

The Invisible Character
A Perspective into the Significance of Set Design in Film, Theater and Television

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Abstract

The importance of set design is easily comprehended by looking at the history of performing arts and its progress; but the point worth noting is the progression and gradual transformation in the role set design plays in media today. In modern film and theater works, set design is not just a means to create the spaces needed in the story, but it is a character by itself. This paper focuses on the qualities and nuances of set design character and how its components contribute to shaping this character. Based on such perception of the set, two fundamental and interrelated aspects are introduced and discussed: A myriad of information that is provided to the spectator by a brief look, while they are usually unaware of it, and that a complete and detailed set can gravely affect the actors and the audience and enhance their generated emotions. In addition, the transforming role of set design in correlation with technological advancements of the modern performing arts is discussed in this work. It was concluded that, although one cannot ignore these advancements and their influence in performing arts, it should be noted that they cannot substitute the entirety of the design process. Therefore, the designers must educate themselves in these fields and understand these new techniques, so that they can become a mediator between the usual requirements of the set and the technology in use.

Keywords: set design, modern, media, audience, emotions, designer, mediator

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Introduction

Set Design is one of the oldest fields of art in performing arts. As performing arts progressed through time and the public showed more interest in seeing and analyzing this art form, set design started to develop as well and continued to play a major role in transforming the quality and nature of the performance art.

The importance of set design is easily comprehended by looking at the history of performing arts and its progress; but the point worth noting is the progression and gradual transformation in the role set design plays in media today. In modern film and theater works, set design is not just a means to create the spaces needed in the story, but it is a character by itself. All the components of the set, from the constructed double-hung window to the pen that is placed on the study desk, contribute to shaping this character.

This way of defining the set has two different but eternally related aspects: one is that in a brief look, even without having the actors in costumes on set, the set will give the spectator all the information about the type of people who live there and even some insights into the history of their relationship with the space. This will unconsciously affect the viewer. The beauty of this effect is that the viewer is usually not aware of it and if the set is working right, this whole process will happen rapidly and organically.

The other aspect is that a complete and detailed set can gravely affect the actors. There is sometimes this assumption that the actor's job is to act and a good actor should be able to play the role perfectly even with the least amount of external influences such as the set. Although there is some truth to this theory, a major point is neglected here; that the actor is an "emotion generating machine" and everything surrounding them, from the set and décor to the type and quality of the lighting, influences their relationship with the character. Is it precisely for this reason that in some famous cases like "True Detective", the actors volunteered to help decorate the sets that are constantly featured in the story. (Figure 1)



Figure 1: The garage set in True Detective

Some people believe that due to the technological advancements, especially in Visual Effects and Projection Design, the need for designing the sets is soon to be

diminished. Although one cannot ignore these advancements and their influence in performing arts, it should be noted that they cannot substitute the entirety of the design process, but have to be incorporated in it. More than anything, they make the designer educate themselves in these fields and find a way to understand these new techniques. As we can see even today the biggest movies and TV series that are heavily dependent on Visual Effects such as “Blade Runner 2049” and “Stranger Things” or grand theater pieces in which there is a usage of mixed media such as “Kings of War” by “Ivo van Hove” are not totally needless from set design. In these cases, the designer is rather a mediator between the usual requirements of the set and the technology in use. They facilitate the relationship between the two and make sure every component is appropriately placed in the context of the story with regard to the preliminary idea. In fact, here the designer is a mediator between the director and the Visual Effects supervisor. They will work through the design process by visually translating the director’s ideas and constantly collaborating with Visual Effects department; this will lead to the final design which is used as a reference for the whole production team. A superb example is the latest adaptation of “Lion King” in which the production designer *James Chinlund* was challenged to create an environment for the virtual world based on real life geography (he took the design to Kenya) to compliment the documentary-style approach the production team had taken. This was probably one of the most technical productions of the last year that was heavily dependent on VR and yet the presence of a well rounded design concept created by a professional designer proved to be absolutely mandatory.



Figure 2: The process of making Lion King, (Pictured) Caleb Deschanel,
Photo by: Michael Legato.

Conclusion

The ever-growing significance of the set design is explicit in remarkable works in the movies, TV and theater. The key point, however, is that the best designs happen to be so natural and visceral that pull the viewer right into the story, in a way that the viewer does not even recognize the created set and its components. Set and décor is always a fundamental piece in any work in the field of performing arts, and overlooking this fact will only decrease the value and strength of the work.

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