Research for theatre design always begins with the script. Clues about the pace, mood, environment and characters are hidden within the dialogue and the stage directions. Often, a designer will read a play once for an initial reaction, twice to get a idea of the mood and style, and during the third read, take down notes about what is required from the set, props and costumes. It is necessary to know the play intimately before beginning any research in order to distinguish the valuable information among the overwhelming amount of books, periodicals, journals and images that are available.

*Jesus Hopped the A Train* is a modern realistic drama written by Stephen Adly Gurgis. It follows Angel, a young man who has been incarcerated in Riker’s Island for shooting the leader of a cult in a valiant yet poor attempt to save his friend, who was a member of the cult. Due to the notoriety of his crime and the violent way he is treated by other inmates, he is transferred to the maximum security ward. The only other prisoner in this part of the jail is Lucius, a serial killer on death row. Lucius and Angel can only interact during the single hour of the day they are transferred from their cells to rooftop exercise cages. Lucius takes this opportunity to preach Christianity to Angel, as he claims to have found God since his incarceration. Between these scenes, we watch Angel interact with his lawyer, Mary Jane, in a legal consult room inside the jail. Angel has admitted his crime to her, but she rationalizes her decision to continue representing him and commit perjury because she believes that Angel’s crime was moral. Through the action and characterization, Gurgis provided us with vague blueprints of what we needed to create. The characters are rash, emotional and energetic. Their world is cold and violent. These are the first impressions that formed the foundation of our designs.

After reading and analyzing the play, it helps to familiarize
oneself with the world the play presents, in this case, Riker’s Island. Although efforts to visit the institution were made by the production team, the high level of security for the area rendered it impossible. Despite the jail being only miles away, we had to study it through secondary resources. Inside Rikers, a book written by Jennifer Wynn, a school teacher at the jail, proved to be the most important piece of textural research utilized. This personal report reinforced the immediacy of the play’s characters by providing non-fictional accounts of similar people. It also provided a wealth of descriptions of the institution, from the seemingly ever-foggy Manhattan skyline to the constant roar of airplanes overhead en route to LaGuardia Airport. The production team took turns reading the book and we used it as a basis for design and concept conversations. Other textural research included periodicals that mentioned the institution or other jails. We even delved into psychological reports on the relationships between prisoners and correction officers, as well as analyses of serial killers and cults.

Armed with a firm understanding of the play and background information on the jail and the characters, it was time to conduct visual and primary research.

Although most of the play took place on the roof of a Riker’s Island building, it was important to translate the archetypal details of a prison into the design so it would be recognized as a part of a penal colony. Figure 1 shows a picture that was found at the New York Picture Collection at the Mid-Manhattan Library. It depicts some standard aspects of American jails that were recurrent in much of my research. For instance, many jails are painted with some variation of the color teal because it is believed to have a
calming effect on the prisoners. Light only enters the space in shafts, textured by bars or metal mesh set in the thick concrete walls. There is always a contrast between the high open corridors and the tiny cells. Figure 2 shows a shining sea of razor wire, easily the most distinguishable aspect of the exterior of a penal colony. To bring these aspects up to the roof of the prison where the play is set, I worked the teal color into the concrete paint treatment of the stage floor and strung razor wire across the back of the stage. Figure 3 shows these aspects of the set in a production photograph. These details may have been subtle, but they transformed the theatre into a place of danger and oppression that was recognizable to the audience.

Helpful research for the outdoor exercise cages was more difficult to find. Figures 4 was the result of an internet search. Although the cage in the photograph is slightly less secure than the ones that would be found at Riker's Island, it was helpful for the study of the structure and the beam placement of the chain-link, as well as the approximate amount of room the inmates have inside.

After using the research to determine the placement, colors, texture and mood, I had to start focusing on the details. I became an expert in chain-link, and learned all the terminology required to design a realistic looking exercise cage. The trickiest aspect was designing the lock of the cage, which could be opened by the guard's key. I studied the parts of a high security lock, as pictured in Figure 5, to determine how they worked and how we could imitate it for the purposes of the show.

Another important part of the cage was the lockable slot in the door. Prisoners are led into the cage with their handcuffs on. Once the door is shut behind them and securely locked, they reach their arms through the slot and the Corrections Officer removes the handcuffs through the slot. The only photograph I could find of this slot was from a magazine shown in Figure 6. The photograph has helpful details of the slot, but it has been installed in a metal door, not a chain-link door, which was required by the script. Trips to the library and internet searches proved inadequate for this information, and I actually had to rent a prison documentary DVD and pause it at just the right moment to sketch out the door of the chain-link fence.
Although aspects of the set were stylistic, getting the tiny details right were important to me. They were a tribute to the real-life people the characters represented. The details also provided the actors with nuances for their characters. The ability for Lucius, the serial killer, to cling on to the chain link fence after Valdez, the Corrections Officer, slammed his cage door immersed the actors in the moment, which in turn engaged the audience.

The image of inmates exercising on a roof is complicated. Although they are confined to chain link exercise cages, this is the single hour of the day where they are out in the open, under the wide sky. The area designated for the Legal Consult room provided the ability to highlight the difference between the outside and the inside in the form of a hanging ceiling piece.

The low ceiling communicated how confined the inmates were during the other 23 hours of the day when they were not on the roof. The inspiration for the design of the piece was a cement drop beam ceiling in a photograph of Alcatraz, shown in Figure 7. I could not install a completely solid ceiling in the space, because the lighting designer would lose the ability to light that area from above. Instead of having a solid, heavy ceiling, I used the thick concrete slats from the photograph to design my ceiling. I left space between them for lighting purposes. The ceiling actually provided the lighting designer with an interesting object to project light through. Figure 8 shows the ceiling above the legal consult room as threatening and constrictive in contrast to the wide open space of the roof.

In order to give the play a more intimate environment, the director decided she’d rather have the audience sit on the stage among the action, instead of in the auditorium. This was an incredible and rare opportunity for me to design the seating units and use them to define the space, as opposed to working in a pre-determined layout. Since the play is about judgment in the
eyes of God, the law, and each other, we though it would be interesting to shape the audience as a jury box but with the style of the Riker’s Island roof. We enclosed them with chain link panels in the back, and the concrete perimeter of the roof in front. Figure 9 shows the resulting atmosphere of danger and constriction.

Once the design was finalized, it was my job to draft out the logistics of the set within the given space. These drawings were for the purpose of the technical director, who had to budget, purchase materials for, and build the set. The drawings must communicate a lot of information about three dimensional objects in two dimensional rendering. Often, there are many plates that detail each side of an object to ensure that nothing is left out. The designer must specify the materials and the dimensions of everything. The most important drawing is the groundplan shown in Figure 10. The groundplan is a bird’s eye view of the entire theatre, and it shows the placement of the set. The different line styles and weights are standards of this type of communication, and they each have their own meaning. This groundplan was drafted using a computer program, but they can also be drawn by hand.

The next step was to build a model. The model is a three dimensional representation of the set design, in scale. The model is used by the director to visualize and determine the movement of the actors before the set is built. Often, the set is not available for rehearsals, and sometimes the actors even rehearse in a completely different space. The model can aid in an actor’s ability to imagine the set during rehearsal and be aware of what it will look like once it is built and installed. During the preliminary stage in our design process, our lighting designer was busy working on a different show. I sent him snapshots of the model, like the one in Figure 11, so he would be able to grasp the design concept and use it to influence his lighting design.

The reason that I chose to pursue theatre design is because I am a polymath- my interests span a great deal of subjects, and my desire to learn is overwhelming. Theatre design is hard work, but it requires constant research. Being a set designer has changed the way I observe my environment. I take my time and really look at the world around me, learning new things every step of the way. Jesus Hopped the A Train gave me the opportunity to discover a world I knew nothing about. I learned statistics regarding American jails, psychology of prisoners, the history of penal colonies, and the chemistry and engineering of construction materials, all while utilizing my artistic creativity and exploring the depths of my emotions. No matter how difficult and challenging theatre design may be, the extent of the rewards always makes it worthwhile.
Figure 10