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Making the stage a home is SCR scenic designer's specialty



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By Michael Miller
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If Tony Fanning could get a roof over the head of Forrest Gump and the president of the United States, then three squabbling Cape Cod sisters should pose little problem.

Fanning, the scenic designer for South Coast Repertory's new play, "Of Good Stock," has a lengthy track record in the entertainment business. Among his film credits, in addition to the [Tom Hanks](#) classic, are "Spider-Man," "Amistad," "Harold & Kumar Escape from Guantanamo Bay" and the TV series "The West Wing," for which he shared a 1999 Emmy for Outstanding Art Direction for a Single Camera Series.

For "Of Good Stock," Fanning, an SCR collaborator in the past, got to delve into his own memories: Three decades ago, he spent two seasons doing summer theater in Cape Cod. He got an assist from playwright Melissa Ross, who plied him with photos of her own home on the Massachusetts coastline.

Last week, as a hard-hat crew constructed the set on the Segerstrom Stage, Fanning spoke with the Daily Pilot about his history as an art director — and where that massive tree on the right side of the stage came from. The following are excerpts from the conversation:

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Did you listen to the song "Old Cape Cod" by Patti Page over and over for inspiration?

[laughs] No, I didn't, but I should look that one up.

There's really a flavor to East Coast architecture that you don't get on the West Coast, wouldn't you agree?

Yes, most definitely. And we tried to capture that. We're doing kind of colonial — you know, a renovated colonial-style home.

But part of the challenge of the show is that Melissa's piece

goes back and forth between interior and exterior and day and night. There's a pier outside the house, and then there's a roadside scene, so you have to kind of get all of that onstage and be able to also have a full interior that's where the main part of the show takes place. So that was a big challenge for us, to figure out how that all happened.

How many houses would you say you've designed over the years for different plays — or movies, television, everything else you've done?

A lot. I would say more than 100, probably more like 250, maybe. And I've done some really great ones — like, I worked on the Gump house when I was an assistant early in my film career, and then later I did another movie called "What Lies Beneath," and that's similar architecture to what we're doing here, on a lakefront. And I did a remake of "Straw Dogs," where we built the whole house, and so I've done quite a bit of them.

I would imagine when you tell people you worked on "Forrest Gump," that's probably a great conversation starter.

Yes, always is.

So you worked on his childhood home in Alabama?

Yeah. That was — they found a location in Beaufort, S.C., that had the tree-lined drive that they really wanted, and then they built the house where Bob [Zemeckis], the director, wanted it to be in relation to those trees. So it was pretty great, a great experience.

Speaking of designing buildings, you got an Emmy about 15 years ago for working on "The West Wing." What was that process like, re-creating the White House for a TV show?

That was a good experience. It was a director who had worked on "ER," so he really wanted to get the same feeling that they had in "ER" into the White House, like the moving-on-your-feet camera with people walking, talking, that kind of idea. So we took the West Wing and we basically opened it up so you could kind of see from space to space. And that was kind of what made that series and that set work the way that it did, [that] it was so flexible in terms of moving from one space to the next, which the real West Wing is not. *[laughs]*

And everybody thinks the West Wing is kind of a really glamorous place to be, but it's not really. It's kind of — a lot of the folks work down in the basement and have no windows, and it's not very comfortable, and they're all kind of crammed in there.

Let's talk a little about your entertainment career. There are probably any number of kids who dream about being actors; they dream about being directors, screenwriters. Tell me about art directors. What fueled that passion for you when you were a kid?

My dad was a contractor, and ... I kind of grew up around construction, contractors. My grandfather was an electrical contractor, so I grew up kind of around it. And it was a natural. When I got involved in theater and entertainment, it was a natural thing for me to do, because I was familiar with it. And then I studied a little bit of architecture and got into stage design, which naturally led into art

directing for film and television.

It wasn't something I aspired to do, art direction or film or television. I kind of wanted to just be a theater kid. But the draw was so strong that I was able to kind of make a whole career out of it and still keep doing theater on the side. Not on the side, but in between, I guess you could say.

One thing that's true of any artist is that they make a lot of subtle choices that the viewer or the audience might not necessarily pick up on. Tell me about some of those choices that you make as an art director. When you're designing a set like the one for "Of Good Stock," what are some of the factors that go into what color something might be, where a chair might be positioned, something like that?

Well, for stage design, a lot of positioning of furniture and how the set sits on the stage are based on some of the sight lines. This is a difficult theater to work in because the sightlines are rather wide, and the proscenium opening is wide. A lot of times, I base it on the characters and any information that the playwright or the director wants to bring to the table. ...

I think it's very easy to just do a beautiful showroom version of this style home, and we looked at a lot of those photographs of all those old showroom-like homes, but we want this to be a little bit more real and more personal, so right now, I'm just kind of getting into the finishing touches that kind of help make it look a little more personal to who the family really is and try and tell some more intricacies of their background and some history of who they are.

Speaking of personal touches, I understand the tree that you have on stage is from [SCR artistic director] Marc Masterson's yard. Is that correct?

[laughs] Yes, you have all the information, don't you?

How did that come to be used in the play?

Well, Marc wanted to get rid of it, and we needed a tree as a starting framework. So I went over and looked at it and decided that part of it was the right size for the show, that it would fit and it was the right shape for our stage. So we went over and cut down those pieces with the help of tree guys, and we reassembled it sort of the same way, but we're adding to it and making it slightly different. And it will be a different kind of tree altogether. We're using the kind of base of it for our framework.

What's going to happen to the tree after the play?

I think it will probably be cut up for firewood.



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