

AMERICAN CONSERVATORY THEATER  
Carey Perloff, Artistic Director Heather Kitchen, Executive Director

PRESENTS

# WORDS <sup>on</sup> PLAYS

INSIGHT INTO THE PLAY, THE PLAYWRIGHT, AND THE PRODUCTION

## *The Quality of Life*

WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY JANE ANDERSON  
AMERICAN CONSERVATORY THEATER  
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"A great nation  
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 **A.C.T.**  
american conservatory theater

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## THE INNATE POWER OF NATURE, LIGHT, AND AIR

Designing *The Quality of Life* for A.C.T.

BY LESLEY GIBSON

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Playwright Jane Anderson’s stage directions for the opening scene of *The Quality of Life* describe Dinah and Bill sitting alone in their living room, “isolated in a pool of light,” with a single photo of their late daughter hanging above them. When *The Quality of Life* premiered in the Audrey Skirball Kenis Theater in Los Angeles last year, an audience of 115 watched the action from three sides of a thrust stage, experiencing the intimacy of the couple’s grief at a close enough distance to all but reach out and touch the actors.

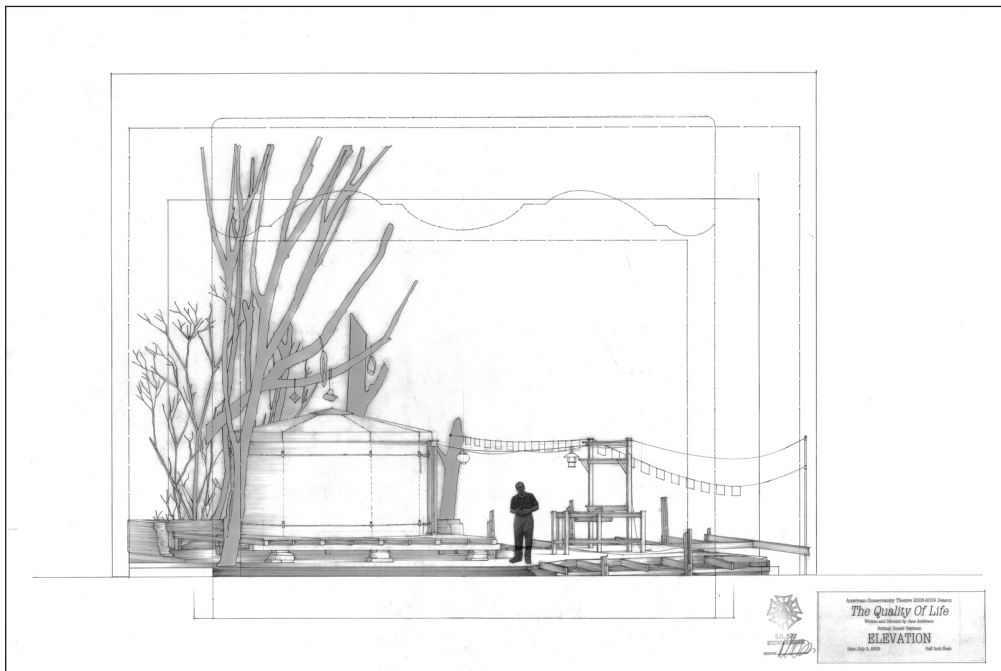
Following the final performance of its successful L.A. run, A.C.T.’s artistic and production teams prepared to welcome the play into the 1,000-seat American Conservatory Theater, with its 77-foot-wide stage and majestic gold-leaf proscenium. A new group of designers, familiar with A.C.T.’s historic house, were brought in to re-imagine the sensory experience of the play—which travels from the closeness of that opening scene to the expanse of a fire-ravaged northern California hillside—in a way that would make the most of the theater’s grandeur and sophisticated technology while allowing the comic and often tender emotional themes of the play to shine through.

Just before rehearsals began in San Francisco, we talked to the designers about the process of re-setting the stage for a brand-new production of *The Quality of Life* at the American Conservatory Theater.

### SCENIC DESIGNER DONALD EASTMAN

#### WHAT WERE YOUR INITIAL THOUGHTS ABOUT THE DESIGN FOR THIS PLAY?

DONALD EASTMAN: I was interested in capturing the power of setting the people against the sky, as opposed to a painted drop of trees, which is what they had in [the original production]. The characters in this play have lost everything. This set has to look like loss. You want to see small people in a big sky with nothing left. Of course, the set is richer than that, but it’s all about: Which way is the view, which way are we looking out from the cliff of the house? It’s a hill house, so it’s perched up somewhere, so that’s why I tried to put the feeling of the view at the back, so we can see sky, as opposed to a comforting, foresty, idyllic thing.



*The Quality of Life* set design sketch of Jeannette and Neil's home, by scenic designer Donald Eastman

**WHAT PARTICULAR CHALLENGES DID YOU CONFRONT IN DESIGNING A SET FOR A THEATER TEN TIMES THE SIZE OF THE ORIGINAL VENUE?**

The most important thing is that, when the setting is realistic, you have to keep the emotional air right. In this play you don't want to look at a lot of stuff; you want to feel like there's nothing. So there are areas where there is a lot of detail, but then there are areas where it just chills, so you get a rest from all the information.

When you're in a more intimate theater, you're really *in* the location. Things tend to seem real to you. Realistic sets are especially challenging, because you might naturally have, say, a trash can next to one thing, something else next to another thing, and so on. But when you step back and look at the bigger picture you might see: I really need something shiny here, or something that lights up over there. Ultimately, you're making a kind of a picture that can in turns be haunting, familiar, evocative, and emotional. It's very hard work, and I've been cursing it [*laughs*]. And then to make it more fun we get to go to three other locations.

**HOW DID YOU APPROACH THE DESIGN FOR THE OTHER LOCATIONS?**

Whenever we're not [on Jeannette and Neil's land], we're in Bill and Dinah's space. We're trying to set those as simply as we can, so really the focus is on Bill and Dinah and what's