

Through the Piercing Eyes of Edvard Munch: Ibsen and Strindberg on Stage

Beverly Elliott and Tom Markus

In the early 1980s, while we were Artistic Director and Literary Advisor for the Virginia Museum Theatre, the professional theatre company in Richmond, we scheduled productions of Ibsen's *Ghosts* and Strindberg's *The Father*. We were eager to re-examine these seminal works of modern drama by finding a way to produce this pair of nearly one-hundred-year-old plays so that they might have an intellectual and emotional impact on a contemporary American audience analogous to that felt a century earlier by their European predecessors. It is well-known that both playwrights struggled to find sympathetic audiences and that both received scabrous attacks from the critical establishment when their works first appeared. These blustering broadsides provided a starting point for the intellectual side of our preparations. "An open drain; a loathsome sore unbandaged; a dirty act done publicly," was the London *Daily Telegraph's* review of the 1891 English premiere of *Ghosts*.¹ The Swedish premiere of *The Father* in 1888 was attacked as "the awful imaginings of a sick brain."² The critics' fervor made us wonder why these works should generate such passionate attacks and how we could hope to produce these plays a century later so as to engender an equally passionate response? We realized we must seek both innovative theatrical designs and acting and staging conventions which might lead to a production concept that would permit these Scandinavian plays to touch our Virginia audience profoundly.

The research began with a consideration of the artistic environment in which the plays were conceived. Ibsen and Strindberg were prominent in the Scandinavian Renaissance which invigorated Europe's artistic and intellectual

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worlds at the turn of the last century and they could be viewed as the literary counterparts to the great Norwegian artist Edvard Munch. When we read the reviews of Munch's 1886 and 1892 retrospectives in Christiania, we knew we were mining a rich vein. One critic said Munch's works were "only bizarre madness, delirious moods, and feverish hallucination." The critic for *Aftenposten* added: "There is no madness or inanity in this world that some fool or other won't eagerly admire."³ Many of the critical reactions to Munch's work, like those to Ibsen's and Strindberg's, referred to the supposed immorality or likely insanity of their creators. In this regard, as in others our research revealed, Munch, Ibsen, and Strindberg proved kindred spirits. We were not surprised to learn how much their careers were intertwined, how their artistic theories were harmonious, and how their works of arts shared similar techniques. They influenced one another's development and their works were mutually referential. Munch made sketches for a stage setting for *Ghosts*. Strindberg titled one of his own paintings *The Night of Jealousy* in emulation of Munch's more famous work, *Jealousy*, and Ibsen hung a portrait of Strindberg in his study and acknowledged: "I can't write a line unless that crazy man is there to stare at me with his mad eyes."⁴

All three Scandinavian masters engaged in a struggle that led to the theatrical and visual styles we know today as Expressionism. Ibsen was the oldest and most conservative of the three. Yet even in his earliest plays, he had made bold use of symbols in a manner akin to that of his Scandinavian colleagues. A well-known example is the rising sun at the conclusion of *Ghosts* which completes a light/dark pattern that is the subject of much critical writing.⁵

Strindberg, though best known for his dramas, was a prolific and adventurous painter. He strove to express an inner or subjective reality in his canvasses, and his subjective painting technique is analogous to his dramatic technique, as revealed in his oft-quoted introduction to *A Dream Play*:

Upon an insignificant background of real life events the imagination spins and weaves new patterns: a blend of memories, experience, pure inventions, absurdities, and improvisations. Those who follow the author's thinking will perhaps find a certain similarity between the apparent jumble of a dream and life's motley, unmanageable canvas.⁶

We hear in this an echo of his admonition that "one should paint one's inner emotions and not keep copying sticks and stones which in themselves are insignificant and attain proper meaning only by passing through and being molded by the individual's perception."⁷

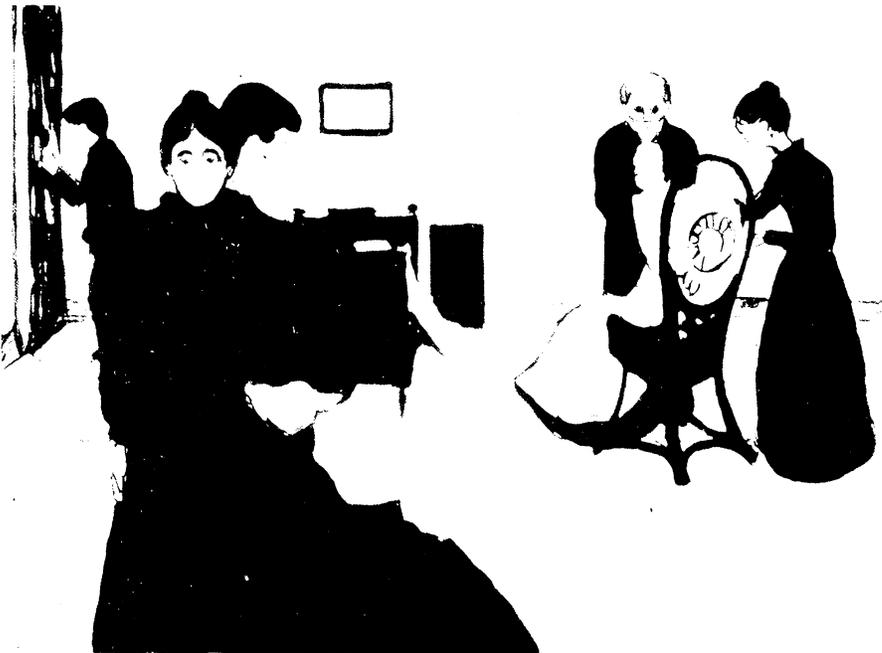
Munch articulated a similarly subjective approach in 1889: "Whether a picture resembles nature means nothing. To explain a picture is impossible. It's exactly because an artist has no other way of explaining a subject that he

paints it."⁸ This struggle towards new forms for the expression of subjective truth and the use of symbolic substructures was most powerfully revealed in Peter Watkins' extraordinary 1976 film, *Edvard Munch*. Though the film makes no reference to Ibsen, it does include Strindberg as a character and we viewed the film closely during our preparations.

Our work progressed in tandem. While Elliott's research was corroborating the three artists' common theoretical beliefs and technical practices, Munch's lithographs were working on Markus's artistic imagination. He discovered he could not think of the plays without Munch's images before his eyes. He could not look at particular Munch works without "seeing" moments in the plays. We were ready then for the next step in our experiment: *Ghosts*.

We took the main theme of the play to be the effect on the individual, the family, and, by extension, society when the Self is repressed by social, theological, and philosophical inhibitions. Our task was to find a theatrical visualization of the "essence" of Ibsen's text. We were determined to deny the audience the chance to dismiss the action as something that happened to some quaint folks a long time ago.

The scenic designer of *Ghosts* was Joseph A. Varga, who collaborated closely on both ventures. We began with the works of Munch at hand. Markus's compelling image at that juncture, and the initial inspiration for the visualization of the production, was *The Death Room*. As the design concept developed, other Munch paintings and lithographs became directly influential.



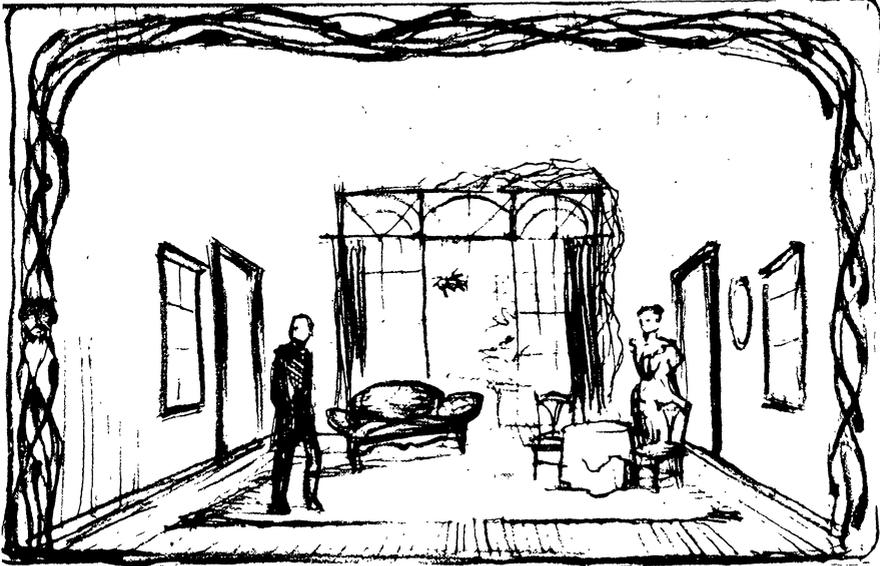
The Death Room

Varga provided a selectively realistic playing area inside a symbolic environment so as to reveal the tension between the text's realistic surface and its symbolic and mythic substructure. We emulated Munch's lithographs by creating a frame through which the subject of the work was to be viewed, as Munch had done in his *Madonna*. Here, the frame is filled with spermatozoa which surround a ghostly fetus, and we felt this would be an ideal motif for *Ghosts* which, at least on one level, is about the inheritance of syphilis.



Madonna

Varga utilized aspects of the Art Nouveau style of Munch's own work and planned a three-dimensional false proscenium which would frame the performance within the constraints of traditional realistic conventions while providing a symbolic and, we hoped, subliminal context for the audience. The spirochetes and spermatozoa seemed to emanate from the face of "Captain Alving," a molded mask in the lower left side of the frame. This mask was spotlighted during the performance so that the dead man's "ghost" could watch over the actions resulting from his profligacy. The likeness for this mask was drawn from Munch's *Jealousy* and we found that the notion of mutual reference in our work strove to parallel that of our Scandinavian masters.



Set design for *Ghosts*

The vibrancy of this element of the production's scenery was intensified further when we were able to cast as Oswald, a young actor, Michael McKenzie, who bore a sufficient likeness to our mask to make omnipresent the illusion of father watching son.

Upstage of this framing false proscenium was a raked rectangular platform which seemed to float freely in space, like the chamber in Munch's *The Death Room*. There were no walls to Varga's setting, but on one side were two free-standing and practical doors. On the other were a door and a free-hanging window through which the final sunlight could stream unhindered. At the back, there was a glass and steel conservatory, filled with real plants. The drawing room had a rich wood floor and was warmly and invitingly furnished with lush Victorian pieces and an oriental rug in the rust hues of Munch's *Madonna*.

Surrounding this playing platform was a symbolic rain curtain. Five miles of gray twine were strung in vertical lines between the stage floor and battens hung out of sight above. When lit through steel blue gels, this string "curtain" gave a shimmering illusion of the rain falling outside the Alving home, while also evoking the vertical lines in Munch's *Women on a Bridge*. Further upstage, lowering almost imperceptibly until the performance's final moments,

was a huge abstraction of the fjords beyond. When brightly lit as though by the rising sun, these abstract cliffs turned avalanche-white and seemed, in the words of Richmond critic James Parker, as though they were "ready to crash down upon the desperate figures of Mrs. Alving and her comatose son."⁹

In addition to an evocative set design, we were looking for conventions to aid in the staging of the play, and we again found inspiration in Munch. *Evening at Karl Johan Street* is among his more compelling works. In his book *Eros and Psyche*, art historian Reidar Dittman observes that Munch "slices through the surging crowd, dissecting it and baring its soul by bringing some of its members up close, their vacuous stares eye to eye with the viewer."¹⁰ As in *The Death Room* and *Evening at Karl Johan Street*, the figures in Munch's *Anxiety* and *The Sick Room* also peer directly at the viewers, their hollowed eyes accosting us, making us complicitous in the painful scenes depicted. Watkins's film also makes effective use of this device, as characters peer into the lens of the camera while the action progresses, thus denying us the right to divert our eyes or our consciences. Markus used the same device in staging our production of *Ghosts*. On occasions, lines were delivered "front," directly through the "fourth wall." Osvald's imploring or accusing stare achieved a communion with the theatre's audience which transcended that of a willingly suspended disbelief. The audience could not dismiss the events as a fiction. The performance was now! The scenery and the theatricality of this staging convention made the production as immediate to its audience as Munch's canvases and lithographs are to all but the most desensitized beholder.

Audience and critical reception corroborated the success of this first half of our "Scandinavian Experiment." The reviewers described our production as "evocative" and "haunting." More importantly, the production met with long and sustained applause, and with strong sales at the box office. The leading newspaper's critic accurately described the audience at the evening's conclusion as sitting stunned in "profound silence."¹¹

Munch's piercing vision had provided a means to recover the immediacy and power of Ibsen's play for an audience of contemporary Virginians.

II.

A year later, we turned our energies to Strindberg's modern tragedy *The Father*. Our goal this time was to find a way to create for the audience the intensely subjective state of the playwright, while rendering the traditionally naturalistic story in an unpretentious manner. In the words of Professor Robert Potter of the University of California, "*The Father* is a sequence of events in the life and mind of a condemned man. The Captain is Strindberg's central dramatic figure and, as such, the objective victim of tragic circumstances. But he is also the man through whose sensibility we experience the play unfolding with the compression and inevitability of a nightmare." Potter rightly saw *The Father* as three-dimensional. The events that take place

within *time* and *space*, he wrote, "assume the dimension of a personal vision, biased and subjectively distorted. A domestic quarrel becomes, in the weird depth of this perspective, a duel to the death between female and male." And he added that "the imperative difficulty of staging *The Father* is in realizing its illusive third dimension."¹²

We needed a text which was inflected towards Expressionism. Working from the French translation Strindberg himself had prepared for Emile Zola, Markus crafted a version which he fancied Strindberg would have written, had he created *The Father* a decade after his so-called Naturalistic period. Potter described this text:

In fashioning a new English version of Strindberg's text, the director has given welcome attention to the metaphorical and poetic tendencies of Strindberg's language. Certain aspects of the editing --particularly the virtual elimination of specifics of place and proper names--have exerted a generalizing effect.¹³

Markus's text in hand, we set to the task of conceptualizing the production, and once again our research led us to Munch and once again his work provided the inspiration. We found there was an artistic bonding between Munch and Strindberg that exceeded the mere similarities of technique shared by Munch and Ibsen. As critic Dittman points out:

There are features in *The Father* pointing toward much more radical theatre than that of Zola: deliberate distortions and exaggerations, and underneath all its eruptive anguish a faint throb of nostalgic lyricism, elements entirely alien to the naturalistic approach but central in the expressionist movement, whether in words or in pictures. This may well explain why one of the most worn books in Edvard Munch's collection is his paperback copy of *The Father*.¹⁴

Munch's lithographs of *Strindberg* and *The Shriek* were our starting place.



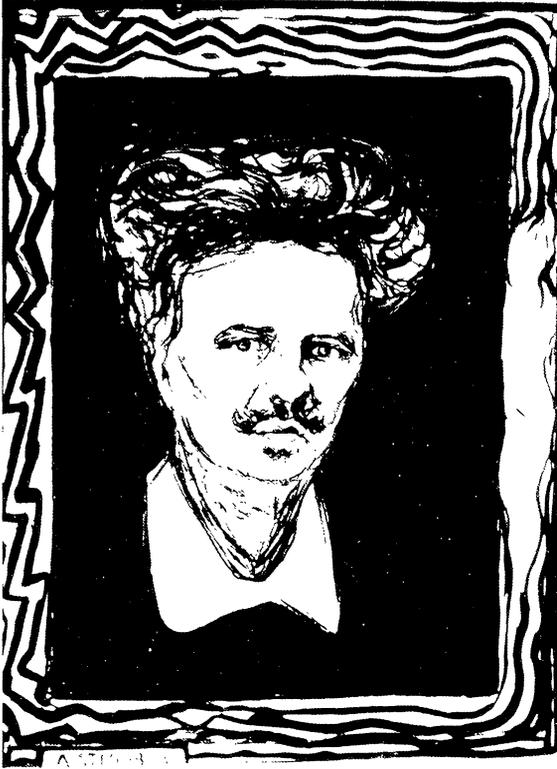
The Shriek

The personal anguish of *The Shriek* seemed to Markus as quintessential to *The Father* as *The Death Room* had been to *Ghosts*. Munch's description of the profound experience which inspired him to create this work has been quoted frequently, but is worth repeating here:

I walked along the road with two friends. Then the sun went down. All of a sudden the sky became blood. I stopped, leaned against the railing, weary to death. Over the dark blue fjord and the city lay clouds dripping with blood. My friends went on, I remained behind, trembling, with an open wound in my breast, and sensed a surging cry throughout nature.¹⁵

When we re-read these words, Markus said he thought he heard the cry of Strindberg's Captain at the moment he hurls the lighted lamp at his elemental enemy, his wife. We knew our experiment was moving forward.

Munch's *Strindberg* is a haunted man staring piercingly through the frame to demand our action. He is like Strindberg's Captain, challenging the men in the audience to remember their ancestor Hercules and to take up their clubs against all the Omphales who torment them. The frame of Munch's portrait shows the female form that tormented Strindberg, her hair flowing around the central figure in jagged lines, much as the web of Laura's net ensnares The Captain.



Strindberg

We found this same motif in Munch's *In a Man's Head*. This work, executed the year after his portrait of Strindberg, reveals the same fascination with sexual themes that Strindberg is famous for having popularized in the drama. Munch's sensitivity to the evocative power of angularity is seen in these works and also in *Rue Lafayette*, which Dittman describes as "characterized by a firm geometric structure of decisive perpendiculars and horizontals pierced by highly elongated diagonals."¹⁶ A similar quality is found in Munch's *Ibsen with Lighthouse*, which anticipates the expressionistic techniques popularized in the 1919 film *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*.

The notion of using expressionistic techniques in staging Strindberg's plays was explored a couple of years after our production in an academic study by Benjamin K. Bennett of the University of Virginia, who wrote:

The expressionist allows the mental or emotional content of his picture to distort the composition and so abandons all semblance of imitation. . . . Stage settings no longer represent believable locations but are stripped to their bare essentials as symbols emanating from the consciousness of a character.¹⁷

Bennett's scholarly observation corroborates our theatrical discoveries. We can't know if he saw and was influenced by our production (we were only one hundred miles apart, after all) or if it was only a serendipitous coincidence that we were all engaged in similar research in quite variant forms: his appearing in words on a page, ours in actions on a stage.

Our production's entire action was played out on Varga's small, raked, irregularly shaped octagonal platform set in a black void.



Set design for *The Father*

This ritual battlefield was framed in a sequence of seven irregular and angular arches, the largest of which was cantilevered out over the audience at an alarming angle. These suggested the ensnaring strands of Laura's web while simultaneously employing the dynamic of Munch's diagonals. The spectators were "inside" the play's hallucinatory world and saw piercingly into The Captain's emotional abyss by gazing through the distorting "tunnel" of the setting--deep into the protagonist's mind.

The monochromatic world of the production was entirely gray--Varga's idea, but also Strindberg's color! Describing his painting *The Night of Jealousy*, Strindberg's wife Frieda Uhl wrote, "Only slowly does my eye adjust to the details of that gloomy color, fumbling for meaning as in an ominous night. . . . Never have I seen gray that vividly presented."¹⁸ Our costumes, as designed by Bronwyn Caldwell, used a variety of textures and tones, but the austere palette of grays and the audience's concomitant hunger for the relieving variety of color promulgated in the spectators a feeling of anxiety akin to *The Captain's*. The arches, floor, and furniture were all heavily coated with flocking, so that all visible lines seemed imprecise and all sounds muted, intensifying the pervasive mood of anxiety. Upstage, behind a transparent gauze and framed with the smallest of the arches, Markus's script called for a life-model of *The Captain*, costumed identically to actor Walter Rhodes, and with a life-mask taken from his face. This led the audience to feel themselves inside an action which they viewed against the reflecting stare of *The Captain*, who surveyed both himself and them. They watched and were participants, much as *The Captain* was. The audience sensed an empathic fusion with *The Captain* and became his omniscient alter-ego. The reflexiveness central to Strindberg's hallucinatory play was thereby visualized, and the distorting angularity and the compression of all color into a variety of grays combined to define a world of nightmarish intensity. Angularity, color, and the creation of a self-reflexive hallucination had been our governing concerns in the development of the production's designs. Through the application of Munch's techniques and aesthetics, the subjective third dimension of a personal vision was achieved.

As with the previous year's production of Ibsen's *Ghosts*, we needed theatrical conventions and a performance style which would complete our aesthetic. The text, stripped of naturalistic detail and therefore resonating to its classical allusions, helped lift the scope of the event towards the tragic plane. Formality and economy in the designs suggested a world of high tragedy. The staging followed suit. But in moments of high emotion, the actors confronted the audience directly, piercing through their defenses with Munch-like stares. Near the end of Act Two, there is a gentle passage in which Strindberg's *Captain* lyrically recounts the lost days of their courtship and Laura, cradling him in her arms, looks out to the audience, insisting on their complicity in the unfolding tragedy. We have been taught to think of *The Father* as a battle; at this moment, however, it was a lyrical and deeply moving lament. The two actors' faces were turned "out." The characters spoke to each other; the actors spoke to the audience; and the audience experienced the production's third dimension.

The playing style was not exclusively tragic, and the production's success with critics and audiences may in some degree have resulted from juxtaposing grandiose tragedy with an ironic modern sensibility. Strindberg left instructions that the actor playing his protagonist should be "of a rather lively disposition who, with the superior, self-mocking, slightly cynical air of a man

of the world fully conscious of his own merits, goes in tolerably good spirits to meet his fate, wrapping himself as he dies in the spider web that he cannot, because of certain laws of nature, rip asunder."¹⁹ Actor Walter Rhodes seems to have achieved this to the satisfaction of the reviewer who observed that "Rhodes gets to interpret many of Strindberg's more humorous lines--funny but with that unfunny undercurrent."²⁰ Another reviewer, by taking exception to the performance, unwittingly confirmed its success (and his own critical biases) by noting that even though "Rhodes is an imposing figure on stage, tall and central," and has a "bravura stance and personality," yet he delivered his lines in a manner that "crossed that delicate balance line between comedy and tragedy."²¹ Despite that reviewer's qualifications, the production was frequently saluted with standing ovations, and the local critical community selected it as the "Year's Best Play."

With hindsight, we recognize the success of this experiment resulted from our need to release the texts from the prison of the staging conventions of their own era, conventions which had frequently rendered them out-dated and musty melodramas fit only for museums and textbooks, and to reconceive them for today's stage within the *spirit* of the artistic ferment which engendered them. By exploring the aesthetics, techniques, subjects, and temperaments common to this Scandinavian trio, we were able to liberate these great plays into an artistic timelessness which made them vital and current in today's world.

From Munch's *The Death Room* to Varga's rendering for *Ghosts*, and from Munch's *The Shriek* to Varga's *The Father*, we had completed our "Scandinavian Experiment" and found a way to help these great writers of nineteenth-century Europe reach the twentieth century audiences of Virginia.

*Peirce College, Philadelphia, and
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Notes

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2. Michael Meyer, *Strindberg: A Biography* (New York: Oxford UP, 1987) 189.
3. *Aftenposten*, October 9, 1882, quoted in Reidar Dittman, *Eros and Psyche: Strindberg and Munch in the 1890s* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1982) 71.
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5. Robert W. Corrigan, "The Sun Always Rises: Ibsen's *Ghosts* as Tragedy," *Tragedy: Vision and Form* (San Francisco: Chandler, 1965) 393-404.
6. Harry G. Carlson, trans., *Strindberg: Five Plays* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1983) 205.
7. August Strindberg, *Samlade Skrifter* (Stockholm: Albert Bonniers Forlag, 1911-1927) 24:9, quoted in Dittman 51.
8. Munch Museum Archive, quoted in Dittman 73.
9. James Parker, "Review of *Ghosts*," *Ibsen News and Comment* 3 (1982): 23-25.
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11. Roy Proctor, rev. of *Ghosts*, *Richmond News-Leader*, 11 February 1981: 27.
12. Robert Potter, "Playwright and the Play," playbill for *The Father*, Virginia Museum Theatre, February 1982: 23.
13. Potter 23.
14. Dittman 34.
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20. Cheryl Patterson, rev. of *The Father*, WRFK radio, Richmond, Virginia, 26 February 1982.
21. John Shulson, rev. of *The Father*, *Daily Press*, Newport News, Virginia, 26 February 1982: 41.



Set design for *Ghosts*

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