

KING LEAR  
A GILDED AGE TRAGEDY

By

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## Introduction

*King Lear* has been one of my favorite plays since I first encountered it years ago and was an easy choice for my thesis project. Many of the prominent characters and scenes have been unforgettable; stuck in the back of my mind. I believed I knew the play well, but reading it again for the first time since becoming a theatre designer was quite a new experience. The elements of ruthlessness, chaos and violence were still as I remembered. This time though, I started to connect more with the underlying themes of greed, ambition and family ties. I began to see parallels between the situations in *King Lear* and today's world. Suddenly the play wasn't happening in medieval England but modern America.

But rather than setting the play in contemporary times, I chose to place it in Victorian America, during the height of what became known as the Gilded Age. This decision was made for several reasons. First, it places *Lear* in a time that is both somewhat modern and removed from today's technology and social conventions. This allows for most of the play's smaller plot devices, such as the absence of telephones, to be a little more believable.

Second, the opulent wealth and cutthroat capitalism of the Gilded Age seems a perfect environment for *Lear* and his royal family. However, during the Victorian period in America, men rose to power through ambition and ingenuity rather than birthright. The greatest of these industrialists considered

themselves in the same league as the European aristocracy and even royalty. They would stop at nothing to achieve their goals. I see the character of Lear himself as one such unscrupulous captain of industry.

This concept of setting *King Lear* in America could easily be seen as containing a political message. After all, many of the wealthiest businessmen from this time, on whom I've based the character of Lear, often were accused of using questionable means to achieve their financial goals. I suppose it would be naïve to think this would not arouse discussion of today's financial industry. Thought provoking situations would be the extent of my contribution to the discussion, not blatant messages for or against capitalism. I plan to avoid directly connecting the play with contemporary politics and business practice. My intention is only to examine the extreme nature of this period in American history through the timeless words of Shakespeare.

### Design Concept and Research

The production design for *King Lear* would be the world of American industry during the 1880s. My initial desire was to explore the textures and colors of this time. The first ideas that came to mind were very abstract; more of a feeling of the environment and the people than any sort of usable design. When I started analyzing and researching the script, my thinking became more specific. I began to see the characters in paintings by Thomas Eakins and Degas. The textures and subtle color shifts of Whistler's nocturne paintings also spoke to the simple, raw quality I wanted to capture in the design. Old grainy photographs of the actual people who lived and worked during this time helped to bring authenticity to my design. Some of the scenes in these photos helped me to visualize what the production might look like on stage. This helped me determine the epic scale of the production. I knew I wanted to use the entire stage and as many extras as possible. This would help to emphasize my idea of Lear's kingdom being a large corporation with many workers.

## Costume Design

The costumes I've designed for *King Lear* ground the show in the Victorian period. They reveal status and character while helping to establish time and place. Through research photos, and because of the concept of this production, I had a general idea of what the costumes would look like well before any of the renderings were complete. The cast is quite large, and, in addition, I would require a lot of extras to fully realize my approach to the production.

The majority of the characters in *King Lear* are men. The uniformity of men's dress during the 1880s could work poorly on stage if taken too literally. In order to avoid repetition, I use subtle accents to the standardized silhouettes to help define the individual characters. The play establishes a hierarchy that I've translated into the world of business in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Instead of kings, knights, and soldiers, it's now a president of the corporation, his board of directors and the workers on the factory floor.

Starting at the top with Lear himself, I saw a dramatic transition from riches to rags. When the play begins, he is the most powerful character. In the first scene, he is wearing a three-piece suit, but has substituted a splendid robe, decorated with regalia for the jacket (image 1). I wanted to show that he is completely at home when he is conducting business. In addition to distinguishing him from the other characters, the robe shows that he is in the

top seat and has nothing to prove to anyone. Later, in the second act, Lear is wearing traveling clothes. He wears a light topcoat to set him off from his horde of cronies who wear dark colors (image 2). Finally, when his daughters force him out into the night, Lear takes a drastic turn for the worse. In the famous scene on the “heath”, he strips down and eventually finds wildflowers to decorate his remaining garments (image 3). By this point, Lear has gone from everything to nothing.

As the personal confidant to Lear, the Fool is a powerful character until Lear’s kingdom begins to crumble. When researching Victorian society I found they had a naïve attitude about superstition that is fitting for this play. Victorians were fascinated by foreign cultures. I pictured the character of the Fool to be an “eastern” guru of sorts (image 4). Someone far enough removed from American society that he can accommodate the singing and dancing required of the character, and not look silly or out of place. He is someone who the Victorians may have trusted because of his outsider’s take on what is happening around him.

Lear’s three daughters are the only women in the play, and yet they are definitely among the most important characters. Goneril is the oldest, and I also saw her as the most calculating and conniving. She never falters in her mission to relieve her father of his empire, and, therefore, I decided to give her a slightly militaristic look by incorporating a chevron theme in all of her



costume changes. Also, to heighten the effect, I've made all of her collars high and rigid (images 5-7). Once we get to the end of the play, she has taken all measures to attract the attention of Edmund. Her dress is tight fitting with a tall collar and low-cut neckline (image 7). I thought it would be appropriate if she were wearing a deep, almost blood red by this point in the play because she does nothing to hide her cutthroat intentions from the other characters.

The second daughter, Regan, is not as cut and dried as Goneril. To me, she seems less regimented and more even tempered than her older sister. Her character seems to change more throughout the course of the play, and I attempted to capture her descent to evil through her costumes. She begins with a high contrast black and white costume (image 8), and, as the play progresses, her dresses get darker and darker. By the end of the play, she is wearing almost all black (image 11). I've used lace and velveteen materials for her dresses because it seems to capture the delicate balance of her temperament. Also, these rich fabrics tie in nicely with her husband, Cornwall's costumes.

Cordelia is the youngest of Lear's daughters, and she is the only one who honestly cares for her father. In addition to the division of Lear's kingdom in the opening scene of the play, she is also being offered up for marriage. I have her wearing an elegant, slightly revealing evening gown

(image 12). During the middle of the play she is away from the action. When she returns to attempt to stop her sisters from taking complete control, she is wearing a costume that incorporates many features found on men's dress of the period. A simple cut jacket with wide lapels and even a top hat (image 13). Gender is not necessarily an issue in the forefront of my production concept, but I feel this is a good point in the play to provoke some thought on the topic. In this man's world, she feels it necessary to be unsexed in order to rule.

The husbands of the daughters are also very prominent characters. Whereas the two eldest daughters are one in the same in their ruthless ambition, Goneril's husband, Albany, and Regan's husband, Cornwall, couldn't be more different. At first Albany doesn't fully understand his wife's ill intentions, and later, he renounces her for her actions. Wanting nothing to do with the treachery around him, I've dressed Albany in neutral colors (image 15). Cornwall, on the other hand, is a brutish instigator, and dresses to impress and, when necessary, intimidate. He wears starkly contrasting tones and favors wearing clothes that make his shoulders look larger than normal (images 16-18). This is especially apparent when he is wearing a black Inverness cape with white pants (image 17).

The other family who gets caught up in Lear's business, Gloucester and his two sons, are of slightly lower rank, and therefore dress somewhat

modestly in comparison (images 19-22). Edgar is the content son, while Edmund, the bastard son, is scheming and ambitious. He would do anything to work his way up the ranks as quickly as possible. I show his progression from worker to leader by moving him from an everyday, mostly brown (image 22), ensemble to almost all black (image 23). While he may be lower ranking than Lear's family, by the end of the play, both Goneril and Regan are vying for his attention. Edmund's character is, in my mind, the perfect character for the setting I've chosen for this production. While he might not always win the moral battle, like many American businessmen in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, he believes that ambition and drive are the guiding principles of man.

Most of the play's other characters are of lesser consequence. Many fall on either Lear's team or on the side of his daughters and Edmund. I've established a loose guideline for how to tell one side from the other. For the most part, Lear's allies dress in some variation of blue (image 24), while the other side would be more likely to wear red. Again this is a very loose guideline, and I did not necessarily want a strict division in the two sides. This will help to clarify where the numerous extras fall in their loyalties. If a character is neutral, his costume palette typically is also (images 25-27).

## Set Design

When I first decided to set *King Lear* in Gilded Age America, I was drawn to the new wealth and opulence that was often on par with royalty. Early in the process, I began research on the domestic settings of the time. The palatial homes being built by the wealthiest of industrialists were rich with ornate details, but lacked the specificity I desired. They could easily be mistaken for their European counterparts. Simply put, nothing about these elaborately furnished rooms seemed uniquely American.

Upon this realization, I decided to focus strongly on the business side of my production concept and became drawn to the subtle beauty of Victorian industrial architecture. Everything, even the details of the machines used in factories, was designed with a distinct look. I started to see the set as a functional mechanism, almost machine-like, but with an air of grace. On one hand rugged and functional, but at the same time refined. The set design attempts to balance the structural necessity and aesthetic desire of Victorian architecture. The structure is primarily influenced by industrial buildings and the materials found in them. Though the set is meant to be visually impressive, it maintains a neutral quality that is necessary for the many various scenes and locations in the play (images 29-30).

The idea of being watched and surrounded is a theme I explore throughout the production. Numerous extras would be required to give the

impression of a very private situation between a father and his daughters being put on public display. The roles of these extras would change according to the requirements of the scene and range widely. All of the larger scenes would include any number of these living scenic elements.

When the play begins, Lear sits powerfully center stage at a long table ready to conduct the evening's business of inheritance (image 31). The main playing area is a large raked deck that starts before the proscenium arch and ends with a midstage platform. It is filled with Lear's family and their attendants. Goneril and Regan sit on either side of Lear's desk, and two vacant chairs downstage are in anticipation of Cordelia's suitors. Two-story high, glazed brick walls enclose the stage. Dark cast iron columns and heavy support structures loom overhead. At the back of the room, a large window catches the last light from sunset. Lurking in the dark corners, Lear's cronies silently watch the scene play out from the high balconies attached at either end of the walls. After the scene plays out and Lear exits, leaving Goneril and Regan alone to confirm their scheme, the set begins to come alive. Pulley wheels and gears spin down from the ceiling. The set machine comes to life with cranking and churning sounds and brings a visual motif of complexity and chaos.

This set movement continues into the next scene and underscores the launch of Edmund's plot to gain power (image 33). The metal screens at the

back of the set track offstage to provide an entrance for the new location that is centered on the upstage platform. After Edmund's plan is set into motion, the machines crescendo and begin to slow down to a halt during the next short downstage scene between Goneril and Oswald. The large variety of entrances in the set are used to help distinguish own scene from the next, and brief scenes are typically played used the entrances downstage of the brick walls in a sort of in-one configuration.

By the time Lear enters with his horde of rowdy companions, a table and chairs has entered upstage and we are now at the home of Goneril and Albany. When Lear and his cronies are at the height of their carousing, Goneril enters on the upstage balcony. Extras are used to fill the balconies and surround the party on stage. From her powerful position, Goneril drives Lear out from her keep and the scene shifts off (image 35).

The following scene finds Lear alone with his Fool and gentleman. It is a stark contrast with the crowd in the last scene, and provides a transition back to Edmund's workings. Again the screens shift to provide an upstage opening, revealing the large group of men Gloucester has gathered to search for Edgar. During this scene, the machines turn and stay in place until the arrival of Regan and Cornwall.

The next few scenes take place in the same location, and the entire deck is utilized to accommodate the proceedings. For the short scene when

Edgar is disguising himself as a beggar, he sneaks in from one of the far downstage entrances. Shifts in the lighting would be used to isolate the various happenings on stage. By the end of Act II, all of the characters who have arrived at Gloucester's that night are onstage to witness the standoff between Lear and his two eldest daughters (image 40). Chaos begins to stir in the background beyond the metal screens and sounds somewhat resembling an approaching storm build in intensity. Goneril and Regan join together and drive Lear out into the night. At this point, Lear's world is being torn apart and the set begins its most dramatic shift of the entire show. The machine wheels lower into place and spin as in previous scenes. The sounds from upstage mesh with the mechanical sounds of the machines and grow into a whirlwind. Iron beams overhead and the window unit at the rear of the space slowly and deliberately rise out of view and the machines move lower and become more present. With a loud clank, the machines shift direction and the columns begin to track offstage. The balconies at front and back follow the columns and exit from the scene. The upstage screen panels part from the center and track off behind the brick walls.

At the beginning of Act III, we are left with an empty shell of the previous setting (images 30, 41). The columns have now become part of the brick walls. At the back of this wide-open arrangement is a scrim followed by a dark backdrop that create a seemingly endless expanse of nothing. When

Lear and his Fool enter from upstage, the new location is fully realized and the sounds from the transition continue to underscore the following scenes. A growing commotion begins far upstage and we begin to see the faint outline of a mob behind the scrim. It becomes apparent that the noises are coming not just from the machines, but also from the large crowd of “worker” extras upstage. Sounds of protestors echo rumbles of thunder and gusts of wind. This is Lear’s storm and is meant to signify his fall from power. His lack of control over his kingdom or corporation has resulted in unrest among his workers, and they play a large role throughout the rest of the play. We never specifically see any picket signs or hear any clear pleas from the crowd, but the idea is ever present in a very abstract form.

The majority of the scenes from this point on take place outside. For the remainder of the play, the set does minimal shifting. A blackout drop is used to cut down the height of the upstage opening for scenes that take place outside but away from the mayhem. For interior scenes, the background is extinguished entirely. The largest shift during the second half of the show is at the end of Act III. When Gloucester is blinded by Cornwall, the rear balconies enter to help define the space and provide a perch for onlookers of the violence (image 47).

During the fourth and fifth acts, the background element of the crowd is still present, but is now used to symbolize the conflict between the two



opposing factions. Lear and Cordelia fight to gain back control of the company from Goneril, Regan and Edmund. The two camps are distinguished through the use of the screen panels. Lear's camp is wide open and exposed. The "British" side is lined with the panels, leaving only an opening to allow entrance into the camp (image 55). The background image would be cut in half by the blackout drop to establish distance from the Lear's camp. Only when it becomes clear that Lear's side has lost control does the background chaos cease. The final scenes are played out on the British side where Lear and Cordelia are being held prisoner. Only a fragment of the world that Lear built remains at the end of the show.

## Lighting Design

My research for the lighting design of *King Lear* is largely based on paintings of the Victorian period. Due to the layout of the stage, the lights would have to be integrated very closely with the set design. The downstage structural area would be lit in a type of heightened realism that recalls genre paintings from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The upstage area containing the scrim and backdrop would be lit more expressively to match the mood and intensity of the various scenes. Turner's landscapes are an inspiration for the texture and tones I would include in the background. The color palette would work in the same way, and grow more saturated as it moves further upstage. Gradations of color, bringing to mind the nocturne paintings of Whistler, would be used to on the far upstage backdrop.

During the first two acts, the full set is in place and the lighting is relatively low-key, with highlight areas for the main action surrounded by areas of deep shadow. The interior scenes could have two possible sources of light. The window at the rear of the set motivates the lighting direction during the daytime. At night, the light would be softer and broken up into pools as if the space was being lit with gas lamps (image 31). The colors would reinforce this idea, and even include a pale green from the top that would provide a subtle cast over the shadow areas. When an exterior scene happens in the first two acts, moonlight is the motivating source. Less front fill

light would be used to make the overall look darker. The window would be glowing as though we are looking in from outside (image 36).

For acts three through five, the set is wide open, revealing the scrim and backdrop. The lighting for the downstage area is now primarily motivated by the colors and intensity of the background lighting (image 30). The scrim would be lit at random angles with rough, abstract textures and earth tones to provide varying degrees of opacity. The backdrop of dark filled scrim would be lit as if it were a cyclorama, but mostly at low intensity levels. Texture similar to that on the front scrim would also be applied to the backdrop to help break up the surface and add depth. Ground row instruments would shine up from the floor onto the backdrop to provide a gradation effect and to silhouette the group of extras behind the scrim. Steep backlighting is the only angle used for this far upstage acting area.

As the light moves further downstage, it becomes less saturated, but is tied directly to the background colors. The gloss finish and raked angle of the stage would cause a reflection from the scene in the background and provide a seamless transition between the areas. This would also make the space appear even larger and almost infinite.

Due to the complex structure and length of the script, lighting would play a key role in establishing locations and helping the transition from one scene to the next. For larger scenes, the lights would cover the entire space.

Brief scenes often played downstage, would be lit in a very isolated fashion (image 34). Since there is essentially only one major set change, varying the lighting from one location to the next is crucial to show the change of location and the passage of time. Much of this would be accomplished through intensity. I don't see a radical change in the color of light being necessary in the downstage area. Most the color change would happen through the background lighting.

## Conclusion

*King Lear* has been a challenging and wonderful design experience. The scope and complexity of the script were inspiring, and I hope to have captured both in my designs. Shakespeare's works are known for their ability to live on through an almost endless number of production approaches. Although my concept is fairly specific, not once did I feel as though I were forcing my ideas onto the play. The entire process seemed to fit together quite organically.

The size of the production would be the main practical concern. It would no doubt be a very expensive endeavor, and, when many companies routinely perform Shakespeare on an almost bare stage, seems a bit of a luxury. But I feel that the setting and ideas involved in this production would be something that today's audience could identify with. Although it is set in the 1880s, the design has a very contemporary feel and movement. It has an almost cinematic quality that is becoming more common in today's theatre. Some may argue that the large design overwhelms the material, but I think *King Lear's* broad themes operate well on an epic scale.

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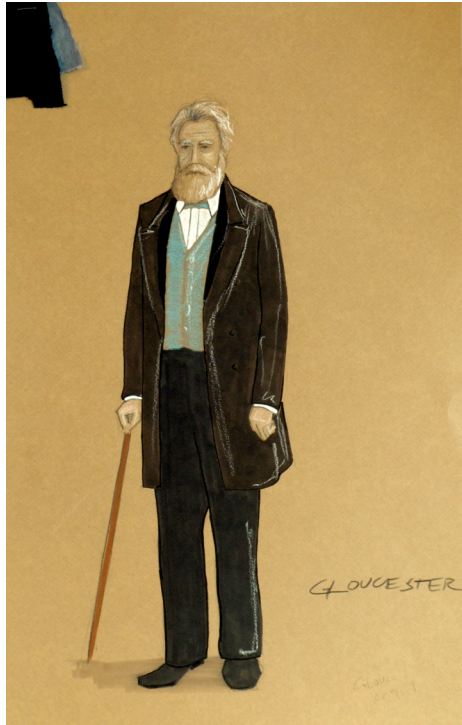




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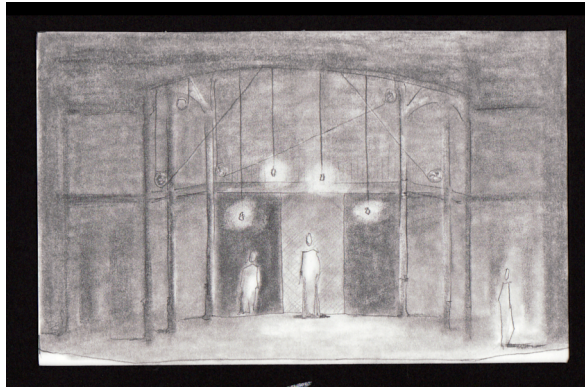


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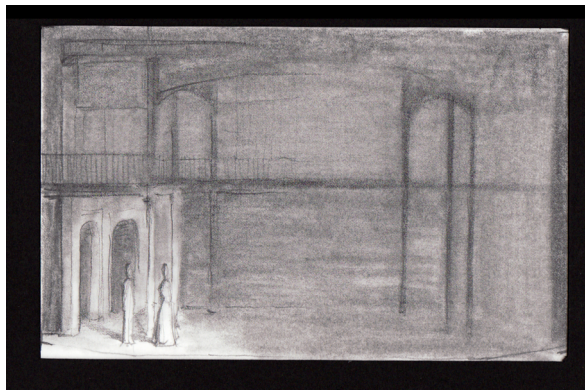


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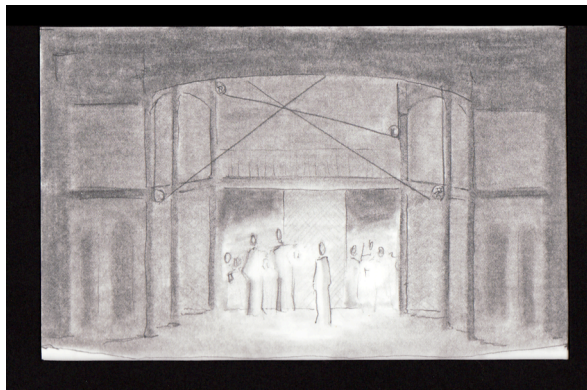
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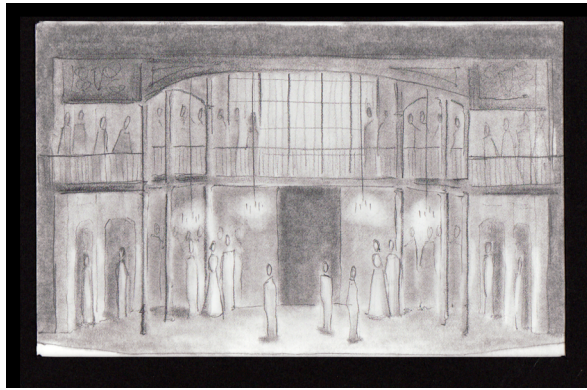
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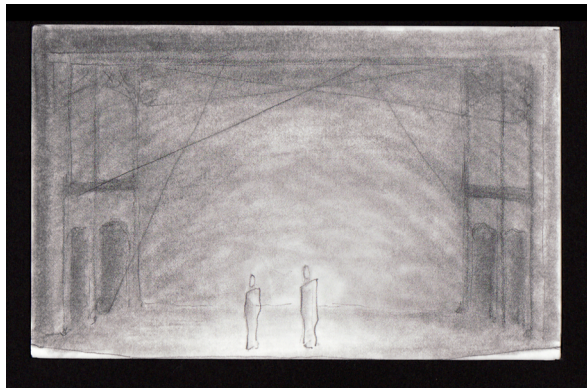
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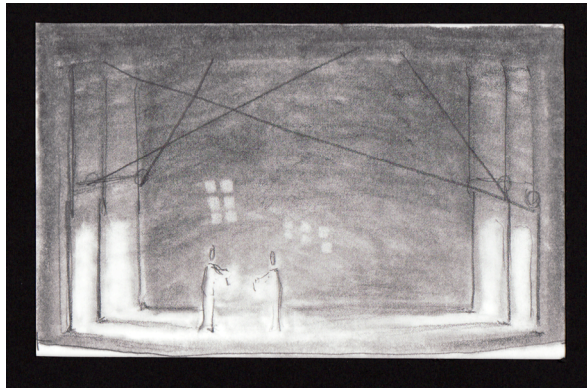
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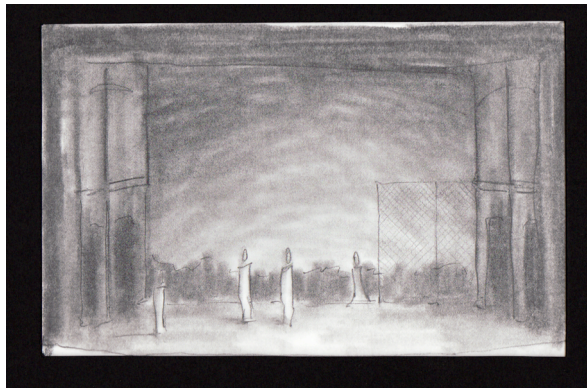
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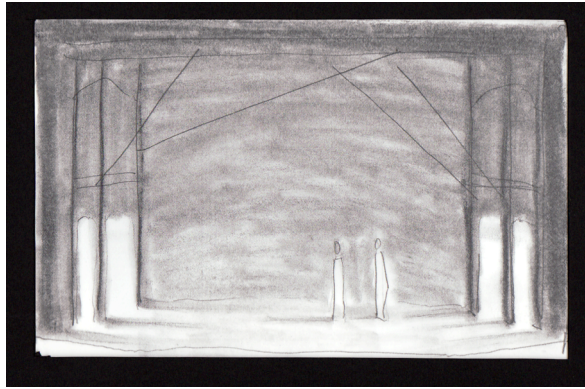
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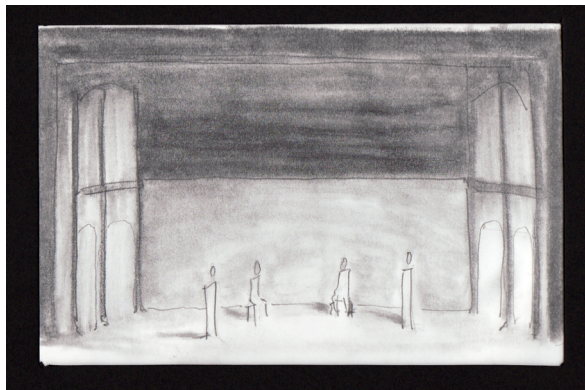
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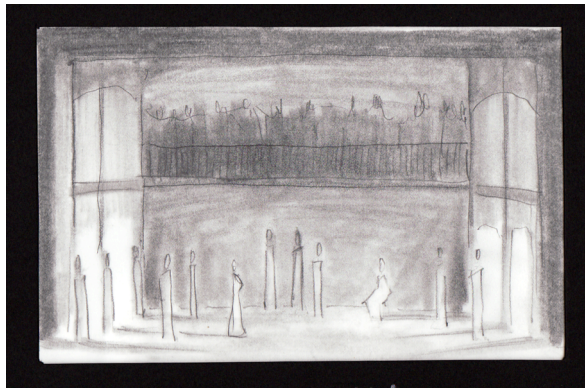
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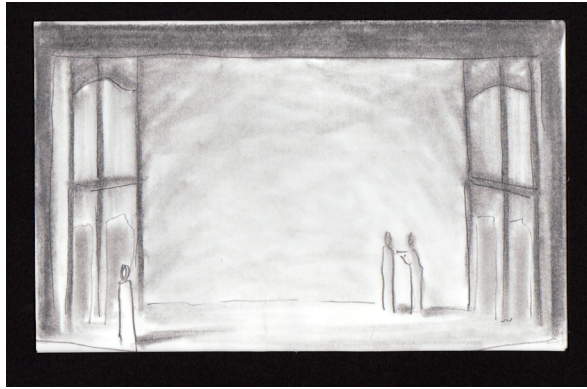
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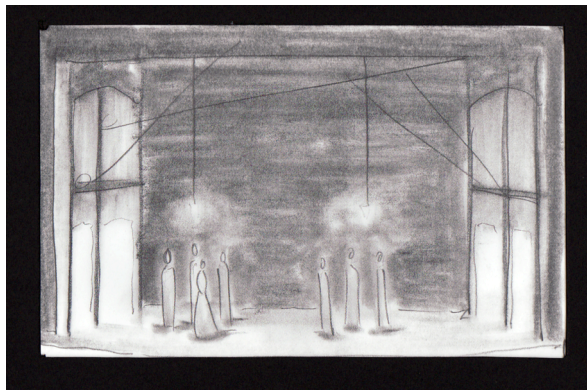
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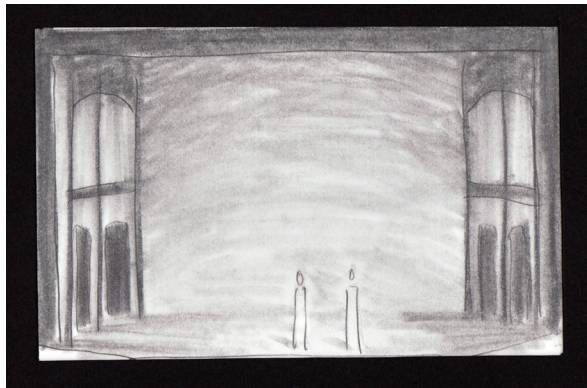
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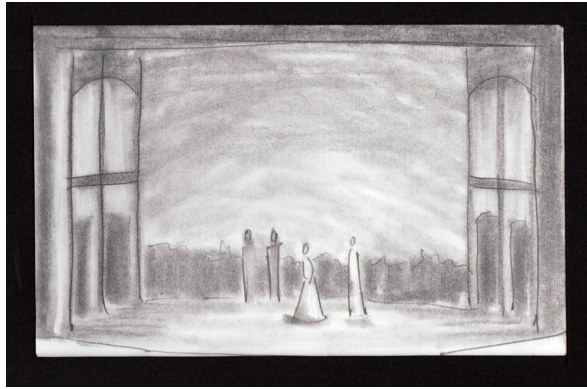
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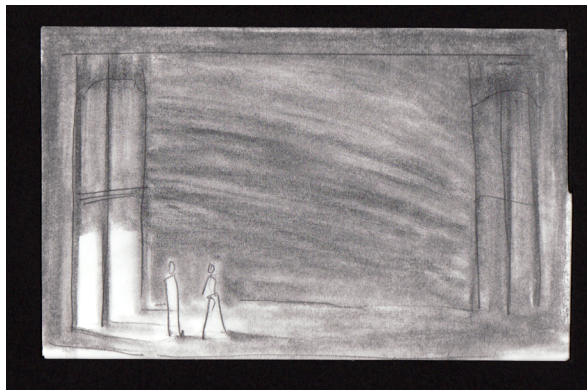
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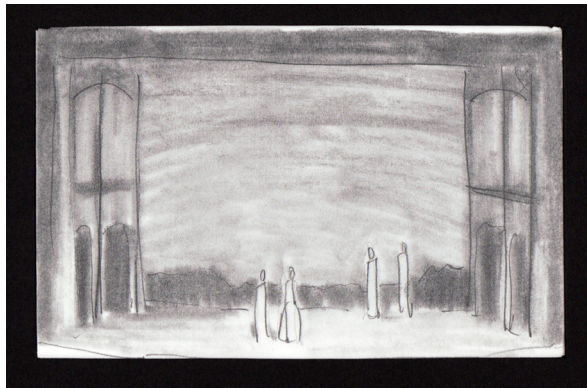
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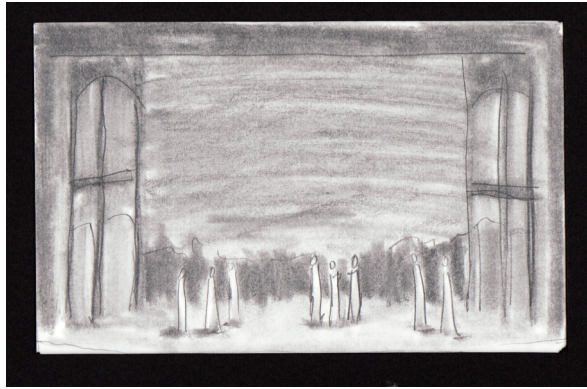
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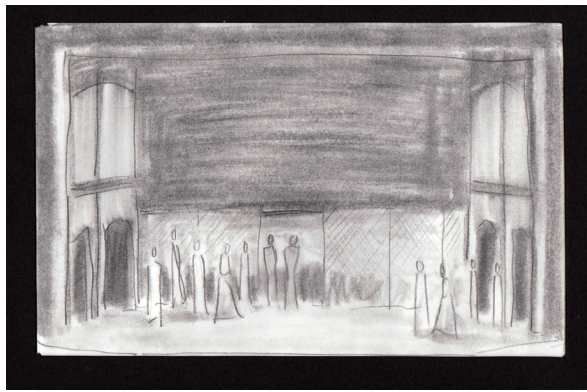
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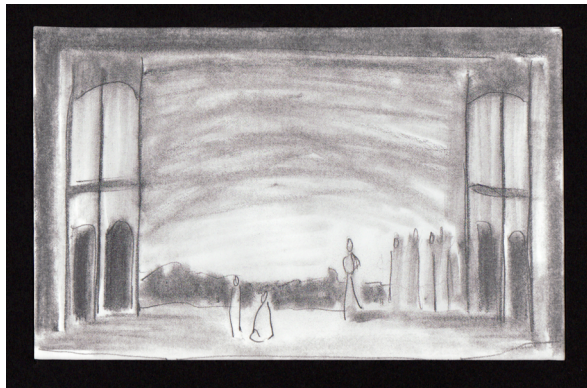
53)



54)

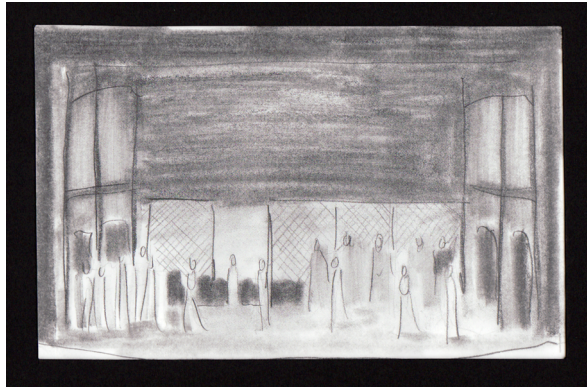


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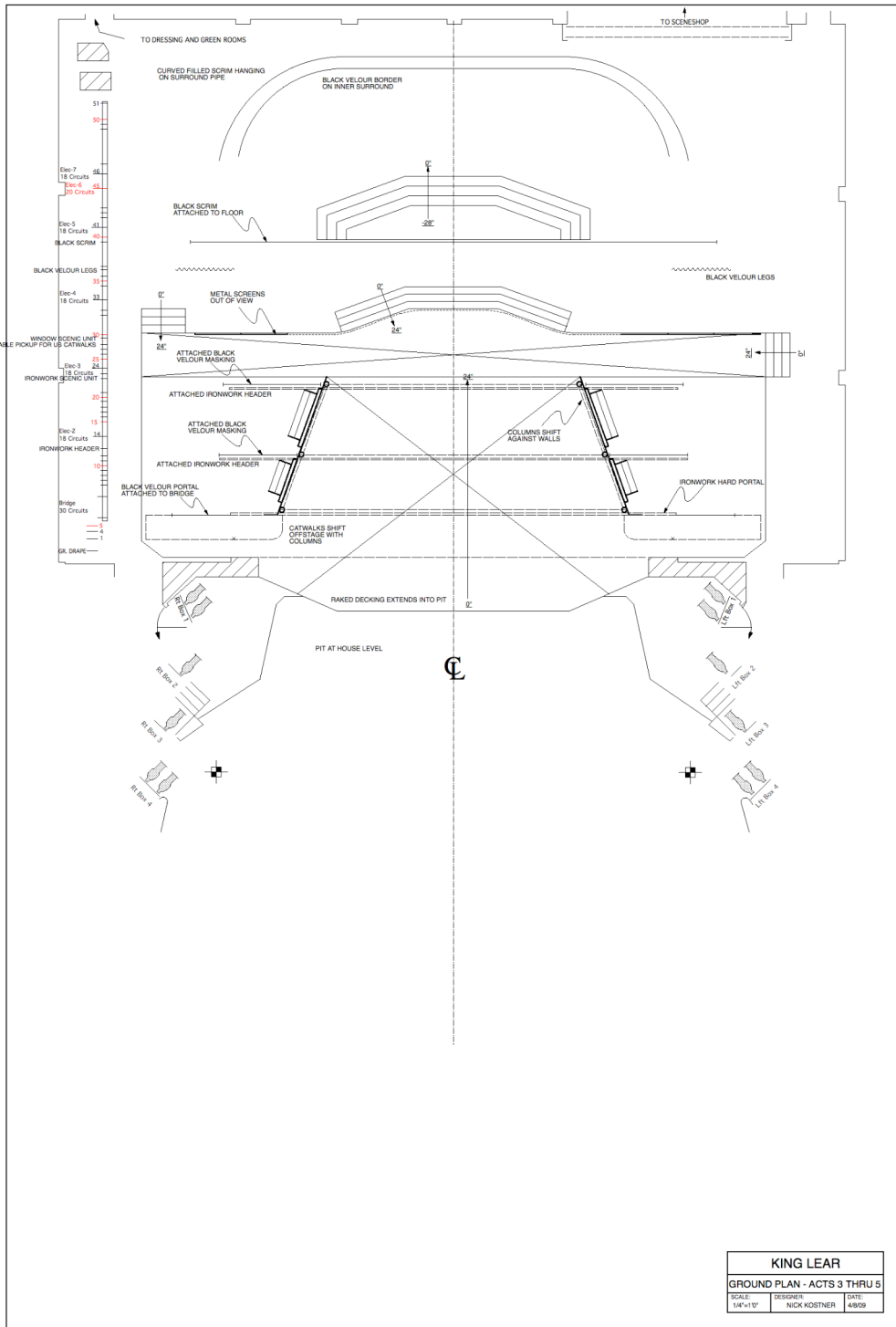
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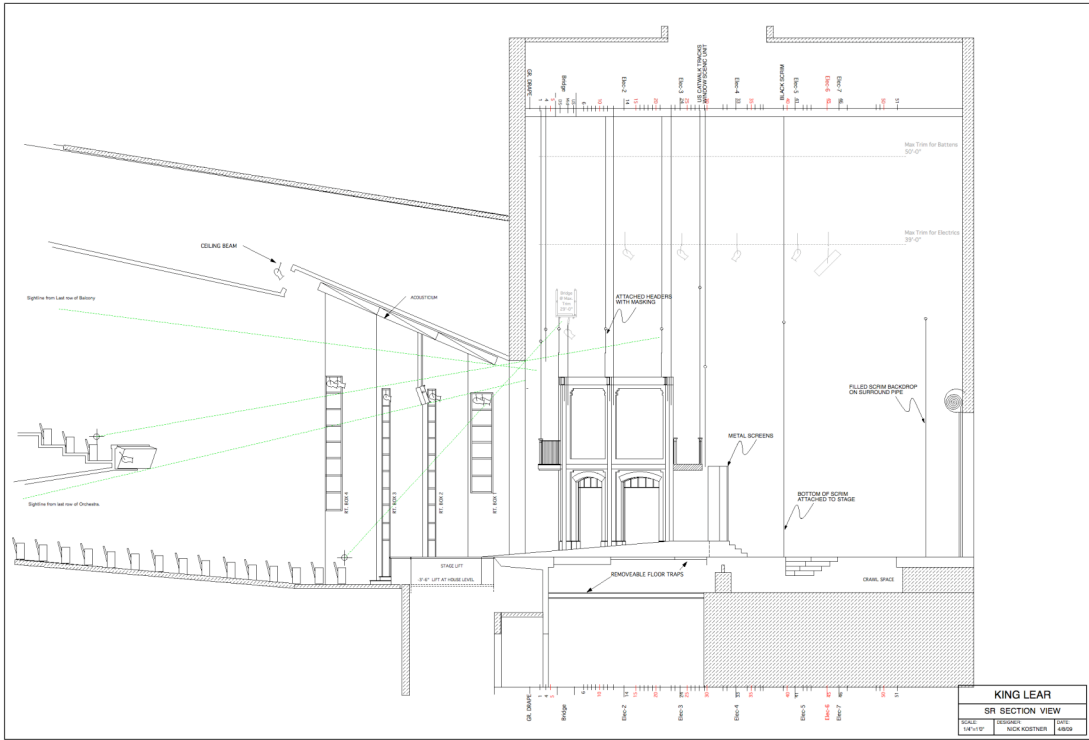


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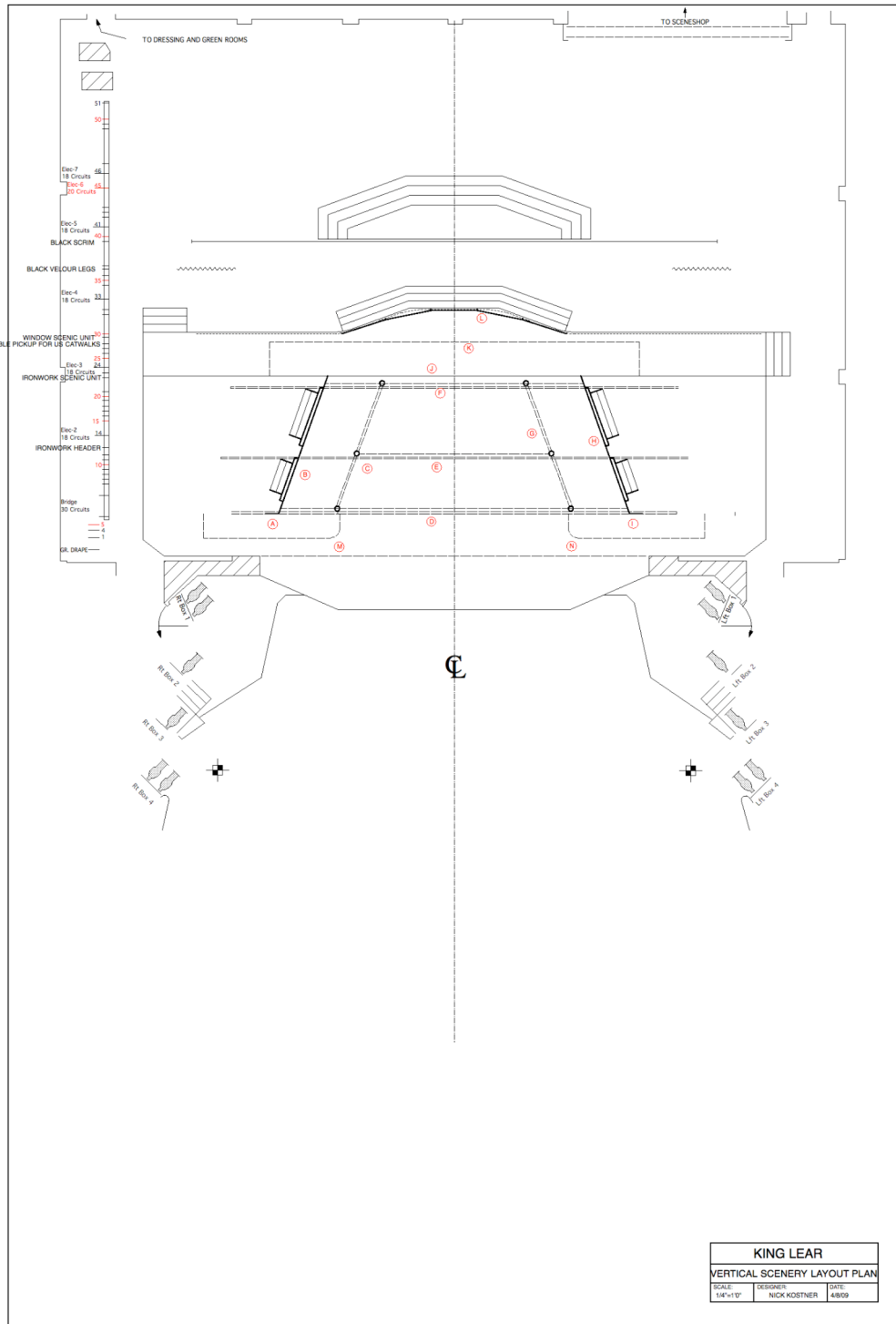




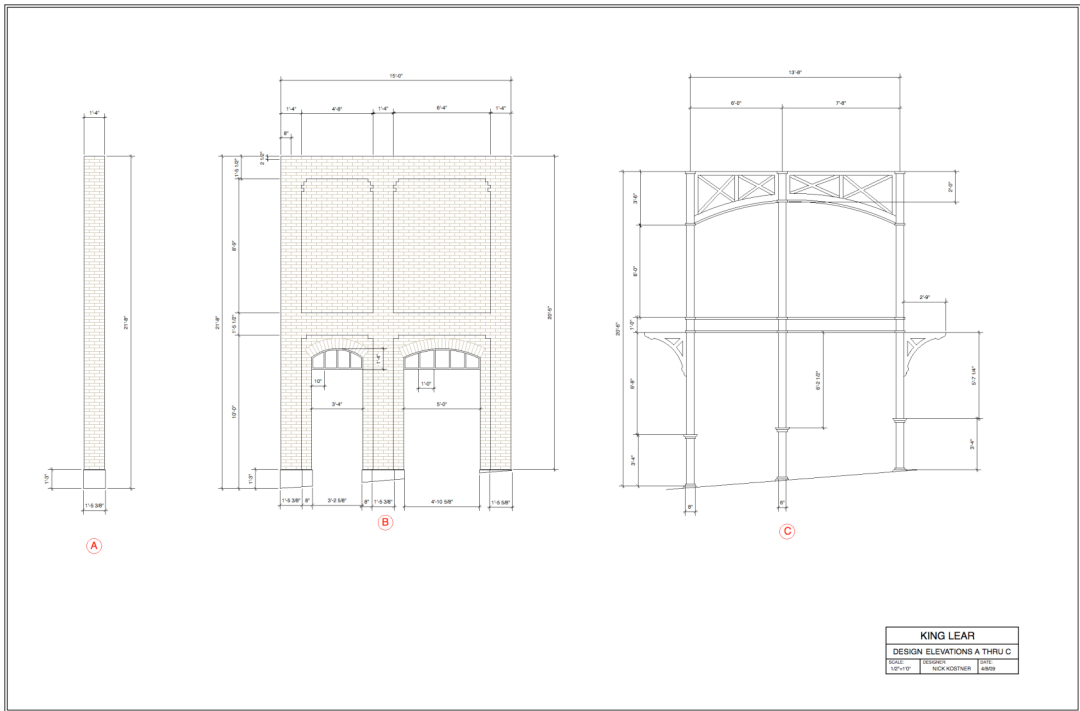
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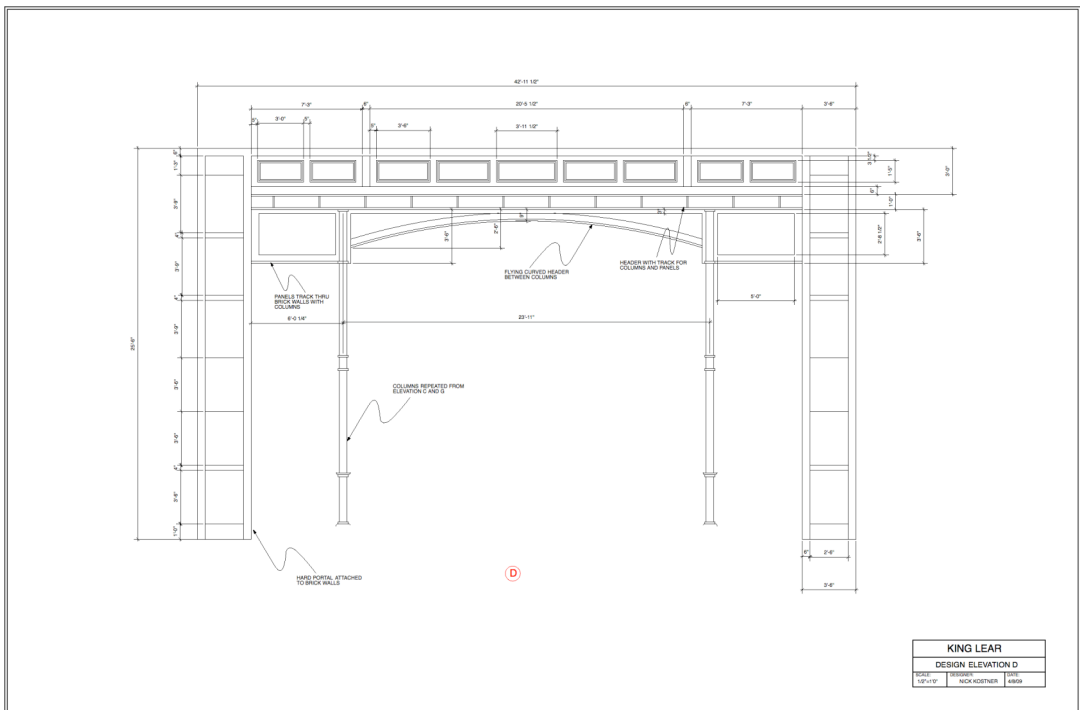
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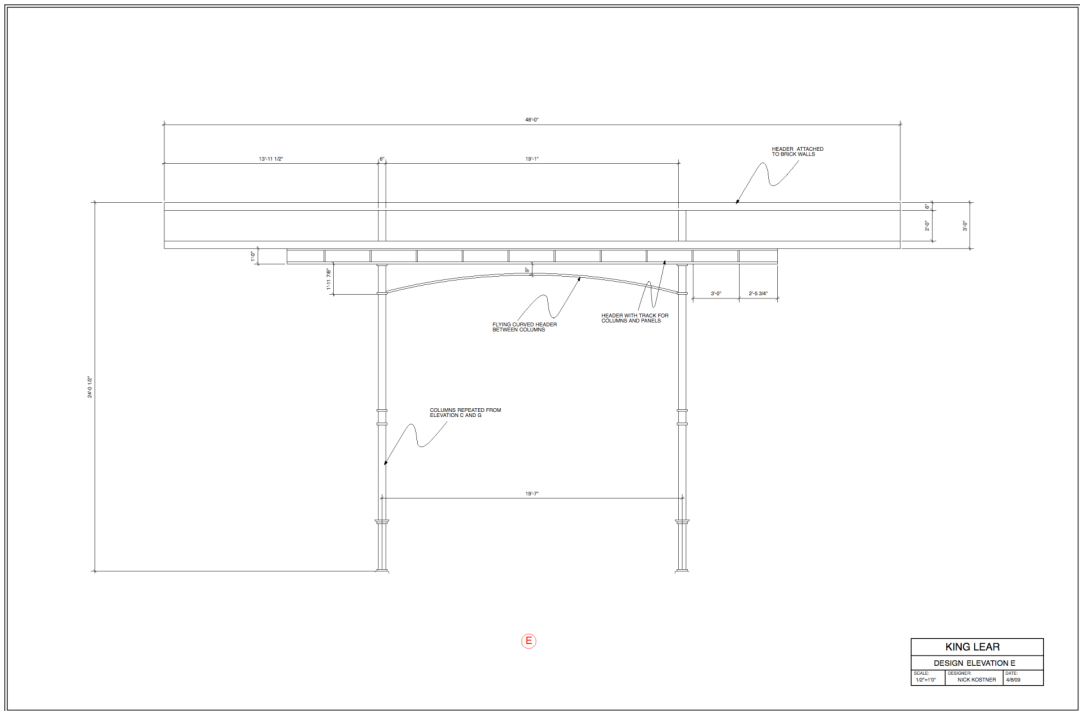
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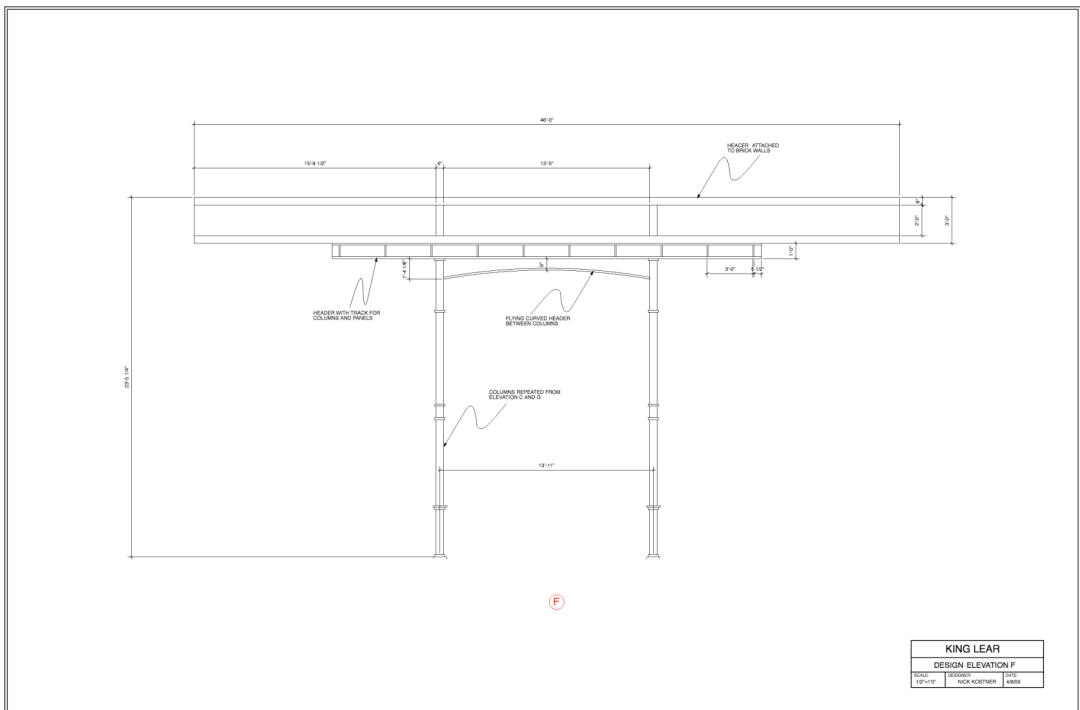
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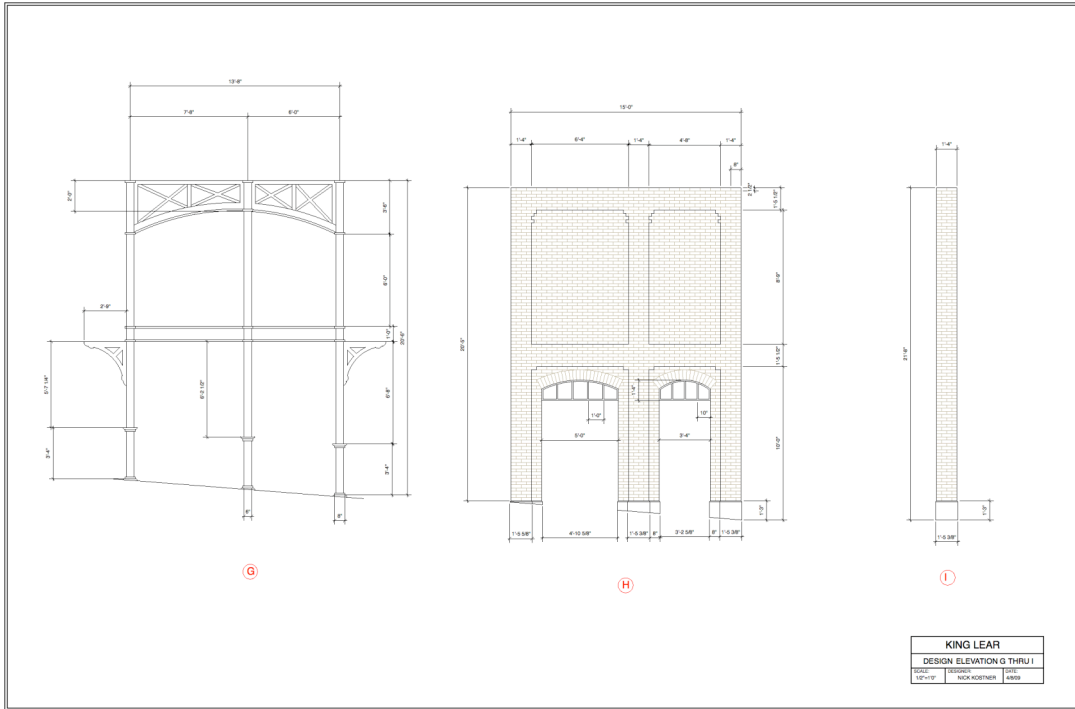
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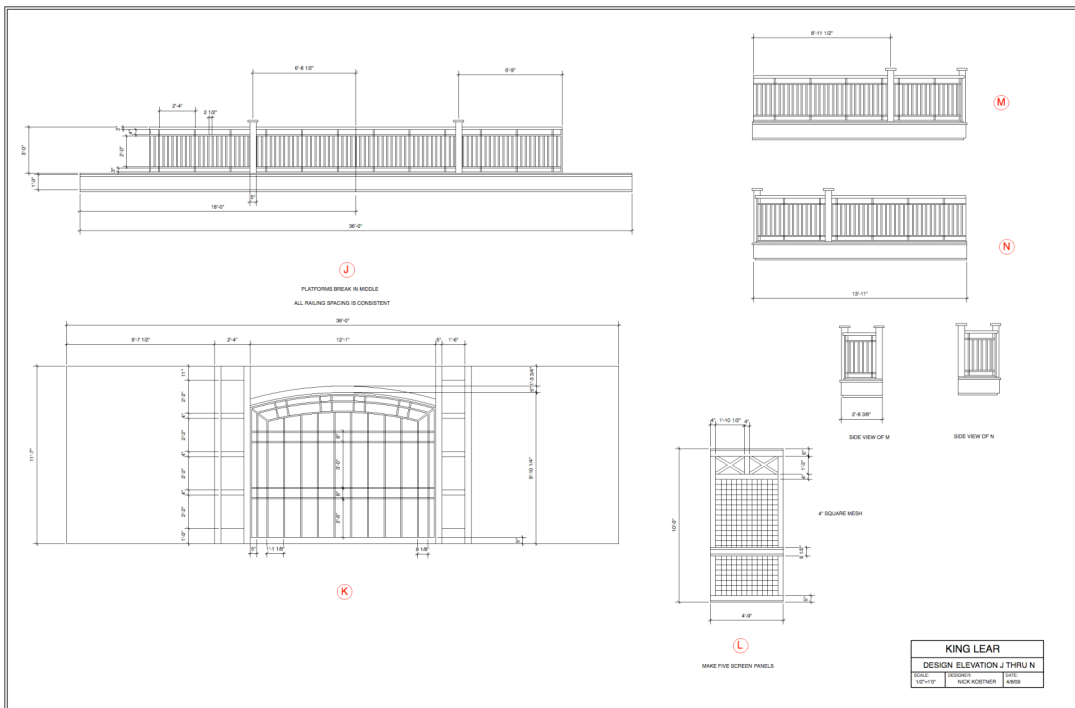
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65)

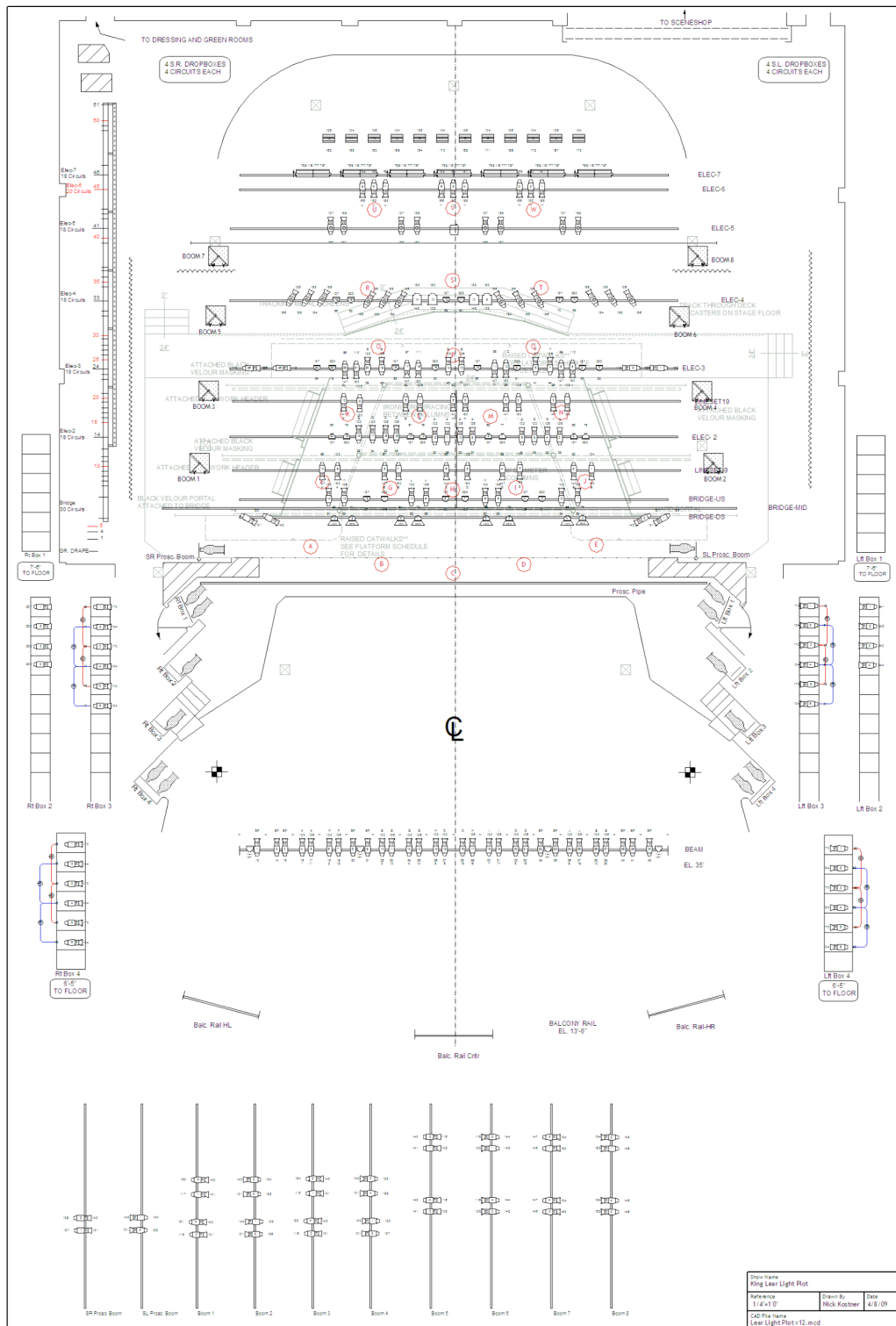


66)



67)





68)