

Designer Jess Curtis gives us an insight in to designing this re-imagined production

Could you describe your career route into Design?

My mum and dad have always been passionate about the theatre, so it's always been part of my life. I found my own way into the industry by reading an article about a school in London that ran a year-long course for stage designers, called Motley. Years later, having been distracted by a degree in Illustration and some time working illustrating children's books, I was drawn back to the theatre. I applied for Motley, having done some design for school plays and a stint at the National Youth Theatre. I got a place and that year I really understood and fell in love with the idea of being a designer. I got my first job from our graduating show and have been working ever since.

What do you enjoy most about your job as a set designer?

It is a brilliant job, and there are lots of things I love about it. There is the chance to work with great plays, analysing the text, imagining the characters and their worlds and then playing around with that vision in collaboration with the director. I love making things, so the hands-on elements of drawing and model-making can be stressful, but very satisfying. I also like meeting and working with all the great people that contribute to a production- each production is a great team effort, which is why people often talk about theatre in terms of family - you are all in it together!



What was your starting point as set designer for *Villette*?

Linda's script is incredibly atmospheric and evocative, so I looked at lots of visual material - sculpture, art, photography, landscapes - that seemed to have the right mood to discuss with Mark. Alongside that imaginative work, I start to look at the practicalities: what types of space do we need, how many actors, what is the theatre like, what are the biggest challenges in the piece? How much time and money do we have?

All these questions start to shape an approach to the design. I think the two elements that guided us most were; what does our future world look like?; what are these characters doing? e.g digging, observing one another, clinical analysis, falling in love, running away.



Did you and the Director, Mark Rosenblatt discuss ideas before coming up with a final design concept? Is the relationship between director and designer an important one?

The relationship between the designer and director is crucial. You have to understand why they want to tell this story, what they think it means? Do they have a specific feeling about the way they want to visualize or physically express it in the theatre? Do any of these things demand a particular kind of space?

Mark and I looked at the pictures I had gathered to see what struck a chord. This way we built an aesthetic for the space and the clothes. I also make very odd drawings of characters and spaces - we look at these and start to put things in the box. The box is a model of the theatre space - 25 times smaller than real life- that helps us to play with ideas before we settle on a final design. I make miniature versions of the things we want to use- out of bits of white card and sellotape, and then in full detail- to test our ideas before we present a finished design.

What were your main sources of inspiration as a designer for *Villette*?

They were very varied, but I looked at **Anthony Gormley's** recent sculpture, especially in cloud chambers, Modernist Architect **Tadao Ando**, and documentary images of archaeologists and virologists at work.

How did you decide which moments from the script to highlight and draw upon to create the overall design?

Initially, that is part of my personal process in reading the play - looking for things that mean something to me or spark a response that can become something visual. This could be a theme, a smell, a colour, a feeling.

Mark and I, and then later in partnership with Andre, the video designer develop a storyboard- a visual map of the play- which helps us to see where key visual moments need to be, as well as a

careful analysis of the script. The design has to hold the whole story and accommodate, for this play, fast and minimal journeys between a whole range of spaces.

Does the design concept change or adapt during rehearsals?

To a varying degree. It is very usual, with a new play especially, that the actors discover new and exciting things physically or textually as they rehearse which the production incorporates. To some degree this process continues right up to performance - and even beyond in terms of an actor's performance, as so much can be learnt by an audience's reaction. When things have been built and money has been spent, however, it gets harder to make any fundamental changes.

Do you collaborate with or discuss ideas with other designers working on the piece?

Very much so - as well as with the actors, video designer, movement director, and the technicians who make the set and costumes at the theatre. I am also designing the costumes for the play, so that is one less person that I have to worry about!

What is the most exciting part of the process for you?

That is a hard question as I love it all - I get most nervous walking into the theatre for the first time as the set is going in - in case it doesn't fit!

It is also very exciting sitting in the audience at the first night, waiting for the curtain to go up, to see what they think.

Which three words would you choose to describe your design concept for Villette?

Hmmmm- it's quite a complicated thing to sum up, but I will offer

Opaque, mutable, earthbound

