2014

Chapter 12a. "Jolly Good Show!": The POW Theatre Production Handbook | Part One: Theatres, Scenery, Props, Staging

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Chapter 12: "Jolly Good Show!"

Theatrical Production Overview

"In a large collection of people as we were there were men of every conceivable trade and skill," wrote Jack Chalker about those in the camp who were essential to the theatrical enterprise, "carpenters, tinsmiths, instrument-makers, tailors, designers, artists, actors, musicians, hatters, forgers, cat-burglars, safe-breakers, paper-makers, writers—everything one could think of, and this was very much to our advantage."[1] Some of these men became members of the design, technical, and support crews.

The astonishing array of theatrical elements that the POW designers and technicians were able to provide for the shows greatly enhanced the experience for their audiences. "The improvisation for décor and dresses had to be seen to be believed," wrote a dumbfounded Captain Aylwin. "With only coconut oil lamps, lighting effects were produced to rival any provincial and perhaps even London theatre and the coloured dresses made from mosquito nets and rice sacks were amazing."[2] Aylwin was writing about his experience of the theatre at Chungkai in early 1944; as we've seen in the preceding chapters, there was more amazement to come. If the shows the POWs saw in these theatres surprised and delighted—and they did—it was due as much to the imagination and ingenuity of the design and technical personnel as it was to the producers and performers.

The POW Theatre Production Handbook[i]

Part One:

- A. The POW Theatres.
- B. Scenery.
- C. Set Pieces and Properties.
- D. Staging: Two Exceptional Productions.

Part Two:

- E. Lighting.
- F. Costumes.
- G. Musical Instrument Construction.

Note: locations within visual artifacts will be given from the point of view of the audience-reader.

Part One: Theatres, Scenery, Props, Staging

A. The POW Theatres

Theatre Construction

There is a sizable visual and verbal record of most, if not all, of the proscenium theatres in the base hospital and relocation camps in Thailand. All were built along similar lines, following the model of the European proscenium theatre that had become the standard architectural configuration for performance venues featuring Western theatrical styles.

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i My appreciation to Tom Barrett, Technical Director of the Macalester College Theatre and Dance Department, for vetting Sections A-E, and G; and to Lynn Farrington, Costumer for the department, for her expertise in identifying the special features of the costumes in Part F.

The Site. The POW proscenium theatres were freestanding structures, usually built in a level open area next to the camp's parade ground, the gathering place for the whole camp. Since audiences sat on flat ground, *sightlines*—the ability of each audience member to see the stage clearly—were a problem. The stage, therefore, had to be raised high enough so that spectators at the back could see over the heads of those in front of them.

The sites for the theatres in Chungkai and Tamuang were different. They were located at the bottom of a slope, which formed a natural amphitheatre and allowed all audience members an unobstructed view of the stage. Unlike the theatres on the edge of the bare parade ground, these two had a backdrop of trees and other leafy vegetation, which in Jack Chalker's eyes (writing about the theatre at Chungkai), only enhanced the aesthetic experience of attending the theatre:

> Bordering directly onto the eastern edge of the river Kwai (partly occupied now by the present cemetery area) was a natural auditorium of gently rising ground which provided an exceptionally convenient and extremely beautiful setting for a stage facing the rising ground. . . . The setting, looking westwards over some thinned-out jungle vegetation and palmyra across to the hills on the far side of the river, was exquisite, especially on a brilliant moonlight night. A little to the right up-river was a massive "sugar-loaf" rock rising from the distant jungle hundreds of feet, partly covered with sub-tropical rain forest vegetation.[3]

Figure 12.1. Watercolor of the Chungkai theatre. Courtesy of Jack Chalker.

The striking "sugar-loaf" formation is seen in the background of Chalker's watercolor.

Foundation. Whether situated on the flat ground or at the bottom of a slope, the *stagehouse*—the structure in which the performances took place—sat on a raised rectangular foundation of built-up and

packed-down earth. Norman Pritchard explained that "tons and tons of earth were moved by hand (no vehicles!) to make a platform."[4] (Excavating and carrying dirt to build huge earthen mounds was not a new task for many of these POWs.) A large boxlike framework of bamboo was constructed, and the earth was deposited inside. Bamboo matting was attached to the interior to create a retaining wall. The exterior of this platform framework is best seen in one of the Kanburi theatre photographs.

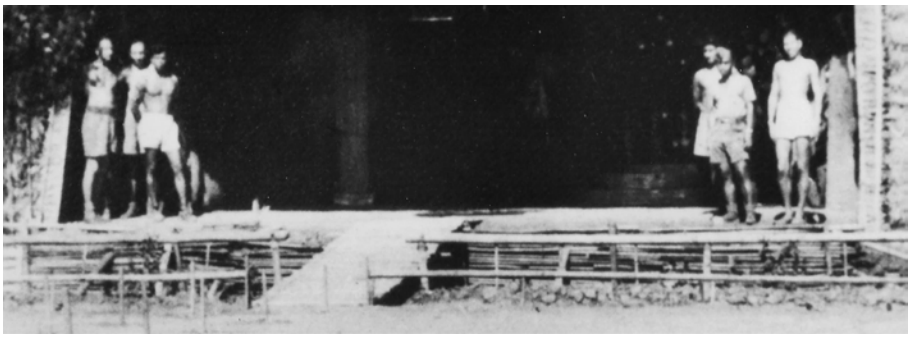


Figure 12.2. Kanburi Officers' Camp theatre. Photograph detail. Australian War Memorial.

Here again, Chungkai, because of its location, was different. The major portion of the earth for the raised platform stage did not have to be excavated and carted laboriously into place but already existed as one side of a "small shallow valley."[5] The earth from the excavation of the orchestra pit, as well as from the terracing of the opposite slope into an amphitheatre, provided fill so the stage could be properly sized, shaped, and leveled. Otherwise, the foundation was similar to those seen elsewhere. Chalker estimated the height of the foundation at Chungkai to be "about a metre and a half [4.9 feet]."[6]

Stagehouse. The bamboo and atap construction techniques used to build the stagehouse followed the same basic truss construction employed by the POWs in their pitched-roof sleeping huts and other camp structures. "No nails were used," wrote Donald Smith, "as the prisoners soon learned the trick of fitting pieces of bamboo together like a jigsaw puzzle, and of lashing the rafter-beams with long strips of wet, tough tree-fibre."[7]

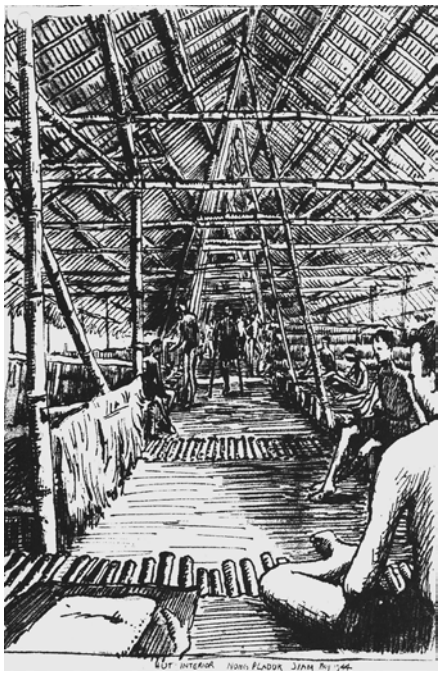
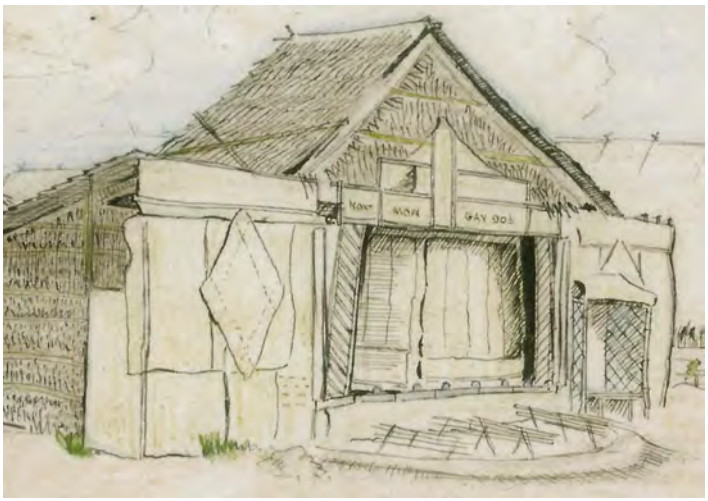


Figure 12.3 Hut interior at Nong Pladuk. William Wilder. Courtesy of Anthony Wilder.

William Wilder's sketch of the interior of one of these bamboo and atap huts at Nong Pladuk provides a clear view of what the theatre's internal structure may have looked like. POW construction engineers, guided by someone with an intimate understanding of the architecture of proscenium theatres back home, were able to extend and modify this truss construction technology to build the stagehouses—oblong "boxes," actually—enclosed on three sides. We have the exact dimensions of only one POW playhouse: the new theatre at Nong Pladuk. Its dimensions were given as: "Height 22', Width 32', Length 40'."[ii]

Proscenium Arch. On the short side facing the audience was the proscenium arch, which created a framing device for the stage action. The side walls of this arch were constructed of plaited bamboo matting attached to large rectangular frames, or *flats*. Flats are normally wooden frames, strengthened by crosspieces and corner braces, with some sort of material stretched tightly over them. Since wood was available only in small quantities, the ubiquitous bamboo was used instead.

ii This information appear on the back of Wilder's sketch.



Figures 12.4. Tamarkan theatre detail. Rae Nixon. Australian War Memorial. Courtesy of Mrs. Rae Nixon.
Figure 12.5. Kanburi theatre detail. Photograph. Australian War Memorial. Courtesy of Mrs. Rae Nixon.
Figure 12.6. Chungkai theatre detail. Photograph courtesy of Martin Percival.

Each of the theatres in the Kanburi area had distinctive designs on the side walls of their proscenium arch that were not only aesthetically pleasing but also served to hold the bamboo matting in place: at Tamarkan, the central top squares of matting were turned sideways to create a diamond design; at Kanburi Officers' Camp, slender rods of bamboo were grouped together at the bottom of the wall partway from the proscenium opening and then spread out in a fan shape; and at Chungkai, shaggy atap thatch was attached by horizontal pieces of bamboo to keep out the rain.

By the time the *Wonder Bar* photographs were taken, a small rectangle of bamboo displaying the Chungkai theatre logo—an entwined "T" and "C" superimposed over masks of Comedy and Tragedy—decorated either side of the proscenium.

Figure 12.7. Chungkai theatre logo by Huib van Laar. Image copyright Museon, The Hague, Netherlands.

One of these logos can be seen at the left in the Chungkai theatre photograph (**Figure 12.6**). When the theatre was rebuilt in another part of the camp in November 1944, the logos were replaced by large paintings of "nude beauties" (see **Figure 6.45** and **Figure 6.46**)[8] and a newly designed logo was placed at the apex of the header over the proscenium arch.[9]

John Coast estimated the height of the Chungkai theatre's proscenium opening (from the stage to the bottom of the header) was "about eight feet six inches."[10]

At Tamarkan, the header served as a marquee advertising the current, or coming, attraction (see **Figure 12.4**). The header for the theatre in the Kanburi Officers' Camp was a huge façade, the roof line behind it sloping quickly down from the ridgepole to the top of the side walls. At the apex, the stylized "Playhouse Presents" logo provided an additional signature for this theatre.

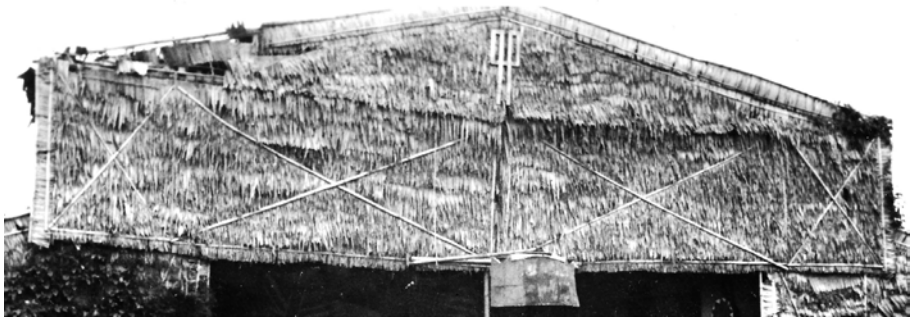


Figure 12.8. Façade of Kanburi Officers' Camp theatre. Photograph detail. Australian War Memorial.

Roof. All of the proscenium theatres in Thailand eventually had pitched roofs covered with atap thatch like the men's huts. The roofs not only kept the performers dry during the annual monsoon seasons but the paint on the sets from running and the packed-earth stage floors from turning into mud.For most proscenium theatres, the pitched roof ended at the outer edges of the arch, but the roofs of the Nong Pladuk, Nakhon Pathom, and last Chungkai theatres extended beyond the outer edges, covering offstage spaces.

The Stage and Its Appointments

Apron. The performance area in front of a proscenium arch is called the *apron*. In a theatre lit by natural light, the apron would be the major performance area. But when artificial lighting was approved, the value of the apron diminished as the entertainers moved upstage of the proscenium arch.

Playing Area. Nearly all the proscenium theatre stages in Thailand had hard-packed dirt floors. The exception was at Tamarkan, which had a floor made of wooden planks.[11] Where these planks came from is not known; it's possible they were left over from the construction of the wooden bridge or the molds for the concrete pilings of the steel bridge. Coast believed that the dimension of the playing area in the Chungkai theatre were "about 24 feet front [wide] and 18 feet sides [deep]."[12] A note on the back of Wilder's sketch of the new Nong Pladuk theatre states the stage width was "20' long X 22' [deep]."

Wings. The theatrical term *wings* can be ambiguous, referring either to the spaces on the sides of the stage out of the audience's sight or to architectural features of the stage's internal structure. Most of the POW stagehouses contained multiple sets of permanent wings: rectangular frames covered with matting set out at an angle some distance from the side walls (allowing for passage behind) and projecting into the playing area. They not only created an inner frame for the action and hid any offstage activity occurring "in the wings" behind them but also allowed for multiple entrance points. A detail from one of the Kanburi photographs gives a good view of these wings on the audience right side of the stage.

Figure 12.9. Kanburi Officers Camp theatre.
Photograph detail. Australian War Memorial.

In comparison, the wings on the Chungkai stage were constructed differently, not fixed in one position, but flexible. Mounted on central vertical pivot points, they could be placed in "open" or "closed" positions and even reversed to reveal a new setting.[13]

Back Wall. The back wall of a stage defines the upstage limits of the playing area and also functions as masking for a *crossover*: a space behind that allowed actors to move quickly from one side of the stage to the other without being seen.

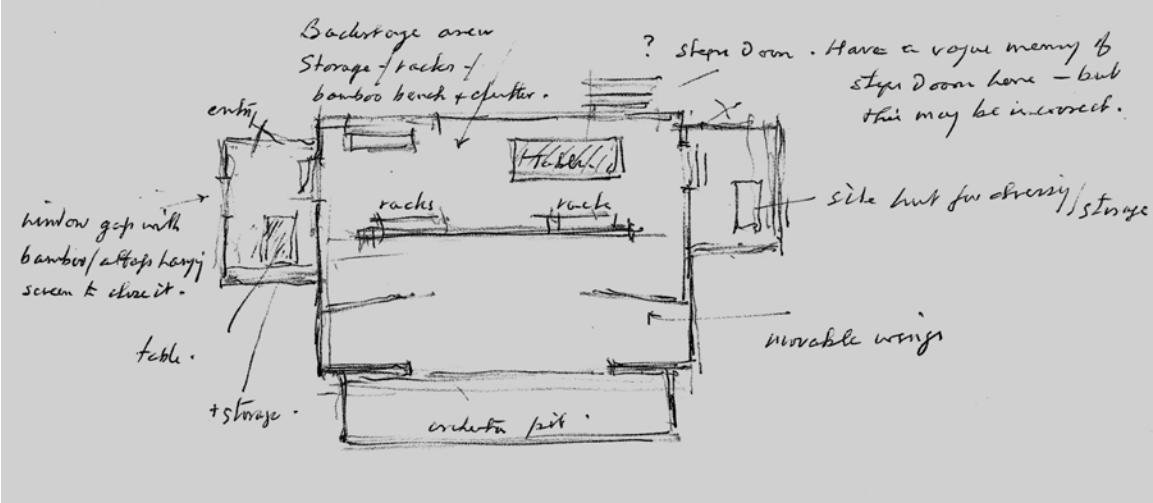


Figure 12.10. Ground plan of Chungkai theatre. Courtesy of Jack Chalker.

This sketch of the Chungkai theatre's interior layout drawn by Jack Chalker confirms the location of the back wall, which he called the "main bamboo screening," and the crossover behind it, allowing entrances to be made upstage from either side.[14] Since the backstage area at Chungkai was on the same level as the stage, such a crossover was possible. For the other Thailand theatres, the stage and the dressing room were on different levels, making such transit difficult, if not impossible. Instead, a backdrop had to be *dead hung*[iii] some feet downstage of the back wall to allow for crossovers. The back wall itself could be painted and used as a *cyclorama* ("cyc") to function as part of a setting, usually representing the sky.

Fly Gallery. Besides protecting against rain, another benefit of the pitched roof was to create a *fly gallery*—the space above the stage not usually visible to an audience, commonly referred to as *the flies*. From a fly gallery, backdrops or small scenery pieces can be *flown* (raised and lowered) on battens hung from a wooden grid over the stage.

iii Dead hung *is a theatrical term for hanging a drop or curtain from a batten that could not be raised or lowered during the show.*

Grid. The typical grid in these POW theatres was composed of "six stout bamboo poles."[15] The three poles running from front to back acted as supports for the stagehouse structure; the three poles parallel to the proscenium arch not only supported the side walls but functioned as battens from which scenery and/or lighting could be hung.

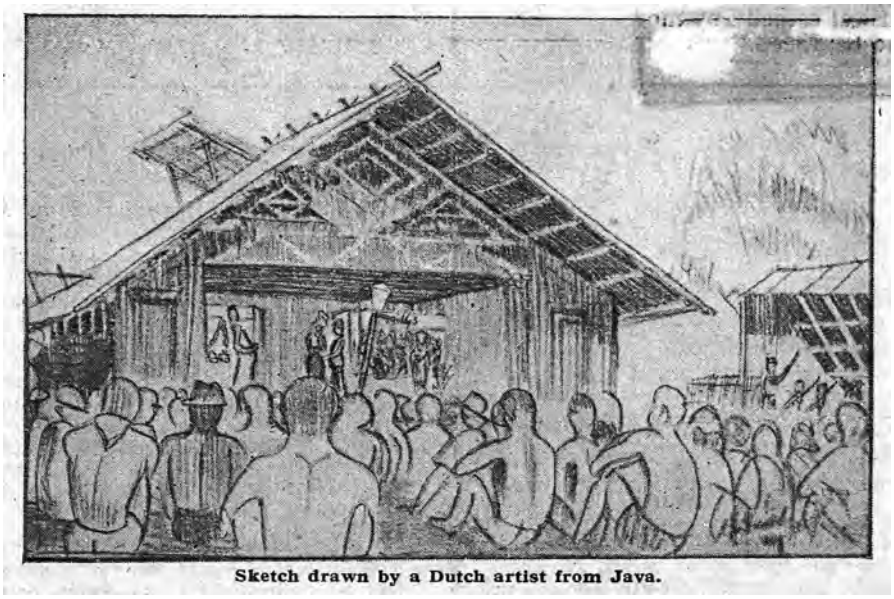


Figure 12.11. Sketch of Nakhon Pathom. Artist Unknown.

Flying scenery in and out requires a *counter-weight* system with a *pin rail* where the ropes attached to the scenery can be *tied off* (secured). It is traditionally located in the wings offstage to the right. Except for Nakhon Pathom,[iv] Ubon, and the last theatre at Chungkai, none of the fly galleries in these POW theatres was actually high enough to handle full scenery being flown in and out; therefore, backdrops had to be either dead hung or rigged as roll drops. A *roll drop* is a backdrop that can be rolled up and down on a cylinder controlled by ropes and pulleys from offstage. In Section D, below, we will see how the ability to use dead hung and roll drops greatly facilitated the changeover from one scene to the next in *Memories of the Gay 90s*.

Front Curtains. Proscenium theatres require front curtains to hide the setting and any actors in place on stage before the show starts. Front curtains are usually hung from a pipe that sits along the upstage side of the proscenium arch and are rigged as a *draw curtain* to be pulled from the center to the sides or raised above the lower edge of the header. In POW theatres draw-type front curtains were normally made from rice sacks or tent canvas stitched together, as seen in Ubon (**see Figure 12.14 below**).

iv The theatre constructed there in 1945.

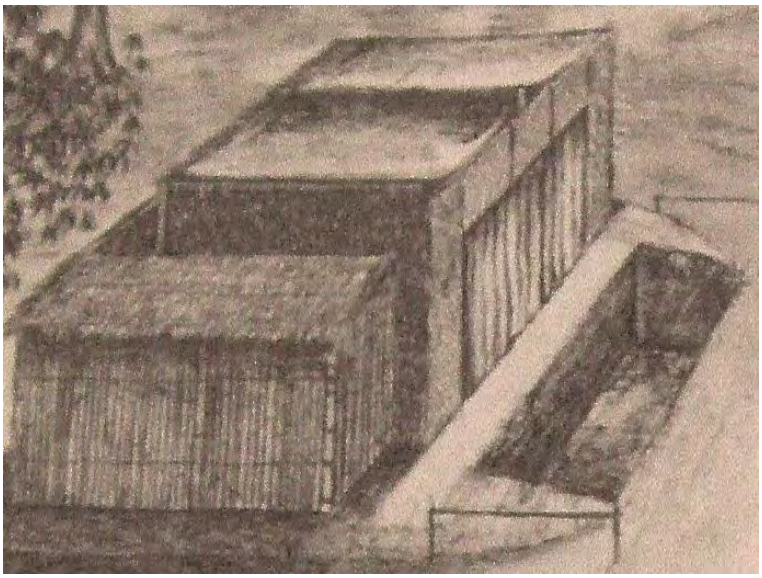


Figure 12.12. Sketch of Chungkai theatre detail. Philip Meninsky. IWM Art LD6529.

In Philip Meninsky's sketch of the Chungkai theatre, a draw-type front curtain is shown in place and closed. When "the curtain fell down when they attempted to draw it," during *Shooting Stars* (an occasion for barracking laugher and loud applause from the audience), they experimented with a different type of front curtain.[16]

This new curtain, John Durnford notes, was made of mosquito netting "stitched together and weighted to fall straight."[17] Remarking on his watercolor of the Chungkai theatre (**Figure 12.1**), Chalker wrote, "I seem to have indicated a rolled front curtain in the sketch. I know this was attempted but I can't remember it being used."[18] The bamboo roller for this curtain is seen in the *Wonder Bar* photographs (**see Figure 6.25**) and was used for that show and others after Chalker left the camp.

When lit from the front by daylight or stage lighting, the mosquito netting would be opaque like a scrim curtain. When lit from the back, a scrim becomes transparent. The transformation from one to the other is magical, as Custance Baker acknowledges in his description of the opening moment of *The Christmas Spirit*: "The gauze curtain was raised just like a pantomime transformation scene and disclosed a group of choristers in white surplices lit up by our two tilly lamps and little oil lamps disguised as candles."[19] At Chungkai, at least, any mention of the curtain "going up" is not just metaphorical.

In Tamarkan, Nakhon Pathom, Kanburi Officers' Camp, and perhaps Nong Pladuk as well, an alternative solution was devised for their front curtains. Instead of fabric—much more valuable for use as costumes or roll drops—the stage technicians utilized woven bamboo or grass mats.

Figure 12.13. Nakhon Pathom theatre. Watercolor. Courtesy of Jack Chalker.

At Nakhon Pathom, three large sections of "bamboo sleeping mats tied together" were suspended by tabs from two long parallel bamboo poles. When they were pulled back into the wings, the center section would nest in front of one of the other sections.[20] At Kanburi Officers' Camp, the "pair of huge bamboo screens" functioning as front curtains were manipulated differently: "The idea was for a stage hand to stand behind each half," Carter observed. "When the curtain 'rose,' each man would clutch his half of the screen and lug it into the wings, when the curtain 'fell' the men would sprint on stage again, bringing the screens together."[21]

Unique Ubon

The theatre at Ubon Aerodrome Camp had several unique architectural features that suggest someone involved in its design may have had knowledge of pre-nineteenth-century theatre architecture.

According to Norman Pritchard, the stage was "3 feet high at the front and about 4 feet high at the back."[22] A stage that is higher at the back than the front is called a *raked stage*. (This architectural feature was first used in the Italian Renaissance theatres.) Custance Baker learned about the reason for this raking from Leo Britt: "Stages, Chungkai included, are built on a slight forward slope so that the audience in the pit or the stalls can see the whole of the stage surface. The back is 'up stage' and the front by the foot lights is 'down stage."[23]

Figure 12.14. Ubon theatre. Photograph. Courtesy of Norman Pritchard.

This photograph of the Ubon theatre taken after liberation shows that the side walls of the proscenium arch are angled back and shorter on their upstage sides than on their downstage sides. The header angled in and down is also narrower on its upstage side. Where the side walls and header join upstage, they form a smaller inner proscenium. In each side wall is a doorway giving easy access to the front of the stage. This structural feature is reminiscent of some eighteenth-century British theatres.

Two large *flats* extended out on either side of the proscenium arch to prevent audiences from seeing performers making their entrances and exits. There was no orchestra pit at Ubon.

Support Spaces

All theatres need support spaces for dressing rooms, workrooms, rehearsal rooms, and offices. Meninsky's sketch (**see Figure 12.12**) shows one of the two small shed-like extensions that sat on opposite sides of the the Chungkai theatre stagehouse. In notes accompanying his ground plan (**Figure 12.10**), Chalker explained, "On each side and set back from the front, extensions were made linked through to the stage and with an outside entrance to them as well. Each had a sloping roof linked in to the side of the main structure. My bumbling memory is that these two side extensions had their bases at ground level and that we had steps up inside to give access to the main theatre area."[24] One of these side extensions was used as the makeup room; the other as the wardrobe/dressing room.[25] Each side extension also had window openings, atap flaps that could be propped open for light and ventilation.

Backstage Areas. As already noted, the backstage area at Chungkai was on the same level as the stage. Its primary purpose was to serve as a workroom, as it contained "a bamboo table back-stage on which costumes and props were made."[26] During the run of a show, this table and others in the extensions could also serve as locations for the actors' hand props. But there was another internal division of the backstage area as well: an office for the theatre committee.[27]

Since the backstage areas at Tamarkan were on a ground level, the interior layout was a bit

different. Besides his sketch of the front view of the Tamarkan theatre, Rae Nixon also sketched a rear view as well.

Figure 12.15. Back view of the Tamarkan theatre. Rae Nixon. Australian War Memorial. Courtesy of Mrs. Rae Nixon.

Visible in this sketch are the same shed-like extensions on either side of the stagehouse as at Chungkai; the one on the audience's left served as "the wardrobe annexe."[28]

Attached to the back of the stagehouse but sitting at a lower level is a large shed-like construction, accessed by "three steps at the back of the stage [which led down] to the artists' dressing room, with a table and three mirrors."[29] A sketch by Dutch artist Flip Relf shows the interior of this dressing room in use prior to a show.[30]

Figure 12.16. Backstage dressing room in the Tamarkan theatre. Sketch. Flip Relf. Courtesy of Rhyll Rivett.

This backstage view shows actors getting ready for a performance. In the background are the steps leading from the dressing room directly up to the stage.

Nixon's back view of the Tamarkan theatre also shows a separate, open-sided, gable-roofed building, which may have been used for building props.

Rehearsal Spaces. Most POW producer-directors found some quiet corner of the camp that could serve as a rehearsal space. Chungkai actually had two designated rehearsal spaces.

The "Bamboo Rehearsal Theatre" was situated in a clearing in a grove of slender arching bamboo near the theatre. When Norman Carter was shown the space by Captain Charles Faulder, he thought it resembled a cathedral: "Faulder said: 'It took a long time to make this clearing and we had to do it quietly because we didn't want to frighten the squirrels away. It's a lovely spot, cool and quiet, the sun never pierces the fronds.'"[31]

The "Slaughter House Rehearsal Theatre," used by the Chungkai orchestra, was so named because "in this clearing the butchers had formerly performed the gruesome task of killing the camps' meat with a sledgehammer."[32]

Orchestra Pit. Each proscenium theatre normally had an orchestra pit. Tamarkan and Nong Pladuk had shallow semicircular pits bounded on the audience side by raised earth requiring the conductor be seated so he would not block the audience's view. But at Kanburi and Chungkai the orchestra pits were deep enough to allow the conductor's head to be just above the stage level. These pits were separated from the audience by a railing made of bamboo (see the Kanburi theatre, **Figure 12.2**). For some shows, it appears, the railing was covered with matting to create a *masking panel* which shielded the audience's eyes from the glare of pit lights used by the musicians and helped focus their attention on the stage.

At Nakhon Pathom, the orchestra was located at audience right under a separate lean-to construction (**see Figure 8.9**). This solution worked well, especially for the performances of plays where the orchestra's role was solely to provide incidental and/or *entr'acte* music. For band concerts and variety shows, the musicians would be on stage.

Audience and Front of House Areas

But the term *theatre* suggests more than just the stagehouse and its support facilities. It also implies the seating area(s) as well as the *front of house* box office.

Seating. As has already been mentioned, because these theatres had to accommodate large numbers of audience members, they were usually built next to the parade ground so the troops could use the cleared level ground for their seating area. The dimensions of the seating area within the bamboo railings for the new theatre at Nong Pladuk were: "Auditorium 30' front widening to 60' back."[v]

v Information on the reverse of Wilder's sketch.

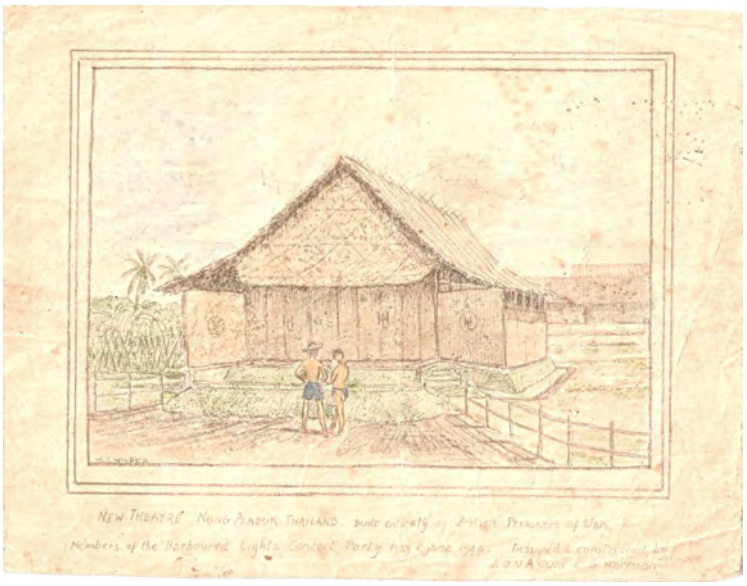


Figure 12.17. New Nong Pladuk Theatre. William Wilder. Courtesy of Eve Allum and Anthony Wilder.

At Chungkai and Tamuang the seating areas were amphitheaters carved out of sloping banks. The estimates of the seating capacity at Chungkai differ dependent upon which theatre you are talking about. The early theatre seen in Chalker's watercolor (**Figure 12.1**) appears to have accommodated at least 2,000 men.[33] Coast, who was intimately involved in this theatre as a stage manager and producer, wrote that "5,000 people sometimes saw a show" in it.[34] But he must have been counting not only the "standing room only" areas at the back and and sides but total audience attendance for a two-night run.

The later Chungkai amphitheatre, best seen in Fielding pen and ink sketch (see **Figure 6.39**), seated 3,000 audience members.[35] Norman Carter avowed that amphitheatre seating had distinct advantages over parade ground seating: "The results were a large semicircle comprising gallery, pit, dress circle and stalls. The terraces were just deep enough to allow one's feet to rest comfortable on the ground and wide enough to prevent the man below from resting his back against your shins, or his backside on your feet."[36] Each of the different levels and sections of seating were marked off by low bamboo railings. As far as is known, only Chungkai used ushers stationed at various entry points to help audience members find their seats.

Box Office. Even if 5,000 POWs could manage to see a show during its short run, it was still impossible in these vastly overcrowded camps for everyone to attend a performance at the same time.[vi] Booking seats in most of POW camp theatres in Thailand, was not by reserving them at a box office, but by placing an article of clothing on the ground in front of the theatre where you wanted to sit. As Tom Morris explained: "It would [be] coats, clogs, and Dixies [mess kits], and whatever marking the spot for somebody."[37]

When this procedure proved unworkable at Chungkai—there were just too many men in the camp and too few performances of any one show—a box office with reserved seating available for a fee was

vi The standard policy was for each military unit to be notified as to when it might attend a production. This policy did not seem to apply in the hospital and relocation camps.

initiated. In this way POWs could be assured of getting a seat for a particular show and not have to stand at the back and/or sides or miss the show entirely. Arthur Johnston described how the reserved seating system worked:

> Reserved seats comprised a large area to the left side of the centre aisle extending from the top of the bank almost to the orchestra pit, and held for officers at 10c, portions of the adjoining right hand side also being held for their use. Remainder right hand side for O/R at 5c per seat. Also a reserved area [at the front] for unfits (wheelchairs and anything available) and Japs on left hand side.[38]

Officers, who received higher monthly wages than the other ranks, were clearly favored by this reserved seating policy. And since seating for other ranks was limited, most were forced to stand at the back or sides. Charging fees for reserved seats provided much needed income to fund future entertainment, to everyone's benefit. The first tickets issued at Chungkai were stamped round metal disks. Later they were paper and, like those back home, color coded to indicate performance date, seating area, row, and seat number.

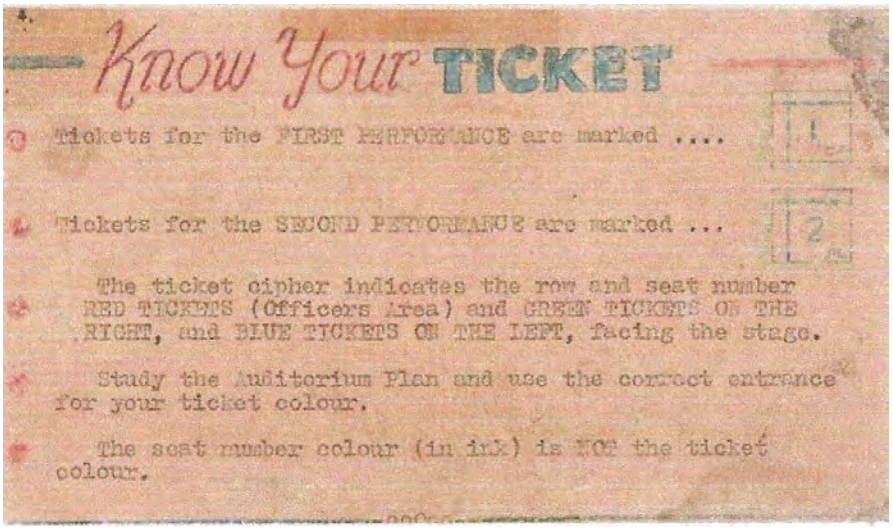


Figure 12.18. "Know Your Ticket" sign. Chungkai. Image copyright Museon, The Hague, Netherlands.

None of the other POW theatres in Thailand, as far as is known, established either a box office or a reserved-seating-for-a-fee policy.

B. Scenery

The POWs were continually surprised and delighted by the scenic abilities of their set designers and stage technicians and never failed to show their appreciation for the ingenuity and artistry on display. After attending a pantomime production of *Cinderella*, Basil Peacock wrote, "The scenic effect was so

good and ingenious that no one laughed, and all applauded such stage-craft."[39] Jacobs had noted similar reactions to Frank Brydges' scenic creations at Tamarkan: "when the curtain went up there was invariably a round of applause for the setting, because the audience fully realized the difficulties under which we were working."[40] Brydges had a good sense of design: before the war he had been "a compositor for the Sydney Herald."[41]

We know the names of a few other gifted set designers:

At Chungkai: David Ffokes, Huib van Laar, Te Tovey, Jack Chalker, and Rob Brazil (as a team), and later Frank Brydges.

At Nong Pladuk: "Tich" Harrison, Norman Pritchard, Jan van Holthe.

At Nakhon Pathom: Rob Brazil, Fred "Smudger" Smith.

At Kanburi Officers' Camp: Fred "Smudger" Smith.

At Ubon: Jan van Holthe and Norman Pritchard (as a team).

Scenic Materials

Flats. Like the construction of the proscenium theatres mentioned previously, scenery was made from an assortment of different-sized *flats*. Woven matting of split bamboo was primarily used to cover these frames, but it wasn't the only material so employed.[42] Large sheets of woven grass used by the Japanese "for partitioning their living quarters" were also used.[43]

Curtains and Backdrops. Vegetable and rice sacks, old tent canvas, woven bamboo matting, and sometimes even stitched-together mosquito netting were used for front curtains. Backdrops (British, *back-cloths*) that were to be rolled up and down had to be made from pliable material like rice sacks, tent canvas or mosquito netting; backdrops to be dead hung could be of stiff woven matting.

Paint. Finding the materials from which to fashion different-colored paint called for much ingenuity. Back at Aungganaung, Burma, in 1943, Frank Brydges had created pigments by crushing various colored stones found in the jungle. In the hospital and relocation camps, POW artists, chemists, and stage technicians had time to experiment with a variety of possibilities. For Jack Chalker, happenstance also played a role in this process: "We had dug large pits in the dry season to form large ponds from the monsoon rains which lasted for a bit into the next dry season. In [Nakhon Pathom][vii] we found below the brown mud level, some five or six feet down, a thin band of fairly bright yellow earth with some very black stuff below it. We collected some of each, dried it and pounded it to a powder."[44]

The following list of dry pigment colors has been created by collating various reports on what colors were derived from what sources and used as paint for sets and props—and even costumes.

White	quicklime, whitewash, bamboo ash, chalk
Black	soot from cooking pots, charcoal, mud
Red	ink (stolen from the Japanese administrator's office), brick dust, mercurochrome, food coloring
Yellow	curry powder, turmeric, food coloring, clay
Blue	ink, indigo
Brown	boiled bark, mud
Green	plants, cow manure boiled in water[45]

Of the last, Philip Brugman reported, "The color was beautiful, but we couldn't get rid of the

vii Chalker writes "Chungkai" here, but I believe he misremembered the location. All the examples he gives of how this clay was used are from Nakhon Pathom. Also, at Chungkai there was no need to dig holding tanks for water as it bordered two rivers. Nakhon Pathom hospital camp, on the other hand, was not near an immediate source of water.

stench."[46]

At Tamarkan, the Japanese commandant permitted the POWs to purchase ink in various colors from the nearby town of Kanchanaburi—but only through a Japanese go-between, so they could make a good profit for themselves.[47]

Lighter shades of paint could be made by mixing in white pigment; darker shades by mixing in black. Various pigments could be combined to create other palette colors. The amount of water added to the pigment determined its intensity: less water created a more saturated color; more water created a thin wash.

Tapioca, grown in the camp as part of the meager food supplies, provided the necessary sizing. "The root was boiled up in an old gula malacca [cane sweetener] tin," Chalker recalled, "and the gelatinous result provided an adhesive which would, when mixed with colouring, adhere to bamboo matting and cloth."[48] If the painted sets were for an open-air theatre, such as the early structures at Chungkai and Nakhon Pathom, their durability was not guaranteed: "If it rained," Brazil wrote, "[the setting] had to be painted again."[49]

Brushes. With old shaving brushes and anything else they could devise, gifted scenic artists worked wonders. Carter called Brydges' backdrop of the Yellow Brick Road for *The Wizard of Oz* "a triumph of shaving-brush artistry."[50] For the more detailed work, old toothbrushes were employed.[51]

Set Designs

There are very few verbal accounts or visual images of the POW scene designers at work or descriptions of the settings they created. One account we do have is from Arthur Johnston, who described the stylish 1930s Art Deco–inspired setting for Eric Cliffe's *Promenade Concert* at Chungkai.

> Stage all in white (most probably white chalked or limed) with the effect of a promenade obtained by having 3 arches at back of stage, and on the two supports, two lamps of modernistic design supposed to be set in, something after this style:—
>
> On the right side wall a surrealist drawing of a piano gave a finishing touch to what would otherwise have been just a bare white wall. Done with charcoal with white chalk for the keyboard and light and shade effects.[52]

The white and black design was extended to the furniture and costumes for the musicians as well: "The orchestra stands were also done in white and the whole orchestra and conductor wore white shirts (of a type) although the rest of their dress, as can be imagined, was extremely varied."[53] "Excellent set. Very striking and effective especially in lamplight," wrote Richardson.[54]

Norman Carter described a scenic artist at work in Chungkai preparing a backdrop for the production of *Outward Bound*: "Somebody had scrounged lengths of old canvas, sewn them together and then hung the finished 'cloth' on to bamboo poles. A scenic artist was outlining in charcoal the back wall of a ship's bar, with a doorway cut dead centre, through which could be seen the white ship's rails."[55]

And when Jacobs saw *Cinderella* he was also suitably impressed with the scenery: "The painting of the ballroom scene was a miracle of achievement by a Dutch artist, who had the most meager materials at his disposal. On a plane [*sic*] grass mat utilized as a backcloth, using lime wash, ink, tumeric [*sic*] and

cow manure, the artist had painted a scene which for balance and color and perspective would have been difficult to surpass."[56]

Figure 12.19. Kanburi Officers' Camp theatre. Photograph detail. Australian War Memorial.

This photograph taken after liberation at Kanburi Officers' Camp is the only known visual artifact showing POW scenic artists at work. At center three prisoners in their G-string "Jap Happies" are painting a giant map of Europe and the Mediterranean to be flown in during their "Victory Show" as others look on. Set designer Fred "Smudger" Smith stands at left center. Upstage is a backdrop decorated with the flags of Australia, Great Britain, the United States, and the Netherlands. The side wings are painted with appropriate bunting, rosettes, and other victory symbols as well.

Renderings and Thumbnail Sketches

Set Renderings. The best examples we have of POW scenic designs are Robert Brazil's rendering for *Greenwood Fantasy* at Nakhon Pathom, Norman Pritchard's of a set for *Escapado Argentino* at Nong Pladuk, and Pritchard and Jan van Holthe's renderings for a series of revues at Ubon.

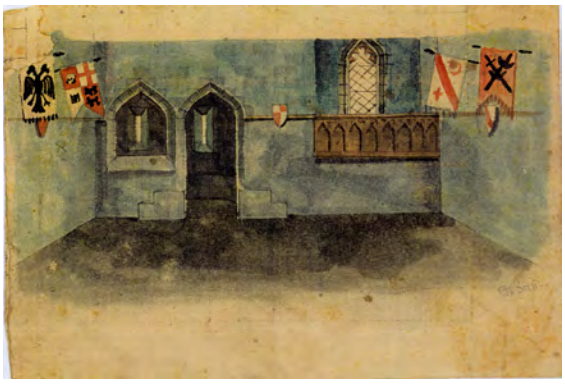


Figure 12.20. Set rendering for Greenwood Fantasy.

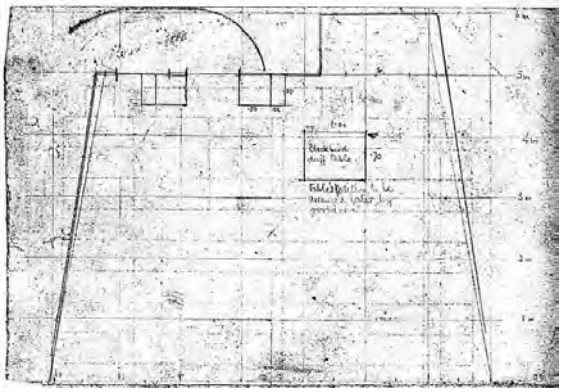


Figure 12.21. Ground plan for Greenwood Fantasy. Both courtesy of Robert Brazil.

Brazil's set design for the musical comedy *Greenwood Fantasy* is a *unit set*, which means that

all the action takes place in this same basic structure, although the locale might change from interior to exterior by a change of set dressing and set pieces. Commenting on his set design for the open-air theatre, Brazil said, "If you look at the set and the [ground plan], there is an entrance middle left, with a window. On the right there is a high window, and below it, and in front of it, a section of 'wooden paneling.' This is where The Sheriff would stand, with his ladies. The floor behind there was raised eighteen inches, to convey the importance of the characters there."[57]

His ground plan indicates a table at the right, "position to be arranged later by production." The only entrance shown is from the back by walking up an earthen ramp, although performers must have been able to enter downstage of the side walls as well.

Both van Holthe and Pritchard were involved in designing shows at Nong Pladuk. None of van Holthe's set designs have survived, but Pritchard's for the cantina scene in *Escapado Argentino* has.

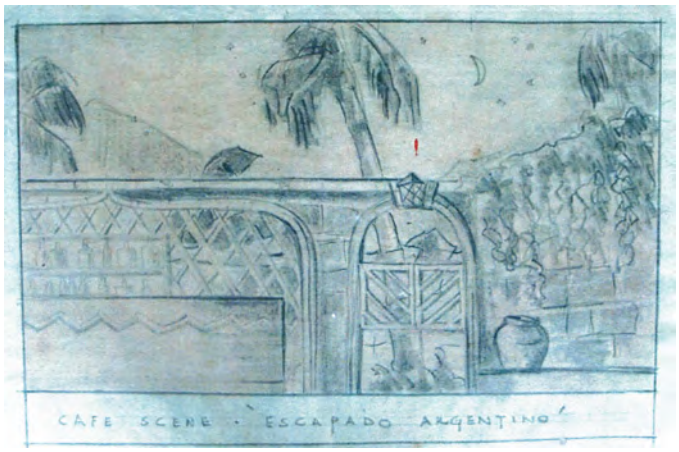


Figure 12.22. Set design for café scene. Courtesy of Norman Pritchard.

His design shows a half wall with an arched doorway and swinging doors sitting downstage of a backdrop painted with mountains and what appear to be tall, freestanding palm trees. A café light is positioned over the doorway. Left of it is a bar with a liquor cabinet behind. Back of the cabinet is the wall made of bamboo latticework so the audience can see through it to any action upstage. At right is a flat painted to look like a solid stone wall festooned with vines and a large earthen jar. In the background is a backdrop painted with palm trees and mountains.

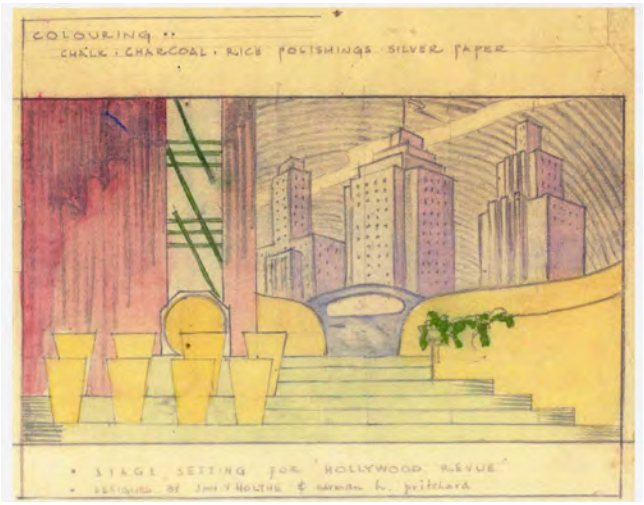


Figure 12.23. Set rendering for *Hollywood Revue*. Courtesy of Norman Pritchard.

Hollywood Revue, Pritchard's and van Holthe's first joint set design endeavor at Ubon, was heavily influenced by 1930s Art Deco style. Their color palette was limited to yellow, purplish-red, purple, and green. The band is placed at the left on three sets of risers (British, *rostrums*). These same risers, augmented with three steps, form a flight of stairs at center and on the right. Upstage center, framed by the entrance between two half walls, is a grey-blue ("silver") limousine, its door directly opposite the opening in the wall. Van Holthe's and Pritchard's notes on the rendering indicate what materials should be used to paint the set and create the metallic look of the limousine: "chalk, charcoal, rice polishings, silver paper." Silver paper came from the foil packaging used in tea chests and cigarette packs.

Their next production, *Bright & Breezy*, entailed a similar use of the stage. This time the color palette was primarily blue, grey, brown, and pink. The band, their pink music stands decorated with yellow sailboats, were moved to the opposite side. The backdrop shows a seaside pier jutting out into the ocean at left with a large, circular, three-tiered pavilion at its end framed by blue billowing clouds. A cartoon figure of a sailor with a life preserver painted on a large blue panel with a white and gold chevron design stands behind the band (see the rendering for *Bright & Breezy* in the Image Gallery, **Figure 12.24**).

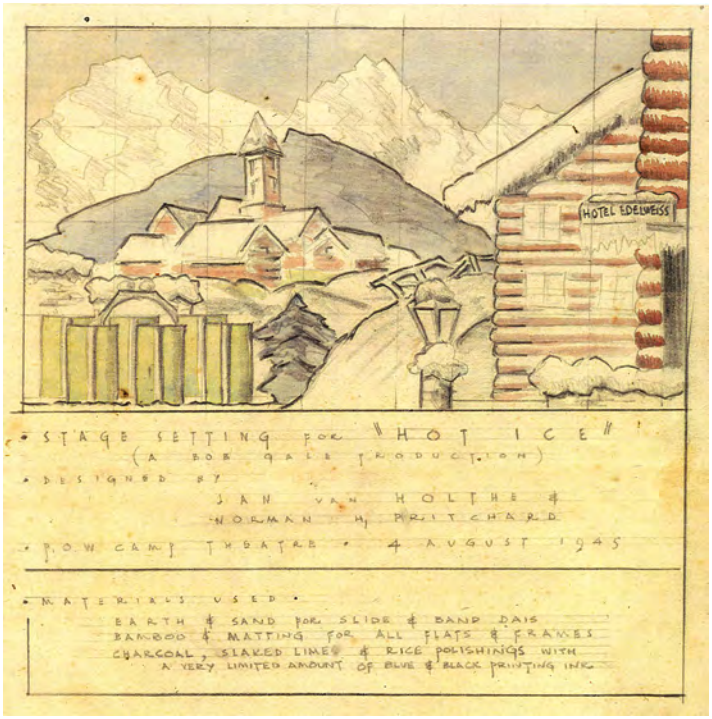


Figure 12.25. Set rendering for *Hot Ice*. Courtesy of Norman Pritchard.

Hot Ice, the next-to-last show at Ubon, represents van Holthe's and Pritchard's most elaborate and sophisticated design work. Unlike the previous two settings, the design of this set implies that *Hot Ice* was a book-revue with a plot and characters. The setting is the grounds of a resort hotel in a small town in the Bavarian or Swiss Alps. The band has been placed on a dais at the back on the left; to its right sits a small fir tree. The right side of the stage is taken up with part of a large log building: the Hotel Edelweiss. Everything is laden with snow.

For this set, van Holthe and Pritchard incorporated into their design the door in the right proscenium arch. Painted to look like a log wall, it served as the main entrance to the hotel. Downstage of it is a snowdrift *ground row*.[viii] Up center is a snow-covered toboggan slide that slopes down onto the stage from off to the right. A lantern on a post marks its terminus. Performers could make their entrances from upstage by riding in on toboggans.[58] Other entrances were made through the proscenium door on audience left, which, not included in the rendering, was seen as a neutral part of the stage.

Upstage of the set is an elaborate backdrop with snow-covered shrubbery in the foreground, a town hall with its tall central tower in the mid-distance, behind which looms a large blue-grey mountain. In the far distance are high snow-capped mountains seen against a pale blue winter sky.

viii A ground row *is a low, narrow, two-dimensional piece of scenery.*

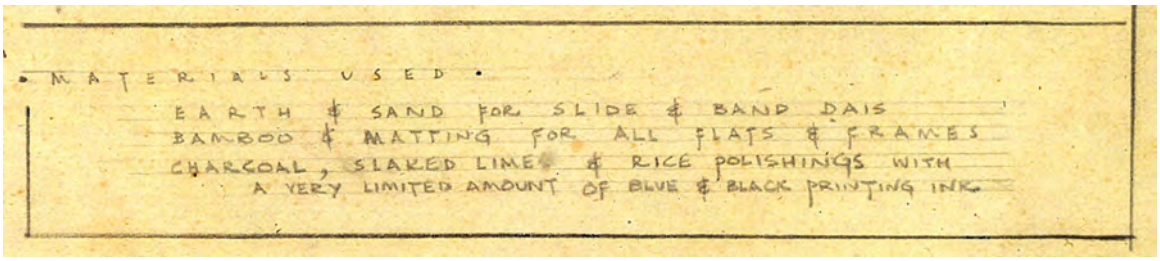


Figure 12.26. Set rendering for *Hot Ice*, detail. Courtesy of Norman Pritchard.

Van Holthe's and Pritchard's notes on the rendering indicate the materials to be used in building and painting this set: "Earth & sand for slide & band dais; bamboo & matting for all flats & frames; charcoal, slaked lime & rice polishings with a very limited amount of blue & black printing ink."[59]

Thumbnail Sketches. Most of the illustrations of what sets actually looked like in performance come from Rae Nixon's thumbnail sketches included in the background of his costume renderings. One of his most complete sketches of a Frank Brydges setting is for the opening scene from *Dingbats Abroad*.

Figure 12.27. Costume plate for *Dingbats Abroad*, detail. Rae Nixon. Australian War Memorial. Courtesy of Mrs. Rae Nixon.

This sketch shows the front of a stone house with shuttered windows and a door sitting at an angle on the left. At a matching angle on the right is a stable with a horse's head poking out over the top of a half-open stable door. Up center is a picket fence with an open gate. (The window shutters, the front door, the stable door, and the gate were apparently all *practical*, which means they could actually be opened and closed.) A tree stands to the right upstage.[60] Other settings for *Dingbats Abroad* took place on the deck of an ocean liner, at a nightclub in Paris, and at a Native American powwow in the Rocky Mountains. (Frank Brydges' sets for *Memories of the Gay 90s* will be examined more closely in Section D, below.)

C. Set Pieces and Properties

Scenic items the camp craftsmen and scenic technicians constructed out of bamboo, woven matting, tin cans, the small amount of wood available from tea chests and Red Cross boxes, and all sorts of other scrounged materials were marvels of inventiveness and skill. Since most of the POWs were not knowledgeable about the finer points of theatre terminology, their diary entries and memoirs tend to label anything they saw onstage other than the sets and costumes as "props." Still, it is important to make

distinctions between *set pieces* and *props*.

Set Pieces

Set pieces are usually fairly large constructions that are important parts of the setting but separate from it. They are generally divided into two categories: two-dimensional set pieces and three-dimensional set pieces.

Two-dimensional Set Pieces. A two-dimensional set piece needs some sort of external support. Examples would be the map of Europe being worked on in Kanburi (**see Figure 12.19**) or the silhouettes of St. Paul's Cathedral in *Gay 90s*. Like the "silver" limousine made of bamboo matting in *Hollywood Revue,* they can even become an integral part of the action.

Three-dimensional Set Pieces. Three-dimensional set pieces are self-supporting. The cabaret bar in *Wonder Bar* would be an excellent example of a set piece, or the "little annexe" and apple tree in *Memories of the Gay 90s*. The blossoming apple tree was "solved by Arthur Shakes carrying a dead tree half a mile, nailing it down on the stage and spending hours laboriously smothering it with paper blossoms tinted with red ink stolen from the Jap orderely room," wrote Carter. The "little annexe" was constructed of wood taken from dismantled Red Cross boxes that were then "painstakingly" sawn into lattice strips "to form a charming summer-house."[61]

Properties

Props, on the other hand, are everything else that appears onstage that is not actor, costume, or scenery. This very large category can be subdivided into furniture, set dressing, and hand props.

Furniture. All sorts of furniture were made for the shows: chairs, wardrobes, beds, tables, divans, and a fainting couch. The two deck chairs Carter needed for Gay 90s "took four days to hack out of hardwood with a rusty saw and then were used for only three minutes in a front cloth during a scene change."[62] Actually, a longer scene they were supposed to be in was cut from the show, which must have caused some hard feelings among the props crew.[ix] They were used later in *Dingbats Abroad*.

At Chungkai, Colonel Cary Owtram praised the marvelous work of "a devoted bank of professional makers-up led by Sergt. Taylor of the Norfolks."[63] Terry Morris recalled "two remarkable bits of furniture" made by their props crew: "One was of a grand piano constructed out of bamboo and rush matting, and also a radiogram[x] of similar construction material."[64] The piano was actually a baby grand, and it almost fooled Norman Carter when he saw it onstage: "It looked real but inspection showed that it was a 'prop' made of bamboo and reed matting, camouflaged with soot from the cookhouse." Even the pedals worked.[65]

"The radiogram," Morris explained, "had a panel at the front with a sliding element, so when you opened the lid of the radiogram, it pulled the slide away to reveal a cocoanut oil lamp, i.e. it gave the impression . . . as you lifted up the lid, [that] you sort of switched the machine on for action."[xi66] Musicians and actors were positioned on the other side of the set wall behind it so the sound seemed to emanate from the radiogram itself.[67]

Set Dressing. *Set dressings* are small items, like mirrors, paintings, bric-a-brac on a fireplace mantle, and so on for interior settings, or vines or flowers for exterior settings, added to a set to "dress it up" and make it appear more aesthetically pleasing and/or realistic.

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ix A common occurrence.
x The British term for a large floor-model console radio.
xi This is exactly how some radio console models were made.

Hand Props. Any object handled by an actor in a show is considered a *hand prop*: a cigarette, eyeglasses, the beer steins and glasses in *Wonder Bar*—the latter "made out of quinine bottles cut round the middle by the string method,"[68] the multicolored parrot that sat on Ted Weller's wrist as he sang the "Bluebird of Happiness"—the list is endless.

Jim Jacobs had fond memories of Less Luff,[xii] the props person at Tamarkan: "He was a genius at making hand props; he even contrived to manufacture a set of puppets which were used as dancing marionettes in the Toy Shop scene from Pinocchio."[69] But it was the puppet for Pinocchio that posed the biggest technical problem for Luff to solve:

> The puppet . . . had to be an exact copy of Wally [McQueen], down to the last button. The matter was finally solved by smothering Wally's face in papier-mache (old tenko [roll call] papers and rice-paste), and leaving two small holes for breathing. Then our little comic had to lie on his back until the soggy mess had dried out. It took four hours. After this, Brydges painted the mask to look like Wally and it was stuck on the puppet's head. [Frank] Purtell [the costumer] slapped on a little cap with a jaunty (duck) feather and behold—Pinocchio![70]

Then, of course there was the question of how to transform the wooden puppet into its living embodiment, Wally McQueen. "In Disney's classic picture this took hundreds of feet of film," observed Carter. "We managed with two feet—Wally's. The show opened in the Toy Shop, with the Old Toymaker (Les Atyeo) admiring the puppet he had just finished. He then pulled out a long drawer from the back wall, put the puppet in, and slid the drawer back into the wall. Wally then lifted out the dummy, got into the drawer himself, and when the Toymaker pulled it out—Pinocchio was animated."[71]

Major Technical Achievements

In all the POW accounts of the theatrical activity that took place along the Thailand-Burma Railway, three remarkable technical achievements stand out: one is the giant lotus that opened and closed in *Circus Cavaljos* at Chungkai; another, the turntable stage in *Hi Gang!* at Nong Pladuk; and the last, the American B-29 bomber flying onto the stage at the climax of the "Victory Show" at Ubon.

The Lotus. The articulated lotus that appeared in the "Mystery of the Lotus" dance in *Circus Cavaljos* was, in Terry Morris' words, "a work of amateur genius."[72] During the performance, a dancer called the Spirit of the Lotus stepped out of the center of this huge unfolding lotus blossom and then returned to it as it closed up around her (this scene is more fully described in Chapter 6: "Chungkai Showcase").

Joop Postma, the show's producer-director, described its construction: "The making of the lotus flower was a big job. We made it on very thin laths of bamboo that could be curved in the shape of a petal and then had it covered with paper."[73] The mechanism that caused the lotus blossoms to open and then close up again was worked from behind the backdrop by crew members.

The Turntable Stage. For the finale of the show *Hi Gang!* "Tich" Harrison and his tech crew produced a turntable out of metal, wood, and bamboo. Its construction and operation were explained by performer Fergus Anckorn:

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xii Luff had been rescued off the H.M.A.S. Perth *before it went down.*

> *But they made a turntable stage. . . . They had a [railway] rail, and [Harrison] got some wheels from somewhere, roller skate-type wheels . . . and they had a big handle. And the people at the back would be pushing this around. And the curtains were drawn back—rice sacks—and you'd seen this lot playing on there—Ace Connolly, Bob Gale, and all that lot—and as they finished their act, they were playing off, and the thing would come around, and all there was the new lot on. And that was just done with bits of wood and this circular stage.*[74]

The B-29. It is Anckorn, too, who recalled the replica of an American B-29 long-range bomber being slowly lowered to the stage during the finale of the "Victory Show" as the song "Out of the Blue Came Freedom" was sung.[xiii]

> *But how they did it, I don't know, because the windows of the aircraft had cellophane on [them], and where that came from, I don't know. I don't know what it was hooked up to . . . must have been a bamboo [batten?] . . . but it was a four-engine plane, and it looked like one, and people were in it. And they must have lowered it down from behind the proscenium.*
>
> *And it came down with all propellers turning and people waving through the windows and flags waving. . . . It was a tremendous finale, it really was.*[75]

[To hear Fergus Anckorn tell about these technical achievements, listen to **Audio Link 12.1**.]

Audio  **12.1**

D. Staging: Two Exceptional Productions

Two productions illustrate the extraordinary capabilities developed by the POW scenic artists, their stage technicians, and running crews: Leo Britt's *Wonder Bar* at Chungkai in May 1944 and Norman Carter's *Memories of the Gay 90s* at Tamarkan a month later. Each of these productions required extensive scenery, and each used a different staging method.

Wonder Bar

Leo Britt's production of the musical comedy *Wonder Bar* used "box set" staging. A box set creates the illusion of an enclosed interior space. This type of staging was ideal for theatrical productions of plays like *Night Must Fall*, which employed one setting throughout. Or, like Wim Kan's *Roland ons Kind*, used

xiii Jock Cameron, who had been a member of "Tich" Harrison's crew at Nong Pladuk, headed up the stage technicians at Ubon.

the same set for three different interiors by changing the furniture and set dressing during the act break. Changing from one box set to another during a performance on these rudimentary proscenium stages could be cumbersome, noisy, and time consuming, so it was normally not attempted. Plays calling for more than one setting were rewritten so they could take place in a single setting.

Since each side of the reversible wings at Chungkai could have its own design, box settings there could be completely changed. Arthur Johnston's remark about the set changes for *Wonder Bar*—"Two complete changes of scenery with very little waiting between acts"—suggests that in his experience such efficiency was usually not the case.[76]

Whatever the original London production of *Wonder Bar* might have required in terms of settings, it is difficult to believe that the producers didn't exploit the possibilities of at least one outdoor scene in the wonderland of the Swiss Alps. But combining interior box sets with an exterior setting in the same production would have been difficult, so Britt's version was revised to take place in two separate interior locations inside the Grand Hotel at St. Moritz, Switzerland: "Sir Charles Bedroom Suite" (Act I) and "The 'Wonder Bar' Cabaret" (Acts II and III). Even then set designer Te Tovey faced a difficult challenge.

Little is known about what the "Sir Charles Bedroom Suite" set actually looked like, except what can be gleaned from Arthur Johnston's and Selby Milner's brief accounts. What Johnston records was: "Bedroom scene with wardrobes, full length mirrors, a double bed and divan and 'Bobby' Spong (female impersonator) in bed in nightgown, right up to the best London presentation and standard."[77] To this description, Milner adds, "lady's bedroom. . . . included all the usual articles of furniture, which looked as if they might have come from a London furniture house, despite their being made of bamboo, bamboo-matting, sacking, and bits of cloth, string, tin-foil from tea chests, quantities of white-wash and charcoal."[78] Side wings in the closed position together with a back wall with a doorway may have completed this setting.

Figure 12.28. *Wonder Bar* detail. Photograph courtesy of Martin Percival.

The *Wonder Bar* photograph provides a partial view of "The 'Wonder Bar' Cabaret." Here are the reverse sides of the wings used for the setting in Act I—their inner construction clearly visible but tricked out with some crosspieces to create the look of trellises for a garden restaurant/night club. Entrances and exits into the cabaret could be made through the two upstage doorways or by the proscenium arch down right and left.

The cabaret set contains small, round, cloth-covered cocktail tables and stools. In the background

is the thatched-roof bar, counters and back shelves laden with prop beer and liquor bottles "with glasses made out of quinine bottles cut round the middle by the string method."[79] On the back wall a sign reads, "Wonder Bar." Risers create steps leading to an outside balcony accessible through two wide doorways. Visible through the door openings are a balcony with a scrolled "wrought-iron" (bamboo) railing and, beyond it, a painted backdrop of snow-capped Alpine mountains. The snow-capped mountains were actually three-dimensional, Selby Milner informs us, "made by sticking quantities of kapok fluff onto a bamboo-matting screen."[80] The whole back half of the cabaret set could have been preset behind the Act I setting to facilitate the set change.

Memories of the Gay 90s

Norman Carter's *Memories of the Gay 90s* was likely the most elaborate and complex theatrical production ever mounted in the POW theatres of Thailand. The plot line of this original revue repeated the typical pattern of following a few characters on a trip abroad, thus permitting a series of exciting interior and exterior locations.

Inspired by the nineteenth-century British Victorian music hall, *Memories of the Gay 90s* called for nine set changes involving six different sets. Changes from one set to the next would be accomplished through "wing and drop" staging. *Wing and drop staging,* used in Western theatre since the Renaissance, employs a series of side wings and painted backdrops to create a variety of settings for a show. Revues and musical comedies, which used multiple settings and needed to make set changes quickly, normally employed this method. Performers could enter or exit the stage through any of the wings. In Carter's production, the design painted on the wings remained the same throughout the show. Frank Brydges' designs for the various *Gay 90s* sets exhibit both extensive knowledge of what late-nineteenth-century England or Paris looked like.

A Prologue introducing Mr. and Mrs. Dan Leno, the two main characters and the production's premise, played on the apron downstage of the front curtain.

Figure 12.29. "Little annexe" setting. Costume plot detail. Rae Nixon. Australian War Memorial. Courtesy of Mrs. Rae Nixon.

As the characters left the apron and settled into their "little annexe" in front of the proscenium

arch at audience right where they could reminisce about the past, the front curtains parted and Scene 1, the stage in the Old Bull and Bush Music Hall—the first of Dan and Lily's memory scenes—was revealed.

Figure 12.30. Costume plot detail showing "Music Hall" setting. Rae Nixon. Australian War Memorial. Courtesy of Mrs. Rae Nixon.

Rae Nixon's sketch shows Lily Langtry standing on a planked wooden stage—the actual wooden floor of the Tamarkan theatre—in front of a backdrop painted with a low balustrade flanked by fluted columns. This scene was played *in one,* which means it was performed in the first slot downstage of the first set of wings, as scenery for the next scene had already been preset behind it. As this scene ended, the "Music Hall" drop was rolled up to reveal the full-stage setting for Scene 2: "The Parlour."

In the background of Nixon's sketch of Mr. and Mrs. Leno in their bower is a partial view of the "Parlour" setting onstage (see **Figure 12.29**). A back wall with a three-dimensional fireplace unit at its center sat upstage. Its mantle contained set dressing: a clock, a small vase of flowers, and some knickknacks. An oval mirror hung over it. To its right was a fainting couch; a painting hung on the wall. At least one other piece of furniture—a period wooden chair—was also part of the setting.

As the characters in the "Parlour" scene were leaving the stage, the "Music Hall" drop was lowered in readiness for Scene 3: "The Old Kent Road"—a musical turn by another music hall great—played *in one*. During his turn, the setting for the "Parlour Scene," was removed so that when the "Music Hall" drop was rolled up, Scene 4: "The Margate Beach Scene" was revealed.

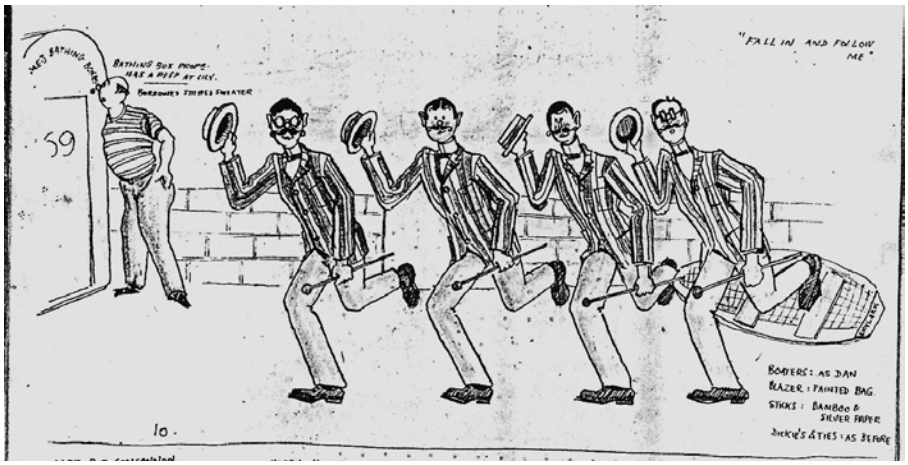

Figure 12.31. Costume plot detail showing "The Margate Beach" setting. Rae Nixon. Australian War Memorial. Courtesy of Mrs. Rae Nixon.

The "Margate Beach" setting consisted of two three-dimensional and practical bathing rooms[xiv] flanking the stage at up right and up left. Upstage was a ground row painted to look like a dressed stone seawall with an opening at center leading (down?) to the beach, thus allowing entrances/exits to be made from upstage of the wall.[xv] A lamppost stands upstage at left of center (not seen in **Figure 12.31**). Downstage of the wall at the right is a replica of a wherry—a type of rowboat available for rental at British seaside resorts. A backdrop painted to represent the sky hung upstage.[xvi] Much of this setting, except for the bathing rooms and the rowboat, could also have been preset behind the Parlour Scene at the opening of the show, which would have facilitated the changeover.

As the characters exited Scene 4, a new rolled drop was lowered just downstage of the Margate set pieces for Scene 5: "The Can Can Scene," which took place in a Parisian cabaret. Nixon did not provide a thumbnail of the set in his sketchbook, but he drew a separate view of the scene in performance from the audience's perspective.

xiv Bathing boxes, a feature of late-nineteenth-century British seaside resorts, were enclosed rectangular boxes on wheels in which people not only could change into their bathing suits but could then be rolled partway into the sea so that the ladies, in particular, could bathe more discreetly.
xv Since the backstage area at Tamarkan was on a lower level, it is possible that characters going down to or coming up from "the beach" entered directly from it in front of the sky drop.
xvi Or this could have been the back wall painted to function as a sky cyclorama.

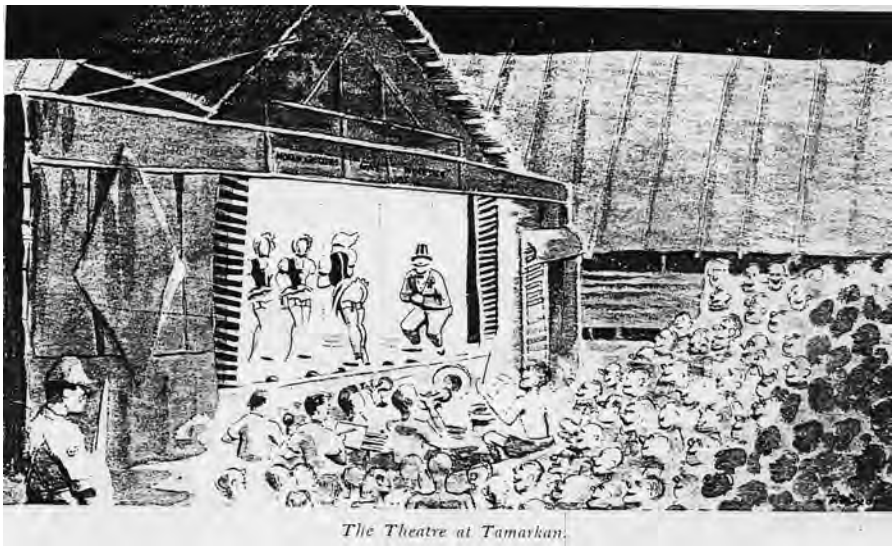

Figure 12.32. "The Can Can" setting. Rae Nixon. Australian War Memorial. Courtesy of Mrs. Rae Nixon.

This sketch shows the bonneted cancan dancers onstage, flipping their short ruffled skirts and showing off their bums while the French comedian cheers them on. The setting is difficult to see but seems to include a *tab curtain*—a curtain rigged to be pulled up "to form a triangular draped opening"[81]—and fluted columns on the side wings.[xvii] While this scene was taking place, the setting for Scene 6: "The Lights of London," was put in place upstage of the backdrop.

Figure 12.33. "The Lights of London" setting. Costume plot detail. Rae Nixon.

Figure 12.34. "The Lights of London" setting. Costume plot detail. Rae Nixon.

Australian War Memorial. Courtesy of Mrs. Rae Nixon.

xvii These could be the same fluted column wings from the "Music Hall" scene.

The "Lights of London" scene took place on the London embankment. Upstage was the sky drop (first seen in the "Margate Beach" scene) with two-dimensional silhouettes of the city—the dome of St. Paul's Cathedral is visible—standing in front of it. Downstage was a stone wall (the same ground row that appeared in the "Margate Beach" scene), but with a coffee stall placed at center in front of the wall's opening. The lamppost from the Margate scene also reappeared, now downstage of the wall. When the "Lights of London" scene was over, the "Music Hall" backdrop was lowered again *in one* for Scenes 7, 8, and the hastily added 8-A—further re-creations of old music hall and variety numbers—to be played in front of it while a changeover to Scene 9: "The Orchard" took place behind the drop. As the performers in Scene 8-A left the stage, the "Music Hall" backdrop was raised, and the setting for Scene 9: "The Orchard Scene" was revealed.

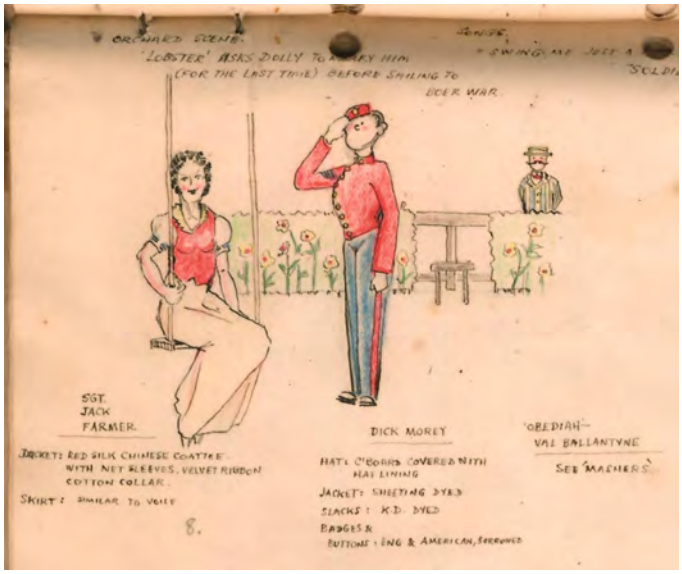

Figure 12.35. "The Orchard" setting. Costume plot detail. Rae Nixon. Australian War Memorial. Courtesy of Mrs. Rae Nixon

Not seen in this costume plot detail is the huge flowering apple tree that sat downstage at audience left. But the swing that was flown in from the grid (to look as if it hung from one of its branches) is visible. In the background was a low hedge (the stone wall ground row in a new guise, with a painted cloth over it), its center opening containing a turnstile; a row of flowers sat downstage of the hedge. Upstage behind the hedge was a path on which one character entered on a bicycle.[xviii] Another small tree stood behind the hedge at up right. In the background is the ubiquitous sky drop (or back wall cyclorama).

Though *Wonder Bar* and *Memories of the Gay 90s* used completely different staging methods, they both required well-trained and rehearsed running crews to execute the changeovers effectively. With these two productions, Leo Britt and Norman Carter pushed the limits of what could be accomplished in the Thailand POW theatres.

xviii The bicycle must have been borrowed from one of the Thai traders allowed in the camp.

Endnotes

1 Chalker, Notes.
2 Aylwin, IWM 67/330/1, typed page 3.
3 Chalker, Letter, 3 March 2000.
4 Pritchard, “the undefeated,” 6.
5 Owtram, 109.
6 Chalker, Letter, 23 June 2003.
7 D. Smith, 110.
8 John Sharp, 1145.
9 John Sharp, 1145.
10 Coast, 175–176.
11 Tom Morris, Interview, 5.
12 Coast, 175–176.
13 Coast, 176.
14 Chalker, Letter, 23 June 2003.
15 Carter, 168.
16 Coast, 178.
17 Durnford, 145.
18 Chalker, Letter, 23 June 2003.
19 Baker, “Extracts from ‘A Memoir,’” 15.
20 Ingram, 1.
21 Carter, 186.
22 Pritchard, “the undefeated,” 6.
23 Baker, “Extracts from ‘A Memoir,’” 16-17.
24 Chalker, Letter 23 June 2003.
25 Coast, 170.
26 Chalker, Letter, 23 June 2003.
27 Coast, 170.
28 Carter, 168.
29 Carter, 168.
30 Rivett, illustration facing page 321.
31 Carter, 180–181.
32 Coast, 183.
33 Chalker, Letter, 3 March 2000.
34 Coast, 170.
35 Hardie, Diary, 5 January 1945.
36 Carter, 177–178.
37 Morris, Interview, 19.
38 Johnston, 113.
39 Peacock, 231.
40 Jacobs, 117–118.
41 Jacobs, 118.
42 Owtram, IWM, 105; Brazil, Letter, 29 October 2000; Thompson, 98.
43 Durnford, 145; Jacobs, 129; Owtram, 105.
44 Chalker, Letter, 23 June 2003.
45 Brazil, Letter, 29 October 2000; Chalker, 2007, 111; Coast, 185; Jacobs, 117, 129; Nixon, PIX, 16; Leffelaar and van Witsen, 257, trans. by Sheri Tromp; Owtram, 105; Mullineux, 22.
46 Leffelaar and van Witsen, 257, trans. by Sheri Tromp.
47 Jacobs, 117–118.
48 Chalker, Letter, 3 March 2000.

49 Brazil, Letter, 29 October 2000.
50 Carter, 169.
51 Ingram, 2.
52 Johnston, 113.
53 Johnston, 113.
54 Richardson, Diary, 82.
55 Carter, 186.
56 Jacobs, 129.
57 Brazil, Letter, 29 October 2000.
58 Pritchard, Interview, 17.
59 Pritchard Collection.
60 Nixon, Sketchbook, SK-16.
61 Carter, 171–172.
62 Carter, 171–172.
63 Owtram, 105.
64 Terry Morris, Self-interview #1, 5.
65 Carter, 179.
66 Terry Morris, Self-interview #1, 5.
67 Coast, 184–185.
68 Milner, Diary, 21 May 1944.
69 Jacobs, 117–118.
70 Carter, 170.
71 Carter, 170.
72 Terry Morris, Self-interview #1, 5.
73 Leffelaar and van Witsen, 249, trans. by Sheri Tromp.
74 Anckorn, Interview, 48, 64.
75 Compilation from Anckorn, Interview, 48–49, 63–64.
76 Johnston, 113.
77 Johnston, 113.
78 Milner, Diary, 21 May 1944.
79 Milner, Diary, 21 May 1944.
80 Milner, Diary, 21 May 1944.
81 Philip Barber, “New Scene Technicians Handbook,” as found in John Gassner’s *Producing the Play*, revised edition, 828–829.