2011

A Design Concept for the Lighting Design of Federico García Lorca's The House of Bernarda Alba

Thaddeus L. Kramer

University of Massachusetts Amherst

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A DESIGN CONCEPT FOR THE LIGHTING DESIGN OF
FEDERICO GARCÍA LORCA'S THE HOUSE OF BERNARDA ALBA

A Thesis Presented
by
THADDEUS L. KRAMER

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

May 2011

Theater
Lighting Design
A DESIGN CONCEPT FOR THE LIGHTING DESIGN OF FEDERICO GARCÍA LORCA'S THE HOUSE OF BERNARDA ALBA

A Thesis Presented

by

THADDEUS L. KRAMER

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Penny L. Remsen, Department Chair
Department of Theater
DEDICATION

To my loving and supportive girlfriend, Cheryl.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First, I’d like to thank my advisor, teacher, friend, and confidant Penny Remsen. Over the past three years, I have learned so much about lighting design and art in general, and I have grown as an artist and human being even more through her guidance and teaching. I had no idea that I would come so far in such a short time with her help.

Secondly, I’d like to thank my advisor on this project, Matthew Richards for his guidance and support. A thank you is also owed to Michael Dubin, the department’s master electrician, for his outsider’s view of the project and wealth of knowledge, and the electrics shop staff for their hard work bringing my design to fruition. In addition, I would like to thank my assistant Daniel Kent for his help and long hours of hard work making this production a success. I would also like to acknowledge Daniel’s amazing production photos, some of which have been included in this thesis.

Thanks is also due to the production’s set designer, Miguel Romero, for designing a set that allowed a non-traditional approach to what could be considered a traditional play, and for allowing me to use sketches of his work in this document. I would also like to thank the project’s director, Toby Bercovici for taking a leap of faith with a production that she both was not familiar with and did not choose.

I would also like to acknowledge Jonathan Hicks for being a wonderful colleague, and confidant during my time at UMass. Finally, I would like to thank my girlfriend Cheryl. Without her love, support, and willingness to allow me to be so far away, none of what I have learned and accomplished would have been possible.
ABSTRACT

A DESIGN CONCEPT FOR THE LIGHTING AND SOUND DESIGN OF FEDERICO GARCÍA LORCA’S THE HOUSE OF BERNARDA ALBA

MAY 2011

THADDEUS L. KRAMER, B.F.A., WRIGHT STATE UNIVERSITY

M.F.A., UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST

Directed by: Professor Penny Remsen

A discussion of the abstract approach for the lighting design of the Theater Department’s Fall 2010 production of Federico García Lorca’s The House of Bernarda Alba through the use of time of day and “clean and dirty” light.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF FIGURES</td>
<td>viii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. PRE-PRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Play</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Design Process</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. PRODUCTION</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technical Rehearsals</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Final Design</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX: ADDITIONAL DOCUMENTATION</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Preliminary Set Sketches by Set Designer Miguel Romero</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>An example of the clean white light of Act I</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>An example of more tinted light of Act II</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Frame grab from Ingmar Bergman’s <em>Cries and Whispers</em> illustrating Bergman’s use of chiaroscuro</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Example of white light in a monochromatic environment</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Research image for Act 1 depicting a cool blue quality of “white” light</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Research image for Act 2 depicting a warmer quality of “white” light</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Research image for Act 3 depicting a very cold and blue quality of “white” light</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Example of lighting off-stage areas</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Act 1 Scene 1 - The mourners in the House of Bernarda Alba</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>Act 1 Scene 2 – Bernarda talks with her daughters after the mourners have left</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER I

PRE-PRODUCTION

The Play

The House of Bernarda Alba by Federico García Lorca tells the story of Bernarda Alba and her five daughters as they begin the eight-year mourning process for their late father. The story is set exclusively within their house in Andalusia, Spain during what seems like the late nineteenth or early twentieth century.

Throughout the story, Bernarda’s daughters struggle to be free from the repressive grip on their lives while challenging her microscopic control of their every desire.

The play begins with Bernarda in strong control over everything in her world: her daughters, the housekeepers, even going so far as to lock out the townspeople from their lives to prevent the spread of rumors. As the play progresses, Bernarda begins to lose control of her daughters as they become jealous of their sister Angustias who is about to escape Bernarda's controlling clutches through marriage.

Throughout the play Bernarda attempts to remain in control of her daughters. In the end, however, she loses all control and her world falls apart as it is revealed that her youngest daughter, Adela, has been having an affair with Angustias’s future husband, Pepe. Bernarda faces the penultimate rebellion and subsequent collapse of her well-controlled world after Adela commits suicide immediately after Bernarda chases Pepe away with a gun.
The Design Process

After reading the play for the first time, I found it difficult to find a way into the piece. My initial conversations with our director, Toby Bercovici, did not delve deep enough into the ideas in the text to clarify the play for me. We discussed concepts such as how the play was “heightened but realistic” and how the play was full of bisemic images. That is, images that have different meanings depending on their context. However, these ideas were still too broad for me to fashion into a useful approach to the production’s lighting design.

The set consisted of a bi-level rectangular platform that was painted white with an additional five chairs – also painted white – that the actresses could move and arrange throughout the space. Almost all of the costumes were black with a silhouette suggestive of, but not from, a specific period. These designs’ abstract interpretation of Lorca’s text, while appropriate for our particular production, did not provide an obvious solution to the lighting design.

Figure 1: Preliminary Set Sketches by Set Designer Miguel Romero
Finally nearly a month after rehearsals began, Toby, our director, and I had a meeting that produced an idea that I was able to embrace and use as the core of my lighting design. We discussed how Bernarda wasn’t just a tyrant, but rather she was a person who had a choice to either allow her daughters to have their own lives or to control every last detail of their lives for them. In choosing to be a dominating mother, she followed the culture of her time and location; a choice that may have been self-sabotaging in the end. In doing so, Bernarda created a world that was impeccably clean, as this represented order and her control over her world. As the play progressed, and she lost control over her daughters, Bernarda’s world became dirtier and disorganized.

My design supported this idea through the use of what I referred to as “clean and dirty light”. To me, clean white light was crisp, clean, and cool and dirty light was tinted, or depending on how dirty it was, saturated with color. Throughout the play regardless of the reality of the situations she was faced with, Bernarda always felt like she was in control of her world. To support the idea of a clean world in the strict control of Bernarda, I chose key light that was white with little to no color tints, and to support the opposite idea of a dirty world, and thus less control by Bernarda, I added tints and saturated colors to the key through the use of fill light that came from a 45-degree angle. The key light was always soft-edged and came from above and bounced off of the white set to light the actors regardless of its clean or dirty state.
At the beginning of the play, Bernarda is very much in control of her daughters; therefore, I began the first act with crisp white light with slightly tinted fill light as can be seen in figure 2.

![Figure 2: An example of the clean white light of Act I](image)

As the play progressed, I began to further tint the white fill light with color that became more saturated closer to the end of the play. An example of this can be seen in figure 3 on the following page.
In my design, I chose to merge the idea of time of day with the idea of clean and dirty light. This meant that the colors that would be introduced into the fill light as dirty light as the play progressed would also support time of day. The first act, which took place in the late morning, was bright and white representing noontime sunlight. The second act was colored with ambers representing late afternoon sunsets, and the final act was colored with the deep blues of the late evening and night.

**Research**

From the start of the production process our director, Toby Bercovici, was interested in a pursuing the play with a more abstract approach. As such, she was not interested in an obviously naturalistic light, that is, light that is created directly
by natural sources such as the sun or the moon. While time of day can be specifically suggested through the use of naturalistic light, our production was not intended be a realistic recreation of the world of Andalusian, Spain as indicated by Lorca’s stage directions, but rather a heightened commentary on that world created through the use of abnormal angles on the key light.

In general in most productions, the primary face light for the actors comes directly from the front. The lighting design for this production broke away from that general rule due to the abstract approach to the set and the fact that the production was set in the round with audience on all four sides making it difficult to have every audience member see a similar quality of light on the actor’s faces. The primary face light for the actors was actually top light that bounced off of the white set. By using this untraditional approach that the audience was not used to, the light was able to take on a heightened quality.

Early on in our discussions, Toby asked me to look at specifically at Ingmar Bergman’s films: Winter Light, The Silence, and Cries and Whispers. Much of what she asked me to look for in these films was more related to the sound design of our production, but she was also interested in Bergman’s use of chiaroscuro – that is the manipulation of light and shadow. In the film Cries and Whispers, Toby was particularly fascinated by a specific close-up shot of one of the actors as shown in Figure 4, because her face illustrated a high degree of chiaroscuro. It was necessary to remind Toby that while it was possible to mimic the quality of light in this image, that it would not possible to recreate an exact copy of this image on our stage due to
the limitations of theater in the round – with audience on all four sides – as opposed to the ability of film to show a single specific view from one direction.

![Figure 4: Frame grab from Ingmar Bergman’s Cries and Whispers illustrating Bergman’s use of chiaroscuro](image)

As our preproduction discussions continued another major topic of dialogue and further research was “white” light. Toby had made it clear from the beginning of the design process that she was interested in a monochromatic world, and that any colors in that world other than black and white would be meaningful and used sparingly. Therefore, the use of color clearly had to be limited to creating the idea of “clean” and “dirty” light. As a lighting designer, I knew that the production would not be successful if I had chosen to use only one quality of white light. Therefore, it was necessary to develop several methods to create a variety of “white” light to

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support the varying levels of control Bernarda had over her world during the progression of the play.

During the design process, I had to continually remind Toby when she mentioned the use of white light in the production that she was not looking for only one type of white light, but rather several similar qualities of light that while different all suggested the same “white” light. That is light that appeared to be white to the audience, but that may or may not have tints of color. I discovered through previous experience and hands-on research in the department’s light lab that “white” light can easily be created by manipulating the audience’s perception of what is white.

Figure 5: Example of white light in a monochromatic environment
The first act of the show would have the only truly white light, an example of which is shown in Figure 6. The light would be crisp, sterile, and colorless to support Bernarda’s creation of a sterile world in an attempt to maintain iron-fisted control of every aspect of her daughters’ lives while avoiding any influences from the outside. While this idea seemingly contradicts the play as written, it is supported by the abstract approach we took as a design team to Lorca’s realistic setting. Furthermore, this idea creates a base level of clean light representing Bernarda’s strong control over her daughters that will allow for a change to more saturate colors and dirtier light as her tightfisted control begins to falter.

Figure 6: Research image for Act 1 depicting a cool blue quality of “white” light
The lighting idea for Act 2, an example of which is shown in Figure 7, continued to follow the idea of colorless “white” light. I choose a “white” light that was tinted in a warmer range to suggest both time of day and the beginnings of Bernarda’s loss of control to the audience. This supports the conversations during the knitting circle about men that would otherwise be unheard of in Bernarda’s presence.

Figure 7: Research image for Act 2 depicting a warmer quality of “white” light

Act 3 was very different from the previous acts of the play in both time of day and tone. In this act, Bernarda finally looses her controlling grasp on her daughters,
and her world, as she knows it, begins to crumble. Her daughters openly fight about Angustias’ upcoming marriage to Pepe. I choose a “white” light that was saturated with blue tint as shown in Figure 8. This idea strongly supports the dirtying of the light that represents Bernarda’s loss of control of her world.

Figure 8: Research image for Act 3 depicting a very cold and blue quality of “white” light
CHAPTER II

PRODUCTION

Technical Rehearsals

Compared to some of the challenges while discussing the text with the production team and developing the actual lighting design, I felt that the technical rehearsal process for this production went smoothly and that the design ideas were easily executed. The lighting ideas worked well with the staging, and rather than trying to correct problems within the design, I found myself responding to Toby’s requests for subtle changes with ease.

During the technical rehearsal process I found that my design was easily executed by following the choices that I had made regarding the cleanliness or dirtiness of the light in each scene. Act 1 was crisp, clean, and cool, Act 2 became warmer and more tinted following the dirtying of the light, and Act 3 was the most saturated color representing the dirtiest light in the show. In this way, I was able to follow my choice that the lighting would slowly become dirtier as the play progressed.

The only major lighting issue that I needed to address during the technical rehearsal process was light for the actors entering and exiting from the corners off of the main platform. Miguel Romero, the set designer, had asked me to try to avoid directly lighting anything off the platform. He felt, and I agreed, that the white acting platform would provide plenty of bounce to light the rest of the space. Furthermore, we both agreed that our abstract approach to the world of the play allowed it bleed
off into nothingness, and therefore allowed the actresses to not be as visible off the platform as they were on it.

Figure 9: Example of lighting off-stage areas

While Toby agreed in principle, there were several times where she asked for additional light on the actresses in these normally darker areas. Furthermore, she also had changed some of the blocking from our original discussions to place some of the action off of the main acting platform. I was able to successfully support these
choices and balance both her and Miguel’s requests by adding subtle hints of light to these areas as needed.

**The Final Design**

I feel that the final design as produced for this production was successful, and that it supported this particular production’s approach to *The House of Bernarda Alba*. However, while the production was a success, I believe that there were elements of my design that were not as clear as they could have been and therefore were hard for the audience to understand. Specifically, by combining the ideas of time of day and clean and dirty light I was not able to clearly express to the audience the idea of how the cleanliness of the world related to Bernarda’s control of the world.

I believe this was not as much a problem with the design as it was a problem with how I thought of and discussed the design. I realized while talking to Toby after the show had opened, that while the clean and dirty idea was relevant to the story for her – and for this production – that the idea of time of day was more important. She thought that despite the otherwise abstract approach to the play, that it was still important to represent Lorca’s choice to place the scenes at different times – perhaps as a metaphor to the cycle of life or a relationship. While I attempted to represent this idea with color, I failed to fully flesh out the idea with other qualities of light such as angle and intensity. Furthermore, these ideas may have been clearer had I chosen to stick within a single color palette of either all warm or all cool colors rather then blending those ideas as I did in this design.
Overall, the show was a very bright show, when perhaps there were times that could have been much more isolated and dimmer. For example, during scene one when the town's people enter Bernarda’s home to mourn her late husband, the lighting is very bright and open as seen in figure 10. This idea helped to support Lorca’s story of hundreds of mourners entering the home.
Figure 11: Act 1 Scene 2 – Bernarda talks with her daughters after the mourners have left

The following scenes were more personal and intimate between Bernarda and her daughters without influence or interference from outsiders. The overall quality from the first scenes with the mourners remained during the following scenes, but the light was less intense and more isolated to support the idea that these scenes were personal and intimate to the family.
**Conclusion**

Our production took an abstract approach to an otherwise more straightforward text through the use of theater in the round versus the proscenium theater it was written for, and the use of highly suggestive set pieces versus the highly realistic environments that Lorca described in his text. While this approach was challenging for both me as the principle creator of the world through light and sound and to our director, Toby, as she brought the world alive through the staging of the story, I feel that this production including my lighting design was a success. We learned a great deal about communicating ideas to one another as we worked to develop our point of view of Lorca’s text. While there were ideas that could have been clearer to the audience through further development and exploration, I do not feel that they took away from this work or Lorca’s story. Through a highly productive and educational process we presented a triumphant modern view of Lorca’s classic, *The House of Bernarda Alba*.  

17
APPENDIX

ADDITIONAL DOCUMENTATION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Filename</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
BIBLIOGRAPHY