

# A Guide to Costume and Scenic Design for Theatre for Young Audiences

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The design that supports a production in professional theatre is often an integral aspect of a show. It creates the mood of the play and greatly affects the audience's perception of a location, a character, and a story. I wondered whether the theatre for young audiences (TYA) industry would also find this to be true, because there are very few sources that discuss the specifics of design for TYA. Thus, as my intern project, I decided to consult AATE members to help create a preliminary resource. The following guide is created from the survey *Design in Children's Theatre* which I created and sent out to the designers, artistic directors, and technical directors in AATE's membership (see Appendix 1 for survey details). Some of the responses were quite surprising, especially many artists' assertions that children are visually more intelligent than adults. The variety of opposing opinions was also quite interesting, though I believe this can be explained in two ways: first, the variety of respondents—some costume technicians, some artistic directors, etc.—affected the responses because the way each type of designer approaches design is different; second, I believe this is indicative of the nature of theatre. It is an art, and art is subjective. I attempted to address opposing views in the body of this guide, but the focus is on the majority and what would be most helpful to amateur designers.

## Process

All artists interviewed agreed on a basic process for designing a show, no matter the audience:

1. Read the script several times. First, always read to simply enjoy the story. Allow yourself to imagine the world in its most ideal and complete format. In subsequent readings, pay attention to specific mentions of location, time of day, season, social class, entrances and exits, clothing, props, etc.—anything that might be helpful in creating the world of the play. Make a list or mark up the script. These notes need not be strictly adhered to, but may be integral to the story and

- thus helpful later.
2. Talk with the director and the rest of the design team to come up with themes and concepts that will be focused on throughout the show.
  3. Research, research, research. Whether it be time period, cultural origin, or just a basic emotion you will focus on in the design, spend lots of time looking up different ways this idea has been presented before. And not just in theatre—in other visual arts, writings, advertising materials, etc.—anything that inspires you.
  4. Begin creating a design. Start with sketches. Check with the director and design team for critiques, and changes. As the design begins to mature, move on to full color renderings and finally a scale model.
  5. Create.

**Tip:** One artist talked about design in terms of ideals and wish lists. After the first couple of readings, create a wish list of everything you would like to see on stage, disregarding budget and available materials. Order them in terms of importance. As the design team meets and the almost inevitable budget cuts come along, go back to your list and determine what the design can do without, or try to think of other creative ways the same effect can be achieved. You might be surprised at how this forces creativity.

## Theatre for Young Audiences vs. Adult Audiences

As one artist said, "I think designers/directors occasionally feel they can 'phone it in' on younger audiences ... these people should not be rehired" (Survey, Holly Wiencek, *Design in Children's Theatre*, July 14 - August 4, 2009). Other artists I interviewed agreed: there is very little difference between design for young audiences and design for adult audiences. A decrease in focus of design for young audiences is most often due to a lack of funds. All artists agreed that design should be equally valued for young audiences as for adult audiences. An artist should still try to create a believable and accurate world for the play. A designer's job is to provide visual cues that allow the audience to better understand what is happening on stage. "But if the audience, of whatever age, isn't following our lead, it means *we've* not done our jobs" (Survey, Holly Wiencek, *Design in Children's Theatre*, July 14 - August 4, 2009).

However, there are ways to better engage a younger audience through design:

- Include bright colors.
- Use bigger/bolder colors and textures.
- Try to build from something the children can relate to—movies, video games, books, etc.
- Create things that seem magical, but the moving parts can be seen.
- Evoke a cartoon-like quality.
- Use softer edges.
- Scale back aspects that might seem frightening.

#### Specifically for Set Design:

- Include moving objects, such as turntables, drops, etc.
- Static spaces are very hard on kids.
  - Play with scale according to the size of the actor (for example, to make adult actors look like children, make the set larger).

#### Specifically for Costume Design:

- Color code groups, families.
- Use contrasting colors on characters to make them easy to identify.

At the same time, it is important to not overwhelm the audience. "If the design pulls the attention from the actors, the design has failed" (Survey, Holly Wiencek, *Design in Children's Theatre*, July 14 - August 4, 2009). Do not add bright colors just because it is a children's show; the purpose of everything on stage is to help create the world of the play. Use color, texture, and size sparingly, but try to incorporate what you do use in fun and whimsical ways.

**Tip:** If the production is an adaptation of a well-known children's book, movie, or television show, turn to the source materials and artwork for inspiration. Returning to the source material occurs much more often in TYA as it creates a reference point for a young audience can easily relate to.

## When education is involved...

For a show in which primary goal is educating rather than solely entertaining its audience, the design does need not change drastically, if at all. The interviewed artists agreed that for an educational show to be most effective, the audience must be able to believe in the world created on stage.

As one designer stated: "Younger audiences know when they are being lied to" (Survey, Holly Wiencek, *Design in Children's Theatre*, July 14 - August 5, 2009).

However, there are a few ways that you can incorporate education into the design:

- If the show is teaching about math or language, it may be helpful to include some words or symbols on stage for the visual learners in the audience.
- Educational theatres often have a smaller budget, so a simpler set and pulling costumes helps.

If the show is to be educational for the actors, again, the design need not change. However, the process can be altered slightly to better incorporate the young participants.

- One costume designer likes to talk with her young actors about themselves and their characters so she can incorporate something about the actor in the costume to help facilitate ownership of the role.
- You can also teach children about the process of designing a show by using different techniques in which they help brainstorm. Who knows, maybe you'll be inspired! See the links below for some lesson plans to teach students about design.

### **Lesson Plans in Design:**

[ArtsWork: Understanding Stage Design: Using Visual Elements to Provide Information to an Audience](#)

[ArtsWork: Imagining the Environment: Introduction](#)

[ArtsWork: Floor Plans and Set and Costume Renderings](#)

[ArtsWork: The Costumes](#)

## Relying on Imagination

It was interesting to see the role that designers allowed imagination to play for younger audiences. The childhood years are filled with occasions to "play pretend" and read fairy tales and fantasy. Are children better able to use their imaginations when watching a play than adults? Almost all artists responded with a resounding yes. However, almost all also agreed that this should never be a reason for not filling out a design. A lighting designer made this important point: "I feel that a young audience needs more reference points to connect them to the space—big on imagination, not so big on subtlety" (Survey, Holly Wiencek, *Design in Children's Theatre*, July 14 - August 4, 2009).

However, designers often answered that despite the need to not "phone it in" in children's theatre, designs can usually be much simpler. Adults expect a certain amount of detail and reality in the sets and costumes of shows they pay to see, but children better allow themselves to be captivated by the story. The trick is to create a design that contributes seamlessly to the story being told. After all, an imagination is a terrible thing to waste.

Which brings me to what most of the surveyed artists cited as one of the most difficult aspects of designing for children's theatre: the instantaneous transport from reality to fantasy and back again. "If a play is in one central location it's wonderful, but when it travels to multiple places, that tends to make it more difficult" (Survey, Holly Wiencek, *Design in Children's Theatre*, July 14 - August 4, 2009). The answer to this dilemma tended to be to create an abstract and adaptable set. I worried about children's ability to understand location changes in an abstract set; however, many designers said they rely on the actors for this. "The level of abstraction required can be challenging—we're often asked to evoke a home, and a forest, and a cave, and a palace, and a village, and a flying carpet, etc, etc.—all seamlessly, instantly, with little or no scene changes. So we need to create things that are simple enough that the perception can be changed just by changing how an actor interacts with them"(Survey, Holly Wiencek, *Design in Children's Theatre*, July 14 - August 4, 2009). The lesson is that children will fill in missing pieces with their imaginations as long as designers give them enough to build on.

When beginning this project I was quite sure I would find that many of the artists would say that there is less of a focus on design in children's theatre, but this did not turn out to be the case. I think the need to transfer among different locations seamlessly is the reason. "I think there is more of a focus on design for a theater production for young audiences. Ninety percent of the time, a designer is creating some abstract, non-realistic, fantasy world as per most children's stories" (Survey, Holly Wiencek, *Design in Children's Theatre*, July 14 - August 4, 2009). Many artists also believe that children are visually more intelligent than adults. Children are bombarded with whimsical images and fantasy stories through television shows and picture books every day, and have thus become experts in visual storytelling. We must find a way to absorb the audience. One designer also cited the advances in technology as a bigger challenge for designers: "Kids today need more to make them sit in awe than they did thirty years ago, so the ante for a magnificent design gets upped tenfold" (Survey, Holly Wiencek, *Design in Children's Theatre*, July 14 – August 4, 2009).

## **Traveling Theatre**

The challenges of a traveling theatre troupe affect the design of sets and costumes greatly. Portability, size, efficiency, and cleanliness are all very important to consider. As traveling troupes are usually rather small, each member will probably be responsible for more than one job. Thus, the designs must be actor-friendly.

- Costumes must be easy to get on and off if actors are playing more than one character.
- Costumes should be easy to wash.
- Set pieces must be easy to transport as well as easy to move around on stage.
- Remember that the production will be put on in many different locations with many different backgrounds, so consider your colors carefully.
- The lack of a set can easily be overcome by using different lighting or sound effects. "You can make them see a jail with just a jail bars gobo hitting the floor. You can make a busy street with a sound cue" (Survey, Holly Wiencek, *Design in Children's Theatre*, July 14 - August 4, 2009).
- In some locations, such as many elementary schools, you may not

have the ability to use theatrical lighting effects. Consider other ways to create a scene, such as music or even cardboard set pieces. These can help create reference points for the audience.

## Difficult Shows

Here is a list of some specific shows that designers have found particularly difficult to work with. You may want to avoid these while you're still getting your feet wet!

- Anything with several locations that need to flow into each other almost instantly (especially from reality to fantasy).
  - *The Chronicles of Narnia*
  - *The Bridge to Terebithia*
- Stories conceived as books, because they call for very specific situations and often have wild demands.
  - *The BFG*: "all about playing with scale—the boy is an actor in some scenes, a tiny puppet in others, and the giant is an actor in some and a giant puppet in others. So the logistics are tricky" (Survey, Holly Wiencek, *Design in Children's Theatre*, July 14 - August 4, 2009).
  - *Harold and the Purple Crayon*: "has demands like a scene where Harold draws a balloon, grabs the string, and floats away, as well as a scene where he draws a boat and sails off in it. Making those ideas clear, when they obviously can't be presented literally can be a challenge" (Survey, Holly Wiencek, *Design in Children's Theatre*, July 14 - August 4, 2009).
- "Realistic plays, because of the desire to provide as much detail as possible" (Survey, Holly Wiencek, *Design in Children's Theatre*, July 14 - August 4, 2009).
- "Plays based on collections of books - so many scenes, so quick, they're like a variety show - a "best of" such and such character. Needs are huge and the heart of the story is often small." (Survey, Holly Wiencek, *Design in Children's Theatre*, July 14 - August 4, 2009).
- "Shows for the very young. This is a relatively young area of growth in our field and we are still striving for a proper grasp and aesthetic." (Survey, Holly Wiencek, *Design in Children's Theatre*, July 14 - August 4, 2009).

## Funding

The majority of survey participants cited low budgets as the biggest challenge when designing for children's theatre. Here are some resources where you can research funding for your theatre.

American Theatre Wing  
The Bush Foundation  
Canada Council for the Arts  
Children's Theatre Foundation of America  
Flintridge Foundation  
The Ford Foundation  
The Jim Henson Foundation  
National Endowment for the Arts  
Ontario Artist  
The Shubert Foundation  
[Southern Arts Foundation](#)  
Theatre Communications Group  
The United States Institute for Theatre Technology, Inc.

## Other Resources

**Tip:** One designer cited using a six-year-old to bounce ideas off to see if they will engage the audience and how they will react. “Watch one [child] watch the show and you'll know if something lands, if something you thought wasn't scary, is, and what's going to have them bouncing in their seat.” (Survey, Holly Wiencek, *Design in Children's Theatre*, July 14 – August 4, 2009)

### *Children's Theatre*

by Jed Horace Davis and Mary Jane Larson Watkins

Only snippets available online, however scene design is discussed in Chapter 7.

[Preview here.](#)

### Children's Theatre: An Annotated Bibliography of Internet Sources

*Costume and Makeup* (Phaidon Theater Manuals)

by Michael Holt

[Preview and read reviews here.](#)

*Scene Design: A Guide to the Stage*

Written and illustrated by Henning Nelms

A rather old source, but has some helpful information for beginning designers, simple ways to create sets for schools, low-budget troupes, etc.

[Preview here.](#)

Sceno:graphy

The Theatre Design Website

<http://sceno.org>

*Sculpting Space in the Theatre*

by Babak A. Ebrahimian

[Preview and read reviews here.](#)

*Stage Design and Properties* (Phaidon Theater Manuals)

by Michael Holt

[Preview and read reviews here.](#)

“Subjective: The Artful Life”

Personal Musings on Contemporary Art and Creative Culture

Blog by Jeffrey T. Baker

[Putting Children in Children's Theatre Design](#)

and

[Natural Children's Theatre Design](#)

*Technical Design Solutions for Theatre*

Edited by Bronislaw, Joseph Sammler, and Don Harvey

[Preview here.](#)

*Technical Theatre for Nontechnical People*

by Drew Campbell

[Preview and read reviews here.](#)

“Urban Sensibilities: A New Approach to Stage Design”

by Cynthia Barnes

[Read here.](#)

## Appendix 1: Survey Details

### *Design in Children's Theatre*

1. What is your job title?
2. What types of shows have you designed before? (Theatre for young audiences? Professional theatre? Theatre for adults?)
3. In your experience, does designing costumes and sets for young audiences differ from designing for adults? (If so, how?) Is your goal for what you want to create on stage different?
4. What are the steps you normally take when creating a design concept for a show? Does this change with the age of the audience?
5. Do you feel as if there is less of a focus on design in theatre for young audiences than theatre for adults? If so, do you think this harms the show any?
6. Have you found that you're able to rely on a young audience's imagination more than a more mature audience's?
7. What are some ways to relate to/engage a young audience through design?
8. When designing a show with a primarily educational purpose, how does your design approach differ? In terms of both the design process and the design concept.
9. Does the age of the actors affect how you design a show? (Adult actors vs. child actors) If so, how? If the actors are children, do you try to incorporate them into the design/construction of the set/costumes? Do you think there is any value in this?
10. What do you see as the biggest challenge when designing the sets and costumes for theatre for young audiences?
11. If you are a teaching artist or part of a touring company, you obviously require a portable design, but are there any other factors you think are important for such a design—or can you rely on the audience's imagination to create your world?
12. Do you use abstract sets? Does this translate well to young audiences?
13. What plays for young audiences do you find most challenging to design?
14. What resources would you recommend to other designers of children's theatre?
15. Any other information you think would be useful to other AATE members?

I received responses from professors, technical directors, production associates, production managers, scenic designers, lighting designers, costume designers, and artistic directors. Other than job title, all responses were anonymous.