

Make Your Props Pop

Your prop might look good on the workbench, but how can you be sure it'll sizzle onstage?

Why do some props "pop"? It is easy enough to build a prop in your shop, but when it gets onstage, you do not want it to look like it was just built in a shop. You want it to look like it has a life of its own, as though it belongs on set and has always been there.

Sadly, a prop may not pop for a number of reasons. It may look good while you are working on it, but when it is onstage, the audience can be 10, 30 or even 50 feet away, and all that subtle detail you thought it possessed just disappears. The lights on the stage will affect the prop differently than the lights in your shop, and whatever colors you thought your prop had will be completely different. Finally, it may be difficult to determine what the prop will look like in the context of all the other elements, such as costumes and set pieces.

While no scientific formula exists to ensure your prop has that vital life onstage, it may spark inspiration to hear what other artisans have done when their props lacked punch. I talked with props artisans on three different projects they recently completed, and asked they did when they realized their prop needed more pop.

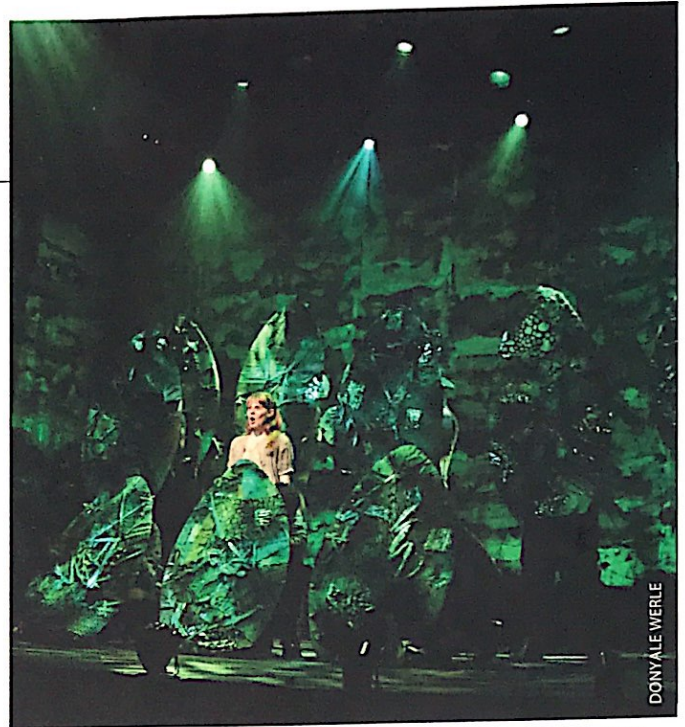
A dungeon master could not have been more comfortable yet proud atop their seat of power.

—Karl Anderson

A Christmas Carol

Natalie Kearns, props artisan at Trinity Rep, had to make a ham for their recent production of *A Christmas Carol*, designed by Michael McGarty. The show was set in the 1950s, so the ham was a canned ham covered in pineapples and maraschino cherries.

The ham itself was carved from two pieces of pink insulation foam glued together with construction adhesive. Kearns carved the diamond pattern on top, coated the whole thing in Sculpt or Coat, and finished it off with pink



A moment from the Broadway production of *Peter and the Starcatcher*, with "Jungle Board" hand props in use.

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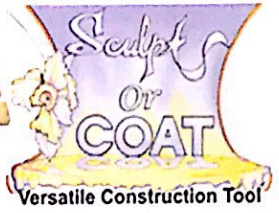
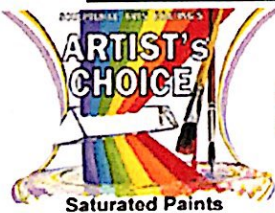
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Feature

and brown paint. She cut the pineapples out of soft upholstery foam and substituted dried beans for the cherries.

The ham looked good, but it needed some final layer to make it look "cooked" and "honey-glazed." Kearns decided a coating of amber shellac would give the whole thing a sheen and an orange glow that would bring it to life.

The pineapples and cherries also looked flat. Kearns says, "I wasn't happy with their texture and felt that they didn't have the realistic 'wet look' that fruit has." She tried a technique she has used in the past: a layer of hot glue. "I like using hot glue when I make fake food because, unlike a clear sealer, it adds depth as well as shine, which made it perfect for pineapples." She adds, "this should be done in a well ventilated area, because hot glue

Most of the throne itself was constructed from birch plywood and MDF, with some "wiggle wood" for the top. The seat and front step were given a "cap" of blue foam which was carved and coated to give a worn look. The other details were cut and routed directly into the sheet goods. With all of this dimensional detail, they decided that the cracks could not simply be painted on, but would need to be dimensional as well.

They originally discussed using a Dremel tool for the cracks, but the tight schedule required something a bit more aggressive. Prop carpenter Karl Anderson explains, "An abrasive cut-off wheel was put on a grinder, and the cracks denoted on the elevation were marked by a Sharpie as precisely as needed. Then, much smoke ensued." Carving grooves through multiple layers of solid mate-



Meghan Buchanan making the Jungle Board hand prop for the Broadway production of *Peter and the Starcatcher*.



Natalie Kearns used Sculpt or Coat to gloss the "ham" and used hot glue to give the pineapples and cherries shine and depth.

and foam release harmful vapors." The fruit got the translucent depth they possess in real life, and the Cratchit family got their ham.

The Dungeons and the Dragons

Joe Cunningham relates the tale of a carved stone throne recently built at the Actors Theatre of Louisville. The play *The Dungeons and the Dragons* needed a throne with carved details and a worn stone look, as well as a number of cracks to show the age, and it all needed to be finished in two and a half days. It was important to discuss beforehand how much texture and relief the prop would get, since there would not be much time to adjust it once it got onstage.

rial required a lot of ventilation. Only when the majority of the work was done was the Dremel brought out to smooth the edges.

The throne was coated in a layer of Jaxsan rubber roofing compound and a blend of various grey paints. At this point, they realized the cracks might disappear and flatten out in the back rows of the theatre house. They decided an old scenic painter's trick would help make them pop: They painted a dark wash in the deep recesses of the carved grooves, then feathered a white highlight along some of the edges to accentuate the cracks. Says Anderson, "A dungeon master could not have been more comfortable yet proud atop their seat of power."

"It was a matter of getting the nuance right."
 —Meghan Buchanan

Peter and the Starcatcher

"I don't know how we feel about the yellow."

That's what prop artisans Meghan Buchanan and Grady Barker remember hearing from the design team of *Peter and the Starcatcher* in the run-up to its Broadway opening. For the Off-Broadway production of the show Buchanan and Barker had created a number of "jungle boards," three-foot tall polycarbonate "leaves" which the actors used in a variety of ways during dances and ritualistic movements. But midway through the technical rehearsals on the Broadway production, the design team discovered these jungle boards needed some visual help. They had tried a

would look good in the shop, but onstage, the hot yellow color in one of the fabrics would compete with some other element." After they removed the yellow, the design team noticed that the mylar was too reflective, and they had to mute all of that. The process continued like this for a while, as every subtle change introduced a new problem. "The boards had to work in the context of the show. The function worked, but they needed the right aesthetic."

So what finally made the props pop? "Glitter," admits Buchanan, with a bit of a laugh at the stupendous obviousness of the admission. They dabbed bits of polycrylic on random spots of the boards and blew handfuls



The props team at Actors Theatre of Louisville used an old scenic painter's trick to detail a stone throne.

Painting a dark wash in the deep recesses of the carved grooves, with a feathered white highlight along some of the edges accentuate the cracks of the throne.

number of other shops in the city, but returned to Buchanan and Barker's shop, Paper Mâché Monkey, to recapture the magic from the downtown show.

Part of the problem, Buchanan explained, was that the downtown show was designed and built very organically. The jungle boards they created down there ended up being about 15 layers of spandex fabric, mylar, paint, glitter, Rosco Crystal Gel and other products, with each layer being tweaked after being viewed on stage. The Broadway version attempted to replicate the look in a single shot, which did not work.

"It was a matter of getting the nuance right," Buchanan explains. "It

of glitter, which adhered to the wet sealant.

While this process could have continued indefinitely, the show eventually opened, and the props went on stage. The attention to detail was worth it; the entire design team won Tony Awards for *Peter and the Starcatcher*. Donyale Werle even thanked Buchanan and Barker in her acceptance speech for Best Scenic Design in a Play. Most of the audience would probably never guess how much work went into those jungle boards; the same is true of the throne at Actors Theatre, or the ham at Trinity Rep. That's the sign that the prop is truly successful: It looks like it has always belonged up onstage. **SD**

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