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Inside the Boudoir: Designing the World of Lynn Nottage’s *Intimate Apparel*

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### The Importance of Research in Design

Lynn Nottage’s *Intimate Apparel* is a period piece that takes place in turn-of-the-century New York City. The play, which centers around a 35 year old, unmarried black lingerie seamstress, features themes about race, class, gender, and sexuality of the time.

Each theme is integral to the plot, and Nottage has thoroughly studied the intersectionality and context of them in 1905 New York City. Therefore, theatrical design for the show must embrace all of these themes and represent them truthfully on stage. A strong design will require extensive research on the part of the designer.

My project seeks to emphasize the relationship between historical, contextual, and artistic research and design.

Because I am a scenic artist, I am focusing on paint designs and set decorating. The play takes place entirely in the bedrooms and boudoirs of characters; my designs and research reflect these environments.

### The Play, Script Analysis

The most important resource a designer has is the original text, with the playwright’s descriptions of each scene. These requirements, as written by the playwright, are referred to as the *givens*, and will include specifics like: furniture required, atmosphere, important properties, as well as context like date and location.

Usually, these givens are listed at the beginning of the scene as *stage notes*, but others are found as clues in dialogue throughout the scene. For my research, I had to meticulously read the play several times in order to properly note and represent each of the givens Nottage provides. My research was broken down by character and scene.

**Example of givens:**

*Another bedroom in a cramped tenement flat. It is small and cluttered with bolts of fabric.* (Nottage 16)

### Visual Research

Primary photo sources became my most important research, as I was able to find over fifty photos of bedrooms in 1900s New York City. These provided invaluable insight into the realities of different classes of citizens at the time.

**I also researched decorative arts from the time period and was inspired by several of the pieces I found for different scenes in the play.**

### Other Textual Research

A designer must not rely completely on the text to provide clues about the historical and cultural context of the play. The areas I focused on most in my research were class, race, and gender in New York in the early twentieth century. I read a variety of secondary sources to build my understanding and integrated them into my paper. I also relied on technical handbooks to advise my design process.

### Conclusion

This project was meant to act as a research intensive, practical way for me to apply my scenic studies. I was able to completely immerse myself in research, both textual and visual to create five historically appropriate scenes that embrace and enhance the original text. Below is an example of the design process for just one of these scenes.

Cited: