

FIRST IMPRESSION QUESTIONS:

What strike you as the most important ideas, feelings, images, and moments from the first read/listen?

Take quick note of your first impressions. Don't edit—just let them tumble onto the page in any form they take. Doodles, shorthand words and phrases, full sentences, quotes from the text, even sketches can be potent reminders of what you feel most compelled by. These are the seeds of your fuller interpretation.

What does this world look like? Do you imagine any specific scenic elements? Colors, shapes, textures, lighting qualities? Is this an architectural world, a natural world, fragmented scenery, or highly realistic? Is there a configuration of the audience in relation to the playing space that you want to employ? If you know the space, are there ways that you'd like to use it for this specific production? Adjectives that describe textures, colors, and condition—like “gritty,” “pristine,” “pastel,” “earth-toned”—can be useful. And those descriptions may be different for different portions of the show.

Do any strong staging images stand out? Compositional ideas can sometimes come to you as you read and listen. Note these. Phrases like “a swirling mob carrying protest signs,” “the city is his enemy,” “the earth opens up to reveal her” can be provocative as you move forward. These can also come from the text, the stage directions, or the music.

What does the world of this show feel like to you? It can be useful to recognize the emotional experience of the show on first encounter. Orderliness, comic chaos, pastoral romance, emotional austerity, psychological intrigue, etc. The qualities of the music can often tell you a good deal about this question. Stephen Sondheim's *Pacific Overtures* will suggest a very different world than *Grease*. Try to articulate your gut reactions. No one has to read your notes, and you can refine the wording later on.

Who are the most important people in the story? Is *A Little Night Music* Frederick's story? Desiree's? A trio of characters sharing focus? Why do you care about these people? Who attracts you or distances you? You don't need to think simply in terms of heroes and villains to identify whose story matters most to you. There's no need to judge any characters. Just react.

What are you reminded of? Did any works of visual art, literature, TV, film, or other items of popular culture come to mind as you read and listened? These references can sometimes provide you with an anchor for your production and help your designers get a handle on your ideas for the show. For instance, the original production of *Fiddler on the Roof* was powerfully influenced by the director's attraction to the work of painter Marc Chagall.

How do the historical setting of the story (or the writing of the show) and the location affect your ideas about it? Jason Robert Brown's *Parade* is deeply rooted in Georgia in 1913. History, culture, and place have a great deal to do with that story. This may not be the case with other shows. Does historical accuracy matter to you?

What is the style of this piece? Style can be identified as the rules for performance behavior that we consistently employ in a show. Asking if the world of your show is like a comic strip, a *noir* movie, a Strindberg play, or a rock concert can tell you a lot about your impressions. You might see your production of *Damn Yankees* as a riff on the comic strip *Beetle Bailey* or, very differently, like the film *The Natural*.

Do I have strong biases about the show coming into the process? We're often very familiar with a show before we sit down to read and listen to it. You may have seen it before, watched the film, or been involved in previous productions in some way. This can impact your vision of the show from the outset. This isn't always a bad thing, but it can definitely limit your capacity to discover new ideas and possibilities. Consider what you already know and feel about the show and whether you want to recreate those impressions, reject them, modify them, or do something else. The original production of a show certainly reflects one way to tell the story, but it's not the only way

Create a concept statement

The next important step in clarifying your ideas is to write a well-crafted statement of your vision for the show.

Think big! Take a stand! The concept statement, to be useful, must reveal what it is about the show that engages your passion, and what you want the production to say. There is no such thing as just “directing the show as written.” We *are* interpreters of the text. You *will* make conscious and even unconscious choices about the story, the characters, the ideas and messages being delivered. Accept this and embrace it, because it’s one of the most important parts of your job. This concept statement is the first step in that process.

For a first draft, try the following exercises as you work to develop this mission statement for your production.

This is the story of... In just one paragraph, try writing the essential story you wish to tell. This is not the same as a plot summary.

Themes and ideas. The story statement will often contain these ideas, but you will find it useful to articulate, separately, the themes and ideas that motivate even the show.

Images and visual style. ...a general sense of the feeling and visual qualities of the show.

Descriptive Statements

Visual/Artistic Elements

Clarify and refine. Refine and clarify your ideas into one or two pages.

ANALYSIS QUESTIONS (These were written for set design...modify for other areas)

- 1. Make a list of all the locations in the order they occur in the show. You'll discover that some of them are used multiple times, while others only appear once. For each scene, place the location, act and scene number at the top of a blank page. You can fill in the answers to the following questions where they belong on each of these pages. This will be invaluable to you as you proceed with this process.
- 2. What needs to happen in each location? Are there intimate duets or full stage dance numbers, parades or conspiracies, or both at different times? Does the space need to feel expansive or claustrophobic, based on what you imagine the action to be? Do you need levels, doorways, walls, parapets and towers, planks and crates? This is the place to identify the requirements of the script and your imagination.
- What does each location *feel like* to you? Use adjectives and descriptive phrases like "prissy, fastidious, obsessively organized," "coarse and rustic," or "as romantic as a valentine." These evocative phrases can fuel a designer's imagination. Look for the ways that characters describe the space. "Lonely Room" in *Oklahoma!* is an excellent example of a song that tells you about a location.
- Whose territory is the location? Do we identify the location primarily with one character? If so, you have a chance to make a statement about that character here. The dark shadows of Jud Fry's personality are reflected in his dank and gloomy smokehouse dwelling.
- Do you have an overriding metaphorical idea for the show? Perhaps you see the entire space as a circus tent in which the central character is a ringmaster. Or perhaps you see it as a cage, in which all the characters are trapped, waiting to be freed. Is this a ring of Dante's hell that everyone suffers in, or a Garden of Eden before the fall? It isn't required that you imagine the space in terms of a big, overarching metaphor. But if this works for you, share these ideas with your designer at the beginning of the conversation. It might lead to exciting design solutions.
- Do you have a clear image in mind for any specific locations? Let the designer know this now. It will waste everyone's time if you try to nudge her into this choice without saying so directly. Most designers can live with this sort of requirement and even improve upon it. But you have to be honest up front. It's also important to stay open to other possibilities. You might discover that the designer has another idea that works even better to help you achieve your aim.
- Is historical and geographical accuracy important to you? Sometimes the literal accuracy of a location is secondary to its emotional quality. In other cases, the corn not only has to be exactly as high as an Asian elephant's eye, it also has to be precisely the right hybrid of corn. Decide these things before you meet with your designer.
- For each scene, what space have you just come from and where are you about to go? How the show looks is obviously important. But how you get from one place to the next is what we call the *scenic flow* of a show, and is among the most important decisions you make with your designer. The questions of full-stage scenes versus smaller "in one" locations will come up here. You don't have to answer these questions now, but be aware that they will need to be addressed at some point.
- How do we get from one location to the next? Does the scene end completely before you begin the transition or is it a fluid *segue*? Here is where you start to anticipate the scenic transitions. Since the audience is going to have to sit and watch the scenery move, no matter what you do, you might as well make some theatre out of it. You might even be able to use the transition to tell the story. This part of the show doesn't have to be a burden. It can be an opportunity.
- How does the scenery move? Do you imagine the scenery being flown or moved mechanically on wagons, so it appears to the audience to be moving by itself, or are there crew members or actors involved in these changes? This is an important question to address in terms of theatrical style, so consider it carefully. Also, if the actors do move scenery, some theatres have very clear rules about who can and cannot do so. If the transitions are integral parts of the action, these decisions are much easier.