

Scenic Design for *An Inspector Calls*

By

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This report documents the scenic design and construction process for *An Inspector Calls*. A play produced by the University of Florida School of Theater and Dance in their Nadine Macguire Black Box theater. Directed by Dr. David Young, the production ran October 21st - 30th 2012.

An Inspector Calls, takes place in a single night at the Birling's country estate. The play centers around a man, calling himself inspector Goole, coming to the estate to interview the family about their involvement with a girl who has just died from drinking disinfectant. The design sought to create an environment that was both regal and imposing. it also attempted to serve both the needs of the director and those of the script. Clear communication of ideas and research with the entire production team was key in making this design a reality.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The University of Florida production of *An Inspector Calls*, written by J.B. Priestly, opened on October 21st, 2011 and ran through October 30th, 2011. The play is ostensibly a murder mystery, but also deals with the separation of wealth between the classes. The action of the play centers around an inspector who comes to the house of a wealthy business owner. The inspector comes to interview the man and his family about their dealings with a young girl who has just died.

The scene design for *An Inspector Calls* was developed over a 9 month collaboration with the director and other designers. We began meetings for this production in February of 2011. These meetings became the core of the final design. We discussed the general themes of the show and came to a general consensus that the play needed a space that was both imposing and livable. Since there was little deviation from the initial concept, it gave the production team time to focus on the details.

Since this play takes place in a single room of a country estate in 1912, this design very quickly became about the historical period research. The challenge came in finding period furniture and décor that could make a cohesive room and convey the proper sense of tension for the script. The design team held many meetings discussing the details that would go into this room. Meetings were held with the lighting designer to discuss whether this was a gas household or if it had been converted to gas. We eventually decided that the house would have been converted to electric. From there, we went about discussing lighting fixtures for the room. We also discussed color pallets with the

costume designer. We wanted the characters to stand out and not get lost in the scenery.

The final design meeting was held before the summer break. The final design package was turned in six months before the opening of the show. The early deadline allowed the shop to build the bulk of the show over the summer break. This was both good and bad. It meant that more time could be spent on detail work in the fall, but it meant that no one was there to oversee the construction. This meant that there was no way to fix any mistakes made in construction. One wall was assembled backwards, so masking, floorplans and furniture placement had to be adjusted to make it work. Once back from summer, detail work on doors and molding could begin.

Since the majority of the build was supposed to be done over the summer, this production did not have access to the full shop staff. What it did have, was several untrained workers. Using laser cut stencils, we were able to utilize a large untrained staff to create an intricate floor treatment. We also used laser cut stencils to make a wallpaper pattern. Since the walls and platforming were assembled over the summer, this allowed the director to rehearse and block the entire show on the set. While he and the stage manager both had renderings and full sets of the drafting, there was no need to tape out a rehearsal space or make assumptions about where things would be located.

Once tech week came, the design team was ready to go. There was still some details that needed to be addressed, but the overall picture was there. This allowed the design team to look at the overall picture and decide what did and did not work. Being able to spend the time focusing on the details and discussing set dressing with the other designers made for a much more cohesive and well received design.

Chapter 2

PLAY SYNOPSIS

An Inspector Calls takes place in a single night at the Birlings' country estate. The play centers around a man, calling himself Inspector Goole, coming to the estate to interview the family about their involvement with a girl who has just died from drinking disinfectant.

The play opens with the family, having just finished dinner, drinking port. This quickly turns to a celebration as Gerald Croft gives an engagement ring to Sheila Birling. Sheila is the eldest daughter of Arthur and Sybil Birling. Gerald is the son of one of Arthur Birling's leading competitors. Also in attendance is Eric Birling, the younger son of Arthur and Sybil.

The mood soon shifts when the maid announces that an Inspector Goole has arrived and wishes to speak with Mr. Birling. Once there, the inspector tells the story of a girl named Eva Smith who has died from drinking disinfectant. He shows a picture to Mr. Birling who then recognizes her as a girl he fired from his factory after she incited a strike. After Arthur admits that he had fired her, Goole turns his attention to Sheila Birling. The Inspector says that the girl changed her name and began working at a dress shop in town. Goole then shows a picture to Sheila who immediately recognizes the girl as one who she had fired from the store. Sheila tells her story of having the girl fired for a dress looking prettier on the girl than it did on Sheila.

At this point, the Goole tells them that the girl had then changed her name to Daisy Renton. Gerald gives himself away immediately by reacting to the name. We then learn that Gerald had had an affair with Daisy Renton, putting her up in an apartment and taking care of her for a while. Bringing this to light upsets Gerald, so he decides to go out for a walk to clear

his head. The inspector then tells a story of a girl who goes to Mrs. Birling's charity looking for help. She is turned away in part because she uses the name Mrs. Birling. The girl also comes to the charity saying she is pregnant, and that she can no longer take money from the man she is seeing, because the man is stealing it from his work. At this point Eric returns to the house. Eric is visibly drunk, and upset. It turns out that he is the man that the young girl is seeing. It is revealed that Eric has been stealing money from his father's business. This of course is a shock to the entire family.

Having visibly upset every member of the dinner party, Inspector Goole takes this as his cue to leave, but not before delivering a very impassioned speech. His monologue about the separation of wealth and how the growing problem needs to be rectified soon or society will collapse. This is by far the most poignant moment of the play. This is the only time where the inspector is speaking to the entire party, and the only time where he speaks in broader terms than just the demise of the girl.

The Inspector leaves and Gerald returns. It turns out that Gerald has been out walking and ran into a friend of his on the local police force. After speaking with the local sergeant, he finds out that there is no one in the department named Inspector Goole. He then pieces together the facts of what has just transpired. Goole never shows anyone the picture of the girl together, so there is no way of knowing if he shows them the same picture. The inspector also says that the girl changed her name frequently, so again there is no way of knowing if it is the same girl in all the stories. Enough doubt is raised that Gerald eventually calls the local hospital to inquire about the girl only to find out that there is no girl that has died from drinking disinfectant or any other suicide in several months.

This brings the family some relief knowing that they have not contributed to a young

girls death. Shelia is still rather upset after learning of all of the things that the family has admitted to doing, but the mood in the room has definitely lifted. The last moment of the play is darkened by a phone call from the police saying that a girl has just died from drinking disinfectant and that a police inspector is on his way to the house to question them.

Chapter 3

PRODUCTION HISTORY

An Inspector Calls was written by British author J.B. Priestly, during World War II. It was first produced in Moscow Russia in 1945. Due to the play's dark theme and the fact that the Inspector can be construed to have communist leanings, it was deemed to be volatile for wartime Britain. The first British production opened in the fall of 1946. (Maggie p.328)

The first British production was staged at the New Theatre in London. The cast included Sir Ralph Richardson as Inspector Goole, Margaret Leighton as Sheila Birling, and a young Sir Alec Guinness as Eric Birling. Almost a year later the play opened on Broadway. The New York premiere opened on October 21, 1947. It was staged at the Booth Theatre and it was directed by Cedric Hardwicke. The production was designed by Stewart Chaney, and starred Thomas Mitchell, John Buckmaster and Doris Lloyd. (Stringer p. 330)

It has also had several revivals, including one in London in 1987. It premiered at Theatre Clywd on April. A month later, it transferred to Westminster Theatre in London's West end. That production was directed by Peter Dews, and designed by Daphne Dare.

In 1992 director Stephen Daldry revived it again with a successful production at National Theatre in London, in one of their smaller spaces. It transferred to larger theaters twice, and ran through 2010. This production is currently still on tour in Europe. This production also transferred to Broadway in 1994 with new scenic and costume designs by Ian Macneil, and lighting by Rick Fisher. (www.ibdb.com) This production won numerous awards both in London and New York, making this the most awarded show in history.(aninspectorcalls.com)

CHAPTER 4

TIME PERIOD AND RESEARCH

The play was originally set in a small town in England, at the manor house of Arthur Birling. In initial meetings with the director, he expressed interest in changing the setting to New England. The director, Dr. Young felt that it would be too difficult to work up convincing British accents for the entire cast, and therefore felt that moving the play to New England was a safer choice. Luckily, many of the country estates in New England were modeled after the estates in Britain, so there was very little difference between the two locations.

The main difference was the introduction of electricity. In this period, electricity was much more prevalent in the Northeast United States than it would have been in the English Countryside. Since the design team had already expressed interest in using incandescent light over gaslight, this was a fortunate consequence of the change.

Much of the research came from two locations. The first location was photographs and paintings of the period. These helped with the layout of the room as well as the color scheme. The second major research source was period catalogs. Catalogs became a great source for detail work. Builder's catalogs had many architectural details, and Home catalogs were an excellent source for set dressing and props.

Much of the research also lent itself to the dark, imposing nature of the script. Many of the color palettes were in a dark neutral tone that would allow costumes to draw attention to the actor. This research was done in coordination with the costume designer. By working with the costumer we came up with a palette that would compliment her costumes. We had some lenience on the women's color palettes but men in this time period were traditionally in black

and white tuxedos.

We decided that using some sort of backdrop behind the windows would be too distracting, so we chose to go with clouded windows and use lighting gobos to create the silhouette of leaves and branches to imply the idea of the outdoor environment.

CHAPTER 5

THE DESIGN PROCESS

From the very beginning, Doctor Young had a very clear idea of what he wanted for the show. He wanted a feeling of descending into the space as well as a grand entrance for the inspector. He also wanted a dining table and a fireplace. It was the design team's job to create an environment that was both intimidating yet lived in.

In the first few meetings, we were able to agree upon a floor plan. This gave the production team time to address the details of the space. This meant that we could use the details to create the environment. We were able to pick a wallpaper and color that that would complement the costumes and work well with the lights. It meant that we could also focus on the furniture and set dressing. Since we chose a New England country home, we chose colonial furniture. Since this was a realistic piece, the design process became more of a research project than an artistic project. The artistic element came into the process more in picking and combining the correct elements of the period to give the desired mood and feeling of the piece.

The design meetings became more of a sharing of research images. We could go through the images pick our favorites and then show them to the director. It was overwhelming to try to show the director all of the research so we pared down the pile to the images we found the most compelling. Dr. Young seemed to respond best when we worked independently and came to him with a narrowed down list of options. By the final design meeting the team had created a cohesive design that could be produced in within the time and budget allowed.

Overall this was not a difficult design process. On of the more difficult aspects was getting a director to agree to, and finalize a design almost seven months before the show, and almost five months before rehearsal or casting.

CHAPTER 6

THE CREATION OF THE PRODUCTION

Since the bulk of the construction happened over summer break, it meant that the design team would not be around to supervise or offer input on order of completion. This caused certain problems when we returned. Certain changes were made to the design that had to be accepted sight unseen. For the most part these were minor changes in molding and trim, which is to be expected. There were really only two major problems that we encountered.

The first problem we had to overcome was that the entire stage left wall was built backwards. Unfortunately we did not have the shop time or resources to fix it. We simply had to accommodate this change. It meant rearranging the furniture and traffic patterns of the room.

The second problem we encountered was that all of the trim had been permanently affixed to the wall before the walls were painted. This significantly slowed down the painting process because we had to take extra time to mask off all of the trim before we painted the walls, and then mask the wall when it came time to paint the trim. Once again, since this was done over break, no one could offer input, and mistakes had to be accepted and dealt with accordingly.

The positive aspect of the show being constructed so far in advance, was simply the availability of time. Since this show was in the slot in front of the musical, it meant that it did not have a lot of shop support leading up to the show. This meant that it was the designer's job to finish the construction of the scenery as well as do most of the painting. Even with the small roadblocks the design team had a time to overcome them.

Since the shop was busy with another production, The help this production received was mostly unskilled student labor. This meant that we had to tailor certain projects to make them easy for anyone to do well. We used the laser cutter to make a large number of stencils to for the

floor treatment and the wallpaper. This meant that we could implement an intricate wood parquet floor and a very elaborate wallpaper design, without a lot of skilled artists to paint.

Having the extra time also allowed the design team to work on certain projects that would not have been possible otherwise. We had time to fabricate a fireplace and a chandelier that would have been cost prohibitive to buy. We were able to fabricate a lot of the trim to give the fireplace an elegant and ominous feeling. It also allowed us to build a large scale crystal beaded chandelier that would have been far too expensive to buy. We had decided early that we wanted some sort of chandelier to give the room a sense of a ceiling.

It also meant that the director could have his entire rehearsal process on the stage. This allowed him to develop the blocking organically and try several different options before settling on what looked the best.

CHAPTER 7

TECH WEEK AND OPENING

Since the design team had extra time in the space in the weeks leading up to tech week, it made the process itself go much smoother. Our first rehearsal on Saturday went incredibly smooth. It was scheduled to run until ten at night. We finished the morning session, and felt so good about where we were, that we released the actors for the rest of the day. The production team took a nice relaxed lunch, then came back and worked a few of the technical elements. We were still finished by three-thirty. This gave the designers time to work on the technical issues before meeting for Sunday's rehearsal.

Sunday also ran very smoothly. Since we were able to work through many of our notes from Saturday before Sunday's rehearsal, we were able to just run the show from start to finish, and take notes as we went. This also made for an abbreviated Sunday rehearsal. The only major notes from a scenic standpoint were cosmetic, like finishing touchup paint and trim.

By Monday, the production started adding certain elements of costuming. This was also a smooth transition. At this point scenically we were simply adding and arranging set dressing.

We were able to use the plotter to print paintings, and paint over them with a clear acrylic medium to give them the look of brush strokes under light. We were also able to use this time to finish out the return wall rooms.

From a scenic standpoint, the entire tech week process went incredibly smooth. The only changes made through the week were finishing paint and trim, and making decisions about set dressing.

CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSION

Overall this was a smooth experience. The director had a decisive vision that he articulated clearly, the design team collaborated and communicated well, and it made for a cohesive aesthetic. The scene design itself was not the most interesting of concepts but it fit the play well, and worked well with the production. There will always be things that could have been better with a design, and I will always see the need for improvement. But under the circumstances presented to me, I am happy with the conception and implementation of this design. I feel that I used the resources at my disposal to the best of my ability to produce a design of the highest possible quality.

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APENDEX A

DRAFTING

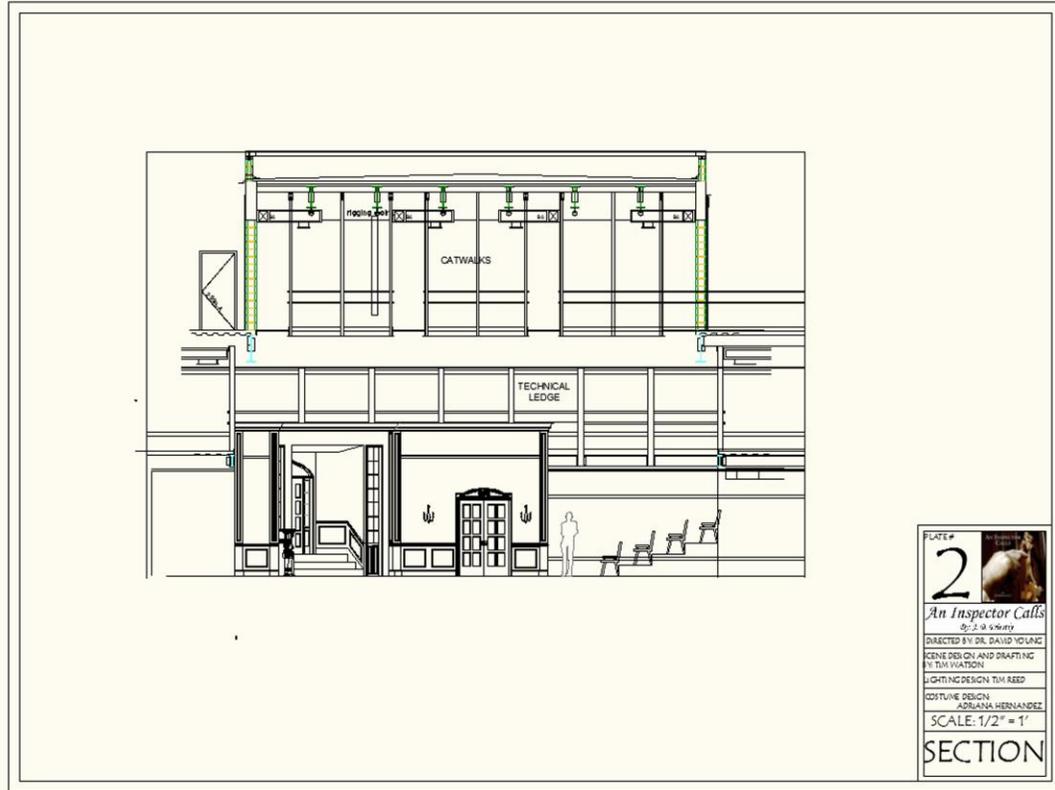
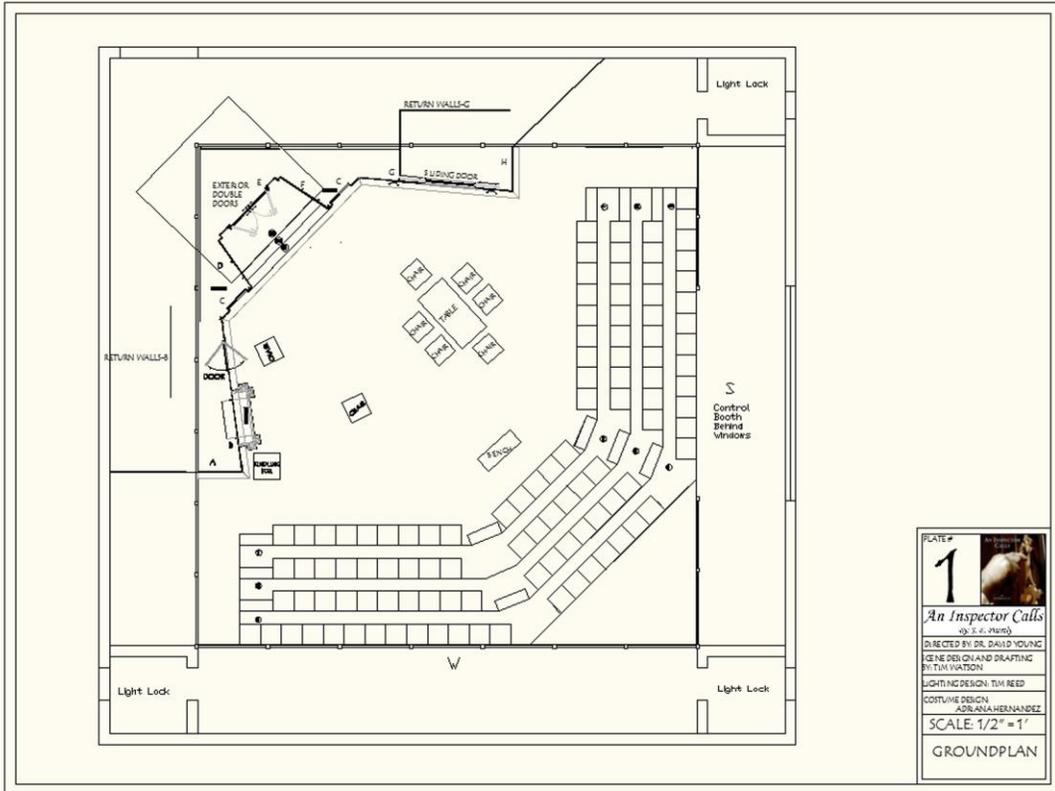


Figure 1- groundplan and section

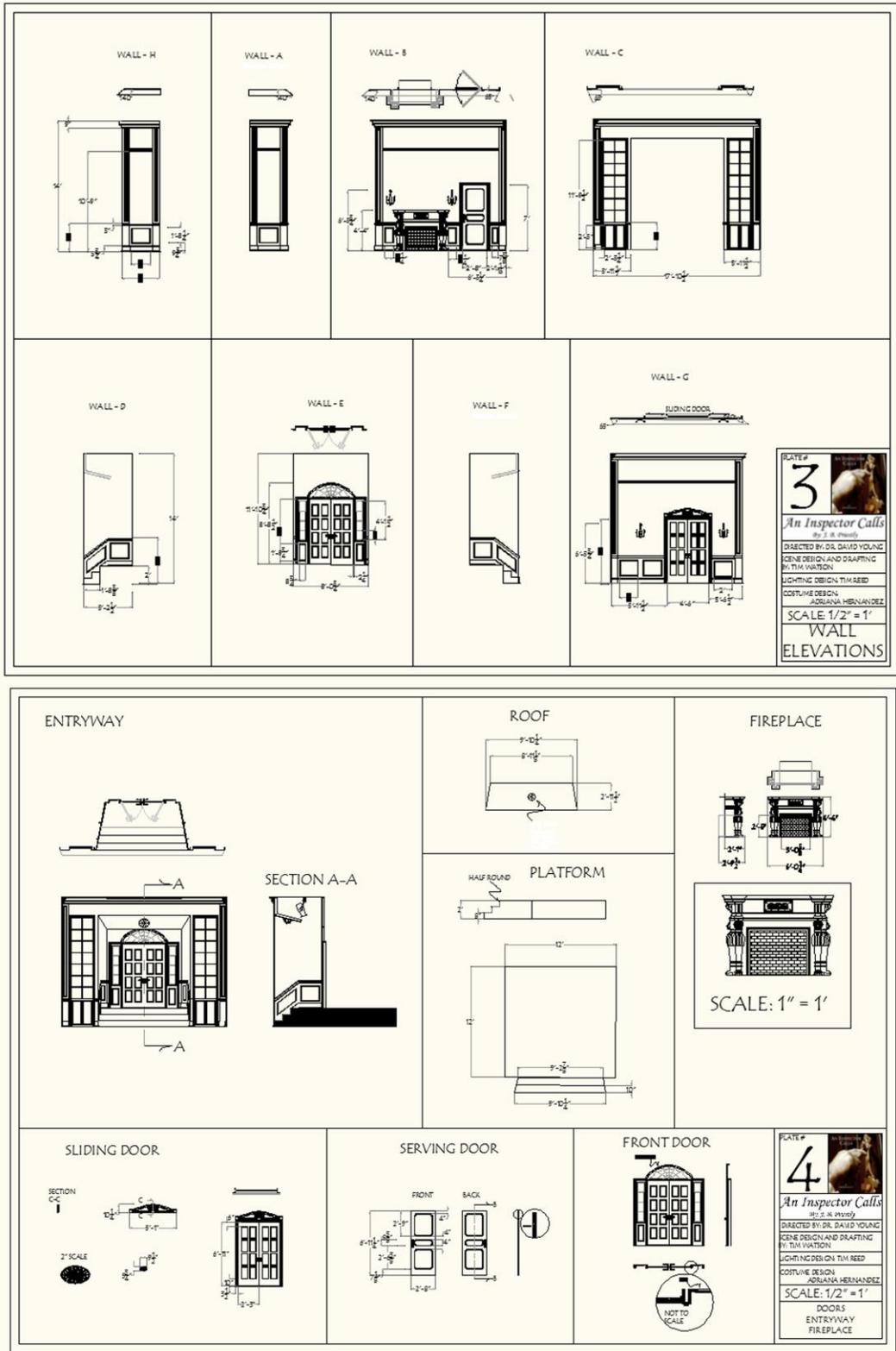


Figure 2 - Walls and Details

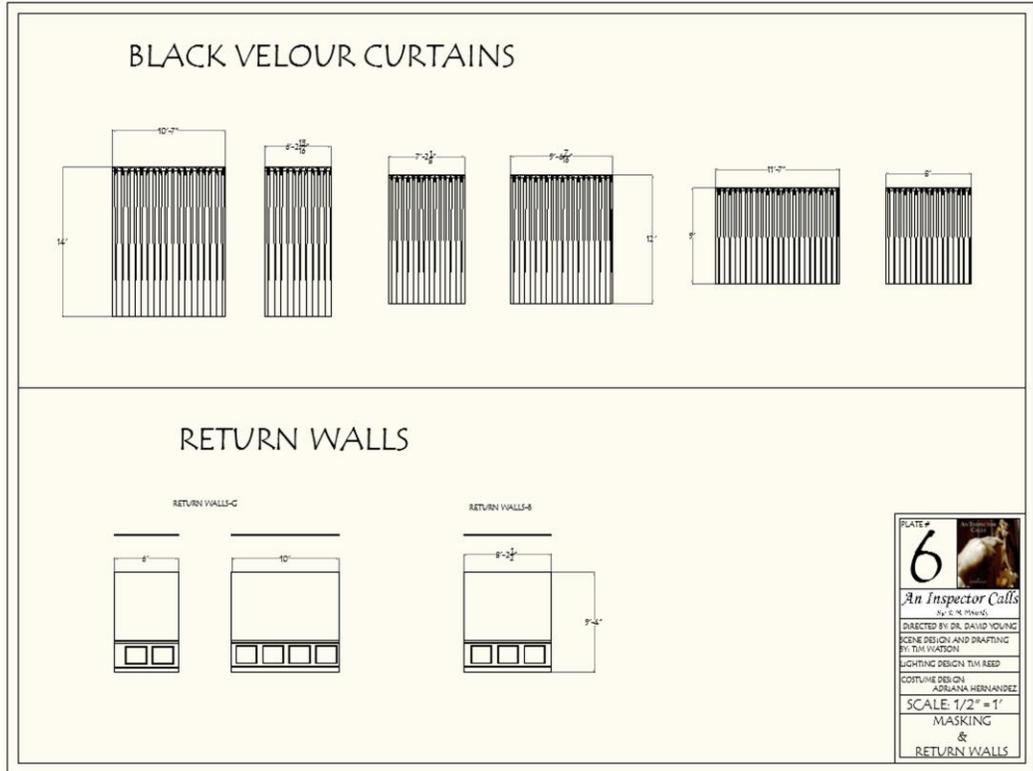
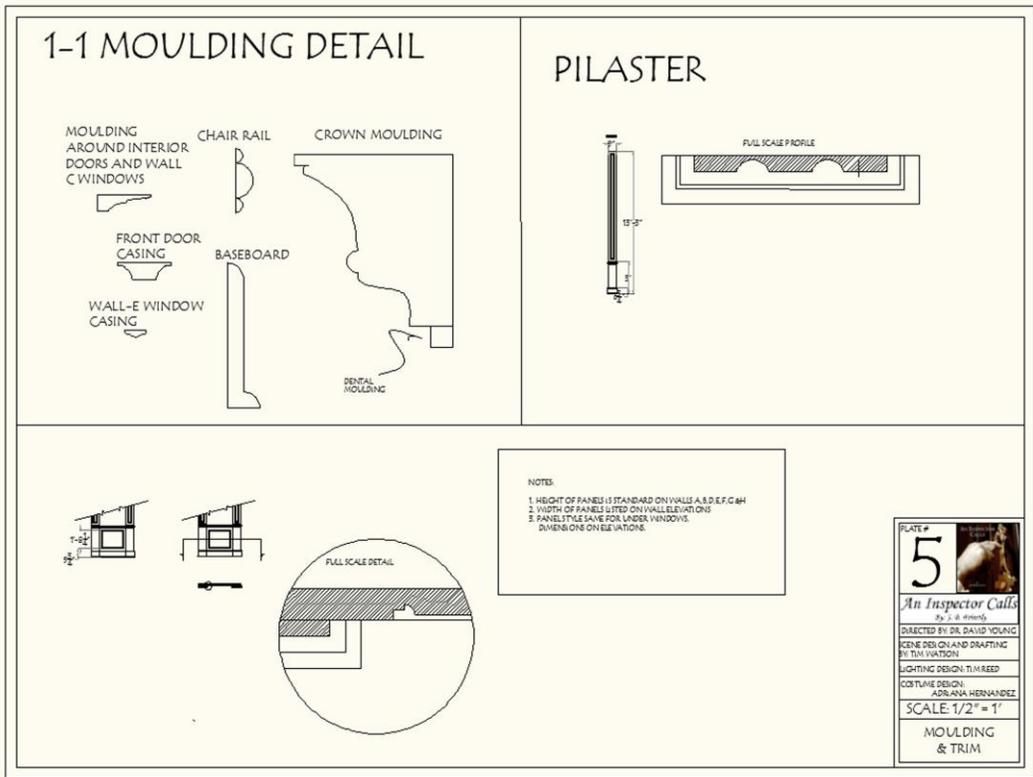


Figure 3 moulding and masking

APENDEX B
PAINT ELEVATIONS

FLOOR



Figure 1 - floor sample and elevation

WALLS



Figure- 2 walls A,B & H

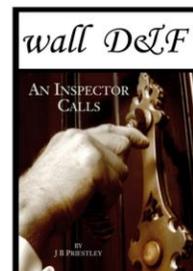
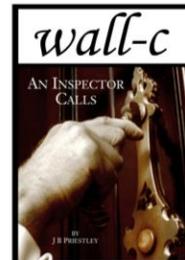


Figure 3- walls C, D & F

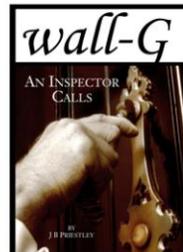
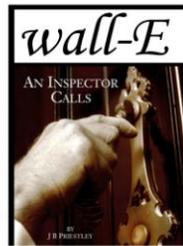


Figure 4 -Walls E & F

APENDEX C

RENDERING



Figure 1 - computer rendering

APENDEX D

Production Photos



Figure 1- Preshow



Figure 2 - Dinner
30



Figure 3 - Mrs. Birling's story



Figure 4 - Shelia's accusation

Biography

Tim Watson Was born in Starkville Mississippi. He received a bachelor's degree from Western Michigan University in Theatre Design and Technology. He has worked Professionally as a Scene Designer, Lighting Designer, Sound Designer, Technical Director, Scenic Artist, carpenter and electrician. He has worked at such places as Heartland Scenic Studio, Kansas City Repertory Theater, Omaha Theater Company, Ballet Omaha, Omaha Children's Theater, The Rose Theater, The Coterie Theater, The Kalamazoo Civic Theater, University Of Missouri Kansas City, University Of Iowa, and Albion College.