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**Precursors for performance: a model for an unrealised production**

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**Abstract**

The article discusses an unrealised production of Verdi’s opera *Simon Boccanegra,* directed by John Dexter and designed by Jocelyn Herbert, and scheduled for the 1984/85 season at the Metropolitan Opera in New York. The objects generated by the creative process, now held in the Jocelyn Herbert Archive in the National Theatre, London, are considered as ‘precursors for performance’: objects from which new objects can be produced. The set model for the production is a rich source of information about the collaboration between Dexter and Herbert, while notebooks, personal recollections and correspondence indicate how models were used in the conversation between Herbert and scenic artists. Rather than focusing on the teleological function of the archive in showing how an artist arrived at a final design, this approach provides a way of thinking about the generative potential of archival materials.

[138 words]

**Precursors for performance: a model for an unrealised production**

What remains of a production that was never performed? This article discusses a production of Verdi’s opera *Simon Boccanegra* scheduled for the 1984/85 season at the Metropolitan Opera in New York. The production was cancelled by the management of the opera company in May 1984, just five months before rehearsals were due to begin, citing the projected cost of the design. Costume drawings and elements of a set model for this production have been preserved in the archive of the designer Jocelyn Herbert, along with associated correspondence and notes.1 Any creative process generates new material from many hands, including visual and contextual research, notes of meetings and early conceptual sketches, models, technical drawings, samples of fabric and painting, promotional copy, photographs, programmes and reviews. Even a production that has been cancelled leaves traces, both material and emotional. Creative collaborators spend months thinking about the forthcoming production and establishing new, temporary networks of relationships – within a theatre building and beyond it. Precisely because this production of *Simon Boccanegra* was unrealised, it suggests a new approach to ‘performance remains’ in the archive as ‘precursor materials’. A designer whose work is preserved in an archive is partly of interest as a ‘precursor’ or ancestor, one who came before contemporary practitioners and had an influence on them – and this is certainly true of Jocelyn Herbert, as I discuss below. In the chemical sense, however, a ‘precursor substance’ is one from which another is formed, especially by metabolic reaction.2 Costume drawings and set models can be considered as precursors of performance: objects from which new objects are produced through digestion and synthesis. Rather than focusing on the teleological function of the archive in showing how an artist arrived at a final design, this approach provides a way of thinking about the generative potential of archival materials. In addition, models provide a particularly rich source of information about collaboration and working practices.

The Met’s 1984 production of *Simon Boccanegra* was to be directed by John Dexter, conducted by James Levine and designed by Jocelyn Herbert. Costume drawings, floor plans and model pieces, photographs of the assembled set model, as well as diaries and correspondence relating to the production, are held in the Jocelyn Herbert Archive, now part of the National Theatre Archive in London. The archive contains over 6,000 drawings, as well as model pieces for more than 30 productions designed by Jocelyn Herbert. Born in London in 1917, Herbert studied painting in Paris with André Lhote, and set design with Vladimir Polunin at the Slade. In 1936, she joined the London Theatre Studio, which had been opened by Michel Saint-Denis and George Devine the previous year. The training emphasised the collaborative nature of theatre and demanded a practical engagement with every aspect of theatre from students, whether they were focusing on acting or design; the teachers ‘expected their students to approach the theatre not from a theoretical or intellectual perspective, but through hands-on experience of all its working processes’ (Cornford 2012, 158). Herbert married while at the LTS and brought up her four children before returning to work in theatre in 1956. She joined the English Stage Company at the Royal Court Theatre as a scenic artist, going on to design a series of highly influential premieres.3 Fellow designer Timothy O’Brien comments, ‘In six years, Herbert’s work, based on a spare poetic aesthetic tending to abstraction, had become the style of Devine’s Royal Court’ (O’Brien 2003). Herbert developed many long-standing professional relationships rooted in sociability and friendship: with the playwrights Samuel Beckett, David Storey and Tony Harrison, and with directors including Tony Richardson, Lindsay Anderson and John Dexter. From 1961 onwards, she designed more widely for theatres beyond the Royal Court, for film and for opera. Without taking on a formal teaching role, Herbert had a close engagement with several theatre design courses in London, at institutions including the Central School of Art and Design, Wimbledon School of Art, and the Motley Theatre Design Course. Suggesting young designers for jobs is a recurring theme in her later correspondence and many of her assistants and co-designers became significant innovators in their own right. Hayden Griffin recalled that while he didn’t know her well, his first important jobs came to him through Herbert’s recommendation, commenting that she ‘taught me (and, I think, the whole of my generation of designers) by example rather than through formal teaching’ (Courtney 1993, 228). Herbert’s impact on theatre design was as much about working practices as her aesthetic: she argued that design should serve the intentions of the production as a whole and embodied a highly collaborative way of working.

The collaboration between Herbert and John Dexter lasted more than 30 years, beginning in 1957 with a production of *Purgatory* by W.B. Yeats. It took in premières of five of Arnold Wesker’s plays, as well as *Othello*, *Pygmalion* and *The* *Life of Galileo*. By 1984, they had also collaborated on four operas: *Lulu* (1977), *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* (1979) and *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* (1979) at the New York Met, and *La Forza del Destino* at the Paris Opera (1975). Dexter was Director of Production at the Met from 1974 to 1981; by 1984 he had become ‘Production Advisor’, a role that freed him from administrative duties and allowed him to take on projects elsewhere. Sir Peter Hall was originally scheduled to direct *Simon Boccanegra* in the 1984-5 season, but as Hall’s first two operas at the Met had not been regarded as successes, Dexter was invited to direct the opera instead and asked Herbert to design set and costumes. The reasons for the eventual cancellation of this production are disputed, but its projected cost was the issue of explicit disagreement. The episode is mentioned in passing in the autobiography of Joseph Volpe, technical director at the Met at the time, and in a history of the opera company (Fiedler 2001). In both accounts, the role of Herbert as designer is invisible, elided with that of the director. However, documents in the Jocelyn Herbert Archive demonstrate that regardless of the institutional and personal politics surrounding the production, practical questions defined by the set model are central to the story.

**The model**

Verdi’s opera is set in fourteenth-century Genoa and is based on the real story of Simon Boccanegra, a former pirate who became the first Doge, or chief magistrate, of the city state. An engagement diary for 1984, recording Jocelyn Herbert’s research trip to the Italian Institute in London on 30 January, suggests the effort that had to be put into tracking down visual sources in this period: ‘at last some information about Genoa’ (JH/10/22). Her design evokes the interior of the Doge’s palace which survives in Genoa – a courtyard with a chequerboard floor, surrounded by an arcade – as well as Byzantine and Islamic influences in the Cathedral of San Lorenzo. However, Italian paintings and engravings of the early Renaissance – easily accessible to Herbert in the collection of the National Gallery in London - appear to be an equally important source. The costume designs in watercolour and gouache include suggestions of richly patterned brocades in turquoise and verdigris, as well as figures in cloaks and tunics in browns and greys. There are also pen and ink sketches of details such as leather pouches on belts (JH/4/88). The set design employs simple geometric forms – arches, domes, pillars – decorated with contrasting shades of marble as flat discs and horizontal bands. This combination of simplified forms and surface texture recalls buildings depicted by Piero della Francesca, as in the fresco ‘The History of the True Cross’ in the Basilica di San Francesco in Arezzo, painted circa 1460. (A photocopy of a plate from a book showing the fresco is among Herbert’s research materials.)

In the archive, some 30 pieces of a 1:25 scale model are stored in a grey cardboard box. The model pieces for *Simon Boccanegra* are unusually heavy, due to the use of wood and metal. They include a dozen tall arches with rounded tops, made of card covered with cream and grey marbled paper, with the geometric decoration in light relief. The card sections are attached with double-sided tape to hinged frames made of brass square tube. Photos of the assembled model show the arches in various configurations: folded in zigzags to create an arcade; as openings on either side of a grand doorway; or enclosing two small, square lobbies, with large doors filling the arches at the rear. Thirty years on, the surviving model pieces give an impression of ruin and decay, with empty metal frames that resemble scaffolding and black panels where the reverse of the board is exposed. The sticky tape is yellowed and crumbling; the marbled paper is peeling away from the curved sections of the structure. Another large structure, the façade of a domed building, is made of sturdy plywood rather than card, with relief detail in layers of card, and pillars covered in black and white marbled paper. Tall doors with smaller doors set into them are painted to look like bronze and pierced in geometrical patterns. The box also contains lengths of curved balustrade, a throne, two white marble benches, and two rows of slender cedar trees made of green sponge.

Herbert may have decided to use wood and metal for this model, rather than the more usual card, because of fears about the rigours of the journey between London and New York. A letter written seven years earlier, about the model for her design for *Lulu*, indicates her concerns:

I hope everything arrived intact – we made the model as solid as possible to withstand the journey except for the GARRET which will need assembling and sticking together. The PROPS are more of a problem as some of them are very delicate. (JH/12/1-2)

In his reply, David Reppa, the Met’s resident scenic designer, reassures her that the model had arrived safely, although it did require some repair.

The underlying reason for building a sturdy model with working hinges was John Dexter’s insistence on having a technically functioning model that he could work with for an extended period of time. Accounts of previous collaborations between Herbert and Dexter testify to their habit of collaborating closely on the scenography through the model. Dexter describes how the director and designer spent ‘two weeks talking’ about the staging for Arnold Wesker’s *Chicken Soup with Barley* (1958): ‘looking at the groundplan, playing with bits of cardboard’. He says, ‘We had to “sort out the plumbing”, the geography of the place. You do that with any play, no matter how abstract’ (Courtney 1993, 215). Some twenty years later, when Herbert and Dexter were preparing *The Life of Galileo* for the National Theatre, London, she had a model of the Olivier stage made so she could work on early ideas with Dexter during a stay in New York (Hiley 1981, 27). Later, her set model was photographed to help the production team in working out the cost of the design; she then flew to New York with the set model so that Dexter could work with it (ibid, 36). In his book-length study of this production of *The Life of Galileo*,Jim Hiley describes how they used the model together to develop staging ideas:

For this, as for most of her projects, Herbert used a mass of sketches with the model rather than detailed design plans. She and Dexter passed endless little drawings to and fro as they talked. Dexter would seek her ideas not just on how the set might look, but also about how the action might move upon it. In their collaboration, the dividing line between design and ‘blocking’ was always fluid; later, Herbert would watch rehearsals and offer comments on the actors’ moves, just as now Dexter was scribbling his own notions onto sketches she had made. (Hiley 1981, 27)

As this comment suggests, Dexter was highly visual and was comfortable in using drawing to communicate practical and conceptual ideas. Joseph Volpe mentions this ability as one of the reasons Dexter worked so effectively with backstage teams (Volpe 2006, 70).

It seems likely that Herbert felt it was important to construct a model for *Simon Boccanegra* that would survive active use. In particular, the linked archways needed to stand up reliably even as they were folded into different configurations, perhaps explaining the use of brass tube for the structure. Photographs of the model taken by James Heffernan, the Met’s house photographer, show various arrangements of the settings in different light conditions:

* the Doge, in red velvet and ermine, stands by his throne on a dais with four steps, against a tall door of pierced bronze about six metres high; some 24 members of the council, also in red robes, are ranged on either side; through two open archways, there is a terrace enclosed by a balustrade
* five archways span the stage, with further arches folded outwards towards the audience to create an arcade (Fig. 4)
* an interior: the Doge stands by a wooden table; the archways are topped with a dome, and they zigzag to create two small square lobbies either side of a doorway with open red curtains. A balustrade immediately beyond the doorway suggests a balcony with a view of an Italian hill city (Fig. 5)
* the terrace is downstage, with sections of balustrade edging the stage and nine or ten arched doorways curving around to enclose it; the city in the distance is in silhouette, as at night. (JH/9/17)

Black and white photocopies of paintings and woodcuts in the Jocelyn Herbert Archive provide the reference imagery for three backdrops showing the city at different times of day and night.4 The backdrop in Figure 3 is based on a detail of the Piero della Francesca fresco mentioned above, in which the city of Jerusalem is depicted as the Tuscan city of Arezzo, with steepled towers, pitched roofs covered in terracotta tiles, and pink and grey stucco walls clustered on a steep hill. Figures 4 and 5 show other options: a blue sky, and a more distant cityscape, possibly based on a medieval woodcut that can be found among the reference material in the archive (JH/4/88).

**Going to New York**

The model for *Simon Boccanegra* was a working tool and not a work of art; this had to be made clear to customs inspectors. A letter from Joseph Clark, Volpe’s assistant, addressed ‘TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN’ (27 April 1984) states that ‘Miss Jocelyn Herbert is travelling to New York on May 9, 1984, and bringing with her a model for a proposed new production of *Simon Boccanegra*, an opera which will be presented at the Metropolitan Opera in our 1984/85 season. This model, and any drawings or plans accompanying it, are intended for reference use here at the Metropolitan only. They are not intended for sale and have no intrinsic value. The model and original designs are and will remain the property of Miss Herbert who will be taking them back to London with her after the production has opened.’ Clark’s emphatic assertion that the model has ‘no intrinsic value’ is addressed to bureaucrats and customs officers but reflects the provisionality of the model: despite the investment of many hours of skilled labour, it is an object primarily intended to generate other material objects.

Herbert kept a brief diary of the events of this nine-day trip. Many of her notebooks and sketchbooks include isolated diary entries; more extended diaries were often kept during travel and film-shoots. The decision to make daily notes on this short trip perhaps reflects a certain isolation in New York; in London she would have been able to share day-to-day frustrations with family and colleagues in person or by phone. Alongside notes on work meetings, the diary also records dinners with John Dexter and with Anne Atik and Avigdor Arikha, close friends of Samuel Beckett, noting that Arikha had just designed a production of Beckett’s play *Endgame*.

The musical director of *Simon Boccanegra* was to be James Levine, with lighting by Gil Wechsler (erroneously spelt as ‘Gill’ in the diary). In the following extracts from her diary, Herbert also refers to Anthony Bliss, executive director of the Met.5 The Met had been founded in 1883, and the company was apparently preoccupied with gala events throughout its Centennial year. The first entries suggest an atmosphere of some confusion and changes of plan:

May 9

Fly to New York

John sick with Egyptian tummy – and out of action –

MET: engrossed in huge gala scheduled for Sunday –

can’t show model till Monday –

very irritating + depressing

did not improve John’s state either

Finally settled to work on costumes with Dickie on Thursday –

after that collapsed + slept on + off till morning

Thursday

Finally decided to set up model with David and Michael in Art Dept tomorrow

so that it will be there

for Levine + John to look at on Sunday

Ran into Joe Clark on way out + he now wants to see model with Gill Tomorrow?

Friday

worked on setting up model all day with David and Michael

Drama as Gill not going to be in New York on Monday – so Joe Clark insisted on him and Gill seeing model this evening. This made me late back to have dinner with John who of course was furious – ‘Why hadn’t I rung him’? etc etc

Suppose there will be another big row on Monday.

Gala seems to have completely taken over everyone at the Met – no arrangements for Monday showing seem to have been made – no one has been [alerted?] – no Time made?

Monday

9.30 Show Model? who to is a mystery.

Showed Model to Bliss + Volpe

Bliss appeared to like it (JH/2/60)

At this point, Herbert had shown the model to the holders of the purse strings. There is perhaps a hint of the storm to come in the fact that only Bliss’s response is recorded. The next diary entry is concerned with technical questions that were presumably raised during the Monday evening showing, or on the following day in discussion with Dexter:

Queries on Model

1. Technical question of moving the arches

2. Construction of floor.

3. Flying position of central [grille?] + Sc. 4 arches

4. Enlarge Back Sc 4 Arches Height

5. Question of Grooved row + gauzes

6. Decision – which back cloth? Talk to Stanley. Mixture of the two.

Alongside the technical queries, there is an artistic decision - 'which back cloth?'. While this decision remains Herbert's responsibility, it involves discussion with 'Stanley' – presumably one of the scenic artists at the Met. Given the opera’s movement through 24 hours, it might be that Stanley was consulted on how a ‘mixture of the two’ might be realised, to create a cloth capable of being lit to suggest both day and night. Although further discussion of the back cloth is noted in the diary, the following two days were dominated by heated meetings about the production budget.

Wednesday

Extraordinary meeting at 2.30 in Bliss’s luxuriously vulgar office – with Volpe – John – Joe Clark + Bliss

Volpe really showing his hand and attacking John in an unbelievable way

-

They say production must come in at £500,000 [*sic* not $] – or else? –

where can it be cut? –

no real figures seriously budgeted – Joe Clark detailed to work all night

2nd meeting for Thursday at 2

Clark would have used the model to calculate the cost of materials and construction. It is not clear why ‘no real figures’ for the design had been discussed at an earlier stage, since these would usually be calculated from a white card model. The following day, Herbert went to the workshops across the Hudson in New Jersey to talk to the scenic artists:

Thursday

To workshops after long delay

Saw samples of Marble painting. Talked about backcloth etc

As she comments in a letter to David Reppa relating to the set for *Lulu* (23 June 1976), Herbert felt it was important to meet the scenic artists and relate her samples of finishes to the model: ‘because sometimes the samples are not as lively as the model and sometimes the other way round’. The morning in the workshop was followed by another meeting with the management:

Meeting with Bliss again

He made long speech about MET not having any money - + if Board wouldn’t meet budget reverting to plan of using Chicago set – in which case they would lose John – Levine

A production budget for *Simon Boccanegra* on Met Opera headed paper in the Jocelyn Herbert Archive shows that a total of $800,000 had been allotted for construction, props, costumes and wigs and design and direction fees. (Herbert was to be paid $11,000 for set design and $20,000 for costume design; Dexter $30,000 as director.) As indicated by Herbert’s diary entry quoted above, Bliss and Volpe wanted a much less expensive production. The company was in financial trouble, despite celebrating its Centennial year: ‘while the Met garnered international attention and acclaim, it was faced with a deficit of $4 million’ (Fiedler 2001, 194). This was the last day of Herbert’s New York trip; the last entry of the diary reads: ‘No time for any shopping/Left for London’ (JH/2/60). A few days later, on the 24 May, the productionwas cancelled. Dexter recorded in his diary:

Bliss lunch

They cancel SB. Sad for us. Tragic for them. (Dexter 1993, 185)

The production was cancelled five months before the start of rehearsals – relatively late in the day, given the long lead times typical of opera. Presumably unable to get the Board’s agreement to the budget for the Dexter/Herbert production of *Simon Boccanegra,* Bliss replaced it with an existing production of the same opera borrowed from the Chicago Lyric Opera.6

Even a cancelled production leaves behind physical and emotional traces, despite the impulse to preserve and document being perhaps less urgent than with a fully realised production.7 The scenic artists at the Met had already prepared samples of marbling; other members of staff would have been scheduling rehearsal rooms and writing promotional copy. The Jocelyn Herbert Archive contains material relating to this production from many different hands: as well as Herbert’s costume designs, there are technical drawings of the stage; letters between Herbert and various members of staff at the Met in copy and in draft, and between Herbert and Dexter; carefully staged photographs of the set model taken by the Met’s house photographer, and a handful of dim Polaroids. Jocelyn Herbert’s appointment diary for 1984 still records the dates for putting up the *Simon Boccanegra* set and the start of rehearsals on the 22 October, even though other London appointments were subsequently written in on these days. The fact that Herbert did not cross out the key dates on which the staging of the operawas meant to begin suggests that she retained an awareness of the cancelled production, and was perhaps in some sense haunted by it. No other evidence of her attitude to the cancellation has so far been discovered in the archive.

Dexter, however, clearly felt it as a personal betrayal. He had an intense relationship with the Met, alongside a growing desire to pursue other projects. When first appointed as Director of Production in 1974, he had been, according to Fiedler, ‘appalled’ to discover that

not a single member of the administrative technical staff could read a blueprint or had practical experience in judging what time, manpower, and space would be needed for any given stage design. He urged Bliss to dismiss many of the technical staff, from stage managers to department heads. (Fiedler 2001, 120).

Dexter did find ‘one man whose intelligence and talent met his lofty standards: Joseph Volpe’ (ibid.). Volpe was a master carpenter who had begun work at the Met in 1964, joining a closely-knit shop in which many of the staff were related to each other. Dexter brought to the Met an attitude that had developed through his work with Herbert at the Royal Court: he held that limitations to the budget could free creativity. Together, Dexter and Herbert achieved remarkable intimacy with the Met’s vast stage. Selecting the Dexter/Herbert 1977 production of *Lulu* as an example of ‘magnificence at the Met’ in his book of that name, Robert Jacobson notes how Herbert’s design brought the singers towards the audience: ‘her sets are not only consistent, visually varied and always interesting in their detail, but provide well-focused playing areas that seem to thrust the action right into the audience’s lap’ (Jacobson 1985, 142). The consensus had previously been that the Met was too large for small-scale works like Mozart’s *Abduction from the Seraglio*. But for the 1979 production at the Met, Herbert ‘designed simple, bright sets that extended out into the auditorium’, and as with *Lulu*, a staging that ‘kept the singers near the front of the stage so that they were close to the Mozart-size orchestra in the pit and the audience’ (Fiedler 2001, 129). Fiedler suggests that as well as allowing the Met to extend its repertoire to include smaller-scale operas, Dexter’s ‘contagious’ belief in the combination of simple means and the audience’s imagination helped to motivate staff at the Met to turn around the company’s financial problems.

Despite the strong early rapport between Dexter and Volpe, they eventually fell out. Volpe recalls the period after Dexter’s resignation as director of productions in 1981: ‘To John, I had also become a bad guy. In my new capacity as director of operations, I now had the authority to tell him what was or wasn’t financially realistic.’ Volpe links the battle over *Simon* *Boccanegra* to this developing conflict over budgets. In 1982, he had turned down Dexter’s request for an assistant. The next year, he writes, Dexter ‘submitted his designs for a new production of Verdi’s *Simon Boccanegra*. For costly excess, they out-Zeffirellied Zeffirelli. I advised Tony Bliss that the production was much larger than it needed to be. The Dexter designs were rejected’ (Volpe 2006, 80-81). In this account, Jocelyn Herbert’s work disappears entirely into the ‘Dexter designs’. In fact, she doesn’t appear in Volpe’s book at all, even though he lists *Lulu* and *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* as ‘among the Met’s most beautifully conceived and designed productions’, with the latter being his favourite Met production (ibid., 71). In her history of the Met, Fiedler quotes Volpe’s account of the *Simon Boccanegra* dispute, again without mentioning Herbert.

Volpe speculates that with *Simon Boccanegra* John Dexter was trying to prove that he was capable of producing a lavish, large scale opera, but Dexter claimed that the design was economical, rather than excessive, writing in his diary on 16 May:

I have an ulterior motive in taking on *Simon Boccanegra* under these absurd conditions. I want for all and for once to demonstrate that economy can mean style as long as the economy dominates the style. No one can do *Simon* for less and with more skill than I. (Dexter 1993, 183-4)

Dexter cites the influence of private sponsors and their preference for nineteenth-century opera as the reason for the decision not to fund his production, and blames Bliss for choosing ‘money over policy’ (ibid. 185). It is hard to determine which of these competing interpretations to follow. The model indicates a substantial set, but it would have been quite uncharacteristic of Herbert and Dexter to insist on expensive materials. David Reppa comments that Herbert was interested in using non-traditional materials without any snobbish attachment to commercial value: ‘Other designers will go shopping but if what they see is inexpensive then they’re not interested, but Jocelyn isn’t like that at all and I remember when we shopped for *Lulu* ninety five percent of the furniture was purchased from antique or junk shops.’ (Courtney 1993, 226).

**From the model to the stage**

While Dexter’s autobiography testifies to his close working relationship with Herbert, further insight into the collaboration can be gained by looking at some of the questions Herbert posed to Dexter while working on the *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*:

Abduction Questions

‘How are we going to get Sutherland down a Ladder? How high can window be?’

‘What happens at end of Act IV. Seems to be no music for Sc. change.

Constanza +Belmonte taken off –

Osmin’s solo

1) Will it happen during Osmin’s solo in view

2) Will there be a pause

3) Osmin come down stage of curtain for aria while Sc. change happening behind.

Act III

Square in front of Palace.

Is Osmin dwelling necessary –

is he always there

which window for Ladies escape –

1) why does window give on square

2) More of a courtyard - ? in which case would the sea be at the back – or façade of Palace? (JH/2/58)

Herbert’s questions document a collaborative process in which designer and director are developing the world of the opera together (for example, defining its location as a town square or courtyard), and solving practical problems (how the singers would negotiate challenging elements of the staging). It is particularly interesting to note the three options Herbert provides for dealing with a transition between scenes for which the opera provides no music or indications about staging. It is in the nature of design for performance that dramaturgical, aesthetic and practical questions are inextricably intertwined. Herbert poses the ‘problem’ as a shared one, while also proposing three distinct solutions. In reviews, such decisions are typically attributed to a director rather than a designer. It is thanks to the physical separation between Herbert and Dexter (and the cost of transatlantic calls in the 1980s) that their conversations around staging have been documented for a number of their collaborations.

As a ‘precursor’ for performance, the model is a physical object from which other physical objects are generated. I will end with a brief discussion of how ideas expressed in the model are transformed into a space for performance. Many have commented on Herbert’s direct engagement with carpenters, scenic artists and other makers as equal collaborators.8 David Reppa writes of the backstage team at the Met,

There’s a lot of affection for her here simply because she was interested in us so we, in turn, became interested in her and her work. It’s not unusual for a designer never to go round and thank the people in the workshops after they’ve been here, but Jocelyn is not like that at all. She’ll sit down and eat with the workshops’ crew and not talk about herself or the work, but will listen to their problems instead.’ (quoted in Courtney 1993, 225)

Notes made by Herbert during the collaboration with Dexter on Arnold Wesker’s play *The Merchant* (1977) indicate what she valued in her relationship with makers, both in the ‘attitude to the work’ and the ‘quality of the final product’. She writes that she is unhappy with the set elements and furniture produced by one workshop, where the ‘only consideration’ is doing things cheaply. She complains about poor quality materials, construction and finish: flaking paint, raw edges and visible joints. In the model, the primary structure had been made entirely of metal and thus had ‘tension + rigidity + all metal + one piece reinforced the other’. The set had instead been built with a metal framework filled in with plywood and foam:

No finish – no care. No concern – take a look at front face of Rostrum –

also at Risers of Steps – Not made as drawing with slab cantilevered over Riser – see Detail of Drawing

Herbert ends the account of the unsatisfactory workshop by complaining that there was ‘Never any discussion or suggestions’ and the finish of the pieces was ‘Disgraceful’. She contrasts this with the approach of another carpenter working on the same production, with whom the collaborative relationship comes to the fore:

When working with Bob – you tell him what you want – and how something should look – and what it is used for and whether it should be light or heavy etc – He then discusses the best way of making it and frequently has a suggestion to make to lighten or simplify the construction – and imaginative ideas [as to] ways to economise but not loose [sic] the quality of the work. He is in fact INTERESTED in the work AND in giving you what you want.

The Result is that: –

Everything that Bob has made is in direct contrast to the rest of the stuff

It is light – solid – smooth – and made of good timber etc and not just all the old junk that was lying around the yard. In fact it has some quality + some finish. (JH/3/43a)

Herbert’s commitment to a close working relationship with carpenters and scenic artists inevitably put her out of sympathy with changes to the organisation of space at the Metropolitan Opera in 1982.

The Met had moved to the brand new Lincoln Center in 1966. By 1982, the building needed major repairs and cleaning. It was also over-crowded, with the expanded marketing and development departments needing more office space. Anthony Bliss decided to move the scenic and carpentry shops to a warehouse in Weehawken, New Jersey. Two years later, he decided to close the Weehawken workshops entirely. Existing sets would be stored in containers, and new sets constructed in Broadway workshops. According to Johanna Fiedler, these changes saved the company $2 million a year (Fiedler 2001, 194). They were

interpreted by company members as an indication of Bliss’s corporate mentality; there was room in the opera house for “all those people with clipboards,” as one chorister said, but not for the scenic artists and carpenters who created what was seen onstage.’ (173-4)

This view is reflected in a letter Herbert drafted to Joseph Volpe, copying in Anthony Bliss, James Levine, and Members of Executive Committee. The letter is handwritten on yellow ‘legal’ notepaper, and although it is undated, the mention of ‘three previous productions’ suggests it was written in New York during the preparations for *Simon Boccanegra*:

As a visiting Designer I recognize that the internal decisions of the M.E.T Authorities are no concern of mine, but I cannot let this visit pass without commenting on the disappearance of the scenic Artists shop from the 5th floor of the MET Building.

Getting out of the elevator to find what appeared to be a Battery container for HUMANS instead of the magnificent open space of the old paint shop was a sad moment indeed.

It seems indicative of the present change in values that space for offices is considered more important to the opera than space for the creative work that is actually seen on the stage.

Having worked at the MET on three previous productions I for one will bitterly regret and sadly miss not having the scenic construction + prop shops in the main building any more. The possibility of having everything made under one roof in the past (including the costumes) was one of the things that made working at the MET a pleasure and not a hassle and also in these stringent times must have facilitated the control of the cost as well as the visual excellence of the productions. (JH/12/1-2)

This letter recognises the financial pressure the opera company was experiencing, as well as suggesting the friction between management and production departments, giving a sense of the atmosphere at the time of the cancellation of the Dexter/Herbert *Simon Boccanegra*.

The written material in the Jocelyn Herbert Archive supports the view that for Herbert the model was a means of collaborating, rather than a set of instructions to be handed over. These ways of working are largely documented in anecdote and oral history rather than in production documents. As such, they form part of the ‘body to body’ transmission that Rebecca Schneider contrasts with the archive as conventionally understood, one of ‘the ways in which performance remains but remains differently’ (Schneider 2001, 101).

The model pieces for *Simon Boccanegra* occupy an intermediate position between the document and fleshly memory: stored flat in grey cardboard boxes, one of hundreds of such boxes shelved on the rolling stacks in the basement of the National Theatre archive, they resemble documents. But once removed from the box, the sturdiness of the construction of these model pieces speaks of practices: of the many hands that would manipulate them over days and weeks to discover staging solutions, or as references for construction and finish. The significance of the model pieces lies in their materiality, but after 35 years, the glued paper is peeling and sticky tape decaying.

The disappearance of Jocelyn Herbert from Joseph Volpe’s account of the production reflects a wider under-representation of designers’ work, accentuated in this case because the production was unrealised.9 But the model parts that survive in the archive have a great deal to contribute to the understanding of practices of collaboration between designer and director, and with other artists and craftspeople. The information they provide is not only visual, but also tactile and kinetic – in this case, the unusual weight and manipulability of the arches reflects the importance for director and designer of working through the model to develop staging ideas. Alongside this, written material contributes to the understanding of the material objects, as for example, Herbert’s diary reveals how she discussed not just technical questions (how to move the arches) but also the realisation of the back cloth (or how to combine two ideas for the back cloth) with the resident scenic designer and scenic artists at the Met. The John Dexter/Jocelyn Herbert production of *Simon Boccanegra* is absent from existing documentation of Herbert’s work and from the circulation of digital images. In those respects, it is ‘as if it never happened’. However, as this essay has sought to show, the production generated many material objects. They are ‘precursors’ not only in the sense of belonging to a ‘forerunner’ who had a significant influence on design practice, but also as ‘substances’ capable of generating others. Whether the 1984/5 *Simon Boccanegra* model pieces are capable of generating performance in the present moment remains to be seen as others, in their turn, take the folding arches, marble columns and balustrades from the grey archival boxes.

[6239 words]

**Endnotes**

1: Thanks to Erin Lee and Malcolm Mathieson of the National Theatre Archive and John Tomasicchio and Peter Clark of the Metropolitan Opera for their assistance, and to the Trustees of the Jocelyn Herbert Archive and the Metropolitan Opera Archive for the kind permission to reproduce archive material.

2. In the UK, the Home Office regulates the possession and sale of ‘precursor chemicals’ that can be used to manufacture narcotic or psychotropic drugs or explosives <https://www.gov.uk/licence-to-possess-or-sell-drug-precursors> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/licensing-for-home-users-of-explosives-precursors/licensing-for-home-users-of-poisons-and-explosive-precursors#regulated-substances>

3. Premières designed by Herbert in her first years at the Royal Court include: *The Chairs* and *The Lesson* (Eugène Ionesco, British premières, 1957, 1958); *The Sport of My Mad Mother* (Ann Jellicoe, world première, 1958); *Krapp’s Last Tape* (Samuel Beckett, world première 1958) and *Happy Days* (Samuel Beckett, British première 1962); *The Kitchen* and the trilogy: *Roots, Chicken Soup with Barley* and *I’m Talking About Jerusalem* (Arnold Wesker, world premières 1959, 1960), *Serjeant Musgrave’s Dance* (John Arden, world première 1959) and *Luther* (John Osborne, world première 1961).

4: Alessandra Campana discusses the 1881 staging of *Simon Boccanegra* and the importance of light in a drama that takes place across 24 hours, suggesting that the opera thematises the shadows of the past (Campana 2015).

5: In transcribing from Herbert’s notebooks, I have retained her sometimes unconventional capitalisation and line breaks. Although the line breaks are often simply functional (her large script running out of space on the line), they are also used to indicate a new thought or for emphasis, something which reflects Herbert’s reading of poetry and making of lists.

6: In 1984 the Chicago Lyric Opera had a budget of $12.5 million, compared to the Met’s $79 million budget. An article in the *New York Times* quoted the general manager, Ardis Krainik, as saying, ‘We don't spend a million and a half on our productions here […] It wouldn't make sense. Our proscenium is only 50 feet, and our theater is not as technically resplendent as the Met. We could never do anything like their “Bohème” or “Hoffmann.” But that doesn't mean the productions can't be beautiful. In fact, the Met itself is borrowing our “Simon Boccanegra” for its new production this year.’ <https://www.nytimes.com/1984/11/04/arts/music-notes-chicago-opera-on-track.html>.

7: Writer and director Tony Harrison, who also worked with Herbert over a long period of time, indicates the frustration associated with unrealised projects, even as he archives them: ‘I have labels attached by drawing pins to the shelves that carry the hundreds of notebooks of all my projects in poetry, theatre and film. And there is a large, ever-growing section labelled ‘Unrealised Projects’, which I was forced to add to last year with some bitterness [..]’ (Harrison 2017, 32).

8: As Trish Montemuro, a stage manager who worked with Herbert at the National Theatre, put it, ‘All the crew and workshop staff loved her because she talked to them, took their advice and listened to their views about the play or how a piece of scenery of a prop might work better. She nurtured talent.’ She quotes a member of the National Theatre stage crew, ‘When she asked for opinions or thoughts she listened to you, adapted and improved your vague ideas out of all recognition – then gave YOU the credit’ ([JH/2/55/3](http://catalogue.nationaltheatre.org.uk/CalmView/TreeBrowse.aspx?src=CalmView.Catalog&field=RefNo&key=JH%2f2%2f55%2f3)). See also tributes in Courtney 1993, pp. 211-232.

9: In contrast, reviews of the staged productions at the Met, both in their original productions and in later revivals as recently as 2016, give Herbert full credit.

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**Captions**

Fig. 1: ‘SIMON, SCENE 2, HUNT’ Costume design for *Simon Boccanegra* by Jocelyn Herbert, JH/4/88, National Theatre Archive.

Fig. 2: Detail of folding arch with soldered hinge. JH/5/10, National Theatre Archive. Photo E. Margolies.

Fig. 3: The Doge in his palace. Model photograph by James Heffernan; digitised image of print in the National Theatre Archive. © The Metropolitan Opera Archives.

Fig. 4: Amelia in the garden of the Grimaldi palace. Model photograph by James Heffernan; digitised image of print in the National Theatre Archive. © The Metropolitan Opera Archives.

Fig. 5: Interior with the Doge, with city in background. Model photograph by James Heffernan; digitised image of print in the National Theatre Archive. © The Metropolitan Opera Archives.

Fig. 6: Early sketch plan by Jocelyn Herbert showing ideas for the configuration of the folding arches in various scenes. JH/4/88 National Theatre Archive.

Fig. 7: Letter from Joseph Clark to Jocelyn Herbert © The Metropolitan Opera Archives. Text reproduced by kind permission of The Metropolitan Opera. Photo E. Margolies.

**Biographical note**

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