

BACKYARD TEXTURES

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In June 2005, the Contemporary American Theatre Festival in Shepherdstown, West Virginia, premiered Lydia Stryks drama *American Tet*. Much of the play's action took place in a typical suburban American back yard. Scene designer Markas Henry created a stage picture that reflected the conflict in the script by placing realistic elements against a weathered wood abstraction of an American flag. Next to the well-manicured lawn was a red brick retaining wall surrounded by a perfect white picket fence, a slate patio, and a redwood deck.

The stone surfaces provided several challenges. Real brick and slate would have looked very nice in the small Studio Theatre but, in that CATF runs its season in repertory with as little as two hours or so for changeovers, the weight of real materials would have made changeovers a challenge to say the least. The scenic art staff and the carpentry staff there fore joined forces to manufacture realistic-looking, lighter-weight brick and slate out of materials we either had in the shop or could find at the local home improvement warehouse. Our time frame was short and our budget was low. Our results, however, proved our methods valid. The textures looked real, were easy to shift during changeovers, and held up to a month-long run. For those who may find themselves in a similar situation, what follows is a step-by-step account of the process used to create the slate for the patio and the brick for the retaining wall for anyone else who may find themselves in a similar situation.

Slate Patio

Our faux slate began as ½" MDF cut into four different sizes. My intern and I used angle grinders to carve out the layered ridges typical in slate. We consciously tried not to carve the same sized pieces in exactly the same way.

When we finished carving, we proceeded to give the MDF a slight overall surface grain, similar to that of the slate we were using as a reference, by applying a layer of vinyl spackle mixed with glue and running a paintbrush through it.

Since the slate was going to be laid as a patio, it had to withstand being walked on. We waited until the surface treatment was dry, and then applied a layer of polyester resin. We saved a step, when we did a second batch of slate, but using Bondo in place of the vinyl/glue mixture.

Then the pieces were given a base coating of grey Tough Prime (a mix of black and white) after which they were

individually adhered to a sheet of ¼” Masonite, measuring the overall size of the patio. The next phases were then pretty straight forward. We applied thin washes and spatters of red-orange (the deck color), green (the grass), light grey, and warm brown (colors in the flag), to give variety to the slate and to tie together the colors of the other surfaces on the set. To seal, we used several coats of Crete Seal, a commercial concrete sealer. This protected the surface and also gave the slate a slight sheen.

Brick Retaining Wall

We had a limited time frame in which to accomplish the brick texture. The shop cut 2 X 7 rectangles of ¼” Masonite and attached them to the retaining wall, thereby creating a brick pattern. We used trowels to apply ready-mixed concrete patch to the entire surface, even filling in the mortar lines between the Masonite.

To reestablish the mortar, we found a triangular scrap of Masonite and rounded one point until it was about ¼: in diameter. The process of running this rounded point through the mortar cracks left a concave depression in the concrete patch, which very closely resembled the real thing. We found it cleaner to do the verticals first, and then run through the horizontal course lines.

Once the mortar was redefined, we gave the bricks a uniform rough texture by stippling with a foam float.

Just to make sure the concrete patch did not rub off when the actors walked or sat on the top edge, we sealed the surface with two coats of Elastometric roof coating before coloring the brick.

We were trying to achieve a “perfect” brick look with this technique. The concrete patch has a long working time; this makes it possible to achieve the look of different types of brick simply by working with a variety of tools. When I returned home, I experimented with a few variations:

1. Wire-cut brick - After evening out the foam float, run a rough brush through the wet cement patch.
2. Smoother, more aged brick - Use a sponge and water to even out the concrete patch. I roughened the edges of the Masonite “bricks” with the angle grinder before applying texture, and did not remove as much substance from the mortar cracks.

While the process of cutting and attaching the Masonite “bricks” can be time consuming, it is quicker in the long run than lining. The concrete patch adheres well enough that it can be applied on horizontal or vertical surfaces and it also takes

paint well.