

TODD ROSENBERG



ROBERT KUSEL

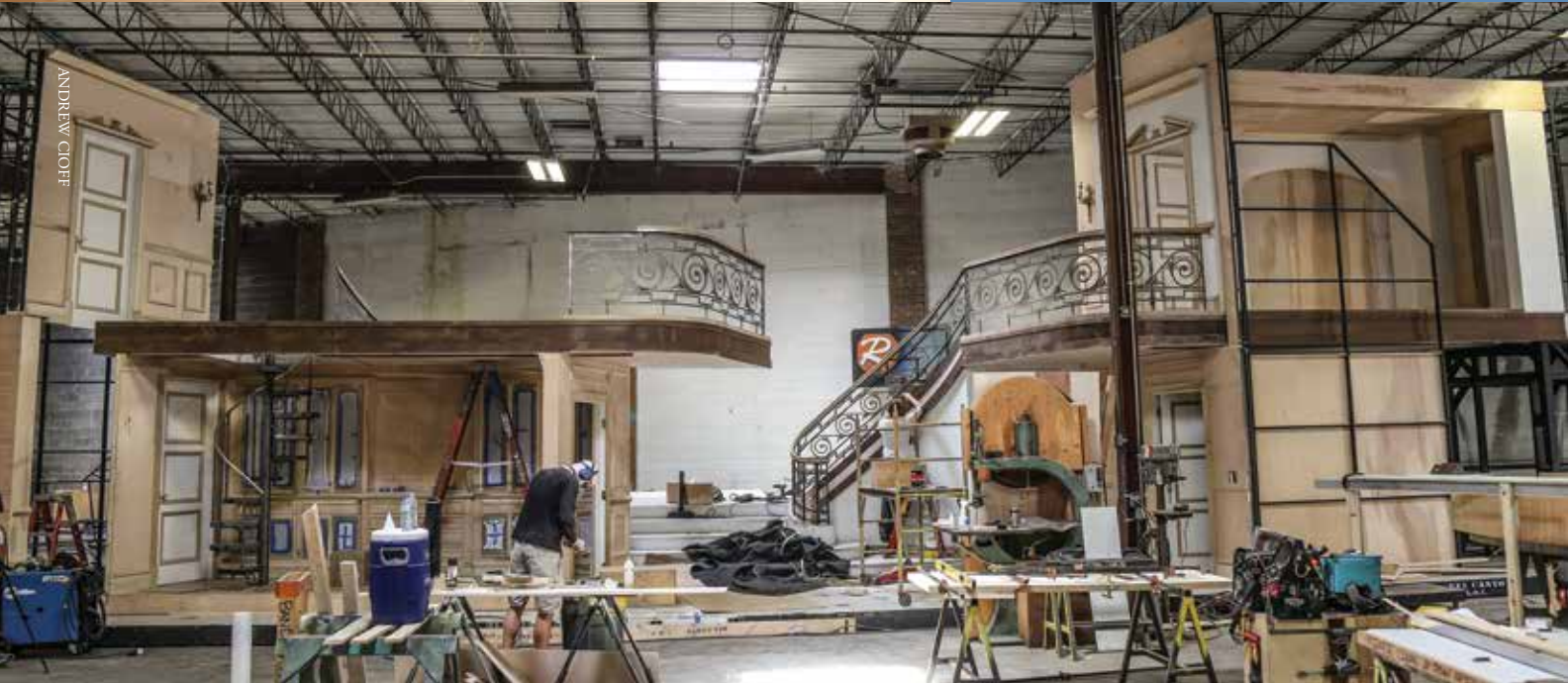


Above: Lyric's props department made these extravagant "pastries" for Act Two of The Marriage of Figaro using foam, glue, and paint.

Left: During summer pre-season work, Lyric's technical department and each production's creative team finalize scenery and lighting cues and check the production's props.

Below: The set for Lyric Opera's world premiere of Bel Canto was built at Ravenswood Studio in Lincolnwood.

ANDREW CLOFF



The Big Reveal:

How scenery and props set the scene at Lyric

by Magda Krance

Every time the curtain rises at Lyric, it's like a giant present is being unwrapped before our eyes. The revealed scenery surprises and delights, or inspires an awestruck gasp and sometimes, spontaneous applause. As the performance progresses and the scenery changes, the revelations continue to unfurl.

That's certainly what directors and set designers hope for when they start imagining opera productions at least a year or two before the audience sees them. How do they get from that initial brainstorming to the big reveal? It takes a veritable global village to make it happen, and each production has its own distinctive journey.

After Lyric's general director Anthony Freud invites a director to create a new production for a future season, the director chooses a designer and they meet to discuss their concept, talking through every scene change. The designer contacts Lyric's technical director Michael Smallwood to ask about stage dimensions and the technical capabilities of Lyric's theater, what stock scenic elements are available, whether shows are performed in repertory, how much technical rehearsal time is allotted, and how much time is available onstage during final rehearsals to fine-tune the scenery.

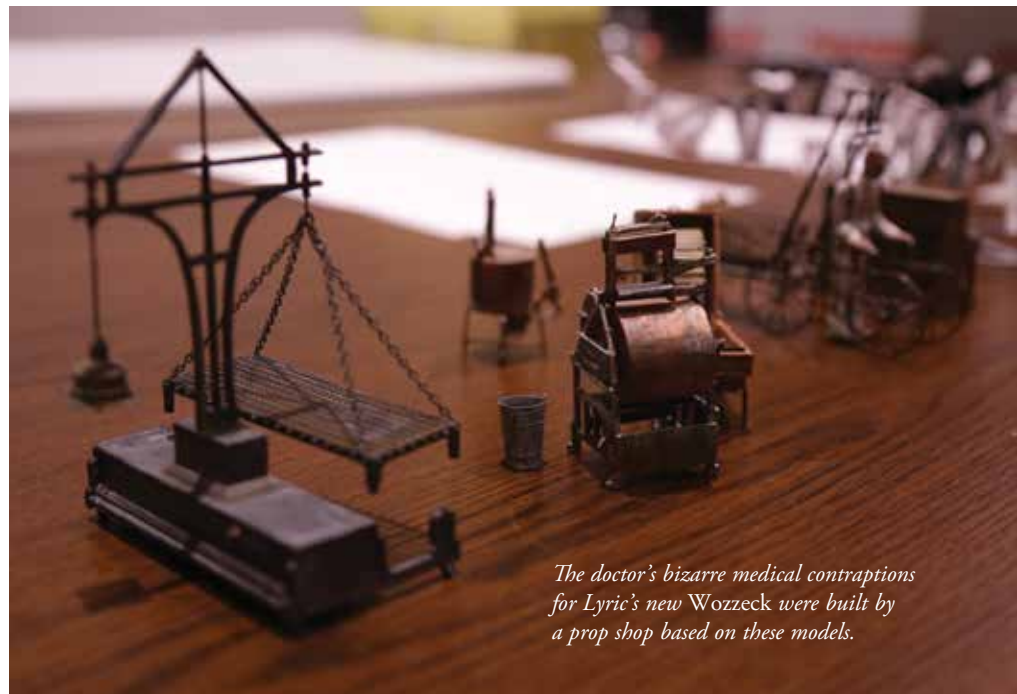
When a set model is completed, the creative team schedules a presentation, which often includes costume designs as well. (Ideally this happens at least a year before the summer tech rehearsals that precede the season.) Members of Lyric's stage management, technical, artistic, production, marketing, development, wardrobe, wig and makeup, and props staffs join Freud, deputy general director

Drew Landmesser (Lyric's former technical director), board president David Ormesher, and sometimes production sponsors, in a backstage rehearsal room for the big reveal.

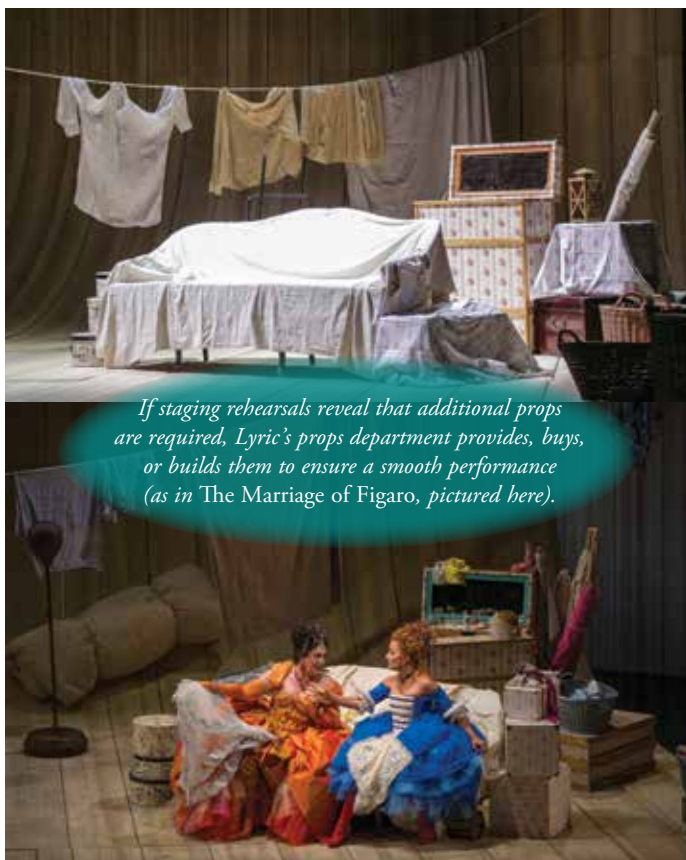
The creative team presents the production design scene by scene, answering detailed logistical questions then and in subsequent meetings: how does this piece of scenery get on and off the stage (for example, the enormous pier in *Carousel* last season)? Does it happen during a pause or a musical interlude? Is it *a vista* (in view of the audience)? Are there costumed stagehands to move scenery (as in *The Passenger* and *The Barber of Seville*)? Is the scenery dimensional or flat, hard or soft? Does it fly vertically or move laterally offstage? Are there traps in the floor? Who or what comes through them (e.g. the entire massive banquet table and Don Giovanni with it)? Is there fire

(cleverly simulated with lighting in *Il trovatore*, flammable gel in *Otello's* bonfire) or water (*The Marriage of Figaro's* playful finale) or smoke or fog (the first scene change in *Cinderella*)? What unusual props are needed (fake mollusks for *Carousel's* clambake, mountains of sweets in *Hansel and Gretel*, including edible elements for the performers to gobble onstage)?

Before leaving (in under 36 hours), the set designer shares a list of preferred scenic shops. The set model stays at Lyric, where detailed photos are taken before it's eventually sent to the scenery builder. Smallwood looks for "best price, best product" when he sends bid packets out to a few scenic shops, detailing every last bit of scenery: decks, wagons, wall units, drops (there were lots in *Rusalka*), special electrics (e.g. carousel lights), ground cloths, a painted cyclorama backdrop. The

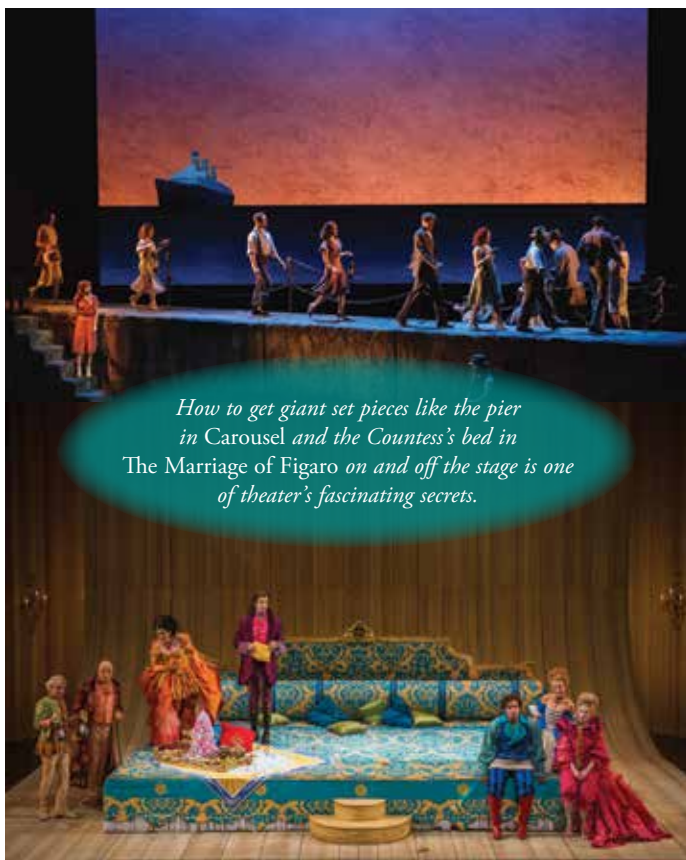


The doctor's bizarre medical contraptions for Lyric's new Wozzeck were built by a prop shop based on these models.



MICHAEL BROSILOW

If staging rehearsals reveal that additional props are required, Lyric's props department provides, buys, or builds them to ensure a smooth performance (as in *The Marriage of Figaro*, pictured here).



ROBERT KUSEL

MICHAEL BROSILOW

How to get giant set pieces like the pier in *Carousel* and the Countess's bed in *The Marriage of Figaro* and off the stage is one of theater's fascinating secrets.

shops respond in a few weeks with itemized cost and time estimates to build the show.

Smallwood and assistant technical director Scott Wolfson go over the bid packets, scrutinizing every item for potential “value engineering,” as they call it. If a design is still over budget, they’ll go back to the designer and ask for some cuts and compromises – Styrofoam instead of a pricier material, for instance. (Rarely, the designer and director may be asked to reconceive the whole show, if it’s too far off budget.)

Eventually they settle on a scene shop and budget, which can take about three months, between other projects the technical department is managing – like the current season’s productions! The sets for this season’s *Figaro* and *Wozzeck* and 2013’s *Elektra* and *Rusalka* were built at Bay Productions in Cardiff, Wales; *Bel Canto* was built nearby at Ravenswood Studio in Lincolnwood (which also built the new orchestra shell designed by Jeanne Gang for Lyric’s 60th Anniversary Gala Concert). “Some shows are more about engineering and scale, like *Wozzeck* and *Elektra*,” Smallwood explains. “Bay excels at

these big, textural sets that have a lot of depth and layers and carving and buildup on them. We chose to keep *Bel Canto* here because it’s a world premiere and we wanted to keep a closer eye on it. They did a great job with the engineering.” Sometimes, he adds, an engineering subcontractor may be brought in to approve a set “for what we want it to do, especially with people flying and set elements overhead.”

Set construction takes five to six months, depending on the size and complexity of the show. “Generally for every show there are three shop visits, starting with a kickoff meeting in December or January with the designer at the shop, to meet the people who will engineer and draw all the units, as well as the painters who will finish the units,” Smallwood says. “We can discuss any finer details that weren’t so evident in the bid package or email exchanges. The second visit, in April or May, is a midway check-in to see how the structure is coming along, so we can make sure it’ll work onstage, work for the show, work for the changeovers. For example, with *Figaro* we discovered all the statue platforms were built backwards!

We could get those redone before shipping. We’ll also see some large-scale samples for the designer to approve before the set is painted. At the third visit in early June we’ll see things 90% finished, so we can give tweaking notes before it goes into a container and is shipped, making sure everyone is happy with it. We expect shows to be delivered by mid-July for summer tech rehearsals.”

“Sometimes parts of the set are built by secondary companies that came up with a really good price for that stair unit,” notes production manager April Busch. “There’s a lot of jigsaw puzzling going on!” Lyric’s new production of *The Sound of Music* (designed by Michael Yeargan, whose *Nabucco* returns to Lyric this season) came from hither and yon; the walls came from Ravenswood locally, and the deck (the set’s base) came from Bay overseas. Multiple contractors can make the matching of paint treatments tricky, but Lyric’s got a guy – charge artist Brian Traynor – who handles scenic paint touchups to unify the scenery’s look.

But first, it’s got to get here. “We need an hour from Ravenswood, two or three days

from a shop we use in upstate New York,” says Smallwood. Shipping from overseas takes about 42 days – if things don’t get held up in customs, by port strikes, by weather, or by rail issues. (Michael Schoenig, technical finance manager, negotiates the logistics with international travel brokers.) Two shipping containers fit on a flat rail car; if there aren’t two containers of scenery, the railroad company may wait until there’s something to share the car with the single scenery container. (If that happens and time is tight, the scenery may be trucked to Chicago.) Trucks collect the scenery at a local rail yard and transport it to Lyric’s warehouse area on the southwest side of town, or straight to the opera house during the summer tech rehearsal period.

It takes between five and eight trucks to load in a show, depending on its complexity. They pull up to Lyric’s Washington Street loading dock one at a time after the morning rush hour; each truck backs onto the truck lift and lowers to stage level for unloading in the scenery-handling area north of the stage. Large pieces are assembled there by Lyric’s summer stage crew, comprising 53 stagehands.

As the previous production’s tech rehearsals wrap up, the latest arrival moves onto the stage for final assembly so that lights can be focused on Monday. On Tuesday and Wednesday lighting and scenic cues are finalized by the creative team. If a show has transferred from another company, adjustments may be needed, as was the case for *The Merry Widow*: some scenic elements were modified from the original Met production to accommodate the different dimensions of Lyric’s stage. Explains Smallwood, “The Met used some of their stage lifts for the transition

from Act Two to Act Three; we’re not able to do that here, so we met with the director and designer, discussed how to restage and rework the transition for Lyric’s stage, and were able to practice that solution at the summer tech.” Sometimes a new show’s new tricks get their first trial run just days before dress rehearsal, as with *Figaro*’s water feature. As shop welder Drew Trusk commented in mid-September, “We don’t know till we put the water in the pool what it’s going to do or where it’s going to go.” Fortunately, the special effect worked according to plan and enhanced the finale charmingly.

After a show’s tech week, the scenery either goes to Lyric’s warehouse area to be stored in shipping containers, or if it’s the first or second show of the season it stays in scenery handling, with portions going to the main rehearsal room so that the cast can acclimate during staging rehearsals.

This is when the props really come into play. For months in advance, properties master Charles Reilly and his team assemble the elements large and small that lend authenticity to each Lyric production, as specified by each set designer. Some are constructed on premises (the trick sofa for Act One of *Figaro*) or built by faraway prop shops (such as the weird medical contraptions needed for Lyric’s new *Wozzeck*). Some are purchased and adapted, and some come from Lyric’s backstage props closet, a labyrinthine treasure trove. There are even more props squirreled away in a warehouse container. During staging rehearsals, the director and designer may realize that a bed needs a dust ruffle and a bolster pillow for the heroine to lounge on, or that she needs a water bottle nearby that appears to be part of

the scenery. Or that the laundry on the line in another scene needs to be a different color. For *Figaro*, director Barbara Gaines added a personal prop to the opening scene: a vintage wood-and-cork hat stand that belonged to her grandmother, who brought Gaines to her first operas as a child and always put the hats she wore to the opera on that stand. In Lyric’s production, it supports Susanna’s veil and is playfully serenaded by Figaro. Later, Susanna rings a silver bell that also belonged to Gaines’s grandmother.

For the world-premiere production of *Bel Canto*, set designer David Korins enjoyed creating stately scenery that starts out pristinely elegant and clean, deteriorates over the course of the performance because of the hostage crisis, and has to be reset in immaculate condition for the next performance. Maria DeFabo, Lyric’s properties and scenic arts coordinator, explains that much of the tech rehearsal was spent choreographing chaos through relocation of props and furniture, for instance stacking chairs as barricades, marking the walls (and figuring out what to use that would be both visible and washable), and having two identical sofas – one for the opening scene, and one that’s been heavily distressed and dirtied to depict the mansion two months later.

Lyric’s new production of *Rusalka* (2013-14) posed great creative challenges. The props list for the witch Ježibaba included an antique baby buggy, a carpet bag jammed with potion ingredients such as dragon’s blood, a squeezable bat that squirted blood, a snake, a whole cat, and the cauldron itself. The Act-Two kitchen scene featured a dinosaur-sized hanging carcass, a swan being stuffed, assorted



From model to full-scale set – this is how Paolo Ventura’s design for Carousel was realized onstage.



TODD ROSENBERG (BOTH PHOTOS)

Above: The swan stuffing in Rusalka's Act Two kitchen scene contained real lettuce, cabbage, and onions. Holding the swan is the Kitchen Boy (Daniela Mack), who is conversing with the Gamekeeper (Philip Horst).

Left: Among other items, the props list for the witch Ježibaba (Jill Grove) in Rusalka called for a cauldron and a cat.

Below: For operas with actual eating onstage (as pictured here in Hansel and Gretel), Lyric's props department contains a full kitchen.

cleavers, and chunks of meat to be chopped. Recalls DeFabo, "We bought giant fake meats from fake-food suppliers. Our scenic artist sculpted the fake meat with upholstery foam and expanding foam, and covered it with stage blood. We could reuse it for every performance, but the swan stuffing was real heads of lettuce, cabbage, and onion. We lined the inside of the bird with a garbage bag and pitched it after every performance.

"For Act Two of *Figaro*, there was a giant 10-foot-long cart of pastries and a food fight at the end of the act – we made all of that from scratch in house using foam, glue, and paint," DeFabo says. Food and drink play a key role in several operas, and a full kitchen was added to Lyric's props department a few years ago.

During the opera season, about 14 stagehands staff the props department. "The recent trend in opera is to have more props and to interact with them more," DeFabo says. "Shows from the past few years have a significantly larger number of props than the revival shows from 15-20 years ago. Some designers and directors have very specific ideas,



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and sometimes what they're asking for isn't made or may contradict the laws of physics. We've had to make things appear to be floating that can't actually float. It's a challenge until we figure it out, and then it becomes fun!"

Magda Krance is Lyric's manager of media relations. Prior to joining the company in 1992, she worked as a fulltime freelance journalist for several national and local magazines and newspapers, and as an editor for Outside magazine.