Layout Ideas From The Opera

By John Pursell

AS A PROFESSIONAL TRUMPET PLAYER for over 30 years, I've had occasion to play in the "pit" for many operatic and theatrical performances. Part of working as a trumpet player in an opera is frequent long periods of time when you aren't playing. It's then that I was able to observe more closely the various tricks and techniques that went into stage scenery, and over the years I have tried to incorporate some of them into my modeling. Here are some of the ideas and techniques I have learned.

1. LIGHTING IS PARAMOUNT.

Without good lighting, even the best production will fall short. But it's not simply a matter of throwing as much light on the scene (or the model) as possible, but rather how it's used. In the theater, lighting is used to accent certain elements or performers, hence, the "spotlight". It's also used to draw attention away from a particular element. By spotlighting a performer on an otherwise dark stage, all kinds of things can be going on in the dark—scene changes, etc.—while your attention is elsewhere. Can we use this in modeling? Sure. In a rudimentary form, increase light on your more highly detailed areas; reduce it slightly on the less-detailed or unfinished areas. The viewer's attention will automatically be drawn to the highly lighted areas.

Stage light is also rarely a pure form of white light. Most general stage lighting is a mixture of white, red and blue bulbs, in roughly a 5:2:2 ratio. This helps more closely approximate natural sunlight. Increasing the blue light and reducing the white also helps develop a nighttime scene. The blue light still allows visibility, but it's obvious that it's night. They don't simply turn off the lights and leave everybody groping in the dark.

2. SHADOWS ARE THE BIGGEST DESTROYER OF REALISM.

It does little good to paint a backdrop of a mountain that's supposed to be miles away, and then have a cast member (or locomotive) cast a shadow on it. An easy way to eliminate this is to make sure that any object close enough to throw a shadow has a dark background. This leads us naturally to the next point.

3. COLOR GETS LIGHTER AND GENERALLY GRAYER THE FARTHER AWAY YOU GO.

And while it may seem obvious, details disappear the farther away they get. Yet we often forget this and spend hours detailing individual trees on a backdrop that's supposed to be miles away. My favorite trick for distant hills is to paint them a single color, usually a medium gray, and then over-spray them with a 9:1 thinned mixture of my sky color. This imparts that hazy look that is so typical of distant scenes.

If a background scene is supposed to be a mile or more away, I dispense with all the details, except perhaps a slight variation in color now and again. Buildings a few blocks away are indicated only by a shadow profile.

Keeping the background simpler also has the effect of accenting the more highly detailed scene in front; again, the theater does this as well. For example, many years ago, I performed for a production of Verdi's opera Aida, which is set in ancient Egypt. The stage sets were little more than large geometric shapes, painted in a sand color, and then rearranged for different scenes. Cheap and easy. But with the money the company saved on scenery, they were able to provide incredibly ornate costumes for

the singers. The contrast between the stark stage and the costumes was dramatic.

By the same token, urban scenes can benefit by this idea. Even though buildings to the rear of your scene may only be a theoretical block or so away, try painting them in a color that's a shade or two lighter than your foreground buildings. For trim, use muted light grays or tans, avoiding greens and other bright colors. Use a little less detail, as well. You'll be amazed at the depth it imparts, and the attention it draws to your more-detailed front buildings.

4. PERSPECTIVE CAN BE AN ENHANCER OR DESTROYER OF REALISM.

Make buildings smaller as they go back and you have an excellent forced-perspective that says "distance." But then put a backdrop behind them that has printed trees far too large and you've just destroyed the illusion. If you have a scene that's only viewed from the right, and you use a printed backdrop that's obviously viewed from the left, your viewers will instantly know something's wrong. They may not be able to put their finger on it, but they'll know.

5. IF YOU CAN'T SEE IT, WHO CARES?

Earl Smallshaw is a big proponent of this idea. In the theater, backdrops are called "flats." There's a good reason – they're almost always flat and there's nothing behind them. If your buildings are only viewed from the front or side, why model the rear? I just substitute a sheet of plain plastic and then use that extra piece to kit-bash another building.

And speaking of buildings: nothing gives away the illusion quite so fast as having a building that's not sitting perfectly level, or has gaps around the foundation and the ground. In the theater, buildings or building fronts that are leaning or tilted are usually used for a caricature effect. We don't want caricatures – we want realism!

Certainly there are other lessons to be learned, but those are some of basic ideas that I have gathered during my career. Even today, when playing a show or opera, I keep my eyes open for scenery ideas.

So, go to the opera! You'll be surprised what you might learn!