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Child's Play –

Set and prop design as a collaborative and creative process in schools

Kalpana Balaji

It is said that for theatre to work and to convey a story to its audience, the first thing you need is the wilful suspension of disbelief. Everyone watching knows that the story unfolding in front of their eyes isn't real. Everybody knows that they are in a large hall somewhere and the stage is filled with "actors". Yet, once the play begins, as an audience you suspend your disbelief. You buy in to the story and the setting, and if it is skilfully told you are transported completely into another world.

In order to tell a story skilfully, all the key ingredients of a theatre production must be put together well. The storyline, the treatment, the acting, the use of stage, the sets, props, lights costume and music. Each component would have to be thought out and planned with the same care. In professional productions, a Director would usually work with a team of others in charge of each component starting from early stages of rehearsal so that there is time and space for different creative inputs to come in and for ideas to bounce off each other.

Over the past six years, I have had the good fortune to work within a close-knit professional theatre group and have been a part of several such productions where the strength of the finished product really came out of collaborative brainstorming over several months. Yet, when I look back at my memories of involvement with theatre in college, and in school, the opportunity for idea exchange, and even the feeling of creating something together is a lot less in college and not there at all in school.

As children in a school play we were told what to do, what to wear and what to say. There was no question of exploring, and certainly no possibility of voicing your opinion on set or costume let alone what the play was about. This is somewhat understandable when there are thirty to forty children put under the charge of two teachers and when the time available is minimal. If the school education system places no priority and gives little or no time for theatre and the arts on a regular year-round basis, then this situation is not surprising, but it is unfortunate. Theatre is a special art form that encompasses all manner of performance arts. Music, dance, acting, body work and a lot of behind-the-scenes creativity as well. For this reason, it is a great space for collaboration and team building among children.

I firmly believe that no one is born a geek or an artist or a bookworm. It is exposure and means that start to shape our interests and make us what we are. Very young children find it a lot easier than adults to switch from reality to a make believe world. They do it constantly by imagining themselves in fantastic situations. They are at once acting, story-telling and wilfully suspending disbelief. As we grow up and get into middle school, the pressures of academic subjects is more but the ability to engage in fantasy role-play is still ever present. If nurtured from a young age, creativity and imagination in every child can also be tapped just as much as other cerebral skills and it can stay as a powerful tool that is ever present and a part of you in your adult professional life.



I am no expert with children. My strength actually lies in design, but what I would like to put forward here are a few suggestions for collaborative creative processes that I have experienced, especially in the field of set and prop design that can be easily used in school plays to enrich the experience for all.

Lets start with a clean slate, or shall I say an empty stage. First ask yourself if the performance you are building towards need to happen on a formal stage or whether it can take place in an informal setting or outdoors. The next question would be do we need to fill it at all? The most commonly used solution is the back-drop. A large stitched canvas with a static scene painted on it. It gives a sense of context and back-ground scenery. Often, our teachers would make us help with the painting and that was fun. But the back-drop never goes away. It can be covered by letting down something else in front of it, which requires certain infrastructure and resources. So a good question to ask ourselves at the very beginning would be whether the back-drop is needed at all. What is it you are trying to tell the audience with the back drop and can it be achieved either through acting or a few suggestive moveable props.

Another commonly used type of set, if resources permit, is the “box-set”. An L or C shaped stiff back-drop with entries and exits through it. Most commonly used if the setting is a room in a building, in which case the box-set has a door and a window and probably some hanging picture frames and so forth. The back-drop and the box-set usually try to create “real” looking scenes although we know that the audience comes in ready to suspend their disbelief. The box set also cuts off a chunk of your stage depth and limits your acting space.

One workshop that we commonly do with the actors in our group at the very beginning of rehearsals is an exercise called freeze frames. This exercise allows us to understand how much of context we can establish

on a stage using just actors and their bodies and no set at all. It can be a great and easy exercise to do with children too.

You start with your context. Lets say that in the story you are trying to tell, the scene is set at a train station . You take a group of upto ten actors and ask them to achieve a freeze frame of the scene. This is done by asking the first person to walk onto the acting space and strike a pose to establish the scene. For a train station, an actor could possibly mimic carrying something heavy, sleeping on the ground, running after a train and so on. The beauty of this exercise is that the list is actually endless and it is best to leave it to each actor (in this case the child) to come up with an idea on their own on the spur of the moment. It trains you to think on your feet, be spontaneous, creative and react to a situation. I believe that all these are important life skills apart from theatre skills.

Once the first person has struck their pose and frozen, the second person walks in and strikes a second pose that fits in with the same theme and in relation to what the first person has done. You gradually build on this to achieve a scene with all eight or ten people. If you have more actors, which is more than likely in a school, you can use the numbers to your advantage. Keep the first scene frozen and ask the other groups who are sitting out to critique it. What do they see. Where is the train, where is the platform, what is he doing. Does it look crowded, imbalanced, interesting, boring. Critical analysis is an important learning tool in this exercise.

A lot of our plays are first blocked out using freeze frames. By doing this exercise repeatedly you allow the actors to bring in a multitude of ideas on how the space can be used and you achieve many scene changes without complicated sets. But everything can’t be achieved with just the body. Sometimes, a single prop can go a long way to establish what you are trying to say. So once we have exhaustively

worked on the freeze frames, we have a better idea of what sort of props we need.

These props can become real objects. For instance if you need a chair, you get chair. Or you could get something that doesn't look like a chair but just a cube or a block. Something that you can sit on, but in another freeze frame, someone could stand on it or lift it and carry it too. Multi-purpose props are great because they look clever, they involve the audience more and they cut down costs.

In order to get the best out of your props you need to workshop with them too. Introduce a set of exercises where the actors come up one by one and imagine a situation using a prop. You can use a single prop and get the actors to come up one by one and use it differently, something like my example with the chair. Again the idea is to let each actor think for themselves. The kind of ideas that emerge from these exercises always amaze me. We usually go from the first prop exercise into a freeze frame exercise combined with a few props. From there you pick out the best ideas and see what you can use in the final play.

Another great exercise in creativity which is also very easy on the pocket is the use of found objects as

props. Pick up interestingly shaped everyday objects. Each actor can be asked to bring one or the director (teacher) can bring a few as back up. The pool of props that you now have should cover a good range of shapes, sizes and weights. They can be anything found around the house, easily recognisable for what it is. Through workshops with these objects, you may find a lot of interesting possibilities. We have in the past done plays where a gramophone player was made up of a set of large cooking vessels where the LP records were a stack of ordinary dinner plates. A well in the corner of the garden was actually three truck tyres stacked one above the other and a Ganesha temple was fabricated in a few seconds by the actors putting together some brooms, baskets and cloth in a quick scene change.



A film poster in the play "Ms Meena" came from the freeze frame exercise

The point I'm trying to make is the more the minds you put together, the more the ideas and the fun. To allow for this to happen, time has to be given by the actors and the person or people conducting the workshop. This time invested will give rich dividends.



KALPANA BALAJI is an Architect who runs her own practice in Chennai. She has been a part of Perch, a Chennai based theatre and performance collective since its inception designing the sets and lights for their productions. Over the past few years Perch has travelled widely across India with several of their productions which include "Sangathi Arinhya – Have you heard", "Moonshine and Skytoffee" and "Ms. Meena". Kalpana can be contacted at kalpana@diagrammar.in