

AMERICAN CONSERVATORY THEATER

Carey Perloff, Artistic Director

PRESENTS

WORDS ^{on} PLAYS

INSIGHT INTO THE PLAY, THE PLAYWRIGHT, AND THE PRODUCTION

Vigil

WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY MORRIS PANYCH

AMERICAN CONSERVATORY THEATER

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PLAYING IN A.C.T.'S ATTIC

An Interview with A.C.T. Properties Supervisor Ryan Parham

BY DAN RUBIN

The story of *Vigil* takes place in the cluttered attic bedroom of a poorly maintained home belonging to Olympia Dukakis's character, the aged and ailing Grace. Playwright Morris Panych explains: "As Grace got older and her world started to close in on her, she just went farther up the stairs" until she could not ascend any higher. She surrounded herself with a personal history to which she is no longer contributing. We asked A.C.T.'s properties supervisor what goes into creating the clutter of a retired hoarder.

WITH A SET THAT IS SO FULL OF STUFF, WHERE IS THE LINE BETWEEN PROP DESIGN AND SET DESIGN?

As with any show, sets is still in charge of the walls, the floor, and the ceiling pieces, doors, windows, things like that. Any item you would put into a moving truck when you change residences: that's considered a prop. That's a good way of thinking about it. It can even come down to lighting fixtures and rugs and pillows. Food, dried goods, canned goods, bicycles.

SO IT'S NOT SIMPLY THAT IF IT IS STATIC ONSTAGE IT'S PART OF A SET, AND IF IT HAS THE CAPABILITY OF MOVING IT'S A PROP? WHAT IS THE BED IN *VIGIL*?

The bed would be a prop. Any sort of furniture piece is a prop. The lines can get a little bit blurred, like they will get blurred with *The Tosca Project* coming up [in June]. There is a huge 15-foot-long bar, and that's in set world (I imagine . . . I'm hoping), because it is more of a permanent fixture of that room. But then with something like that there is definitely a lot of coordination between sets and props: sets will build that Tosca bar, and then props will dress it out with the bottles, the beer tap system, the espresso machine, all the glassware and barware. There's collaboration: sets will make the base structure of an item and then props will take over and dress it out or trim it out.

IS THERE ANYTHING LIKE THAT IN *VIGIL*?

I don't think so. I think it's pretty straightforward. All the items onstage are furniture items. This is Grace's attic, where all her leftover junk from all her life—including photo albums, an accordion she played when she was eight years old, newspapers and magazines—they're all in this room. It's all her possessions, and that definitely falls in props's world.

WHEN YOU HAVE A WORLD DEFINED BY A SPECIFIC CHARACTER'S STUFF, DO YOU HAVE LONG CONVERSATIONS WITH THE DIRECTOR ABOUT THAT CHARACTER? FOR EXAMPLE, HOW DO YOU KNOW GRACE PLAYED AN ACCORDION WHEN SHE WAS EIGHT?

Sometimes I would have that conversation with the director, but with Ken MacDonald designing . . . [he and Morris Panych have] been talking about this play for years, so he's the go-to guy. They'll talk about what items are actually in the space and then, when I come on board, I get more involved with the actual actor usage of those items. Like, Ken and Morris will create this stack of trunks near the window that Marco [Barricelli, who plays Kemp,] needs to climb up. They just want a stack of trunks. I come in and say, "Well, we probably shouldn't put the wicker trunk on the bottom. We should probably use a metal trunk." That's how I get involved: helping them physically shape a world that will withstand theatricality.

TELL ME ABOUT THE "DEATH MACHINE" THAT KEMP BUILDS FOR GRACE WHEN HE GROWS IMPATIENT WAITING FOR HER TO DIE FROM NATURAL CAUSES.

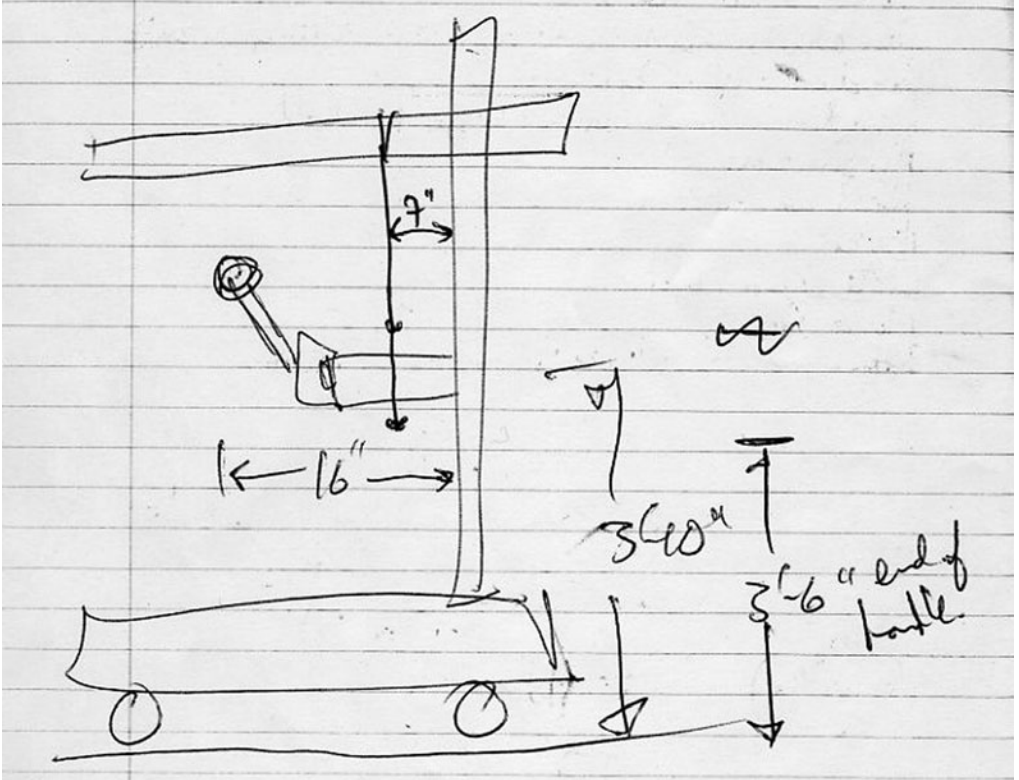
It's based on a photo [from a past production], because Ken and Morris have done this production numerous times before, though there are only a few elements that are constant: they love the fact that it is made out of one of those portable commodes that invalids would have in their room. So it is on a castered dolly with a portable commode. There's a big lever. Because it is so huge, it of course doesn't fit through the doorway into this attic space, so the crossbar is lowered. It comes into the room. It's raised up. There's a jerry-rigged counterweight system.

DO WE SEE KEMP BRING THE MACHINE IN?

Yeah, we see him bring it in, set it up, hook up the jumper cables to the battery. Really the constants are: the commode, the hangman structure, the car battery, and there's a frying pan [activated by] a big switch that will allow it to drop. Kemp gives Grace the choice: she could die an electrical death or from a massive blow to the head. Other than that, the machine is made from basically whatever you can find in the props shop, junk stores, refuse places, as far as gearing it out, making it look like it was built by someone who has never really built anything before.

DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA WHAT THOSE ELEMENTS ARE GOING TO BE?

We're still at the research stage, but we have the battery and the commode and some random pulleys, ropes, and levers and stuff like that. This week we are actually going to



Sketch of the "death machine" for *Vigil* by properties supervisor Ryan Parham

be working on the frying pan. It's a cast-iron frying pan that swings down, and it's supposed to look like it hits Marco in the head and knocks him onto the bed frame, which is then electrocuted. We can't use a real frying pan, because if it does actually make contact with him it would do some damage. So we're going to be researching and doing some experiments as far as what kind of rubber or silicone or foam we can use that will give the appearance and have the rigidity of a fry pan, but if it does make contact it's not going to do much damage.

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IS THE SELECTION OF MATERIALS YOU USE THE PRIMARY PRECAUTION YOU TAKE WITH SOMETHING LIKE THIS, OR ARE THERE OTHER FAILSAFES IN THE APPARATUS ITSELF TO PREVENT INJURIES?

It definitely has to be designed to operate the same way every time. The actor has to be comfortable enough to know what to expect. With something like the death machine, you don't want any improvisation. Technically it would fall under stage violence, so it is highly choreographed and metered out, as far as the actor counting off his steps, timing it to make