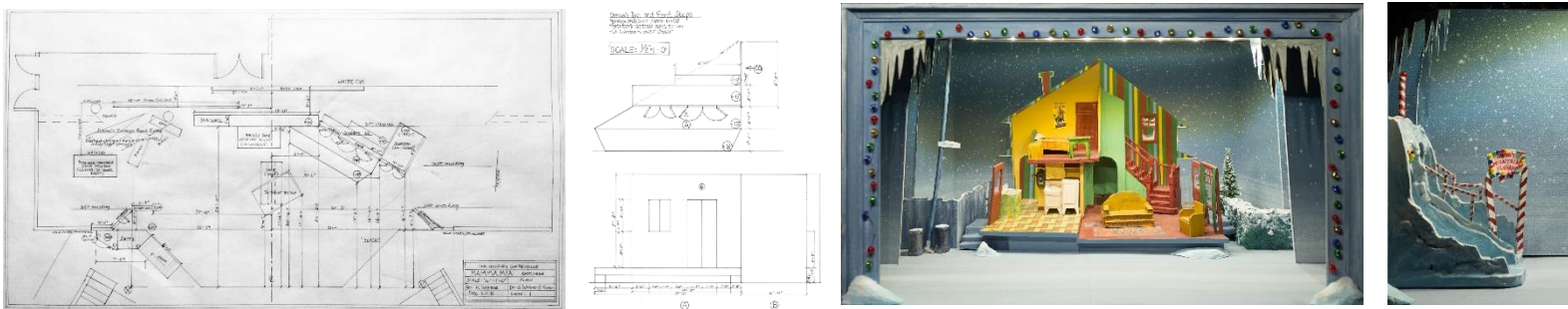


# Theatre People: Set Designer

The set designer creates the look of the performance space including the physical structures, paint treatments, and properties or props - furniture and anything the actors pick up. Depending on the show or the theatre, they might also be responsible for projected images or special effects. The set designer works with the director to develop a concept for the physical world of the play. Once they have collaboratively decided what is important - what is needed onstage, and what do you want to say about it? - the designer turns those themes into visual elements. They sketch ideas, do research, and make drawings, lists, and a model so that elements can be found or built.

Designers are creative problem-solvers. The set designer makes sure that scenic elements support the story and the statements that the director wants to make, but they also ensure that pieces fit in the space, that the scope of the design is appropriate for the budget and the amount of time the theatre has to build it, and come up with ideas about how to approach challenges in the action. Most set designers are self-employed or independent contractors, who are hired by a theatre for a particular show on a short-term contract.



Drafting (by hand or computer) includes a ground plan (top view) of the stage, sections (a type of side view) and elevations (front view) to show all the pieces and their layout. Images from the fundraiser performance of *Mamma Mia*, designed by Kari Hagness. They also build a model to show the set in 3D and give paint details. Model from *A Christmas Story*, designed by Brian Perchaluk.

## Tasks and activities in a typical day

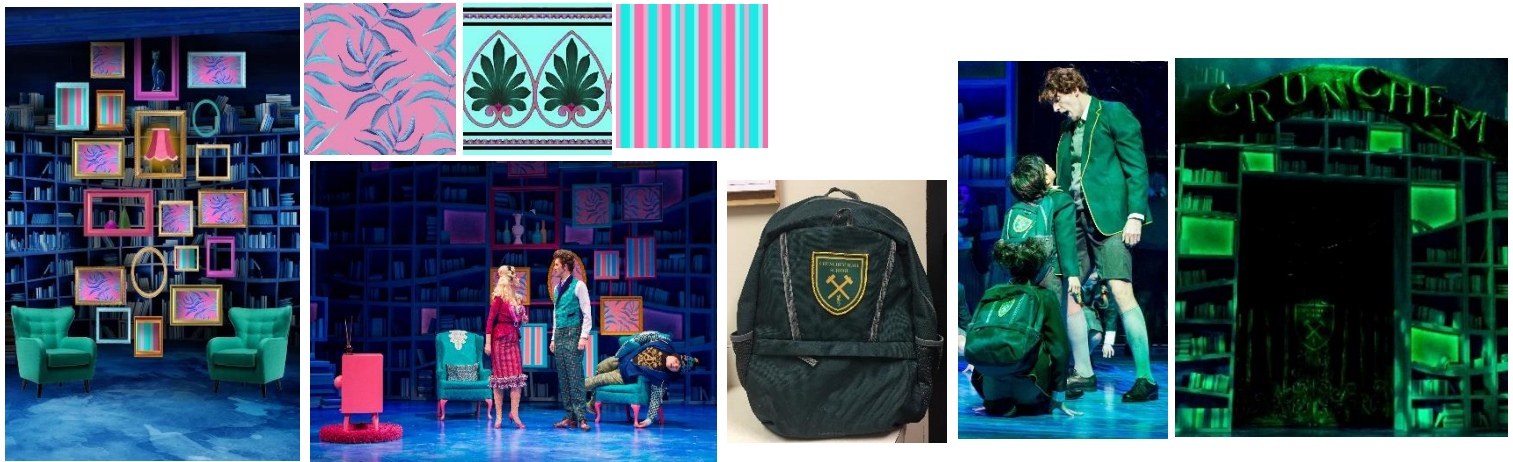
Activities change depending on whether a designer is creating a concept and working towards drawing deadlines, or whether the show is being built and they are in residence at the theatre. (You could be working on multiple shows in different stages at the same time!) Some activities a set designer does regularly are:

- Read the script and respond to it
- Have discussions with the director
- Brainstorm and sketch visual elements
- Research - historical periods, different locations, art movements, and more
- Create engaging visual representations of the set concept
- Create detailed technical drawings of the set for builders, and detailed lists for props
- Find references to share with the building teams: props, paint textures, overall pieces
- Work with props department to shop online or in person or pull pieces from the theatre's stock
- Attend production meetings and individual meetings with other departments (scenic painters, props builders and buyers, carpenters) to clarify information and make choices
- Respond to rehearsal notes, to help come up with solutions to challenges the actors encounter
- Attend rehearsals to understand the needs of the action, and technical rehearsals onstage (later in the process) to ensure things are working as they should and observe any notes needed

# Theatre People: Set Designer

## 10 skills that a set designer uses:

- Time management
- Organization
- Collaboration
- Creativity
- Research
- Technical drawing/drafting and model-building
- Visual, verbal, and written communication
- Decision-making
- Analysis (of story, theme, character, and action)
- Attention to detail



There is lots of set design work in these *Matilda* images. Some designers make set renderings (left) instead of (or in addition to) a model, which show how they imagine the set interacting with costumes or lighting. Set designers are responsible for deciding on every detail, including the exact wallpaper (which sometimes means making it yourself) and logos and lettering that go on set or props, like the sign and backpack patch of Crunchem Hall. Set and costume design by Cory Sincennes, lighting by Gerald King, photos by Dylan Hewlett.

## Building Abilities

There are probably lots of things you are already doing, and things you can start to do, that will serve you in a career as a set designer. Some of these are:

- Figure out ways to express your ideas visually that connect for you! Is that sketching – by hand or digitally, painting, collage, something else?
- Technical drawing/drafting – you don't need to become an expert on this in high school, but it is a necessary skill for you to have eventually.
- Observe the environment around you. How does it make people move and interact? What kinds of feelings and actions does it influence?
- Notice design trends from today and different eras.
- Find an organizational system that works for you to track different tasks and projects.
- Get comfortable with presenting in a group. Practice helps a lot!
- Understand colour/colour theory – important for the choices made in a set design, and in how that set interacts with other design elements like costumes or lighting.
- See and participate in theatre whenever you can, and watch movies and TV! Think critically about what choices you see being made, how they make you feel, and what the intention might have been.
- Learn about other theatre jobs. The set designer has to speak the language of paint, props, construction, movement, and more to have effective conversations with different departments and the director.
- Creative practice of any kind, to discover your own process and aesthetics!