortable with clothes or with lighting but not with hard materials like steel and wood. In a commercial production,” says Ettinger, “the biggest chunk of the budget goes to the set, and there’s a reluctance to entrust those monies to a woman.”

This exhibition and this catalogue may be viewed as preliminaries to changing that perception—prologues to the future history of women’s full and complete role in all aspects of design.



87, 88. With *The Green Bird*, a musical based on a comic fantasy by Carlo Gozzi, and created and directed by Julie Taymor, Christine Jones designs in a strongly symbolic manner. The image at the top shows her model piece for the pyramid of skulls called The Ogre’s Mountain; below, as it appeared onstage. The Cort Theatre, New York, 1996; Cort Theatre, New York (2000).