

NUMBERS & NICHES

790

PERFORMING ARTS

ISSUE 9 • MAY 2017


# Setting the Stage



## **INTRODUCTION:**

### **SETTING THE STAGE**

The indoor theatre as a space was only introduced in the Renaissance period, the first being built in Italy. Before that, theatre pieces were mostly outdoor, travelling pieces meant for mass consumption and entertainment. The roots of Western theatre can be tracked back to 5th century BC Greece, where an annual festival called Dionysia was held in honour of the God, Dionysus. The festival was held in a large outdoor theatre (amphitheatre), with the surrounding environment being used as the set or backdrop. The amphitheatre is an engineering feat in itself with basic scenic elements already being incorporated into the staging of these classical Greek tragedies to heighten the action on stage. For example, the mechane (a crane) was employed when the scene required the actor to fly.

A woman in a black leotard is captured in a dynamic dance pose on a stage. She is positioned on the left side of the frame, with her right leg extended forward and her left leg tucked behind. Her arms are raised, with her right hand near her head and her left hand extended outwards. The stage is illuminated with a strong blue light, creating a dramatic atmosphere. In the background, a wide staircase with several steps leads upwards. The overall scene is a blend of art and architecture, emphasizing the relationship between the performer and the stage set.

A STAGE SET SHOULD NOT  
MAKE A PRETTY PICTURE OF  
ITS OWN. THE EMPTY STAGE  
SHOULD LOOK FORMAL AND  
PLEASING, BUT SHOULD SEEM  
TO BE WAITING FOR THE  
ACTION TO COMPLETE IT;  
IT SHOULD NOT HOLD  
DEFINITE SIGNIFICANCE  
IN ITSELF.

– G. WILSON KNIGHT

Fast forward to today, our understanding of theatre/performance spaces has expanded to showcase several different types of spaces that dramatically affect the staging of a play. The most common type of theatre is the proscenium arch theatre, named so due to the physical frame that surrounds the top, sides and bottom of the stage. However, in the last 40 to 50 years, contemporary theatre companies have moved to using black box



theatres, a large rectangle room with black walls and a flat floor, usually unadorned. Works staged in these theatres focus more on the human features rather than technical ones, the smaller space creating a level of intimacy with the audience.

Crucial to any stage production is the set design, as the set is the first thing audience members see upon entering the theatre. It is important that the set transports them into the world of the play; revealing the time, place, mood and atmosphere about to take place on stage.

Theatre is a collaborative process; no one aspect of a production is more important than another, thus the set designer works closely with the director to establish the shape and look the play would take. This requires the set designer to understand and familiarise themselves with the script, creating a set that rightfully reflects the environment, thus allowing the actors to fully immerse themselves into the world of the play. The set designers then come up with sketches and a 3D model of the set for the director and other designers to look at. These 3D models require time and effort as everything from a chair to a bookshelf has to be individually made. A set is a luxury we must afford.

### OUTDOOR THEATRE

The set needs to be visible from all angles and large enough in scale to be noticeable. Materials used in the building of the stage also need to withstand natural elements. As the set is outdoors, there can be blending of both performance and audience area, with the set interspersed in the area allowing the audience to interact with performers and possibly the set.





## BLACK BOX THEATRE

What is characteristic of the black box theatre is the movable platform seating that can be rearranged to suit the artistic elements of the play; a Traverse stage would see the audience seated at two sides of the stage while theatre-in-the-round is when the audience surrounds all sides of the stage.

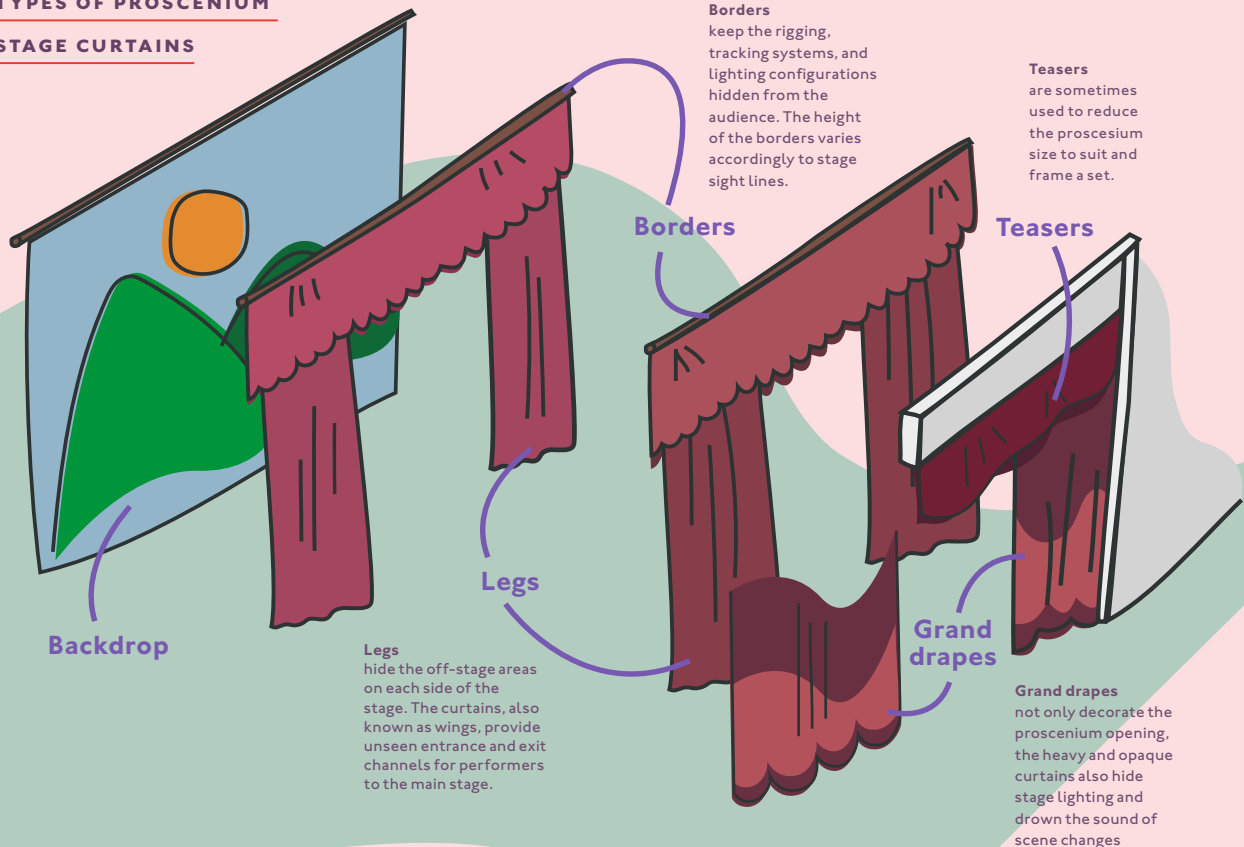
## PROSCENIUM ARCH

This framing separates the audience and actors and provides the window into which the audience witnesses the action on stage. Advantage of this type of staging lies in its ability to ensure that everyone in the audience has a good view of the stage and performers need only focus on one direction.



## TYPES OF PROSCENIUM

### STAGE CURTAINS





## SPOTLIGHT

Nizam Supardi leads *neontights*, the art department of Cake Theatrical Productions, a contemporary performance company committed to creating original works that marry bold experimentation with the traditions of theatrical convention. Known for his aesthetically innovative stage sets, bold visual landscapes and contemporary installations, he is a master craftsman in the creation of inventive scenic possibilities. Highly adaptable and governed by a spirit of experimentation, Nizam designs for a wide range of performance spaces - theatres, unexpected nooks, in and outdoors with a forward-facing design philosophy.



### **Did you choose set design or did set design choose you?**

I chose set design because of the human interaction factor. Working in a collaborative environment appeals to me. I am also drawn to the wide range of design possibilities that arise for each new work.

### **How and why did you get involve with Cake Theatrical Productions?**

I was introduced to Cake by a friend and was quickly drawn to the opportunity to be part of something interesting and unique.

### **What is the full scope of your set/production work? And which is your favourite aspect?**

As a set designer at Cake, I work closely with the director and designers before I begin my design process. We discuss the work and try to imagine how the set can manifest itself in the performance space. After a series of discussions, I begin to sketch and come up with something tangible. I create in tandem with the rehearsal process, often observing rehearsals to take in all that is going on; looking at blocking and the choices that are being made on the rehearsal floor. Thereafter, I begin to construct essential pieces so that the actors can play with them during rehearsals. These may be portions of the set or it could be a prop that is important for an actor to work with as soon as possible. At different stages I meet with the director and production team to discuss if our initial ideas are still applicable or whether adjustments need to be made. There have been instances where the entire

set is erected in the rehearsal venue so that the actors can work with it way in advance. When the set moves into the actual performance space, it is always exciting to see how it all comes together with the rest of the design elements. Sculpting props is my favourite aspect as I get to explore with a wide variety of materials, techniques and tools.

### **How does space and location of each production inform your process and challenge you?**

Every space and location creates different opportunities and challenges. Understanding individual spaces helps me create the best possible and most effective set design for a production.





### **What is effective set design to you?**

An effective set design creates mood, atmosphere and offers creative possibilities to the actors. A set is generally the first element that the audience sees. It is the world that the performers inhabit.

### **What kind of set do you dream of making?**

I want to create a surreal oversized colourful fairground with enormous interactive props where the audiences become the cast and they create their own journey.

### **What is your most memorable set design piece?**

Illogic is my most memorable set. I had the opportunity to create a vast landscape of a vertical and horizontal terrain for the cast to explore. Adding water elements and inverted steps also enhanced the design to create something vast, epic, and poetic.

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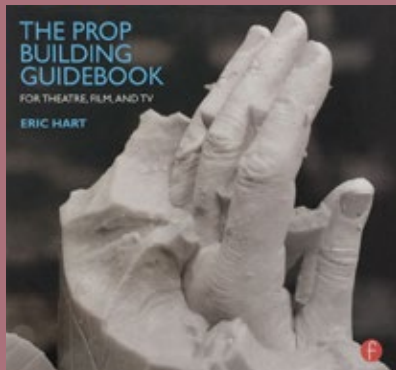
#### **PROPPING UP**

#### **THE STAGE WITH**

#### **NEONTIGHTS**

Nizam Supardi of *neontights* will be divulging little known details of his job as a set and props designer for Cake Theatrical Productions at [library@esplanade.com.sg](mailto:library@esplanade.com.sg) on 27 May 2017 (3pm).

Find out more at [www.nlb.gov.sg/golibrary](http://www.nlb.gov.sg/golibrary).



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## The Props Building Guidebook for Theatre, Film, and TV

By Eric Hart

The book takes you through the fundamentals of set building and prop making with lots of practical tips. It offers insight to new techniques and the use of different materials, showing you how to look at an object, break it apart and put it together again. It is a wealth of valuable information on carpentry, construction with plastic, fabric and the application of graphics.

1

## Sculpting Space in the Theater: Conversations with the Top Set, Light and Costume Designers

Babak Ebrahimian  
Focal Press,  
Massachusetts  
USA, 2006

—  
English 792.025 EBR



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Helmed by Babak Ebrahimian, the interviews in this book are one of a kind in its approach to picking the minds of stage designers; finding out their artistic and conceptual approach to designing set, lights and costumes for the stage. The conversations flow so seamlessly and effortlessly, it's hard not to feel like the designers are speaking to you personally about their work.

2

## Model Making for the Stage: A Practical Guide

Keith Orton  
The Crowood Press,  
Marlborough  
UK, 2004  
—  
English 792.025 ORT



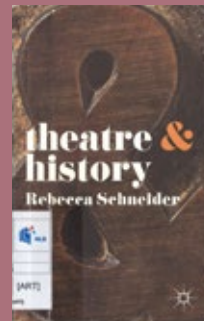
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If you've ever wondered what goes behind the creation of 3D models for set design, this is the book for you. Detailing the model making process, from techniques to presentation, see why set designers are craftsmen in their own right.

3

## Theatre & History

Rebecca Schneider  
Palgrave Macmillan, New York,  
USA, 2014  
—  
English 791.624 SCH -[ART]

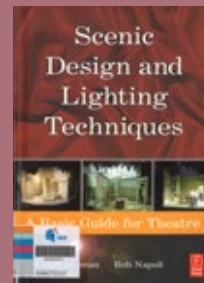


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## Scenic Design and Lighting Techniques: A Basic Guide for Theatre

Chuck Gloman and Rob Napoli  
Focal Press, Boston,  
USA, 2007  
—  
English 792.025 GLO -[ART]



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