

SECTION B: ***THEATRE DESIGN***



TODAY'S LESSON – LOOKING AT SET DESIGN

We will be using the following productions to look at set design:

- Jane Eyre, an original devised work under direction of Sally Cookson for the National Theatre.
- Treasure Island directed by Polly Findlay for National Theatre.

SET DESIGN – AN OVERVIEW

- All the scenery, furniture and props the audience sees at a production of a play make up the set design. The set designer's job is to design these physical surroundings in which the action will take place.
- A theatre set should:
 - (1) suggest the style and tone of the whole production
 - (2) create mood and atmosphere
 - (3) give clues as to the specific time and place of the action
 - (4) offer creative possibilities for the movement and grouping of the actors.
- The set may also need to be designed so the backstage areas used by the actors and stage crew are kept out of sight from the audience. This will depend on the effect the director wants to create with the staging and on the type of stage the production uses.
- All the things appearing on the stage other than the scenery are called stage properties, or props. Set props like furniture, draperies and decorations are the types of things that complete the set and they need to be part of the set design.
- The set designer will normally read the script many times, both to get a feel for the flavour and spirit of the script and to list its specific requirements for scenery, furnishings and props. The time of day, location, season, historical period and any set changes called for in the script are noted. The set designer's focus here is on figuring out everything that may be needed based on the dialogue in the script. Stage directions tend to be ignored at this point in the process.



SET CHANGES

Many productions need to represent more than one location or era on stage.

Some theatre makers believe that set changes can disrupt the rhythm or pace of a production, so designers may use devices to make scene changes smoother, for example using flown scenery and trucks or actors bringing items on or off stage.

Designers can also use a composite set that can represent many different locations without the need for a full set change.

Example image:

Tom Piper's design for Shared Experience's production of *Mermaid* used a set that could represent both a young girl's bedroom and a world under the sea.



NATURALISTIC THEATRE

Previously mainstream, popular theatre mainly prescribed to a naturalistic style. **Naturalism** was a movement in European **drama** and **theatre** that developed in the late 19th and early 20th centuries - aiming to reflect real life back to the audience.

An audience would expect to enter a theatre space which is very clearly defined, the audience would sit and face the proscenium arch stage and view a play, a story presented in such a way that they are transported to the world of the play, and engrossed by the actors' performance, empathising with the characters.

In such a naturalistic performance, the job of the set is to aid this transportation - to recreate real life on the stage. Say the scene is set in a kitchen - the stage lights are set to recreate the natural light of the day time, the back ground has a realistic image of a kitchen, the set may be made up of real kitchen worktops and appliances and the audience watch as if they are looking through the "fourth wall".



NATURALISTIC SET DESIGN – A DOLL'S HOUSE BY HENRIK IBSEN



NON-NATURALISTIC THEATRE

In non-naturalistic set design, the aim is just about the complete opposite. The theatre practitioner Bertolt Brecht, for example, used non-naturalistic set design in his Epic Theatre productions to wake up the audience, to never let them forget that they were watching a theatrical production, and to throw a literal spotlight on the issues of the day, so that the audience would be inspired to discuss and develop their own opinions.

Non-naturalistic techniques may also be used to compliment (or contrast!) with the action in the scene. Non-naturalistic set is important in creating symbolic and metaphorical meaning that may then be interpreted by the audience.

When you think of non-naturalistic set design you may also think about the placement of the audience. Working outside the boundaries of naturalism allows a director to place the audience where they like - or even leave it up to the audience to decide. The audience/actor relationship is thrown into turmoil and this can be incredibly valuable and influential to a performance. The audience are no longer just passive viewers within a non-naturalistic set design - they could be a pool of possible performers, active commentators, or even a part of the set itself.



NON-NATURALISTIC SET DESIGN – A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM, THE GLOBE THEATRE, 2016



INDEPENDENT LEARNING TASK: **NATURALISTIC AND NON-NATURALISTIC THEATRE**

1. Research into the different types of theatre. Create a definition for both.
2. Create a collage slide with theatrical examples for each style.
3. Annotate one full scales image justifying which style it is and why.

SOMETHING TO CONSIDER: WHERE ARE THE AUDIENCE?

Different theatre spaces create different relationships between actors and audience:

- End-on or proscenium arch theatres create a clear divide between actors and audience.
- Thrust theatres partly surround the stage with the audience.
- Theatres in-the-round entirely surround the stage with the audience.
- Traverse theatres have two blocks of audience facing each other across the stage space.
- Promenade theatre allows the audience to move freely around the performance space, often guided by the actors.
- Immersive theatre surrounds the audience with an experience, and they often interact directly with the actors and the space. Each of these configurations creates a different relationship between the actors, audience and performance space. For example, in-the-round or thrust theatres allow the audience members to see one another and observe each other's reactions.



INDEPENDENT LEARNING TASK: **STAGING CONFIGURATIONS**

Create a revision resource to help you remember different staging configurations.

Try to find examples of productions that support the staging configuration.

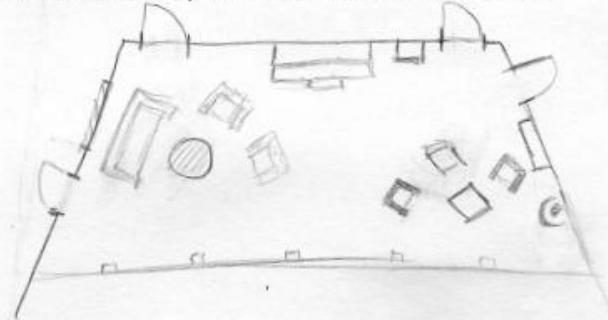
SET DESIGN TERMINOLOGY

Set Design Terminology

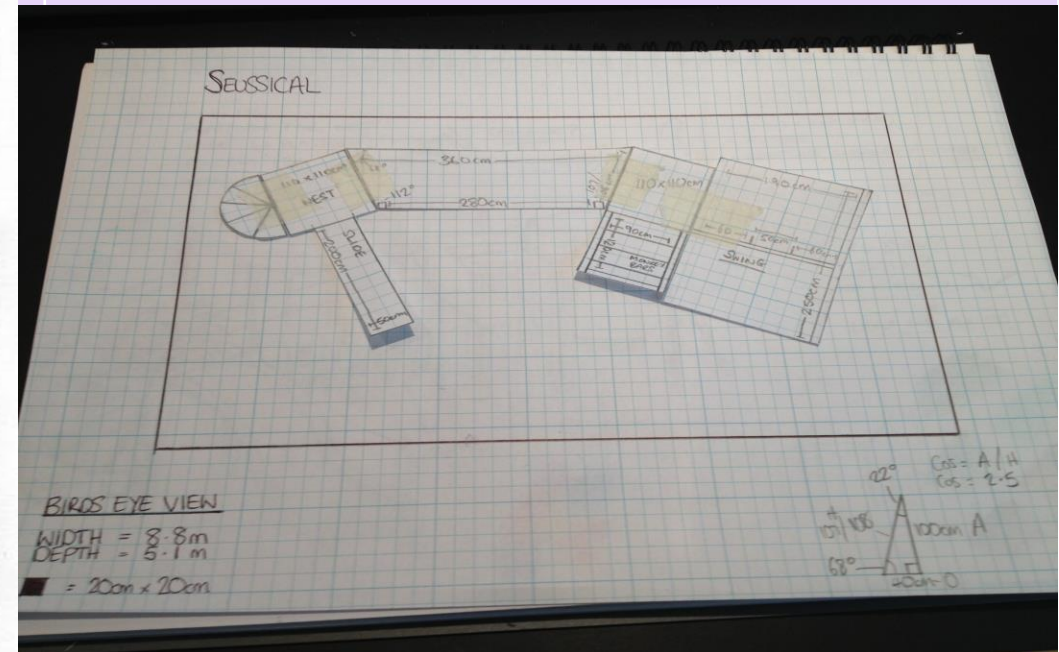
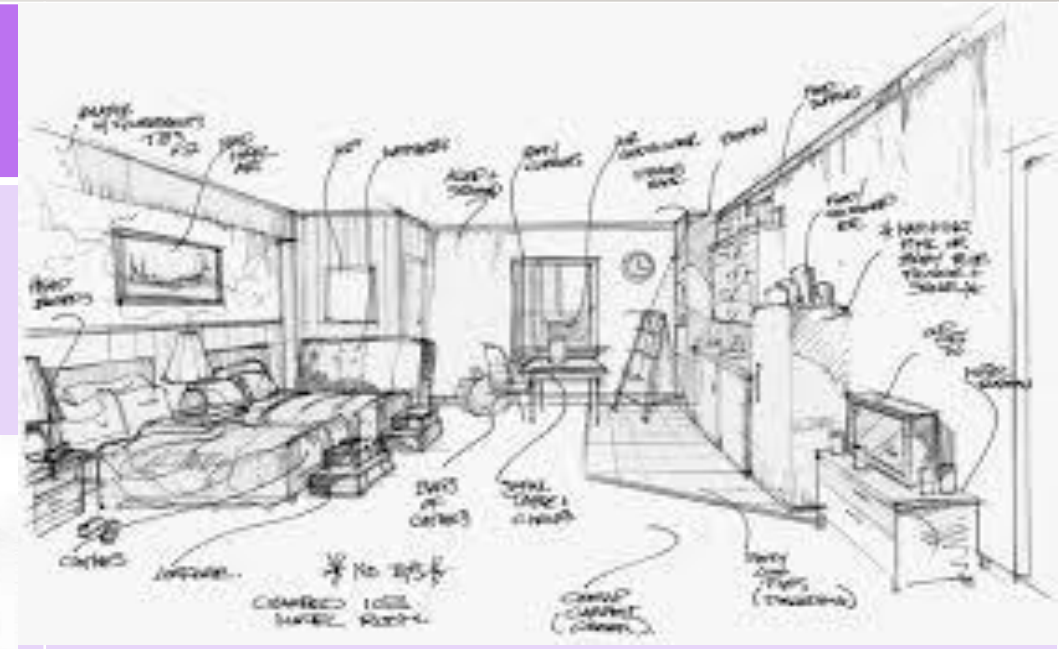
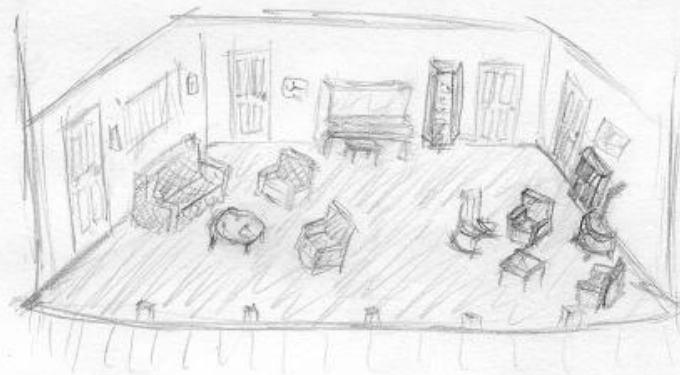
- Choice of staging form.
- Composite of changing set.
- Scale.
- Shape.
- Colour.
- Texture.
- Levels.
- Ramps.
- Steps.
- Flats.
- Scenic devices: flying, trucking, hydraulics, revolves, projections, screens, videos.
- Set dressing, drapes.
- Furniture.
- The performers use of set: entrances/exits, storytelling, change of location.

NOTE: Students are expected to include sketches and/or diagrams.

Blocked set, based upon Ibsen's original directions.



Sketch of blocked set



INDEPENDENT LEARNING TASK:

CREATE A SET GLOSSARY

Set Design Terminology

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Choice of staging form.• Composite of changing set.• Scale.• Shape.• Colour.• Texture.• Levels.• Ramps.• Steps.• Flats. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Scenic devices: flying, trucking, hydraulics, revolves, projections, screens, videos.• Set dressing, drapes.• Furniture.• The performers use of set: entrances/exits, storytelling, change of location. |
|--|--|

Scale = the relative size or extent of something. The size of the set, essentially.

JANE EYRE - DEVISED BY THE COMPANY

DIRECTED BY SALLY COOKSON

BASED ON THE NOVEL BY CHARLOTTE BRONTË

PERFORMED AT THE NATIONAL THEATRE, LONDON

STARRING MADELEINE WORRALL AS JANE EYRE

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9KPE6uXhFEU>





EXTRACT OF JANE EYRE AS SHE TRAVELS
ACROSS COUNTRY TO A NEW TEACHING
POST...

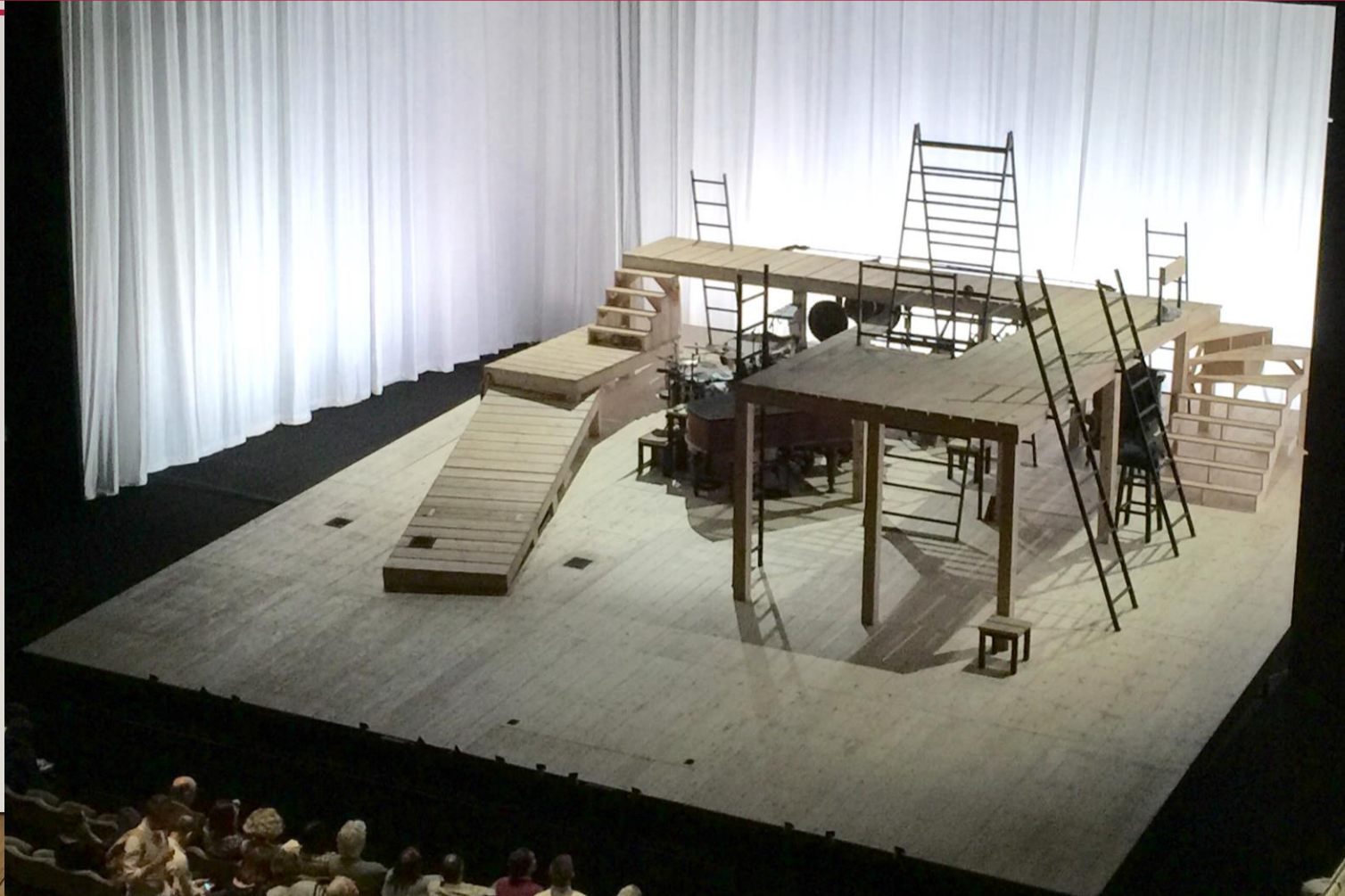
[HTTPS://WWW.YOUTUBE.COM/WATCH?V=_-TR96HWBSG](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_-TR96HWBSG)

CLIP ABOUT SET DESIGN ON JANE EYRE

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UVTRWx8_CKA



Contemporary/Non-Naturalistic Design: Use of traditional materials, yet in a contemporary way. The use of ramps, platforms, levels, ladders, staircases give the design a depth, yet also a sparse feel to it. It is therefore the actors that need to fill this space with their performance. Also note the band placed in the centre of the action – therefore music itself is another character in the play and central to its creation. There is also a 3D element to this set, allowing interesting use of proxemics and movement. This helps to create symbolic and metaphorical meaning for the audience – for example the journey Jane goes on throughout the play. The set design then compliments and supports the action.



*TREASURE ISLAND BY BRIONY LAVERY
ADAPTED FROM THE BOOK BY ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON
DIRECTED BY POLLY FINDLAY
STARRING PATSY FERRAN AND ARTHUR DARVILL*

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9wuCkgL_44s

National
Theatre
Live

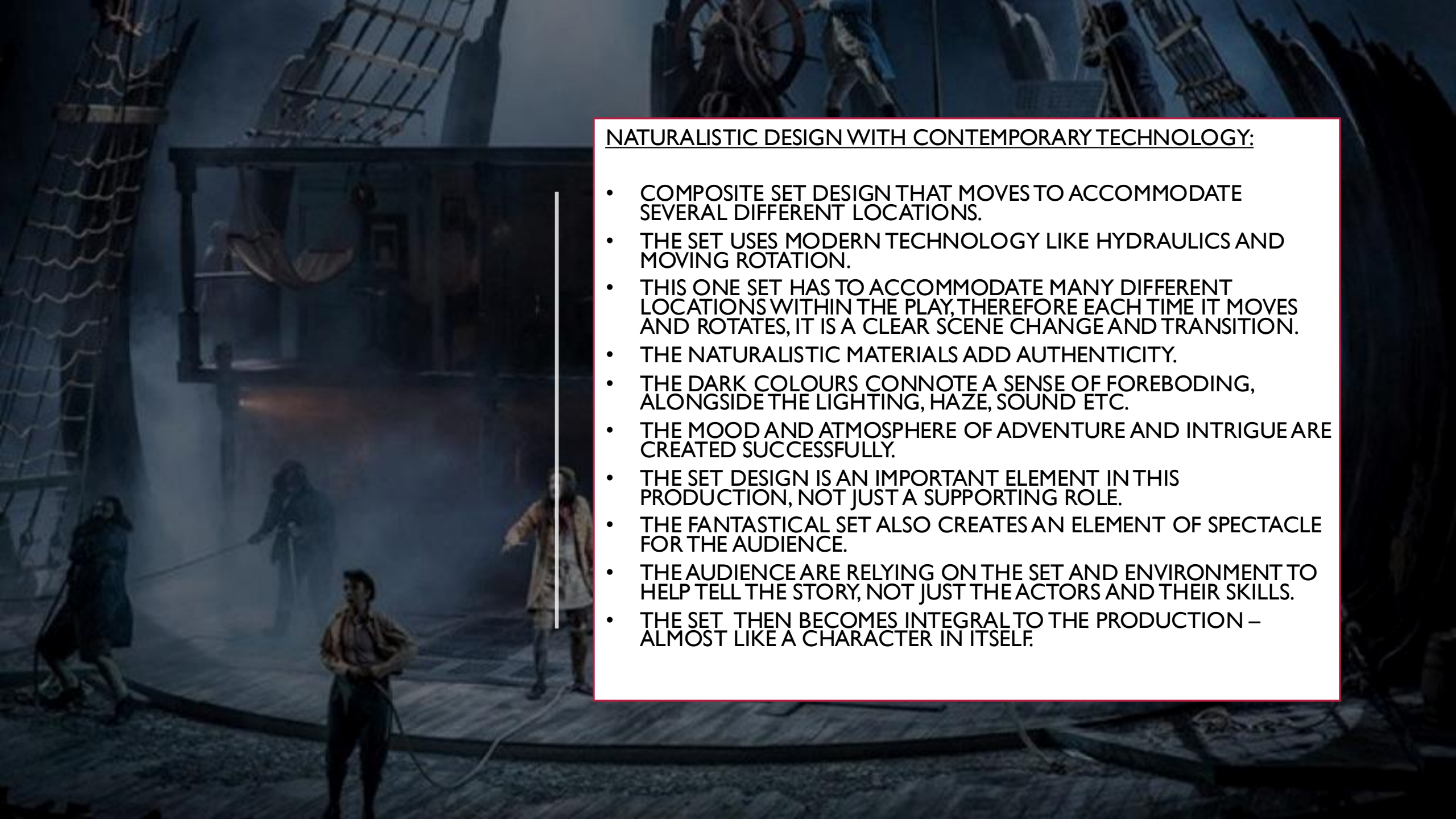


Extract of 'Setting sail on the Hispanola' from Treasure Island.

Note the style of set change and transition...

[HTTPS://WWW.YOUTUBE.COM/WATCH?V=4YUYO_2RGDA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4YUYO_2RGDA)





NATURALISTIC DESIGN WITH CONTEMPORARY TECHNOLOGY:

- COMPOSITE SET DESIGN THAT MOVES TO ACCOMMODATE SEVERAL DIFFERENT LOCATIONS.
- THE SET USES MODERN TECHNOLOGY LIKE HYDRAULICS AND MOVING ROTATION.
- THIS ONE SET HAS TO ACCOMMODATE MANY DIFFERENT LOCATIONS WITHIN THE PLAY, THEREFORE EACH TIME IT MOVES AND ROTATES, IT IS A CLEAR SCENE CHANGE AND TRANSITION.
- THE NATURALISTIC MATERIALS ADD AUTHENTICITY.
- THE DARK COLOURS CONNOTE A SENSE OF FOREBODING, ALONGSIDE THE LIGHTING, HAZE, SOUND ETC.
- THE MOOD AND ATMOSPHERE OF ADVENTURE AND INTRIGUE ARE CREATED SUCCESSFULLY.
- THE SET DESIGN IS AN IMPORTANT ELEMENT IN THIS PRODUCTION, NOT JUST A SUPPORTING ROLE.
- THE FANTASTICAL SET ALSO CREATES AN ELEMENT OF SPECTACLE FOR THE AUDIENCE.
- THE AUDIENCE ARE RELYING ON THE SET AND ENVIRONMENT TO HELP TELL THE STORY, NOT JUST THE ACTORS AND THEIR SKILLS.
- THE SET THEN BECOMES INTEGRAL TO THE PRODUCTION – ALMOST LIKE A CHARACTER IN ITSELF.

SET DESIGN TERMINOLOGY

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Effect of Set Design

Create interesting or imaginative settings for the action.
Location, period, mood, atmosphere, style.

INDEPENDENT LEARNING TASK:

- Find a clip of a production that interests you with their approach to set design.
- Screenshot key set choices and annotate with terminology and its effect.

ANALYSIS =
WHAT/HOW THE SET DESIGNER HAS DONE AND
THE WAY IT **SUPPORTS** THE **STYLE AND AIMS** OF
THE PERFORMANCE.

EXAMPLE SET DESIGN QUESTION

Explain how the set designer created an imaginative or interesting setting for the action of the production. Analyse and evaluate the effectiveness of the design at two specific moments.

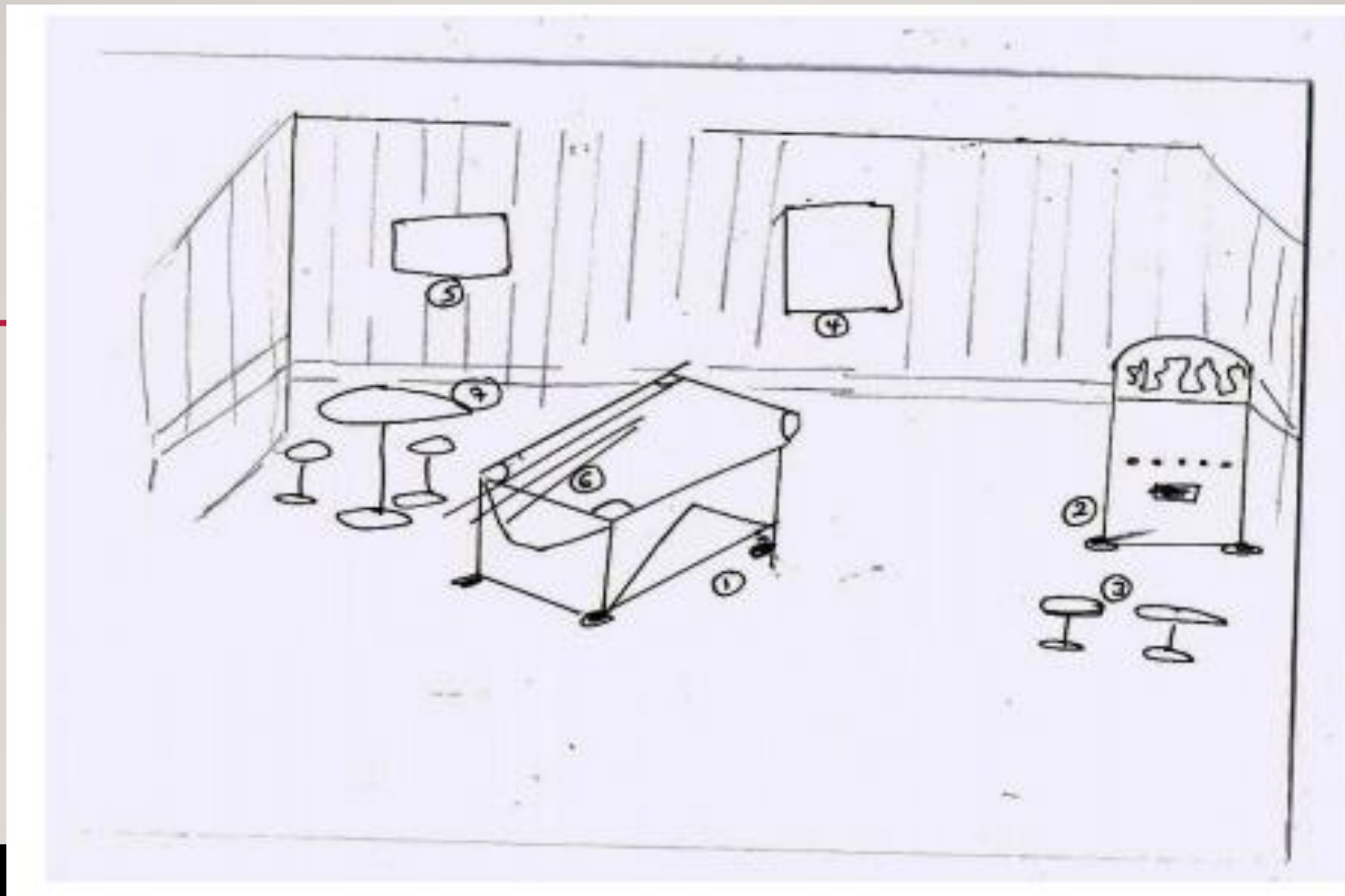
(25 marks)

EXTRACT OF AN EXAMPLE RESPONSE

On the 4th November 2014, I saw a live production of Othello at the Bolton Octagon Theatre. Othello is a Shakespearian tragedy written by William Shakespeare, performed by Frantic Assembly in heightened realism style. The set designer, Laura Hopkins created an impressive setting for the action of the play which had been transposed to an urban district of West Yorkshire with most of the action taking place around a snooker table in a run-down pub. Unlike Shakespeare's original text which is set in Venice and Cyprus, Frantic's take on the play sets the play in a context of squabbles and jealousies played out between competitive 'macho' males in a working class environment. When I first saw the set, I did not think it was going to be very appropriate for the Shakespeare text that we had looked at, in class, before going to see the production. I was expecting something to suggest the Mediterranean setting of the original play. Instead, a snooker/pool table dominated the set. There was a fruit machine stage left and a collection of bar stools and round bar tables dotted around the stage. The impression was tacky and cheap. This was what the set looked like at the beginning of the play. Entrances and exits were stage left and right, down stage (not indicated on sketch).

The set was amazingly flexible, however. The designer Laura Hopkins has been quoted as saying that she wanted a set that 'danced' with the cast. So, although you can't see it on a static sketch, the flats that made up the back and side 'walls' were fully articulated and capable of undulating with the rhythm of the production. Frantic Assembly are famous for their physical style of work and Othello was no exception. The cast were mainly athletic males but there were female characters, Desdemona, Bianca and Emilia and 'extra' women and the production was frequently interrupted by dance and/or fight sequences that were accompanied by high energy music by 'Hybrid'. One specific moment when the set design was really effective was when Iago got Cassio drunk. Cassio admits to Iago that he cannot hold his drink and Iago immediately sees a way to bring disgrace upon his rival for Othello's good opinion. Although Iago tells Cassio he will only drink 'one cup' he manages to trick Cassio into drinking more by singing raucous songs and getting the other 'lads' in the bar to join in a drinking competition. Soon Cassio's head is spinning and this is when the set (the back wall) begins to move, dipping and diving like a concertina, around Cassio, to mirror his feelings of drunkenness. It was incredibly effective to see the walls start to move and snake into new positions as Cassio insisted, 'I am not drunk now, I can stand well enough', while actually appearing to melt into the undulating walls. It was both humorous and un-nerving to watch.

Another transformation of the set occurred when Desdemona and Emilia are suddenly revealed in the 'Ladies toilets'. The 'wall of the pub' seems to dissolve or retract and a complete 'Ladies' toilet with cubicle, sink and grubby looking roller towel dispenser is trucked forward to reveal Desdemona sitting on the top of the toilet lid, with her knees up to her chin and her arms around her legs sobbing desperately as Emilia tries to comfort her about Othello's sudden jealousy. The space in the toilet/washroom appears confined and the walls, sinks and taps looked seedy and run-down – like the rest of the pub. The 'toilet' unit takes up the space of the pool table which simply sinks into a trap-door centre stage. This was really effective in supporting the idea of the play being set in a pub with the Ladies toilet as the only retreat for the women from the aggressive space in the main bar where the boys were constantly sparring and fighting. Overall, this amazingly versatile set was used throughout to enable the cast of Frantic to dance, fight, jump flip, dive and lift in their characteristic style.



Key:

4 1. Pool table 2. Fruit machine 3. Bar stools 4. Dirty window 5. Picture 6. Pool cues 7. Pub table

Band 4 Response.

INDEPENDENT LEARNING TASK: WATCH A LIVE PRODUCTION AVAILABLE ONLINE

Possible places to look:

- National Theatre at Home
- Everybody's Talking about Jamie
- RSC's The Tempest
- You Tube
- Digital Theatre +

