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The Reality of Set Design

Seth Jackson

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Creating an environment isn't always about scale and budget

In the past few years, scenic presentation and creating an environment for weekly services has expanded from the "mega-church-only" into churches and worship centers of all shapes and sizes. This has created the great need for creative, innovative ways to constantly re-invent our environments.

No matter whether you have a staff and a budget, or you are the "all-around-everything-technical expert" working late into the night to focus lights and build scenery a good scenic presentation is something you can achieve. All it takes is a little inventiveness, creativity, and a good understanding of the theatrical ideas and traditions that have been around for hundreds of years.

What's new is actually old

The traditions and training of theater have given us a great resource for ideas and methods to create scenery. The good news is that theatrical presentations also have the great tradition of working on stringent budgets.

What's the big idea!?

No matter what style, material, or approach you take with design there is a simple, yet often over-looked rule: sets should be a faithful, logical, and natural outgrowth of the production concept. This is true of lights, video, set pieces, and just about anything that else that goes on the stage. It all has to fit together to serve the greater concept.

GET REAL!

No matter how fantastic, brilliant, or otherwise life-changing your set design may be, it isn't going to get you anywhere if you can't get it built. Some big issues to consider in design are:

- Time
- Money
- Safety
- Reliability

“Well, it will kind of look like this...”

The greatest idea in the world is no good if the idea can't be expressed. How do you get a pastor, producer, worship leader, or even your team to understand your design? It's all about presentation.

- Sketches
- Renderings
- 3D drawings
- Models

The Designer's Tool box

In the creation of a set, there are standards of what the designer is expected to provide. You may not need all of these, or any of them, depending on what you are creating, but it helps to understand the full process and in the process you will become a better designer.

- Ground Plan
- Front Elevation
- Section View
- Detail Drawings
- Paint Elevations

A Few Tricks to get you started...

Over the years, I have designed many sets for television, touring, and theater. There are some great techniques and materials out there that can always help me look far better than I really am!

- SWAG IT!
- Positive / Negative
- Use lights
- Throw me a net
- Dress in layers
- Got any smoke?
- Home Depot is also Set Depot

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Seth Jackson is the 2007 and 2008 Parnelli Award winner for set designer of the year for his work on Toby Keith with his design partner, Liz O'Keefe. He is also a four time lighting designer of the year nominee for his work on Toby Keith, Barry Manilow, and Hilary Duff. He has also designed productions for David Cook, Carrie Underwood, Melissa Etheridge, Don Henley, American Idols Tour, and most recently is the associate creative director and co-production designer for Star Wars: A Musical Journey, which begins a three-year world tour in September.

Session Goals

- Separate the need for equipment from the ability to present a quality visual experience.
 - Define the techniques, history, and traditions of Set Design.
 - Discuss practical techniques and resources for creating innovative sets out of materials within reach.
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Video Ideas

1. Into The Woods (Broadway musical)
 2. Don Henley, Inside Job
 3. Prince, Sign O' The Times
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Books and Resources

Books

Theatrical Design and Production, J. Michael Gillette
Backstage Handbook
The Theatre Art of Boris Aronson, Frank Rich

Websites

www.plsn.com

www.plsnbookshelf.com