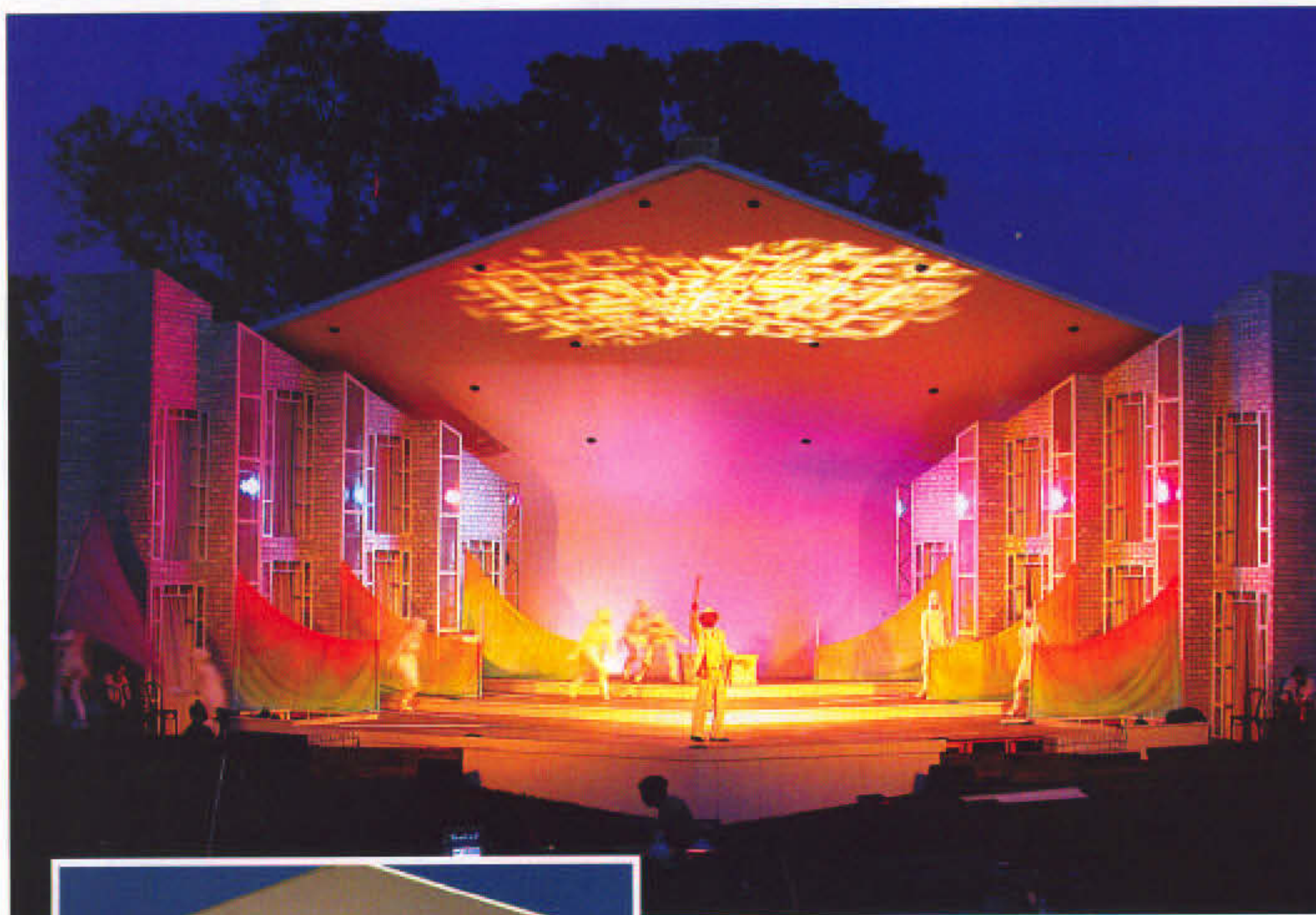


GARY C. HOFF

SCENIC DESIGNER

Having a resident designer on hand need not be a prescription for monotony

BY ROBERT L. NEBLETT



GARY C. HOFF



GARY C. HOFF

Above, *The Winter's Tale* at Tennessee Repertory Theatre in August 2005; inset, Hoff's *Winter's Tale* set model.

Smack dab in the buckle of the Bible Belt, you'll find one place where there is no heated debate about theories of "intelligent design"—the Tennessee Repertory Theatre in Nashville. There, Gary C. Hoff has shaped the company's artistic presence as resident scenic designer and head of design since 1999. Hoff's tenure in Music City USA has been underscored by awards and critical praise for a body of work that runs the gamut from conceptual Shakespeare to lavish period pieces to austere kitchen-sink realism.

After earning a BFA in technical theatre from Central Michigan University, Hoff worked for two seasons with the Kalamazoo Civic Players, where his skills caught the attention of associate director David Grapes. Hoff moved on to spend five-and-a-half years with the Chattanooga Little Theatre before receiving a master's



“His body of work runs the gamut from conceptual Shakespeare to lavish period pieces to austere kitchen-sink realism.”

Tennessee Repertory Theatre's *The Taming of the Shrew*, March 2003, with set design by Hoff.

degree in scenic design from Purdue University and returning to Chattanooga as CLT's resident scenic designer.

In 1999, Grapes became the new executive producing director of Tennessee Rep. "One of the first decisions I made was to establish a resident design team at the Rep," recalls Grapes. "I wanted to make one key hire to oversee all of the elements efficiently."

That key hire would turn out to be Hoff. Now, as head of design, the 40-year-old Hoff coordinates major design elements within individual shows and across the entire season of the Rep's offerings. This gives the Rep's productions a unified aesthetic and helps the company conserve its limited resources.

While artistic leaders of many American companies often have serious reservations about hiring resident designers for fear that productions will begin to look the same, one need only glance at Hoff's portfolio to silence such concerns. Over the years, he has demonstrated a surprising versatility for a wide variety of styles, genres and periods. Hoff's revolving set for *Cyrano* was a Baroque wonderland of historical detail and lush romanticism, while the beauty of the unit set for *Crimes of the Heart* lay in its contemporary suburban simplicity. The central iron framework for *Romeo and Juliet* simultaneously evoked the tiered archways of Rome's Coliseum and the galleries of Shakespeare's Globe Theatre. Hoff's extensive historical research for *The Diary of Anne Frank* found itself onstage in surprising ways, from the elaborate wallpaper patterns in the bathroom (largely unseen by the audience) to cardboard boxes stamped with the actual trademark of Otto Frank's Opekta company.

For 2003's *The Taming of the Shrew*, Verona whimsically meta-

morphosed into a Technicolor snapshot of 1950s suburban bliss. Petruchio's lounge-lizard bachelor pad became Hoff's pride and joy in the scene shop, replete with kitschy leopard-print furniture and silhouettes of Bettie Page-esque pinup girls crafted impishly into the window frames.

Hoff's spectacular outdoor set for *The Winter's Tale*, a co-production with the Nashville Shakespeare Festival in summer 2005, captured the play's timeless magic in an icy environment reminiscent of a futuristic Art Deco cathedral.

Grapes, who left the Rep in 2004, fondly recalls Hoff's design for *Twelve Angry Men*, which blended harsh realism with high theatricality, as one of his favorites. The sepia-toned jury room's abstract, angular forced perspective gained verisimilitude from functional ceiling fans and a period water cooler that became a refuge for the jurors seeking to escape the literal and metaphorical heat of the play's raging legal debate. The production's central action revolved around a monolithic conference table, slightly expressionistic in its exaggerated dimensions and shape, which jutted out beyond the curtain line and threatened to invade the audience's comfort zone. "Very early on in his career in Nashville," Grapes recalls, "Gary established that he was not afraid to make bold, theatrical choices."

In short order, such daring design statements came to typify Hoff's style and serve as a trademark for a new era of the Rep's history in Nashville.

Robert Neblett is a freelance director and dramaturg currently residing in Dallas.