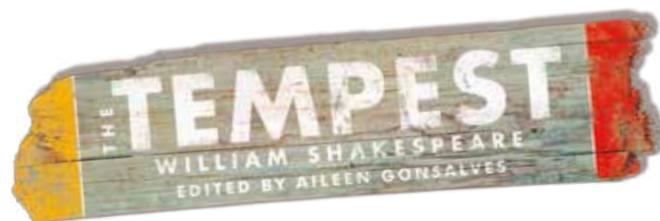


POWER AND DUTY

Playmaking Pack - Resources - Design



Design

KATE McSTRAW

Kate is a freelance theatre designer and has designed the set and costumes for the First Encounters production of *The Tempest*. Here she answers a few questions about the responsibilities of a designer and power of design.

What is the role of 'design' and how important is it to the creation of performance?

I see my role as helping to create the world which the characters – portrayed by the actors – will live. It's looking at the visual language of the text and finding a way to make this exist in front of the audience.

Personally I feel design is really key to the creation of the performance, as it helps hold all the themes together, and the visuals of the production are often critical in helping the audience see and understand the world in which the characters live.

How do you first approach creating the world of a play?

The very first thing is to read the script, several times over. So many of the clues can be found here. It's a bit like being a detective; what in the text tells you about the characters, or the place they live, or the time they live in?

- **Are they rich or poor?**
- **Are they living in history, present time, or future?**
- **Are the characters related? What jobs do they have?**
- **Is the story set in one place, or several places? Is it rural or urban; inside or outside?**

I spend the first few days with the script reading over and over, highlighting in different colours and underlining, writing notes around the edges. Usually I'm left with a lot of questions, but I will have some clear ideas about who these people are, how they are connected to one another, and what the space I create for them (the set) needs to give them.

From here I usually have some initial ideas or thoughts about what I might like to explore further. Some of the characters will start to form quite clearly in my mind, for example 'this is a young girl, around 15, who is timid and the text refers to her wearing a blue dress'. Or I will see that it's set in a certain place and time, for example 'this is a city centre apartment, and the text tells me that streetlights shine into the living room at night.' I'll make note of these and start researching ideas – usually a mixture of searching key phrases on the internet (sites like Pinterest are really useful to help get some visual ideas), as well as visiting the library and going through various texts there.

The next stage is to have conversations with the director of the production. I will often ask my questions from the script reading, share my thoughts about the characters with them, and see what direction the director wants to take the piece. They will usually have a clear idea about what time period they want the production to be set in, and often have some strong ideas too about certain characters or ideas for scenes. The conversations are part of an on-going discussion, where we exchange ideas regularly during the initial concept phase as we, together, try and find the main ideas we want to root the set and costumes in.

How do you approach designing costumes?

As I say, many of the clues about the characters and their costumes are in the text. The main thing is to remember that people don't just wear clothes; they make a choice about what they want to wear, but clothes are also affected by other things such as age, status, time period, what they do for a job etc.

I make a list for each character about what the text tells me about them. Everything from basic 'facts' like gender and age; and how they relate to the other characters, such as family members and friendship groups; to more subtle choices about their characteristics and personality. I will also note any stage directions that indicate changes to the costume – due to weather conditions or a change of circumstances.

Colour pallets are really important to me, and usually feature very quickly. Often the text will mention particular colours, or sometimes when I read the script I get a gut feeling that a character suits a particular colour. Colour is very powerful and looking at the meaning behind colours, can be useful e.g. yellow is a 'happy' colour and purple can denote royalty. Different cultures also have different meanings behind colour, so if the script or character is from a particular culture, it is interesting to research this too.

I then begin drawing, initial sketches at first. I use body templates in the first instance so I can start drawing ideas quickly, without having to worry about getting the proportions right. Over time, once the costume designs are more clearly formed ideas, I will redraw the character to try and reflect some of their personality in the drawing too.

Any production of the *The Tempest* has to involve magic, and *Julius Caesar* too has a strong sense of the supernatural powers, how do you give a sense of magic?

Magic is always an interesting theme, because it can mean different things to different people. It's also non-tangible, so it can be really hard to get the idea across. Music, sound and movement are really key to creating this effectively I think, so I always like to work with the director (and the sound designer and movement director when we have them in our team) to find the best way of creating this together. I also ask the question of what type of magic do we want?

For the RSC First Encounters production of *The Tempest*, we wanted magic to feel really ancient. Prospero uses ancient magic symbols to write down and study his magic powers; and so his costume and the set have these symbols marked on to them. I have also incorporated sound into the set, so that as people move sound is created, which adds to a sense of magic in the land.

All of Shakespeare's plays have characters who possess power – sometimes magic power (like Prospero), sometime political power (like Caesar) – how can this be represented through the design of set and costumes?

When I think about big themes like 'power', I ask myself if there are any stereotypes I can call upon, which an audience member would instantly recognise. For example, if I asked you to describe a robber to me right now, you would probably say something like 'he's wearing black, has a black face-mask or covering, wearing gloves, carrying a weapon and a bag for his stash' – interestingly I've also stereotyped the robber as being male.

You can use this same exercise for lots of character types, and it can be a really useful tool for getting a theme across very quickly to the audience. With power we can do a similar thing; power is often about status, so explore what status does this character have? Are they royal? Religious? Rich? Mean? Height can play a key part in representing power too; power is often represented by having more space – perhaps they are tall already, or maybe they wear heels, or a hat, or hold something that represents power, like a staff or a gun? Perhaps they have broad shoulders so they appear big, which can be achieved through a thick fabric on a cloak, or shoulder pads inside a suit. Perhaps they have lots of jewellery on show to represent wealth? Again, the text will give you lots of clues for the characters.

With the set, again space is often a representation of power, so I would give them moments where they can take up lots of space, or perhaps be raised above the other characters in some way.

Top practical tips or advice for someone designing one of Shakespeare's plays (with limited resources).

The brilliant thing to remember about Shakespeare's plays is that William Shakespeare himself created productions with limited resources (certainly compared to what we are used to seeing in theatres now). I make a list of everything the set needs to be able to do and all the props the characters need to have on them. I then check whether they are really needed at all – or can one prop be used as something else later on? Can that bit of set be a prop instead? I usually work on touring productions, where everything has to fit into a small van, and therefore I can't usually have set flats and large pieces of scenery; instead I use what I call 'prop based sets' such as a load of stacked chairs to create the illusion of walls, or suitcases and boxes which can be, well, most things really with a bit of imagination!

I would look and see what you have in the room around you. If you had to design the set and create the props and costumes from only the things you had in the room you are currently sitting in; what would you do? Remember the best thing about theatre is that it is all pretend! The audience know that, so be creative with what you already have. You need a boat? Great – can that table be a boat? You need some cloaks? Ok, can the coats hanging up on the wall become cloaks somehow? Sometimes the most creative ideas can come from the most limited resources.