Allen, who drew him into acting in children's theater, and then later into juvenile roles in the university theater where during his offstage time he hung around the scene shop and became acquainted with designers and technicians and with the crew work they did.

It should be emphasized that the school presented all the children with many possibilities—artistic, scientific, intellectual. Young Karl was free to select artistic or other options, as were his schoolmates who responded and chose as their natures dictated. The school did not cause him to become artistic. It offered the students an even-handed eclecticism, an orderly array of attractive alternatives.

Coincidence also figured in Eigsti's artistic education. Mysterious and capricious as it is, unexpected opportunity does as much to create artists as does good training and a predetermined plan. This is not to question the depth of the commitment, for after all, coincidence and opportunity bring all sorts of alliances into being, including marriages, religious affiliations, and international treaties. In Eigsti's case capricious luck intervened from time to time and called new directions to his attention. As a sophomore in high school he accompanied his parents to Europe and spent a summer in Belgium and one semester in Geneva. Surrounded by rich European art traditions, he developed a sudden interest in visual art, and this led to serious study of drawing and painting. Coincidence intervened when he had finished his B.A. at American University and was at loose ends after a Fulbright year in Europe. Zelda Fichandler's Arena Stage in Washington, D.C., suddenly needed a scenic designer.

"I was lucky," Eigsti says, emphasizing that he had not been adequately trained for such a demanding job. "I didn't know what I was doing. And at that time nobody else in the regional theaters knew what a set designer does." Though Arena is now one of America's pre-eminent institutional theaters, at that time it too was only learning now to find its way in the dark, and so Eigsti learned along with his employer.

An admirably productive working relationship enduring more than twenty years began thus: by coincidence the candidate and the opportunity happened along at the same time. This was a turning point, not merely a job. "My career," says Eigsti, defining the relationship precisely, "was decided for me at Arena." The implication is that the opportunity created the professional commitment. Carl Jung, cited in Brewer Ghescelin's introduction to The Creative Process (1952), refers to a similar reciprocal relationship: "The work in process becomes the poet's fate. It is not Goethe who creates Faust, but Faust who creates Goethe."

Karl Eigsti, Arena Stage, and their colleagues across the country were unwittingly enacting this drama on an even larger stage. They were not only learning the craft but also participating in the creation of a new profession. As he explains now with the benefit of hindsight, theater design is an art form only forty or fifty years old. In the 1920s and 30s designers were "essentially architects and interior decorators," he says, who created a rectangular space in which actors performed more or less realistic plays. Now, however, theater design has evolved into an art which creates spatial and symbolic relationships which are radically different from those which one expects to encounter onstage. The profession of design now attracts people who are eclectic, people whose primary allegiance is to theater per se rather than to visualization. Contemporary theater designers, he says, are "very handy at bridging gaps," and they "cement the relationships between the verbal, the psychological, and the visual worlds" of a complete production. Theater design has become "the process of converting non-visual ideas into visual imagery."

One might emphasize that Eigsti and his design colleagues, in creating a new profession of design, have been engaged in a continuing process of re-educating themselves. The education of the imagination does not culminate in a commencement day, for there is no fixed body of knowledge which can actually or theoretically be mastered. The imagination discovers solutions which are unprecedented because it continually addresses problems which have never come up before.

Language is an important component in Eigsti's artistic process. This is remarkable since many visual artists are wary of verbalizing, preferring to communicate visually. But Eigsti not only loves to talk, he needs to. When the topic is interesting or compelling, there is no such thing as a brief conversation. In Aronson's American Set Design, Zelda Fichandler describes the process by which she as director and he as designer arrive at their shared understanding of the design elements of productions. "We argue a lot, we talk a lot," she says. Referring to one production she says, "We just talked and talked and talked about what the central image of that play was... It took us months to find out how to embody it physically." His commitment to language extends even beyond these pre-production colloquies. Even after he had begun to establish himself as a designer, Eigsti worked as an actor and as a director at Arena Stage and as a literary manager for the Lincoln Center Repertory Theater.

In re-examining his background, one might find some explanation for Eigsti's puzzling fondness for language. To the difficulty of working in a risky art form and of creating a new artistic profession, Eigsti brought another intractable reality. The Mennonite world-view, which he inherited by being born into it, has in a few moments in its history looked benignly on some art forms, such as music, but has never encouraged the theatrical or visual arts. Many a Mennonite community, when confronted with a young person considering a professional career in the arts, has been willing to bring heavy-duty censure to bear on that crisis. One would not reasonably expect the Mennonite community to produce a major theatrical designer. And yet it did.

This is not to suggest that Eigsti was oppressed. For him, growing up on university campuses, the severity of the traditional Mennonite view of the theater was softened. In his milieu, he says, the arts were not sinful, and in fact his parents took him to see live theater in Chicago and introduced him to music by enrolling him in piano lessons at the age of five. And yet even in this environment, he says. "You had to find some practical use for your talents. Things you did had to contribute to making a living." To his parents, as to many American parents, a life in the theater did not look very promising.

And yet even though his Mennonite

Set design by Karl Eigsti for Speed of the Plow
Pittsburgh Public Theater, 1991
photo by Mark Portland