

University of New Hampshire  
University of New Hampshire Scholars' Repository

---

Honors Theses and Capstones

Student Scholarship

---

Spring 2012

# Memory of Water Scenic Design-- Reinventing Memories on Stage

Xuehui (Kate) Li

*University of New Hampshire - Main Campus*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholars.unh.edu/honors>

 Part of the [Theatre and Performance Studies Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Li, Xuehui (Kate), "Memory of Water Scenic Design-- Reinventing Memories on Stage" (2012). *Honors Theses and Capstones*. 58.  
<https://scholars.unh.edu/honors/58>

This Senior Honors Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Scholarship at University of New Hampshire Scholars' Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Theses and Capstones by an authorized administrator of University of New Hampshire Scholars' Repository. For more information, please contact [nicole.hentz@unh.edu](mailto:nicole.hentz@unh.edu).

University of New Hampshire

# **Memory of Water Scenic Design**

**----- Reinventing Memories on Stage**

Kate (Xuehui) Li

5/1/2012

**Kate (Xuehui) Li**

Senior Thesis Capstone Project

Advised by Szu-Feng Chen

Secondary Advisor: Dan Raymond

University of New Hampshire

05/01/2012

## **Memory of Water Scenic Design**

### **---- Reinventing Memories on Stage**

A good play has the power of reaching into something deep inside a person's heart. It may be subtle, undetectable from the outside, but something echoes inside the heart so that one hears the voice of the play telling him or her something about life. This voice comes from the world of the play, a world that, realistically or non-realistically, is created by the set designer according to the imagination of the playwright and the vision of the director. This is the world on the stage; this is the world where everything starts to happen.

A set designer lives in the play during the process of designing for the show. He or she must first and foremost understand the play, think like the characters, look at the world the way the characters look at the world and see things the characters see. As the set designer for *The Memory of Water*, I lived in the play for almost ten months, from the first time I read the play to the day the show closed. Putting the play on stage is a magical process: it is a process of seeing all my visions and imaginations become solid and tangible on the stage. Here, I am going to summarize this magical experience into several steps, in the case of *The Memory of Water*, the steps of reinventing memories on stage.

### **Understanding the play**

*The Memory of Water* is a comedy in two acts by English playwright Shelagh Stephenson. The play revolves around three sisters—Mary, Teresa and Catherine—who come together for their mother, Vi's funeral. They each have different reactions to the death of their mother, influenced by their different versions of childhood memories with each other and their mother, who would actually come into Mary's mental world and have conversations with her. In these conversations, Vi brings us back to the 60s. However, in the reality of the 90s, all three sisters have their own problems: Mary's relationship with a married doctor Mike, Teresa's love-hate relationship with her husband Frank, Catherine's incapability of keeping a boyfriend.

The memory is a fundamental theme of the play. The three sisters discuss and argue about the memories of their childhood and their mother, rarely are able to come to an

agreement. But different as the sisters are, they share the same mother; the same blood runs through their veins. Some things never change. Just like Vi said, “some things stay in your bones”.

### **Developing the concept**

When I read the play, I see it as half realistic and half non-realistic. The sisters live in a realistic world, but when they remember the childhood memories they enter a non-realistic world of the past. Like Mary said, “all memories are false”. We always intentionally or unintentionally make the memories the way we want them to look like so that they could settle down somewhere deep down in our hearts. That’s why I feel that all memories have a tone to them, as if we look at memories through a piece of colored glass. For *The Memory of Water*, I see a greenish blue tone to the play overall, because the memories are like water that sift through the lives of the sisters; they can dilute and dilute the memories, but the memories can never really be eliminated. When it comes to the childhood memories, I see warmer and more vibrant colors. I hear laughter of small children, sunny days, bicycles, mother with child, and the sisters on the beach, some of which are mentioned in the play.

The reality and the memories are the most important two elements in the play. Since the play is set in the realistic world of North England in the 1990s, the set of the play must be realistic; since the play concerns memories and the ghost of the mother, the set of the play can afford some non-realistic elements. Therefore, my goal was to

incorporate the non-realistic memories with the realistic set in a natural way so that the two would complement each other.

### **Inspirations**

I started out by thinking about artistic inspirations. First ones that came to mind was Surrealism. Surrealistic works of art focus on elements of surprise, unexpected juxtapositions and non sequitur. I looked at paintings by Salvador Dali, such as Paranoiac Visage, Mae West, and The invisible Afghan Hound, in which there are always different layers of images in the same painting—when we first look at them, or when we look at them from far away, we see the painting as one thing, but when we take a closer look at them, we see a totally different painting and an entirely new meaning to them.

Something is always hidden in the seemingly obvious pictures, yet they blend and combine with each other seamlessly. I feel The Memory of Water has such a quality, that when we look into things we see something entirely different hidden underneath, but at the same time they are so obvious—all that we need to do is to look at it from a different perspective.

Another artistic style I thought of was Expressionism. Expressionism is a modernist movement originated in Germany at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In Expressionist works of art, literature and film, the world is typically portrayed from a subjective perspective, strongly affected by emotions, and to express meaning or emotional experience rather than physical reality is the goal of Expressionist artists. Usually the traits of things are literalized and taken to an extreme. I thought of the 1920 German

Expressionist film *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* directed by Robert Wiene, in which the set was abstract with jagged buildings, angled walls and strangely shaped windows and doors, adding to the eerie atmosphere depicted in the film. Expressionism inspired me of certain ways of expressing the feelings I get from the play through the set.

*The Memory of Water* has a dreamy quality, especially when it comes to the memories. However, both Surrealism and Expressionism are a little bit far from the actual style of *The Memory of Water*, since they both are deeply connected with nightmares.

Therefore, after a meeting with the director and advisor, I was introduced to Magic Realism.

Magic Realism is an aesthetic style in which magical elements are blended with the real world. It is a genre in the visual art, film and literature. I looked up for paintings of Magic Realism, and discovered the similarity among these paintings: when we first look at the paintings, we get a realistic impression, but when we look into them, we realize something unrealistic about them. For example, in a Magic Realistic painting, we see a lake in front of a castle surrounded by trees. But when we take a closer look at the painting, we see people walking on the lake, and someone in the foreground putting down square shaped mirrors and paving the lake on the grass as if paving the road.

From Magic Realism, I got the inspiration of how to incorporate the memories into the realistic set.

## **Research and Style**

The research process started right after I read the play and had some basic feelings and ideas about the play. I researched about the play, its previous production photos, the playwright Shelagh Stephenson, the place where the play took place, the characters, the time period and so on. Since set design is a visual design, visual research is the most important research for me. My visual research can be categorized into four parts: research of artistic inspiration, research of the place, research of the memories, and research of furniture style.

The research of artistic inspiration has been discussed in the section above, and my research focused on Magic Realism. Then I researched for the place of the show, which is North England, a place that snows heavily in the winter by the sea. During a meeting with the director, I was told that the playwright grew up in Tyneside, England, which is a place very similar to the place where the play took place. So I looked for pictures of Tyneside and found out beautiful pictures of the sea, the raging waves, the cliff by the sea, the isolated light tower, which gave me a more specific image of Vi's house on the cliff eating away by the sea.

The next step within the research of the place was the research of English cottages. I found many different pictures of English cottages, with both exterior views and interior views. I particularly looked at the pictures of cottages covered by snow, which is the case in the play. From the pictures of interior view of the cottages, I got a sense of the interior design, as well as how the furniture are arranged in the rooms.



In order to have a better idea about where Vi's bedroom is in her house, I looked through floor plans of English houses in the 1960s, and designed a floor plan for her house. I imagined that her room is on the side closer to the cliff, with her window facing the cliff, and through her window, she can see and smell the sea. The old age of the house and the damp environment of the sea are slowly taking the house apart, which is why the crack on her wall is getting worse. The fact that the window is right above the cliff also intensifies the moment when Mary's boyfriend, Mike, tries to get into the house from the window.

Since the memories are a very important element in the show, I spent a significant amount of time researching for childhood memories, especially those pictures with mother and child, or three sisters and sisterhood. I wanted to incorporate the memories with the set, and the best way to do it is to have the pictures of the memories show through the floor vaguely, which would not distract the attention of the audience, but also make a statement about the house full of memories. The sisters are standing in their mother's room, which is full of memories, and in this case of the set, literally; they can choose to deny them, but the memories are always there. It is the past and origin they share, no matter how much they want to deny it and how different they are. The floor is poetic in a way, and we can almost hear the laughter of children far away in the background in a muffled sound, fading away with time.

The last research is more of practical use—the research of furniture style. The furniture form the most part of the set, and the style of the furniture speaks loud for the

characters. They can reflect the characters' personality, taste, interest, and economic and social status. Since the play takes place in Vi's room, the furniture show off Vi as a person. Vi is a very feminine woman, who loves socializing on the weekends and enjoys the attention of men. Therefore, her room would adopt a very feminine style, in which we can almost smell the scent of her perfume and hear the music by Cole Porter. Since this is a rather old house, the furniture naturally have a more vintage style. Vi is not a very rich woman, so her furniture would not be overly expensive and fancy, as she cannot afford to live like royalty.

### **Working with the director and designers**

Theatre is a collaborative art. Everyone has to work towards the same direction in order to ensure that the show has a unified style. Therefore, as a set designer, working with the director and other designers becomes an essential part of the design process. For *The Memory of Water*, I had my first meeting with the director and advisor in May 2011, almost 11 months before the show opened. In this first meeting, we established certain basics and necessities of the play. The meeting served as a starting point for me as a designer.

Then over the summer I read the play many times and brainstormed ideas. I did many of my research and visual research over the summer, as well as sketches and notes. I thought of and prepared different sets of ideas, left a lot of space open for different options and possibilities to present to the director and designers at the beginning of the fall semester.

In the fall semester, I had meetings with the director and the costume designer, lighting designer and our advisor every week. During the first meeting, we started out talking about the feelings we got after reading the play and our understanding of the play. Our discussion of the play made sure that we share the same interpretation and are going in the same direction. I presented my visual research images and my different sets of ideas and inspirations. We discussed what would work and what would not work, narrowing the ideas down to a more specific concept. In each meeting, I would bring in new ideas, either brand new ideas or ideas trimmed according to the last meeting, and we would discuss them and make more precise decisions. For each meeting, I always brought in new sketches and pictures to present my ideas more clearly to the director and my fellow designers.

The costume designer, the lighting designer and I had meetings by ourselves too. We tried our best to accommodate each others' needs. For example, since the lighting designer envisioned the non-realistic world of the memory to be bluish green, she asked me to try to stay away from blue and green in my set, in order to avoid the colliding of the same color. Since the costume designer has to have a lot of costume in the wardrobe and a lot of jewelries in the dressing table, I had to make sure there was enough space in the wardrobe and the dressing table has drawers.

Working with the director and other designers also made sure that the set pieces on stage are practically functional when they are needed to. As a set designer I have to be concerned about both the appearance and the function of the set pieces. In this show, I

had to allow enough acting spaces, sufficient space for the actors to move around and sit.

After a number of meetings with the director, the advisor and my fellow designers, I made a sketch model of the set. The furniture are on scale but are not meticulously shaped or decorated. I made the furniture movable on the stage, so that the director can move them around if necessary. After the sketch model was approved by the director, I made a colored on scale model ( $1/8''=1'$ ) of the set as the final representation of my design.

### **Final design of the set**

The set represents Vi's room. The wall and the furniture in her room are on diagonal on the stage, because first, the Hennessy Theatre is a thrust theatre with audience on three sides, the diagonal would make the set look more aesthetically interesting; second, the set has Magic Realistic influences and aspects to it, making the room on diagonal reinforces the Magic Realistic style as well as distinguishes the memory scenes in the play; third, the diagonal wall accommodates the position of the bed in the center of the stage.

I choose to put the bed on center stage as the most dominate furniture is because that the bed is a representation of Vi. Everyone has to go around the bed no matter where they want to go. It is as if Vi is always there. The sisters can deny her existence, but she is always present in their lives in one way or the other; there is no way that they can avoid her.

The style of the furniture is realistic and true to the time period and Vi's personal taste as well as her socioeconomic status. The two most Magic Realistic elements in the set are the floor and the wall, which are both closely associated with the memories. It is amazing how many details we remember about a memory and how those seemingly most insignificant details can bring us back to the past: a scent that brings us back to a sunny spring day; a flower that reminds us of the whole story of a Saturday afternoon. I printed out pictures of moments and details of childhood memories, such as three sisters watching the sunset hand in hand, mother and child together, a little girl blowing a dandelion, an old swing, grassland with flowers on a sunny day... I incorporated these pictures with the wooden floor and have the pictures show through the patterns of the floor vaguely, showing the undeniable power of the memories.

Accompanying and echoing with the shape of the pictures on the floor, I have the jagged wall. The window is essential to the wall, with very light curtains that float easily, which could dramatize the final moment in the play when Vi's spirit drifts out of the window. The crack on the wall is a sign of the age and history of the house, also a symbol of the house of memories eating away by the sea, or by time.

### **Making memories a reality**

After the designing process is done and the model is made, I drew the ground plan and elevation of the set, submitted them to the scene shop so that they can be built.

However, the process of building the set is more complicated than I initially imagined, and it involved much more participation of the set designer than I anticipated. I had to

be in the scene shop as frequently as I could to make sure everything built were the way I want them to look on the stage. In many cases I had to paint parts of the set, such as the crack on the wall and the decorations on the window seat, and also glue down and glaze all the pictures on the floor, in order to make sure that they look the way I expected.

As in many theatre productions, some parts of the set are built in the scene shop, and many other parts are purchased, which makes the budget important to think about. As a result, I sometimes have to make compromises and alternations to my original design to make sure that we do not exceed our budget. I made a set pieces list and a property list, since props are also considered part of the set. I worked closely with the property master on things ranging from purchasing the side tables and curtains to details such as choosing the right pillows and putting up the right paintings on the wall.

The set has to be tested in rehearsals in order to make sure that it can do what the director and the actors need it to do. Minor changes were made to my original design, due to practical purposes in the show. For example, we added a small table on upstage right next to the love seat because in the show an ashtray needs to be placed next to the love seat. We also changed the originally curved design on the wardrobe for safety reasons.

Finally, since there will be audience on three sides of the stage, visibility is of vital importance when choosing furniture. I had to make sure that the furniture is in the style I would like them to be without blocking anyone's view. Therefore, the furniture at the

edges of the stage are shorter, and the headboard of the bed is see-through, same with the two side tables next to it.

## **Conclusion**

Creating the world of a play is an immensely enjoyable and at the same time powerful job. But with power comes responsibilities. Since the set is what the audience first see when they walk into the theatre as well as where the characters live for the entire show, it can greatly add to or detract from the show. As my first set design experience for an actual production, as well as my last one in college, the set design experience for *The Memory of Water* has taught me more than I ever could have learned in any classroom. My set design experience with *The Memory of Water* will surely become one of those most beautiful and at the same time useful memories I take away from University of New Hampshire, along with the aspiration and courage for a new beginning—to the future, to life.

# Model





## Production Photos



