

**THE
INSIDE
GUIDE TO
SET
DESIGN
FROM
THE
OLD VIC**

GUIDE

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INTRODUCTION BY LAURA HUMPHREY



'There is a wristwatch... ballet' the actor I was working with replied sardonically and with more than a hint of resignation when I asked him why he'd been late on stage.

I was collaborating on a play that jumped across millennia, decades, universes and back again, which needless to say caused unique challenges when it came to set and costume design. On this particular day we were all tired, harassed and deep into tech rehearsals (which is what happens just before a play opens and everyone spends 16 hours a day together in a windowless auditorium wondering whether they've made something that's any good, if it's ever going to be ready and if anyone's going to come and see it). The actor in question had many, many costume changes as we charted his character's journey from childhood to adulthood non-chronologically. And the brilliant costume designer was clear that the same wristwatch simply could *not* be worn throughout. Hence the ballet. Hence my actor missing his cue.

We survived tech, more or less. A few weeks later the show was up and running, and I came back to check in on it. After watching the show, with no missed cues I was pleased to see, I was chatting with the cast afterwards and asked the actor, 'How's the wristwatch ballet?' His response? 'I can't do without it now! Even if not a single audience member notices, changing my watch has become a really important part of how I understand and embody the character's story'.

Set design isn't just about making doors for actors to walk through, giving them watches to wear, or making cool sets. It's an integral part of the storytelling process. It places us — audience and actors — in the world of the characters. It places us in time as well as space; are we in the here and now, a dystopian/utopian future, the eighties, the fifteen-eighties? Design tells us all of these things. Which isn't to say it tells us literally. As the lighting designer Robert Edmond Jones points out, 'There is no more reason for a room on a stage to be a reproduction of an actual room than for an actor who plays the part of Napoleon to be Napoleon, or for an actor who plays Death in the old morality play to be dead.'¹

Design doesn't just communicate the when and where of the story, but also how it's being told. From the aggressive realism of kitchen sink drama to the wild exuberance of a Christmas panto.

More than that, it's a key component of the magic of theatre, the stuff of wonder that we all show up for. It's Mary Poppins' bottomless carpet bag. It's snow suddenly falling on the audience in Matthew Bourne's ballet of *Edward Scissorhands*. It's live chickens and trees in Ultz's design for Jez Butterworth's *Jerusalem*. This, for me, is where design for the stage has the edge over design for the screen. When a piece of the stage moves, or even when a whole stage is dismantled before our eyes, like in Robert Icke and Duncan Macmillan's *1984* at the Almeida Theatre, it can open up a new dimension not just in space but in the story itself. There is a mischief, a trickery in that process that can elevate a theatre piece from compelling to breathtaking.

¹ Robert Edmond Jones (2004) *The Dramatic Imagination: Reflections and Speculations on the Art of the Theatre, Reissue*, p.4, Routledge

For all that magic though, a life in theatre is neither easy nor straightforward for most of us, as you'll see from the artists' profiles. The way is long and wiggly. It takes guts and graft as much as it takes passion and creativity. I hope what you find in these pages is inspiration, practical advice from wise people further along the path and some forward steps for your own journey. Above all, I hope it gives you the confidence of knowing that if you were — or are — the kid with paint on their shirt and feathers in their hair, you're not alone. There's a place for you to make things, tell stories and share your unique view of the world. Come in, get comfy, have a brew. We're for you. Above all, keep making.

LAURA HUMPHREY

Laura is a theatre maker and creative producer.

Theatre as a director/dramaturg includes:
An American Love Story (The Potrero Stage, San Francisco);
Diamond Dick (C Soco Venues Edinburgh).

Theatre as an Assistant Director includes:
The Good Book and *Office Hour* (Berkeley Rep Theatre, California).

Writing includes: *Fast Moving Consumables* (inTransit Festival);
The Searchers and the King Trilogy (participatory film project, Berkeley California).



WHAT'S IN A PICTURE?



**'Soft eyes... Soft eyes,
grasshopper'**

Detective Bunk, The Wire

Set and costume designers create images that tell stories. The audience reads into everything that they see on stage, so every design detail needs to align to the overall vision and story of the play.

We all have a different 'eye'. The particular gift of a designer is using their eye to clearly communicate ideas to an audience. That doesn't necessarily require you to draw beautifully or make amazing model boxes. It does require that you have a deep understanding of and curiosity about the fundamentals that make up our visual world: colour, shape, texture, light and composition.

TASK

Find an image that speaks to you. Don't think too much about why. This could be from a book, magazine or newspaper, from an internet search from a certain word, a piece of artwork or sculpture. Or use the image here:

- 'Soften your eyes!'. This means allowing your gaze to relax and receive information rather than looking hard for details right away. What do you notice about this way of seeing? Note any passing reflections, moods, emotions, perceptions.
- What colours, textures, shapes or objects come to your attention?
- What is the quality of light like? Where is the light coming from?
- Are there any figures in the image? What are they doing?
- What else stands out to you? What is in the foreground, middle ground and background? Where is the focus of the image?



PHOTO: JANIS JAGOMAGO ON UNSPLASH

Take a sheet of paper and note down all the words that come to mind. From those words, what story starts to emerge?

Try this with lots of different images to understand how different pictures tell different stories.

IMAGE AND TEXTURE

TEXTURE TALKS

Designers create environments for a character to exist in. They often use real places as starting points.

TASK

Get a new sheet of paper. Soften those eyes again. Look around you. Allow your gaze to travel around the space you are in. What does your eye settle on? What gives your eye pleasure or unease?

Note down any passing reflections, moods, emotions, perceptions.

How many different textures and surfaces can you find? Look at the walls, floor, furniture and objects in the space. Go right into the corners and onto the floor.

Try and find as many different materials as you can. If you need some help then try and find something that has each of these qualities:

- Wooden
- Metallic
- Rough
- Smooth
- Something that feels warm or cold to the touch
- Transparent
- Soft

A space — even a seemingly boring one — can contain lots of surprising textures and details that you might not expect.

Where is the light coming from in the room or space? Is it natural light through a window or is it light from a lamp or light source? How does this affect how the space feels? Where are the lightest and darkest areas?

Take a moment to close your eyes and listen to the sounds in the space as well. Absorb how it feels.

How does the room feel physically — warm, cold? How does it make you feel? Calm, happy, overwhelmed? How do the textures you have found relate to how the room feels?

Make a list of the keywords you have thought of whilst you have been exploring. It's really useful for designers to have a glossary of materials and textures to refer to when they are coming up with ideas.

You could even take photos of the different textures you have found and label them or sort them into physical or digital albums with the words and feelings you have associated with them. Do this with different spaces to build a library of textures and atmospheres.

HELEN COYSTON

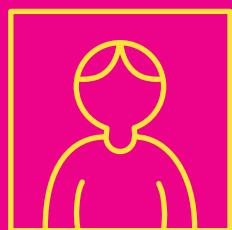
Helen is a set and costume designer, costume supervisor and facilitator, and trained at the Central School of Speech and Drama.

Her recent design work includes: *Two and Our Mutual Friend* (Hull Truck); *Seeds* (Leeds Playhouse/Tour); *Treasure Island, Stepping Out, Alice in Wonderland, A (Scarborough) Christmas Carol, The 39 Steps, Build A Rocket* (Stephen Joseph Theatre); *Operation Mincemeat* (New Diorama Theatre).

She creates and delivers design and craft led workshops for children and young people at schools and youth theatres all over London, and has been regularly designing and making costumes for the playwriting charity Scene & Heard since 2013.

ARTIST PROFILE

CINDY WEN



HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE WHAT A DESIGNER DOES?

Designers create the environment for any kind of live performance, both for the performers and the audience, so they can get into the mindset of the whole piece. We translate honestly what's in the text of a play in a way that isn't necessarily literal — it can be metaphorical and imaginative — but in a way that best serves the story. This non-literal approach allows us to convey and physicalise some of the inner workings and emotional world of the piece.

WHAT HAS BEEN YOUR JOURNEY SO FAR: WHAT FIRST DREW YOU TO SET DESIGN AND WHERE ARE YOU NOW?

Growing up in California I always liked creating environments and making things with my hands. My dad used to watch a lot of Home and Garden Television (a home improvement channel we have in the States) and his passion for design rubbed off on me and my sister. My sister and I were really into themed parties as well, so we would decorate the house for birthdays and holidays based on a theme, never repeating the same one twice. That question of 'what can you do with this space?' took seed really early on and to this day I feel the most fulfilled when I'm working with my hands, exercising my creativity. I was also interested in how stories are told. Being in Southern California I naturally leant towards film and TV, not realising that theatre was something I could make a career out of, so I trained in film production at the University of Southern California. I then went on to get my master's at the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama in theatre design when I realised that theatre was a possible career path.

The turning point for me moving from film into theatre was when I was studying abroad in London during university and a friend took me to see my first London show, *Kiss Me Kate* at The Old Vic in 2013. I remember thinking, 'Wow. I didn't know you could be so expressive

with visual storytelling'. Film and TV production design is more literal, so theatre design was more exciting to me. During my short stint of studying in London, hungering to know more about theatre design, I ended up watching over 20 shows in five months, some multiple times. The deeper I delved, the more I researched what it meant to be a set and costume designer, the more I knew it was the path for me.

I was already in the creative storytelling realm with my film studies but stage design felt more creative to me. In theatre there is a championing of craftsmanship, especially in the UK, right down to making model boxes, which I love to do. And since I had discovered my love for theatre design in the UK it made sense to me to go to a UK drama school. At the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama I had a fantastic and incredibly intense year learning the craft. Following my training, I had the privilege of being a Linbury Prize finalist which led to receiving a bursary at the Royal Opera House and working for well-established companies and designers. Moreover, I am currently part of the Old Vic 12 and, this past year, worked with an amazing group of people and developed original plays. I recognise that I am in a very fortunate position as I have been given so many opportunities and platforms to exhibit my work, which furthered my career.

WHAT DIFFERENCES AND SIMILARITIES DO YOU NOTICE DESIGNING FOR FILM AND DESIGNING FOR THEATRE?

There are definitely some overarching similarities between working in both mediums, but I find there are even more differences between the two. Sometimes on a fringe show you have to wear multiple hats; I've worked on many theatre shows with limited resources and budgets, which often meant I needed to take on various responsibilities outside of being the designer. Film can be really creative, but in terms of organisation

and planning it feels like you're a small cog in a giant machine. The film industry, in some sense, feels more efficient but also more regimented. Everyone has a very specific role and you don't often get to explore other departments or have as much personal creative control as you do in theatre. I like having more control over my designs and a louder influence on the outcome of the production, even though it might mean more work.

In film there's a frame, which is a very manipulative point of view. Whereas in theatre you can't trick people in the same way. In theatre people are paying to sit two metres away as well as 100 metres away and the designer has to work with all those different perspectives. What I find exciting about theatre is that you can't edit your way out of mistakes. In film if something is terrible you can cut or fix it in post-production. But in theatre, you have to rehearse and keep going and if there's a mess-up the audience will see it. The craftsmanship, tension and adrenaline of your work having to show up each night is really exciting.

YOU'RE CURRENTLY ONE OF THE OLD VIC 12 PARTICIPANTS — WHAT HAVE YOU LEARNED FROM THAT EXPERIENCE?

Because of the pandemic we weren't able to do The Old Vic 12 programme as we originally anticipated, which was obviously disappointing. That said, our cohort has been really intentional in meeting up remotely, checking in with each other, being there for each other through all the things that 2020 threw at us. The community aspect was a big take away for me. I have learned that the people I work with are just as, if not more important, to me than the actual productions themselves.

HOW DO YOU MANAGE YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH THE DIRECTOR AND OTHER CREATIVES?

Each show is unique in itself and it depends on the personality of the director and other creatives on the team. Early in your career you're eager to please, work is slim and pays very little so you'll say yes to almost anything. If you get to a point in your career when you're able to pick and choose your work a little more, it's kind of like dating. You meet up with a director over coffee or a show and during that first meeting you try to figure out if you have similar tastes and good rapport. If you get along and think you'll collaborate well together and make great work, you decide to see each other again.

So, by the time we start working together I already know how the director communicates because we have taken the time to get to know each other. For example, some people are very comfortable sending WhatsApp voice memos, while others are more text based or will mainly communicate through email or send messages via social media. Some directors will send Spotify playlists or Pinterest boards to express their vision for the play. It's a constant dialogue — 'have you seen this, have you heard this piece of music?' — trying to get into each other's heads.

My philosophy is always to serve the story. I can put something cool and hip or beautiful on stage, but if it's not going to serve the play I'm not interested. A director and I will comb through a play and keep revisiting it throughout. Because I work a lot in new writing and devised work, it's not uncommon for me and a director to change our minds, allow things to evolve as we keep going back to the text. For my own practice, I also love making models and go through many white card models in order to discover the design. White card models are integral to my design process because they encourage me to explore spatial possibilities without being

precious about it. My white card models aren't even white — I just keep all my cereal boxes and use cereal box cardboard because it's a really nice material for model making and it's more sustainable. Then if I'm meeting a director I'll invite them to mess with it, manipulate it, use it as a play tool.

Relationally it always starts with the director and then other creatives tend to come in later. For instance, the lighting designer might not come in until the final white card model is finished. By that time, I might have been working with the director for a while. Nonetheless, if the show is devised or the director wants other creatives to be involved from the get-go, then all the creatives will be on board at once and feed into each other's work more.

WHAT'S SOMETHING PEOPLE GET WRONG ABOUT SET DESIGNERS?

That there's a 3-step plan to become a designer, or that set designers are similar and come with the same skill set. There are obvious pathways to becoming a theatre designer, like going to drama school, but for many that's not the right pathway and every designer is unique with their own strengths and weaknesses. For example, I think I'm rubbish at drawing or at least I know it's one of my weaker skills. To communicate my ideas I sometimes roughly storyboard scenes, but actually my notebooks are mostly filled with descriptive writing of how I imagine scenes playing out. My written notes are mostly for me because, at the end of the day, I strongly rely on my model making in order to communicate my set design ideas with directors.

I also think a lot of people imagine that being a designer is all fun. There are definitely highlights, but you still have to earn your bread and butter. It is really not a glamorous job. It's a job you have to muck in. Most of the time you'll find me covered in paint, carrying way too many bags and boxes, huffing and puffing as I struggle to get on and off the Tube.

WHAT ARE THE TOP SKILLS YOU SEE IN GREAT SET DESIGNERS?

All the designers I admire think out of the box. They're not restricted by what theatre 'should' be. For example, I respect Bunny Christie and what she did with *The Red Barn* at the National Theatre. She subverted the idea that theatre is static by making something really imaginative with shutters to create a cinematic experience with the mechanics of theatre.

Or with *You For Me For You* in the Jerwood Upstairs at the Royal Court. That is such a small, funky space. Yet Jon Bausor the designer made this kaleidoscope set and even managed to get people to 'fly' in even though there was no fly system. I like it when designers simultaneously embrace and push against the limitations of the space, all in service of the story.

A lot of the designers I admire have an acute eye for detail. Right down to the kind of wood a chair would be made out of because different kinds of wood communicate different kinds of meaning or value. Something made out of walnut rather than pine tells you that it's worth more and therefore the owners might be more affluent. They know what they want, and they also know it's ok to change your mind, being adaptable to whatever is thrown their way.

WHAT ARE SOME PRACTICAL SKILLS/STEPS YOU CAN TAKE TO GET STARTED IN DESIGN?

Saturate yourself with creativity, whether or not you're making theatre. I know theatre can get expensive, so queue for the cheap seats. There are many different kinds of theatre discounts, whether it be for young people and students or for people who are happy to stand in the slips. Watch it live, watch recordings. Develop a taste not just stylistically but in terms of what stories you're interested in.

Go to art galleries. Watch music videos. Everything informs your work in the end. Watch a lot, experience a lot, but don't be passive. Take into account what you like and enjoy. Try to collect things. For example, I have an external hard drive of photos of things I've taken or scanned over the years. I've made folders labelled 'textures', 'light', 'colour' and I still refer back to them. Stay curious. When you're bored with the world you're no longer a relevant designer.

One of the most practical things is to start working with your hands. Try building something. Put things together but also take things apart. One set designer told me to take carpentry classes. I learned so much, and by the end of it I had built a bench. I know it doesn't sound like much, but knowing how things are built helps you not only appreciate how things come together, but will also help you to problem-solve. Especially in the UK you have the wonkiest venues — I say that in the most loving way because I love unconventional venues — so it's important to be able to problem-solve so your set can actually fit into the venue without compromising your design.

WHAT'S SOMETHING YOU WISH YOU'D KNOWN STARTING OUT?

I wish I'd known what it meant to have a freelance career. There are aspects that I love about freelancing, like being able to dictate your own schedule, but it is not for the faint-hearted. It can be financially unstable and you really need to love the craft in order to keep pushing yourself. And you will have to prove your professional worth to others constantly, because you are hired show by show. You will be constantly networking, meeting other theatre makers, hoping that those connections will lead to the next job. You have to build up your self-confidence, even after you land a job. There will be times where you feel like you're not understood and, while theatre is about collaboration, it's important that you don't

apologise or compromise your design if you feel convicted about your choices. You may need to find a new way of communicating to convince your director to get on board with you, but it is possible. Just remember they hired you for a reason.

ARE THERE LONG-TERM CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE DESIGN PROFESSION AS A RESULT OF THE PANDEMIC?

I think one thing that has changed is that people are more open to remote working, which I actually think is exciting, because it hopefully means more international work can happen once we start to open up a bit. There are a lot of people who want to work internationally but because of this idea that you always have to be physically in the room it doesn't happen as much as it could.

I also think that we as designers should be part of the conversation when it comes to socially distanced environments. We specialise in understanding space and we can help move theatres forward without it feeling like we've just ripped half of the chairs out and left the audience to feel like they're in a dystopian future. I'm part of Scene/Change, a group of designers coming together to have conversations about how we can best protect theatre designers and freelancers, and the conversations we've been having about how we can help our industry have been really eye-opening.

It sounds cliché but I do think we'll be back. It would be foolish to think that we'll be back 'to normal' straight away but there have been many moments in history where people thought theatre was a dying art form and have been proven wrong. Look how long it has lasted and continues to advance! There really is nothing like being physically with people, whether that's sitting next to them in the auditorium or rubbing shoulders at the bar.



CINDY LIN

Cindy Lin a set and costume designer with a background in filmmaking. Cindy trained at Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama (MA Theatre Design).

Theatre credits include: *Screwdriver* (Lyric Hammersmith); *Actually* (Trafalgar Studios); *Dismantle This Room* (Royal Court Theatre, Bush Theatre); *Breathe* (Bunker Theatre); *Hurricane Protest Songs* (Graeae); *Electra* (RWCMD).

Opera credits include: *Madam Butterfly* (OperaUpClose); *Faust Alberta, Orpheus and Eurydice* (Opera in the City Festival).

Dance credits include: *Heist* (ZoieLogic).

Cindy is part of The Old Vic 12 2020–2021 cohort, was a Linbury Prize finalist in 2015, and a Royal Opera House bursary recipient in 2017.

PHOTO: CINDY LIN, SCREWDRIVER

CHARACTER CLUES



As well as creating spaces, designers will decide on what costumes an actor will wear to best tell the story of a character. The director, actors, costume and wig teams will feed into this as well, by researching together and through trying out different costumes in fittings.

Every detail of a costume needs to be thought about, from the hairstyle, to glasses, to style of shirt down to shoelaces. Actors need a lot of practice wearing costumes in rehearsals to make sure they can do everything they need to do whilst wearing it (see Laura's watch story in the introduction).

TASK

To explore how to dress a character, we are going to work backwards.

1. Find an item of clothing in your house that is interesting to you.

Spread it out and have a look at it on a table or the floor.

What is it made of? What is the quality of the fabric? Is it cheap or expensive? Light or heavy? Floaty or thick material?

Are there any interesting details? Any buttons missing? Does it have any stains or marks? Does it look new or old?

Make a list of all the things you see whilst looking at the garment



PHOTO: JOHAN PERSONLÖV, ALL MY SONS



PHOTO: STEVE TANNER, WISE CHILDREN

2. Next, imagine that this belongs to someone who isn't you or a member of your household.

Who might wear something like this? What is their personality? Where do they live? What is their job?

For example, if it is a freshly ironed shirt that on first glance looks new and clean but as you look closely you can see there are a few buttons missing and it's wearing out at the cuffs, what does this say to you? Perhaps whoever wears it takes pride in making sure they look after their clothes but they don't want to get rid of this shirt? Maybe it has some value to them? Maybe they don't really care about fashion so are happy to live in the past?

3. To create your character, either write a character profile or sketch a figure wearing the piece of clothing and label it with the characteristics you've decided on. What else would they be wearing to go with this item? Think about shoes, hair, accessories. Think about the colours and patterns your character would wear, do they complement each other? Or do they clash, deliberately or accidentally?

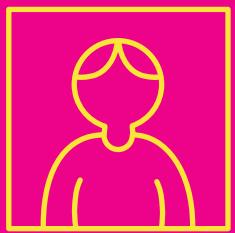
Give your imagination free reign. You can also refer back to the first activity and build an environment for your character to live in. You can draw it, make a Pinterest board, or create a collage. See how far you can go in creating a story for them.

When you design a costume, you are usually given a character and find items to fit their characteristics. Sometimes an item you find will inform the character — just like the exercise you have just done. Each way is equally interesting and each brings its own challenges.



ARTIST PROFILE

MIEN TRAN



HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE WHAT A DESIGNER DOES?

I would see a designer as an artistic collaborator who happens to have skills in scenography and costume design. My conversations with the director and other creatives contribute to the whole world that we create together. Lighting and sound are so key to me; I work on my scenography with these disciplines in mind from the beginning, the set provides for the light and sound to respond to and vice versa. I have a holistic approach so I like to use my specialist skills to have open conversations.

DESCRIBE YOUR JOURNEY SO FAR. WHAT FIRST DREW YOU TO SET DESIGN AND WHERE ARE YOU NOW?

I started working in fashion design with a strong interest in making and textile design. I was drawn to fashion because of the spectacle of narrative. The overarching concepts of a collection operate in this way too. In a similar way to theatre, you're creating a world and a story full of life and character. But I found the fashion world quite restrictive and I didn't think it would allow me to explore and grow so I decided to retrain in theatre design. I studied at the Motley Theatre Design course that was then based in the Theatre Royal Drury Lane [no longer running]. It was a baptism of fire, but there was a generosity in theatre that I hadn't experienced in other worlds. It was still really daunting to learn all of this new knowledge and technical skill but also because of how non-diverse the theatre world was at that point. Most of the stories we studied were from a Western canon. There was nothing speaking to my experience and even now I often find

myself the only Southeast Asian woman in the room. As someone who came later to the profession, someone from a working class, refugee background, I didn't see anyone who represented me and I did question whether this was a realistic goal for me. This has shaped my role as how I see my responsibility as a theatre practitioner.

I had no idea that working as a designer in theatre was a possible career until much later, so I had to be audacious. I squirreled away some savings, even though I probably didn't believe I could make it work in theatre, I thought I owed it to myself and to those who made my life possible to try.

YOUR WORK CROSSES INTO LOTS OF DIFFERENT DISCIPLINES AND WORLDS. HOW DOES THAT INFLUENCE YOUR SET DESIGN?

I'm a visual and performance artist; critical theory contemporary art and community work is a huge part of my knowledge making and practice as a theatre designer. My independent art practice gives me a portal to explore issues such as climate injustice, diaspora, oppression and identity, which drive my curiosity. It also creates opportunities to view my work in theatre from different perspectives and reflect on my practice as a whole, they are parallel practices and each informs the other. At first I did experience some resistance to my art in the theatre world because people wanted me to 'just' be a designer, but I think the industry is learning to be less possessive of its designers and see other creative practices as valuable.

YOU HAD AN ESSAY PUBLISHED IN THE JOURNAL FOR BRITISH THEATRE DESIGNERS WHICH TALKS ABOUT THE MEETING POINT BETWEEN ACTIVISM AND DESIGN. HOW DO YOU SEE YOUR ROLE AS A DESIGNER IN THAT?

Young people especially have so much to offer here; if you look through history it's always the students, the younger people putting themselves on the line to make change. We owe them a lot, now and in the past.

It's only in the last 10 years that I've realised that activism and protest was something I can do. Growing up, as a Vietnamese refugee with Chinese heritage in the UK, we were always expected to be grateful — and only grateful — to have been given settlement in the UK and were discouraged from speaking up. That experience embeds itself in your psyche.

You're fearful of the repercussions of speaking up. It made me realise that different people have different things to lose and so we need to be sensitive about how we embrace and engage with different types of protest and activism. Not everyone has the privilege of walking the streets with the banner because the repercussions for them might be very real — deportation or arrest, for example.

I want to find an authentic voice to push that conversation further, with a generous and holistic approach that respects every person and their contribution, however big or small. I have my privileges, I'm not on the front line, but I want to use my art and design practice to challenge systems of oppression that we live with on a daily basis. A protest decision I made a long time ago was not to use social media platforms, even though that may have impacted my career in some ways, because I feel more in control of my output if it is not controlled by and making money for conglomerates of power.

WHAT IMPACT HAS THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC HAD ON YOU AND ON THE SET DESIGN WORLD IN GENERAL? WHAT ARE SOME OPPORTUNITIES MOVING FORWARD?

It has shown that the status quo doesn't work. It exposed the fact that we need better structures in place to support the artists who actually make up a high percentage of the industry. Like many freelancers I lost all of my work in 2020, having had the whole year booked up, and I had to reconfigure everything. We are sadly going to lose a lot of brilliant talent because we haven't put into place structures that help people sustain themselves through crises. Luckily I had a couple of online gigs, I did some teaching online and I had some other work from my art practice that sustained me financially.

In terms of opportunities for the future, we've learned that online is possible, but it's not the same. The most important opportunity for us is to rethink what our industry is at the core of those principles. We need to think greener, for example. I'm starting to see contracts now suggest that at least 50% of the materials used in the set design should have had a previous life. That's brilliant. But unless there are the teams and structures in place to help designers deliver that, it's going to be impossible. We also need to have financial incentives in place for freelancers — pension schemes that are paid into whilst we're contracted to a theatre, for example. We need to help freelancers have a decent life in return when freelancers are giving their whole lives to this industry. Theatre is all encompassing, when you're on a project you see no one else, everybody knows that. But how do we look after each other whilst we're doing that? Diversity, equality, making sure we have an infrastructure in place that is economically viable for freelancers are all opportunities that I see.



HOW DO YOU MANAGE YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH THE DIRECTOR AND OTHER CREATIVES?

I like working with directors and teams who are open to collaboration, who give equal importance to everyone in the room. Those are not only brilliant pieces of work, but they start a legacy for good working practices and collaborations in the future. But you also inevitably work with directors who don't have that training and aren't able to work that way. That's when I lean on my active listening and diplomacy skills to negotiate the relationship, it doesn't always work but that's life.

Sometimes you jump into the collaboration and people are really listening and it's so organic and fulfilling. And there are other times you know that you've been employed as just a designer and that's all they want from you.

I always hope that the way I work with other people has a little ripple to make for a better industry. It's good practice to have situations where you have to discover the relationship and find different ways of working, it is not an artistic utopia all the time. When working with a director with a really strong vision and practice, I like to absorb as much knowledge as possible. As long as people don't disrespect you and make you feel inferior it's possible to work with lots of different people; we all need to have empathy towards each other.

WHAT'S SOMETHING PEOPLE GET WRONG ABOUT SET DESIGNERS?

There are lots of designers now challenging the assumption about what a designer should be or is, which is really inspiring. A designer isn't just their design abilities and skill set. They also bring a wealth of knowledge, experience and history with them that often goes untapped. Smart directors and theatre companies will tap into that to get the best out of designers.

WHAT ARE THE TOP SKILLS YOU SEE IN GREAT SET DESIGNERS?

If they can express and communicate the human element of their work, I'm really inspired by that. Designers who are able to see their work in the larger context and don't make it all about them are also really inspiring. However we make the work, we shouldn't make anybody feel horrible about themselves just to achieve our artistic vision. Designers who challenge the stagnation of scenography in traditional theatre, who see theatre as more of a collective experience and who work outside of theatre buildings are exciting to me.

Learning to understand human relationships and how that informs visual collaboration is really important. Anyone can learn, with a bit of help, skills like model making or technical drawing. But integral to good design is understanding how one can design experiences that connect human beings to each other and the world we share.

WHAT'S A GOOD FIRST STEP INTO DESIGN?

Do some training, whatever it is. You could go through a course or assist or shadow a designer. When I started out in theatre I identified designers whose work I liked and wrote to them. Most people are fairly generous and if they have time they will show you a bit of their process. Have the confidence to reach out. There are also more programmes now than there were when I started, although there should be more for designers. Exposure to theatre is really important so you can figure out what you like and there are lots of cheap ticket schemes you can take advantage of. Inspired by Black Ticket Project I've been running a voluntary programme called the East Asian Ticket Club, working with theatres to allocate free tickets to East and Southeast Asian communities.

WHAT ARE YOU READING/ WATCHING/LISTENING TO THAT'S INSPIRING YOU RIGHT NOW?

I'm translating a book about a Vietnamese singer activist called Lộc Vàng, he can't sell his book in Vietnam because the state has censored him and banned its sale, and I have the only copy in the UK. Lộc Vàng was imprisoned in Vietnam for 10 years for singing music that was banned after the American war. I'm working on a project with him and creating the first living archive of his life to be stored at an institute in London, his legacy and fight for his human right to sing should be an inspiration for us all. I am excited about some new work I am making, exploring ideas around sonic witnessing and archives, the practice-based research I am doing on this subject is really fascinating. I am also collaborating with a psychologist in Sweden on a shared interest in studies on emotional prosody and recognition in music and voice. We will create a performative event together in Sweden and I am inspired by all of the new knowledge I am being opened up to. A dear friend Zikri Rahman has recently co-organised an arts activist group called Transnation Art in Malaysia, but it has supporters in many different countries; they exist to support the citizen protests against the military violence in Myanmar, I find their work completely inspiring.



MOI TRAN

Moi Tran is a visual artist, performance maker, and Designer, she also works as a scenographer and costume designer in Theatre, Dance and Opera.

Her practice explores the intersection between contemporary art and live performance.

Born in Vietnam with Chinese Heritage, her work examines theorisations on emotional experience as valued knowledge in the Politics of East Asian and South East Asian communities.

Tran holds an MAFA from Chelsea College of Art, London and has specialised training from The Motley School of Design in scenography and costume design for Theatre, Opera and Dance.

She is part of the AIO Artist Programme, Sweden 2021, SPILL Festival 2021 and Encounter Bow Festival x Chisenhale Dance Space, 2021.

As a designer, theatre projects this year include: *Raya* (Hampstead Theatre); *LETTERS* (The Gate Theatre); *Rare Earth Mettle* (The Royal Court).

SPACES AND STAGES

Designers will design for many different spaces and stages. With each project they will need to take into account the stage configuration and what impact that has on the design consideration, such as whether the audience will see costumes up close, or whether the stage will allow for backdrops.

Here are the main types of stage:

PROSCENIUM ARCH AND END ON (*Right*)

Typical of 18th, 19th and 20th century theatre spaces, the proscenium arch — or ‘prosc’ — stage has an architectural frame that separates the performing space from the audience. The audience all face the same direction and the stage is usually raised. Sometimes the front of the stage extends beyond the proscenium and into the auditorium, which is called an apron or forestage. Proscenium arch spaces allow for backdrops and large, complicated pieces of set and scenery without obstructing the audience’s view. However, it can be challenging to create an intimate performance because of the distance between performers and audience. End on is similar to a proscenium, but without the arch framing the space.



THRUST (*Above*)

The stage — raised or level — extends into the auditorium with the audience sitting on three sides. This type of stage can create more intimacy between the audience and the performers and can also present challenges with sight lines or large pieces of set or scenery.



IN THE ROUND (Above)

Although not necessarily 'round' in the literal sense — it can be square or any other shape — this stage configuration has the audience on all sides with the performance space right in the centre. This, like the thrust, can create more intimacy. Large set pieces can interfere with sightlines — what the audience can see — and performers need to move positions regularly to ensure that the audience on all sides can engage with the performance. The lighting designer also needs to ensure that lights don't shine in the audience member's eyes.

TRAVERSE (Left)

Similar to a catwalk, the audience sit on either side of a long platform stage. The audience can see each other as well as the performers. As with theatre in the round and thrust staging, large pieces of set or backdrops are not possible.

PROMENADE

In a promenade performance, audience members don't sit at all. They follow the action through a specific environment — sometimes outside or in a non-traditional theatre space. Sharing the space with the performance space with the performers is as immersive as it gets and can be particularly exciting. It can also be particularly challenging for theatre makers as they navigate the unpredictability of having the audience 'onstage', being in a non-traditional setting and taking into account added health and safety considerations.

DESIGNING FOR STORY



'We will sit in a room — me... [the director], or whoever I'm collaborating with — sometimes two years before an audience are going to sit in these seats and we will be trying to craft how they will feel... And what we're using to try to craft how they feel are literally a bit of mirror, a few plastic leaves, some wood and paint'

Es Devlin, British theatre designer

Every design starts with a story, whether from a script, an idea, a word or an image.

TASK

Think of the first fairytale or folktale that comes to your mind. It may be something you were told as a child (*Little Red Riding Hood*), a family anecdote ('That time Grandad stole a penguin') or a recent discovery (*American Gods* by Neil Gaiman). Make notes (a scribbled list, mind map, or other), along with any associated words that come to mind:

- What happens?
- Who is mentioned?
- Where do you imagine the story takes place?
- What mood or atmosphere do you imagine?
- What do you think the story is really about? What themes does it explore?
- Do you see any images or colours in your head when you read it?
- Is there anything else you notice?

MOOD BOARD AND RESEARCH

Use magazines, newspapers or online resources like Pinterest to collect as many images as possible that relate to your notes from above. These can be abstract — snippets of colour, shapes or textures. The goal is to create a mood board that visualises your thoughts on the text. There are no wrong answers here, it's all about your response to the story.

Then pause and notice if you're gravitating towards a certain mood, style or time period. Let this focus and deepen your search. Research is an essential part of a designer's journey.



DEVELOPING YOUR DESIGN

A key part of most designer's processes is to create a model box — which is a scaled down version of the set, showing all of the details of the finished set in miniature. This is an important tool that the director and the rest of the team will look at to understand the vision for the show and to troubleshoot any issues before it is built in real size.

Find the following:

- A box, (shoe, cereal, cardboard). You could even use a corner of a room or table top, if there is any interesting and clear space for you to set up your design
- Coloured paper, foil, other interesting bits of paper or recycled materials
- Fabrics — you could use any scraps you might have, or even scarves or bits of clothing to give different textures
- Scissors, glue, tape, blu-tack

Look back at your ideas and images so far. Now have a go at pulling together your ideas into the box, space or sketch. With the following:

- What colours and textures will you use? What is the space made of? Stone, metal, wood, fabric? Something more abstract?
- Are there any structures in the space? Arches, columns, platforms?
- Is there any furniture?
- Where are the entrances and exits?
- Where are your audience?
- Are there any light sources? What does the lighting feel like generally? You could use the flashlight on your phone or a torch to help you
- Are there any special effects in your design?
- Are there any other exciting details you want to include?

The most effective designs tell the story in the clearest way so refer back to the text or anecdote to make decisions.

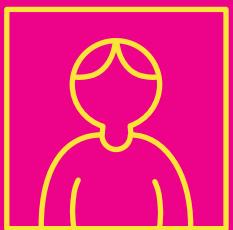
Cut out a cardboard figure, use wire shaped like a person, or use a Lego or toy figure to put your character in the space. This gives a sense of scale to the mini world you are making.

Once you are happy with your design take some photos from different angles to document your process.

You can take the skills you have learnt here into other design processes. What happens next in a real production process? Find out in the next exercise.



ARTIST PROFILE TOM SCOTT



HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE WHAT A DESIGNER DOES?

I'm a firm believer that the job is not only different for different people, but it's also different for me as a designer from project to project. Each project requires something different. It's that range and versatility that subconsciously drew me to the job in the first place and it also makes it hard to define what a designer does.

There are so many schools of thought and approaches to design but at its root, design is really about problem solving. Each project offers up a set of problems that need tackling. The nomadic lifestyle, going from one 'show family' to another and learning different things along the way is what's enriching about it. To dictate what a designer does though, is tricky.

WHAT FIRST DREW YOU TO SET DESIGN AND WHERE DID THAT JOURNEY TAKE YOU?

As a kid I was always creating small worlds; puppets, Lego, figurines, so I was interested in world building from an early age. I also played the piano and wasn't interested in the exams so would have sessions where I would just create, compose and make songs — another form of world building in a way. I thought for a while that music was something I would go into. But theatre design felt like a junction between destinations. A place where I could enjoy all the elements of things I didn't want to let go of. I knew from about the age of 16–17 that I wanted to be involved in that, so quite early on, but I had the benefit of having seen a lot of theatre growing up so it's not surprising really. I did an art foundation and already knew that I wanted to go on to the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama. That took a lot of the angst out of those big life decisions because it just felt like the obvious thing to be doing. Then I moved to London in 2007 when I was a finalist in the Linbury Prize.

WHAT HAVE BEEN SOME TURNING POINTS, NEAR WINS, CLOSE MISSES, AHA MOMENTS YOU'VE NAVIGATED ALONG THE WAY?

Those things don't come in big flashes of light for me. They are incremental realisations that I don't notice until hindsight comes into place and I can reflect. It can be hard to tell in the moment how things are affecting you for better or for worse. It's especially difficult to notice damaging things until they've had time to settle. You often learn the hard way in this profession because historically there has been a lot of mileage for malpractice and poor treatment at work.

I think it's important to stay alert and keep checking in with yourself. As a designer you can start to feel like a gateway and not a destination; you're serving so many needs that it all becomes about how you're doing your job for other people. There's an element of that which is really important in terms of empathy and serving the artistic vision. But you run the risk of putting yourself on the back burner. I've only just started to become aware of that in the last few years, but I now check in with myself at the end of each project to take time to reflect on the experience, what was fulfilling, what wasn't, what was hard, what was good. Journaling is one way to do that.

HOW DO YOU MANAGE YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH THE DIRECTOR AND OTHER CREATIVES?

Whoever you work with, your goal is to find the best ways to solve the creative problems. You can't do that as one person. I like to work with teams that are true teams, in which everyone simultaneously lies down to grapple with the creative problem, but also to stand up and — increasingly so — to stand up with your own voice. Especially in this day and age where it's incredibly important to listen to each other and make sure everybody's

needs are being served in terms of the experience of working with someone, but also in terms of your aesthetic interests.

There is a big big leap of trust that needs to happen. The experiences and relationships that are most dear to me as a designer are the ones where everybody takes a leap of faith and trusts in the trajectory and the ideas of the people around them. It goes wrong when there's an endeavour to have a collective experience and a team ethos but there is too much uncertainty, doubt, paranoia, mistrust. It can be about someone else on the team, the audience, reviewers, donors, the theatre itself. Those demons can really rot away at the ideas and the relationships between teams in a way that negatively impacts the work. The ones where you all believe in the process and the people you're making it with and enjoy that time together takes a little bit of the pressure off of what comes out the other end. When the love and the trust and the ideas are embedded in the process, that shows in the work. I hope!

WHAT'S SOMETHING PEOPLE GET WRONG ABOUT SET AND COSTUME DESIGNERS?

Critically and as an audience, especially in the UK we are too heavily geared towards thinking of design in terms of the 'stuff' — the physical amount of scenery and material on stage. That's how we get stuck in a binary analysis of 'simple yet effective' or 'extraordinary and elaborate' with nothing in between. People can only quantify our role in terms of how much they can see of it on stage.

If you start to fold in environmental questions in terms of policies and set building, that school of thought has to be busted past. Otherwise, you're stuck in a trap where designers fear that if they don't put enough material stuff on stage then they won't be seen to be doing their job properly, which is incredibly wasteful.

If it has to be something that is marketable on Instagram then our profession gets stuck in a feedback loop because you end up only focusing on product not process.

The process is what the designer is really about; the conceptual wrangling and world building sometimes even before the script has been written. That is so important for the design process. The role for me is one of pathfinding and adventure, where the journey is as significant as the destination. I don't think many people understand how the stuff on stage gets there, whereas for me that's all it's about. Quite often the stuff that gets on stage might not be what I intended or as finished as I'd like, but I think you can always see the thought process clearly and how those ideas came about. I think that is massively underrated in how people are taught to view the work because we live in a country where theatre is praised for delivering reliable outputs rather than a messy, interesting exploration of ideas.

WHAT DO YOU SEE AS THE TOP CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR PEOPLE WHO ARE JUST STARTING OUT?

The pro of theatre having been dormant for a year and a half means that there is an opportunity and a hunger to bring something new and different and enlivening. I think the pandemic has accelerated that conversation so I really hope theatres and institutions get on board with that momentum. There's an opportunity for young people to ride the coattails of this moment and push theatres, push institutions into the 21st century. I feel hopeful and excited about that. The generation below me is a really politicised group of people that are passionate and angry and have got a lot to say and those are the people I want to hear from going forward. If they can get a job, which is the big challenge.

IN RECENT YEARS YOU'VE STARTED DIRECTING (BERBERIAN SOUND STUDIO, DONMAR). GIVEN YOU'VE WORKED CLOSELY WITH SO MANY DIRECTORS, DID ANYTHING SURPRISE YOU (GOOD OR BAD) OR FEEL UNEXPECTED ABOUT TAKING ON THAT ROLE YOURSELF?

When I first started to talk about directing I applied to direct something a few years ago and I didn't get that gig. The feedback was that I needed to get 'match fit' with actors. I remember vividly thinking that I've seen all the actors I've worked with agonising about their body, their process, their lives. There is no more intimate experience than working with actors when you're talking about putting clothes on their body and I've been doing it since the very beginning. I also kept saying 'this is not a job swap'. It's the same job, I was just spending the majority of my time in the same room with a script in my hand, instead of with a sketchbook in my hand running around a million different rooms. I partly wanted to direct to help people understand that the divisions between our roles are nowhere near as insurmountable as we're led to believe.

WHAT ARE THE TOP SKILLS YOU SEE IN GREAT SET DESIGNERS?

The way that designers are discussed often is in terms of either being 'insensitive' or 'sensitive' to the work. So designers who are seen as insensitive and create extraordinary visuals but are in danger of drowning the story. The other end of the spectrum is the sleight of hand touch which is all about elevating the whole thing, which can result in a much better experience, but it's harder to articulate what that designer really does in terms of what you see in front of you. I'm glad we have so many designers that excel at both ends of that. Being able to go and see work that offers a range is really important.

I'm increasingly interested in a younger generation that are artists less defined by strict roles, as well as these younger designers who are very political, well read, have a point of view.

When I was starting out it still felt like you had to dance the dance to be at the party.

I broke through at a time when the 'breakthrough' was all about age. That was all the industry was capable of. So instead of being in your forties to design, you could be in your early twenties. Designers like myself and Chloe Lamford and others were part of that movement, so one of my early shows just two years after I graduated was at the RSC which was unusual at the time. What I'm excited about though is the next breakthrough, because we need to do a lot better. That's not just about identity politics, it's also about artist background. How can we draw in and excite more adjacent artists to come and be involved in theatre and for them to carry with them new stories, new life experiences, new models of working, process, life experiences that we're missing out on at the moment?

WHAT'S SOMETHING YOU WISH YOU KNEW STARTING OUT?

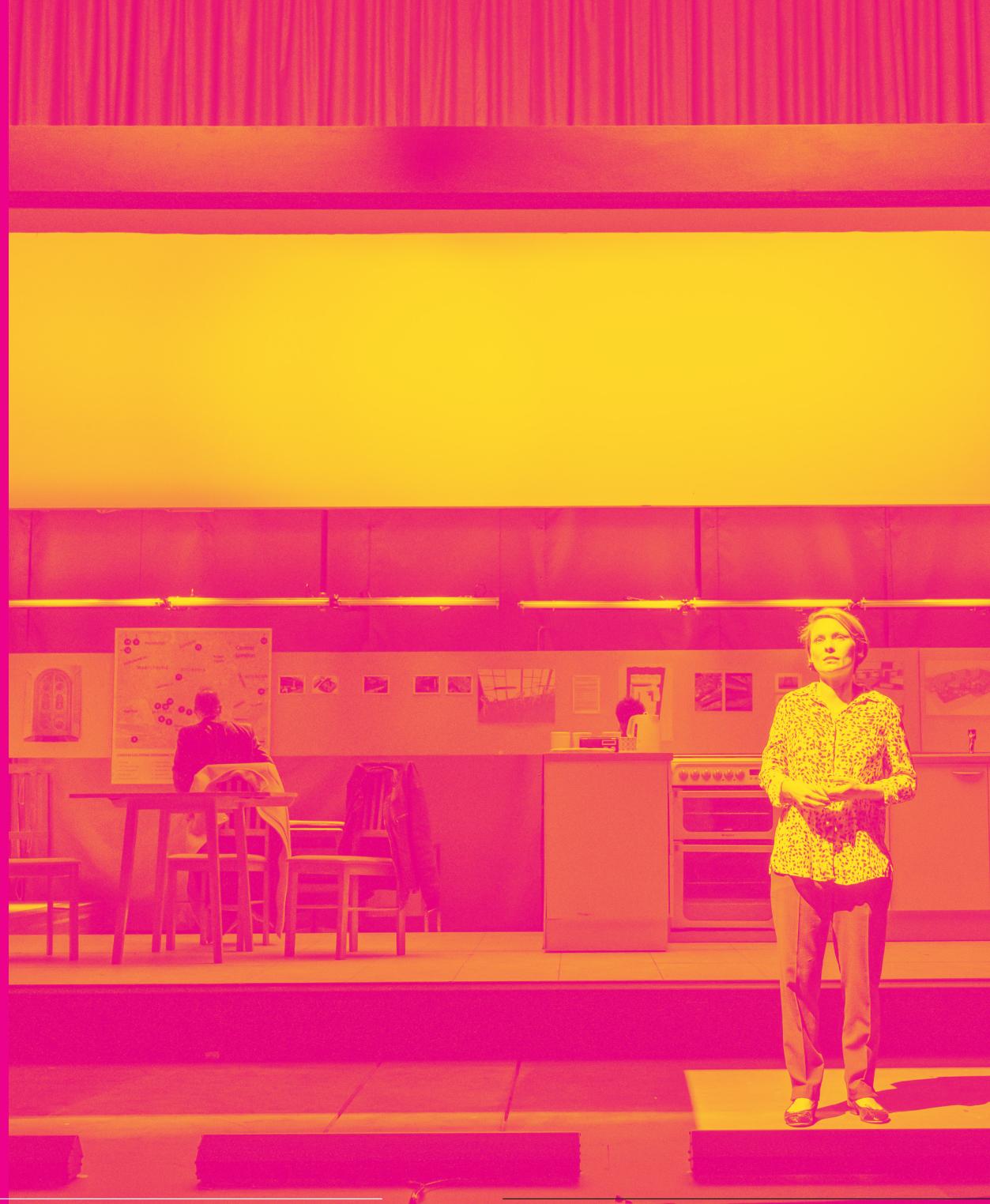
I wish I knew that designers can lead. I wish I was taught and that there was a theatre culture in which I could see evidence of stories being made in all sorts of ways, not just a writer producing a script and handing it to a director. I think theatres have got a huge amount to learn in terms of how they commission artists. I wish I knew that I could initiate my own projects earlier, but I also wish we had a climate where that was more welcomed and where people were less fearful of the risk involved.

FINALLY, WHAT ARE YOU WATCHING/LISTENING TO/ READING/EATING/LOOKING AT RIGHT NOW THAT'S INSPIRING YOU FROM A DESIGN PERSPECTIVE?

This whole last year has been about self-care and seeing the value that brings to my artistic process. There is a thing about working hard in this country that is instilled so deeply in us that people forget that taking time for yourself is inputting into your creative process, even though objectively you're taking time off. So, my self-care routine is one thing.

Over lockdown I designed and had made some new furniture for my house and it was great to be able to apply what I do to something that's actually in my own space. So, my partner and I have a new dining room table and chairs and every night, instead of eating in front of the TV, we now light two candles and eat at the table. The ritual of having that moment is important.

I'm also in a reading group of theatre designers headed up by Rosie Elnile (a performance designer). She has set up a monthly reading group where we all sit and look at texts, writing, film, music, things adjacent to our craft and we all discuss those pieces and how it can change the work. That feels very valuable and important right now.



TOM SCUTT

Tom is a London-based director, scenic and costume designer for live events.

The studio's work reaches extensively across theatre, opera, dance, exhibition and live music including collaborations with Christine and the Queens, The Pet Shop Boys, Sam Smith, Apple Music and MTV.

He regularly works in London's major theatres (National Theatre, Royal Court, Almeida, Donmar Warehouse, ENO) and is Tony-nominated for his work on Broadway.

He has provided the UK premiere designs for notable plays such as *A Very Expensive Poison* (The Old Vic) the award-winning *King Charles III* (Almeida); *Constellations* (Royal Court); *Fairview* (Young Vic) and *Mr Burns: A Post-Electric Play* (Almeida) as well as award-winning revivals such as *Summer and Smoke* (Almeida), *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *Little Shop of Horrors* (Regents Park Open Air Theatre).

Tom is an Honorary Fellow of the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama, an Associate Artist of the Donmar Warehouse and a resident at Somerset House Studios.

HOW TO COLLABORATE



A designer needs to be able to communicate and work well with all the different departments: producing, lighting, sound, costume, stage management and technical stage teams.

As you can see from the artists' profiles, collaboration and communication are key components of the role.

Designers will find often themselves jumping between a costume fitting with an actor figuring out the best way a headdress should fit, to a meeting with a sound technician to decide on the placement of speakers to fit into a certain piece of set, to having a quick catch up with the producer about the props budget to make sure that the team won't overspend.

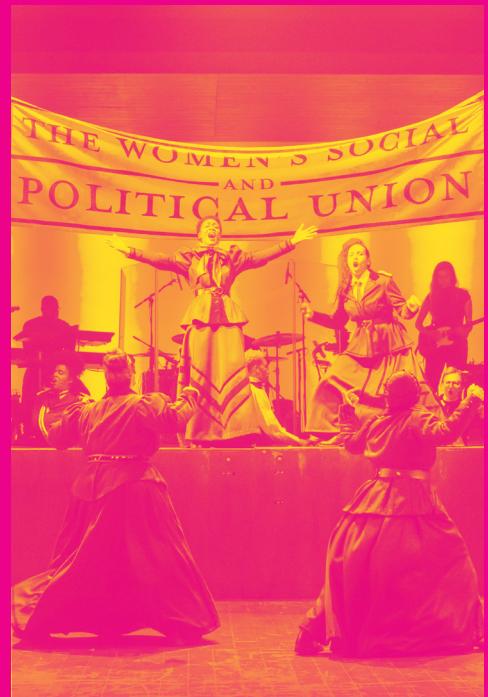
There will be lots of production meetings throughout the process where everyone will come together and work out what needs to be solved. Throughout the journey and all of the problems that arise, the designer and director have to make sure that everyone sticks to the vision of the play.

Look at the design you have created in the previous exercises. Imagine you are now working with the rest of your production team, starting to rehearse the show and make the design a reality.

Think about how you might navigate the following scenarios:

- The director tells you that one of the actors must now perform a dance ending in a cartwheel in their costume. They don't have time to change into anything else. How will you adapt the costume?
- The producer lets you know they were unable to secure some key funding that affects the production budget. This means that you need to cut or down-scale a piece of your set design as there isn't enough money to build it. What can you change or adapt to make it fit the budget? Can you make an exciting new choice despite the challenge?
- The lighting designer wants to add some practical lights into the set. They want your opinion on the best style of lights to use. What do you think will work best with the rest of your design? Something realistic like a ceiling lamp, or street lamp? Something more fantastical? Come up with some ideas you can share with them.

You may even be able to come up with several solutions for each challenge. Being able to offer up options is a key part of a designer's role.



FURTHER READING, WATCHING & LISTENING



Still curious?
Here you can find books, videos and series to keep you going on your design journey.

THINGS TO READ

Set & costume Design Books

What is Scenography?
by Pamela Howard

Designing Costume for Stage and Screen
by Deidre Clancy

Character Costume Figure Drawing: Step-by-Step Drawing Methods for Theatre Costume Designers
by Tan Huixiang

Unmasking Theatre Design: A Designer's Guide to Finding Inspiration and Cultivating Creativity
by Lynne Porter

Model-making: Materials and Methods
by David Neat

General Reference Books

The Art Book
by Phaidon

Robert Opie Scrapbooks,
for period references

John Peacock's books,
for shapes/silhouettes
for period plays

Costume, 1066–1990s
by John Peacock

The Chronicle of Western Costume From the Ancient World to the Late Twentieth Century
by John Peacock

Fashion magazines like Vogue and others like National Geographic and Ideal Home are full of adverts and big picture pages that are great for collaging

THINGS TO WATCH

Costume for Theatre

Vicki Mortimer on Follies
[youtube.com/watch?v=JO1eLvnh6eg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JO1eLvnh6eg)

Katie Sykes on Jane Eyre
[youtube.com/watch?v=ISGzQLkjZYK](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ISGzQLkjZYK)

Costume Department at Wicked
[youtube.com/watch?v=UlpRPv0Cfkw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UlpRPv0Cfkw)

Costume for Film/TV

Film and TV costume designers are a useful resource as well as theatre.

Sandy Powell on *The Favourite*
[youtube.com/watch?v=AUW7b-6CZm8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AUW7b-6CZm8)

Jane Petrie on *The Crown*
[youtube.com/watch?v=5cK0aWxJg3w](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5cK0aWxJg3w)

Ruth Carter on *Black Panther*
[youtube.com/watch?v=mmP1aHJjJ-U](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mmP1aHJjJ-U)

Marvel Costume Department
[youtube.com/watch?v=PVuX5U19iEk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PVuX5U19iEk)

Set
Es Devlin's TED talk on designing large scale events
[youtube.com/watch?v=CeOadxT7kPA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CeOadxT7kPA)

'How We Made It' — Red Barn at the National Theatre
nationaltheatre.org.uk/file/20571/view

Time Lapse of a Set Change at the Royal Opera House

youtube.com/watch?v=oFbu4iwEvbk

The Jungle at The Young Vic Set Build
youtube.com/watch?v=Y9UfM5t5XY0

Harry Potter and The Cursed Child Set Design
youtube.com/watch?v=bclmW-UXPL4

Harry Potter film Production Designer
youtube.com/watch?v=XSG2FhjxXTs

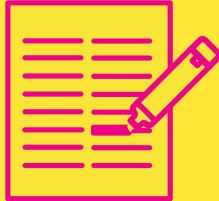
Royal Opera House Set Chat
youtube.com/watch?v=OLw-QapkxnA

Beetlejuice the Musical Set Chat
youtube.com/watch?v=wtqgQua5giM

Abstract — The Art of Design

netflix.com/title/80057883
Recommended by Cindy Lin

GLOSSARY OF THEATRE TERMS



CAD

Computer-Aided Design. Using a computer to help with 2D plans and drawings, or increasingly for 3D visualisation of how a set will look, and how lighting will affect it.

CHIAROSCURO

The use of contrasts of light and shade, especially in order to enhance the depiction of character and for general dramatic effect.

COLOUR THEORY

The science behind the way colour works can help lighting, costume and set designers to make their work as vibrant (or dull) as the play requires.

CONCEPT ILLUSTRATION

The art of creating an illustration on paper showing how a design concept will look when built.

CREATIVES

A team of theatre artists who work together to put on a production. Such as (but not limited to) a designer, lighting designer, sound designer, costume designer and composer.

FALSE PERSPECTIVE

A scenic design technique that makes a building or set appear larger than it actually is.

FRINGE THEATRE

Fringe Theatre provides a space to try new and experimental forms of work, or for artists who are starting out in their careers to make work. Typically fringe theatre productions have smaller budgets than subsidised or commercial work.

GROUND PLAN

A scaled plan (overhead) view of the theatre stage area or of a set design, to enable all technical departments to ensure that everything will fit correctly into the space available.

LIGHTING DESIGNER (LD)

Works with the director, set designer, costume designer, sound designer and other creatives to create the lighting, atmosphere, and time of day for the production. Responsible for the configuration of lighting equipment and the creation of lighting states (cues). On a large show, the lighting designer may also be responsible for putting together the team of people who realise the lighting design — production electrician, programmer and other specialist technicians.

On smaller shows the lighting designers are often expected to do many things like rigging the equipment and programming cues into the lighting desk. Lighting designers have both creative vision and a craft knowledge of how the lighting equipment they use works.

MASKING

Neutral material or designed scenery which defines the performance area and conceals the technical areas.

MISE-EN-SCÈNE

A French term used to describe all the visual aspects on the stage, such as the set design.

MODEL/MODEL BOX

A scale model provided by the set designer to help all the technical departments to coordinate and plan a production. Used as a reference when building, painting, dressing and lighting the set.

MOOD BOARD

An arrangement of images, colours, textures and so on that are put together to evoke a certain mood or theme. Directors and designers will often start with a mood board when discussing design ideas for a production.

PRACTICAL

Is any on-stage light source that acts as a practical part of the physical environment of the play. A table lamp, for example.

PRODUCER

Responsible for raising finances, booking theatres, negotiating and issuing contracts, and managing how the budget is spent. They organise and manage technical, stage management, and are responsible for ensuring a successful project from first ideas to final performance.

PROPPING

Buying props for the production.

PROSCENIUM ARCH

The frame that surrounds a stage space, separating the audience from the stage. The audience all sit facing the same way and the stage is often raised.

RENDERING

3D (Design). The process of producing a real-world style image within a 3D design program.

RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT (R&D)

An opportunity to test out ideas for a potential future production but without the pressure of a final performance. R&D offers artists the chance to experiment and play with ideas before taking them into a full production. This can also be a way to attract venues and funders to help develop work further.

SATURATION

The amount of colour in a lighting state, paint treatment or costume design.

SCALE

Designers usually work in 1:25 scale, but 1:50 and 1:10 scale are also used. Working in scale in models and drawings allows them to accurately test out and represent spaces and details in a more practical size. It means that each element is the same proportion to the real thing but smaller or larger by the scale number (i.e. 25 times smaller than the real sized thing).

SCENERY

The flattage on the stage and any flown scenery or cloths that have been assembled by the set team, under the direction of the set designer for a particular performance.

The arrangement of scenery for a particular scene or part of the performance is known as the 'set'.

SCENOGRAPHY

The design and painting of theatrical scenery.

From:
What is Scenography?
by Pamela Howard

'The Scenographer has to be an artist who can understand how to work with and incorporate the ideas of the director, understand text as a writer, be sensitive to the needs of a performer exposed to an audience, and create imaginative and appropriate spaces for productions (...) and also understand music and sound as a musician and composer, and the effects of light and shadow as a fine arts painter and photographer.'

SIGHT LINES

The lines of sight that the audience has from where they are to the action happening onstage.

SOUND DESIGNER

The sound designer works closely with the director and creatives to create the aural world of the show, including sound effects, atmospheres and sonic textures. They may choose, edit and remix music; work with a composer to make original music; or work with

live musicians in the theatre. The sound designer may advise on how to best hear the performers, which may involve acoustic adjustments to the theatre and set, or microphones. The sound designer will design a sound system, bespoke to the specific production and auditorium, that will give the audience the best experience of the show.

SWATCH

A sample of fabric to demonstrate the material to use on a costume or set design, or a sample of lighting gel.

STAGE MANAGER

Stage managers typically provide practical and organisational support to the director, actors, designers, stage crew and technicians throughout the production process. They also are the director's representative during performances, making sure that the production runs smoothly.

TECHNICAL DRAWINGS

Sometimes also called 'working drawings', these visually communicate how something functions or is constructed so it can be made or built. The process of making technical drawings is called 'drafting'.

TECHNICAL TEAM/CREW

Often abbreviated to the 'tech crew' or simply the 'crew' (individually often known as 'techs' or 'technicians'), are the people employed behind the scenes ('backstage') to control all the technical aspects of creating a concert, play, musical, opera or other live performance.

TECH REHEARSAL

Technical rehearsals that focus on the technological aspects of the performance, such as lighting, sound and set.

THUMBNAIL SKETCH

A series of exploratory or explanatory small sketches which help to show design concepts and how parts of them may appear when built.

WHITE CARD

Shows the form of the set, but not the detail of painting/ texture/colour. When that's been approved by the director, and has been roughly budgeted, the final model is produced which should look identical to the finished set on stage.



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Interested in taking design further?

Whether it's training, competitions or online resources, we've got you covered. The following opportunities are completely free. This is not an exhaustive list but a good place to start. Talk to your local theatre to see what opportunities they offer for designers.

TRAINING

Lewisham Youth Theatre, London – Volunteering, Placements & Work Experience

[leishamyouththeatre.com/get-involved/volunteer/](http://lewishamyouththeatre.com/get-involved/volunteer/)

Every year students, new graduates and community members give their time and gain real experience of working in a professional theatre environment. Participants support with making the making of set, costumes and props across 10 days in Easter and summer holidays.

Finborough Theatre, London – Intern & Voluntary Positions

finboroughtheatre.co.uk/opportunities.php

A minimum of two months placement for at least three days a week in a multi-award-winning Off West End theatre. Participants will gain mentoring advice from Artistic Director Neil McPherson. Experience across all departments in the theatre, specifically in production where you will liaise with designers concerning procurement of props, furniture and set dressing.

ATG – Work in Theatre

atgtickets.com/creative-learning-community-partnerships/

A course across four weeks in Easter and Summer holidays exploring possible career options available in theatre. Taking place in one of ATG's West End theatres in areas such as Theatre Management, Backstage and Front of House.

National Theatre

nationaltheatre.org.uk/about-the-national-theatre/careers/work-placements

Scenic construction, scenic painting, and carpentry department work placements available.

COMPETITIONS

The Old Vic – London, The Old Vic 12

oldvictheatre.com/join-in-for-creatives

The Old Vic 12 aims to nurture and develop the next generation of theatre practitioners through offering access and insights into theatre-making, mentoring from industry experts, delivering masterclasses to other emerging artists, and collaborating with each other to create brand new work. Each year the project works with three directors and offers the opportunity to develop a new play over the course of the project with support from the theatre.

NSDF

nsdf.org.uk

nsdf.org.uk/taking-part-in-the-festival/joining-the-festival-team/

A week-long festival for young artists to showcase their work, network with industry professionals and take part in workshops. You can also join the technical team for the festival.

USEFUL RESOURCES

MAKE

talawamake.com

An online networking site for Black artists in the UK to network, spark collaborations and learn new skills within the theatre industry. The site was created by Talawa Theatre Company.

Masterclass, Theatre Royal Haymarket – London

masterclass.org.uk

A regular programme of workshops with industry professionals, opportunities to develop your creative practice and careers advice for 16–30 years, all offered for free.

Creative and Cultural Skills

ccskills.org.uk/our-services/apprenticeships

Support the UK cultural sector by shaping skills, education and employment best practice. They provide an email contact to discuss apprenticeships in cultural organisations.

Get Into Theatre

getintotheatre.org

Find information and opportunities to help you pursue a career in theatre in the UK, including backstage, performing, training and apprenticeships.

Silver Arts Award

artsaward.org.uk/site/?id=66

Silver Arts Award is a Level 2 qualification on the Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF) and is designed for ages 14 and above but is open to young people aged 11–25.

To achieve a Silver Arts Award, young people collect evidence in an individual arts portfolio of their experiences of arts practice and arts leadership.

Black Ticket Project

Instagram
[@blackticketproject](https://www.instagram.com/@blackticketproject)

London-based award-winning bridge organisation securing access to theatre for young Black people.

East Asian Ticket Club

Instagram
[@east_asian_ticket_club](https://www.instagram.com/@east_asian_ticket_club)

An engagement scheme to encourage and increase East Asian participation across the Arts in the UK.

Open Drama Workshops

youtube.com/playlist?list=PL9pi33EAJWKEPnz4qkzju-2t7zZ971Hhh

This playlist was curated by Open Drama UK in collaboration with We Teach Drama to share their Think Like a Designer webinar series.

Many theatres (The Old Vic, The Manchester Royal Exchange, Sheffield Theatres) offer cheap ticket schemes for young people. Just look up your local theatre and see what they offer.

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The Old Vic Theatre Trust 2000 Charity No. 1072590
The Old Vic Endowment Trust Charity No. 1147946