The first time I met Karl Eigsti was in 1979 when I invited him to Wichita, Kansas to judge a national undergraduate design competition. In my invitation, I encouraged him to bring a project to share with the students. Much to our delight he brought a large model of *Knockout*, the Broadway production he was designing at the time. The enthusiasm he had for this project stimulated a genuine excitement among the students and was inspiring for this faculty member. Many others were impressed with Eigsti’s design of *Knockout*: it received a Tony Award nomination and the Joseph Maharam Foundation Award.

In the summer of 2001 our paths crossed again when a student in my theatre program at University of Minnesota, Duluth was investigating the graduate training program at Brandeis University where Eigsti teaches. A call to introduce my student led to extended conversations with him which in turn blossomed into a plan to mount an exhibit of Eigsti’s work at the upcoming USITT conference. As often happens, this plan sparked another idea and members of the Scene Design Commission have nominated Eigsti to receive a USITT Distinguished Achievement Award.

Arnold Aronson, who in 1985 devoted a chapter to Karl Eigsti in his book, *American Set Design*, wrote the following words for the nomination: “Karl Eigsti has been a major designer in the American theatre. Although he has not always received the recognition of some of his more famous colleagues, he has played a significant role in the development of design and has been notable for a distinctive and elegant style. Of particular interest are his designs for the Arena Stage in Washington. Working under the notoriously difficult circumstances of designing for theatre-in-the-round, he created a virtually new vocabulary that conveyed the meaning and emotion of a play through emblematic means when traditional ground plans were not always possible. In more recent years he has made his mark as an educator. One of the most articulate designers in the industry, he brought his talents and insights to new generations of students and attracted a first-class faculty around him. The combination of his work as scenographer and educator will leave a lasting mark on American theatre.”

In preparation for the exhibit, I visited Eigsti at his home outside Boston this past summer. Together, we reviewed his forty-year career which includes over fifteen Broadway productions, numerous productions at several major regional theatres, industrials for big-name clients like IBM, a television show or two and finally teaching. I decided to focus this article on his work for the Arena Stage in Washington, DC, mainly because the style and the vocabulary Eigsti developed there has had such a major influence on contemporary American scenic design. He talked about the frustration many of us feel when approaching a design for arena stage: “The main problem with arena,” he said, “is there was never a play that was written for the arena stage—with the exception as I found out later of Alan Aykborn who actually had an arena theatre up in Yorkshire… and had written many of his plays for the arena.” Eigsti had plenty of opportunities to explore this “problem” at Arena Stage. His sketches for a few of his shows there are shown here along with his observations about them.

A comprehensive look at Eigsti’s work will be on display at the 2002 USITT Conference & Stage Expo in New Orleans, February 14th through the 16th.

“Every play produced on the arena stage needs to be transformed into a three-dimensional plan. That plan must preserve the integrity of the play and at the same time serve as a functioning dynamic for the problems that exist as far as focus and directional attention.”  

KARL EIGSTI
“The problem we faced with *Billy Bud* was concerning the architecture of a ship. The forward and an aft part of the ship establishes a front and back relationship. The arena is not set up that way. The arena is a multi-dimensional four-sided object. For the production of *Billy Bud*, we had a variety of locations to represent on stage. There were scenes in the captains cabin, in the hold where the men were and scenes both below and above deck. So how do you do this in an arena format? In addition to that the director wanted to make the audience feel like they were on the ship, as well as below and above deck.

“So the answer to this ground plan was to see the design as an abstraction and not a directional thing. The audience was drawn into the action by ropes that came in from the entrances representing the exterior of the boat, the above-deck areas. The stage floor was comprised of a variety of grates and platformed decks. The locations of above the deck and below the deck were indicated by the use of light. When light was coming up through the grates, that indicated the location was below deck. When the light struck the ropes, that gave us the indication of being above deck.”

“Now this is 1964, when scenery in the round was limited to a rug and a Victorian loveseat. Nobody ever thought of sculptural scenery in a three-dimensional context especially with its regard to plan. Plan in the 1960s was thought of as a rather static thing.”

Interiors for Broadway shows at that time were designed using a formula: you have the coffee table, the sofa, the chairs, and you have three steps up and the entrance of the apartment on a platform. Nothing has to move because you can see over the chair, over the table, and over the sofa and see whoever comes into the apartment or house. The arena stage configuration required that Eigsti break out of this formula.

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**Long Day’s Journey Into Night**

By Eugene O'Neill

1965: Arena Stage, directed by Mel Shapiro.

“During the research process, Mel Shapiro and I went to the house of *Long Day’s Journey*. The last owner was still living in the house when we visited New London. We noticed the plan of the house, especially on the first floor. There were three rooms: the front room, the dining room and the little porch. The rooms were connected by archways and bled freely into each other. Visually, they were open, the only way you could get away from anybody in that floorplan was to go upstairs. [In Eigsti’s set design] the second floor was created as an abstraction of shutters and rafters above the arena stage. Up in the air, hovering over the whole production, as an ominous cloud over these three men, was the spirit of Mary.”

In those days, *Long Day’s Journey* was always done with a realistic interior. In Eigsti’s set, the various acting areas were fused together. A series of floor patterns, for example parquet and planking, indicated the various rooms without the use of any walls. “Here again, the challenge of doing this play in the arena, led to a sort of revolutionary way of staging.”
The National Health
By Peter Nichols
1978: Arena Stage, directed by David Chambers.

National Health was another challenge. It was a ward in a hospital; essentially a row of beds going down, and then something in between—like a barracks. Eigsti used the arrangement of beds to establish a polarity of four different corners. Every plan in the arena has some kind of element which throws it out into the four points of the compass. In this particular design it was the placement of beds.

The windows which you see in the drawing were stained glass, Arts and Crafts style. The hospital, a relic of the past whose windows combined with the awkward mechanism of the cages coming up and down to serve the patients in the beds, provided a Victorian feeling for the play.

Death of a Salesman
By Arthur Miller
1974: Arena Stage, directed by Zelda Fichandler.

This particular sketch happens to be a proscenium version of the original arena design of Death of a Salesman. “The design was intended to go to Israel but it never actually happened. The sketch however, became so popular, that I just kept it in my portfolio. It was then published in Arnold Aronson’s book and became the icon for the production.”

Eigsti confronted the open space problem when he started designing the arena production of Death of a Salesman. “We wanted to make this play atmospheric, a dream play, a surreal image. Mielziner’s interior set for the original production was done in the style of the 1950s. We decided not to have any indication of the house.” This concept included visual icons hovering above the stage, sort of floating surreal memories, “like a Dali painting.” Icons such as the model of the house, sample cases, the car and a tree limb were suspended from the ceiling in and around a series of frames. These picture frames were interlocking, so no matter where you sat in the audience, you saw the icons, these memories, through multiple layers in this three-dimensional space.

“Over my twenty-five years of designing in the arena space, I always felt the need to penetrate the cubic volume with some kind of vertical.” A design element needs to link the world that’s hovering overhead with the floor and the actors on it, or “a visual separation, a void, seems to be created.”

Eigsti identified architectural elements that would help develop a visual relationship between the hanging pieces and the floor pieces. Posts became a integral design element for the arena space. “We modeled these posts as an extension of the front porch, typical of Gothic [architecture].” The actors wound their way through these posts almost ignoring them, while at the same time being grounded by them. The frames interpreted the space above. “The frames are interlocking in different planes, and in many cases they were like an Escher drawing.” One frame would be here and the other frame would be inside of it without any way of rationalizing their relationship.

As the actors walked through the stage space and they moved pieces of furniture, seemingly at random. “They basically wore the house.” When the play moved to scenes in the hotel, the actors picked an area that didn’t have a bed and claimed it. “They would pull up a chair, use the chair in that scene…the whole play was done in Willy Loman’s head…in his memory with no architectural rational.

“Arthur Miller, the playwright, came and saw the production. In retrospect he said, ‘this is the way I imaged it in the first place.’”
The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui
By Bertolt Brecht, translated by Ralph Manheim
1974: Arena Stage, directed by Zelda Fichandler.

One of the problems for Eigsti in designing Arturo Ui for an arena stage was including an orchestra. “We made a stand for the orchestra. The actual orchestra was on a platform floating in the air above the stage, like a circus orchestra over the entrance when the elephants come into the arena.” All the scenery was delivered to the stage with a forklift, in true circus fashion.

The stage floor is the defining element for the arena as far as color and texture is concerned. A swastika painted on the deck, and partially obscured by saw dust, became the backdrop for the show. The whole production was done like a clown show.

The band platform up above the stage was decorated with grotesque wings. “I was using winged seahorses as mid-European, gothic images of a bizarre nature. Images found in the Third Reich but without the obvious use of the swastika.” The whole play takes place in Chicago with Arturo Ui being a florist. Like a 1920s gangster story, each figure has its historical connection to the Third Reich.

The Front Page
By Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur
1974: Arena Stage, directed by Edward Payson Call.

The Front Page had two elements that posed design problems for the arena stage: the convict and Hildy, locked in the room, must be seen simultaneously with reporters trying to gain entry at the door, and, someone must jump out of a window never to be seen again.

First of all, the reporters knocking on the door: “I visualized this room was an attic in city hall where they had stuffed the reporters…” like a makeshift newsroom. Access to the room was through an L-shaped opening cut into the floor with steps going down to a landing. The door going down to the landing was only seen three feet above the floor level, so it didn’t mask the rest of the room. The rest of the steps went down into the trap room. When the reporters came in, the audience could just see their heads down in this stairwell. “And so psychologically you can see Hildy and the convict in the room… the visual barrier of the door has been resolved.”

Diagonally opposed to the entrance of the room was the big bay window through which the girl jumped. Behind the window was a trap opening masked with black drapes. “Every night she would run and jump [through the window], disappearing behind it. The audience was totally shocked because they were looking at her all night long, she ran all the way across the stage, took a running leap, jumped through the window… it was always a shock, everybody in the audience would gasp when it happened.”

Another design problem was the ceiling area, from which debris needed to fall in one scene. Vertical pipes were used to create a visual connection between the acting area and the ceiling above without obstructing the view of the audience. The existence of a ceiling was reinforced when submachine gun fire came through the window, knocking plaster down and bursting some pipes.
**Duck Hunting**

By Alexander Vampilov, translated by Alma H. Law

1978: Arena Stage, directed by Zelda Fichandler.

“*Duck Hunting*—let’s talk about the verticality again. This was a Russian play, a story about a man who was depressed by his life in a Socialist state and was going duck hunting. It was raining the entire time and he eventually commits suicide with his shotgun. The image of the duck hunting in the rain is so pervasive in the text. About eighteen silver-gray cables were stretched from the grid on an angle into the deck. The deck was gray carpet. The actors just walked through the maze of cables ignoring them. Wherever you sat in the auditorium you could see these cables pick up the light. They fractured the stage picture, which provided a wonderful focal point to the actor. The actor would always be seen with this very thin line, as a kind of framing device. It was a groupulous [huh?] play, a more of a play on words.”

“Two types of ducks were used in the production. The realistic ducks in flight were sculptural ducks that we crafted out of clay. These ducks were arranged like a flock of ducks that were scared up by a hunter. They were permanent hangings throughout the whole play. The lines of rain came down through that…but down below, positioned about two feet above the ground, were painted decoys, large ducks. These were the artificial ducks.” There was a lot of imagery in this play: the images of these decoys being artificial ducks floating on the surface compared to the real ducks free and flying above but hunted was the overall theme. “It was really a beautiful play and visually I was so thrilled with it.”

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**Screen Play**

By István Örkény, adapted by Gitta Honegger with Zelda Fichandler

1983: Arena Stage, directed by Zelda Fichandler.

“*Screen Play* was also done in a large circus environment. It was a very surreal play, very abstract. We had to be able to perform a variety of scenes on stage.” One of the demands for arena design is for the expansion of the stage for large scenes and the diminishing of the stage for smaller scenes. The arena designer must find ingenious ways of delivering the smaller scenes to the center of the stage. If the small acting area is located in a corner, a large part of the audience will be too far away.

“Small scenes should be positioned center stage, so you have an equal-distant focus for the various audience members in the four tiers of the arena.” A platform with lights rigged beneath it, lowered down at center stage, provided a smaller acting area for intimate scenes. ❖