NO THEATRE BUILDING? NO PROBLEM

Texas Tech Presents Entire Season in Found and Site-Specific Locations

story compiled by Mark Charney

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Sometimes loss creates opportunity. The School of Theatre and Dance at Texas Tech University discovered this to be true when we faced a semester without access to our theatres due to construction of a new theatre building. Most universities would look to rent other comparable spaces, but we decided to become adventuresome: We agreed to try a season – yep, a full year – of presenting theatre in site-specific and found spaces.

If you haven’t heard of either, productions are site-specific when they allow the content of the play to determine the best site where it would realistically occur: hence, the parking lot of the Lubbock Nissan dealership to tell the story of the musical *Hands on a Hardbody*, or the local Equestrian Center to share the circus-related events of *Elephant’s Graveyard*. With found spaces, the site may not be exactly right for the play’s setting, but the location still facilitates the play as well as a theatre might while posing fascinating possibilities. We “found” this space; let’s use it to our advantage.

We knew we were facing huge challenges. Our patrons had to relocate for most of our shows, and this meant different seating, sometimes outside under a tent or the stars, where we were dependent on the weather (which “betrayed” us more often than not). Our design teams had to be even more inventive than normal, often transporting set pieces, lighting, costumes, props and more under duress and fighting with frigid temperatures. Our actors had to learn a new way of communicating, making sure that their voices could be heard in a variety of spaces without theatre acoustics, while directors had to rethink new ways of telling stories.

In this article, we detail the successes and the challenges of dedicating an entire season to unconventional spaces. You will hear from our director of marketing, who discusses how he persuaded patrons to venture miles away from the spaces they had frequented for 50 years; from our head of design, who offers advice based on how best to harness the environment; from our technical director, who patiently and expertly coordinated the entire season; and from two directors, who share their strategies for embracing an equestrian center and an art gallery, respectively, to tell their narratives.

Spoiler: We definitely recommend it.

**Finding the spaces and choosing the plays**

The entire idea began with a commitment to the community. We figured that we had to have permission from sites before we could dream up a season. So, with a few potential plays in mind, our director of marketing, Cory Norman, and I headed out into the community to scout locations. Our “go-to” shows, the examples we used when persuading everyone to consider a site-specific season, were *Hands on a Hardbody* in the Nissan dealership and *Elephant’s Graveyard* in the Texas Tech Equestrian Center. So we started there. But we also looked for other sites that just seemed interesting: an art museum, a church, even a skating rink. *The Christians? Xanadu?* The idea was to come back to the season selection committee with a variety of possible locations.

Almost every potential site we visited offered to help. Sometimes finances got in the way, but, by and large, every site was at least interested in partnering. When we visited with the Nissan dealership, the equestrian center, the National Ranching Heritage Center, and yeah, even the owner of a personal home, we were met with a city that welcomed us, not only for this season, but possibly in subsequent years.

At the end of our scouting session, we returned to the season selection committee with more sites than we could use. As is the case at most colleges and universities, we have to choose plays that represent a wide variety of genres, periods and authors, while still paying attention to our BFAs, our MFAs, NAST requirements, our audience and diversity. *Hands on a Hardbody* and *Elephant’s Graveyard* were approved quickly, but it took us months to fit the rest of the sites with the plays that best suited our mission.

**Marketing the season**

Our site-specific and found-space season gave us an opportunity to create new relationships with established businesses and organizations all over our hometown of Lubbock, TX. Not only did we share resources with our hosts, we also shared audiences.

The locations we chose included:

- Two spaces at the Louise Hopkins Underwood Center for the Arts (LHUCA): the Christine Devitt Icehouse, a large, finished warehouse, for *Of Beauty Queens and Childhood Dreams*; and the Helen Jones

The locations we chose included:

- The 1800s.

Writing of this story was coordinated by Mark Charney, with content contributed by the Texas Tech faculty and staff members quoted in each section.

Opposite page: Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson, featuring Luke Weber as Andrew Jackson (front), was presented in the 6666 Barn at the National Ranching Heritage Center, a collection of buildings dating to the 1800s.
Gallery, a small art gallery inside the main LHUCA building, for Passing.
• The Charles Adams Studio Project’s 5&J Gallery, an old city police garage converted into a modern art gallery, for DanceTech.
• McGavock Nissan’s new car parking lot for Hands on a Hardbody.
• An indoor arena at Texas Tech’s Equestrian Center for Elephant’s Graveyard.
• The interior of the 6666 Barn at the National Ranching Heritage Center, a collection of ranching buildings from the late 18th to the early 20th century, for Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson.

We had a natural overlap of patrons with organizations like the 5&J Gallery and LHUCA. Meanwhile, the Texas Tech Equestrian Center, the National Ranching Heritage Center and the Nissan dealership – which had a combined email list of 50,000 names – offered opportunities to reach new audiences: a marketer’s dream!

In developing the season’s artwork, Cory Norman, our director of marketing, saw an opportunity to highlight the partnerships and showcase the venues.

“We gathered exterior shots of the buildings for each production, featuring, when possible, the signage of each partner, and I built the posters to depict the exterior photograph of the location,” Norman said. “In many cases, the site was immediately recognizable without the address, which was provided near the bottom-right corner of each poster.”

Norman’s idea for the season brochure was a foldout map, much like the ones distributed at an amusement park. Above the map was a “key” of sorts for each number, providing the title, author, dates, address and synopsis for each show. The opposite side of the brochure (shown on Page 31) displayed the artwork for each show with titles, authors and dates. Viewed together, the set of posters and the brochure featured our connection to the community.

When selling individual shows, we used a combination of print marketing, social media, newsletter exchanges, and radio/TV advertising to highlight our partnerships. We relied on the School of Theatre and Dance marketing team for the radio/TV ads and print marketing. Our print marketing was a 4x6 postcard with information/graphics on both sides and highlighted our partner venue. The small size of the postcards made them easy to hand out at monthly First Friday Art Trail events and leave behind at the partner organizations, as well as other popular community venues. Deeper collaboration occurred when coordinating social media posts and cross-promoting in our newsletters and those of our partners. Because most performances sold out well in advance of opening – Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson sold out in late November and opened in early February – we didn’t advertise ticket discounts.

“As the season progressed, our patron list grew and shows sold out,” Norman said. “We finished at 90% capacity, and our subscription sales grew by 33% the following season.”

At the end of our season, we not only had created partnerships that would last, but also had increased our audience and taught our students the value of flexibility and creative marketing.

**Box office and ticketing**

We use TIX, an online ticketing software, in our box office. Most of our partners were able to offer us onsite WiFi. For venues without WiFi, our box office staff created sales forms for each transaction. To simplify the process, we made all of our shows general admission.

“The front-of-house (FOH) operations for each show varied by location,” said Norman. “Our team met at the venue the day after load-in, about a week prior to opening, to strategize the front-of-house needs of the production.”

In most locations, the FOH operations functioned as usual, as parking was near the venue, walk paths were well-lit, and entrances/exits were clearly marked. Other venues, such as the equestrian center – which was located on the outskirts of town and difficult to find in the dark – required greater preparation, multiple site visits prior to load-in, and an increased number of volunteers on performance nights. On the whole, we allowed the site to determine the need, but it wasn’t rare to ask FOH staff to guide patrons in with lighted wands.

**Technical challenges**

When you have eight shows in unfamiliar settings, you need to start by answering questions. The three big ones that technical director Jared Roberts faced were: One, where are the restrooms? Two, how much power is available? Three, what is the weather?

Restrooms needed not only to serve the audiences’ needs, but also to provide the cast with dressing rooms. In the equestrian center where Elephant’s Graveyard was performed, one restroom had to be shared between the cast and the audience, and it was far from the audience entrance.
OF BEAUTY QUEENS AND CHILDHOOD DREAMS
By Michelle Benson
LOCATION: Christine DeVitt Icehouse, Louise Hopkins Underwood Center for the Arts (LHUCA).
HOW/WHY LOCATION CHOSEN: Open warehouse that closely resembled a sound stage.
BIGGEST CHALLENGE: Electrical and grid challenges forced the show into a proscenium configuration (not ideal).
BIGGEST BENEFIT: Known location for arts events with ample patron services.

HANDS ON A HARDBODY
Book by Doug Wright; lyrics by Amanda Green; music by Trey Anastasio and Amanda Green
LOCATION: McGavock Nissan.
HOW/WHY LOCATION CHOSEN: Play is set at a Nissan dealership.
BIGGEST CHALLENGE: No accessible electrical power and exposure to inclement weather.
BIGGEST BENEFIT: Huge cross-promotional opportunity and ideal location for the play.

PASSING
By Dipika Guha
LOCATION: Helen Jones Gallery, LHUCA.
HOW/WHY LOCATION CHOSEN: The story’s setting at an artist’s public exhibition made the studio gallery an ideal site-specific venue to stage the play.
BIGGEST CHALLENGE: Sharing the space with a concurrent art exhibition meant we needed to strike the set after each performance.
BIGGEST BENEFIT: Appropriate setting for the play, with readily available power and patron services.

FALL DANCE FESTIVAL
LOCATION: Creative Movement Studio on the Texas Tech University campus.
BIGGEST BENEFIT: The NRHC is a well-known and easily identifiable location for Lubbock audiences.

ELEPHANT’S GRAVEYARD
By George Brant
LOCATION: Texas Tech Equestrian Center.
BIGGEST CHALLENGE: The arena closely resembled a circus environment.
BIGGEST BENEFIT: The gallery is in a well-known downtown arts location, and the performance coincided with the monthly First Friday Arts Trail.

Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson
Book by Alex Timbers; music and lyrics by Michael Friedman
LOCATION: National Ranching Heritage Center (NRHC).
BIGGEST CHALLENGE: The NRHC, a collection of ranching buildings from the late 18th to the early 20th century, provided an appropriate setting.
BIGGEST BENEFIT: The small interior of the 6666 Barn reduced both audience size and the playing space for the show.

CANTERVILLE
Conceived and directed by Randall Rapstine
LOCATION: Donor’s home in nearby neighborhood.
BIGGEST CHALLENGE: Displacing the owner from her residence during rehearsals and performances.
BIGGEST BENEFIT: Having many spaces for audiences to traverse to create their own narratives for the story.
“Because the audience had to walk about 100 feet from the door to the stage, we used rope light to guide them through this massive space to their seats and the restroom,” Roberts said.

For *Hands on a Hardbody*, we faced a couple of unique issues. First, there was no venue – just a big empty spot in a parking lot. And second, no electricity was available. To solve the first issue, we rented a 40-foot by 60-foot gable frame tent. Inside this tent we placed the set (which included a real Nissan Frontier), 120 audience seats, lighting, speakers, a six-piece band, and the control booth with stage management and lighting and sound boards. The real challenge came when we needed to power all of the equipment for the show. We solved this by renting a 550kw diesel generator. Using it in conjunction with our portable dimmers supplied more than enough power for the production.

**Elephant’s Graveyard: Creating a Circus Aura in an Equestrian Center**

*by Linda Donahue, director*

Directing *Elephant’s Graveyard* was a joy, a successful site-specific enterprise. What a challenge, but totally worth the obstacles!

We presented the play at the Texas Tech Equestrian Center, the 100-acre home of our university’s equestrian team. It includes a 500-seat indoor arena, two warm-up arenas and four more large event arenas.

It didn’t really sound like a great space for a play. However, after visiting the huge arena, we continued our commitment to stage George Brant’s circus show *Elephant’s Graveyard* in the center of the space, with seating for 120, replicating a Barnum & Bailey ambience, with popcorn and peanuts sold from a food stand. The design and production folks were on board for the accommodations we needed.

About 10 days before our performance, the equestrian center moved us from the large arena to a smaller practice arena because the hosts had booked a rodeo during our play dates. In addition to dealing with this surprise, I had concerns about the soft-packed dirt on the arena floor, good for horses and galloping and doing rope tricks, but challenging for the actors vocally due to the dust in the air. To help alleviate our concerns, the equestrian center agreed to use machines to pack the dirt, which helped enormously with dust. Another plus: The smaller location did not require the use of microphones.

We found adaptability to be key. We used horse stalls as dressing rooms. There was no heat, so we used space heaters to keep the actors warm. The location was hard to find, so our design team placed signs at the various unlighted rural street intersections, indicating the location of the equestrian center. We used twinkling holiday lights to guide the audience from the parking lot to the arena. Our professionals also covered a number of non-ADA potholes to make access easier for our audience.

The arena space offered possibilities for strong directorial choices. Because *Elephant’s Graveyard* replicates a traveling circus, I wanted to stage the show in the round, like a three-ring circus, which fostered a presentational style. We dedicated ourselves to exaggerated bold movements and blocking inspired by the text and physical atmosphere of the location.

The play requires an elephant, but obviously not a “real” animal. Our decision was to show Mary, the elephant, in a symbolic manner by using electric lanterns to represent her elephant essence and stage presence. This unique convention worked beautifully, as evidenced by the gasps we heard from the audience when Mary was disturbingly hanged.

The upshot: Our patrons congratulated our students and production team for this unique experience in an unusual location. They loved coming into a “circus,” and left feeling as if they had experienced a true three-ring circus event.
“The downside was that the generator created a lot of noise that was disrupting to the show,” Roberts said. “Fortunately, we were able to reduce the noise to an almost inaudible rumble by using the school’s 24-foot box trailer as a buffer between the tent and the generator.”

The first rule of weather is to plan for worst-case scenarios. With both *Hands on a Hardbody* and *Elephant’s Graveyard*, there was no way to efficiently heat the space, “so we pulled our stock of blankets from props to keep our audiences warm,” Roberts said. A student organization sold warmers and hot chocolate in the concession stand and offered towels as seat warmers. For *Hands on a Hardbody*, the cast dressed in the break room of the dealership and waited as long as possible before entering the tent.

Once we answered each of those questions, it was up to the design team to optimize what was available.

**Passing: Staging a Play Set at an Art Exhibition in an Actual Gallery**

*by Jesse Jou, director*

W*e* presented *Passing* by Dipika Guha in the Helen DeVitt Jones Studio Gallery at the Louise Hopkins Underwood Center for the Arts (LHUCA). The play tells the story of Matilda, a successful indigenous artist who reflects on her captivity as the ward of an abusive couple during a national reconciliation day featuring her paintings. The story’s setting at an artist’s public exhibition made the studio gallery an ideal site-specific venue to stage the play.

The site had several advantages for performance: Power was readily available, patron services like restrooms and parking were convenient and comfortable, and the staff of LHUCA was collegial and excited to have us there. The layout of the building allowed us to begin the show in the lobby, with everyone gathered to hear the first speech of the play in front of a fake gallery wall created to match the building. Then patrons moved into the gallery proper, transformed by student and faculty designers to resemble an exhibit, with museum labels next to set pieces, props and even the stage manager’s booth.

The major logistical challenge was sharing the space with a concurrent art exhibition. LHUCA’s curator was clear that the design could not obscure or block access to the other art on display. We harmonized the design with those pieces, since they would, by default, become a part of the world we were creating. A large ceiling piece remained in place, but the set, technical booths, seating and risers were set up before and struck after every performance.

Our production of *Passing* coincided with the revelation that the Trump Administration was ramping up child separation as a supposed deterrent for migration across the southern U.S. border. Suddenly, the show’s depiction of the horrors inflicted on children for political power and white supremacy achieved a disturbing currency for everyone on the team.

In the gallery, I staged the show in an “alley” or “tennis court” configuration, with the audience on either side of the action, because stage configurations that face audience members toward each other can create closeness and help implicate them in the story. This configuration had other artistic advantages. The alley freed the student scenic designer from designing walls to contain a set; thus, he focused on the holistic composition of pieces with the existing architecture. Finally, the alley challenged students to perform in a configuration unlike the prosenium and thrust. Acting in 360 degrees, playing diagonals, and throwing attention to both sides of the audience were repeated precepts in the rehearsal room through opening night.

The success of the collaboration relied on goodwill between Texas Tech and LHUCA: We committed to being good guests, and they reciprocated with flexibility and accommodation. In the end, the intimacy of the space and its function as a gallery worked beautifully with the themes of the play.
Design on the road

Designing for multiple off-site venues in one season is a challenge. Our program centers around students having major roles in design and technology, which created a unique learning opportunity, noted Andrea Bilkey, head of design.

“Not only were we designing the production, oftentimes we were designing the whole environment: starting with the audience’s approach, moving them through the entry, and then on to the event itself,” Bilkey said.

To begin, we asked the designers many guiding questions: How does the audience arrive? Is there appropriate accessibility and lighting in the parking area, the entrance to the space, and access to the restrooms? Does the audience experience anything on the approach to the space? Does the venue have any controllable lighting for house lights or an audio system? How is the natural ambient sound? Are there skylights that may cast unwanted light into the space? What is the opening of the largest door into the space/what are our clearances? Can our setup remain in place, or do we need to strike it every evening? Is there lockable storage for our equipment? Are drawings of the space available? What, if anything, already exists in the space that might be incorporated into the designs? Then, of course, we explored how the answers informed each design.

“As you might imagine, this list of questions was overwhelming,” Bilkey said. “And sometimes the answers shifted during the process. Remaining calm and rolling with it was part of the fun.”

Each team performed site visits, sometimes multiple ones, to find answers. For the most part, each of the new venues had access to an area for patron parking; ingress lighting was more varied. In some cases, a simple addition was the answer: some rope light, fairy lights or ushers with flashlights. The designers had fun figuring out the audience’s approach.

“For Elephant’s Graveyard, the seating platforms were in silhouette against a couple of trusses, with a few lights shining on a central ring, which made it easy to imagine being a small-town kid attending their first traveling circus,” Bilkey said.

Placing Passing in an art gallery, where patrons mingled pre-show in front of an existing exhibit that blended with the show’s exhibit, created a way for the show to naturally signal its start without dramatic lighting.

Two of the venues had skylights, and while this diminished the stage lighting for matinee performances, it also allowed for exits to be seen during potential blackouts without detracting from the impact.

“Very few of the spaces had what we would call houselights for egress, but many had ambient or focused lighting that we used for pre-show, intermission and post-show environments, which helped to reduce the equipment brought in for lighting,” Bilkey said.

DanceTech was a production with a blend of design challenges: The show took place both indoors and outdoors. The indoor portion, which began the evening, featured a large glass wall while the dancers also performed outdoors over a mixture of dirt, gravel and paving. The site had minimal power, which needed to be shared among audio, lighting, one small central dressing area and restrooms. The audience moved throughout the evening to various locations around the gallery space.

“One of the first questions was, do we centralize lighting and sound, or do we have one setup for indoors and one for outdoors?” Bilkey said.

The latter made the most sense because the theatre doesn’t own outdoor-rated lighting equipment. The interior portion had a few truss towers and a handful of LED fixtures. Lighting and sound were run traditionally. Moving outside, sound was run in a similar fashion, with the booth under a central shed area, surrounded by speakers aiming out into essentially a circular performance area. The audience moved into this space by following rope light, and the exterior spaces were lit by...
streetlights, battery-operated lights in costumes, and rechargeable LED work lights, sometimes with gel added, which could be transported from piece to piece by crew members as the audience walked.

“In one piece, the performers even used their cellular phones to illuminate their faces,” Bilkey said.

Using the shop truck and one of the choreographer’s vehicles, the team achieved a traditional shin-mid-height sidelight with nontraditional sources.

“How they caught the dancers, the costumes and the dust stirred up by the movement made it raw, gritty, intense and exciting,” Bilkey said. “Which pretty much summarizes a season off-site.”

Load-in and load-out

Each show had to be installed in one day, so the goal was to simplify the process. Creating a system was key to the successful setup and take-down of each show.

For example, as technical director Roberts planned how to load in the set, he wanted the crew to use only two tools: “We used 3/8-inch bolts for every connection, so the crew used a ratchet with a socket and a combination wrench. Our electricians used only an open-end adjustable wrench.” This allowed the crew to focus on the work, and not what tool they needed for each task.

After the run, strike was, at most, four hours. We were able to fit everything – scenery, props, lighting, sound, costumes, tools and equipment – into one 24-foot box trailer.

During their season working off-site, students and staff learned new processes and techniques that have carried into the school’s traditional spaces, Roberts said.

“We learned to keep asking questions,” he said. “If you lock yourself into one way of accomplishing a task, you will never be able to embrace the environment.”

A risk with benefits

In spite of all the obstacles, our season of site-specific and found spaces aligned us. To overcome the problems inherent in unconventional spaces, our students, faculty and staff began to problem-solve together. The more risks we took, the more we learned to share stories in a myriad of ways.

Embracing the opportunity to make theatre using spaces meant for other things ultimately allowed us to reach new audiences and learn more about theatre and dance. It was a challenge, sure, but the type our School of Theatre and Dance enjoys, the type we need if we are to continue to train our students to be adaptable while embracing our community. And while our new building may not force us to embrace site-specific and found spaces for every show, we plan to continue this new tradition going forward.

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