

# DESIGN

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he does. He's the man who looks at a play and makes its locale come to life.

For 18 years in Los Angeles, he designed and constructed sets for TV shows, music videos, TV commercials and made-for-TV movies. But in 2003, he moved to Naples, and became the set designer for the Naples Players at the Sugden Community Theatre.

"My parents were heavily involved with the Naples Players since the mid-'80s," Flynn says. "My dad, Bill Flynn, was on the design committee for the theater. I was in LA building sets. There was always a blueprint of the building in the dining room when I would visit. I kept saying, 'You need to have a bigger [set] shop.' It kept getting cut, getting made smaller."

But at Flynn's urging, his father kept fighting for more space for the set shop.

"I certainly had no idea that I'd be working here," Flynn says.

Ironically, he's now in charge of the set shop he kept insisting be made larger. And, a plaque outside dedicates the scene shop entrance to Flynn's late father.

The two-story space, almost the size of a small house, is the envy of any community theater. In addition to work space, the area houses the remains of disassembled sets from previous productions, which are then recycled for future shows. According to Flynn, they could easily build a tiny house with the amount of lumber they use for a big show, such as last season's "Cabaret."

"Reusing material, we're actually really good about that," Flynn says, standing on stage as volunteers scurry about, building the set for the season's opening production of "The Goodbye Girl." "[A piece of set] gets continually smaller, until by the fourth or fifth time used, it's 1 foot by 1 foot."

He looks around.

"You can point to a lot of this stuff, you recognize it from previous productions," he says. "That's the granite floor from 'The Secret Garden.' Those two doors are from 'Broadway Bound,' the other door I bought for 'Arsenic and Old Lace.' Those two doors are from 'The 1940s Radio Hour.' The daybed is from the hospital bed in 'Wit.'"

Flynn knows the sets intimately. Sometimes, while working on a new set, he'll recognize a piece of wood — and the show it was in previously — simply by the paint that's on it.

The set for the current show, "The Goodbye Girl," has flies (that come down from above the stage), wagons (a low platform on wheels) and multiple-purpose set pieces which are one thing in one scene, then, when turned around, are something else completely.

Artistic director Dallas Dunnagan points to one piece.

"That's going to do triple duty," she says. "It represents the door to her apartment, the front of the building. It turns, and becomes a rooftop, then becomes a fire escape that the hero climbs up to get the girl."

"It's the hardest-working piece in show business," she jokes. "It started as a one-story unit. Then it became a two-story unit. Set design is creating an image while at the same time you're problem solving."

Dunnagan and Flynn sit down weeks prior to each show to discuss the set needs.

"Dallas calls, we sit down," Flynn says. "It might be two hours, three hours. We do that for two or three days."

But for "The Goodbye Girl," he says, they met "three, four, five hours a week for a week and a half, two weeks. You



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Jeff Smith & Ray Marasco help build scenery.

start to solve one problem, then you realize that drawing #28 isn't going to work. We'd think we had a great solution, and then we'd get to the end of the show, and it wouldn't work."

So the two would have to go back to the drawing board.

"One of the challenges of this process is that it was a huge Broadway production," Dunnagan says. "We worked to distill it down to what it ultimately represented, which is, what it feels like to live in New York. And do it in a 35-square-foot area."

While New York has a vast scope to it, it's also a city of neighborhoods.

You may not know your neighbors, but you're familiar with the people you pass on the street everyday, the homeless guy, the jogger, she says, calling New York "the smallest largest city in the world. What we tried to do," Dunnagan says, "we decided to stay with the Goodbye Girl's environs. We distilled it down to a few sets. We stay in Paula's environment, her dance studio, her apartment, her street. In the Broadway production, they ended up in a rowboat in Central Park on a lake!"

"The play is better served in intimacy," she says. "When you think of the movie, you think about the apartment and those two people thrown together in that apartment."

But still, sets needed to be made for her apartment, the front of her apartment, her stoop, a bus stop, the entrance to a subway, her dance studio, a television studio, the rooftop of her building, the fire escape to her apartment. Flynn also had to design sets for three different views of an off-off-Broadway theater: the front of the theater, backstage, and then the stage and partial audience.

"We see the theater from three different points of view," Dunnagan says. "They perform a very off-the-wall production of 'Richard III.' It's Keystone Kops meet Sam Peckinpah, without the blood."

"In the original Broadway production, there were a lot of little insert sets, like the schoolyard, two different Central Park themes, the stoop. We just localized it all to her neighborhood."

"We're not Broadway," Flynn says.

But still, for a community theater, the sets can be stunningly professional. And at times, the sets themselves have received well-deserved applause when the curtains rise.

"We never steer away from big set



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Shop Supervisor Mike Santos works on scenery.

shows and big cast shows," says Dunnagan, standing in the wings while volunteers saw and drill and hammer on-stage. "The time of year is important. This show is a little bigger than we usually do at this time of year. That is important in developing it."

"The sets and costumes are built by volunteers," she explains. "And a portion of them are snowbirds. So until they return, it's not always smart to have a huge production."

According to Flynn, the volunteers began building the set of "The Goodbye Girl" Sept. 10, a little over a month before the show opens. He had only two volunteers then. In late September, he was up to eight volunteers.

"In March, we'll be up to 20. The changing numbers of volunteers is hard to design around," he says. But, he says, "the volunteers are a lot more fun than the guys I was working with in L.A.!"

Design for "The Goodbye Girl" began in mid-August.

Flynn built a stage model that's approximately 2-foot by 3-foot, with half-inch equaling one foot of actual stage space.

"We wanted to get that vertigo, claustrophobic, frenetic feeling," Flynn says.

"One of the things about New York is that it's a huge thing, the upward soars, and then you walk into these little apartments," Dunnagan says. The two begin speaking in tandem to describe what they want.

"You see the skyline at the distance, or the ground floor, the stores," Flynn says.

"Especially if you're a New Yorker,

if you go

>> **What:** "The Goodbye Girl"

>> **When:** Oct. 15 – Nov. 8

>> **Where:** The Sugden Community Theatre, 701 5th Avenue South

>> **Cost:** \$35 for adults, \$10 for students 18 and younger; also available is a special "dinner and a show" package (with dinner at Vergina Restaurant) for \$58.

>> **Information:** Call 263-7990 or go to [www.naplesplayers.com](http://www.naplesplayers.com)

do you ever rarely look up," Dunnagan adds.

"The canyon quality of the city is what grabs me," Flynn says. "That's what we wanted to capture on the set."

"We hope it's going to have the emotional impact of New York," Dunnagan says. "Urban and frenetic. Set designing is having an emotional, visceral impact, but it's also problem solving. We've done the problem solving. Matt has to figure out how to project that physically, not just on paper. What does it look like? How does it get backlit? We start talking about color."

"Amid the gray, gritty asphalt concrete of New York there are pops of color," he says, "trash cans, signs, fire hydrants, taxis, posters – bold pops of color surrounded by gray and grit. Inside the apartment, grayness, dullness, and everything she brings in is just neon. That becomes a constant motif: little brilliant spots of color. Ideally, 100 of them in every scene."

Of course, when creative minds meet, they're not always in agreement.

"We battled about the grittiness of New York," Flynn says.

"Just today, we were discussing the neighborhood," Dunnagan says. "It's probably near Chelsea."

Flynn was thinking chicken sausage in the windows and Russian lettering, but Dunnagan was thinking shoes.

"We're talking about the gentrification of America," Dunnagan says, who has decided to set the play in current-day New York. "You can go anywhere and see the same stores. You could go to the Village and go to the kitschy stores, but now they're in Alphabet city."

"Now the sidewalk is like a mall," Flynn says.

"The Goodbye Girl" is Flynn's 54th show for the Naples Players.

He estimates he does 60 to 70 percent of all the sets.

"If it's about rich people, it can be really beautiful," he says. "Noel Coward's 'Present Laughter,' 'Enchanted April.' I keep getting the coal miners and the New York kitchen-sink dramas," he jokes. "You go out of your way to make them ugly."

"I really enjoy being here," Flynn says. "When you're biggest problem of the day is: how are we going to make angel wings? It's a lot of fun. Every minute of that process, you're fully engaged. And on opening night, that flood of relief, and also the exaltation that comes with it. The curtain rising: that's pretty cool. Especially sitting with these guys. We sit in the same corner of the theater during the members' preview, and that feels neat with them sharing that."

And while it's typically only actors receive the applause at the end of a performance, "the applause at the end is for all of us," Dunnagan acknowledges.

Flynn and his volunteers who build the sets, as well as all the others who work behind the scenes, never take bows.

But Flynn gets his own reward. Most nights, when the curtain goes up, Flynn's backstage.

"I sit in my office, I have the speakers on," he says. "I hear the applause and the gasps when the curtain goes up."

Then he closes up and goes home, knowing he's designed another successful set. ■