

AMERICAN CONSERVATORY THEATER
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PRESENTS

WORDS ^{on} PLAYS

INSIGHT INTO THE PLAY, THE PLAYWRIGHT, AND THE PRODUCTION

The Rainmaker

BY N. RICHARD NASH

DIRECTED BY MARK RUCKER

AMERICAN CONSERVATORY THEATER

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THE RAINMAKER DESIGN PRESENTATION

Excerpts from Remarks Made to A.C.T. Cast and Staff September 24, 2007

DIRECTOR MARK RUCKER: The timing of this piece, for me personally, couldn't be more interesting. It only occurred to me very recently how long I have been carrying around this story. From the time I was about seven years old until maybe around twelve, I was obsessed with Katharine Hepburn. I would pore over the *TV Guide*, mark when her movies were playing, and set my alarm clock and get up at four o'clock in the morning to watch a movie of hers. Of course, one of those mornings, or late evenings, was *The Rainmaker*. I was absolutely captivated by it. There are three movies of hers in particular that I was really struck by: *The Rainmaker*, a movie called *Desk Set*, and the one set in Venice, the David Lean movie . . . *Summertime*.

For some reason these movies really spoke to me, at eight, nine years old. They're all movies about women who are a little bit older than . . . whatever [*laughter*], who have made lives for themselves but have possibly missed their chance for love. How the hell does that speak to an eight-year-old boy from Orange County? I have no idea, but it did. And it freaks me out a little bit to think that decisions like that, at that age, could possibly lead to my sitting in this room with you now. It's fascinating. And as I watch my six-year-old nephew, I'm wondering what choices he's making that are going to lead him to his future. It boggles my mind and I don't know what to think about it. And part of the play that speaks to me is about parenting decisions—how much is too much and how much is not enough, and balancing. Balancing is a thing I've been thinking about as I worked on the play.

My next encounter with this story was I think in my freshman or sophomore year of high school, when in drama class my favorite scene partner, Pam Franklin, and I—after having conquered George and Martha [*laughter*—determined that our next scene would be Lizzie and Starbuck. So a 15-year-old, skinny, kind of effeminate boy took on the role of Starbuck. I'd like to say that I took away something amazing from that, but I just felt completely inept at the end of it. In thinking about it now, however, I realize that I didn't understand; I was working so hard at the bravado that I didn't understand the vulnerability there. I didn't understand how close, or in a similar place, the two characters in that scene really are.

In looking at the play in the last couple of months I've come to be enamored of all of the characters in the play, to appreciate how all of them are in a particular place at this particular moment, a place that, I'm thinking about now, is one of a kind of balancing of

self. Whether it means self-worth or self-esteem or confidence, or whatever the words are that we might choose, or you might use individually to think about it, I find it fascinating that I've come to a place with each and every one of the characters where I'm thinking about these things. And thinking about how each of them is struggling in his or her own way with a sense of self. I love that about the play. And I realize that that's something that probably struck me as an eight-year-old boy, something that I've been struggling with, and looking at, and wondering about, up until last night at midnight. Not that I finished last night . . . [*laughter*]

The thing that's interesting about balancing—I'm going to overuse that word today—is that it's something we went through in working on the play, the designers and [dramaturg] Michael [Paller] and I. When we started to have discussions about the play, we found that the first question we had to answer was: Where are we? The script doesn't tell us literally where the action takes place. We began to understand that it's not necessarily a literal place. I don't know that that means it's not a *real* place, because I think it has to be a real place. But I looked at every town that is listed in the play and thought for a minute that we were in Texas, because there is a Four Corners in Texas, but none of the other towns [mentioned in the script] were there. And then I tried Kansas and New Mexico and Colorado and Nebraska and I didn't find the place.

What's interesting is that the play gives us specific towns that are meant to have a specific quality. There is so much in the play that is real and specific and literal—frying eggs, for example—and then as you step back farther there are these other aspects, there is a spectrum that leads us all the way to a fantastic yellow sky. Or something beautiful and romantic and poetic. So for us, it's been a bit of a journey trying to figure out how to embody these qualities of the play.

I also immediately assumed that, because the play was written in 1953–54 and the script doesn't tell us that it is set in a specific time or another era, the action takes place in 1953–54. I think it was [costume designer] Lydia [Tanji] and Michael, following that, who brought up some evidence about things mentioned in the script—the radio crystal set, the telephone, Snookie's car—which we researched, and we realized that Nash is telling us the play does not in fact take place in the time that it was written, even though other productions have sometimes set it in the fifties.

So, we found our way to a different place, following the evidence. However, I still feel it's a literal place, which we've decided to land in the very early 1930s, because of the time of drought. But because there is no reference to Depression problems, or to financial problems unrelated to the drought, the setting still feels nonliteral in that sense. It's been fascinating trying to land, and not land. I want to leave room for us to make some decisions [in

rehearsal], as well, for me to learn from you about what the play is. I am also excited about doing what does, in some ways, feel like a realistic play. [Scenic designer] Rob [Morgan] and I worked hard to try to get, believe it or not, a three-walled set for this, which is very traditional and, at this point, I think, kind of refreshing for us to see, especially at A.C.T., which tends to do plays that have metaphor and ideas and trail-blazing visuals. Maybe we can do that, too, and have the visuals and a kind of edge about it, as well.

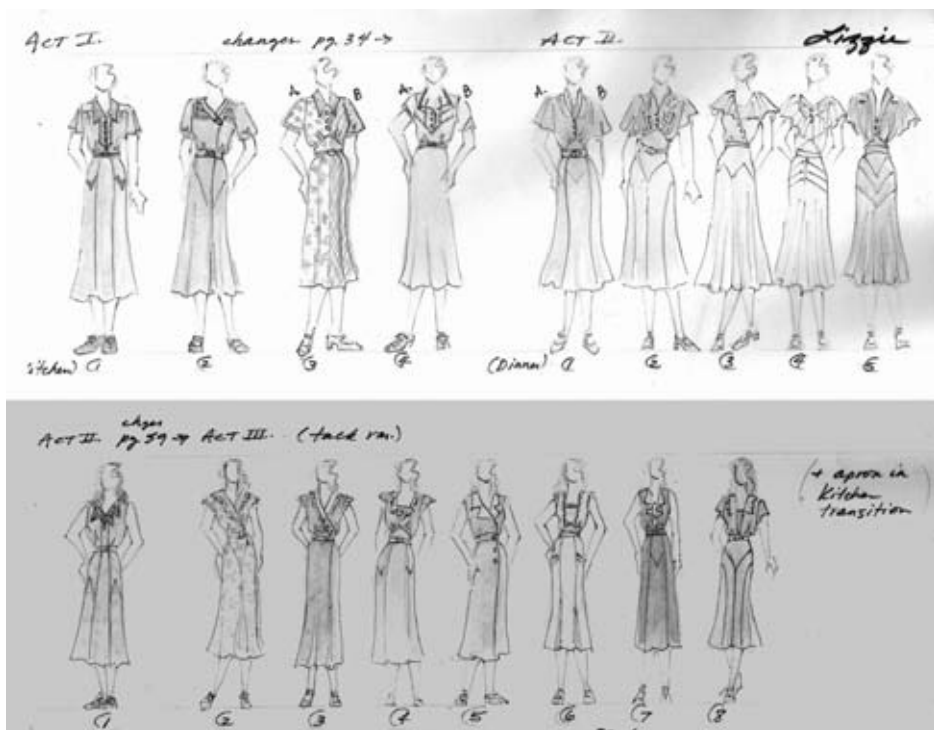
SCENIC DESIGNER ROB MORGAN: [*Morgan's remarks accompanied a slideshow of visual images: photographs of paintings, set models and drawings, interiors and exteriors of ranches and farmhouses, etc.*] As Mark said, we started meeting around May or June and started talking about where we are, again trying to figure out where this is. I just want to go over some of the visual research that seemed to bubble to the top in terms of this play. Some of the work of Andrew Wyeth, Thomas Hart Benton, obviously. An influence on costumes was artist Grant Wood, whose work is a lot like Thomas Hart Benton's, in a sense—real classic environments, classic rolling hills, classic farm architecture. Some farmhouse interiors, things that seemed to resonate as we were tossing images back and forth via email. Mark and I talked about whether any of these images would stick, kind of like throwing pasta at a wall: What's going to stick in terms of this show? A couple of them were these really vibrant color interiors. At one point Mark wrote me and said this play is a “valentine to a sweeter time,” and those words really resonated with me in terms of a visual way to go with this. So there are some classic exteriors, a windmill. From there we went to a very rough white model. [Lighting designer] Don [Darnutzer] then would take a photo I emailed to him [of the set model] and change the background, change the sky, so we could bounce ideas off of Mark to give him an idea of what sunsets looked like, what the Curry kitchen looks like during the day, what the set in a night scene might look like, some of the color.

We have three basic looks: the Curry house, File's office, and the tack room. The tack room has to be a very magical place for us. It has to be the place where Lizzie and Starbuck really fall in love. It has to have that magical quality to it.

COSTUME DESIGNER LYDIA TANJI: In my research we found that the middle class didn't really feel the Depression until the mid 1930s. We chose 1930–32 for Lizzie's looks, and her clothes are mainly new because of her Sweetriver visit. The first look is in the kitchen at home, which is more practical and streamlined. For the dinner scene, it's more flowy, and she feels a little ridiculous afterward when File doesn't show. Starbuck has a little showmanship, and we also wanted to differentiate the cattlemen from the farmers, so we went with a more western look. He has some Native American accents. The Sheriff is cozy, and

File, in his first look, is much more untogether, and then he makes an effort when he goes to see Lizzie. Jimmy has an elk-tooth necklace that is gone after he gets Snookie's hat. Noah is more studious and uptight. With H.C., we're just having fun.

SOUND DESIGNER JEFF MOCKUS: We originally talked about the late 1920s, but since we shifted to the early thirties I'm very pleased, because it opens up a few more possibilities, musically. What I've been searching for is a precursor to country, like western swing, but isn't hillbilly music. Not like the *O Brother Where Art Thou* soundtrack, which is a great example of stuff that came out of Alabama, which is east of all of this. I'm just trying to find something that's going to speak to a western state a little more. Music on the radio at that time was almost all live, and we've got these archival recordings. Either they were at a dance and they'd hear a territory band that just plays the area, or in the bigger towns they would see the Chicago, New York, and New Orleans acts that would tour around the entire country. There was a great band called the Light Crust Dough Boys, which was very common—they would put together a band that would promote a product, so, "Light Crust Dough."



Looks for Lizzie designed by Lydia Tanji