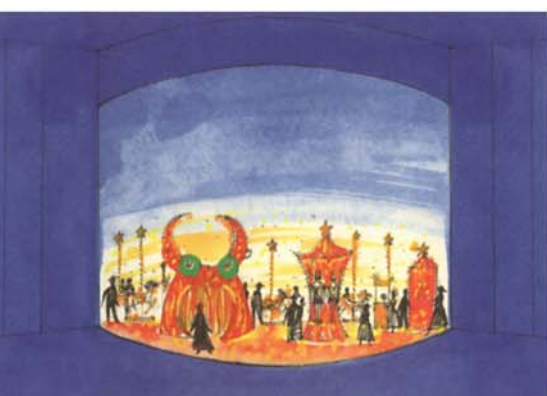
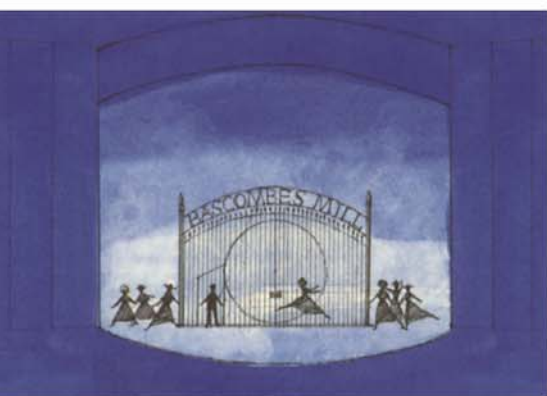


Designing for the Theatre

Second edition



Francis Reid

Designing for the Theatre

Second edition

Francis Reid

This edition published 2011 by Routledge:

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
711 Third Avenue
New York, NY 10017

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
2 Park Square, Milton Park
Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Second edition 1996
Reprinted 2000
First edition 1989
A & C Black (Publishers) Limited
35 Bedford Row, London WC1R 4JH

© 1996, 1989 Francis Reid

ISBN 0-7136-4398-6

Published simultaneously in the USA by
Theatre Arts Books/Routledge
29 West 35 Street, New York, NY 10001

ISBN 0-87830-062-7

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form or by any means – graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping or information storage and retrieval systems – without the prior permission in writing of the publishers.

CIP catalogue records for this book are available from the British Library and the Library of Congress.

CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	
Prologue	
1 The role of design	1
2 The theatre building	4
3 Visual style	19
4 Space and time	30
5 Some practicalities	41
6 The design process	51
7 Design realisation	69
8 Designing with new technologies	77
9 Learning to design	83
10 Critical evaluation	90
Some suggestions for further reading	93
Glossary of technical stage terms	95
Index	103

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author and publishers gratefully acknowledge permission to use the following:

pp. 5, 8 Richard Leacroft, *Theatre & Playhouse*, Methuen; p. 6 RHWL, architects, courtesy of Town House Publicity (photo: Martin Charles); p. 10 courtesy of Rockerick Ham; p. 11 Orange County Performing Arts Center; pp. 12–13 *New York Times*; p. 14 Theatre Projects Consultants, p. 15 Royal Shakespeare Company (photo: Nicholas Sargeant); p. 16 (photo: Michael Mayhew); p. 17 RHWL, architects; p. 21 David Walker; p. 22 Jim Hiley *Theatre at Work*, Routledge & Kegan Paul (photo: Zoe Dominic); pp. 25, 57, 58, 59 Glyndebourne (photos: Guy Gravett); p. 23 (photo: Ivan Kyncl); p. 26 (photo: Donald Cooper); p. 27 (photo: Bill Cooper); p. 28 Royal Opera House (photo: Leslie E. Spatt); p. 29 (photo: Cathy Ryan); pp. 37, 38 Pani; p. 39 Prague Theatre Institute; p. 40 (photo: Ann Curtis); p. 44 Above (photo: Robert Workman), below (photo: Peter Davison); p. 45 (photo: Claire Lyth); p. 53 (right) David Hockney, *Hockney Paints the Stage*; p. 61 (illustrations: Rae Smith); p. 65 (illustrations: Kate Borthwick); p. 68 (illustration: Paul Dart); p. 70 Wimbledon School of Art; pp. 78, 79 Modelbox Limited (photo: TVS); p. 87 Central School of Art & Design.

PROLOGUE

Theatre has always been a strongly visual experience. But the images which once merely decorated the stage are today expected to be a totally integrated feature of the production, not only providing environmental support for the actors but contributing a visual response that is metaphorical rather than literal.

This book considers the potential contribution of costume, settings, props and lighting to a stage production and endeavours to explain the process by which they are designed. Theatre design, like every other art, is ultimately based on decisions which arise from inspiration rather than logic. Yet these ideas can only be stimulated, filtered and developed within the framework of a work process.

The book is intended as an introduction to the possibilities and processes of design for the theatre. It is hoped it will offer sufficient insight into the design process to provide an embryonic designer with a method of proceeding from first thought to first night.

The author is indebted to the many designers with whom he has worked — and the many more he has never met but whose art has excited him as a member of the audience — for stimulating his visual thinking about theatre. He is particularly grateful to London's Central School of Art and Design, whose theatre design staff and students inspired this attempt to verbalise a process which is concerned with images rather than with words.

Although its basic work processes tend to remain constant, theatre design is a continuously evolving art. The illustrations in this new edition, therefore, include many designs for productions which have been staged in the seven years since the first edition was published. These designs were shown in the *Make Space!* exhibition from which the British entry was selected for the 1995 Prague Quadrennial where it was awarded a special Gold Medal.

This page intentionally left blank

1 THE ROLE OF DESIGN

THEATRE DESIGNERS are members of the creative team who bring life, through performance, to a dramatic script and/or score. This team includes:

- **Actors** who are the primary interpreters of a writer's words and music.
- **Designers** whose visual interpretation of script and score costumes the actors and provides a supportive environment.
- **Directors** who integrate all the individual elements of interpretation within an overall concept, the style of which they have primary responsibility for establishing.
- **Audiences** who assist a fresh renewal of the interpretation at each performance through their response to the production and their interactive rapport with the actors and with each other.

Whether *writers* and *composers* take an active role in the interpretation of their work depends primarily, and obviously, upon whether they are still alive. Even so, their involvement rarely extends beyond the first production and possibly an occasional major revival.

A large support team of *enablers* help translate creative ideas into performance reality. In particular, the realisation of all visual aspects is dependent upon the interpretative skills of costume, set and prop makers, and technicians.

The prime enablers are *producers* whose packaging of a production includes the decision to do it, the bringing together of a team and the provision of funding. The producer's role is essentially one of creative midwifery. During preparation and rehearsals the key enablers are *production managers* whose organisation of time and money ensures that the production is ready for its first performance, on schedule and within budget. Responsibility for enabling a smooth performance every night, through the integration of acting and technology, rests with *stage managers*.

It must be emphasised that every member of the enabling team has a creative role. Designers are totally dependent upon the creative skills of all those who are involved in interpreting their designs. Interpretation is more than just a matter of carrying out instructions. Even the most detailed design is still something of a skeletal idea to be developed and transformed during its realisation as a costume, prop, scenic element or lighting balance.

Indeed at no point during the realisation of a dramatic work for performance can anyone respond in a merely passive way. Even when the script includes very specific instructions for how it is to be performed, and when these instructions are faithfully adhered to, the variations between different productions can still be immense. Therefore a designer's role, like that of everyone working in a theatre (or attending the performance as audience), is one of creative interpretation.

THE DESIGNER'S VISUAL RESPONSE

The designer's contribution to a production arises out of a visual response to the dramatist's words and/or the composer's music. This response will be influenced by discussions with the other members of the creative team. Ideally it would also be a response to observation of character and ensemble development during rehearsal. However, the realities of scheduling normally require irreversible design decisions to be made before rehearsals have even started.

This visual response will most obviously manifest itself in the costuming of the actors and provision of an environment for the stage action. But it should also offer a statement about the play's intent: a visual metaphor for its verbal philosophy.

This philosophy may not necessarily be a particularly deep or searching one. Theatre offers the possibility of exploring the nature of humanity at all levels, from the fundamental to the frivolous. And to make comment on several levels simultaneously. Even the most lightweight play, apparently seeking only to amuse, offers comment on human frailty that can trigger quite fundamental thinking in an audience.

The designer's visual response to the nature of the play will be a factor which both influences, and is influenced by, the style of production which the creative team decide to pursue. Visual style will help to determine the nature of the stage environment. But this will also be heavily dependent upon the practical needs of the action. Design should be focused on the need to support the actors: the clothes they wear, the objects they handle and the world they inhabit must support their projection of the characters they play.

AREAS OF DESIGN

Costumes including wigs and make-up, are particularly associated with acting since the clothes an actor wears will both stem from the way a character is played and, in turn, influence the way that the character is played.

Settings and lighting provide a flexible stage environment which can support the play's progress through time and place. The nature and flexibility of this stage environment is determined by the demands of the text, and by the way in which the chosen production style handles such demands.

Props contribute a link between actor and environment. All objects which the actors handle are classified as props (shortened from properties, a word deeply established in theatre jargon). They are an intrinsic part of the action and are not

to be confused with dressing the set by placing objects on it for purely visual effect. Props include everything from furniture and meals to the personal props used by particular characters in the furtherance of the plot (e.g. pens, letters, money, etc.) and costume props which are more in the nature of clothing accessories (e.g. umbrellas, spectacles, etc.).

VISUAL STYLE

Everything placed upon a stage by a designer is conditioned by the visual style which has been adopted for the production. This visual style contributes to, and is derived from, the overall production style which the creative team have chosen for their interpretation of the script. It determines just how the designer dresses the actors and provides them with a stage environment. Conversely, it is the way in which the actors are dressed and the nature of the environment in which they perform that establishes the style. A classic case of interaction!

FOUR-DIMENSIONAL DESIGN

Theatre designers are neither interior designers nor fashion designers. Stage space, stage clothes and stage lighting are not designed for living in, but to provide a visual metaphor for a literary or musical dramatic work and support its communication through performance.

At a purely physical level the theatre designer, handling three-dimensional space and objects within a time progression, is a four-dimensional designer. However, considering the somewhat metaphysical nature of theatre, it would not be difficult to propose additional, more philosophically based, dimensions to a theatre designer's work.

2 THE THEATRE BUILDING

Before considering production design in any depth, we should give some thought to the nature of theatre buildings. How does the design of a production's stage environment relate to the total environment provided by the architectural form and function of the theatre in which the production is housed?

Until the present century, the situation was straightforward. Theatre had a standard form and, although this gradually developed, the pace of change was so slow that each generation had a clear view of what constituted a theatre. And they could go to a performance with a clear expectation of a standard production style, familiar in both its acting and its settings.

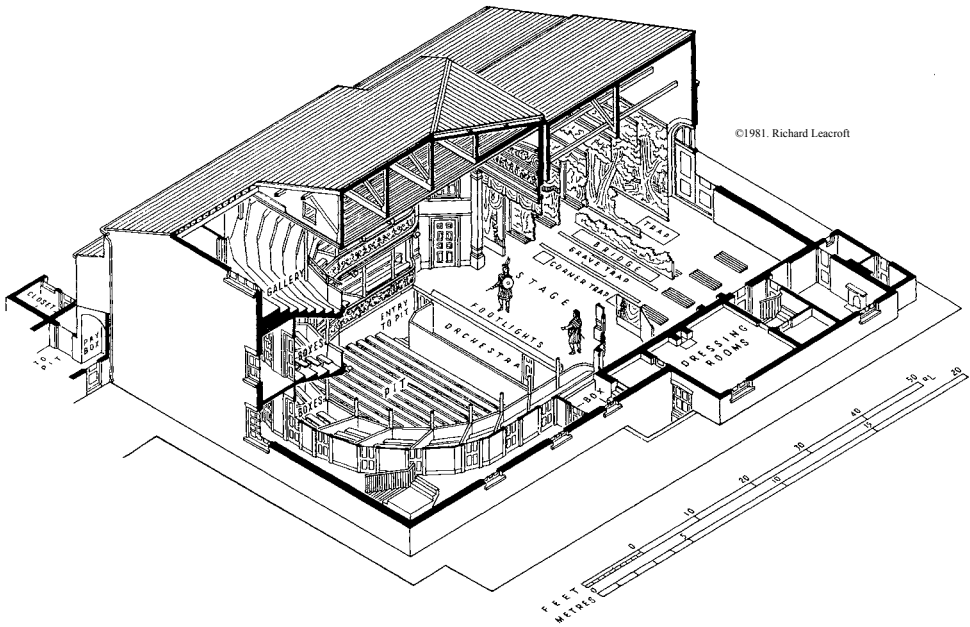
But in the current century the pace of change has quickened. 'Theatre' has been the subject of a great deal of fundamental thinking, and there is now a whole range of theatre building forms simultaneously available as options. Perhaps the easiest way to consider these current optional forms is by a brief historical survey of their evolution.

FROM THE RENAISSANCE TO THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

Changeable scenery did not become a regular part of the actor's environment until the development of indoor theatre after the Renaissance. And then, for nearly two centuries, the scenery remained a decorative background with little interaction between actor and scene.

Actors in a Georgian playhouse played on a stage which thrust into the auditorium, well beyond the first boxes. Any action of consequence took place forward of the proscenium which was flanked by a pair of doors used for entrances and exits. The close contact with the audience that resulted from this thrusting stage was further emphasised by actors and audience sharing the same auditorium lighting. The actors were thus associated more with the galleried room that was the auditorium than with the scenic background which was restricted to making a pictorial statement of the location of the action.

Although the scenic pictures were not a particularly integrated feature of a production, they did have an important role and indeed their significance for the audience is confirmed by the printing of descriptions on the advertising bills, especially when a scene was newly painted. (A playhouse repertoire was so wide that the basic production design process was one of permutation. New scenes were additions to stock, and although a scene's initial appearance might well be



©1981. Richard Leacroft

Richard Leacroft's drawing of William Wilkins' *Barnwell Theatre in Cambridge* (c. 1816) reconstructs a typical intimate Georgian playhouse.

for a specific play, thereafter it could be called upon to serve any production.)

Audiences responded positively to perspective painting in a theatre where stage depth could be used to enhance the perspective. We cannot fully know how the audiences reacted but it seems likely that their objective appreciation of the painter's art was mixed with a suspension of disbelief which, induced by the total atmosphere of the performance, allowed paint and canvas to become reality.

Scenic backgrounds were always accorded more importance in opera and ballet — and indeed still are. Large choruses, and plots hinging upon magic transformations, brought the action into a more integral contact with the scene. But that scene was still a perspective painting whose vanishing point resulted in perfect viewing being possible from only one central position in the auditorium. Nevertheless, the general quality of the painting was such that pleasure could usually be obtained from even the most awkward line of sight.

It was audience preference for a visual theatre that ultimately pushed the actor back into the scene. The managers were happy to accede: apart from a commercial desire (and need) to please the audience, the retreat of the thrust stage increased auditorium capacity.

Scenery took the standardised form imposed by the universal technical architecture of the stage. This provided machinery for locating and changing side wings and overhead borders. Every stage had sets of grooves in which side wings could be slid on and off. The grooves were parallel to the front of the stage and