

SET DESIGN, FROM THE BEGINNING

by Michael Powers

You've just taken your dream job teaching English and you've just been told that you're designing the scenery for the next school or community play. You're a newbie in theatre and are wondering if design is for you and just what does set design involve. You're an architect and want to design things more exciting than another steel building. Now What! What do you do? Where do you go? What are you in for?

Let's try to define just what scene design is, and what the designer's responsibilities are. The most basic description of a designer is someone who "creates the environment of the performance." The main responsibility is to convey your thoughts and ideas about that environment to the director, shop, cast and crew so that your vision can be realized. The performance can be ballet, opera, drama, film, video, ad infinitum. Notice that I have not yet mentioned walls or backdrops or platforms. Those things are still a long way off.

To "create an environment" how does one go about creating an environment. What are the tools and skills that are necessary to be a designer? The most important tool is your imagination, the most important skill is the ability to channel your imagination in an intelligent and cohesive manner.

While skills as an artist and draftsman are very valuable, they are not absolutely necessary. There have been excellent and famous designers with little or few skills as an artist or draftsman. However, it was in spite of that lack, not because of it that they became skilled designers. It also does not mean one should not make every effort to develop those skills. Without these skills you will have to rely a great deal on good directors and technical directors. In many cases, you might well be both the designer and the technical director. You may get lucky and have a Master Carpenter or Technical Director who can take ideas off a paper napkin and with a smile, turn it into scenery. You may get one who has neither the skills nor temperament to give you a hand.

Last but not least, if you are at a theatre that is fully staffed, you might find that you are only one of several designers that they are working with at one time. They expect you to present them with a reasonable set of plans to start with, because they don't have time to develop your plans for you. If you don't develop your sketching and drafting, you will find it much more difficult to communicate your ideas to the directors and to the people who will build your designs. I

am not saying that you must be an engineering quality draftsman, quite the opposite. I have worked with designers whose drafting skills ranged from the proverbial magic marker on a paper napkin to those of an experienced architect, and with designers whose sketches resembled everything from clip art to art class scribbles to real works of art in their own right.

The thing that sets the good designers apart from the poor ones is organization. The good designers always have the show thought out and planned. The drawings, regardless of quality, are organized and clear. Even if the "sketch" or rendering is a collage of clip art, it tells what the designer wants. If you

want to be a good designer, sketch, draw, paint at every opportunity. You will find that the skills will develop. The drawing and painting are not an art but merely a craft that can be learned. What you draw and paint is the thing that will make you an artist.

We said that set design was to "create an environment" how does one go about creating an environment? The first thing is always to read the script. This may seem "well, Duh! Of course!" or just the opposite, it may sound unnecessary because "I've seen the movie 20 times" or "I did this show a

couple of years ago. I know what it looks like!" No matter how well you think you know the show, you don't really know it. Even if you've directed it before, you don't really know it. If you are leaning toward the latter thought, things have changed since you last experienced the show. The director is different, the theatre is different, the times are different, and you have had more and different life experiences. All of these things will influence your vision of the script.

"The times are different? What do you mean, it's only been a couple of years!" How would you have looked at a script about Lincoln's assassination just before and just after Hinkley shot Reagan? Would you look at a script about presidential integrity the same way today that you would have before Monica Lewinsky? The point is: to read the script every time you do a show as though it was a new and different experience that you've never had before. Read it with a fresh mind and throw out preconceptions and thoughts of "well, when I was there, we did it this way....". Remember, there are as many right ways of doing a show as there are theatres doing it. There are, of course, just as many wrong ways of doing it. What is right, is the concept that fits the director you are working with, and the theatre you are at, the cast you have, the budget, the crew, the theatre facility and the "when" you are doing the production.

Now! How does one go about reading a script. It's not as easy as simply reading it and finding out what happens. When you first read a script to design any element, sets, costumes, lighting, sound, FX, it should always be as though you are reading it for the very first time. Don't look at the stage directions and the descriptions of the set that "they" used. Don't look at the picture or floor plan in the back of the script if there is one. The set they used was designed for that specific theatre, with that specific director, with their specific budget. That theatre may have had a much larger or much smaller stage than you will be working with. You may not have a fly gallery or a trap room. They may have had a staircase coming up from the orchestra pit and you don't have a pit. They may have had the front door stage left because their stage was too shallow to have a crossover and the dressing rooms were stage left. I always have my wife go through a script and mark out all descriptions of the set and the blocking. That way, when I read it I don't have the thoughts of the Broadway director at that theatre with that cast with that designer influencing my thoughts.

Now as you read the script, note everything that you need. Not what would be nice, not what you would like, but what you absolutelyNEED....! My personal experience is that the more light weight the script, the more "things" you "need". Look at Shakespeare. We have

pushed and pulled him, updated him, thrown him into every strange situation on earth and several in outer space. Yet we are still doing his plays after almost 400 years. All in all, the only thing he “needs” is the dialogue and a place to say it. Does that mean that, we, as designers are unnecessary? No, we still have to create the atmosphere and environment in which the dialogue can have the greatest impact on the audience. For example, the script reads, “Don crosses left, picks up the magazine from the coffee table, and flips through it while waiting for Mary”. Do you need the magazine or coffee table? No! What you need is something to exhibit Don’s impatience while waiting. The script reads, “Mary slams the door in John’s face, stopping his advance while she flees.” Do you need a door? No, you need something to stop John’s advance. It can be a door, a chair or a drawbridge. The point is you must find those things you really, really need and why you need them. Everything you imagine should be rooted in the script in some form or another. Maybe what you envision is a “dark and gloomy night”. It should be evoked by the events, emotions and dialogue in the script, not the stage directions from the Broadway production.

The next task is called “homework” or research. Talk to the director and find his initial concept as to location and time period. Go to a library or similar source and find everything you can about the time and place of the director’s concept. Look in the newspaper archives and get a feeling for the public opinions and thoughts of the times. Was it a bull market or a bear market? Was it a time of expansion or isolationism? What were the political trends? If the director wants to set Romeo and Juliet in the 1930’s, what is it about the ‘30’s that is distinct and unique? What is his reason or explanation for setting the play in this particular period? The more you can learn about the period the better.

In addition to finding out the “What” of the time, look for the “Why”. The “Whys” of a time or place will help you to use the “What’s” to enhance the look or feel you are trying to get across. A good example of this is the set design for the original Batman film. As the camera pans through the city in the film’s opening moments, the viewer feels insignificant and dwarfed by the size and scope of the buildings and architecture. When the view pans up to the sky you get a feeling of something overpowering and ominous above. What is it about the look of the city that makes you feel this way?

The feeling was conceived almost 1,500 years ago when the European peoples were introduced to the concept of Christianity. The new, monotheistic God was all-powerful. He was a mysterious, vengeful and angry God. As the new religion grew and flourished, it inspired the architecture of the Middle Ages that we call “Gothic”. Gothic architecture, in it’s towering spires and vaulted ceilings, was designed to make the viewer realize the small and insignificant roll he played in the scheme of the universe. When “Batman” the movie was first conceived, the setting could have been anything from an ultra modern glass and steel city to a 1920’s emerging skyscraper world. Anton Furst looked at the script and saw that the Gotham City populace was pushed into a role of abject servitude and fear. His “New Age” gothic look, halfway between reality and science fiction was awesome. He took his knowledge of the historic architecture and it’s “Why” and produced a stunning image of Bruce Wayne’s city.

As you read the script you will form a mental image of the “setting” and it’s style and the atmosphere. Make a list of the things you feel are needed and the general atmosphere in the scenes. Go to the director with this list and merge his/her feelings and concepts with yours. Now! And only now, you can begin to put real concrete images to paper. At first, sketch thoughts and impressions.

Sketch feelings, sketch ideas. Don’t sketch specific places or things. This is the point where you and the director finalize the show “concept” or “point of view”. What is “concept”? A good example of concept is the Pittsburgh Public’s production of “Two Gentlemen Of Verona”. The director looked at the opening scene between Valentine and Proteus. In that scene, Proteus laments that he has neglected his studies because of thinking about Julia. Later Valentine falls instantly and completely in love with Silvia after spying her for an instant standing on a balcony. The director took these moments from the script (and others, of course) to form a concept of two young men graduating from “Verona” high school and leaving for “Milan” University during the American roaring twenties. The concept came from the script and worked with the story. The actions of the two young men fit the age group they were set in, the rapid paced antics of the rest of the show fit well with the “crazy” times of the twenties.

Next you take the “needs” list and the images and the trends of the period, knead them with the director’s concept and “bake” them with a period of contemplation. Now you can take your preliminary sketches, pictures from books, magazines etc. and form a strong basis of what you and the director want the show to look like in terms of style and line, color and texture. Now re-read the script and this time look at it from a director’s point of view. How would you block certain scenes, where would you have entrances and exits? What kind of movement would you use, smooth and flowing or sharp and fast? Do you need to provide easy movement from one part of the stage to another or do you need to intentionally hinder movement. For example, in

“Born Yesterday” there is a scene between Harry and Billie in which Harry is very angry with Billie. Harry is the kind of man who would not hesitate to hit a woman if there is nothing stopping him. In this scene, you, as a designer, have to provide the director with a believable barrier to separate the two.

Donald Oenslager, the original Broadway designer, solved the problem by placing the entrance to hotel suite’s bedrooms off a small landing. The landing was about four feet above the main room, with an iron railing. For the scene in question, Harry was at the far end of the landing from the stair, leaning over the rail toward Billie. To actually hit her he would have had to break off the confrontation, gone to the stair and down, around the sofa.....! What the designer did was to place a believable barrier between the two so the confrontation could escalate without a physical outcome.

Now at last, you can start thinking about walls and stairs and doors and the rest of the physical world you are about to create. Look at your

research and preliminary sketches. Develop a floor plan of what you want the set to look like. If it is realistic with walls and doors, etc. sketch out the rest of the building, where the other rooms are, where the characters are when they are not on stage. This will make your set more realistic and help to provide the director with logical entrances and exits. You are not going to build these other rooms but you need to consider them in your planning. Even if you are designing a set with levels and platforms, determine where “other” places are for each scene. If the road to Scotland is off right in the first act, your audience will want it to be off right in the second act.

Once you have developed a preliminary floor plan for your set, it is time to make it a reality. Here there are many different routes to the end depending on your particular circumstances. What is your budget, do you have to use existing scenery pieces, does your theatre build everything from scratch, etc. With whatever restrictions or existing conditions you have to work with, now you revise and adjust the design to fit.

Now you draw a finalized floor plan with measurements and dimensions. The floor plan is usually drawn to a scale of $\frac{1}{2}$ " equals one foot, $\frac{1}{4}$ " to the foot is also acceptable. This plan will include furniture, rugs, specific props that take up floor space such as a baby buggy or a wheelbarrow. It should also include backings behind doors, backdrops, masking curtains etc. At this stage you need to draw a black and white sketch of how you want the set to appear.

Many designers will also make a “white” model at this time. The white model is nothing more than matte board or illustration board or even cardboard, cut out into the shapes and sizes of the walls, wood or styrofoam blocks for platforms and thimbles spools etc for furniture. Models, like the floor plan, are usually done in a scale of $\frac{1}{2}$ " equals one foot or $\frac{1}{4}$ " equals one foot. The sketch or model tells the director what he will be working with. The stage manager will need the floor plan to layout rehearsal space and the sketches/model to show the actors what the set will look like.