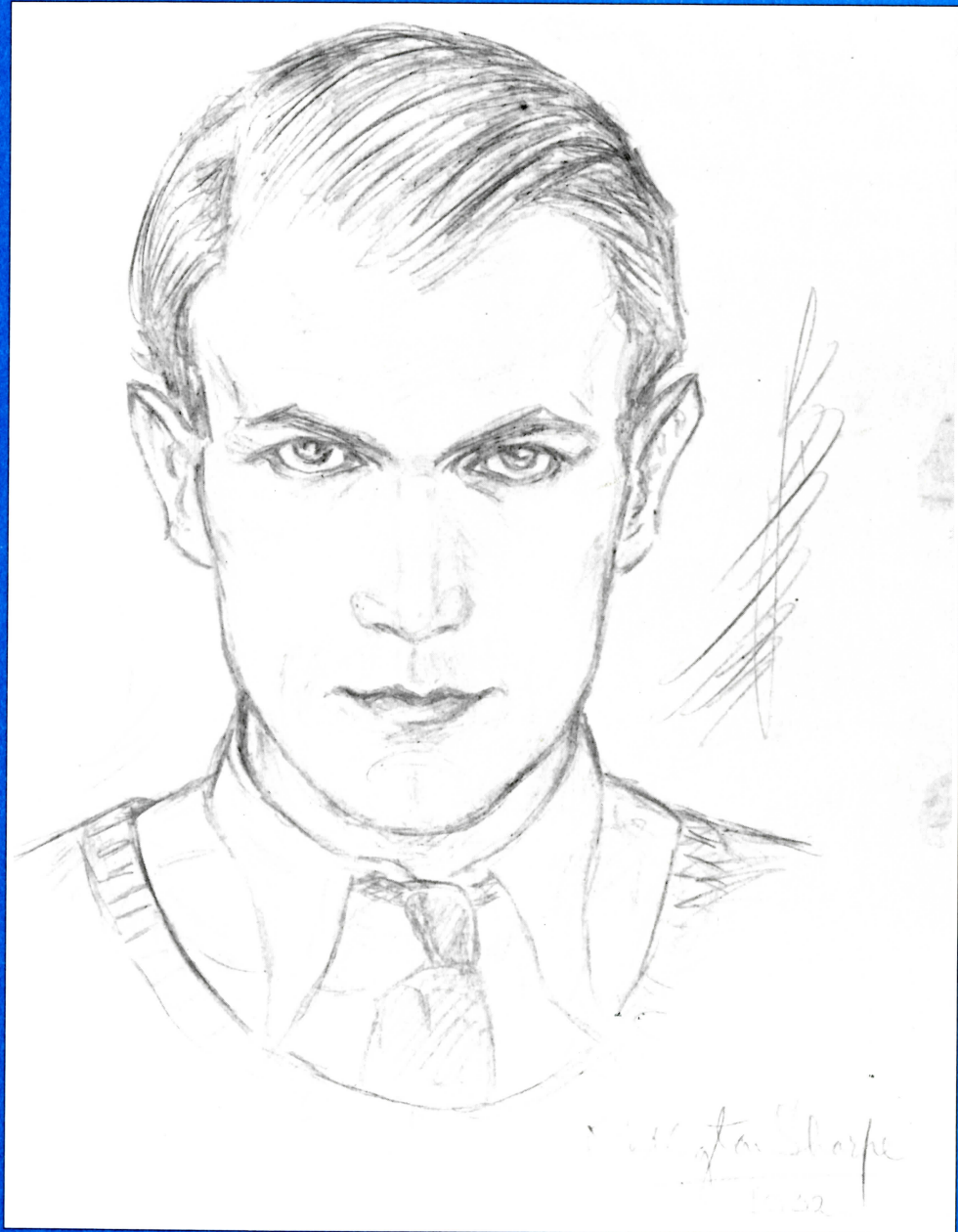


# Robert Redington Sharpe

*The Life of a Theatre Designer*









Robert R. R. R. R.  
1926.

Hassan-

Scene 3.

# Robert Redington Sharpe

## *The Life of a Theatre Designer*

by

Arnold Wengrow

An Exhibition

at the

Harvard Theatre Collection

July 9 - September 15, 1990

Harvard Theatre Collection

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1990

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Frontispiece: Hassan, Scene 3, *Hassan*, 1926 (16a)

In Memory of  
J. Mitchell Reames  
1920 - 1987

*Prince of Librarians*





## FOREWORD

The senseless death in 1934 of a young American stage designer of promise, Robert Redington Sharpe, whose murder in New York was never solved, has remained a sad loss to staff members of the Harvard Theatre Collection decades later. Although none of the present generation here could have ever met Sharpe because of the difference in years, our extensive collection from his youthful career for such important producing organization as the Pasadena Community Playhouse and the Theatre Guild, combined with the dearth of information until now about his life, have always evoked an aura of mystery.

That it is possible at all for Arnold Wengrow to present this deeply-researched and enlightening exhibition on the life and work of Robert Redington Sharpe and to prepare the catalog with its biography is largely owed to the unlikely survival of Sharpe's collection of designs and albums. The binding ribbon of continuity within the Harvard Theatre Collection, threading its way from the days of our first curator, Robert Gould Shaw, through the interests and scholarship of Professor Wengrow, who was assistant curator from 1966 to 1968, to the staff of the present day, has brought forward the memory of Sharpe and eventually revealed his art again. This exhibition marks the first time his short-lived career can be evaluated as a whole.

As Professor Wengrow recounts, Robert Gould Shaw attended a production of the play *Hassan* in 1926 at the Pasadena Community Playhouse, a prominent company in its day, and was struck by the stage settings. He appealed to the designer to place his work for the production in the Harvard Theatre Collection, of which Shaw had been honorary curator for over ten years. Shaw's foresight has become a moving testament to the power and importance of historical preservation of art and archives in the performing arts, whose documents are generally elusive. Sharpe responded favorably to Shaw's invitation, which appealed to his ambition, determination to succeed, and strong sense of posterity. In addition, he took the further step of placing a note among his well-kept papers that he wished all of his work housed in the Harvard Theatre Collection. As so often is the case, Sharpe's papers were in jeopardy at the time of his unexpected death, until his aunt arrived in time from outside the city to gather them and transfer them ultimately to Harvard.

Sharpe's cousin, H.H. Sharpe III, now of Boston, has been generous with information for many years and support in the preparation of the biography and exhibition. Our deepest gratitude is to Professor Arnold Wengrow, whose interest was stirred over twenty years ago by the work of young Robert Sharpe. When working in the stacks of the Harvard Theatre Collection, he came upon the drawings and albums of this designer who was so close in age to himself at the time Sharpe's career was halted. Sharpe's chances had been difficult enough: the Depression had made his opportunity to develop further in the theatre problematic, and it probably was responsible for his death as an apparent robbery victim. The young designer's yearning for recognition is fulfilled by Arnold Wengrow's dedicated research and recovery of the texture of Sharpe's life and career in the theatre. At last, it is possible to honor our long association together with an exhibition and publication, through significant support from the University Research Council, University of North Carolina at Asheville, and from Joseph N. and Martha Clapp Freudenberger of the Committee for the Harvard Theatre Collection.

Jeanne T. Newlin  
Curator



Shortly after midnight on Friday, May 11, 1934, Robert Redington Sharpe, a twenty-nine year old theatrical scene designer, was found unconscious on the third level of the Sixth Avenue and Waverly Place subway station in New York, suffering from severe head injuries received during an apparent robbery attempt. He was taken to Bellevue Hospital, where he died the following Monday at 11:15 a.m.

At the time of his death, Sharpe was best known as the designer of the ultra-naturalistic setting for Jack Kirkland's *Tobacco Road*. The dramatization of the Erskine Caldwell novel had survived a shaky first month the previous December and was settling in as one of Broadway's longest running sensation dramas. The success of *Tobacco Road* had come at a much-needed time for Sharpe. He had attracted considerable attention in 1928, when at age twenty-three he received the assignment to design *Major Barbara* for the Theatre Guild. He had been hailed as a young genius who had studied with Norman Bel Geddes at age seventeen and at nineteen had become the first art director of the Pasadena Community Playhouse. But the Depression had halted his progress. Now, in the spring of 1934, just as his career was beginning to move forward again, a capricious death had struck him down.

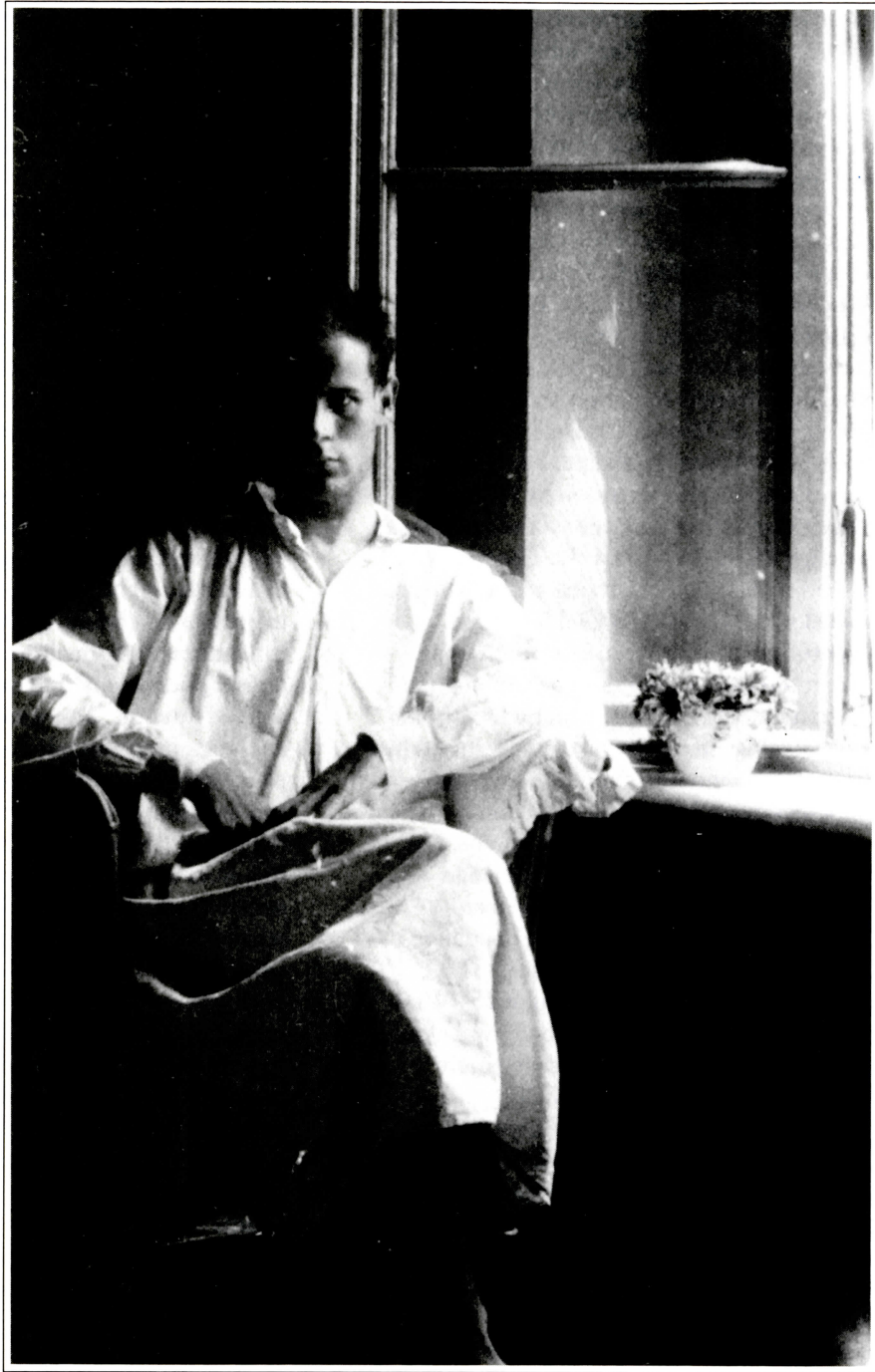
An aunt, Mrs. Hugh Henry Sharpe, was located late Sunday night at her home in Valley Falls, New York. She arrived at Bellevue on Monday morning an hour after Robert Redington Sharpe had died. The police took her to the apartment at 254 West 12th Street where her nephew had lived alone, and she hastily gathered up drawings and papers for shipment to Valley Falls.

Mrs. Sharpe's son, H.H. Sharpe III, sorted through the materials which filled a steamer trunk and discovered a note written by Robert Redington Sharpe indicating that he wanted his drawings and other theatrical papers given to the Harvard Theatre Collection. Robert Sharpe had met Robert Gould Shaw, the founding collector and honorary first curator of Harvard's performing arts research library, when Shaw had visited the Pasadena Community Playhouse in April 1926. Shaw admired Sharpe's designs for James Elroy Flecker's *Hassan* and requested the drawings for Harvard. The young designer was flattered by the request and mentioned it frequently in newspaper interviews later in his career. He

saved the letter from Shaw thanking him for the gift and pasted it in his scrapbook.

H.H. Sharpe presented Robert Redington Sharpe's theatrical legacy to the Harvard Theatre Collection in August 1938. At the time, it was simply accessioned as five portfolios of original drawings, five scrapbooks, thirty-three photographs, and a package of fifty costume sketches.

A thorough examination reveals the Sharpe gift to be a collection of almost 1,000 individual watercolor, pencil, pastel, and charcoal drawings, many annotated by the artist, spanning Robert Redington Sharpe's progress from his earliest childhood efforts to his flourishing at the Pasadena Community Playhouse, from his explorations in Europe to the establishment of his career in New York. The drawings are scenery and costume designs for plays produced, designs for fantasy projects, portrait sketches of Sharpe's associates in California and New York, illustrations for magazines and books, study sketches, and caricatures of personalities and social and artistic phenomena that captured the artist's amused interest. Two scrapbooks contain clippings, programs, photographs, ground plans, letters, contracts, mounted drawings, and manuscript notes which document his life from birth (there is a telegram of congratulation from an aunt on his arrival) to the final uncertain days during the Depression. These scrapbooks contain small preliminary watercolor sketches for *Major Barbara* and *Tobacco Road*, the only drawings of these two important productions which seem to have survived. In addition, there is a scrapbook of illustrations from magazines and reproductions of other designers' work and a portfolio of mounted clippings of historical, architectural, and design motifs, which show the influences on Sharpe's art. We can now rediscover the scope and variety of a fertile theatrical talent which, because it was cut off too soon, has been overlooked.



Robert Redington Sharpe in the Ospedale per Ammalati, Milan, 1926

## CHILDHOOD

Robert Redington Sharpe was born in Boston on December 4, 1904. His father was George Bertram Sharpe, a young man at the beginning of a promising career in the advertising business. Bert Sharpe had sold advertising for the Boston City Directory and then worked in the advertising department of the *Chicago Daily News*. There he had married Alice Leslie Redington, the daughter of a prominent Chicago family, on October 29, 1902. Leslie Redington had studied at the Chicago Musical College School of Acting under the direction of Hart Conway, and Sharpe family legend had it that she had been a member of Maude Adams' company. Robert Sharpe perpetuated this notion in newspaper interviews, but it seems to be apocryphal. Leslie Redington finished at the Chicago Musical College in May 1902 and married in October of the same year, while Maude Adams had closed her tour of *Quality Street* in Orange, New Jersey, on May 1, 1902, and did not appear again until the following November. She had played an engagement in Chicago on March 27, 1902, and it may have been then that the stage-struck Leslie Redington obtained a walk-on with the company. Nevertheless, she appeared to believe that she had given up a promising career in the theatre for marriage.

The couple moved to Boston, where Bert Sharpe worked in the advertising department of the *Boston Traveler*. After a variety of positions, including advertising manager for the Studebaker Company in South Bend, Indiana, Bert Sharpe moved the family to New York, where he became advertising manager for the DeLavel Separator Company. He began to establish himself as an authority on agricultural advertising and as a leader in the newly emerging field of organized advertising. A second son, Richard, was born in 1907.

Leslie Redington Sharpe was determined that her sons were going to be artistic. When Robert showed some inclination for drawing, she encouraged him by entering his efforts in children's drawing competitions sponsored by Wanamaker's and the Rogers Peet Company. He won first prize in the seven-year old class in Wanamaker's Christmas contest in 1912, and the following spring he had his first work reproduced in a newspaper. It was an ordinary child's drawing, stiff and two-dimensional, of a girl and her dog discovering thirty-one

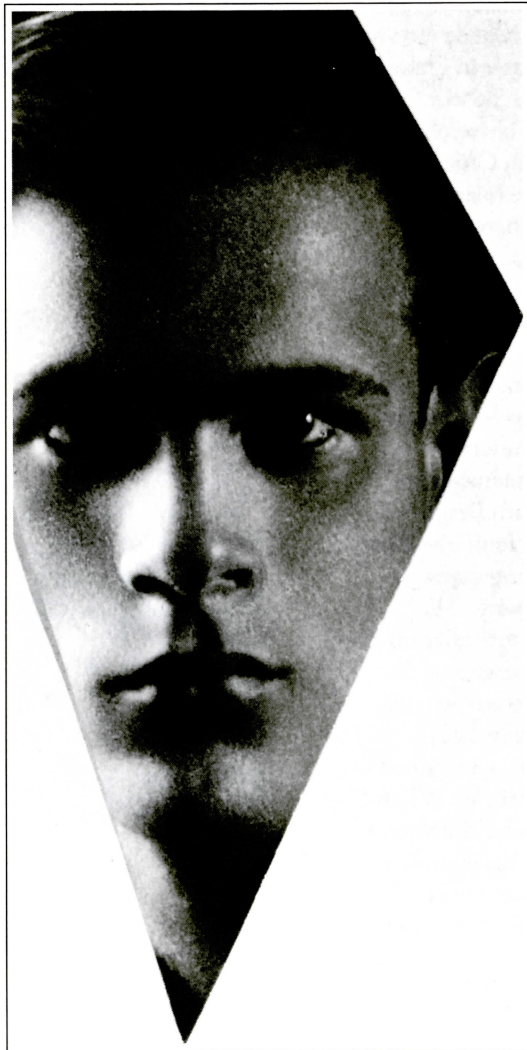
varieties of wild flowers, all of them represented by short, thick, vertical crayon lines. Nevertheless, Robert—or Leslie—saved the drawing and the clipping from the *Tribune*. Virtually everything pertaining to Robert Sharpe's childhood successes was saved: scrawled pencil drawings done on ruled paper at age four or five, a Christmas card he made, a stick-figure portrait of Leslie decked out in elaborate earrings and egret feathers, snippets from society columns noting birthday parties. It is all ordinary, the child's drawings, the programs from dancing school recitals and Boy Scout troop plays. What is extraordinary is that it was all saved, all lovingly mounted and labeled and explicated by Robert some twenty-five years later. Bert Sharpe, the advertising executive, was known as a modest, down-to-earth man; it was Leslie Redington Sharpe who had a flair for self-advertisement. She passed it on to Robert, along with a sense of his artistic destiny.



Leslie Redington Sharpe

Robert's cousin, H.H. Sharpe of Boston, and his aunt, Mrs. Hugh Henry Sharpe of Valley Falls, remembered Leslie as a vain, self-willed woman. Much to their amusement, she would send them as a Christmas present every year a large, new studio portrait of herself. She

had dark, exotic, deep-set eyes that looked out intently from beneath sharply arched brows. Her face was long and oval, slightly squared at the edge of the cheeks and at the chin. There was nothing delicate about her face; the eyes were a bit too far apart, the nose a little too wide and too short, the lips a little too thin. But the curve of the brow, the force of the jaw, the slight pout of the lower lip, the high cheekbones, and the intensity of the eyes gave her a striking look of mystery and determination. Robert inherited his mother's deep-set, intense eyes, and as an adult he emphasized them in photographs and self-portraits with a direct, somber gaze. There is a photograph of himself in the scrapbooks that he has cut at sharp angles to point to the eyes.



Robert Redington Sharpe

While she was encouraging his drawing, Leslie was also introducing Robert to the theatre. In 1933, he compiled a fifteen-page list of all the plays and movies he had seen, year by year, since 1912, when his mother took him to the Hippodrome on Sixth Avenue between 43rd and 44th Streets. It had opened in 1905 as the largest theatre in the world, seating 5,200, with a stage ninety-six feet wide and a proscenium forty feet high. Robert went to the Hippodrome every year until the family moved to Cleveland in 1915, and here he nourished a budding taste for variety performances and spectacle. All in all, between 1912 and 1915, he saw fifteen plays, including *The Bluebird* at the Majestic in Brooklyn (he remembered it as "charming"), *Julius Caesar* with Robert Mantell, and *Ben Hur* and *Chu Chin Chow* at the Manhattan Opera House (*Chu Chin Chow* was "beautiful").

Robert began making model theatres, using his father's old ties for curtains and draperies, and giving performances for the neighborhood children. He painted elaborate cardboard settings and extravagantly dressed cardboard characters, all to be cut out and set up, the characters mounted on metal stands and moved with a magnet underneath the stage floor. He was particularly attracted to fairy tales with exotic settings and characters: Arabia, Egypt, China, India, medieval princesses and knights, harem girls, blackamoor slaves, magicians, sultans, dragons, Eastern princes on caparisoned horses. While the contest drawings and juvenilia are all quite ordinary and inhibited, the setting and costume designs for model theatres made after Robert Sharpe was thirteen suddenly begin to exhibit the qualities that characterize his mature work: a flair for sensuous, vivid color; a feel for whimsical, decorative line; attention to meticulous painted detail; an eye for fantasy and macabre humor; and a passion for texture. Indeed, from the first of the childhood plays that he kept, a piece called "The Magician," done in 1917, which is relatively crude in its execution, to the last, "Perie Banou," done in 1919, which is sophisticated and controlled, Robert Redington Sharpe developed the style and technique that he was happiest with almost until the end. The child embellished the costumes of his fairy-tale characters with bits of feathers and fabric, slick colored papers, shiny foils, even real dragon-fly wings for a

fairy, and a real butterfly for a harem girl's headdress. He used egg shells for oriental domes and punched pin-holes in pagoda-palaces to let light sparkle through.

The childhood plays and settings herald one major theme of Sharpe's work: exotic, luxuriant, chromatic fantasy. But another kind of fantasy, darker, more interior, also appears for the first time in the early work. A 1918 drawing titled "Dead Cities of the Moon" is a metaphor for a mood that manifests itself throughout his life and lurks beneath the sensual, saturated surfaces of his brightest work. "Dead Cities of the Moon" is Robert Sharpe's landscape of nightmare: pale yellow and blue-green craters, pinnacles, and cliffs; jagged, glacial formations jutting up against a jet black sky; silent, lifeless, ghostly, a desolate, abandoned monument from which civilization has departed. It is a hard lunar landscape of despair.

In 1915, Bert Sharpe moved the family once again, to Cleveland, where he took a position as advertising manager for the Cleveland Tractor Company. Robert was enrolled in Shaw High School and began studying at the Cleveland Art Institute. The only times he studied art formally were in Cleveland and a few years later with Norman Bel Geddes in New York. Neither time did his talent flourish. The four sheets of drawings he saved from the Cleveland Art Institute are pedestrian, labored exercises, contained by a painfully drawn outline which gives them a coloring-book look. When he was serving his own vision, the discipline of careful draftsmanship freed him, helped express and shape his fanciful imagination. But in his school work, the discipline — or the instructor — seemed merely to suppress it. The Cleveland drawings are monochromatic and subdued, out of character for the boy whose theatrical fantasies already showed an abundant sense of color and line.

Robert continued to be an avid theatre-goer and saw twenty-nine plays from the time the family moved to Cleveland until the summer of 1922, when they moved to Detroit. Along with light comedies and melodramas, he saw *Macbeth* with Robert Mantell, *Hamlet* with Walter Hampden, *The Return of Peter Grimm* with David Warfield, *The Emperor Jones* with Charles Gilpin, Southern and Marlowe in *The Taming of the Shrew*, and a

performance by Thurston the Magician ("great tricks"). He saw two productions which appealed to his love of exotic spectacle, *Kismet* and *Mecca*, and two different editions of the Ziegfeld Follies ("wonderful girls, exquisite costumes").

In the summer of 1921, Robert obtained his first job in the theatre, working at Robert McLaughlin's Ohio Stock Company, although it is not clear what he did. He lists eleven plays for the summer, all ephemeral comedies and melodramas, noting that he had small parts in two and that in a third "my drawings used." Henry Hull, who was to star as Jeeter Lester in *Tobacco Road*, the last production of Sharpe's career, starred in two productions at the Ohio Stock during that summer of Sharpe's first association with the professional theatre.

Bert Sharpe left Cleveland late in 1921 to become advertising manager for the Burroughs Adding Machine Company in Detroit. The family joined him there in the summer of 1922, after Robert graduated from high school. Robert later said, "Father wanted me to go to Harvard after I finished high school, but I wanted to go to New York and make my mistakes while I was still young. Mother was sympathetic." Leslie's determination prevailed over Bert's reservations, and Robert, not quite eighteen, was sent to New York in the fall to study with Norman Bel Geddes.

Norman Bel Geddes was himself then only twenty-nine and already a leading exponent of that radical simplification and total integration of all the visual arts of theatre production known as “the new stagecraft.” Like Sharpe, Bel Geddes had studied as a boy at the Cleveland Art Institute, but unlike Sharpe, he had rebelled against the unimaginative instruction and struck out on his own. He had been designing professionally since 1916 and by 1922 had earned a national reputation for his abstract, architectural settings. He had begun stage classes, limited to twenty students, to advance his philosophy of theatre and, as he put it, “help those who want and deserved to be helped.”<sup>1</sup>

What did the seventeen-year old Sharpe think in that first class when he heard Bel Geddes describe designing for the stage as “thinking wholly in terms of solids and voids” or decree that “in this class you are to disregard ornament”?<sup>2</sup> Sharpe’s delight in theatre was for painterly surface and lavish decoration. Did the young student have the courage to drop in freely, as Bel Geddes invited, and expose his most imaginative designs to his visionary teacher? The only work that Sharpe saved from his studies with Bel Geddes was seven small photographs of a model for Schnitzler’s *The Green Cockatoo*, and what a dreary, cramped setting it is. Thinking wholly in solids and voids did not come easily for Sharpe.

Nevertheless, he must have impressed the master on some account, for he was allowed to assist in actual production work, although he was required to tone down his “too-fantastic streak.” Sharpe later observed that “my first models and sense of color were better in my early work than when I finished art school. Instinctively I put colors together when I was a kid that later I didn’t dare mix.” He acknowledged Bel Geddes, however, as “one of the great geniuses of the theatre” and always cited his association with him when talking to interviewers. This may have been his Redington myth-making proclivity attempting to establish a protégé-master image. For his part, Bel Geddes seems to have taken very little notice of Robert Redington Sharpe, and there is no evidence that they communicated after Sharpe’s one year of study.

Sharpe plunged into active theatre-going in New York. He saw an average of one play a

week between the fall of 1922 and the following summer, many of which exemplified the most vital European and American theatrical currents of the day. His comments indicate their exhilarating effect on him. He saw the Capeks’ *The Insect Comedy* and *R.U.R.* (“most unusual and bizarre,” “thrilling”), *Hamlet* with John Barrymore and revolutionary settings by Robert Edmond Jones, *The Lower Depths* performed by the Moscow Art Theatre on its first American tour, *Peer Gynt* with Joseph Schildkraut (“extraordinary”), *The Adding Machine* (“darned clever and unusual”), and a performance by Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn.

He also treated his taste for variety performances and visual spectacle to *Chauve Souris* (“delightful”), *The Greenwich Village Follies* and *The Music Box Revue* (“wonderfully beautiful,” “screamingly funny”), his boyhood favorite, the Hippodrome (“spectacular fans, water scenes”), and *George White’s Scandals* (“gorgeous jewel scene”).

Even while he was conscientiously copying designs by Appia, Craig, and Golovine from Moderwell’s *The Theatre of Today* to please Bel Geddes, Sharpe was indulging his “too-fantastic streak” by making models and watercolor drawings for the elaborate follies tableaux, which he always called “ballets.” There are twenty-four of these fantasy projects, dating from 1922 to 1931, with such titles as “Ballet of Musical Instruments,” “Ballet of Slave Princesses,” and “Ballet des Métaux.” They depict elegantly distorted mannequins displaying fanciful costume variations of a central theme. The women are icily sensual, often revealing milk-white limbs and red-tipped breasts. But they always appear imprisoned, frozen in costumes that are more armature than garments. It is clear that Sharpe was greatly influenced by and imitative of the French designer Erté, whose fashion illustrations had been appearing in *Harper’s Bazaar* since 1915 and whose costumes Sharpe would have seen in *The Greenwich Village Follies* in 1922. Erté’s serpentine line, hard-edged forms, and flat, saturated color were adopted by Sharpe with little variation. But what appealed to Sharpe most of all was Erté’s orientalism and erotic allegory, the transformation of women into startling, nonhuman symbols. Sharpe’s women are harder, more threatening than those of Erté, and the



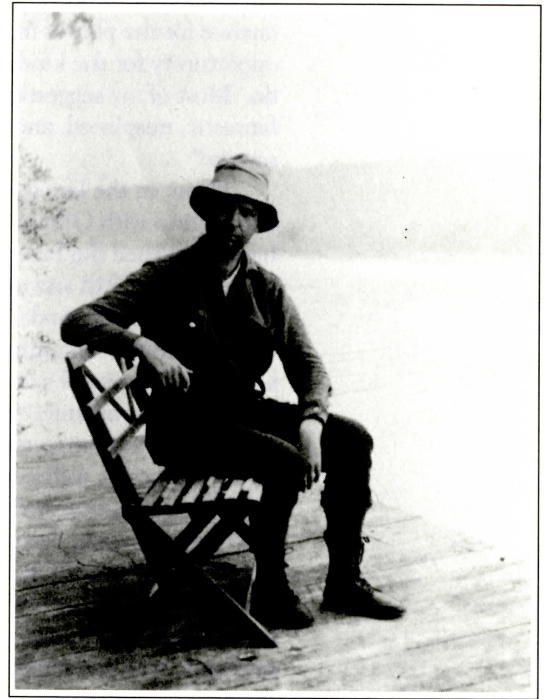
scenarios of his imaginary ballets are filled with violence and grotesquerie.

In the "Ballet of Jewels," dated 1923, women dressed as precious stones appear one by one against a black backdrop in an opening cut out of a silver drop curtain: ruby, sapphire, topaz, amethyst, pearl, turquoise, fire opal, emerald, tourmaline, and diamond; the precious metals silver and gold; and the secondary gems, cat's eye, onyx, bloodstone, alabaster, garnet, aquamarine, agate, lapis-lazuli, jade, moonstone, and coral; all building up to the Perfect Jewel, a totally nude woman supporting a gigantic, glowing wheel of a headdress made of concentric bands of indigo, purple, green, yellow, orange, leading to a center of deep red. The women are hard-eyed, crimson-lipped, seductive Amazons. The jewels are piled on their heads and explode off their bodies. Amethyst has a Medusa-head of curving crystal fronds. Pearl wears a tower of shell-like shapes dripping with ropes of pearls and topped by one enormous bauble. Ruby's headdress is a fan of lightning bolts. The jewels are like armor, like shields, like spikes, like claws. It is a remarkable procession, glacial and ominous, of greed and lust.

The fantasy ballets were outlets for Sharpe's most persistent artistic and psychological themes. As pure illustration they display the range of his stylistic experimentation. Although he claimed in letters to friends to have designed for music-halls in Europe, it is possible to verify only two occasions on which he actually did have his follies-type designs used. One was in 1927 in Berlin at the Theater am Kurfürstendamm, and the second was in 1930 when he did three settings for *Earl Carroll's Vanities*. Neither occasion permitted him to exercise his too-fantastic streak. The seven costume designs and six act-drops for the satiric "Kinder-Revue" called *Hans im Glück* are pastel and cartoon-like, droll rather than biting. No renderings of his sets for Earl Carroll have survived, but the fact that in an extravaganza of sixty-eight scenes, Sharpe had the commission for only three, and those blandly titled "Apartment Hunting," "Lobby of the St. Moritz," and "All Quiet," indicates that he never really saw his talent as a dreamer of follies spectacle recognized.

After his year of study with Bel Geddes was up in the spring of 1923, Sharpe tried a variety of jobs unconnected with the theatre, including working as a window dresser and an architect's assistant. He was unsure of what direction he should move in and felt no pressure to find one.

Then on Friday, August 10, 1923, he received a telegram from his brother in Detroit notifying him that his father was dead. George Bertram Sharpe had drowned early that morning while on vacation alone at Algonquin Park, a resort two hundred miles north of Toronto. He had left his hotel at 7:20 a.m. for a swim, and at 8:15 a.m. his body was discovered lying at the bottom of the lake. He was forty-six years old.



George Bertram Sharpe

Bert Sharpe's death left the family's financial position insecure, so Robert took a job as an apprentice at the Gates and Morange scenic studio at 533 West 43rd Street. There, he later said, "I learned all of the things I should not do. I didn't like the work, although it did teach me how to paint all of my own settings, and I realized there must be practicality to all visions."

After five months, he was glad to leave at the end of January 1924 and go to Los Angeles, where Leslie had moved with his younger brother. He arrived in California with a letter of introduction from Gates and Morange and high hopes of getting into the movies. He made the rounds with his portfolio. He tried unsuccessfully to get in to see Cecil B. DeMille, but obtained an audience with Ferdinand Earle, producer of lavish versions of *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* and *Faust*. Earle sent him to Charles Eyton of Famous Players-Lasky with the encomium, "If Leon Bakst were not doing my 'Faust' costumes, I'd employ Sharpe." Sharpe said later that he had worked as a draftsman in a movie studio, and it must have been at this time for a few short months in the spring of 1924. He did not like it, however. "There was no chance for the play of imagination and little opportunity for the kind of thing I wanted to do. Most of my suggestions were wildly fantastic, misplaced, and not applicable for the screen."

Then, in the late spring, he made a vital connection with Gilmor Brown, the man who had established the Pasadena Community Playhouse in 1918 and quickly made it into a nationally-known model of a spirited, artistically vigorous community theatre. Originally a minor professional actor touring with second-rate companies throughout the West, Brown had been attracted to Pasadena in 1916 by its well-to-do, well-educated, socially cohesive population with a long-standing interest in the arts. He tried to run a professional stock company in a former burlesque theatre called the Savoy, but when this was a financial failure, he was persuaded by local residents, who admired his appealing personality and genuine interest in community projects, to develop a theatre based on amateur participation.<sup>3</sup>

The little theatre movement in America was then in its first flower, and Brown, in a combination of visionary idealism and professional shrewdness, seized the opportunity. He offered skillfully mixed seasons of potboilers, classics, and experimental plays, cast perceptively from all segments of the community and mounted simply but tastefully.



Gilmor Brown

Brown frequently supplemented his work at the Pasadena Community Playhouse by directing outdoor dramas and pageants for community and college groups, a practice he had begun as a young touring actor. Now, in June of 1924, he was staging Euripides' *The Bacchae* (produced under the title of *The Bacchanals*) as the second annual outdoor Greek drama presented by the senior class at Occidental College. Robert Sharpe was recommended to him as a designer, perhaps by Norman Bel Geddes, and the production began an important and successful association for both men.

*The Bacchae* as designed by Sharpe is a curious mixture of Euripides, educational earnestness, Aubrey Beardsley, and the Ziegfeld Follies. The costumes are conceived in flat, bright colors, including stark white body and face make-up for the Chorus and Bacchus. Sharpe has succeeded in turning the women of the chorus into real chorines, with vivid red lips against dead white faces, wigs of gold wound with ribbons and grapes, and black snakes entwining their heads and waists. When Agave enters with the head of Pentheus dripping bloody streamers, she too is dead-white with scarlet lips and wears a scarlet robe trailing fifteen feet behind her. The Chorus women unwind black scarves from around their waists and throw them over their heads. Agave drops her robe and reveals herself all in black, with a single fiery jewel at her breast. Sharpe's designs must have been more outré than the head of the Greek department and the president of the college anticipated, but they were evidently not displeased, for the young artist was invited back to design *Iphigenia in Aulis* the following June.

More importantly, Gilmore Brown invited Sharpe to begin designing for the Pasadena Community Playhouse. Brown had always had an appreciative eye for good scene design. Even as a struggling actor-manager touring his scrappy stock company, he had carried drops that were dyed rather than painted, giving a less garish effect and also allowing them to be folded and stored without the paint peeling off. At the ill-fated Savoy Stock Company in Pasadena, a reviewer had noted that the scenic work was "one of the most commendable features of the company's offerings, for, in spite of the small stage, the sets of the plays so far, both for interiors and forest scenes, have been

unusually good. Color harmony and the value of simplicity in planning the set are thoroughly recognized, and the stage pictures are most effective."

Both from conviction and from economic necessity, Brown had adopted the principles of the new stagecraft in mounting the classics and experimental productions. *The Tempest* used colored lights against a set of white draperies; *The Master of Shadows*, an original play, depicted the Sermon on the Mount with a chorus speaking the text while silhouetted figures pantomimed the action behind a scrim; and *King Lear* was cubistic in design.

The theatre that Brown invited Sharpe to design for was the old Savoy on North Fair Oaks Avenue. It was a Spanish-styled stucco building seating approximately 490, with almost nonexistent ventilation and an old tin roof. The roof clattered so badly during a storm that actors were inaudible, and it leaked to the point where buckets were needed to catch the rain. Both the budget and the stage would guarantee that Sharpe's practical skills as a designer would be honed and his taste for spectacle adapted to a small scale. The stage measured thirty feet across and eighteen feet deep, although there was a thirty-foot loft which permitted some scenery to be hung. Brown once remarked that the stage was so shallow that his stage pictures often had the quality of a Greek frieze, which may have been just the reason the flat, painterly designs of Sharpe worked so well there.

Sharpe began at the Playhouse immediately after *The Bacchae* and designed seven productions from the end of June to the middle of August, starting with *Lady Windermere's Fan*, and including W.S. Gilbert's *Engaged*, A.A. Milne's *The Dover Road*, Charles Kennedy's *The Servant in the House*, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. In the Shakespeare comedy, Sharpe used a simple white-draped setting varied with colored lighting, with an enormous midsummer moon set almost at floor level over a low, nonrepresentational platform. The Greek characters were in black, white, and gold, the rustics in browns, and the fairies in red, gold, silver, and blue. George Pierce Baker, whose playwriting workshop at Harvard was of international fame, attended a performance and was quoted in the *Pasadena Star-News* as admiring its "sheer simplicity" which revealed "more of the real beauties of Shakespeare than the usual present-day staging.

The tendency to overelaborate settings with electric flowers, illuminated mushrooms, and fairies on wires detracts from the natural charm of such plays." In addition to designing, the tall, lanky Sharpe also played the role of Starveling, using the stage name Peter Wendell.

Brown was pleased with Sharpe's work and eventually created a position for him as the first art director of the Pasadena Community Playhouse. Sharpe liked to claim that he had arrived at this status when he was nineteen, which technically would have been before his birthday in December 1924, but he does not appear on the staff listing until late in the 1924-25 season and then at the bottom of the list as "art supervisor." Later, when the group moved into its new theatre in May 1925, Sharpe's name appears with the staff on the special opening program as "Art Director" in fourth position after Gilmor Brown and the two associate directors, Lenore Shanewise and Maurice Wells. Nevertheless, Sharpe settled immediately into the operation of the theatre, certainly on a paid basis, and designed twelve productions for the theatre on North Fair Oaks Avenue from the fall of 1924 until the following spring.

He was billing himself now as Robert R. Sharpe, but his friends called him Bob. He lived in a rooming house near the theatre and occupied a kind of "sleeping porch," as it was called, which was painted completely white and could be dazzling in Pasadena's midsummer sun. He was six feet, three inches tall, very angular and loose-jointed, and seemed much older than nineteen. He had a deep voice, a gift for mimicry, and an amusing manner of telling a story. He made friends easily, and there were frequent outings to Laguna Beach and Point Firmin, bridge parties, and excursions to Catalina. He amused his friends by drawing quick pencil portraits of them which delighted the artist as much as the sitter.

Sharpe had joined the Pasadena Community Playhouse at exactly the moment of its coming of age. Gilmor Brown's genius for attracting bright young talent, for melding the efforts of a diverse group of workers, for providing artistic vision while satisfying a popular audience, and for creating an aura of community pride had brought the Playhouse to international prominence in a very short time.

In 1922, property had been acquired on El Molina Avenue on which to construct a new theatre, and the following year a community-wide fundraising campaign was undertaken. In the fall of 1924, just as Robert Sharpe was beginning his first full season, construction on the new building was begun. It was completed the following spring, and the theatre opened on May 18, 1925, with a flourish of excitement and publicity. The building, in the California Spanish style, won praise for its charm as well as its utility. Gilmor Brown had wanted an unconventional open stage, but his community supporters were not ready for such an innovation. They did agree to two small side stages on either side of a proscenium arch thirty-two feet wide and twenty feet high. The side stages connected to a shallow, removable forestage curving out over the orchestra pit, thus allowing the director to thrust some of the action beyond the proscenium line. Behind the proscenium, the stage was eighty feet wide, thirty-one feet deep, and sixty-seven feet to the grid. There were forty-five sets of rope lines for flying scenery. It was for this stage that Robert Redington Sharpe designed twenty-two productions in the next eleven months during the most sustained period of productivity in his short career. His work at the Pasadena Community Playhouse allowed him to experiment with every kind of setting in every kind of style: realistic, expressionistic, detailed, simplified, sculptural, painterly, period, futuristic. Renderings or sketches for eighteen of the forty-one productions Sharpe did are preserved, along with photographs by Ralph Freud or Margaret Craig of the completed settings, documenting thoroughly their scenic conception and execution. Sharpe brought visual distinction to the Pasadena Community Playhouse in its first year in the theatre it was to occupy for the next forty-five years, and he set a high standard for the position that many distinguished designers, including Janis Muncis, were to occupy.

Sharpe's settings generally received favorable notices in newspaper reviews, particularly those of the *Pasadena Star-News*, which tended to emphasize only the positive aspects of the Playhouse's productions; more importantly, the Los Angeles papers frequently singled out his settings for mention. Monroe Lathrop of the *Los Angeles Evening Express* was a particularly strong supporter of the young designer. Reviewing the second production in the new

theatre, *The Lady of the Lamp*, the rival critic for *The Los Angeles Times* remarked that Sharpe's settings could be compared for beauty only to those of *Romeo and Juliet* seen earlier in the season in Los Angeles. Lathrop then responded in the *Express* two days later that Sharpe's settings had a "rare charm, richness, and distinction" the equal of which he could not recall seeing in a Los Angeles theatre. Sharpe, who thrived on such public praise, labeled the *Times* review in his scrapbook "wonderful criticism" and Lathrop's rejoinder "another wonderful criticism." Lathrop later wrote Sharpe a personal letter predicting greater things for him than Pasadena: "I don't wish the Community Theatre any bad luck; at the same time I hope that your large talent and skill will find opportunity in the biggest field, where they can have the fullest equipment and meet with the largest measure of appreciation. I am sure this is bound to come about, for there aren't many of your kind."

As a matter of fact, Sharpe did design bits and pieces for productions in Los Angeles: a set of grilled doors for Act I of *The Clinging Vine*, a musical starring Peggy Wood; a prologue setting for the Gershwins' *Lady Be Good*; and he "arranged" the settings for *The Lady*, a vehicle for Pauline Frederick. But despite the publicity and the praise, the wider world of the theatre did not come seeking him out.

By the winter of 1926, Sharpe was getting restless in Pasadena. He was, he said, "slightly weary of the American way of doing things." He had settled into a comfortable life, bustling with work and enjoyable society, but as satisfying as it was for his ego, it was not very good for his art. He was, after all, only twenty-one and ambitious for adventure. Several of his friends from the Playhouse had gone to Europe, including Margaret Linley, a small, mischievous girl with a pixie haircut whom he had met the previous August, so he decided he would give up the security of Pasadena and spend a year or two poking around on the Continent.

Only once in his career was Sharpe's genius for pageantry and oriental splendor truly fulfilled. Fittingly enough, it was his valedictory production for the Pasadena Community Playhouse, where his talents were best recognized. The production was *Hassan*, the achievement that initiated his connection with the Harvard Theatre Collection. Robert Gould Shaw saw *Hassan* by chance, but he could not have chosen a more representative, more totally realized example of Robert Redington Sharpe's work if he had been able to survey the designer's entire career. Here, at last, was an appropriate canvas for Sharpe's riotous color imagination, his passion for visual lushness. Sharpe's own notes on the production demonstrate the cinematic flow of his imagination. It was color and music and movement, not ideas, that fascinated him.

The Court scene was of simple white curtains, softly lit with amber. Center was a gold platform and steps; on it several stools, and behind it an immense double-door of bronze. Costumes . . . depict the Guests who come to have audience with the Caliph. Against the simple background, one by one those figures entered, each more vivid, more elaborate, more spectacular, than the one before. Some, like the Jester and Wrestler, were grotesque, some exquisite, like Ishak, the Poet; others wore enormous turbans, brocaded robes, tremendous plumes, jewels, chains, earrings. . . . One was all in silver with long silver tassels from his sleeves and a sash of vermillion. Another in gold cloth heavily appliqued with color. A Chinese Philosopher wore deep blue and cérise, with a tall, tall hat and long, long whiskers; he walked on stilt-shoes six inches high! Others wore yellow, green, purple, red, orange, tan, blue . . . When at last the stage was like a great bed of brilliant flowers, suddenly the gaudy old Herald struck a huge bronze gong before the bronze doors looming center-stage. They ponderously swung open, and there, against a background of violent vermillion, stood the Caliph in pure white! His robe sparkled with diamonds, shone with satin, glittered with pearls. . . . During

the rest of the play Masrur was completely in black, with gold eyebrows and ears and a gold sash. For the torture-scene, he had a headdress like a spurt of blood encircled with human bones. Scarlet earrings from ears, and scarlet ribbons from wrists, with his black sash merging into bloody scarlet. He entered over a stairway, silhouetted huge against a lowering sky, his great sword held straight above him. . . . The unfortunate lovers, about to be tortured, were garbed wholly in black, and dragged heavy balls and chains behind them. To slow, terrifying music and ominous crash of drums, the procession, headed by Masrur, appeared over the wall, slowly descended the stair, and passed out at one side into the torture chamber. The lights dimmed almost to nothing. Suddenly there was a frightful shriek, and a flare from the open door. Shriek upon shriek, moan and cry of anguish. Then silence—and slowly darkness. The fountain in the garden flowed crimson—it was running blood! Curtain.

The twenty-six costume drawings, in opaque watercolor embellished with gold and silver on mottled grey-green board, are Sharpe's loveliest. The colors dazzle both in their brilliance and in their variety. Equally surprising and various are the costumes' shapes and decorations: tunics, turbans, tights, caftans, capes, copes, vests, mantles, pantaloons; double-layered collars the width of shoulders; vast tubular sleeves that drip to the floor; bell-shaped sleeves, balloon-shaped sleeves, double sleeves, triple sleeves, quadruple sleeves; shoes that curl from toes to ankles; bushy headdresses, spikey headdresses, feathery headdresses, headdresses like cigars, like helmets, like mushrooms; all embroidered with vines, leaves, petals, flowers, stars, teardrops; and hung with chains and pendants, bracelets and beads, ribbons, tassels, and pearls. Beards are black, white, thick, thin, curly, straight, pointed, divided, braided, tilted up, tilted out. Mustaches curl up to cheeks, out to ears, down to waists. It is all sensuousity and virtuosity, irrepressible and irresistible.

There was a flurry of farewell praise, a long interview on the front page of the drama section of the Sunday *Los Angeles Times*, a party in the Green Room of the Playhouse after the final dress rehearsal of *Hassan*, a check and a letter of appreciation from the Governing Board, and then Sharpe was off to New York and a new life.

## PARIS AND BERLIN

Sharpe sailed for Europe on the S.S. *Lancastria* at midnight on Friday, April 30, 1926. He was traveling Tourist Third Class, but on the first day out he located a service passage and sallied up to the First Class Deck. There he managed to bluff the days out until almost the very end of the voyage, enjoying morning refreshments and afternoon tea, dancing in the ballroom, drinking at the smart bar, and mixing famously with all the First Class passengers. But a coal strike in England made docking at Southampton impossible as scheduled, so the ship stayed a couple of extra days at sea. To pass the time, a group of passengers organized a treasure hunt. When Bob and a charming young girl from Asheville, North Carolina, named Rachel Howland won the prize, the losers demanded, "Who is this mysterious person who flits vaguely over this ship and wins all our money from under our noses?"

Sharpe recounts the story in a journal he kept, which he later typed and titled "Travel Notes, 1926-28." It stayed in the possession of H.H. Sharpe when the drawings and scrap-books came to Harvard, and he has kindly let it be used now to document Robert Sharpe's stay in Europe. It conveys the exhilaration with which an observant, imaginative, ambitious young American, with little money but lots of charm, plunged into the artistic and social ferment of Paris and Berlin in the mid-1920s.

After the passengers complained, the chief purser came to banish Sharpe from the First Class Deck, but the young man persuaded the officer to let him remain, since, he reasoned, he had managed to escape detection for the entire voyage and a little while longer surely wouldn't matter. This jaunty ingenuousness no doubt eased his way into many socially advantageous situations.

Rachel Howland was sailing on her first trip to Europe that spring with her younger sister, Francisca, and their Aunt Radie. She later recalled that the prize for the treasure hunt was thirteen dollars and that Robert Sharpe was a modest young man of great personal attractiveness. He came to call in Paris and took them all on an evening boat trip down the Seine to a little garden restaurant where the proprietor played different musical instruments for them, and they drank cider and giggled a lot. She met him again

later, by chance at a party in New York, but by then she was married, and memories of ship-board treasure hunts and garden restaurants on the Seine had been dimmed by the Depression.

Sharpe established himself in a studio hotel on the Rue Campagne-Première and set about absorbing all that the museums and monuments, theatres and music-halls, cafés and nightclubs, resorts and retreats of France, Italy, England, and Germany could offer. He got a design job here and there, did an illustration or two, worked on sketches and projects, and took photographs. He met the right people and got his name in the society columns. He saw Josephine Baker at the Folies Bergères and Mistinguett at the Moulin Rouge. He observed Isadora Duncan, fat, puffy, and made-up like a prima donna, at a Georges Antheil concert. Georges Pitoëff gave him tickets for the Théâtre des Arts, and Gaston Baty complimented him on his designs for *Salomé*.

In the summer of 1926, he and Margaret Linley, his friend from Pasadena, decided to take a walking tour of Italy, intending to make themselves look as little like tourists as possible. Maggie was to disguise herself as a boy, Bob would grow a beard, and they would live as peasants, eating and sleeping in wayside inns.



Margaret Linley

They started out and crossed briefly into Switzerland, but when they tried to cross into Italy, the guards did not want to admit Maggie. Her passport showed a picture of a girl, and here clearly was a boy. Neither he nor Maggie could speak Italian yet and could not make themselves understood in French or English. So finally Bob opened their knapsack and showed them a pair of Maggie's pink underwear, after which they were allowed to pass.

All of their friends had warned them to be inoculated against typhoid, but Bob had a reaction to the shot and after a week had to be hospitalized in Milan. Three and a half weeks later, they were able to resume their tour, now going by Third Class trains to make up for lost time. In Venice, Bob fell into the Grand Canal in front of the Doge's Palace while stepping back to take a photograph. The maid at the hotel put his trousers in the oven to dry. He and Maggie quarreled in Naples, but they patched it up by going to Capri. They went down into Sicily and then returned to Paris on a rainy night in early October.

While he was in the hospital in Milan, Sharpe received a letter from Lenore Shane-wise, associate director of the Pasadena Playhouse. He was very glad to get news of his friends in California and wrote her a warm reply, not mentioning that he was traveling with Margaret Linley for fear that the news would get back to her family.

Your letter came at a most welcome time, and made me very, very happy. For I was in a hospital here with pneumonia, complicated by pleurisy and bronchial catarrh. . . . It was very sweet of you to write. Please do it again soon and tell me more about the Playhouse. I had thought Gilmor was coming to Europe this summer. I am going to Germany this autumn, I think—he had planned to go there, too. Tell Gilmor I will send a résumé of the theatres in France and Italy on my return to Paris. . . and give him my very best regards. I'm glad Jimmy Hyde is satisfying all of you: tho my dear Lenore, the very clever scenery idea for "The Potters" you wrote me of, was not his, but mine! I had made a whole set of pencil

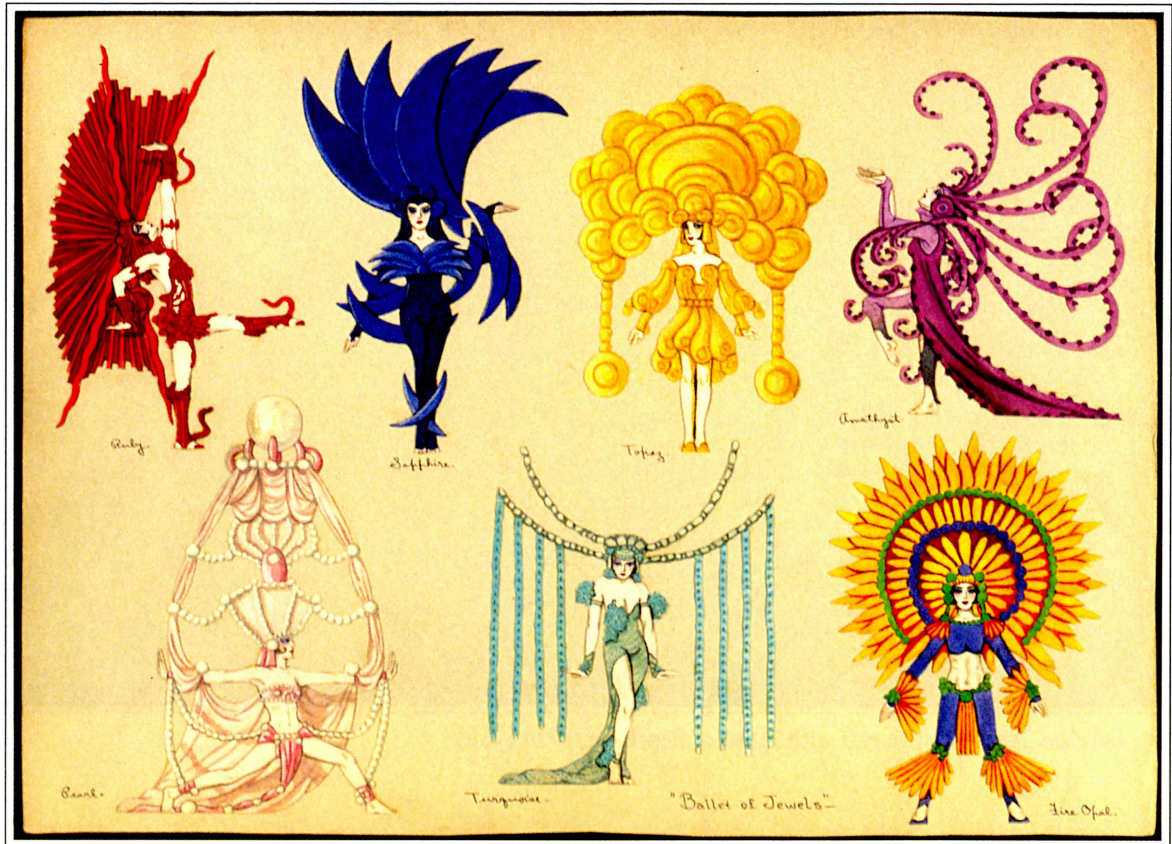
sketches for it before I left, using the arch-frame with a futuristic painted city. He only developed it into finished designs: how could you have forgotten I did it, naughty lady? (The truth is, I'm really quite jealous of the Hyde-person, because I was never so happy in my life as there with all of you.) Somehow I am always saying "when I return to the Playhouse"—whereas perhaps I should never go back, but try my wings at greater fields (N.Y. for instance).

After almost a year in Paris, Sharpe decided to go to Berlin. Before leaving, he summed up his impressions of the French theatre in a long article that he sent back to *The Los Angeles Times*. Now signing himself Redington Sharpe, he criticized the Folies Bergères, Casino de Paris, and the Palace for unoriginal tableau-parades, the Fratellini Clowns for low humor, French farces for hackneyed plots, the Grand Guignol for appalling settings, and the national theatre for an outdated style. He did approve of Gaston Baty and Georges Pitoëff, who were presenting new plays in experimental productions, the former at the Studio Champs Elysées, and the latter at the Théâtre des Arts. It seemed to Sharpe that Germany and Russia were in the lead in advanced methods of production and scene design. So at the end of March 1927, he left for Berlin without knowing a word of German and with only twenty-five dollars and a letter of introduction from Firmin Gemier of the Théâtre National de l'Odéon.

His arrival in Berlin did not augur well. He had missed his train from Paris, and when he did reach Berlin on a night train, he expected to stop at a major terminal. When the train seemed to be passing through the city without coming to a terminal, he got off in desperation at a station in the slums of the Alexanderplatz and spent his first night in a dingy, spider-infested hotel, where he woke to the sight of hundreds of crucifixes formed by yellow light coming through the crossed mullions of the dirty windows.

From that ill-omened beginning, Sharpe spent exactly one year to the day in Germany. It was, he wrote in his diary, a year of "much unhappiness but great advance" in his work. He discovered that an unfavorable rate of exchange and high prices made his meager

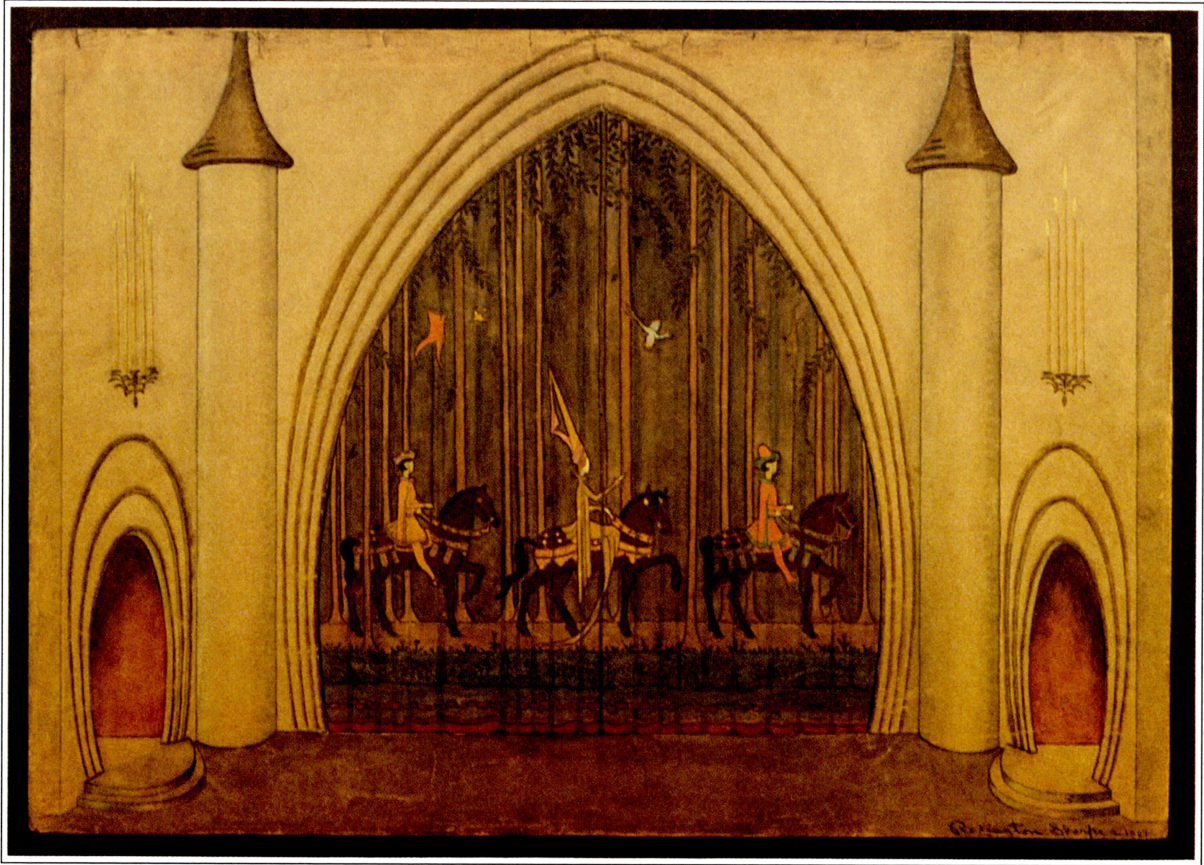




Ballet of Jewels (Ruby, Sapphire, Topaz, Amethyst, Pearl, Turquoise, Fire Opal), 1923 (9c)



*The Bacchae, Agave's Entrance with Head of Pentheus, 1924 (11d)*



*Pelléas and Mélisande*, Front Curtain, 1927 (17a)



Tobacco Road, Watercolor sketch for setting, 1933 (26a)

finances even more precarious. He found very little work and fewer friends and frequently went hungry. He fell into a "continual unliving dream-state" which often grew to nightmare proportions.

Sharpe found Berlin depressing after Paris. Paris had *esprit*. Berlin was like a combination of Chicago and New York, without the charm of either. Berlin was bustling and noisy. He was intrigued by the nightlife and found the theatre progressive. There was frenzied traffic and jostling crowds. But no *esprit*. He lived in a dreary pension run by three spinster sisters at Helmstedterstrasse 3, which he caricatured wryly in a drawing titled "Pension Wolff." The landlady, "The Head Wolff," is seated at one end of a sparsely laid table, and opposite her sits "The Business Wolff." Seated at the sides of the table are "The Perfumed Lady," "Mischa's Mamma," and "little Mischa," "The Music Master," "The German Coquette," a huge, brutish "Nero," "The Sweet Russian Jews," an effeminate man labeled "Auntie Gustav," an aging fatale called "The Russian Peril," and "Sad-Austria," a moody-looking woman with a big nose. The only things on the table are a dish of sauerkraut at one end, a dish of fish pudding at the other, and in between a pitcher of water and a thin vase with one spindly flower. Despite the accommodations, the Head Wolff, Fräulein Anna, had a heart as gold as the watch pinned on her bosom. "She adored me," Sharpe said.

He went to the theatre or the opera about once a week. Some of it he found "punk" and the audience's continual eating disgusting. The Grosse Schauspielhaus he thought horribly ugly, "dripping stalactite-architecture, like the udders of some huge cow hanging over one." He did like the intimacy and taste of the Komödie, however, and was surprised at the spontaneity and lightness of the musical comedy *Mannequins*, which he thought "unexpected in this nation."

He was fascinated with the technical proficiency of the German theatre and experimented in his own sketches with the spare, mechanized, constructivist style he was observing. From the drawings, it is clear that the style did not suit him, since form and spatiality were never his great interests. His German drawings are like his schoolboy exercises, dutiful attempts with no inner conviction.

His best work in Germany, and one of the loveliest sets of renderings he did, was a project for the Debussy opera *Pelléas and Mélisande*. It is in his romantic style, here softened and saddened by the mood of the opera and his own loneliness. There are twelve scenes, an act curtain, and a permanent proscenium painted in delicate watercolor washes on grey paper. The proscenium depicts the walls of a fairy-tale castle, with two turrets on either side and a pointed arch in the center. The arch serves as an inner proscenium opening in which the act curtain and drops are to be hung. A small forestage is indicated for action in front of the proscenium.

Sharpe's renderings and the act curtain are mounted behind arch-shaped openings on black mats, bordered with a thin gold line. The ensemble, intended for display or presentation, is reminiscent of his childhood models.

The act curtain is a frieze-like forest scene, with long, thin, tapering tree trunks, and a princess wearing a tall peaked cap riding on a high-prancing horse, accompanied before and behind by two courtiers. The figures are as thin as the trees, and the colors are somber.

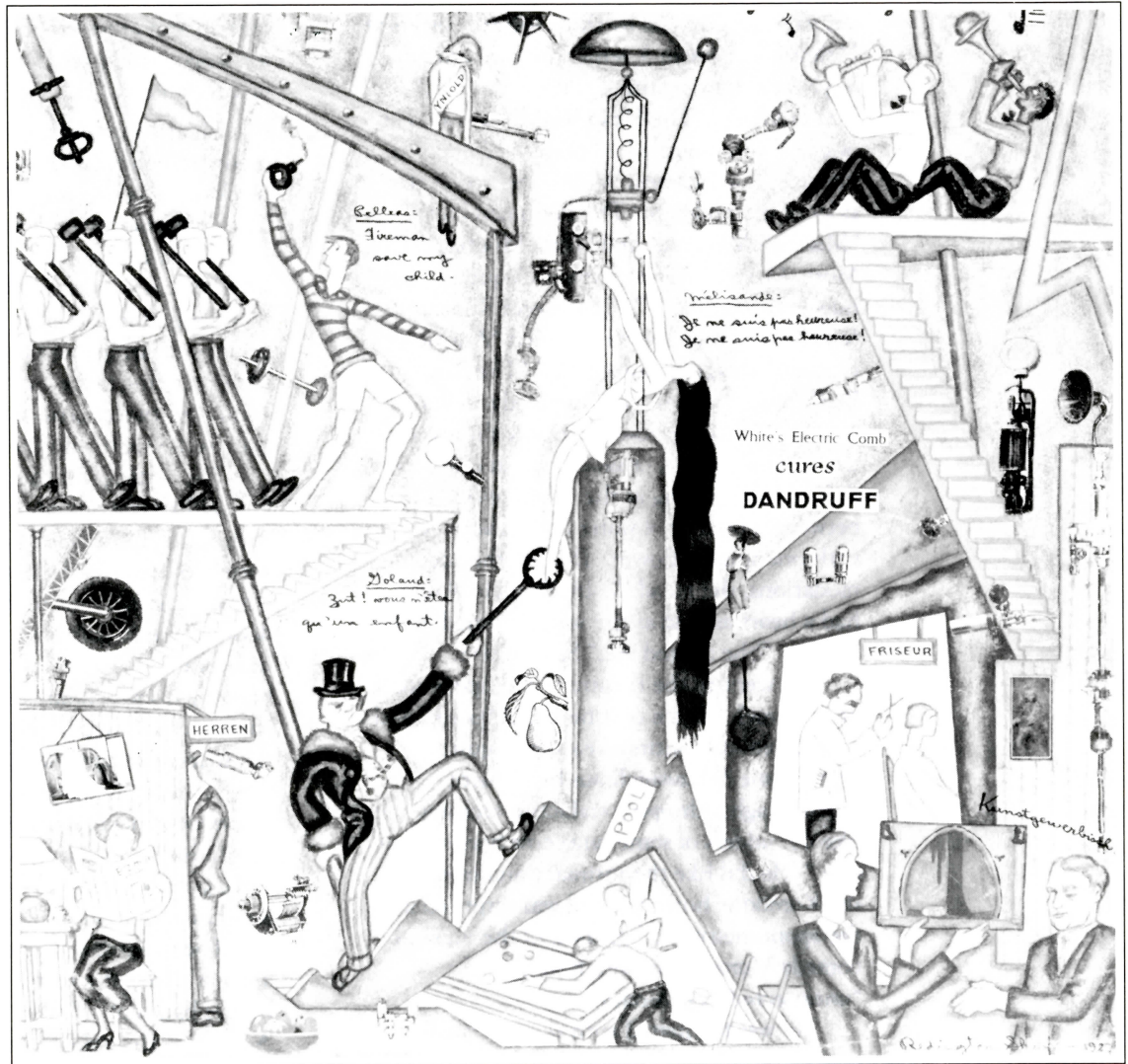
The settings for each scene are simple: a few well-proportioned objects nicely balanced within the frame, with a pleasing and subtle variety of space and shape from scene to scene. The act curtain rises to reveal a great double-door, which in turn swings open to reveal an indeterminate gloom, with a single lamp hanging from a chain, and a great cobweb stretched across the top of the arch. Although the space is compressed and enclosed by the flat frame of the castle wall and the arch, there is a sense of deep, if undefined space. Sharpe says in his notes that this is to be achieved with three gauze cycloramas hung one behind another and lit with diffuse light.

The forest is suggested by three tall, angularly folded screens, with the trees simple bronze bands of color painted on them flatly. A room in the palace is a free-form stone arch, through which an expanse of murky blue sky is seen. A pinkish-coral curtain, a stone bench, and single great floor candlestick complete the set. A palace exterior is a cut-drop of stylized evergreen branches on dark green netting, with a green-grey wall and a muted yellow sky behind.

Golaud's room introduces a few bright, luminous colors—coral, rose, yellow, pale violet—in stained-glass panels of a towering, freestanding screen. A green couch is placed in front. Golaud is in peacock blue and burnt orange, and Mélisande is in deep rose. The scene at the well is simply a low stone coping and a single, jagged drape, suggesting a tree, hanging above it. The lovers' meeting place is a single, huge tree trunk with its roots exposed.

there is the sense that he is still unable, or unwilling, to let his imagination break free of the confining outline.

The fragile charm of Sharpe's *Pelléas and Mélisande* had no appeal in the raucous temper of Berlin. Sharpe was becoming quite annoyed with the mania for constructivist, politicized, anti-decorative theatre, and he struck back with a witty parody that he called "*Pelléas and Mélisande* as Piscator would do it, Berlin."



Parody of *Pelléas and Mélisande* (as Piscator would do it, Berlin), 1927 (18)

Although all the designs are in Sharpe's usual flat, illustrative style, his notes indicate that he was concerned with molding space within the tight frame of the arch. The effect, however, is of a picture within a picture, and

In the lower right hand corner of the picture I myself am found with one of my actual designs; Erwin Kalser is saying "Kunstgewerbliche," [sic] which means "too decorative" and ornamental. So in the

center of the structural setting we find poor Mélisande clinging to a bell which is clanging loudly; she cries “Je ne suis pas heureuse”; her lovely long hair is cut from an English advertisement for dandruff. . . . Golaud has become a bloated Capitalist; he is pinching her leg with a cruel pincers, saying “Zut! vous n’êtes qu’un enfant.” Above, the Proletariat-workers come to the rescue, armed with a red flag and maces; Pélleas leads them in his underdrawers, carrying a bomb and saying, “Fireman, save my child!” Little Yniold is hung with a red bit of rope; a jazz-band plays in another corner; the round brass piece hung next to the barber is the German sign for a barbershop; the bits of wheels, pictures, fruit, etc. pasted about are just for nonsense; the most amusing thing of all about this picture is that the Germans did not know it was a parody, but thought it an excellent stage-design!!

Sharpe traveled throughout Germany, Austria, and into Czechoslovakia, and then, homesick and tired of living from hand to mouth, he began to think about returning to America, even to Pasadena. He wrote to Lenore Shanewise, who had visited him in Berlin during the spring:

Now that you’re back in Pasadena (I suppose you are) what exactly is your impression of Europe—and incidentally how does Pasadena seem after it? I ask the latter question for a very important personal reason: I am beginning to make plans for my next year. Tho, if as many things happen to me as did last year, my plans may change a dozen times. Anyway, do write me, please, just once more before you become so busy at the Playhouse again that you settle into that habitual silence which seems to envelop everyone I know there. Gilmor, for example, is apparently retaliating for my long taciturnity with an even longer one. . . . Margaret Linley’s sole claim to continued existence is the telegram, announcing your arrival, which, tho the most delightful of heralds, can scarcely be considered weighty correspondence.

Sharpe also wrote her that he was still “tediously poor” but finding enough work illustrating, caricaturing, and doing portraits to live until the fall. He thought he might have an opportunity to work with Pirchan as an assistant at the Staatstheater, but this never materialized. He did get a commission in October 1927 for a revue called *Hans im Glück* at the Theater am Kurfürstendamm and then became supervising art director there, which carried him through the winter.

About this time, Sharpe was introduced to Harold Nicolson, the young British diplomat and author who had recently been posted to Berlin, and over the next few months Nicolson encouraged Sharpe’s friendship with drinks and dinners. Nicolson had a taste for “these odd wild Americans,” he wrote to his wife, the author Vita Sackville-West, who had remained in England, and Bobby Sharpe appeared to him to be a “nice, shy gentle creature — & rather hungry.”<sup>4</sup> For his part, Sharpe took the opportunity to promote his work and to be fed.

On December 19, Vita returned home after a five-day visit, and Nicolson consoled himself in the evening with a brandy at Stabels in Unter den Linden. He read in an anthology of German war poems from 1415-1914, which only made him gloomier, and hoped Bobby Sharpe would turn up. About midnight, when he was about ready to give up waiting, Bobby arrived with a huge portfolio of scene designs under his arm. He was just back from Potsdam, where he had been to see a theatre director, and had not had dinner. Nicolson watched him eat some ham and listened to his youthful American chatter and felt a little better.<sup>5</sup>

When Vita’s cousin, Eddy Sackville-West, who could be tiresome, came to Berlin for a visit later in the month, Nicolson prevailed upon Sharpe to show him around, although he told Vita that he feared that “Bobby who is a simple soul will not cotton on to Eddy.” The day after Christmas the three of them went to see the new Douglas Fairbanks film, *El Gaucho*. Afterwards they listened to American jazz at a hot, crowded, smelly cabaret. Eddy and Bobby, Nicolson was glad to see, were getting along famously and celebrated New Year’s Eve together.<sup>6</sup>

During the first week of 1928, Nicolson took Sharpe to dinner again and afterwards went back to Pension Wolff to look at Bobby’s

designs. He wrote to Vita on January 9 that they were “really rather good”:

A whole set for Strauss' *Salomé* which really is original. He has got an idea for a play in which the supers carry their own scenery — great screens . . . which they hold in front of them & which are differently painted back & front so that when the supers turn round the whole thing changes. The thing would only do for a play on Piscator lines — but it is a good idea. [You] will like Bobby — he is a *really* nice simple clever soul — wholly uneducated — *terribly* low.<sup>7</sup>

Sharpe was down with the flu later in the week, and Nicolson visited him in his pension, “such a *low* little cupboard of a room & Bobby in a sweater & a dressing gown with dreadful sinus pains & furious because he can't get on with the play he is writing.” The synopsis sounded interesting, Nicolson told Vita, although he was not to be allowed to see it for weeks.

Nevertheless, a few days later Sharpe telephoned to ask if he could bring the play around to read. “Oh my God — it *was* low,” Nicolson wrote to Vita. “You see it's cosmic — with spirits of time & the spirit of mockery & hollow laughs (off).” The staging would have to be everything, he said. “I couldn't work up any very tremendous enthusiasm & I fear I rather damped him. Poor Bobby.”<sup>8</sup>

But it wasn't just Harold Nicolson's lack of enthusiasm that was damping Sharpe's spirits. He knew it was time to return to America. There was something missing here, the sense of belonging that he had known in Pasadena, a sense of advancing. Although he found the Germans kind, there was something that prevented him from completely liking them. They lacked soul, he told Lenore Shanewise. And the French, for all their brilliance, lacked depth. He was out of temper with the times in Berlin, unable to penetrate the established theatres and unwilling to apprehend the revolutionary theatrical ferment going on around them. He saw Piscator's *Good Soldier Schweik* with settings by George Grosz in January 1928, and it apparently had no effect on him. And if he were aware of Bertolt Brecht, he makes no mention

of him. In Pasadena there had been a wholesome artistic innocence that accepted Sharpe as a nineteen-year old genius. In Berlin he was just another designer, and not a terribly original one at that. He was working in a style that was, to advocates of constructivism and expressionism, insubstantial, if not actually frivolous, and certainly out of date.

He had made the rounds of the constantly changing carnival. He had attended a party given by Thomas Mann's son, Klaus Mann, after the première of his new play, spent a week at Hiddensee as the guest of novelist Paul Cohen-Portheim, made the rounds of the cabarets with Harold Nicolson and Eddy Sackville-West, gotten his name in the newspapers. But now the carnival had turned to shadows, and he was ready to go home.

He wrote to the doyen of German theatrical directors, Max Reinhardt, in Vienna in one last attempt to get in to show his portfolio, and then he left abruptly for Paris, for a final visit to the city he loved best. Reinhardt's secretary wrote to him on March 23, 1928, that the Professor would be back in Berlin in about four weeks, or perhaps he would see him in Salzburg in August. But it was too late. Sharpe sailed from Cherbourg on April 12 on the S.S. *George Washington*, feeling, he wrote in his journal, “not like an American returning home, but an unhappy wanderer going to some incredible and definitely foreign land.”



Sharpe settled into an apartment at 38 West 12th Street and began making the rounds, looking for work. It was too late in the season to find anything in the theatre, so he supported himself by decorating windows for Macy's and selling illustrations to magazines. He also wrote a series of weekly articles for the *Berliner Zeitung am Mittag* from the end of May through July on his impressions of America after his two-year absence. "I had forgotten," he wrote, "how fast the subway trains go, and for several days I found myself staring at the people on the streets, until I got reacquainted with the fact that most of them did speak English." His rediscovery of America, at least of jaunty, jazzy New York, stimulated him as much now as Europe had on his arrival there. He was fascinated by the skyscrapers and the express elevators, the new Holland tunnel, the automats, soda fountains, and luncheonettes ("A meal a minute—everything American Style"). He visited speakeasies where the wine was mixed with pure alcohol and cherry juice and cooled with pieces of ice. He described trenchantly the vogue for Negro culture among the intellectual amusement hunters of Manhattan, who flocked to Harlem nightclubs and attempted to cultivate black friends, while the blacks retreated ever further away from the invading whites. He was astonished at the vulgarity of the new movie cathedrals, the Roxy-Palace and the Paramount, with their six thousand-seat auditoriums, giant bronze pillars, bronze doors, bronze rails, their hundreds of doormen, pages, and ushers ("It was not revealed to me how many tons of hair-oil these young people needed daily, for their prescribed shining hair-dos").

By the fall, he was getting very anxious for work in the theatre but having very little luck. Then, unexpectedly, the Theatre Guild needed to replace a faltering production of *Faust*, which had opened the Guild's eleventh season on October 8, 1928, to universally bad notices. When a proposed production of *Wings Over Europe* was sidetracked because of difficulties with Equity over the use of British actors, the Guild hastily scheduled a revival of Shaw's *Major Barbara*.

Sharpe may have heard of the change in the Guild's schedule from Douglass Montgomery, his old friend from the Pasadena Playhouse, who was playing Valentine in *Faust*. Sharpe had designed *Major Barbara* for the Playhouse

in 1926 and could be counted on to know the requirements on short notice. He showed his portfolio to the board of the Guild and was offered the assignment. He was not yet a full member of the scene designers' union, but his previous affiliation with the scene painters' union from his days at Gates and Morange allowed this to be overlooked. He signed a contract on October 19, exactly one month before the production was to open. His fee was one thousand dollars.

The Theatre Guild must have seemed like a homecoming to Sharpe. In addition to Douglass Montgomery, he found himself working with another old friend from Pasadena, Maurice Wells, who was playing Stephen Undershaft in his first assignment for the Guild. Here, once again, Sharpe was in the midst of a cohesive theatre group that had evolved from the work of earnest amateurs into a potent professional force. And, once again, Sharp was being hailed as a young genius with a bright future before him.

*Major Barbara* opened on Monday, November 19, to modest praise from the critics, who found the performances generally satisfying and the play still intellectually pertinent twenty-three years after its original production. *The New York Times* epitomized the reactions to Sharpe's settings in noting that they were "remarkable for not calling any particular attention to themselves, and that is as it should be."

Nevertheless, on the following Sunday, the *Times* featured Sharpe prominently in an article titled "A 23-Year Old Scene Designer," and the *New York World* devoted a column to him under the heading "A Credo for the Scenic Designer." Sharpe was exhilarated at this sign that his career in New York had taken wing. He photographed the billboard in front of the Guild Theatre and noted in his scrapbook that only three names were mentioned: George Bernard Shaw, Philip Moeller, the director, and Redington Sharpe.

There are no complete renderings for *Major Barbara* among Sharpe's drawings, but from the photographs, the rough sketches in his scrapbook, and the working drawings, it is clear that the designs were as innocuous as the *Times* review suggests. Working in haste on a production viewed by its producers as a season stopgap, Sharpe turned out serviceable realistic settings, stilted in their spatial arrangement and totally lacking the stamp of his artistic personality.

Despite the publicity and Sharpe's optimism, it was not an auspicious start. *Major Barbara* closed after eighty-four performances, and at the beginning of 1929 Sharpe found himself again out of work and with few prospects. Although he continued to cling to his one association with the Theatre Guild in promoting himself, Sharpe's charm did not win him the permanent place with these tough-minded New York veterans as it had in the more genial atmosphere of Pasadena. Helen Westley, one of the founders of the Guild and a member of its board, an actress frequently cast in Guild productions as the strong-willed, disagreeable woman (she was playing Lady Britomart in *Major Barbara*), had opposed Sharpe's selection as the designer. The scene designer Lee Simonson, another Guild founder and board member, also took a dislike to Sharpe and prevented him from getting any further work with the Guild, or so it seemed to Sharpe.

There was, in fact, something about Bob Sharpe which provoked intense dislike among some who knew him. To those who judged him professionally, it may have seemed that his facility with the surfaces of style concealed a lack of originality and substance. To those who perceived his steady self-advertisement and ambition, his boyish charm may have seemed forced. And to those who came close to him, a streak of Redington selfishness, a detached and muted threat of cruelty, may have appeared beneath the bright façade.

In the spring, Sharpe took a leisurely trip South, visiting historic sites in Philadelphia, Virginia, Washington, and New Orleans. He then headed to California to stay the month of June with his mother in Los Angeles and renew his ties with his friends in Pasadena. He returned East to spend July and August as art director at the Theatre in the Woods, Boothbay Harbor, Maine.

The Theatre in the Woods was run by Henry Irvine, an English actor who had worked with Forbes-Robertson, Beerbohm Tree, and Charles Wyndham before coming to America to play in Reinhardt's *The Miracle*. Irvine and his wife, Cicely, founded the Woodland Players at their summer home in Boothbay in 1923 as a combination summer school of acting and stock company. Prior to the summer of 1929, performances had been given outdoors, but now Irvine had built a little theatre seating two

hundred and fifty in which he planned to present nine productions during a nine-week season. The *Portland Sunday Telegram and Sunday Press Herald* announced that Robert Redington Sharpe, "recognized as one of the greatest scene designers in the world," could be credited with the interior of the new theatre.

That bit of public relations puffery was the last Sharpe would enjoy of the innocent image of himself as the young genius on the verge of a dynamic career. The Woodland Players presented a thoroughly banal season, distinguished for Sharpe only by a production at the end of the summer of his own adaptation of Cocteau's *Orpheus*. He saved no drawings from his stay in Boothbay.

Sharpe did not know it, but the momentum of his career was dying. Even as he returned to New York, the country was sinking into a financial depression that would narrow his prospects for employment and extinguish the gaiety his fanciful imagination needed to flourish. From the fall of 1929 until the opening of *Tobacco Road* in the winter of 1933, Sharpe struggled to support himself, to adapt his scenic style to a somber, hard-pressed theatrical mood, and to maintain his personal equilibrium in the face of frustration and failure. He was able to obtain four commissions in New York in the five seasons prior to *Tobacco Road*, and all four productions closed in less than two weeks. There were long periods when he had no work at all, except for an occasional drawing sold to a magazine or an illustration for a book cover to a publisher.

As the Depression deepened, Bob visited his aunt and uncle in Valley Falls, where from time to time he could find respite from discouragement and actual hunger. His aunt, Frances Taft Sharpe, who was to rescue his drawings after his death, would feed him well and slip him some money, unknown to her husband, who, like Bob's father, could not fully approve the bohemian life his nephew was living. In these visits, Sharpe also found solace in his love for the outdoors. He and Cousin Hy, Herman Sharpe, who was five years younger, would hike through the woods, stopping frequently for Bob to sketch trees and topography. Eating regularly, amidst the peace of the country and the affection of Aunt Fran's household, Bob's melancholy would dissipate and his entertaining humor bubble up again.

A photograph album and an address book are the only documentation for Sharpe's personal life in New York after 1929. Except for the European travel notes, no letters or other personal papers were saved when Frances Sharpe retrieved his drawings. Nevertheless, from these and from the recollections of those who knew him, it is apparent that Sharpe's social charm and gift for friendship did not fail him, however bleak his situation. He visited frequently with Maurice Wells and his wife, Emma Blankenhorn, who lived in an apartment near his, and they were invited to the parties that Bob loved to give. He renewed his association with Margaret Linley, their youthful and sometimes stormy infatuation now mutually faded. After they parted in Europe, she had returned to California and the Pasadena Community Playhouse, then came to New York to work first as an assistant to the producer Gilbert Miller and later as casting director for the Theatre Guild. She married John Gerard and often invited Bob to their charming two hundred-year old stone farmhouse near Stockton, New Jersey, where Maggie's weekend parties for her friends in the New York theatre world were events. It was at a party at the apartment in New York of Helen Seaman, a close friend who taught at the Friends School, that Sharpe met Rachel Howland again, the delightful girl who had been his treasure-hunt partner on the S.S. *Lancastria*. She was married now to Walter Hinman, a fellow teacher of Helen Seaman's. There were other friends, photographed by Bob here and there in the city, on outings at Asbury Park and Coney Island, on weekends in New Jersey, Connecticut, and upstate New York, the snapshots mounted in his album, and carefully identified by name and place and date. All that is lacking are the clues that would tell us who they were and how his life and theirs impinged. And beyond the immediate circle, he listed two hundred ninety-five names and addresses of those he considered his friends in California, New York, and Europe.

But despite the comforts of friendship, a current of loneliness, ever-present since childhood, now flowed more strongly beneath the stream of his life. The color and exuberance drained out of his work for the theatre,

both actual and projected, and in the personal drawings images of desolation and the grotesque alternate with wishful, anemic pastoral scenes. A 1931 drawing of a nude man, hanging suspended in space above jagged, lunar mountains, is annotated, "Oh God. I am so lonely. Alone."

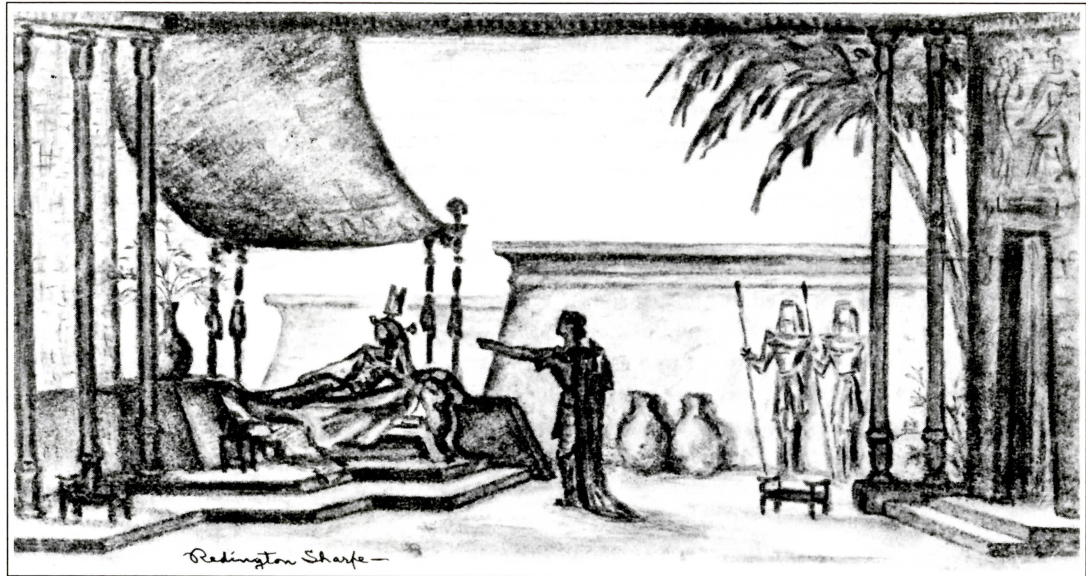
The first few months of the 1929-30 season did not portend the hard times to come. Sharpe was engaged by Tom Weatherly on September 28, 1929, to design a play by Daniel Rubin called *Undertow*, a clumsy drama of a Texas newspaperman and his wife, whose marriage disintegrates under the corrupting influence of life in New York, leading the wife to drink, infidelity, and murder. Sharpe's fee was to be one thousand dollars. The play opened on November 19 at the Biltmore Theatre under the title of *Claire Adams* and was greeted by an audience which "laughed jeeringly in the wrong places." It expired after seven performances. Sharpe's setting of a dingy one-room Greenwich Village apartment went unnoticed.

Still, this was not a serious setback. Almost immediately, on December 4, he signed a contract with John Golden for nine hundred dollars to design sets and properties for Bertram Block's *Even in Egypt*, a farcical re-telling of the Biblical story of Joseph's rise from slave to Pharaoh's right-hand man. George Jessel was to play Joseph as a wise-cracking Jewish boy always on the lookout for a good business opportunity. This seemed like a project suited to Sharpe's talents for exotic settings in a decorative, whimsical style. But for some reason, perhaps a heavy-handed interpretation by the director and producer, Sharpe's imagination did not soar. His sketches of decorative detail for the scene painter are filled with hieroglyphic flowers, birds, stalks, dots, dashes, and borders, but it is all literal and dull.

There is one scene design for the production among the drawings, however, a charcoal sketch with no notations for color. Despite its monotone simplicity, the sketch shows a real advance in Sharpe's work. It is one of the most architecturally solid, visually dynamic of all his settings. Depicting a courtyard of an Egyptian house, the setting uses low platforms placed at angles to a wall at the back to create a sense of space both enclosing the actors and receding into the distance. A sail-like canopy over a couch on a dais is the only curving line, serving

as a graceful contrast to the angles of the walls and the verticals of the columns and at the same time as a further means of leading the eye into the background space. For the first time, Sharpe managed to move away from his usual set of flat planes behind actors to a series of volumes inhabited by actors.

Nothing again as fall approached. The season of 1930-31 was half over and still no work. Early in February 1931, his mother suffered a cerebral hemorrhage in Los Angeles. There was an urgent exchange of telegrams between Bob and his brother Dick in California. Dick advised him on the morning of February 6



*Joseph*, 1930 (22)

The production previewed in January 1930 in Philadelphia to a lukewarm reception. George S. Kaufman was brought in to replace William Keighly as the director in an attempt to tighten up the script and sharpen the humor. But when it opened under the new title *Joseph* at the Liberty Theatre in New York on February 12, 1930, Brooks Atkinson in *The New York Times* pronounced it only spasmodically entertaining and “thin to the point of transparency.” It closed after thirteen performances.

And then nothing. Almost six months elapsed before he got another commission, and when it came, it was for three hundred dollars for three innocuous settings in the sixty-eight-scene *Earl Carroll's Vanities* in August. Glamorous chorines in glorious follies spectacle had passed him by forever.

that it would be useless for him to try to get there; the doctor gave only forty-eight hours at most, and she would not know him. At 6:00 p.m. another telegram reported that she was unconscious and declining rapidly. Shortly after midnight on February 7, Bob received a third telegram from Dick announcing that their mother had died at 8:55 p.m. The following evening at 8:00 p.m. his brother's last telegram arrived: “Funeral Two Tuesday Afternoon Stop Flowers Arrived OK Love Dick.” Bob pasted the telegrams in his scrapbook on a page titled “Mother's Death—(and episodes from her life)” along with a sample of her handwriting as a young girl, a photograph and program of her appearance in *The Cabinet Minister* at the Hart Conway School of Acting in Chicago, an invitation to her wedding to George Bertram Sharpe, and the notice in *The Los Angeles Times* of the death of Leslie R. Sharpe, “beloved mother of Robert Redington Sharpe.”

As he did with all newspaper notices in which he was mentioned, he underlined his own name.

He passed the spring of 1931 trying to bring in a little money and keep his name in circulation. He exhibited some of his costume designs at the Civic Club International Restaurant at 18 East 10th Street and spoke on his experiences in Germany at a luncheon there on March 7. An article entitled "Where Symbolism Matters," which he had submitted to Stewart Beach at *Theatre Magazine* in the fall, appeared in the March issue. He designed a program cover for the World Conference of the American Federation of the Blind and sold a small drawing to the *New Yorker* for the April 25 issue.

He was also trying during this period of enforced idleness to locate for himself a new scenic style, or at least a more saleable one. He wrote in "Where Symbolism Matters" that scenery should interpret mood primarily, rather than realistically represent locale; the mood should be reduced to the simplest visual symbols selected for their subtlety and suggestiveness. Always able and even eager to reflect a successful style, Sharpe aligned himself publicly with the designers — Bel Geddes, Simonson, Robert Edmond Jones — whose ranks he wished to join. He toyed with his designs for *Major Barbara*, simplifying and abstracting them, forcing them into the solids and voids that Bel Geddes had urged on him ten years before. He chose *Major Barbara* no doubt because as his one New York accomplishment to date it would be useful in getting a little publicity. Besides, it might reinforce his now fading connection with the Theatre Guild. He submitted photographs of his reworked designs to *Theatre Arts Monthly*, which published them in June under the title "Steps in the Development of a Space Stage."

Unfortunately, the modernist aesthetic which Sharpe admired and tried so dutifully to adopt was fundamentally uncongenial to his talents. He did not have the stamina to adhere to his own vision or the originality to forge a new painterly style in opposition to the prevailing tide. Sharpe's clippings of illustrations include designs by Simonson, Jones, Bel Geddes, Jo Mielziner, and Terrence Gray, but he does not seem to have looked abroad to the designers and painters from whom he might

have drawn the best sustenance: Joseph Urban, Bakst, Goncharova, Larionov, Braque, Matisse, and Picasso. His theatre-going list shows that until the last few months of his life he was oblivious to opera and ballet, forms where scenically he might have found a home.

## CALIFORNIA

In the summer of 1931, Sharpe went back to California, possibly planning to stay only long enough to attend to his mother's estate, perhaps hoping to find better opportunities there than in New York. Certainly it was a nostalgic retreat to the scene of his happiest and most productive years, although he made no firm arrangement to assume his old position at the Pasadena Community Playhouse. He gave a series of lectures at the end of July to summer session students at the Playhouse's School of the Theatre. He then stayed on through the 1931-32 season as guest designer for six productions. The most interesting of these were the first English-language production of Richard Beer-Hofmann's *Jacob's Dream*, notable for utilizing Sharpe's own translation, and *Dragon's Teeth*, an expressionist morality play by Shirland Quin on the evils of modern warfare.

The eleven costume drawings for *Dragon's Teeth* show that Sharpe was artistically back home, creating, as he had in *Hassan*, richly symbolic visual extravaganza. The panorama of allegorical characters gave his grotesquerie space to unfurl: Engineers with white faces framed in cogwheels; green-faced Chemists wearing hats shaped like atomic structures; Airmen of the Apocalypse carrying emblems of poison gas, bombs, and dynamite; and Death, played by Sharpe himself, dressed in a black, cowled robe emblazoned with a white skeleton, his hands great talons, his cape suggesting vampire wings, and the whole figure entwined with green worms. It was Sharpe's ironic revenge on the follies, a fashion parade of horrors.

## NEW YORK

But Sharpe was not ready to settle again into the comfortable routine of Pasadena. Although the New York theatre was in the pit of the Depression, with only half its theatres in use and only half its actors employed, it was there that Sharpe was determined to make his mark. He spent June and July at the Surry Playhouse in Maine, along with the still unknown Henry Fonda, Joseph Cotten, and Shepperd Strudwick; he then returned to New York in August to begin making the rounds again. His experience in designing historically accurate period plays may have been the

decisive factor in his obtaining the commission in November for Helen Menken's production of *Saint Wench*, a muddled costume comedy by John Colton, author of the dramatization of *Rain*. Miss Menken was to star as the fictional sixteenth century Saint Mara of Trabia, who as a young girl betrothed to a priest, surrenders to a dashing bandit and spends the rest of her life atoning, until she becomes a saint with powers of healing. The improbable plot was matched only by the inept production. On its try-out at the Broad Street Theatre in Philadelphia at the end of December, the critic for the *Philadelphia Inquirer* noted that "There was a deal of ranting and shrieking, seldom relieved by humor" and that Miss Menken seemed to be "attempting to make up in sound what the play lacked in sense." Sharpe's faintly Byzantine settings, however, gathered much praise in Philadelphia, as they would later in New York. The *Inquirer* called the settings "beautiful" and "impressive in their rich simplicity," and the *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin* said they had "rare beauty and authority."

After the January 2, 1933, opening at the Lyceum Theatre in New York, John Mason Brown piled on the epithets in the *New York Evening Post*: "an unconscionable bore," "costume claptrap of the silliest kind," "as woeful a sample of elaborate costume nonsense as the local theatre has produced in many years." He exempted Sharpe, however, by saying that it was "skillfully set." Brooks Atkinson in the *Times* was only a little less gleeful in his condemnation of the play, saying that it was "vague and elusive" and "vexed with the sort of ostentatious dialogue to which commercial playwrights are addicted when they are caught up by the divine afflatus." But he too had words of praise for Sharpe, saying that the setting had "a cool and spacious sort of beauty." The production closed after twelve performances. Sharpe received a polite, formal, one-line note from Lee Simonson, addressing him as "My dear Mr. Sharpe," congratulating him for his notice in the *Times*. Then Sharpe was out of work for the rest of the season.

He exhibited four of his costume designs for *Dragon's Teeth* in the Theatre Arts section of the Architectural League of New York's forty-eighth annual exhibition from February 18 to March 12. Although he was not specifically mentioned in the review of the exhibition in the *Herald Tribune*, he tried to bolster his spirits by underlining references to "the best work done by the artists of the theatre in the last twenty years" and "vivid colored sketches designed by the leading stage designers" and "the best work done by the leading theatre artists of the country." He did not underline the completion of the phrase, "as well as by a number of young men of promise in New York." Apparently he had decided that at age twenty-eight he was no longer in the promising young genius category.

But promising young man or leading theatre artist, he could not get work. On his visits to Valley Falls, he could not hide from his aunt and his cousins his deep discouragement, his feeling that his luck had run out.

Bad luck continued to plague him as the 1933-34 season began. Even his imagination seemed to forsake him. He submitted a set of sketches to an organization of adventurous young theatre workers who had split off from the Theatre Guild to establish themselves as an independent, experimental alternative. No doubt Sharpe was attracted as much to the spirit of the Group Theatre as he was by the prospect of a commission. They were united in purpose, fervently idealistic, and clearly on the forefront of success. He made three small drawings for their new play, *Men in White* by Sidney Kingsley, but they were some of his weakest work: static, cramped, amateurishly executed, totally lacking in mood or character. He noted on the drawings that they were "not accepted" and may have pondered again his bad luck when *Men in White* went on to become one of the biggest hits of the season.

Meanwhile, he seemed doomed to designing dreary settings for dreary failures. His next commission was for *Strange Orchestra* by Rodney Ackland, an aimless English *Lower Depths*, portraying seduction, murder, theft, alcoholism, and illness among the inhabitants of a drab Chelsea boarding house. It opened and closed on November 28.

Sharpe then moved from the lower depths of London to the even lower depths of the

American South. While *Strange Orchestra* was still in rehearsal, he was engaged by Anthony Brown to design the setting and costumes for *Tobacco Road*, Jack Kirkland's dramatization of the Erskine Caldwell novel. His flair for meticulous detail was now turned to reproducing the look and feel and even the smell of the squalid yard and shack of a Georgia sharecropper. In an inspiration of authenticity, Sharpe piled tons of dirt on the stage and combed junk yards and vacant lots for rusty cans, corn cobs, and inner tubes. Instead of designing the costumes, he called on the resources of Maude Odell, a member of the cast playing Sister Bessie, the evangelist, who had a farm in South Carolina. She telephoned her caretaker to offer fifty cents or a dollar for pants, shirts, and dresses belonging to the farm workers and instructed him to photograph the people in the clothes, then to boil the garments for at least two days before sending them on.

*Tobacco Road* opened on December 4, 1933, at the Masque Theatre. It depicted the lurid life of the Lesters, a family of starving poor whites consisting of the shiftless and obscene father, Jeeter, his sour, long-suffering wife, Ada, and his ancient grandmother, who says nothing throughout the play and eventually disappears in the fields while foraging for food, presumably to die in a brush fire. Ada's main concern is getting a new dress to be buried in and saving her twelve-year old, golden-haired daughter, Pearl, whom Jeeter has married off to a neighbor, Lov Bensey, for seven dollars. Lov comes complaining to Jeeter because Pearl won't give him his money's worth, so Jeeter tries to make an exchange for his other daughter, the unattractive Ellie May. Jeeter's good-looking but slightly moronic son, Dude, takes up with Sister Bessie, an Augusta prostitute turned evangelist, who bribes him into matrimony with the automobile he has been craving. Dude wrecks the car, killing his mother in the process, and Pearl runs off to Augusta. Jeeter is left leaning lazily on the porch, wondering how to get the hundred dollars he needs to keep the bank from foreclosing the mortgage on the land that has been in the Lester family for generations.

The critics generally agreed that the Kirkland script was rambling and undramatic but that Henry Hull, hitherto cast as the handsome hero in light comedies, was giving the performance of his career. Brooks Atkinson wrote that the play was "one of the grossest

episodes ever put on the stage” and that the theatre “has never sheltered a fouler or more degenerate parcel of folks than the hardscrabble family of Lester.” He granted, however, that it had “spasmodic moments of merciless power when truth is flung into your face with all the slime that truth contains” and called Hull’s performance “a character portrait as mordant and brilliant as you can imagine. . . pungent, pathetic, horrible, and gargantuanly comic.” John Anderson in the *New York Evening Journal* wrote that it was “dull in the absence of dramatic movement” but that as a “hearty picture, done with color and license,” it held the stage “by the simple brutality and illumination of its playing.”

dirt. All the crevices of the old shack drip with dirt. So do all the pants-bottoms and the hair-braids.” Stark Young in *The New Republic* called Sharpe’s setting of shanty, naked tree, shed, well, and deep ground dirt “better drama than most decor or most plays.”

Maggie Linley and Maurice Wells’ wife were at the opening night to wish Bob good luck, but afterwards Emma Wells told her husband she predicted an early demise for the show. For a time it did seem as if Georgia squalor would not hold sufficient appeal for New York audiences. *Tobacco Road* stayed open only through the tenacity of the producer and the willingness of the actors to accept a



*Tobacco Road*, 1933 (26f)

John Mason Brown in the *Evening Post* admitted that there were times when the “loamy mortals in ‘Tobacco Road’ have an authentic and an unconventional interest that cannot be denied” but found the play as a whole “as feeble as it is unpleasant.” Only Percy Hammond in the *Herald Tribune* was unreserved in his praise, calling it a “vividly authentic, minor and squalid tragedy, lighted in the right spots with glowing and honest humor.”

No matter their opinions of the drama itself, the critics admired Sharpe’s setting for its accuracy and appropriateness. *Time* noted that “the smell of hot dust, of unwashed bedding and dried food leavings seems to drift out over Manhattan audiences.” Gilbert Gabriel in the *New York American* noted, as did several other critics, the novelty of real dirt: “Every time any of the characters sits down on the ground the air grows soupy with

percentage of the practically nonexistent receipts. But then, after Christmas, attendance started to climb, and by mid-January 1934 *Tobacco Road* was settling in as a solid hit. Perhaps audiences were attracted to the exotic southern depravity or the pleasure of seeing a misery worse than their own. “You’ll be glad you aren’t in Dixie when you see. . . ‘Tobacco Road,’ ” wrote Robert Garland in the *World-Telegram*. “Away down South in the land of cotton they’re looking forward to the Depression.” Whatever the reason, it looked like dreariness would finally prove lucky for Sharpe. He was beginning to get notices again on the theatrical pages, and on January 10, 1934, his *Tobacco Road* setting was parodied in a James Thurber cartoon in the *New Yorker*. Just as the country was beginning to climb out of the depths of the economic crisis, Sharpe himself seemed to have turned a corner personally and professionally.



Artistically too a new mood settled on him. His last work was a project for *Sweet Nell of Old Drury*, Paul Kester's comedy of Nell Gwyn and Charles II. Done in the late winter or early spring of 1934, the drawings show Sharpe now firmly in command of scenic conception, space, color, atmosphere, and illustrative technique. Looking to the art and theatre of the seventeenth century for his inspiration, he places all four acts in a unit-setting of neutral arches varied with in-sets and properties to suggest different locales. The arches, although structural in defining the space, are purposely, through subtly, painted to convey a moderate degree of stylization. It is an elegant, beautiful set, its spaces various and open, its colors muted, its ambience one, as Sharpe himself noted, of "austere richness." With *Sweet Nell of Old Drury*, Sharpe had synthesized realism, symbolism, and the painterly style. He had at last reconciled the need to create solids and voids with his love of color, decoration, and fantasy.

With *Tobacco Road* becoming almost a permanent fixture on Broadway, with his fame seemingly assured, and with his creative imagination rekindled, the future looked bright for Robert Redington Sharpe in the spring of 1934. He may have contemplated his good luck late one night in May after a pleasant dinner party with friends as his subway train stopped at the station at Sixth Avenue and Waverly Place.

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At the end of May 1934, Ralph and Mayfair Freud received a letter in Pasadena from Homer Garrison Pfander, an English instructor at New York University and a friend of Bob Sharpe's, telling them of his death. He reported that the body had been cremated on May 18 and the ashes taken by Bob's uncle to Bennington, Vermont, where George Bertram Sharpe was buried. "Needless to say," he wrote, "all of us miss the color and intelligence and fine artistry that was Bob. We who have been his constant companions for years miss him unspeakably." Maurice Wells remembered that he and his wife attended

"with great sadness" a spare memorial service arranged by the family in New York and attended by only a few close friends. "Bob was a most gifted, lovable, and attractive individual," he said, "and those of us who worked and were associated with him were devoted to him. His death was a great waste."

*Tobacco Road* continued to run for eight years, closing on May 31, 1941, after 3,182 performances and road tours by three companies. At the end of its first year, *The New York Times* had reported on its phenomenal success, recounting in detail how the setting's tons of dirt had been transferred when the production moved from the Masque Theatre to the Forty-eighth Street Theatre. There was no mention of the man who had designed the set or his untimely death.

## NOTES

1. Norman Bel Geddes, *Miracle in the Evening* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1960), pp. 262-63.
2. Bel Geddes, p. 261.
3. Gilmor Brown and the founding of the Pasadena Community Playhouse are treated in Gail Shoup's *The Origin and Early History of the Pasadena Community Playhouse*, Diss. University of California, Los Angeles, 1968.
4. Harold Nicolson to Vita Sackville-West, November 24, December 9, 1927.
5. HN to VS-W, December 20, 1927.
6. HN to VS-W, December 23, 27, 1927.
7. HN to VS-W, January 9, 1928.
8. HN to VS-W, January 14, 16, 1928.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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The primary source of information for Sharpe's life and work was, of course, the scrapbooks he meticulously compiled, now in the Harvard Theatre Collection. The libraries of several other institutions held clues, however, and I am grateful to their librarians for helping me tease them out: Dorothy Swerdlove at the Theatre Collection of the New York Public Library; Peter Dzwonkoski at Yale University; Elizabeth Keith at the Pasadena Public Library; Susan Naulty at the Huntington Library; and Sandra Taylor and Elissa R. Henken at the Lilly Library of Indiana University, which houses the Vita Sackville-West/Harold Nicolson correspondence. At Ramsey Library at the University of North Carolina at Asheville, Malcolm Blowers and his efficient staff, especially William Buchanan, were always helpful.

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Arnold Wengrow  
Asheville, North Carolina

CHECKLIST OF  
WORKS EXHIBITED

Measurements are given in centimeters, height preceding width. Unless otherwise noted, items exhibited are by Robert Redington Sharpe and were given to the Harvard Theatre Collection by H.H. Sharpe III.

1. Robert Redington Sharpe (1904-1934)  
Self-Portrait, 1932  
Pencil on tracing paper  
Signed: Redington Sharpe, 1932  
28 x 21.5

CHILDHOOD AND STUDENT WORK, 1918-1923

2. *Dead Cities of the Moon*  
4 Watercolor drawings with pen and ink on illustration card; mounted by the artist on grey board; unsigned  
Labelled by the artist on mount: (Drawn in 1918)  
11 x 8 each
3. *The Dream Lady (1920)*  
Watercolor on board  
Signed: Robert R. Sharpe  
28.5 x 22.5
4. Models from Childhood Plays  
*Unfinished Egyptian Play (1922)*  
3 Settings  
Watercolor on board embellished with fabric, gold paint, gold and silver foil, cut-out characters; mounted by the artist on grey board  
16 x 29.5  
12.5 x 16  
14.5 x 27.25
5. Models from Childhood Plays  
*Unfinished Egyptian Play (1922)*  
  
2 Settings  
Watercolor on board, embellished with foil, cut-out characters, fabric  
13.75 x 20  
13.5 x 15  
  
3 Cut-out characters with stage properties  
Watercolor on board embellished with fabric, feathers
  - a. Boatman  
10.5 x 14

- b. Pharaoh  
14 x 15.5
  - c. Queen  
15 x 13.5
6. *A few characters from childhood plays*  
25 Cut-out characters  
Watercolor on board embellished with fabric, feathers; mounted by the artist on grey board  
Each approximately 10 x 3
  7. *Decorative Head*  
Watercolor on board  
Signed: Robert R. Sharpe 1922  
30.5 x 23
  8. *Decorative Head*  
Watercolor on board  
Signed: RRS 1922  
30.5 x 23
  9. *Ballet of Jewels 1923*
    - a. Model Setting of Temple  
Watercolor on board  
30 x 36.5
    - b. Act Drop for Amethyst  
Signed: Robert R. Sharpe 1923  
30 x 36.5
    - c. 7 Cut-out characters  
Ruby, Sapphire, Topaz, Amethyst, Pearl, Turquoise, Fire Opal  
Watercolor on paper, mounted by the artist on grey paper  
Each approximately 18 x 12
    - d. 12 Cut-out characters  
Cat's Eye, "The Perfect Jewel," Onyx, Bloodstone, Alabaster, Garnet, Aquamarine, Agate, Lapis Lazuli, Jade, Moonstone, Coral  
Watercolor on paper, embellished with tinsel, mounted by the artist on grey paper  
Each approximately 15 x 5
    - e. 5 Cut-out characters  
Emerald, Diamond, Tourmaline, Silver, Gold  
Watercolor on paper, embellished with foil, tinsel, mounted by the artist on grey paper  
Each approximately 17 x 12

10. Sketches for Scene Designs  
3 Pencil sketches on green paper,  
mounted by the artist on grey card with  
2 Egyptian sketches (below)  
Signed: Robert R. Sharpe 1922, with  
annotations by the artist: "suggested by  
designs by Appia, Craig, and Golovine  
from Moderwell's *The Theatre of Today*"  
Each 12.5 x 20.5

*Egyptian Water Front*  
*Interior Egyptian Palace*

- 2 Pencil sketches on paper, mounted by  
the artist on grey card with 3 sketches  
suggested by Appia, Craig, and Golov-  
ine (above)  
Signed: Robert R. Sharpe 1922  
Each 9 x 11

CALIFORNIA, 1924-1926

11. *The Bacchae (The Bacchanals* by  
Euripides, translated by W.D. Ward)  
Occidental College  
Directed by Gilmor Brown  
June 12, 1924

4 Costume designs  
Watercolor and gouache on grey  
illustration board  
Signed: Robert R. Sharpe 1924

- a. Bacchus, Bacchus in Disguise  
37.5 x 21  
b. Chorus  
21.5 x 37.25  
c. Pentheus in Disguise  
37.25 x 21  
d. Agave's Entrance (with head of  
Pentheus)  
21 x 37.5

12. *The Servant in the House* by Charles  
Kennedy  
Pasadena Community Playhouse  
Directed by Gilmor Brown  
August 11-20, 1924

2 Scene designs

- a. The Beginning  
Watercolor on paper  
Signed: Robert R. Sharpe 1924  
18 x 26.5

- b. The Ending  
Watercolor on paper  
18 x 26.5

Costume Design for Manson  
Watercolor on paper  
Signed: Robert R. Sharpe 1924  
16.5 x 12.5

Photograph of The Ending by Ralph Freud  
11 x 19

13. *Peer Gynt* by Henrik Ibsen  
Pasadena Community Playhouse  
Directed by Gilmor Brown  
July 2 - 11, 1925

Scene Design  
In the Mountains  
Watercolor on paper; unsigned  
11.5 x 20

Photograph by Margaret Craig  
11 x 16.5

14. *The Show Shop* by James Forbes  
Pasadena Community Playhouse  
Directed by Gilmor Brown  
October 1-10, 1925

Portrait of Leland Anderson as Steve  
Pencil on paper  
Signed: Robert R. Sharpe 1925  
30.5 x 22.75

15. *The Lady of the Lamp* by Earl Carroll  
Pasadena Community Playhouse  
Directed by Gilmor Brown  
June 4-15, 1925

Portrait of Leland Anderson as a Palace  
Guard  
Pencil on paper  
Signed: Robert R. Sharpe, 1925  
30.5 x 23

16. *Hassan* by James Elroy Flecker  
Pasadena Community Playhouse  
Directed by Gilmor Brown  
April 5-17, 1926

11 Costume designs  
Watercolor and gouache on grey  
illustration board  
Signed: Robert R. Sharpe 1926

- a. Hassan, Scene 3  
38.5 x 21
- b. Prince of Damascus  
38.5 x 21
- c. Prince of Koniah  
38.75 x 21
- d. Governor of Khovasan  
38.5 x 21
- e. The Calligraphist  
39 x 20.75
- f. Rajah of India  
Embellished with gold paint  
38.5 x 21
- g. The Chinese Philosopher  
38.5 x 21
- h. The Dervish  
38.5 x 20.5
- i. Jafar, Scene 7  
38.5 x 21
- j. Herald, Scene 7  
38.5 x 21
- k. Caliph, Scene 7  
37 x 21

Gift of the Artist, 1926

#### BERLIN, 1927

17. *Pelléas and Mélisande*  
Opera by Claude Debussy

10 Scene designs  
Watercolor on paper; mounted by the  
artist on mat paper  
Signed: Redington Sharpe 1927

- a. Front curtain in cut-out  
proscenium  
35 x 49.5  
Designs below are arch-shaped  
drops mounted by the artist  
behind black cut-out mats  
representing a proscenium  
opening, outlined with gold paint

- b. The Great Door  
27 x 24.5 at widest dimensions
- c. Behind the Door  
27 x 24.5
- d. A Room in the Palace  
27.5 x 24.5
- e. Outside the Palace  
27.75 x 24.5
- f. Golaud's Room  
27.5 x 24.5
- g. The Well  
27.5 x 24.5
- h. The Grotto by the Sea  
27.5 x 24.5
- i. The Tower  
27.25 x 24.25
- j. A Vault Beneath the Palace  
27.5 x 24.5

18. *Parody of "Pelléas and Mélisande"* (As Piscator  
*would do it, Berlin*)  
Watercolor with ink and paper cut-outs on  
paper  
Signed: Redington Sharpe 1927  
31.25 x 31.25

19. *Hans im Glück*  
A Fairy Tale Revue by Marcellus Schiffer  
Theater am Kurfürstendamm, Berlin  
Directed by Marcellus Schiffer  
Scenery and Costumes by Redington Sharpe  
October 21, 1927

7 Scene designs  
Watercolor on paper  
Signed: Redington Sharpe 1927

- a. Inner Stage  
19.75 x 42.25
- b. Werkstatt des Goldschmieds  
16.25 x 23
- c. Die Prinzessin auf der Erbe  
16.25 x 22.75
- d. Hänsel und Gretel  
16.25 x 23
- e. Grüne Wiese  
16.24 x 23
- f. Der See, Die Hütte  
16.25 x 23
- g. Doktor Dolittle  
16.5 x 23

- 4 Costume designs  
Watercolor on paper  
Signed: Redington Sharpe 1927
- h. Der König  
15.75 x 12.5
  - i. Der Leibarzt  
15.5 x 12.25

Printed poster  
Theater am Kurfürstendamm, Freitag, 21  
Oktober, 3 Uhr nachm. Uraufführung  
Jeden Mittwoch, Sonnabend und  
Sonntag ½ 4 Uhr nachm. Hans im Glück  
. . . Nauck & Hartmann, Berlin N S4  
Rosenthaler Str 30  
68 x 44.5

20. Commentaries, Berlin 1927  
"Two very sarcastic depictions of the  
'Deutsches' character; one the boarding-  
house where I lived, the other a rather  
mean (but very true) portrait of a lady-  
friend."
- a. Frau Gert Frank; a Deutsche  
Aesthete!  
Pencil on paper  
Signed: Redington Sharpe 1927  
31 x 23
  - b. Pension Wolff  
Ink on paper  
Signed: Redington Sharpe 1927  
31 x 22.5
  - c. [Description of Pension Wolff]  
Autograph manuscript in pencil  
1 page  
"Fräulein Anna, the eldest (about  
60) had a face like a dull axe &  
was myopic. Her sparse gray hair,  
clumsily streaked with henna, was  
piled on top of her head in a frizzy  
knot: on the bosom of her  
inevitable brown satin dress was  
pinned a gold watch. She sat at  
the place of honor heading the  
long table, staring blindly about  
her, darting forward with heron-  
like movements to catch a word, a  
phrase. . . . The Pension was run  
by three Sisters Wolff; prehistoric  
spinsters with simpering manners  
and obese bodies. . . . They were  
all three, one felt, slightly decayed;  
there was something definitely  
*lethal* about them. . . ."

## NEW YORK, 1928-1930

21. *Major Barbara* by George Bernard Shaw  
The Theatre Guild, New York  
Designed by Redington Sharpe  
November 19, 1928

3 Preliminary sketches for scene designs  
Watercolor on paper, mounted by the artist  
in scrapbook; unsigned

- a. Acts I-III, Living Room  
8.75 x 18
- b. Act II, Warehouse Yard  
8.8 x 18
- c. Act IV, Munition Factory  
8.7 x 18

Property plots, ground plans  
Black and brown ink on paper, with United  
Scenic Artists stamp and signature: Reding-  
ton Sharpe 1928

- d. Act I - III  
21.5 x 27.5
- e. Act II  
21.5 x 27.5

Property list

Typescript with manuscript annotations in  
ink by Robert Redington Sharpe  
6 pages  
The typescript lists all stage properties used in  
each act; the manuscript annotations give  
source for purchase ("Macy's, Gimbel's,  
Bloomingdale's," etc.). There are also  
annotations about lighting ("The *lights* are  
mostly pink, amber, & white spots - Foots  
up ½, amber/Deep blue outside window  
R & L . . .," etc.).

Photograph of Act I, The Living Room  
Photograph by Vandamm, New York  
18.7 x 23.8  
Gift of Arthur Hanna

Photograph of Act II, Salvation Army  
Shelter  
Photograph by Vandamm, New York  
18.7 x 23.8

22. *Joseph* by Bertram Block  
Liberty Theatre, New York  
Directed by George S. Kaufmann  
Produced by John Golden  
February 12, 1930

A Terrace in Potiphar's Villa  
Charcoal on paper  
Signed: Redington Sharpe  
18.7 x 35.5

#### CALIFORNIA, 1931-1932

23. *Jacob's Dream* by Richard Beer-  
Hofmann  
Pasadena Community Playhouse  
Directed by Gilmor Brown  
March 31 - April 2, 1932

2 Scene designs  
Charcoal and white watercolor on paper  
Signed: Redington Sharpe 1932

- a. Act I, Isaac's House  
21.7 x 35.6
- b. Act II, A Mountain Top  
21.7 x 35.6

4 Costume designs  
Charcoal and white watercolor on paper  
Signed: Redington Sharpe 1932

- c. Jacob  
28 x 21.7
- d. Esau  
28 x 21.7
- e. Satan  
28 x 21.7
- f. Michael  
28 x 21.7

Costume Notes  
Autograph manuscript in pencil  
3 pages

24. *Dragon's Teeth* by Shirland Quin

Pasadena Community Playhouse  
Directed by Gilmor Brown  
November 23, 1931

8 Costume designs  
Watercolor and charcoal on paper, mounted  
by the artist on grey board  
Signed: Redington Sharpe 1931

- a. Chemists  
30.5 x 17.9
- b. Automaton Soldiers  
30.6 x 17.8
- c. First Airman of the Apocalypse  
30.6 x 18
- d. Second Airman of the Apocalypse  
30.6 x 17.7
- e. Third Airman of the Apocalypse  
30.5 x 17.8
- f. Pestilence  
30.5 x 17.7
- g. Lust  
30.5 x 17.7
- h. Death  
30.5 x 17.7

Description of Costumes  
Typescript with manuscript annotations by  
Robert Redington Sharpe  
1 page

#### NEW YORK, 1933-1934

25. *Saint Wench* by John Colton  
Lyceum Theatre, New York  
Directed by Charles Hopkins  
Produced by Helen Menken  
January 2, 1933

5 Scene designs  
Color sketches to show lighting effects  
Watercolor on paper, unsigned

- a. Act I, The Beginning  
10.2 x 17.3
- b. Act I, Second Effect  
10.5 x 17.2
- c. Act I, General Lighting  
10.3 x 17.3
- d. Act II, General Lighting  
10.2 x 17.4
- e. Act III, The Ending  
10.1 x 17.2



26. *Tobacco Road* by Jack Kirkland  
 Based on the novel by Erskine Caldwell  
 Masque Theatre, New York  
 Produced and directed by Anthony  
 Brown  
 Setting by Robert Redington Sharpe  
 December 4, 1933
- a. Rough sketch for setting  
 Watercolor on paper; mounted by  
 the artist in scrapbook  
 Signed: Sharpe  
 14.5 x 21.4  
 This is the only known drawing of  
 the setting for *Tobacco Road*
  - b. Ground Plan  
 Blueprint (red-line on sepia paper)  
 with United Scenic Artists stamp  
 49.1 x 73.1
  - c. Elevation for House, Outhouse,  
 Tree Wings, Dirt Pile & Tree,  
 Fence  
 Blueprint (red-line on sepia paper)  
 with United Scene Artists stamp  
 54.2 x 78
  - d. Elevation for Border, Ground  
 Row, and Ramp  
 Blueprint (red-line on sepia paper)  
 with United Scene Artists stamp  
 58.3 x 74.6
  - e. Portrait sketch  
 Sam Byrd as Dude Lester  
 Conte crayon on paper  
 Signed: Redington Sharpe 1934  
 35.4 x 25
  - f. Permanent setting for *Tobacco  
 Road*, December 1933  
 Photograph by White, New York  
 Mounted by Robert Redington  
 Sharpe on board with his manu-  
 script annotations on reverse:  
 "A squalid shack and yard at the  
 end of a tobacco road in  
 Georgia—dirt, disrepair, and deso-  
 lation . . . Henry Hull, as the  
 leading character, on the porch."
27. *Sweet Nell of Old Drury* by Paul Kester
- 4 Scene designs  
 Watercolor on grey paper  
 Signed: Redington Sharpe 1934
- a. Act One, A Street in London  
 25.7 x 40
  - b. Act Two, An Anteroom in Nell's  
 House  
 25.7 x 40.2
  - c. Act Three, A Room in Jeffrey's House  
 25.6 x 39.9
  - d. Act Four, A Chamber in Whitehall  
 Palace  
 25.9 x 40.1





