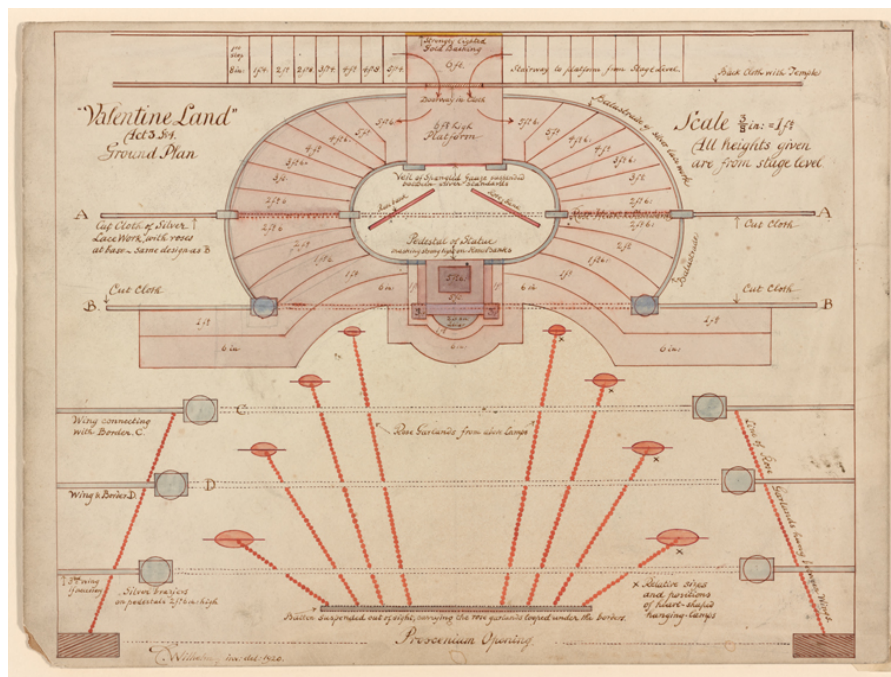


## Technical Elements: Callista Payne; Theatre and History

A century ago, R. H. Burnside's *Good Times* opened at the Hippodrome—once the world's largest stage—and helped to establish Burnside's legacy as an extraordinary producer. The grandeur of the Hippodrome inspired the creative team of this show to make a memorable production, as we can see in the existing stage design, costumes, and other technical elements, such as photographs and memories. Burnside's production of *Tip Top* also made use of the Hippodrome's potential limitless theatrical possibilities that this creative team possessed. Because of the success of this production, it was also performed in the Globe Theatre, and the Colonial Theatre in Chicago.

The sets of *Tip Top* in their rendering and design parallel the large scale and ambition of the creative team involved in this show. The show's designer, Carl Wilhelm, created a florist shop, courtroom, and the "Valentine Land" scene, (later called Land of the Heart's Desire upon the official production opening ) in the same space, each of which is unique in terms of aesthetic and style. Here, in the florist's shop, we can see the artist's ideas of his set worked out in detail before he handles the practicality of it. Already, from a point of conception, Wilhelm designs an ambience of openness and elegance, with high walls and ceilings. The size and magnitude of the spaces he creates for his work not only assist in production, but match the bold nature of Burnside's musicals.



The set dressings like the flora and fauna of the shop, while perhaps not what someone would expect in a florist's shop, assist the rest of the creative team as they finalize the costumes and choreography to match the sense of symmetry he imagines. Since this work would take place prior to the physical creation of the set, it would be important for the director, actors, and the rest of the company to understand Wilhelm's images.



<https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/37a366a0-5658-0132-460e-58d385a7bbd0>

The carpenters for *Tip Top* had no easy feat creating Wilhelm's vision. His design for Valentine Land being filled with various elevations as shown in the ground plan, shown above. Understandably, it is difficult to see the level of detail from this small image, but as the notes on this page indicate, the front portion of the main stage sits only at 6 inches, building all the way up to a six foot high platform located at center stage. A baton hung just up of the proscenium opening, while out of sight a garland provides more set dressing, and heart shaped hanging lamps are hung angling towards the center of the stage, also hung with garland.

Costuming in *Tip Top* mimics the extravagance of the set design, as is clearly seen in this specific example below. This image, a design sketch for the character "Princess White" showcases the influence of the Jazz Age culture surrounding the Burnside creative team at this time (O'Kane Conwell).



<https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/44a20ce0-8a2b-0132-ce23-58d385a7b928>

The costume designer for these pieces, Marguerite O’Kane Conwell, clearly showcases the stereotypical dancer dress of the 1920s. This woman wears heavy blush and colorful makeup, with a dress covered in feathers and beads. The stark contrast of the scarlet piece she holds was likely used to encourage tasteful choreography, as well as enhance the meaning of the number. The musical’s revue structure allows ample opportunity to exploit images of a jazz club, as was clearly done with this costume.

In contrast to the representations of the jazz club, the next image (below) illustrates a design for the “Valentine Land” scenes, which shows influence not from the American Twenties,



but from Victorian France (O’Kane Conwell).

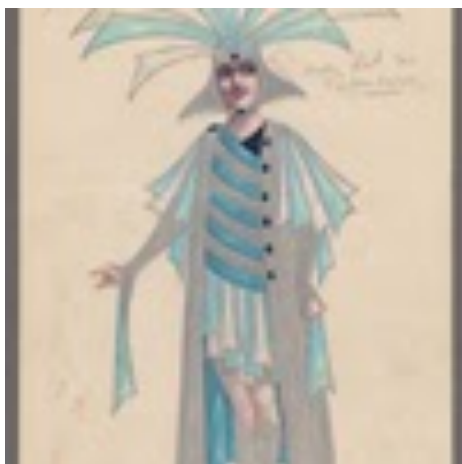
<https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/5772e280-8a2b-0132-68d6-58d385a7b928>

Interestingly, the designer also indicated the desire to use Paris Velvet for the waistcoat. The influence from European design parallels other works of theatre that may have influenced these creators, such as Oscar Wilde's famed *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), which focused on elitism in London. The inclusion of costumes such as this is an interesting choice. Similarly, extravagant costumes are worn by the chorus from the "Shop Scene," enhanced by layers of taffeta and lace with bright colors.



<https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/552609c0-8a2b-0132-b761-58d385a7b928>

The costumes in Burnside's *Good Times* were designed by Will R. Barnes, and are a complete contrast in style from that of Conwell's work. As a production, the exuberant theme of *Good Times* called for a completely different approach, which Barnes achieved with color blocking, or the use of a singular color in both the sets and costume for a particular scene. For the work in the special act for the Four Roses, each design is a blocked color with a lining that mimics the color of one of the other actors on stage.



<https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/f92ec200-11c4-0131-1da2-58d385a7bbd0>

Each lead character is given names like “Beauty”, “Ambition”, and “Adventure”, and is likewise given a costume that reflects these stock character descriptions. These characters are given their costumes based upon the features and creative elements of what their name may insinuate. For instance, we have an image of the design for the character “Imagination”, seen above (Barnes). This character rendering includes notes such as “make all in black and red” and “bleak”. These descriptions indicate that, although Barnes intended his image of imagination to be this icy and elegant costume, he and the creative team decided to focus on a more flat color scheme, creating an ominous tone on stage with red on the interior of the garb and black as the exterior. In addition, extensions from the head piece in this costume were removed. Adjustments like this clearly alter the way a company would view a production and character in a particular number.

Both *Tip Top* and *Good Times* exemplify the intricacies of Burnside’s imagination and that of his creative team. Because these designs and renderings from these productions are held in the NYPL collections, scholars are able to speculate as to the success of the technical production aspects of these productions and their significance to the production as a whole.

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