

THEATER

Playwright Tina Howe has revised her **"One Shoe Off,"** about a zany theatrical party, for its West Coast premiere by the Lost World company. The production, which features Melissa Weber and Alan Feinstein, opens Thursday at the Gascon Center Theatre.



KEVIN P. CASEY / Los Angeles Times

MIGHTY REAL: Karen TenEyck says her set for "Pygmalion" at SCR strives to deliver "all the little realistic things" the play specifies.

Sets and Sensibility

Karen TenEyck approaches set design with a sense of purpose. For SCR's upcoming 'Pygmalion,' reality counts.

By Jan Breslauer

Designer Karen TenEyck may create magical, and often massive, sets for both theater and opera, but when it comes to her working philosophy, she's surprisingly concise. The artist is a firm believer in less is more.

"I always try to have the least amount of things onstage that I can to say what needs to be said," explains the New York-based designer, during a recent conversation at South Coast Repertory, where she's creating a set for George Bernard Shaw's "Pygmalion," opening Sept. 5.

"I try not to have a lot of clutter," she continues. "I came from a graphic design background, and I think that influenced the work a lot. The point is to say what

you need to say as minimally as you can."

Yet TenEyck isn't so spare that she leaves her audience stranded. "I like to have a little bit of something that is real and recognizable to the audience, so that they can grab onto it visually," she says. "If a set is totally abstract, there's nothing really for the audience to get involved with."

"A set may not be realistic at all, but if they see big trees, they know trees," she continues. "So if you can take that and twist it around or show it from a different perspective, it gets them more involved. I don't like to alienate the audience totally."

Speaking of trees, it was a garden that first brought TenEyck to the attention of Southern California audiences. For last season's SCR staging of Richard Greenberg's adaptation of Marivaux's "The Triumph of Love," TenEyck designed a formal 18th century French garden that was as seductive as it was surprising.

Mixing ornately manicured hedges with other offbeat greenery, TenEyck created an outdoor world fit for a philosopher, with trees that appeared to be sprouting books and, farther away, a picture of a reflecting

pool and sky hanging in the middle of where you'd expect the actual sky to be.

The Times' Laurie Winer wrote that TenEyck "made the stage an essay on Enlightenment-age beliefs about art and nature . . . perfect embodiment of Greenberg and director Mark Rucker's ambitions for the play."

The goal of any set design, as TenEyck sees it, is to strike a balance between accessibility and innovation. "It's harder than you might guess to have one of those shows where you can say 'everything just really came together,'" says the designer, 39, whose work has been seen at the Manhattan Theatre Club and Mabou Mines in New York, Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park and Indiana Repertory, as well as other theaters and opera houses.

"I have to feel happy with the set. It's also really important to me that the audience gets it, that they have a good time or maybe a little vacation without leaving town, and that it gets their mind off work."

For "Pygmalion," for instance, TenEyck

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THEATER NOTES

Sheldon Epps' Plans for the Playhouse

By Don Shirley

Throughout its long history, the Pasadena Playhouse never paid much attention to black playwrights or themes.

It's difficult to be sure that none of the playhouse's first 1,059 shows—from 1917 until a dormant period began in 1969—were by black writers, because some of those playwrights have faded into obscurity. However, a scan of the list of those productions reveals no recognizable black writers.

Since the playhouse returned to full production in 1986, the only mainstage production that was conceived by an African American was the musical revue "Blues in the Night" in 1995. There have been several other shows with primarily black characters since then, but none written by blacks. The playhouse's first non-musical play written by an African American is scheduled for next May: "The Old Settler," by John Henry Redwood.

So last week may have been a historical turning point, as Sheldon Epps—the African American director who conceived "Blues in the Night" and will direct "The Old Settler"—took over as the playhouse's artistic director. He is the first nonwhite to hold that title at any of Southern California's professional, larger-than-mid-sized theater companies.

"Every theater in every city should reflect and serve the entirety of the community in which it's located," Epps said. "More and more, major American cities are colorful." (Pasadena was 18% black in 1996 estimates.) "The work on the stage has to represent all of those colors."

"I don't recommend material because it's black," Epps emphasized. "The Old Settler" is wonderfully moving, beautifully written. The characters' emotions are without color. At the same time, because the characters are black, it can appeal to people of color, because they like to see people like themselves on stage."

Epps acknowledged that the Pasadena subscription audience has a reputation for being white and conservative, but that description fits most of the major theaters in the country, he contended. "Every theater grapples with getting younger and more mixed audiences." Single-ticket sales sometimes do the job, he added—the audience for the playhouse's hit musical "Sisterella" last year was "young and hot. To me, vibrancy and energy are more important than color."

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▶ **"PYGMALION,"** South Coast Repertory, 655 Town Center Drive, Costa Mesa. Dates: Opens Sept. 5. Regular schedule: Tuesdays to Saturdays, 8 p.m.; Sundays, 7:30 p.m.; Saturdays and Sundays, 2:30 p.m. Ends Oct. 5. Prices: \$28-\$43. Phone: (714) 957-4033.

TenEyck

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opted for an approach that's nearly the opposite of her "Triumph of Love" strategy. In designing Shaw's comedy about phonetics professor Henry Higgins and his quest to transform the flower girl Eliza Doolittle, she's opted to downplay rather than highlight the philosophical underpinnings of the play.

"I felt that realism and people's stuff—what they've accumulated or not accumulated in their lives—was more important than the myth of Pygmalion and Galatea," says TenEyck, referring to Shaw's source, the tale of a sculptor who creates a beautiful statue and then marries it. "I don't know that that's important for the audience."

"With 'Pygmalion,' [director William Ludel] and I talked a lot about [realism], because it's a lot different from a lot of the other shows that I've been doing," she continues. "The play is very spe-

cific about all the little realistic things [there need to be]."

The result is a lavishly detailed set that is one of the most ambitious and extensive designs South Coast Rep has ever had to construct. To hear TenEyck tell it, though, huge may well be the only proper way to render Shaw's play.

"By its very nature, it's a big show," says the designer. "Each of these locations is very specifically in a different part of town, so you can't use a lot of the same things from scene to scene."

"It's important that Mrs. Higgins' home is more of a restful place and doesn't have the energy and frantic nature of living right in the middle of the city that Higgins' place would have."

The level of detail is also intended to distinguish the play from any associations the audience might have with the Alan J. Lerner and Frederick Loewe musical based on it. "Because, of course, we're fighting 'My Fair Lady,' it's tricky to stylize the show in a way that you can do the scene changes, but it doesn't feel like a musical comedy," says TenEyck.

"We [wanted to] try not to make it too musical-comedy, but something very specific and real," she continues. "Everyone is working very hard to get all the details right: so the molding looks like real molding in a house, as opposed to one of those theatrical ideas. We're trying to give each piece of furniture, each prop, as much integrity as it can have—as much of the realness of that thing, as opposed to a stylized idea of it."

One reason contemporary designers—including, at times, TenEyck herself—often prefer the mythic to the realistic is that realism is both costly and difficult. "Realism is a lot of work, and it's also very expensive," she says.

"The very nature of theater now is that people try to stylize things so that we can save money and get a 'look' for the show. I can't say that's true for every designer, but at least that's been my approach."

That pragmatism is inspired, at least in part, by TenEyck's work background before her career in the professional theater.

Raised in Wilmington, Del., TenEyck attended Kutztown State College in Pennsylvania and earned a degree in advertising/graphic design. During her 20s, she worked at a series of jobs in the advertising field.

It didn't take long for her to become discontent. "I worked at [advertising] agencies, had a job as an art director at a hospital in

Philadelphia and I just didn't think that it was a worthwhile thing to be doing," recalls TenEyck.

"I didn't like selling somebody else's stuff and I just wanted my life to have more meaning. It sounds very clichéd, but that's what happened."

Unfortunately, there was no easy way to segue into another line of work. "I was surrounded by people at the time who were dissatisfied with their lives, but they weren't really willing to make the jump and actually do something about it," says TenEyck. "It doesn't seem now like it should have been such a difficult transition, but it was."

TenEyck's way out was to return to theater, a passion she'd first discovered in high school. TenEyck worked in community theater for a while but ran into a stumbling block when she tried to move into paying jobs.

"I tried to get some work and it was just a joke," she says. "Without knowing anybody and without any training, it was just impossible. I realized I needed to go back to school."

TenEyck studied at the Yale School of Drama, graduating in 1991, equipped for her new career.

After Yale, TenEyck returned to Philadelphia and advertising in order to pay off her school loans. Then, as she began to get more and better theater jobs, she was able to phase out the advertising and move, after a year, to New York.

TenEyck has continued to use the skills she gained in advertising, most obviously in promoting her own work, including on her Web site (<http://www.inch.com/~kteneyck>), which features an informative display of her designs for theater and opera productions around the country.

More important, though, is the way those years have helped make her certain she's now where she wants to be. "I actually feel fortunate that I had the experience of working in the business world before," says TenEyck. "Then when something's going wrong and it gets frustrating, you don't feel that the grass would be so much greener on the other side. I know what the other side is."

"Sitting behind a desk—and I've done that, so I know what I'm talking about—is not for me. At least in my mind, this is completely different than what I was doing before."

"It's the sense of being an artist," she continues. "It took me a long time to be able to say that." □

Jan Breslauer is a regular contributor to *Calendar*.