

Making Props for Community Theatre

Revised June 2015

By Jim Scott

1711 Habwood Lane

Henrico VA 23238

Community theatre relies on volunteers, and many of the jobs that need to be done don't require dramatic training. For these jobs, what's important is experience as an audience member. You need to know how a play looks to the audience - what they notice, and what they don't notice. In the past nine years I've provided props for a number of plays. Before that I had never even been backstage at a theatre. What follows are brief descriptions of some of the more interesting props I've been called upon to supply. Perhaps you'll be encouraged to try your hand at props in community theatre. All it takes is eagerness, the willingness to use whatever skills you already have, and a little problem-solving creativity.

All opinions expressed herein are my own, and not those of any theatre or any other person.

Technically, a prop is anything on stage that an actor touches, other than the set or costumes. As you'll see later, some items fall into a gray area, such as a lamp, which is usually considered part of the set, or a pocket-watch, which might be treated as a costume item.

Props are acquired in several ways:

- The theatre may already have what's needed, from a previous play.
- The prop might be scrounged from a friend, a relative, a cast member, a business, or another theatre.
- It might have to be made by the props designer (who thereby *earns* the title).
- As a last resort, it might have to be purchased, preferably at a thrift store.

In the following examples from 21 plays at five Richmond area community theatres, I emphasize mostly props that had to be made. They're grouped by play, chronologically. As you read, try to keep a community theatre perspective. A salaried props designer for a large professional theatre is likely to have access to a professional workshop and a sizeable budget. The examples presented here are from low-budget community theatre, where the process is arguably more fun.

***Fools* - February 2-12, 2006**

In February 2006, I acted in my first stage play. It was Neil Simon's comedy *Fools*¹, about a little Russian village whose inhabitants were under a curse of foolishness. The venue was the newly-opened Jewish Family Theatre in Richmond's Jewish Community Center. I had a small part as Mishkin, the postman. In one scene, I delivered what the script described as "an urgent letter". Somebody gave me a piece of paper or a little white envelope to use. I thought it might be better for a comic mailman to have a humorous-looking letter to deliver. At home I found a larger-than-normal envelope, manila-colored. I found an image of an old Russian postage stamp, printed it larger-than-life on my computer, and glued it onto the envelope. Instead of an address on the envelope, I printed Cyrillic characters that might look like they spelled "URGENT" from a distance, and glued that on the envelope as well. This was the "urgent letter" I delivered onstage. It was my first prop.

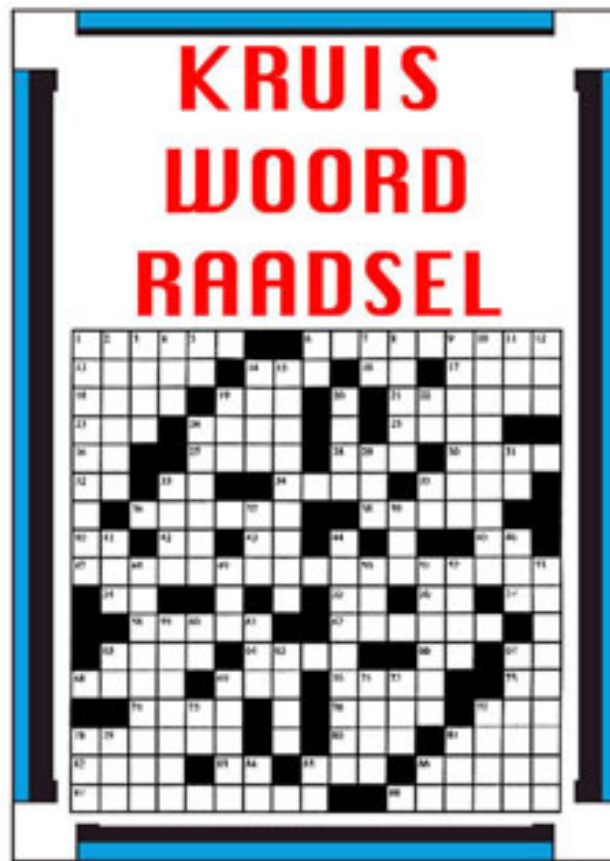


¹ Directed by Sheryle Criswell

The Diary of Anne Frank - May 11-21, 2006

The first play for which I was actually in charge of props was *The Diary of Anne Frank*², again at the Jewish Family Theatre. This was my first experience with food props. Besides the meals that the family ate in their hideaway attic, there was a scene in which Anne's older sister Margot becomes angry and begins throwing potatoes. I had to keep the stage crew supplied with enough potatoes for each performance. After the show, potato pieces had to be found and removed from the stage.

But there were more interesting props. In one scene, Anne gives Margot a crossword puzzle book as a Christmas present. Since the Franks were Dutch, we didn't want a book with English on the cover, so I had to make one with a Dutch cover. Using computer graphics (Photoshop), I designed a cover with a crossword diagram and the Dutch words for "cross", "word", and "puzzle": namely, "kruis", "woord", and "raadsel".

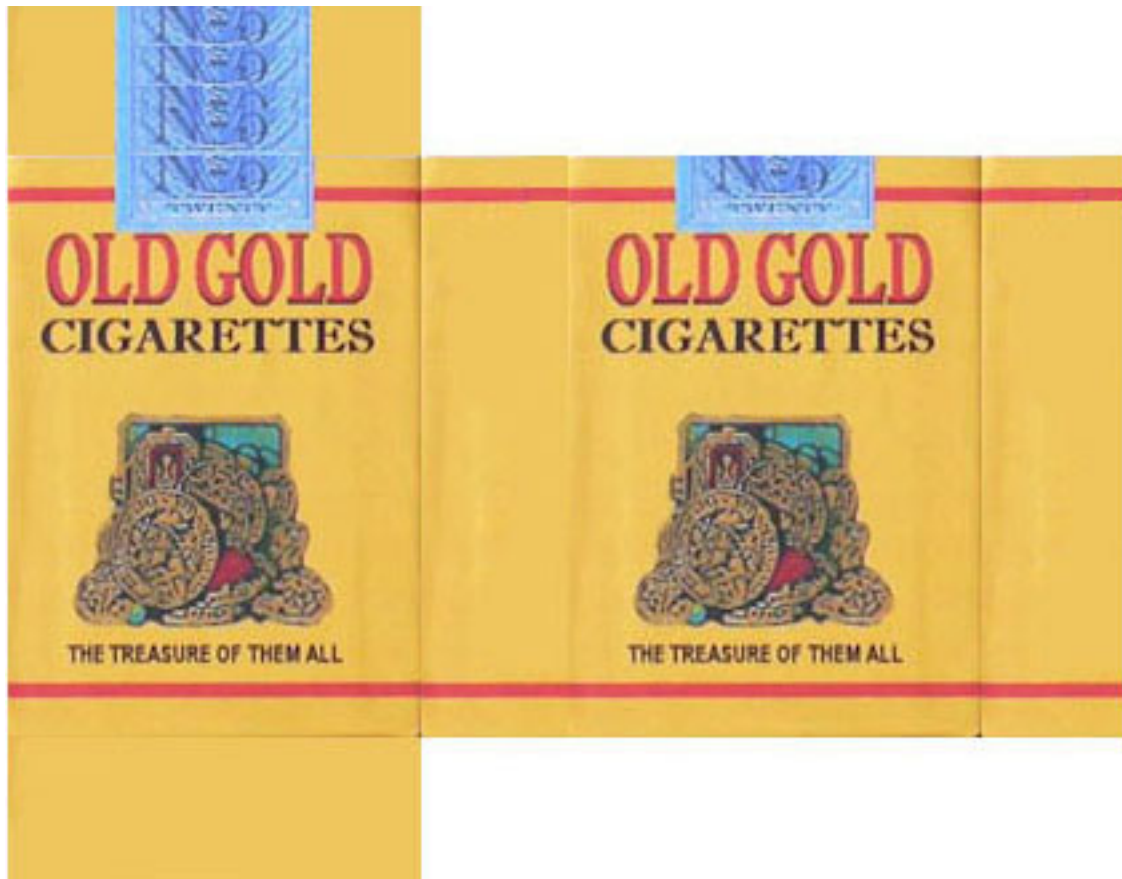


(In retrospect, I should have used the actual Dutch term "kruiswoordpuzzel".)

I put this together with a blank back cover and about 1/4 inch of blank paper in the middle, and glued the spine to hold it together.

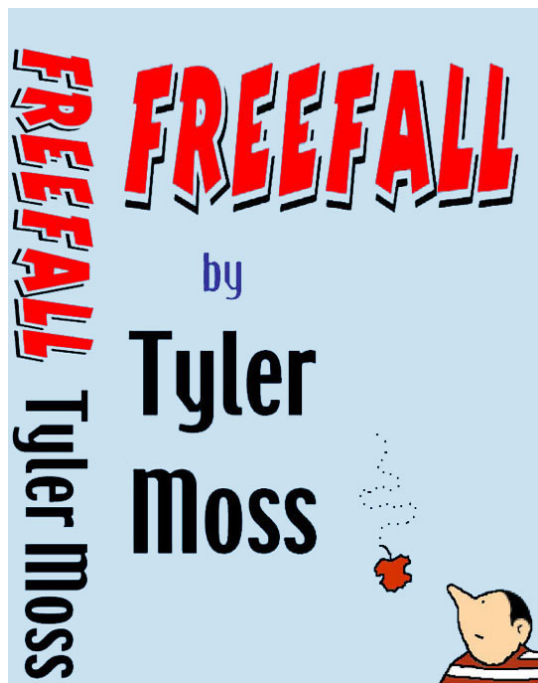
² Adapted by Frances Goodrich and Albert Hackett, directed by Sheryle Criswell

We also needed a pack of cigarettes. I figured they could have been American cigarettes, but they needed to be something that existed in the 1940s. On the Web I found an image of a pack of Old Gold cigarettes. With Photoshop, I expanded this into the six surfaces of a pack and printed it as a single piece of cardstock that could be folded into a pack. I cut a rectangular slab of Styrofoam as filler, wrapped the folded cover around it, and fastened it all together.



***Crossing Delancey* - November 1-12, 2006**

*Crossing Delancey*³ at the Jewish Family Theatre was set largely in a bookstore. I was able to use computer graphics for several items. We needed a display of several copies of a new book on sale, so I designed a book cover and printed several copies to put on various books of the same size and shape.



There was also a need for an ID card for a deliveryman. Almost anything shaped like an ID card would have worked, but I had some fun designing an ID card with a photo of me when I was in college. I printed it on card stock with the same image on both sides, and laminated it.



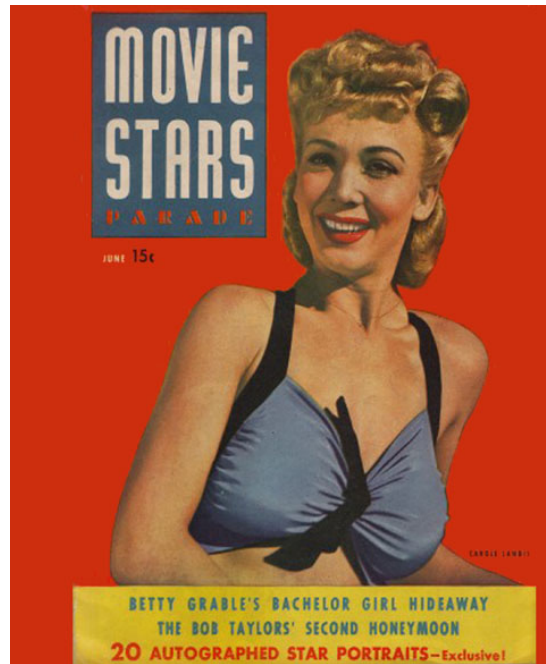
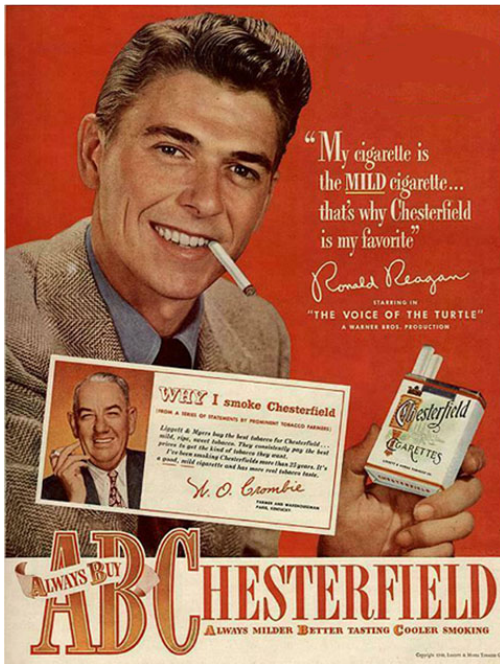
³ By Susan Sandler, directed by Alan Jay Criswell

In addition, the script called for a chocolate cake. It would not be eaten - it would just be used as a visual prop. So to avoid spoilage, I made a fake cake. This was my first venture into making a fake food prop, and it was barely acceptable. I started with a cylindrical box and used a spatula to spread on some fake brown icing. I then sprayed it with a clear gloss to make it shiny.



***Lost in Yonkers* - February 1-11, 2007**

*Lost in Yonkers*⁴ at the Jewish Family Theatre was set in the 1940s. One prop we needed was a movie magazine. Actual magazines from that era are not impossible to find, but we needed one that would still look new. Even if we had found such an item, it would probably have cost a large fraction of the props budget available. So I made one, using a front cover and a back cover retrieved separately from the Internet.



⁴ Written by Neil Simon, directed by Sheryle Criswell

***The Night Thoreau Spent in Jail* - September 20-October 13, 2007**

One of the strangest props I ever had to come up with was for *The Night Thoreau Spent in Jail*⁵, the first of two plays I worked on at the new Henley Street Theatre. We needed a chicken wearing gloves! (According to the script, Thoreau put gloves onto chickens to keep them from trampling flowers.) It was deemed acceptable that the chicken could be inanimate; using a live chicken would have been a disaster for sure. However, it would need to look reasonably realistic. I considered the idea of making one, but I had no clue as to how to proceed.

Fortunately, the Internet once again came to the rescue. I found a company⁶ that offered life-like models of various animals, and I ordered a chicken for \$30. It was rather lightweight, and probably had a Styrofoam core. But the feathers appeared to be real.

Then there were the gloves. Where does one find ready-made chicken gloves? This required a handcrafted solution. Even with my meager knowledge of sewing, I was able to cut four pieces of brown felt, sew each pair together with carpet thread, turn them inside out, and force them onto the chicken's feet.



⁵ Written by Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee, directed by Alex Previterra

⁶ <http://www.thisplaceisazoo.com/>

***The Spanish Tragedy* - January 10-February 2, 2008**

Although *The Spanish Tragedy*⁷ at the Henley Street Theatre was set in modern times, we needed minimalistic crowns for two of the characters, the King of Spain and the viceroy. Technically, crowns are costume items, not props, but they seemed too much to ask of the costume designer. Crowns can be purchased locally, but they're gaudy plastic things suitable for high school farces. So I created a couple of crowns that, although they looked crude close up, met the requirement of looking okay from a distance.



This was my first foray into metal craft. I bought some sheet aluminum from a hobby shop, and a pop rivet gun at a hardware store. I had never used pop rivets before, so I practiced on some scrap. The actors gave me their head measurements, and I made patterns on paper. I cut the aluminum with tin snips, drilled holes, and put in the rivets. I glued on some fake jewels, and put in a narrow pad that would be invisible when the crown was worn. The second photo shows the King of Spain⁸ in costume backstage.

More aluminum work was called for when I made a "badge of office" for Hieronimo⁹. I cut the eight-pointed "star" out of aluminum, with extra width so I could fold back each of the edges. This made for crisp, but not too sharp, edges, and added some apparent thickness. Then I glued a gold-colored decoration onto the center of the star.

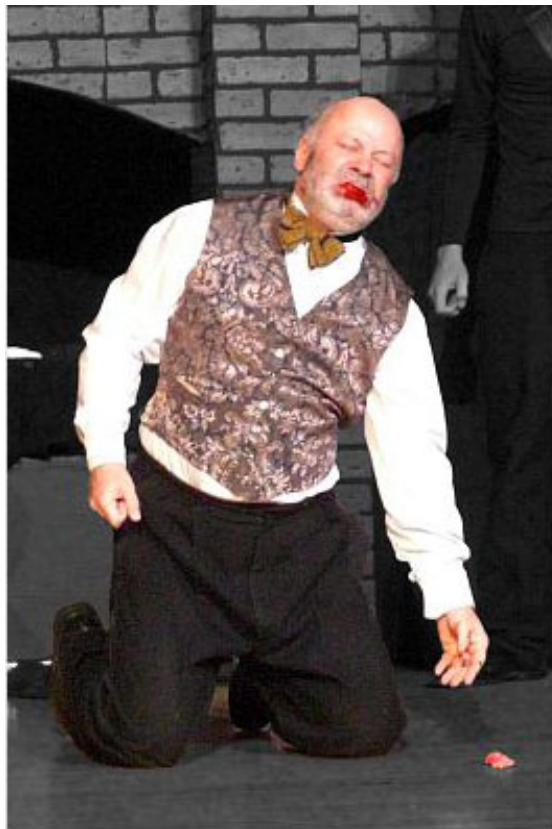
⁷ Written by Thomas Kyd, directed by John-Michael MacDonald

⁸ Played by Ken Moretti

⁹ Played by Frank Creasy



At the end of the play, Hieronimo cuts his tongue out. The blood was simply a capsule of edible fake blood from the local costume and prop shop¹⁰. The severed tongue? Silly Putty.



¹⁰ Premiere Costumes, 3339 W Cary Street

All My Sons - January 21-February 7, 2009

In each performance of *All My Sons*¹¹ at Chamberlayne Actors Theatre (CAT), a small apple tree gets knocked down by the wind, dragged backstage, and discarded. A friend who lives on a rural property let me cut down a weed tree and take it home. It wasn't an apple tree, but this was winter and it didn't have leaves anyway. It was about five feet tall, with a trunk about one inch in diameter, and with branches that grew more up than out, so it wouldn't take up too much space on the stage. The set crew made a mechanical arrangement that would hold the tree upright, but would allow it to be "snapped off by the wind".

It remained to convert it into an *apple* tree by adding leaves and apples. It was easy enough to buy several small decorative fake apples at a craft store¹² and tie them on with floral wire. For the leaves, I bought a roll of green duct tape. To make each leaf, I cut about six inches of floral wire and about five inches of green duct tape. I put one end of the wire down the middle of half of the length of duct tape, then folded the tape over on the wire so the edges of the tape met. I pressed the whole thing flat, then cut the duct tape into the shape of an apple leaf. (The photo shows a real apple leaf. It has a shape that was easy to cut with scissors.) I made hundreds of leaves and attached them with the wire to the tree branches. This was a prop that needed occasional maintenance, because the tree got some ill treatment at every performance, and sometimes a few leaves and apples needed to be reattached.



¹¹Written by Arthur Miller, directed by Sheryle Criswell

¹² Michaels, 9856 W. Broad Street

[illegible]

***Radium Girls* - March 26-April 11, 2010**

*Radium Girls*¹⁴ is about a number of young women who, in the 1920s, were hired to paint watches and instrument dials with radium paint to make the numbers on the dials glow in the dark. The production at Chamberlayne Actors Theatre¹⁵ presented a number of opportunities for a props designer. One of the grossest props ever created was a specimen of human jawbone that had been eaten away by cancer (caused by a girl using her lips and tongue to tip her paint brushes).



The first problem was finding some bone. (I could have just used something that *looked like* bone, but nothing came to mind.) My wife and I are vegetarians, so there was none around the house. At a grocery store, I asked a butcher if he had any scrap bone. Not wanting to miss a sale, he told me to buy a piece of soup bone. This soup bone was about three inches long and the same distance wide, and looked like a section out of a cow's femur. I boiled it to make it as sterile as possible, and then considered how to get a smaller piece out of it. In the end, I had to whack it repeatedly with a chisel and small sledge hammer. Eventually a large but usable piece split off. I put it into a pickle jar, using a suitably-shaped piece of plastic to hold the bone vertical (more for the sake of visibility than because it looked natural). I then added weak tea to simulate a preservative fluid, and added a hand-written label. The second photo shows the dentist Dr. Knef¹⁶ examining the specimen.

Also in the category of gross props was an X-ray of a cancer-ridden jaw. A dentist was kind enough to give me an old X-ray of an anonymous patient with serious dental problems. I scanned it and augmented it with Photoshop, then had it printed on a transparency at a copy shop¹⁷.

¹⁴ Written by D. W. Gregory

¹⁵ Directed by Amy Berlin

¹⁶ Played by Jonathan Hardison

¹⁷ Staples, 1530 N. Parham Road



Actually, the areas eaten away would have been black, not white, but sometimes the need for visual impact overcomes scientific accuracy.

Several newspapers were needed, as in *All My Sons*:

NEW YORK EVENING GRAPHIC
DECEMBER 4, 1927

Pan American Airways Opens For Business



Minor Gladgrind walked home from the school, in a state of considerable satisfaction. It was his school, and he intended it to be a model. He intended every child in it to be a model - just as the young Gladgrinds were all models.

There were five young Gladgrinds, and they were models every one. They had been born in a house, and from that house, as soon as they could run alone, they had been made to run in the garden room. The first object with which they had been associated, or of which they had a remembrance, was a large black horse with a dry clip, chugging ghastly white figures on it.

Not that they knew, by name or nature, anything about an Open Clip horse. I only use the word to express a more

little Gladgrind had ever heard the silly jingle, Twinkle, twinkle, little star, how I wonder what you are? No little Gladgrind had ever known wonder on the subject, each little Gladgrind having at five years old dismissed the Great Bear like a Professor Owen, and driven Charles's Wain like a locomotive engine-driver. No little Gladgrind had ever known wonder on the subject, each little Gladgrind having at five years old dismissed the Great Bear like a Professor Owen, and driven Charles's Wain like a locomotive engine-driver. No little Gladgrind had ever known wonder on the subject, each little Gladgrind having at five years old dismissed the Great Bear like a Professor Owen, and driven Charles's Wain like a locomotive engine-driver.

There were five young Gladgrinds, and they were models every one. They had been born in a house, and from that house, as soon as they could run alone, they had been made to run in the garden room. The first object with which they had been associated, or of which they had a remembrance, was a large black horse with a dry clip, chugging ghastly white figures on it.

Not that they knew, by name or nature, anything about an Open Clip horse. I only use the word to express a more

DECEMBER 4, 1927

Calling Europe; Transatlantic Phone Calls Now Possible



little Gladgrind had ever heard the silly jingle, Twinkle, twinkle, little star, how I wonder what you are? No little Gladgrind had ever known wonder on the subject, each little Gladgrind having at five years old dismissed the Great Bear like a Professor Owen, and driven Charles's Wain like a locomotive engine-driver. No little Gladgrind had ever known wonder on the subject, each little Gladgrind having at five years old dismissed the Great Bear like a Professor Owen, and driven Charles's Wain like a locomotive engine-driver.

There were five young Gladgrinds, and they were models every one. They had been born in a house, and from that house, as soon as they could run alone, they had been made to run in the garden room. The first object with which they had been associated, or of which they had a remembrance, was a large black horse with a dry clip, chugging ghastly white figures on it.

Not that they knew, by name or nature, anything about an Open Clip horse. I only use the word to express a more

NEW YORK EVENING GRAPHIC
FIVE CENTS
DECEMBER 4, 1927

Radium Workers Feel Slow Death



little Gladgrind had ever heard the silly jingle, Twinkle, twinkle, little star, how I wonder what you are? No little Gladgrind had ever known wonder on the subject, each little Gladgrind having at five years old dismissed the Great Bear like a Professor Owen, and driven Charles's Wain like a locomotive engine-driver. No little Gladgrind had ever known wonder on the subject, each little Gladgrind having at five years old dismissed the Great Bear like a Professor Owen, and driven Charles's Wain like a locomotive engine-driver.

There were five young Gladgrinds, and they were models every one. They had been born in a house, and from that house, as soon as they could run alone, they had been made to run in the garden room. The first object with which they had been associated, or of which they had a remembrance, was a large black horse with a dry clip, chugging ghastly white figures on it.

Not that they knew, by name or nature, anything about an Open Clip horse. I only use the word to express a more

NEW YORK EVENING GRAPHIC
FIVE CENTS
DECEMBER 4, 1927

Floods Hurt Mississippi



little Gladgrind had ever heard the silly jingle, Twinkle, twinkle, little star, how I wonder what you are? No little Gladgrind had ever known wonder on the subject, each little Gladgrind having at five years old dismissed the Great Bear like a Professor Owen, and driven Charles's Wain like a locomotive engine-driver. No little Gladgrind had ever known wonder on the subject, each little Gladgrind having at five years old dismissed the Great Bear like a Professor Owen, and driven Charles's Wain like a locomotive engine-driver.

There were five young Gladgrinds, and they were models every one. They had been born in a house, and from that house, as soon as they could run alone, they had been made to run in the garden room. The first object with which they had been associated, or of which they had a remembrance, was a large black horse with a dry clip, chugging ghastly white figures on it.

Not that they knew, by name or nature, anything about an Open Clip horse. I only use the word to express a more

NEW YORK EVENING GRAPHIC
FIVE CENTS
DECEMBER 4, 1927

Influenza Kills 1,000 Each Week in United Kingdom



little Gladgrind had ever heard the silly jingle, Twinkle, twinkle, little star, how I wonder what you are? No little Gladgrind had ever known wonder on the subject, each little Gladgrind having at five years old dismissed the Great Bear like a Professor Owen, and driven Charles's Wain like a locomotive engine-driver. No little Gladgrind had ever known wonder on the subject, each little Gladgrind having at five years old dismissed the Great Bear like a Professor Owen, and driven Charles's Wain like a locomotive engine-driver.

There were five young Gladgrinds, and they were models every one. They had been born in a house, and from that house, as soon as they could run alone, they had been made to run in the garden room. The first object with which they had been associated, or of which they had a remembrance, was a large black horse with a dry clip, chugging ghastly white figures on it.

Not that they knew, by name or nature, anything about an Open Clip horse. I only use the word to express a more

NEW YORK EVENING GRAPHIC
FIVE CENTS
DECEMBER 4, 1927

Ford Switches Gears, Starts Model A



little Gladgrind had ever heard the silly jingle, Twinkle, twinkle, little star, how I wonder what you are? No little Gladgrind had ever known wonder on the subject, each little Gladgrind having at five years old dismissed the Great Bear like a Professor Owen, and driven Charles's Wain like a locomotive engine-driver. No little Gladgrind had ever known wonder on the subject, each little Gladgrind having at five years old dismissed the Great Bear like a Professor Owen, and driven Charles's Wain like a locomotive engine-driver.

There were five young Gladgrinds, and they were models every one. They had been born in a house, and from that house, as soon as they could run alone, they had been made to run in the garden room. The first object with which they had been associated, or of which they had a remembrance, was a large black horse with a dry clip, chugging ghastly white figures on it.

Not that they knew, by name or nature, anything about an Open Clip horse. I only use the word to express a more

This production blurred the line between props and lighting because the action on stage was augmented with images projected onto flat areas just above the stage. I provided these images using both straight photography and computer graphics. They included newspaper headlines, clock faces, tombstones, and this picture of an apparently radioactive hairbrush.



I photographed the brush at a consignment store¹⁸ where I sometimes buy props. In this case, they were nice enough to let me take a picture without buying anything. Then I enhanced the image in Photoshop to make it seem to glow.

¹⁸ The Attic, in Gayton Crossing Shopping Center

***The Fiddler's House* - January 21-February 6, 2011**

The toughest prop needed for *The Fiddler's House*¹⁹ at Chamberlayne Actors Theatre was an IV stand with IV bags and tubing. I started with the assumption that I'd be able to borrow an actual IV stand from a medical facility somewhere, but no such luck. Anyway, modern IV stands are complicated affairs, with built-in electronics. Props usually need to be as simple as possible to avoid being distracting. In the end, I built one. I used a discarded shower curtain rod as the pole. I built a simple wooden base and painted it white. For the hooks at the top, I simply bent strong wire and attached it near the top of the pole.

The IV bags turned out to be easy. I went to a local drug store²⁰ and asked. The pharmacist gave me two out-of-date saline bags that she happened to have in the back room.

In this production, lighting for this scene²¹ was such that the IV stand was in the shadows, and its details didn't matter.



¹⁹ Written and directed by Sheryle Criswell

²⁰ Westbury Pharmacy, 8903 Three Chopt Road

²¹ The actors are Akin Smith and Deidre Jones.

Almost, Maine - March 25-April 10, 2011

*Almost, Maine*²² at Chamberlayne Actors Theatre called for a number of beer cans, specifically Budweiser and Natural Light. Actual alcohol isn't allowed on stage, so beer cans would have to have been emptied and perhaps filled with water or another non-alcoholic beverage. But this isn't an option if the can is to be opened on stage - the audience must hear the pop and the fizz. In that case, the only option is to use a soda can covered with a label that makes it look like a beer can.

I created Budweiser and Natural Light labels, starting with one actual empty can of each. I used tin snips to cut off the tops and bottoms of the cans, leaving only the cylinder part. Then I cut this vertically along a strip where there was no design, and flattened the cylinder to make a flat rectangle. (It was necessary to make some little snips along the top edge, where the top of the can had been, to get it to flatten.) I scanned this aluminum rectangle, then used Photoshop to touch up the many little flaws introduced by the physical manipulation of the metal. At this point I had an image file for each of the two beer brands, ready for printing.

I printed copies of each label on glossy photo paper, resulting in a reasonably sturdy and shiny surface. Shiny objects are generally avoided on stage, because the spotlights would reflect off of them. But that's mostly a problem only for flat objects. Beer cans aren't flat, and besides, they have to be shiny to look real.



The labels were ready to be applied to actual cans, either empty or unopened. Most canned beverages have some printing on the tapered part just under the lid, and the cylindrical labels would not cover this. So I used a flexible white plastic tape to cover that part of the can.

²² Written by John Cariani, directed by Amy Berlin

Then I wrapped the label snugly around the can and fastened it where it (just barely) overlapped, using a flexible clear plastic tape. Using this method, rather than gluing the label to the can, allowed the label to be reused on another can if necessary. In fact, in *Almost, Maine*, several Natural Light cans are crushed. The labels withstood this pretty well, deforming with the crushed cans, but springing back to life when removed from the cans later.

The photo above shows, from left to right, a simulated Budweiser can, a real Budweiser can, a simulated Natural Light can, and a real Natural Light can.

***Home Fires* - October 21-November 5, 2011**

*Home Fires*²³ at Chamberlayne Actors Theatre called for a movie magazine, which I put together with Photoshop using images from the Web. Since this magazine would have high visibility, I created the inside of the cover as well as the outside.



I filled the inside with newspaper pages trimmed to fit.

Another prop we needed was an unbreakable 78 rpm photograph record. (I won't go into *why* it needed to be unbreakable.) It's easy enough to find 78 rpm records in thrift shops,

²³ Written by Jack Heifner, directed by Toni Cacioppo

but they *are* inherently fragile. The set designer²⁴ helped me out by making a disk of unbreakable black vinyl of the correct diameter and thickness. I drilled a hole in the center and used sandpaper with circular movements to simulate the grooves, leaving the usual clear spaces near the outside edge and outside the label in the center. Then I glued onto the center of each side a label that I had created by scanning an actual 78 rpm record and printing it on photo paper.



The first photo shows a real 78 rpm record on the right, and the simulated one on the left.

²⁴ Lin Heath

***Why Torture Is Wrong* - November 10-December 4, 2011**

I was asked on short notice to do props for *Why Torture Is Wrong (And the People Who Love Them)*²⁵ at the Firehouse Theatre Project. I had to scramble for a couple of weeks to get it all done.

This play called for a number of strange props. A ball gag was purchased online. There were numerous weapons - I was able to borrow these from another theatre²⁶. I simulated a bottle of Mace spray by buying a little pump spray bottle at a craft shop²⁷ and wrapping a label around it that I created with Photoshop.



(See *Catfish Moon*, below, to see what the bottle itself looked like.)

We also needed severed body parts for a sort of torture dream sequence that turns out not to have really happened. In other words, the character survives intact. I got some flesh-colored clay at the same craft shop, a kind that could be baked lightly to harden it somewhat. I painted the gory bits with red paint.



²⁵ Written by Christopher Durang, directed by Billy-Christopher Maupin

²⁶ The University of Richmond's Department of Theatre and Dance

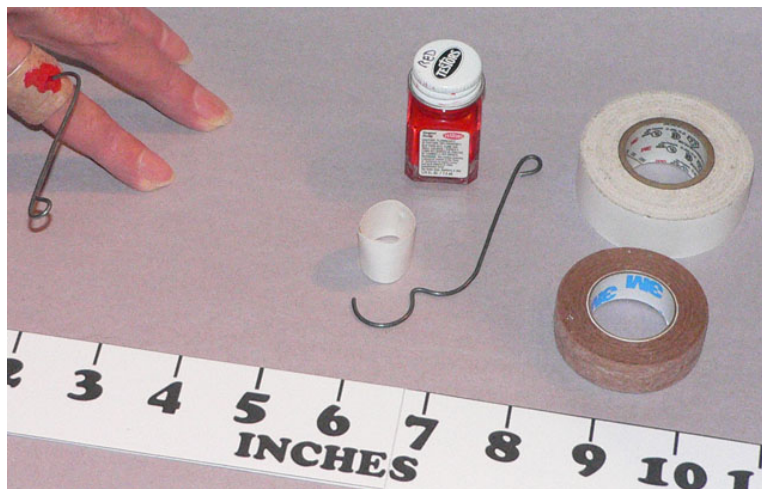
²⁷ Ben Franklin, now A. C. Moore, 8524 Patterson Avenue

***Catfish Moon* - May 18-June 3, 2012**

As each new play seems to do, *Catfish Moon*²⁸ at Chamberlayne Actors Theatre led to new experiences in providing props. But it also reused old ideas. We used the Budweiser beer can labels (see *Almost, Maine*) again. And for a bottle of "Off" bug spray, I used the same type of pump spray bottle that was needed in *Why Torture Is Wrong*, but with a different label this time.



In one scene, a character gets a fishhook stuck in his finger. I made a device out of bent wire, tape, and red paint, that could be easily slipped on and off of a finger.



In another scene, a piece of plywood is discovered. It turns out to be a handmade "No Swimming" sign that appears to have lain on the ground for years. To get this prop started, the set designer²⁹ provided me with a piece of plywood of the appropriate size and shape. I

²⁸ Written by Laddy Sartin, directed by Laurie Follmer

²⁹ Lin Heath

used a small sledge hammer to beat up the edges. Then I used a paint brush to apply a solution that makes wood look old and gray - steel wool marinated in vinegar overnight.



After letting it dry, I hand-painted the letters "NO SWIMMING" on it.

The prop that I had the most difficulty with was an urn for cremated remains. I don't have the skills to create such a thing, so I would have to borrow or buy one. Logically, no one was going to *lend* us a cremation urn! I found that the only way to buy such an urn would be to buy one retail; and even the cheapest ones were too expensive for our budget. In a case like this, I try to keep the idea of what we're looking for in the back of my mind as I go through the day, especially in stores. One day as I was browsing a local consignment store³⁰, I spotted several examples of what looked like cremation urns - a little smaller, but the right shape! They turned out to be *ginger jars*! I sent photos of those available to the director, and we decided to get the black one.



³⁰ The Attic, in Gayton Crossing Shopping Center

***The 13th of Paris* - January 18-February 3, 2013**

*The 13th of Paris*³¹ was one of the most captivating plays I've worked on. It was produced at CAT Theatre, previously known as Chamberlayne Actors Theatre. The one prop that symbolized it, at least for me, was the "bright orange watering can". Although the script calls for just one, we needed two for logistical reasons. Watering cans are available widely, but not the iconic kind, metal with a flared sprinkling head. I finally found two at an arts and craft store³² and eagerly snatched them up. They were bare galvanized metal, and intended more for decoration than for utility.



I caulked their inside seams to avoid leaking what little water we would actually use in them. All the bright orange spray paint I could find said "not for use on galvanized metal", but I used it anyway, with good results³³.



³¹ Written by Max Smart, directed by Amy Berlin

³² A. C. Moore, 8524 Patterson Avenue

³³ The watering can scene shows Amber Dale Boice as Annie, and Alex Ireys as Vincent.

***Play On!* - May 17-June 2, 2013**

*Play On!*³⁴ is, as its name implies, a play within a play. It was produced at CAT Theatre. The featured prop was a "sparkling necklace" with a large diamond-type central stone. I had noticed a perfect fake stone, about two inches long, for sale at another arts and craft store³⁵.



Beyond that, I had no idea how to make a necklace, except that I thought some kind of string would be involved. Fortunately, my new props sidekick at the time, Sandy Siler, is a whiz at stringing necklaces. She came up with a dandy.



In fact, she had to make several copies, all reinforced to withstand rough treatment.

³⁴ Written by Rick Abbot, directed by Amber dePass

³⁵ Michaels, 9856 W. Broad Street

***The Odd Couple (Female Version)* - October 25-November 9, 2013**

The Odd Couple (Female Version) ³⁶, as produced at CAT Theatre, was the most difficult play I've ever had to do props for. One reason is that it called for a coffee cup to be thrown and smashed in one scene, and ditto for a plate in another scene. Thus, we had to have a supply of breakable cups and dishes sufficient for every performance plus a number of rehearsals.

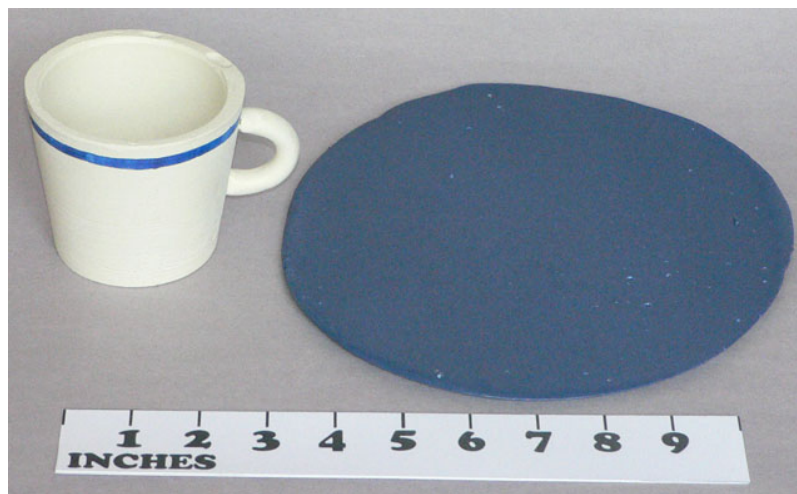
Certainly breakable prop dishes can be purchased, but that would have been much too expensive. After researching the process for making breakable stage glass from sugar, I decided to go with plaster of Paris. I bought some plaster in powder form and mixed up a batch. It was a liquid, and would require some kind of mold to create its shape while it dried.

For the plate, I poured the liquid plaster into a large shallow dish. When the plaster hardened, it was flat on top, curved on the bottom, thick in the middle and almost sharp at the outside edge. I sanded the edge to make it less sharp and to even out the inevitable irregularities.

For the cup, by trial and error I came up with a way to pour the liquid plaster into a large paper cup and then push a smaller paper cup down into the center of the liquid. It was hard to keep the smaller cup in the center, so there were many failures in which the upper edge of the resulting plaster cup was too thin on one side and too thick on the other.

The handle on the coffee cup was a different problem. It didn't necessarily have to be breakable itself, so I made the handles out of bakeable clay³⁷ and glued them on.

I painted the plates blue, and used a marker to put a blue stripe around the top of each cup.



³⁶ Written by Neil Simon, directed by Melissa Rayford

³⁷ The same kind of clay used for the severed body parts in *Why Torture Is Wrong*

The whole thing required many hours of workshop time.

Another major prop was a "Pure-A-Tron" air cleaner. In a thrift shop I found an inexpensive room humidifier. I glued all the parts together to make it a single unit that wouldn't fall apart, then painted the clear parts with silver paint. The fan motor still worked, so we could plug it in and get the fan noise if we wanted.



But perhaps the most troublesome prop of all in this play was the dark, smouldering roast capon, which was to be carried in on a platter while emitting smoke. My partner in props, Sandy Siler, made a wonderful fake burnt capon, hollow with an opening on the side away from the audience. We just had to figure a way to get smoke to come out.

There are many ways to make a stage scene generally smoky, but fewer ways to get smoke to come from a specific spot. Add the fact that the source of the smoke would be moving across stage, the restriction that we were not allowed to use anything that might produce an odor, and the fear of setting off the theatre smoke alarm - and it came down to dry ice.

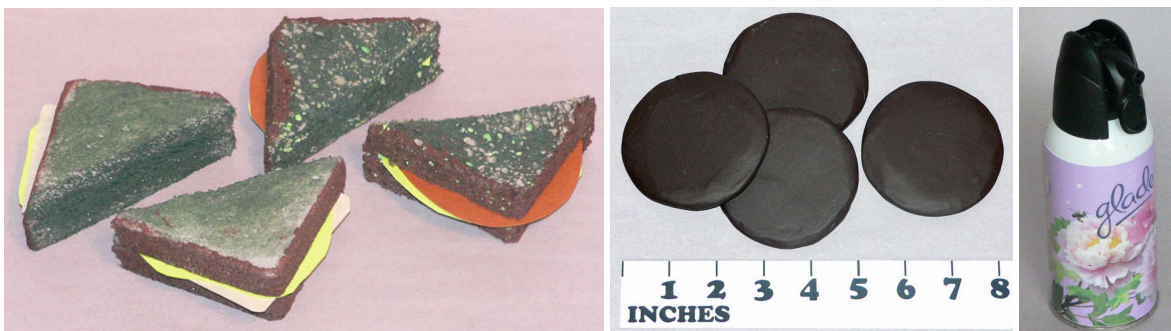
We put a little hidden bowl of water inside the fake capon. Just before the platter was to be brought onto stage, the stage crew would drop a small slab of dry ice into the water. That

immediately produces quantities of white carbon dioxide vapor. The movement of air around the platter stirs up the vapor to produce the visual effect of smoke³⁸.



The reason this was such a difficult prop, aside from the long thought process that brought us to using dry ice, was the requirement of having a supply of dry ice available for each performance. Dry ice will not last more than a few days in any cooler, no matter how much insulation you add. And forget about putting it into a refrigerator freezer, which is 109 degrees warmer than dry ice. Consequently, I had to obtain dry ice and bring it to the theatre once or twice every week.

Other interesting props in this play included spoiled sandwiches, brown coasters that "look like big chocolate mints", and spray can of room deodorizer:



Again, because we didn't want to produce any odor or real smoke, the room deodorizer was a can of compressed air³⁹ (intended for cleaning equipment such as computer keyboards) with a fake label.

³⁸ The actors are Alan Gropper and Donna Marie Miller.

³⁹ From Staples, 1530 N. Parham Road

Leaving Iowa - May 23-June 8, 2014

*Leaving Iowa*⁴⁰ at CAT Theatre used numerous props. Fortunately, many of them could be borrowed, or were simple to make. We needed a couple of smallish grocery carts⁴¹, a View Master with disks⁴², a unicycle⁴³, and many more. The script called for a "humongous, cement-block-size" Krispie Treat, not necessarily edible. My attempt to make one by painting a large piece of Styrofoam looked quite fake:



In the end, I think Sandy Siler made actual Krispie Treats, either one big one or several small ones fastened together, and then shellacked it so it wouldn't be sticky. (Sandy was in charge of set dressing for this production, but helped with this prop because she had the expertise required.)

Probably the strangest prop for this play was a wind chime made from "petrified Apache toenails", for sale in an Amish flea market. To make the toenails, I cut oblong shapes from a sheet of thin, flexible translucent plastic left over from a food container. I dabbed these with Goop brand adhesive and let it dry, for an irregular and generally gross look. Then I was able to assemble a wind chime using bits of wood, cord, and a length of aluminum tubing. A metal nut hung in the middle of the cord that went through the aluminum tube, to provide the actual chime sound.



⁴⁰ Written by Tim Clue & Spike Manton, directed by Amy Berlin

⁴¹ Borrowed from A. C. Moore, 8524 Patterson Avenue

⁴² Lent by Sandy Siler

⁴³ Borrowed from a friend by Sandy Siler

***Pump Boys and Dinettes* - July 11-27, 2014**

*Pump Boys and Dinettes*⁴⁴, produced by the Henrico Theatre Company at The Cultural Arts Center at Glen Allen, had an auto mechanic shop interior on one half of the stage, and the interior of a diner on the other. Consequently, there were numerous onstage items to conjure the feeling of auto repair or meal preparation. Many of these were provided by the set designer and crew, partly because an object that isn't handled by an actor isn't technically a prop, but mostly because the different specialties on the crew cooperatively cross each other's boundaries. I made fake fan belts for a wall rack (set decor), because I had a supply of black rubber tubing.



The script called for a working (!) Polaroid camera; which clearly would have to be acquired, not made. Fortunately, the director, Amy Perdue, had her own camera. But would film still be available for this old technology? The answer was "yes". I was able to buy eight-packs of Polaroid 600 film locally⁴⁵.



But the prop that was the most fun was the two pies that the two dinette ladies danced with. As a general rule, when you need to make a prop and don't know how to do it (or even when you need to acquire a prop and don't know where to find it), Google the name of the prop plus "prop" or "fake". It might help to include the name of the play. I did this after trying to make a fake pie crust with some leftover clay; it was unsuccessful because it cracked, and was too heavy anyway. When I researched fake pies on the web, I found a

website that recommended a material I had never heard of, Crayola Model Magic⁴⁶. Although it's not cheap, it worked very well for this application, resulting in a lightweight flexible crust. I colored the crust with a spray dye⁴⁷ and used caulk to make a white cream pie topping. For details, see my article "Making Fake Pies for HTC's July 2014 Production of *Pump Boys and Dinettes*"⁴⁸.

⁴⁴ Written by John Foley, Mark Hardwick, Debra Monk, Cass Morgan, John Schimmel, & Jim Wann; directed by Amy Perdue

⁴⁵ Richmond Camera, Carytown, 3128 W Cary Street

⁴⁶ From Michaels, 9856 W. Broad Street

⁴⁷ Tint It by Design Master, also from Michaels - the best color for this application is sepia.

⁴⁸ jkmscott.net/data/MakingFakePies.pdf

***Sherlock Holmes: The Final Adventure* - October 24-November 8, 2014**

Sherlock Holmes: The Final Adventure at CAT Theatre⁴⁹ was heavy with props. The most involved was the cylinder phonograph plus enough wax cylinders to allow for one to be crushed in each performance.

I quickly established that antique cylinder phonographs cost hundreds of dollars or more. Clearly no one would lend us one, and we couldn't afford to buy one. But as a prop, it didn't need to be operable; it just needed to look right. It was a fun project to shop around in craft stores and hardware stores, as well as my own accumulation of odds and ends, and find parts that could be put together to make a fake phonograph. A Google image search reveals that there were many types and models of cylinder phonographs, so the prop didn't need to look exactly like any one of them.

I made a wooden box and attached various objects of metal, plastic, rubber, and pasteboard. The final convincing touch was a realistic-looking "Edison Standard Phonograph" label. I found a good image of one online, printed it on photographic paper, cut it out, and applied it with double-sided tape. For details about how the phonograph was made, see my article "Making a Fake Cylinder Phonograph as a Prop"⁵⁰.



With the cylinders, even more so than with the phonograph itself, it was absolutely clear that we would not be crushing real phonographic cylinders. So I would have to make them, enough for every performance plus at least the last several rehearsals.

I easily found images and dimensions for phonographic cylinders online, but I didn't find a lot of applicable advice about how to fake them. So I began experimenting. The first thing I needed was a supply of black wax. I searched the usual stores for either black wax as such, or for black wax dye. (I thought about just using black candles, but I suspected that they might not be black all the way through.) The only solution I found was bags of black wax chips, available at only one store⁵¹. Then after a great deal of experimentation, I came up

⁴⁹ Written by Steven Dietz, directed by Lynn Smith

⁵⁰ jkmscott.net/data/MakingAFakeCylinderPhonograph.pdf

⁵¹ The Hobby Lobby, 11280 W Broad Street

with a mold consisting of two cylinders, one inside the other. The melted black wax was poured between the inner and outer cylinders and allowed to harden. The whole process was actually very difficult, and there were many failures. Probably all of the resulting wax cylinders had defects, but nothing the audience could see. For the sordid details, see my article "Making Fake Wax Cylinders for a Fake Cylinder Phonograph"⁵².

One other prop that proved interesting to make was a breakfast of scrambled eggs and burnt toast. See "Making Fake Toast and Scrambled Eggs"⁵³.

⁵² jkmscott.net/data/MakingFakeWaxCylinders.pdf

⁵³ jkmscott.net/data/MakingFakeToastAndEggs.pdf

***Quartet* - May 22-June 6, 2015**

It was fairly easy to provide props for *Quartet* at CAT Theatre⁵⁴. There was a little difficulty finding four CD Walkman players and four sets of headphones; but as is usual with technology from a specific era, these will be harder to find for future productions.

Act 2 Scene 3 calls for Wilf to open a bottle of stout and drink from it. CAT (but apparently not all theatres) has a strict rule against the consumption of actual alcoholic beverages onstage. But we wanted to be able to use a bottle opener to top the cap, and to hear the pop and fizz sounds. The stage director⁵⁵ informed me of the existence of bottle capper tools, so I researched them online, then I purchased a nice sturdy bottle capper from one of the many websites that sell tools for home beer-brewing⁵⁶. In addition (at great personal sacrifice, I consumed several bottles of Guinness stout, saved the bottles, and cleaned them out. I was able to remove the caps unbent so they could be reused (although new bottle caps can be purchased). Thus, the stage crew would be able to fill the bottles with cola (dark and fizzy, like stout), cap the bottles tightly to retain the fizz, and have the bottle make the appropriate sounds when opened onstage.



There was one other prop that was particularly rewarding. We needed four copies of the score for the *Quartet* from *Rigoletto*. It was easy enough to find a good online image for the cover. I had this printed on half of a 12x18" piece of white cardstock, so it could be folded to make a standard-size 9x12" score. I wanted it to be yellow, but the copy shop⁵⁷ didn't have colored cardstock in the size I needed. So I used spray tint⁵⁸ to color the paper without obscuring the printing.

For the insides, I just needed a number of folded 12x18" sheets of regular-weight white paper printed with any kind of musical score. But as it happened, I already owned a copy of the score we needed! The *Quartet* from *Rigoletto* has always been my favorite opera selection. Many years ago, long before the Internet, I wondered what a score for a quartet would look like - how would the four voices be shown, along with the orchestral score? So I went to the main Richmond Public Library, requested the score for *Rigoletto* (they had the whole opera in one large

⁵⁴ Written by Rodger Harwood, directed by Laurie Follmer

⁵⁵ Tiffany Jenkins

⁵⁶ Adventures in Homebrewing, <http://www.homebrewing.org>, \$25.64 with shipping and tax

⁵⁷ Staples, 1530 N. Parham Road

⁵⁸ Tint It by Design Master, from Michaels, 9856 W. Broad Street

volume), and copied the Quartet pages on their copier. I could not have known that years later it would help to make the scores for the play more meaningful. After the final performance, each of the four actors kept his or her copy of the score as a souvenir of a wonderful production.

Conclusion

When you need to supply a particular prop, your last resort is to buy it retail. Instead, check first to see if your theatre already has it. Failing that, it's best if it can be borrowed from, or donated by, someone who, in exchange, gets thanked in the program. If you think that's a possibility, mention your need to everyone you chat with; if nothing else, you'll never be stumped for how to start a conversation.

If nothing turns up, or if the prop needed is just so specialized that you don't expect to find one ready-made, then you can look forward to the fun of making it. Use your imagination, look in craft stores for possible materials, ask others for ideas. As props designer, your reward comes twice: first, when the director says, "It's just what we need!"; and second, during the performance, when your prop is center stage, hopefully not hidden behind the actors.