

Grand piano is set piece for MLT's upcoming play

When is a grand piano not a grand piano? When it's a set piece for Markham Little Theatre's upcoming production of Noel Coward's *Blithe Spirit*. It's the ambitious creation of set designer Bob Black.

The playwright, a composer, singer and songwriter as well, included a piano as a matter of course in most of his set descriptions — as a working prop or just as set dressing.

In *Blithe Spirit*, it is the latter and when the cost of rental proved prohibitive, the director, Lillian Sievanen, reluctantly decided to dispense with it.

But she had reckoned without the ingenuity of Bob Black. Last spring he designed for *Absurd Person Singular* some remarkably authentic kitchen appliances — a stove, a washing machine and an Aga cooker. If a grand piano would enhance his current set, he would build one.

Mr. Black tells how he now finds himself putting the finishing touches to an elegant drawing room of a house in Kent. "One Saturday morning last fall I dropped off my wife, Joyce, at the MLT workshop to do some painting on the set of *On Golden Pond*. I went in, just to see what it was all about, and the next thing I knew, someone had shoved a hammer in my hand and I was helping the crew to build the thing."

From that involuntary beginning, he went on to design the set for MLT's next production, *The Dining Room*. It shared in a nomination for best visual production of a play in the 1986 drama festival of the Association of Community Theatres, Central Ontario.

A retired Bell Canada engineering supervisor, Mr. Black confesses that he often puts in longer hours on set building than he did

when he was gainfully employed. "But I really enjoy working with these people," he says. "They're a great bunch, lots of fun and all really wonderful, responsible workers."

Prominent among the "great bunch" are Adrian Wyatt, construction supervisor, and Lyn Jones, painting supervisor. Mrs. Jones is the first woman in MLT to take an active part in set building — for the last four plays sawing, hammering and drilling along with the rest of the crew. This time, she is overseeing the extensive and complicated painting.

MLT rarely uses real wallpaper on a set. "It's costly and ruins flats for further use," explains *Blithe Spirit*'s producer, Bill Monahan. "By painting it instead, we get just the right design for the time and place of the play's setting."

The set designer cuts out the pattern on a brick or cylinder of foam rubber, which is dipped in paint and dabbed or rolled on the pre-painted flats. "It takes a steady hand and eye," he says, "but the results are subtle and au-

thentic. Most people in the audience can't tell it from the real thing."

Mr. Monahan knows whereof he speaks. Until Mr. Black came along a year ago, he had designed most of MLT's sets for the last 16 years. His work has earned him an award for *There Goes The Bridge* in 1979 and a nomination for Lord Arthur Savile's *Crime* in 1985.

This is Mr. Monahan's first stint at producing. "It's a different kettle of fish," he says, "organizing the back stage work, but it's a challenge. It's great to have someone else doing the sets for a change, too. Bob is such a perfectionist — he's done really excellent work."

Mr. Monahan's wife, Betsy, and her niece, Bonnie Durward, are joint costume designers for *Blithe Spirit*. Their greatest challenge lies in dressing the title character, Elvira. Her ghostly shenanigans and appearance call for further ingenuity from special effects technician Martin Smith and from make-up artist Kerry Harman.

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