

Tricks of the Trade

by Marc Rubinstein
Lord Aelfric of Sarisberie

A theater professional offers hints on a variety of projects

Simulating Leather for Roman Tents

To the problem of a leather-like effect for the Roman papilio, there is a commonly used theatrical glue trade named Phlex Glu, from Spectra Dynamics in Albuquerque, NM. It is water soluble when wet, but after it dries it's fairly water resistant. Although milky-white when wet, it dries clear. It also makes a fairly good binder in case one wishes to use dry pigments or bronzing powders of any kind, and the dried glue is quite flexible. Now the problem: it is not flammable when wet, but it is when dry. This was supposed to have been dealt with early after it was developed, but apparently it can't be done without the Phlex Glu also becoming water soluble like the food-service flexible glue (by Swifts) from which it was developed.

With the Phlex Glu one can both seal the canvas and paint it to look like leather, but also, with the addition of some sort of filler like dutch whiting with which to fill and eliminate the pores of the canvas' weave, it can help imitate the surface of leather as well.

Oh, and if I remember correctly, The Tent Book also describes the papilio and other Roman troop and officer tents—including Nero's huge octagonal tent—and mentions that some may have been of varied fabrics, one a canvas or canvas-like fabric...

Materials and Techniques for Backdrops

In regards to your Painted wall hangings and backdrops bit: unbleached muslin is a great material...especially for this, as that is what is used in theaters for the same. Canvas has gotten too expensive for all but the best commercial theaters, and even there the drop is usually so far away from the audience that it hardly matters. Though instead of washing and drying to preshrink it, theatre types first paint the sewn whole drop with sizing, a thinnish half glue/half water mixture with some whiting thrown in, which shrinks the fabric and fills the pores somewhat, preparing the drop for painting (for dyed drops one does not size as it inhibits the fabric's absorption of the dye; the dye itself will wet and shrink the drop). I've

often seen, and have myself made, reasonably good looking stained glass window drops: the "leaded" portions painted opaque and the "glass" dyed so it remains translucent. Lit from behind with seams cleverly hidden by working into the design) they can be quite breathtaking. Lynn Pecktal's book, Painting for the Theatre is excellent for these types of things. Oh, and the clear acrylic latex gel or Phlex Glu if you can get it) can be an excellent waterproof carrier for water-based dyes.

(Editor's note: See the article in this issue on simulating stained glass windows.)

Portable Flooring

As for flooring that is lightweight and/or portable, again something I've used often in theatre. For mosaics or tiles of many kinds and wooden floors of many kinds, take sheets of 3/4" plywood and use a router to create grout lines or to space boards (and carve lightly or use a rounded or shaped bit to create roughened wood) then paint and seal the boards front, back and edges. These are then keyed with 3 holes on the narrow end and five on the long end, with one end and one side getting quarter inch by 1" to 1 1/2" metal pins set in so they can be interconnected when laid flat...outside edges of the design get no holes or pins but might be edged with one-by stock.

This is better than trying to use shiplap or tongue and groove sheets, because the tongues, edges of the grooves and the shiplaps are thin and break easily. There are also fasteners from Simmons which can be inset into the sheets and then used like coffin locks to pull sheets together and lock them tight. The sheets need not be full-sized four (feet) by eights, of course, and can be shaped and painted as needed. One can even design them with thin battens beneath—often called sleepers—so that the sheets need not lie directly against the ground. There are many variations one may try.

Simulated Stone

Fake stone is most often done today with etched and carved foam, for theatre and movable pieces or "wild walls" in movies or **Gunnite** (sort of a sprayed on plasticized cement, often used for free form swimming pools) for some other movie set uses and for theme parks. There is a material by the trade name of Stoh which is a polymer with a gritty cement-like stuff in it which is designed to be applied over styrofoam which is getting more

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and more use in the building trades. I have seen and used this (in some sample stuff for Sea World a couple of years ago) and it is quite nice, nowhere near as heavy as gunnite, is designed for use over flat or even sculpted foam, and it feels as well as looks like stone. It even comes in many colors.

There is also a spay-on polymer based coating paint called **Varie Coat** by Pleko Southwest, Inc. (1824 E. 6th St., Tempe, AZ 85281 602/968-0113) which comes in 28 colors and three or four multi-color mixes, like granite. It can be brushed on, but is best sprayed with the use of a hopper gun. It sticks well and remains fairly flexible besides.

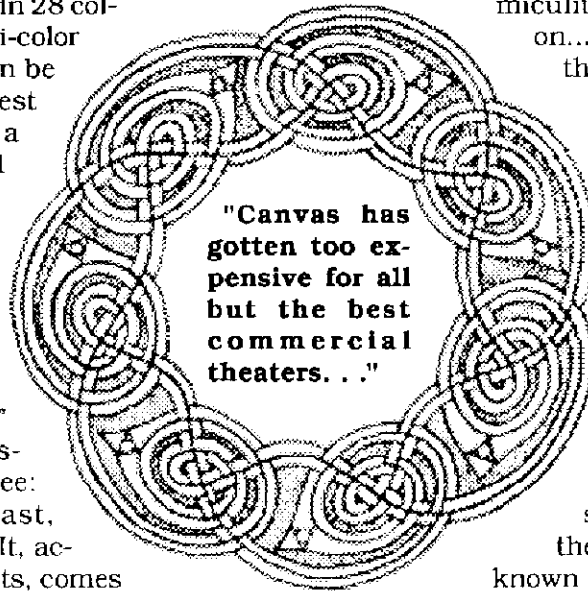
I have also recently been sent samples of a substance called **Stuc-O-Flex**, an "elastometric, textured exterior finish system" from Perma-Chink Systems, Inc. (call toll free: 1-800-548-3554 East, 1-800-548-1231 West). It, according to it's hype sheets, comes in a wide variety of colors, can follow shapes and create a wide variety of textures, is fully ASTM tested with a class A fire rating, is very elastic, acrylic, creates a "breathable" membrane, and has other benefits such as crack resistance. It is, however, formulated for spraying, so I don't know how well it brushes on...but they do provide that 800 number and claim to provide such

technical support. They even have what they call "Polymer Reinforced Mortar or PRM as a base coat for the Stuco-Flex, which is troweled on and probably can be worked into many suitable textures.

But really, all of the above can probably be imitated by getting something like the Phlex-Glu or a really good latex or acrylic paint and adding some sand, sawdust or cabosil or vermiculite into it before painting it on...and then sealing the whole thing with another coat after drying.

There are also available vacuformed heavy duty plastic and fiberglass sculpted sheets done for vertical, horizontal as well as some for walkable surfaces. They look like stone, brick, rock, bamboo mat, dried riverbed, and many other textures and are almost real-looking out of the package, before painting. You've seen them in movies (after they've been painted) and never known the difference...even in close ups! The draw back? They are fairly expensive, especially the good ones, and you want ones that will both travel and wear well.

One of the oldest, and sometimes still the most believable, theatrical ways of creating stone and stone structures is to use painted paper mache' over chicken wire on a wooden frame...and there are many ways to make it breakdown for travel.



"Canvas has gotten too expensive for all but the best commercial theaters..."

Scavengers Corner

Good places to find good stuff

Stuc-o-Flex
(for fake stone)
1-800-548-3554 (East)
1-800-548-1231 (West)

Varie Coat
(spray on "granite")
1824 E. 6th St.
Tempe, AZ 85281
(602) 968-0113

Phlex Glu
(flexible waterproof glue)
Spectra Dynamics
Albuquerque, New Mexico

Leather and Accessories
M. Siegel Co.
120 Pond St.
Ashland, Mass. 01721
(508) 881-5200

Next Issue

CHAIRS

A special section on period chairs, including plans, photos and documentation.

NORSE ALLTHING CAMP

An article describing the construction of a "Viking" period dwelling

PENNSIC REVIEW

An overview of architecture, furnishings and cool ideas from this year's Pennsic War

And much more!