

# ALL THE WORLD'S A STAGE SET

## Handbook of Scene Painting

Dr. Jane Coryell



Painting set for *Queen Victoria Meets Buffalo Bill*, Piscataqua Players, N.H.

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## INTRODUCTION

### MY BACKGROUND

I learned scenic art by experience and observation. Since 1979, I have designed more than 100 sets for school and community theatre group productions. For most of them, I was head scenic artist and set painting coordinator. Since childhood, I have drawn easily, but not often done paintings. Yet “throwing paint around in a big way” for stage scenery came naturally. I also see about 50 professional productions a year and steal ideas quite shamelessly. Picasso said that bad artists copy; good artists steal. So I reckon I’m in good company. I also happen to have a fairly strong visual sense. Theatre sense just developed along the way ~ especially being able to predict how paintwork might look under stage lighting.

To personal experience, I have added advice from

- Ontario community theatre competition adjudicators,
- Reginald Bronskill (professional designer, 1985 consultant for The Oakville Players’ *Dracula*, at the Oakville Centre for Performing Arts)
- skilled painting crew members, who even helped invent some techniques as we adopted the title *The Scene Team ~ We Work in Stages*. **MY APOLOGIES** to the painters pictured in this handbook. Names are missing because of my neglecting to identify innumerable assistants as I took snapshots. But their work is remembered.
- Susan Forde (coordinator of painting crews for The Oakville Players and BurlOak Theatre Group) who has taken summer workshops at Stratford, Ontario
- paint store folders of paint finishes
- resource books
  - *Scene Painting ~ Tools and Techniques ~ A complete step-by-step guide to painting theatrical scenery for professional, amateur, and school dramatic productions* by Daniel Veaner (Prentice-Hall, 1984)
  - *The complete Book of Decorative Paint Techniques ~ The definitive step-by-step guide to paint finishes and interior decoration techniques* by Annie Sloan & Kate Gwynn (Collins and Brown, 1989)

### WRY OBSERVATIONS BASED ON EXPERIENCE

Over the years, I learned that theatre is one of the few places where wood is painted to look just like what it is ~ wood. Theatre is also about the only place where breaking down is encouraged ~ even required. First, you build up the detail / paintwork. Then, you break it down so that it doesn’t look like what it is ~ a brand new paint job.

Scenic art also highlights a difference between the U.S.A. and Canada. The French word *FAUX* (meaning fake or false) in America is pronounced *FOX*. In Canada, it’s pronounced *FOE*. This trivia is useful if one is crossing borders or making “fox” rocks.

### WARNING

As you’re walking, driving, cycling about with friends and family, avoid irritating them with too many exclamations of “Ohmigosh! Just look at that terrific rust!” or “What wonderful crumbling bricks and rotting concrete!” or “Dontcha just love that ageing wood!” or “What gorgeous peeling paint!” Just take snapshots for your picture file. They’ll be invaluable visual resources. Mind you, perhaps like you, friends and family will become increasingly aware that all the world really is a stage set.

## TIPS AND TOOLS

### Enticing New Volunteer Scene Painters

Give the set painting crew a fun name like *The Scene Team ~ We Work in Stages*.

The wide variety of set painting work means there fun jobs for highly skilled painters AND for people who have never even held a paint brush. Invite them ALL to play along.

During set painting sessions, take snapshots of grinning painters at work. Make a collage to display in the lobby at performances. Add an invitation for new volunteers. Include a note that no experience is necessary ~ volunteers will learn "on the job".

As part of their graduation diploma, students are required to volunteer in community activities. Invite students to add to their "community service hours" through set painting.

### The Star System

Set painting embraces a wide range of painting skills. For instance, priming a flat with a basecoat of paint, using a roller, can be done by anyone capable of dipping a roller into paint and applying it to the surface in a smooth, controlled way. That's a 1-star job. It requires someone with no-star or 1-star artistic / painting skills. Woodgraining with a woodgrain rocker is a 4-star job because of the control and visualization needed. Woodgraining with a brush is a 5-star job because of the visual and manual demands. The 4 and 5-star jobs require that a painter can work close up AND, while they're painting, envisage the effect as seen in the back row.

As painters become more experienced, they will delight in "graduating" from one star to the next, as they get more and more practice.

### Organizing Painting Sessions

During the scene painting sessions, make lists of the various jobs and each required step. Star each step suitably. Volunteers can see which parts they can do. Check off each step / job as it is completed. Everyone gets a strong sense of accomplishment as painting proceeds and as checklists are completed and removed.

### Use Water-based Paint

Water-based paint is best for easy application, quick clean-up, no fumes, safety under stage-lights. Matte or satin finish, rather than gloss, prevents glare on stage. Even Verathane can be water-based to add naturalistic sheen to wood-look.

### Using Old Paint to Keep Painting Costs Low

Avoid keeping old paint so long that the ageing latex "goes sour". It can develop a noxious slime and stink to high heaven. Before that stage, however, bits of old paint can be mixed to make a base coat with which to prime flats. Depending on the proportion of the various colours, the blend will be a yukky brown or grey which will be covered on a new set.

### Lighting Effects on Painted Surfaces

The richer the painted surface, the better it will look under stage lights. If the paintwork is just one colour, it will have a flat, matte finish under lights and look like what it is ~ a brand new paint job. If possible, use two or more closely related colours.

### Mis-tints and Cast-off Paints Keep Painting Costs Low

A gallon of what a paint store calls a "mis-tint" is MUCH costs much less than a gallon of newly mixed paint. Often, what a store customer rejects is perfectly fine on the set in progress. Cast-off paints donated to recycling centres and waste disposal sites are often useful. They are very inexpensive ~ sometimes free.



### Thinning New Paint

Instead of using new paint straight from the can, thin it to the consistency of cream. Slightly thinned paint goes on easier and dries faster than paint which is nearly the consistency of yogurt. Thick paint might leave ridges and lines from rollers and brushes.

### Cleaning Paint Trays

Trays **SHOULD** be cleaned after each painting session. But they can be left to dry without being scraped and rinsed off, if the same colour is to be used for several sessions. After a few uses, dried paint can be peeled off fairly easily.

### Cleaning and Drying Rollers (see illustration)

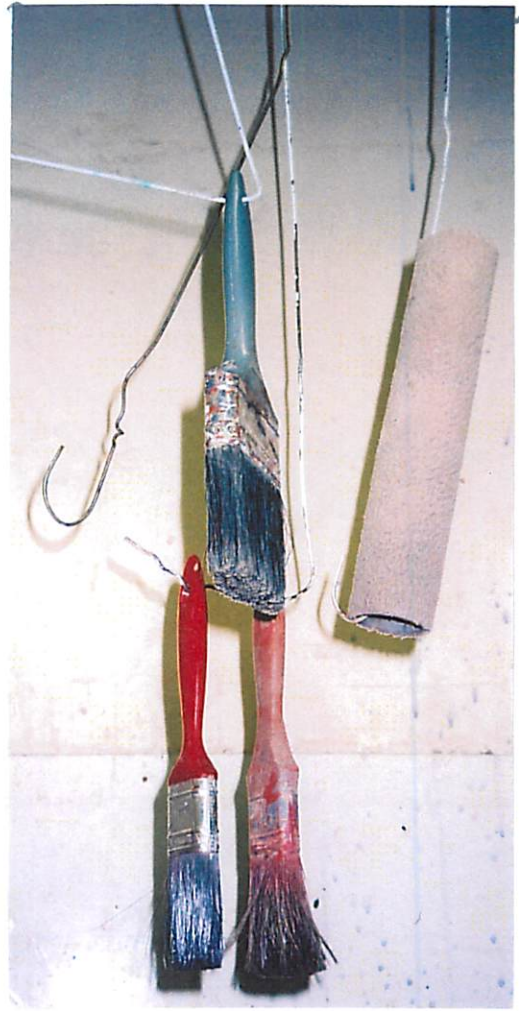
- A roller spinner is a smart investment. With the roller attached to it, pump the handle to whirl and spray off the paint under running water. **WARNING** ~ Do this job in a deep sink so that the water and paint aren't sprayed all over the work space.
- Rollers can be left standing to dry. But one end doesn't dry well as water pools at the base. Instead, straighten a wire coat hanger. Keep the hanging loop. Slide a cleaned roller down the length of the wire, so that it will be caught by the loop. Bend the end of the "top" of the wire to hang it over the sink to drip dry. Of course, some sort of rod or support needs to be rigged up above the sink for the hanger to be suspended.



### Cleaning and Drying Brushes (see illustration from BurlOak Theatre Group studio)

- Avoid hot water. It can harm the glue keeping the bristles attached to the handle.
- If possible, clear away paint clinging to the bristles near the metal part of the handle. If that paint remains, it can bleed into the next paint job. Gently spread the bristles apart while the brush is under running water. Then press the bristles back in shape.
- To keep brushes in good condition, hang them to dry with the bristles downwards. A straightened wire coat hanger holds several brushes over the sink, as they drip dry.





### Refillable Carpenter's Chalk Line

A carpenter's chalk line is perfect for marking long, straight lines. This can be a 3-person job. First, guide marks are measured on the surface. One person holds the chalk and line container at one extreme mark. Another person gently pulls the metal "handle" to the other extreme. A third person raises the line at its centre and snaps it onto the surface. The chalk is usually good for 4 or 5 snaps before the line needs to be wound back into the container to get re-loaded with chalk.

#### **WARNINGS & ADVICE**

- Avoid getting chalk all over the flat. Do the pulling a little bit away from it. Then move into position.
- When the line is first loaded with chalk, do just a LITTLE snap. If the line is raised too high above the flat, chalk will fly all over it. With each application, the snap can be increased in height to use more chalk, before the line has to be re-loaded.
- Blue chalk is easier to clean up. GENTLY sponge off unwanted chalk.

### Opening a new Can of Paint

To help prevent paint from filling the groove around the top of the paint can where the lid fits in, use a thick nail to hammer half a dozen "drip holes" into the groove.

### Closing Paint Cans

Using a metal hammer or a rubber mallet to re-attach paint lids MIGHT distort the lid's edge, making a mis-fit, which leads to dried out paint. Instead, set the lid in position and stand on the can. If shoes need protection, cover it with a paper towel standing on it.

## **Stirring Paint**

A metal paint stirrer from a hardware store can be attached to an electric drill to stir very thick paints. Use the drill at low speed.

## **Storing Paint**

When stacking paint for storage, add dab a bit of the colour to the vertical outside. Stack the cans so that the vertical swatch is easily visible to avoid repetitive unstacking / re-stacking in the search for useful colours. Grouping colours in storage also helps in the search. For long-term storage, add a water "skin" onto the paint to prevent solidifying.

## **Mixing New Paint Colours from Old Stock or New Mistints**

- Knowing a bit about colour theory can help lower paint costs. For instance, if the theatre stocks unused reds and greens, then new browns can be created. Or blues and oranges. Or yellows and purples. These are complementary pairs on a colour wheel. Some paint supply stores proved a folder about colour theory and mixing.
- When mixing new colours, add the darker to the lighter to save time, work, and paint.

## **Woodgraining Tools (see Techniques Section on Woodgraining)**

- A "woodgrain rocker" makes fine woodgraining quickly, easily, and realistically. After use, it must be well cleaned and carefully stored, since it can break easily. Finding woodgrain rockers may take time since not many paint or craft stores carry them.
- A skilled painter can use old paint brushes with stiff bristles for woodgraining.
- A whisk, like a tiny broom, has stiff enough bristles for skilled woodgraining.

## **Textured Rollers**

"Speciality" rollers are available in paint stores. Some have grooves and patterns for special effects painting. One style of roller has pieces of leather attached. Both are highly useful for painting textured surfaces quickly and easily. Stockpile them, since not all supply stores carry them.

## **Roller "Thickness"**

Some paint rollers have very thick, soft surfaces. They are useful for very super-fine visual effect, but they don't operate as smoothly and quickly as a medium textured roller for more general usage. A thinly textured roller can leave unwanted marks.

## **Sponges ~ Natural and Manufactured**

Natural sea-foam sponges are useful for texturing ~ a 3-star job. BUT their texture CAN leave an undesired polka-dot effect. So can manufactured sponges with large holes. Sponges used on floor sponge-mops for household cleaning can be useful for creating bricks. Keep a stock of sponges of different sizes and textures for the various textures required in set painting.

## **Feathers**

Large goose feathers are useful for fine texturing, especially on marble. Instead of buying them, simply collect cast-offs from where Canada Geese hang out.

## **Paint Sprayer (see Spritzing Technique)**

A large (1' high, 8-pint capacity) plastic sprayer for garden use is perfect for spraying VERY THIN paint onto a horizontal surface for texturing and toning. Paint needs to be as thin as skim milk, almost running off a finger-tip. The sprayer MUST be thoroughly cleaned IMMEDIATELY after usage to prevent clogging. Avoid a window-cleaner sprayer that just splurts, splats, and dribbles.



### **Metal Straight-Edger**

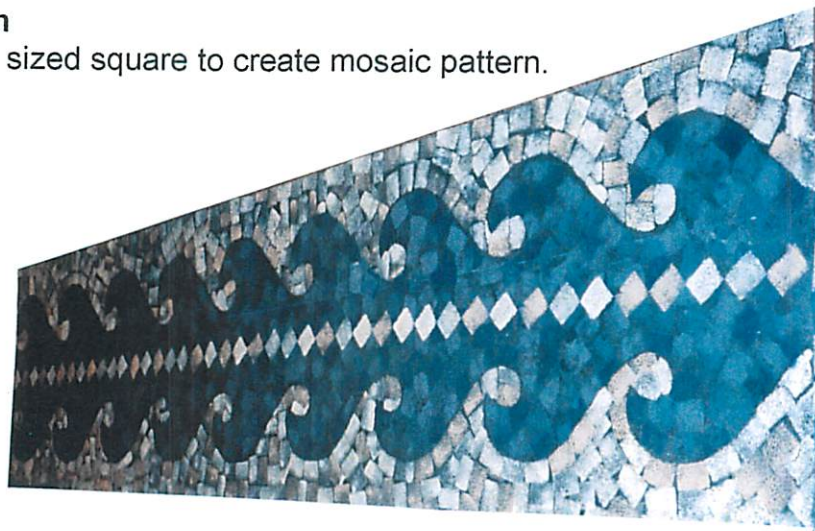
Hardware and paint suppliers carry a metal straight-edger with a plastic handle. For long stretches of straight lines, an absolutely straight piece of wood is a useful guide.

### **Free Cardboard and Tissue Painting**

Shingles, old siding, old wood trim, tall reeds can be done with cardboard, cut to size. It's often available free some home appliance and bicycle stores. To avoid warping, paint both sides. If the corrugation shows, do tissue-painting on one side and the visible edges. Gift-wrap tissue tears easily in one direction, rather than the other. Before painting, tear up long strips as wide as seem suitable. Paint the cardboard on one side. **WHILE THE SURFACE IS STILL WET**, lay on the tissue. It can be wrinkled for texture or brushed out fairly smoothly. Use a paint brush. A sponge will tear up the tissue.

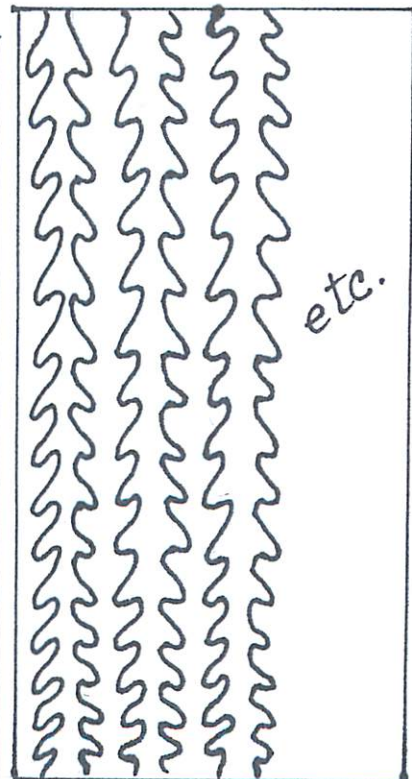
### **Sponge Mosaic Pattern**

Cut sponge into suitably sized square to create mosaic pattern.



### **Fabric Willow Leaves**

Cut long pieces of polyester in various greens into shapes in such a way that no fabric is wasted. Varying the spaces between each strand of leaves, staple them to a piece of 1"x3" wood, so that the leaves can be hung where needed.



## CHECKLIST OF USEFUL TOOLS & EQUIPMENT FOR SCENE PAINTING SHOP

Standard sized roller frame-handles & rollers for household latex paint  
Roller cleaner ~ metal hand-spinner that twirls paint off rollers to clean them fast & well  
Small roller frame-handles & rollers (narrow & regular radius, various textures)  
Long handles to attach to roller handles to extend painters' reach  
Specialty textured rollers ~ Home Hardware has one with floppy leather pieces attached  
Plastic bags for wet rollers to use the next day (grocery store vegetable free bags) paint  
Brushes ~ bristle, foam, various widths, styles, (from new to stiff & scruffy for texturing)  
Art paint brushes 1" to very small, flat edge and pointed tip  
Plastic containers with lids for carrying and storing small amounts of paint  
Paint trays and plastic liners  
Sponges of various sizes ~ natural sea sponges AND household cleaning sponges  
Scissors  
Cutting knives ~ Mastercraft extended blade with refills ~ small and large  
Brown paper towers  
Newspapers  
Cheap white gif  
Cheap gift-wrap tissue paper  
Masking tape in various widths  
Painters tape, 1" wide especially (easily removed from paintwork, good for guidelines)  
Carpenter's refillable chalk line with powder (keep in plastic bag if powder spills)  
Carpenters measuring tape (26 feet / 8 meters is good size)  
Measuring stick (inches and metric)  
Pencils  
White plastic erasers are better than yellow squares and pink rubber oblongs  
Black permanent markers (chisel tips and pointed tips)  
Long absolutely straight piece of wood (for lengths of straight lines)  
Steel edger for painting straight lines (if wood strip isn't used)  
Clean-up cloths  
Large plastic grocery shopping bags for rolling texture onto wet paint  
Wood grain rocker  
Goose feathers in good condition (for marble detailing ~ free in nearby parks)  
Pump sprayer ~ weed/bug repellant sprayer, holds 8 cups of spritzing paint) 2-3 spares  
Large funnel to fill sprayer  
Big buckets for water & mixing & storing paint (with lids for storage)  
Floor protection sheets if required  
Rubber mallet to tap paint can lids back into place without wrecking edges & close fit  
Paint can openers  
Paint stirrers ~ wooden sticks from paint store & metal stirrer to attach to electric drill  
Rubber gloves ~ store left & rights in separate labeled plastic bags for quick access  
Shelving sufficient for STACKING paints by colour (put colour swatch on facing side)  
A way to hang rollers & brushes (bristles down) to dry over sink / wet area (see p.5)  
Large utility sink (that will get very dirty with age and usage) with good drainage  
Floor fans of various sizes to speed up paint drying (with extension cords)  
Large garbage can



## SPECIAL PAINTING TECHNIQUES

### 2-TONE or 3-TONE ROLLER WAP-WAP

This technique is useful for applying 2 or even 3 tones of paint at the same time. It is useful for texturing and for "breaking down" colour in one step. It works best on a flat surface, such as a theatre flat lying on the floor. Working vertically is possible, but challenging. It saves time and work. Wap-wapping is a 2 or 3-star job, depending on the subtlety required. With practice, a one-star painter can move into this 2-star technique.

1. Prepare desired paint colours to the texture of table cream. Fill separate paint trays with each colour.
2. Use ONE ROLLER. It can be on an extended handle of long or medium length to make work easier.
3. Dip the roller **JUST ON THE SURFACE OF THE FIRST PAINT**. **Be careful NOT TO IMMERSE** the roller, as is usually done when applying one color of paint. Do NOT roll the roller on the slope of the tray, as usual.
4. Gently rotate the roller to expose the opposite side without paint yet.
5. Dip the "clean" side of the roller just on the surface of the second paint. Again, take care NOT TO IMMERSE the roller nor roll it on the slope of the tray.
6. Immediately, apply the paint to the flat by hitting the roller onto the surface. **DO NOT ROLL IT**, as is usually done. Literally, whap the roller down **IN CONSTANTLY CHANGING DIRECTIONS** to avoid a pattern of stripes.
7. When paint seems to be all the same colour, re-load the roller as before.
8. Re-commence whapping a bit farther away from where you left off. Otherwise, there may be too much difference between where you left off and where you re-started. That change of intensity will be even more noticeable under stage lights.

A member of *The Scene Team ~ We Work in Stages* loads one roller with three tones of paint to do a 3-tone roller wap-wap of medium, light, dark greys.





The techniques below do not require ambidexterity. Each is a 2- or 3-star job, depending on the desired subtlety. With some practice, novice painters can do both.

## TWO-TONE SPONGE TAP-TAP

This technique uses 2 or 3 colours simultaneously to create texture quickly and easily. One sponge loaded with different colours on different sides can be used. Or two sponges, each loaded with a different colour, can be applied, one in each hand.

1. Load separate trays with the separate paints to be applied.
2. Use dampened reasonably porous sponges. Avoid natural sea sponges unless dots and speckles are desired. Very smooth sponges don't work well here.
3. Gently lay the sponge onto the surface of the paint in the tray. **DO NOT IMMERSE SPONGE**. Gently scrape or pat off excess paint on the tray's sloping edge to avoid drips and blotches. If using only one sponge, rotate it and repeat the loading process on the opposite side of the sponge.
4. Gently tap the sponge onto the surface being painted. Carefully pressing the sponge onto the surface can also work. **AVOID leaving a pattern** of the sponge's shape or edges. Curving the sponge into your hand as you paint can avoid patterning.

## TWO-BRUSH SLAP-SLAP

Loading two brushes each with a different colour and slapping them simultaneously onto the painting surface adds an interesting scumbled texture and ageing. Using brushes of different sizes and bristles can increase the degree of texturing.

Painter loading 2 sponges for 2-tone tap-tap of medium brown plus very dark grey.



Painter using 2 brushes at once to slap light and dark grey onto a medium grey surface.





## SPRITZING

This term came from a lot of spraying and glitter I was adding to a nightclub set for *Not Waving* (Everyman Theatre Company, 1986). SPRITZ 'N' GLITZ became a catch-word. As a final treatment for texturing and "breaking down" paint, spraying very thin paint works only when the surfaces are laid out flat. Otherwise, paint drips and dribbles. If THAT look is desired, especially when the paint is smeared and blotched with a sponge for special "SPACKLE" effect, then spray vertically.

A spray bottle like a window cleaner sprayer doesn't work well because it doesn't provide a long, continuous spray. An electric sprayer may be problematic because of dragging the cord and hose around the work area and the flats being sprayed.

I prefer a pump-plant sprayer, available in gardening departments in some hardware stores. The catch is that the entire sprayer MUST be dismantled IMMEDIATELY after spraying so that every part can be vigorously rinsed clear of paint. Otherwise, the pump-sprayer clogs up or just spurts out blobs of paint, if it works at all. A good plan is to stock up on the pump-sprayers whenever a store carries them. They are not expensive.

Paint must be VERY THIN to work in the pump-sprayer. Mix a goodly supply in a spare bucket or pail. Test the paint consistency by letting it drip quickly off your bare finger-tip. Wearing a rubber glove for this test can be misleading for the consistency. Fill the sprayer. A large funnel helps the pouring. Prime the pump. Test it in the paint cleaning sink. Add more water if the paint doesn't spray easily. If it's so thin that colour doesn't show, add more paint.

When spritzing the scenery, turn off fans so that YOU control the direction of the spray. Hold the sprayer about shoulder height. Keep the nozzle horizontal to the floor, not point down onto it. Use a smooth, even motion back and forth across the area being spritzed. If several flats are used, lay them out in the order they will be seen on stage. Leave a walk-way between them so that you can continue working smoothly. Work all around the flat so that spray is evenly applied. Keep priming the pump to keep spray even. If spray starts to blotch or drip, prime the pump again. Or it may be time to re-fill the pump. Keep dry paper towel or slightly damp sponge handy to tamp up drips / drops.





## STENCILS

Stencils are useful for creating the look of tiles on walls and floors; such as, ceramic bathroom and kitchen walls, fireplace surrounds, linoleum flooring, and wall paper. Commercial patterns are available. Patterns to suit the play in progress can be created. Use stiff vinyl, not floppy vinyl for an inexpensive stencil. Old roll-down blinds may work.

1. Create the stencil on stiff vinyl. If several colours will be used, more than one stencil pattern may be required. Draw the pattern so that there are no loose parts. Cut out the openings with an exacto knife or (better yet) a Mastercraft cutter with an extendable blade.
2. Prepare the surface for stenciling by painting the "background" colour(s) in one or two tones. (see 2-tone roller wap-wap technique)
3. If guidelines are required, use a carpenter's chalkline or simply pencil in the guidelines.
4. Set the stencil pattern in position. Tape it to the surface or hold it firmly so that the paintwork and pattern are not smudged. To apply paint, use a wide round brush (like a big rouge brush) or a small sponge. Ensure that the squared edges of the sponge don't show in the pattern. After dipping the sponge into a bit of paint, gently wipe off excess paint to avoid blobs in the pattern. Gently tap and press the sponge into the cut-away pattern, ensuring that the pattern edges show clearly, without a sense of outline. Avoid scraping or sliding the sponge across the surface. The method is a basically a gentle tap-tap. (see sponge tat-tap technique) If desired, more than one paint colour can be applied before the stencil is moved to the next location. Use two sponges. Or add one colour of paint to one side of the sponge AND the second colour to the back of the sponge. Keep rotating sponge sides. Let some of the base-coat background colour show for subtle texturing.
5. FREQUENTLY wipe paint off the back of the stencil and away from the cut edges of the pattern so that paint isn't carried from one position to another.
6. To suggest dark grouting, outline tile shapes with a felt-tip marker after stenciling. For light grouting, apply paint with a firm, thin brush. A wood or metal guide may help keep lines straight.
7. Store cleaned stencils flat so that they can be re-used.

Stencil on woodgrain (done with woodgraining tool) above door: *Trap for a Lonely Man*



See additional examples of stenciling



## STENCILING



Above: Stenciled lower door panel  
Right: Starting a 2-colour stencil  
Below: Grouting added to "tiles"





## BOULDERS ~ Fabric Draped Over Chicken Wire

1. For easily moved boulders, attach chicken wire to the top edges of cardboard boxes. Top flaps can be removed, or taped upright to help support chicken wire. Wire can also be made to stick out at the sides and front of the box to add size and realism.
2. Manipulate the chicken wire into rock-like forms.
3. In a large bucket, mix about  $\frac{1}{2}$  cup of carpenter's glue into 1 gallon of latex paint of a basic colour to suit the boulders' over-all colour.
4. Cut **light-weight** fabric (light colour, no pattern, cotton or polyester blend) into suitable sizes to drape over the chicken wire. If audience does not see the backs of the boulders, they don't need to be covered.
5. Dip fabric into paint. Squeeze out excess paint. Drape over chicken wire. Shape fabric as desired.
6. Gently sponge or brush on more rock colours, as desired. Add these colours while the dipping paint is still wet to make blending easier.
7. Let dry.





## STONE AND ROCK WALLS with Bundles of Newspaper

1. Scrunch up a piece of newspaper into a bundle the size of the rock desired. Experiment with various sizes to get the most realistic look. With masking tape, attach newspaper "bumps" to surface, spacing them realistically. If needed, also use a JT21 staple gun. Avoid a T50 staple gun, which can leave staples sticking up to get in the way or to cause small injuries.
2. Add  $\frac{1}{2}$  cup of carpenters glue to  $\frac{1}{2}$  gallon can of paint, mixing browns and greys.
3. Dip a brown paper towel into the paint/glue mixture. Gently squeeze out excess paint. Gently open towel to its full size by gently stroking it over the inside rim of paint container.
4. Drape towel onto newspaper bumps and bulges, and into gaps (to be mortar).
5. When paper is dry, use brushes to slop on more colour for rich, realistic look.
6. If necessary, re-paint mortar areas with smaller brush.

Above: real rock wall (in weird light)

Below: fake wall (with paper)



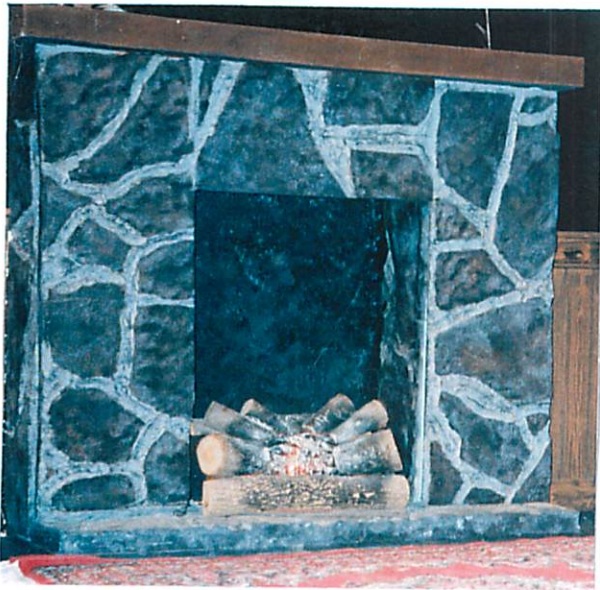


## STONE WALLS

### GOUGING AND TISSUE-PAINTING ON STYRENE

1. Sheets of styrene (2" thick foam used in construction) in reasonably good condition can be scrounged from building sites. Free is better than full price, especially when the pieces will likely be trashed after the production ends.
2. Gouge out lines where the mortar will be on the wall. The rounded end of a felt tip marker or the eraser end of a pencil will serve the purpose. Gouge deeply enough to be noticeable but still realistic. The pattern of stones can be regular or irregular, depending on the desired look.
3. Tissue-paint the entire surface in 2 or 3 tones of grey. This technique means using a brush to slop paint onto the styrene in an area about 2' x 2'. While the paint is wet, lay on a sheet of white gift-wrap tissue, judiciously adding wrinkles as you go. Brush paint onto the tissue to make it stick to the styrene. There is enough glue in latex paint to do the trick. Continue to paint and tissue, paint the whole surface. The variety of grey paint and the ridges of tissue will add realistic texture and dimension under stage lights. This layer becomes the mortar.
4. With 2 or 3 darker shades of grey / brown, paint the stones, now outlined by the mortar gouges.

Stone fireplace using gouged styrene



Stone Wall



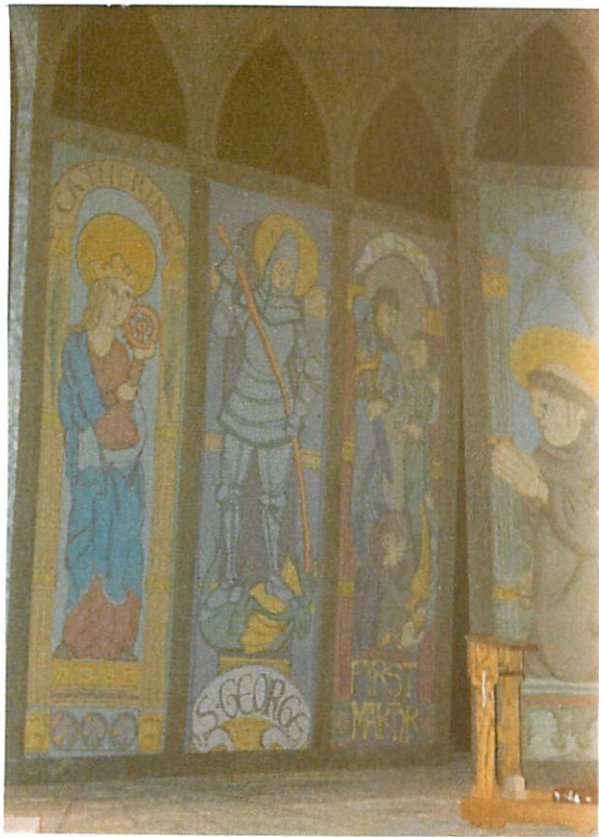
Styrene gouging can also work as brick wall. Stapling on artificial ivy adds realism.



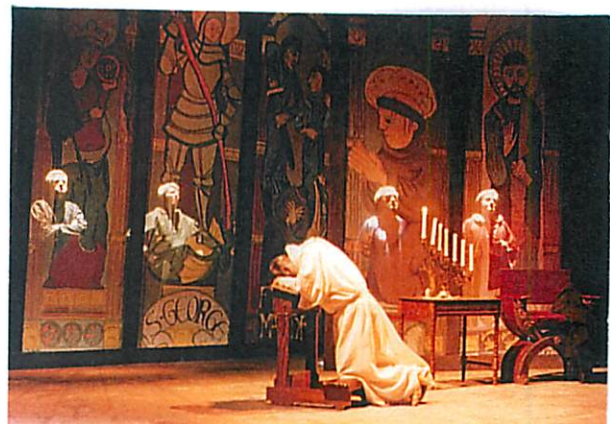
## SCRIM

Scrim is an open-weave fabric, like stiff cheesecloth or very dense netting. Without any light behind, it is opaque. With light on it or just behind it, audience can see through it. It can be coloured with very thin paint or with dye. For outlines of images on the scrim, use permanent felt-tip markers. They also work as a "stop" to help prevent paint and fabric dye from bleeding from one area to another (rather like lines of wax in batik work).

1. Outline design onto large paper. Lay scrim on the design. Trace outline onto scrim with permanent felt-tip marker. Use smooth, even, long strokes. While tracing, hold scrim firmly to prevent it from bunching up. Alternatively, draw the outline directly onto the scrim without using a paper pattern.
2. Brush dye or VERY thin paint into areas to be coloured. SUSPEND the scrim between tables or chairs so that paint or dye does not spread across areas.
3. Scrim can be painted before or after being stapled to its frame or hanging support.
4. If scrim is flown in and out during performance, it may need weight ~ thin dowel ~ at the base to prevent it from floating too freely or from being entangled in stage lights.
5. If lines and shading (like a drawing) are desired, use oil pastels. Work on a hard surface, not in mid-air.



*Murder in the Cathedral ~*  
scrim stained glass windows  
Above: no backlighting on murderers  
Right: murderers visible with top-lighting





## WOOD GRAIN

If a specific type of wood grain is desired, especially if reference is made in the dialogue ~ eg: "lovely oak paneling" ~ check patterns in a decorating handbook or paint store pamphlet about wood finishes. Often, a general sense of wood grain is all that's needed because of the audience's distance from the set.

1. Base-coat the entire surface with 2 or 3 tones of brown. (see 2-tone roller wap-wap, or brush slap-slap)
2. If a woodgrain rocker is being used (a 3-star job), work in sections of the surface to be "wood". Apply a thin coat of the darkest brown to a section. Immediately, use the woodgrain rocker to create a grain pattern. As the rocker is dragged along the paint, in a straight line, gently rock it up and down. Be careful not to follow the same pattern of rocking all the time. Otherwise, knotholes will line up unnaturally. Apply a thin coat of the darkest brown in the next section to be grained. Repeat the process until the entire surface is covered. IMMEDIATELY clean wood rocker grooves THOROUGHLY to keep them in good shape for later painting.
3. If graining is done with a brush, work in a free-hand motion with a variety of thickness of brush. This is a 4-star job since the painter needs to have good control and the ability to visualize the effect from a distance, while working close-hand.
4. To create the sheen which is typical of woodwork, brush on a thin coat of water-base verathane. Depending on the final look under stage lights, use satin finish. Apply with a brush or sponge, NOT a roller. The roller tends to create milky bubbles and spoil the paintwork. **NEVER SHAKE VERATHANE.** It will turn milky and wreck all the hard work. Just stir gently with a stir stick.

Below: wood grain rocker in *Trap for a Lonely Man*

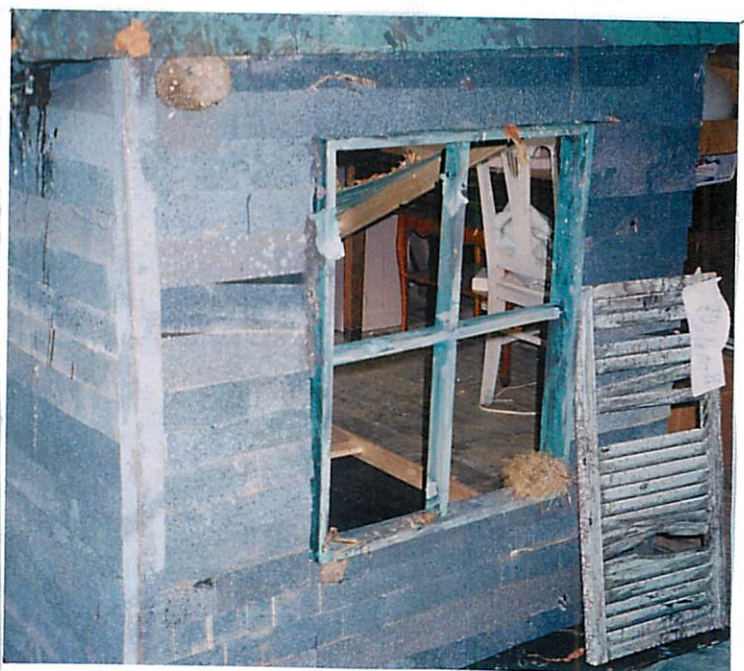
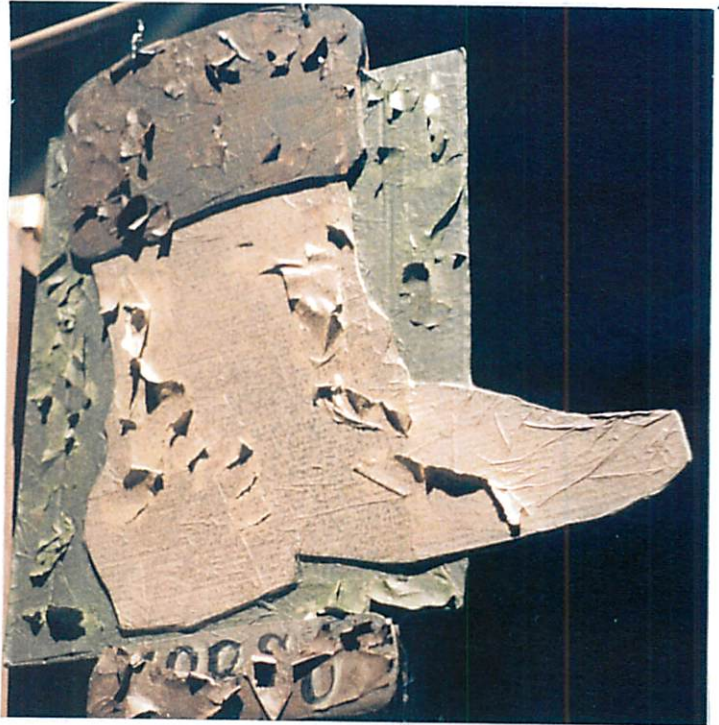
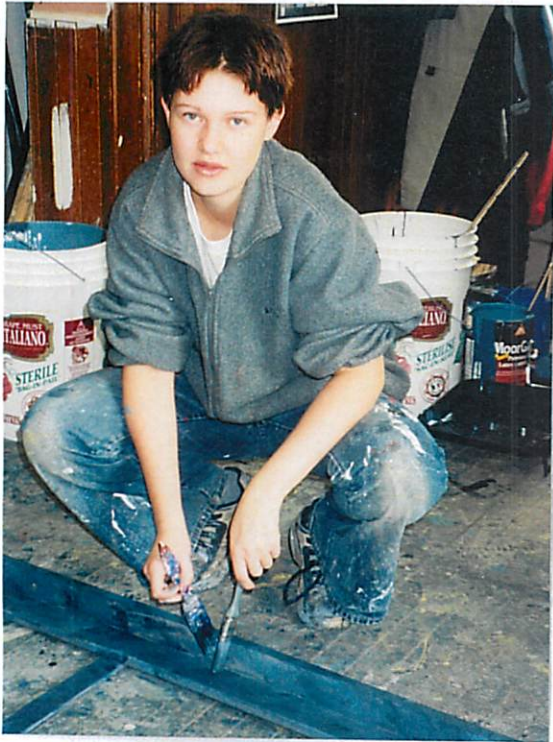




## WEATHERED WOOD AND PEELING PAINT

Pictures of actual peeling paint and weathered wood are useful guides.

1. Base-coat or prime with 2-tone roller wap-wap in colours suitable to set, in case this first coat ends up showing through subsequent layers of paint.
2. Using 2 colours suited to set design, do a 2-brush Slap-Slap. If suitable, let evidence of bristles show, rather than trying to smooth over their traces. For weathered wood, ensure the brush lines (if they show) logically follow the wood pieces, whether they are attached (as if they are real) horizontally or vertically.
3. If bits of peeling paint sticking out from the surface are desired, brush in bits of brown paper towel, torn into small pieces AS YOU PAINT. Let paper bits stick out. There is enough glue in latex paint to adhere paper to the surface. White cleaning paper towels will not work. Brown paper or tissue wrapping paper are best.
4. Spritz two final colours for strong effect of texture and ageing.





## MARBLE

### Major advice ~ Know what different kinds of marble look like.

For instance, Breccia, Sienna, Egyptian, Italian, Red Derbyshire, Vert Antique, and St. Remi are distinct in colour, veining and texture.

1. From set design, determine what type of marble is desired. Pictures from paint shops and decorating handbooks are useful guides for the right "look".

### A ROUGH GUIDE

2. Do a 2 or 3-tone roller wap-wap over entire surface with 2 or 3 tones of colour. A rounded surface may not suit roller treatment, Instead, use a 2 or 3-tone brush slap-slap or 2 or 3-tone sponge tap-tap.
3. Use sponges and brushes (both bristle and foam) to added markings and blotching.
4. For a typical marble sheen, cover surface (once entirely dry) with water-based verathane. Avoid glossy verathane, since it may reflect too much stage light. But satin or semi-gloss may serve the purpose. **IMPORTANT WARNING: DO NOT SHAKE VERATHANE. STIR GENTLY.** Otherwise, it bubbles on the set as you paint.



Left: marble walls in *Ring Round the Moon*  
Above: Sploosh & splatter as marble "base"



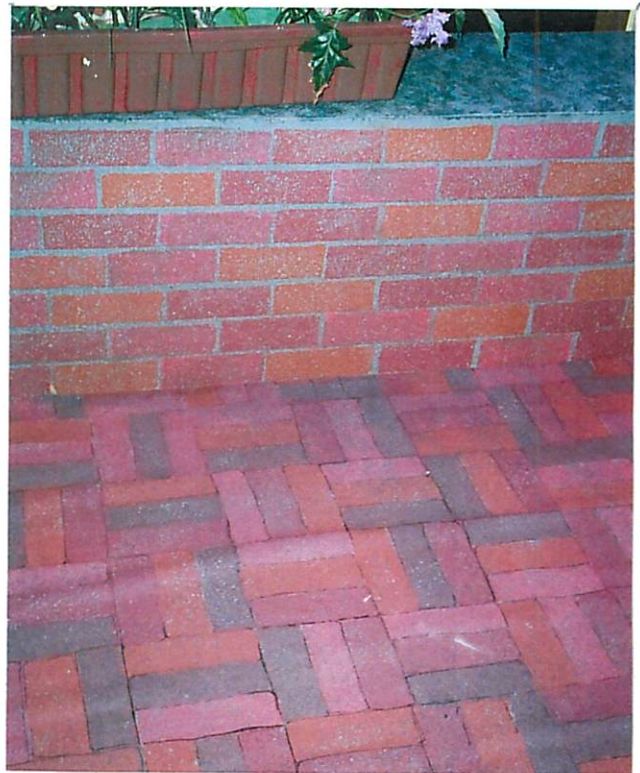
## BRICKWORK

1. From set design, choose brick colours ~ same or varied. Decide mortar shade. Beige? Grey? Dark grey? Is there a pattern to the brick colours or brick shapes?
2. To enhance texture, paint the entire surface in 2 tones of mortar colour.
3. Measure for the width of the brickwork horizontally. Include ONE dimension for the mortar plus one dimension for the thickness (height size) of brick. If sponges are a realistic brick size in width and height, use that measurement as the guide. When mortar paint is dry, mark brick measurements up edges of surface to be bricked. Work from the same end, so that lines don't end up crooked ~ as might happen if lines are marked DOWN one edge of a flat and UP the opposite edge.
4. Use carpenter's chalkline with blue powder to snap horizontal guidelines. Chalk can be GENTLY wiped off the surface once brickwork is done. If a chalkline is not used, a piece of wood can guide pencil lines IF THE WOOD IS ABSOLUTELY STRAIGHT.
5. Prepare trays of brick colour(s) to dip brick-sized sponges in. Gently touch the entire surface of the sponge onto the surface of the paint. Be sure that the edges and corners are coated slightly with paint, to get the full brick shape. Scrape the sponge gently along the edge of the tray to wipe off excess paint. That helps ensure the paint doesn't ooze into the mortar. GENTLY lay the sponge into position along the brick line. GENTLY press the entire sponge. For a brick wall, start at the bottom of the wall. As in real-life bricklaying, ENSURE THAT THE BOTTOM ROW IS A LINE OF BRICKS, NOT MORTAR. Work horizontally along a guideline. Leave a realistic vertical straight gap of mortar between each brick. **To prepare brick sponges, dampen them slightly.** Totally dry sponges won't work. Neither will really wet ones.

**TIP:** Hardware / painting stores carry attractive brick and stone wallpaper, which is easy to apply and remove. If the budget allows for the purchase, considerable time is saved.



Sponging bricks onto flat



sponged brick wall & patio

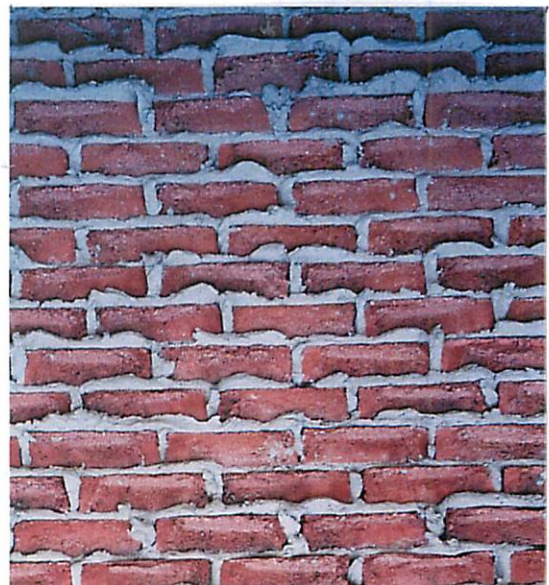


### BRICKWORK ...continued

6. For the second row of bricks START WITH A HALF-BRICK so that the vertical mortar lines are staggered as in real life. Otherwise, the wall looks wonky. The brick sponge doesn't need to be cut in half. Just gently press half of it onto the wall.
7. For realistic texture and to increase the look of light and shadow, one side of the brick sponge can be dipped on one colour and then immediately dipped in a second related colour. Then, one colour is pressed gently onto the surface, and the sponge is turned over to gently press the second colour into the same spot, even while the first paint layer is still wet. Otherwise, two separate sponges can be used. Fairly soon, the sponge will be simply all the same colour as the wet paint merges on its surface. Wash the sponge. Squeeze it ALMOST DRY. Continue sponging.
8. Depending on the final visual effect desired, high lights and shadows can be brushed into logical position. For realism, use irregular strokes with a thin brush, to avoid getting an unrealistic line of consistent thickness.
9. For really rich texture, once all work is complete and carpenter's chalk has been removed, spritz two tones of brick or mortar colour not already used. The final effect desired will determine of the order of spritz light, dark, or even medium.



Sponged bricks on flats



Real brick walls



## FLAGSTONE ~ Walls, Patios, Pathways

1. Consult set design to determine the look of the flagstone area. What are the stones laid on ~ dirt? concrete? gravel? Are stones fairly uniform in colour? Or do they vary with some dark, some light, some medium? Are there reddish or brownish tones?
2. Prepare paint colours according to design needs.
3. Use **Two-Tone roller wap-wap** to cover entire surface in the colours which will appear between the stones ~ dark earth-tones? Dark greys? Light greys?
4. Consult set design for sizes and shapes of stones ~ rounded? very angular?

### IRREGULAR, NATURALISTIC EDGES ALONG STONES

5. When background is dry, use 1" wide painter's tape to lay out the pattern of the stones. What is being taped over is the dirt / concrete/ gravel onto which the flagstones are laid. Keep varying the width of the tape by folding it over on itself to create a realistic variety of spaces between stones. Ensure the tape is firmly positioned so that new paint doesn't creep underneath it and spoil the "outline" effect. 1" masking tape can also work. But avoid leaving it on the fresh paintwork too long, lest it picks up paint as the tape is being removed.
6. Sponge various stone colours into the stone shapes now outlined with tape. Some of the "background" colours may be allowed to appear in the stones to add texture.

### GEOMETRIC, SHARP-EDGED STONES (see pictures below)

Use 1" wide painter's tape to "map" out the pattern of stones. Be sure tape is firmly attached so that paint won't creep underneath and roller won't lift it up. Use Two-Tone or Three-Tone Roller Wap-Wap as colours of stones.

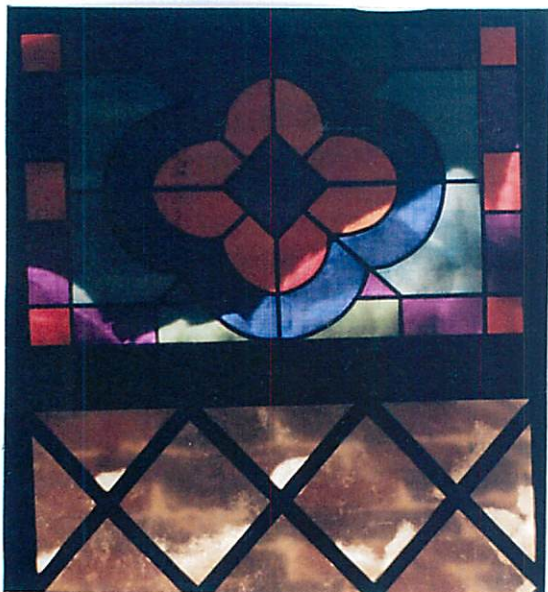
7. **GENTLY** remove tape. This step can be done before the sponged paint is totally dry.  
**WARNING** \* Ripping away tape in a big swoop can ruin the work just done!
8. If desired, brush on naturalistic highlights / shadows ~ depending on source of light in the play. For instance, is there moonlight or sunlight or electric light?
9. If possible, SPRITZ on two tones. Whether a light or dark is the final tone depends on what will work best on stage under lights for "the look" of the play. For instance, a comedy could have lighter flagstones. Darker flagstones might suit a tragedy.





## FAUX STAINED GLASS

1. Use matte shower curtain liner as glass (cheap at most "dollar" stores). Avoid shiny plastic. It reflects too much stage light. To get rid of folds, hang the plastic for a few days before colouring it. Use chisel-tip permanent felt-tip markers. Sharpies are my favourite brand. **Work on a smooth work surface to prevent any texturing on the work space appearing in the felt tip work.**
2. A pattern / design needs to be drawn on paper, using a black permanent maker.
3. Cut the plastic 2" larger than the design. That margin is needed to staple the plastic to the window frame, once the colouring is done.
4. Tape the paper pattern to the back of the plastic so that the plastic doesn't move while it's being coloured. Use "invisible" tape. It has a matte finish so that you actually can see it on the plastic (despite its label). Painters tape is useful, too. But masking tape can leave a sticky trace. Fold over a bit of the tape end so that it's easy to find and grip when it's to be removed.
5. With black marker, trace the outline of the glass shapes onto one side of the plastic. Use smooth, even strokes to capture the look of leading used for stained glass work.
6. Gently remove the plastic to colour **THE BACK SIDE**, according to the design. If coloured markers are used on the same side as the black, it can smear into colours.
7. With smooth, even, long strokes, add colours according to the pattern. Since black outlines are on the reverse side of the plastic, take the colours into the black lines **JUST A BIT** to prevent clear gaps which would look like holes in the glass. It may be necessary to intensify the colours or eliminate marker stroke lines. If so, re-colour the same shape on the same side of the plastic but work in a different direction.
8. When colouring is done, re-draw the black "lead" lines **ON THE COLOURED SIDE**.
9. If necessary, re-colour shapes on the first side, avoiding black smudges / smears.
10. Staple the plastic to the back of the window frame. Work the way artists stretch canvas. Staple opposite edges so that the plastic can be stretched taut **WITHOUT BEING RIPPED**. Depending on the size of the plastic, this step can be a 3-person job (at least) ~ people to hold the plastic in position + people to staple. Use a JT21 stapler, since a T50 staples might tear the plastic.
11. Once the plastic is in place, do a visible black outline around the entire glass window. This signifies leading that frames glass work and attaches it to the window frame.



Stained glass in *Mousetrap* window



Stained glass in *Ring Round the Moon*



## FABRIC AS WALLPAPER

Wallpaper can be done as a stencil. But if a large area is to be covered, and if the budget permits, fabric can be stapled to flats. A lot of time can be saved. So can the fabric. Sometimes, fabric stores have big sales! A JT21 stapler is better than a T50, since its staples can tear fabric and be hard to remove.

Aligning the pattern can be tricky. It's easier to work flat rather than upright, especially if ladders are required. Receding side-edges of flats that show need to be included in calculations and patterning, if a  $\frac{3}{4}$  round isn't used at the join, as part of the woodwork.

Wallpaper fabric in *Mousetrap*



Wallpaper fabric in *When We are Married*





## SCENIC ARTISTRY ~ QUALIFICATIONS & RESPONSIBILITIES OF SCENE PAINTING COORDINATOR, HEAD SCENIC ARTIST, AND SET DESIGNER

### SCENE PAINTING COORDINATOR

#### QUALIFICATIONS of PAINTING COORDINATOR

- good on detail and organization and likes managing activities
- enjoys working CALMLY with people of widely varied ages, types, and levels of expertise
- has a car and credit card for running errands and fetching equipment and materials
- doesn't mind waiting a bit for reimbursement, instead of working from an advance

#### RESPONSIBILITIES

- establish painting schedule
- assemble painting crew (**THE SCENE TEAM ~ WE WORK IN STAGES**) from group members, the community, schools
- ensure materials / tools / equipment are ready for painters (see checklist below \*)
- ensure that set / scenery / pieces are ready for painters to work on
- record students' Community Service Hours, sign their log books, write letter for portfolio
- ensure painters tidy and clean up after each painting session
- take snapshots of The Scene Team in action & make collage for front of house display (if approved by production team. It seems to encourage people to volunteer for scene painting.)
- keep orderly way of working so that tools aren't misplaced during or after painting session
- ensure brushes & rollers are thoroughly cleaned for later use & to reduce costs
- on opening each new can of paint, use long nail to hammer 8-12 holes around top of rim so that paint runs back down into can. This practice makes easier re-sealing of paint can.
- label and number flats in order for set up in theatre **THIS IS CRITICAL!**
- pack materials & equipment that may be needed for touch ups at theatre after move-in
- assemble small crew for touch ups at theatre after set is up
- supervise touch-ups with head-scenic artist

#### \* EQUIPMENT / MATERIALS CHECKLIST FOR THE SCENE PAINTING COORDINATOR

- paints according to set designer's directions / colour charts
- long AND short stir sticks and paint can openers
- rubber mallet to close paint cans. **DO NOT USE HAMMER.** It ruins lids & causes dried paint and makes cans difficult to re-open. Or simply stand on the paint can to press lid in place. Don't stamp on the can!
- brushes (bristle AND sponge), rollers, long handles, trays (at least 8-10) to occupy big team
- rubber gloves (separate into 2 clear plastic bags, labelled Left & Right to make easy finding of pairs of gloves, or just one)
- paint roller spinner to clean rollers efficiently
- sponges (especially brick-sized ones. NB: the huge rounded sponges are not particularly useful. Their outline shows too easily. Their density creates inefficient painting. Their smoothness doesn't suit texturing. They can't be cut into useful sizes / shapes). Have plenty of sponges to occupy large team working with several colours at the same time.
- carpenter's measuring tape, pencils, crayons, yard sticks (**NOT METRIC** – theatre is Imperial)
- 4-6 pairs of SHARP, strong scissors. Include at least one squeeze type for lefties.
- carpenter's chalk-line and re-fill powder
- plenty of masking tape in various widths
- painter's tape (green, for masking and defining edges ... removed **SOON** after painting!)
- white gift-wrapping tissue paper (for texturing and covering cardboard / styrene)
- carpenter's glue
- big 5-gallon empty plastic pots with lids for mixing / storing big supplies of paint
- pump sprayers for final spritz as breaking down (after all the building up)

continued....



## **HEAD SCENIC ARTIST (head scene painter)**

**NB:** Head Scenic Artist MAY be the same person as the painting coordinator, but not necessarily. The difference is that the **Head Scenic Artist MUST be artistic and understand painting for theatre**. The painting coordinator doesn't have to be a 3-star painter. It helps, when making painting decisions. But fine-tuned decisions come with practice. The coordinator is more an activity manager than a visual artist.

### **QUALIFICATIONS of HEAD SCENIC ARTIST**

- must have artistic sense of colour, texture, detail, composition
- must be able to "see" the large picture AND the details TOGETHER at the same time
- able to mix suitable colours from given paints if they aren't bought new to designer's plan
- know the suitable consistency of paint for applying to scenery
- be creatively resourceful in solving problems of colour, texture, etc. that may arise
- understand how to get visual effects desired by set designer and director
- understand how to do break-down techniques, after colour & detail have been built up
- able to mix and apply spritz as final layers of texturing & breakdown

### **RESPONSIBILITIES**

- capture designer's intentions for the set – colour, texture, detail, breaking down
- demonstrate & coach painting techniques
- ensure consistent OVER ALL "look" is being maintained
- mix the paints for required colour and suitable consistency
- spritz final breakdown or special effects. **CRITICAL to spritz flats IN THEIR ORDER on stage**
- ensure pump sprayer for spritzing is PERFECTLY CLEAN AFTER EACH USAGE
- after set-up, help with touch-ups that require theatrical / artistic eye and hand

## **SET DESIGNER'S RESPONSIBILITIES**

- in consultation with director, establish visual interpretation of play
- do rendering and or sketches, model, floor plan, construction diagrams, elevations
- advise on stage props and set decoration (set dressing) for consistency with design intentions
- explain model and visual concepts at first read-through of play (or when desired by director)
- attend occasional rehearsals in order to see how set is being used / played on in order to ensure that the set serves the conceptualization of the play AND the actors' actions. Adapt set to suit alterations that may be required as rehearsals progress and ideas develop.
- provide colour schemes and fabric swatches for scene painting, costuming, lighting
- consult with set construction team to resolve problems they may encounter and to adopt solutions they may create
- consult with lighting designer to coordinate best visual effects to capture the play's intention
- give OC technical crew the floor plan, elevations, and hanging necessities before move-in
- be at move-in from very beginning to ensure positioning of set and hanging necessities
- during move-in and technical rehearsals, ensure touch-ups are completed. Critically examine set from every vantage point in the audience – front & back rows, extreme sides, centre

### **IDEAL TIME-LINE FOR SET DESIGNER (at least a 6-8 month lapse of time)**

- consultations with director from concepts to details
- script analysis for set requirements (Jane Coryell's workshop lists the steps in detail)
- period research (if necessary) and consultation with director
- sketches and consultation with director (and SOON with lighting designer, head of construction, costume designer, set dressing team for stage pops & set decor)
- scale model, diagrams
- explanation at first read-through
- consultation with painting coordinator and head scenic artist
- check-ups of on-going set painting for consistency of intended effects
- move-in guidance
- final check of touch-ups between move-in and opening



# ALL THE WORLD'S A STAGE SET

## Handbook of Scene Painting

Dr. Jane Coryell

Pictured below ~ Jane painting set for *Amadeus*  
West End Studio Theatre, Oakville, 2002

Since 1979, Dr. Jane Coryell has designed over 100 sets for community theatre groups, schools, and professional companies in and near Oakville, Ontario. She has received 9 awards and 6 nominations with Theatre Ontario. In 2002, the Oakville Centre for Performing Arts recognized Jane's outstanding contributions to theatre with their prestigious annual Appreciation Award. In 2006, she received the Oakville Community Spirit Award for volunteerism in the Arts. For 20 of her 30 years of high school teaching, Jane taught Creative Drama from grades 9-11. For 15 years of her teaching career, she taught Visual Art. Her PhD is in Art Education (1995, University of Toronto, O.I.S.E.). On most of her productions, she was head scenic artist and painting coordinator. This handbook is based on that expertise and experience.

