

World Building: Concept and Design Exercises

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Exploring what the world of the production might look, sound, smell, and feel like can be a terrific portal into exploring the play. Especially for students who may be less at ease with text-based work, working in an artistic space can be a great and equally fruitful practice.

In the theatre, we traditionally work with a range of design elements: sets or scenic, props, lights, sound, costumes, and (increasingly) video or projection.

Design Exercise: Making Design Choices (also called Design Slam)

- Identify the main types of design: set (including props), costumes, lights, sound we use in the theatre. Discuss how video and projection design are also becoming regular parts of the theater design scheme.
- Using a fairy tale, story you all know, or the text you are working on, discuss the FACTS (similar to the Given Circumstances for actors). Write everything down on a large piece of paper or split the students into small groups. For this exercise, the physical paper matters.
 - If using a text, mine the text as a group for anything that gives us information about sets, costumes, lights, and sound. Stick to the facts (discuss the notion of Embedded Stage Directions if working on Shakespeare and look to explicit Stage Directions, as well).
 - If using a story or fairy tale as a guide, go over the practical needs of the story and identify which design ‘category’ those needs fall under (Sets- two houses and breadcrumbs; Lights – difference between day and night; etc.).
- Discuss the ‘metaphorical’ or emotional needs of the story. What’s the mood of the story? Does it change? If so, how/where?
- Finish the following phrase: “This is a world full of _____” or “This world feels like _____”. Encourage students to complete the phrase with emotion words, objects, kinds of people, etc. Encourage the students to move away from the literal or practical and into the experiential.

Exercise: Designed Tableaux

- Split the class up into groups of 4-6 students. Give each group one moment of a familiar story or scene from a play. Have them discuss the “essence” of the story or scene.
- Have each group create three tableaux that communicate the beginning, middle, and end of their moment from the story. Have each group make intentional choices about the set, lighting, costume, and prop requirements for their interpretation of the scene. Encourage students to use what’s available to them in the classroom.

A word about materials: It can be useful to guide the students through an imaginative exercise for design in which the “sky’s the limit” in terms of budgets. However, given both the budget realities for most schools and theaters, it is equally helpful to follow up the first exercise with a discussion about how to turn big ideas into effective theatrical gestures. For example, if you interpret the world at the end of *MACBETH* as full of black/darkness, perhaps the abstract use of a black piece of cloth can be deployed in compelling ways. Not only are more metaphoric design strategies typically more accessible, they can also be the strongest theatre-makers, since theatre comes from a world of metaphor.



Exercise: Concept Design

(This exercise is related to design slam, but its agenda is different: to get to the essence of the students' imagined production-- and in getting to the essence of the production, to understand the world of the play more deeply. While both exercises can accommodate different levels and learning styles, it is fair to say that Design Slam is better for younger students and Concept work more easily suited to older ones.)

- Pick a scene from a play and have the group re-through it together.
- Divide the group into smaller groups and ask each group to find THE FACTS of the scene, which should include:
 - Imbedded stage directions (separate the ones specific to acting from the environmental ones)
 - Imbedded props
 - Indications of time of day, place, season, any sensory information
- Come back together and make a master list.
- Ask the group to identify words in the scene that feel the most operative, juicy, or essential to the story of the scene. (Hint: could be words or phrases which are repeated, typically nouns or verbs). Make a master list of those, and, if there are a lot, have the group vote it down to the strongest 6.
- Ask the group to make a final list that uses their imaginations, filling in the phrases:
 - If this scene were a smell, it would be _____
 - If this scene were a sound, it would be _____
 - If this scene were an image, it would be _____
- Ask the group to land on one or two key ideas from this final list and use that as the launch for the scene (or play's) concept. "This scene is going to be like a rotting peach in the sun"- non-literal, but based on text! And ripe (pun intended) for imaginative work for directors, actors, and designers.

Additional prompts:

What moment or exchange or line in the scene feels like the essential moment (like the operative line)? Does the scene feel constrained or expansive? Small space or large? Do the characters have too much or too little space? (Again, focus on the nonliteral; do not solve the logistics of staging, but ask yourself: what does it *feel* like?)

