

# PAINTING BACKDROPS

*by Dave Weiss*

This can be a great way for your visual artists to serve your church's drama ministry or Vacation Bible School or anywhere else. Often VBS Curricula come with a backdrop plan for the skits, you can use their plan or design your own. And the best part is, it's really easy.

To start you'll need a space large enough to stretch the drop. The size of the drop will vary due to the size of your performing space. In most cases, an eight by twelve foot backdrop will suffice. Purchase enough pieces of straight one by three pieces of lumber to construct a frame large enough to stretch the backdrop. For extra sturdiness screw corner braces to each corner of the frame. Once you have completed the frame, get a plastic backdrop and tack it to the back of the frame. This drop will protect the wall behind the backdrop. Let this hang slightly loose so that it will not stick to the back of the drop. This will impede the drying of the paint. Then stand the frame up against the wall. Then place several backdrops on the floor around the frame to protect the flooring.

You are now ready to begin working on the backdrop itself. I prefer to use muslin. It is lightweight, holds paint well and comes in wide

widths which creates a seamless drop. Go to your local fabric store and ask for 108-110 inch wide muslin. Have someone who is handy with a sewing machine cut the drop to size and hem the edges of the drop.



Once the drop is hemmed it is ready to be stretched on the frame. Since the frame is not usually part of the finished drop, I recommend attaching it with push pins. You can tap them in with a tack hammer and pull them out easily when the project is complete. To stretch I recommend starting in one top corner and stretching across the top edge tacking about every 18 inches. After the top is tacked, alternate, going from side to side and tacking every 18 inches being sure to pull the drop tight. Lastly tack the drop

across the bottom of the frame pulling down as you tack. When it is finished, the drop should be fairly tight.

Paint the drop with a coat or two of latex white paint to help the drop hold its shape and allow to dry.

Now the fun begins. There are a couple of ways to do this. If you're very patient, you can draw a grid over the drop and scale up

proportionally from your drawing. This can work pretty well, but it is slow. My favorite method is to have my drawing or drop design copied onto a transparency and projecting it onto the backdrop. There are several ways to draw the design onto the drop. One that I have found to be the best is to use a permanent marker. You need to draw carefully with a marker, but it will bleed through as many coats of paint as you can put on it allowing you to have the lines to work with throughout the project. Keep in mind that the drop will rarely be seen from closer than ten feet and the lines will barely be visible. (I usually use a cartoon style for my drops and actually enhance the lines as the last step of the project.) If the lines are troublesome for you, you can also draw with a pencil.

OK, you're ready to paint. Let's take a minute here to look at paint. For a large project like this most traditional art paints would be excessively expensive, especially for the average small church budget. I have found that latex house paint works great. After years of helping paint sets for a small high school musical working on a tight budget I have discovered a great asset, the mis-mixed bin. This is a place at any paint store where they sell the paints that someone mis-mixed. The color just wasn't quite right. The store sells this paint for anywhere between 50 and 75 percent off. You really don't care that much about the color anyway, you will be blending and mixing and drybrushing and so on. Often you can buy enough paint for years of backdrop painting for a small investment. If you keep the lids on and keep the cans clean paint lasts a long time.

Get yourself a variety of different sized brushes including a few large ones for filling in large areas. You will also want plenty of paper towels and a sink or a nice big bucket of water for keeping brushes clean. Also save a variety of different sized jars for mixing paint. Keep a mallet nearby to hammer paint can lids back on for a good seal. Also keep a paper towel in hand at all times to catch a quick drip before it runs and makes a mess.

Painting is the fun part but if you're not used to it, painting on a vertical surface with liquid paint takes some practice. I recommend starting with the lightest colors and working to dark adding black last. This is helpful because if you have a drip, it is easier to cover it with a darker color. Working with Latex paint and covering such large areas makes wet on wet color blending difficult. I have found the best way to work is to block in all the large color areas and then dry brush the shading in. Dry brushing is just as it says. You put paint on your brush and scrape most of it away leaving pigment on your brush which gives a very subtle shading effect. Another way to do it is to go back over your blocked in area with the same color in the area you want to shade and then while it is still wet, add your shading color and blend them together.

To display the drop, hang it from the top and tack the bottom to a board to give some weight and keep the drop tight. Also Musilin is somewhat translucent so it is best to have no light behind the drop. Close the blinds or cover the windows if necessary. Frontlighting the drop will also help.

If you follow these steps, your group should be able to complete some very beautiful backdrops. Once you are finished with the backdrop, you may want to consider seeing how it can be used to bless someone else's ministry. This is especially great with VBS where often several churches in a community will be using the same curriculum. Consider sharing the drop with others. This is a fun project that anyone can do. You can also apply many of these principals to make murals and wall hangings. Try it today!



**An A.M.O.K. Resource**

*(Arts Ministry Outreach for the Kingdom)*

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