

“Enhancing the Look of My Magic Show “ Or “More than I ever want to Know about Set Design”

By Jack Hart

A Chicago based architect observed: “Architects don’t like to be accused of being mere functionalists. The issue is transcendence, taking a thing beyond what it portends to be”

My father was an architect and I’ve worked in an architectural office, designing amusement parks. So while I not only subscribe to this attitude myself, in these notes aspire to unfold some of the secrets of design that will hopefully inspire you to “transcend” the typical lack of attention to the visual aspects of magical storytelling.

In sharing these aspects of the design process you will become better equipped as a “do it yourselfer” and know more about what to expect when collaborating on a larger project or when taking your show to the next level.

Trained in the theater as a set designer (not to be confused with the film production term for draftsman) I find approaching most design projects theatrically provides a means of connecting with people on several levels (transcendence). The set designer in theater, like the production designer in film is responsible for the overall look of the show. (As a TV art director, we use to describe our job as “being in charge of everything out of focus.” Meaning everything but the actors.)

As you know, our minds work by association. The basis of magic relies on associations that lead the spectator to believe something that isn’t real. Humor works the same way, setting up assumptions so that the punch line is counter intuitive. (How’s that for analyzing the fun out of humor?) A play sets up characters and situations to which the audience can relate via association from their own life experiences. So as a designer I am looking for the visual clues that will unfold the Author’s and/or Directors intent of the story for the audience. Here’s how the process works according to Michael Gillette, author of “ Theatrical Design and Production”

The process starts with:

Commitment

For the designer this means deciding to do the best job possible, solving the problems and bring the design to reality. For the magician, it means the investment of not only finances but also crating, storage, trucking and set up and tear down (working backstage at the Magic *LIVE* convention last August 04, I saw Master illusionist Rick Thomas backstage unbolting the illusions and helping load them into the truck...the less glamorous side of show biz)

Commitment does not have to mean more stuff. I could also mean a determination to maintain a consistent style. Creative magic inventor, John Cornelius uses an expensive looking Montblanc style pen for his "Pen through Anything" and a Waterford Crystal glass for his FISM flash. Dean Dill uses a handcrafted rose wood box, with his logo laser engraved and brass hinges. It could have been a cardboard box as his prototype was; however Dean, too, has a commitment to classy props. These are objects to which their clientele can relate, thus building a relational bridge.

Another aspect of production to which one could commit is verisimilitude. (Didn't know that this was going to be educational, too) If the story line you are using describes an ancient artifact and it in fact looks like it was just bought at WalMart, then possibly the story becomes humorous, whether intended or not. Theatrical magic is about "come pretend with me"(the willing suspension of disbelief). Are we strong enough storytellers that the tale we weave transcends the props or visuals we use? Or would our story be enhanced by something that looked as though it might be authentic? Everything the audience sees contributes to their understanding of your message. Either it will distract and keep the communication superficial, or it will help engage the audience's imagination to penetrate their hearts.

In the effect "Missed by one" an elaborate story of yester-year reveals one away from a thought of card. The reveal is a photo of a cowboy whom the story was supposedly about. However, the photo is a clean copy of a sepia tone picture, hot off the ink jet printer on glossy paper. Wouldn't it be an addition to the verisimilitude of the effect to have the photo aged, possibly printed on non-glossy stock, resembling an actual antique photo? Verisimilitude: the appearance of being true or real.

Since magic (and theater) happens in the mind, we can engage the imagination in a variety of ways. It doesn't all have to be literal. Japanese Kabuki Theatre uses conventions to portray reality like waving long silk streamers to simulate waves of the ocean or ribbons on a pole to simulate rain.

Whether ultra realistic (as we see in the movies) or highly stylized, the commitment to consistency will greatly enhance the production.

Incubation

This is the time the designer injects himself or herself with research into a particular style or period. Someone said "To steal ideas from one person is plagiarism; to steal from many is research." Finding uncommon research or recombining elements that have the flavor of the period gives the appearance of originality. (Did I say that?)

Mason Williams, known for writing the "Classical Gas" musical piece for guitar and symphony in the '70's (so last century) wrote several books, one of which was called "Flavors." His contention is that Bach or The Beatles or Bernstein are flavors that can be used in creating and their identity summons a whole layer of associations that add to the understanding of the end product. Looking at styles as "Flavors" when tastefully combined can pique the interest and enhance the magical experience. Post Modern Architecture reinterprets flavors from the past with new silhouettes or materials, conjuring a connection to history while looking forward.

The theater, television and film designers are always studying periods and styles to become better storytellers, to help the audience connect with the story being told. Being steeped in the period or style before designing will help the designer stay the course or stray on purpose rather than ignorance.

Watch the extra DVD's in Lord of the Rings and discover how the designers invented "back story" that wasn't written in the script or by Tolkien to give consistency and justification for the designs they chose. In designed the "monster," a Brett Daniels version of the magician without a middle, for Lance Burton. It was seen on his TV special. The basis for the design was the "Alien" movies designed by Hans Geiger. His biomechanical "Flavor" gave a unique design to the prop built by Bill Smith. Years later he signed the show at the Monte Carlo and developed a whole sword fencing production number around "The Phantom of the Opera"

style. Frankly, the biomechanical “monster” doesn’t fit the romantic style of Phantom. As jarring as I’d like to believe even the untrained might be offended, no one has ever complained to the management. Proving that as Broadway producers use to say “You don’t go away whistling the scenery. I don’t tell this story to deconstruct the premise that the visual aspects are important, rather to say that we need to have perspective and not be legalistic about this stuff.

Selection

After being steeped in research, visually kick started, it’s time to solve problems and address the drawing board. In magic, the design can work for or against the illusion. In the 1970’s, Doug Henning’s Broadway show, there was a Harbin zig-zag with a girl in a granny dress painted in a position that essentially revealed the trick. So while the granny dress (the visual hook) provided the right “Flavor” (selection) it didn’t solve the design problem, thus the execution of it left something to be desired. Design is as much about practicality and problem solving as it is visual inspiration.

Implementation

This is the phase where the planning is finalized. Plans are drawn, enough information given to communicate to the various shops. All the drawings, renderings or models are completed so all involved will be able to provide the look agreed upon. The difference between the way an artist approaches an assignment and the way a designer approaches is that the artist will do instinctively what he thinks will work, with the caveat that if he doesn’t like it he’ll do it over. The designer preplans everything possible so that others hopefully don’t have to do it over again and again.

I prefer the preplanning, however, I’ve worked with very creative artists the make the creative process very enjoyable.

Evaluation

This is the phase where we grow. In processing the experience we learn. It's mostly about asking the tough questions and being willed to grow from the answers. Did I communicate with other team members? Did I communicate with the client? Were expectations met? Exceeded? By me? By the Client? Did I communicate when I changed something or it got changed? What would I do differently? What worked well?

This type of processing questions will help you learn from each experience.

I started in television the way most art directors do as an assistant. Usually this lasts for a few years (3-5) and then you graduate to art director. Well after six weeks I found myself as an art director. I asked the art director who put me there how I was going to learn the job. He replied "I've been learning at other people's expense for 25 years, why shouldn't you?" So the evaluation phase is an important aspect of growing in whatever endeavor, performing or backstage.

Over-overview

I hope that this overview of the design process will encourage you to venture into making an effort to add some visual aspects to your next crusade or kids presentation. At the very least, start evaluating the wardrobe and props and table that you use. Does it have a style; does it function the way you want? What is the look of your show? Is it consistent with the promo material you have? I once had a friend in college whom manufactured Chamois clothing. So I had a vest custom made with a loud lining, meant to get a laugh. It had custom pockets inside and out for performing. Harry Blackstone jr. was a mentor and friend. He came to visit me in college and took one look at the vest and pronounced "Jack, you're not that cool" I never wore it...he was right. Self-evaluation can be tough.