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A stage setting can help establish the mood, style, and meaning of a play. In the arts, style refers to the manner in which a work is done: how scenery looks, how a playwright uses language or exaggerates dramatic elements, how performers portray characters. (A realistic acting style, for example, resembles the way people behave in everyday life; in contrast, the lofty quality of traditional tragedy calls for formal, larger-than-life movements and gestures).
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Sight Lines *

Have you ever watched a production from a seat in the auditorium when the setting is so placed on stage that you can see but a part of it, or when some vital scene is played just beyond the limits of your visibility? If so, you will appreciate the importance of adequate sight lines. Determining satisfactory sight lines for a setting is the responsibility of the designer. This step must be taken early in the process of designing, usually at the time the ground plans are formulated. Sight line drawings assure the designer that all important parts of the setting and all acting areas are within the range of visibility of each member of the audience.

Two separate drawings are required to test the sight lines of any proposed setting. One is a horizontal sectional plan and the other a vertical sectional elevation. Both must be carefully scaled mechanical drawings representing different views of the auditorium with the set in position on stage. By locating the position of the extreme side seats in the first and last row in the orchestra and in the first and last row of the balcony, it is possible to test the sight lines of a setting with surprising accuracy. A straight line drawn from one of these seats past the edge of the proscenium arch and to the setting will reveal how much or how little of the setting is visible to a person seated at that point. If it becomes apparent from this test that an important entrance will be lost to view to a good portion of the audience, the setting should be adjusted until the sight lines are considered satisfactory.

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Sight Lines (continued)

From the horizontal sectional drawing the designer can not only test for good sight lines but he can determine the width and proper placement for the tormentors, returns, masking backings, groundrows, and cutouts.

The vertical sectional elevation is used in much the same manner. If a sight line is drawn from the highest seat in the house past the lower edge of the teaser, it will reveal how much or how little can be seen of an actor standing on the highest level of the setting. If this test indicates poor sight lines, these may be corrected by adjusting the teaser height, the depth of the setting, or the height of the levels. This drawing makes it possible to establish the height of the teaser, the light bridge, and the depth and placement of the ceiling and of all masking backings. This is especially valuable in testing the sight lines of exterior settings when it is essential to know the exact height and placement of possible foliage borders, tree silhouettes, and drops.
Unfortunately, some theatres have been so poorly planned in regard to sight lines that no amount of set adjustment and rearrangement can possibly result in satisfactory sight lines. It has been my experience to work within a theatre where, if sight lines were extended from the two extreme side seats past the proscenium arch, little or no acting area could be seen. In such situations there is only one satisfactory solution - rope off the extreme sides of the auditorium and do not sell such seats.
An improperly or inadequately masked set is a sign of a second-rate production. Most people come to the theatre to be entertained, to escape into the world of the play. When they can see backstage and watch actors waiting for their cues, stagehands lounging around, or any of the backstage paraphernalia, their concentration on the substance of the play is broken. All of these unnecessary distractions can be avoided if the scenic designer takes the time to draft some sight-line drawings.
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**Sight-Line Drawings (continued)**

The sight lines of any set can be checked through the use of two drawings, a ground plan and a vertical section of the stage and auditorium, with the set in its proper position on the stage. The horizontal section, or plan view, shows the view of the stage, or sight line, of the people sitting in the extreme side seats of the first and last rows of the auditorium. The vertical section shows a side view of the sight line for the same seats.
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Sight-Line Drawings (continued)

The little time required to draft sight-line drawings is time 'well spent. Too often the scenery is built, painted, and assembled on stage before the sight lines are checked. The sight lines may be perfectly satisfactory, but occasionally some area of the set is out of sight of the audience, the backing flats are too small, or the masking drapes have been hung in the wrong position. Sight-line drawings can reveal any potential problems with masking in sufficient time to correct them.

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The Ground plan *

The ground plan is the key drawing on which the remainder of the designer's plans are based. It is a scale mechanical drawing showing the top view of a setting in its proper position on the stage: It clearly shows the form of the set and its relationship to the physical structure of the theatre. The location and measurements are given for all architectural features of the set, onstage and off, such as doors, windows, fireplaces, columns, stairs, and ramps. Additionally, the position and measurements for all backing, ground rows, wings, borders, and cycloramas are indicated.

A majority of the work done in planning a production depends on the information provided by the ground plan. During the rehearsal period, the director has the stage manager, using the ground plan as a guide, tape or chalk the outline of the design onto the rehearsal room floor. Then the actors can rehearse and perfect their blocking in a space that corresponds to the actual set.

The lighting designer, when drawing the light plot, uses the ground plan to provide information about the shape and placement of the set within the theatre.

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“This type of information is needed when making decisions about the hanging positions for the various instruments that will light the production.

The technical director uses the ground plan for a wide variety of functions. Together with the center-line section, it tells the TD (technical director) where the set will sit on the stage and where to place the masking. It also indicates a great deal of information about the amount of materials that will be needed to construct the set(s).”*

This is a ground plan of the actual stage area, what is referred to as the playing area. To visualize this type of drawing, think of a bird’s eye point of view (above looking down),

“Playwright *

The playwright is obviously a vital and essential link in the production chain. The playwright creates and develops the ideas that ultimately evolve into the written script. In the initial public performance of the play, he or she may be involved in the production process. The playwright frequently helps the director by explaining his or her interpretation of various plot and character developments. During this developmental process, the playwright often needs to rewrite portions of some scenes or even whole scenes or acts. If the playwright is not available for conferences or meetings, the production design team proceeds with the development and interpretation of the script on its own.”


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**The Set Designer**

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**SAM**

Ya look good tonight, Ruby Ann.

**RUBY**

Thank ya, Sam.

**SAM**

Don't go doin' no thankin', fact's a fact.

(pause)

Ya could look a little better though. Use ta look real good.

**RUBY**

Yes, sir.

(Sam takes out a small package that he's had in his back pocket and tosses it to Ruby Ann Jane)

**SAM**

Catch.

(she does)

Maybe it'll help.

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The above section of dialogue is from my stage play, “Ruby Ann Jane’s Melody”.

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