The Constant Wife Revisited: The Progression of a Play from Conception to the Final Stage Production

Kimberly H. Parkin
Virginia Commonwealth University

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THE CONSTANT WIFE REVISITED: THE PROGRESSION OF A PLAY FROM CONCEPTION TO THE FINAL STAGE PRODUCTION

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

By

KIMBERLY H. PARKIN
B.A in English/Film, James Madison University, 2002

Noreen Barnes
Director of Graduate Studies, Theatre Department

Virginia Commonwealth University
Richmond, Virginia
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I. Introduction

My thesis show, *The Constant Wife*, was performed at Barksdale Theatre in Richmond, Virginia in September 2006. This particular show was full of challenges that tested my abilities as a designer. Each show that I have designed over the course of the past three years has added not only something to my portfolio, but to my skill level as well. Every show has afforded me a lesson by which my style or demeanor has grown. All seven of the shows I have completed have lead me to this point – each helping to mold me into the designer that I am today. With my first show, *The Man who Came to Dinner*, I had a crash course in basically everything from time management to drafting, elevations, and even conducting myself with my colleagues. It was my first show, my first semester, and I had a lot to learn. As I continued to progress throughout my time at VCU, my designs grew not only in size, but in depth and detail as well. *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* for VCU was one of the largest shows I have done while *The Underpants* for Actors Guild of Lexington was the smallest, but each one afforded me a better understanding of my process and allowed me to explore and change it each time to fit what I need. Each show is different and I have spent most of my time over the past three years trying as many different ways of achieving my process so that I could see which way worked the best for me. From the style of drafting to elevation and model techniques, I have experimented with different materials and methods to learn from my mistakes. One of my favorite shows, *Scapino*, what I believe to also be one of my best, was also
performed at Barksdale Theatre. That production showed me how to master the Barksdale space and create an elaborate, captivating and functional set. This particular show was also my first encounter with understanding my role as the designer in relation to the director. It was here that I first began to assess what exactly the role of the designer entailed and what rights I had to defend my choices. It has been a continuous process from that point on and I am sure it will continue to flux as I become more experienced.

My goals for the *The Constant Wife* were very succinct and simple on the surface – design a world that captures the wit and charm of characters that live in it. Below the surface of that goal there is the unraveling of not only the overall world of the play, but the characters themselves so that I could better understand and develop my design based on their personalities. This particular play is centered on the relationships of the main characters and their status in society. I wanted to convey that through the set – to me, it was pivotal to the design.

Another goal, a personal goal I had for myself, was to further my own skills by using this show, like the others before it, as a stepping-stone to the one that followed it. Model building and elevations are an integral part of my process, but mostly I wanted to work on my drafting by trying to make myself more thorough and faster. I have come a long way since drafting my first show and although I have the knowledge now, I still wanted to work on my speed. After working and reworking Forum, which had almost twenty plates, my speed and skills doubled, but there is always further to go.

Another goal I had not only applies to this particular show, but rather all of the
shows I have done and continue to do. One of my favorite parts of this job is working with new faces and establishing new relationships to build upon. During my three years with VCU, I have striven to establish myself not only with the people I work with every day in the shop, but also with all the other individuals that help define the outcome of a show. I have worked within my department at VCU as well as with several local theatres in an effort to connect and establish associations with people in every aspect of my field, including ones that do not have a direct connection to the shows I design. I feel that having a wide network of individuals to discuss aspects of your work with can only further your overall growth and style.

I have been working with Barksdale Theatre for three years now and have developed solid relationships with almost everyone and that is one of my favorite parts of continually working there. This was my first time working with this particular director, Steve Perigard, so I wanted to do well and develop a strong connection by giving him what he needs for the space as well as projecting my vision of the set.

The space at Barksdale is an interesting space with a plethora of challenges, such as uneven flooring, no backstage space, and four round poles that hold up the grid and sit at the four corners of the stage creating sightline issues for the audience. The poles are always visible and a factor in every set designed in the space. Despite all of these problems, I enjoy meeting the trials presented by understanding the idiosyncrasies of the stage and working them into my designs in the most inventive ways I can.
The production staff at Barksdale is limited, but dedicated and work well together. Often there are issues with the staff being over scheduled and the sets are not completed until opening, if then. One of the highlights of working with Barksdale Theatre, however, is the people and the “family attitude” that surrounds each show. I have come to learn that most theatre productions have that rush-at-the-end feeling as all the loose ends are tied together. It takes strength, determination, and a sense of passion to keep pushing show after show to make sure your vision is portrayed; although that notion did little to comfort me when I was working on *The Constant Wife* this past September.

For my thesis, I have recorded the progression of my show, *The Constant Wife*. I will discuss the conception of my original design as well as the changes that occurred while working with the director and other designers. I kept a notebook of the events that unfolded during meetings and pre-production. I will address the problems that
arose during the pre-production, what exactly I did to rectify those situations, and what I might have done differently if given the opportunity. I have divided the thesis into sections defined by how the production unfolded – Process of the Pre-Production, Execution of the Design and Evaluation of the Design. The final section of the thesis details what I learned from the events that transpired and how I can apply those lessons to future designs. Several appendixes are also included that give various pieces of information that I used to develop my design as well as the majority of my research, including a larger version of the images in this paper, my drafting, and photos of the finished set. *The Constant Wife* is an excellent show on which to reflect because of the multitude of problems that arose during the pre-production as well as the fact that it provided a lesson in balancing multiple projects as I was designing a second show simultaneously.

II. Process of the Pre-Production

*The Constant Wife* was written by W. Somerset Maugham in 1927; it is a comedy of manners that satirizes the mannerisms of social classes while tossing in an illicit love affair. This affair is less important than the play’s witty dialogue. Maugham’s life was often compiled of a series of emotions that he was forced to suppress at one point or another, but he used it all to his advantage by becoming quick-witted and reflecting his emotions within his writing - that way he always had the last word.
The leading character in *The Constant Wife*, Constance Middleton, exudes this same quality in a world filled with confinement and subtle oppressions. Constance is the calm, intelligent and self-possessed wife of a successful London doctor. She is restricted by the ideals of a dying Victorian society implemented by her husband and her mother. Throughout the play she is faced with situations and characters that try to confine her to a specific social world that she is not a part of, but her quick thinking and finesse always keep her coming out on top.

In the initial meetings, the Director stated only the basics as far as what he needed on stage and as the pre-production unfolded and the meetings progressed, we made changes here and there to the layout as well as the style of the décor. The Director had minimal needs: he wanted the stage world defined separately from the audience - he did not want the characters to enter through the voms closest to the audience, but rather only have onstage entrances and exits to create a clear partition. He also requested a fireplace downstage as a conversational spot to draw his actors downstage. His final statement was that he was going to closely follow the stage directions in the text. The rest was up to me, so I began to develop a concept for the next meeting with the Director.

One issue that arose early in the pre-production that I did not expect was that *The Constant Wife*’s basic set layout was very similar to that of *The Man who Came to Dinner*, a show I had done at Barksdale Theatre two seasons prior. The Director remembered that design and although he liked it, he knew the patrons would remember it as well and wanted *The Constant Wife* to be completely different. Based on necessity
and the theatre’s unmalleable space, the overall layout created the same furniture placement and a similar wall configuration to *The Man who Came to Dinner*.

To create a design that was still functional, yet as different as possible from the previous show, I changed the angle and layout of the walls, made sure we didn’t use similar furniture, and consciously made sure the set’s colors and dressing were unique to this design. It seemed simple enough, but with a limited budget and furniture/dressing resources, it became increasingly difficult. The Director and I wanted newer, better furniture, but for some of the larger pieces – the piano, couch and desk – we had to use the stock furniture to save time.

I believe I was successful in making the layout different, even though at times I felt that focusing on the previous show actually kept the design from being as complete as possible. One design element that I felt was aesthetically necessary was a step in the upstage portion of the set. It had worked well in *The Man who Came to Dinner* by splitting the playing area and creating a better overall flow across the stage. The further upstage a set is built in Barksdale’s thrust theatre, the less the Director is likely to use the space, even though it is wanted for appearance and the overall vision of the design. With *The Constant Wife*, the space was not used much, which meant that a step would not be in the way of the actors and it would tie that space to the rest of the design by breaking the floor into two levels. Since I had included the step in the previous show, however, it was cut. I understood the reason the Director did not want the step and it was one design element I did not believe was worth fighting for because there were more important things that needed to be pushed through such as the pole covers and
My design process is different with each show and honestly, most of the time I am unaware of all the steps because it is an instinctual process in which the design seems to make itself. I generally began my process by reading the script—I usually reread it about four or five times, each time looking for something different. The first time it is for the story and the relationship of the characters to each other as well as the overall space and setting. The next time is primarily allotted to the layout and larger set pieces—the necessary items, and the third time it is for the rest of the smaller furniture, props, dressing, etc. The fourth or fifth is as a final sweep to see if I missed anything in the previous reads. During that process, I generally research each step as I go along until I have compiled a rather large amount of images of the general architecture and styles as well as the history surrounding the time period. Once my options have been defined, I begin organizing my thoughts and putting them down on paper—whether it is a simple list of ideas or an actual sketch. It all depends on how the information comes into my head and how best I can convey my thoughts to the director.

As I read and reread the script, there were certain images that would appear in my head that just seemed to fit my vision of Constance’s home. Specifics that probably seem random to most, but make sense to me in my mind and had to be on stage just like the “necessities” that the script calls for. I could see windows—at least two or three as well as double doors. The main entrance into the sitting room had to have double doors that opened onstage for dramatic effect. The script also called for another room off of the main sitting room, which would mean another door and therefore the second
entrance for the Director. I knew that the John and Constance’s relationship was pivotal to the design and that Constance’s change in the third act had to be reflected in the design. It was too important to the play not to show a decided change. As far as décor, I usually pick colors a bit later in the process, but I definitely could see a lot of vertical lines especially after I picked my design styles – Victorian and Art Nouveau.

After establishing a general basis for my design and organizing my thoughts for the Director as well as drawing up a rough groundplan, we met again. In this meeting, I presented my ideas to the Director explaining why I felt that certain things were necessary and why I thought we should use the Victorian and Art Nouveau periods as our design impetuses even though the eras were an earlier than the play’s setting. The Director understood the explanation of the Victorian portion of the design because the buildings would have been built earlier and therefore in a different style than the contemporary. However, not everyone was convinced by the Art Nouveau and it was suggested that I research a later period and show it to the Director so that he could understand the difference. Chronologically, the next period that fit was Art Deco, but to me, the period was too rigid and harsh to reflect Constance’s personality and did not look as good juxtaposed next to the Victorian architecture. In the next meeting I presented my new research, which the Director disliked and we chose the Art Nouveau designs instead. Even though the period was earlier than the play’s setting – 1920s, it visually suited the design concept and the character better. That decided, I then had to take the Director’s needs and my ideas and develop them into a full design.

Scenically, The Constant Wife is a fascinating show because of the relationship
between the set and the characters. The characters portray a united progression throughout the play; thus, I felt the design should become a character as well, reflecting the same changes that the characters experienced. I focused my design on the relationship of the two main characters – John and Constance Middleton. The design unfolded naturally by juxtaposing John’s stoic and rigid persona to Constance’s soft subtleties and free-flowing demeanor – reflecting the endless friction between their two worlds, causing a power struggle between them throughout the production. My design concept mirrored the characters’ transitions through clear, but simple set changes since there was a limited amount of time for transitioning between acts. The dominant character, Constance Middleton, was the focal point of the show and her transition into self-discovery and her search for independence manifested itself through a visual change in Act Three. Constance’s interest in interior design aided my endeavor to mirror her changes through this shift.

Through my character analysis, I concluded, based on John’s nature and his inability to allow “frivolous” items in his home, that although Constance was an interior designer, the décor would be a bit more controlled by John and as a result behind on the times. Therefore the Victorian style would be reflected through the furniture, specific pieces of set dressing from photos, lamps, fabrics, and colors at the beginning of the play. As Constance changed, so would the set dressings to suit a style of the décor that matched Constance’s attitude.

The information provided in the script and a close character analysis informed my choices in my design. The script called for a London home, specifically on Harley
Street, in the late 1920s. This was an era when many medical professionals lived and worked from their homes. Most homes during this period were older – typically Edwardian or Victorian - that were revamped to suit the current décor of the era.

As stated earlier, I chose to have the interior design of the building reflect my architectural research of the Victorian period. The wall layout, the shapes of doorways, and windows and the types of mouldings used had Victorian style such as a bigger crown moulding, picture rails, chair rails, and larger baseboards. I chose to have these scenic elements remain constant throughout the play connecting the two worlds of John and Constance.

My research in both Victorian architecture and décor yielded a lot of solid images that helped to shape my design. In establishing the overall layout, I studied a variety of different Victorian rooms, furniture styles and colors. The typical Victorian setting was often visually cluttered and full of a variety of patterns, shapes and colors. This clutter would not have worked for this design which required clean, crisp lines that could be translated as late Victorian and then again as Art Nouveau. Below is a sample of my research that I used in the beginning to help define the stage plan and décor.
I chose Art Nouveau for Constance, even though the period was earlier than the 1920’s, based upon my analysis of the main characters. The play is set in 1926 and the Art Nouveau period clearly ended by 1916. I wanted a time period that embodied
Constance’s persona as well as the Victorian style personified John. The Art Nouveau style captured everything about Constance that made her who she was and made her different from every other character within the play. Art Nouveau is filled with soft curves and free-flowing, intricate lines, which reminded me of her free-spirited nature and wily feminine charms. Art Nouveau is often seen as feminine because of the curves and the complicated designs that seem simple at first glance. The style is romantic and based in nature, filled with trees, flowers, leaves, magic, and often a nude feminine figure. After doing much research, I concluded that the Art Nouveau period was not only suitably dated for the time period of the play, but a seemingly perfect match for Constance’s demeanor and a great juxtaposition against John’s rigid Victorian ideals. I had my two styles so that I could continue with the development of my design. I drew my design from stacks of research focusing on Art Nouveau décor and Victorian architecture that was common in London during that era. Specific furniture and décor research for the Art Nouveau period included the following:
Using all of my research I developed the wall layout of my design, as well as overall furniture placement and entrances and exits. I then began to pour back over my research in an effort to bring my design to life through texture and color. I selected a range of colors – some bold, and some softer, muted tones – that fit both eras – Victorian and Art Nouveau – knowing that the set changes I wanted made had to fit within a 15-minute intermission. My color palette best complimented

Figure 19: "Pandora" by O. Redon
Constance’s décor, but all of the colors appealed to both styles. As I often do in the beginning with my designs when I am trying to choose colors, I researched art during the specific period needed. I found a painting that fit the overall spirit of the show and pulled colors from the painting to use in the design. For this particular show, I selected the painting “Pandora” by O. Redon. The painting captured the overall essence of my design because it had the same sense of flowing femininity and verticallity that mirrored the Art Nouveau style. After days of looking at hundreds of paintings, I saw “Pandora” and knew it was exactly what I had been looking for not only in texture and shape, but color as well. The colors, the shapes, the fluid curves all matched the images in my head of my design; every color I used in my design originated from this painting.

For the walls, I wanted something that was dramatic, but would not diminish the fabrics used in the costumes or distract from the actors. A good set should compliment the action on stage, not overwhelm it - a set only exists in the realm of the actors and the play. I used a deep, bluish, sage green found in the sky of “Pandora” for the walls, adding a similar touch of texture that was subtle and soft, blending the two colors, but not dominating the surface. By sponging, or adding a soft ragging texture to the blue and green, mixing them, creating high and low lights, the walls softened in a way that could not be replicated by a flat color. The softer tones in the painting, the creams and subtle pink, were used to reflect the Victorian décor while the richer, bolder colors were stronger in the Third Act Art Nouveau change. Pulling the richer colors from the surrounding flowers - touches of deep antique red and brighter blues and purples - added a dramatic compliment to Constance’s third act décor choices – her own little
secrets slipped into a world of neutral and softer tones. I also used the richer colors on the wallpaper border that wrapped around the room above the picture rail. I knew that I wanted a border design to reflect the Art Nouveau style, but I wasn’t sure of the actual design. I researched a lot of common wallpaper designs and even just the overall Art Nouveau design style, but nothing jumped out until I found this vase.

*Figure 20: Art Nouveau Vase*

The colors of the vase are what caught my attention to begin with, but they did not completely fit with the design that was already approved so I altered the colors a little, pulling from the painting instead. I then took the original design of the flowers and vines and created a new image by repeating a portion of the vase’s design to create the border across the wall and then add the vines as an accent on the ends of the walls.

*Figure 21: Wallpaper template*
I continued the colors that I designated for the Victorian look of the design, such as a warm yellow, brown beige, a light, crisp cream, a pale pinkish beige, and soft yellows in the masking rooms – the hallway and the stage left room leading to the kitchen – to reflect the waning Victorian era and John’s authority. The overall palette was minimal, but by strategically placing variations of the different colors throughout the design, I was able to complete my vision of Constance’s home. These colors, coupled with the set dressing – touches of gold, deep purple and red-orange found in picture frames and various furniture fabric – tied together all of the scenic elements. I wanted a clear delineation to the first and second acts verses the third not only in color, but set dressing as well. Knowing that Barksdale had a limited amount of furniture resources, I did an immense amount of research so that I could find items that fit the style of my design and were readily available to use during the run of the production.

Once the initial design was finished and I had a complete packet of rough drawings, I met again with the Director to present my design and go over any changes he might have at that time. The design was approved and from there, most of the rest of the meetings focused on the further development of the specifics of the design, various detail plates being approved and the relationship of the colors and textures with the other Designers. The completed design represented my most comprehensive work to date, from research to the actual design, color palette, props, and furniture. With each show that I have completed, another level of my evolution as a designer as been completed, and each time I find that I have become more thorough in my execution of the design as well as the actual development of the design. With my design of The
Constant Wife completed, my attention turned to executing the design.

III. Execution of the Design

Throughout the pre-production, various problems arose in all different realms of design, not just set. As the Director and I worked out the kinks in the design and what he needed based on the script, the construction of the set began. We rapidly ran into issues with the lack of manpower to collect items for the set dressing and props as well as a lack of painters to help the Charge Artist.

One of the biggest issues that we had on the show was the lack of manpower for the construction. My drawings were due a few days before classes started for the Fall semester, since the opening of the show was September 21, 2006. We had preliminary meetings with the director, other designers and the technical director prior to that date. The Production Manager set no deadlines for follow-up drawings, details or even a model. I had my drawings in by the end of August and continued to work on my details and model, providing my own deadlines so we could have progress. I later learned that the reason there were no deadlines was because the entire crew, save three people - Technical Director, Assistant Technical Director and the Charge Artist - had quit that summer and they had not yet hired anyone new to build the show. After learning this, I discussed my concerns with the Production Manager and was assured that they had started construction and that they would be hiring out to speed things along, since the design was so detailed.
Prior to my discussion with the Production Manager, I had not known of the theatre’s predicament, so I designed my show, built a model, choose my colors, and followed my normal design schedule, turning pieces in as I completed them and changing minor elements that the Director and I discussed. There were no major changes, save a few tweaks here and there. Throughout the pre-production, when I asked about the build, I was simply told that it was going slowly and they were looking for more supplementary help to speed the process along. Had I known that there were only two builders, I would have made an executive decision and pared down my original vision so that it could be built on time. The overall design was not that complicated, but the architecture of the Victorian London home was filled with many elaborate details.

Once the set was finally under construction, larger issues arose from the particulars of the design. As I stated before, the Victorian era was known for its meticulous patterns and I added various moldings, an intricate wallpaper design, stained glass windows, and a multitude of set dressing such as picture frames, paintings, furniture, and other furnishings to the architecture of the set to convey the style as well as to reflect the differences between the two eras. Many of these details were not added until after opening and some not at all.

Perhaps the biggest concern with the execution was that the Director had to step into the role of John Middleton the week before tech. This affected other issues that arose as well as many that had already occurred and were not satisfactorily solved or reoccurred. It is important to relay this fact before discussing the other problems
because it helps to understand the state of the Director during most of the build. Having taken over the role of John, the Director was overwhelmed and this made it increasingly harder for him to make any further decisions on the overall design.

This affected the overall build as well as my relationship with the Director. So, I initiated a meeting with him to discuss the state of the build and how we could take some of the pressure off of him and rectify some of my concerns. As we talked, I could see he was becoming more and more agitated as we went through the list of items still to build and props to find. He could not understand why we were so behind and why the Production Manager had not provided us with more help. I offered to deal with all of the details that didn’t need his approval. He suggested that I make all decisions related to the set because he needed to focus on the acting and blocking and believed I could handle any set choices. I agreed, and once the process became more streamlined, everything ran smoother. We were still behind on the build, but additional personnel was finally added to speed up the construction.

I spent most of my extra time updating the director and assuring him that despite the fact that no set had been built, and we were a mere three or four weeks out, I believed that it would be ready on time. At times, I had to keep my calm on the outside even if I panicked a little on the inside. If both of us were panicked, nothing would get done. This helped me to be more focused and organized than any other show I had done. I remember the Director asking me the night before opening, when there was still a massive amount of work left to finish, how I had managed to be calm throughout – I just told him that I had worked with Barksdale enough to know that it would get
As time passed and opening night approached, I was forced to decide what to keep and what to cut, while still trying to make sure the design made sense and reflected the original vision I had in my mind. On opening night, I was told that the crown moulding would not be completely attached in time and since Theatre IV had another show opening at another venue that needed to be completed, they would not be able to attach the rest of it at all. To put it plainly – I disagreed with that idea. The moulding was not something I felt could be cut and still have the same design - the picture would be incomplete. The Technical Director and Production Manager tried to convince me that it was dark enough at the top of the walls, and as long as we painted the wall the same color, no one would be able to tell. I contemplated the easy fix, but after studying the set I could tell that would not work without it looking too unfinished. The day after opening, the rest of the moulding was added and the execution of the design was as complete as it would get.

Details such as the stained glass windows or the exterior masking were not completed, but the crew was able to finish the majority of the set - enough for it to look complete to anyone who did not know the original design. The items not finished were not “necessary” for the design to be functional, but would have given the set a finished look that did not come through in the final product. The stained glass would have added a completeness to the room as would the other furnishings and pictures that we did not get to add. In my original design I had a street scene with the tops of trees and a lamppost indicating that the room/set was on the second level – John’s office was done, no matter what.
therefore on the first level, which was typical during this period. Since these items could not be added, we made the inner curtains heavier so that it was harder to see out of the windows. I believe that had the cyclorama, trees and lamppost been added, although a small accent, it would have completed the stage and made the overall vision much more realistic.

Another portion of the set that was almost not included in the execution of the design were the covers on the four poles that surround the stage. The Technical Director wanted to cut them completely because he did not believe we had enough time to make them and he believed that their size and color would create a sightline issue. The typical poles that are always in the space are painted black to “disappear”. The Technical Director believed that because my design required thicker mouldings and because they were cream colored like the rest of the moulding on the set, they would be in the way and therefore needed to be cut. I did not believe that they would be cumbersome to the audience and although we were short on time, there were items in stock that were close enough to my design that they could be quickly reworked. I understood that we were in a time crunch and that if something had to be cut, the pole covers would have been a viable option, but in my opinion there was still enough time to complete them. Without the covers, the poles were an intrusion of the theatre space into the set and with the covers, the poles were an architectural aspect of the apartment. Because of this, I fought for them and the Technical Director was able to complete them before the show opened.

Another predicament was with the construction of the fireplace. The Technical
Director did not believe that the fireplace was needed because he thought there was not a sufficient amount of time to complete it. I appreciated his honesty and candor about what he felt the crew had time to construct. The fireplace was not pivotal to my overall design and normally I would have cut it, but the Director had already blocked the majority of his downstage action around the fireplace and because of this I felt like it had to be included. After working with the crew for almost three years, I knew that the Technical Director was very cautious and tended to overestimate the build time.

The Director, the Technical Director, and I met to discuss the build schedule and what could be reworked or cut. We decided that although time was short, the fireplace would be built and we could eliminate some of the finishing touches in the offstage left room and hallway, which could only be seen by parts of the audience. The understanding was that the Director and I would get the majority of the design elements that we wanted, but lose a few details that were not integral to the overall design. I ended up being responsible for selecting and picking up the ceramic tiles and other necessary items for the fireplace so that the Technical Director would have more time to draft his drawings of the fireplace, which he had not started. I later found out that in some cases, if the Technical Director wanted something cut, he would not process my drawings into technical drawings because he believed he could convince the Director or I to have it cut. While I understand the logic in prioritizing their workflow, this would back things up towards the end of the build when time was of the essence and neither the Director nor the Designer would budge on cutting certain parts of the set. The Production Manager should have stepped in to help mediate the situation, but he was
too busy trying to take care of other issues. The fireplace was added with minimal moulding and decoration – basically a mantle and the tile. Although it did not look exactly like my design, it added to the overall sense of realism in my design.

In addition to the construction crew being overwhelmed for *The Constant Wife*, the rest of the production crew was understaffed and stretched thin between various productions. There was no Prop Master and subsequently by the time we reached tech week, we had found no show props or viable furniture. Weeks before opening night, I had spoken with the Production Manager primarily on the issues of overhire and I knew that he had been looking for someone to fill the position. He asked for my updated props list and told me that he thought he had found someone and from that point forward I believed the matter had been taken care of. In looking back, had I been more assertive on this issue and followed up with the Production Manager, I would have discovered that they were never able to find anyone to hire.

After working with Barksdale for three years, I developed a familiar relationship with the people I worked with on each show. While that relationship has proven to be an asset time and again, this was one instance that it came back to haunt me. I believed they had found a Prop Master because in the past, they had not let me down, but this time I was wrong and it cost me a lot of extra time. I’ve learned that there is a fine line in being friendly and establishing a level of comfort with people that you continue to work with, but you must always remember that you are in fact working and maintain a level of professionalism.

Realizing we had no Prop Master, no furniture, and truly no set at the start of
tech, sent the Director into a bit of panic. To solve these problems, the Production Manager stepped in and added it to his list of things to do. I helped collect props, furniture, and do all of the set dressing, which is normally not the job of the Designer. I did not mind helping out though because I knew that if I didn’t help, it would be impossible to get everything done and it would not look like the vision I had designed.

Collecting the props proved to be far less cumbersome than the furniture. The furniture in storage only afforded us a few pieces that were in good enough condition to be put on stage and most of the Theatre IV resources – local antique stores - did not have anything visually or economically suitable that fit the periods, especially Art Nouveau. After searching for sometime and repeatedly coming up empty-handed, Ron Keller suggested Boone’s Antiques, which ended up having an immense collection that supplied almost ninety percent of the furniture for the show. Boone’s Antiques loaned us the furniture – almost $10,000 of the store’s stock – to be used in the show and only asked for tickets and an ad in the show’s program. Before leaving the store, I took photographs to record exactly what furniture was taken, what it looked like, and checked if anything was scratched or broken.

Once we had the furniture, things began to settle down because it felt as though we truly had the beginnings of a set. Unfortunately, however, we still did not actually have a set, just pieces of one. We had most of the walls, but no windows, nor any details like the crown moulding or picture rail. Paint had only put down a base coat on the very little that was built and although we had the furniture, much of it needed to be touched up or recovered.
Two of the largest items that needed to be recovered were the sofa and armchair. The original fabric of both were not in bad condition, but the sofa was yellow and with the yellow-toned rug, the yellow-based cream trim and the multitude of amber colored lights, the room would have been saturated in yellow. We borrowed the armchair from VCU and the fabric was beautiful, but the color scheme did not fit the color palette chosen for the show. The original color scheme had little to no yellow in it to begin with, but as we searched for items to dress the set such as rugs, curtain fabric and more, I was forced to change some of the colors based on what was available.

Recovering the sofa and armchair would not have been that cumbersome task, but without a crew and no one on the crew who knew how to recover a sofa or chair, we hit yet another snag. I had never recovered something as large as a sofa, but I was willing to try – the only problem was that I was needed to finish collecting and making the rest of the props and set dressing. We finally found two upholsterers the week of opening who came in at the last minute as a favor to the Production Manager and me and even then, both projects were not finished until the day before opening. If they had not stepped in, we would not have been able to finish the recovering as well as other tasks that needed our attention.

The problems with the paint were by in large an extension of the construction issues. That is the nature of the beast – problems in the build lead to set pieces being finished late, and therefore there is less time to work and rework them in paint. I have also found that carpenters believe paint will cover certain “cosmetics issues” that could be solved easier and faster with extra puttying and sanding. Since I am also a painter, I
design paint heavy shows, so it takes longer to do all of the different techniques.

The biggest issues with paint were the walls. I had hoped for that soft bluish green that I mentioned in the Process of the Pre-Production section, but that was not what I got because the texture and colors were completely wrong. The initial problems started with the elevations. The Director, the Costume Designer and I had decided on the basic colors and overall I believe we came up with a solid palette. The Costume Designer was unsure of her color choices and told me to pick my colors and we would meet later, which we did, and unfortunately our selections were very similar. Both of us had selected softer, neutral colors – the warm beiges, pinks, and creams. The biggest problems were the color changes I needed in the third act because it meant that my additional use of colors took away more options from the Costume Designer. We revisited our research separately. I chose a few bolder colors to counteract the neutral ones that she had chosen, but continued to blend some paler hues into my palette. I also chose a minimal amount of pattern while the Costume Designer’s work focused on it. Overall, the final product worked well together between her patterns and the blending of my colors.

After my initial color choices, I did my first elevation. Once the Director saw it, he said he wanted me to go lighter – more pastel – and I explained that I did not believe it would work as well with the costume colors already chosen. He insisted, stating he “just needed to see it to understand.” I created a new elevation, but kept the original because I had the feeling he was not going to like the more pastel color once he saw them. He did not. He hated the lighter version and asked if I could make it a touch
darker. I adjusted the colors a few more times until it ended up back to almost the exact color from the first elevation. Finally, the Director stated he liked the color and wanted to see a larger version - on the walls. This coincided with the point in which enough walls were built to test as well as when I assumed responsibility for all the set decisions. We moved past the wall elevations and color choices and it came down to the Charge Artist to recreate my color scheme on the set, which brings us to the next issue.

The Charge Artist was not able to transfer the paint design or color from my elevations to the set. Although she is an excellent painter, she starts her process by studying the elevation and then unfortunately does not look at them again unless the Designer feels it is not reflecting their elevations. She chooses to follow her interpretation of the elevation, rather than what is actually on the paper. My experience as a painter makes it harder for her because I am specific - rather than wanting an interpretation, I want exactly what I show the painter. Also, because the Charge Artist’s work did not exactly reflect my color choices, it also did not reflect what the Director and I had decided upon. As the Charge Artist worked, the Director became increasingly upset and agitated at the color she painted on the walls. She had based the walls a very bright and vibrant lime green. Then a very dark, almost black forest green was sponged over the lime green. The Director became worried that the walls were too dark and the show would not read as a comedy. The Director immediately stopped the Charge Artist and there ensued a huge discussion, which ended with a very frustrated Director. When I arrived that evening to see how things were progressing, he greeted me with an abundance of questions of what we were going to do to fix it. I spoke with the Charge
Artist and went over exactly what I was looking for, showing her examples of what I would like for all the walls.

The colors were very different from my elevation and the technique was different than what I would have used if I were the Charge Artist. We had discussed color and technique and even though she used my technique, her style and colors were off. After working on this show, I have learned that I should give more information and go over the style and technique in even more depth with the Charge Artist. I should have painted a portion of the wall while walking her through the steps. Being open to others’ techniques and ideas is what has helped me get this far as well as trying new ways of doing things on my own, but if it hinders the overall production then more explanation and detail is needed.

From there, I thought the technique and colors were set, but we continued to have further issues. I was not there all of the time because of obligations with school, teaching, and the shop, therefore entire days of work were done before I could get there to discuss any changes or notes I had given from the previous nights tech rehearsal. The Charge Artist would have large sections painted before I arrived – and in this case, once again in the wrong color and technique. The color for the walls was closer, but not in the same base as my elevation – the base color should have been blue-based, but the Charge Artist used yellow. With paint, changing the base color, often changes the over tonality of the color no matter what you mix with it later.

Another problem was that the Charge Artist was sponging the paint as I had discussed, but the sponging technique was not fluid and soft as I had demonstrated, but
rather, stiff and harsh. The texture was now a very rigid, dense design that overpowered the rest of the set. I remember walking onto the set, the Director staring at me, and then the wall, waiting for my response. I attempted to control my reaction, but I think it was clear that it was not what I wanted. The Director and I sat down and discussed our options. I decided on a technique that would soften the sponging and lighten the color. I spoke with the Charge Artist and explained how it differed from the elevation and what exactly should be done to fix it. She agreed and started to fix it the next day.

The next night, the wall texture was softer, but the color just was not right, but we were out of time. It was less than one week until opening and the rest of the wallpaper, the border and much more needed to be painted. We decided to move on to the next part and if we had time, we would return to the wall color and fix them. In looking back, I understand exactly what would have made the walls the right color and texture and had we had one more day, we could have done it. The walls were almost complete after we softened the texture the first time and had we added a thin wash of a grayish blue it would have toned down the yellow-green and softened the sponging all at once. I, of course, realized this on opening night – too little too late.

On the afternoon of opening night I remember walking into the space and it was like the set had exploded! Moulding was all over the floor, sawdust was everywhere, paint was everywhere and truth be told, the masking walls had not been painted and much of the set dressing had not been added. Volunteers were trying to attach the border around the top of the walls, but tripping over the carpenters who were installing the baseboard. The carpet was rolled up and the furniture was scattered throughout the
theatre. I remember thinking for the first time that we might not get it all done in time.

I dove in to help paint in the last areas that needed it and then jumped into props and set dressing. It was a close one, but everyone pitched in from the production crew, the volunteers, friends of friends and even the office staff. We worked and cleaned until 7:35pm and the doors opened a little late, at 7:45pm. I remember gluing the ribbon on the Third Act valance as the Production Manager frantically vacuumed the theatre and the Stage Manager screamed at everyone to hurry because the doors needed to open and the stage had to be pre-set. Looking back now, I can laugh at the ridiculous nature of everything, especially that day in particular because although we did not complete everything, we got a huge portion of the set done in a very small window and no one other than the crew was the wiser.

IV. Evaluation of the Design

*The Constant Wife* was the very embodiment of teamwork because the show would not have succeeded without the aid of all those different people. Throughout the show there were a select few who helped to make the tremendous chaos a bit more bearable and without their help, the set would not have been finished. This story was really a series of unfortunate events – one right after the other, and even if the colors were not exactly right or all the details were not added or the design exactly as I imagined, it looked amazing, and the learning experiences it afforded were immeasurable.
On this production, my overall process seemed to have the best flow since I started designing. All of my previous experiences have helped me to resolve tense situations and learn to focus on getting my work done faster as well as help me to identify what can be done and what cannot in the execution of the design. I also learned more of how to channel quick thinking and to be assertive on this show more than all of the other shows I designed combined. I gained knowledge that not only applied to specific situations, but also offered useful ways of handling issues that will most likely reoccur in future designs.

One of the more important lessons I learned while working on *The Constant Wife* was how to decide what was vital enough in my design to fight for and what could be let go without destroying the essence of the design. Often, what I believed worthy of fighting for was linked with what someone else – either the Director or the Lighting Designer - believed was needed to complete the picture. Ideally, every aspect of a design would be completed, but often that is not the case. Working at Barksdale the past three years, and especially this show, helped me learn to define what was important in my design – the difference between what I would like and what is necessary.

In conjunction with that lesson, I learned how to change small portions of the design on the spot without destroying the overall concept of the design. Designing, especially on a budget, often requires some finesse and reworking of your original design to fit the constraints of what is available.

In retrospect, I guess my greatest weakness is the fact that I am still trying to find a balance between standing up for my design ideas and knowing when to
compromise because of differences in artistic vision or because of time, skill, or economic limitations. In working with my Director and Technical Director on The Constant Wife, I did compromise on some issues, but I believe that I stood firm where I felt aspects of the design needed to be completed to create a finished set.

The fact that I did not design this particular show until my final year was an important aspect in its success. I think that during my first two years in the M.F.A. program, I might have struggled through the production, but having those extra two years of knowledge and experience from prior, yet less chaotic productions, I believe prepared me for The Constant Wife. Every show I have done over the past three years has shaped me into the designer I am today. Every show I design in the future will add to my foundational experiences, continuing to shape my style, my demeanor, and my ability to grow as a designer.

One of the reasons I love designing are the changes: the changing people, the changing shows and spaces, the changing styles, and constant revamping of what has come before. The past three years were a series of events that led me to where I am today - good and bad experiences that have defined my work as a designer. Each show has taught me lessons and each show has added depth to my persona as a designer. It has also taught me about collaboration and relationships and the dynamic between not only the director and the scenic designer, but the scenic designer and the other designers as well. Working with this Director was difficult at times, but I really enjoyed it and it taught me so much more than if it had been a lot smoother. We were able to compliment one another enough that we were able to make up for each other’s
deficiencies. Our relationship is a good one and we have always enjoyed working together – he hired me to design a second show he directed later in that season. My design of *The Constant Wife* is a comprehensive look at not only my artistic ability to design, but also my process in developing that design from concept all the way to the finished product on stage.

*The Constant Wife*, coupled with my last year in the M.F.A. program, was by far my most intense learning process to date – the pinnacle of my formal education as a designer, and I loved every second of it. At times it was overwhelming designing *The Constant Wife* and dealing with its abundance of production issues while also designing *The Underpants* for the Actors Guild of Lexington and keeping pace with my academic obligations. Through all of it, it was the ability to take each challenge in stride, make good, clear decisions and move on to the next issue that made me realize that I had in fact, become a designer. I was no longer just working on projects for school – even though *The Constant Wife* was through school – but I was a Scenic Designer. I am eager to take this knowledge and put it to the test on my next endeavor. My goals for the next project are just as simple as this one – create a set that reflects the world of the script and further my skills as much as I can by building on the knowledge that I already have.

Although I gained practical information on this show, the greatest thing I can take away from it is my confidence. *The Constant Wife* taught me how to manage my time when there was no time, it showed me how to make quick decisions on my feet without compromising my design, and it taught me how to deal with impatient and
frustrated people without being too aggressive or rude. All in all...I think that *The Constant Wife* could be a very promising start as it has helped tremendously in shaping the designer I am and the designer I am going to be.
Bibliography


Appendix A: Maugham and Plot Summary

Maugham often wrote about real situations and real people from his life, casting people in stereotypes in his stories; from his cold, austere uncle, to his childhood at the King’s School in Canterbury, and even his medical background and his travels as a spy. His turbulent and eclectic life influenced much of his writing as he used his life as a stepping-stone into his imagination. His medical training gave Maugham the chance to study people and their emotional reactions to situations. He learned to record life; bringing some real characters and some that were a little more loosely based on real patients, to life in his stories. Maugham’s life was often compiled of a series of emotions that he was forced to suppress at one point or another, but he used it all to his advantage by becoming quick-witted and reflecting his emotions within his writing - that way he always had the last word.

In *The Constant Wife*, as the plot unfolded, the audience learned that Constance has been fully aware of her husband’s infidelity with her best friend Marie-Louise. She purposefully maintained the lies held by her other friends and family so that they would continue to believe she had no idea of the affair. When confronted by Marie-Louise's jealous husband, however, Constance’s poise was put to the test when she reacted in a way unexpected by her family - she deftly concealed the affair from the husband, and then told her family that she had known all along. She further shocked them by demonstrating a total lack of sentiment on the subject of matrimony, specifically her own. The modern wife, she explained, was nothing but a parasite, "a prostitute who doesn't deliver the goods." She resolved to establish her own economic independence (which she considers the only real independence), by going into business as an interior decorator.
with her friend Barbara. At the opening of the third act, it is clear that a transformation has happened not only to Constance, but their home as well. After a year of successful employment and achieving economic independence, she paid her husband for her room and board and then announced she was going off for an Italian vacation with a longtime male friend and admirer. As she walks out of the house, her independence resonating, and John cursing and loving her all the more, the play ends. Maugham created a sense of closure and comedy through the irony of the tables being turned on John. The final scene of John being shocked and outraged at this turn of events, but capitulating to her outrageous charm, captures the overall playful and comedic nature of Maugham’s writing.
Appendix B: Set Photographs
Appendix C: Model Pictures
Appendix E: Research

Figure 1. (Amaya 116)

Figure 2. (Barilli 21)
Figure 3. (Barilli 45)

Figure 4. (Barilli 46)
Figure 5. (Barilli 47)

Figure 6. (Barilli 56)
Figure 7. (Barilli 57)

Figure 8. (Barilli 58)
Figure 9. (Barilli 90)

Figure 10. (Buffet-Challie 84)
Figure 11. (Buffet-Challie 108)

Figure 12. (Buffet-Challie 109)
Figure 15. (Draguet, Michel & Crowet 21)

Figure 16. (Draguet, Michel & Crowet 47)
Figure 17. (Draguet, Michel & Crowet 51)

Figure 18. (Draguet, Michel & Crowet 88)
Figure 23. (Gibbs 135)

Figure 24. (Gibbs 172)
Figure 25. (Grow & Von Zweck 31)

Figure 26. (Grow & Von Zweck 39)
Figure 27. (Grow & Von Zweck 48)

Figure 28. (Grow & Von Zweck 84)
Figure 29. (Grow & Von Zweck 86)

Figure 30. (Grow & Von Zweck 113)
Figure 31. (Grow & Von Zweck 119)

Figure 32. (Grow & Von Zweck 121)
Figure 36. (Jackson 24)

Figure 37. (Jackson 29)
Figure 38. (Jackson 29)

Figure 39. (Leopold 35)
Figure 40. (Leopold 92)

Figure 41. (Leopold 244)
Figure 44. (Long 86)

Figure 45. (Mayhew 289)
Figure 48. (Mayhew 307)

Figure 49. (Mayhew 307)
Figure 52. (Moore 93)

Figure 53. (Waddell 74)
Figure 54. (Waddell 196)

Figure 55. (Waddell 204)