

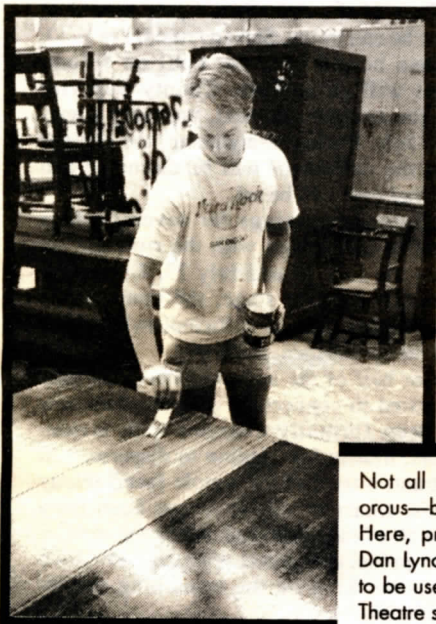
# HIGH ON THE

## BACKSTAGE WHERE DREAMS

NO ONE NOTICES TECHIES UNTIL THEY MAKE MISTAKES.

A HUNDRED THINGS MAY GO WELL IN A GIVEN PLAY, BUT THE ONE TECHNICAL ERROR—A LATE SOUND CUE, A MISSING PROP, A BURNT-OUT LIGHT—OFTEN STICKS WITH THE ACTORS AND AUDIENCE LONGER THAN A STIRRING LINE OR GREAT PERFORMANCE.

TECHIES ARE THE PEOPLE BEHIND EVERY SHOW, SUCCESSFUL OR UNSUCCESSFUL. BACKSTAGE IS THE PLACE WHERE MUCH OF THE REAL WORK, FROM COSTUMING TO SCULPTING PROPS, IS DONE.



Not all tech work is glamorous—but all is necessary. Here, production assistant Dan Lynch works on a table to be used in a future Court Theatre show.

"There's a lot of burnout in tech work because it's a thankless job," says Hugh Brashear, the Mr. Fixit of Chico theater.

Why actors act is more or less obvious—most are egomaniacs, people who *need* an audience and stage.

Why techies voluntarily endure the strenuous work and neglect of backstage toil is harder to understand.

"I like seeing my name in the program," says Court Theatre production assistant Jerome Salyers. "I like being an unsung hero; I like being a martyr. I like knowing that if I only get yelled at for the one prop left on stage, I did everything else well."

"There's magic in tech work," Brashear says. "When the audience comes into the house, the set creates a mood before they even sit down. The lights create a mood before the actors say a line."

**AN AMAZING AMOUNT** of unseen work goes into any play production, from painting floors to designing costumes to coddling insecure performers.

Court Theatre stagehands spend days preparing for a show by searching for hard-to-find props or pasting promotional pictures on walls. Some learn how to operate the light and sound boards in a tiny room overlooking the Wismer Theater stage.

Intricate lighting patterns must be designed and entered into a computer; costumes are either compiled from previous productions or created fresh; appropriate sound effects are located.

Nearly all of a production's tech work is completed well in advance of the show's opening, leaving only a handful of nervous stagehands and a headphone-wearing stage manager to run the proceedings.

An audience can usually discern how much time a show's players have spent in rehearsal, but few comprehend the backstage effort involved.

"It's just as much a performance as acting or directing," says Court Theatre technical director James Gilbert. "Just because you're not physically in front of the audience is not important, because what you've done is in front of the audience."

Set designers take pride in the mood-creating effectiveness of their work, whether it be minimalist or complicated, with elaborate props or suggested staging.



"It's a sculpture," Brashear says of his sets, "and I have the opportunity to have people walk around on my sculpture."

But whether audience members—or even the performers—realize they're walking on a set designer's sculpture is less certain.

"We sometimes feel unappreciated, like we don't get enough respect," Salyers says. "But then again, people don't go into technical theater so they can be recognized."

"A lot of times it is a thankless job, and as a techie I don't like everything I have to do," he continues. "But there are rewards. Once in a while you get to do something you're really proud of—a lighting design, a set design, or even a prop—something that stands out."

In a more personal way, techies maintain, the size of their egos rivals their acting counterparts. Whether tech work is thankless doesn't matter, Gilbert says. "You don't do it for other people; you do it for yourself."

**THE CHALLENGES OF** backstage work take many forms, not all involving set construction or hanging lights.

Chico State costume designer Martha Acuna finds herself playing several different roles for CSUC actors. "They want a therapist, they want a buddy, and they want someone who



With practiced eye and skilled fingers, costume designer Martha Acuna puts the finishing touches on Johnny Lancaster's elaborate *Woman in Mind* costume.

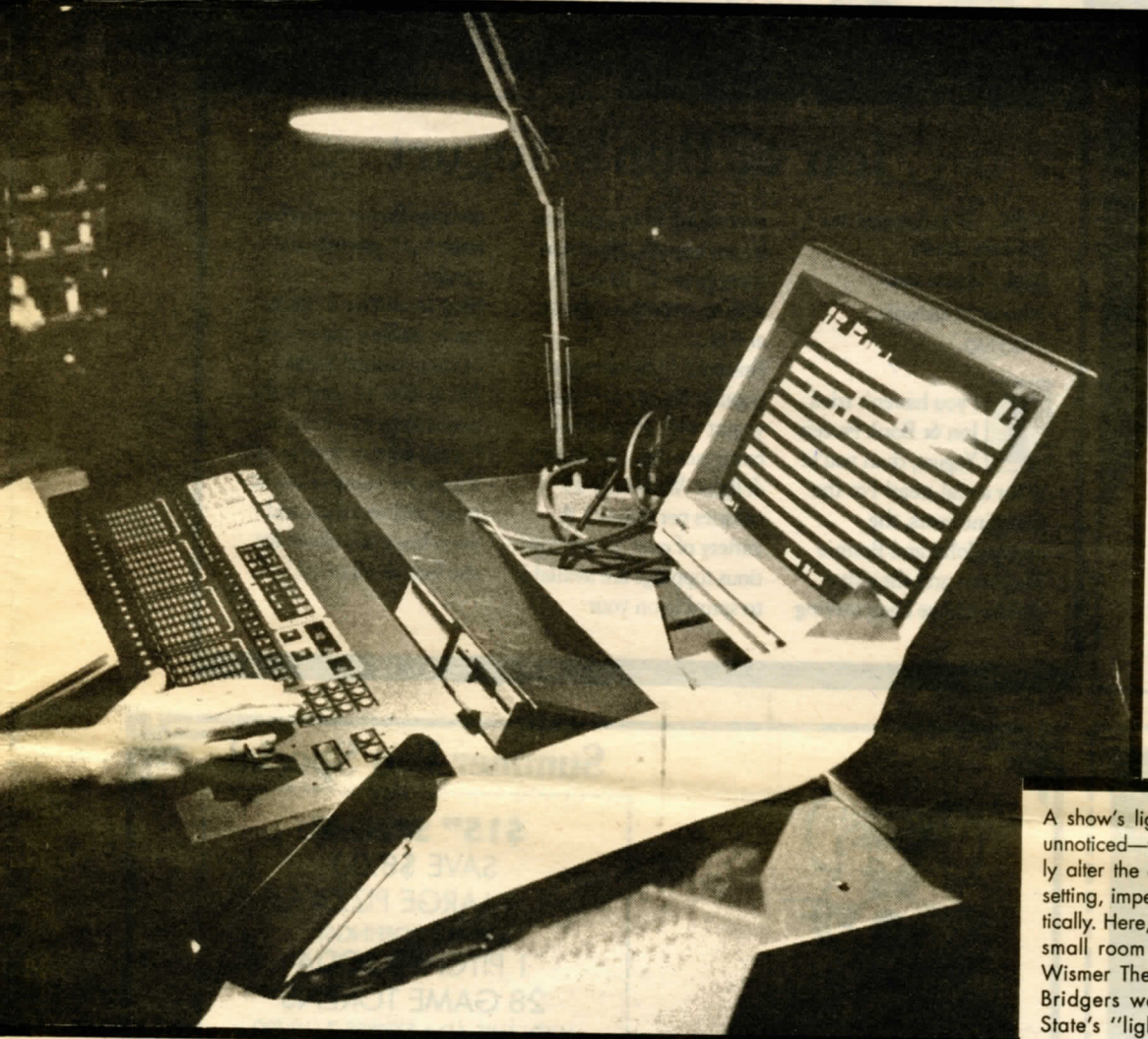


# LIGHTING

## MS COME TO LIFE

BY MATTHEW BUDMAN

PHOTOS BY MARK THALMAN



A show's lighting often goes unnoticed—yet it can radically alter the onstage mood or setting, imperceptibly or drastically. Here, watching from a small room overlooking the Wismer Theater stage, Tony Bridgers works with Chico State's "light board" while designing lighting for Court Theatre's *Educating Rita*.

will make them look good on stage," she says.

Acuna notes that actors often blame tech people for circumstances beyond their control. "Whenever they're not happy with their parts," she says, "they think the costumes are wrong or the makeup is too severe."

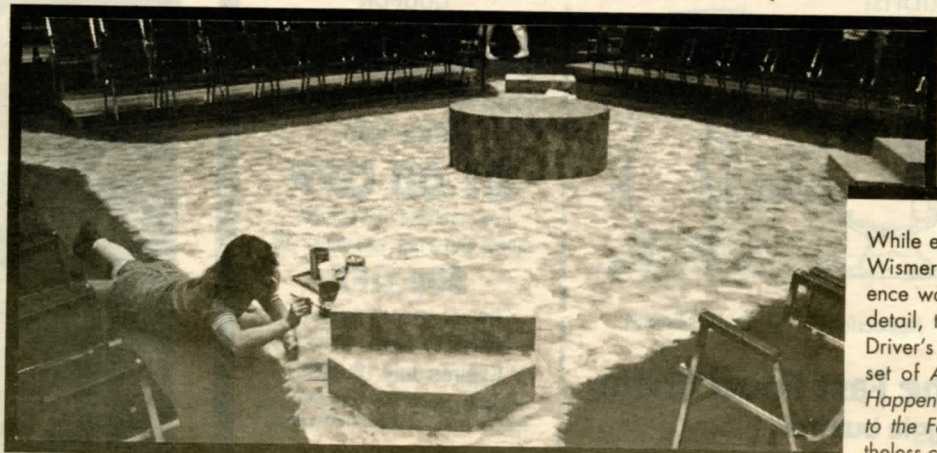
Many techies are reformed or only occasional actors who find as much satisfaction in backstage work. Tom Reid, a Court Theatre production assistant, believes small theater companies often need tech work more than actors. "If you're going to do community theater, acting alone isn't going to get the play going," he says. "As time goes on, you realize that acting isn't everything."

And, as Salyers says, post-graduation salaries are a factor in choosing tech work. "There is always a need for techies. There

will always be money on our side of the stage."

Unlike routine engineering work, techies are constantly faced with new dilemmas that require creative solutions. For instance, "Actors have a real problem with putting their hands in their pockets," Acuna says. "Sometimes I sew their pockets shut."

"Every play is a different problem," Gilbert says. "What you've done in the past is not important. You're put on the line again. That's the transitory nature of theater." □



While every member of Wismer Theater's audience won't notice each detail, touches like Jak Driver's painting of the set of *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* are nevertheless crucial.

## Technical Horror Stories

"When techies get together," says Jerome Salyers, "they talk about technical screw-ups. When actors get together, they talk about—technical screw-ups."

Whether a show is mediocre or outstanding, a technical error on- or offstage is always a conversation topic—if not for the audience, at least the backstage crew.

Usually, Dan Lynch says, "technical mess-ups aren't that major. You can usually fix it well enough that it doesn't get noticed."

However, sometimes that's too much to hope for.

Here are the worst technical horror stories of five backstage veterans:

Hugh Brashear's best tale concerns a single large prop. During a production of *The Nutcracker*, Brashear was responsible for operating the show's growing Christmas tree. "I was pulling the Christmas tree to make it grow, and I pulled it four feet off the ground," he recalls. "We had a floating Christmas tree."

Salyers, working on a Chico State production of *Once in a Lifetime*, accidentally hit a lock with an elbow while moving scenery behind the stage curtain, sending a 200-pound wall crashing 35 feet to the stage. Though hidden behind the curtain, "Everybody knew because there was this monstrous boom," he says. "It was hysterical. Not at the time, though."

Martha Acuna is sometimes forced to watch actors arrive onstage wearing her costumes wrong or backward, but she remembers a worse disaster. She designed costumes for a 1982 dance concert in which the performers wore tops held by one thin, sheer strap. "In the middle of the dance, the strap broke," Acuna says, "so she was doing a topless modern dance. Luckily she had nice breasts, which was all I could say after the show."

James Gilbert recalls a production of *Blood Wedding* in which the set was fitted with sliding doors. "Somehow they weren't set on the track properly and they fell off onto the stage." He can't remember any insurmountable technical horror story. "My worst ones are in my dreams," he says. "Everything is wrong."

Lynch was assistant stage manager for Chico State's fall 1988 dance production and responsible for dealing with unexpected onstage events. In the middle of the production, a dancer knocked a champagne glass out of the hand of a stagehand handing it to her. "It shattered all over the floor," Lynch says. He froze, but a nearby dance instructor immediately sent the stagehand back out on stage with a broom, saving the scene.

"It's only like five seconds that pass by but you think it's a minute or two," Lynch says of disasters. "I learned to always have a backup."