heritage did not make things easy for him, it also offered a positive response to the tradition: the spoken word. The Mennonite faith is a verbal one, expressing its truths in words, not icons. The theology is biblicocentric, which is verbal. On Sunday mornings the sermon is central, not the liturgy, not the symbol. The spoken word in Mennonite circles is the vehicle by which one worships, explores, debates, explains. If therefore, his Mennonite heritage had erected obstacles to his artistic impulses, it had also provided him with an acceptable mode of response to that heritage. If he could not expect his desire to make visual the language of a play script to be taken for granted, he could take for granted the willingness to verbalize the motive.

Ambivalence is a hallmark of Karl Eigtist’s designs. One cannot help wondering whether his existential ambivalence contributes to an artistic strategy, which often produces quite miraculous or magical results. His design for the Broadway production of Murder at the Howard Johnson’s, for example, showed not only the interior of the building (the primary interest of 1920s designers), but the exterior as well. For a 1974 production of Arthur Miller’s Death of a Salesman at Arena Stage, he went further. Twenty feet above a bare stage he suspended models of a house, a coin, a trophy, a car—icons of the central character’s materialistic system of values. The audiences saw the surfaces of things, but through Eigtist’s design saw the content of the central character’s mind as well. In a bold design for another Miller play, The Crucible, at the Fulton Opera House in Lancaster, Pa., Eigtist created walls composed of heavy columns. They were non-specific, as that multi-scene play required, but they also conveyed a visual echo of primitive pylons, such as the rocks at Stonehenge. Karl Eigtist is an artist who sees—and sees into—and through his set design enables audiences to do the same. It is an ability probably based on personal ambivalence transformed.

That ability is widely regarded as an integral part of the act of creation. Eigtist regards this as an educational principle as well. Now the head of the theater design department of Brandeis University’s professional theater training program, he considers his teaching an extension of his professional life; one art informs the other. From his ability to see surfaces and beneath and beyond surfaces, he has derived a philosophy of teaching remarkable for its benign tone. “My idea is to train them all to be themselves,” he says. “I don’t have a predetermined idea of where they should go. My philosophy is that each student is not competing but is in an individual tutorial. If someone else is more ‘gifted,’ it doesn’t matter.

He specifically avoids competitiveness, a quality often associated with other major design schools such as Yale School of Drama or New York University. But Eigtist’s seemingly gentler mode may ultimately be the most demanding way to teach theater design. For it requires that students know themselves and their own abilities, as was required of him, and that they be constantly open to each situation in which they work.

Theater design is a fluid profession, constantly being changed by the nature of each new assignment and the emergence of unforeseen problems. Each assignment makes an unexpected demand for a new set of abilities. No one designer, therefore, can be a model for all others, for unexpected new problems will call for abilities which the model did not possess. Further, the multiplex world of the theater requires that all participants work in collaboration. The creative and technical problems are so huge that they can be solved only by a coalition of artists, all of whom have different talents and all of whom, being human, are by definition limited. Within this coalition any and all talents, large and small, come into their own, become useful, become valuable. These are the realities of production upon which Eigtist bases his teaching methods rather than on traditional academic competitiveness. He educates students who learn how to collaborate and who expect the unexpected.

In the final analysis, Karl Eigtist does not serve the art of scenic design, nor even the American theater. He serves the imagination. Reluctant like many other dedicated artists to respect departmental boundaries or genre distinctions or the lure of careerism, he throws himself wholeheartedly into designing a set for a Brandeis University student production, and he does the same when designing a multi-million-dollar Broadway show. Art is not only a quantifiable object but also a process informing a way of life. The dedication to this way of life is an artist’s response to George Babbitt’s trumpeting the monetary value of culture.

But the imagination, says Eigtist, still does have social value. The imagination, as well as the art which results from that process, “gives one the ability to experience without having to pay the consequences.” The imagination can lead an individual or a group into a vision of unknown realities, there to explore the undiscovered countries it has never seen, may not wish to move to, but will emerge from richer for having had the vision. It is this which makes an individual dedicated to imagination important to a civilization, this ability to enable audiences to make such explorations. Not having to “pay the consequences,” Eigtist says, is true of “not only the negative and tragic things but also the good things you might not have an opportunity to experience.” This exploration of the undiscovered always includes a return to daily life. A theater ticket is a round-trip ticket. Imagination gives us, he says, “an opportunity to reach another level outside our daily existence and to incorporate this other level into our daily lives. Imagination enlarges the basis of our existence.”

Karl Eigtist has had to make an immense journey from his plain-spoken Mennonite heritage to the rich imagery of his theater designs. While it is probably not true that adversity builds character, it may be true that obstacles stimulate the human problem-solving impulse. Imagination roams, constantly foraging, seeking out new problems to solve, new visions to embody. Four decades after starting his piano lessons, during which time Eigtist continued to play moderately well, he has resumed the study of music. He has enrolled in classes in piano and music theory. Imagination, like Goethe’s hero, Faust, searches restlessly, never settling down to say, “Enough. I am satisfied.” Does this mean that in the course of time we will witness the debut of Karl Eigtist, concert-artist-former-scenic-designer? It does not matter. American artists, once having come to terms with our society’s devaluing the imagination, often focus on the journey rather than the destination. “Americans are always moving on,” begins Stephen Vincent Benet’s Western Star. “We don’t know where we’re going, but we’re on our way!” Imagination likewise does not limit possibilities. Having recently turned fifty-one, Karl Eigtist buoyantly announces, “I’m just starting out!”