parate parts of experience, is lauded in theory by the traditions of American thought, but in practice is reduced to a denatured version of itself.

Karl Eigsti deals daily with a specific variation of the American artist’s dilemma. A designer of stage scenery, he is acclaimed by critics and regarded by his fellow professionals as a consummate master. Yet the industry in which he has achieved such notable success is plagued by financial anomalies: the large-scale, funded, non-profit theaters have achieved institutional stability but increasingly showing signs of artistic poverty, and commercial Broadway production continues to expand its budgets and income while narrowing its range of interests and its audience. Art and business overlap in American theater. When the economy has the sniffles, the theater shows the symptoms of pneumonia.

In such a decidedly impure environment, how is it possible to be a creative artist? When Samuel Taylor Coleridge defined the Imagination as “the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception... a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM,” he did not take into account the need to work within a commercial system. Coleridge did not postulate deadlines, labor laws, and budgets. And yet Karl Eigsti has succeeded within that system—so well, in fact, that a study of his career serves as an illustrative study of the way in which imagination works within restrictions. Such a study, even though ultimately an exemplum, begins with biography.

One might as a first step examine Eigsti’s apprenticeship, which was a long and productive one. His restless mind encouraged him early to study an astonishingly wide variety of art forms and skills: piano, art history, acting, playwriting, directing at the NYU School of the Arts, and drawing at the School of Visual Arts. He has worked professionally as an actor, director, script writer, broadcaster, lighting designer, costume designer, and theatrical literary manager, in addition to the careers for which he is now known best: scenic designer and teacher.

The fact that he has not lost touch with his Mennonite heritage adds to the rich mixture of his versatility. His roots are in the Bloomingoton-Normal (Illinois) and Goshen (Indiana) areas. His father, Dr. O. J. Eigsti, was a professor of genetics and a plant-bredreder, who taught at the University of Oklahoma, Illinois State University, and Northwestern. From his father, Karl Eigsti inherited not only an understanding of those who spend their lives breeding plants and animals, but also a genetic process for growing seedless watermelons. This man, who grew up in a religious tradition which did not encourage a professional commitment to the theater or the visual arts and who is now cited in Arnold Aronson’s American Set Design (New York, 1985) as one of America’s pre-eminent theatrical designers, is still capable of talking knowledgeably on a regular basis with his Texas and Oklahoma watermelon growers. This designer, who according to Aronson is known for his symbolist and theatricalist designs, still has his feet on the earth—often, literally. He still enjoys that relationship. In an interview with Michele LaRue in Theatre Crafts magazine (March, 1989, pp. 12-13), Eigsti remarks, “In 1968-69, the season I did my first Broadway show, I went from the Guthrie Theatre to Goshen to harvest two hundred acres of seed.”

Of necessity, his world ranges from symbolism to business law to watermelon seeds. In America, if not in the older civilizations in the world, theater artists have always had to be financially ingenious and astute. In moving from theater design to his more recently acquired responsibilities for growing and marketing his father’s hybrid watermelons, Eigsti says he learned a lot about agribusiness and lawyers and corporations’ lack of conscience. But he has always been a businessman of a sort. “You have to have a degree of business sense to free-lance in our very competitive theater environment,” he says in the Theatre Crafts interview. “I wasn’t intimidated by taking on a project in which there were a lot of unknowns: I’d been there before.”

A mind that moves adroitly from stage space to visual symbols to acoustics to hybrid watermelons to marketing strategies to the education of young designers—the existence of such a range of abilities raises large questions. How does this quality of mind come to be? Was it something within the individual or in the milieu that made such versatility possible? Can the conditions which engendered this versatility be reproduced for future generations?

One should quickly qualify the inquiry with a clear distinction: Versatility is partly a matter of skill and not necessarily a sign of imaginativeness. For theatrical designers versatility is a normal part of the job. A designer always has to begin by reading the play script, functioning as literary critic, engaging in interpretive discussions with the director or even the playwright, sometimes going so far as urging major textual revisions upon the creative team. Pre-production work requires that a designer be a skilled draftsman as well as a painter or model-maker or both. The working drawings of modern stage designs often demand that the set designer have the engineering skills one would expect in an architect’s office or, in the case of a lighting designer, a knowledge of electricity equivalent to that of an electrical engineer. When a designer works in a small, understaffed theater (of which there are a great many), the designer must also execute the designs and become crew chief, carpenter, and scenic artist or, in the case of a costume designer, patternmaker, cutter, and stitcher. All theatrical designers, then, are versatile because they have to be. When the normal demands of the work make versatility necessary, it becomes commonplace.

Even taking this into account, Eigsti’s versatility is still extraordinary. He goes beyond the usual catalog of technical skills to bring together a high order of literary insight, a characteristic theatrical style, and a firm philosophical viewpoint. Normal designer-versatility does not include these latter qualities. Then add to them Eigsti’s twenty-year commitment to the teaching of young professionals, and the questions become even more complex. For professional and pedagogical concerns, though one would hope they might be harmonious, are really not the same at all, and not all designers can comfortably reconcile them. What made it possible for Eigsti? Examining his career in the framework of probing questions seems to lead only to further questions.

Hints of answers may be found in his early education, for in childhood he learned, as we all do, to envision the adult role he eventually fulfilled. He had the good fortune to be enrolled in a public school operated as the laboratory of the College of Education of Illinois State University, and it was in this highly advanced program that he first became interested in theater. In fact, it was a particular teacher, Mabel Claire...