

WORDS on PLAYS

INSIGHT INTO THE PLAY, THE PLAYWRIGHT, AND THE PRODUCTION

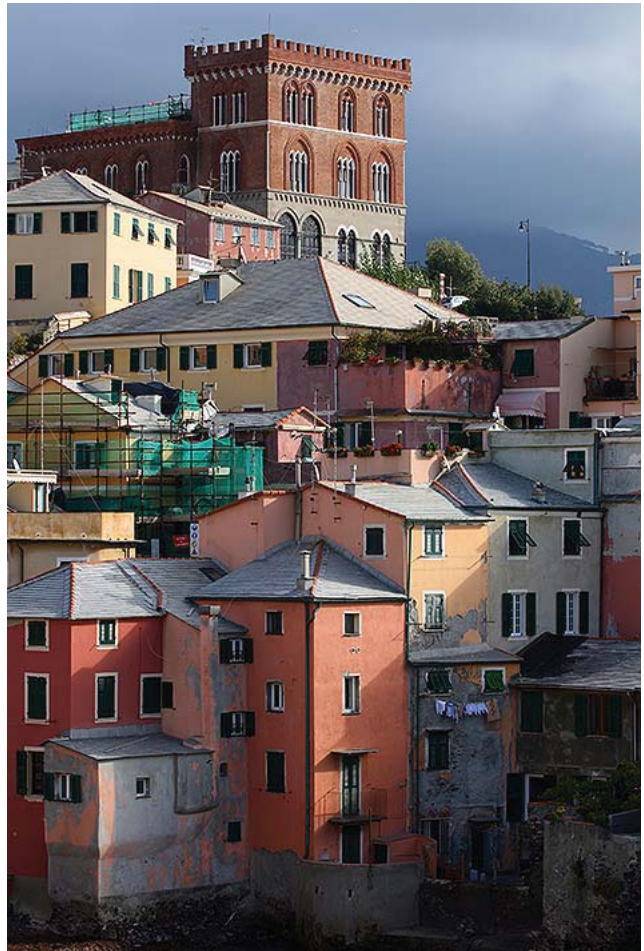
A PLAYGROUND OF ITALIAN WINDOWS

An Interview with Scenic Designer Erik Flatmo about *Scapin*

BY DAN RUBIN

While A.C.T.'s production of *Scapin* theatricalizes an American adaptation of a French play, there was no question for scenic designer Erik Flatmo that his set would be grounded in Italian architecture and imagery. History supports his impulse. When Molière was born in 1622, neoclassical ideals were finally gaining a foothold in France after more than a century of struggling for popularity. Cardinal Richelieu used his position under King Louis XIII to push French literature and the arts towards Italian aesthetics and, to this end, gave France its first Italianate theater in 1641: the Palais Cardinal, which became the Palais-Royal upon Richelieu's death a year later. The space boasted, among other things, a permanent proscenium arch. Molière's *Les fourberies de Scapin* premiered at the Palais-Royal 30 years later. Based on commedia dell'arte structure, employing commedia-inspired characters, and opening on a stage that looked like it belonged in Rome, everything about *The Tricks of Scapin* was Italian, save for the fact that it was written in French.

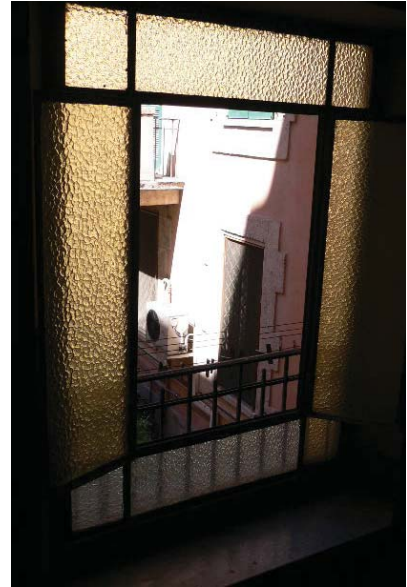
We spoke with Flatmo about creating an Italian atmosphere on the A.C.T. stage and navigating the scenic necessities of director Bill Irwin's particular brand of physical comedy.



Boccadasse, Genoa, Italy. Research image that inspired Erik Flatmo's scenic design for *Scapin*.

IN THIS ADAPTATION OF *SCAPIN*, NO SETTING IS SPECIFIED IN THE STAGE DIRECTIONS. WHEN DID YOU DECIDE TO RETURN THE PLAY TO ITS ITALIAN ROOTS?

When I first read the play, it felt like Italy. It felt sunny and jovial, and I thought that Italy would be a more robust base than Molière's France. Also, even though it doesn't say what city or country the play takes place in, there are allusions to a port and a bay, and that also makes it feel Italian. It was originally intended to be set in Naples, although I referred more often to Genoa.



ABOVE Views of Italy. Research images that inspired Erik Flatmo's scenic design for *Scapin*.

NEXT PAGE Patterns of Italy. Research images that inspired Erik Flatmo's scenic design for *Scapin*.

A LOT OF YOUR RESEARCH IS BASED ON YOUR OWN PHOTOGRAPHS OF ITALY. DID YOU GO THERE FOR THIS SHOW?

I went there for fun four or five years ago, and I took a lot of photographs. I guess I knew somewhere down the line they would be useful, but I kind of forgot about them until I started working on this show and realized I needed images of Italian architecture. The more I looked at these photos, the more apparent it became to me that my own primary research would become the material backbone of the design.

I knew I wanted the walls [of the structures onstage] to be patterned in some way, and originally I was thinking of inventing my own patterns, but the more I thought about it, the more copying existing patterns seemed like the right thing to do.

WHEN I THINK ABOUT THIS PLAY (AND ALL BIG, FRENETIC COMEDIES), I DON'T THINK OF ORNAMENTATION, BUT ABOUT THE BIGGER PHYSICAL NECESSITIES.

I definitely didn't start out with the details; I started with the larger gesture. At first what was important to me was the sense of urbanity—that it's happening on a street. The scene is very straightforward: we have two houses. But it was clear to me that this isn't *Much Ado About Nothing*. This isn't a villa. This is an urban context.

Anyone who has been to Europe knows that the streets there are much narrower, and there's this sense of enclosure that you get in the urban centers, even Renaissance urban centers. Stone streets and stone facades. I really wanted to capture that. And height was important to me. It was really about creating a street.

Also, in the script, one of Scapin's first entrances is from a window. That led to the idea of creating an environment with a lot of windows facing the street. In Italy, what I found very powerful is how a street can be open during the day when people are going about their business, but then there'll be siesta and everything closes down and all the shutters close. That image of a street being open versus a street being closed is very powerful, so I really grabbed onto the idea of shutters.

That also seemed like a good way to create a structure that is a playground; windows to climb in and out of are useful for this kind of comedy.



HOW DO THE ACTORS GET DOWN FROM THE WINDOWS?

It all takes place inside the actual structures. In the four corner buildings there will be rung ladders, or something similar, inside the set pieces. In the two main houses, there will have to be platforming.

THERE ARE 14 WINDOWS TOTAL; ARE THEY ALL USABLE?

Yes. Some of them have signs coming through them, but the actors can use those, too. That was a big technical problem we had to solve. Luckily, Mark Luevano, the shop foreman, really did a great job coming up with a solution by designing shutters that can mechanically open, to allow the signs to come through, but are also functional for an actor who walks up and manually opens and closes it.



WHAT ARE THE SIGNS FOR?

In the text, George, one of the musicians [played by Randall Craig], manipulates signs that announce things like, “Exposition.” That device brings up the questions: “What kind of world are we in? Is this entirely realistic?” Apparently not, because we’re in a world where signs can just appear. So I had to figure out the rules, and I decided one rule would be that all the signs would come out of windows. We have broken that rule (and at this point we have a sign that flies in from above), but the larger gesture that the windows are the mouthpieces for these signs seemed good to me.

At the same time, this isn’t a play about windows. You’ll notice that most of them don’t face the audience directly. They’re either facing offstage or at angles so nobody looks at them straight on. They’re not upstaging what is happening onstage actorwise.



The patterning came in when I was trying to answer the question, “How real are these houses?” It is important that the show retain one foot in reality but also have one foot in a world that is magical and light. That’s a very delicate balance. On one hand, you don’t want to get too jokey—the jokes should be in the show, not in the set—but on the other hand, you don’t want it to be so heavy that it’s like a museum recreation. It is really difficult to walk that line, and the patterning seemed useful because it *is* real. None of it’s made up. And because of that, it connects to reality while suggesting an illustrative world that’s light and fun.



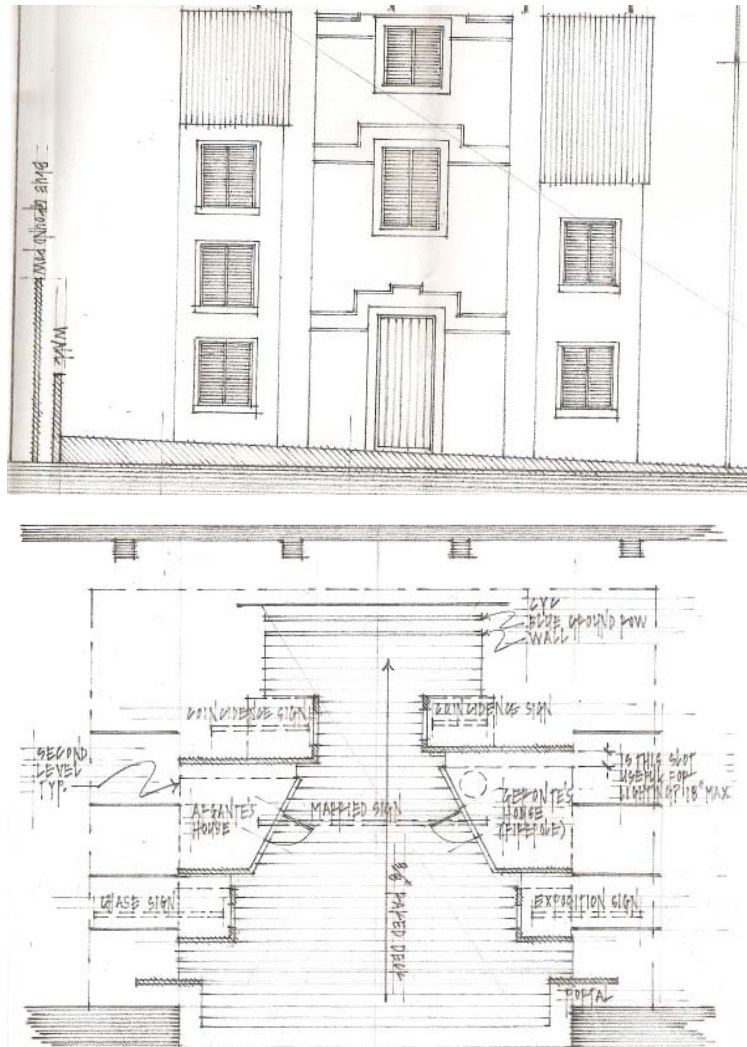
ARE THERE OTHER ELEMENTS THAT YOU INCLUDED TO PUSH THE WORLD TOWARDS THE UNREAL?

The two main structures, Argante and Geronte’s houses (the structures that the actors interact with the most), have dimension to them: baseboards on the façades, molding, a cornice. The shutters are real shutters. The things that the actors will be touching are real. Bill expressed to me that it was important that the stakes be high enough, and real enough, for these characters that when they get in trouble, or their lives are on the line, the audience fears for them. For that

to happen, there has to be some reality to the set. That's really where the two main houses come from.

The other structures feel much less real. There are six structures total onstage, and those at the four corners are basically milk-box shaped. If you look at the cities of the Cinque Terre and Genoa [in Italy], you definitely see tall, milk-box structures that are painted in Mediterranean colors: pumpkin, pink, green. They are just these tall boxes with punctured window openings, and that's really where the spirit of those four structures in the set design come from.

A huge inspiration for me was Piero Fornasetti, a 20th-century Italian designer. His work was the first thing I thought of when I read the script. He's no longer living, but there's a design house that produces housewares, fabrics, and all sorts of wonderful things using his designs. What I see as one of the signatures of Italian design (contemporary or modern) is the ability to do something that is of its own time that also connects to the past, bridging the past and the here and now. Fornasetti's work has a carefree spirit to it, but, at the same time, his sources are really rooted in Italian history: you'll see a lot of neoclassical and renaissance sourcing. A lot of that information is in his design work, but it doesn't weigh it down.



ABOVE Early design drawings for *Scapin* by scenic designer Erik Flatmo (made before it was decided not to include a raked stage)

SO YOU WERE TRYING TO REPLICATE THE IDEA OF HONORING HISTORY.

While making the design contemporary. How do you create that world? I think it has to have a certain lightness. Lightness is really the word that feels right to me. It wasn't really as much an effort to directly copy Fornasetti as it was to capture that spirit. That said, there is a design for a sun that may or may not make it onstage. We'll see. If it gets in the way, we'll cut it, but there is a sun on a stick that could appear in Act II and swing onto the stage. It is very directly inspired by Fornasetti. The benches are also replicas of his work.

SPEAKING OF SWINGING, I HEARD THERE MAY BE CHARACTERS SWINGING IN FROM OFFSTAGE?

The set is kind of a jungle gym, but a lot of that [physical action] will emerge in the rehearsal room. I would definitely be thrilled if they were able to use the set in acrobatic ways. I hope I've set up something with that potential.



Piero Fornasetti-inspired sun by scenic designer Erik Flatmo

ARE THE MUSICIANS ONSTAGE?

The musicians are in the house-left orchestra box. With them I've always thought about the Johnny Carson show and that dynamic between the bandleader and the show: how he wants to be part of it, but, at the same time, isn't actually on the stage. Having the musicians in the orchestra box, I think, is a wonderful solution because it lets them be very close to the audience. Everyone can see them. They are both part of the stage and part of the audience, which I think is exactly where they want to live.

WERE THERE ANY MAJOR OBSTACLES IN DESIGNING THIS SET?

I would say the biggest challenge I have encountered is color. I wanted to create a world with color; I knew I didn't want it to be simply black and white, because Italy is so vibrant and the play is so vibrant. Also, for the Roundabout [Theatre Company] production in 1997 (which I watched at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts), the scenery was entirely black and white, so I wanted to try something different. At the same time creating a world with color everywhere was too much. It's important that the actors stand out,

and if you put too much color onstage you drown the actors. There was a lot of conversation about finding the right balance.

What I settled on was that the floor and Argante and Geronte's houses are mostly gray, black, and white, while the four corner buildings have color. I picked four colors that I like that I think work with the costumes and are taken from Italian houses, particularly in and around Genoa. I'm really happy because the upstage-right structure is a green that is actually copied from Prada, which is very Italian and contemporary.

In reality, the pattern work on Italian buildings is very colorful, but I decided to limit it to grays. That was another way I was able to limit the palette so we didn't get ten million colors onstage.

WHAT HAPPENS TO THE SET DESIGN ONCE REHEARSALS START?

There may be some minor revisions in terms of a detail here and there, but by that point the bones, the main components, are set. What may happen is, once we throw the actors on the set, some things may come up, such as the height of a bench may want to be modified or maybe the access structure (the step unit or ladder that they use to get to a certain window) may want to change slightly. We're talking about smaller things. There's always something. You don't know what's going to happen. Every project I work on there are all these ideas that, for whatever reason, turn out not to be useful. I used to have a movable fountain that would get pushed around in the middle of the courtyard, but Bill didn't need it.



Cinque Terre, Italy. Research image that inspired Erik Flatmo's scenic design for *Scapin*.

DO YOU DESIGN DIFFERENTLY FOR A COMEDY THAN YOU DO FOR A TRAGEDY?

I guess so. I never think of it that directly. I never think, "Well, today I'm working on a comedy, so I better brighten up my color palette." But, really, yes. Some things I've learned: a little bit of color *is* good for comedy. I'm fully aware that it's a cliché, but if you starve the audience of any lightness, any brightness, they don't know that it's a comedy. It's not pandering. If you can signify visually to an audience by, for instance, giving them some bright colors, in a sense you're giving them permission to laugh. But it's not a didactic process: "Today I'm designing for a comedy, so I'll use bright orange, sky blue, and purple." It's not like that.

THE STORYTELLING REALLY BEGINS AS SOON AS THE AUDIENCE SEES THE SET.

Audiences aren't dumb. They'll figure out that they are seeing a comedy regardless, but it's a conversation we're having. In that conversation, I'm saying, "This is a world that's not exactly real, and it's a little bit sunny." And they say, "Oh, it's a comedy. I'm allowed to laugh." That's great for the performers because then we are all starting from a higher benchmark. We don't have to completely reinvent the wheel every time. I'm sure if I looked back on my own work, there are exceptions, and I did once design a comedy where the director and I decided, "We're going to make this so real. As real as possible. We're not going to do anything that's funny in the set." It wasn't a disaster by any means. It was a great production. But in the end I felt I could have lightened it up a little bit.

HOW HAS IT BEEN WORKING WITH BILL IRWIN?

It's been wonderful. Bill's been amazing. He's a wonderful physical performer, so that really tells me that, no matter what I do, the set has to be serviceable to the physical actor. It has to provide the actors opportunities for physical comedy. For example, we discussed whether or not we wanted to have a raked stage. On a purely visual level, the rake would have been beautiful, but it would have made it more difficult for the actors, so we decided to cut the rake. It's nice to know that the physicality is the most important thing. Everything else has to work around that.