BEHIND THE DESIGN
WITH THE CREATIVE TEAM
OF THE WINTER’S TALE

This season at the Alley we welcome Michael Locher as Director of Design. In this series we’ll go behind the design of several productions to learn more about how the artistic choices make it to the stage.

MICHAEL LOCHER
Scenic Designer and Alley Theatre Director of Design

"For modern scenic designers, Shakespeare can be tricky."

Theatre performances in Shakespeare’s time rarely involved scenery as we know it – meaning that a shift from a battlefield to a bedroom was meant to be a subtle gesture, suggested by the actors onstage and the words they spoke. Contemporary audiences, however, have come to appreciate what designers bring to the table. Because we work to realize what Shakespeare only hints at, four hundred year-old plays written for a bare stage that dish out some of our biggest challenges. The Winter’s Tale is one of the toughest, as the action is split between two locations, Sicilia and Bohemia, which are meant to look and feel very distinct. Sicilia is an urbane society in the throes of palace intrigue; Bohemia is a pastoral, relaxed community. A scenic designer tackling The Winter’s Tale needs to think strategically right off the bat:

"How are we going to depict the play’s split geography?"

As director, Rob Melrose introduced a take on the play which teased some really unique solutions. Melrose loved the idea of creating a Sicilia inspired by modern-day Houston: a stylish, art-filled penthouse where sophisticated Texans mingled, drinks in hand.

"He also asked me to devise a way to imagine Bohemia as a rural counterpart: a balmy amalgam of the West Texas desert, Hill Country, and even the Gulf Coast."

When Melrose further proposed that the story could unfold from the imagination of a young character onstage, almost like a dream, a concept clicked: we would set the entirety of The Winter’s Tale within a Houston penthouse, and permit mythic imagery of wild Texas to seep in and blossom like a fantasy.
I always find it helpful to devise a “theory of the design” – for each production, a guiding principle that explains my approach and frames my choices. For *Murder on the Orient Express*, it was the notion of a story conjured from Poirot’s memory, with visuals emerging from a dark ether. In this case, establishing that our story was fundamentally rooted in a single interior was fun and liberating. What does it look like when a sunset on the desert invades an urban penthouse? Or when wildflowers blossom in a Houston highrise? I’m looking forward to seeing how our audience appreciates the premise – and I hope they enjoy, as we have, an unexpected celebration of this beautiful region!

CLIFF CARUTHERS
Sound Designer

“The big role for sound and music in the show is to help paint the different environments of Sicilia and Bohemia.”

One of the ways we’re doing this is by having Mike Whitebread accompany the entire play on guitar. In Houston (or Sicilia), he’s playing a kind of urban blues, from Tom Waits’ *Blue Valentine* to straight-up jazz.

Mythic Texas (or Bohemia) is much more folk-influenced with many of Autolycus’ songs set to well-known folk melodies. The song he sings as the prologue is set to *In The Pines* that traces back to the 19th century, but Lead Belly made it famous in the 1940’s, so it has some Texas roots.

The idea of having a musician on stage came from Rob, which is something he’s done in other productions. It gives us a lot of flexibility to create the sound in the rehearsal room with the actors. Mike can really bring his improvisatory skills to the fore, just as an actor does as they work to develop their character during the rehearsal process.

My hope is that the sound and the music help make things clear and really tell the story. It’s a complicated play with lots of elements, lots of settings, and I want to make sure the music helps tell us where we are at any given point. I also think it helps with the idea that these two very different worlds can come together in a special way.

CAT TATE STARMER
Lighting Designer

Our production of *The Winter’s Tale* is set in two very different locations: urban Houston and a mythic, rural Texas reminiscent of King Ranch. The light is key to defining and sculpting these two physical places, while painting the world of an intensely psychological story of injustice and its discovery and subsequent celebration of redemption.

Sicilia is represented by a modern, high-rise apartment lit as an interior living space would be, with overhead chandeliers and table lamps. When we travel to Bohemia, the exterior country setting, I’m chasing the feeling of the world expanding beyond its walls and coming alive with warm, saturated colors. Bohemia’s dominant lighting source is the sun, as it paints a wildflower field or dapples through trees. To create the impression of texture, I use a lighting system, which is a series of theatrical lights that illuminates the entire stage, fitted with a color, called a gel, and a gobo to wash the set. A gobo is a small metal plate with cut-outs that is inserted into a theatrical light and will shape the beam of light. The intended effect will feel reminiscent of sunlight filtered through tree leaves.

The largest elements of our set are the windows at the back of the Sicilian apartment. While I’ve been in Houston, I’ve done a lot of research into the skyline and what might be seen through the windows, what the buildings look like at night and what quality and color of light is visible. For storytelling reasons, we wanted the buildings...
to feel close and the world to feel compact. This allows us to really expand into Bohemia, where we’re able to open up that view and add color highlighting the beauty of the wildflowers and the ever-changing sky.

“I really want to create a journey from a nighttime urban apartment, where compact living mirrors the tension of the narrative, to the rural countryside surrounded by beautiful, colorful vistas where joy can be found again.”

I want the lighting to aid in the overall emotional storytelling as well as the clarity of the narrative. I hope you walk away feeling like you’ve been somewhere that’s a little bit magical but also very real. I want to convey the emotionality of each moment. That’s something I hope lighting always accomplishes. As the lighting designer, I’m integral to taking the acted story and enhancing its focus and resonance, ultimately helping to reveal the soul of the play.

Our director Rob Melrose felt strongly about making the story immediately accessible and easy to connect with. Because in the world of costumes I deal with the materiality of bodies, my challenge is always to distill the big ideas we develop as a design team into specific choices in garments, textures, silhouette etc. A play like The Winter’s Tale takes the audience through different locations and times, and the costumes are there to help us connect to the characters throughout their journey.

“Our very contemporary take on Sicilia is initially about elegance, wealth, and balance — in contrast to the playfulness and irreverence of Bohemia.”

With Bohemia comes an explosion of warm fall colors and a certain exuberance in the use of patterns and details.