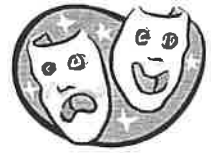
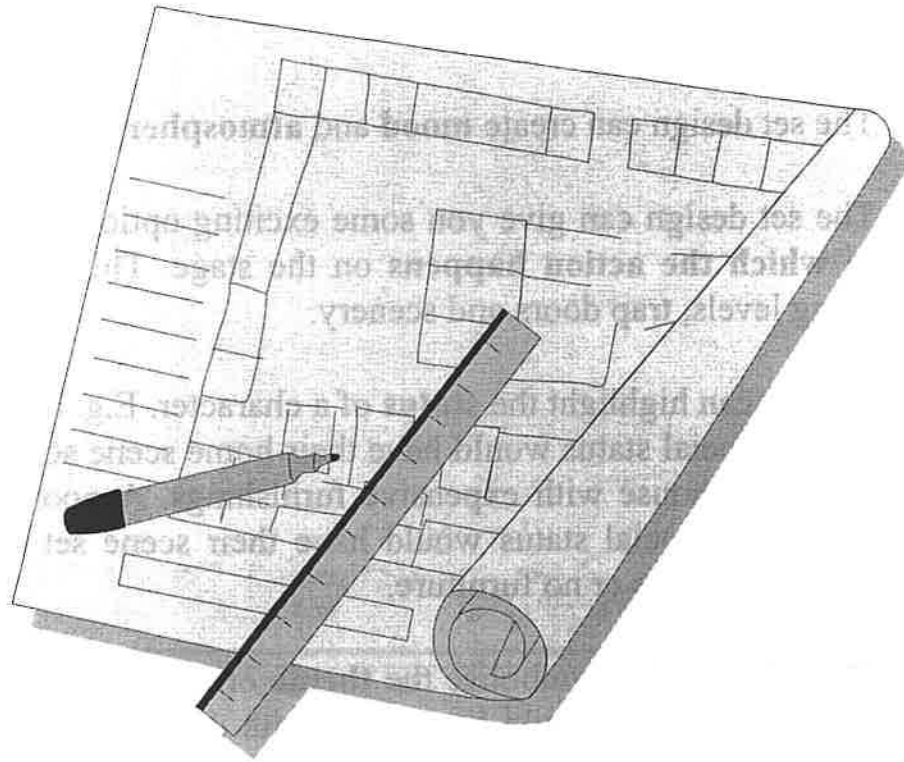


DRAMA



## *PRODUCTION SKILLS*



# SET DESIGN

## Why do need this skill in a theatrical production?

- At its simplest, the set design establishes for the audience **where** the action is taking place.
- It also shows the audience **when** the play takes place. The **period of time** in which the drama is set is made clear by the set design.
- The set design can create **mood** and **atmosphere**.
- The set design can give you some exciting options for **the way in which the action happens** on the stage. This can be done using levels, trap doors and scenery.
- The set can highlight the **status** of a character. E.g. a rich person of high social status would have their home scene set in a richly decorated house with expensive furnishings. A poor person of the lowest social status would have their scene set in a small room with little or no furniture.
- The set can also symbolise the **theme** or **message** of the piece. Eg. *The Steamie* would have a set with dull colours and dingy wash stations indicating to the audience the bleak existence the woman faced in those times.

**The set should be an integral part of the production, which both reflects and develops the director's vision of the text being staged.**

## The role of a set designer.

- The set designer's job is to make clear to the audience **where** and **when** the play is taking place by designing scenery and furniture that communicates the location of the play.
- They have to design a set that is **workable** on stage. This means that there is no furniture or scenery blocking the audience's view. It also means that certain requirements of the play have to be met. For example, Peter Pan has to be able to see the bed through the window. The set designer must make sure that Wendy's bed is visible from the window.
- The set designer should take the **themes, issues and messages** of a play and design a set that **communicates these meanings to an audience**. The set should not just show where the action is taking place, it should say far more to an audience. This is the challenge facing the set designer. They are artists, painting a three dimensional picture on a stage.
- The set designer also has the responsibility of designing a **set that is safe to work on**. It must also fit the criteria given by the writer although the set designer can interpret this in any way they like.
- The set designer should also take into consideration if they want their design to be **naturalistic** or **symbolic/abstract**.

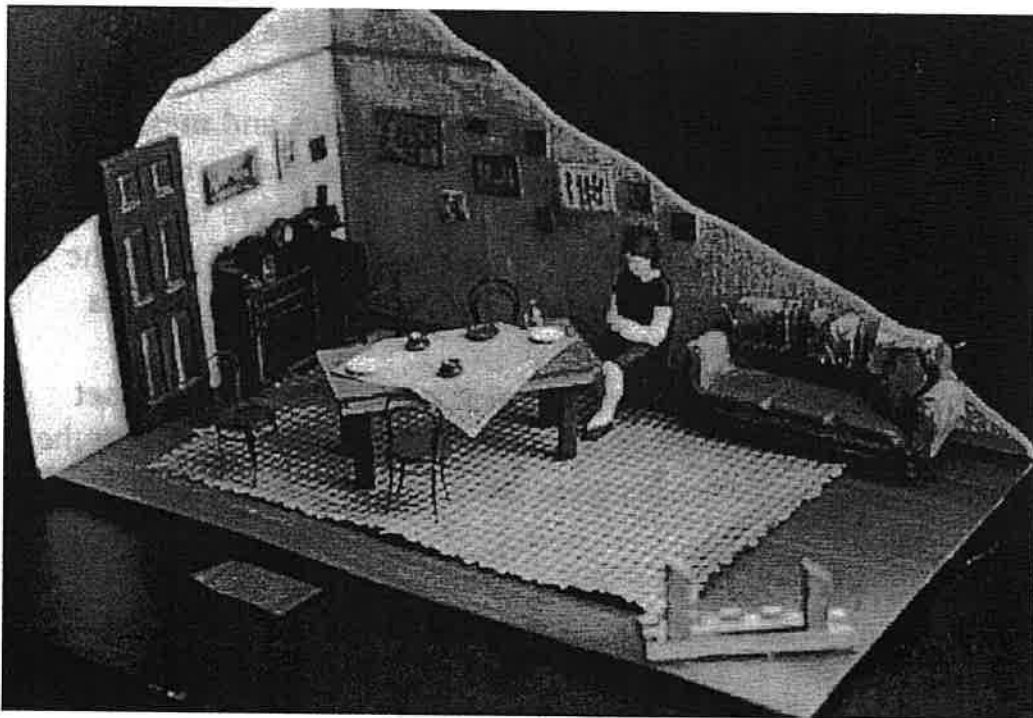
*For example, the set may look exactly like a living room with walls, doors, coffee tables, pictures, a television and windows or the set design may only represent a living room with a sofa and a coffee table only. Whatever the set designer decides, he/she must have a **clear reason** for choosing to have that particular set. They have a far greater responsibility than simply putting a few tables and chairs on the set because that is what the script asks for.*

## What equipment does a set designer use?

The set designer will initially use a **ground plan** to show the rest of the production team his/her vision for the set.

The set designer will then take their plans and make a **scale model** of the set to be used on stage. The scale model is an exact miniature replica of what the set designer intends to build on stage.

*The picture below is an example of a scale model:*



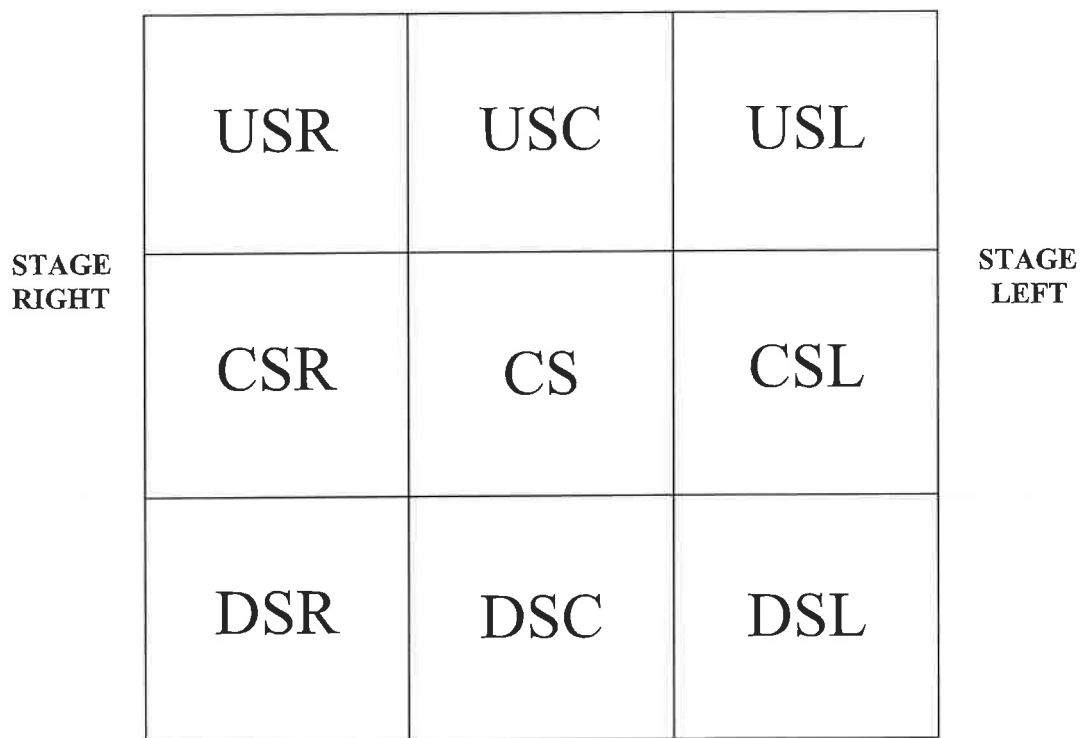
## AREAS OF THE STAGE

The acting areas can be divided into nine areas to make it clearer for the actors to rehearse. Referring to these areas using the correct vocabulary provides a common language for all.

**REMEMBER!**

Stage left and stage right are always from the perspective of the actor facing the audience.

**Upstage**



**Downstage**



**A u d i e n c e**

USR – Up Stage Right  
 USC – Up Stage Centre  
 USL – Up Stage Left

CSR – Centre Stage Right  
 CS – Centre Stage  
 CSL – Centre Stage Left

DSR – Down Stage Right  
 DSC – Down Stage Centre  
 DSL – Down Stage Left

**What does a set designer have to do?**

The set designer has many important decisions to make. However, before they make those decisions they must collect as much information as they can to help them make those decisions. The following points detail what would be expected of you:

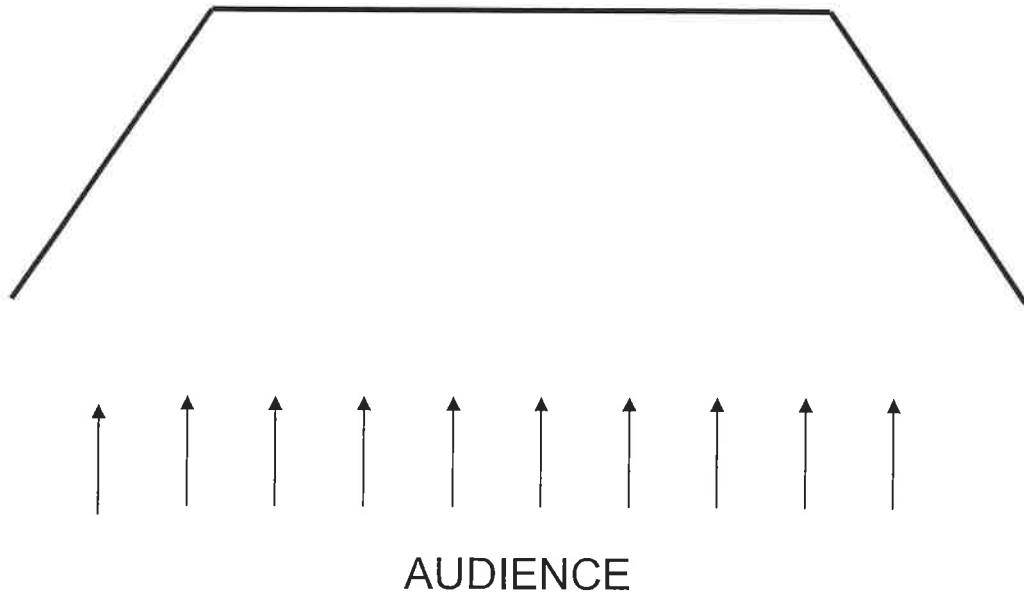
1. **The first thing you must do is read the script.**
2. **You must then go and establish what the performance space is like in terms of:**
  - Acting area (*where the acting will take place*)
  - Offstage areas (*where the set, props and costumes will be stored during the performance*)
  - Sightlines (*this is the view of the highest, lowest and widest point of the audience looking at the stage*)
3. **You then have to make notes about:**
  - How many scenes are there?
  - Where do those scenes take place?
  - When do the scenes take place?
  - What is the mood or atmosphere of each scene?
  - What space is needed for the action in the scene?
  - Are there any unusual requirements in the play?
4. **You would then decide upon the type of staging to be used in the performance.**

This is very important; as the type of staging will have a direct impact on the way the play is presented to an audience

There are also many reasons for using particular types of staging – some are good, some are bad. It all depends on what you want your presentation to be like.

There are three main types of staging that you can use:

## PROSCENIUM ARCH

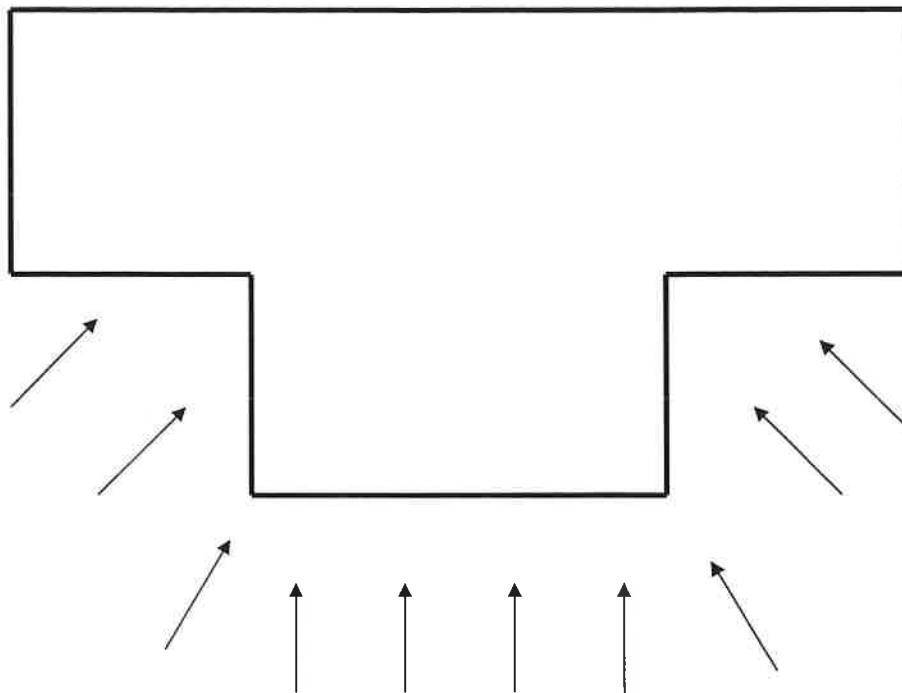


Proscenium Arch staging is where the audience are on one side facing the front of the stage.

### **The benefits of proscenium arch staging:**

- Fourth wall creates a distance between actors and audience
- Traditional theatre space sustains suspension of disbelief
- Good sightlines
- Ease of set changes
- Use of flies (a system of rope lines, blocks, counterweights and related devices that enables a stage crew to fly (hoist) quickly, quietly and safely components such as curtains, lights, scenery, stage effects and, sometimes, people)
- Good space in wings for storage of set etc
- Use of curtain allows for division of acting space
- Entire stage can be hidden
- Actors only have to face one way – ease of direction
- With the audience on one side the blocking of the play is fairly straightforward.

### Thrust stage



## AUDIENCE

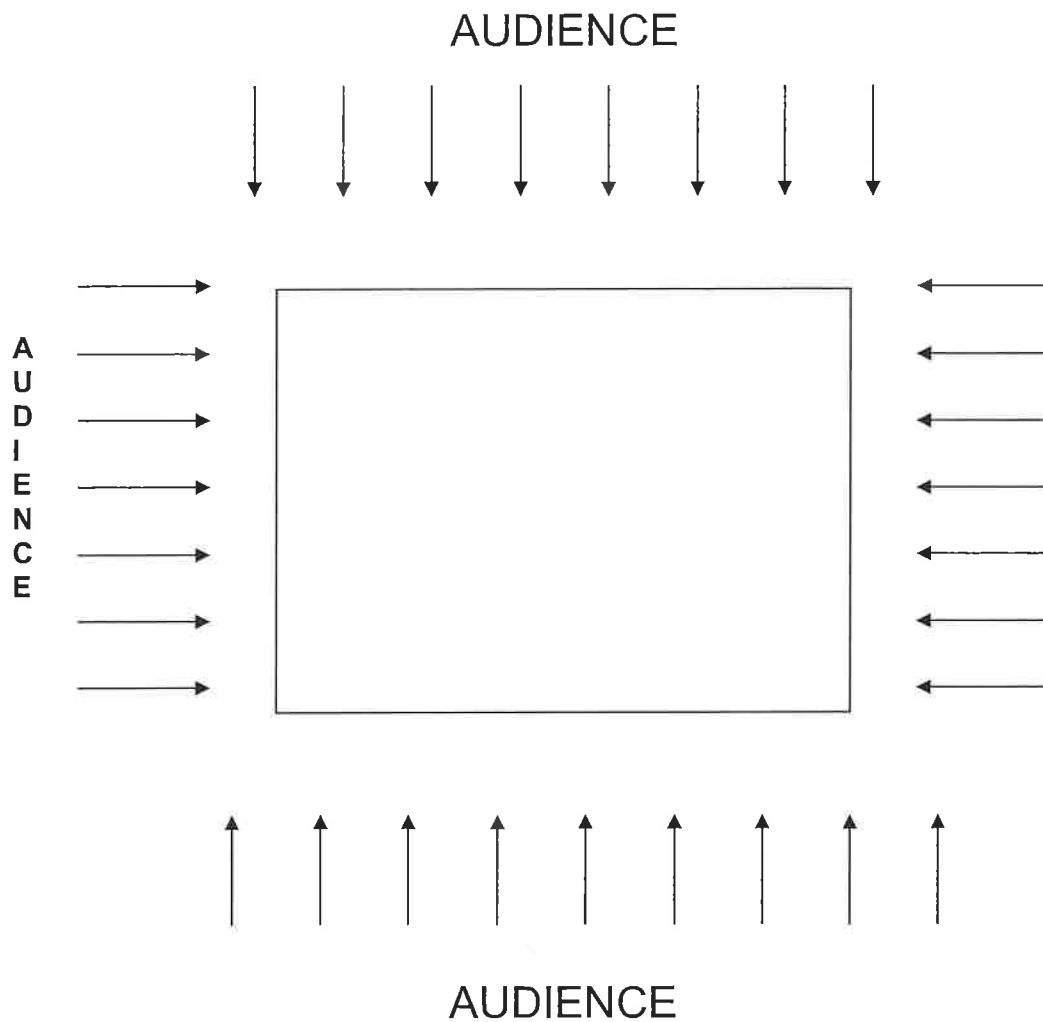
With this type of staging the main acting area has an addition of an 'apron' or 'thrust' piece of staging at the front of the stage. This means that the audience are on three sides.

### **Benefits of thrust staging:**

- Closer actor audience relationship
- Possibility for inventive use of space/movement of actors
- Can still use some benefits of proscenium arch, good wing space, use of flies etc.
- Use of thrust allows for actor to be isolated onstage, surrounded by audience, therefore increasing audience participation.
- Allows for key moments in a performance to be brought forward to the audience. This highlights the action/character and can draw in the audience's attention.

### **Theatre in the round**





With this type of staging, the audience are on all sides.

**Benefits of Theatre in the Round staging:**

- With the audience on all sides, they are fully involved in the action at all times.
- The acting is very close to the audience, therefore there is a far closer actor-audience relationship. The audience are pulled in to the action and feel emotionally involved.
- The possibility of creating incredible tension with a feeling of no escape with the characters surrounded on all sides.
- There are a variety of options for entrances and exits, through the audience and thus involving them in the action.

**5. Your ideas for the set design now have to be written down in the form of a Ground Plan.**

A Ground Plan is a **bird's eye view** of the acting area. It clearly shows the position of the set in the acting area.

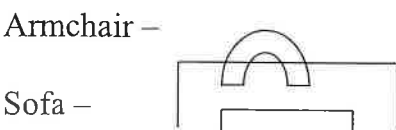
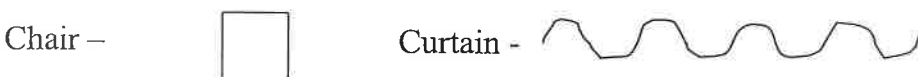
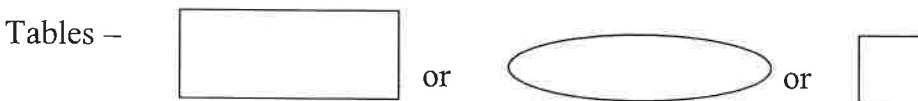
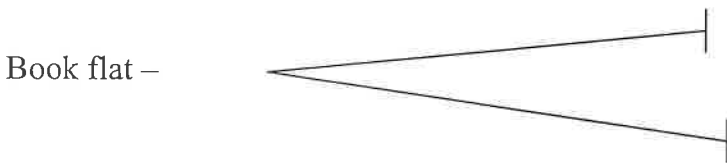
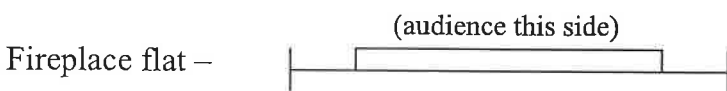
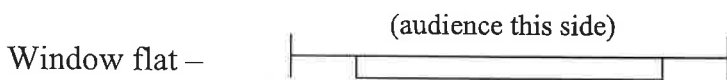
You will have to draw a ground plan for each scene of your play.

We draw a ground plan by using the type of staging as our template.

We then use symbols to show the reader where everything goes.

There are some symbols that are used all of the time in set design.

They are listed below:



Lamp –



Rostrum –



Treads –



(the arrow always points **up** the stairs)

**You may not recognise some of these words. Written below are descriptions of what some of them are:**

**Plain Flat**

A wooden frame covered with stretched canvas or hard board. Several flats are usually joined together to form a wall, which may be painted to represent whatever is required.

**Cut Flat**

Similar to a plain flat, but with a shape or a design cut out of it. For example, a tree.

**Door Flat**

A plain flat with a space cut out of it for a door to be hung on hinges. The door normally opens out onto the stage.

**Window Flat**

A plain flat with a space cut out of it for a window to be inserted.

**Fireplace Flat**

A plain flat with a space cut out of it for a fireplace to be inserted.

**Book Flat**

Two plain flats hinged together like a book, which can open and close like a book. This is used when you have a quick set change. The book flat can be quickly opened to reveal a new location.

**Rostrum**

Any type of portable platform used to raise or vary the height or shape of the stage. The plural of **rostrum** is **rostra**.

**Treads**

Steps that are usually used to get on and off stage or rostra.

## EXTRA BITS

There are some items of furniture that you may wish to use and are not on the list shown above e.g. a bed. This where the **key** of your ground plan is so important. The **key** is a list of explanations for the symbols that you use on your ground plan. If you can't find a symbol for the piece of furniture that you want to include, make one up. In order for it to be clear to the reader however, you must write the same made up symbol on your **key** and clearly identify what you intend it to be.

For example:

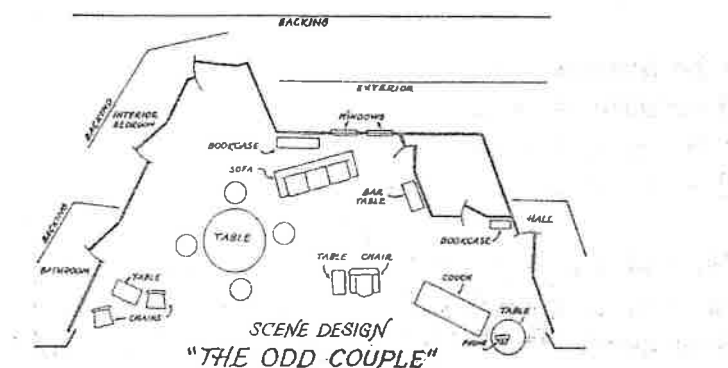
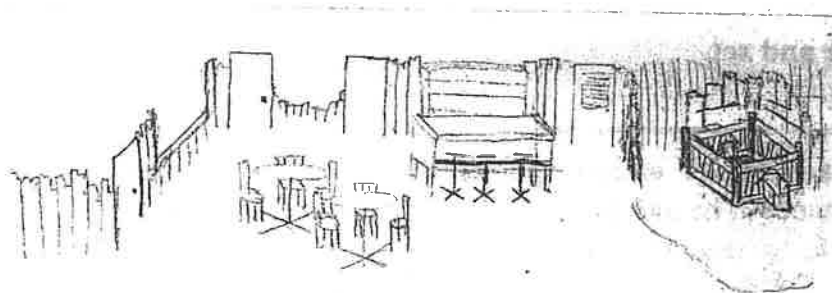


## What do I have to include in my Ground Plan?

There are specific requirements for what you have to include in your ground plan. You must include these requirements every time you draw a ground plan. They are as follows:

1. You must write down **where** the scene takes place.
2. You must also write down **when** it takes place. (Date & time of day) If the time changes during the scene, e.g. a flashback, you must write that date down as well.
3. The **type of staging** must be clearly marked
4. The set design must be **practical in dramatic terms**. This means that the space in which the actors perform must be big enough for their needs. This means not having any un-necessary furniture or flats in the way. Your ground plan must make sense to someone who will be performing on it.

5. You must mark on your ground plan all points where the **audience** will be sitting.
6. You must include your **key** with clear explanations of your symbols.
7. You must mark on your ground plan the **entrances and exits** for the actors.
8. Your ground plan must be **roughly to scale**. If your lamp is four times size of your chair, then something is wrong.
9. If you have a complicated set, it is a very good idea to give **short explanation** of what you intend you set to look like.
10. You must clearly indicate the **starting positions of the actors**.



Example of Set Design Ground Plan

**Ground Plan Checklist**

**(tick when completed)**

- |  |                                     |
|--|-------------------------------------|
| 1. Location of scene? .....                                    | <input type="checkbox"/>            |
| 2. Date and time of scene?.....                                | <input type="checkbox"/>            |
| 3. Is it clear what type of staging I am using?.....           | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| 4. Have I shown all areas in which the audience will sit?..... | <input type="checkbox"/>            |
| 5. Is my ground plan roughly to scale?.....                    | <input type="checkbox"/>            |
| 6. Does my set design work in practical terms?.....            | <input type="checkbox"/>            |
| 7. Have I shown the starting positions of all the actors?..... | <input type="checkbox"/>            |
| 8. Have I shown where the entrances and exits?.....            | <input type="checkbox"/>            |
| 9. Key?.....   | <input type="checkbox"/>            |
| 10. Have I included a short explanation?.....                  | <input type="checkbox"/>            |

## Who does a set designer work with?

### The Director

The **Director will have an overall vision** for the play. This may involve specific set **requirements being requested by the Director**. The set designer must work very closely with the director to make sure that their **interpretation of the themes/issues/messages of the play are the same**.

### The Costume Designer/Technician

The design of the **costumes must compliment the style of the set**. Again, these two production team members may have very different ideas for the visual impact of a production, but they must work closely together to **ensure there is a link between costume and set**.

### The Actor

The **actors must be made aware of any special effects or set changes** that may affect their performance. The **safety of an actor is also of prime concern** and they should be able to talk to the set designer about any concerns or questions they have.

### The Props Master

The **props will have to be designed in keeping with the set**. The **style or period of the set will determine what props are used**. For instance, in the production of the Merry Wives of Windsor, which was set in the 1940's, the pens, bottles, baskets and briefcases were all from the same period.

### The Lighting Designer/Technician

The lighting plays a crucial part in the set design as **a brilliant set can be made ineffective if it is not lit properly**. The set designer and the lighting designer must be in very close contact to ensure all the **moods and tensions are brought out using a combination of set and lights**.

### The Stage Manager

As the **boss of backstage**, the Stage Manager would need to **be kept up to date on all set designs**. It will be **his/her job to organise set changes** if they are required, and he/she will have to plan these well in advance to ensure all backstage requirements are fulfilled.

## How can a set designer be creative?

### Permanent set or a Changeable set?

A **permanent set** is a set that remains onstage throughout the whole performance and doesn't change. There is the opportunity to add and remove small pieces of furniture and props, but the majority of the set stays the same.

A **changeable set** is one which changes significantly from scene to scene. You also have the choice of using a **composite set**. This is a set which consists of two or more locations being on stage at one time.

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### Naturalistic or Abstract/Symbolic

A **naturalistic set design** is a set which recreates as closely as possible the actual location in every detail.

An **abstract** or **symbolic set design** is a set which only represents the actual location or shows some of the major themes or issues. This will depend largely on the style of your presentation.

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**Colours and patterns** are also very important in a set design. The colour of your flats/scenery, furniture and floor can communicate a great deal to an audience. Make it visually effective!

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**Height and Levels** are a good way of adding variety to your set. It can also give you some exciting options in terms of your acting. We do this by using rostra.

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Use the **back walls/flats/cyclorama** to full effect using appropriate colours and visual imagery i.e. words, pictures, moving images, numbers or paintings.

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Think how the set can **change** during the course of a production to coincide with the changes in the story.

**Please answer these questions in sentences:**

**1. Write down, in your own words, what you feel the main roles and responsibilities of a set designer to be.**

Write them down as bullet-points, for example –

- Read the play and analyse it, making notes about what set is required.

**2. Why is set design essential to a theatrical production? (Why do we need this skill?)**

For example –

- Set helps to define the location in which the action is taking place

**3. Write down the members of the theatre production team that the set designer has to work/liase with and why this liaison is necessary.**

For example –

- It is important that the set designer liases with the director to make sure that their plans support the director's interpretation of the play and the style of the production.

**Now draw a *Ground Plan* for one of the following scenarios. You must include all of the set design and scenery mentioned with each piece in the correct position. You may wish to add to this list**



**in order to make the set design more effective. All of the set designs are for the *Proscenium Arch* type of staging.**

1. A graveyard at midnight with headstones USR & CSR & USC. There is also a coffin DSL with a candle burning on top of it.
2. A living room with a sofa, a table with a lamp on it, three windows, a fireplace, a door, French/patio doors, a picture of David Beckham and a television set.
3. A school classroom with ten desks, a teacher's desk, a door and a blackboard.
4. A doctor's waiting room.
5. The throne room of a palace with a throne sitting on top of a rostra. There is also a door directly behind the throne. Add your own pieces of scenery and set to give the impression of a lush expensive kingdom.

**REMEMBER!**

Think about the type of staging you are working with to establish where and when the scene(s) takes place. Does the playwright give any indication as to what is in the scene? If so, include it in your ground plan(s) when designing.

