

## Berkeleyan



Never in the footlights but always on the scene, props manager Jean Fichtenkort has made her mark on campus theater productions since 1989. A self-described "tactile person," she has a "covetous attitude" toward the used items she's perpetually tracking down. (Peg Skorpinski photo)



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[\(javascript:popUp\('props.html'\)\)](#) Props from theater productions past

## Materiel girl, materiel world

Theater department's longtime props manager builds, borrows, purchases, and repurposes to outfit each season's sets in style

By Cathy Cockrell, Public Affairs | 21 September 2006

A single, seedy motel room with a rotating cast of desperate characters. That's the premise of the darkly comic six-play cycle *Suburban Motel*, which the theater department will stage in its entirety this fall. A felicitous premise, in some ways, if you're in charge of furnishing the season's stage sets and supplying student actors with every object they use onstage - all on a modest budget.

For 17 years that job has fallen to Jean Fichtenkort, properties manager for Theater, Dance, and Performance Studies, a Jean-of-all-trades whose varied work can call for reupholstering a Biedermeier divan, trolling eBay for Depression-era luggage stickers, or building a dinosaur skeleton from PVC pipe and chickenwire.

These days - with *Suburban Motel*'s first duet of plays (*Criminal Genius* and *Adult Entertainment*) set to open next Friday - Fichtenkort is on the prowl for pre-stressed items and petty-crime paraphernalia. Online she found a suitably cheesy dresser-and-nightstand set and a chandelier with a shiny brass chain. A pair of low-priced but "classic" polyester bedspreads - "with a real intense, multicolored pattern designed to hide stains" - proved more tricky, as most were for sale only in large lots (she convinced a vendor to part with two spreads from a lot of 34). Cloth for gags and bindings come from the cache of sorted fabrics in her full-to-the-gills hand-props room beneath Zellerbach Hall; the requisite framed wall art was purchased at Goodwill.

If most props for the *Suburban Motel* cycle - penned by the celebrated Canadian playwright George F. Walker - are inexpensive, the production does require back-up inventory, as not since Marion Crane's ill-fated shower in the Bates Motel has blood and bad karma flowed so freely in a motor lodge. *Criminal Genius* features a pair of petty criminals (Rolly and his son Stevie) who botch an arson job and end up kidnapping their victim's adult daughter. Although Stevie protests too much that "we don't do violence under any circumstance," bullets inevitably fly, and Room 25 is the worse for wear.

"Look into 'blood' that will come out of carpet easily," read Fichtenkort's production notes for the show. (In dimly lit settings, she knows from experience, chocolate sauce can be quite convincing.)

Operable drapes collapse; a framed print must fall off the wall. "We go through at least three floor lamps in this show. It won't get broken every night," she adds hopefully.

Fichtenkort, who earned her B.S. in health education, did not intentionally set out to be a stage tech, much less a props expert. She credits an early stint in summer-stock productions for getting her hooked on theater, and her "hands on" approach to material objects - especially when the objects in question come with a history - for her longevity in the job.

"I love flea markets, yard sales, thrift stores - where I can go in and touch things that aren't new," she says. "It's like soul food for me, to be able to handle something used."

A successful props manager also needs to be handy with tools, "think in three dimensions," and be able to interpret what a designer and director are trying to say. Organization is a plus - though Fichtenkort is such a "tactile person," she says, that she's resisted using a database.

On the other hand, the digital age has brought Craigslist and eBay - which together "have changed my life," she says. For last fall's production of *Cradle Will Rock*, she scored retro soda-fountain handles, at \$30 for a pair, on the online-auction giant. "It was one of those moments when you go 'God bless eBay.' A chrome and Bakelite art-deco soda pull, right down stage center? Probably only 10 people in the audience noticed, but I noticed. Damn, those looked good!"

With luck the props for *Suburban Motel* will be as fabulously "right." Currently Fichtenkort is hunting for hard-to-find bargain-priced vintage lighting equipment, which the motel guests in *Featuring Loretta* use for shooting an amateur porn video. Rounding up the rest of the items - hot plate, hairbrush, six-pack, charred steak, cartons of Chinese takeout, even the handcuffs, dildo, whipping cream, and chocolate syrup - should be painless by comparison.