

# Alumni Profile: William Eckert ('49)

**William Eckert** ('49) met **Jean Levy** ('50) while both were undergraduates at Tulane University in 1939. He was studying architecture and she, art. Theater was their extra-curricular activity. This was the beginning of an enduring relationship that extended from the personal—marriage, children, grandchildren—to an unusual and renowned professional partnership as co-set and/or costume and/or lighting designers of forty Broadway shows, as well as off-Broadway, Regional theater, ballet, opera, TV, and film.

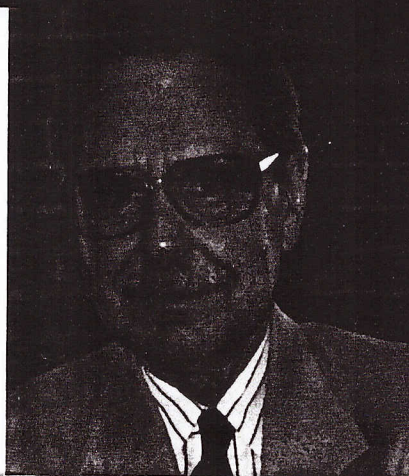
They became particularly associated with musicals, among which included *Damn Yankees*, *Lil' Abner*, *Fiorello!*, *She Loves Me*, *Anyone Can Whistle*, *Flora*, *The Red Menace*, and *Mame*.

They didn't neglect straight shows either, as their work on the seminal Arthur Kopit play *Oh Dad, Poor Dad, Momma's Hung You in the Closet and I'm Feelin' So Sad* attests. Furthermore, their list of collaborators reads like a veritable who's who of American theater: George

Abbot, Michael Kidd, Harold Prince, Herbert Ross, Bob Fosse, Peter Gennaro, Gene Saks, Jerome Robbins, Agnes DeMille, Jose Quintero, Frank Cosaro, Robert Lewis, and Arthur Laurents—to name just some of the premier directors and choreographers with whom they worked—without even mentioning the sterling composers, writers, actors, and other designers.

But, before their illustrious co-career could begin, World War II intervened. Both served as Japanese translators (Bill in the army, and Jean as a civilian) in the same complex near Washington, D.C.

After the war, they decided to further their theater education at "the best" graduate program in the country. In these post-war years, the Yale School of Drama, while always an intense environment, was filled, according to Bill, with a particular ferment and fervor:



Above: William Eckert, 1998.

Right: William and Jean Eckert, 1953.

"It was an ideal time to be there. Practically the whole class had been in the army. The average age was about twenty-five . . . We had a little more life experience, had done something we detested. So we were very determined."

At that time, the program of study wasn't as rigidly segregated by discipline. Said Bill, "Yale has always been concerned with theater . . . not design or playwriting." So the Eckerts not

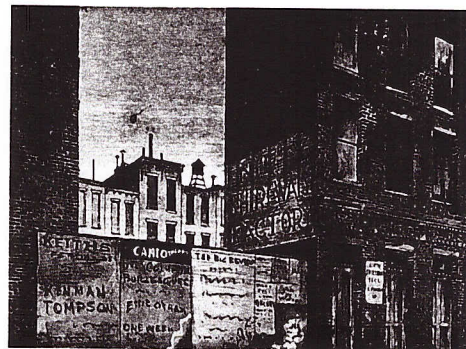
only designed, but Bill wrote and directed while Jean acted. "We

had a lot more autonomy to explore areas of personal interest to us."

While Bill remembers **Donald Oenslager** as "very inspirational, very positive," he has special praise for **Frank Bevan** who taught costume design. He was "one of the best classroom teachers . . . he could really analyze theater." Since this was also the era of the great pre-Broadway try-out tours, there would be a new show nearly every week at the Shubert Theatre; early

versions of *Streetcar* and *All My Sons* passed through New Haven while the Eckerts were there. These shows became an integral part of the student's education. Bevan and a group of students would watch these

nascent, even raw, shows in which new scenes could be added that night. Afterwards Bevan led discussions on not only the design elements, but the strengths and weaknesses of the entire dramaturgical effort.



Set design for *Fiorello!*





Costume design for *Fiorello!*

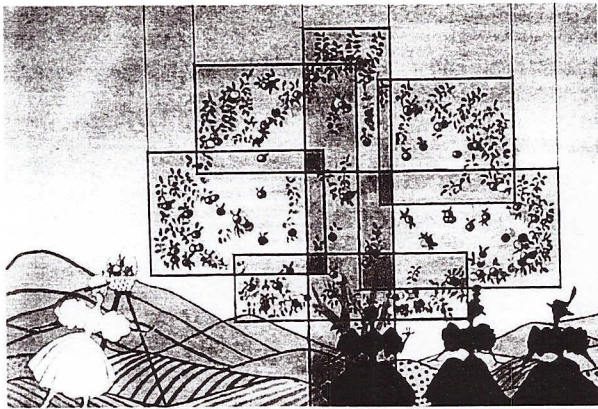
After Yale, first Bill and then Jean, worked for the infant industry of television. They created sets week after week for the live dramas then being made. However, they always took time off to design for theater. So much time off, that CBS eventually requested that they make a choice, and they chose Broadway.

One of their early Broadway efforts, *The Golden Apple*, illustrates both the couple's artistic philosophy and innovativeness:

"Whatever is appropriate to the play is what we like to do, and tried to do . . .

It was a musical of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* in 19th century America, but with a very contemporary point of view. No dialogue. All song. We convinced the lyricist and the composer, and they sold all the other people."

The Eckert's scenic solution was to create a profusion of hanging painted frames that formed a stylized tree, very much, in effect, like a quasi-cubistic, early Mondrian painting. As Bill remembers, "at the time, it was very out there." (Their design would later win the Donaldson Award for Best Scenery for a Musical, 1953-54.)



Set and costume designs for *The Golden Apple*.

Their philosophy of finding their design idea first and foremost from the play itself can further be seen by the great variety of styles they worked in. Many were often marked by a charming whimsicality, which matched the fairy tale or cartoonish quality of the plays, e.g. the bed with tiered mattresses like an insane wedding cake for *Once Upon a Mattress*, or the hillbilly shacks like isolated tufts of grass on the backdrop of *Lil' Abner*, while the design for the comparatively gritty *Damn Yankees* was praised by the *New York Times* as having a "complete authenticity in the baseball set."

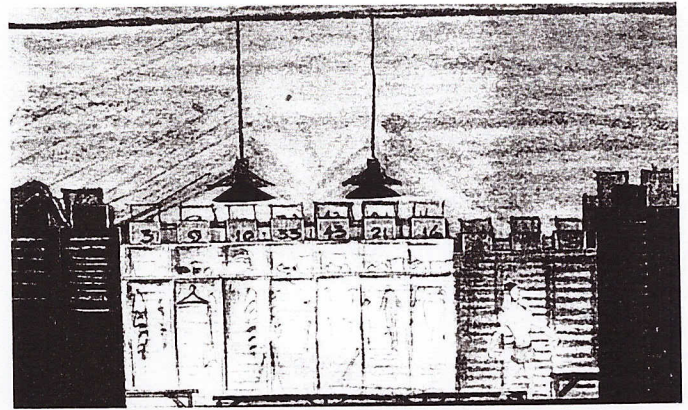
Similarly, they approached the collaborative process with directors on the same case-by-case basis. When pressed to name a particularly satisfying collaborator, Bill specified that grand old-man-of-the-theater, George Abbott. During the

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try-out period for *Damn Yankees*, three songs and the biggest dance number were cut right here in New Haven, which equated to the elimination of two sets as well, but that was an expected part of the process.

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Set design for *Damn Yankees*.

Since Abbott would eventually direct eleven of the shows they designed, he grew to trust the Eckerts' aesthetic sense so much that he eventually would say, "Just tell me where the doors and furniture will be." Though for Bill, that period of trust was actually "less fun."

Of course, the Eckerts' main collaborators were each other. The couple always claimed it was impossible to divvy up who did what on a project. Bill didn't see their collaboration as anything more than the natural order of things:

"We always worked completely together. Jean drew much better than I did. I drafted much better than she did . . . But still, there never was any division of labor. Once we had an idea, either of us could carry it forward . . ."

The Eckerts continued to design in New York through the early '70s, however, changing theater economics and growing family needs brought about their decision to move to Dallas. "We were tired of hustling, and you do have to hustle." In Dallas they helped found the design program at Southern Methodist University in 1971.

They taught, as well as co-designed, in Dallas and around the country, until Jean passed away in 1993.

Bill continues to teach set design as an SMU Professor Emeritus. His most recent set design was for the Aphra Behn play *The Rover*, performed at SMU earlier this year.

— Julius Galacki ('98)