



# BLINDSIDED

by Simon Stephens, directed by Sarah Frankcom

## Interview with BLINDSIDED Designer Anna Fleischle

Conducted by Assistant Director Liz Stevenson

How would you describe the role of the designer, what do you see as your job?

It always depends on the piece and the way you work with the director, but the kind of collaboration I enjoy is where you work with the director to find the world and the concept of the play and develop it. Together you find a visual language and decide how you want the story to be told and how you translate that visually in the space.

Could you take me through the different stages of the journey from your first reading of the play to the creation of the final model box?

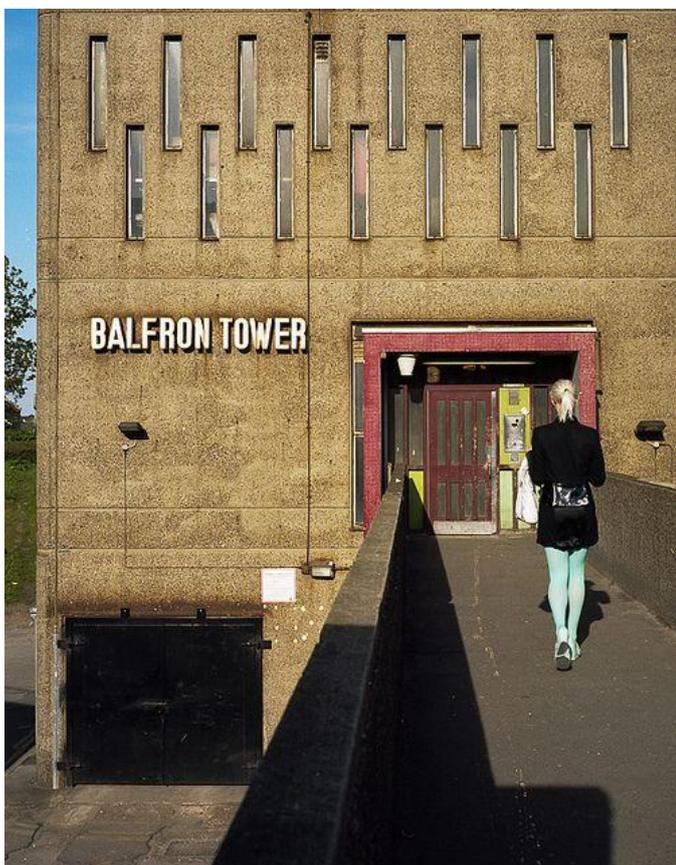
You have initial ideas when you read it, but then Sarah and I met up and just talked in general about how we wanted to approach it. We were both clear from the beginning that we didn't want it to be naturalistic; so we didn't feel like we needed to have interiors of houses and sofas etc. There is such an underlying psychological story, it is about the journey the characters take and the events that lead to someone's head going into such a strange place where other logic applies. So it became quite important to explore the psychology of the places these people live in, so whether it's the surroundings of the country, or the weather, or particular kinds of buildings- these things are important to how people feel about themselves and about their lives, and all of that has a strong influence on the characters and the development of the story.

I met with Simon independently, so it was interesting to see what his thoughts were. I did a lot of research. I started by looking at Stockport in the 1970s and what the building structures were like. Then I became interested in the architecture of buildings that are purpose built, where people are living close together in environments that aren't necessarily their choice and somehow they don't really own it, or they can't make it their own. I looked at planning for cities and housing estates and there always seemed to be an architectural



Reference images from Anna's research

idea behind it which on the page or in the model looks fantastic and very stylish but then the reality of it for the people who actually have to live there is a completely different story. Quite often when it is all minimalist and newly done it might look nice but then things quickly fall into disrepair. Also you often have places in cities such as the areas under bridges or the places people pass through that nobody has really thought about, and they are somehow quite sad. I guess these environments had a lot to do with the kind of spaces the characters are in their heads, they are locked into a place that isn't so nice. When you look at these areas for me it kind of turns into shapes, and how those shapes sit in relation to each other and how that influences the space and how you feel about it.



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You have to be able to let yourself go through different journeys that aren't necessarily logical. It's about finding the core truth and the fundamental sense of it without being tied down to realistic things like working out entrances and exits. I always try and distance myself from that because I feel that once I've worked out what it's about and the sense I want the space to have, then that informs where you go from there.

The second time Sarah and I met I brought a whole lot of pictures; images from the time and some more abstract images. I looked at a lot of public art and interesting sculptures. I explored the difference between tight interior spaces and vast open spaces with big sky and fields. And we started finding out where we both met and which bits we were both interested in, and then I went off and tried to define that and work out where that led us.

We met one more time to talk about things in more detail. Then I started playing with shapes and I started to think about the space here, which obviously is so unusual and different to a normal theatre space. I try not to let that worry me but to think about it as a different way that people look at something- it's not a little box where people look through a viewfinder, I always think you need to think about it as a sculpture rather than a theatre set, as it's three-dimensional. I decided I wanted to create something like a vacuum and to create space, I felt it was going upwards, with a void in the middle within that space.

How do you explore ideas, do you work in the model or do you work by sketching? Every time it's slightly different. Sometimes that's what takes me the longest, working out the right way to work. Sometimes it might be sketch sometimes it might purely be in the model box but this was very much in my head. I felt that there needed to be journeys in it, possibilities of dynamic lines between people, so that they might not stand next to each other but wherever they stand in the space, there is a the line between them and there is a kind of energy in that. I wanted different levels. I liked that there is a different physicality to how you walk up or down something, such as the ramp.

I went into my studio and I thought, this will take me days now! But it took about 2 hours because it was so clear in my head, I cut out bits of card and put them into different positions and then thought, that's actually it! I came in and showed it to Sarah and since then I don't think much has changed at all.

After thinking about the shapes in the space I then thought about textures. When I just had the shapes it all looked very white and minimalist and beautiful and then I thought that's exactly what I don't want! It's always hard to then apply texture because whatever you do it's quite big because they're big clean shapes you are covering and you have to be really careful. I didn't want anything with a kind of theatrical fakeness to it, I thought I'd be interested in all these shapes being built out of materials we see outside all the time- quite basic, pure materials. I walked around outside and thought about what I could see all around me.

How did you collaborate with the lighting designer?

I've worked with Lee (Curran) before and Simon had said from the beginning that he felt that the lighting could all be quite bold, so he was someone I suggested to Sarah. I like lighting designers who work a lot in dance because they think very sculpturally about light. It's not so much about lighting a set nicely and creating atmospheres but they are actually creating the design- there are so many dance pieces where there isn't any set. I've seen shows he's lit where he just created amazing spaces by the way he arranges the lights, not only through the light itself but through where the lanterns went and how he arranged them. I

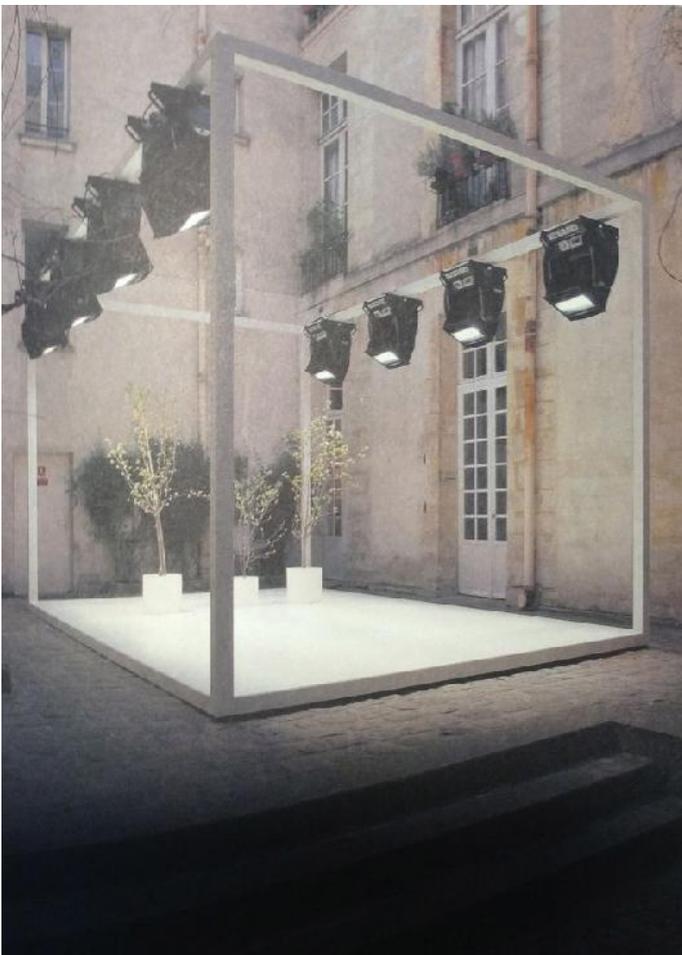
thought that would be an interesting way of approaching this piece. I wanted some of the light sources to be part of the design.

Could you tell me a little about your process when it comes to costume design?

In this case it's slightly different than drawing designs and handing them over because it's very much about real characters and real people in a time that isn't too far away. If you sit at home and you look at your research and you pull something together and do a drawing then there's always something slightly artificial about that because you're always a page away from the piece and the people who are going to be wearing the costumes. I like working in a way where you let it grow out of watching how the actors move, when the director has started working, so it's a much more organic process. You try and find the people rather than create them, and that way you end up with something that's more natural. I want them to come onstage and they could be anyone getting up from the audience, and that's quite hard actually! I've worked with Tracey the Costume supervisor before and she's very good at working like that. It's slightly more unnerving because you can't plan it so much, but we talk it through a lot and she goes out and finds the items. Fittings take longer because you're trying your way through it. The actors can bring something to it as well which is nice. Together we've really started to find these people I think.

What would you say are the challenges of designing for this space?

As a designer you have to think differently, which is always a good thing I think. You can't go back to some formula or pattern. It's got a really quite exciting energy that's different to other spaces, and one of the reasons why it is like that is because of all the different exits and entrances. Instead of entering the space from the wings you move freely from one space into another so it can be faster, those journeys are more realistic, you don't have that thing of having only two metres to run up and then you're kind of thrown on the stage! It's also interesting that the audience watching it are always in your picture. It is harder to create theatrical illusion and magic as there's lots of things you can't do because you'll always see the back of something. I don't think that should ever be something negative, you just have to find a different answer to it really. I really enjoy it but the first time it is daunting because you can't fall back onto your usual way of looking at things.



Reference images from Anna's research

## BLINDSIDED Design Activities

WHY NOT? Build a few simple 3D shapes out of card. Experiment with where you put the shapes in a space. Build an object that resembles a human being in your space. How might it feel for your figure to be in this space? Experiment with different materials your shapes can be made from- how does this alter the feel of your creation?

WHY NOT? Imagine your kitchen as a theatre set. How does this space feel and why? What does it say about the people who inhabit it? Imagine that the surfaces and objects in your kitchen were made of completely different materials – how does this affect your impression of this space?

WHY NOT? Work with a partner to discuss a collection of images. How do you each respond differently to the images? Which elements excite you both?

WHY NOT? Choose a simple well known story, perhaps a fairy tale. Think about how you would design a production of your fairytale in the theatre. Choose 3 images each that you feel could be a starting point for your design.

Combine your 3 images with a partner's. How might you use both of your ideas in conceiving a design?

WHY NOT? Think about the village/town/city you live in. What materials and shapes do you see all around you? How would you design a production of your fairy tale using your hometown as the setting?

WHY NOT? Choose a character from your favourite story. Can you create a set design that sums up their psychology?

WHY NOT? Select a scene from Blindsided and choose a different environment to set it in. Does this make you feel differently about the characters and the events of that scene?

WHY NOT? Think about what you are wearing now; the colours, textures and shapes. What does your dress say about you?

BLINDSIDED runs at the Royal Exchange from 23 January - 15 February 2014.

Box Office: 0161 833 9833  
[royalexchange.co.uk/blindsided](http://royalexchange.co.uk/blindsided)

Ticket prices: £10 - £36

Running time: Approx. 2 hours and 30 minutes, including 1 interval of 20 minutes

Age Guidance: Suitable for ages 14+ due to strong language

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IN CONVERSATION WITH...

Saturday 1 February: 1pm - 2.30pm

A panel discussion with playwright Simon Stephens alongside leading theatre professionals and academics from the University of Manchester.

FREE, but ticketed (tickets available from Box Office: 0161 833 9833)

BEHIND THE SCENES...BLINDSIDED

Tuesday 4 February, 10am – 12 noon

A pre-show, talk-based introduction to the play and production. Join members of the creative team as they discuss and demonstrate the process of bringing the production to the stage. For up to 100 people. Suitable for individuals, schools and groups. Age 16+.

£6/£4 (concessions & group leaders). Book on 0161 615 6702.

AFTER SHOW DISCUSSION

Thursday 13 February