

CUADC Guide to Set Design



Almost every theatre show needs a set designer, whose role is to design the aesthetic of the stage space. The job requires working creatively with the Director and other members of the production team to come up with a plan, and then realizing that plan (or something like it!) with the Technical Director. You will have to get hands on and be in charge of any creative parts of the making, such as painting the set, but the TD is responsible for getting most of the set items made or sourced. It is an excellent opportunity to be creative, but also to take a big organizational role in getting a show on the stage!

Working with Production Team and Director

Designing a set is a process that usually involves a team effort. The production team is working to make the stage look as good as possible, and this involves many aspects of design such as lighting, set and costume, which all effect each other. The director can sometimes have a clear vision of the set they want, in which case you work closely together on making that perfect. The other extreme is a director with merely a concept for the play and you should come up with ideas that reflect this concept. Communication with the whole production team is key, and there will be regular meetings throughout the design process. The TD will most likely set you deadlines for designs or ideas so that set gets made.

Technical Director

The Technical Director is the person in charge of getting the set built, and getting it done safely. They will do the risk assessment (with you) and work out how to make your designs possible within the restraints of the budget and other practical factors. This requires willingness on both your parts to adapt or change ideas, and work together. Of course the way each set designer and TD work together will be different, but it is important you establish how to work effectively together.

You are in charge of creative decisions, which normally means things such as sourcing furniture and painting. The ADC has a furniture store, which you can use furniture from if it is not being used by another show. If there is not the right thing there, then you could consider charity shops, borrowing from colleges or (if you leave enough time) buying online (e.g Amazon, Ebay, Gumtree).

Paint can be bought from B and Q or similar, or there are art shops and stationary stores if you need more particular things. All paint can be left on the paint shelves by the workshop, and should be labeled with the show name. It is possible to use paint from shows that have finished, but it is always worth checking with someone. Stock flats must be painted with Rosco (as your TD or management about this)

NB/ you are not allowed to paint in the workshop space, but can paint in the scene dock next to it.

Drawing up designs

Doing set drawings is important for at least two reasons. Firstly, sketches help the director visualize what you have planned, which is useful in production meetings and for the director to start planning stage blocking (how the actors are going to move around the stage). A word of warning, many directors (and in fact many set designers) often can't conceive the scale of things on stage, and might express shock at how small or large a particular part of the set is when they actually see it on stage.

Secondly, drawings communicate your ideas to the TD in earlier stages, meaning they can comment on feasibility of ideas. Later on, the TD will use the final set design to build the set from. There are a number of points in the process where designs need to be passed by management, but the TD should make sure this happens.

The type of drawings you do depends on the complexity and style of the set, and the way in which you are working with the TD. They could be quick annotated sketches, coloured in drawings or to scale technical drawings. An important tool in drawing up the more technical drawings, and helping yourself to realize the space of the theatre are stage plans (<http://lampie.org/adc/stageplan.html> or the ADC/Corpus Playroom website). They are useful to work out whether your ideas will practically fit on the stage, or with planning a moving/changing set. Also, the side plan of the ADC means you can work out the sight lines of the audience, allowing you to avoid a piece of set that prevents half the audience seeing what is going on on stage. Late shows are given a smaller section of the stage than the Main Show, as the main show often leaves set on stage. Communication with the Main Show is important to avoid confusion or disappointment.

How to Research

The time you have to design a show affects how much time should be spent researching and at which point decisions need to be made.

Obviously the way you research and come up with ideas is very personal to the individual, but it is important that you and the director are working together towards the same general aesthetic of the show. It is most likely useful to have some record of your inspirations and ideas, along with notes from meetings. This could be in a sketchbook or online, or any way that suits you.

If you are stuck with ideas, I would recommend looking at past productions, possibly of the show. Even searching "set design" on Google can provide inspiration.

Lastly, turn up to the Get In to ensure the whole thing looks great and give a hand setting up.

Getting Involved

The Freshers Shows are an excellent opportunity to get involved, even if you already have experience with set design, as they are a good introduction to the workings of the ADC /the Playrooms. You can also look on camdram.net for the vacancies in shows (Vacant positions, then Technical) and apply to the show contacts. Don't hesitate to ask them what they want in an application (remember they are just students too). To get a reminder of shows looking for people, sign up to the designers' list at Freshers' events, or subscribe at <http://cuadc.com/get-involved/>

If you have any further questions, email the CUADC Committee Designers' Rep at designer@cuadc.org