

# Versatility act

Tony Lassing: engineer, artist and set designer

When asked why he chose engineering as a profession, Tony Lassing, P.Eng. shrugs. "My uncle was an engineer," he says, explaining that his uncles were his male role models because his father died when he was about six years old.

In the course of conversation, he reveals a deeper motive. "I love engineering, as a business. I like to figure things out and do little sketches and [say] 'Let's do it like this.' *Engineering is creative in its own way.*"

Creativity is evident everywhere in Lassing's house. The walls are covered with his original oils, water colours and sketches. Sculptures in steel, copper and wood dot the lawns and gardens of his seven-acre property just north of Trenton, Ontario.

His drive shed contains more of his work, much of the material being found — oil paintings recently displayed in a gallery in Belleville; a decorative steel screen that used to be in front of the wood stove in the 19th century farmhouse; his "Wal-Mart" collection of oil paintings on photographs.

As part of Studio 21, a co-operative gallery run by 18 Belleville-area artists, Lassing sells enough of his work to pay for the materials he does purchase, and to cover his share of the rent and utilities for the downtown display space. "It's not a lucrative business, but I'm not losing anything on it."

His sculpting — mostly abstract with human figures as a popular subject — is restricted to the warmer months for fear of burning down his old wooden house with his welding equipment. And when it's too cold outside to weld, he turns his art, architecture and engineering talents to designing sets for the Belleville Theatre Guild. He joined the group within a few years of arriving in Trenton from his native Amsterdam, and now has design credits for "30 or 40 plays" (enough to lose count of, at any rate). His most recent project, the set for a musical written by guild mem-



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bers, is a bit of a departure for him. "I'm usually interested in the Irish plays and the stuff that has a message, like the *Diary of Anne Frank* or *Mother Courage* [by Bertolt Brecht]."

These days his time is divided between creating art and finding creative solutions to bulk-handling engineering problems at his Trenton consulting firm, Lassing Dibben. The firm has a staff of 30 and a satellite office in Scarborough. Although he "retired" several years ago, he started spending weekday mornings at the office again after his partner, Dave Dibben, died. "It's enjoyable to keep your nose in and know what's going on. [And] if I'm not interested in a job, I don't do it. I'm able to pass it on to other people."

He credits Dibben, who became his partner in the '60s, with leading the firm to specialize in conveyors. "Our engineering work is in such a restricted part of the market that we've never been out of work."

Lassing obtained his architectural qualifications 30 years ago, but decided to give that part of the practice away to his architect partner in 1996.

One of his architectural projects was the firm's new home, completed in 1991. Here his artistic side clashes with the pragmatics of engineering. "When I designed our office, it was windows all around. One room was dedicated to [two or three] computers, with no windows in it." With the 30 computers now in use came blinds for all those windows. "They were supposed to bring in natural light for drafting," he laughs. "The whole thing changed overnight."

Judging by the old desktop in his studio, and his admission that he has just barely taught himself to type, it's safe to say he feels computers don't do much for his engineering creativity. "I still do a lot of stuff by hand if it's not too complicated," he says. And with talent like his, why not?

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