

ABSTRACT

Title of Document: A COSTUME DESIGN FOR JOHN PATRICK SHANLEY'S *SAVAGE IN LIMBO*

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Directed By: Professor Helen Q. Huang,
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The purpose of this thesis is to document the artistic process of the costume design for John Patrick Shanley's *Savage in Limbo*, which was produced at the University of Maryland, College Park by the Department of Theatre in March of 2006. The intent of this document is to depict the costume designer's process from textual analysis through completion of the stage design in four chapters. Chapter 1 is a textual analysis of Shanley's script. Chapter 2 details the meetings, visual research and pre-production collaboration of the director and design team that worked to create the design concept. Chapter 3 documents the technical realization of the costume design and collaboration with other members of the production team. Chapter 4 is a critical self-analysis reflecting on both strengths and weaknesses of the costume design and the designer's process.

A COSTUME DESIGN FOR JOHN PATRICK SHANLEY'S
SAVAGE IN LIMBO

By

Yvette Marie Ryan

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Introduction

The purpose of this thesis is to document and analyze the costume design process for John Patrick Shanley's *Savage in Limbo*, produced at the University of Maryland, College Park in March 2006 by the Department of Theatre and the Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company in the Robert and Arlene Kogod Theatre. This was the second show produced under the auspices of a new working relationship between the Department of Theatre and the Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company, a professional company located in Washington D.C. In this arrangement, student actors and designers and stage managers have the opportunity to work with their professional counterparts in a "blended company" under the artistic guidance of both the faculty of the Department of Theatre and members of the Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company.

For this production of *Savage in Limbo*, Professor Mitchell Hébert, a long time member of both the Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company and the performance faculty at the University of Maryland, served as director. Eric Van Wyk was the set designer, Rebecca Wolf designed the lights, and Kathryn Pong was the sound designer. Lisa Vivo was the production Stage Manager and her Assistant Stage Managers were Becki Wegand and Jenna Deacon. Visiting Assistant Professor Susan Haedicke was the lead dramaturg and Ana Marie Salamat was her assistant.

The costume shop manager was Alison Ragland. Marilyn Deighton, Lecturer in costume technology, was the show's draper, with additional support provided by Susan Chiang and Lisa Burgess, both drapers in the University of Maryland costume shop. The assistant to the costume designer was Jackie Littman.

Faculty advisors for this production were Professor Helen Q. Huang (costumes), Associate Professor Daniel Conway (set) and Assistant Professor Harold Burgess (lights) who also served as the overall design supervisor. Daniel MacLean Wagner served as Artistic Director for the Department of Theatre in conjunction with Harold Shalwitz, Artistic Director of Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company. Additional artistic support was provided by Brian Smith, Production Manager for Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company.

Theatre is art with an expiration date. After the show closes the only things that remain are production photos and paperwork generated during the process of getting the show on stage. The show, as it existed for a brief time, is gone forever. In this document, I will attempt to preserve a fragment of the *Savage in Limbo* I helped to create.

In Chapter One, I provide pertinent background information about John Patrick Shanley, the play, and the time in which it was written. I also discuss how *Savage in Limbo* is not only a play relevant to a particular time in the author's life, but also a play representing a greater point of view on the 1980s as an era.

Chapter Two documents the costume design process from Concept Meeting to Design Approval, focusing on research, design development, artistic collaboration, and revision as parts of my design process.

In Chapter 3, I detail the realization of the costume design from initial approval through opening night, with particular emphasis placed on the acquisition of

costume pieces, costume fittings, and collaboration with both my fellow designers and the costume shop.

Chapter 4 is a critical self-analysis that focuses on both the strengths and weakness of not only the production, but also of myself as a designer and an artist preparing to enter the professional world.

Chapter 1: Textual Analysis

John Patrick Shanley is a prolific playwright. In a career spanning three decades, he has written more than twenty plays ranging from homegrown tales of the Bronx to topical treatments on current events. *Savage in Limbo* is one of Shanley's early "Bronx plays". Laden with personal demons, it is not only a representation of his personal struggles, but also a snapshot of a subsection of people failing to live up to ideals of the so-called Greed Decade of 1980s America.

John Patrick Shanley: "Bard of the Bronx"

John Patrick Shanley burst onto the theatre scene in 1983 with *Danny and the Deep Blue Sea* and has been turning out new work regularly ever since including *the dreamer examines his pillow*, *Italian American Reconciliation*, *Beggars in the House of Plenty*, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, *Dirty Story*, and *Doubt*, which won a Tony Award and the Pulitzer Prize in 2004. In the middle of his artistically rich playwrighting career, he turned to screenwriting to pay the bills when the National Endowment for the Arts grant he was living on began to dwindle¹.

George Harrison (of Beatles fame) produced Shanley's first screenplay *Five Corners* in 1987, paving the way for *Moonstruck*, for which he won an Academy Award, later that same year. Other screenplays include *Joe Versus the Volcano* (also

¹ Robert Coe, "The Evolution of John Patrick Shanley." *American Theatre*; Nov 2004, Vol. 21, No. 9, 25.

his film directorial debut) and screen adaptations of *Alive* and *Congo*. He was nominated for an Emmy award in 2002 for HBO's *Live From Baghdad*. All of these achievements come from a man who was "...thrown out of St. Helena's kindergarten... banned from St. Anthony's hot lunch program... expelled from cardinal Spellman High School... [and] placed on academic probation by New York University," during his seemingly misguided youth².

While John Patrick Shanley left behind his past, serving in the Marine Corps and eventually returning to NYU to graduate valedictorian of all schools, some of his best work (including award winners *Moonstruck* and *Doubt*) has remained close to home. Shanley grew up in an Italian-Irish immigrant neighborhood of the Bronx in the 1960s where he attended Catholic schools until he was expelled from high school and sent to a boarding school in New Hampshire. His blue-collar neighborhood and Catholic-school background figure heavily into his work, especially his early plays.

Savage: A 1960s Bronx Childhood

Savage in Limbo was Shanley's 1984 follow-up to *Danny and the Deep Blue Sea*. It is especially entrenched in not only the Bronx of the early 1980s, but also memories of the Bronx he grew up in during the 1960s. While the characters are reflecting on their Catholic grammar school past, we are allowed to taste both the sweetness of their dreams and the bitterness of the environment in which they grew up and have never been able to escape.

² *Playbill*, "Playbill Biography: John Patrick Shanley," <http://www.playbill.com/celebritybuzz/whoswho/biography/11189> (accessed 09 March 2006)

In my neighborhood, they'd take penguins out of the Bronx Zoo and beat them to death. I was hung off a five-story building by my feet when I was a child and threatened that they were going to drop me, and I was beaten or in fistfights several times a week, probably for ten years. And I grew up around people who ended up in jail for violent crime. One of my closest friends ended up in jail for arson. It was a crucible. A very violent place³.

We glimpse this past in *Savage in Limbo* through Tony's story of his buddy Jimmy Rina who blew up his sister with a nail bomb and April's recollections of her hero, Father Rogan, and his downward spiral from respected priest to neighborhood crazy man. The violence is not only in the stories; it is also in the language. The characters employ crass language and are merciless with one another. Linda, who is still hoping for reconciliation with Tony, tells him, "Listen to you. I think you got about a five-watt bulb burnin in there. It's a miracle to me that you can make your way around⁴." These are not typical words of romance, but there is a poetic beauty to Shanley's characters, even when they are being cruel to one another.

Music and poetic language was as much a part of John Patrick Shanley's childhood as the violence of the Bronx. His father emigrated from Ireland at age twenty-four and Shanley's mother was first-generation US citizen from an Irish immigrant family. In their household, the extended family would gather and Shanley's father would sing Irish folk songs and play the accordion⁵. Shanley describes him as "explosively witty" and possessed of a gift for language that he

³ Martha McCarty, "John Patrick Shanley: A Literary Childhood," *Dramatics Magazine*, Sept. 1998, 10.

⁴ John Patrick Shanley, *Savage in Limbo*, New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1986, 22.

⁵ Martha McCarty, "John Patrick Shanley: A Literary Childhood," *Dramatics Magazine*, Sept. 1998, 12.

finally understood when he went to visit his aunt and uncle on the family farm back in Ireland who "...spoke, basically in poetry, all the time⁶."

The young John Patrick Shanley contributed to the poetic quality of his household as well. He began writing poetry at age eleven, and it was his dominant form of literary expression until he discovered playwriting in his final year at NYU. While Shanley was writing poems that his mother would display under the glass coffee table top in the family living room, he was also reading poets such as Gerard Manley Hopkins, Dylan Thomas, Yeats and Baudelaire⁷. He had never spoken with anyone about what he read until he was expelled from Cardinal Spellman High School. At the New Hampshire prep school where his parents sent him, he surprised his teachers with a broad knowledge of poets and their work—when they could understand him. "I had a very heavy Bronx accent and I mispronounced words I had only read—the one that comes to mind is *Guy-duh-moss-pot* instead of Guy de Maupassant⁸." He had an early gift for uniting the language of the Bronx and poetry.

In Limbo: Shanley in the 1980s

While *Savage in Limbo* has a strong foundation in Shanley's childhood in the 1960s, its subject matter and theatrical devices, like those of his other "Bronx plays",

⁶ Boris Kachka, "Influences: Pulitzer Winner John Patrick Shanley," *New York Magazine*, April 18 2005, <http://www.newyorkmetro.com/nymetro/arts/theater/11704/index.html> (accessed 09 March 2006)

⁷ Martha McCarty, "John Patrick Shanley: A Literary Childhood," *Dramatics Magazine*, Sept. 1998, 10.

⁸ Boris Kachka, "Influences: Pulitzer Winner John Patrick Shanley," *New York Magazine*, April 18 2005, <http://www.newyorkmetro.com/nymetro/arts/theater/11704/index.html> (accessed 09 March 2006)

are undeniably bound to the state of his life in the early 1980s. He considers *Savage in Limbo* to be part of a four-play cycle including *Danny and the Deep Blue Sea*, *the dreamer examines his pillow*, and *Italian American Reconciliation*, which focused on his personal struggles at that point in his life⁹.

Shanley wrote *Savage in Limbo* while his first marriage was falling apart and he was trying to decide ultimately what to do with his life. Repeatedly tempted in the 1980s to move from lower Manhattan back to the Bronx, he made it as far up as 177th street before he “had to stop [himself] from crossing over the line into the Bronx and never coming back¹⁰.” With plays like *Savage in Limbo*, Shanley shows us that while you can never really go home, you can visit. He put his struggles—all of the “voices in his head¹¹”—on stage to talk to one another and wrestle with the black and white notion that there are times in life when one must decide to either change or die.

...If you pay attention to your emotions, they will tell you what to do...If you come to trust that and say ‘I am this person. I was born this person’ as opposed to ‘I did not chose to be this person. I was born that person.’ Now I can either choose to live that life or do nothing. Those are the only two choices I can make...If you step off your road...you stand there for as long as you want—you can’t go back and you’re not going to be on anybody else’s—you’re going to be on yours. So, it’s like choosing life or death, whether you are going to live your life or you’re not going to live. Maybe you’re going to stay in a state of stasis and wait for death which you see a lot of people doing¹².

⁹ Craig Gholson, “John Patrick Shanley,” *Bomb*, 24 Summer 1988, 25.

¹⁰ Boris Kachka, “Influences: Pulitzer Winner John Patrick Shanley,” *New York Magazine*, April 18 2005, <http://www.newyorkmetro.com/nymetro/arts/theater/11704/index.html> (accessed 09 March 2006)

¹¹ Craig Gholson, “John Patrick Shanley,” *Bomb*, 24 Summer 1988, 23.

¹² *Ibid*, 23.

The five characters in *Savage in Limbo* represent various iterations of the dichotomy between life and death that Shanley described. The play takes each of them to the edge of the road, and forces them to make a choice. By the end of the play, they have each made their choice—life, death, or the “side of the road”.

Linda has been living a marginal version of her life until Tony—what she considers her life—tries to take a new direction without her. Tony has “been dreamin [his] life’d when [he] said go,” watching it all slip away¹³. Linda and Tony choose life. She reenters the race and he leaves the bar, finally starting a life.

Murk and April have been idling on the side of the road for a long time before the play begins. Murk is content with his simple routine; to him, it is life. April is less content, tormented by the life she is watching disappear, but when given the choice of getting out or remaining unchanged, she chooses to continue “just starin at the meter runnin¹⁴,” letting Murk take her back to a life that left her long ago.

Denise is stuck between these two ends of the spectrum of life and death. She has a sincere desire to change, to move on, to start living her life, but she is out of touch with her emotions and cannot feel her way down into the person she is and allow herself to get back on her road and continue living. Instead she remains in a black hole of intellectual ruminations that will not allow her to move forward yet tells her she cannot move backward.

While Shanley wrote plays like *Savage in Limbo* to work through the problems he was experiencing, that part of his career—devoted to looking back at the

¹³ John Patrick Shanley, *Savage in Limbo*, New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1986, 36.

¹⁴ John Patrick Shanley, *Savage in Limbo*, New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1986, 18.

Bronx he left— eventually came to an end. “I’m not that much of a ‘go back and purchase your childhood home’ kind of person. It doesn’t really work. I remember Bob Dylan did, and you know, eventually he sold it again¹⁵.”

The Greed Decade

Beyond being linked to a major crisis point in John Patrick Shanley’s life, *Savage in Limbo* is bound to the time it grew out of: the 1980s. The tragedy of these five characters wasting their lives is thrown into sharp relief when considered in the context of Reagan Era American society. Shanley, and the characters he creates in *Savage in Limbo* were children in the socially idealistic 1960s, came of age in the 1970s Me Decade of “extreme self-examination” and hit a crisis point in the 1980s Greed Decade of “self-expression and grandstanding¹⁶.” Their voices and the social standards of success that these characters fail to meet are unique to that time in our country’s history. Just as Tony and Linda want to escape their homes and routines, they also struggle against the ideals of the 1980s. Denise is entirely aware of the changing world around her, but she cannot move into the time, while Murk and April checked out of society long ago, and live in a time that has been replaced.

¹⁵ Boris Kachka, “Influences: Pulitzer Winner John Patrick Shanley,” *New York Magazine*, April 18 2005, <http://www.newyorkmetro.com/nymetro/arts/theater/11704/index.html> (accessed 09 March 2006)

¹⁶ Anne Slowey, Foreword to *Elle Style: The 1980s*, by François Baudot and Jean Demachy, Newport Beach: Filipacchi Publishing, 2003, 6.

The character of Tony is linked to the ideas of status-dressing and looking for something outside one's self to find happiness¹⁷. In his case, it is the conquest of women. He reduces his life to “the girl, the car, [and] the bed”, externalizing his happiness and making it something he can possess¹⁸. Like a corporate drone striving for happiness in wealth, he eliminates the things that hold him back (relationships, for instance) and cultivates what will help him succeed (appearance). When he realizes his life is passing him by, he thinks that changing his appearance can change his life, but Linda knows it will not be enough. “You can change your clothes from now to New Year's and it ain't gonna do you dip. What you gotta do, Anthony, sweetheart, is you gotta do your laundry. It ain't the new clothes that make the man. It's what he does with his dirty things¹⁹.” By changing clothes and looking for “ugly girls” to save him, Tony would simply be remarketing the same product in a different package to get what he needs, but this time his women would also be in a new package—physical ugliness.

While Linda can see Tony's problems, she is blind to her own, even though she and Tony are both caught up in the similar dilemmas. She also externalizes her happiness, placing it in Monday nights with Tony and what it takes to keep Monday night, which is her external appearance. She is influenced by the body-consciousness

¹⁷ Anne Slowey, Foreword to *Elle Style: The 1980s*, by François Baudot and Jean Demachy, Newport Beach: Filipacchi Publishing, 2003, 5.

¹⁸ John Patrick Shanley, *Savage in Limbo*, New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1986, 21.

¹⁹ John Patrick Shanley, *Savage in Limbo*, New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1986, 23.

trend of the time as well as the repackaging of her identity to succeed²⁰. “I said I’d be ugly for him, but he said no. It didn’t work that way. I’m so ashamed. I feel ugly. I feel fat²¹.”

For both Linda and Tony, it is when they stop looking at the exterior that they are able to rejoin life. They each see they have problems inside themselves, and accept them in order to change. They choose one another because they look beyond the surface and choose to embrace each other, imperfect as they may be.

Denise has failed to step into the 1980s. “The 1970s gave us the explosion of pop-psychology, feminism, [and] the sexual revolution...” which let single women have upwardly mobile careers, move out of the family home, and enjoy sexual freedom unlike any other time in the history of the United States²². Instead of embracing these changes to move forward in life, she has remained in her childhood bedroom, a thirty-two year old virgin trying to ignore her discontent. She tries to explain to Linda what it feels like to be a virgin, “I feel strong. Like I’m wearin chains and I could snap ‘em any time. I feel ready. I go to work and I feel like I could take over the company, but I just type,²³” and tells a story of wasted opportunity. Denise sees the options spread out before her, but will not take a step forward to embrace the opportunities she has been afforded by the times in which she lives. Her life will remain stalled until she stops looking at her options and chooses one.

²⁰ Anne Slowey, Foreword to *Elle Style: The 1980s*, by François Baudot and Jean Demachy, Newport Beach: Filipacchi Publishing, 2003, 8.

²¹ John Patrick Shanley, *Savage in Limbo*, New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1986, 12.

²² Anne Slowey, Foreword to *Elle Style: The 1980s*, by François Baudot and Jean Demachy, Newport Beach: Filipacchi Publishing, 2003, 5.

²³ John Patrick Shanley, *Savage in Limbo*, New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1986, 13-14.

Murk and April are unable to be part of the world that outsiders like Tony, Linda and Denise bring into the bar. Beyond failing to achieve personal or financial success, they actively pursue the status quo in a time when progress and the slogan “Just Do It” was still a mantra, not a corporate slogan²⁴. At some point, they both checked out of life. For April it appears to have been when her mother, “the only person ever stupid enough to love me”, died on a childhood Christmas; that is where Murk takes April to return her happiness²⁵. It is less clear when Murk decided to stop moving forward. His wooden foot, strict adherence to rules, and dialogue with Denise suggest the possibility that he served in Vietnam.

SAVAGE. He’s never grown up. He still thinks he’s
playin Simon Says on the playground.

MURK. I never played Simon Says.

SAVAGE. Well, whatever.

MURK. I played War.

SAVAGE. Bang, bang.

MURK. Shut up, Savage²⁶.

These two characters, caught in the past, further highlight the entrenchment of the 1980s in Tony and Linda as well as the dichotomy of life and between the two couples. Furthermore, these characters tie the play to a specific history that would be absent if the play were updated to the present day.

²⁴ Anne Slowey, Foreword to *Elle Style: The 1980s*, by François Baudot and Jean Demachy, Newport Beach: Filipacchi Publishing, 2003, 11.

²⁵ John Patrick Shanley, *Savage in Limbo*, New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1986, 35.

²⁶ John Patrick Shanley, *Savage in Limbo*, New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1986, 10-11.

Chapter 2: Pre-Production Process

Concept Meeting

The first step in our design process at the University of Maryland is a Concept Meeting in which the director discusses their conceptual approach to the show.

When the design team met with Professor Hébert he told us to feel free to share our ideas openly as we worked together. In this spirit of collaboration, he brought two strong ideas to the table to discuss with the designers: the “concert play” and Hyperrealism.

John Patrick Shanley describes *Savage in Limbo* as a “concert play”, and elaborates on what that means to him.

In a concert play the audience, at least in my mind, is included in the world which the characters inhabit. And the play itself is more a series of related emotional and intellectual events than a conventional story. The characters are given more room, *more stage*, to express themselves than the restraints of naturalism would allow. And I hope of course, too, that there is a certain musical performance quality to it all²⁷.

Professor Hébert further unpacked the idea, relating it to the way Shanley composes his characters—they are bigger than life. Additionally, because each character has a different sound, like different genres of music, their intense moments of confession play out like arias, pushing energy out in waves. Visually, this meant the design elements needed to support this energy flow and pull in the audience. Professor Hébert wanted the design to hold the play, but not comment on it. It would be

²⁷John Patrick Shanley, *Savage in Limbo*, New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1986, 3.

grounded in reality but not slave to it. I interpreted that to mean my costume design should act as a realistic canvas for the actors. I would give them a foundation that indicated who the characters are, and they would flesh out the character's life in the performance.

The second idea Professor Hébert was interested in exploring was Hyperrealism. Hyperrealism is a genre of painting in which the subject is depicted in such realistic detail that the effect surpasses reality, creating an almost unsettling depiction of life²⁸. Because the struggles and emotions of the characters are at the edge of reality, he wanted to explore the idea of incorporating hyper-real details into the design as a visual metaphor. This was intriguing because it would keep my idea of the design being a “blank canvas” from descending into stereotypes. Grasping on to these two ideas, I began my visual research.

Research

When I initially met with Professor Huang following the Concept Meeting, she asked me why Professor Hébert and the design team wanted to set the show in the 1980s instead of updating it to present day. I explained the two compelling factors in favor of the 1980s. First, the text is rife with time-specific references. Tony's brilliant and extensive monologue about the Soviet Union could be perceived as irrelevant fifteen years after the end of the Cold War. Second, these characters were written in a time when personal success was of paramount importance, and they are all failing miserably at reaching benchmarks of personal success.

²⁸ MSN Encarta “Hyperrealism” (accessed 09 March 2006)
http://encarta.msn.com/dictionary_1861739424/hyperrealism.html

Satisfied with our reasons, Professor Huang advised me not to focus on clothing of the period in initial research, but rather strive to show an intuitive understanding of the characters using images from the 1980s. Forcing myself to disregard clothing, I found inspiration primarily in the photography of Nan Goldin, Philip-Lorca diCorcia, and David Armstrong. For me, each of these photographers captured in their work different aspects of what I saw in *Savage in Limbo*. Nan Goldin depicts the dirty, ugly side of urban life, and dives deep into human sexuality, the experience of her own abusive relationships, and mental illness. Philip-Lorca diCorcia photographs isolated people in images that look artificial and cut off from the subject. He uses unusual light and colors that evoke an uneasy feeling. David Armstrong takes portraits of people who are beautifully fragile and damaged. These qualities fit my impression of the characters.

I checked in with Professor Huang again after my initial round of research, and she liked the direction I was headed. She told me to email Professor Hébert and let him know the nature of the research I was bringing and promise clothing research with the sketches. I did this and set up a time to meet with the design team again.

Research Exchange and the “Interactive Cornell Box”

Mr. Van Wyk, Ms. Wolf and I got together before our Research Presentation Meeting to touch base and share our images. We spread everything out on a table, explained why we liked particular images and looked for connections in our research. We did not need to look very hard.

Beyond a unified emotional connection to the play, we also had more concrete

research ideas in common. Each of us were drawn to images with unexpected details such as a jukebox in someone's living room or a poured cement dog sitting in the corner of a room. We also had an interest in similar materials and textures: brick, paneling, tile, plastic and synthetic fabrics. The most exciting overlap in research was related to color. All three of us were in love with a putrid shade of green that reoccurred across our images. We unanimously agreed that the show's palette felt like it should balance neutrals and colors, with the colors generally being lower intensity, higher saturation shades.

Whenever Mr. Van Wyk prefaces a remark with "This may be a crazy idea, but..." I am instantly interested in what he has to say. At the end of our research exchange when he told Ms. Wolf and me that he wanted to build an environmental box loosely based on Joseph Cornell's sculpture boxes as a design development tool to share with Professor Hébert²⁹. He invited us to join him, and we gladly accepted. I wanted to work with Mr. Van Wyk closely as he developed the environment because Murk and April seem like fixtures of the bar to me, like the furniture or dead plants on the set, and I wanted our designs to have unity.

We each brought elements we wanted to incorporate into the piece. My favorite contribution was an old metal fan I found at a thrift store. When I brought it out, Mr. Van Wyk asked me if he had talked about a fan the previous night. When I told him he had not, he laughed in disbelief; we were on the same page.

²⁹ Joseph Cornell was a mid-20th century sculpture who created art pieces consisting of "dovecotes" and "boxes" filled with text, images and 3-d objects based on a visual theme or metaphor.

Research Presentation Meeting

At the Research Presentation Meeting Mr. Van Wyk's original assessment was confirmed, the environmental box was deemed "crazy." Crazy, but effective at conveying three ideas the design team was interested in developing: the stage space not being cut off from the audience, a sense of history to the bar, and an unpleasantness that should repulse the characters, and yet does not.

I used the Research Meeting as an opportunity to refine my direction through Professor Hébert's feedback. I presented my research images to Professor Hébert in pairs or groups, explaining what I liked about each image and making mental notes on the images in which he also saw his ideas about the characters. I also eliminated images that were less effective.

Professor Huang's advice to not show too much clothing research was spot-on. Professor Hébert and I were able to use the images I presented to talk about the characters without getting bogged down in buttons and hemlines. Professor Conway, Mr. Van Wyk's advisor, was concerned that I would fall behind in the design process because I had not shown more clothing research prior to sketching. I agreed to meet with Professor Hébert prior to the Preliminary Design Presentation Meeting to show more research.

Sketching and Post-Research Meeting

Because much of what constitutes detailed clothing research for the 1980s is found in magazines and catalogues, which lack any reference to character and instead focus on selling a product, I wanted to present it side by side with sketches. I set to

work sketching to prepare for my post-research meeting.

I reviewed all of my clothing and character research and began sketching quickly, letting my intuition guide me through the revisions. The show was being cast early in the same week the design team would present preliminary designs. I wanted to get a workable set of sketches out and feedback from Professor Hébert because I prefer to design for a character first and consider the specific actor second. My goal was to be working on revisions when the cast list was posted.

For the character of Denise, I designed a wrap dress with a ribbon tie closure, pumps and a distressed leather jacket. I sketched a flower in her hair, half as a joke to myself, "...a bee in a jar, dreaming about flowers..."³⁰ Linda was over the top in a mini-skirt, lace shirt and dangerously high heels. I loaded on the accessories that Professor Hébert and I had discussed from my research. I took my inspiration for April from a research image Professor Hébert liked. I gave her a layered look with a long tee shirt, sweater and jacket all over leggings with high top sneakers. I finished it with a girlish headband that was offbeat with her sad clothes.

The men were more basic in style but a study in contrast. Tony looked "done up" and impractical in leather pants, a flowing silk shirt and too much jewelry. Murk was at the other end of the spectrum, utilitarian in his button-up shirt, tie, work pants and solid work boots. I met with Professor Huang, she told me the sketches were fun to look at but that I needed to be careful not to get too carried away, especially with the women. The five characters are all very different people, but I needed to make sure they were all in the same world, and that no one character looked too extreme

³⁰ John Patrick Shanley, *Savage in Limbo*, New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1986, 13.

next to another character.

Preliminary Design Presentation

I chose to not present color renderings at the Preliminary Design Presentation because Mr. Van Wyk was not yet ready to move into color and was showing a neutral model. It was important to me that we remained close together as we progressed into color because I wanted to make a clear distinction between Murk and April, who are part of the world of the bar, and the other characters who come into the bar from the outside, and I knew color would play a role in making that clear.

I presented my sketches alongside supporting research and Professor Hébert agreed with most of my choices. Murk, Tony, and Denise were ready to be seen in color renderings. Linda's mini-skirt and sexy top were something the character would wear, but, as Professor Huang had cautioned me, they were a little too extreme for the circumstances of the text. Professor Hébert was interested in making Linda's movement very active, which would require a more flexible style. He had lent me a copy of the film *Mortal Thoughts* early in the process as a jumping off point for the period style and to show me how he saw the characters in *Savage in Limbo* interacting. He asked to see a sketch of Linda in pants and urged me to keep the style of Demi Moore's character from the movie in mind as I did my next round of sketches.

April was the character that Professor Hébert and I had the hardest time connecting on, despite our early agreement on research images. She is an extremely complex character. Her lines, although small in amount, always have impact.

Professor Hébert could not see April in pants so he asked for a more feminine sketch with “less going on”. I could understand his request. Going back to my desire to design costumes that could act as a canvas or the performer, I needed to simplify.

Sketching, Round Two

Back at the drawing board, I created a new look for Linda first. Taking inspiration from *Mortal Thoughts*, I sketched high-waisted jeans paired with a sexy lace top. I finished the look with cowboy boots and a big belt, keeping the hair and accessories from the first round of sketches.

My new look for April was more simple and feminine. It consisted of a knee-length cotton summer dress and a somewhat shabby cardigan sweater matched with flats and a soft, side swept ponytail. I launched into color, hoping these revisions fit Professor Hébert’s vision.

Design Presentation

When we met again for the Design Presentation Meeting Professor Hébert was very pleased with Linda’s revision. He especially liked the cowboy boots, which he had previously intimated were his favorite part of Demi Moore’s *Mortal Thoughts* costume. Before we moved on to April, Professor Hébert had a second thought. Linda’s short-sleeved red lace top was not feminine enough. He asked me “How about some ruffles or something?” I was skeptical, but I told him I would see what I could do. Privately, I was afraid the look would be dowdy.

April was less successful. The look was too sad with the frumpy sweater.

Professor Hébert explained that he thought she would be more fashionable because she has a line about keeping her “options open” when she refuses to marry Murk³¹. He wanted to justify why she would consider herself a catch, by making her fairly attractive. We talked about the choice, and I respectfully disagreed with his assessment that she had a fashion consciousness. I interpreted the text as she had gone from wanting to become a nun to a downward spiral of drinking and personal neglect. Where or when did the awareness of fashion manifest? At an impasse, the dramaturg, Susan Haedicke voiced her opinion that April could be stuck in another era in which her life had been good, for instance, the mid-1970s when she would have been in her mid-twenties. Intrigued by that possibility, Professor Hébert and I agreed to look at a sketch of a 1970s inspired look.

In terms of color, I was making progress. While Mr. Van Wyk was still in between the white model and a color model, he and I had met to discuss color and he was not worried about my choices prior to the Design Presentation Meeting and agreed that I needed to move forward and show color. Professor Hébert agreed with the majority of my color choices, even that of April whom we had not settled on a final design for yet. He was concerned about Tony. He felt the shirt was too busy with the number of colors it contained and asked me to paint one that was less colorful, yet still “popped”.

Revisiting April

Once again working on April, I created three looks with varying levels of

³¹John Patrick Shanley, *Savage in Limbo*, New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1986, 35.

1970s influence. The first look I created was separates: a long cotton tunic shirt paired with a prairie style skirt. I thought it might be perceived as too fashionable because both of those styles had resurfaced as fashion trends this year. The second was inspired by a 1980s Gunne Sax dress with a strong 1970s inspiration. While I liked it in terms of its place in fashion history, it felt “*Little House on the Prairie*” to me. The final look was a classic 1970s empire-waisted dress with a crochet lace vest. I liked this look the best, but I was not sold on the 1970s style as “April enough”.

In my next meeting with Professor Hébert, I explained the three renderings and told him my “pros and cons” of each. We agreed on most of my reservations about the first two looks, and we decided to work with the 1970s empire line dress.

Design Check-up Meeting

We held an additional design team meeting to show Mr. Van Wyk’s finalized color model and my color and style changes. Professor Hébert liked the ruffled top on Linda. Revisiting Tony’s shirt, I had swung too far toward tame with a striped vivid orange and Columbia blue and he told me to go back to my original idea for the multi-colored print.

April was a longer conversation. Howard Shalwitz, who had previously remained relatively silent about my costume choices, asked an important question. Why does April look so put together? Professor Hébert and I explained the idea that April still thought she was “a catch” and that we were trying to show that in her look. Mr. Shalwitz agreed with that possibility but suggested that we look at taking a

slightly quirkiest approach to the character—maybe a frumpy sweater or something else that does not work with the dress. We decided to try blending more of my ideas from the second round of sketching into the current look. Confident that we agreed on our new direction, we decided to forego another round of April sketches.

Design Approval

Between meetings with Professor Hebert and the design team, I was working with Ms. Ragland to cost-out the show, and the budget looked tight. We were going into the Design Approval Meeting with a budget breakdown that showed us going over budget because I had designed several items that were both unusual and expensive. We discussed the possibility of cutting some of those items from the design—leather pants, boots for Linda, the Santa suit, beard and wig.

Unfortunately, most of these items were non-negotiable. Santa is in the script, and Linda's boots were too important to her look. Ms. Ragland pointed to the leather pants as the best option and I had to be firm. I could not do it. While the line in the script says that Tony “sometimes” wears leather pants, I knew, as an audience member, that if I heard that line and then he came in wearing something other than leather pants, I would be taken out of the moment wondering why he was not wearing them.

Ms. Ragland expressed her confidence that I could shop the show for the amount we were allotted, but she was firm at the Design Approval Meeting, making it clear to all present that we could not afford major changes. With frugality impressed upon me, I made my shopping plans.

Chapter 3: Production Process

Shopping

After my design for *Savage in Limbo* was approved in mid-December, I attempted to pull costume pieces from Maryland's stock. Because Maryland keeps very few modern garments, and the small amount in stock would not fit my cast, I switched tactics and began to shop for the costume pieces. I knew I had a limited amount of time to complete my initial shopping because the show was approved very close to the end of the fall semester, and all of my pieces were due in the shop by the end of the first week we returned from winter break. To further complicate matters, the pieces I needed to buy were very specific, and the budget mandated prudence in all non-returnable purchases.

My next step was to make a shopping plan in order to use my time effectively. Most of my clothing purchases would probably be second-hand because I was looking for garments from the 1980s. I decided to go to vintage and thrift stores before the mall to maximize my chances of finding the right garments quickly. I also broke down the list of items I needed to buy into categories based on where I thought I might find them.

I began my shopping at vintage stores in Takoma Park, Maryland because they have the largest quantity of quality vintage clothing available in the greater Washington D.C. area. I set a goal to find Linda's boots, April's dress and sweater, Denise's dress and shoes, and Tony's silk shirt in Takoma Park. It was a very ambitious goal, and not surprisingly I did not meet it. Vintage stores have a constantly rotating stock that can be heavy on one era of clothing for a time then shift

to another era as people buy pieces. The 1980s were not prominent in any Takoma Park shops. I managed to find April's dress (which had a 1970s flavor) and shoes for Denise.

Undaunted, I ventured into Washington D.C. to try the shops on U Street, NW. My luck turned and I found a sweater for April and a dress I hoped could work for Denise, but the dress was questionable. I found a navy polyester matte jersey wrap dress—exactly what I needed—but it had long, dolman sleeves and a long skirt. I had designed short cap sleeves and a knee-length skirt. I thought my draper could alter the dress to my design, but I was concerned about the extra work it would cause for Ms. Deighton. After much debate I bought the dress, deciding it would be a better use of time to buy the dress and alter it than to build it or have to come back again later to buy, risking it being sold out from under me. Having made only small progress, I ended the day shopping online. I purchased leather pants and a colorful silk shirt for Tony from the International Male website.

Before leaving Maryland for the winter break I made a two-day thrift store tour and a trip to the mall. The thrift stores were much more fruitful than the vintage stores. The first day I bought complete outfits for Murk and Linda as well as a better sweater for April and accessories for Denise. On the second day I was less successful at the thrift stores, only finding purses—albeit very good ones—for all three women. I continued to come up short on boots for Linda and April. My problem was solved at the Prince Georges Plaza Mall where I finally found the elusive boots.

While I was out of town for Christmas, the package from International Male arrived. I was worried about the silk shirt I had ordered for Tony. It was very bright

and the silk charmeuse fabric had a bolder sheen than I was expecting. I would not know how it looked under lights until Ms. Wolf could return from break and we could look at it together in the light lab, but I sensed the silk's reflective nature would be a problem.

I made another mall trip and thrift store tour to buy more options for Tony's silk shirt. I went to the local thrift stores again, but I did not find any shirts. I stumbled across a ruffled lace top that I picked up as another option for Linda. It was white, but I knew I could dye the nylon lace red, and if the shirt worked, Professor Hébert (who wanted ruffles) and I (who wanted lace) would see both our visions realized in one garment. I decided it was time to go further out in Maryland to find the silk shirts, taking trips to Rockville, Indian Head, and Bladensburg. It was worth the effort because I found a hidden cache of silk shirts at a Salvation Army store in Bladensburg. Satisfied that I had enough options for fittings, I set up a fitting schedule with Ms. Ragland.

Fittings: Round One

My fittings were scheduled for the first week of rehearsals. I planned to see the women first, anticipating that those fittings would present more potential challenges.

We brought Lindsey Snyder, who was playing Denise, in for her fitting first because the navy jersey dress would need significant alterations, and we wanted to give Ms. Deighton an early start. She was initially resistant to my request to reshape the sleeves because she did not think the dolman shape could be satisfactorily altered into cap sleeves. I felt certain that the dress could be altered, and Professor Huang

agreed with me. After receiving some assistance from Ms. Ragland in the fitting, Ms. Deighton found an acceptable solution for creating cap sleeves out of the dolman shape. In the end everyone, including Ms. Snyder, was pleased with the dress, but none of my jacket options worked. I wanted the jacket to look too casual and worn out to match the dress. While the jackets I tried were correct to the period, they simply did not achieve the look I was developing with the outfit. I decided to buy another jacket and see it on Ms. Snyder in her second fitting.

The next fitting with Ms. Madorno, who was playing April, was very short. The only significant change was in undergarments. When she put on her dress, it was slightly too tight in the bust, but she and I agreed that a less supportive, unlined bra would correct the problem. After the fitting I began to have an uneasy feeling. Ms. Madorno strongly resembled my rendering, which Mr. Shalwitz rightly called “too fashionable” in the Design Presentation meeting. Even with the quirky sweater I substituted for the 1970s crochet vest and fewer accessories, I was not sure if I had made the right choice when I let myself be convinced to make April’s look more “pulled together”. I resolved to revisit the look again before tech.

My fitting with Ms. DeSanti, who was playing Linda, was problematic. The boots we tried fit well and looked wonderful, but Ms. DeSanti did not like them because she thought the pointy 1980s toe shape made them “clownish.” We had a similar experience with the tight, high-waisted jeans I had designed. Ms. DeSanti was outside of her comfort zone because both the boots and jeans were such a radical departure from what she is used to wearing. Professor Huang could tell she was frustrated and asked her to try on all of the different jeans and pick out her favorite.

Professor Huang's solution of letting her pick out what she thought looked best worked. After assurance that she looked "like Linda", we were able to tentatively move forward in the fitting.

We tried three tops and narrowed down to a red cotton ruffled button up that Professor Huang loved but I was less excited about, and the white ruffled lace top that I favored. I did not like the three-quarter length sleeves on the cotton top and Professor Huang was ambivalent about the lace shirt because of the color, but Ms. DeSanti thought the lace looked sexier. I assured Professor Huang the lace would look better once dyed red, and she agreed to look at it in the second fitting.

I gave Ms. DeSanti a jacket with a beaded tiger stitched on the back, and we finally had a piece everyone liked. It went perfectly with a black metallic and gold chain-handled purse that she loved. I was ready to end the fitting on a high note when Ms. DeSanti asked about two items I was not anticipating: body padding, and a wig.

Ms. DeSanti is very slender and padding would help her look more like Shanley's description of Linda. A wig would have been easier and perhaps more effective in creating the 1980s "big hair" than Ms. DeSanti's own fine, shoulder-length hair. I fully understood her concerns on both topics, but I was not prepared to make any on the spot commitments.

From the beginning of the design process, Professor Hébert and I were both opposed to wigs because the Kogod Theatre is a very intimate space, and wigs rarely look good up close. I explained this to Ms. DeSanti but assured her I would speak with him about the matter that day. I also promised to discuss the padding idea. I

sensed she was uneasy about both topics but I was resolved to have more concrete information before making any promises.

I did not have an opportunity to speak with Professor Hébert directly, however, because Ms. DeSanti went to him first to voice her concerns. He stopped by the costume shop shortly after her fitting to discuss the wig and padding. Fortunately, I had been able to sit down with Ms. Ragland and we had a plan in place before he arrived. With Professor Hébert's approval, we decided to create both a padded girdle and a padded bra that together would help make Ms. DeSanti look more like she had given birth to three children by giving her more prominent hips and a fuller, less youthful bust line. Neither Professor Hébert nor I was keen on the idea of a wig, but we appreciated Ms. DeSanti's concerns about her hair not being full enough to create the style. We agreed to see a lace-fronted wig at the next fitting. If the wig did not work, we would try to work with her hair.

The men's fittings were successful and relatively uneventful. Mr. Getman was very collaborative in the fitting, making a request for a tie and reading glasses as accessories to enhance his character. The leather pants I bought for Mr. Wilson fit well through the seat and hips, but I had some concerns about the fullness of the legs. Because I wasn't sure how intense his movement would be, I decided to keep my concerns to myself and wait until I had them on stage before making any radical requests to alter leather.

Rehearsal Room Changes: Shoes

My footwear journey was eventful. Professor Hébert requested show shoes to be used in rehearsal as early as possible. Early in the rehearsal process new shoes were requested for Ms. Madorno, which did not surprise me because of my unresolved questions about the look we settled on for her. Slippers were specifically requested to replace them. They seemed to me like a good way to return quirkiness to April's design.

I was more worried about a request for loafers worn without socks to replace the motorcycle boots on Mr. Wilson. I was concerned because motorcycle boots were specifically discussed in the Preliminary Design meeting, and the change did not initially make sense to me. That look was a popular choice worn with jeans by “yuppies” and British men in the 1980s. Loafers without socks simply did not fit my idea of an Italian stud in leather pants. Unable to bring myself to see skin peeking out from under the pant hem, I made a compromise I hoped Professor Hébert would find acceptable. I bought a second pair of boots with a more streamlined look and a pair of slip-on dress shoes with fuller coverage than a loafer. Initially Mr. Wilson liked the new boots better, but Professor Hébert was concerned that they would hinder Mr. Wilson's movement. We opted for the slip-on dress shoes.

Finally, a request came to change the boots for Ms. DeSanti because they were “fine” but did not “do anything” for her walk. With my budget unable to accommodate extra shoes, I had to appeal to Professor Huang and David Kriebs, our production manager, to go over budget in order to buy new boots. Citing the relatively small size of the budget and the nature of the request to cover unanticipated

changes in the design, and not to cover mistakes or inappropriate changes, I was given permission by David Kriebs and Professor Huang to extend my budget slightly.

Fittings: Round Two

Ms. Snyder's second fitting went even better than the first. Ms. Deighton worked magic in her alterations of the dress and it fit Ms. Snyder beautifully. Additionally I found a wonderful leather jacket from the mid-1970s for her, and Ms. Snyder loved it, saying "Denise bought this jacket for herself with her first real paycheck." I was thrilled that I gave Ms. Snyder a costume piece that was not only appropriate, but also spoke to her character.

Ms. DeSanti's second fitting also went well. I had crafted a bra stuffed with lentils that gave her the fuller, lower bosom of a woman who had given birth and was "almost fat"³². I paired it with a padded girdle that was undetectable under clothing, and Ms. DeSanti liked the changes to her typically slender shape. We further built up the look with shoulder pads, oversized earrings, and a new pair of 3 ½-inch spike-heeled, slouch boots. The teased wig with side swept bangs finished off everything. Ms. DeSanti, Professor Hébert, Professor Huang and I all agreed that the wig needed to be restyled in a wider, fuller style without height in the bangs because they added too much length to Ms. DeSanti's narrow facial features.

Tech Weekend and Dress Rehearsals

³² John Patrick Shanley, *Savage in Limbo*, New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1986, 12.

I felt confident going into tech weekend. I knew a few items would need more work, but they were not unmanageable. The costumes were completely wearable, and my extensive revisions before tech reassured me. Furthermore Ms. Wolf and I had taken the clothes into the light lab to test the gel colors on my fabrics, and I paid multiple visits to the paint shop to keep tabs on the paint colors as they developed.

I made one last minute change on Friday night before the rest of the design team saw the costumes. I took away all of April's accessories and asked her to wear the rehearsal sweater because it had become stretched out and had a magnificent coffee stain on it that I wanted to see on stage.

When I went to Ms. Madorno to make these requests, I had an unpleasant discovery waiting for me. The peachy orange crinkle cotton dress did not fit her at all. Despite the bra change, the dress was even tighter than the first time she tried it. I reassured Ms. Madorno that it must have shrunk in the wash, and I had a replacement dress I could give her Monday after I dyed it orange. She agreed to wear the ill-fitting orange dress for tech in order to help Ms. Wolf make informed color decisions.

The show looked good on stage, but small adjustments were still necessary. I was wrong about the rehearsal sweater. The solid cream color was too hot under the lights and drew unneeded focus to April. Ms. Wolf and I conferred with Professor Hébert and decided to try a brown sweater instead. It improved the color balance and the sweater had pockets, an added bonus that Ms. Madorno immediately took advantage of and began using in her performance.

The last change on Friday night was Tony's shirts. The white A-shirt and red-toned silk shirt were not popping off the set. He looked drab and did not match Ms.

DeSanti's power on stage. After looking at five more options, with the input of both Ms. Wolf and Mr. Van Wyk, we settled on the original silk charmeuse shirt from International Male. I planned to dye it down Monday to take away some of the intensity and shorten the sleeves. The design team agreed those changes would help the color balance.

Saturday morning I went shopping. I found a belt with a huge, gaudy buckle and a black A-shirt for Tony. The new belt and shirt helped develop the look, but my impulse to cut the long sleeves down myself (instead of leaving it for the draper on Monday) made a huge difference in the intensity of the colors. When we saw more of his arm, the shirt was less overwhelming. However, the biggest improvement to help the shirt came from Ms. Wolf. She adjusted her lights in a way that eliminated the need to dye it at all.

My final change on Saturday was again related to shoes. Mr. Wilson was still not matching Ms. DeSanti's power, and Professor Hébert asked me if I could solve the problem with a taller heel. Nothing I pulled from stock worked. Over our dinner break I repurchased the boots I had tried on Mr. Wilson a few weeks back. They worked; both Professor Hébert and I were relieved.

The anticipated item at Sunday night's dress rehearsal was Ms. DeSanti's wig. Unfortunately the stylist did not show up with the wig until the actors were called to places. To make matters worse, the wig looked nothing like what I discussed with the stylist. At the production meeting that evening, Professor Hébert and I both agreed the wig was more of a hindrance than a help and cut it from the show. This worked

out very well; an excellent hairstyle was achieved by the second evening using the actor's hair.

Aside from the wig, Professor Huang had only two concerns after dress rehearsal. We discussed how neat Murk looked with his tie fully done up. I explained that it was a character choice Mr. Getman had made and we agreed to let it stand. Her other concern was the fit of April's dress, which we already had a plan in place to correct. Sue Chiang was able to step in and do an alteration, inserting an extra piece of material in the back to give the dress more ease across the bust. Lisa Burgess also pulled off a small miracle by altering the leather pants, which both Professor Hébert and I agreed needed a more streamlined fit on Mr. Wilson's leg. Ms. Burgess expertly handled taking them in through the leg without losing needed room in the hips and seat.

I made very few additional changes during dress rehearsals. Because so many potential problems were corrected before we reached tech, the show was completed Tuesday evening, and I was pleased with the results.

Chapter 4: Post-Production Self-Analysis

I think one of the most difficult challenges any artist faces is being objective about their work because they have a close personal connection to it as the creator. This is even more difficult for theatre artists because we do not work alone, but rather we rely on one another to each do our part to take the show as far as it can go. It is easy to swing to extremes when assigning responsibility for a production's shortcomings, either placing all of it on other collaborators or heaping too much on one's self. Looking back on *Savage in Limbo*, I think it was a solid show. Now, with distance and a little more perspective, I can see which of my choices worked, and what I could have adjusted.

Costumes On Stage: What Worked

If pressed to name my best moments in *Savage in Limbo* I would point to three: Linda's costume, the way Murk and April worked with the set, and visual pairing through costumes.

Linda's costume was my best individual look in the show; it visually excited me as a designer. In the end, she was the whole package. Even the ruffles on her top that I feared would be dowdy worked. The costume worked with the performer, the set and the lights. Ms. DeSanti used every bit of the costume while she played the role, and it enhanced her work because each item I gave her was character driven. The balance of colors and textures among the pieces made her costume one of the most visually interesting with the set and lights. The red top allowed her to stand out from

the green walls but the similar value between the color of her shirt and the color of the walls gave her a unity with the environment. The blue jeans never got lost against the dark wood bar because they were of a higher value. The textures in her costume also played a part in giving Linda a fairly unified look under most lighting conditions. She could walk through different areas, and while the colors would shift under the gels, the garments always looked good.

Of all of my design ideas, I think I was most successful in unifying Murk and April with the bar, and isolating them from the people who came into it. Working closely with Mr. Van Wyk through the color process paid off in the look of Murk and April on the set. Their colors were in harmony with the set without letting them get lost in the walls. Beyond color, their straightforward, practical style of dress and the natural materials were unified with the environment and separated them from the “outsiders” who were more dressed up, colorful, and wore a greater variety of textures and materials.

Finally, I think I succeeded at the concept of “visual pairing”. I typically dislike strongly linking couples and groups through their costumes unless it is a convention of the play’s period or style. I think subtle visual pairing worked for this show because it was used not only as a way to pair couples (Linda and Tony, Murk and April), but also as a way of isolating Denise from the other characters. I created the pairings through style, which I think is a more subtle technique than, for instance, color. Tony and Linda were dressed in a style that was more up-to-date and trendy, with a focus on contrasting textures and more saturated colors. Murk and April shared a unity through natural materials, less saturated colors and a clothing style that was classic,

with a nod to the past. Denise was adrift with a look that did not match anyone else in the play. She paired with neither the flashy Tony and Linda nor the utilitarian Murk and April.

Costumes On Stage: What Didn't Work

Like all art you never finish a design; you eventually abandon it. If I had this show to do all over again, I think there are three things I would have adjusted that I eventually let go in this process: Tony's shirt, and Denise's dress, and the color balance among the costumes.

The shirt we settled on for Tony was the best available solution, but looking back I now think I should have asked the shop to build my ideal shirt rather than insisting I would be able to find the perfect one. I liked it most of the time, but when Tony went into certain areas of the set the lighting did unflattering things to the shirt. He looked great in the general look of the room, but under the harsher practical support the material's sheen was feminine and washed out, creating a hot spot in the overall stage picture. The lighting color change near the perimeter of the set did unattractive things to the shirt's color when Tony was near the walls, especially downstage left. Because the colors of the shirt were all the same value, they blended more and the gel color gave them a sickly appearance. I realize I could have worked with Ms. Wolf more to solve the problem, but I also understand that she needed both practical support and her perimeter colors to accomplish her design goals. Knowing what I do now, I would have selected a material with variety in both color and value

to make the look “pop”, and I would not have picked a fabric with a sheen.

Denise’s dress was less of a distinct problem than Tony’s shirt. There were some nights it worked very well, and other nights it felt wrong. I think some of this was related to how the performance was going for Ms. Snyder (in terms of artistic idea) and some of it was the mechanics of a wrap dress. The bottom line is that no costume is perfect, but it should be able to take almost anything the actor throws at it. In hindsight, to correct the technical errors I should have asked the shop to build a dress to her measurements rather than altering an existing one.

Had the dress been technically perfect I am still not sure if it was the best choice for the character, again this varied from night to night. Professor Hébert and I talked about this at one point during tech. We both had a little voice telling us something was not quite right. We both generally liked the dress, but neither of us could pinpoint the source of our reservations about it. We let it go because it is impossible to correct a problem that cannot be identified. I am still thinking about the problem, and the closest I have come to identifying it is that the dress was too specific for the character. She does not know who she is or what she wants, and maybe the dress did not serve as the “blank canvas” for her to express that. Perhaps I chose a dress that commented on her character too much.

I was satisfied overall with the color relationship between the costumes and the other design elements, but there are very specific adjustments I would have made to enhance the stage picture. There were moments when Denise was lost against the bar. I would have taken her dress closer to my rendering, a royal blue, rather than navy, and if the shop had built it I would have selected a fabric with a very small print

to create more texture. I think those adjustments would have helped her visual power when she put herself between Linda and Tony and made her generally more visible on the set.

Also, to enhance visibility, I would have selected a slightly darker value sweater for April. I think it would have worked better, balanced between the value of her dress and the value of the bar; instead it was slightly too close to the dress. I also think that if the stripe in Murk's shirt had been slightly stronger, it would have helped Ms. Wolf in her struggle to give Murk more dimension.

Communication and Collaboration

Every designer faces challenges as they develop and find their path as an artist. Some are eliminated quickly, and others take longer to surmount. In my time as a student designer, I have been working with Professor Huang to improve my communication skills. Clear communication is the key that opens the door to good collaboration with the production team.

The Director and Goal-Oriented Problem Solving

Professor Hébert and I had an informal meeting about *Savage in Limbo* months before our first Concept Meeting. One of the things we discussed was the difficulty of “front loading” a design into a show before the rehearsals begin. One of these challenges is handling change in rehearsal when it inevitably happens. The key to making this process as easy as possible is remaining flexible and learning the goal the director wants to accomplish through the change. I credit my work with Professor

Hébert for leading me toward this goal-oriented method of problem solving.

In the past I have had frustrating interactions with directors when handed a solution to something they wanted changed, especially when the solution did not make sense in the context of the rest of the design. I had one of these experiences with Professor Hébert the first time we changed Mr. Wilson's shoes and Professor Hébert requested loafers without socks. I found a compromise that temporarily solved the problem, but in the end I needed to change the shoes again because I had not identified all of Professor Hébert's goals and balanced them with mine. Working in this new style, by the end of tech, adjusting the show no longer felt like changing the design because every adjustment I made to meet Professor Hébert's goals was balanced with my own.

I realize every director is different, and has a different communication style, but I think this goal-oriented approach can be a positive way to approach problem solving, especially with someone you have not worked with before. It lends itself to a new working relationship because both people come together and brainstorm, thereby learning to speak a common language. Furthermore, it embraces the collaborative nature of theatre and allows collaborators to communicate respectfully and avoid micro-managing one another.

The Design Team: All for One, and One for All

I have had a broad range of experiences collaborating with other designers in the past. I have worked with designers with whom I could never find common ground, and others I agreed with entirely. My collaboration with Ms. Wolf and Mr.

Van Wyk has been one of the most enjoyable I have experienced. In addition to being talented artists they are forthright, empathetic, and deeply interested in the contributions of other designers on the team.

Mr. Van Wyk was always direct when we worked together. He told me exactly what he was striving for in his design as well as offering feedback on my own and giving me help whenever I asked for it. While I was struggling with Tony's shirt in tech, I sought his opinion. Ms. Wolf and I were too close to the problems with color and value to see our solution. Mr. Van Wyk urged me to be bold, and use the shirt I feared was too intense. The choice went against our original color ideas, but Mr. Van Wyk's understanding of the importance of the costume in supporting Tony's character made it possible for me to bend our self-imposed color rules to good result.

Ms. Wolf is a skilled listener and great unifier, two talents I think go hand in hand. She began creating the glue to solidify our design ideas early by supplementing her own research with ideas she picked out in the research Mr. Van Wyk and I presented. She was also instrumental in solving my problems with Tony's shirt. When we settled on one, I decided I would need to dye it to bring it more in the world of the set, and I discussed what direction Ms. Wolf would like me to take the color. When I returned to tech the next day, Ms. Wolf had eliminated that need through her lighting adjustments.

I think the most successful part of our collaboration was that while our designs were individually interesting they needed each other—and the performers—to be complete. It is easy to have three great visual ideas on stage that coexist, yet do not fully relate to one another. It takes much more compromise and devotion to bring

unity to the work of three artists. *Savage in Limbo* is an ensemble show—the lives of the characters interlock. The design echoed the ensemble-style of the piece. As each character in the ensemble has a moment to shine, so does each design element.

Different Actors, Different Needs

As a costume designer I communicate with actors directly, and there is an art to doing it well. Being friendly, professional, and polite does not always mean you will have a successful interaction. I learned two valuable lessons about actor/designer collaboration on this show. The first is to be more concerned about their needs than they need you to be, and the second is to just be yourself. If I had followed these two precepts from the start, I would have had a much better first fitting with Ms. DeSanti.

I take people at face value. In Ms. De Santi's first fitting I would ask her a question, she would answer positively, and I would move to the next topic. If she asked me a question, I was similarly direct with her. What I realized from her anxiety in the fitting is that she needed to be asked more than once how she felt about the costume pieces, the movement, and character. Also I could take the cue from her and give her longer, more detailed answers because she found the extra information useful, not superfluous. If I had simply emphasized my concern about her needs more, she would not have felt like I was disregarding her opinion. I need to tailor my attention level to what each actor wants, but it is better to go too far, and then pull back than to not do enough.

I should handle my demeanor in a similar way. I can be socially awkward, and I try to control it by wearing my serious professional face when I am working with

new people. I am learning that people would rather work with someone who shows their personality—quirks included—than a person who appears cold. Ironically, had I been more myself with Ms. DeSanti she probably would have been more comfortable with me as a designer than she was while I was trying to “act professional.” I need to concern myself more with being friendly and easy to talk with and let the quality of my work show my professionalism.

The Costume Shop

Costume designers and costume technicians have the same goal: they want the shows they work on to look good. As a designer, I have learned four valuable communication lessons that help make that goal happen: knowing who to ask, knowing when to ask, remaining open to suggestions, and being as articulate as possible. Because I purchased all of the costumes for *Savage in Limbo*, I had less interaction with the shop, but my experience on this show reinforced these principles.

When I wanted Tony’s leather pants taken in, I ended up with beautiful results because I was careful about how I approached the situation. I waited until I knew the alteration was necessary and I spoke with Ms. Ragland first, letting her confirm Ms. Deighton’s workload. As it happened, Ms. Deighton was too busy to make the changes herself. By going to Ms. Ragland, I eliminated unnecessary anxiety for Ms. Deighton, and Ms. Burgess stepped in to complete the job. I was very clear about what I wanted—less material at the knee, and more negative space between his legs—and Ms. Burgess worked out her own solution to make the change happen.

Clarity about my needs also assisted me in getting the alteration Ms. Deighton

was initially hesitant to make on Denise's dress. When I wanted the sleeves changed, I stated my goal for the look and provided the Ms. Deighton with visual research from which to work. By asking early, and giving her plenty of time to approach the project, Ms. Deighton and I were both happy.

Life Lessons: Finding the Happy Medium

During my first semester at the University of Maryland Professor Huang said something to me that I always keep in mind when designing or teaching a design class. A design needs to be burning hot or freezing cold, never in the middle. The middle is boring. This is true for designs but not for designers. There is something positive to be said for the happy medium.

Flexibility

I think every designer encounters difficulties with their level of flexibility, especially early in their career when they are less experienced. With experience we learn where the line falls between too rigid and too easily swayed. When I began designing at the university, I was too rigid because I could not communicate my ideas clearly. Had I been better able to express myself, I would have spent less time wondering why my ideas were being misinterpreted and more time making my ideas work.

As I came to understand how to communicate with others, I went too far the opposite direction and let myself lose sight of my ideas because I was trying too hard

to be flexible and “nice”. I did a professional show last summer that I was dissatisfied with because, in my efforts to be pleasant and easy to work with, I let the director talk me out of my design ideas and push me towards recreating a previous production.

I am beginning to see now that flexibility has different levels, and on most projects I will need to fluctuate between different levels to accomplish my goals. On *Savage in Limbo* I was rigid when I wanted my draper to alter a dress to my design, and I was given what I wanted because while I was firm I was also polite and very specific when I explained my needs. I was flexible when Professor Hébert and I could not agree on a direction for April, letting the dramaturg give me a whole new direction to take the character. When I finished that journey, I had a design that was still mine but could never have happened if I had not opened myself up to suggestions.

I have also learned that timing has an important impact on flexibility. I am much more open to change when I have time to see how the new idea fits into the bigger picture. In the past, when feeling pressured to make a snap decision without the opportunity to think it through, I would try to prevent the change. Now, if I have not had the opportunity to give a change enough thought, I ask for time to think before choosing a solution. ‘Can I get back to you on that?’ is the best question I have ever asked. I find that ten minutes to myself to consider a problem yields a better solution and happier colleagues.

Maintaining Perspective

For a long time, Professor Huang has told me not to take criticism personally because it is a reflection of the work, not me as a person. I have understood that for almost as long as she has been saying it, but she has continued to reiterate her point whenever we talk about a problem I am having. During the pre-production period of *Savage in Limbo* I finally realized that, while I did not consider criticism of my work a direct reflection on me, I still took it far too seriously because I took my work too seriously. Sadly it took the sudden, unexpected death of a family member to shake me out of the mind set that my work is the most important thing in my life.

The design team had a meeting scheduled the same day as the funeral. Professor Huang excused me from it and informed David Kriebs that I could not attend. Mr. Kriebs tried to reschedule the meeting to a time earlier in the week, not knowing why I could not attend. When he approached me about my availability, it came to me—sometimes you have to say ‘no’, and I did. I surprised myself when I did that because I had put my work first for a long time, always striving to do the job perfectly. It made me realize that I cannot have perfection every time I try something, and more than that, no one else expects me or my work to be perfect every step of the way. Sometimes I will need to reschedule meetings and sometimes I will need to buy three pairs of shoes to find the perfect pair, but I cannot let each unexpected twist or turn become a struggle. If I do, I will never be able to do my job, which is what design is, a job. It is a job I love, but I need to keep it in proper perspective.

Conclusion

Looking back on my costume design for *Savage in Limbo*, I would consider the design successful, even though there are things I think I could have done better. Working through each problem made me a better designer because they increased my visual awareness as well as my ability to work with other people.

Designing this show was an immensely satisfying experience. I am glad I had a small, contemporary show for my last design at the University of Maryland. In addition to it being radically different from the other shows I designed here, it gave me the opportunity to take time in considering each step I took and why I chose those steps to realize my design. I think this heightened awareness of my own actions will help me as I transition from designing at the university to designing professionally.

Appendix A: Visual Research



Fig. 1 Research Image for *Savage in Limbo*
Photo by Nan Goldin



Fig. 2 Research Image for *Savage in Limbo*
Photo by Joann Callis



Fig. 3 Research Image for *Savage in Limbo*
Photo by Nan Goldin



Fig. 4 Research Image for *Savage in Limbo*
Photo by Nan Goldin



Fig. 5 Research Image for *Savage in Limbo*
Photo by Nan Goldin



Fig. 6 Research Image for Denise Savage
Photo by Philip-Lorca diCorcia



Fig. 7 Research Image for Denise Savage
Photo by David Armstrong



Fig. 8 Research Image for Denise Savage—Dress



Fig. 9 Research Image for Denise Savage—Hair



Fig. 10 Research Image for Linda Rotunda
Photo by Philip-Lorca diCorcia



Fig. 11 Research Image for Linda Rotunda
Photo by Nan Goldin



Fig. 12 Research Image for Linda Rotunda
Photo by David Armstrong

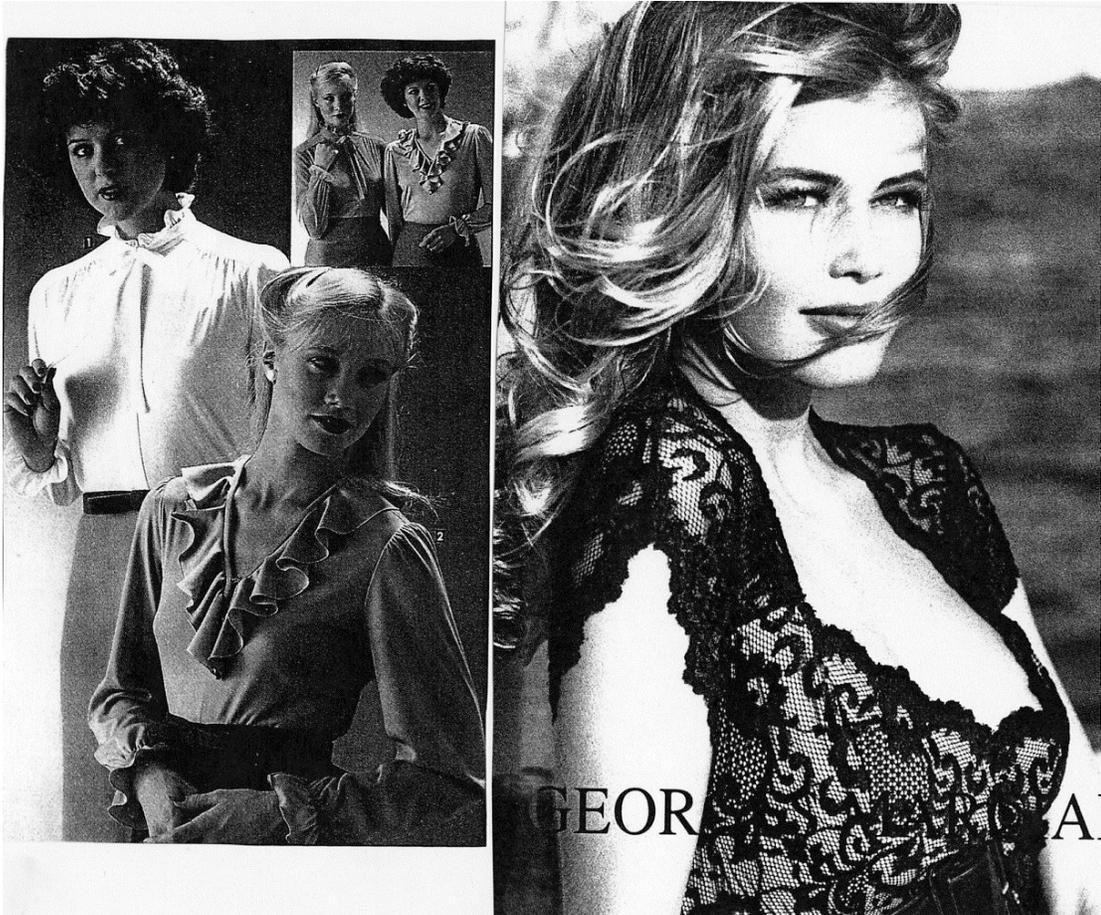


Fig. 13 Research Image for Linda Rotunda—Tops



Fig. 14 Research Image for Linda Rotunda—Jeans



Fig. 15 Research Image for Linda Rotunda—Boots

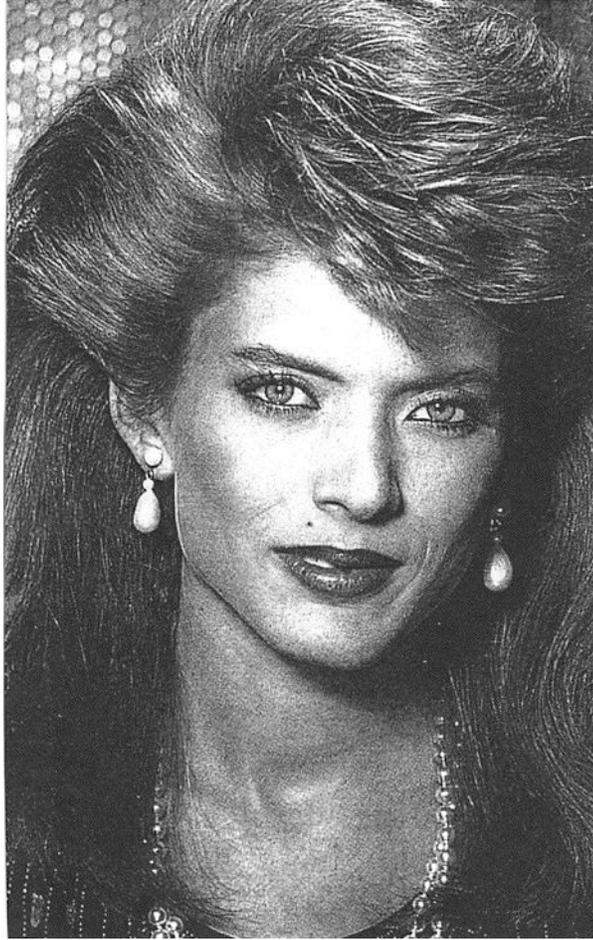


Fig. 16 Research Image for Linda Rotunda—Hair and Makeup



Fig. 17 Research Image for Tony Aronica
Photo by Philip-Lorca diCorcia



Fig. 18 Research Image for Tony Aronica
Photo by Nan Goldin

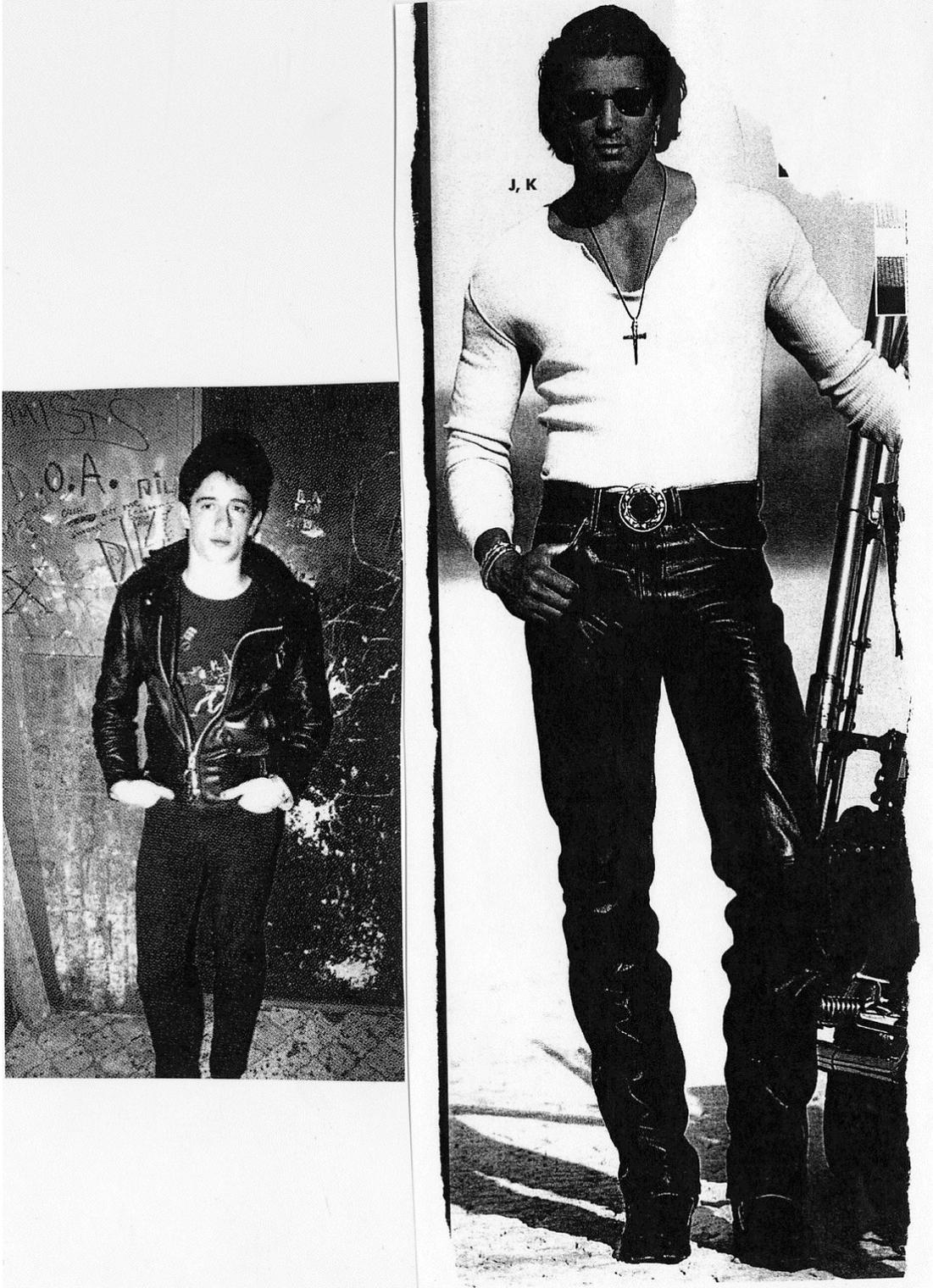


Fig. 19 Research Image for Tony Aronica--Clothes



Fig. 20 Research Image for April White
Photo by Maud Schuyler Clay



Fig. 21 Research Image for April White
Photo by Nan Goldin



Fig. 22 Research Image for April White
Photo by Nan Goldin



Fig. 23 Research Image for April White—Dress



Fig. 24 Research Image for Murk
Photo by Philip-Lorca diCorcia

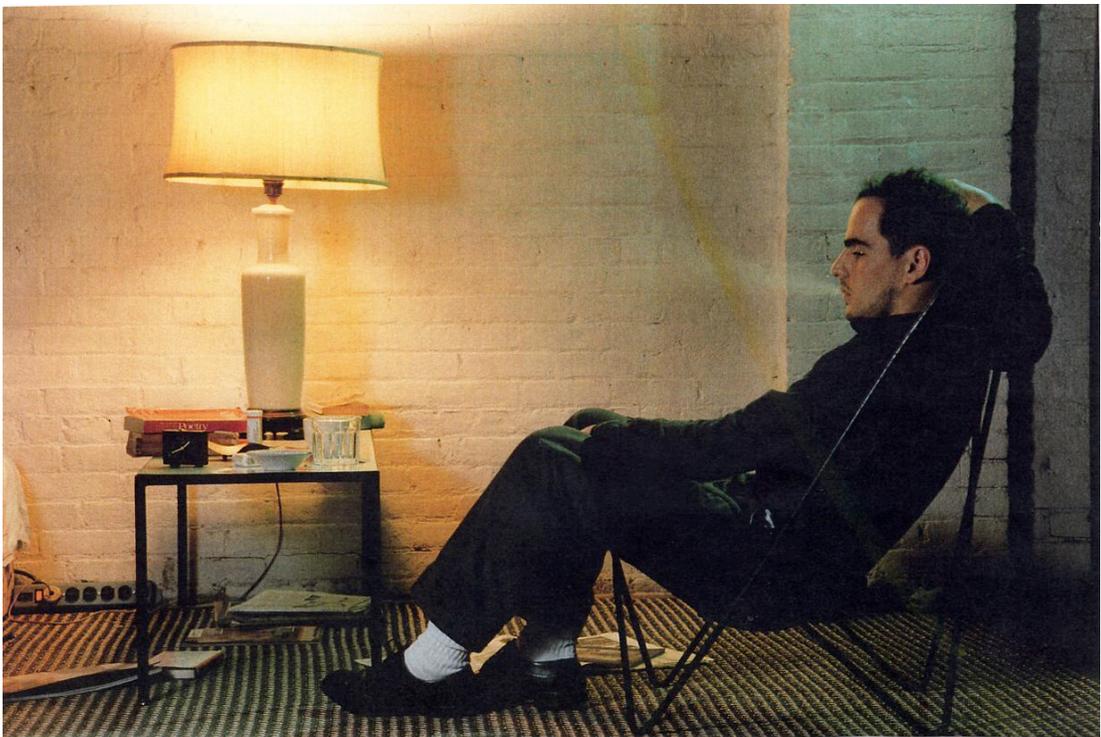


Fig. 25 Research Image for Murk
Photo by Philip-Lorca diCorcia



Fig. 26 Research Image for Murk
Photo by Philip-Lorca diCorcia



Fig. 27 Research Image for Murk
Photo by Philip-Lorca diCorcia

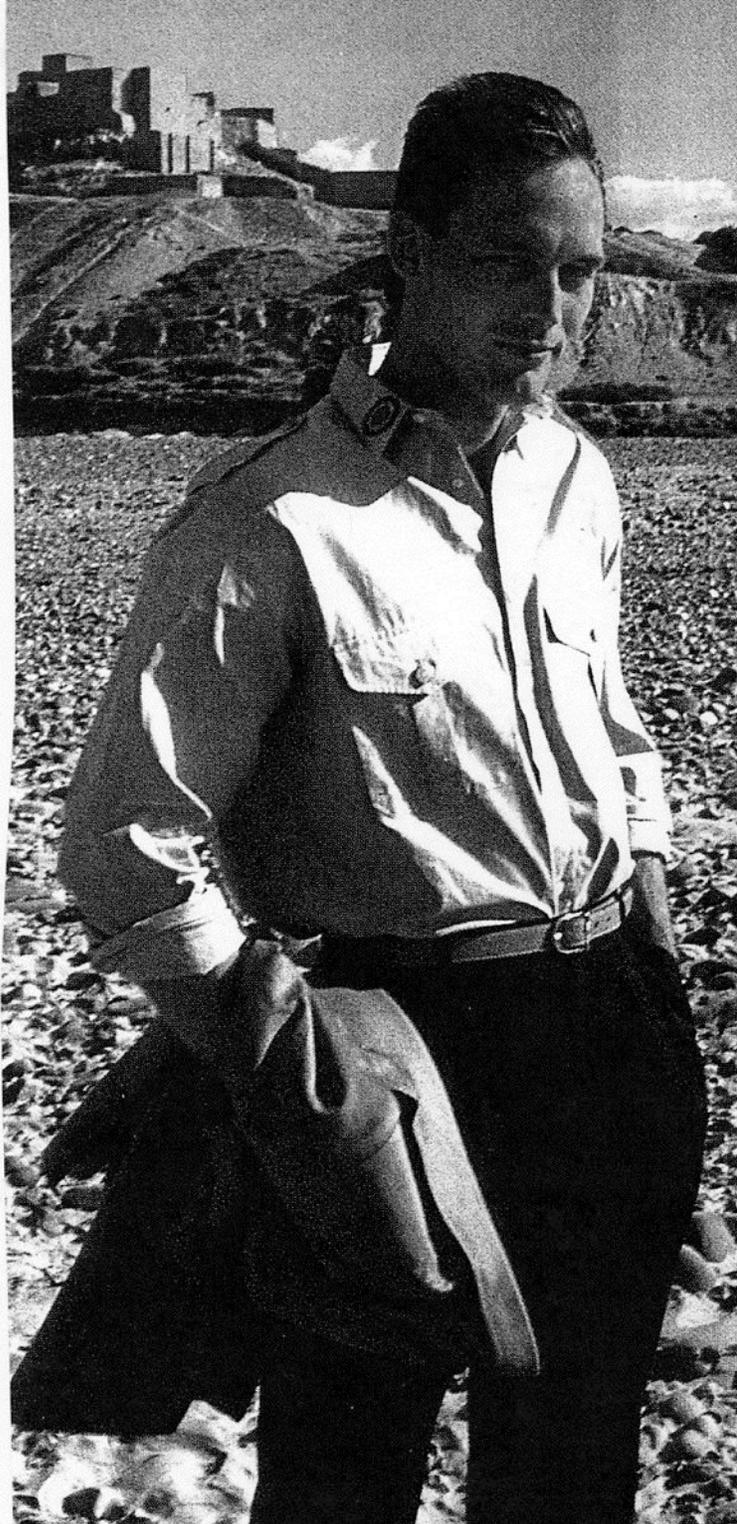


Fig. 28 Research Image for Murk—Clothes

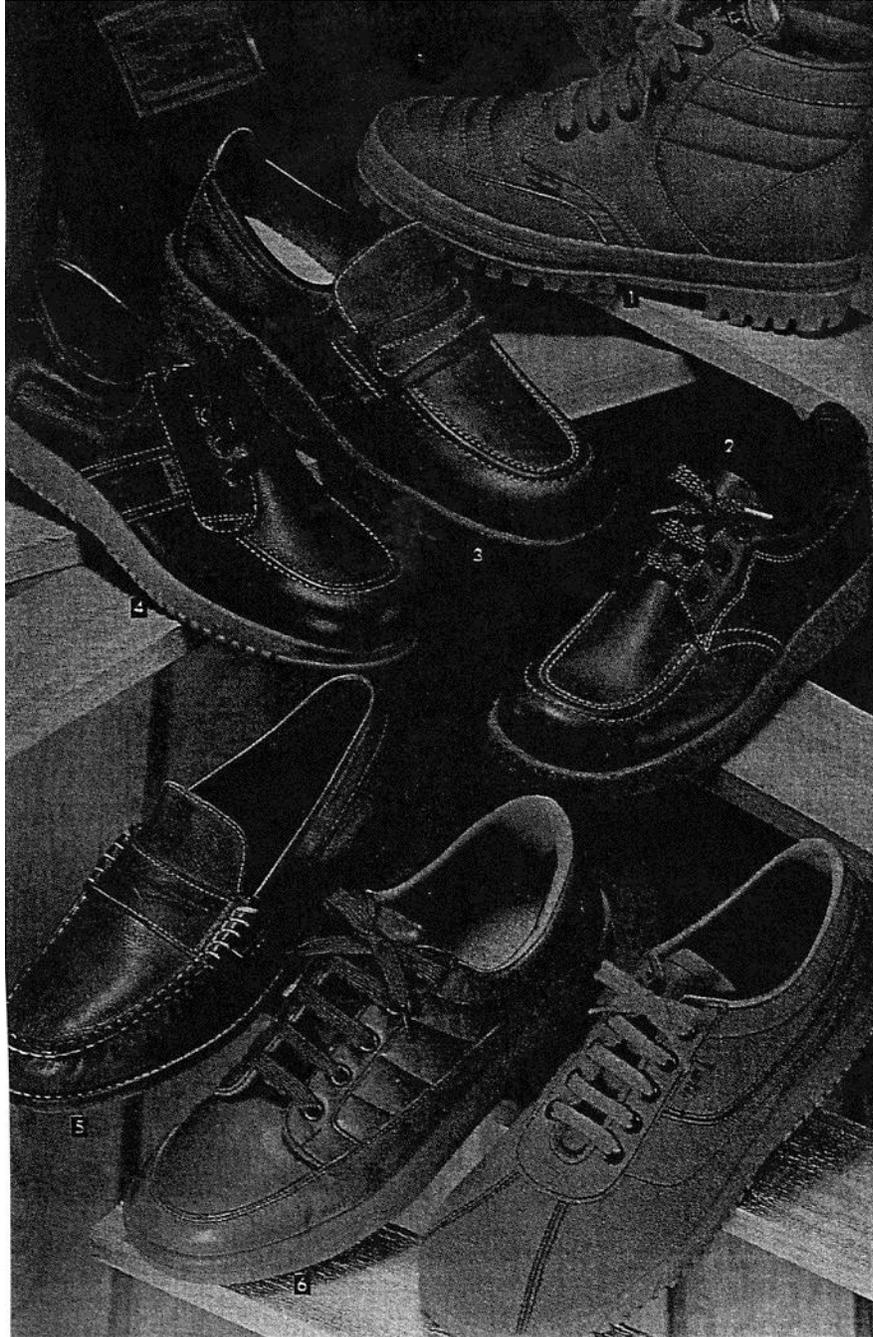


Fig. 29 Research Image for Murk—Shoes

Appendix B: Costume Renderings



Fig. 30 Denise Savage
Costume Rendering by Yvette M. Ryan



Fig. 31 Linda Rotunda
Costume rendering by Yvette M. Ryan



Fig. 32 Tony Aronica (Final Color Version)
Costume Rendering by Yvette M. Ryan



Fig. 33 Tony Aronica (Color version One)
Costume rendering by Yvette M. Ryan



Fig. 34 Tony Aronica (Color version Two)
Costume rendering by Yvette M. Ryan



Fig 35 April White (Final Version)
Costume Rendering by Yvette M. Ryan



Fig. 36 April White (Alternate Version One)
Costume Rendering by Yvette M. Ryan



Fig. 37 April White (Alternate Version Two)
Costume Rendering by Yvette M. Ryan



Figure 38 Murk
Costume Rendering by Yvette M. Ryan

Appendix C: Production Photographs



Fig. 39 Lindsey Snyder as Denise.
Photo by Stan Barouh



Fig. 40 Maia DeSanti as Linda, Lindsey Snyder as Denise, Tim Getman as Murk
Photo by Stan Barouh.



Fig. 41 Maia DeSanti as Linda, Lindsey Snyder as Denise, Tim Getman as Murk
Photo by Stan Barouh.



Fig. 42 Lindsey Snyder as Denise. (front) Tim Getman as Murk,
Tiernan Madorno as April
Photo by Stan Barouh.



Fig. 43 Chris Wilson as Tony, Tim Getman as Murk, Maia DeSanti as Linda
Photo by Stan Barouh



Fig. 44 Maia de Santi as Linda, Chris Wilson as Tony
Photo by Stan Barouh.



Fig. 45 Chris Wilson as Tony
Photo by Stan Barouh



Fig. 46 Tim Getman as Murk, Tiernan Madorno as April
Photo by Stan Barouh



Fig. 47 Tim Getman as Murk, Tiernan Madorno as April
Photo by Stan Barouh



Fig. 48 Tiernan Madorn as April
Photo by Stan Barouh



Fig. 49 Tiernan Madorno as April, Lindsey Snyder as Denise,
Tim Getman as Murk (back)
Photo by Stan Barouh



Fig. 50 Set Design by Eric Van Eyk, Lighting Design by Rebecca Wolf

Appendix D: Supporting Paperwork

Savage in Limbo Piece List

| Actor | Character | Piece |
|------------------|-----------|------------------------------|
| DeSanti, Maia | Linda | Red lace Blouse |
| | | Blk/Gld twill Jacket |
| | | Tapered blue Jeans |
| | | White leather Boots |
| | | Socks |
| | | Nude Bra |
| | | Blk chain Purse |
| | | Gld hoop Earrings |
| | | Gld Cross Necklace |
| | | Blk/Gld Bracelets |
| | | Padded girdle |
| Madorno, Tiernan | April | Pumpkin crinkle cotton Dress |
| | | Brown floral Sweater |
| | | Beaded hairclip |
| | | Gld cross on Necklace |
| | | Distressed tan moccasins |
| | | Pink lace bra |
| | | Argyle Socks |
| | | Cordovan purse |
| Snyder, Lindsey | Denise | Navy knit jersey Dress |
| | | Tan leather Jacket |
| | | Blk spike Heels |
| | | Nude Nylons |
| | | Nude Bra |
| | | Gold/Pink Earrings |
| | | Blk patchwork Purse |
| | | Orange Hair flower |
| | | Pink/Gld bracelet |

| | | |
|---------------|-------|-----------------------------|
| Getman, Tim | Murk | Grey stripe Shirt |
| | | Tan twill Pants |
| | | Olive drab Tie |
| | | Brown braided Belt |
| | | Brown work Shoes |
| | | Silver/gold Watch |
| | | Silver Reading glasses |
| | Santa | Red/wht Hat w/ attached wig |
| | | White Beard |
| | | Red/white Coat |
| | | |
| Wilson, Chris | Tony | Multi colored Silk shirt |
| | | Black A-shirt |
| | | Black Leather pants |
| | | Gold Necklace |
| | | Gold Ring |
| | | Black boots |
| | | Gold bracelet |

**Savage in Limbo
Costume Change Tracking Sheet**

| Actor | Character | Start wearing | Remove | Add | Page |
|--------------|------------------|--|----------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------|
| Women | | | | | |
| DeSanti | Linda | All pieces | Jacket (on stage) | None | TBD |
| Madomo | April | All pieces | None | None | N/A |
| Snyder | Denise | All pieces | Jacket (on stage) | None | TBD |
| Men | | | | | |
| Getman | Murk | Shirt, pants, tie, shoes, watch, undergarments | None/TBD | Santa jacket, hat, beard (on stage) | 29 |
| | | Santa | All Santa (on stage) | None | 30 |
| Wilson | Tony | All pieces | None | None | N/A |

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