An Introduction to Technical Theatre

by Tal Sanders
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Where do design ideas come from? The best short answer: from the script! In the theatre, the script is our base material. When material is well chosen for your specific audience, your inspiration mostly comes from that script. The collaborative process begins once a group of theatre makers who comprise the creative team get together to discuss possibilities for their production. In preparation for this first meeting, sometimes referred to as a “design conference,” each participant will have immersed themselves in the script and familiarized themselves with any and all references made to history, people, places, or cultures—anything that may be unfamiliar to them.

**There’s More to Know**

Like to read? Creative team members read the script for a production many times. Each reading delivers new insights and new information about the story being told. Theatre makers must know not only the story, but also the workings of the way it is told in order to effectively deliver it to an audience. The first reading should be for pleasure and to let the script work on you. Take note of what surprised or moved you on the first reading, when you are as close to the audience’s experience of the story as you will ever be. The second reading allows you to focus on the shape of the play, its imagery, and needs. Further readings will reveal more specific details about characters and story dynamics. The more you read, the clearer you will be about how you can effectively deliver the story to your audience.

Their homework done, the creative team can then discuss the themes within the play and the best way to help the audience experience the play and receive its message.

Early conversations involve thoughtful exchanges about these ideas, while also touching on production concerns such as timeline, budgetary realities, and cast size. Often the production’s director speaks about what excites them about the script, a specific theme they want to showcase, or a vision for the production. Many designers take copious notes during the first meeting so they can be sure to consider all
the ideas brought to the table by their collaborators. Some bring visual samples of images, colors, or textures they have responded to while reading and researching the script. The first meeting of a creative team is successful if everyone leaves with a clearer vision of how the production might take form.

After this first meeting, most designers go back to the script and read it again. They identify connections between the text and the ideas discussed in the meeting. Sometimes individual meetings with the director help the ideas progress. By the time a second meeting is called, the designers are usually able to bring a series of visual examples to illustrate the direction in which they have been moving. It is often the more tangible arts of scenery and costuming that are able to share visual representations of what the production might look like first. Thumbnail sketches of scenery and line renderings of costumes may be shared at this time. If the work presented is well received by the entire creative team, a sense of the style and concept for the production becomes clearer, and designs of more ephemeral elements such as light, sound, and movement can be expressed more distinctly against it. All of these considerations are eventually expressed as a production concept, which helps to unify the vision for the production. Aside from a production concept, color use for designs, stage mechanics, rehearsal scheduling, and budget allocation are also usually discussed at a second meeting.

There’s More to Know

There are endless ways to represent the scenic needs of plays. Scenic designs are generally categorized by one of the following styles:

A single set show: A single environment supports the entire performance. Items may move within the setting, but the audience is not transported to another location through set changes. Often a three-wall interior setting is used. Such a setting is referred to as a “box set.”

A unit set show: One setting serves for multiple locations with minor adjustments. A designer may find an overarching theme to represent, yet allow accommodations for small, specific elements required by scene locations.

A multi-set show: In this setting elements are changeable in order to transport the audience to a number of locations. Usually full stage changes are made, which often require both time and crews to facilitate.

After the second meeting, each designer goes to work on the support materials that accompany their designs. A scenic designer develops a set of drafted, scaled plans of the theatre space and the show design and sets of colored renderings or samples of color elements. A costume designer produces a series of color renderings of each costume and chooses swatches of fabric that represent the color and texture of the costume elements. A lighting designer prepares a series of drafted views that map
where the lighting equipment will be placed, the color filters it will employ, and lists of the specific equipment required. Sound designers submit a map of the equipment locations and a list of cues to be supplied or created.

By the time designers have created the backup materials to communicate their designs, meetings with the technical director, costume shop manager, and master electrician are required to then plan the execution of the designs. This may take place in individual meetings between designers and area leads or may come in the form of a production meeting.

Production meetings continue throughout the production process. If possible, a weekly meeting is helpful. Many professional productions have fewer meetings because creative team members are often working from different cities until closer to technical rehearsals.

The designer’s job is far from finished once they have submitted plans to the technical director. After plans are received, the process of determining the cost of realizing the design begins. Designers may be asked to alter or revise their plans to bring them into budget. Once a design has been deemed affordable, the designers begin to work closely with the shops to see that the details of the designs are realized appropriately. Daily communications from the rehearsal room also influence the design and sometimes require alterations to be made. The designer’s role at this time is to shepherd the design through this part of the process.

Once construction is completed, the process of loading the design elements into the theatre space begins. Once again the designers are on hand to ensure all of the elements are in place and properly finished. During this time, the production may hold a spacing rehearsal, when the director and performers are given time to explore the realized elements, which until that time may have been represented in the rehearsal room with only tape lines and rough approximations of props and costume pieces.

After everything has been installed in the theatre space, the technical rehearsal process can begin. During this time, designers work with the stage manager and technical director to finalize the elements of the show and adapt the design for any new circumstances discovered at load-in or a spacing rehearsal. We have learned to expect that adjustments need to be made once everything comes together. We hope that if we have planned and communicated well, the changes needed are achievable in the amount of work time we have prior to opening. The designers, director, and management team work to pull all aspects of the production together in a way that is most effective for the audiences.

We are all storytellers, and the technical and dress rehearsal periods are our opportunity to ensure we are all telling a cohesive story to our audience. Following each rehearsal, there are usually daily sessions of technical notes, in which concerns and needs are communicated to the entire company. Often a separate session of notes is also held involving only the performers, director, and stage manager to discuss acting notes.
The final part of the process involves **preview performances**. Previews are test performances. They allow the production to gauge how an audience will interact with the performance. For instance, in a comedy it is very important to allow the audience a moment to laugh, but then to keep the show’s pace moving forward. If a performer cuts off the audience’s reaction by speaking too soon after a laugh line, then the audience is conditioned not to laugh for fear they will miss the dialogue being spoken onstage. A preview performance allows the performers and crew the opportunity to perfect the timing of the show. Traditionally tickets for preview performances are sold at a discounted rate. In most theatres, reviewers who might write about the production are not allowed to review a preview performance. During previews, designers continue to finesse their designs, while also learning from how the audience reacts to the work. Daily production meetings or note sessions continue through the preview period.

Once opening night has arrived, designers’ services are no longer needed and most move on to the next project.

However, individually, designers should always take time to reflect on each production and evaluate their work, their choices, and the relative success of each.

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**For Further Exploration**
