

FINDING A HOME ON THE CHESAPEAKE BAY

By Scenic Designer James J. Fenton

Last summer, scenic designer James J. Fenton took a trip, along with director Charles Towers, to visit the Chesapeake Bay home of playwright Bruce Graham, which inspired the setting of *The Outgoing Tide*. Fenton's account of their journey reveals how real-world locations can find new light on stage.

The path through the design development process of a play is an uneven and obscure route. Moments of inspiration appear through grassy mists, and the edge of the trail is as vague as the horizon line between the sky and the waters of the Chesapeake Bay. Through the overhanging branches, there are only your constant companions: the words of the playwright and, in my case, a visit to his home where our play is set.

Autumn had not yet fully arrived when Charles Towers, the director, and I met at New York's Penn Station for our trip to Bruce Graham's home in Elkton, Maryland (just north of the Chesapeake Bay proper). During the two-hour train ride we discussed our new project, *The Outgoing Tide*, in both abstract and logistical contexts. We've both experienced the struggles of a loved one with Alzheimer's, and felt a deep passion to give the story its due justice. The scenic design needed to be more than just a place in time. Charles and I shared a strong desire to free ourselves from the tight constraints of a naturalistic setting, but knew that we must provide the audience a tether to the actual place this family lived in order to illustrate the stakes of the story. Charles spoke honestly about his personal connection to the play as the city gave way to the lush hillsides of Delaware and then Maryland. I, having never been to the Chesapeake Bay, was attempting to constrain my natural tendency to visualize the environment in anticipation of its storied beauty.

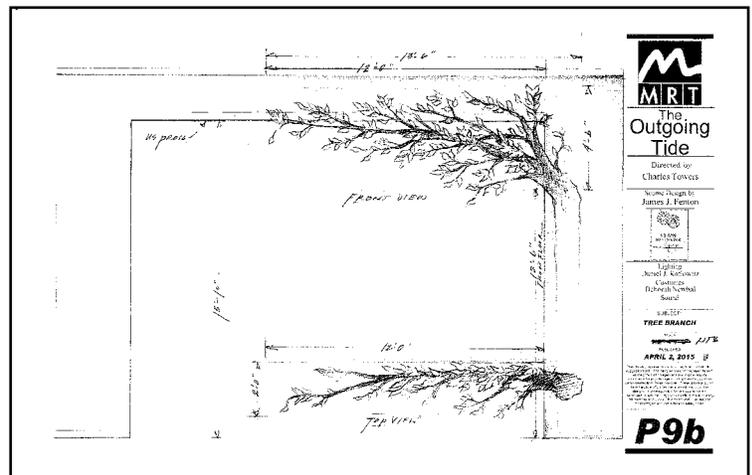
A fascinating aspect of the region that could be easily (and even intentionally) ignored is the suburban, working-class normality of the highways and roads leading to the communities on the bay. The script itself discusses this as a matter of course in dialogue:

Gunner: Red Lobster. That's their idea of a restaurant 'round here. They don't even melt the butter right. Go figure.

There are even deeper elements reflecting this perspective in the subtext. This is a community where people live out their entire lives. It is deeply ingrained in their American paradigm that a long life of hard and



An artful mix of realism and fantasy transforms the playwright's home into a scenic sketch and model.



Sketch for the 12-foot branch that will hang over the set.

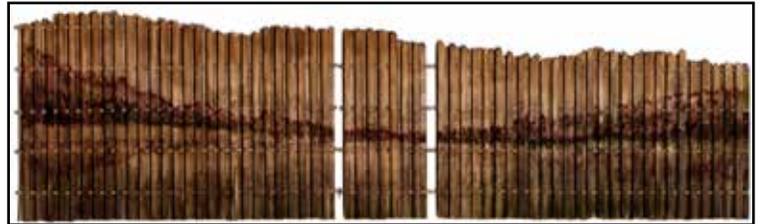
dedicated work should lead to peaceful golden years and soft memories of twilight. Retirement should provide a supportive community and protective environment for the people who have kept the blood of this great country flowing. These ideals became as necessary to the staging environment as the dining room table to truly understand this family. This is the home where they have chosen to live their final years together.

As we left behind the strip malls, trucker stations, and fast food drive-thru's, the winding deciduous hillsides brought us to a short driveway lined with flower and vegetable gardens in a tree-hidden yard. The Elk River, barely peeking from behind the renovated rustic home, confessed itself in the gentle sounds of waves and the smell of salt water.

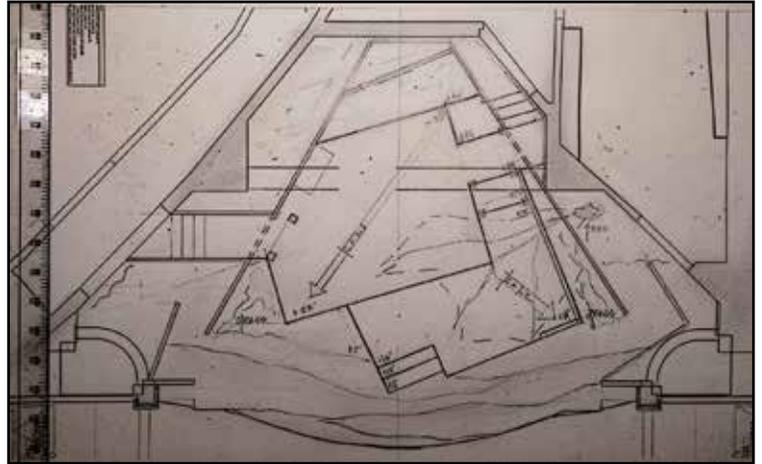
The home itself had a modest yet profound history. Once a log cabin on an embankment, it had seen generations of families grow, and architectural additions gracefully accumulated to accommodate modern living without imposing onto the landscape. A modernized country kitchen, a screened-in porch and a large, tiered patio deck with fishing rods and kayaks lashed to posts told endless tales of relaxing sunsets facing south towards the unseen ocean. I barely had my shoes off, and Bruce and Charles were already neck deep in the river. I dove right in and met them in the warm silty water.

Looking back from the shallow water, the view of the house's tiers and natural elements rising from the beach were the first major design inspiration for Charles and myself. The layers of texture, material and moisture moving away from the sand and up the topography pointed a way for us to create the multiple levels for the home, meanwhile allowing for the expressionistic turns that the play requires.

After our swim it seemed only natural for us to kayak further out onto the gentle Chesapeake waters. The full late summer foliage dominated the coastline and I imagined autumn on the low hillsides reflected in the water. Lonely grey timber docks crawled out through tall grasses to meet us, heavy with years of water saturation. Pairs of old metal-framed chairs held fishing poles and sat silent by metal coolers in the slowly setting sun. Tranquility reigned on the low waves and wet embankments leading us back to the playwright's home, ready to get to work designing our show.



Bruce's fence will take on larger-than-life proportions on the MRT stage.



Floor Plan for The Outgoing Tide.



The dock at Bruce's Maryland home.

All drawings and photographs by scenic designer James J. Fenton.