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# The Design Process Examined

Reviewed by: Ellen E. Jones

*Unmasking Theatre Design:
A Designer's Guide to Finding Inspiration
and Cultivating Creativity*

By Lynne Porter
Focal Press ISBN: 978-0-415-73841-5

Lynne Porter realized that the traditional master-apprentice approach of teaching theatrical design was often only successful for students with an innate design sense. She questioned the technique of critiquing "apprentice" work in the hopes that work will improve over time. Porter describes the typical result of that teaching method in her introduction: "Too many times, we laboriously massage a not-very-good idea into a not-very-good finished design." That epiphany was the cata-lyst for the research used in writing *Unmasking Theatre Design: A Designer's Guide to Finding Inspiration and Cultivating Creativity.*

The author argues against the common misconception that a polished, aesthetically pleasing presentation equals a good design. Facile skill sets—drawing and rendering skills or amazing Photoshop and Vectorworks Renderworks abilities—are often confused with evidence of creativity and good design. Porter articulately states that those work products—models, renderings, sketches—are the means to a design, not the design itself. She divides theatrical design into two discrete components: the initial creative process, which results in generation and selection of a design idea, and the completion of the aforementioned communication tools as expressions of the design idea.

The book deconstructs the cre-

ative process used by theatre designers to create an organized (though, she is quick to point out, not linear) and repeatable design process that generates good design ideas. Her goal is to outline unambiguous steps that can be used both to teach theatrical design and to develop a realized design.

Is the book useful for readers who are neither academics nor beginners? Definitely, if you agree, as I do, with Porter's underlying assumptions about what constitutes a good design:

- The design must be rooted in the script, the overall approach of the entire creative team, and ultimately take into account the specific parameters and resources of the company where the play will be produced.
- Research is a necessity, not a luxury.
- Design is not a linear process; there is continual refinement as a designer seeks the best design ideas.
- Good design ideas have visual elements inherently built, so those ideas are the inspiration for visual results.
- Elegant design solutions are the simplest, cleanest, most effective responses to the design problems of a specific production.
- Good theatrical designs are based on good design ideas (concepts), not on access to unlimited resources.

The book offers enough background to make it useful for the most inexperienced designer. A brief introduction to the nature of theatre and the role of the theatrical designer offer a starting point for the new practitioner. A succinct, yet complete, treatment of the elements of design and principles of composition, as well as a listing of the visual tools used in scenic design, costume design, and lighting design, is included in early chapters.

Porter then segues into chapters about script analysis that offer examples and exercises to encourage generation of potential design ideas centered on the text. Illustrative examples of free writing exercises based on responses to the plot as well as character actions and dialogue are particularly useful. The section on imagery research and its integration into the stage design includes similar examples of visual brainstorming. The suggested exercises demonstrate the link of visual and textual information to design development.

This is one of the few books about design that reinforces the nonlinear nature of the design process. Elegant design requires continual refinement that comes from further conceptualization steps as new discoveries are made. Another highlight of the book is the comprehensive explanation of collaboration. While producing theatre is almost always described as a collaborative process, mentors rarely explain what that term really means or what actions and behaviors are indicative of good collaboration.

While the creative process is presented as a cerebral activity, Porter is clear that it can never be totally separated from the practical circumstances of production. She outlines the range of other influences that may impact a designer's ideas and the design solutions chosen. The impact of the personalities of the creative team, deficiencies of the script, the physical venue, and the resources and attitudes of the producing organization must all be considered in the design process at some point. Case studies offer specific examples of responding to these external factors as part of the design process.

Porter includes checklists and bulleted lists to organize material and exercises for each specified design activity. In some sections, the content may seem repetitive for the reader who is not in a class—text, bulleted outline lists, and exercises based on the bulleted lists. However, they do clarify the steps of the design process she suggests.

Most of the text is illustrated with graphics and simple work flow charts. The book is also filled with

images of larger documents, sketches, and production photographs that offer a bridge between the theoretical process and realized production work. Indeed there are more than 160 figures in a book with 260 pages in the main text. The quantity of simple graphics can be distracting. While the layout is interesting, the graphics are so numerous that they have limited the available space for actual content. The book's photographs are of high quality; however, the captioning is not always specific enough for the reader to understand the purpose of the image.

The appendix is an excellent resource. It includes a bibliography of suggested reading on both related topics and the specific contents of the book and a list of software and app suggestions. Supplemental exercises for more advanced work can also be found in the appendix. Perhaps even more valuable is the inclusion of a segment titled "Design Conference Unpacked." Instructions for how to prepare for each meeting and the usual process and outcomes for the usual series of four design conferences are detailed.

Both the quotations within the body of the book and the end notes of each chapter evidence Porter's commitment to research and investigation into creativity, design, and thought process. Her work that is used as examples in the book clearly indicates her expertise and talent as a scenic designer.

*Unmasking Theatre Design* is clearly geared to developing designers and the classroom setting. The book offers a number of strategies for designers to enhance the process of creating visual elements for a production. The book can be a good tool for teaching the design process. The back cover descriptions states that Porter's process is appropriate to scenery, costume, lighting, projection, and sound design. However, examples in the book are heavily weighted toward scenery and costumes, with lighting as a tertiary focus. The content does not mention sound or projection design specifically, nor does it offer examples and exercises related to sound or projection design.

The techniques described and illustrated are probably already incorporated into an experienced designer's creative process, although documentation of each step may not be as organized or complete. Certainly, the book is a reminder for designers at any level to continually reexamine their work flows to make sure they are not cutting corners and to perhaps be more conscious about the design process. The contents can be an interesting refresher for more seasoned designers.

Porter's book is a provocative read for anyone teaching theatrical design, particularly at the undergraduate level. It is full of interesting ideas and provides a strong background for discussions of the design process and design pedagogy. 🔊