DESIGNING AND COSTUMING ‘TWO’

TWO by Jim Cartwright takes place in a pub during the course of one evening and involves two actors playing fourteen different characters between them. This presents many challenges for actors Justin Moorhouse and Victoria Elliott whose job it is to bring these people to life both physically and vocally, but it also presents an interesting challenge for TWO designer Amanda Stoodley, who has the delicate task of dressing the characters.

Costume and Clothes

The two central characters in TWO are the pub Landlord and Landlady. The story starts and ends with them. Designer Amanda Stoodley explains: “It is as if these two characters conjure up the others.” With this in mind she wanted to make sure that they were always present, so their costumes became the base onto which everything else is layered. Rather than big make up and wig changes for each of the fourteen characters, accessories are used to keep all the changes fluid, to support the storytelling and to maintain the design ‘rules’ of the production - as a wig change is a different theatrical language to hat and clothes changes. TWO director, Greg Hersov talks about the light-touch quality of costume changes so that the audience enjoy seeing how characters are transformed. There should be a sense of fun in changing costumes.

Added to the idea of the Landlord and Lady being a base to work from is the sense that all the character costumes are connected and interconnected. During her design process, Amanda kept coming back to the word symbiosis – a close and often long term relationship or biological interaction formed between two living organisms. “The intricate connections between each of the seven couples has to be reflected in the clothes they wear. This means that a small change to one characters’ costume impacts on the other so I am continually making sure that the balance is right between them.”

At the beginning of her design process, Amanda often starts with the characters shoes, “I think I look at people from the floor up and you can tell a lot about a person from their shoes. I have known people who have worked in security and they say they often clock someone by their shoes. Furthermore, the weight, material and sole of a shoe affects your posture.”

Although the design process can begin months before the actors are even cast, the detailed work really takes off during the rehearsal process. For The Royal Exchange production of TWO, Amanda worked closely with both actors for five weeks leading up to the first public performances to continually evolve the character clothes from her original designs to what you see on stage. “This happens through a process of collaboration with the actors including long conversations and costume fittings.” For example, Amanda’s original designs for Mr Iger were a tank top over his landlord shirt with some little glasses and soft soled shoes. However, she explains how this developed during her work with actor Justin Moorhouse: “In order for Justin to get his head around the character of Mr Iger, he saw a pair of shoes in Wardrobe, the ones he’s actually wearing in the show, and was starting to talk about a little bow tie. So suddenly Mr Iger was becoming more of a comical and bright perky look, but it actually made him much stronger than Mrs Iger and there was suddenly a power shift. So then we had to up
the game with Mrs Iger and change her costume in response to that to make sure we still have the right balance between them.”

WHY NOT? Look on the following page at Amanda Stoodley’s preliminary and final design drawings as well as the production photos to see the changes that characters have or haven’t undergone.

WHY NOT? Pick a character from TWO and think about what type of shoes they would wear and why. Find pictures or actual shoes to support your ideas. Now try working from the physical first. Find a pair of shoes and put them on. Walk around in them and see how the shoes affect your posture and body language and general physicality. From doing this, see if you can develop a detailed character.

A local pub. A while ago.
TWO was first performed in 1989, for the Royal Exchange production the script hasn’t been changed so prices and popular references in the script are as they were in the original production. However, it is not a period piece but rather has a more timeless quality. Again this vision for the production must be reflected in the costumes. Amanda has carefully selected items that not only fit with the work the actors are doing to develop their characters but that also fit with the world of the play and have a timeless quality about them.

WHY NOT? Look through your wardrobe and find items of clothing that you might say are timeless and items that definitely depict a particularly period. What is it about the clothes that led you to your decision? Alternatively, pick a decade between now and when the play was first performed (1989) and make list of clothing or accessories that help to define that period in time.

The show outside the theatre module
As well as making sure the costumes look and feel right for the actors and the production, Amanda has to make sure that all the changes are physically possible. During rehearsals actors have rehearsal costumes to not only help them create their characters but also to begin to get a sense of how changes might happen in the show and what needs to be achieved. At the Royal Exchange once the Wardrobe department have completed all the costumes for any production they become the responsibility of the Maintenance Wardrobe department who literally maintain and replenish the costumes during the course of a run. A key role in the Maintenance Wardrobe department is that played by the dressers in the Royal Exchange Hall (which becomes backstage during a performance) who help actors with quick changes. Depending how quick they are these can take place in the curtained quick change booths that you can see situated by the public stairs leading up to the first gallery. Alternatively they might take place on the move as an actor needs to get from one entrance to another.

While TWO has a cast of two, there a two dressers, a Stage Manager and Assistant Stage Manager to support the actors as well as a member of the Wigs and Make-Up department to apply make up changes and make sure that hats go on and off without altering the hair style. Together the team make sure that everything backstage happens as smoothly as possible.

The quickest change in TWO is for Victoria Elliott who has literally seconds to change from the Woman to Landlady towards the end of the play. This change is so quick that Victoria is practically still off stage when she begins talking and is stepping into on her new character shoes (strategically placed by the Stage Manager) as she enters the space. In another quick exit and entrance near the beginning of TWO, Victoria exits from Door 5 as the Old Woman and reappears as Maudie at Door 7. Backstage the team are racing around the space with her as she is flinging off her clothes as she goes and stepping into her shoes just at the last minute.

There are actually fifteen pairs of shoes in the show even though there are only fourteen characters. This is because Justin Moorhouse as the Landlord changes on stage behind the bar and so an extra pair of identical shoes is required.

There are plenty of tricks to help the actors and backstage team achieve the speedy changes including shoes with elastic laces that can be slipped on more quickly.

WHY NOT? Make a list of other tricks and procedures that would help an actor to change quickly backstage.

Thanks to TWO designer Amanda Stoodley for her help with this article.
GREG HERSOV - DIRECTOR
I've known Jim Cartwright for many years. We first met when I auditioned him for a play I was directing at the Royal Exchange Theatre. Sometimes you ask an actor to perform a speech of his choice. Jim did this monologue about a skinhead discovering the joy of Buddhism. It was extraordinary. When I asked which play it came from Jim said he'd written it himself. A few years later I saw the speech in Jim's ground breaking play ROAD. We invited Jim to direct his play for us in Manchester. I worked with him on the production and saw how he loved actors and had a wonderfully warm and humane attitude to his characters. In 1999 when the Exchange reopened after the bomb, Jim wrote and starred in PRIZE NIGHT which I directed. I saw how he responded to the cast we'd assembled, often writing brilliant material after a rehearsal when he could feel where a scene was going. In 2003 we revived LITTLE VOICE which had a tremendous response from its audiences. Jim has always been a friend to this theatre and it's great to be able to continue our association with TWO.

I think any good writer has a tone and a style that is utterly distinctive. It's like a saxophone player has a sound you know immediately can only be that player. Jim has a way with language that is both colloquial and poetic. He creates ordinary folk who are extraordinary in the way they talk about their lives. He also creates plays that stretch the conventional ideas of what theatre can be. Jim's plays have a mysterious form all of their own. TWO has two performers playing fourteen characters: Seven stages of femaleness and maleness. The play is set in a pub but all the stuff you'd normally see is mimed. That intrigues and excites me as a director. How do you do that in a 750 seat in the round space? We're finding out at the moment but I do think that TWO looks at one of the most basic things in our lives : we start as one, and spend our life discovering how to be two. For me our space always puts the actors at the centre and through their art we share stories that connect us in our journey to understand our lives a little bit better. I think TWO is one of those plays that embodies the spirit of this theatre.

We've just started rehearsals, but preparing a production takes place over a few months. Casting was obviously important! I worked with Justin on ZACK last Christmas and I'd seen Vicky in a production in Newcastle which led to us working together on AS YOU LIKE IT. We like to build relationships with performers who take to our space. TWO is a huge challenge but I can't think of too many better plays to do if you're a real theatre actor.

Design is a process that takes place over some months before rehearsals. Amanda Stoodley and I had a series of meetings starting in July. The main questions for us were different in nature: firstly, to locate the pub and the characters in a real context; second, how to design this pub in the round. Most existing plays need to be reinvented for our space as the writer has normally imagined the play for a traditional proscenium theatre. I think this gives a freshness to our revivals as one has to examine a play in a really rigorous fashion and you find out how the play can speak in a new way, through a different configuration, for an audience. We also had to think about how to achieve change of character through costume. Third and most important, was how to respond to the special atmosphere that Jim creates as a writer. TWO is both ordinary and extraordinary. How to visualise that special voice became the most important part of our exploration.

AMANDA STOODLEY – DESIGNER
It was a real treat to be asked to design TWO - another brilliant play, and in this incredible space, with all its idiosyncrasies, challenges, and magic. I love the poetry and vibrancy in Jim's writing and the way he observes and represents relationships and the human spirit. The pub is the perfect setting for this story – I am intrigued by its special alchemy and the role it plays in our society. My first thoughts were of the pub as an organism, with the bar as its heart at the core – a central bar made of two half circles. I was also fascinated by the symbiotic nature of the relationships in the play. I have designed the costumes with this symbiosis in mind and the couples compliment each other in various ways. We are not trying to disguise our Landlord and Landlady when they conjure up and become the other characters, instead we want to develop the connectivity between each persona.

Greg and I agreed, very early on, that the elements of the bar should be mimed, as Jim
originally noted. Thinking about stripping things back and the significance of what remains and why has been an interesting and, at times bewildering, process! Creating an essence of ‘pubness’ with a familiar and authentic feel was essential, so the design for the set is based on and inspired by reality. However, Greg really wanted a world that was mysterious as well and felt as though it was growing out of the theatre, so details and elements have been altered and displaced to evoke something more extraordinary. My research explored Surrealist painting and sculpture, symbols ancient and modern, church interiors and alchemic engravings and I utilised these influences to inform my design- for example, I have reworked a traditional carpet design using a variety of symbols that I felt chimed with the play’s themes. I felt the play harboured many untold secrets and wanted to imbue the foundation of the set with a similar feeling. The carvings on the bar continue concocting this ‘magic potion’ with images of male and female icons (Elvis and Marilyn, with a touch of Pat Phoenix), watched over by Cupid. However, all of this symbolism is clandestine and intentionally subtle because fundamentally the design is there to serve the play text itself by creating the right atmosphere and environment for the story to unfold.

ANDY BUBBLE – PROPS AND SETTINGS
The centre piece of the set for TWO is this huge chandelier which hangs above the bar in the centre of the stage. It is made from more than 400 real bar glasses – pint, shot and tumblers. It has six rings, with a long central section, and gradually gets shorter with each ring. It took the Theatre’s workshop about two weeks to make! The problem we immediately encountered is that each glass had to have a small hole drilled into it – using a diamond drill bit – so we could attach a wire. The first question we had to ask ourselves was how were we to do that?

Initially we wondered whether we could use polycarbonate rather than real glass. However, we didn’t want to do that because the polycarbonate just doesn’t react or twinkle under the lights in the same way. The second question was could we use toughened glass? But we realised that because of its molecular structure toughened glass was actually more prone to shattering when it was drilled into. So we came to the conclusion we needed to use real glasses. And that meant doing a lot of research to make sure we could make something that was safe. We consulted Dr Rachel Tomlinson from Sheffield University, a Doctor of Mechanical Engineering who specialises in stress fractures in glass. We explained the problem to her and went to the university with some sample glasses that had already been drilled. They were put under a polaroscope, which shows up the stress patterns in glass. We compared drilled glasses with un-drilled glasses and discovered there was very little difference. After these fundamental safety checks we were reassured that real glasses were the safest option for the design.

It has been a lot of work but the end result means the set has the right magical, ethereal feel that designer Amanda Stoodley was after. We really hope our work will add something rather special to the production.

MAX WEBSTER – ASSISTANT DIRECTOR
On the first page of TWO Jim Cartwright specifies that the set should be a pub bar, but all the glasses, pumps, till and optics should be mimed. When people say “mime” most people instantly think of a dodgy French bloke in a beret and stripy t-shirt stuck in an invisible glass box. Or perhaps the highly stylized art form of Marcel Marceau, or Jean-Louis Barrault in Les Enfants du Paradis. But really mime is one of the first ways everybody has of communicating and engaging imaginatively - as children we all mimed great battles, epic journeys across the sea, or even invisible friends.
When we started playing in the rehearsal room to create our pub, the challenge was to re-discover the same level of seriousness and belief in this imaginary world that the child has in their pretend tea-set. But this time it is not only the people playing who have to believe these things exist – we have to convince all the audience who will be watching. How to find the one gesture, the one way of holding the hands that communicates a double gin and tonic or pint of bitter? What exactly is the rustle of a packet of crisps? People often say that theatre is something that happens on stage, but really, when it works, it is because something is happening in the imagination of the audience. With mime the actors are asking the audience to engage their imagination, just like the child does, who hands an adult a pretend tea-cup, and so become an active part in telling the story.

STEVE BROWN – SOUND DESIGNER

When I first read TWO it was obvious to me that designing sound for this play was going to be challenging in many ways. TWO is set in a single location and takes place in a single evening. The transitions between scenes, despite being challenging for the actors involved, need little in the way of any extra explanation. Often the real demands of designing sound within the Royal Exchange Theatre is taking the audience on a sonic journey which consists of multiple, often unfamiliar locations over a precise periods of time, all of which can (and often is) explained using sound. The challenge with this play is finding sounds and music which support the emotions of the characters whilst staying true to writer’s and director’s overall vision.

My process started in late October when I created little sonic signatures for all of the characters; some of these were stripped down versions of songs which are staple pub jukebox favourites, or simple naturalistic sounds which connect with the character in some way. This is a technique I often use to try and understand the play and characters in greater depth. Rarely do I share these sound sketches, but on this occasion I was interested in what Greg had to say about them. I was sure that there was a way of unlocking the sound world of this play and I was determined to find it.

I’m writing this towards the end of the first week of rehearsals and I’ve already recorded nearly six hours of sound, most of which will not find its way into the production but nevertheless is an all important part of the total process. My next step is to try and understand why the two very particular popular songs which are mentioned in the script are there, and how I can compliment these with any personal choices that I, Greg, or the cast make for other sections of this production. Undoubtedly, the toughest part of the next few weeks will be to visit pubs in the area and making some environmental recordings. I will do this in order to discover how the sound world of these establishments changes as the evening progresses. I hope to find some signature sounds which we can, in some way, use to place the audience at specific points of a typical evening at the pub. Of course the play represents a theatrically condensed evening, but the sound design will greatly enhance the journey the cast and audience will take throughout the evening.

CHRIS DAVEY – LIGHTING DESIGNER

This will be my ninth design for the Royal Exchange, and I first got involved with TWO when Greg and I were working on AS YOU LIKE IT. Greg talked with great passion about Jim and their long history together and how he thought it was an extraordinary piece of writing. I love working on pieces where there is a bond between writer and director. One of my roles as lighting designer is to support the writing in telling the story, be it helping to emote the time of day or season, or to underscore the emotion of the characters. This journey of emotions can change instantly and I can help punctuate those changes either subtly or very visibly. Greg makes it easier for me to understand how big a gesture to make in the lighting as he is so in tune with Jim's writing.

I love the fact there are only two actors playing all the parts in TWO. I love that the audience will really get to know both actors as they move from one character to another, and that they talk directly to the audience: the other pub dwellers. I love that the dialogue is down to earth, it really creates the atmosphere of a working, thriving pub, yet as Greg says there is an epic, cathedral quality to the piece which is reflected in the set design by the beautiful chandelier of pub glasses.

The Exchange is like no other theatre. It is like a fish bowl with a 360 degree vantage point for the audience. In a proscenium theatre I can control and model a picture as it is seen from one side. The audience looks through the proscenium arch and I can use techniques to highlight actors and pull them out from the scenery. In the round, every member of the audience has a different perspective so a lamp that lights the face of an actor is also the highlight for someone else seeing the back of the same actor. Designing TWO is going to be different because at times the lighting design can be very tight and intimate and at other times expansive.