

ARTIST AT WORK

# Grand Illusions



Sets by Anita Stewart include the Portland Stage productions of (clockwise from above) *Center of Gravity*, *Red*, and *Love/Sick*.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: DARREN SETLOW; DIANE HUDSON; AARON FLACK(3)



Anita Stewart's **Play Me a Story** program teaches Portland school children the magic of collaboration along with theater skills.

As the dream weaver at Portland Stage, **Anita Stewart** is an ever rising star.



BY DIANE HUDSON

When Portland Stage Executive and Artistic Director Anita Stewart looks back on her first visits here in the 1990s, it's not about beach lounging or lobsters.

Somehow she "always managed" to get hired to work on shows rehearsing in December, in tech in January.

"So I was here for New Year's, and I went to the fireworks right downtown—massive fireworks you felt like were right over you, blasting away. I sort of got the picture of how Portland burned down a couple of times. It felt pretty extreme—fabulous, so full of life and color and so cold and everybody just dealt with it."

And she remembers going to the Port-hole: "It was a place where fishermen would come off the boats wearing these giant yellow waders and they would come in to eat, sloshing water all over the floor, and smelling of fish, fresh fish. It was local color, real color." For Anita, Portland was "real people living a real life."



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Anita Stewart in a playful moment at her home studio, below left; on stage during *Our Man in Havana*, above; and with a colleague creating props for the forthcoming *Lost Boy Found* in Whole Foods.



### FINDING HOME

At the time, Stewart was a free-lance theater designer, doing shows in “Seattle, Dallas, Chicago, Minneapolis, Atlanta, all over,” and each gig required a stay of several weeks.

“You really get a sense of what it’s like to

live in the city where you’re working.” Increasingly, Portland became “one of the few places that, coming out of a New York base,” she could see herself moving to. “It was inspiring to my work.”

The other draw was “the theater space itself. It’s just this jewel box. There’s not a

bad seat in the house. It’s one of the best theater spaces in the country, and I’ve worked at a lot of them.”

While an undergraduate at Yale, Stewart studied architecture. But the thought of building something that would be standing 50 or 100 years from now made her stomach tie up in knots, “triple and quadruple knots.” When she looked at things she’d done in the past, very few of those ideas seemed to her to be the best they could be. It was always, “Well, if I had done it this way, it would be even better.” For her, theater solves this problem. “It gives you something here, in the moment, right now.” It’s “the best thing ever,” and then it becomes “a memory.”

Another problem with architecture. When doing a mock-up for a design, she’d invent people who lived in it and a back story that made her design something other than just abstract space.

“This was really set design, but it just took me a while to figure it out. When she did, she plunged wholeheartedly into the Yale School of Drama, where she found her mentors, master teachers Ming Cho Lee (sets) and Jennifer Tipton (lighting).



### TEAMWORK

It was at Yale during grueling studies, often working from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. with few breaks, putting on a different play each week, that she discovered one of the strongest attractions for her in theater work is the element of collaboration. “Each production involves getting together with a group of people to solve a problem (as opposed to being a competition, where one of us succeeds and the other doesn’t). It is more about us creating something really amazing together.”

At Portland Stage, there’s the additional challenge of working within restrictions posed by the venue itself. When she designed at other theaters (like the Guthrie in Minneapolis) and was budgeted with as much money as she wanted, she found it far harder to figure out how to proceed. “As an artist, it’s much easier when I have to push against something, as opposed to when the sky’s the limit.”

And push she does, with “an amazing staff” of 24, plus 10 or 11 interns, a no-frills stage, and very limited budget. “We can do it,” Stewart says, “because people believe in the art and they want to be doing it. That’s what gets the job done.”

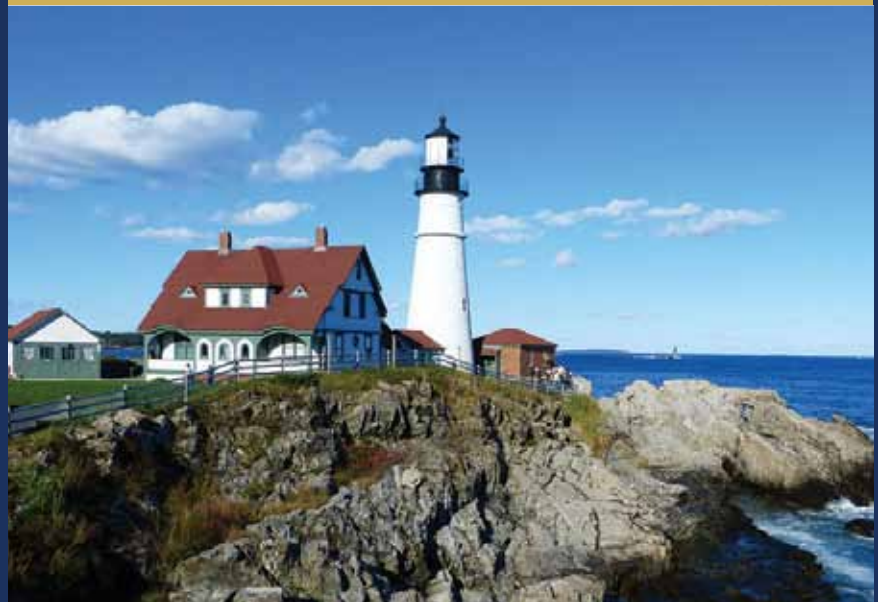
Take technical director Ted Gallant, with whom Stewart has worked for the past 20 years. Stewart drafts the set and Gallant, a carpenter and mechanical engineer aided by an intern and technical assistant, puts everything together in less than three weeks on a materials budget of about \$2,700. “It’s fun to see him get a project and latch onto it,” says Stewart.

A particularly dazzling production was John Cariani’s *Love/Sick*, a play involving 12 different locations. “I didn’t want to have the audience suffer through stage hands constantly lugging things on and off the set,” she says. “Ted figured it out, making

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a turntable with three rooms. If we were at a bigger theater, we'd have a whole hydraulic system, but we don't. There was this huge bicycle wheel with a chain that went the circumference of a 14-foot circle, and then it went over to the side. He used gears so that a person could stand and crank the whole thing around. When the turntable reached a specific position, a light would go on so you knew you were at one of the places to stop." All of this from the hardware store. "Very basic stage mechanics," Stewart says. "Lever and pulley, really ingenious."

## FROM THE STAGE UP

Every set is a uniquely designed thing. It's not "something that comes out of a book," and there is no place to go and say, "OK, that's the set." It involves a collaborative team that comes together to build a bespoke production exactly for Portland Stage.

Before anything can be done design-wise, Stewart has to come to a meeting of minds with the director. Some are inspiring and can "take what you have and make it more." Director Paul Mullins does this for Stewart. Working together on *Center of Gravity* and *Red*, they were able to create "a world that felt right for the plays and the action that needed to happen, with a cleanness where things were able to move seamlessly."

Much of design is in the transitions. Some favorites include *Intimate Apparel*, *Dinner with Friends*, *Hidden Tennessee*, *Arcadia*, and *Rough Crossing*. Each had "a different and unique solution, but the full space felt unified within the design." Most of these involved "very interactive spaces with the light—things would move through a dappled light that was very compelling." Stewart looks for things that "can morph and change from one place or one thing into another and feel natural rather than like a lot of work."

She engages talented lighting designers to add visual voltage, notably Greg Carville, Bryon Winn, and, occasionally, Christopher Akerlind, who shared the directorship of Portland Stage with her when she first came in the 1996-'97 season.

What gives Stewart nightmares is when there are multiple locations and lots of specific activities with furniture or props that actors are required to use. Some shows that demand everything to be present in a scene, but then, just as whimsically, it has to disappear. "People in cars are really hard, too," she says. "They are station-



ary, sitting—so, not much action, but you have to figure out how to suggest the car—a steering wheel, just a box, a little flat cut-out or a full hood of a vehicle. Each comes with its own challenges.”

The puzzle, as Stewart sees it, is to determine how to get multiple worlds playing at once, working with projections, light, and more sculptural space—and then you get those moments when you are part of something truly magical and everybody feels it. “It’s like no other feeling—you know you’ve experienced a great event. It’s why people run marathons or go to hear great music. It just touches you in a real way.”

### SETTING ROOTS

Stewart has grown from “needing and wanting that” into recognizing that she is “connecting, not just to a group of artists but to a community.” An audience that compels her to live here. “Connectivity is what Portland gave me.”

Stewart and her husband, the actor and director Ron Botting, live on O’Brion Street, steps from the Eastern Promenade. They have a son and a daughter. Stewart’s home studio is a pleasantly chaotic space with glowing original pine floors.

Being a mother inspired her to take an active role in education programs. She spearheaded the popular “Play Me A Story,” Portland Stage’s school outreach program now active in all Portland schools, K-12. “The impact of how we approach putting a play together can have an enormous effect on kids. Trying to collaborate and find meaning in a text—that is exactly what they need.” Ditto for imagery that takes you to the heart of a story. “Meaning comes from how you say words, not just what words you say.” ■

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