

Island Beaches Give Sculptor the Alphabet for Spelling Out Creative Statement



By Phyllis Meras

"That pile of wood is my alphabet," Marion Kinsella said, "and I have to string the pieces together to make my statement. They're something by themselves, of course, but making them work as language is a fascinating problem."

It was a rainy, muddy Saturday afternoon. Miss Kinsella, a sculptor, an interior designer and assistant lighting designer for *Pretty Belle, the Musical*, a play that is now in Boston, had left the city for a weekend in West Tisbury. Had the weather been different, it might have been a weekend of beachcombing for wood for her sculptures, for, fall, winter and spring one is likely to encounter her roaming the shore, filling her arms with gnarled branches, whitened branches, odds and ends of shingles, clothespins, popsicle sticks, wooden floats, lobster pot skeletons.

But it was a weekend of rain, so she was inside, surrounded by wood and sculpture, but also by lighting plots and plans and drawing boards, as she made diagrams for an upcoming book on lighting by the late Jean Rosenthal, the lighting designer with whom she worked for more than 14 years.

pattern of her choreography hasn't changed since then there's been no need for the lights to change." Miss Kinsella shuffled through yard-long cardboard plans dotted with miniature lights.

"Lighting dance," she said, "is relatively easy lighting. It's sculptural lighting. You're dealing with form in space. Lighting a play, on the other hand, is listening light. You're lighting faces. Lighting a musical tends to be more emotional. It's like mood support for a movie.

Kinsella talked enthusiastically of his projects. When he had gone, she smiled.

"Last year," she said, "when I was asked to define the creative process, I knew perfectly well no adult in his right mind would try to do it. It's so ephemeral. But then I found Steve and Mike who are too young yet to know what the impossible is, so we went out and did the impossible. It was a good feeling."

(Steve Sint)

It's a more obvious kind of lighting. You can use as many as 250 lights, whereas the Martha Graham plan has only about 90 lights."

Miss Kinsella sighed and murmured that no matter how hard she tried to talk sculpture, invariably it was lighting that captured attention as a conversation topic.

But that was the end of her protest. She poured white mugful of coffee—twined—blue-speckered—around a ring of a chair—

desk, and settled in for a longer talk about lights.

Lighting, she said, is a somewhat bypassed aspect of the theatre. "Most people just aren't aware of it," but it's telling you how you should feel. This scene is cold or stark or romantic.

Lighting is a subtle underscoring. The visual aspects of a show are, of course, sets first and then lighting and costumes sharing the rest of it—unless you have an open set with virtually no scenery. Then lighting becomes the most important thing about it. Or if you have a bright Restoration comedy, you're not going to do a lot with lighting. The costumes are going to be more important.

Art of the Century

"Lighting as far as I'm concerned, is especially fascinating, because it's an art of this century. Before the coming of electricity, people were mainly busy getting enough intensity so the audience could see what was going on on stage, though there were a few marvelous gags with candles—they even had a way of getting a little color in. But then electricity came, and the real fun began.

Unwinding from her chair, and pushing horn-rimmed glasses into place efficiently, she talked of what a major job lighting is in the theatre today.

"For example, if you have a lavish musical with 250 lights, and you go on a five-week tour before the show opens on Broadway and you're in one theatre somewhere for two weeks and another for three weeks, you have to have a precise record of where you put your lights so you can set everything up quickly when you move."

This, specifically, is where Miss Kinsella comes in, painstakingly recording lighting patterns.

Marion Kinsella, whom friends call Mickey, got into theatre entirely by accident, and has stayed in it much the same way, for she regards herself as a sculptor and became involved with the stage "only to make a living."

A native of New Britain, Conn., and a graduate in fine arts of Syracuse University, she went to New York looking for any sort of art job; roomed with lighting designer Tharon Musser, and soon found herself assisting her. One of their combined jobs took them to Stratford, where she met Jean Rosenthal, and

the friendship that brought the Vineyard, and that kept lighting.

It was fascinating working with her, Miss Kinsella recalls watching the way she worked others to make a perfect product.

"She'd read the play, vary it and then she'd go and talk to the director, and then the set designer and maybe he'd have a third opinion of what the lighting should be somehow, from all this she'd go up with a whole image. I've been impressed with this about theatre, the same way I'm impressed when I listen to a phony orchestra and I realize there are 60 different individual elements there and yet it comes a beautiful whole."

Among the Broadway products on which she has most enjoyed working is *West Side Story* she believes, signaled a chain concept of the American nation.

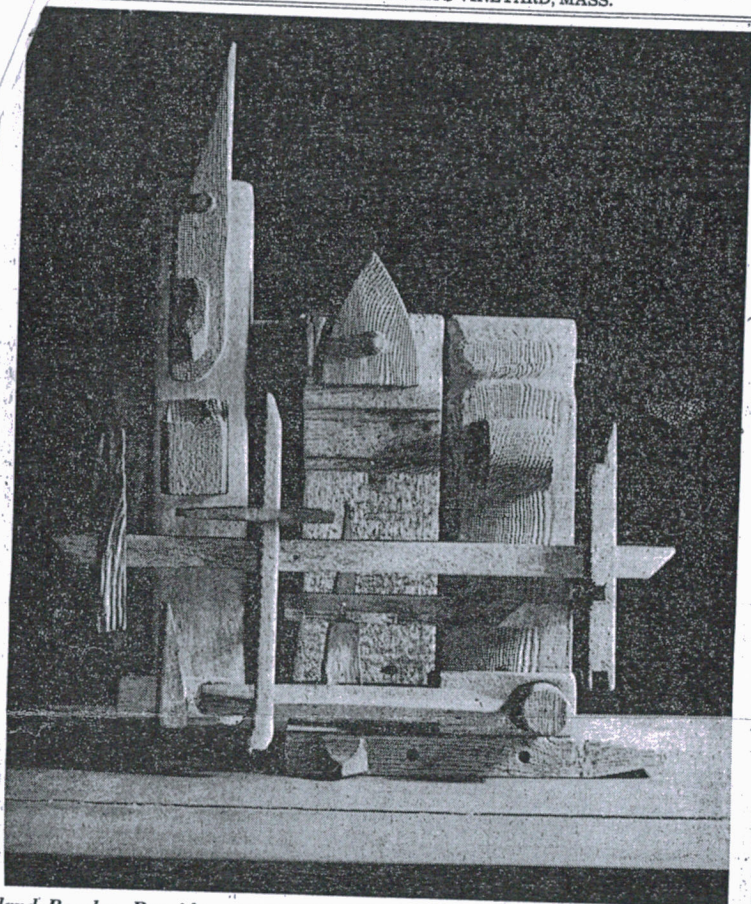
"That was in 1957. All of a sudden after that musicals began something; or a lot of them began to pay more attention to the book. The medium of the musical began to try to be broader. *Y Fiddler on the Roof* with a humor in it, but it had some gutsy moments in it, too, and you had *Cabaret*, and that wasn't intended to be funny. *Pretty Belle* isn't. It's a very show about a Southern big game.

First Vineyard Visit

The year 1957, as well as the year of *West Side Story*—the first time Miss Kinsella, Miss Rosenthal, came to the yard.

"And this is where I, like Jean, my best work. When you work with me here, you always have a party. But when you want to go alone to work people seem to let and leave you alone. When someone to walk the beach look for my 'alphabet' I can

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(Michael Zide)

Island Beaches Provide Alphabet for Sculpture

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someone. When I just want to go looking all alone, I can do that."

Like getting into lighting, Miss Kinsella began driftwood sculpting quite accidentally.

"I was a naturalistic sculptor. And then I just happened to look around the studio one day and it was full of wood. 'Why don't you use it, dummy?' I said to myself, and so I began to. Actually, I started out as a painter, but I'm a tactile person and I kept being dissatisfied with what I could do on a single plane—that was how I got into sculpture. But now I find that that old understanding of color comes in very handy. There are always subtle color differentiations in the driftwood pieces I collect and I find that the color can contribute almost as much as the shape to the overall work I'm creating.

"How do I know when I walk a beach what piece of wood I want? I don't know. The piece I pick up one day, I might never have looked at the day before because my mood would have been a different one. The wood I collect and the sculpture I create depends on where I am in my life that day. That's what creation is. It's how you live your life and where you're at in it. What you spit up out of your guts is whatever you've been chewing on. As far as I'm concerned, Shakespeare is a pretty good source of ideas.

there was a dead fawn. It was one of those beautiful false spring days and when I went home I did a piece called *Elegy to a Fawn* that sold immediately. Whatever you say as an artist depends on the quality of your mind."

There was a knock on the door. It was photographer, Michael Zide who, last year, with another young photographer, Steve Sint, helped Miss Kinsella define the creative process from the standpoint of a sculptor for a teaching experiment going on at Bucknell University. The pair followed Miss Kinsella on her beach walks, observing what wood attracted her and why it seemed to and photographing her as she collected.

"There was talk, for a time, of Mike's pictures this year. Miss Kinsella talked enthusiastically of his projects. When he had gone, she smiled.

"Last year," she said, "when I was asked to define the creative process, I knew perfectly well no adult in his right mind would try to do it. It's so ephemeral. But then I found Steve and Mike who are too young yet to know what the impossible is, so we went out and did the impossible. It was a good feeling."