

THE COMPLETE TEXT: Marlane Meyer's *The Chemistry of Change*

AMERICAN THEATRE

SEPTEMBER 1998

U.S. \$4.95/CAN. \$6.50

women in THEATRE

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the shows are all written by a lot younger people, who are, I suppose, complaining about their mother-in-laws."

Television enables Sternhagen to take theatre jobs, as she did last spring when, at the suggestion of journalist Joseph Hurley, she accepted the role in the Irish Repertory Theatre's Off-Broadway production of *Long Day's Journey*. Ironically, Sternhagen is older than O'Neill's anguished, morphine-addicted heroine. But to see her performance was to watch a wrenching combination of maternal love and physical and psychological deterioration that transcended age.

"O'Neill tells you how she behaves," says Sternhagen, explaining how she worked on the role. "What I had to do was fight against some of his stage directions, which have the character's hands fluttering, her eyes not looking at somebody. I found if I allowed myself that, it could turn into such a neurotic performance. I had to follow my instincts about what it would be to be terribly uncomfortable and depressed, and what it would do to your body and behavior."

Part of what it would do to this particular Mary Tyrone was make her talk—incessantly. Words streamed out of the character's mouth in such a torrent that it was easy to sympathize with the husband and sons who couldn't bear to be near her. "We did some judicious cutting," says Sternhagen. "Our stage manager called José Quintero [the director whose name has become synonymous with O'Neill's work], who said that the best way to cut O'Neill is in snippets. Don't take large chunks out, take little unnecessary repetitions. It enabled me to just barrel ahead. Because she couldn't stop talking. Once the dam broke, she never stopped."

Despite the rarity of such a rich part, Sternhagen is not one to complain. She turns down work if it's not to her standard, and she prizes spending time with her grandchildren. "Occasionally I talk with actor friends my age. We kind of commiserate: 'Oh yes, this is a problem we have.'"

"But you know," she adds, "it's a problem that older people have generally. People don't necessarily want to hire them. I feel lucky that, in show business, they need older performers as frequently as they do." **AT**

Karen TenEyck A SURREAL EYE

An innovative designer pushes the technological envelope

By Jane Hogan

Well, I'm not a technophobe—that's for sure," declares scenic designer Karen TenEyck. Indeed, she's fascinated by the prospect of bringing virtual and theatrical worlds together. Best known for her innovative use of computer technology in a number of high-profile pieces—including the virtual projection design for two recent Mabou Mines productions, a 1995 remounting of *The Red Horse Animation* and the company's 1996 high-tech extravaganza, *An Epidog*—the designer does not wish to be thought of as what she jokingly refers to as "the slide person."

All the same, TenEyck does view computer-generated technology as an important theatrical aid. This past summer, for instance, she designed background projections for the Shakespeare Festival/LA's site-specific production of *Julius Caesar*, set on the steps of Los Angeles' City Hall. TenEyck approached the project as though she were designing Caesar's public-relations campaign, and

many of the images evoked giant advertising billboards.

What is it about the use of technology in stage design that intrigues her so much? "I think that in design we should employ as many paintbrushes as we can," she says. "Maybe it won't always work out. But you never know what the next voice is and how you can bring a unique visualization to the work."

Since graduating from Yale's MFA program in 1991, TenEyck has worked on wildly diverse projects, some tech-heavy, others examples of simplicity itself. Her design for last year's *The Triumph of Love* at California's South Coast Repertory, for example, used no technological elements whatsoever; instead it played with the audience's perspective. She designed the set as a vista that continues on until it blends with the horizon, but the audience's viewpoint was quickly shattered when a character made an entrance by climbing over the back wall. "He's this giant figure on this tiny background," says TenEyck. "His appearance makes a joke of the whole thing—which was my take on this production."



Playing with perspective: TenEyck's setting for *Julius Caesar* at Costa Mesa's South Coast Repertory



Not just the slide person: Karen TenEyck

TenEyck's interest in the arts started early. Growing up in West Virginia, the designer remembers selling her drawings around the neighborhood so she could buy sodas. ("My entrepreneurial spirit goes back to the cradle," she jokes.) Her family moved to the Wilmington, Del., area when she was nine, and it was there that she took on her first design assignment, helping a high school art teacher design sets for a production of *The Sound of Music*. "I thought it was the most thankless job that ever existed," she laughs. "I couldn't believe how much work it took."

Abandoning her fledgling theatrical career to pursue a more practical path, TenEyck studied graphic design at Pennsylvania's Kutztown University, then moved on to work as an art director for an advertising agency and a hospital. "Once I figured out how to do graphic design," she says, "there was little left in the way of challenges." Projects in community theatre and a visit to Yale to check out Ming Cho Lee's design class led her to apply to the university's graduate theatre program.

Today, TenEyck lives in Brooklyn and works steadily at theatres across the country, combining her artistic and technological talents to create surreal and fantastic images. As she sees it, computer technology's entrance onto the stage is another inevitable evolution of the theatrical process. "The point of a show shouldn't

be technology, but it is a big aspect of our lives right now. As a 'character' it does have validity; it should not become too self-conscious. Technology is only a negative when you don't pay attention to the play anymore.

"After all, years ago no one used light boards," she points out. "Now look how dependent people are on them. They don't get in the way of the work."

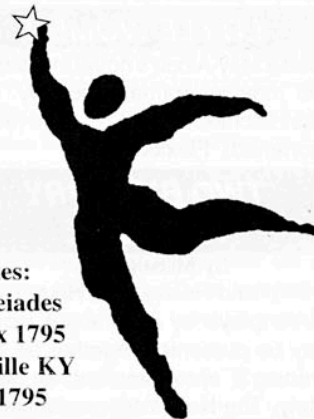
This past summer TenEyck designed *School for Scandal* at the New Jersey Shakespeare Festival, and hopes this season to collaborate with New York's Gertrude Stein Repertory Theatre on what she calls "a frightening version of *Ubu Roi*" that incorporates part-human, part-plastic puppets. "Theatre encompasses so many elements," she says. "It is life, and it therefore has everything to do with every aspect of life." **AT**

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