

strange BEDFELLOWS?

by karin mckie

*The barge she sat in, like a burnish'd throne,
Burn'd on the water: the poop was beaten gold;
Purple the sails, and so perfuméd that
The winds were lovesick with them; the oars were
silver,
Which to the tune of flutes kept stroke, and made
The water which they beat to follow faster,
As amorous of their strokes.*

The previous description of Cleopatra's barge was penned by unknown design commentator William Shakespeare, perhaps more famous for a few plays he wrote. Disclosed by this example, the worlds of design and theater have always been inextricably linked via their devotion to visual and practical expression, and the growth of both art forms has evolved aligned. Shakespeare and his contemporaries used language to create environments from palaces to battlefields on empty wooden stages, while modern interior designers are charged with actually building mansions and neoteric battlegrounds, a.k.a. corporate offices. Anyone who has been to a theme park or theme restaurant lately has witnessed the inherent theatricality of design today. Yet these occupations remain disparate.

But are interior design and theatrical design truly strange bedfellows? Vital working and living spaces are crucial to both disciplines, yet they appear to be vastly different occupations that rarely, if ever, intersect.

Why does this disconnect exist between these two artistic and worthwhile pursuits?

While acknowledging the training, sweat and toil that theater design practitioners endure, Chicago actor, writer, and 'recovering' stagehand Alex Blatt cautioned, "Being a theatrical carpenter does not a carpenter make. Building things out of white pine that are meant to be torn down six weeks later teaches you nothing useful for the real world. This is accentuated by the many stories from people of my own ilk, armed with confidence in their power tools and a sincere desire to learn by doing, who build a deck that warps into a Modigliani painting inside of five years, or a theater electrician who tries wiring at home,

creating a Frank Thomas hitting a home run-type fireworks explosion." Blatt agreed that there are many crossover talents between the two mediums - "color theory; drafting, drawing, and presentational renderings; visual psychology; and that intangible, a 'designer's inclination.'" The difference remains that theatrical designers suggest the existence of a space that does not REALLY exist, and interior designers step inside a space that does not YET exist.

Can the chasm between theater design and interior design be spanned? Indeed, trained theater designers do take a glut of germane courses in pursuit of their degrees. Yet despite this design-centered education, many theater designers might admit to a certain naivete about the level of training that interior designers receive. Even though most theater design practitioners remain above the level of Martha Stewart devotees who carefully file their home design magazines, take notes while watching PBS renovation programming, and are confident in their penchant for good taste, they also understand that the interior design firms that receive theater design-centric resumes probably have a special machine, for CV's without interior design experience, that shreds them, making a horrible, cackling noise. When considering the move to the probably more lucrative and dependable field of interior design, denizens of theater design would probably still remain cognizant of the magical moments they would miss from live performance. Any lighting designer or operator worth their salt can transcend mere humanity, becoming an enchanter that conjures up the human-crafted forces of nature,

evoking the power of emotion through mere fingertips poised over a light board. The immediacy of theater is an irreplaceable collaboration of artists and audience, converging in one place, one moment, one shared experience.

The converse of this conundrum is could interior designers bear to have their work end up on the scrap heap at the close of a show; their vision enduring only in the memories of the audience and the theater's archival photos? Work by a designer that, "...struts and frets [its] hour on the stage, and then is heard no more...a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing" (Shakespeare's 'Scottish play'). Robert G. Smith, an award-winning Chicago-based set and lighting designer, whose work has appeared in theaters all over the world, including Chicago's Stage Left Theatre and a number of prominent ensembles, sums up his satisfaction with theatrical design by recounting the old chestnut - "What's your best set? My next one." A universal conviction for all designers, to be sure.

"Designing a set is almost a reversal of an interior designer's process and often more complicated," Smith posited. "It is the nature of theater to reveal aspects of character that aren't necessarily something that a person would want known, unlike interior design. It is an environment which comments on the subject of a play, and an arrangement of space that promotes the movement necessary for the action of the play to occur. You are making an environment that exists for one event only."

Smith continued, "Whereas an interior designer meets with clients, discusses their needs and tastes, then designs based on what is presumed will occur there, a set designer has read the

play and knows exactly what will take place in the space.” In an article he wrote for *PerformInk*, Chicago’s entertainment trade paper, Smith said, “The scene designer is told more about the personalities of the room’s occupants than most interior designers ever get. And one also must design for what has already happened in the space as well.”

This point is key in theatrical design, and ostensibly for interior design. In theater, the scenic elements are often considered another critical ‘dramatis personae;’ a catalyst for propelling characters towards decisions and actions that change their lives permanently on this certain day. Sam Shepard’s ‘stark, low-rent motel room on the edge of the Mojave Desert,’ in his play “Fool for Love,” irrevocably fuels and contains the vital, claustrophobic, and incestuous love of May and Eddie, as dictated in the text. If Vladimir and Estragon leave the ‘country road’ of Samuel Beckett’s “Waiting for Godot,” the entire essence of the play is lost.

Also in *PerformInk*, Smith asserted his dissent of theater design vs. interior design, challenging Louis Sullivan’s ‘Form follows function.’ “Form shouldn’t follow

function, it should BE function,” he said. He agreed that, “In architecture and in stage scenery, there is one constant: that which is great, that which inspires, that which goes beyond itself to become art

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does so because it has a vision behind it. However, vision does not blindly follow the function which it must perform; it transcends it’s function, it comments on it, enriches it with those details which are appropriate, and ultimately defines by its very existence the function for which it was created, and in doing so becomes aesthetically inseparable from function. Put simply, the designer controls action.”

Smith referenced great theatrical designer Boris Anderson, who said, “I strongly believe that for each play you must first and foremost create a space which, inherent in its design, already holds the mystique of the entire event.” Designers of all stripes seem to know instinctively that design must be performed for what is happening as well as what may be. Smith also echoes the ‘Design Evolution’ theme of this issue of PERSPECTIVE. He believes that the best method of arriving at a production concept is an evolutionary one, arising from exchanges of ideas and impressions in the minds of the production’s creative team.

He said, “It’s not enough for a director to say, ‘make it look Bauhaus’ or ‘I see this as eighteenth-century Spain.’ I want to talk about WHY the images of Bauhaus are suited to this particular play, and what do those images say to an audience today, right now, in this particular social, economic, political time and place.”

Astute advice for all designers - finding pertinent references and applications, perhaps historical and perhaps newly-minted, for creating space that is relevant, not faddish, that

supports the mission of design and its execution for humans that inhabit that space, whether real or imagined.

The most recent in their series of facilitated design discussions, IIDA’s Large Interior Design Practice Roundtable #6, held in April 2000, concurred with the working style that theater designers have implemented for generations - the importance of integrated practice. The participants agreed that “the client benefits from the designer’s ability to bring in experts who can best solve a broad range of issues and concerns.” Collaboration for the client, - in the theater, the audience - with integral experts has long been the mainstay of theater craft. During Stage Left Theatre’s critically-acclaimed and award-winning play “Police Deaf Near Far” last spring, police officers and deaf activists were brought in during the rehearsal and performance processes to inform this production and its audiences about communication between and amongst the hearing and hearing-impaired cultures, as well as the interaction with police officers explored in the play.

Other considerations discussed by Roundtable attendees also echo the

process of theater design, including IIDA President Elect Cary Johnson’s assertion that “the challenge facing the design community is broadening the definition of design.” Prudent play

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production has always included a multi-skilled production team, including the set designer, director, lighting designer, costume designer, prop designer, dramaturg, actors, playwrights, educators and other experts necessary to present a thoughtful, integrated work. In a successful presentation, these experts in their particular disciplines meet from the conception to

the completion of a piece to align, refine and redefine the goals of a particular play.

“As an outcome of the cooperation experienced through integration, each area of collaboration benefits,” also reported the Roundtable Summary.

Collaboration is indeed the glue which holds all design practice together. So much so that Kimberly Senior - director, performer, dramaturg and Arts Exchange Associate for Chicago’s prestigious Steppenwolf Theatre Ensemble - helped name her own theater company ‘CollaborAction’ to express the melding of collaboration and action. Even as a veteran of many acclaimed ‘off-Loop’ Chicago productions, she reveals that though CollaborAction’s sets are first-rate, she inhabits a less than stellar home environment. She laments, “Yes. My apartment is Salvation Army furnished. And badly.”

Here’s hoping that interior designers and theatrical designers can find the common ground to make glorious spaces in which to live, share an evening at the theater, and thrive. If this is not, “To be...” then “...the rest is silence” (Hamlet). 