

usitt

td&t

2015  
f a i l

theatre design & technology



## The Design Process

*Unmasking Theatre Design: A Designer's Guide to Finding Inspiration and Cultivating Creativity* by Lynne Porter; Burlington, MA, Focal Press, 2014. 320 pp. Cloth, \$157.95. Paper, \$44.95.

Reviewed by Peter Kallok

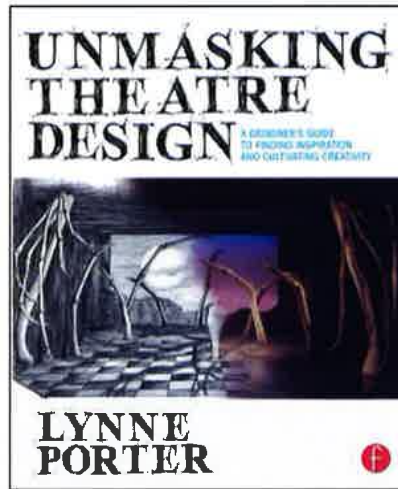
A student of mine returned from last spring's USITT Annual Conference & Stage Expo full of enthusiasm. She opened her bag, first tossed me a piece of some hard-won swag, and then excitedly pulled out a new book she had purchased, Lynne Porter's *Unmasking Theatre Design*. I had recently downloaded a review copy but had not yet had the opportunity to read it. My student's enthusiasm sparked my curiosity, so I sat down with it.

Porter, a professor of theatre and the resident designer in the Theatre Program at Fairfield University in Connecticut, has spent 20 years teaching undergraduate students about the design process. She wondered why some students were thriving and others floundering. To quell her frustrations—frustrations I share—over the vast spectrum of student success in the classroom, she thoroughly assessed her own methods and strategies for teaching design. By analyzing every detail of her own design process, Porter has devised a clear and systematic method that encourages young design students to follow a step-by-step progression.

There is nothing mysterious here. She explains and then demonstrates that design doesn't just appear magically. Porter shares a method that is firm enough for young design students seeking guidelines they can follow, yet allows space to find their own individual comfort zones.

### TACKLING THE QUESTIONS

When students are faced with their first design project, whether it is scenic, costumes, lights, sound, or projections, how do they proceed? When they ultimately get stuck, how do they move forward? Why did they make the choices they made? And are those choices valid? *Unmasking Theatre*



*Design* tackles all these questions. The book includes numerous examples, photographs, and diagrams of the various stages and elements of the design process. Porter focuses mainly on scenic, costume, and lighting design, but most of her exercises and methods can be easily applied to sound and projection design as well. She makes room for the reader to explore alternative ways of designing that accommodates individual learning styles.

The book is organized in five parts. Part one, "Theatre and Design," introduces us to the nature and function of theatre and how designers participate in its making. This section includes the requisite discussion of the elements and principles of design. I found the author's notion of designers' "expressive tools" (theatre-specific elements of design) clear and insightful. As she examines the particular tools of the scenic, costume, and lighting designer, she references several nicely composed color photographs with clear explanatory notes.

In part two, "Deconstructing the Creative Process," Porter spends three chapters discussing how we think, the concept of ideation, and the creative and critical thought processes. Though their relevance to a design process is fairly evident, students will benefit from the specific discussion of why and how these concepts can clarify or enlighten the design process. Anticipating that direct relevance aspect, the

author provides examples in the next section of the text.

### THEORY INTO PRACTICE

Part three, "Putting Theory into Practice," provides a nice flow chart illustrating how the design process can dovetail with the creative processes introduced in the previous chapter. I question Porter's introduction of visual icons representing her own creative thinking "personas": a deerstalker's hat (Detective), a propeller-topped beanie (the Imaginative Kid), a wig of rolled curls (Judge), and a beret (Artist). Nonetheless, it is important the author demonstrates that as one proceeds through the design process, from first play reading to design presentation, different modes of creative thinking or inquiry are utilized, and thus should be recognized as integral to a vigorous and successful process.

Of particular note is Porter's emphasis on thorough explorations of design ideas. She encourages us to "propel the work forward." Don't stop at the first interesting visual design idea, keep looking. Great advice for young designers, who often latch onto their first design solution and can't let go or explore any further. She espouses a "good, better, best" process that urges experimentation and development. This section offers wonderful suggestions and activities such as note and list generation, mind maps, free writing, and visual brainstorming.

Part four, "Unpacking the Design Process," takes us through the design process step by step. This is easy to follow and to engage with, and most students would benefit from this format. From effective suggestions for play reading techniques to analysis and visual research, from design concepts to expression and execution, students will be well prepared, developing confidence along the way. The book provides excellent illustrative examples of the development of scenic, costume, and lighting design ideas. Porter clearly demonstrates that it is important for students to understand that it takes patience and hard work to develop strong designs.

Part four concludes with a case study of the author's own scenic design process

for a production of *Dracula*. It is particularly helpful to witness the author at work. We observe how she grappled with a design problem, continued to experiment with the design, and took suggestions all along the way. We get a good example of the give and take, and the artistic voices of director and designer working together. But I missed the voices of the costume and lighting designers in this example. Did their input influence the scenic design?

### **FRUITFUL COLLABORATION**

In part five, "Putting It All Together," the author discusses what makes a fruitful and satisfying collaboration. Her comments regarding abusive situations were quite significant and should be highlighted. Though I did find the discussion regarding introverts and extroverts interesting, I don't think its prominence is necessarily warranted. Her subsections, "A Designer's Advice to Directors" and "How Designers Can Speak to Directors" were on the mark. I hope Porter considers expanding these discussions in future writing.

Porter plants inspirational quotes throughout the text. Although many are appropriate, they are dominated by white, male figures. There is only one quote from a woman, and there are no significant quotes from designers, writers, or artists of color. The book includes an Appendix of supplemental exercises and information as well as a Suggested Reading list organized by helpful topics such as "creativity," "play analysis," and "drawing, painting, and model-making." The Software Resources section includes a substantial listing of software and mobile device apps for theatre designers.

Overall, Lynne Porter has written a welcome textbook that will guide many young designers of today, as well as encourage those of us who teach design to feel comfortable reassessing our own classroom methods. We can use *Unmasking Theatre Design* as our guide. I certainly will.

*Peter Kallok is an assistant professor of theatre design at Hampshire College in Massachusetts. In addition to his teaching and work as a scenic and lighting designer, Peter has had light art installations in*

*Brooklyn, New York, and Montague, Massachusetts. He is currently working on a design-driven performance piece about Rachel Carson and DDT.*