Explorations in Design

Discovering My Process

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THA499 Capstone Senior Project
Dr. Alan Litsey & Professor Michael Flowers
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"Design is a renaissance attitude that combines technology, cognitive science, human need, and beauty to produce something that the world didn't know it was missing."

- Paula Antonelli

A designer's process is more than the means to an end. A designer's process is his or her identity; a culmination of experiences, work ethic, culture, and values. The most important tool for designers is not their eye for color, sewing skills, or ability to take risks, it is the process by which they articulate and concretize the beauty visualized in their minds. One of the most agonizing experiences is having a truly phenomenal vision and not knowing how to materialize it. Over the past four years I have worked from the ground up as a technician and as a designer to sculpt my own process. Perhaps it is my design process, found through the leadership roles I have held, that strengthens my confidence to face the intimidating world of theatrical design after graduation. It is important to understand that a design process is composed of parts that are unique to every designer, however there are two components that are crucial for the success of a design process (and design). A designer must understand and master respectful collaboration with all involved in a production and clearly articulate the design to those constructing it.

Without these two components, even the best visualized design and organized process will fail. This past January I designed the set for *The Who's Tommy* and assisted in the construction; I truly learned the importance of collaboration and articulation in my design process.

Fundamentally, a design process is a series of steps by which the goal of creating a scenic, costume, lighting or audio design or the artistry of an efficiently coordinated production occurs (Gillette 2013). It is not a linear progression; it is a fluctuating back and forth movement that occurs as the designer moves through the various stages of the design process as he or she sees fit (Gillette 2013). Designers like Alison Ford and J. Michael Gillette believe there is a certain structure, with seven foundational pillars, to the design process. These are not to be confused with methods. The methods in a design process are up to the designer, decided on by their experiences, values, culture, and work ethic. Methods are the physical means in a design process by which a designer achieves his or her vision. For example, creating an image morgue, gel color-coded promptbook, or audio-recorded notes are physical methods designers implement. Ford and Gillette state that commitment, analysis, research, incubation, selection, implementation, and evaluation are the foundational steps to the design process (Gillette 2013). After designing four shows at Birmingham-Southern College Theatre, I firmly agree with the seven foundational pillars in a design process.

Briefly discussing these seven foundations to a design process, I would like to accompany them with my own experiences I believe support Ford and Gillette's theories. Commitment is considered the most important part of the whole design process in Gillette's book, *Theatrical Design and Production*. The logic is simple; if a designer commits himself or

herself completely to a design, he or she is promising that the best work will be achieved (Gillette 2013). Viewing a design as a challenge and committing to solve the challenge connects the designer with his or her primitive competitive nature. In my experience committing to the play is indeed the most important foundation of the design process. When I started my first lighting design at Birmingham-Southern College for *The Impressario* in the Opera Trio, I was hesitant and nervous to design. I was uncommitted, dictated by my fear of never designing lights before and my lack of knowledge about operas. I saw the design as an anvil hanging over my head rather than a challenge waiting to be solved. However, after talking to a fellow designer in the Opera Trio, he convinced me to believe in the show and most importantly to have faith in myself. "This is a challenge to which you are well equipped to solve." When I sat down to my light plot with a refocused mind I found that the design challenge approach left me confident to solve it. Though this light design was small, it was important for me because I realized that to design (and design well) I must commit to the show and to myself. Tim Parsey says, "Our opportunity, as designers, is to learn how to handle the complexity, rather than shy away from it, and to realize that the big art of design is to make complicated things seem simple." This is to commit. Gillette's concept of transforming complexity into a challenge is an important part of the commitment step in a design process (Gillette 1987).

The next foundation in a design process is the analysis, which has two objectives: gather information that will clarify the challenge and identify where further research is needed to aid the design (Gillette 2013). This can be accomplished in two ways, first by reading the script and second by questioning and conversation. It is suggested that the script be read a total of three

times, each reading with the objective of learning something new. The first reading is for fun; to "discover the flavor of the play" (Gillette 2013). The second reading is to find specific moments within the play that stimulate the creative mind. For example, when I read my scripts for a second time I have a notebook and when I come across language or situations I can write down what I see. Occasionally, like the light design of *RENT,* I would doodle images and clip out gel colors that I felt captured the mood of the moment. For me, the second reading is the most time consuming, yet can yield the most raw design concepts. Finally, it is suggested that the designer read the script a third time for the technical and mechanical necessities of a script (Gillette 1987). For the set design of *Crimes of the Heart,* I highlighted every set piece mentioned and every prop used. This helped me later compile a list of all necessary props and set pieces so when I collaborated with the production team I was prepared. Conversation with the production team and directors allowed for more knowledge in the analysis process as well. Occasionally the director will make decisions like changing the era in which the play occurs. That is why conversation is important to the analysis process.

Research is another foundation to the design process. A designer must study the historical background of each production (Gillette 1987). This historical research can include architectural styles of that era, technological advancements (or lack there of), culture of that region, and anything mentioned in the script. The play *Crimes of the Heart* is set in Hazelhurst, Mississippi after Hurricane Camille. My research as the set designer included history of Hurricane Camille and the damage it caused in Mississippi. The research also included pictures of the hurricane and historical accounts from witnesses. Though I did not create hurricane damage and distress in

the set, I was able to mentally fill out the world of the playwright and characters in the show. Knowing that the show is set in the McGrath sister's home in 1978, this does not mean that the home was built in 1978. Rather, the script tells us that the home was the grandmother's, which indicates that the architecture would be from the 30's or 40's rather than the 70's. Research can show us ways to take an older home and have modern updates like in my set for *Crimes of the Heart*. Though the research process can be mundane since the designer is not exercising his or her creative mind, it is crucial to creating a believable design.

Unfortunately for me, I usually do not get the opportunity to do the next step in the design process. Gillette asks, "How many times have you come up with the solution to a problem after you have 'slept on it'?" The reason is because the information you needed was locked in your subconscious and only time and stress reduction allowed the answer to float up to your conscious (Gillette 2013). The incubation period does exactly that; it provides the time in which you need to let ideas form. Ideally, a designer will set this project down all together and focus on something not design related. I have found this step is seemingly impossible for my schedule. I believe in the importance of the incubation period because after a show has closed I often find myself thinking, "Oh, why didn't I do that?" "That would have been a better use of space!" and "I should've used backlight in that scene." These are all examples of situations that possibly could have been avoided if I had allowed myself time for incubation.

The selection part of the design process is simply where the designer sifts through all the data she or he has collected and begins brainstorming on conceptual ideas. As a lighting designer and a set designer I find the processes similar yet the methods different for each media. As a

scenic designer for *The Who's Tommy* and *Crimes of the Heart,* I started out with six or seven pages filled with thumbnail sketches. Some of the sketches were completely different than the others and some were identical except for placement of furniture. As a set designer, I would use my research and data collected to know what is necessary in each scene and follow the guidelines given by the script. Sometimes I would color in my thumbnails with crayons (to appease the inner child in me) and other times I would cut and paste wallpaper samples from the Internet onto my thumbnails. As a lighting designer my methods were a little peculiar. For the light design of *RENT* I drew the basic set design in thumbnail form and would sketch the placement of each character on the set. I would then highlight where I wanted the light to illuminate the subject and include snippets of gel colors to further visual my design. Needless to say, my design book was full of design concepts that I did not use and plenty of little triangles of gels. Many designers argue that the most difficult part of the design process is the selection. However, I found that adequate research and collaboration with the production crew made the selection process fairly simple. Though I am not a famous or phenomenal designer, I have yet to close one of my productions regretting my overall design choice.

Once a design concept is chosen, the implantation phase begins. I will be the first to admit, this is the most difficult and frustrating portion of a design process. The implementation process is where the designer stops planning and starts doing (Gillette 2013). Implementation is different for each type of designer. As a scenic designer, I made my final color rendering of my set. For *The Who's Tommy,* I created a three-dimensional model on Google Sketchup and rendered it in color so the production team could see and move throughout the virtual space.

My final color rendering of the set design for *Crimes of the Heart* was a physical three-dimensional model made of foam core and Bristol board. Both set designs were accompanied with final construction plans for the build crew that included the paint colors, wallpaper patterns, and floor samples.   As the lighting designer for *RENT*, I created a light plot in Vectorworks and included all the appropriate paperwork (magic sheets, gel numbers, gobos, and circuit schedules).

Since I have only designed in educational theatre, the implementation process is not as hands-free as the professional world. Professional designers have assistants and technicians who are present throughout the whole implementation process (Pilbrow 1997).   At Birmingham-Southern College Theatre, the designer is equally as involved in the implementation process as the technicians. As the lighting designer for *RENT,* I was present for all of the hanging, focusing, and work calls for the light crew. For most purposes (I haven't asked the light crew head) I think that being present during the implementation was a much-needed step.   There are always problems that occur, no matter how talented the crew or how great the design. Being able to immediately answer questions and work with the crew to problem solve results in a powerful feeling of accomplishment and efficiency.   Renowned lighting designer Dennis Parichy states in his book, *Illuminating the Play,* that a truly invested lighting designer, whenever possible, should play a present part of the execution of their design (Parichy 2009). After completing the light design for *RENT*, I firmly agree with him.

My experience with *The Who's Tommy* leads me to believe that the implementation process for a set designer can vary. My experience as designer for *Crimes of the Heart* was less involved and labor intensive compared to *The Who's Tommy*. For *The Who's Tommy,* I was

involved in every step of building my set design for this show. Every day we were faced with a challenge that we needed to overcome, whether it was an oversight in the design or a lack of materials. As the designer I was able to make official and educated decisions with the help of the technical director and crew. For example, I miscalculated the length of my entire set a few days after it was constructed. It was crucial that the set be longer to hide actors as they came onstage from the cyclorama pit. Being present, I was able to make a decision with collaboration for the technical director and director. I believe at Birmingham-Southern College Theatre the implementation process is more labor intensive than that of a professional designer's process – seeing how we don't have assistants! However, this is beneficial for a designer so they can use the experiences and knowledge gained from the hands-on implementation process in the next step.

The final step in the design process according to J. Michael Gillette is the evaluation. Evaluation takes place within each step of the design process and occurs after the completion of the show. The final evaluation is not necessarily a back-patting session as an examination of the methods and materials used in the final design goal (Gillette 2013). Designers will evaluate their selections to see if they were appropriate, logical, and effective to determine if they can be used in the future. Gillette states that as a designer becomes more familiar with the design process, they will discover that their own work is more creative with results being produced easier and quicker. Looking back on my starting design, *The Impressario*, I had absolutely no idea where to start or what to do. After designing *Crimes of the Heart, RENT, and The Who's Tommy*, I am confident now in my personal design process and I have watched the growth in my methods and

the ease of creating. That is not to say that I have not had trouble. Believe me, I have; but my evaluation of each show has revealed what works and what does not, thus bettering my design process.

Through my experience designing at Birmingham-Southern College, I believe that Allison Ford and J. Michael Gillette's seven fundamental steps in a design process are indeed necessary. However, I assert that there are two other essential components crucial for the success of a design process and a design. A designer must master respectful collaboration with the production team and must clearly articulate the design to the technical crew. While designing and constructing the set of *The Who's Tommy* I learned the importance of collaboration and articulation. In the early stages of my design I met with the director and technical director of the show once a week or so. We discussed my vision and the director's vision with input from the assistant director and the technical director. As we moved along the process, the technical director reminded me of our in house construction skill while the director reminded me of the time frame in which I had to work. Collaboration with the assistant director and director allowed me to understand their visions and desires for set pieces that would be utilized in the show. During the implementation process I worked tirelessly with the technical director to construct the set. Whenever a challenge occurred, we sat down together and discussed how we could overcome it. I also realized through the implementation process that collaboration with the lighting designer was crucial. I learned a valuable lesson about collaboration with other designers during *The Who's Tommy.* Sometimes jobs can overlap when lighting instruments are part of the set (or are placed on the set). According to Dennis Parichy, any form of lighting on a

set is the responsibility of the lighting designer if the cues are programed by the designer or into the designer's patch (Parichy 2009). A part of my set design included four LED lights under muslin-faced staircases. Since the stage was revolving cables could not be attached to the set to light the staircases. After much collaboration with the technical director and lighting designer, we ordered wireless DMX receiver and transmitter that would allow the lighting designer to control the lights without a physical cable. Unfortunately, there was confusion about who was responsible to make the DMX receiver and transmitter work. I realized that I was unclear and should have articulated more clearly to the lighting designer and crew about its completion.

Another example of the importance of collaboration and articulation occurred during the implementation process as well. A week into the build of *The Who's Tommy,* when I realized that my plan to screen-print an image over nine 8 foot by 4 foot panels would not work, I was quick to collaborate with the technical direct and director about how to solve the problem. We wanted to keep the idea of a huge image of a distorted pinball machine but our budget would not allow for the proper printing. Immediately we came to the conclusion that we would have to paint the image on the set. Though it was a time consuming (and paint consuming) project, we were able to pull it off. These valuable lessons are ones that I will carry for the rest of my career as a designer. I will never hesitate to stress the importance of collaboration and articulation. Not only can problems be solved more efficiently but they can also be avoided!

Through my personal experience at Birmingham-Southern College Theatre, I have found that the seven pillars in the design process are absolutely necessary. However, I believe that commitment, analysis, research, incubation, selection, implementation, and evaluation cannot

happen without collaboration with other and clear articulation. In my opinion, collaboration and articulation means admitting to mistakes and learning how to avoid them in the future. I learned this many times throughout designs for *RENT* and *The Who's Tommy*. Being a conscience designer includes helping anyone in the production team that needs an extra hand. Finally, and most importantly, collaboration and articulation must include honest conversations with yourself during the entire process. A designer must understand what worked and did not work in their process, and be honest about it. Allowing yourself to understand what has failed is as important as understanding what has not. A designer can walk away from a show with an even better grasp on his or her design process after being honest with himself or herself during evaluation. As I sit here today writing this paper, I can look back at the design process for *The Who's Tommy* (and every other design) and tell myself what I need to improve and what I did well. That is the evidence to the importance of all seven steps in the design process, including collaboration and articulation.

What I have learned about myself as a designer and about my design process here at Birmingham-Southern College is irreplaceable. Solidifying a design process is the most valuable skill I possess. As mentioned above, a designer's process is his or her identity. It is shaped by their experiences, culture, values, and work ethic. As Alan Litsey said, "We are all students of process." All my experiences as a technician and designer have concretized my design process through the seven foundations laid out by Gillette. The liberal arts education I have received at Birmingham-Southern has sculpted by my values and work ethic. Through my three-week marathon of building the set for *The Who's Tommy,* I believe a designer must understand and

master respectful collaboration with all involved in a production and clearly articulate the design to those constructing it. Without these two components, even the best visualized design and organized process will fail. I have discovered (and built) my design process and I am confident in my abilities to face the word of design after graduation. I cannot wait for my next design so I can show the world something they never knew they were missing.

I would like to include a quote from one of my favorite designers, Richard Pilbrow. "A design should never say, look at me; it should always say, look at this." No matter where I go or what show I am designing I will never forget that my design is part of a larger masterpiece. I will always do my best to help those in my production team and never take away from their art. To me, that is cognitive design.

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