



UNIT 9

STAGE
OF
mind

9. SET DESIGN AND PRODUCTION

Designing a set for a theatre performance involves both creative and practical elements, using physical materials to support the narrative and imaginative needs of the play. This process draws on concepts from visual art and closely analyses the play-text or script to create a physical space that interacts with the performance.

In addition to the artistic aspects of a production, there are logistical interactions that must be managed between performers, directors, stage management, technical teams, and the venue. This also includes aspects such as publicity, creation of promotional materials, and audience research in some cases.

This unit is designed to introduce participants to the subject through a combination of theatre-based games and practical exercises. Through dialogue and group discussion, participants will share ideas and experiences to develop skills related to stage set design and production. By the end of the unit, participants will have gained practical skills and knowledge to contribute to the successful production of a theatre performance.

9.1 Learning outcomes

Upon completion of this unit, participants of the training program will:

- ▶ develop a basic understanding of the various elements involved in a theatre production.
- ▶ recognize the significance of set design in conveying the visual narrative of a production.
- ▶ enhance their creativity by generating and communicating design concepts.
- ▶ comprehend the meanings and concepts behind set design and production.

9.2 Theoretical background / Approach

Set design and production in the Western Tradition are traced back to the theatre of ancient Greece. Beginning with productions that used a small number of actors using masks and basic backdrops in natural light, theatre design and production evolved into an increasingly complex art and craft. From the small travelling theatres of Medieval Europe to Elizabethan Theatre to the grandiose picture-box theatres of the 18th century and into modern time, set design and production have developed along with technology (interior lighting, movable set-pieces), artistic trends, and the norms of society.

Theatre reflects the world it is created in and set design and production choices do as well. Either imitating the world as closely as possible, creating a spectacle to distract from the world, or even critique the world in abstract or minimalist presentation. There is no absolute choice for designing a set, but it must be functional and meet the requirements of the theatre director.

Theatre production is made up of all the components that go into producing a live theatre event, including the director and set designer. However, there are many more roles required to stage a play. The number of roles depends on the size of the production, and whether it is commercial or community/voluntary. Common roles include the production manager, stage manager, lighting and sound designers, make-up



and costuming technicians as well as venue staff like the front of house manager, box-office staff, and sales and marketing teams.

9.3 Learning and teaching methods

This unit employs a variety of teaching and learning methods to provide a comprehensive learning experience. The workshops are structured to include both formal and informal activities, with a balance between learning information and using creativity to apply that knowledge.

The teaching method emphasizes active listening, group discussion, and the sharing of observations and responses. Participants will be encouraged to express what they have observed or learned and then to expand upon that knowledge. The facilitator will foster a supportive learning environment, encouraging participants to explore and enhance their interest in set design and theatre production.

All the activities presented are optional and non-obligatory. Facilitators must be flexible and sensitive to the individual needs of participants, offering alternative options where necessary to ensure that everyone can fully engage in the learning process.

9.4 Detailed unit description

The main goal of this unit is to give the participants a basic understanding of set design and productions through both presentational and experiential knowledge.

Given the technical nature of this unit, it is important to balance the imparting of technical information with opportunities to apply the knowledge in an approachable way. It is also important that the body is activated as well as the mind, the introductory, core, and closing activities are designed with this in mind.

Starting the workshop, the participants can become familiar with each other and the space they are working in through the introductory exercises. Space is the key concept in set design and engaging with the workshop space in an embodied way will prepare the participants for the core activities.

The core activities consist of videos and practical exercises that allow participants to practice the ideas they've learned. There is no right answer to what the participants produce; instead, the activities are a way for participants to explore their creativity and develop their skills.

The closure activities provide participants with a moment of quiet reflection to relax and internalize what they have learned. As the workshop may include many unfamiliar terms, it's crucial to create a calm and supportive environment that allows participants to ask questions and share observations without feeling anxious.

9.5 Unit assessment

Assessment should be customized to suit the competencies, experience, and expectations of each individual, and should consider the unique challenges they may face. The progress of every participant will be evaluated based on their comprehension of the various elements involved in a theatre production and the significance of set design in conveying the visual narrative of a production. Participants' creativity and comprehension skills related to the understanding meanings and concepts behind set design and



production should be assessed as well.

To evaluate the effectiveness of the proposed activities in improving the above-mentioned participants' competencies, questionnaires can be used. These questionnaires can allow the participants to express whether they perceive that they have improved their skills in these areas. Additionally, at the end of each session, time should be allocated to discussing these topics to enable participants to share their experiences with their peers.

In the framework of this training programme implementation, it is expected to have a professional familiar with the participants present during the sessions to support the facilitator and to provide objective assessment to ensure that the training is achieving its intended goals.

9.6 Additional resources

- ▶ Brockett, O. G., & Mitchell, M. (2010). *Making a Scene: The History of Stage Design and Technology*. Tobin Theatre Arts Fund. San Antonio. United States.
- ▶ Brook, P. (1968). *The Empty Space*. Touchstone. New York.
- ▶ Low, J. (2016). *Dramatic Spaces*. Routledge. London.

9.7 References

- ▶ Center Theatre Group. (2016, July 26). Working in theatre: Production Management [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yuAjzzDTNOW>
- ▶ TED. (2018, October 31). 3 ways to create a space that moves you, from a Broadway set designer | David Korins [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SU8JYKGekXo>
- ▶ National Theatre. (2019, August 2). Peter Gynt | Designing Theatre [Video]. YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K1eFxlwRI8>
- ▶ Matt Kizer. (2020, March 29). The Lighting Design Process [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UN18kSmSNdk>



9.8 Unit activities

9.8.1 Introduction exercises

EXERCISE NAME: FLOCKING

Exercise number: 1

Aims of the exercise:

- Develop spatial awareness
- Promote an awareness of how people move through a space
- Help the participants feel comfortable working together

Focus level: Low

Energy requirement: Medium

Materials: None

Duration: 15 minutes

Instructions:

The facilitator asks the participants to move around the space, always walking towards an empty space in the room.

While they are moving through the room, participants are asked to observe it, to look what is in it, to notice its lighting and the shape.

The participants are then asked to bring their awareness to the other people moving through the room, and observe how they move and what effect the space has on their movement.

The facilitator then asks the group to try and stop moving all at once, as soon as one person stops everyone else should stop to, without signalling or using words.

Once everyone has stopped, the facilitator directs the participants to start moving again as a group, so as soon as one person moves, everyone moves.

The facilitator asks the participants to start and stop as a group on their own without being told, and continues the exercise for a few minutes until the participants are moving together smoothly as a group.

Bring the participants into a circle and discuss their observations of the space and how it affected their movement.

Use the observations of the room to introduce the basics of set design, relating how design relates to function, and how set designers make decisions based on the setting of the play.



Key Terms

Spatial awareness refers to the ability to understand and perceive one's position in space and the relationships between objects in space.

EXERCISE NAME: SHAPES

Exercise number: 2

Aims of the exercise

- Connect with a sense of fun and playfulness
- Stimulate creative thinking
- Develop teamwork

Focus level: Medium

Energy requirement: Medium

Materials: None

Duration: 15-20 minutes

Instructions:

- ▶ The facilitator asks the participants to walk around the room always moving towards an empty space.
- ▶ Facilitator calls out a series of tasks which participants complete as quickly as possible without discussion.
- ▶ The first task is 'Get into groups of three.' Once completed, instruct participants to walk around the space again until the next task is called out and so on using different sized groups.
- ▶ Once the participants are comfortable getting into groups, add the task for the groups of using their bodies to make a representation of a specific space 'Using your bodies, make a kitchen.'
- ▶ If a group has a particularly successful representation of a space, the facilitator can ask the other participants to interact with the created space like actors using a set.
- ▶ Bring the participants into a circle and reflect on the exercise with a focus on what elements allowed then to understand the representations as a specific space.



EXERCISE NAME: IMAGINE A SPACE

Exercise number: 3

Aims of the exercise

- Understand the narrative role of set design.
- Practice basic design concepts.
- Stimulate creative thinking.

Focus level: High

Energy requirement: Low

Materials: Drawing materials, excerpt of a script

Duration: 20-30 minutes

Instructions:

- ▶ The facilitator asks the participants to gather in a circle and take turns reading through a section of a script. If reading a script is not suitable for the participants, a verbal discussion of a well know story or fairy-tale can be done instead.
- ▶ Ask the participants to think about and discuss the setting of the story, with attention to physical elements referred to directly in the text or implied. Also ask them to discuss the feeling or mood of the story, and how they think it could be shown visually including use of colour and lighting.
- ▶ Lead a discussion on how the visual elements of the performance setting help tell the story of a play.
- ▶ Hand out paper and drawing materials and ask the participants to draw the setting of the text or story they have discussed, as they imagine it.
- ▶ Once they have finished, return to the circle, and ask each participant to talk about the setting they have drawn and discuss how it relates to the story or text.

Key Terms:

A **design concept** provides a comprehensive description of the visual elements and presentation of a theatrical production.



9.8.II Core exercises

EXERCISE NAME: INTRODUCTION TO STAGE LIGHTING

Exercise number: 1

Aims of the exercise:

- Become aware of the role of lighting in set design.
- Engage creatively with lighting design.

Focus level: Low-Medium

Energy requirement: Low-Medium

Materials: PC/Laptop, projector, video on the basics of lighting design, flashlights, red/blue/yellow lighting gels or lightweight coloured paper in those colours

Duration: 30 minutes

Instructions:

- ▶ The facilitator selects and shows to participants a video on the basics of lighting design with the participants.
- ▶ Participants are engaged in a discussion about what the participants learned, focusing on how the direction, level, and colour of lighting affects the mood of a play and how it helps with the storytelling.
- ▶ Participants are then divided into groups, and each of them is given a flashlight. They should play with using the flashlight to create different effects using different directions, distance, and number of people.
- ▶ Ask the participants to observe the different moods created by changes in light.
- ▶ Gather the participants back into the circle, and tape the red, blue, and yellow gels or paper to three of the flashlights.
- ▶ Ask some participants to use the flashlights, and some others participants to volunteer to be actors.
- ▶ Ask the actors to make a stable, dramatic pose, and have the other five experiment with lighting, using colour as well as distance and direction.
- ▶ The facilitator can also direct the actors and the group with the flashlights to attempt a specific scene or mood.
- ▶ Discuss with the participants what they observed about how different forms of lighting changed the feel of the presentation.



EXERCISE NAME: INTRODUCTION TO STAGE LIGHTING

Key Terms:

Lighting gels are transparent filters designed to mount in the front of a lighting fixture to alter the colour of the output light.

EXERCISE NAME: PRACTICAL SET DESIGN

Exercise number: 2

Aims of the exercise

- Understand the basics of set design.
- Apply learning creatively.
- Practice making a set.

Focus level: Low-High

Energy requirement: Low-Medium

Materials: PC/Laptop, projector, video on basics of set design, images of sets from different historical periods, art and crafts materials (cardboard, paper, modelling clay, fabric scraps, pens, pencils, paint, and glue, tape or adhesive)

Duration: 30 minutes

Instructions: The facilitator selects and shows to participants a video on the basics of set design with the participants.

- ▶ Participants are engaged in a discussion about what they learned from the video, with a focus on how the design of a set helps tell the story of the play, and what different elements go into making a set.
- ▶ The facilitator can provide participants with a concise history of set design, highlighting the evolving styles and techniques throughout different time periods such as Ancient Greece, Medieval Europe, Shakespearean and 17th century European theatre, 19th century Realism, 20th century Post-modernism, and contemporary theatre, using relevant examples to illustrate each period.
- ▶ The participants are then asked to get into groups of 3 or 4 and, using a familiar text or story, make a model of a set with the materials provided.
- ▶ To close the activity, participants can be invited to discuss about the various set design ideas and how they help tell the story.



EXERCISE NAME: ELEMENTS OF THEATRE PRODUCTION

Exercise number: 3

Aims of the exercise: Gain an understanding of the different roles that go into producing a performance.

Focus level: Medium

Energy requirement: Low

Materials : PC/Laptop, projector, video on production management, writing materials

Duration: 30 minutes

Instructions:

- ▶ The facilitator selects and shows to participants a video on production management.
- ▶ Participants are engaged in a discussion about what they learned from the video, with a focus on all the different roles that go into producing a play.
- ▶ Participants will have to try and list all the different jobs that go into putting on a play, including the supporting activities like promotion, tickets sales and administration.
- ▶ It can be interesting to present to the participants examples of both large-scale productions and small community-based productions in terms of roles, budgets and number of people involved.
- ▶ A familiar text or story can be used to discuss what would be needed for this group to stage that as a theatre performance, variations such as a budget or performing outside can be explored as well to give them a more complete overview of all the aspect to consider.

Key Terms

Production management involves supervising and managing the overall budget and schedule of a theatrical production, which encompasses tasks such as hiring and scheduling crew members, implementing cost-saving strategies, and resolving any potential issues that may arise during the production process.



9.8.III Closure exercises

EXERCISE NAME: WHO WOULD YOU BE?

Exercise number: 1

Aims of the exercise

- Reflect on learning from the workshop.
- Remind participants of key roles in a theatre production.

Focus level: Medium

Energy requirement: Low

Materials: None

Duration: 15 minutes

Instructions:

- ▶ Participants are invited to sit in a circle.
- ▶ The facilitator begins the reflection and feedback session by asking the group what they remembered from the workshop about theatre production.
- ▶ The facilitator reviews all the different roles that go into making a theatre production.
- ▶ The participants are invited to talk about the role they are most interested in and think about who else they would work with and what their role would be like.

The facilitator can also ask if there were any roles that the participants were not familiar with and discuss those roles as well.

EXERCISE NAME: WHAT STORY WOULD YOU STAGE?

Exercise number: 2

Aims of the exercise

- Creatively review the workshop.
- Bring imagination to the learning process.

Focus level: Medium

Energy requirement: Low



EXERCISE NAME: WHAT STORY WOULD YOU STAGE?

Materials: None

Duration: 15-20 minutes

Instructions:

- ▶ Participants are invited to sit in a circle.
- ▶ The facilitator begins the reflection and feedback session by asking the group what they remember from the workshop about designing sets.
- ▶ The facilitator reviews the concepts of set design and lighting covered in the workshop.
- ▶ The participants are invited to discuss what they learned, what was new and what was familiar.
- ▶ The facilitator invites the participants to close their eyes and think of a story they like or are familiar with and think about what it would look like as a play. The facilitator can encourage them by asking the participants to think about the colours in the set, what kind of lighting it would have, if it would be a very big production with a large set or a small and simple one, etc.
- ▶ After the participants have had time to think, the facilitator asks everyone to open their eyes and volunteer to talk about their ideas.

Key Terms: **Set design** refers to the creation of the physical space in which the action of a performed event takes place.

EXERCISE NAME: RELAXATION REFLECTION

Exercise number: 3

Aims of the exercise:

- Close the workshop.
- Reflect on the workshop in a relaxed way.

Focus level: Low

Energy requirement: Low

Materials: None

Duration: 15 minutes



Instructions:

- Participants are asked to find a place in the room to sit or lie on the floor.
- The facilitator leads a relaxation exercise, asking participants to close their eyes and relax in the space, taking a moment to notice what they sense in the room, and then concentrate on their body.
- The facilitator invites participants to focus on parts of their body, starting with the toes and moving upwards. The participants will tighten and relax each part of their body.
- The facilitator will then invite the participants to silently think about and visualize the workshop, what they enjoyed, what they had difficulty with, what excited them, and so on.
- The participants are then asked to share one thing they experienced from the workshop with the group.

END OF THE UNIT



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