Inherit The Wind: The Evolution of a Concept

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My driving concept for this production of Inherit The Wind was that of confinement and heat. I wanted to create a claustrophobic feeling with the light. I wanted the audience to feel the heat searing into the town as the trial progressed. One of my original thoughts was that this trial was not about a man or an idea, but instead about the heat of religious conservatism against the cold logic of science. By removing the idea that this play is about one event or one man, I am able to expand my scope and therefore take a much broader stroke at the design. By concentrating on the town and the entire societal structure rather than Cates, Drummond, and Brady, I am able to shift my focus to a wider theme.

Coming into the first concept meeting for Inherit The Wind I had taken several notes and already had made time to speak with Craig Siebels, the set designer, while he was in town for Arcadia. Originally the main problem that the design team as a whole, along with the director, Jay Dysart, wanted to overcome was the size of the space. We wanted to give a feeling of confinement. We wanted to create a feeling of claustrophobia. To accomplish this goal we discussed various ways of staging the courtroom that included having a ceiling, which I immediately was opposed to, and having the playing space be so small that the courtroom audience would literally be spilling out of it. By the end of this discussion we decided that by making the space just big enough for everyone to fit into it would still appear clean, and the thirty-seven cast members would give it a very confined look. The ceiling problem was solved, to some degree, by agreeing upon having hanging bulbs fly in to constrict them from above. I

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decided at that point that I would have sharp cuts on the edge of the playing space so that no light would bleed out into the "moats," or areas where the action would not be taking place.

In my research of the play I came across a headline about the trial stating, "Strange Creeds and Theories Are Preached and Sung Within Shadows of the Court House." This struck me as an especially interesting visual concept. Thinking back to my idea of religious conservatism being the heat and the logic of science being cold, I thought that it might be interesting to have the shadow of the Church looming into the courtroom, strongly at first, and then fading away as the play progresses. This would work with my initial theory of the church actually moving in to the courthouse for the trial while the agnostics took over the town. Neither where they are wanted and perhaps where neither belonged. Once Drummond appears Brady is on a slow path to death. Therefore, the shadow of the church would play out as a symbol of the time that he has remaining. Once the verdict is given the church is quite literally removed from the proceedings. However, in the final draft of the set signs from the stores in town had replaced the Church and I no longer thought that this concept would play out, so it was cut.

Along the same line of thinking I decided that I wanted the play to appear somewhat shadowy. To create this effect I utilized a leaf breakup pattern from above. I used no color in these instruments so that I could use them at various times of day. Through this effect I hoped to further enhance the feel that this town is being smothered by the outside influences that they have unwittingly invited into their town. I wanted to further augment the idea that they were in a very closed space with little room for

movement or development. At the same time I wanted to add texture to the space to the space and to the performers. I feel like this subtle use of shadow will help give the claustrophobic feel I am reaching for as well as add something aesthetically to the overall picture.

From the initial meeting that I had with Craig until the Wednesday before we opened there had been discussion about ways that we could theatricalize the first scene to help build up the tension to the court room scenes that follow. Jay had the idea of capturing several moments throughout the first scene through not so subtle changes in light and sound. These manifested themselves as breaks from reality in which the audience is forced to take heed of what is occurring. In theory these moments would serve to hasten the pace and build the drama to Drummond's entrance. In practice, however, they appeared to be clumsy moments that did not fit with the rest of the play that we had created. These moments of the surreal seemed to be lost in the show and the decision was made to cut them one day before we had out first audience. Unfortunately, several other aspects of this premise were left in and I believe served only to confuse the audience. With these moments in place it made sense for the whole sky to turn red as Drummond appeared over the hill. However, once these moments were cut, it was out of place for the sky to turn into "hell" for this entrance. Although I expressed this concern with Jay, he decided that he would like to keep it. While I liked the look I believe that the overall structure of the show would have been better served had this moment been redesigned to conform to the look of the rest of the piece.

In my initial reading of the script Drummond's line to Brady at the end of Act One, "All motion is relative. Perhaps it is you who has moved away—by standing still,"

stuck out to me as being integral to the theme of the play. The idea that the forward motion of thought kills those that linger behind, in this case being Brady, struck me as a theme that I could create a picture with. Initially I wanted to have constant motion within the acting space, but once we decided to take a realistic approach to the show this was right out the window. However, the sky ended up being exactly what I was looking for in subtle motion. Throughout Act Two the sky is constantly fading towards a sunset. The death of religious conservatism as manifested through Brady is eminent as the sun sets on his time in this life. While this not only gave me an outlet for my idea, it also gave me the leverage to create some stunningly dramatic moments at the end of each scene as Brady loses his followers in the end of the first scene and loses his life at the end of the second. This also played out nicely as the revelation that time is running out for Brady and his way of thinking occurs in the one night sequence within the show. This serves as subtle foreshadowing; suggesting that as night falls on religious thought the cold logic of science finds its place. As the fervor of the prayer meeting is shattered by the fact that the Reverend is overzealous I am able to bring a much colder feel to the scene finding Brady and Drummond alone under the stars and the moon, preparing us for the sun setting on Brady's life.

The main technical problem that I encountered was the fact that the court walls fly in. This would take up over 15 line sets if I had chosen not to use them. However, this was not an option. After meeting with the Technical Director and the Stage Supervisor we decided to purchase segments of pipe and install them in place of the 60-foot sections of pipe currently in place. This allowed the court walls to fly in while allowing me to have lights around the walls. This also seemed more practical than under hanging the

pipes as there is less room for error. I also agreed to combine my 3rd and 4th Electrics onto one Box Truss to be financially frugal. This is the one instance where under hanging came into play so that the segments that were on either side of the truss would match its height.

Overall I was able to accomplish the goals that I set up for myself within my concept. While they didn't always manifest themselves the way that I had originally intended, I think that I ended up creating a dynamic look for this very dramatic show. I was able to work with shadows to both create a sense of confinement and a sense of reality. I was able to help the set designer make the space feel smaller than it actually was furthering the claustrophobic feel that we were going for. I was able to create motion relative to the space in a realistic way by starting the scenes in Act Two late in the day and having a slow fade to dusk. Finally I was able to create a nice looking show that helped emphasize the feelings that we were going for without beating the audience over the head with it. My shifts were subtle but effective. Overall, the design, and the show as a whole, was a success.