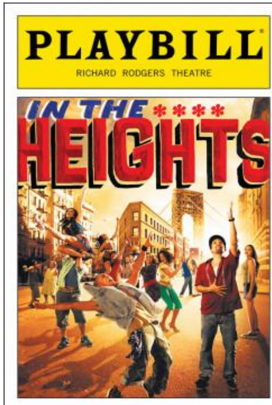

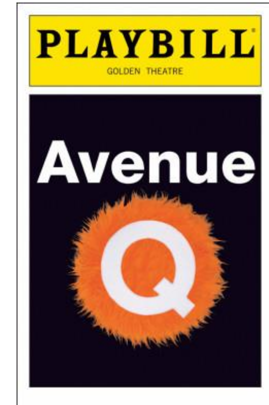

TODD POTTER, SCENIC DESIGNER
INTERVIEW – NYC
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> *"Personality is everything. Talent gets you in the door, but personality keeps you working. Nobody wants to work with someone that's a pain in the ass or a diva. When you work in a studio it's a family and you don't want someone that is going to upset the chemistry of it." TP*

STEVE TAFT: Years ago, you taught college at Drury University, your alma mater in Springfield, Missouri. You had a steady paycheck, benefits and you lived in a nice Midwestern city. What propelled you or inspired you to leave the world of education and pursue professional design opportunities elsewhere?
TODD POTTER: Well, first of all I never really wanted to come to New York. I thought it was way beyond what I was able to do, even though I had many people tell me I needed to go there, but my road went from teaching at Drury to a set designer at a theatre in Tulsa for two years and then another place and another place. The third place I went was in Branson, Missouri. It's a long story, but I realized I needed one-more thing. I needed to go back to school and to study under a real set designer and mentor. Up to this point I learned most everything by reading, observing and practicing. I also worked at a professional theatre in the summers, Starlight Theatre in Kansas City and I saw professional designs and I was able to ask scenic artists on breaks, "Why do you this or that?" and they taught me things. I was a carpenter (at Starlight) so I had kind of weird trek . . . usually people come right of undergraduate or graduate school to New York because they think they're going to kill it and find out it doesn't quite work that way. So, I went back to graduate school at the University of Missouri-Kansas City, studied under John Ezell, did the program in five semesters instead of six and he encouraged me to come to New York.

By that time, at the end of my first semester he brought me to New York at what at that time was known as the "Clam Bake" which Ming Cho Lee put together for all graduating design students at certain schools (not everybody was obviously invited), but everybody had an eight-foot table, and eight-foot high space (what I call a flea market set up) and showed everything they did, and it was at that instance that I realized "I can do this and I'm better than some of these people." And that gave me the impetus

for the next four semesters to work hard (not that I wasn't going to) and eventually come to New York. Luckily, I had a friend coming with me which makes it easier because you can trade stories . . . and that's how I came to New York which I'm glad I did because I think if I was younger, like at age 28 or 30, I wouldn't have been mature enough to deal with it and I would left really quickly.

It takes a while to get used to it. It took me about six months to get use to the closeness, the commuting and just everything you have to deal with. The hoops you have to jump through. But once you figure it out, you're good and that you like it, you're going to stay, so . . . I'm here. And it's been 24 or 25 years now.

ST: Now, your first Broadway show was *The Green Bird*, directed by Julie Taymor?
TP: That was my first actual associate designer job and that came in 1999. I landed here in the fall of '93 and worked as a scenic artist and I got down to my last $50. I got down on my knees and I prayed like when I was a little kid, "I need a job." And low and behold that afternoon someone called and asked me to come in for an interview. I went in and I got the job, because I had a great portfolio and I was one of John Ezell's students and he knew they made good models and he needed a model maker. And I stayed there at David Mitchell's from the middle of December until the end of March and I moved from that to working on *A Christmas Carol* at Madison Square Garden. Tony Walton was the designer and that was great because I met just about everyone I needed to meet that kept my career going. I got jobs from the other associate and assistant designers working on that project . . . there were twelve of us and they kept me working until I eventually got the job as an associate designer.

In the meantime, between 1994 and 1998 I had a regional theatre design career and I worked at theatres with some pretty great directors, but I wasn't making any money. I was also working eight hours-a-day at the Russian Tea room. I joke that they were paying me to practice my drafting and rendering skills and then I'd come home at night and work until three or four in the morning on my designs. It just got to be a grind and I decided I just needed to get back to the assistant design pool and this associate design job came up and I was so grateful to get it [*The Green Bird* directed by Julie Taymor].

Christine Jones, who is a very famous designer believed in my skills and it was her first Broadway show and we really did a great job together. I enjoyed working with her so much. From there I started carving out this career as an associate designer. The one thing you need to know is at that time the associate designer worked between sixteen and twenty-six weeks on a show and in 1999, you were making maybe $1500 dollars-a-week, so you do the numbers. At times, you're making more than the designer until they get their contract signed and royalties begin to kick in if the shows that good. So, it was a really steady gig for me. I like helping people realize their dreams and people have helped me, so I always think of myself as Crash Davis in the film, *Bull Durham*. They bring him in to teach the young pitchers how to be a major league pitcher and that's what I do in the studio. I bring in this maturity and experience to teach the younger people what needs to be done and I've done pretty well with that. At times I train people so well I cut myself out of a job, but I'm lucky sometimes that a designer will call me in to draft on a show and I don't have any other responsibilities.

ST: Now what are the specific differences in responsibilities regarding an Assistant Designer and an Associate Designer? What are their duties and do they have interaction with the scenic designer?
TP: It's changed a lot since 1993. In '93 they called the Associate Designer the "Scenic Coordinator". Then by '96 the Associate Designer became important because you have to realize a Broadway designer

is doing maybe two or three shows on Broadway and maybe two or three shows Off-Broadway or in Regional Theatre . . .

ST: Which is why it's a little tough to get break into the business . . . it's like a monopoly.
TP: (*Laughs*) Exactly. [*A little joking follows involving a bus*.] It's interesting because they're working and they need someone to take a show and run with it and trust them that they're going to get it right and also continue to create that show in the designer's style. Associate Designers are the Lieutenants that are sent out into the battlefield (if you want to call it that). We're there calling the shots. We're there in the fox hole with the grunts working hard. We're really managing people, managing the design not only in the studio but in production meetings and when the design goes to the shop, when it goes to the theatre and what we call, "putting it to sleep". We try at the end of a show to create a package of what actually ended up on stage, because many things change. It's not what it is at the beginning . . .

ST: It's constantly evolving . . .
TP: Yeah, on the shop floor you learn things, you get it in the theatre and you learn things. The producer tells you to do something or their partner, you do things, whatever. That's when the Associate Designer is a Lieutenant. If you can visualize it, they are sweating as much as their troops. The Assistant Designers are doing most of the work so you want to hire the best assistants you can; the people that can draft, that can paint and make models. And you manage them and you assign them certain parts of the design. The stage right wall, the act two set, whatever it may be. The Associate is working on the ground plan, the deck plan and maybe one sheet of drafting that you really want to do. You're coordinating how this is all put together.

ST: Is the Associate in charge of all that during the load-in?
TP: Oh yes. You're a part of that. The assistants are gone by that time. You've taken their work and it's probably been revised or changed by you or them or whatever needs to be done to create the design in way that it grows the way that the producer thought, the director and the designer. We start with a little sketch and then go to a model. We go from a model to drafting and from drafting to bids at scenic shops. It goes into the shop and gets built, then it comes out of the shop and into the theatre and it changes throughout the process.

ST: For the student that works in the scene shop and enjoys being a carpenter, how easy or hard is it for them to get into one of the scenic studios?
TP: I think it's easy. I really do. The hard part is . . . the first thing about New York is the myth that it's a tough place. It can be. The toughest thing here is finding housing. There are jobs everywhere and if you're smart enough and clever enough you'll find a job, but finding housing is the tough part. I wouldn't leave the mid-west or wherever without about five-grand in the bank, 'cause you're going to need it. Anyway, I think for what we call the "crafts people", the people that work in the shops. The painters, the props people, there are so many shops from large to small, and if you know someone that can get you in, they're always looking for new people and talented people. And now with the advent of computer aided stuff that we do they're looking for those people as well.

ST: In regards to drafting: Is there a preference in the professional world regarding hand-drafting or computer assisted drafting or designing with such programs a Photoshop, Vectorworks or other program?
TP: I think eventually were all going to be in a CAD program in every studio. There are designers that still hand draft. One of them is Donyale Werley who won the Tony Award for *Peter and the Starcatcher.* She's a very talented person, very clever and her whole thing is recycling things to create designs (the

Broadway Green Alliance), she still hand-drafts, I know a couple of other people that do, but most people, if they're designers, they are sketching things and then handing it over to the assistants and the associates and then it's transposed into a CAD program. Myself, I actually try to draft at least one show a year or two because I love it and it's not so exact and it looks pretty because I love to draw and it's more conceptual. I think once you put something into a CAD program it looks hard and concrete and doesn't leave room for improvement. I will add on to the whole CAD thing: All the shops, when you send your designs in . . . now remember, a design is conceptual, it's not engineered. You've drawn what you want it to look like eventually, but when it's turned over to the professional shops that's when they turn it into numbers and angles and the geometry that they need to put that set on stage.

Behind the Scenes: *Peter and the Starcatcher Set Design* with Donyale Werley
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LcTKhTW1Few].

Broadway 101: *Peter and the Starcatcher's* Set Shop Brings Imagination to Life
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LDVQ8u2vBzE]

ST: So, they make sure the set is going to fit into the space?
TP: Right. They go over it with a fine-tooth comb. When we used to hand-draft everything they would trace all of our drafting and fit it into numbers because it's all about numbers. They would engineer it and make it work, especially when you have automation of the set. You have decks where pieces move and traps where things pop up. There are so many things that they have to take into account, every quarter of an inch is important. So if you can deliver to the shops drawings in some kind of draft form they love it. I've had some shops say they love hand-drafting but it slows the process down. Now take it a step further, the scenic artists don't really like Photoshop renderings, but it's quicker to send it to them that way.

ST: It's quicker to make changes in color and so on in Photoshop as well.
TP: Yes, but you always follow that up with a hard copy. Without Fed EX or UPS we couldn't do a lot of this theatre stuff. When I first started it was all about Fed EX. I thought it was great that I could design something that night for Starlight in Kansas City and was amazed that they could have it the next day as I lived in Springfield, (Missouri). I often wonder what it was like when designers had to use the U.S. Post Office? [*Laughs*]

ST: Now as a designer you also work in other fields?
TP: Yes.

ST: You've worked on the Russian Tea Room, designed a major Industrial show for Target in Minneapolis and design in other theatre's around the U.S. Tell us about such opportunities and how you supplement your income and utilize your design skills in other fields.
TP: When you get involved in the business . . . for me it was sort of serendipitous, I was working for Tony Walton and his friend, Mervyn LeRoy owned the Russian Tea Room and Tavern on the Green and he was redoing the Russian Tea Room and asked Tony if he knew of any designers that could work on that project? Tony said, "Yes, I know someone who's available now and he's very talented." So, I got that job through him. That's how it works, networking. Being in the right place at the right time, yes, but networking with people that have strong backgrounds. If you don't you'll just be sitting around wondering, "Who's going to call me today? Am I ever going to get a job?"

ST: Now a student right out of college is going to come to NYC and think they're going to do great. One of their first questions is: "Network. OK, but how do you network if you don't know anyone?"
TP: When I was ready to come to New York that summer I sent out postcards to all of the scenic artists in New York. I got a list from the United Scenic Artist Union (USA). And I said, "Hi. I'm blah, blah, blah and I'd loved to work with you. When I'm in town I'm going to give you a call." Something like that. There wasn't a world-wide network at that time. It was phone calls and a postcard and a hand-written note says more than anything. The names of the designers are easy to get through the union or someone you may know that is in the union. But, your college professors have to know one person working in New York and that one person multiplies to three and that three multiplies to maybe ten and then it just steam-rolls and you find your little network of go-to people.

ST: How does personality work within this business? What kind of personalities do people want to work with?
TP: Personality is everything. Talent gets you in the door, but personality keeps you working. Nobody wants to work with someone that's a pain in the ass or a diva. When you work in a studio it's a family and you don't want someone that is going to upset the chemistry of it. So, you try to hire people that are going to get along and have fun, because in this business it's 98% hard work and 2% fun. So, you have to make sure you have fun people to work with and they're hard works as well.

ST: Now, over the years former classmates or students or people I've come to know in the business have careers that have evolved. What's been your observation or experience in that regard?
TP: It's what I call bridging the gap. It's interesting, when I first went to Drury College (now University) the department poster was all of these famous artists. And we had a student, Mike Mallory, who was good at doing caricatures of famous actors and they were crossing over and they (the professors) talked about crossing over (in regards to talents or skills) and bridging the liberal arts with the fine arts and I always thought that was great image. But when I came to New York I realized I'm not going to be an assistant set designer on every production, because there's only so many productions and even more assistants so I have to figure out how to do something else. So, the Russian Tea Room was a great bridge to another Restaurant on 59th Street (which no longer exists). It just didn't go over. I also worked from November through January when the theatre business was kind of silent or asleep as shows have opened. We worked on the Toy Fair with is a big thing, so I worked for a company called Falcon Perspectives and I designed this whole display, the G.I. Joe display. I did Bob the Builder. And I designed this whole interior of a play school room and that I was all drawing all by hand using markers and color pencils, really quick renderings and drafting it. Then the shop would build it and I was managing it through its construction. That was another way to make money. So, you're bridging into that area. Then I bridged into industrials. This was for Target, the company. They do these huge business meanings in the fall and spring at that time. It was in the Target Arena in Minneapolis, the hockey arena. And I had one end of the arena to set up this huge, bigger than opera stage for them to show not only their new ads, but to discuss market strategies and where the business is and they'd have special entertainment. It was just a static set. I did stuff and it paid really well. At times I thought they paid too much but then I'd get a call at 6:00pm New York time and I'd be getting ready to cook dinner and sometimes they'd want me to change something by 6:00pm their time in the mid-west, so I'd have an hour to make these changes and I thought, "Maybe they do pay me enough." That was a great job. I got to use all of my skills as a set designer, artist, scenic artist and just a collaborator with different people: the business people, the arts people and the Target people. I knew when I got the job it would only last so long because that's just the way those things go. It's the fashion trends, they see something and they go for that. So that was a great thing.

Now, I'm bridging over into the field of landscape architecture. My wife started her own landscape architecture business and we design playgrounds for the New York public schools. She's the principal designer, I'm the managing principal and then we have the lead architect that has a license to practice architecture. So, we have our own little studio and we all work together to design and manage the construction of playgrounds that cost $750,000 to a million dollars. It's amazing to see a playground go from being just an asphalt chain link fenced-in area to this incredible shade-tree area and a track and turf field and garden where they (the kids) can plant things and the kids love that. There's an outdoor classroom, we have special playground equipment . . . we have a special vendor in New Jersey that designs playground equipment . . . it's just an incredible collaboration. But, the kids have nothing and they design this with the help of the professionals. The Trust for Public Land is our partner in this and kids have ownership of this because they say: "I created that. I made that happen." And I think it's important to empower the kids. Some of these kids don't have any parents and it gives them hope and I think that important to have hope for the future.

ST: Are there any particular designers that you admire regarding their process or have had a good time working with?
TP: I have to start with John Ezell. For me he's the progenitor of what was my new life. Although I'm bridging over into this landscape architecture field and will one day ride off into the sunset and retire, I'll always paint, because I love to paint and draw.

David Mitchell was the first big designer I worked with. I was amazed at his skill to focus. And he's this incredible painter and visionary. He could tell a story like . . . he was unbelievable. He's kind of a savant. I could tell tons of stories about him. He was just amazing to me. His talent was unbelievable. Unfortunately, he's not with us anymore and I regret that I can't go and see him and talk to him, but that's the way life is.

Tony Walton was the second designer I worked with (and I'm not putting them in order of importance), it's just the way I met them. Tony is another brilliant designer and illustrator. He can do anything with a paint brush. He's has such an eye for color and for detail and taught me so much, not only about design, but about managing people and creating a family in the studio and where personality is so important and I can't thank him enough for forwarding my career because he believed in me.

The next person would be Zach Brown who's a bit under the radar, but Zach had a career in the 1980's and is really known more for his opera and ballet, but he did stuff on Broadway and if you look up his shows he did some pretty incredible productions. And that guy, he's such an incredible painter and designs costumes. He did both in ballet and opera designs, just incredible. Simple costume renderings, but they were so expressive and they said so much and his color pallets were so amazing and I worked with him a lot. We have a great respect for one another as for what I do for him and what he gives me in return. You know, it's not about money. I learn from these people.

And then there's Anna Louizos, [*Avenue Q, In the Heights*] who confided in me for many, many adventures as an associate designer, starting with *Avenue Q*. She's out of the Tony Walton pool of associates and assistants. We both sort of think alike, I love working with her. She's like my sister. She's a great collaborator and we have a great respect for each other. I love her to death and she's been a great designer to work with.

Derek McClain, I worked with on many shows. He's quite different in his methods. The way he does him, but, I really like working with him. I learned a lot from him about how to be more personable with

people, because myself I'm not really that outgoing. I'm really kind of shy. He taught me how to be more outgoing, to say, "Hi, I'm Todd Potter." Otherwise I'd just stand in the corner. I'm kind of like a wallflower. So, I learned a lot from him about that and I enjoyed working on his designs and he also trusted me with his work. I couldn't always read his mind . . . as an associate you always what to think, "What would he do next?" He was hard to read, but I did a couple of times and won a few battles. His career has really taken off. He does everything. It's just incredible, the amount of work he does and to manage it all. It's just amazing to me.

I've probably forgotten somebody but for me those are some of the people that were highlights for me as far as a Broadway associate and assistant. I worked for Heidi Landesman for a couple of projects and a couple of other designers here or there, but those are the ones I worked for the most. You walk into these situations and you don't walk in thinking you know everything because you're going to learn something and should never stop learning about design because there's something new every day.

ST: In the Intro to Theatre text I've used in recent years there's a photo of the model from *In the Heights* which you worked on. Was there someone specifically that built it . . .
TP: (*Laughs*). That's funny.

ST: . . . or was it a team of people?
TP: Actually, it was Anna [Louizos], the designer that built a lot of it. In the process of doing that show I was drafting the set and Donyale was drafting by hand and I was drafting in Vectorworks and Anna was leading a crew, because we had a short amount of time to build the model, and we probably had Anna and two-three assistants, depending on what week it was . . . model makers. That took about two-and-a-half to three weeks of eight hours-a-day of working on that model. There was soldering to do, because the set was all steel and welded and I can tell tons of stories of the process of trying to get that sucker on stage. That's another interview. That picture [of the model] is the set. You could put that on stage. I think I worked on one thing on that model . . . I think it was a streetlight, because it was a New York show. I can remember going out and taking pictures of fire hydrants and taking pictures with my camera. I'd go back and scale them and trace them, but the street light, we finally got it right . . . from all the different *Avenue Q's*, I finally had drawing that street light down. I actually have pictures of one that was laying on the ground and I did measurements . . . because every assistant or associate designer should carry a twelve-foot tape measure in their bag. You're going to need it.

ST: What final bits of advice do you have for the young designer still in school whether they plan on coming to New York or not?
TP: I think the important thing for the young designer whether they come to New York or not is it's important to draw. Draw draw draw, because if you're not picking up your pencil and thinking with it then your designs are going to be dead. You can't do everything with a computer. Think with your pencil and use it as your weapon. As my wife says, I get a happy when I'm using my pencil. The other thing I think is students need to realize the importance of the library. I didn't have a set designer when I was an undergraduate, so I would go to the library and look at books and read books about designers. I was fortunate to have a job at a professional theatre where I saw professional designers drafting and their paint elevations and all that volume of work and I had to practice myself. Maybe if a student isn't designing at school, spend some time creating a design. I mean Adolph Appia (if you remember him) and even [Gordon] Craig's design were conceptual and they were creating things that eventually caught someone's eye. Find a small box set play and design it from beginning to end and research it, do all that stuff. In the end you're going to have a body of work. You're going to have a ground plan, a sectional, some drafting . . . doing one or two pages of drafting. Make a model, do paint elevations, do your

research on the furniture and have image boards where you have all of your research so when you have an interview you can show them your process and how you think. Yes, they can see that you can draft, paint and do models, but they want to know how you think and that's important for any designer. Often, when I interview assistants I want to see what their process is, because I want to see how it fits into my process because I don't need to explain things two or three times because time is money and money is time in the theatre so it's important to hit it right off at the start. And DREAM! Persevere. Dream you can do it. If you think you can, you can do it. Athletes visualize their performance. If they're going to do the long jump and break the record, they visualize it. When I'm thinking of bike races I visualize the course. So, visualize what you're doing and just be persistent, because no one is going to help you. But when you come to New York you'll be surprised at how many people are there to hold your hand and to help you. There's a community, you just have to tap into it.

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