

DESIGNING WITH *A Propelling Pencil*



Antipholus and Luciana costume designs for *The Comedy of Errors* by Michael Pavelka

Designing with, as distinct from for, the ensemble of people who create a Propeller show, is unique and special. The job of set and costume design can easily be perceived as decorator of the event; 50 years back one would often see the credit "décor by..." on theatre posters. It's true that ultimately it's the designer's responsibility that everything you will see on stage looks right, but good design isn't just about the visual and theatre design, even more so in that it effects a hundred other aspects of a production - with Propeller, you can double that!

Charles Eames, the innovative furniture designer, said that design is "a plan for arranging elements in such a way as best to accomplish a particular purpose". Throughout the duration of a live performance, that 'purpose' is constantly moving and changing. The pace of transformation and revelation in a Propeller production, as the company's name suggests, is dynamic. Planning how the scenography can support change, throughout the course of rehearsal and during the intensity of the performance itself, is both challenging and exciting. I regard design in this respect as shaping the process rather than shaping the scenery and clothes.

As with actors in the rehearsal room, designers, directors and technicians have to be prepared to be feet-of-thought, flexible in their approach and so ready to sacrifice their 'babies' to the greater good of the project. The challenge for stage designers is to trust that performance will animate their unforgiving material world of wood, steel and plastic. In an ensemble, the matrix of possible change is multiplied many-fold and the map of the design, the territory of possibility, stretches to the imagination's horizon.



Set design for *The Comedy of Errors* by Michael Pavelka

Set design for *Richard III* by Michael Pavelka



Margaret, Richard III and orderlies costume designs for *Richard III* by Michael Pavelka

At the start of rehearsal, the design is less of an original blueprint for the architecture of the production so much as a tool kit with which to build the foundations - collaboratively. I've never understood Alec Issigonis' joke about the camel being a horse that's been designed by committee; the thing is that a camel is brilliantly designed... ask a Bedouin.

My role has been, to an increasing extent over the span of the company's work, to strategically harness the ideas of others and sculpt them into some sort of visual cohesion. I aspire to being the design equivalent to Mr Cellophane or the Invisible Man, aspiring to the maxim that 'good design is obvious, but great design is transparent'. The key driver of the editing process is that the design has to support the storytelling and not just sum everything up by fixing a definitive image on the page, and then translate that to the stage. Likewise, a costume design isn't complete until a performer is using it. So a costume drawing, particularly one that involves an actor crossing boundaries of age or gender, is simply a graphic way of positioning ideas, posing questions and starting a collective debate. The result is, hopefully, an interesting collision of contrasting ideas in a memorable image that is flexible in performance and so harmonising with Shakespeare's layered narrative.

Working within this very particular, all-male 'ensemble de personnes' brings with it a common bond and a constantly negotiated, but shared, vision. Knowing many of the performers, having returned from previous Propeller productions, gives me a head start. I know their shape, the sound of their voice, hair colour and shoe size - I'm working with friends rather than colleagues.

Ultimately, mutual trust is the essential ingredient; particularly if you're talking about engineering what amounts to a character transplant or, for some, a public sex change!

MICHAEL PAVELKA