

Setting the Scene: The Set Design of Falsettos

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Section 1: Formal Analysis

The musical *Falsettos* premiered for the first time in 1992, written by William Finn and James Lapine. In 2016, the show saw a Broadway revival directed by Lapine himself. The musical is centered around a small cast of characters as they deal with the ever-changing landscape of their life, from a gay husband divorcing his wife to a smitten psychiatrist, and a young boy who does not want a Bar Mitzva. The show deals with themes of family and love, but also with anger and loss. The story is beautiful, and something important to supporting a good story is good production, including lights, sounds, props, costumes, and of course, the set. The Broadway revival saw a new set designed by Tony-award winner David Rockwell. (See Fig1)¹ This set carries much symbolic meaning within the show.

As the musical opens on Act 1, the set is merely a large grey cube upstage center. The cube is covered in lines, implying that it is made of many different pieces and can be taken apart. As the first number begins, the cube is rarely used until the end, when it is spun around and eventually taken apart into many indistinct shapes that are used to give the four male actors, Marvin, Mendel, Whizzer, and Jason levels. It is also used to give the female actor, Trina, things to move and place to sit. These five actors are the whole cast for the first act.

As the first song continues, the actors move and place the set pieces taken out of the cube and create different environments, some made from pieces of the initial cube, and some made from the empty space inside the cube after things had been taken away, such as a seat for Jason.

¹ William Finn, *Falsettos*, directed/performed by James Lapine (2016; New York City: Live from Lincoln Center, 2017), recording of a musical.

By the end of the first number, the plain grey blocks have formed a therapist's office and a living room. These grey blocks will continue to form the entire set for a majority of the show.

The play proceeds with the same ideas as the first song. Actors constantly move the blocks around and steadily destroy the cube to suit their needs, or take apart previous rooms to make new ones. The constant movement of the blocks means that there is rarely a time the sets are consistently one thing. They are office chairs, couches, kitchen counters, living rooms, tables, and even doorways when stacked on top of each other. The show is constantly changing and flowing, and it is up to the audience and picture the carefully placed blocks as a room or pieces of furniture.

The actor performances and sparse props also help to clue in what settings are what and where everyone is relative to each other. Examples of props used are bowls to symbolize a kitchen and potted plants to create a living room. However, these set dressings are not used as much as they would be in a typical play with a more ornate set. Due to the lack of set, the props and costumes stand out more than usual, making it easier to identify characters and locations.

In one of the last songs of Act 1, "Making a Home", the set pieces are moved slowly and carefully as the home is literally created right in front of the audiences eyes.

Act 2 begins without the cube that started the show, but with the shapes arranged into three archways that can be shifted and moved. Continuing from the first act, the second act has constant movement of the blocks. Two added characters, Charlotte and her lover Cordelia, as well as a time skip, provide for more sets, such as Charlotte and Cordelia's apartment and stands at a baseball game. The sets are often chaotic as well, such as in the song "Year of the Child,"

where the set isn't necessarily one defined space or object, but simply a playground for the actors to sit, lay down on, walk over, or rearrange.

The largest change comes a little over halfway through Act 2, during the song "Holding to the Ground." As Trina sings the end of the song, new set pieces make their way on stage that are fundamentally different from all the ones seen before. The blocks that have previously made all the sets are gone from the stage, replaced with a hospital privacy screen, a hospital bed, and a small table, also found in hospitals. This is a jarring change that takes the audience away from the fantasy world of constantly moving blocks, and throws them into the real world of an unmistakable hospital. After the hospital is introduced, the blocks are never again used on stage.

The set of *Falsettos* is a perfect representation of the show and supports the story visually with ease. The story is one of a constantly shifting family full of complex relationships that fall apart and come together erratically. In this way, the set is an extension of the story itself. It's abstract and allows for the message of the story to be more powerful and for the characters to stand out more against a plain grey background. The sparse set dressings stand out against the grey blocks, making use of props more engaging and drawing the audience into the show. In some songs, the set even metaphorically mirrors the show, seen in the literal creation of a home using blocks within the song "Making a Home." Another impressive aspect is the sudden deviation from the set in Act 2, becoming a more traditional and realistic set. The abstract set previously used helped support the idea that nothing is real. This show has constant fourth wall breaks and set changes are part of the choreography, set out in the light. The couches are blocks and the acting is just that, acting. But the introduction of a hospital bed suddenly jolts the audience into reality. It is no longer something fake, made of blocks and a few decorations,

something constantly moving and obviously invented. The hospital bed makes it real. The death is real, the pain is real, and illness affects people all around the world. The change of sets powerfully reminds the viewer that this is a play, but it also reflects reality and is something that affects real people. All together, the set creates a beautiful environment of movement and stasis, contrasting each other yet working together in harmony to embrace and support the themes of the show.

Section 2: Research Essay

Set design in theater is often rewarded for being ornate and intricate. Past winners of the Tony Award for scenic design include the elaborate emerald halls in *Wicked*, the three tiered tilting boat of *Titanic*, and the iconic barricade and french city streets of *Les Miserables*.² However, what is important in good scenic design is not how many levels it is or how many moving parts it requires. What is important is how well the design can support the story. David Rockwell knew this all too well when designing the set for the 2016 revival of the 1992 musical *Falsettos*. Using a minimalist and abstract set as well as a touch of realism for certain moments, he effectively helps tell the story of Marvin, Trina, Jason, Whizzer, Mendel, and their ever-changing, tight-knit family. The story of *Falsettos* has been analyzed by many as the complex wording and creative audience interactions go beyond surface level. From the true story hidden under the music to the connotations of the labels characters use, *Falsettos* is full of meaning. Types of designs have also been analyzed and spoken about. What are the merits of abstract versus realism, and how does each tell an effective story? These two concepts come together with Rockwell's scenic design. *Falsettos* uses an abstract set to support fourth wall breaks, fast transitions and songs, and the story of an ever-changing emotional landscape, before the set shifts and becomes highly realistic to reflect the real issues of disease and death that affect characters in the second act.

² "Winners / Scenic Design" Winners and Honorees, The Tony Awards, accessed December 9, 2019, <https://www.tonyawards.com/winners/year/any/category/scenic-design-play-or-musical/show/any/>.

Falsettos is an unorthodox show that includes fast paced music, fourth-wall breaks, and rapid transitions, which all come together in a script that had constant themes of change. Scott Miller, artistic director at New Line theater, noted that the musical style is “frenetic and insistent,” something heard throughout the show.³ In general, the songs have high BPM, or beats per minute. A higher BPM usually means upbeat songs that sound faster. Songs like “4 Jews in a Room Bitching,” “Trina’s song/March of the Falsettos,” and “You Gotta Die Sometime,” all have BPMs over 150.⁴ This means that this musical is generally very fast paced. The show also contains many rapid transitions from place to place. In the song “I’m Breaking Down,” Trina is singing in a kitchen. The number afterwards however, is a dining room, and later a psychiatrist’s office.⁵ Transitions from place to place are seen constantly throughout the musical, with the show switching between locations rapidly. The song “A Day in Falsettoland” even has three locations within the single song, with an apartment, a racquetball court, and an exercise room.⁶ Along with its speed, *Falsettos* also contains many fourth wall breaking techniques. Near the top of the show, Marvin talks directly to the audience, telling them, “Well the situations this.”⁷ Stage directions also break the fourth wall, with direction such as “Jason speaking to the audience,”⁸ and in a more comedic sense with, “(acting as our tour guide) Homosexuals. (He searches the audience for them.)”⁹ All these elements in the show work together to help support the central themes and ideas of the show. *Falsettos* is a show about the constant and rapid changing of the

³ Scott Miller, “Inside ‘March of the Falsettos,’” New Line Theater, <http://www.newlinetheatre.com/falsettoschapter.html>.

⁴ “BPM for songs by 'Falsettos' 2016 Broadway Company,” Song BPM, accessed December 9, 2019, <https://songbpm.com/@falsettos-2016-broadway-company>

⁵ William Finn, *Falsettos*.

⁶ Finn, *Falsettos*

⁷ William Finn and James Lapine, *Falsettos*, (July 12 1992) 12.

⁸ Finn and Lapine, *Falsettos*, 60.

⁹ Finn and Lapine, *Falsettos*, 97.

landscape of relationships.¹⁰ It is about the break-ups and reconnections of Marvin and Whizzer, the father-son relationship of Marvin and Jason, the dysfunctional family that is Trina, Marvin, and Jason, the new love that sprouts with Trina and Mendel.¹¹ It is a show about love, loss, and relationships, a show that moves quickly through the shifting ground and building and rebuilding of connections with others. This connection includes the one with the audience, never letting them out of the show and forming a relationship with them as well. *Falsettos* masterfully uses music, blocking, and dialogue to pull the audience into a show about the changes of life.

The thematic elements and musical aspects of *Falsettos* are important in understanding the set design, but it is also important to understand what set design is, what it means to be abstract versus realistic, and how the set of the revival of *Falsettos* demonstrates both abstract and realistic designs for different story beats. Set design, also called scenic design, is the world the characters live in. It gives the director an environment, a playground, to tell a story within.¹² The process of set design begins with research and narrative analysis. Set design is meant to help the narrative along. As David Rockwell, Tony-award winning set designer and designer of the *Falsettos* revival set says, “Your job is not to literally tell the same story, your job is to support the telling of the story.”¹³ Set designers must be innovative and original, constantly thinking of creative ways to tell a story.¹⁴ In the case of *Falsettos*, that way was through mostly abstract sets, and one realistic set. Abstract art is “The act of withdrawing the essence of experience,

¹⁰ David Rockwell, “Architect David Rockwell pulls curtain back on designing for the stage,” interview by Asad Syrkett and Zoe Rosenberg, *the Appeal*, Curbed, November 10, 2016, audio, 10:23-11:45 <https://www.curbed.com/2016/11/10/13574950/david-rockwell-group-set-design-stage-she-loves-me>.

¹¹ Miller, “Inside ‘March of the Falsettos,’”

¹² “Read, Render, Realize: A step-by-step guide to set design,” *Dramatics Magazine Online*, appeared in April/May 2018 print issue of *Dramatics*, <https://dramatics.org/read-render-realize/>

¹³ Rockwell, interview

¹⁴ “Set Design,” *Student Technical Theatre Handbook*, Harvard University, accessed December 9, 2019, http://www.hcs.harvard.edu/~htag/handbook/?q=wiki/set_design

epitomizing or summarizing the real-life activity.”¹⁵ The art is often based on shapes or locations, but ones that have been simplified to only their bare elements.¹⁶ It becomes up to the viewer to put the art together, and challenges them to be creative and see the whole picture within their mind. *Falsettos* set is a perfect example of this. The large grey shapes that make up the set are not specific. There are no chairs, tables, or doorways. There are only prisms, blocks, and cubes. It is up to the audience to take the cubes and the context from the dialogue and turn it into a living room or an office. On the flip side, the set also contains a highly realistic aspect to it. Realism in art is used to describe the almost photographic way painters would create artwork, making it look less like a painting and more like a photograph. It can be seen in perfectly proportional statues and exact replicas captured on a canvas.¹⁷ In terms of set design, this is when the stage looks exactly like a real house, or a real street. Realism is common in set design, but lacking in Rockwell’s work on *Falsettos*. At least, until a little more than halfway through Act 2. During the song “Holding to the Ground,” all the grey blocks and shapes are removed from the stage. They are replaced with a realistic hospital bed, IV drip, hospital table, and privacy screen.¹⁸ The audience no longer needs to imagine where the characters are. There cannot be a mistake that they are in a hospital. The set stays like this for the rest of the show. Using both abstraction and realism, Rockwell creates an effective and innovative set that stands out to every viewer.

The question then becomes: how do the elements of the story and music work together with the set to create a fully fledged musical with all elements working in harmony? In so many ways, the abstract set created by Rockwell assists the charms of the musical. The fast-paced

¹⁵ Griffith, Thomas R, "A Layman's Eye View of Abstract Art," Peabody Journal of Education 35, no. 6 (1958): 323-27, www.jstor.org/stable/1491257

¹⁶ “Abstract Art,” Tate, accessed December 9, 2019, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/a/abstract-art>.

¹⁷ “Realism,” Tate, accessed December 9, 2019, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/r/realism>.

¹⁸ Finn, *Falsettos*

music and rapidly switching locations are made easier thanks to the easily moveable blocks. As seen in performances, they are light enough for the actors to carry around themselves.¹⁹ The set pieces are also nondescript, so any block could be a chair or table. This makes everything flow more smoothly and brings together every different location, from apartments to baseball games. The numerous fourth wall breaks are also held up with this set. As mentioned previously, the set is rarely realistic, forcing the viewers to create the spaces using context from the actors. The abstract set reminds the audience time and time again that they are watching a play. Fourth wall breaks do the same thing. These elements work together in harmony rather than contrasting each other, demonstrating how the set design lifts up the show. Most importantly however, is the way a set design supports a story. As Rockwell said, “Your job is to support the telling of the story.”²⁰ The set of *Falsettos* supports the story wonderfully. In Rockwell’s own words, “As I sat with the director and talked about [Falsettos], what was most interesting is how this group of seven people on stage kept reconfiguring the landscape of their life, marriages, separations, re-connections. We decided to tell that story through abstraction.”²¹ The constant moving and shifting pieces, building towers that come crashing down a scene later, the jumble of blocks that never stay in one place at a time, these elements all help to metaphorically show the same story the actors are telling. The set says, this is a play that is about change and movement. It supports the words in the script and helps bring the story to life. And when the set becomes realistic, the message is hit home even harder. As Kerry Reid of the *Chicago Reader* said, “When David Rockwell’s fanciful set of gray playing blocks gives way to a realistic hospital room, we know

¹⁹ Finn, *Falsettos*

²⁰ Rockwell, interview

²¹ Rockwell, interview

that playtime is over.”²² The realism also helps tell the story and convey the serious nature of the end of the play. A character on his deathbed, slowly withering away from a deadly disease surrounded by prejudice. The audience can no longer imagine what the scene could look like, can no longer take themselves out of the story or remind themselves it is not real. The set reminds the audience that death is real, that illness is real, and that this story on stage mirrors the real world. The set design of the 2016 revival of *Falsettos* perfectly sums up the important aspects of the story, supporting both technical details and important emotional moments.

It is the job of a good scenic designer to create a world for characters to inhabit, adding depth to the story. They need to use creativity and innovation to decide what that means for every different play and director. Scenic designers need to not just reflect the real world, but the emotions of the character. They need to fit hundreds of different areas on a single stage and create movement. Their job is often overlooked, yet always necessary. When Rockwell designed the set for the revival of *Falsettos*, a show about a tight-knit family and the changing relationships we all face in life, he hit it out of the park. Using abstract art techniques as well as a realistic contrast when needed, the set design of 2016’s *Falsettos* captures a whole script in a few grey boxes. It demonstrates that a set does not always need to be an ornate, elaborate spectacle. A brilliant set is one that doesn’t just tell the story – it *is* the story.

²² Kerry Reid, “After AIDS, love endures—and so does *Falsettos*,” review of *Falsettos*, directed by James Lapine, *Chicago Reader*, June 4, 2019, <https://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/falsettos-broadway-in-chicago/Content?oid=70756888>.



Fig1: A still image from the professional recording of *Falsettos*, Live from Lincoln Center

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