The Art of Collaboration in Design
By Joanne Martin

Design Supervisor- Santa Fe Opera, Lecturer Santa Clara University, and Costume Designer and technician who lives and works in the San Francisco Bay Area, California, USA.

Designers in all areas of production and product design have dealt with Directors, Project Managers, CEO's, and Producers who have an awful lot of input into the final product or production design with little or no design training: they are often hired for their vision and leadership. As designers we have to make sense of their visions, which are sometimes an elaborate movie that only plays in their head -- as designers we have to turn these images and ideas into a reality.

As designers our primary consideration should be our audience: who is looking at the final product? The <u>function</u> of the design should be based on some questions *that need to be answered collaboratively by the production team*: What does it need to do? How will it be used? How much time and what resources do we have to complete the project? With the audience in mind plus all the practical considerations: what then would be a compelling design for the project that would align with the director's vision?

Over the years I have worked primarily as a designer in Theatre, Dance and Opera, I've done some television and film work where I have encountered many misinformed answers to important questions. For example, one documentary producer told me, (a very young costume designer at the time), "we will be only filming from the waist up." Based on this information, I pictured the scenes described, pulled and made costumes and let the actors all wear their own shoes. *I am not sure where the director was in all this.* When I saw the end product, the PBS special entitled 'Bring Warm Clothes' which was about immigrants in the late 19th century moving to 'Midwestern America', I was mortified: in one scene I clearly saw white tennis shoes on some of the actors dressed in Victorian costumes walking up the steps to an historical old farmhouse. It is these types of moments where you would wish for your name in the rolling credits or program to magically vanish.

In the theatre, it is often easy at a dress rehearsal to fix small issues, but there is rarely the money or time to fix the bigger problems. On a recent outdoor production of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* at Pacific Repertory Theatre in Carmel, California where I was designing costumes, we had unexpected damp weather and the paint on the set didn't dry in time for the first dress rehearsal. At the last minute, while the set designer was eating dinner, the artistic director decided to sprinkle brown dirt all over the wet paint to try to make it dry quicker. Unfortunately the costumes were white so the addition of brown dirt on the stage created a huge problem. We ended up canceling the dress rehearsal and because we were a day behind in the production schedule, it became very difficult to make any last minute changes, which obviously disappointed the director.

In the corporate world when the CEO of a large corporation marches on to the floor of a carefully designed new product launch and says "I hate that floor get rid of it" there are more things to consider, such as a last minute redesign (that's if the designer is available) and the labor, cost and time involved in removing the offending floor, and whether you want to work for that company again. Most designers are willing to compromise when the director says something like " I hate that hat, what can we do about it" after some consideration of your original choice, it is likely that some members of the audience will probably hate that hat too, so you make a change sometimes just to make the director happy, if it is a design choice worth fighting for then *we have the task of justifying our choice.*

Things don't always go the way we want them in a production, but there is always an end product and by the time show opens all of our names are on that production, and as the designers and we have to take responsibility at that point for our work as it stands, this is how far we got to in the design process by opening night and that is what the audience will see for the whole run of the production. Often in large productions we don't get to see all the elements together until the first dress rehearsal or sometimes even on opening night and it is always a nasty shock to see a costume that blends into a wall or a piece of furniture.

The design process has a lot of mitigating factors informing design choices that are made based on time, budget and resources. There have been many shows that I have worked on that by the time the show opens there is always the feeling of if only we had had more money, more time or more people working on the production things would have looked differently. More often than not there is a sense of disappointment or a sense of wishing there could have been more done to make the design more complete. I often wish "Oh, if only those shoes came in size 15!" Or "That is such a shame that is the only hat that would fit the actor with the 24" head."

The need for good communication and a well thought out design process is extremely important. The need for a director and anyone else involved to *really* look at the design drawings and think how they will affect the production is essential. The need for the tech schedule to stay on schedule with no interruptions is vital to the final product. In most theaters there is a Production Manager coordinating all these elements. This person has to be very visual with a background and training in design. She or he should be able to see all the production elements from the audience perspective and can see any train wrecks approaching: be it a costume moment that may be too revealing or a scene change that is going to take too long.

As designers we are all trying to think how all the elements are going to work together but we are often so focused and caught up in on how individual elements or how our "art pieces" are starting to look like we don't always see how the production will look or function together, an experienced production manager can often trouble shoot and see these things being a potential problem and can alert the design team and the director to anything that may not be working together for the production. A good production manager should also be a very practical diplomat that points out things that may have

been overlooked by the design and directorial team who are often focused on their individual artistic areas. Production Managers keep a close handle on the budget and making sure that the production works smoothly and that the set and costumes are practical. Even on very high budget productions that I have worked on you wouldn't believe how many stair cases and doorways are not wide enough to accommodate large costumes even though the dimensions are communicated in the initial production meetings: the actor or singer does have to travel from the stage to the dressing room in that costume and go through all staircases and doorways. Things that seem obvious to those making the costume aren't always obvious to those that are making the set and visa versa. A good production manager overseeing everything is essential.

Production meetings, even though we all need fewer meetings, are essential to the design process, all involved with any say in the final product need to be on board and really look at the designs and try to understand them before the work is produced. I find many theatre directors don't really look at the designs or listen to the designer until the final product is on stage when it's often too late to make significant changes. With experience designers, producers and directors get better at communicating their ideas, and explaining and defending their choices. Ideally, I think there is a real need for audience input before the show opens, traditionally previews or piano dress rehearsals were for this purpose. If the ideas and the design are strong, then a feedback session with the audience at a preview can be useful to all involved with the production.

Ultimately, there needs to be a lot of trust involved in an artistic collaboration. If a designer is hired for a production or project then they should be able to design within the budget and decide how much can be built within the time frame and the producer and director need to trust that when the designer says that something isn't going to work then they should listen and alter the production to what is possible. Design can only be as be as good as the team that produces the design, all should be team players and should be collaborating and working together to make the production as effective and aesthetically pleasing as possible. We say "Break a leg" but not literally, in any production safety should always be first and foremost in all of our thinking, often the first notes that are done after First Dress rehearsal are always performer safety notes before the artistic notes. By the end of the production process on the day of opening we all have our own lists of C.B.B.s (or could be betters), I have never done or seen a show that was in my view absolutely perfect, but we can keep trying and that's what makes the process always challenging and interesting.