

WAITING FOR THE BARBARIANS

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Rana Esfandiary

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WAITING FOR THE BARBARIANS

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Abstract

Waiting for the Barbarians is one of the Philip Glass's political operas, telling the story of conflict between oppressor and oppressed. The theme of the opera is oppression, repression, torture, and unjustifiable restriction of people's freedom. And this theme has been successfully intensified and accentuated by Christopher Hampton's brilliant Libretto and Glass's dynamic music.

Waiting For The Barbarians, with its compelling theme and music, is doubtlessly a challenge for a designer. This piece demands not only a powerful visualization of its allegoric story, but also asks for equally rhythmic images as the music. Therefore the designer should build an environment which is interwoven with emotional, musical, and visual elements of the piece.

When I started to work on the opera I realized that the key to design this piece is found in Philip Glass's own composing method and music. Therefore, I approach the design for the set by utilizing Glass's additive and repetitive music structure and adapting it to the Alpha and Beta brain waves principles. For the costumes, I was inspired by the Mongolian traditional outfits and the pattern from the carpeting art of countries such as Morocco, Iran, Afghanistan, and Tajikistan. Likewise the lighting requirement was fulfilled by using backlights and creating exaggerated shadows to intensify the theme of repression, unjustifiable restriction, fear, and anxiety.

Therefore by fulfilling different elements of the design, the composition was ready to move and dance with Philip Glass's music; from its monophony, to polyphony and then the modulation at the climax of the libretto.

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GLASS AND THE BARBARIANS

“The Opera can become an occasion for dialogue about political crisis, and this illustrates the power of art to turn our attention toward the human dimension of history.”¹

Philip Glass is known as one of the most important and influential composers of the late 20th, early 21st century. His style is unmistakably recognizable and as Tim Page points out “is like watching a modern painting that initially appears static but seems to metamorphose slowly as one concentrates.”²

Waiting For The Barbarians is Philip Glass’s twenty-first and probably his most disciplined and dramatic opera. This opera is based on the famous novel by the South African author J.M. Coetzee. Glass's first attempt for adapting Coetzee's novel into an opera goes back to 1991. As he wrote himself: “I contacted John Coetzee about adapting his book into an opera back in 1991 and made my first treatment of the opera that same year. I'd begun to do this kind of social/political opera in 1979 with *Satyagrah*, an opera that takes place in South Africa, concerning the life of Gandhi and the possibility of social change through non-violence.”³

In *Waiting For The Barbarians* Glass once again has chosen another important and very controversial theme; a theme of oppression, repression, torture, and unjustifiable restriction of people's freedom. Therefore the opera is filled with striking images and evocative moments that are simultaneously intensified with a powerful libretto and impressive music.

The opera describes the story of a Magistrate who after leading his quiet and simple life in a rural border town of an unnamed empire comes to a conflict with a colonel from the capital. Colonel Joll, from the Third Bureau, has an order to wage war against Barbarians. His method of fulfilling the duty of extracting desirable confessions is associated with imprisoning, torturing, beating, and killing prisoners. To oppose Colonel's cruelty, the Magistrate decides to shelter one of the prisoners, a barbarian girl, who has been almost blinded and crippled by Joll's thuggish interrogations. While hiding the barbarian girl in his house, the Magistrate deeply falls in love with her but still intends to take her back to her people. As a consequence of this act, he is

accused of association with the enemy and subsequently is prisoned and tortured by Joll and his thugs. At the end of the opera Joll's plans turns to be a failure and he and his military thugs leave and abandon the town and the Magistrate goes back to his quiet life and memories.

Glass's opera tells a horrific and tragic story about a baseless excuse for occupying innocent people's land, life, and freedom. Therefore it's not fanciful to assert that this opera and its accurate correspondent to today's political and social catastrophes can be comprehended as an allegory of the past, present, and future of conflict between oppressors and innocent people. Philip Glass successfully intensifies and accentuates this allegory by Christopher Hampton's brilliant libretto accompanied by a very dynamic and compelling music of his own.

Therefore I have decided to design this opera for my thesis project because of: First and foremost, its compelling and nostalgic story; Second, it's powerful music, and; Third, its capability of giving variety of choices for interpreting and approaching the piece to a designer.

GLASS, A WHOLE NEW STORY

“The best music is experienced as one event, without start or end”⁴

Philip Glass was born in Baltimore, Maryland. He spent most of his adolescence in Baltimore working in his father's record store, while studying flute and piano. It was through his father's collection that he got acquainted with modern music.

“You know he would have a recording of a Bartok piece or Hindemith; people didn't buy that in Baltimore.”⁵ “The Beethoven quartets didn't sell well, you know Schubert piano trios didn't sell well. He ended up with a very refined collection. He told me later that he listened to these records to see what was wrong with them.”⁶

Before finishing high school, Glass accepted to the University of Chicago at the age of 15; after finishing his study there, he passed the entrance exam of Julliard and left for New York City. During his Five years at Julliard he wrote approximately 75 pieces for orchestra, movie, dance production, etc.

“...you don't learn much at Julliard. What they do at Julliard is they have a very hard entrance examination and very easy graduation examination. It's a good theory because the idea is that you get really talented kids and you put them in a good environment and you wait.”⁷

After Julliard he went to Paris to study piano with Nadia Boulanger. It was during this time that he discovered Indian music and found its additive principles closer to his own repetitive style and taste. The very principle of Indian music is based on bringing smaller units, with different structures, together in order to form larger units. Therefore it stands exactly on the opposite side of the western music which is based on subdividing the longer units into smaller ones. By employing the additive style and pursuing his own repetitive and rhythmic method, his unique and significant music started to develop and attracted attentions.⁸

Wes York describes Glass's uniqueness by asserting: “As is true of many of his pieces, it becomes immediately apparent that Glass makes his statement through the shaping of a minimal number of musical materials. There are no dynamic changes, no new pitch materials after initial

five pulses, no changes of instrumentation, and no juxtapositions of sound and silence. Rather, and stated most simply, contexts of up to five pitches are continually shaped and reshaped as they articulate an even and unchanging pulse.”⁹

This repetitive structure of course created a wide range of reactions from his audiences. While some people were transfixed by his music, the others found it irritatingly boring and annoying. As a consequence most of his audiences, particularly at the beginning of his career, were limited to young and avant-garde artists who were striving to change the classic world of art. But despite numerous negative reactions and criticism toward his work, he never felt any necessity for changing his style or mixing in Western music.

“I don't really take opera composers as models, isn't that the point? I like to listen to the same works that everyone likes to listen to -Mozart, Rossini, Verdi, Wagner and the rest. But it never occurred to me to write like any of them, any more than it would to put on the clothes of nineteenth century Italian. These works occupy a world of their own and it is a beautiful world. One that enriches us all. I am devotee of museum, but I don't want to live in one.”¹⁰

Glass holds the same unconventional viewpoint toward theatre too. He was never interested in American traditional theatre and the works of writers such as Miller and Williams. He was looking for the kind of theatre that was capable of challenging today's progressive world problems in an absolutely none traditional manner. Therefore, his first and foremost controversial piece, *Einstein On The Beach*, was a collaboration with a visionary man of theatre, Robert Wilson, whose work pronouncedly resembled that of Glass's in theatre.

Einstein On the Beach pursued Glass's intention in a very radical way. Its music is based on a series of repeating single group of melodies, accompanied by simple lyrics of “ Do Re Mi Fa” and “ One Two Three” “ One Two Three Four” “ One Two Three Four Five Six”.

Einstein On The Beach strengthened Glass's unconventional style and paved his way for writing pieces such as *Satyagraha*, *Akhmaten*, *Glass Works*, *Metamorphosis*, *1000 Airplanes On The Roof*, *Monsters Of Grace*, *Waiting For The Barbarians*, etc.

“Still I feel very positive about our inherited and changing world of music theatre. New works not modeled on the past are being created, producers are beginning to appear in cities and countries all over the world and the public for these new works is very much there. I don't doubt the world of a traditional repertory opera will eventually be dragged, probably screaming, into the Twenty First century, and that will be whole new story.”¹¹

GLASS FOR GLASS

“I had the ability to write music that was so radical that I could be mistaken for an idiot, and I was often. And that absolutely didn't bother me.”¹²

The process of working on *Waiting For the Barbarians* was a highly intense but at the same time very delightful and tangible, and I was fortunate to experience its greatness. Surprisingly, the process of the design had been initiated at least 3 months before I was even being aware of the existence of *Waiting For The Barbarians*. Since the first time that I heard the music of Philip Glass, I was curious to primarily understand his highly complex musical structure, and then to somehow decode it in a very simple language for myself. To pursue my eagerness, I went through all of his works and tried to simultaneously listen and read theories related to his technique and style of composing. Though my attempts had a very raw and even naïve outcome, by the time that I came across *Waiting For The Barbarians* there was a misty tower of information being piled up in my left brain. Therefore when I heard and read the libretto of the opera, I felt that this work could be that solid foundation for me to base all of the information on it.

The more I got involved with this opera, the more it challenged me in two different main levels. The first level was personal nostalgia toward the story of conflict between oppressor and oppressed. The second was musicality of the piece and its complexity.

When I started to work on the opera even in the stage of doing research and laying out my concept, recognizing and organizing those two main levels of involvement seemed impossible and confusing. Finally, I realized that the key to overcome this bafflement is found in Philip Glass's own composing method and music. Therefore, I decided to apply and utilize Glass's method for designing his own opera. Or in a word, pursuing *the Glass for Glass* theory.

In the following chapters, I will first explain the musical terminologies of Glass's ultra-organized composing system and their scientific contents. I will then describe my approach to apply the musical and scientific systems in my designing process.

GLASSY COMPONENTS

Monophony, Polyphony, Modulation:

Without a doubt Philip Glass's music, can be comprehended by its progressive move from monophony at the opening moment to a complex polyphony and from there towards a kind of modulation.¹³

Alpha (External):

In this process, an entire pattern (group of notes) will undergo a number of repetitions. I will refer to this process as G Alpha.¹⁴



Beta (Internal):

In Beta or Internal process just a part of a pattern will be repeated. This process will be referred to as G Beta.¹⁵



Alpha > Beta:

Always external repetition is more dominant and able to subdue the internal ones.¹⁶

x 28

x 14

SCIENTIFIC TERMINOLOGY

Alpha Brain Wave:

Alpha refers to an effortless state of consciousness. It is a state of relaxation and day dreaming; a state that needs a high level of right brain activity. I will refer to this wave as B Alpha



Beta Brain Wave:

Beta is a state of strongly engaged mind. Low Beta wave is a sign of concentration and higher waves indicate anxiety, depression, ADD, OCD and other anxiety disorders. This term will be referred as B Beta.

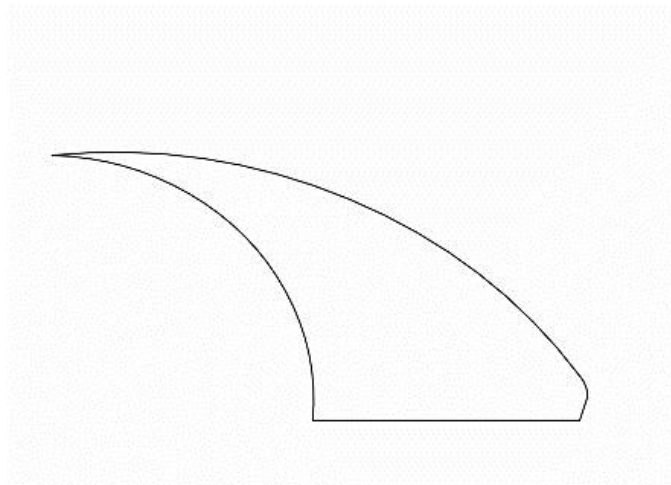


With the principles of G Alpha, B Alpha, G Beta, and B Beta, the design process of *Waiting For The Barbarians* began at the first step.

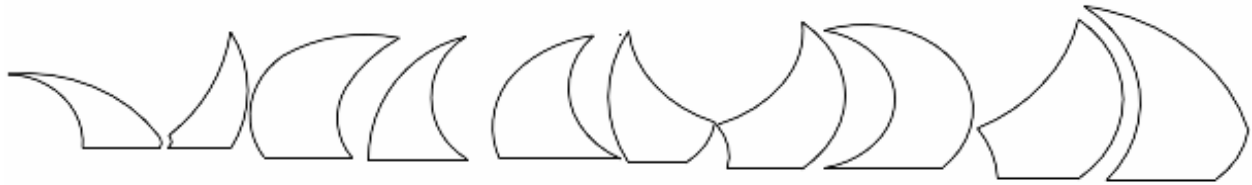
The exact time and place of the action in the opera was not specified. The only available hint in the script was limited to one sentence: *Central Asia*. This, to me, evoked a country such as Mongolia, a country with both deserts and mountains.

My first set of sketches reflected one important feature and that was my primary and naïve reaction to the story; feelings such as fear, anger, empathy and sympathy. I assembled all of those feelings in triangular and knifelike abstract shapes. Since the process was getting intricately emotional, I decided to utilize Philip Glass's composing methods as an alternative solution for my design process.

Based on my initial expressive sketches, I somewhat knew where I was going, but the whole idea was still sort of fragmented pieces of glass scattering all over my brain. Therefore, based on Glass's method the only solution I could imagine to overcome such a chaotic situation was thinking of it as a Monophony. I took one piece and drew and redrew, created and recreated, demolished and re-demolished, and finally sculpted it in a way that I thought would suit the theme of the opera and the music as well.



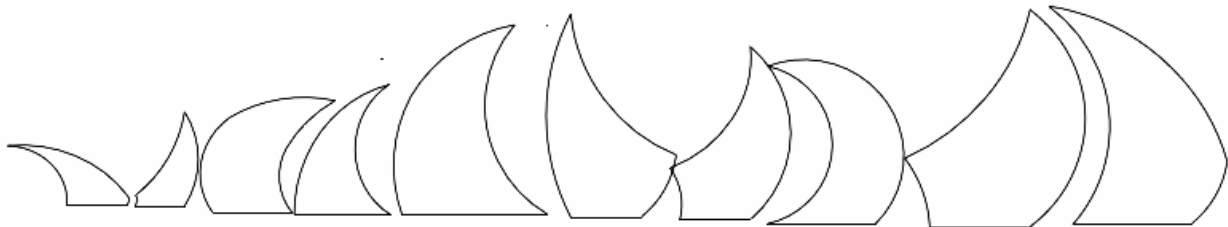
For reaching Polyphony on the stage, I needed more pieces, movements, harmonies, or in other words more visual notes. This necessity reminded me of G Alpha, repetition. So I started repeating the one shape I had, over and over, almost close to nine or ten times.



At this point I was able to write the first equation, with some optimism as to my ability to resolve it:

$$X + G \text{ Alpha} = D \text{ Alpha (Designer Alpha)}$$

In order to substitute X with an appropriate factor such as the right feeling of B Alpha, I needed the shapes to send different waves or feelings. As mood variation is one of the key elements throughout the whole opera, I changed the size of each piece, placing the smallest ones in front of the stage to indicate the higher level of anxiety and the bigger ones in the back (where Barbarians live) to convey the feeling of more relaxed and safer environment.



Following such approach, the Alpha equation was completely solved:

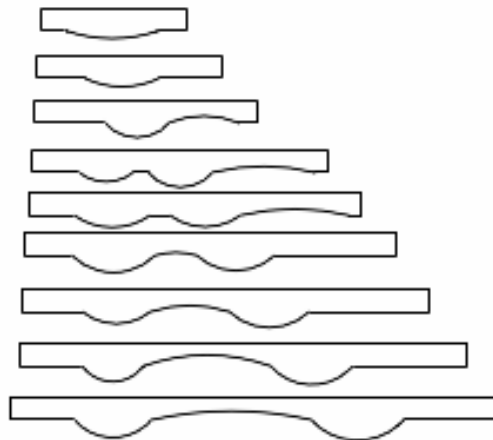
$$B \text{ Alpha} + G \text{ Alpha} = D \text{ Alpha}$$

At the end of the Alpha process I had ten pieces in an absolutely disorganized composition. It was time to think about harmonic Polyphony or harmonic composition. Hence I started moving those pieces around, arranging and rearranging them, again and again. At this point I was also inspired by the panoramic view of the Mongolian desert and mountain. So my intention was to

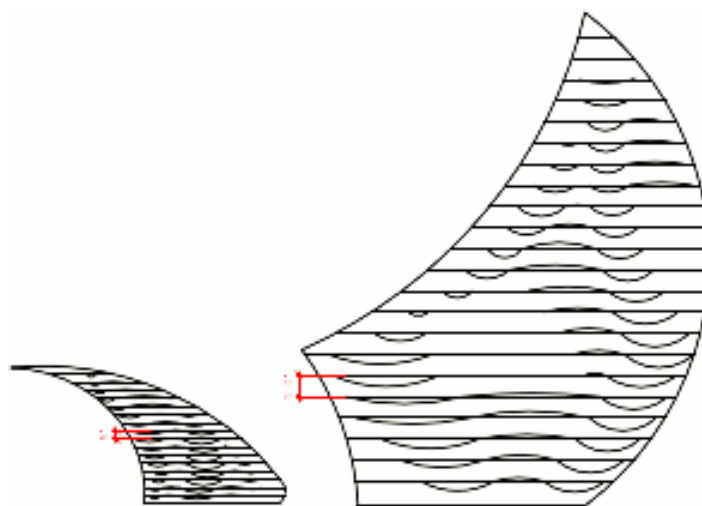
create a kind of arrangement that resembled both mountain and desert simultaneously. After struggling for a while I arrived at the following composition:



After achieving a desirable composition I started to think about Modulation. My first attempts for creating an acceptable Modulation with the set pieces that I had put together, failed. I finally realized that some elements were missing and therefore the set pieces failed to make a modulation. In desperation suddenly the idea of G Beta sparkled in my left brain. Having studied the pieces I had available, I realized that I could only create the external repetition. The missing element was the internal repetition. The G Beta idea started to develop and flourished, while accompanied by the theory of B Beta waves or more details! Some kind of repetitive details with different Hertz conveys divers and different feelings such as anxiety, fear, and relaxation. With the research I conducted on the Mongolian architecture, followed by several sets of sketches I arrived at these wavy details:



I created more condensed Beta waves in order to convey the feeling of higher anxiety level at the front of the stage (where most of the torturing and killing happen). I placed those details with less space between them on the set pieces (5") compared to those at the back (1'), where Barbarians peacefully live.



The Beta equation was solved:

$$G \text{ Beta} + B \text{ Beta} = D \text{ Beta}$$

I then had to solve the Modulation equation:

$$[D \text{ Alfa} \cdot D \text{ Beta}] = \text{Modulation}$$

Having executed all the external and internal repetitions, I still felt that my work on Glass's music was only half done. Though creating harmony was possible by carefully manipulating the combinations of what I had up to that point and using theatrical tricks (such as the turntable, and flying furniture in and out), but the result resembled that of cacophony rather than harmony or modulation. The main reason for this was the absence of light and costumes.

For the costumes, I was inspired by the Mongolian traditional outfits. Therefore I kept the outline and general assembly of Mongolian traditional outfits and just made some changes on the patterns. I intentionally chose the pattern from the carpeting tradition of countries such as Morocco, Iran, Afghanistan, and Tajikistan. My decision was based on my preference of not limiting the story to Mongolia but rather presenting it as a universal story. This was based on the fact that the same kind of news of oppression, killing, and torturing of innocent people is observed all over the world--flowing through news rooms across the globe every day.

The final missing piece to a complete the harmonic modulation was the light. Since the theme of the opera was mostly fear, anxiety, repression, and unjustifiable restriction; the major parts of the lighting design were based on the backlight and creation of shadows in addition to use of spotlights and side lights to creating diverse set of moods and atmospheres. In terms of creating shadows, one way was using back light; the other way was utilizing LED screens and programing them with the desirable images beforehand. I chose the LED screens because they would render the shadows and colors in the correct way.

After fulfilling and completing different elements of my design, the modulation was finally ready. The set, costumes, and lights were ready to move and dance with Philip Glass's superb music. Everything was ready to move on the music's path, from its monophony to polyphony and then the modulation at the climax of the opera. Figure 2 illustrates a monophonic visual composition since only first units (left and right) are moving out. Figures 6 and 7 are the example

of polyphonic visual composition since two units (Three and Four) and furniture are moving simultaneously at the beginning of the scenes 5 and act 6. And finally, Figures 11 and 12 illustrate a modulated visual composition for scene 11 because not only are all units are moving in, but also turntable is revolving simultaneously.

The following elements of the design illustrate how the ideas were realized.

SET AND LIGHT

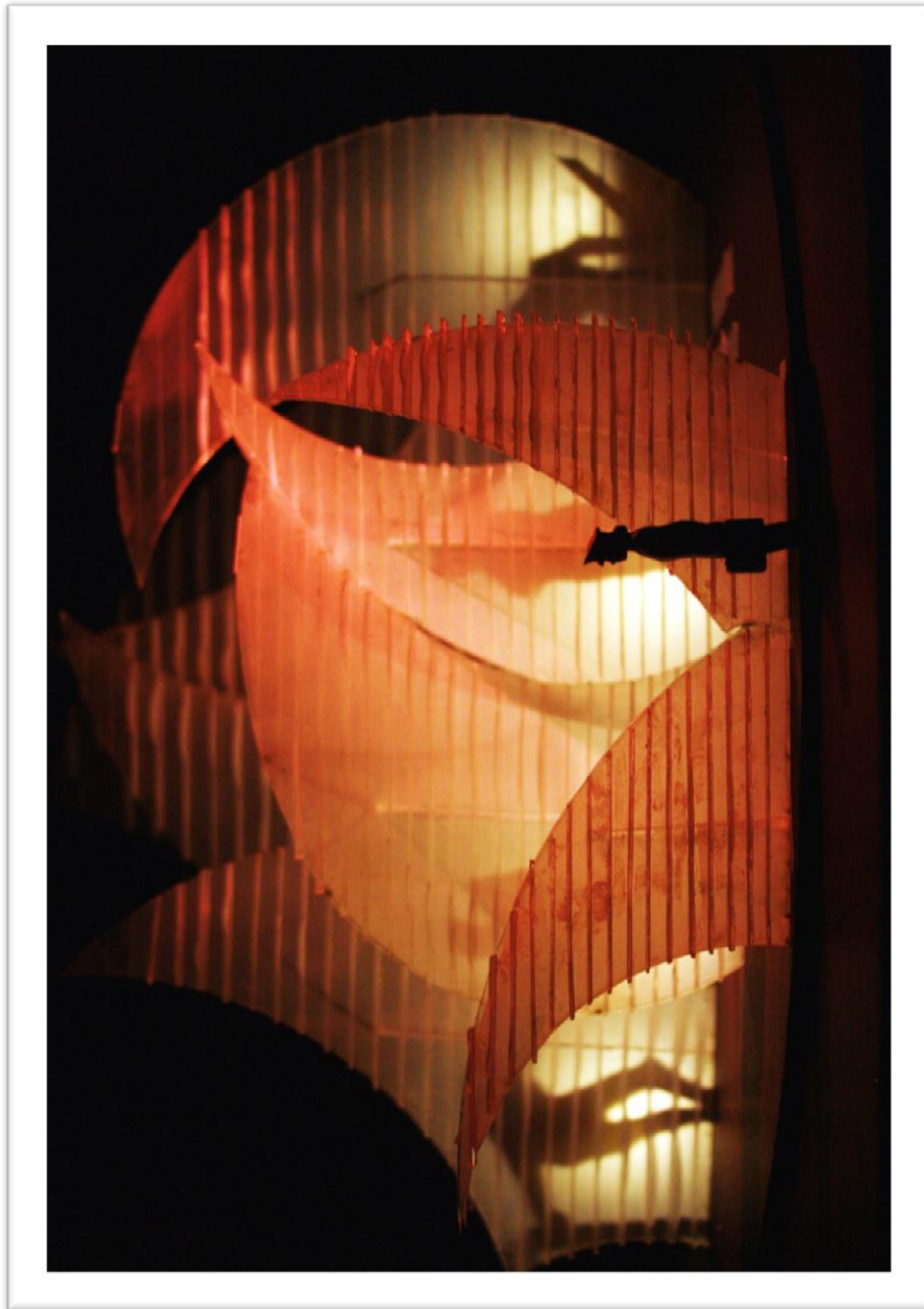


Figure 1: Scene 1, Act 1



Figure 2: Scene 2, Act 1

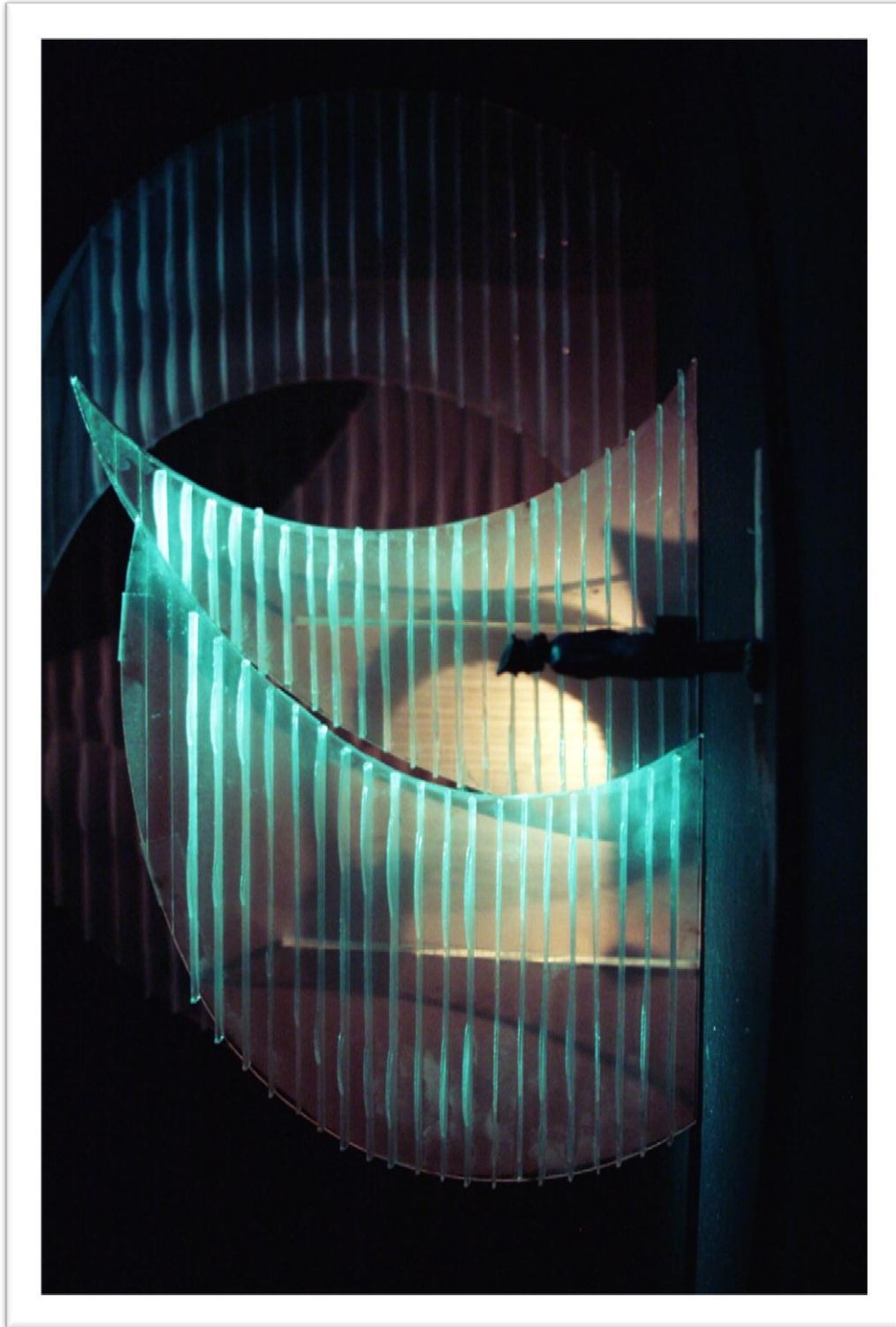


Figure 3: Scene 3, Act 1

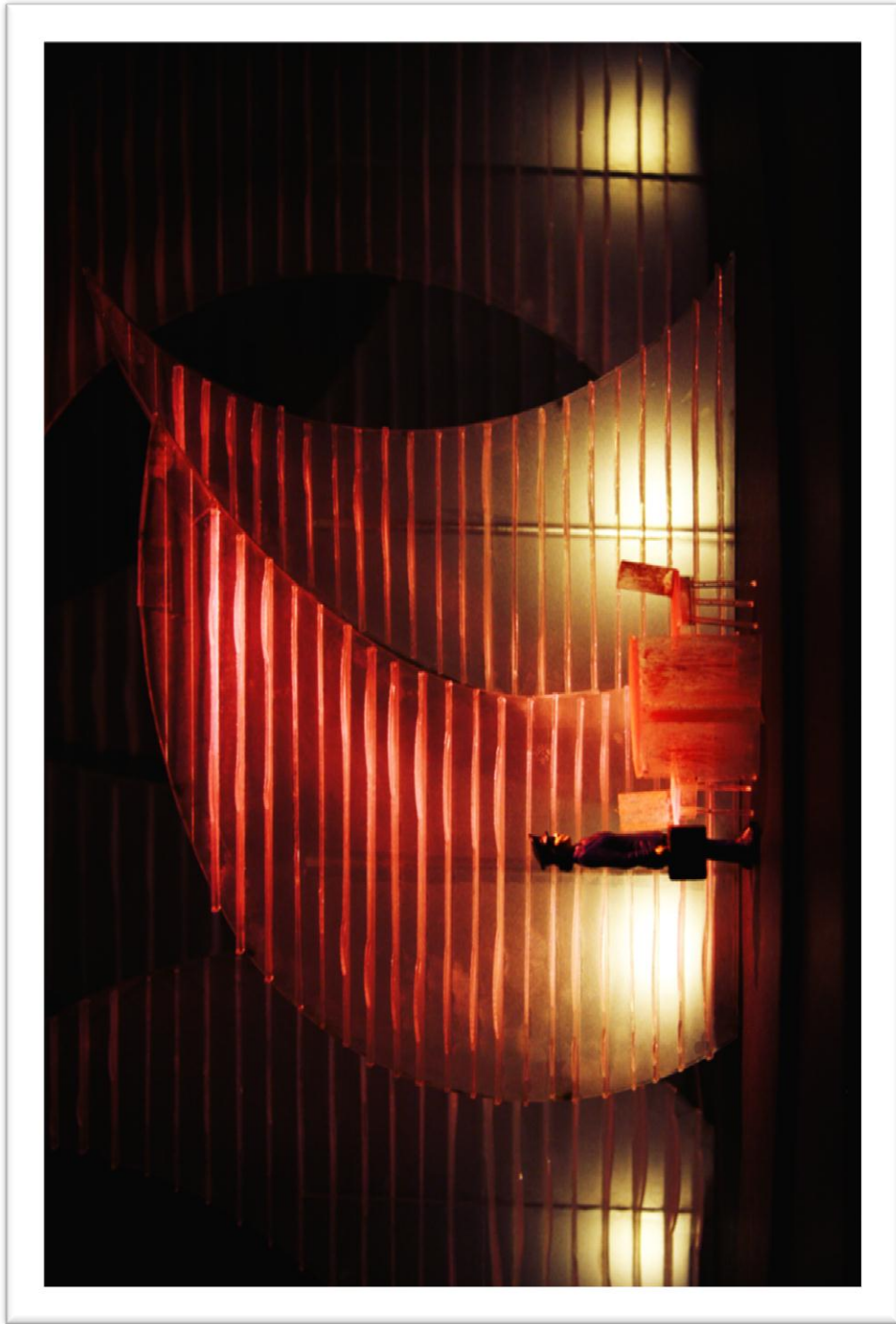


Figure 4: Scene 4, Act 1

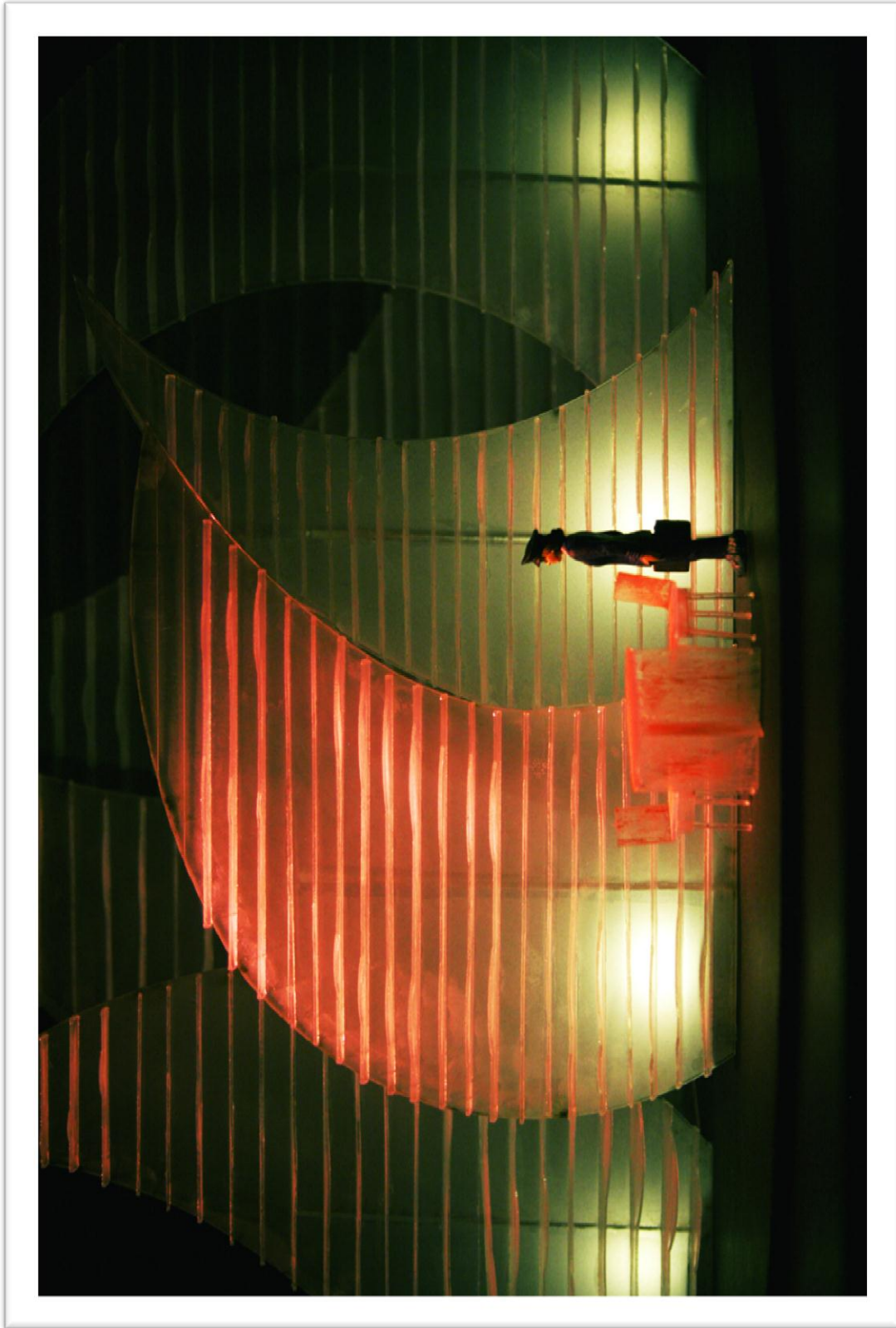


Figure 5: Scene 4, Act 1

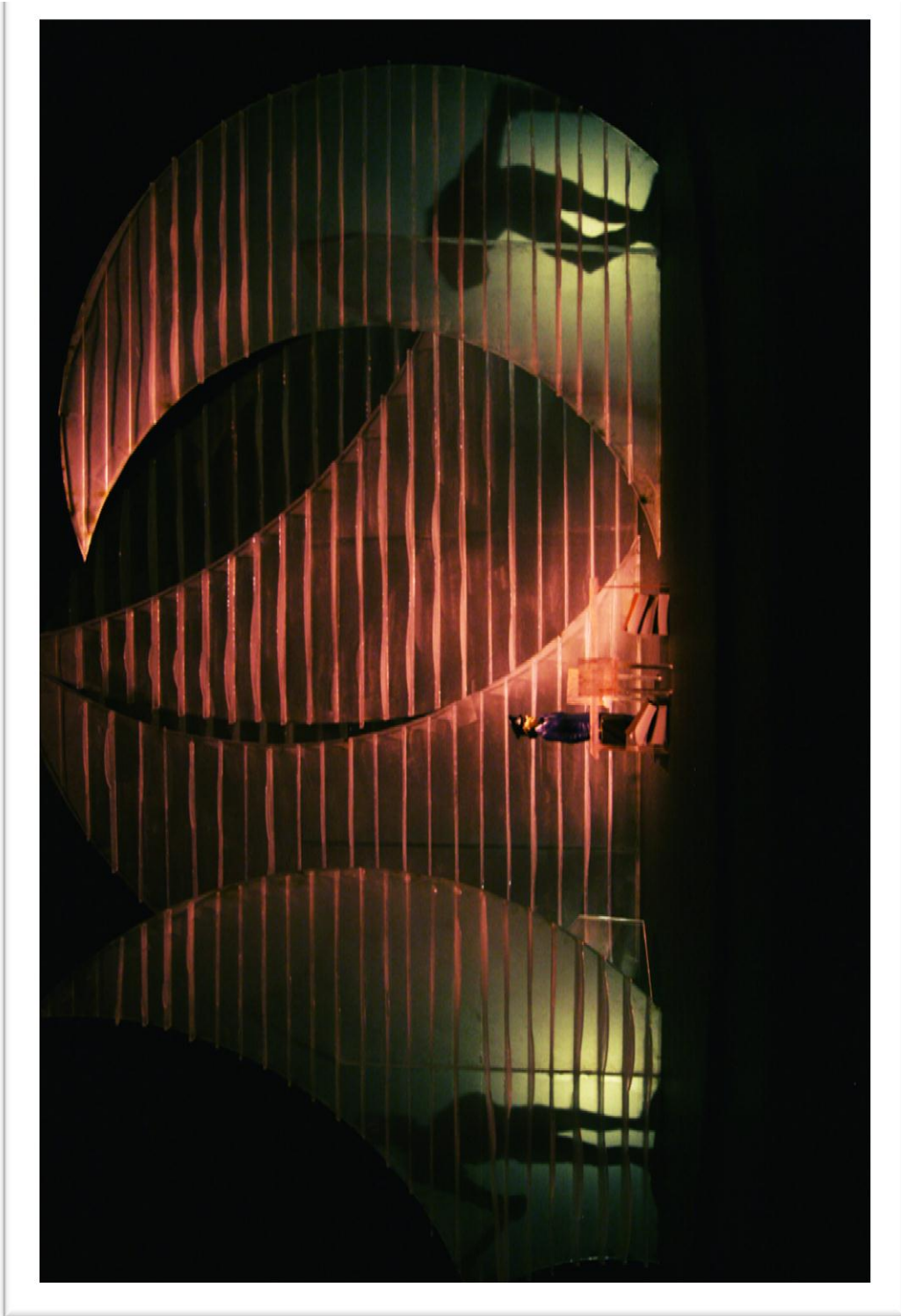


Figure 6: Scene 5, Act 1

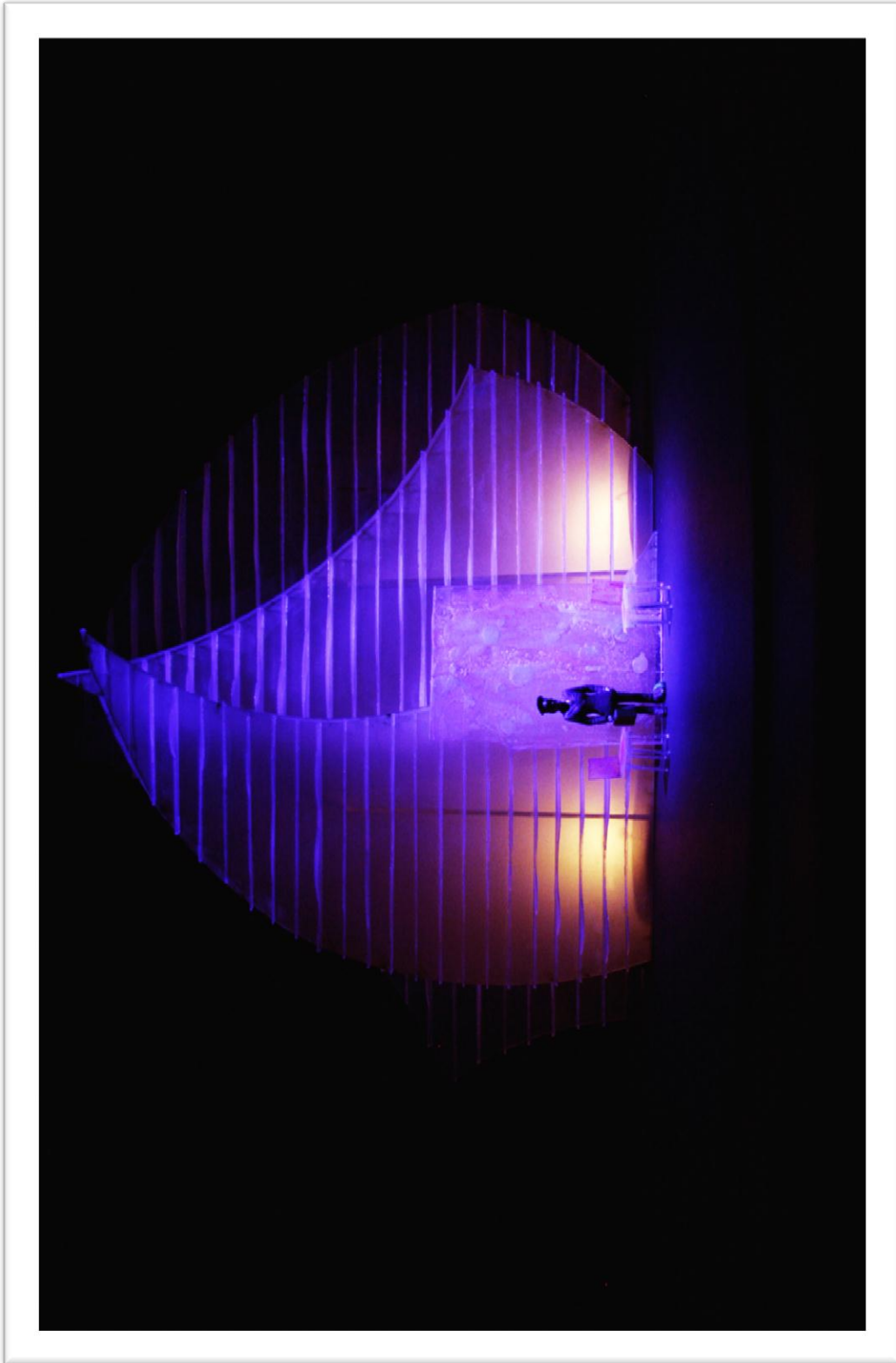


Figure 7: Scene 6, Act 1

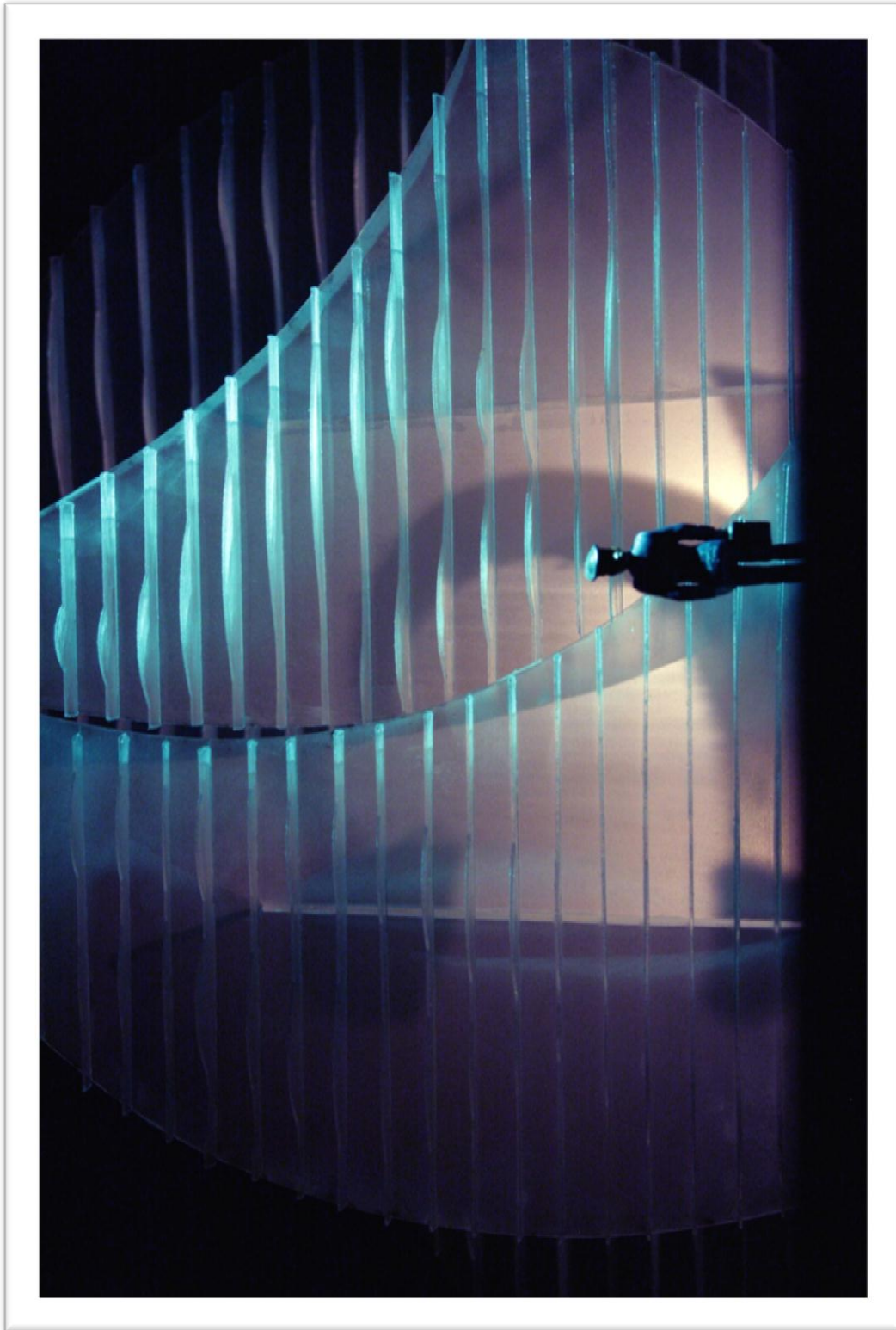


Figure 8: Scene 7, Act 1

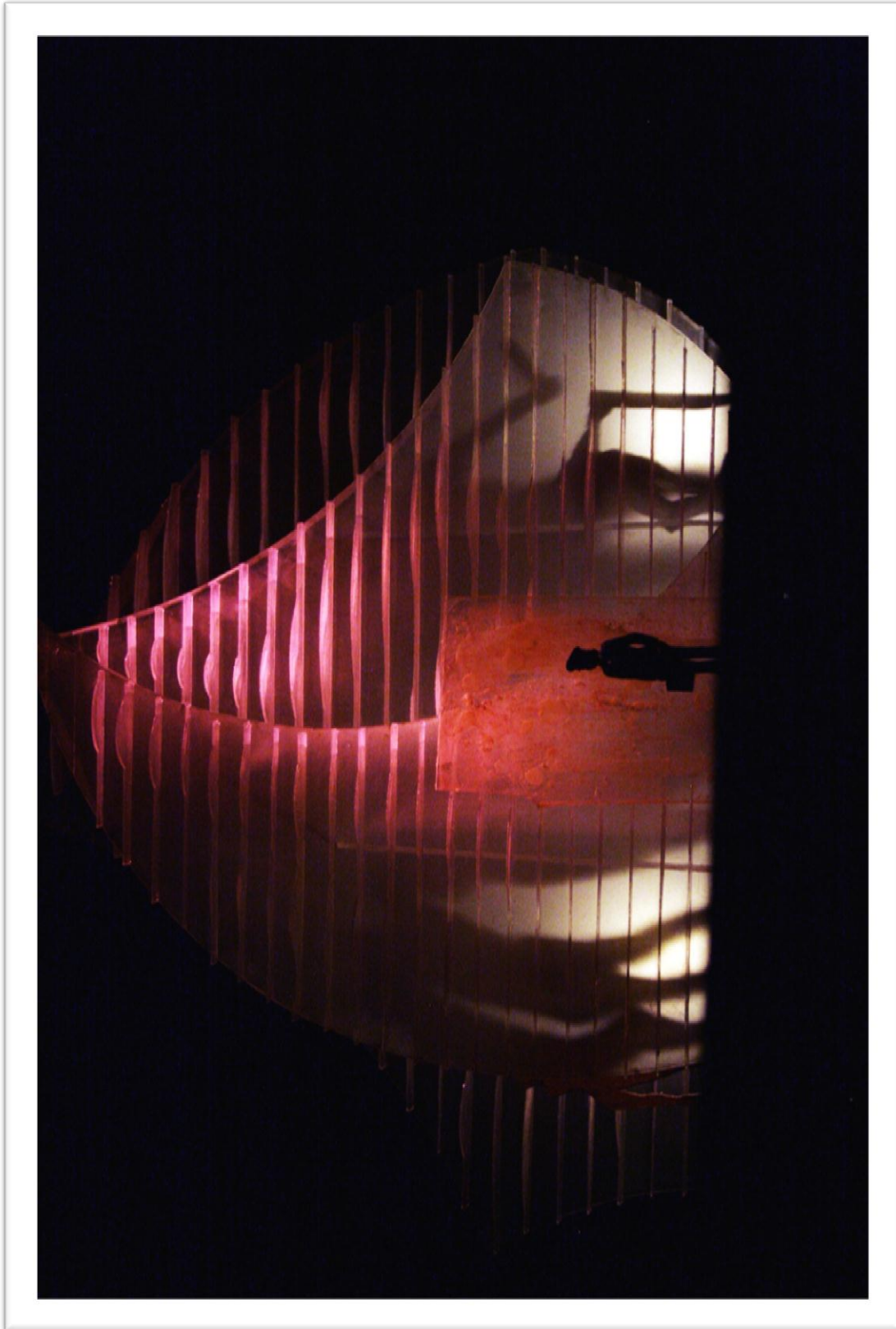


Figure 9: Scene 8, Act 1

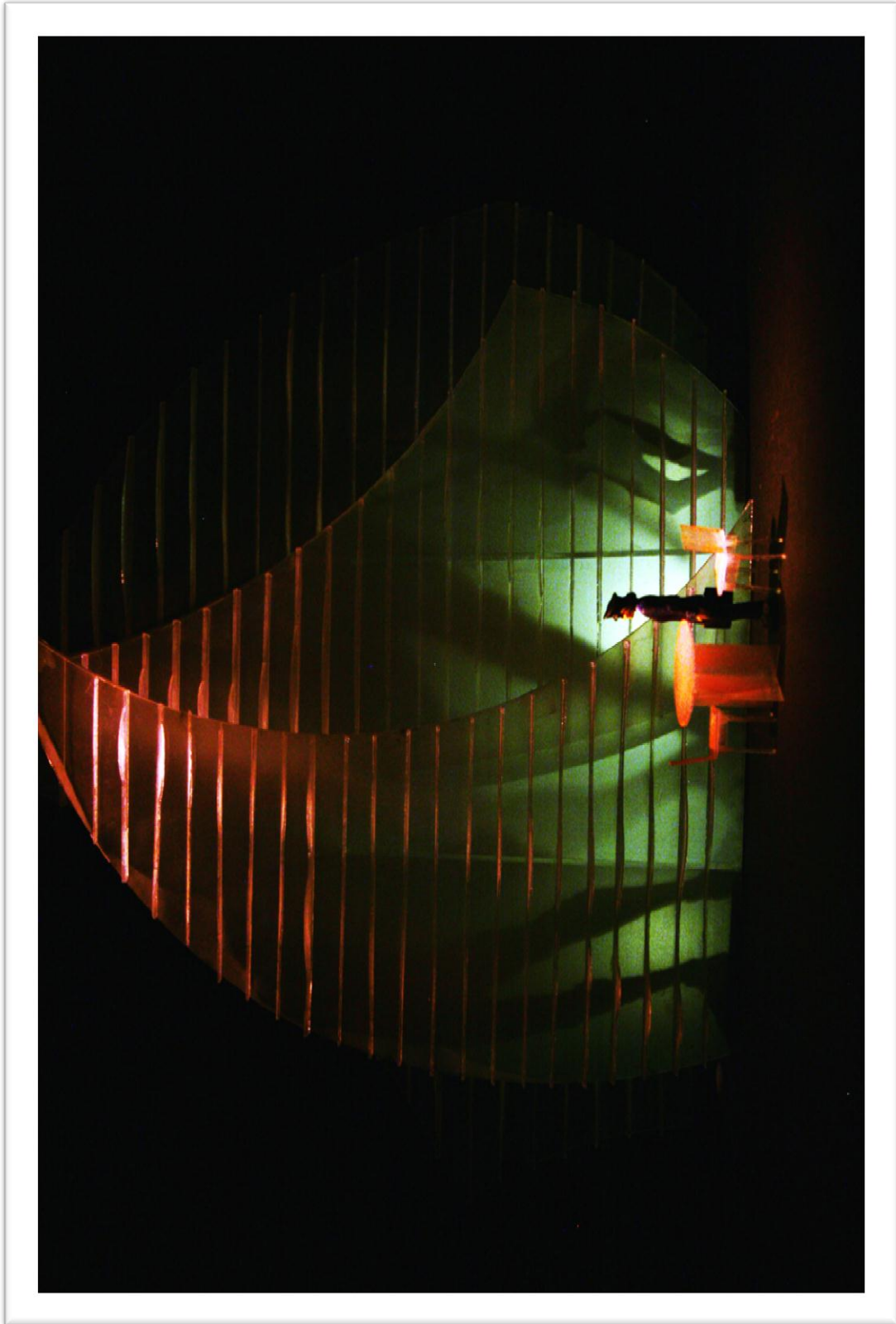


Figure 10: Scene 9, Act 1

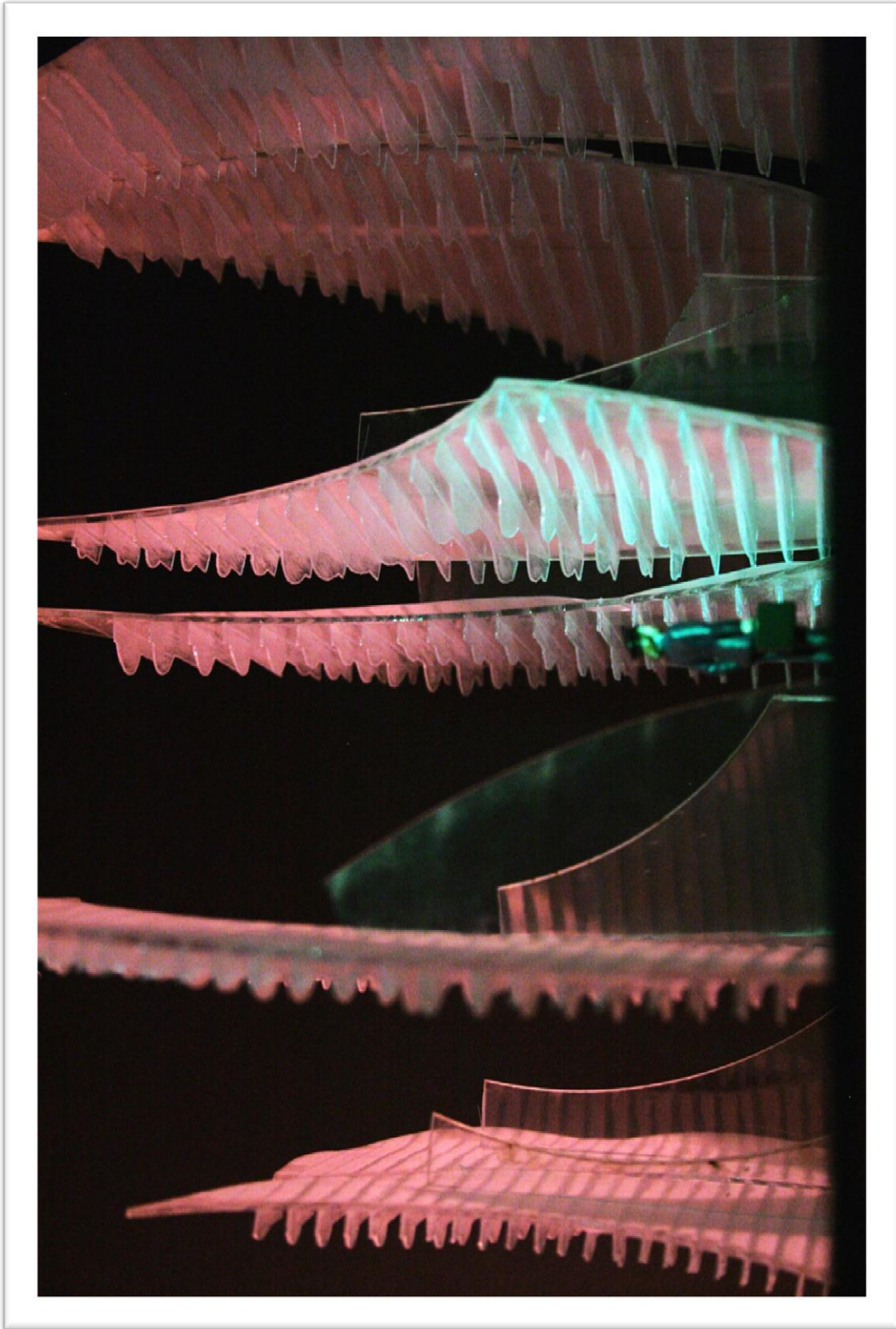


Figure 11: Scene 11, Act 1 (Using the Turntable)

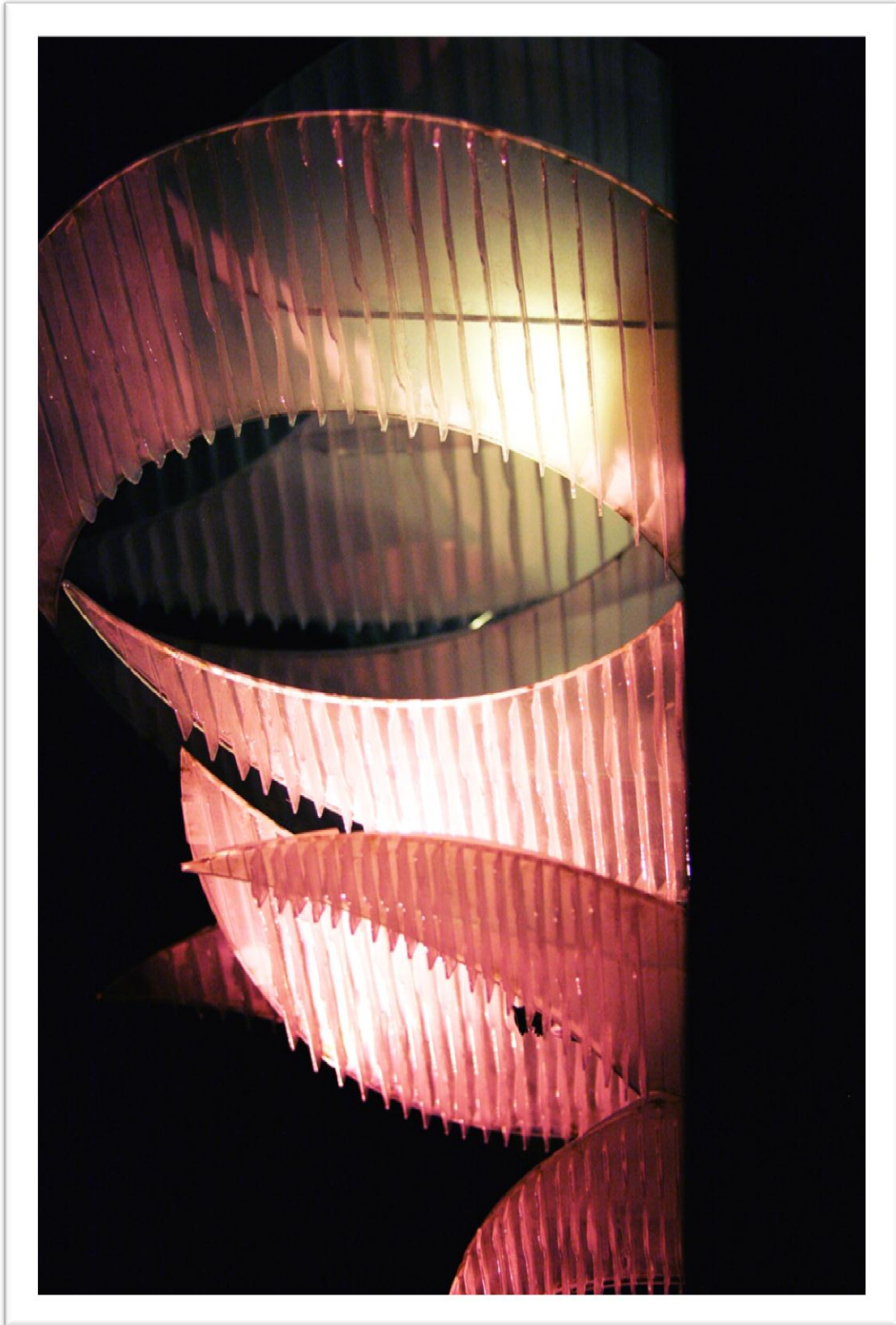


Figure 12: Scene 11, Act 1 (Using the Turntable)

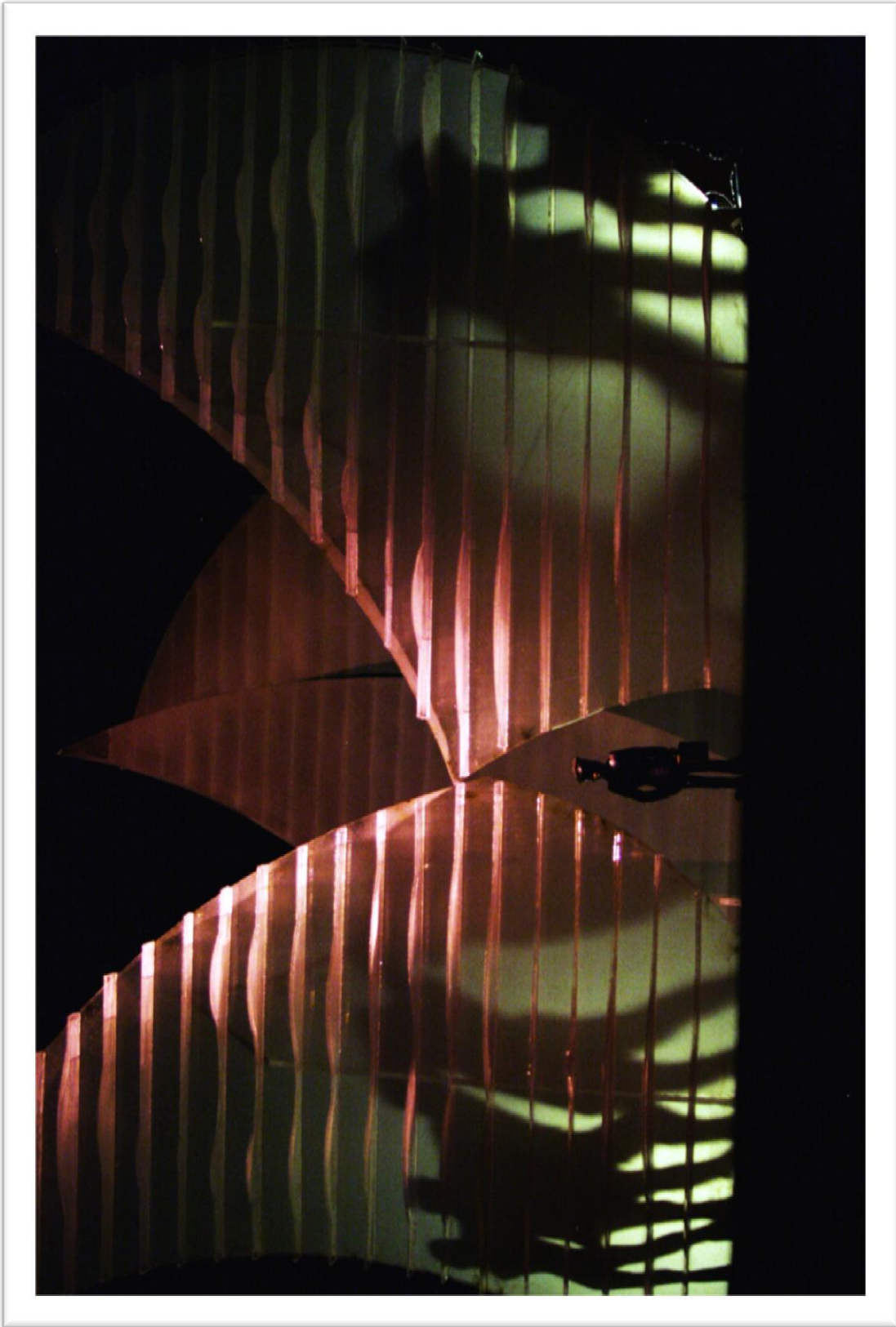


Figure 13: Scene 13, Act 1

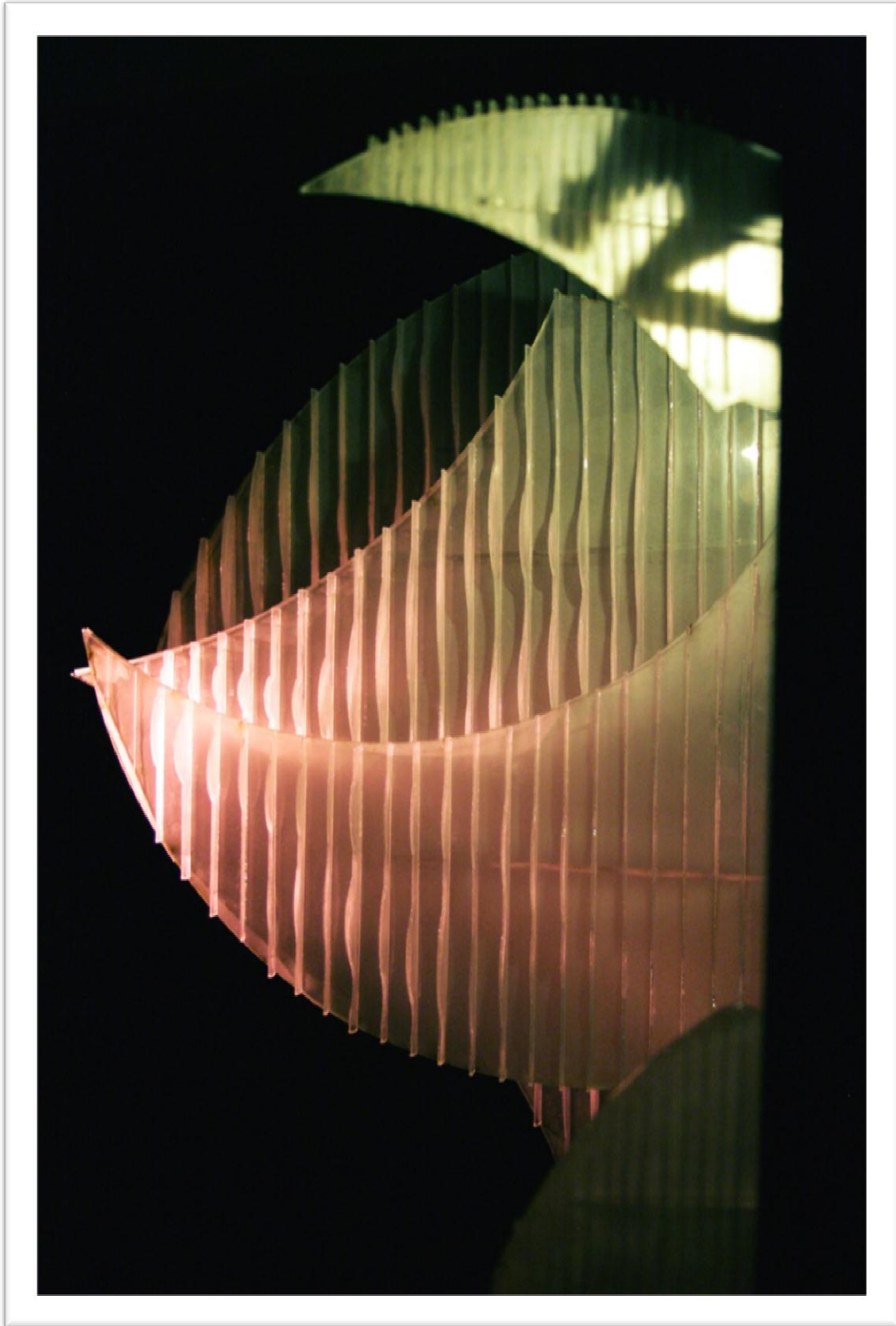


Figure 14: Scene 1, 2, 3, Act 2



Figure 15: Scene 1, 2, 3, Act 2



Figure 16: Scene 4, Act 2

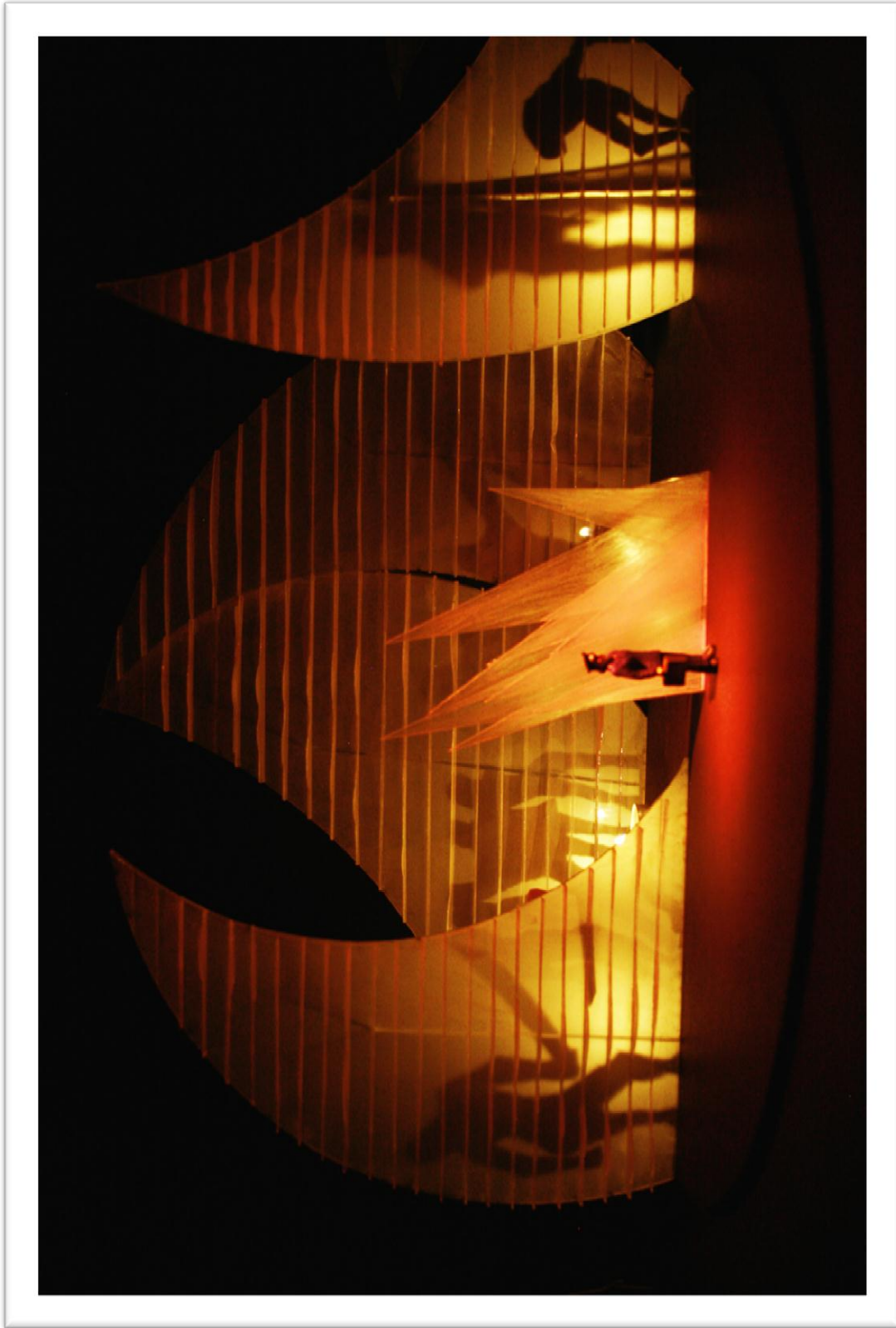


Figure 17: Scene 5, 6, 7, 8, Act 2

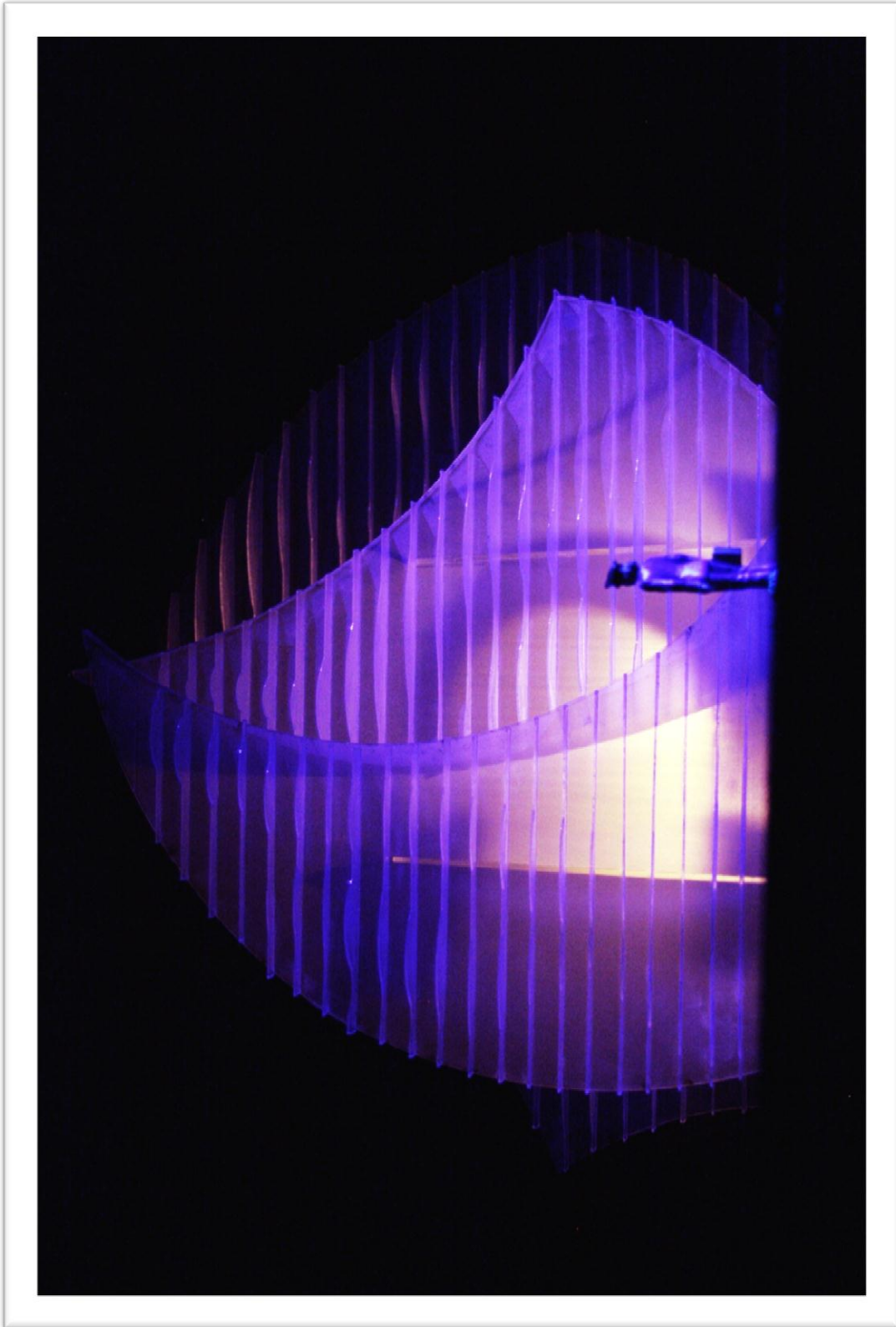


Figure 18: Scene 5, 6, 7, 8, Act 2

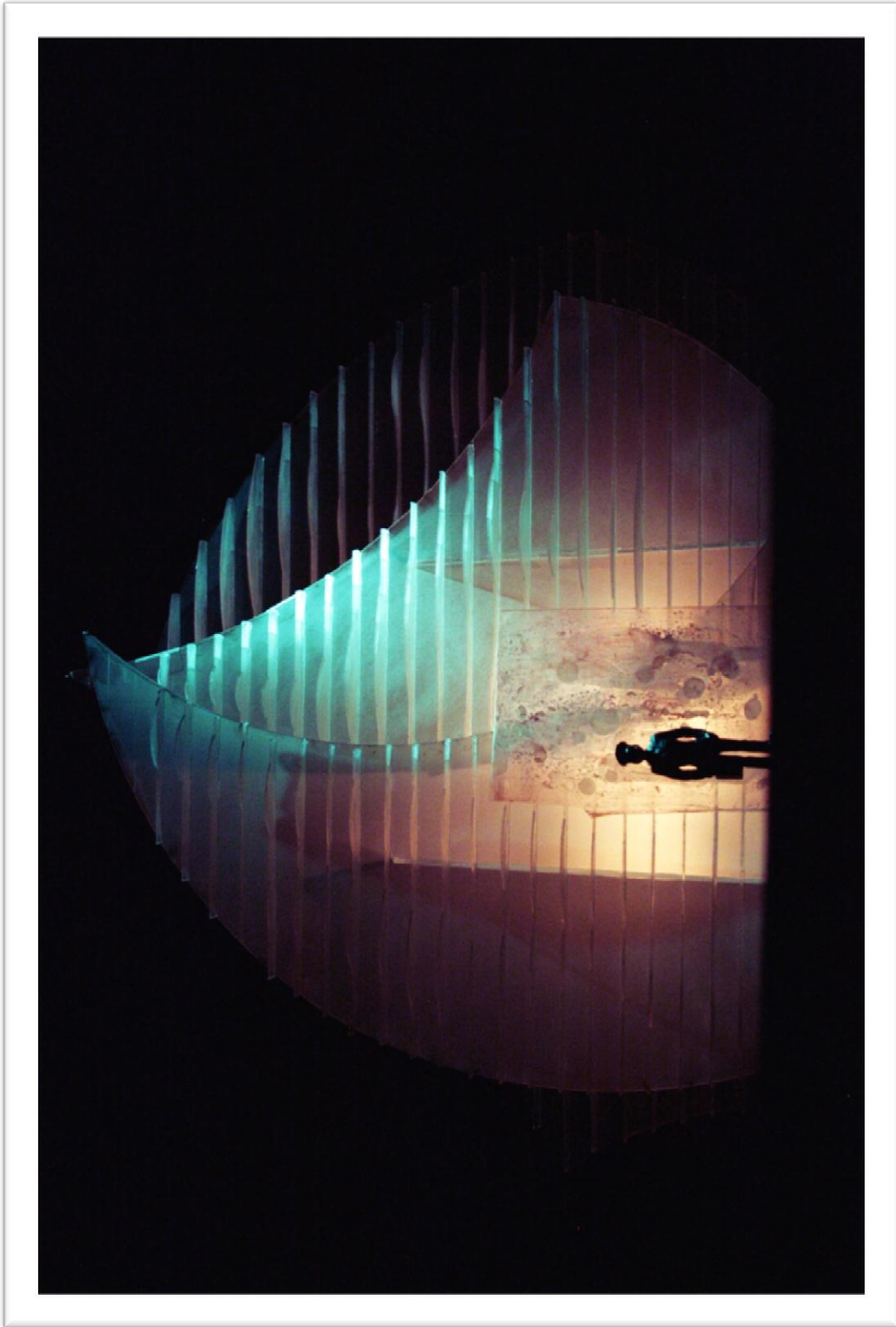


Figure 19: Scene 9, Act 2

DRAFTING

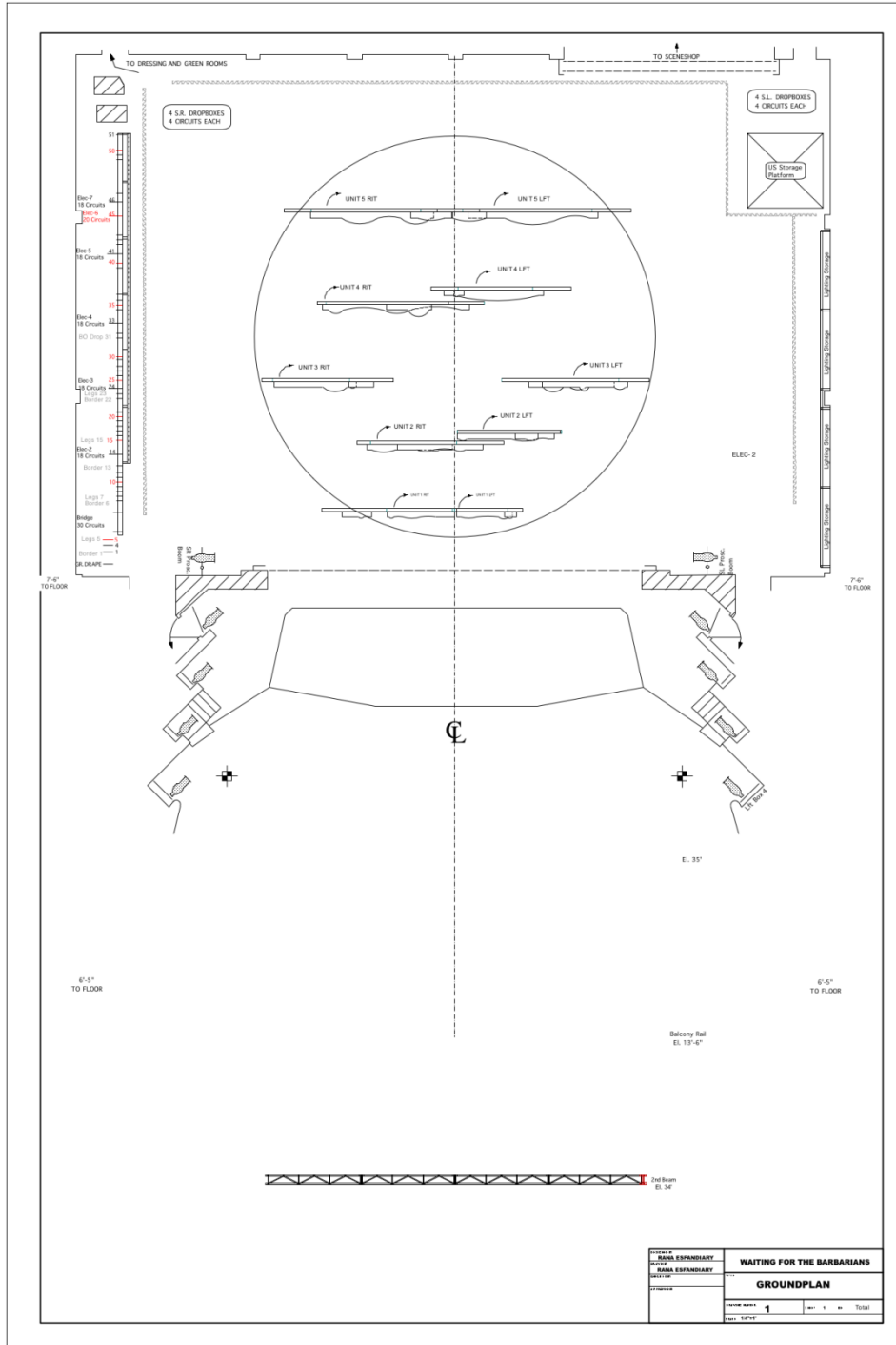


Figure 20: Groundplan Scene 1, Act 1



Figure 21: Side Section Scene 1, Act 1

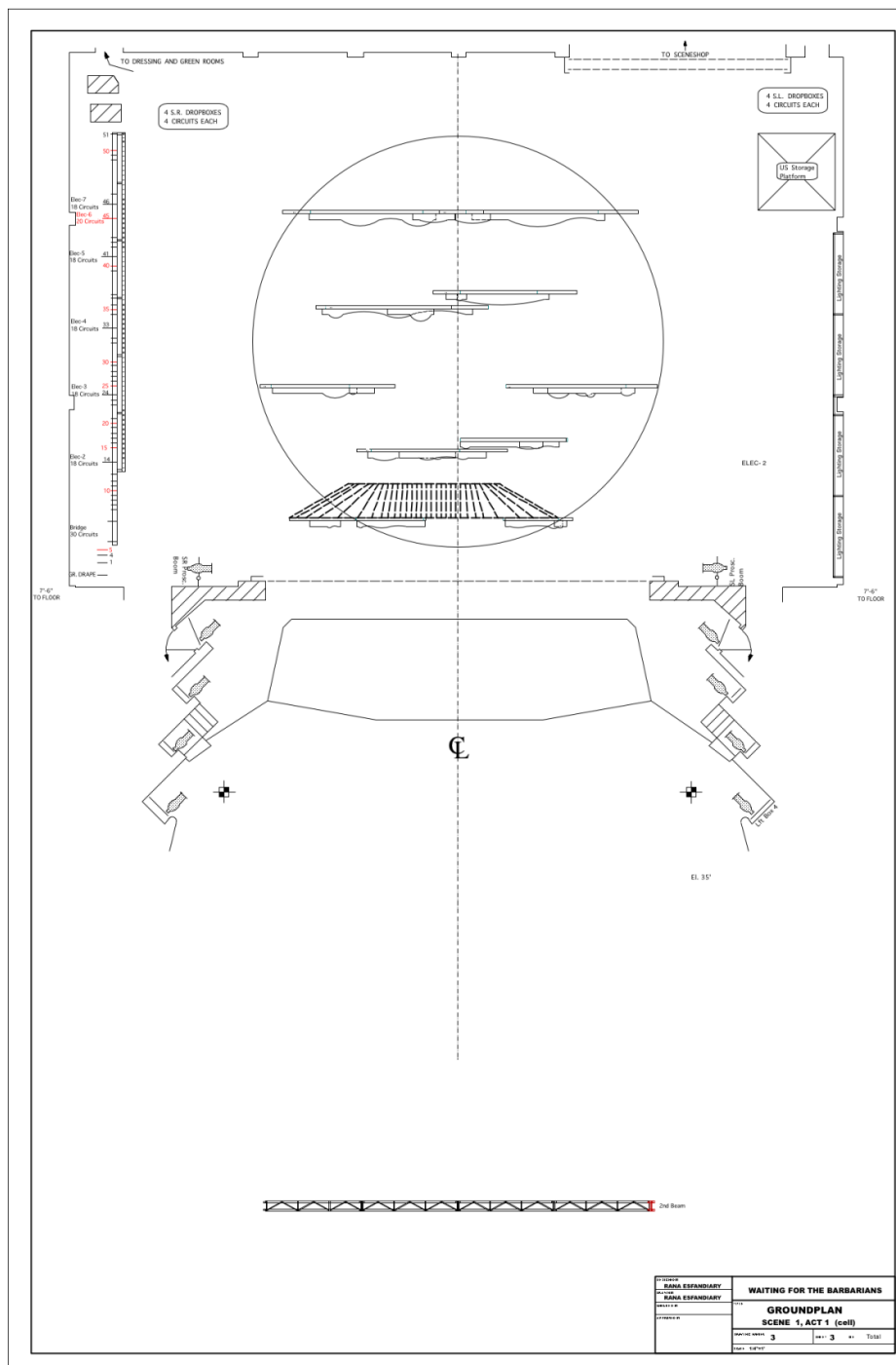


Figure 22: Groundplan Scene 1, Act 1 (Cell)

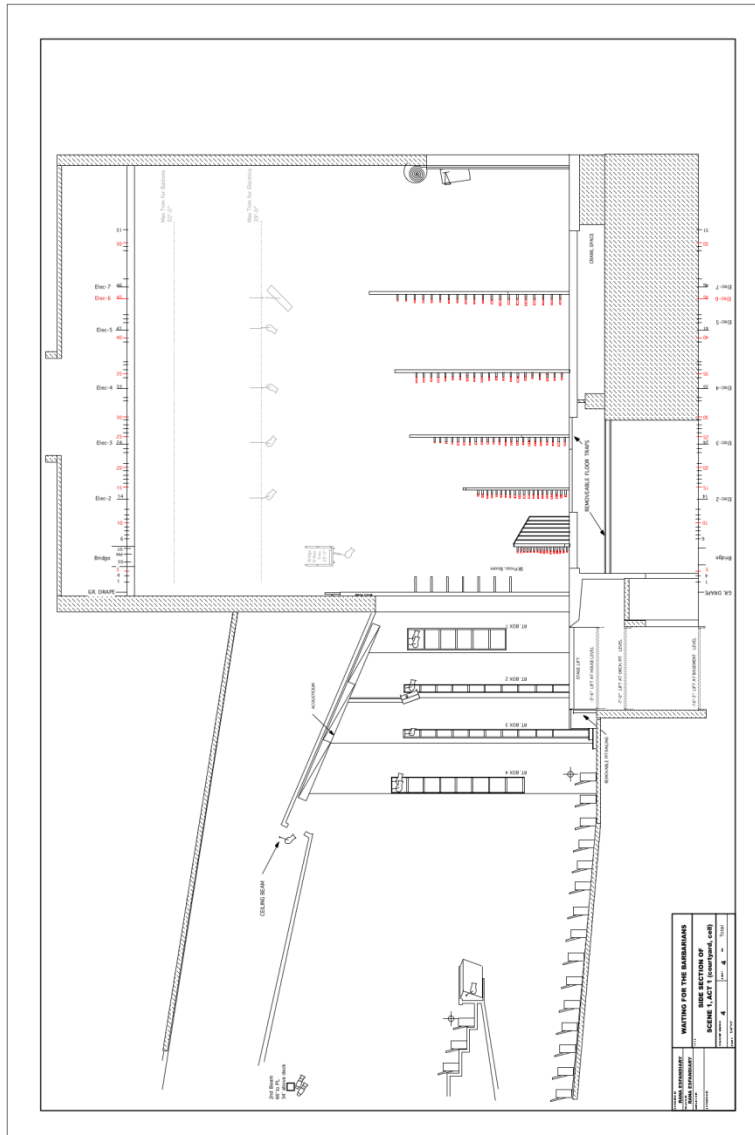


Figure 23: Side Section Scene 1, Act 1 (Cell)

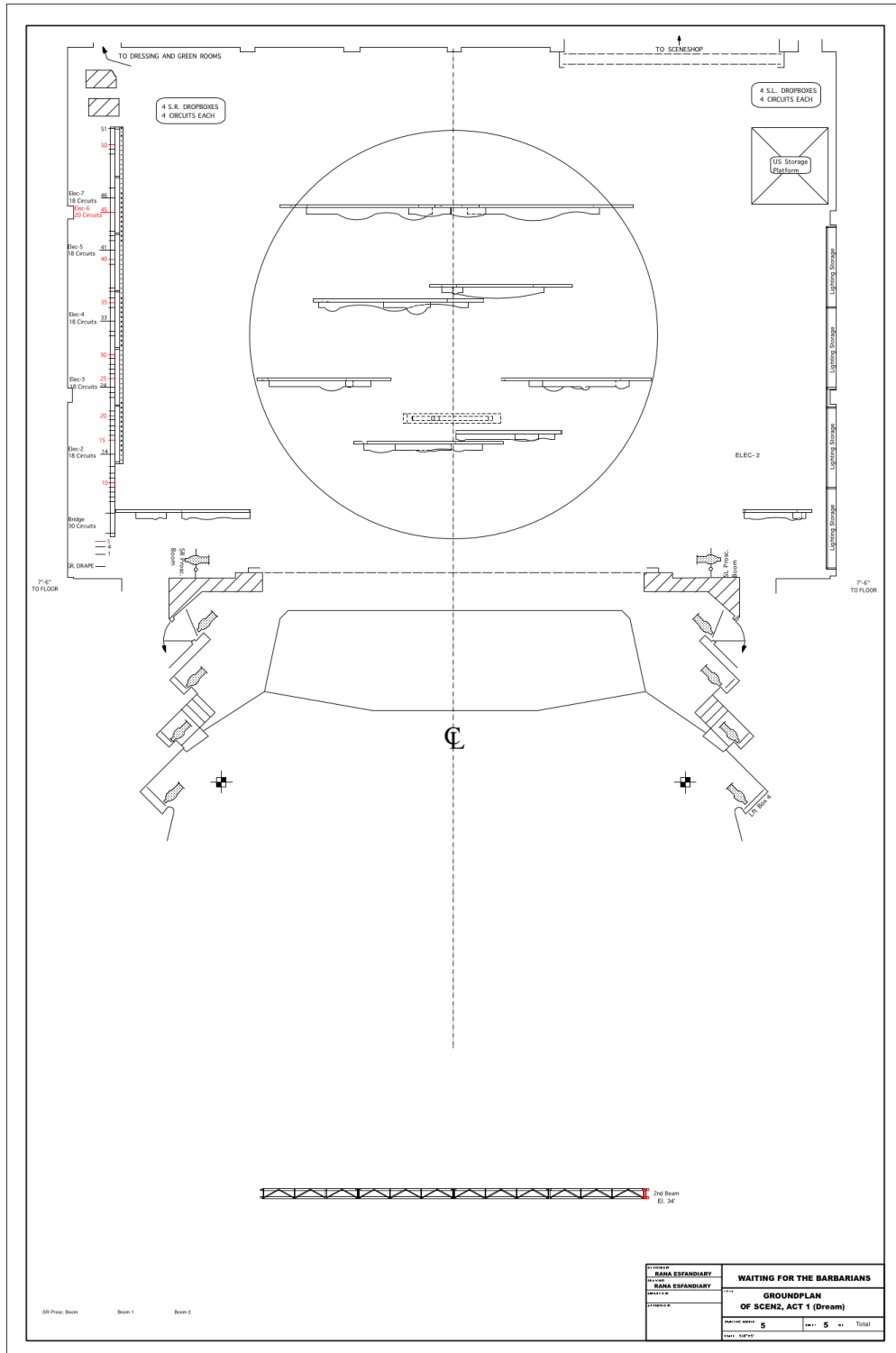


Figure 24: Groundplan Scene 2, Act 1

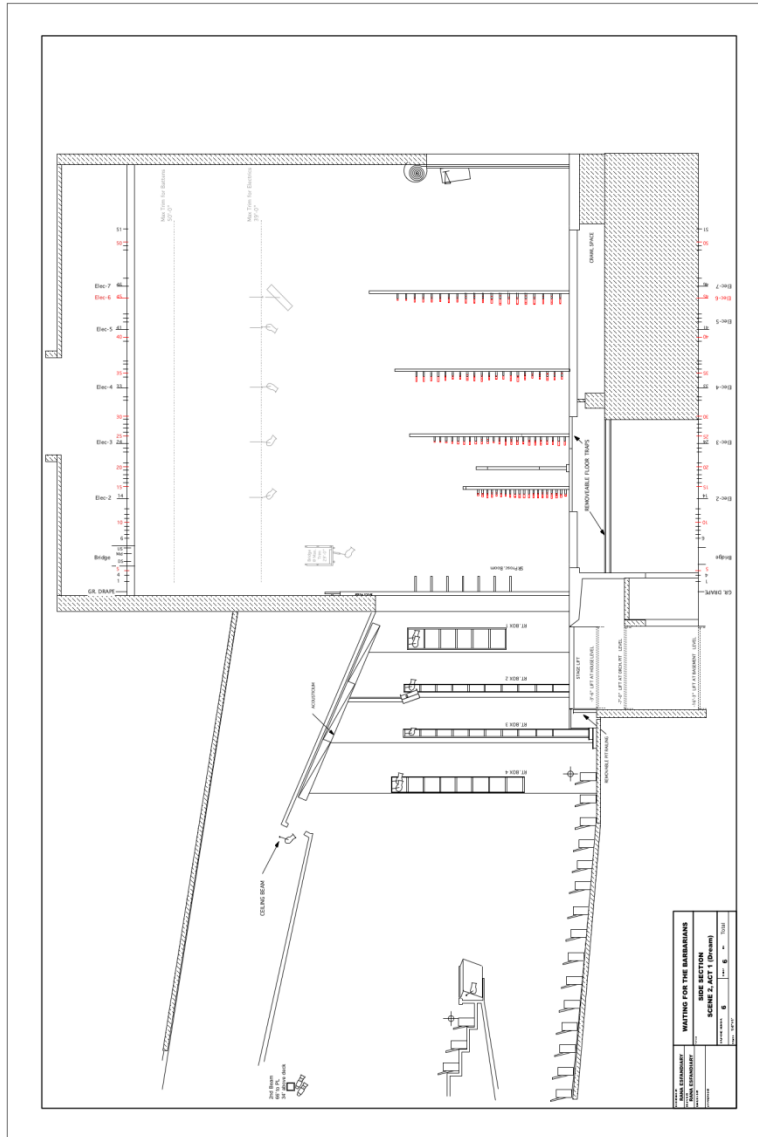


Figure 25: Side Section Scene 2, Act1

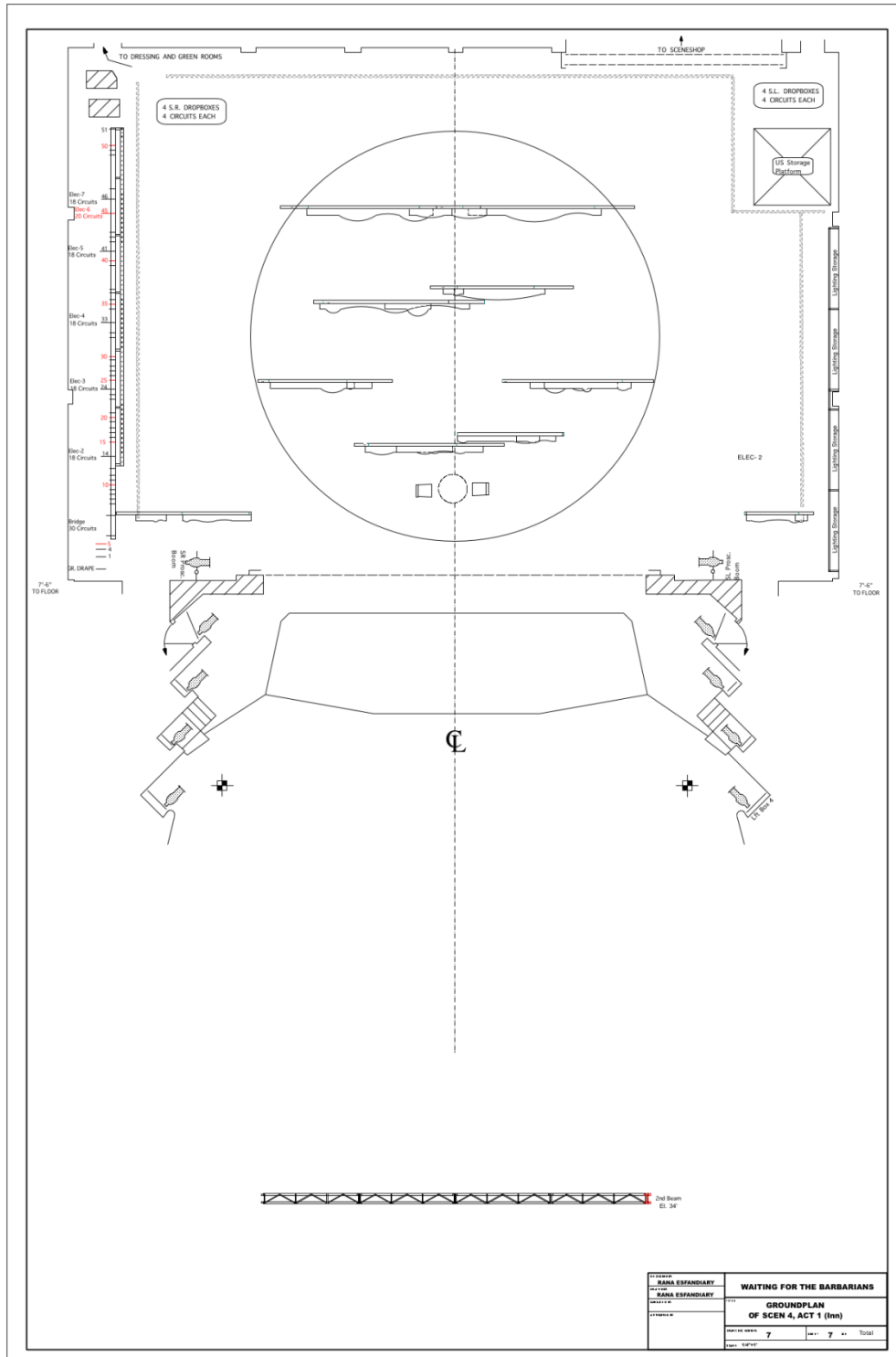


Figure 26: Groundplan Scene 4, Act 1

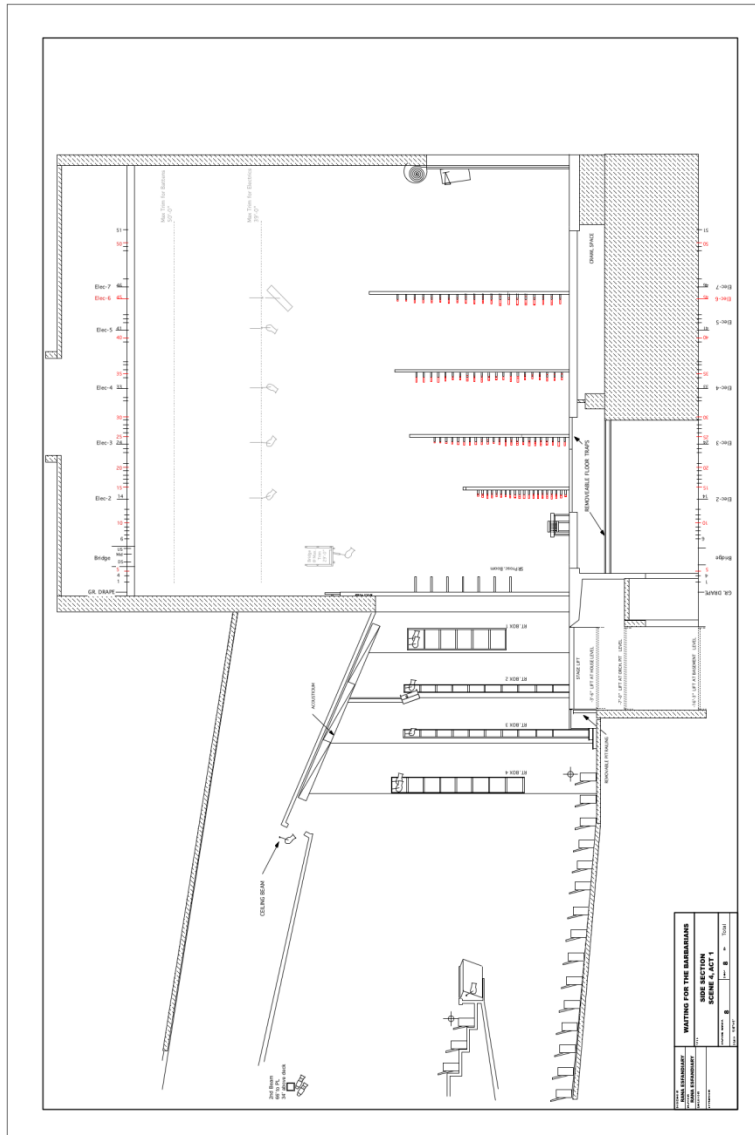


Figure 27: Side Section Scene 4, Act 1

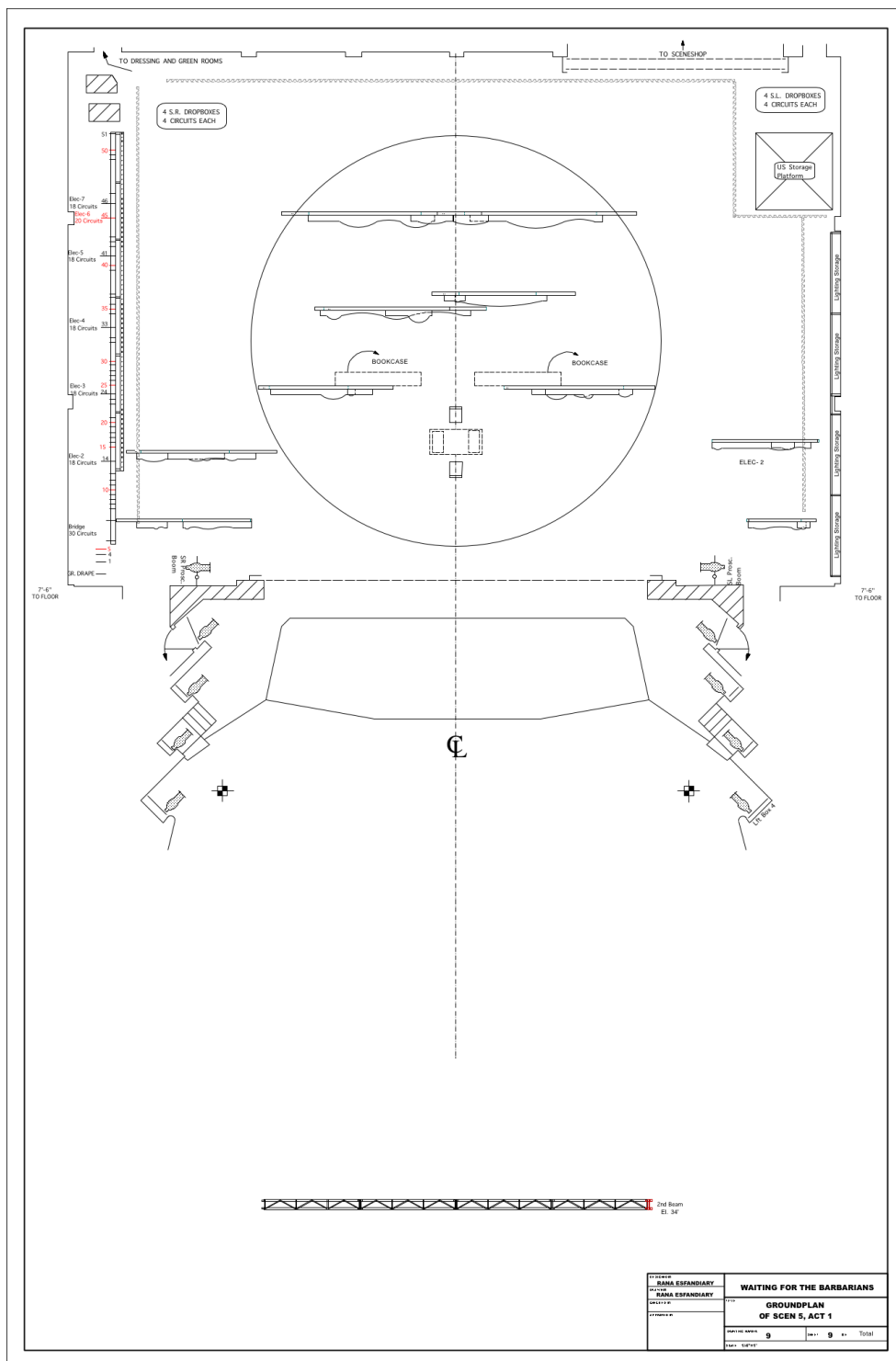


Figure 28: Groundplan Scene 5, Act 1

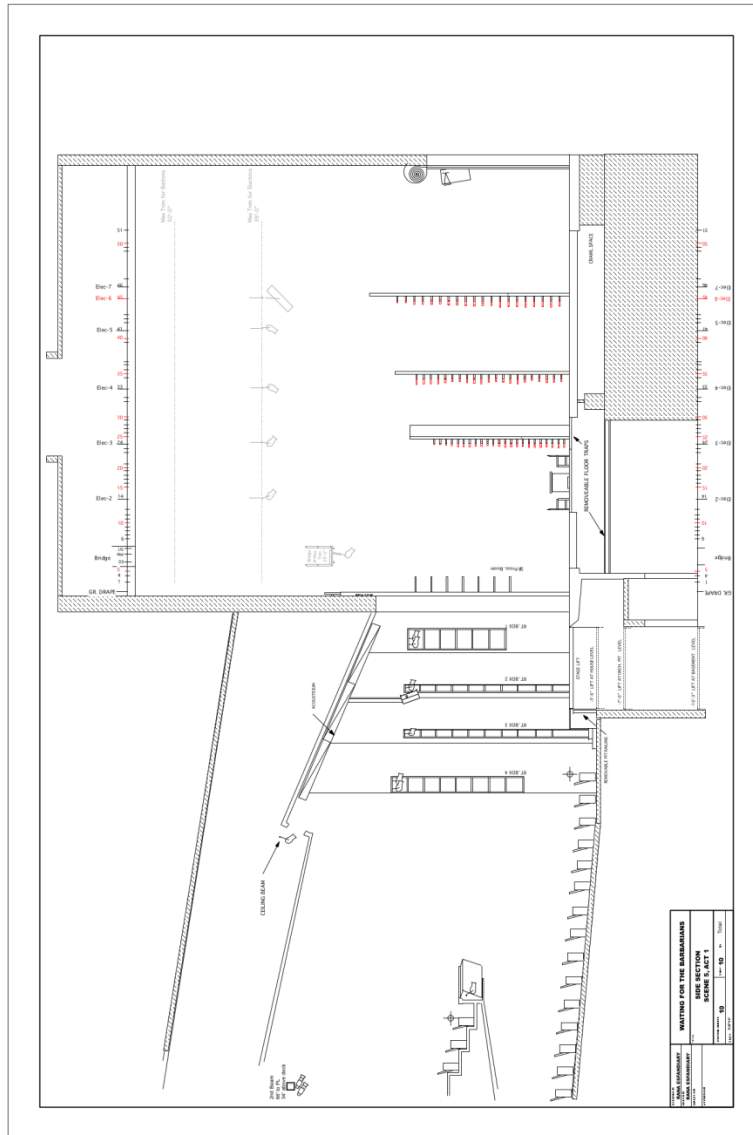


Figure 29: Side Section Scene 5, Act 1

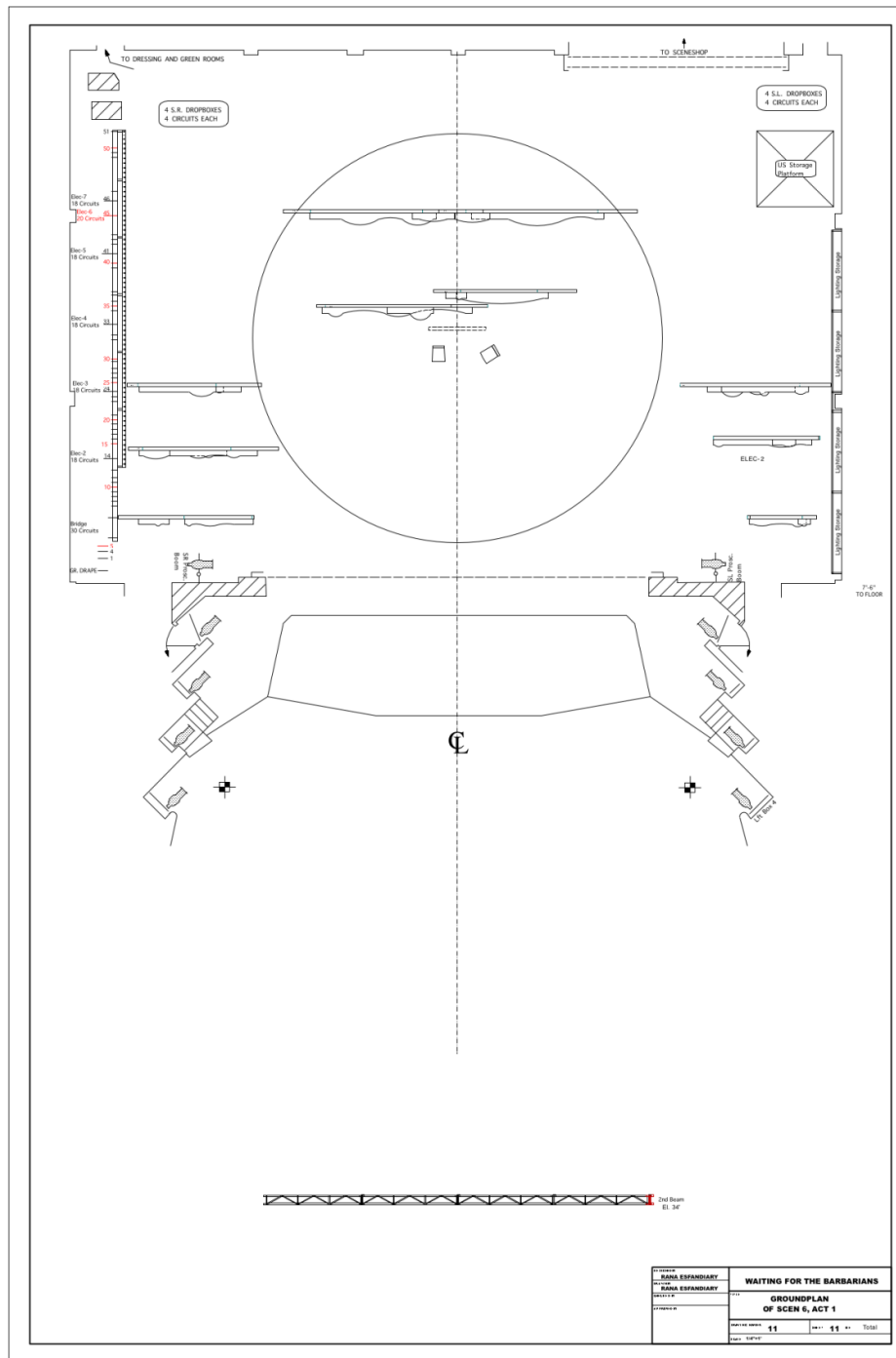


Figure 30: Groundplan Scene 6, Act 1

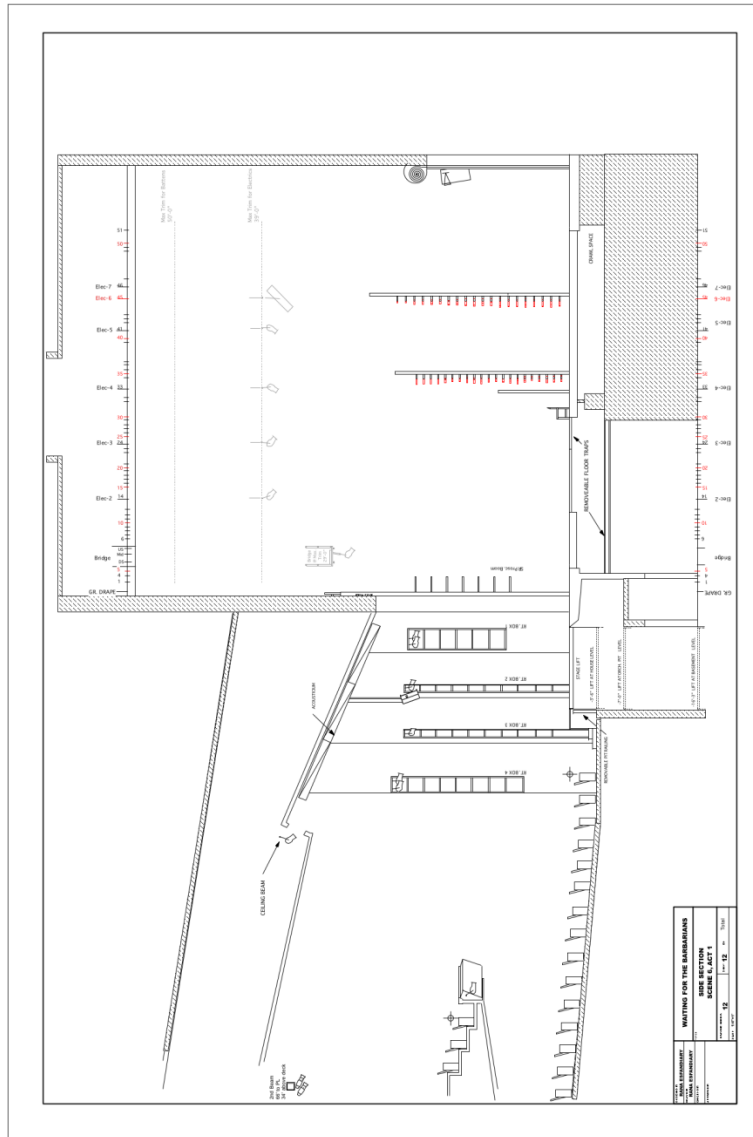


Figure 31: Side Section Scene 6, Act 1

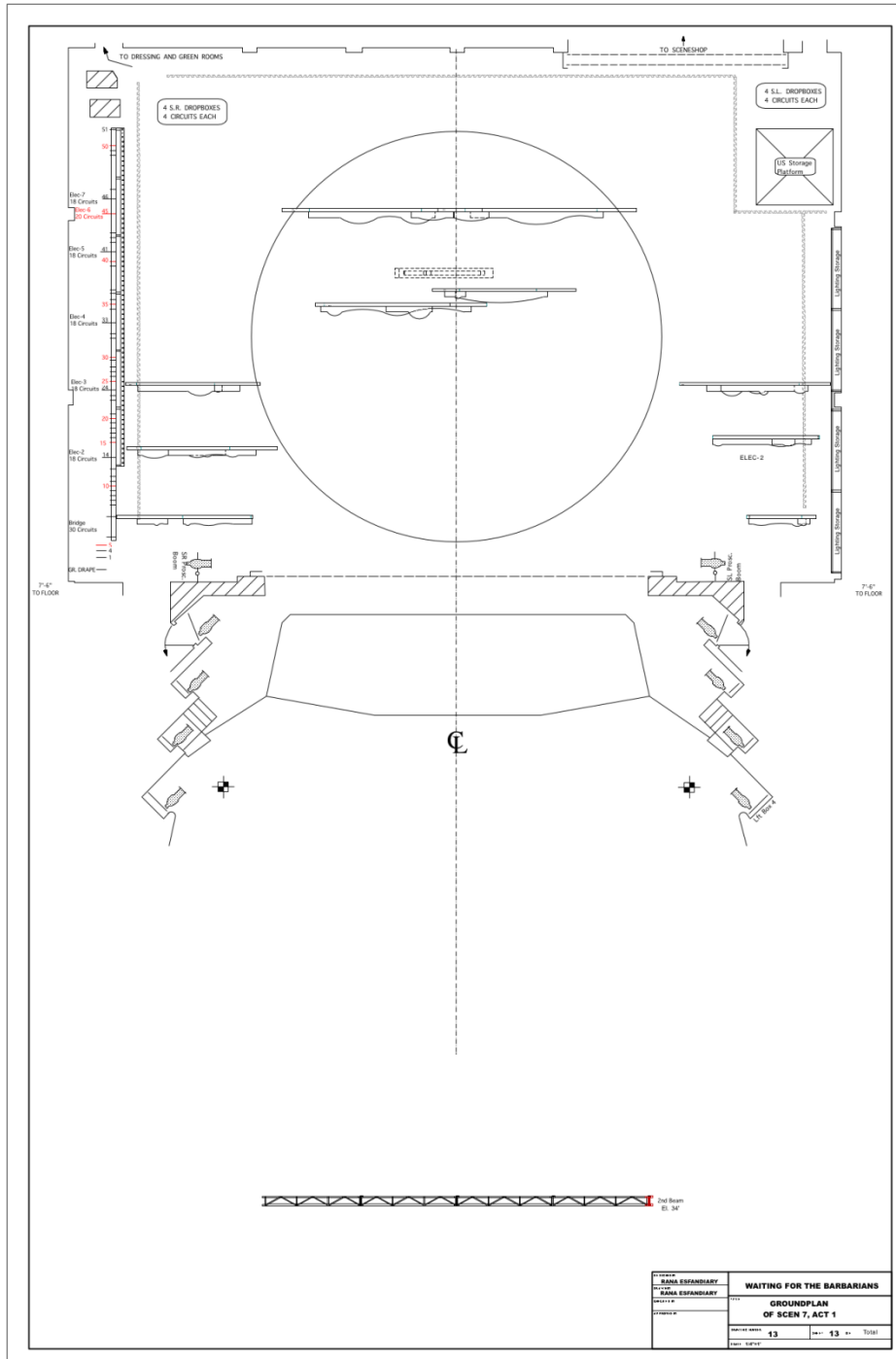


Figure 32: Groundplan Scene 7, Act 1

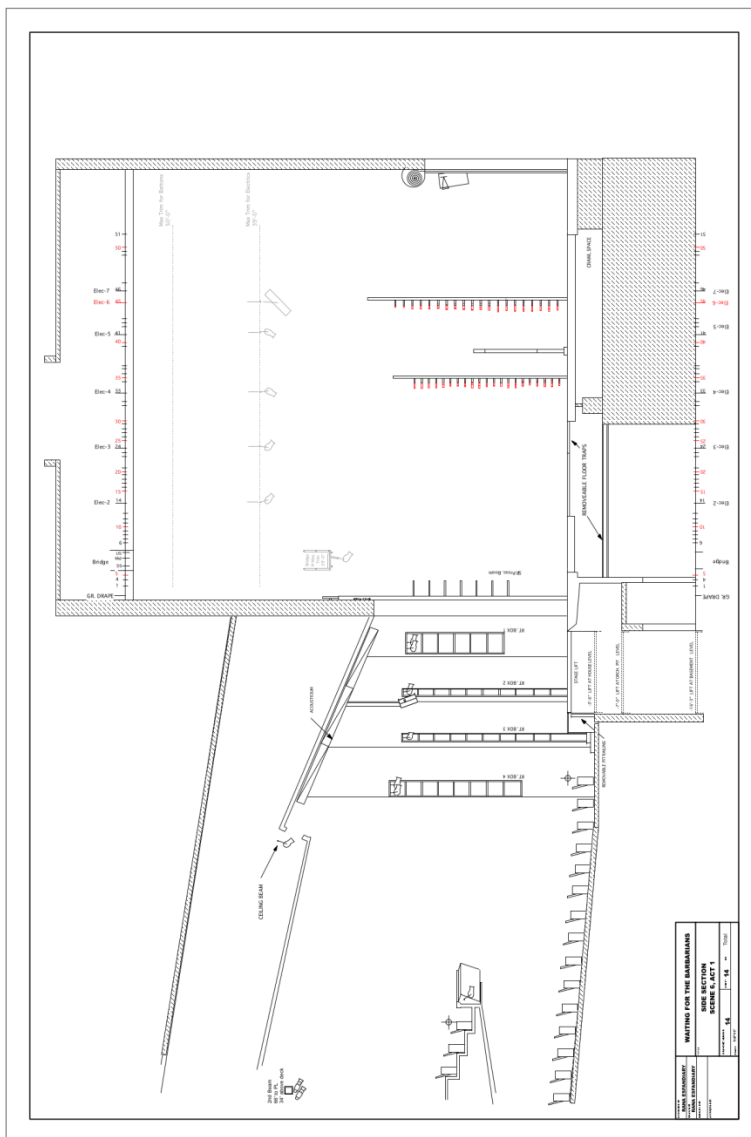


Figure 33: Side Section Scene 7, Act 1

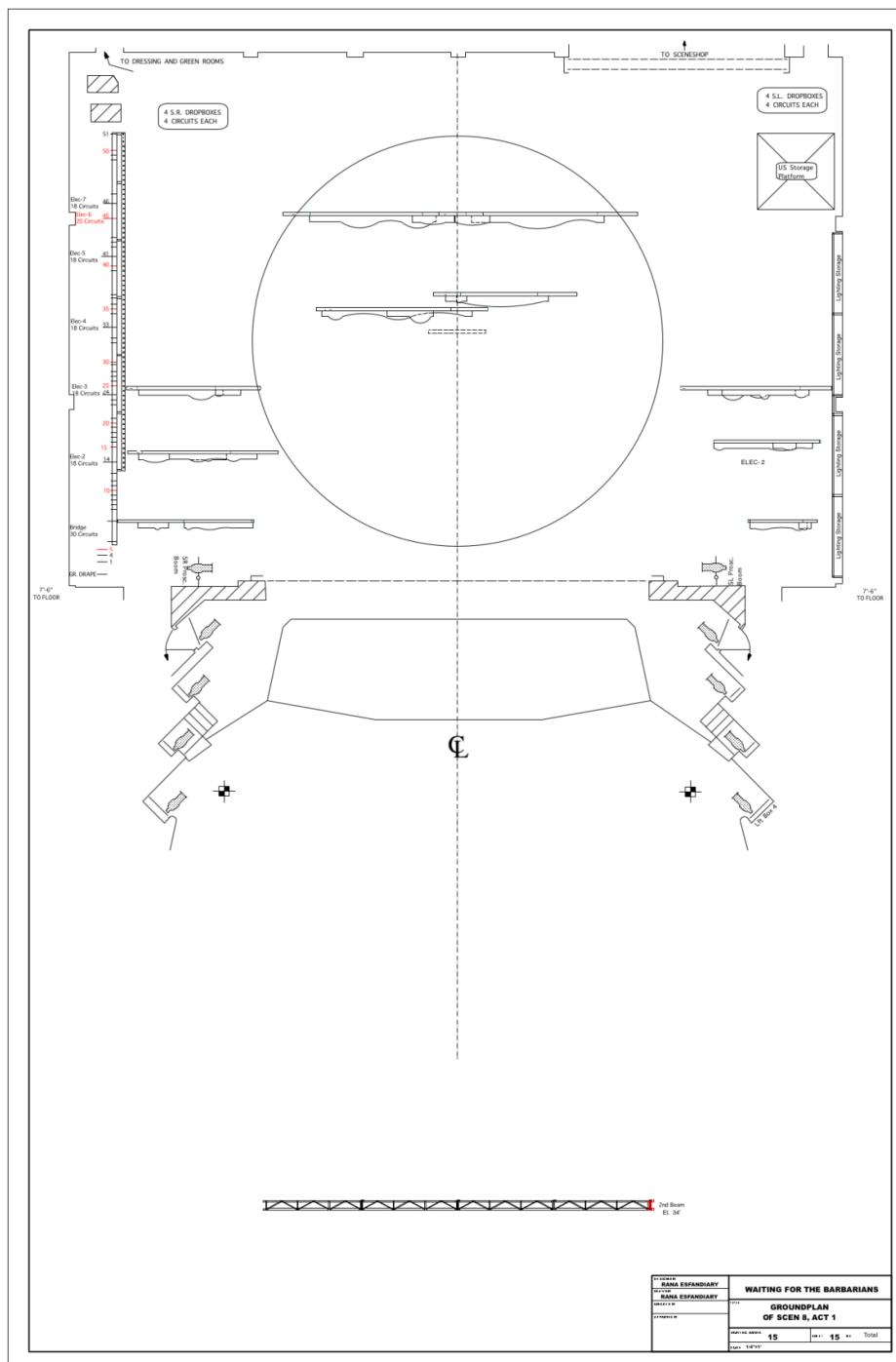


Figure 34: Groundplan Scene 8, Act 1

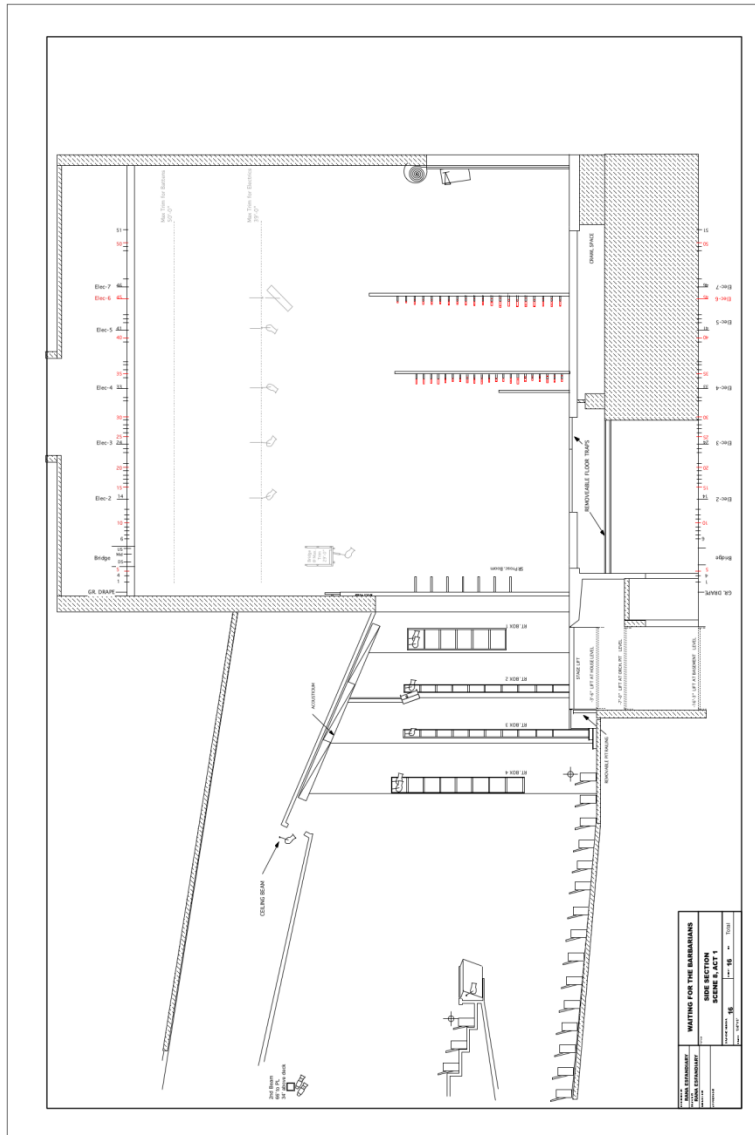
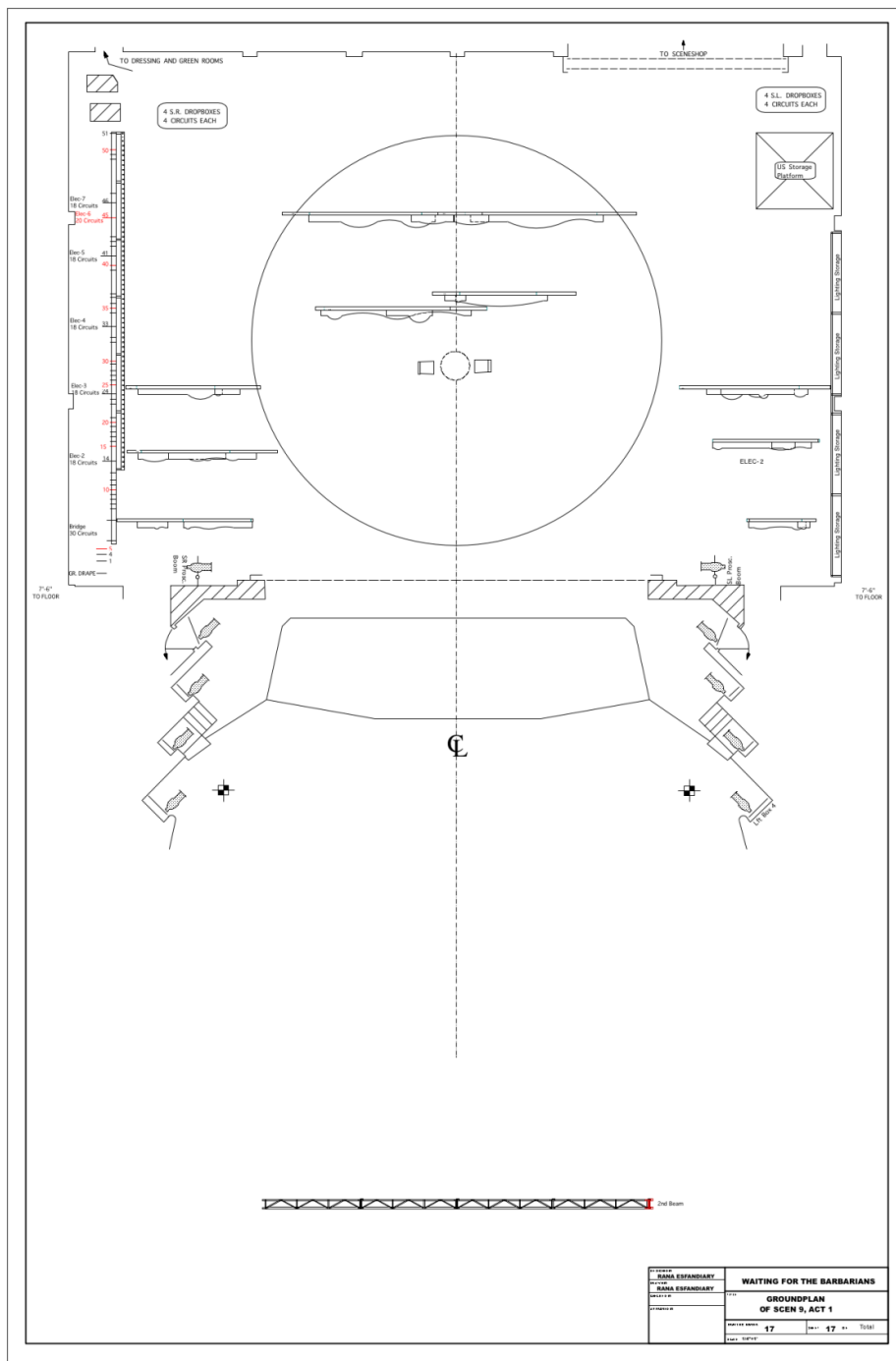


Figure 35: Side Section Scene 8, Act 1



TITLE MAIN ESPANDARY MAIN ESPANDARY DRAWN BY CHECKED BY DATE	WAITING FOR THE BARBARIANS GROUNDPLAN OF SCEN 9, ACT 1 SHEET NO. 17 OF 17
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Figure 36: Groundplan Scene 9, Act 1

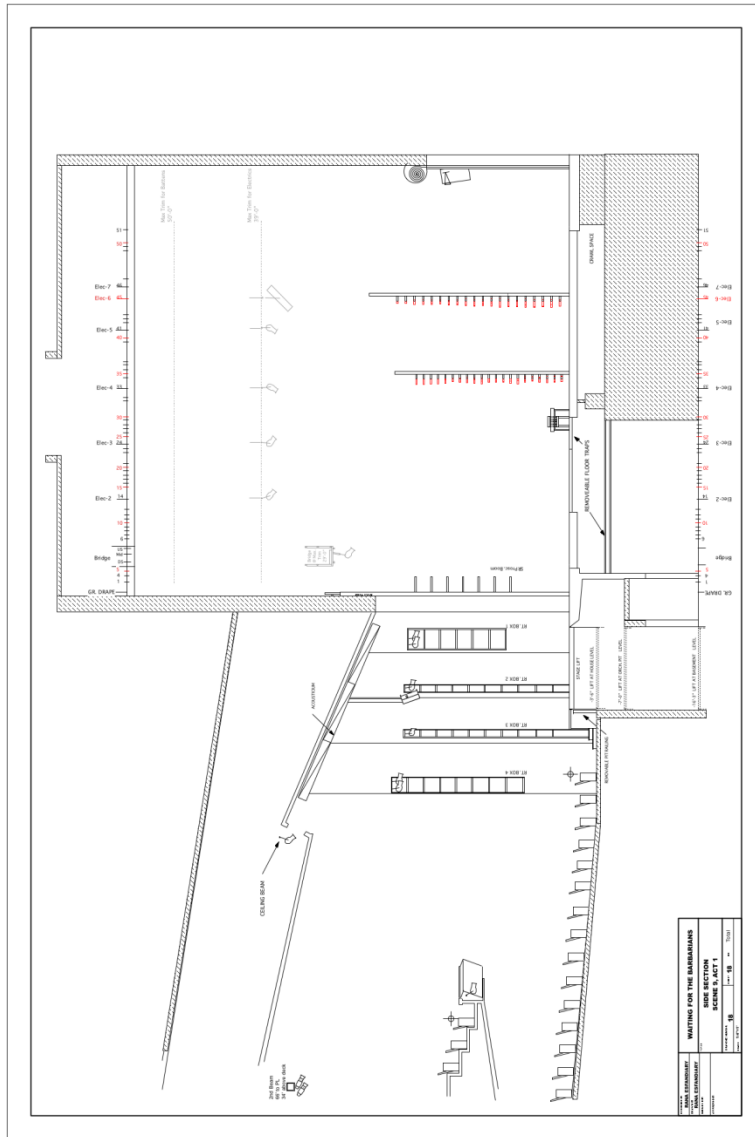


Figure 37: Side Section Scene 9, Act 1

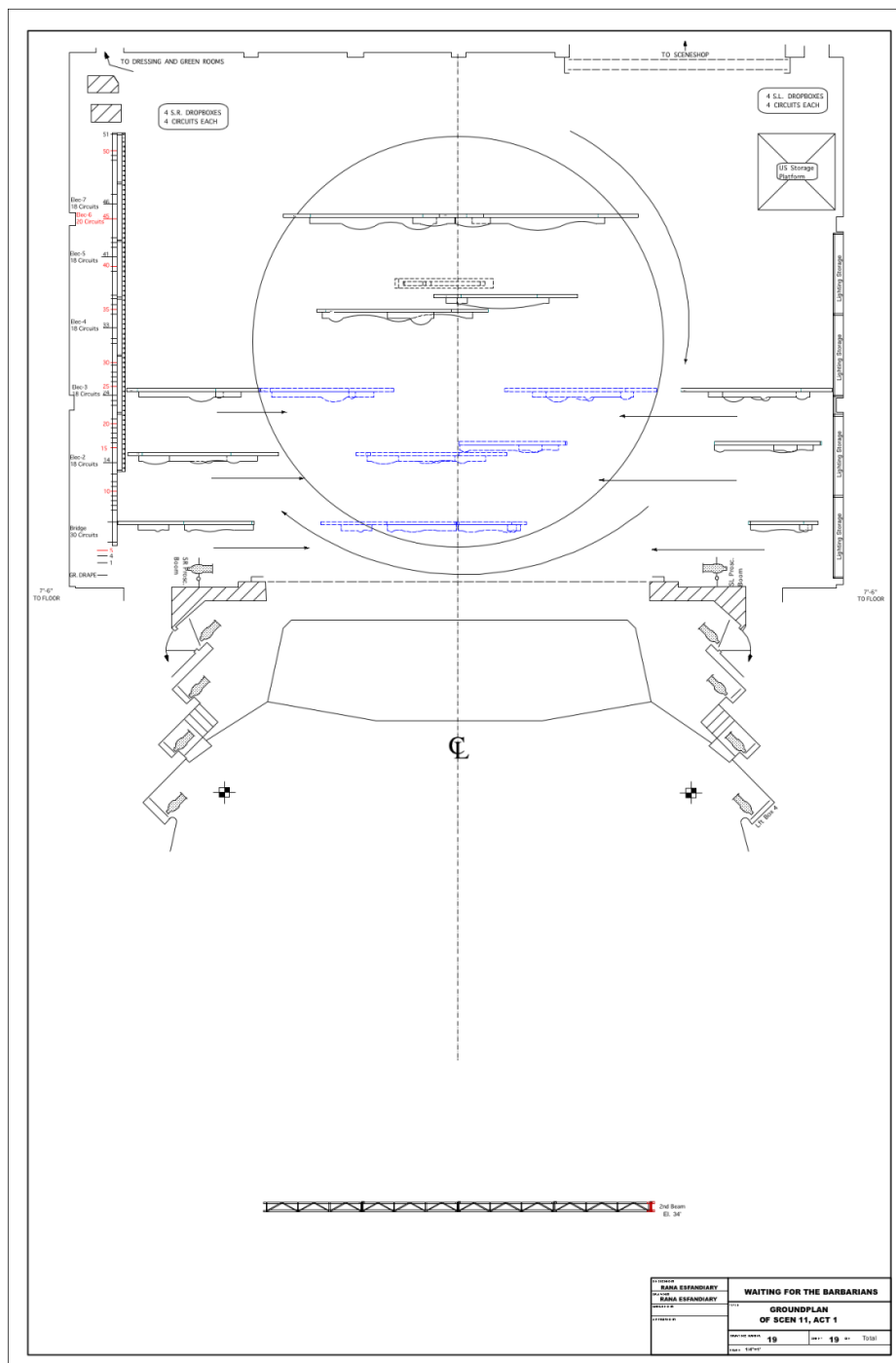


Figure 38: Groundplan Scene 11, Act 1

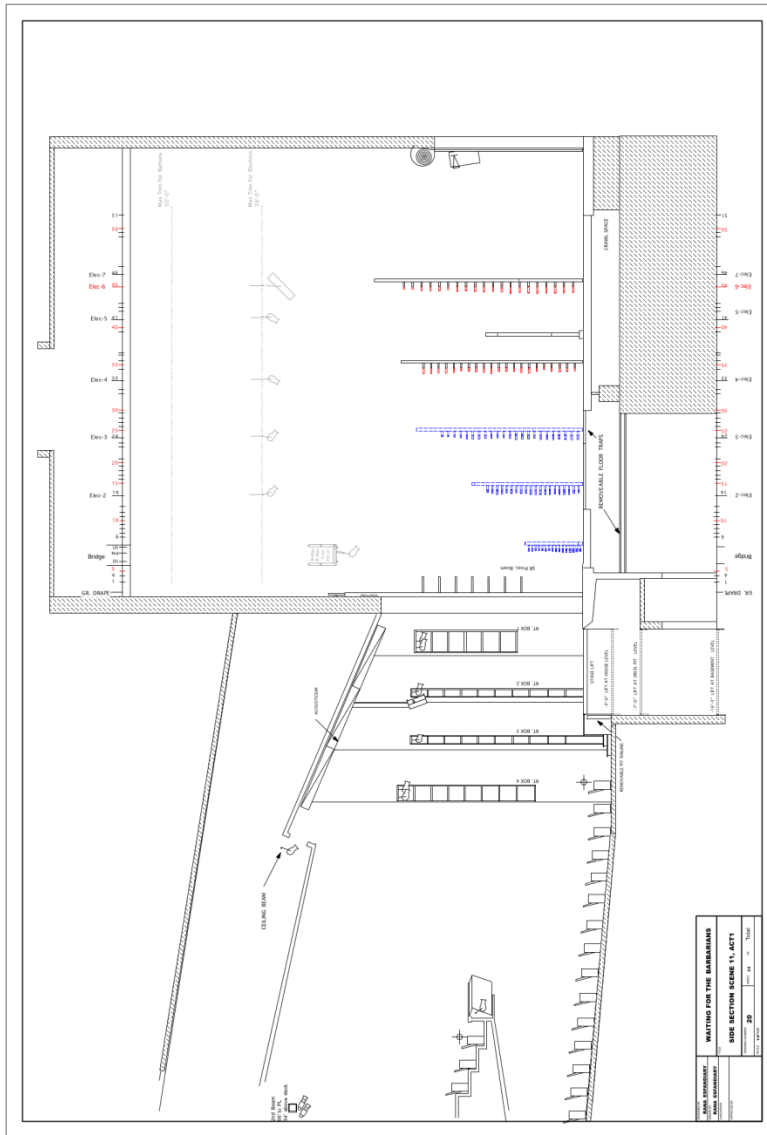


Figure 39: Side Section Scene 11, Act 1

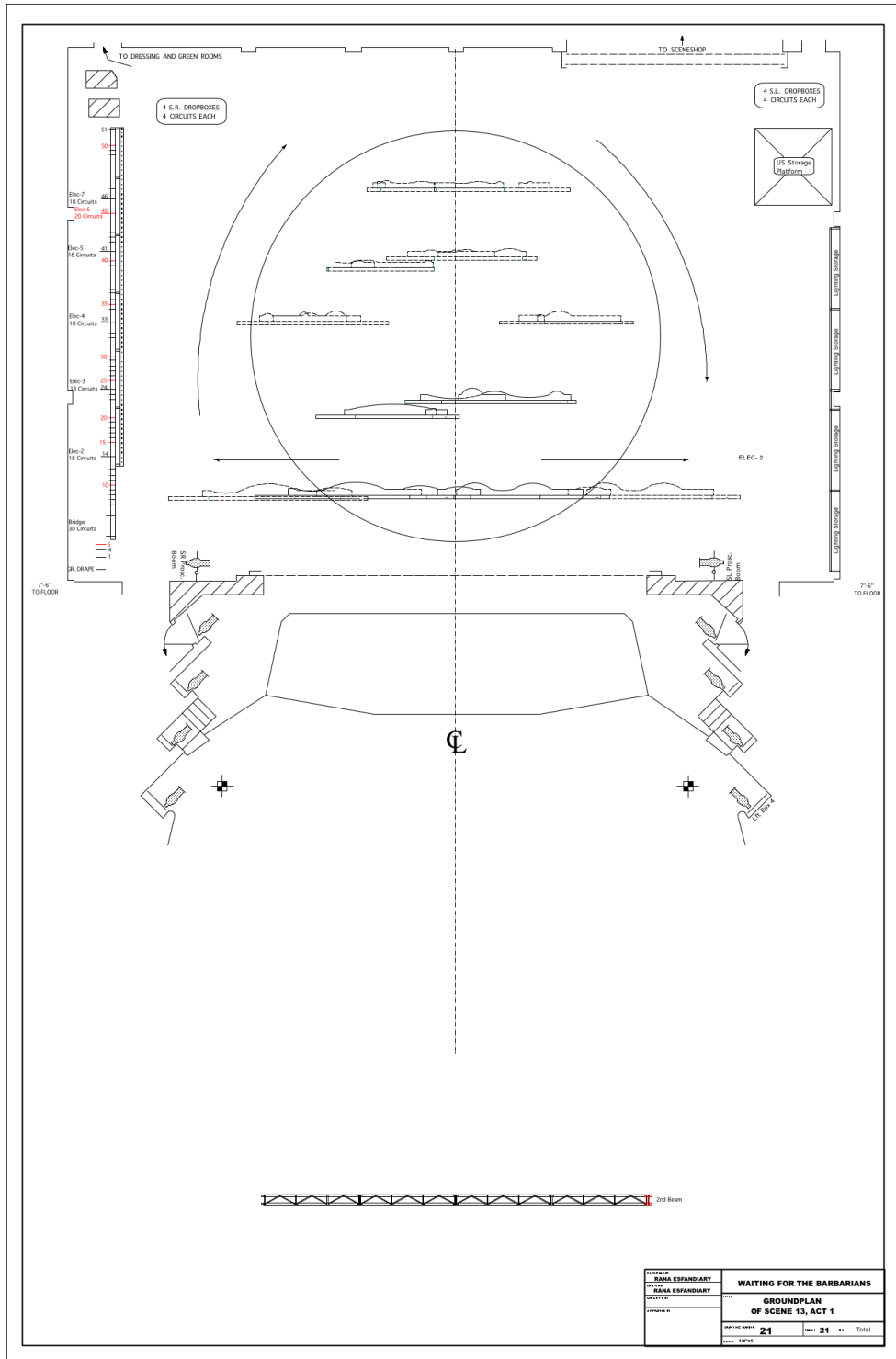


Figure 40: Groundplan Scene 13, Act 1

STORYLINE	MANA ESPANDIARY	WAITING FOR THE BARBARIANS
ACT	MANA ESPANDIARY	
SCENE	MANA ESPANDIARY	GROUNDPLAN OF SCENE 13, ACT 1
DATE	21	21
TOTAL		Total

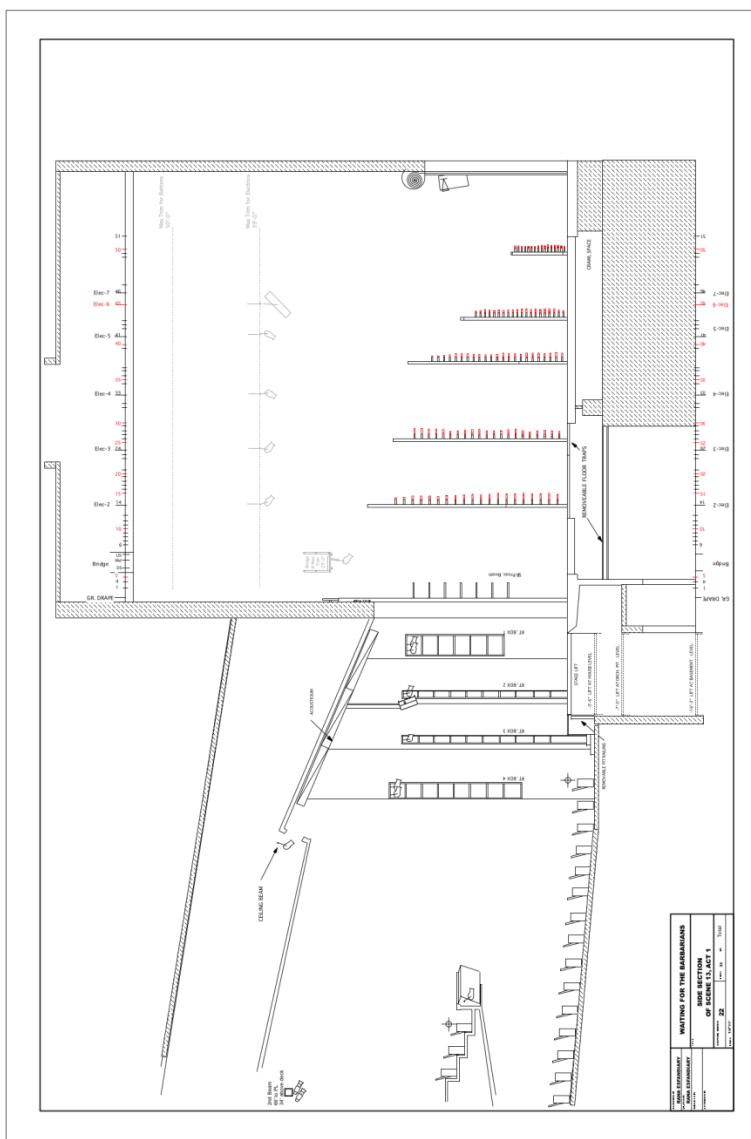


Figure 41: Side Section Scene 13, Act 1

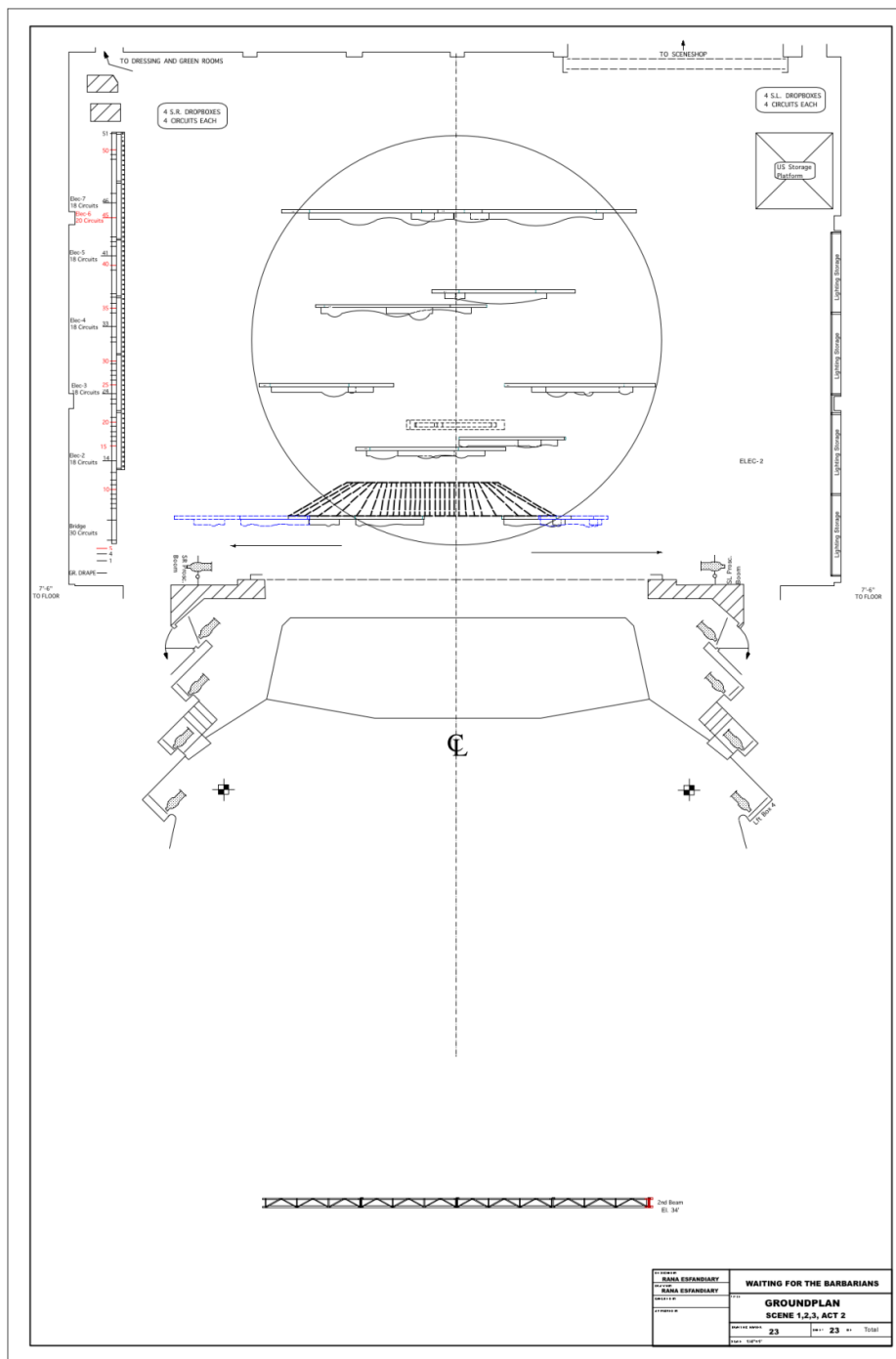


Figure 42: Groundplan Scene 1, 2, 3, Act 2

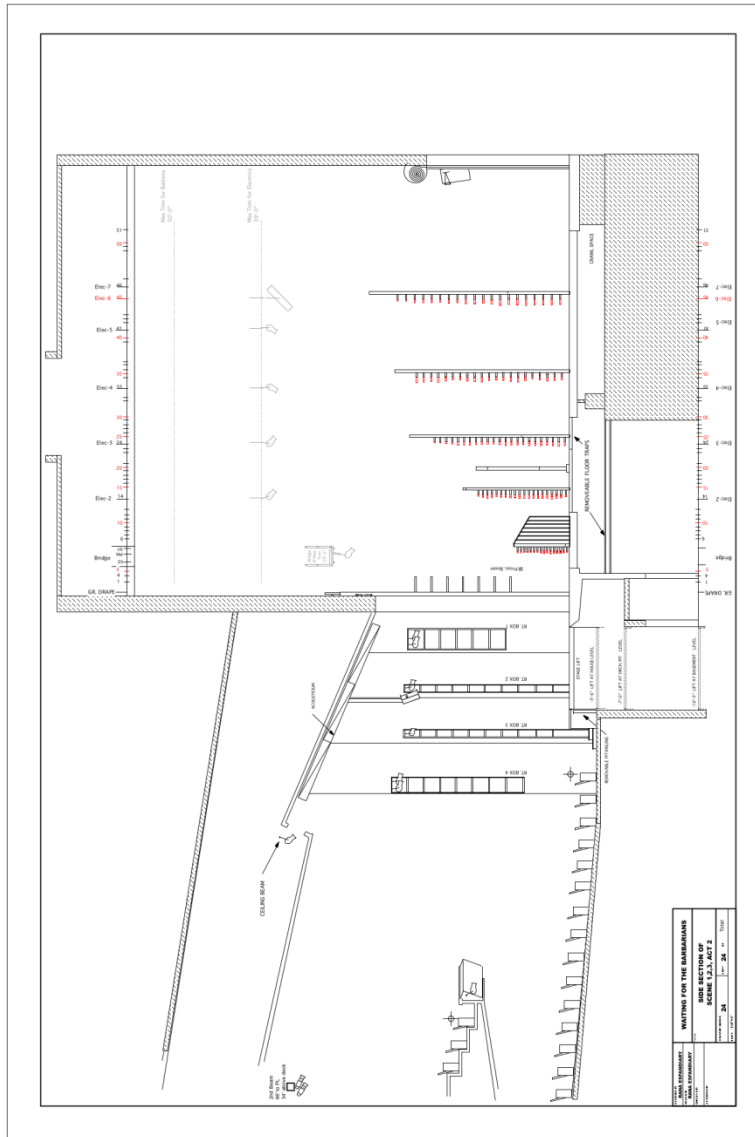


Figure 43: Side Section Scene 1, 2, 3, Act 2

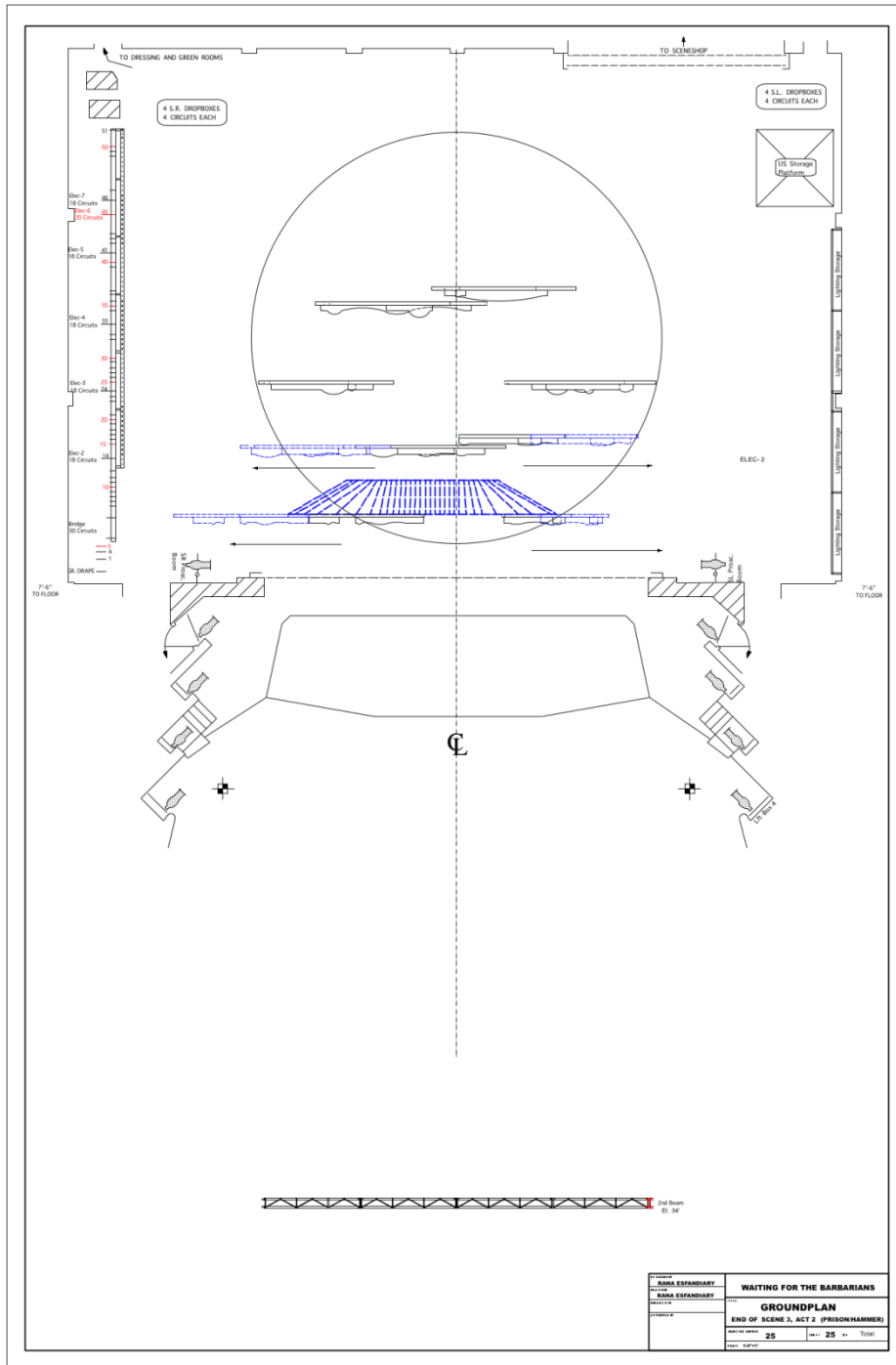


Figure 44: Groundplan Scene 3, Act 2

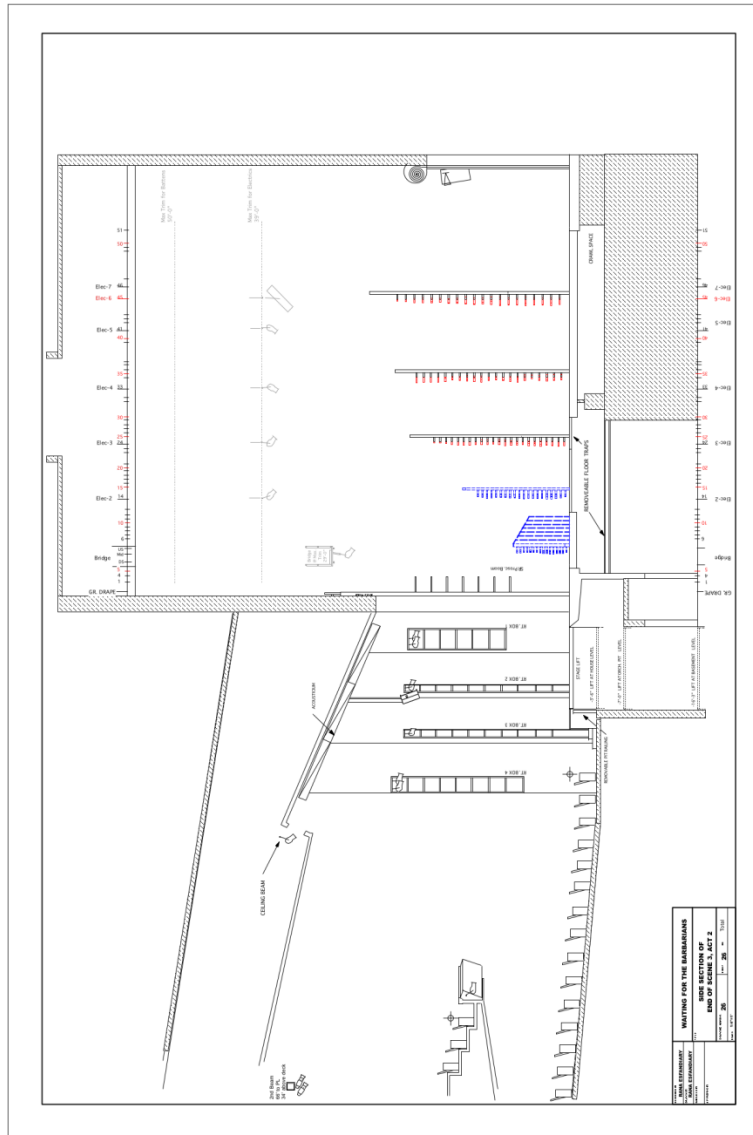


Figure 45: Side Section Scene 3, Act 2

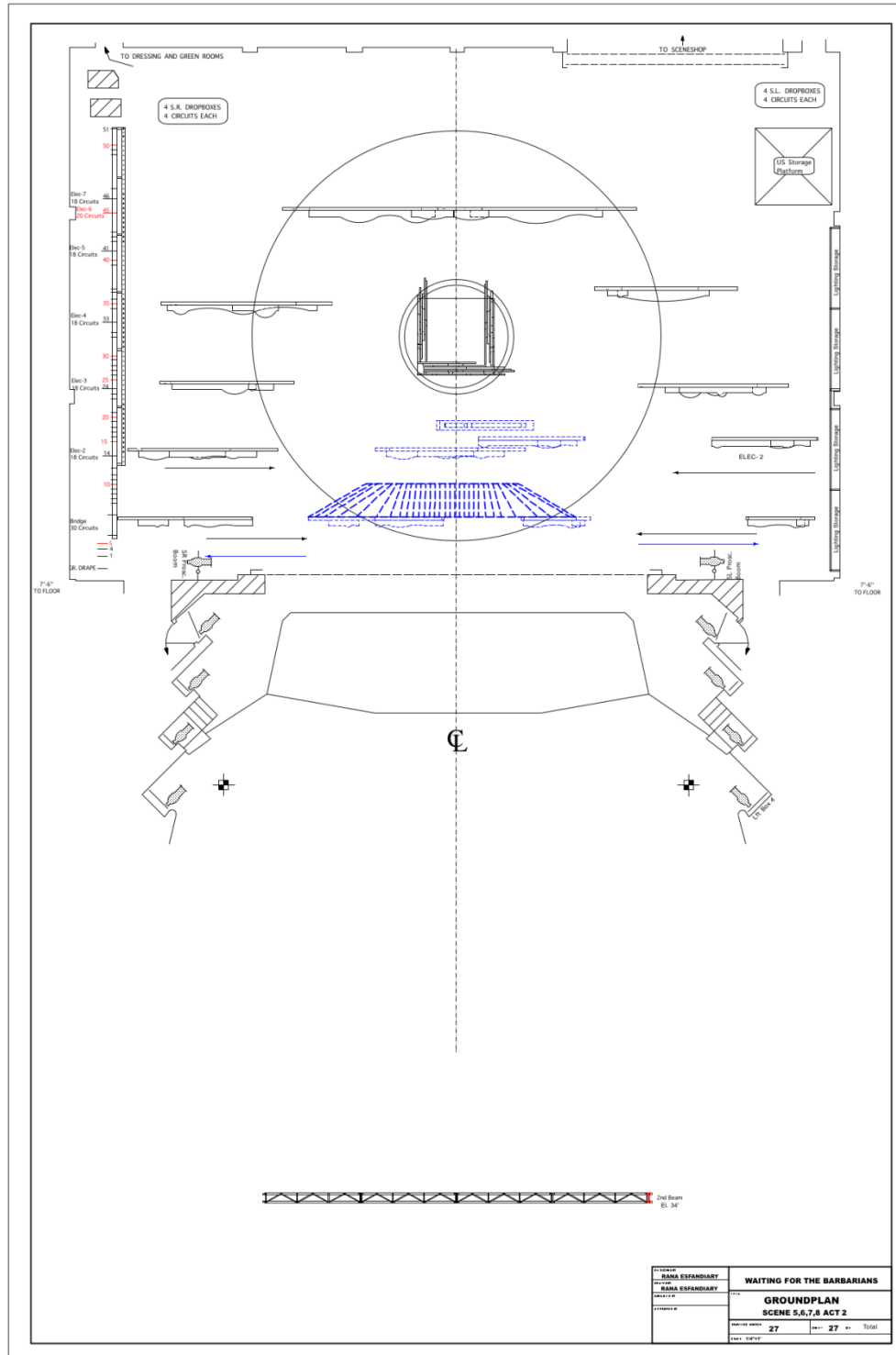


Figure 47: Groundplan Scene 5, 6, 7, 8, Act

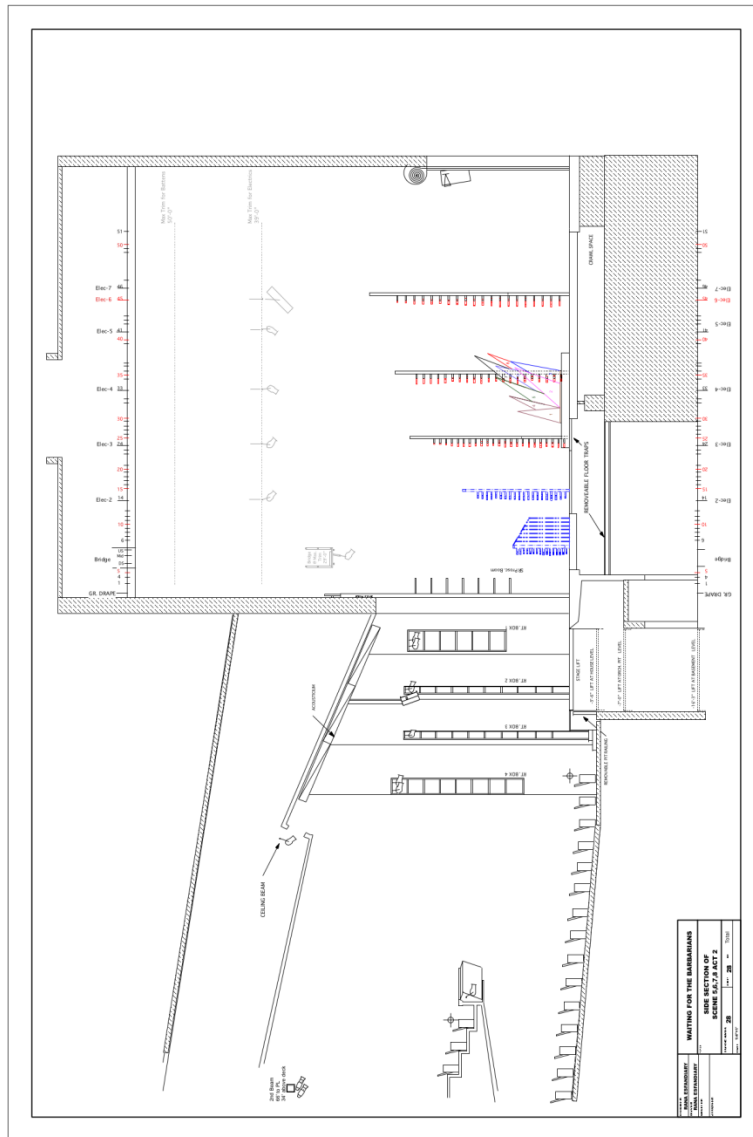


Figure 48: Side Section Scene 5, 6, 7, 8, Act 2

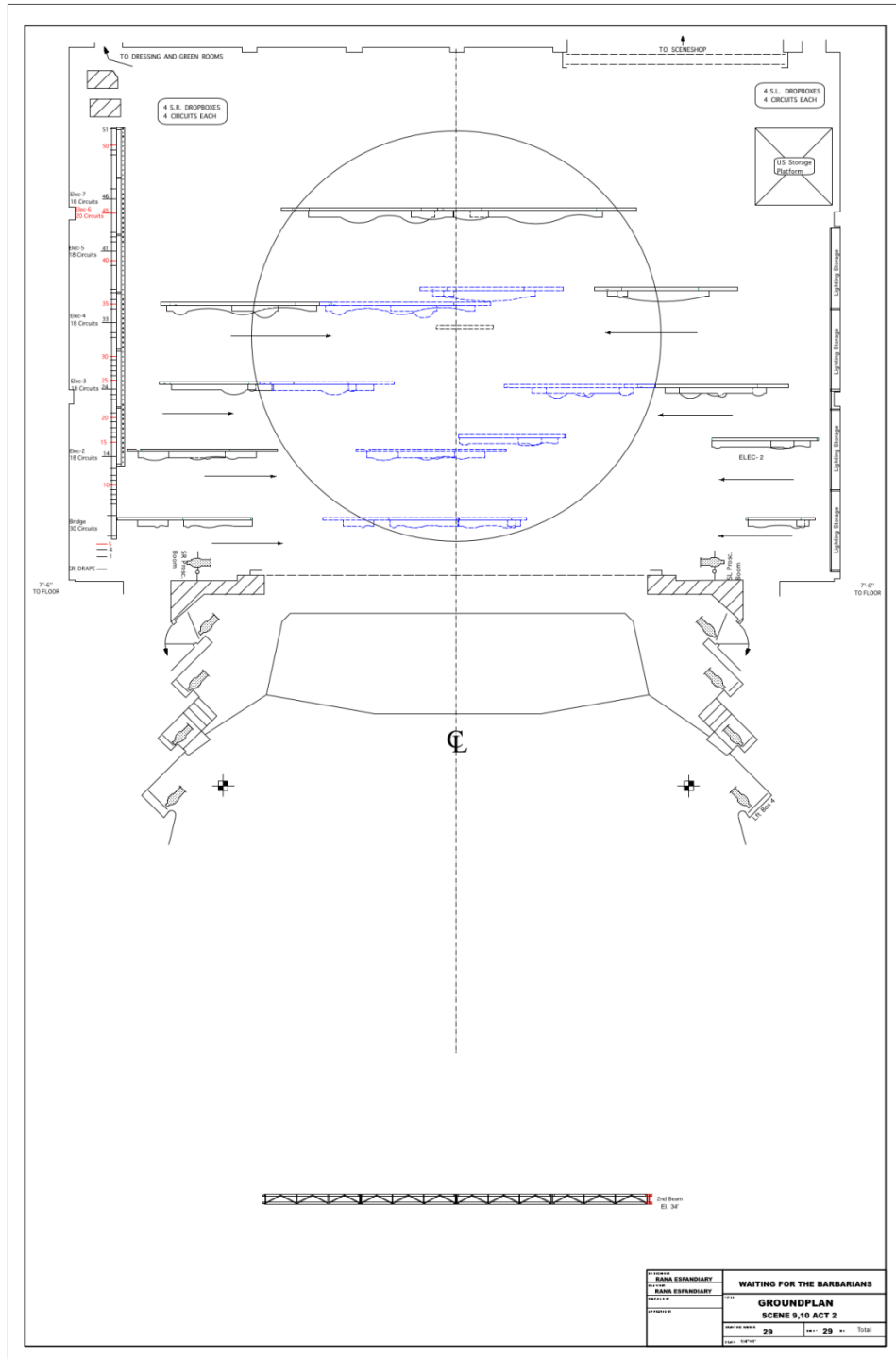


Figure 49: Groundplan Scene 9, 10, Act 2

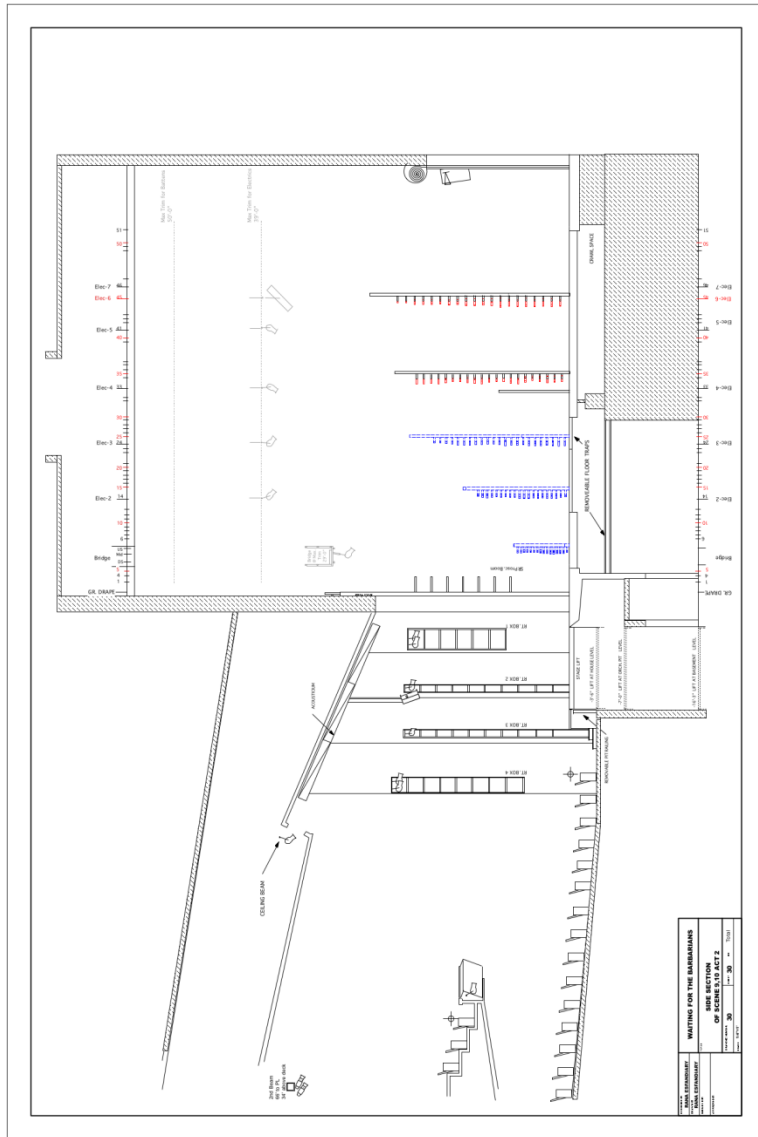


Figure 50: Side Section Scene 9, 10, Act 2

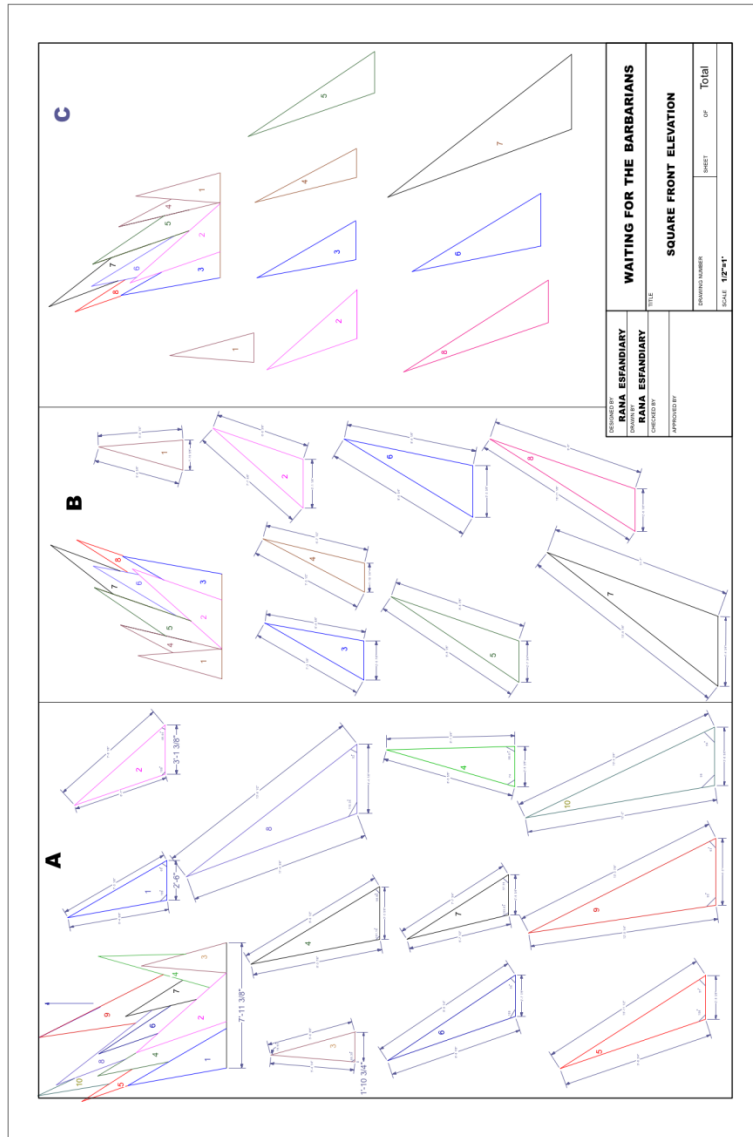


Figure 51: Front Elevation of Square

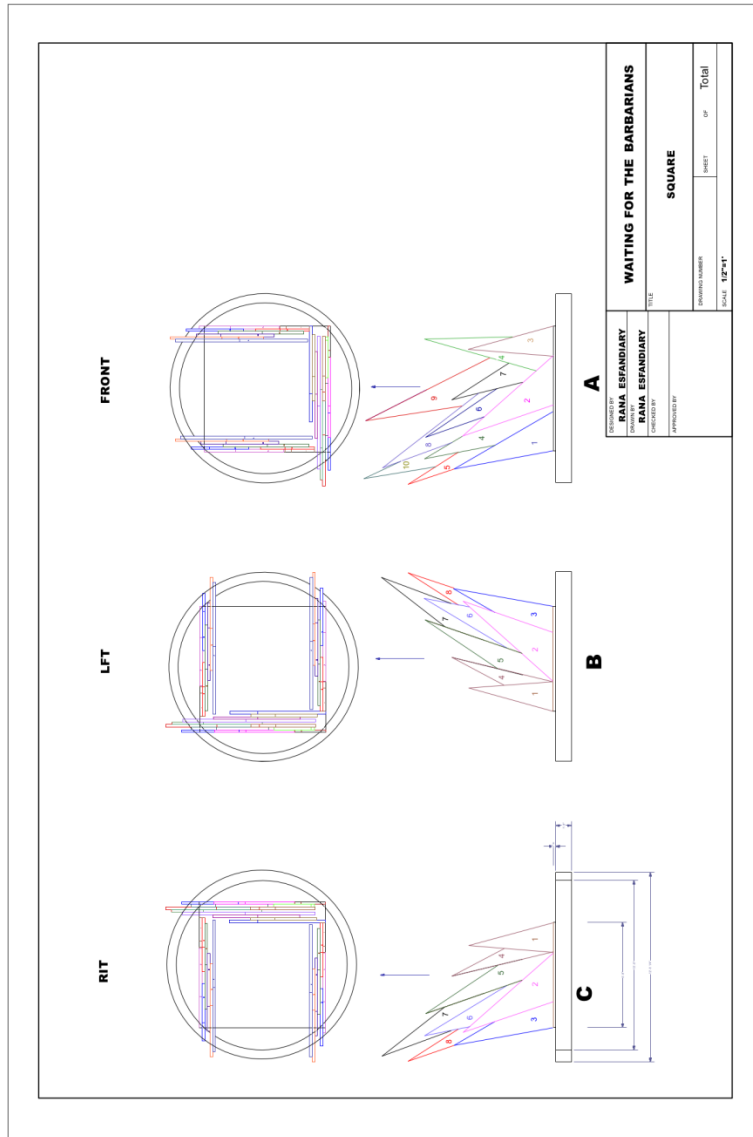


Figure 52: Square

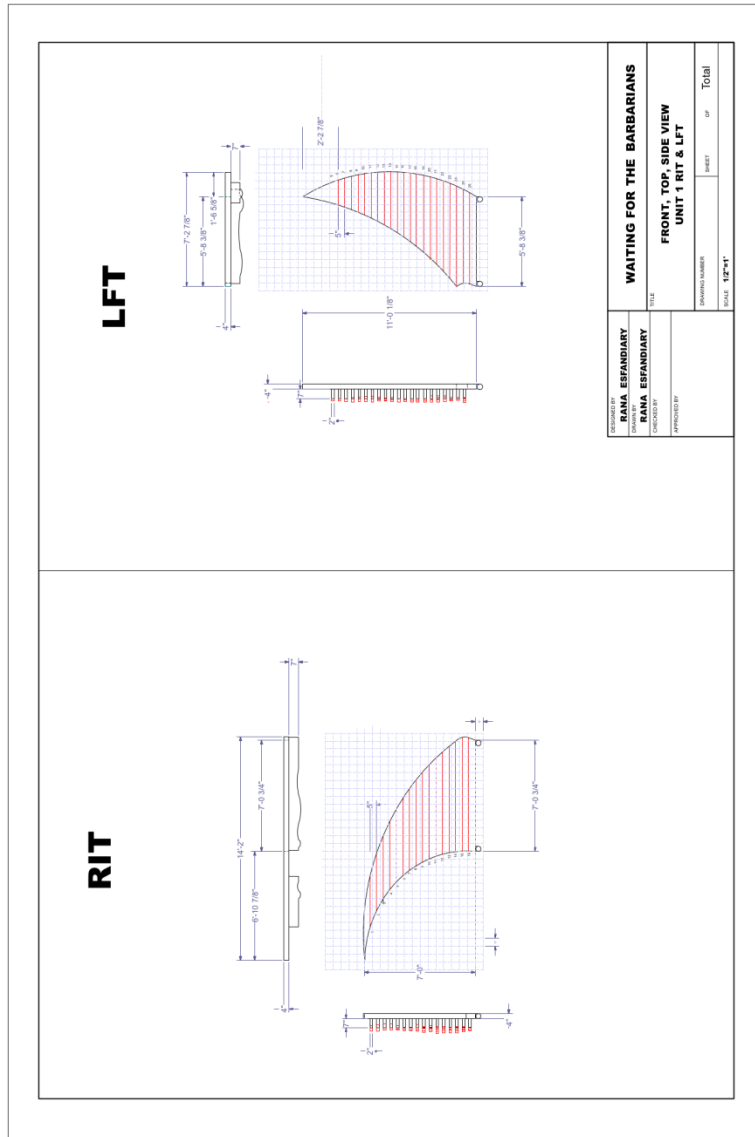


Figure 53: Detail Drawing 1

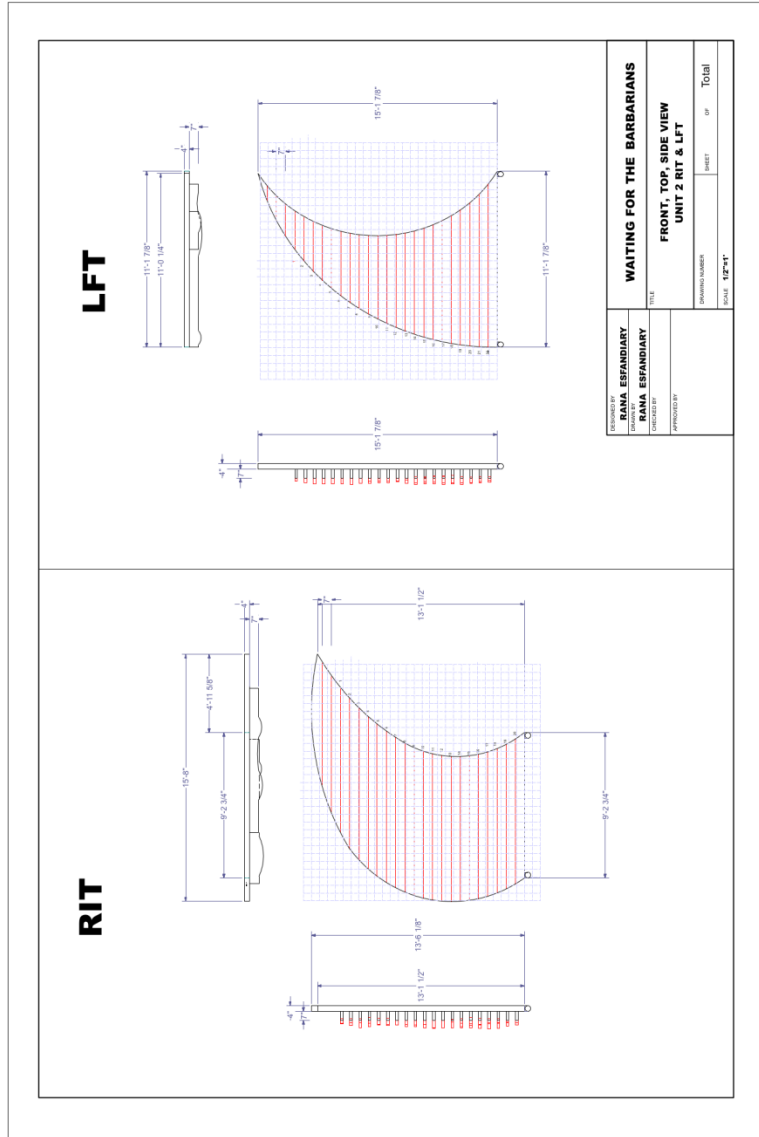


Figure 54: Detail Drawing 2

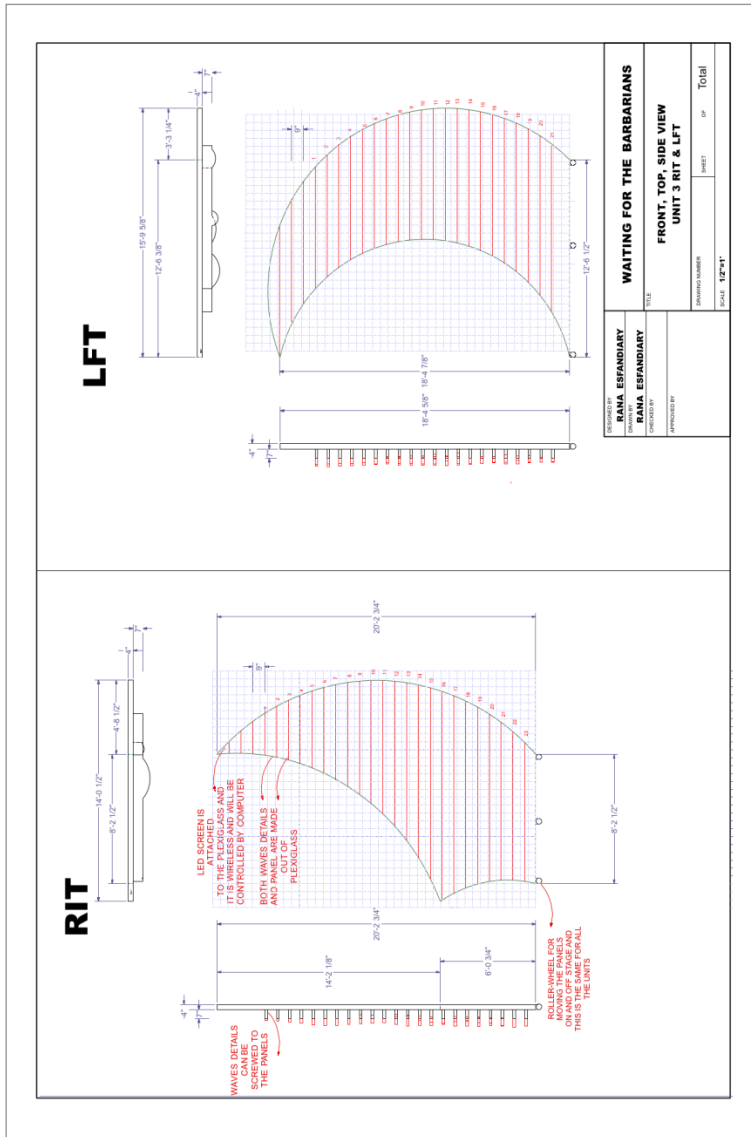


Figure 55: Detail Drawing 3

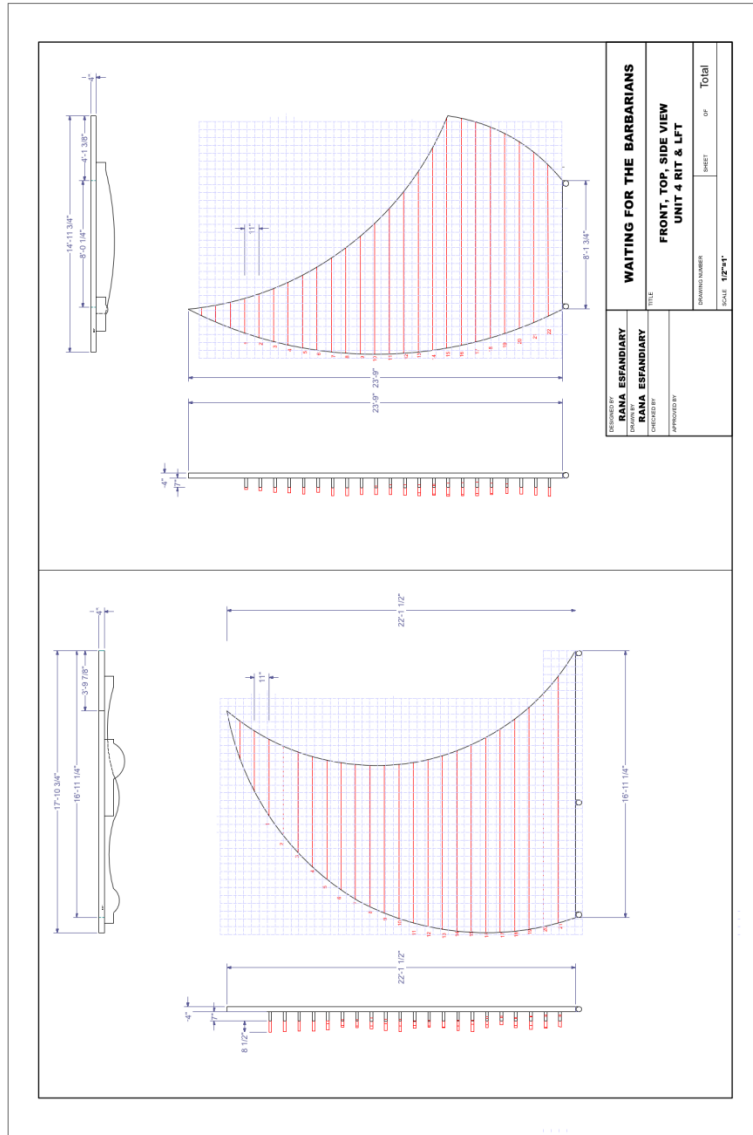


Figure 56: Detail Drawing 4

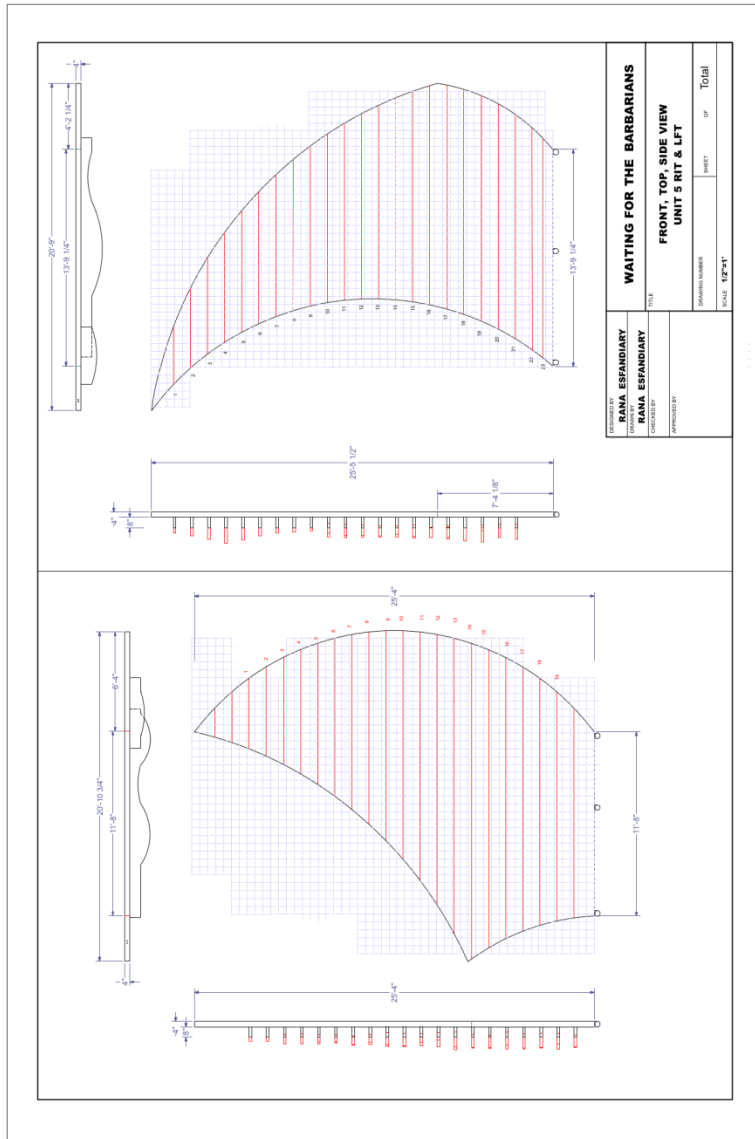


Figure 57: Detail Drawing 5

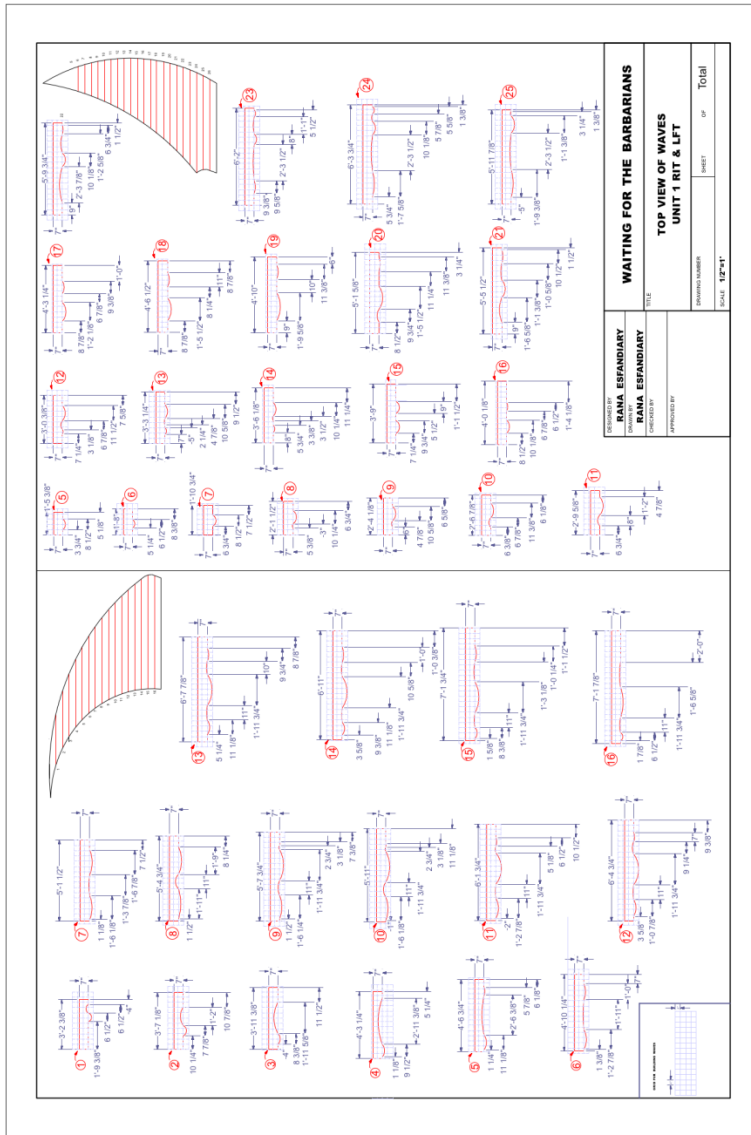


Figure 58: Detail Drawing 6

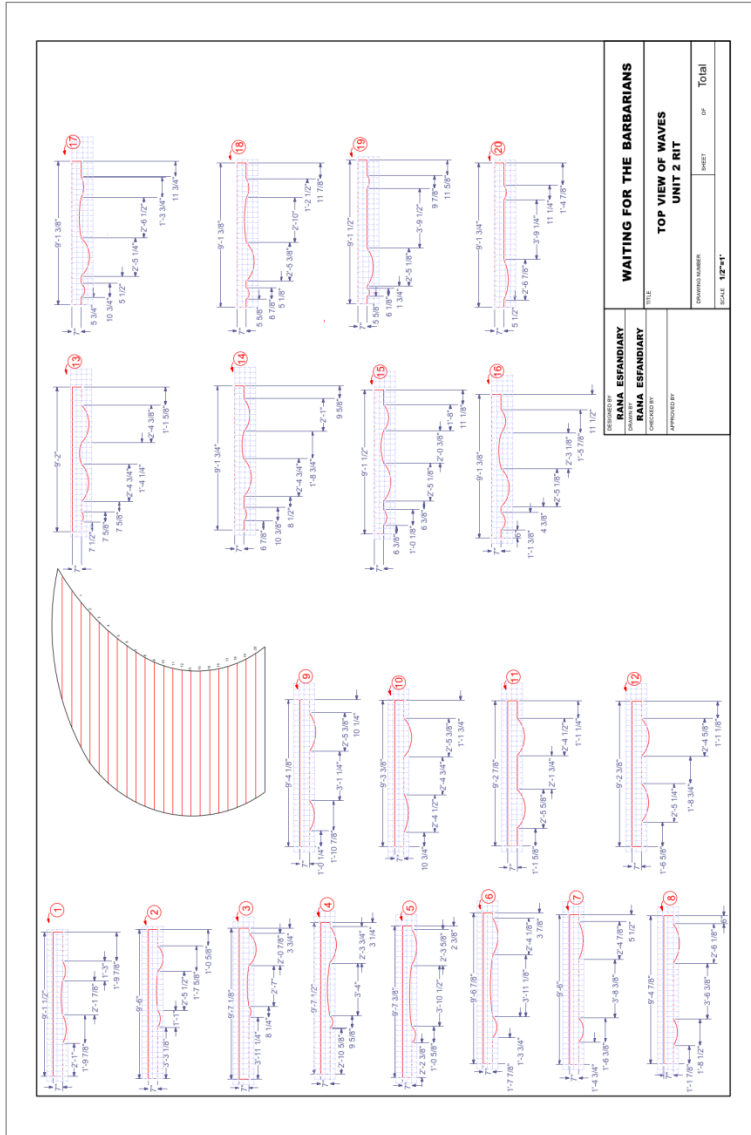


Figure 59: Detail Drawing 7

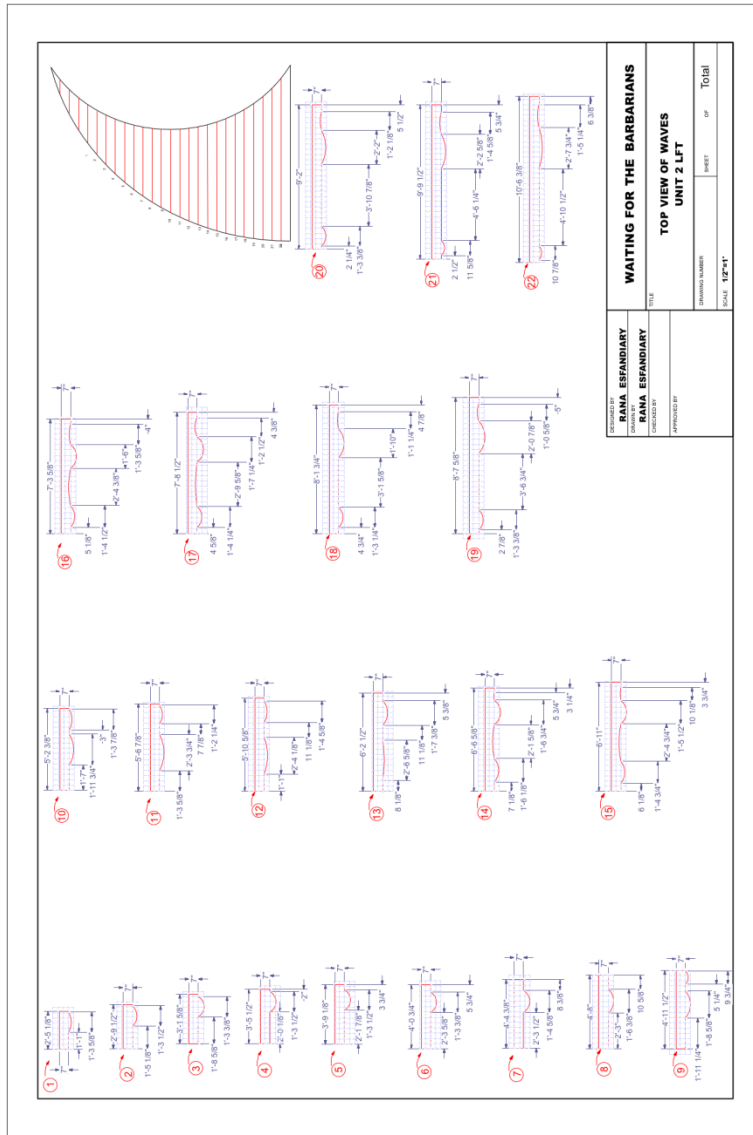


Figure 60: Detail Drawing 8

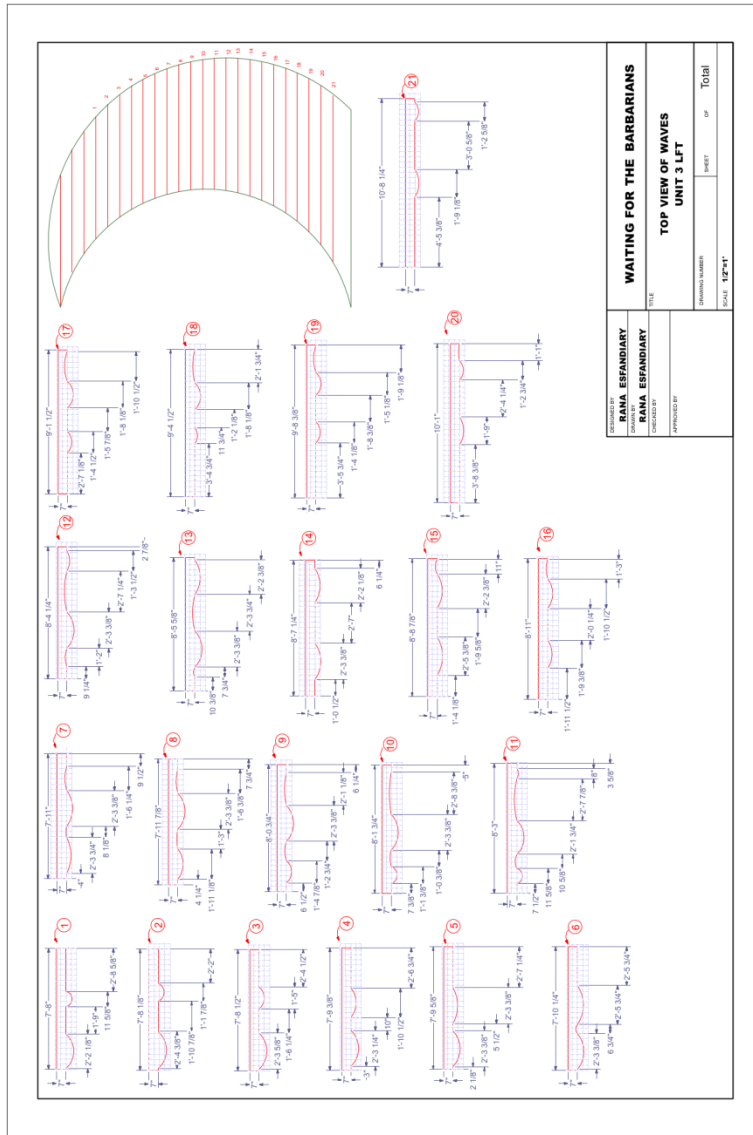


Figure 61: Detail Drawing 9

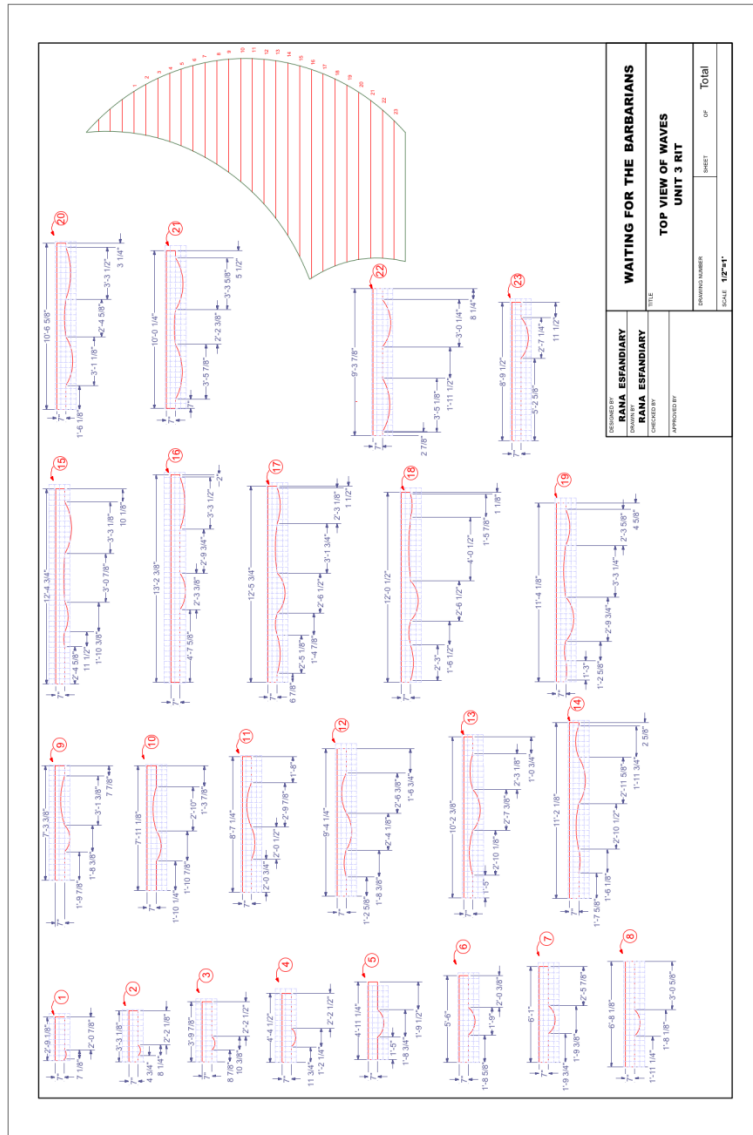


Figure 62: Detail Drawing 10

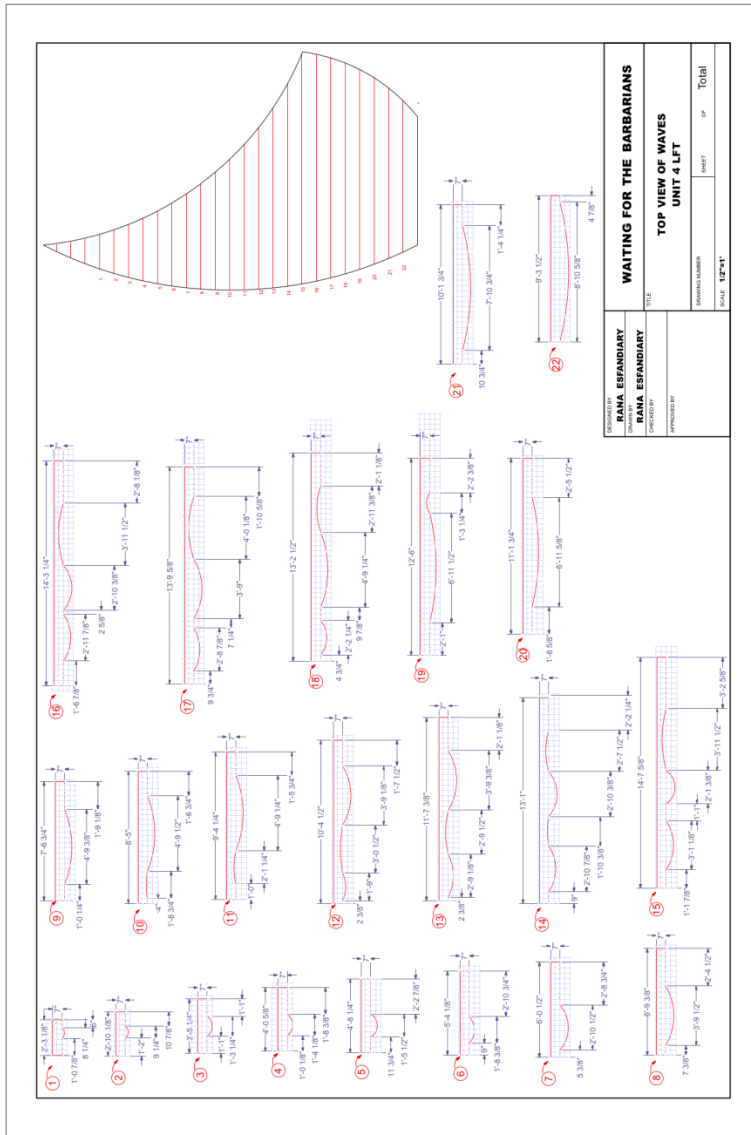


Figure 63: Detail Drawing 11

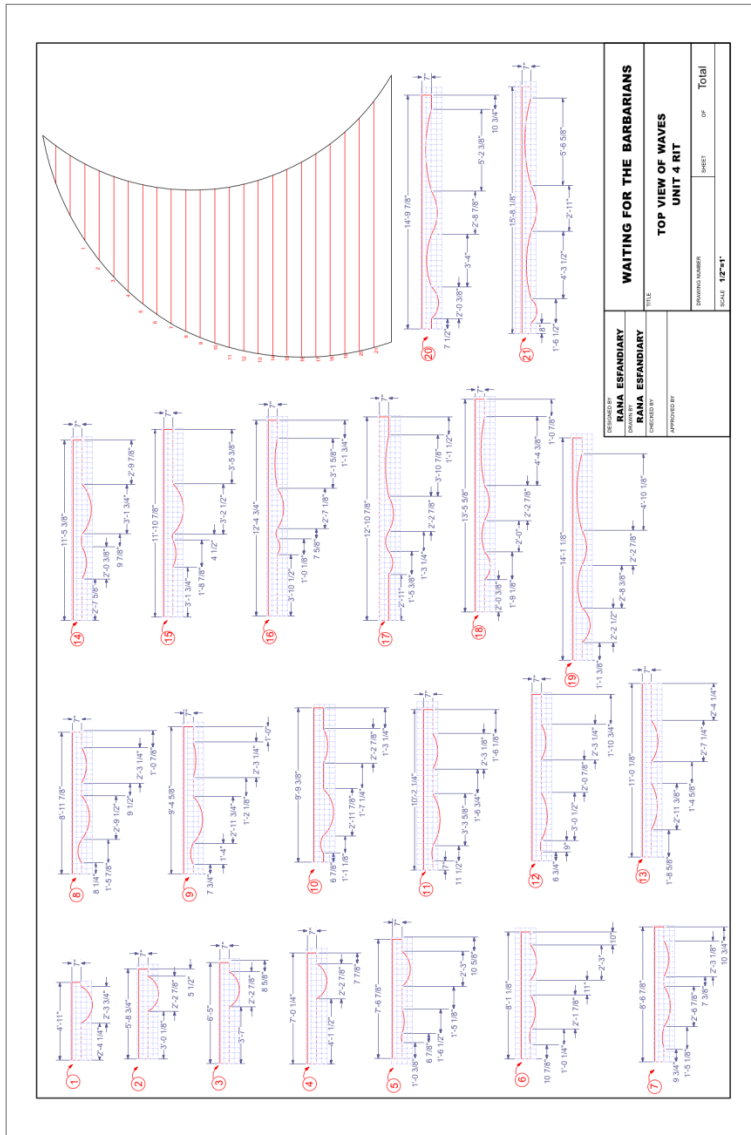


Figure 64: Detail Drawing 12

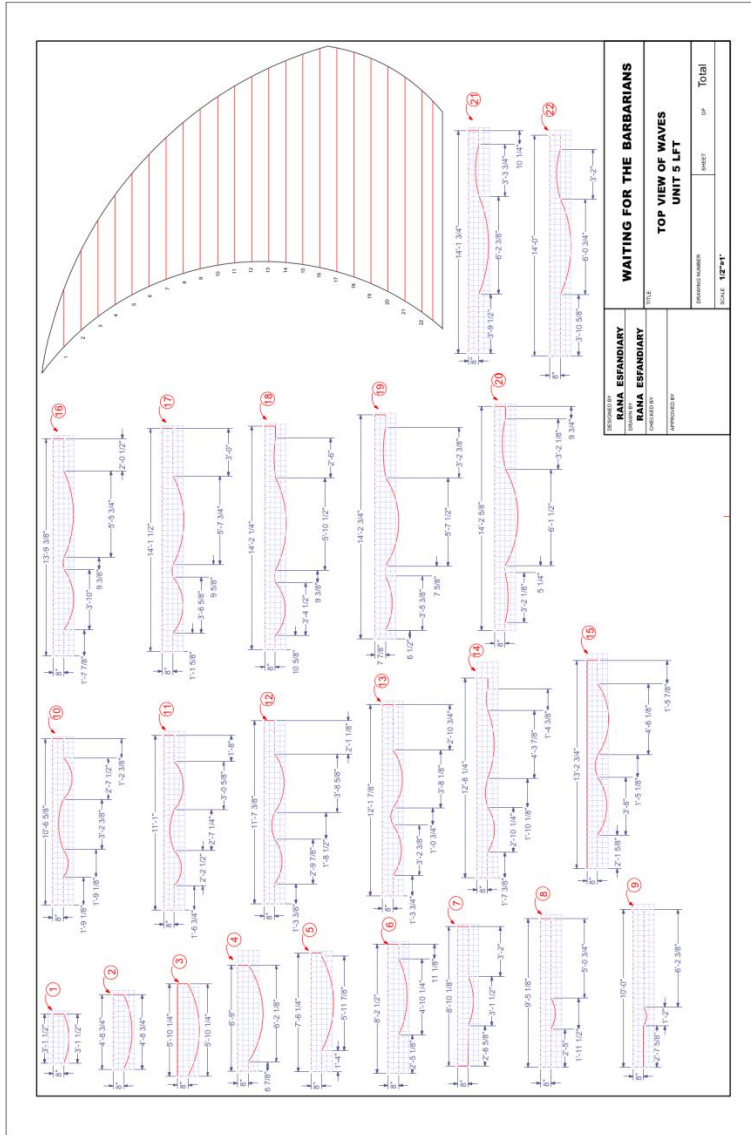


Figure 65: Detail Drawing 13

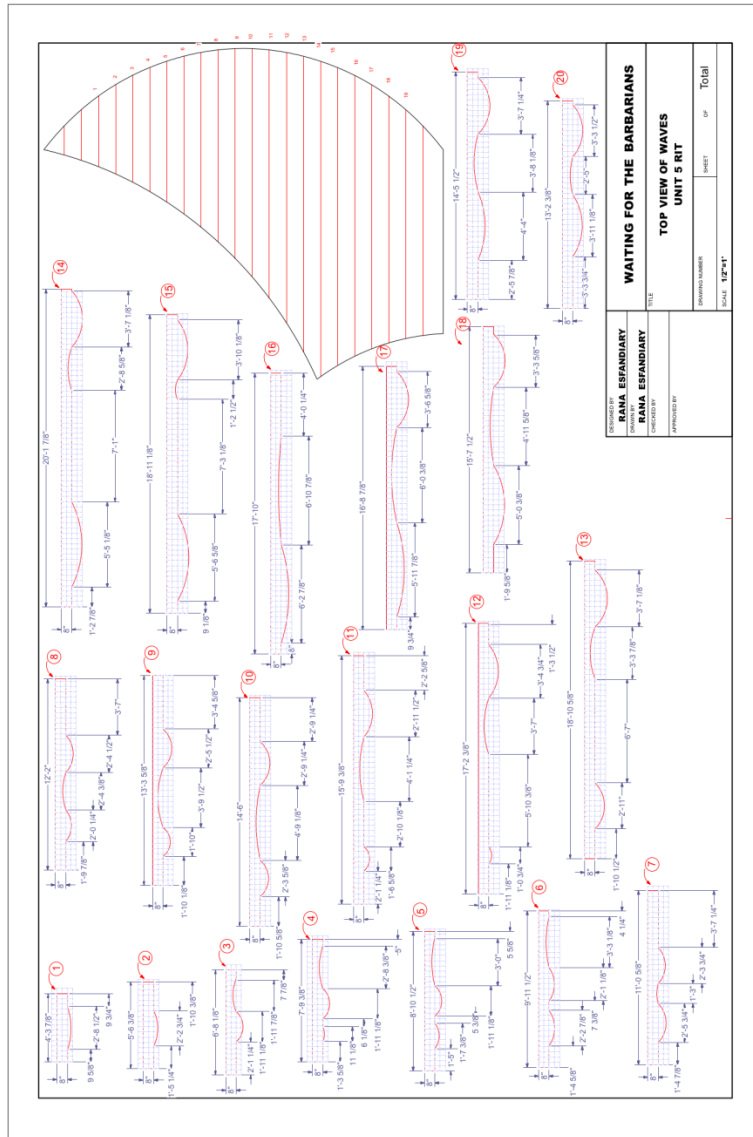


Figure 66: Detail Drawing 14

COSTUME

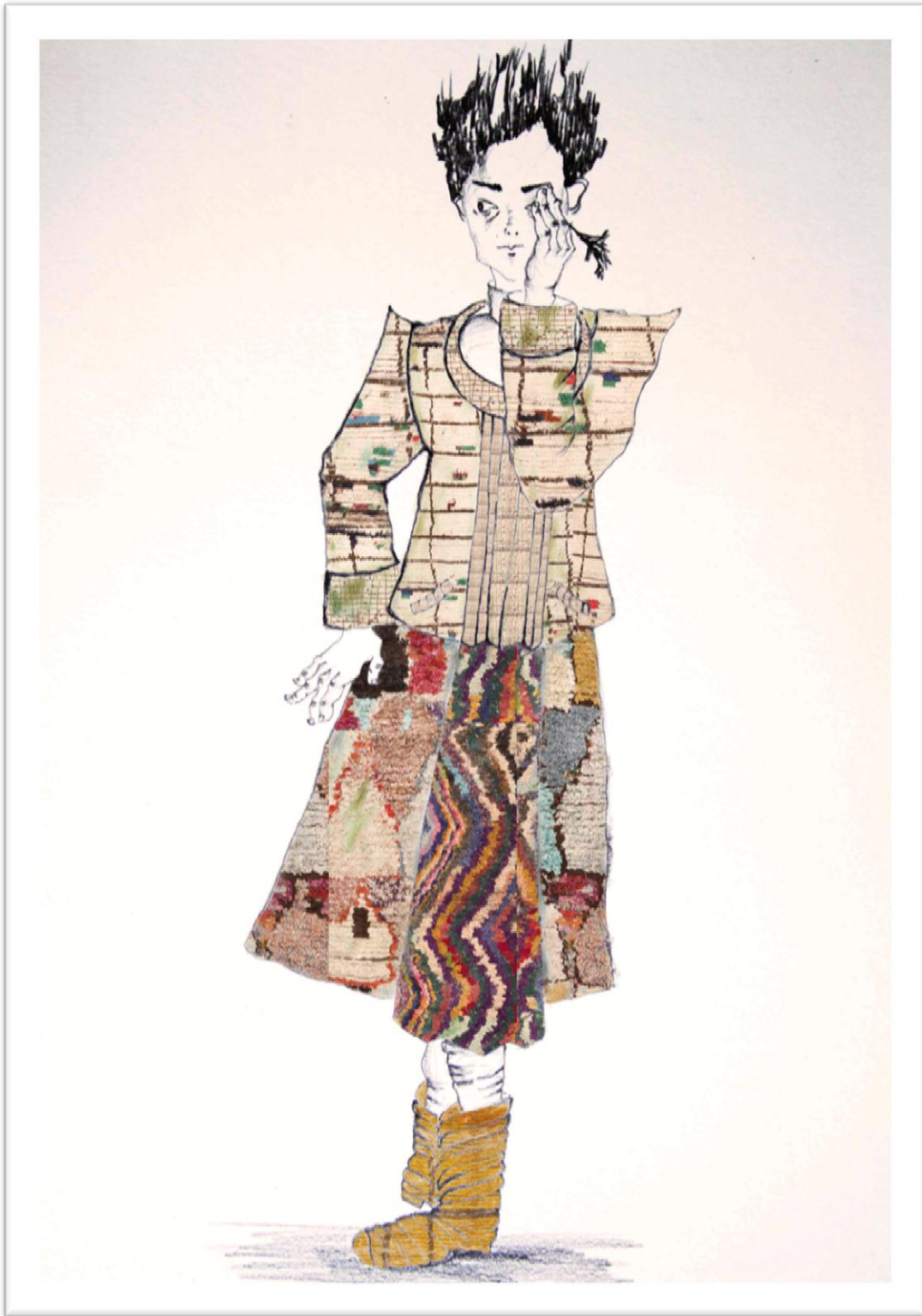


Figure 67: Barbarian Girl

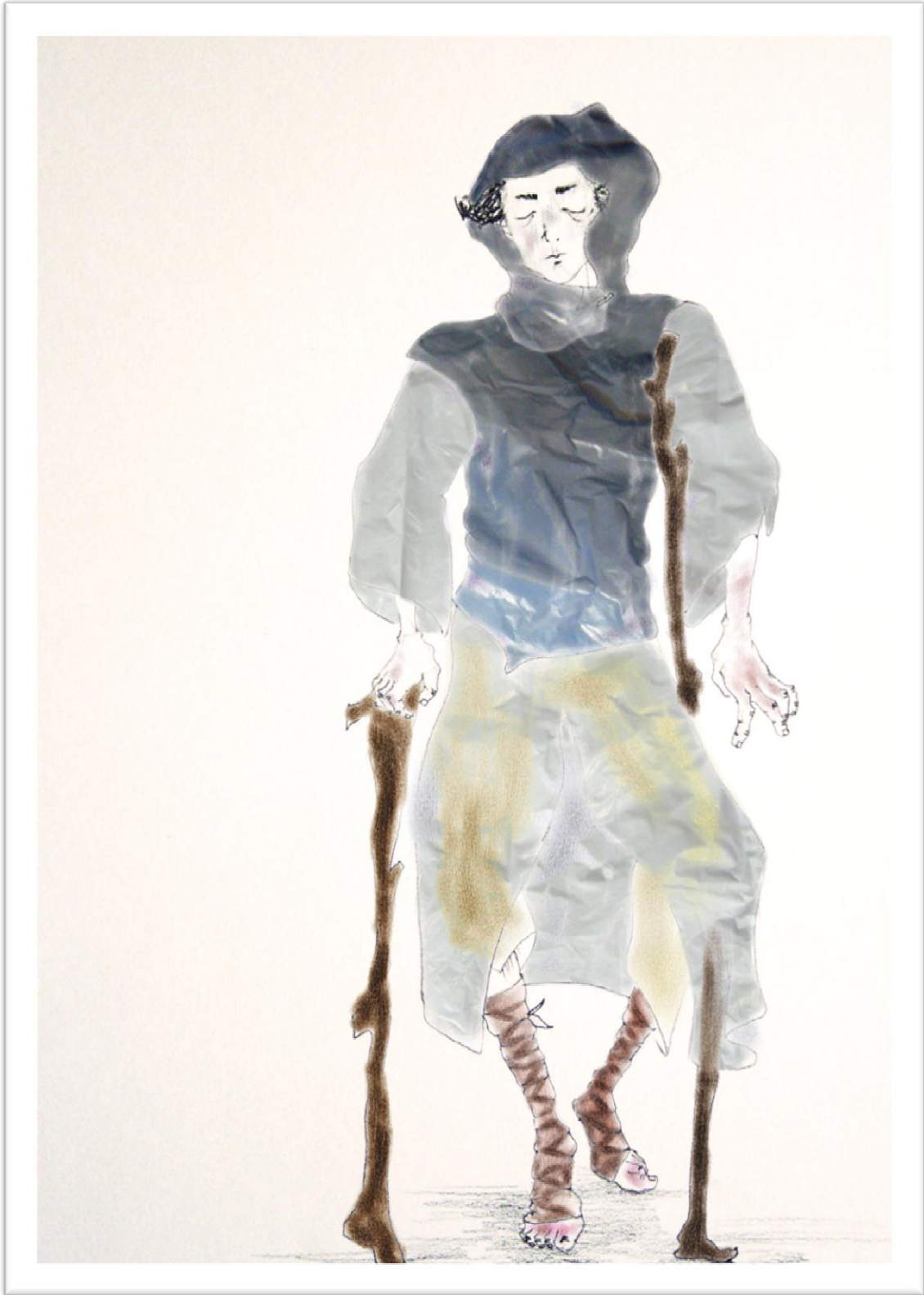


Figure 68: Barbarian Girl

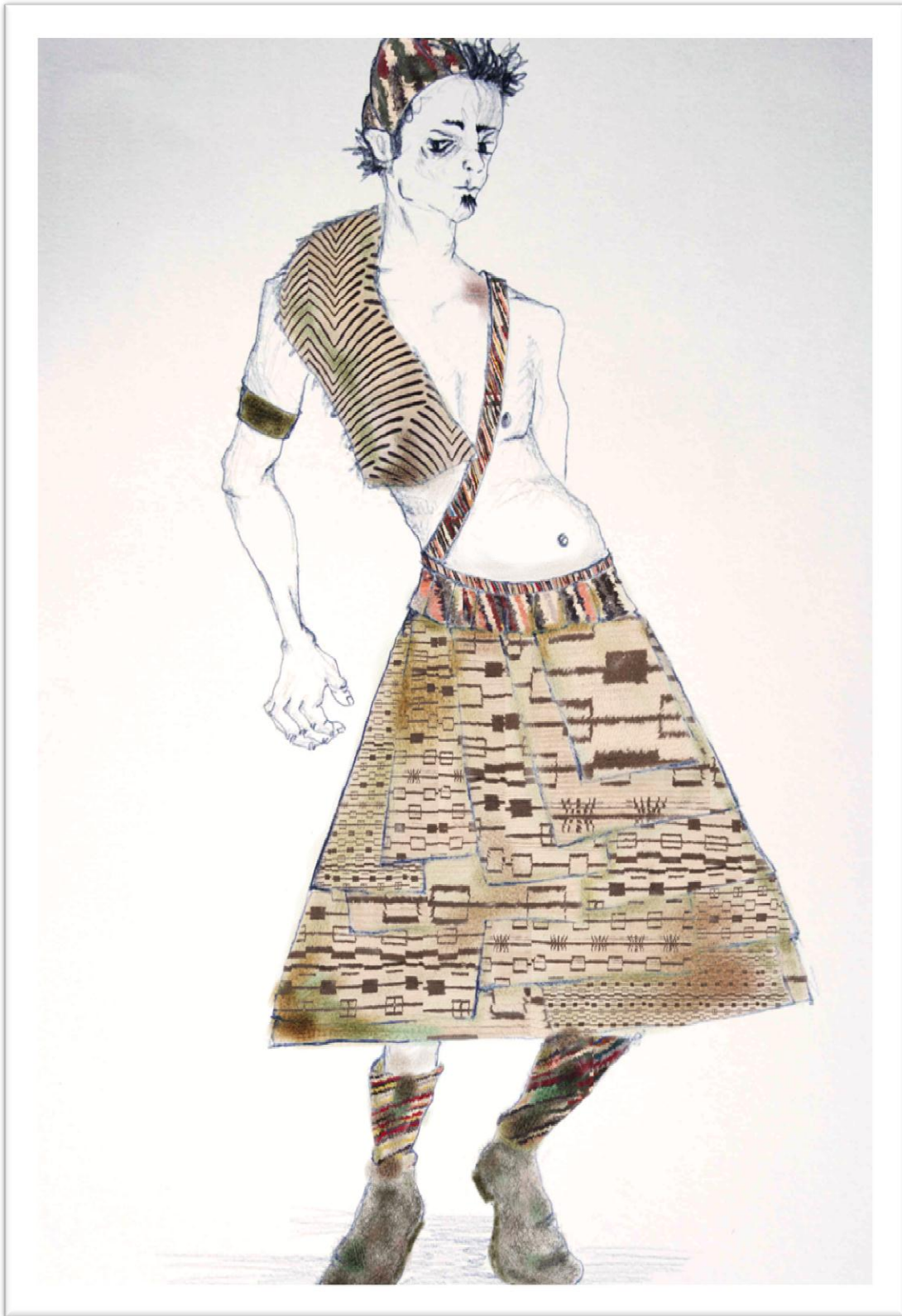


Figure 69: Barbarian 1



Figure 70: Barbarian 2



Figure 71: Colonel Joll

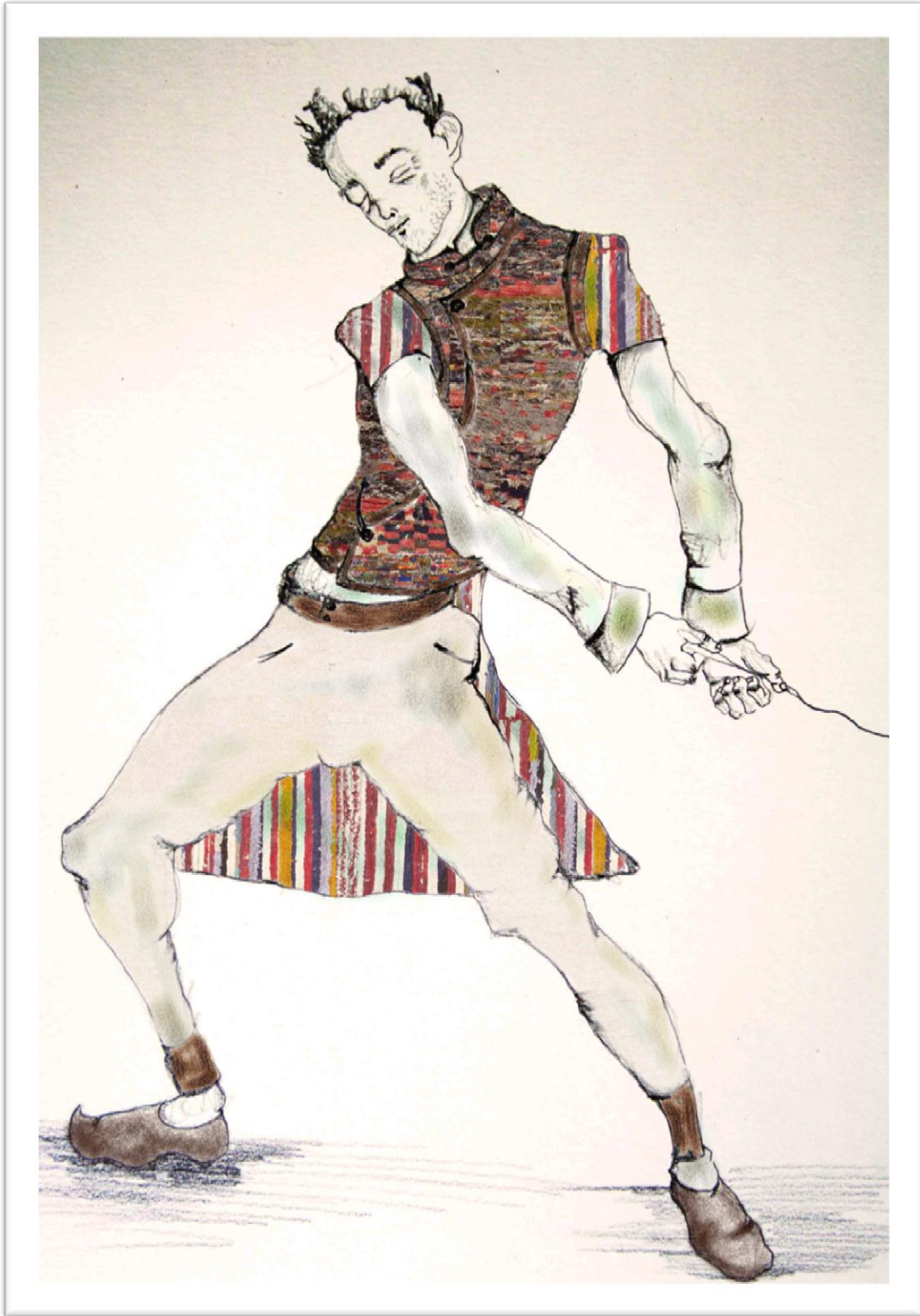


Figure 72: Town People



Figure 73: Town People



Figure 74: Local Guards



Figure 75: Magistrate



Figure 76: Magistrate Coat

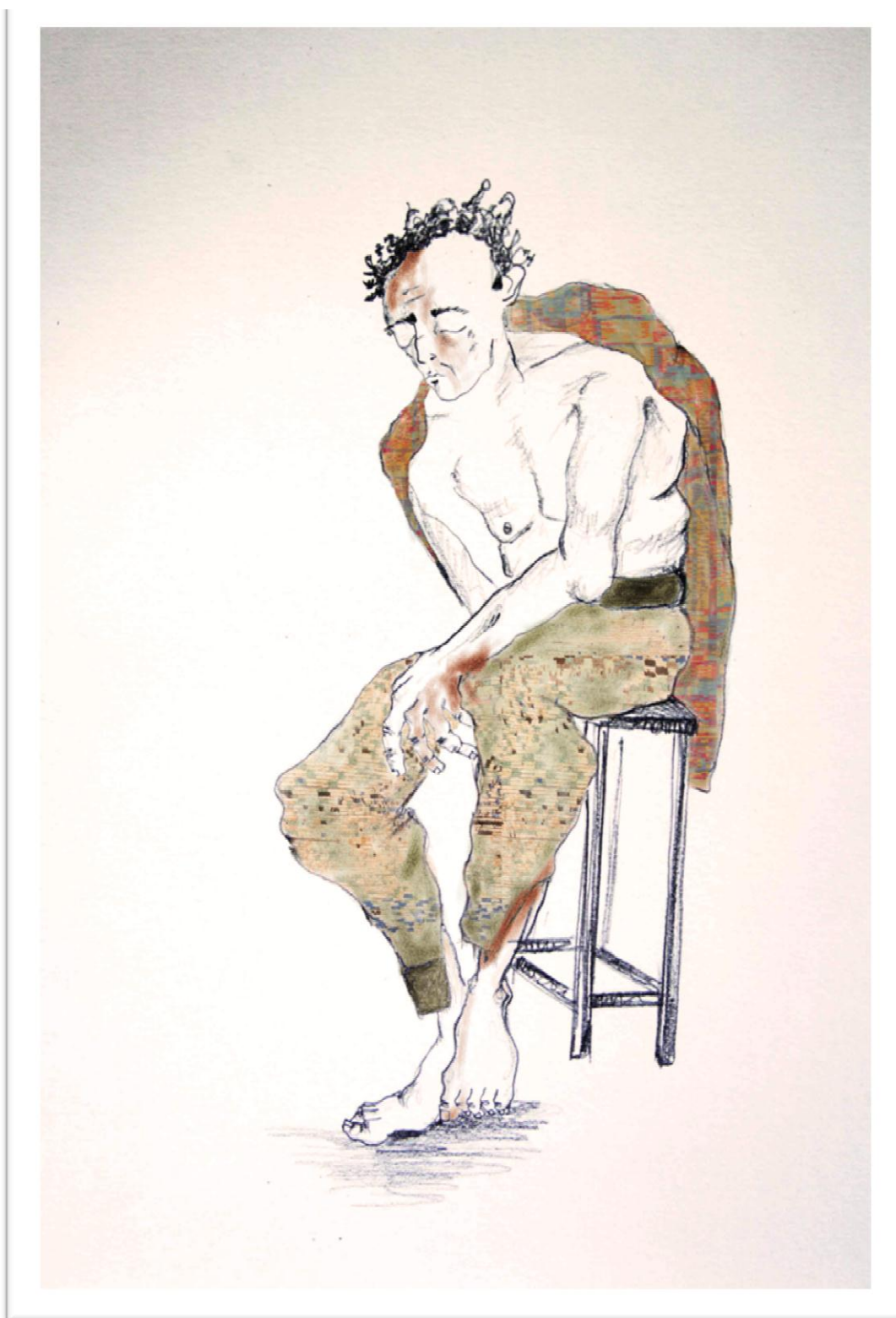


Figure 77: Prisoner 1 (Old Man)



Figure 78: Kid 1

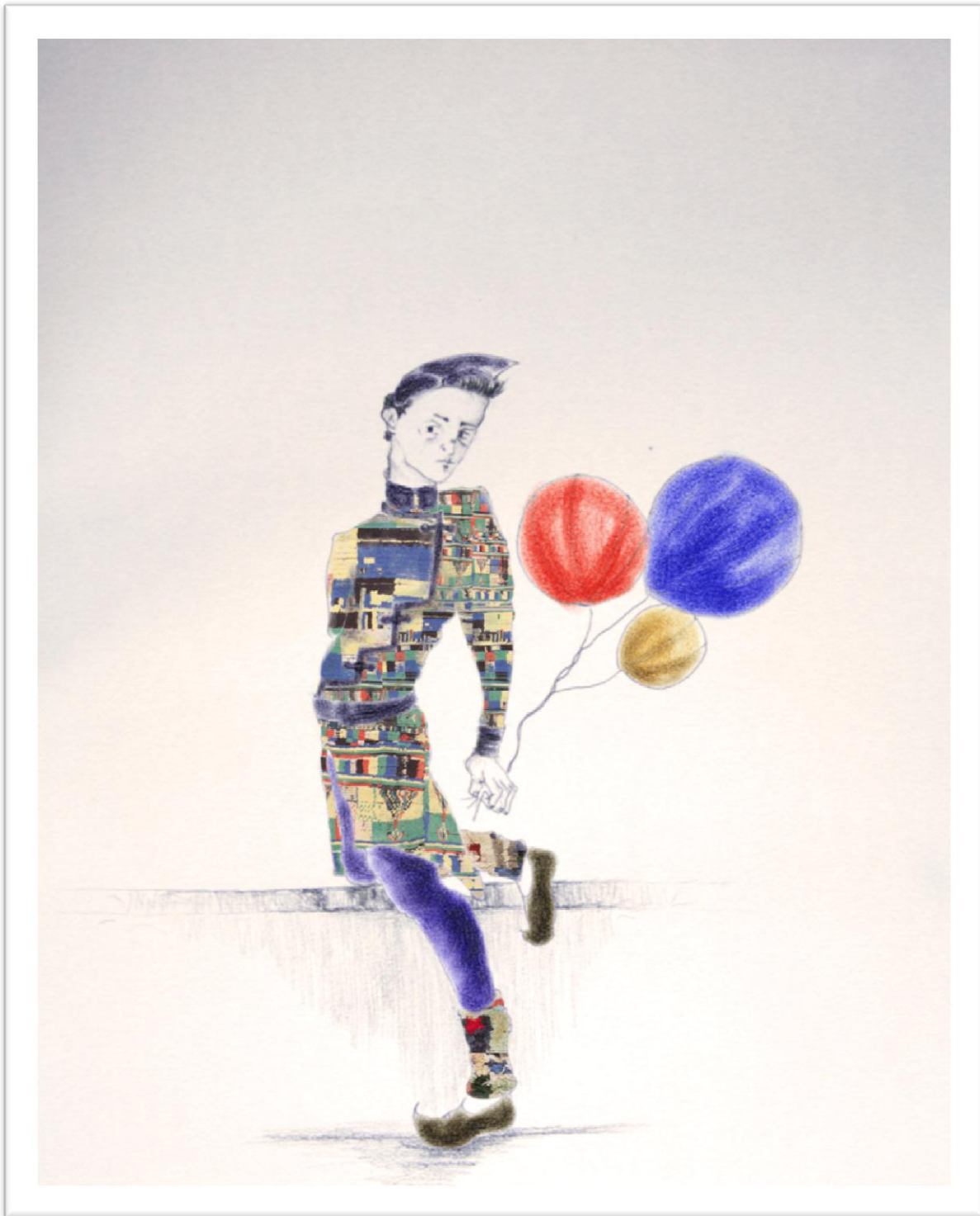


Figure 79: Kid 2

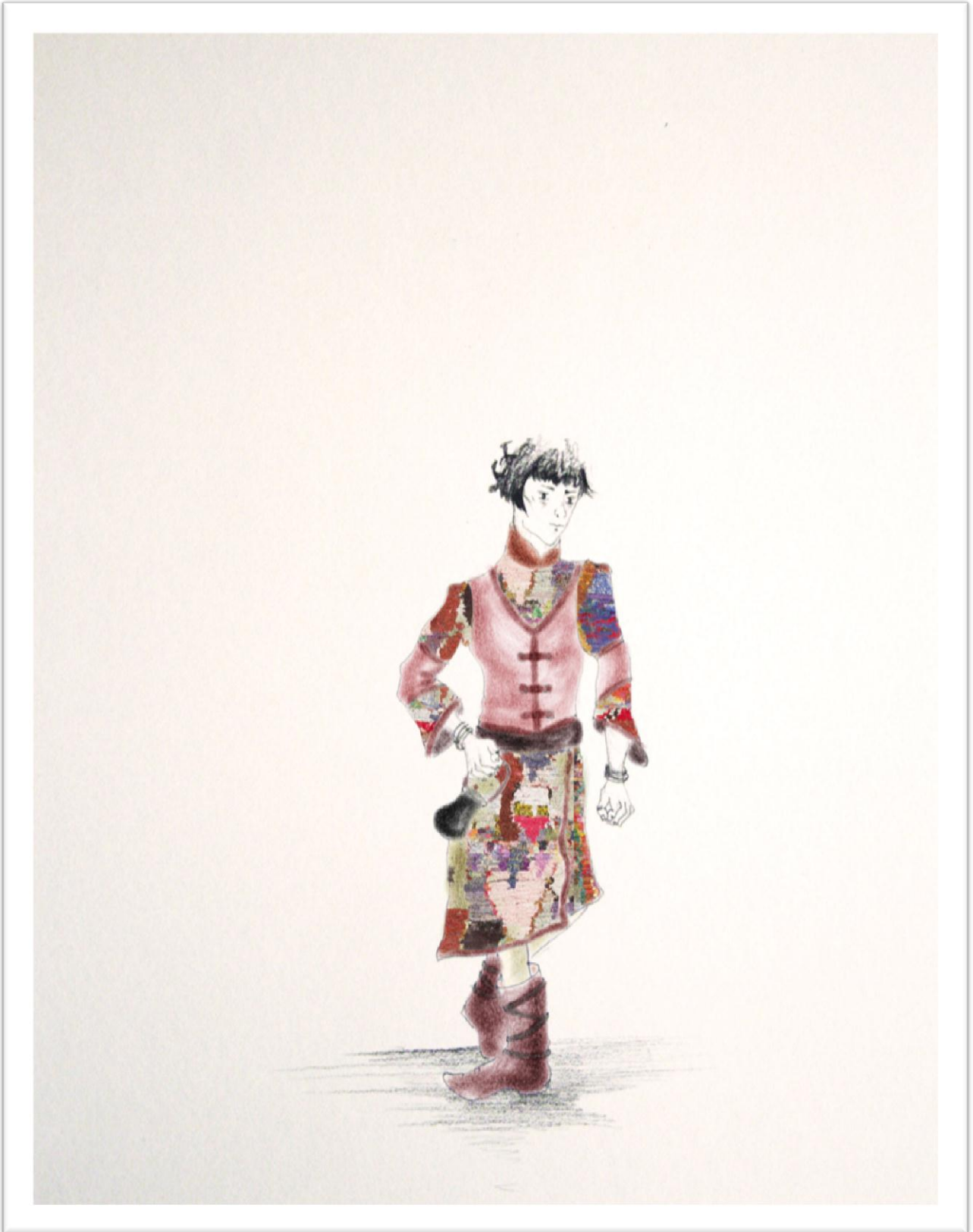


Figure 80: Kid 3



Figure 81: Star and the Cook



Figure 82: Officer from Third Bureau



Figure 83: Deputy Officer and Warrant Officer Mandal



Figure 84: Prisoner 2 (Young Boy)

ENDNOTES

¹ Philip Glass, Guy Montavon. CD Booklet for *Waiting for the Barbarians* by Philip Glass, (New York: Dunvagen Music Publisher. 2005), p. 4

² Tim Page, "Philip Glass", in *Writing on Glass, Essays, Interviews, Criticism*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz, (New York: Schirmer Books: 1997), p.6

³ Philip Glass, Guy Montavon, p. 4

⁴ Wim Mertens, *American Minimal Music*, trans. J Hautekiet, (New York: Alexander Broude Inc: 1983), p. 71

⁵ Ev Grimes, "Interview: Education", in *Writing on Glass, Essays, Interviews, Criticism*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz, p. 13

⁶ Ev Grimes, p. 13

⁷ Ev Grimes, p. 20

⁸ Wim Mertens, p. 68

⁹ Wes York, "Form And Process", in *Writing on Glass, Essays, Interviews, Criticism*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz, (New York: Schirmer Books: 1997), p.61

¹⁰ Tim Page, p. 7

¹¹ Tim Page, p. 9

¹² *A Portrait of Glass in Twelve Parts*, Dir. Scott Hicks. Mondolay Motion Picture Pty. Ltd, 2007. Film.

¹³ Wes York, p. 64

¹⁴ Wes York, p. 64

¹⁵ Wes York, p. 64

¹⁶ Wes York, p. 64

Works Cited

- 1 Glass, Philip. Guy Montavon. *Waiting for the Barbarians* by Philip Glass. New York: Dunvagen Music Publisher, 2005. Print.
- 2 Kostelanetz, Richard. *Writing on Glass, Essays, Interviews, Criticism*. New York: Schirmer Books, 1997. Print.
- 3 Mertens, Wim. *American Minimal Music*, trans. J Hautekiet. New York: Alexander Broude Inc, 1983. Print
- 4 A Portrait of Glass in Twelve Parts, Dir. Hicks, Scott. Mondolay Motion Picture Pty. Ltd, 2007. Film.