

Technical Considerations for “The Spiral Staircase” by F. Andrew Leslie

“The Spiral Staircase” is a mystery/thriller play that became a play through a rather contorted route. It was adapted for the stage by F. Andrew Leslie from the screenplay by Mel Dinelli, which was based on the novel “Some Must Watch” by Ethel Lena White. This has nothing to do with the set, but it amused me greatly and it helps sometimes to remember that the play’s most recent incarnation was a black-and-white film from the 40’s.

The play is suspenseful and melodramatic, comes with a crazy old lady, and takes place on a dark and stormy night. Textbook murder mystery. The three-sentence plot summary is: A serial killer has been offing young girls who have “defects.” Helen, mute ever since she saw her parents die in a fire, is the obvious next target. Now, which of the other five people in the play is the killer, and will someone figure it out before Helen dies?

That said, the script itself describes the setting quite precisely, even going so far as to include a diagram of the set and a props list. The opening description in the first act makes it clear as to the kind of decor that is expected; it is in a “gloomy mid-Victorian mansion” with “sombre wallpaper” and its furnishings are of the “old-fashioned, over-decorated Victorian variety.”

So, there is the mood, tone, and general decorating scheme. Dark, heavy, solid, ornamented, and slightly insane. I will comment on specifics in greater detail within each section. There are four areas of interest that I will focus on: the general layout and requirements, the grand staircase on stage left, the bedroom on stage right, and effects.

General Layout and Other Considerations

The play takes place on the first floor of a Victorian style manor. Two rooms are visible to us: the front living room, which takes up about two thirds of the stage, and Mrs. Warren’s bedroom, which takes up the remaining third. It should be noted that Mrs. Warren is an invalid and what is now her bedroom used to be a study. There are four exits: the front door on stage left, which is a double door; the top of the staircase, which disappears behind a black curtain; a set of double doors that lead to a hallway upstage from the living room; and a single door in Mrs. Warren’s room that leads upstage to a bathroom. Additionally, there

is a door in the wall between the living room and Mrs. Warren's room. Incidentally, in the second act, the double doors from the living room to the back hallway are left open (so Helen can eavesdrop) and there should be a flat behind them that looks like the hallway. The script also suggests that the space behind the door to the bathroom should actually look like a bathroom, but since the door is opened all of twice for a short time each time and the plot doesn't involve the bathroom at all except that that's where the ether is stored, I think all that is needed behind that door is an off-white flat with a dim light that Helen can flick on and off. The door to Mrs. Warren's room and the two front doors should all be functional; i.e. the doorknobs should actually latch. This is especially important for Mrs. Warren's room, as a stage door swinging open at the wrong time would be most unfortunate. As for the doors that exit upstage, as long as they stay shut when they're supposed to, I don't see why they couldn't be made in a manner that doesn't require installing a functioning doorknob. (I've seen doors kept shut by a weight on a pulley system that works just fine.)

Walls should be eight feet high, mostly because flats are commonly made to this height and it's a perfectly good height for the walls of a room. The exception to this is the wall that follows the spiral staircase up on stage left, which should end up being about sixteen feet tall so it's still a full-height wall at the top. The outside wall should curve with the staircase, which presents an interesting problem because I've only ever made flats to be, well, flat. My first instinct is to use muslin stretched tight on a curved frame. When there are lamps in the wall, supports could just be placed behind the muslin and the lamps attached right through the "wall." I would have to take care to not put stress on the muslin itself, only the supports behind it, so I don't create wrinkles or dimples in the supposedly flat muslin. The window that is supposed to be halfway up the staircase presents another issue. I would make the (appropriately curved) window frame first, cut a hole in the muslin to the inside dimension of the frame, and then staple the muslin to the frame. The frame, like the lamps, would have to be supported entirely from below. Windows in curved walls from this time frame use curved window glass, which is a pain in the arse to get hold of. I would use a thick sheet of plastic that can be thermally deformed and shape it to the proper curvature instead of trying to hunt down actual curved glass. As for the cross-pieces (it's Victorian, no surface goes undecorated including windows), I would personally choose to take good measurements and then wander down to the forge in the basement of building four and have fun. For the case in the future when I don't

have access to a forge, a square tube of play-doh left to dry and painted black mimics wrought iron just fine. Twisted, not braided, rope soaked in glue (partially to stiffen it into shape, partially to smooth out the fibrous surface) and painted black would also work.

The part of the basic set that most concerns me is the wall that separates the living room and Mrs. Warren's room. Since it juts out into the space and is a true dividing wall, I'm going to have to watch my sight lines. I'd like it to go at least 3/4 of the way up to the edge of the room so the front wall doesn't have to slant upstage too much. There will be some spots that aren't visible to certain chairs in the audience. I suppose I could just rope off the chairs that are blocked too much, which will likely be three or four in the front left corner of the audience and a few more than that in the front right.

In the opening scene, Mrs. Oates goes around the living room turning on lamps. I'd like to have her actually turn on the lamps (instead of mimicking it and having Lights turn up the stage lights each time). This is easy enough to do since it's supposed to look like a room in a house anyway. Many extension cords end in a block with three outlets, two on one side and one on the other. I would just get a white extension cord of this type, cut a hole in the flat big enough to allow access to both outlets on the two-outlet side, attach the cord to the back of flat, and put a standard frame around it on the front of the wall. Then just run the cords from the lamps to the wall; it's perfectly realistic to, like, plug a lamp into the wall. The cord from the lamp in the middle of the room can just get a throw rug on top of it so people don't trip on it – you know, just like people do at home so they don't trip over the cords. If having the lamps on fully is a problem for Lighting, we could use lamps with a three-level setting and leave it on the dimmest level. Or, use bulbs that glow just enough to make it obvious that they're lightbulbs but will easily be overshadowed (so to speak) by the normal stage lighting.

The floor should be painted brown and covered with lots of floor rugs, the walls should be painted to look like they're covered in wallpaper wherever possible, and it'd be really neat if I could find some faux wooden paneling for cheap to put on the lower 3 to 3 1/2 feet of the walls of the living room (but not up the stairs). That's Dark and Classy in a Can, right there. The palette should be warm and dark; lots of reds, browns, oranges, and gold accents, and blue should not appear anywhere unless maybe there's an arrangement of flowers or a painting on the wall. Dark green is allowed, and you'd have to convince me of the purple. But enough of the colors, on with the fun parts of the set.

Grand Staircase

Despite the title of the play, the staircase is not, in fact, a true spiral staircase; it goes through a sweep of a mere 90°. Given that very little action takes place on the staircase (it seems to be used mostly as an entrance point), a true spiral could be substituted. However, a spiral staircase is necessarily open on the sides and I have yet to see a spiral staircase that doesn't look fragile. This fragility is not in keeping with the feel of the play, so I will stick with the curve instead. True to dramatic Victorian style, the 4-foot wide staircase should flare slightly at the bottom. I'm going for the sweeping grand entrance look.

The script often refers to a set of chairs "under the staircase" which initially led me to wonder if the stairs should have an open carriage. This would once again detract from the solid grandeur of the stairs, so I chose to use a curved wall instead. I'm interpreting the phrase "under the staircase" to be a way of differentiating those chairs from the chairs that are in the middle of the room. I don't think I would choose to use muslin on the curved wall under the stairs like I did on the wall behind it because every step would cause the muslin to shake unless the staircase is built very, very solidly. Instead, I think I'd try (drumroll, please) masonite. It's solid, it's bendy, and it can be painted to look like the rest of the walls more easily than muslin.

Now for a bit of math for the staircase itself. For simplicity, I would like it to be a quarter circle with a flared extension out the front. I would like it to add no more than about eight or nine feet to the stage; let's make it nine to be comfortable. That makes the outer radius of the circle 9 feet: a four-foot wide staircase means the inner radius is 5 feet, and I'll make my calculations from the center of the staircase where people are most likely to be walking, which is a radius of 7 feet. A quarter of a circle of radius 7 feet is a distance of 7 feet is $(2 \cdot \pi \cdot 7 \text{ft}) / 4 =$ almost exactly 11 feet (10.9955 feet, to be precise). This number makes me very happy because I was planning on using a stair rise of the standard 7 inches, which leads to a safe run of 11 inches. That means that over a run of 11 feet, there will be exactly 12 steps with a 7" rise each. 12 steps means that each step will turn a total of 7.5° around the circle, and the total height of the curved section is 7" times 12 steps = 7'. This number also makes me very happy because it means that with a two-step straight stair addition, the total height is 8'2", or 2" above the height of the walls. That's that for the math.

The railing doesn't need to be as structural as it would on a true spiral, just strong enough to support a bit of weight and not wobble. I would suggest just using plain wooden dowels as the supports, two to a step, so I'll need two different lengths. They can be decorated using scrap wood and flexible tubing, then all painted a uniform dark brown color. The newel post should be thicker and able to really support weight as one of the characters dies on top of it.

The railing top can be made in several ways. The more complicated but most correct way to make a moulded wooden railing is to buy two times the length you'll need in straight wood in the desired ornamental shape, then slice the pieces into alternating 1/4" thick slices and laminate them into the curved shape, as discussed in class a couple of months ago. That shouldn't be too much of a problem for this staircase since the curve isn't as tight as it would be for a true spiral. Or, you could go the cheap lazyass route and use a length of flexible tubing as your rail. You can decorate it with small-diameter lengths of tubing or foam in much the same way you did the support posts, then paint it all the same color.

The railing will end at the newel post which, as mentioned earlier, should be thicker and stronger not only because that's what newel posts are supposed to be, but also because a character dies on top of it. Accordingly, an ornamental knob on top of the post should not be pointy. If there must be a protruding knob, it should be a sphere (I think I've seen things like this at hardware stores), but the top will also look fine as a flat plate a bit bigger than the post itself.

Mrs. Warren's Bedroom

Mrs. Warren's bedroom on stage right is separated from the front living room by a scrim wall and a wall with a door in it that juts out from backstage. Since both sides of the wall with the door are visible to different parts of the audience, it'll need to be double-sided (take your normal hard flat and attach luan or whatever wood you're using to cover on the backside as well). The wall should stick out from between two flats, so you should have room to put up supports at the upstage end. However, there is still most of the flat sticking out there unsupported, which worries me a bit. Since both sides of the wall are visible to the audience, I can't just stick a big ol' jack on one side. I could bolt it to the floor (if I am in a theater that allows me to bolt things to the floor), but since it's eight feet tall, the top would still be a bit wobbly,

especially if the door sticks. I propose a slight rearrangement of the suggested furniture to solve this problem. Since the only pieces of furniture that move are the chairs, I could make sure that the table on the stage right side of the wall (upstage of the door in the wall) is heavy and stable and I could put a low cabinet on the stage left side of the wall a bit downstage of the door. Better yet, I could make the table in the room a square end table with a space underneath used for storage. (Dang it, I have the perfect piece back at home...) If I'm not allowed to bolt anything to the floor, I could just fill the cabinets with stage weights and bolt the wall to the backs of the cabinets. That would give it needed stability without distracting from the set.

Now for issues with the scrim. The bedroom spends most of its time covered by a scrim that is painted to look like a continuation of the wall. For short scenes, the standard light-the-inside-and-watch-the-scrim-disappear trick is used. For longer scenes, though, the scrim would get distracting. Although the disappearing trick is effective, if you try to play a scene behind a scrim for too long, the faint blurriness of the scrim gets in the way of the play. The script even suggests making the scrim fly out if possible at points, and I think this is best for many scenes even though the scrim is essential for other scenes. We are only supposed to see what the main characters see, so whenever they're out of the room, it needs to be unseen. Sometimes this happens frequently or quickly enough that actually flying a curtain or a flat in and out is impractical and distracting, so that's when the scrim pulls the disappearing act.

However, when it's lit from the front and is supposed to be a wall, I want the scrim to actually look like a wall. I can't treat the scrim like a curtain; walls don't have wrinkles in them. The scrim needs to be either stretched on a big frame or weighted at the bottom so it is as flat as possible. Then the issue is how to get the thing out of the way. Originally I thought I would put it on two pipes and treat it like a roll drop. Or, I could lift it like an Austrian curtain. However, both of those ideas involve folding or bending the fabric extensively, and I'd be afraid of paint flaking off over the course of a run. Also, both of those ideas involve lifting from the top instead of flying from the side, and in my experience, the former takes a noticeably longer time – and I would like the scrim movements to be quick. Therefore, the solution is to make a light frame for the scrim out of strapping and set the whole thing on a set of tracks, top and bottom. If there's a rug in the front hall, the bottom track will be almost unseen. If the stage left bedroom wall is sturdy enough, I could run the top track out to it and tie the other end to the stage right wall. If there's

room, it can be a straight track out to the side, and since the scrim wall extends offstage, I could have a techie backstage to just push or pull when the time is right. It's simple, low-tech, it has a fast move time, and it looks like a wall when it's onstage and not acting see-through. Great. If the theater doesn't have wing space (La Sala comes to mind), it would be just as effective to have a track that curves backstage and only takes up a few feet as opposed to the full length of the wall. I would just need to make sure that the scrim isn't going to catch on the stage right wall as it goes around the corner (insert scrim-ripping nightmare here).

Effects

It was a dark and stormy night... and the characters won't shut up about it. They make several references to the storm and the rain, so it would be remiss to ignore it. There are five windows; one on the far stage right in Mrs. Warren's room and four on far stage left (one on either side of the front door, one above it, and one halfway up the staircase). I would ignore Mrs. Warren's window for the effects since none of the characters complain about the weather in Mrs. Warren's presence. It would be great to have lightning, especially in the opening scene, which is mostly in darkness until Mrs. Oates starts turning on the lights. I've been annoyed in the past about lightning effects that obviously come from a single strobe and thus start to look more like strobe flashes than lightning effects. I'd want two strobes outside the stage left windows pointing in different directions so it isn't just one flash from one direction all the time. Then I'll let the sound people have fun with rain and thunder sounds. Especially thunder sounds. The opening scene needs thunder in a big, bad way.

All right, there's the thunder and lightning, let's talk about rain. The rain continues for the entire show, so it would be distracting to have an actual water effect going on outside the whole time. However, I don't want the windows to be dry, either; one of my favorite things about electrical storms (besides looking at the lightning itself) is watching the patterns of water on the windows change under what is essentially natural strobe lighting. I would dribble something like a clear paint sealant down the outside of the glass, just enough to refract the light a bit and look like raindrops on a wet window once it's dry. The windows will never be lit from the outside for long enough to see that it isn't real water.

The script also indicates that people should actually be wet when they come through the front door. If we're doing thunder, lightning, and rain, I think that people coming in the front door should be noticeably and honestly wet. I'm thinking a pan (lined with a towel so splashes aren't heard), a small bucket, and a spray bottle just outside the door offstage left. Not much, just enough to get the head (or hat) and shoulders, shoes, and whatever other areas they have time for wet just before the actor goes onstage. There'll be a rug right in front of the door, so they won't really make a mess (in some cases, characters go out of their way to stand on the rug so they don't drip over everything) and in all other cases, Mrs. Oates spirits away their wet items of clothing, so the rest of the set should stay nice and dry while still making it obvious that it's really raining outside.