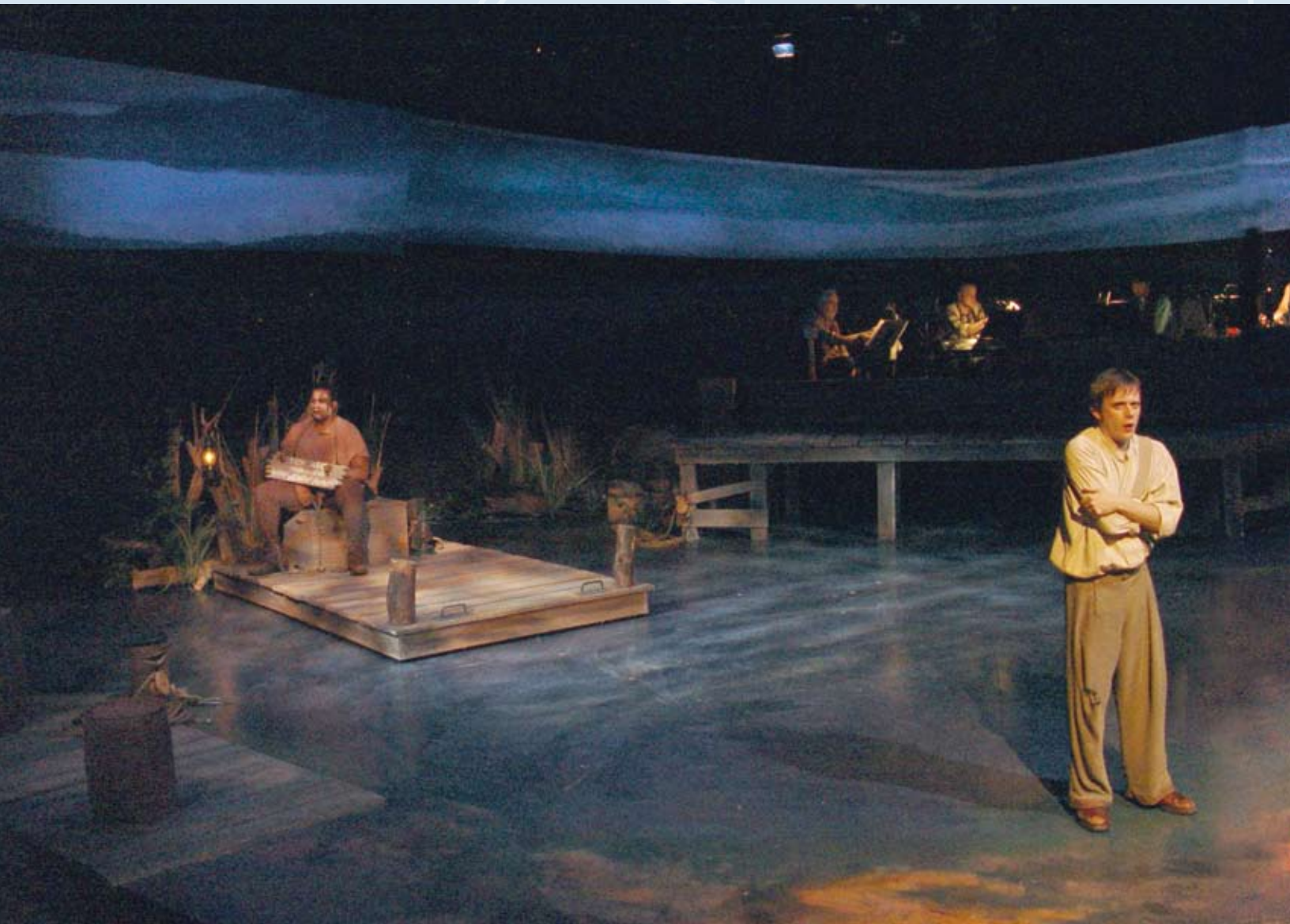# Directing the design

Creating the visual world of the play

The 2006 Human Race Theatre Company production of *Big River*, directed by Joe Deer and designed by Dunsi Dai.

BY JOE DEER

SCENERY CAN TELL the audience a great deal about the world they're entering, and support the director's ideas about mood, conflict, and themes. It offers visual interest and variety and provides a physical space that lends itself to a range of staging opportunities. A good set does all these things.

If you're a lucky director, you have an ally in the process: your scenic designer. Her job is to imagine a visual expression of the world of the play or musical and to represent the set she sees in her head in terms that you and the people responsible for building and painting it can understand in detail. On most productions the scenic designer is also responsible for the properties (all the furniture and all the objects that actors will handle in the show) and set dressing.

It is the shared goal of the director and designer to achieve a design that feels as though there is no other possible visual world that the show could live in. The directorial interpretation and the design are one. But getting to that place takes some thoughtful, intelligent consideration, a talent for metaphor, a collaborative spirit, and a capacity on both sides for sharing and receiving ideas. In this article I'll outline the process that I have used as a director to work with many designers on scores of successful productions.

In a school theatre setting, the director's design ally may be a talented student or a parent who has carpentry skills. The principles are the same as when you're working with a professional scenic designer. (With this key difference: a professional designer will come to the table with a clear under-

standing of her obligations for each stage of the process, and a volunteer or student designer in training probably won't—when it's time for the designer to build a model or draw a detailed ground plan, you'll have to ask for it.)

Thus the process outlined in this article can and should be modified to fit your circumstance. In fact, in most situations this template for collaboration will be adjusted to take advantage of the special opportunities of your school, the interests and talents of your students, and the particular needs of the show you're producing. But this is a good model to start with.

Your first job is to line up the people who will design (this might even be *you*), build and operate the scenery, lights, and costumes for your production. It's a good idea to get this roster of collaborators on board as soon as possible. Have a preliminary get-together to let them know what show you'll all be doing, share a rough outline of the budget, and sketch the production schedule. Be sure to include your music director and choreographer, as well as all of the designers, in the conversation. This is a purely logistical meeting to get the frame of the yet-to-be-painted picture in place. You can outline the process we'll discuss in this article with them and even share the article itself. Establishing a set of shared expectations for the design process will help make things run more smoothly and avoid some of the frustration that can accompany any passionate collaboration. Your production calendar can outline when your part of the process is due to them, and when you'd like theirs, as well. Be sure to allow some

flexibility for the reality of lives that include at least one full-time job besides this very demanding project.

Record your first impressions

As with so much in the theatre, preparation is crucial. Once you've had a chance to read the script and listen to the music (if you're directing a musical) the first time, you'll be ready to go back and start answering some "first impressions" questions that will help you gather your thoughts and lead you to a clearer sense of what you want to do with the show.

Some people resort to simply copying the original design and interpretation of a show because they aren't used to creating a design for their own production. I don't recommend that for two principle reasons. The first is the practical consideration that it will probably not be possible to reproduce the design in a way that satisfies your expectations. The second is the unsettled legal question of whether the creative work of the original director and designer is protected by copyright. So for the purposes of this article, let's treat the design process as if you're the director of the original production starting with a blank slate.

As you make your notes, consider these questions as a way of gathering your thoughts:

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.
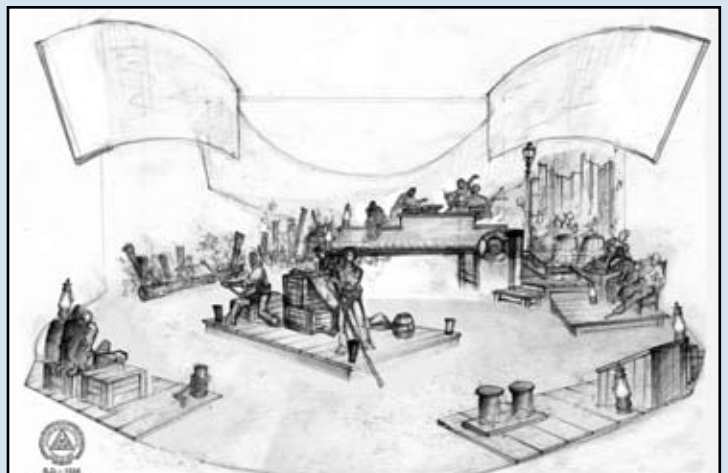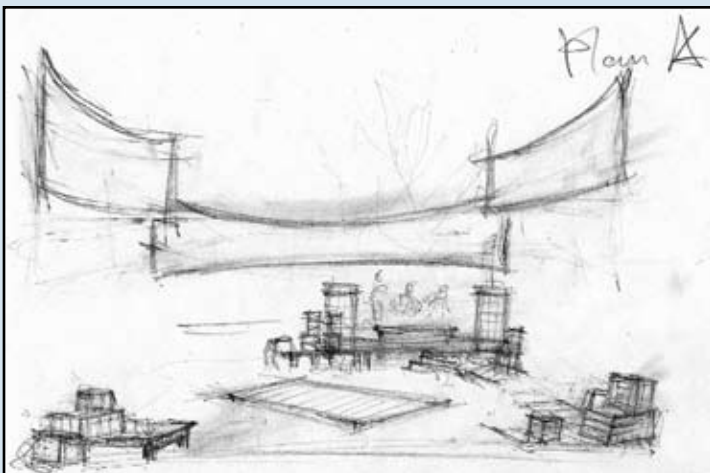
What does the world of this show feel *like to you?* It can be useful to recognize the emotional experience of the

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,

The drawings above show the series of steps Dunsi Dai used to create the set design for *Big River*. Left to right: A thumbnail sketch of the basic style and stage space; a detailed sketch that begins to suggest the relationships and functionality of the set in individual scenes; a color sketch that includes hues, texture, and patterns; and a final complete rendering of the set design.

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.

This will be a touchstone for you and everyone associated with the production as you move forward, so it's worth the time it takes to get it right. You'll want to have all those earlier notes handy as you begin this process.

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. You're not just a traffic cop who schedules rehearsals and sets the blocking. You're the most influential person in the whole production and your fingerprints will be all over the thing when you're done. 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. For instance, for the musical *Big River* you might say:
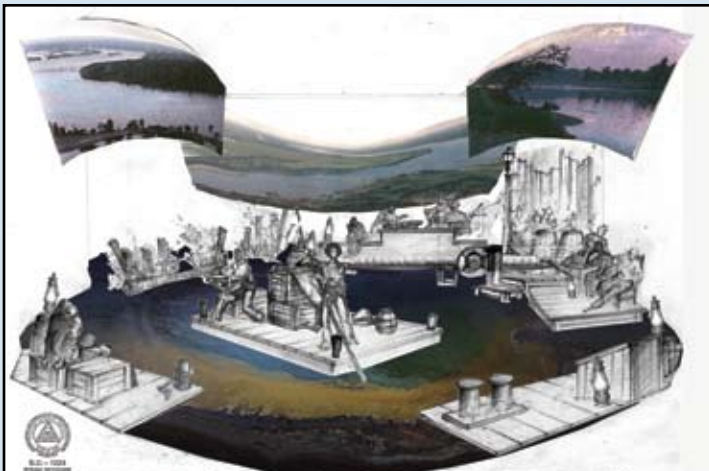
Big River is the story of a simple, unpretentious boy, Huck, who goes on a journey into unknown territory and

discovers his own humanity in the process. It is literally a journey down the Mississippi River just before the Civil War. But more importantly, it is a spiritual journey into the territory of empathy and morality. Over the course of this journey, Huck and his traveling companion, the runaway slave Jim, become friends, then brothers, as they share dreams and discover their profound common bond. With no outside authorities to guide him, Huck must decide what he will do when given control over Jim's destiny. Does he follow the statutory laws of his society and enslave Jim in a horrific circumstance, or does he follow his sense of a higher law—true morality? Huck frees Jim and, as a result, is given his own freedom from an immoral society.

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 silliest shows. For *Seussical*, these statements might apply:

Seussical is about:
• Our ability to imagine wonderful worlds.
• Expanding our narrow consciousness to discover and include other worlds or parts of our world that we never knew, or never bothered to notice.
• Loyalty, simple integrity, and devotion to friends and those we love and commit to.
• Discovering our own inner worth, despite being different.
• Standing up for what we believe in.

You can also express these ideas as a set of thematic conflicts. For *Brigadoon*, for example, you might write "faith vs. logic." For *Fiddler on the Roof*, "tradition vs. change." For *Thoroughly Modern Millie*, "marrying for love vs. marrying for money."

You might feel that one particular piece of dialogue, song or lyric captures the central idea of a show. In *A Chorus Line*, "What I Did For Love" is a potent statement of the show's central theme.

Images and visual style. The concept statement is the place to discuss any images, scenic/lighting/costume design ideas you feel strongly about, visual references and allusions, or anything else that has to do with the visual experience of the show. Don't pretend you are open to ideas that you really can't embrace. If you feel that Dolly Levi must come down a staircase at the center of the stage in *Hello, Dolly!,* say so now. It will save everyone a lot of frustration later on. Most designers can embrace those requirements and make something wonderful out of them. Also, if you have a general sense of the feeling and visual qualities of the show, take the time to express them here. If there are painters, designers or specific visual references you want to make, say so.

Here's a set of statements that helped guide a very successful production of *West Side Story*:

> Claustrophobic city streets
> Nowhere for the teens to do anything
> Decaying neighborhoods
> Once nice, now downtrodden
> Poorly maintained immigrant housing
> Bars on windows
> Volatile atmosphere
> Heat, idle time, end of summer agitation as school about to start, manufactured irritations with each other, no outlet for energy
> Find visual icons to build around; not just a factual, architectural expression of the city
> Fluid scenic changes: must be smooth, within the action; scored for segue rather than change music
> Must be set in the correct period: 1957 (language, social situations are too specific, tame for today)

> Costumes must not be pretty or "preppy," street clothes
> Design cannot feel like "a musical" —more like realistic drama or film; gritty, but heightened theatrically
> Images:
> > Under highway—rumble
> > A cage
> > A portentous, dangerous place— bad things will happen here
> Huge billboard of "optimistic" advertising dwarfs the kids; fading, tattered, year-old advertising—no one even bothers to update the ads in this neighborhood
> Design qualities:
> > Textured brick
> > Metal bars, fire escapes
> > No beauty in their world—every thing is either functional or decaying beauty
> Decapitated busts on buildings
> Painted over marble, building ornaments
> Bright red floor—blood on the streets

Clarify and refine. You'll find it well worth your time to do as we ask our students—refine and clarify your ideas into one or two pages and have this document ready when you get together with your designers. You may choose to give them a copy of your concept statement or simply have it clearly in mind as you talk. It's often enough to have done the exercise; once the ideas get clear for you they tend to live at the front of your imagination any time you deal with the show.

Preliminary scenic questionnaire

Most of the work in scenic design addresses concerns in one of two areas, which constantly inform each other: practical considerations and conceptual considerations. In good design, there appears to be no separation. As preparation for your first meeting with the scenic designer, spend some time with the script and think about the questions below to facilitate a productive design process. This will help avoid 99 percent of your scenic problems later on.

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.

3. 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.

4. 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.

5. 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.

6. 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.

7. 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.

8. 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.

9. 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.

10. 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.

Every director and designer evolve a unique process for working together based on their relationship, personal tastes, and the specific project they're engaged in. But there are traditional ways of working that offer a good basis for the process to begin. Typically, the design collaboration follows a path that includes the following five milestones: a first meeting, thumbnail sketches, detail sketches, color sketches, and a final design package that includes renderings, models, and a ground plan. We'll cover each of those in some detail below. If you are working with a student designer or a volunteer who doesn't have much scenic design experience, you'll want to make certain that your expectations about these steps in the design process are clear early on.

First meeting
The director and designer have an initial meeting to discuss the show. Other designers—costumes, lighting, sound—may also be invited to attend, but don't have to be. The director will offer ideas and images and generally share the content of the concept paper. The designer will respond in whatever way strikes her, sometimes offering visual images to consider, discussing practical concerns, and clarifying the direction of the work.

The most important issues to consider at this time are playing style, visual qualities, and especially your big ideas and central concerns. If you discovered any important points in the questionnaire above, share those now. If you're working with an inexperienced designer, bring as much visual resource with you as possible. Books of photography, art history, architecture, scenic design—any images that help you communicate your ideas—all can be part of a visual resource bank that will stimulate conversation and help get the wheels of creativity turning. Before you finish this meeting, agree on a time for the next meeting and establish a clear timeline for each step of this process. After this first meeting, designers will typically begin doing research and work to get a visual sense of the world of the show based on the initial conversation.

Thumbnail sketches
The next stage of the artistic dialogue will usually come from the scenic designer in the form of loose sketches that suggest space and a bit of style, and offer possible options for the overall design. The less permanent these ideas feel, the better. Try not to let yourself or your designer get so attached to any one idea before this meeting that you're unable to see new possibilities. Quick, rough sketches are often what you'll get, and what you want at this point. In the same way your optometrist may offer you choices of lenses ("better or worse?"), a designer can begin honing in on a design concept based on the director's responses to these offerings. At this point, she may also include her own research material as a way of getting a sense of the kinds of detail you're interested in.

By now, you should be able to narrow your focus by eliminating the options you're not going to pursue, and come to an agreement on the big picture. Define the spaces, style and visual feel of the show clearly. Keep in mind how you'll want to use the space and how much variety you need. The set is a kind of playground for your characters. So look for options and possibilities in terms of levels, depth, intimacy and expansiveness, architecture, and stage pictures. You could easily get stuck creating repetitive movement patterns or static stage pictures. This conversation continues until you and the designer arrive at the third level of the process.

Detail sketches
Armed with the responses from the last meeting, a scenic designer will typically retreat to her studio to refine the ideas that best suited your vision for the show. Out of this comes a set of much more detailed sketches that clearly express space, style, functionality, and the scene-by-scene arrangement of elements. You may also receive a series of miniature ground plans that illustrate the location of each element for each scene. This will help solve the questions of how you get from one location to the next.

This step in the process is critical because the decisions you make here will have a profound effect on the entire production. Track the scene changes carefully. Consider the scale of each of the elements of the scenery. Make sure there's a workable plan for how the scenery will come, go, and make transitions. Good scenic design for a musical functions as a fluid machine, containing exactly what's necessary in a way that makes sense in this particular theatrical world. You're working to solve an artistic puzzle in a creative and imaginative way.

Color sketches

Once you know the scenic design suits the show as you imagine it, and that everything functions as part of a grand scheme, you can move on to the details of color, texture and pattern. Although this has probably been part of earlier discussions, now is the time to be sure you fully address these questions. Designers may bring in photographs or do color sketches or computerized renderings to show you possibilities. You will want to include the costume and lighting designers in this part of the conversation, too, since the colors of the scenery will deeply affect their work and they may have good ideas to consider or practical concerns to voice. Be sure to think about how floor textures and treatments will impact your cast's ability to dance and move in the space. A raked stage with heavy wood planking may look great, but can you do a full-throttle hoedown on it with the women in narrow heels?

Final design package

Your scenic designer will take the choices you make together and create a colored drawing, commonly called a *rendering,* of each location based on them. In some cases, designers create a full-color scale model of the set to express the designs more completely. This is also used by the scenic painters and carpenters to realize the actual set. Designers will usually create at least a *white model*: a scale model of the set with only line drawing details of the scenery. The model will help you visualize the space more easily and get a better understanding of its possibilities.

You will also receive highly detailed scaled *ground plans* for the show. These look like architectural drawings of the set from a bird's eye view, showing you exactly how large items are and where they're placed for each scene. Be sure to discuss the placement of furniture and large property items if you're not certain about that. At this point, you have a finished design and you can begin imagining the action in moment-to-moment details. Your designers will proceed to the shops, volunteers, painting parties and all the rest that makes for realizing a terrific design.

AS YOU CAN SEE, the process described here is essentially a structure for communication that provides for sharing, clarifying, and building on ideas. First, the ideas flow from the director to the designer, at the conceptual level. Then, with increasing specificity and detail, the designer responds until the ideas are ready to be transformed into a physical reality. Having this kind of structured process takes much of the mystery out of collaborating with your design team. You can certainly adapt this approach to your work with lighting and costume designers, as well. It won't take much work to get everyone on the same page, creating the kind of show you dream of watching with collaborators who know what to expect from each other.

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