PROFILE

THEATER DESIGNERS WORKING TOGETHER RIGHT FROM THE START # THE SMALL GROUP

When you're on the road 250 days each year, you get pretty efficient at packing and knowing which airports serve the best food. You also know where to get a decent haircut in a strange city without an appointment. "Look for malls with Apple Stores," laughs Michael Klaers, a lighting designer with The Small Group and leader of the Santa Barbara Vectorworks® User Group. "For some reason, the combination works." All joking aside, Klaers embraces life on the road. "It's a small community that does this type of work, and so the lifestyle is definitely a benefit of the career," he says. "I work in different theaters all over the country, so everywhere I go, I see old friends, and I make new ones. How great is that?"

It's great, indeed, for this Minneapolis native who grew up attending shows in the Twin Cities and admiring the work of local lighting designers. But he wasn't sure he could make a career of it and initially pursued an undergraduate degree in mathematics, relegating theater as a second major. But his love for the arts won out in the end, and he found himself employed at a small theater in Missouri after graduation. His work there launched a career path that eventually led to creating The Small Group with his wife, stage director Risa Brainin.

The Small Group is a collection of theater artists and represents a design philosophy where everyone is working on everything together, all at once, from the

beginning. The team consists of people from each major discipline and one director. For each project, there is a set designer, lighting designer, costume designer, composer, and choreographer. The team gathers and works together all over the country. "There are no hard lines between disciplines," Klaers explains. "So I might have a thought about sound, or the composer will have a thought about lights, and the costume designer will think something about the music. We really get into each other's sandboxes. That's not terribly normal, but in The Small Group, it's expected."
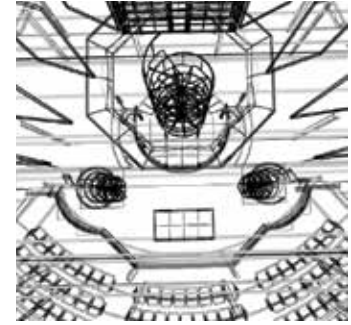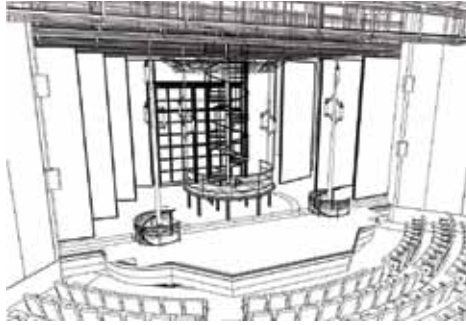
" … with Vectorworks, you can learn from your mistakes. You harvest the good parts. You throw away the bad parts and move on."

– Michael Klaers, Lighting Designer with The Small Group

The Small Group team tests design ideas on one another using Vectorworks software's rendering application Renderworks. Images courtesy of Michael Klaers.

DESIGN PHILOSOPHY: IT'S AN INTERACTION

About a year before a play starts, the people who make up The Small Group sequester themselves at someone's house or a hotel, and they spend two or three solid days together. On the first day, they each pull out a copy of the play, select roles, and read the play out loud together. The advantage of this approach is that it puts the playwright's words in the air. "The experience of a play isn't to be read; rather, it's to be listened to," says Klaers. "It's an interaction. As designers, it gives us a feeling of the relationship between people, so that if you a say a line one way, it means this, but if you say it another way, it means that. This experience of reading the play indicates where we have to make decisions."

The first read-through runs uninterrupted. Then, the team talks about the backstory of why they're doing this play, at this time, and for this audience in this town. It's these discussions that begin to form design ideas in each of their heads. However, no designing actually occurs at this early stage. The team gathers on day two to read the play again. Only this time, they stop and start, and the discussions continue. It takes all day and ensures team members have the same experience with the play and are thinking the same thing because they read the play together.

Only then do team members go away and start coming up with design ideas. Klaers gets his part of the production started by testing ideas in Vectorworks Spotlight software. He drafts everything in 3D and moves things around, lighting events from different angles and changing the shape of it again and again. "I start playing around with what light looks like in the world of a particular play and what light has to do to get to a character," he says. "I question where the light has to come from and what it has to go through." These preliminary sketches and drawings and, sometimes, renderings created with the Renderworks® application, give Klaers something to take back to the group when they gather again a month or two later. "I'm forever doing quick screen grabs of a render and sending them out for feedback," he says.
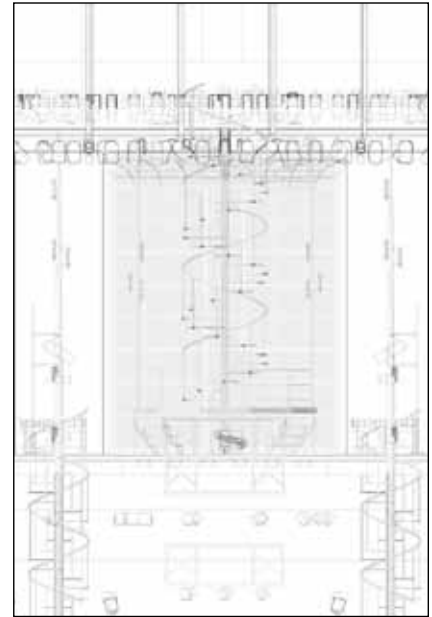
"Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde" actors (l-r) Ryan Artzberger and Mary Beth Fisher performed on a spiral staircase that wound up into the lighting grid and created a unique vertical space on stage. Photo courtesy of Julie Currie.

Spiral staircase in "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde." Image courtesy of Michael Klaers.

Next, Klaers' ideas get put into The Small Group blender when they try out design ideas on one another. Usually, people have models, costume sketches, and pictures of ideas they want to try, so that by the end of the weekend, they have a strong direction of where they are going. Vectorworks software shines in this setting, enabling Klaers to easily make adjustments to new ideas and update the entire file at once.

The purpose of this collaboration is to build a common experience of the play that can be recalled later in the process. There will come a day when they'll cast real actors who speak the play much better than the designers, Klaers jokes. They'll rehearse it, move into a theater, build the set, hang the lights, and compose music. They'll spend 12 hours one day rehearsing before everyone goes home, and all that remain are the director and the designers, sitting in a dark theater. "It'll be quiet," Klaers explains, "and then someone will say, 'You know, when we read the play, I was really scared for this character in scene three. And when we watched in the rehearsal room, I was scared for that character in scene three, but today, when we did it with all the design elements, I wasn't scared.' That group of people who sit around and figure out what happened, who are there at 2:00 a.m. still talking about it and figuring it out, that's The Small Group."

APPROACH PROVES SUCCESSFUL

The Small Group recently worked on Jeffrey Hatcher's adaption of "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde" at the Indiana Repertory Theatre in Indianapolis, Indiana. The unique adaptation cast one actor as Jekyll, and everyone else played different versions of Hyde. For this haunting play, The Small Group's Set Designer Russell Metheny came up with an eye-catching idea of having spiral, DNA-like staircases winding up into the lighting grid.

"Our goal is to ensure that an audience feels that everything had to be the way we've presented it. We want it to feel organic."

– Michael Klaers, Lighting Designer with The Small Group

Director Risa Brainin (right) directs a rehearsal of "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde." Photo courtesy of Michael Klaers.

The spirals continued down into the ground, so that cast members would enter the stage in these cool, convoluted ways, and there was lots of vertical space between actors. Klaers lit the stage so it projected a dense, syrupy feeling in the air. He wanted the audience to be aware of these strands of staircases that kept going up and up, and there was always something glowing in the background that was a little menacing. "It worked really great," Klaers says. "But it only worked because The Small Group got the costumes to integrate with the set, got the lighting to integrate with the costumes and the set, and the music to integrate with everything else. It only worked because we got all this together right from the start."

Another successful project the group recently worked on was "Entangled" by Lila Rose Kaplan and produced by Launch Pad at the University of California, Santa Barbara. The play uses twins as a metaphor for how our lives are entwined.The Small Group's Nayna Ramey designed a beautiful, simple, and elegant set, featuring 20-feet-tall mirrored panels that caused the set to keep looking back at

itself. "This was a challenging set to light," Klaers explains. "I modeled it by setting up virtual cameras inside the Vectorworks program to see what would be reflected from every section in the house. We were able to determine that by tilting the mirrors exactly five degrees—not six and not four—we wouldn't reflect things we didn't want to, and we would reflect the things we did."

LIGHTING IS MILLIONS OF DATA POINTS

It's this precision of working with the 3D modeling tools in Vectorworks Spotlight that gives Klaers a high level of certainty with his designs. "It's how I think in 3D," he says, assessing the power of the program. It's a tool that lets him go from initial ideas, to renderings to share with other designers, to construction documents, to complete sets of data, and to final renderings all in one package.

Klaers also uses the Renderworks application to further test out his design ideas. It helps him to see what a gobo will look like on a set or what impact a

Twenty-feet-tall mirrored panels caused the "Entangled" set to keep looking back at itself.

Setting up virtual cameras inside the Vectorworks program informed designers about what the audience would see from every section in the house. Photos courtesy of David Bazemore, http://davidbazemore.com.

certain angle or color will have on a stage. "I love it because I can do all of this inside Vectorworks," he says. "I can make changes live and re-render it live. It gives me a lot of confidence going into a theater." This is important because one of Klaers' great fears is hanging a light in the wrong place. "You never want to have to go to a stage electrician and say, 'I'm sorry. I screwed up. We need to take all these lights and move them upstage three line sets.' You never want to have that conversation. And with Vectorworks, you don't have to."

Instead, the program gives Klaers certainty that if he hangs a light on line set 17 and trims it at 25 feet, six inches, that the light will go under the border, over the masking flat, hit that window, and cast a shadow on the chair at the stage left side of a table. "I know it will because I've tested it and saw exactly where it lands," he says. "If you get in the real theater and it doesn't land there, then we better check and make sure the set is in the right place." While perhaps a funny anecdote, this certainty is critical to Klaers' success as a lighting designer and brings more work to his firm.

He also commends the application's ability to handle data and graphic and geometric information all at the same time without having to go outside the program. For example, it can organize data formulated by channel or hanging position. "Lighting is millions of data points, so you're always checking to make sure that this doesn't weigh too much or that you're not using too much electricity, that you have enough cuts of the right color, or that you're not using too many of this kind of instrument," he says. "There's a lot of data to keep track of and that data has to be managed carefully because the time in the theater is short, and everybody has to have that data."

The Vectorworks platform also allows users to try design ideas very quickly, experiment with them, and move on. When drafting by hand, "you can take out your eraser and go to town on your drawing and all you've got is eraser shavings," says Klaers. "But with Vectorworks, you can learn from your mistakes. You harvest the good parts. You throw away the bad parts and move on."

The software has indeed allowed Klaers and the members of The Small Group to move on and achieve great things. "We all have an investment in making sure the costumes and scenery are appropriate for a particular rendition, and the same is true with the lighting and music," he says. "Our goal is to ensure that an audience feels that everything had to be the way we've presented it. We want it to feel organic."

This one-time aspiring mathematician has found a formula for success and loves his life. "All my old math friends are making and breaking codes for the government, and I bet they're having a lot of fun," says Klaers. "But so am I … so am I."
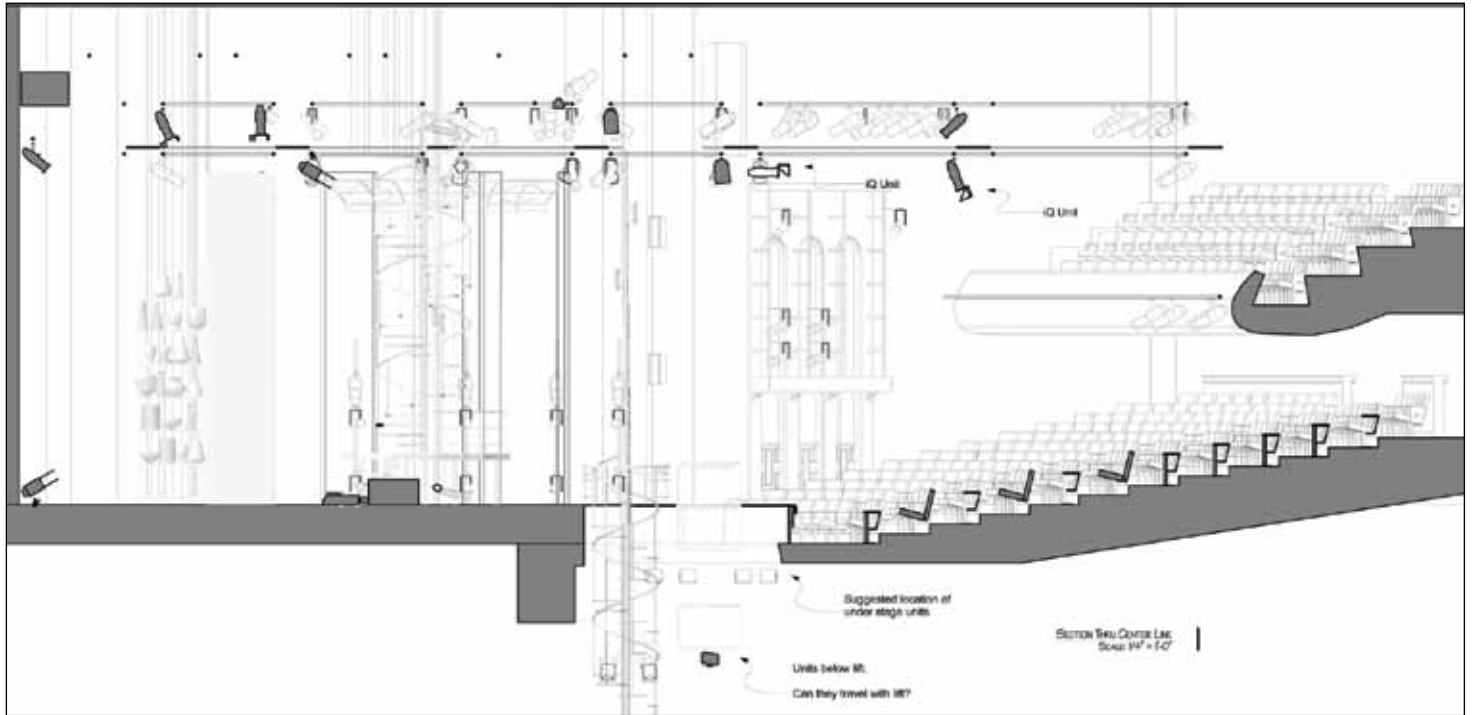
The Vectorworks Spotlight program handles data and graphic and geometric information all in one application, making it easy to generate accurate section and elevation drawings. Image courtesy of Michael Klaers.

Profiled firm:
The Small Group
Santa Barbara, CA
www.verysmallgroup.com
michaelk@verysmallgroup.com

Cover photo:
The "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde" set was lit to project a dense, syrupy feeling in the air. The actors (l-r) are Ryan Artzberger, Kevin Cox, Jason Bradley, and Torrey Hansen. Photo courtesy of Julie Currie.

"Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde" credits:
Director Risa Brainin, Scenic Designer Russell Metheny, Costume Designer Devon Painter, Composer/Sound Designer Michael Keck, and Lighting Designer Michael Klaers. Produced by Indiana Repertory Theatre; Artistic Director Janet Allen and Managing Director Steven Stolen.

"Entangled" credits:
Director Risa Brainin, Scenic Designer Nayna Ramey, Costume Designer Devon Painter, Composer/Sound Designer Brad Carroll, and Lighting Designer Michael Klaers. Presented by the UC Santa Barbara Department of Theater and Dance; LAUNCH PAD Artistic Director Risa Brainin.