

Set for Life

There are rewards for people like Ivo Valentik, who had the courage to throw an unsatisfying job to the winds and take a chance on something wild. How he made the surprising jump from architecture to theatre

By Janet Uren



WHEN IVO VALENTIK SET OUT to study architecture, he had a lofty vision of creating buildings that would last 500 years or more. As a young professional, he found himself designing ceiling tracks for office towers that would, with luck, last for 20. It was not good enough. “I quit,” he says baldly. “Now I build structures that last for about five weeks, and that’s just fine with me.”

With no clear road map to take him away from architecture, Valentik began to do renovation design and construction and to lecture at Algonquin College — and that’s where he ran into his real future. Her name is Teri Loretto, and she is an actor.

Today Valentik is building a reputation as a designer of extraordinary stage sets. He brings an unusual combination of architectural and construction abilities to that work, along with a growing sense of theatre and how it works.

Valentik is a relative newcomer not only to theatre but to Ottawa as well. He was born in Kitchener, grew up in

Double trouble: Valentik created a complicated double set for *Noises Off* (now playing at The Gladstone), a play within a play, in which actors in the first act rehearse on the set of a luxurious English house. In the second act, the set turns back to front, allowing the audience backstage

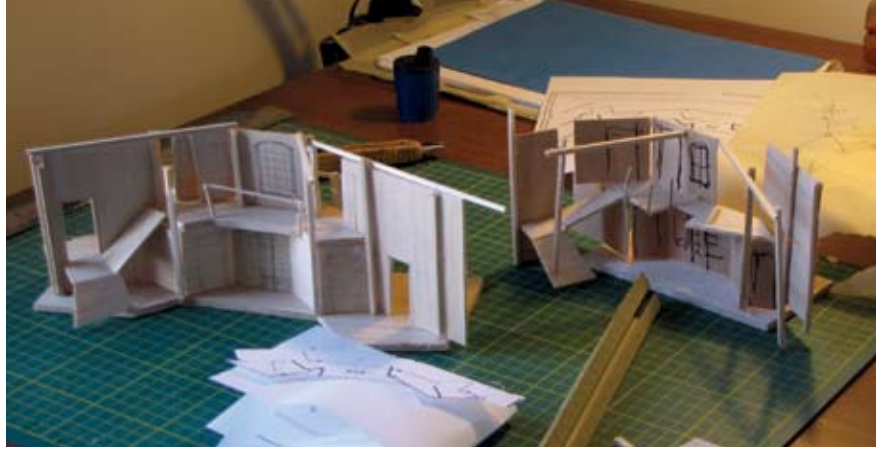
the Quinte region and, after graduating from the University of Waterloo in 1998, was lured to Ottawa by friends. He ended up staying here because something about the city appeals to his fundamentally country soul. “It’s the only city I could ever live in for long,” he declares. “It has the space I need.”

Ottawa satisfies Valentik as a city. As for job satisfaction, it is the multidisciplinary challenge of set design — part art, part mathematics — that keeps him energized.

He says he started off studying architecture because he believed it was the discipline that best combined visual arts and science, and he wanted both. He ended up disappointed. “Architecture



Making plans: Ivo Valentik (shown, with Teri Loretto) became intrigued by theatre set design after being introduced to Loretto, an actor (and his future wife). Valentik reads a play, then sketches ideas before “playing at his desk with bits of wood.” He then builds small-scale models (above) to test out his theories



was something I thought I could use to build a better world,” he explains. “But when I graduated, I found that architects are really just legal engineers and that there was very little exciting design work available to me. I was extremely restless.”

Realizing, as he designed details for dull buildings, that his dream of working on world-changing projects was a long way off, Valentik made the brave decision to jump into the dark waters of unemployment. But not for long. It was Teri Loretto who showed him his next professional landfall. “She was teaching the history of theatre at Algonquin. I was teaching the history of architecture, and we clicked. I was new to town. I liked theatre but didn’t know where to find it. Teri opened that door for me.”

Through Teri, who is now his wife, Valentik met director John P. Kelly of SevenThirty Productions. Kelly was about to mount an ambitious production of a play called *Iron*. He had a minuscule budget for the set and asked Valentik to have a go. The result was a design that ended up carrying off the laurels for Outstanding Set Design at the 2008 Rideau Awards (annually recognizing the best of professional theatre in Ottawa).

FOR VALENTIK, THERE IS NOTHING casual or spontaneous about putting a set together. It is the result of long reflection and experimentation, followed by painstaking design. *Iron* is an example. A play about incarceration, it is grimly set in a prison. Valentik took his time, the first sketches emerging only after a period of intense reading about prisons and playing around with images

of physical and psychological confinement. “I also played with the idea of being watched.”

The small budget actually helped Valentik develop an unusual design — one that supported the ominous feeling of entrapment that Kelly was trying to create. “I had \$1,000 to work with,” Valentik recalls. “In other words, nothing. So I came up with a way to conserve material. By using plywood slats, I needed much less wood. At the same time, those slats imitated the concrete blocks in old prisons. And because they were very open, they allowed me to suggest the threatening sense of someone always peering through. I also used paint — dark gold at the bottom, lightening to white — to give a sense of the walls leaning in.”

Valentik had finally found a calling with the right combination of art and science. After *Iron*, he went on to design a number of sets for Kelly and for the Gladstone Theatre. One of those was a *Midwinter’s Dream Tale*, presented by the Company of Fools last February. “That was such a satisfying project. Most of the time, you begin with the play. In this case, I developed the set in consultation with the company, and the play was actually constructed around the set. It was a wonderful, upside-down process.”

Budget and time constraints are universal in theatre. Valentik worked on another low-budget production for the Ottawa Stilt Union and learned some valuable lessons about the unfortunate collision of complex set with tight deadlines. The specifications were daunting. He had to make a platform that was strong enough for three musicians to stand on, easily collapsible so that it

could be tied on top of a car, and weighed less than 150 pounds. Because he didn’t want to do something boring, Valentik ended up spending two days at his desk, playing with bits of wood. In the end, the concept he devised wasn’t boring, but it had so many different heights and angles that it was a nightmare to construct. The set worked, but at a high cost in terms of time and nervous energy. “Now whenever I’m designing, I keep saying, ‘Remember the stilt show!’ But obviously I didn’t learn my lesson, because now I’m doing *Noises Off* for The Gladstone, and it is even more technically complex.”

Noises Off — onstage at The Gladstone until October 10 — may well be the world’s most hilarious theatrical farce. It is a play within a play, with actors in the first act rehearsing on the set of a luxurious English house; in the second act, the set turns back to front, and the actors effectively invite the audience backstage.

In this instance, proportions were the main challenge in constructing a double set. Since the stage at the Gladstone is relatively wide and shallow, Valentik had to figure out a way to rotate the set without taking out half the audience. As well, with the set cut in half from side to side, the actors are left with a very narrow margin of acting space. In this not very promising space, a thorough understanding of perspective — the kind of thing they teach you in architectural school — comes in handy if you want to fool the audience into seeing depth and straight lines where none exist.

Valentik has created a sense of illusory depth with stairs that twist on their axis and doors that decrease in size with distance from the audience. As for

rotating the set smoothly and quickly, he divided the structure into five. The four sides are mounted on wheels and detach from the central section in order to rotate separately.

“My architectural and construction background certainly came in handy,” Valentik admits. “I didn’t want to have a straight set — visually boring but also unstable. So I used the classic W for the first floor, with doors set into angled walls. All in all, there are 100 different angles on the two sides.” Valentik also had to find a way to disguise the turning mechanism onstage and to eliminate vibration (except, of course, when the script actually calls for the set to vibrate). What follows, in architect speak, is a medley of counterbalances, cross bracing, and sheer walls.

Sleep is not one of the things that a set designer gets a lot of in the weeks leading up to a production, but Valentik likes the late nights. “I have my music blaring in the middle of the night while I’m working — painting wallpaper, for example, so that it looks like stucco.”

Wallpapering is not something Valentik learned in architecture school. “I like the fact that I get to experiment with set design. I’d never worked with wallpaper in my life before *Noises Off*, but there I am not only putting it up but figuring out a way to make it look like something different. I have a real sense of life in the theatre. Sure, I get cranky and tense during the process, but really there’s nothing like seeing what you have imagined on paper coming to life in a theatre.”

Experiments can be risky, but that is part of what draws Valentik to set design. “There’s no money in this work,” he says with a smile. “It’s all about being rewarded for taking risks. It’s so cool!”

When *Noises Off* opened in early September, Valentik was already turning to the next project — the set for *The Final Twist* (at The Gladstone, October 29 to November 14). He has already read the play and met the director and describes the production as a “neat concept.” “The set will have to look like a 1950s movie from the Pinewood Studios, all in pastel colours.”

The real advantage is that all the action and intrigue of this classic mystery takes place in a single room. Nothing rotates!

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