

San Francisco Opera



"We like to think that when the curtain goes down at the end and there's applause, that's for the singers. When the curtain goes up at the beginning and there's applause, that's for us."

-- Scenic artist in charge Jay Kotcher, SF Opera

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Producing an opera means thousands of hours of hard work and ingenuity, and many of the people that make it happen are not those in the spotlight. In the episode "Backstage Crafts," **Spark** goes behind the scenes with the **San Francisco Opera** as the set construction crew takes on the staggering task of building the ambitiously designed scenery for the production of Ferruccio Busoni's 1925 opera "Doktor Faust."

Whereas American operatic productions have mostly stuck with traditional designs for sets and costumes over the last 20 years Europeans have been more interpretive in their art direction. "Doktor Faust," which is co-produced with the Stuttgart Opera, brings some of the more avant-garde aspects of the new European opera to American shores. Set designer Anna Viebrock came up with a single set that will carry a narrative that takes place in four distinct scenes.

The opera tells the story of a man, whose life is shattered after he makes a deal with the devil, and Viebrock wanted the scenery to emphasize the harsh reality of Faust's plight. While visiting the Potrero Hill warehouse where the SF Opera's set construction crew works, she discovered a crumbling industrial scene shop that captured exactly the mood she hoped to create. The carpenters and painters then set about faithfully reproducing the room's decrepit, '50s-era acoustic tile ceilings, peeling paint, rusted water pipes, fire sprinklers and industrial windows.

One of the challenges of the design came from Viebrock's set with more than 1,500 industrial acoustic tiles of the kind that she saw at the warehouse. But those tiles are no longer being manufactured. Moreover, they would have deadened the sound of the singers on stage. So the SF Opera scene shop contracted with an Ohio outfit to manufacture plastic replicas that were painted to look like the real thing. The surface was then painstakingly treated to simulate the stains and peeling paint that result from water damage.

The set for "Doktor Faust" is unusually large. The typical set for San Francisco's War Memorial Theater, where the opera is being put on, is about 60 feet wide. At 98 feet across at its widest point, the L-shaped set for "Doktor Faust" occupies the entire stage, reaching 60 feet upstage and standing 48 feet tall. The floor, walls and ceiling of the set, an area of 10,000 square feet, required approximately 200 sheets of plywood, all of which were hand-painted by scenic artists to the specifications of the design.

Because the War Memorial Theater puts on more than one production at a time and because the opera will be traveling to the Stuttgart Opera, the set needed to be easy to break down, ship, and reassemble. The set construction team accomplished this by making 100 modular flats that are able to fit into four standard 8x8x40-foot shipping containers. Even the enormous ceiling for "Doktor Faust" is designed to be disassembled. Put together, with its skylights, hanging industrial sprinkler pipes and fluorescent lighting, the ceiling weighs approximately 9,000 pounds.