

ALL THE BACKSTAGE IS A WORLD

Britten-Grant Creates A Scene Beyond Baroque

By LIESE GARDNER

Just as it's said that Rome was not built in a day, it could equally be agreed that Versailles was not created on a budget. One baroque brick alone might have cost \$17,000. But that amount is what Britten-Grant Event Design of Washington D.C. had to create the Splendors of Versailles for the Wolf Trap Ball, the northern Virginia theater's annual fundraiser. Working with the Friends of the Wolf Trap Association, headed by executive director Nancy Brockman, Britten-Grant conceptualized and created a world behind the stage.

The 900 patrons arrived for the final performance of the season, but there wasn't any play. Instead of being shown to their usual seats in front of the stage, guests were lead by actors dressed in French baroque costumes and powdered wigs to their reserved seats waiting backstage.

As the event's set designers, Tim Grant and Paul Britten, (Britten, Grant's partner of the last two years, works out of Michigan but was involved with the initial design concept of the Wolf Trap Ball) created Versailles using theatrical techniques such as backdrops, scrim and trompe l'oeil painting. This gave the patrons the proper setting in which to act out their parts as guests.

To script the evening, Grant and Britten first researched the era they were given to create. "They [the Friends of the Wolf Trap] told us the theme and

we ran wild with it. We went to the library and picked out the most salient characteristics of Versailles—the Opera House, the Gardens and the Hall of Mirrors," Grant says.

These scenes filled the huge backstage area. Laid out in a cross configuration, the longest side was the Hall of Mirrors. As guests walked down this hallway, lined with mylar and vinyl panels, they faced the top of the cross, which was the main stage flanked by two 18-foot-tall paintings of baroque sculptures. The

Gardens of Versailles were located upstage, while the Opera House held a stately position downstage.

Working with the limited budget, Grant used canvas backdrops, Styrofoam and Gator Board to create the stages. In addition to being cost-effective, the large backdrops, ranging in size from 14-by-36-feet to 20-by-40-feet also served to scale down

the 70-foot-high ceiling and the 100-foot-long room. "The biggest challenge was the space," Grant says. "You can't imagine the size. Everything had to be on a monumental scale and yet appear elegant with a fine arts look."

Grant, who has a graduate degree in art history, likes working on a large scale. Yet it's the details that are most important in getting the right look, he says. The backdrop that created the Gardens of Versailles was painted from the perspective of someone looking



Scrimmage. To add a kinetic quality to one of the backdrops used at the event, Grant painted a scene of the Opera House interior on a scrim. Behind this, a 25-foot painting of Louis XIV appeared when lit directly.



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down on it from a palace balcony. To add dimension, Grant placed two people dancing on a balcony below. "My art history background came in handy to get the costuming correct. The people in the backdrop are dressed in baroque outfits with all the accoutrements and decorative feel. Also, the people aren't static, but twisting and in motion."

The same is true of the two large statues that flanked the main stage. In keeping with the artistic style of the period, the character's poses incorporate movement. But for all their three-dimensionality, they are actually painted on flat pieces of 8-foot-tall plywood and set on a 10-foot pedestal. "I like trompe l'oeil painting [a style in which objects are depicted with photographic realism] so I enjoyed painting these sculptures the most," Grant says.

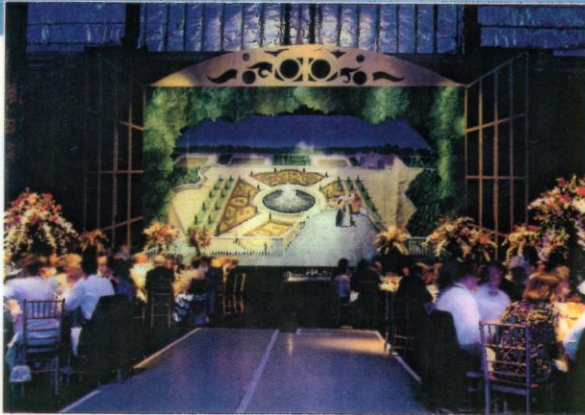
Other areas to which Grant applied his brush and his art background were more challenging. One of those was the Opera House, with its theater-within-a-theater theme. A scrim was painted in detail to depict the interior of the Opera House and was framed with 24-foot-high fluted columns that Grant painted to look like marble. The columns supported a 40-foot-long trompe l'oeil architrave made from Styrofoam and decorated

with elements made from Gator Board. Behind the scrim, a graphic, black-and-white painting of Louis XIV appeared when lit from the front, but was completely invisible when the scrim was lit. Even when Louis was lit, the curtains painted on the scrim never completely disappeared and so provided a frame for the 25-foot-high painting. "I was pleased with the effect but it was hard to get because I couldn't use a lot of layers," Grant explains. "The scrim forced me to paint thin and transparent."

The effort was worth it, however. "We wanted something that would be more kinetic and not as simple as a backdrop," Grant says. "The timing of this was not geared for a specific moment. He would appear at different moments."

Other effects were equally simple and effective. The same type of materials used in the Hall of Mirrors—mylar and vinyl—were used to create the windowlike effect behind the main stage. "The backdrop used textures and reflective materials," Grant says. "There was silver mylar behind the statues and gold mylar in the center. The columns between the panels were painted directly onto the vinyl. We did that to save cost." Design Cuisine, the caterer for the evening, was sta-

Fully Operable. The Opera House of Versailles was recreated not with mortar and steel but with paint that, under Grant's brush, made the Opera House seem as fine and permanent as it must have been in its splendor.



Far above: Stage presence. Grant applied trompe l'oeil painting techniques to turn two 8-foot-tall plywood flats into realistically three-dimensional sculptures from the baroque period.

Above: In perspective. To create a three-dimensional scene on the 14-by-36-foot backdrop of the gardens, Grant used several tricks from his art history background, such as knowing the correct period clothing and the use of perspective. The scene is painted as if from a palace balcony and a couple dancing on a balcony below gave the scene its heightened perspective.

tioned behind the stage. Waiters entered and exited from curtains on either side of the stage. A chandelier, arranged by Neiman Marcus, hung over the dance floor in front of the stage, but the rest of the lighting was handled internally by the Wolf Trap, as was the staging and dance floor. Ralph Hoffman, assisted by Robin Lyttle, was responsible for this portion of the event.

For this event, as with all special events, it took a large cast to do justice to the playwright's vision. In this case, the guests were written into the script. "I like the interaction of people at an event and the decor. It's like the collaboration of arts and theater. In a way, I feel like the special events industry is like that—only, it's a collaboration between performance and decor," Grant says.

This past September, the Wolf Trap Ball brought Britten-Grant back for a command performance. They created the Carnival of Venice for the fundraiser this time. "We used the statues again, they liked them so much. They didn't quite match the style of the period but they worked," Grant says. That's the art of theater and of special events as well—using ingenuity and what you have to create something where once there was nothing.

Although the partners have worked in the special events industry separately for five years, the Britten-Grant team, in its two years together, has learned the theatrical timing of events, and in doing so, is gaining presence in the special event field.

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