

In *Byhalia, Mississippi* the main characters, Jim and Laurel, find their happy home turned upside down when Laurel delivers their eagerly awaited first baby . . . which we will learn is not Jim's son. While enduring intrusions from friends and family, a town with a racially charged history, and their own insecurities and jealousies, Jim and Laurel fight to save their marriage and begin the monumental task of raising a child together. In this design, I wanted there to be a palpable sense that Jim and Laurel are committed to making their space a home—a welcome refuge against the daily battles that wait for them outside their front door. While it was important to the storytelling to evoke the impoverished shabbiness in their prefabricated house on the edge of town, it was also crucial to imbue the space with personality and warmth. I worked to create an utterly realistic visual history for Jim and Laurel within the three walls by filling the space with pictures from childhood, their wedding, and family mementos, all of which testify to, and heighten, the stakes of their conflict.



*Everything is Wonderful* by Chelsea Marcantel, produced by Contemporary American Theater Festival, 2017. Directed by Ed Herendeen. Photo by Seth Freeman.



*Byhalia, Mississippi* by Evan Lander, produced by Contemporary American Theater Festival, 2017. Directed by Marc Masterson. Photo by Seth Freeman.

*Everything is Wonderful* centers on a young woman's return to her Amish family after being exiled from the community. Within hours of her arrival, another outsider comes on the scene: one with a heavy emotional debt to pay to her family. Both people are seeking acknowledgment – even redemption – from a place whose strict customs seem to offer those things without ever actually granting them. In this story, the idea of home exists in a precarious intersection of community, individuality, and the bond of familial love. The play shifts seamlessly between multiple places, and back and forth in time, with the present-day family home acting as the central location. The script requires the space to have some of the trappings of a real house interior, but I wanted it to be evocative of a much larger, symbolic landscape. The family's kitchen and living room hover at the center of the hulking, skeletal frame of an Amish barn, wide open to the broad skies of the Pennsylvania farmland. The space featured Amish farm tools, rendered in steel and tortuously worked into a chaotic, dangerous collage that teeters just beyond the confines of the family's living quarters. The design is a visceral representation of a paradox: a place whose rules both offer and forbid the possibility of deep belonging.