

## Possible Worlds— Designing for Shakespeare in Canada

THE POSSIBLE WORLDS component of the Shakespeare—Made in Canada exhibition throws light on Canadian productions of Shakespearean plays from the point of view of theatrical designers. The theatrical works exhibited in the gallery span several decades and represent a wide range of venues and artists from across the country. The designs derive from the L.W. Conolly Theatre Archives at the University of Guelph—the largest archive on Canadian theatre in Canada—and from the Macdonald Stewart Art Centre’s collection, augmented by works from the Canadian Theatre Museum, the Stratford Festival Archives, and private collections.

As a professional theatre designer and a professor in the School of English and Theatre Studies at the University of Guelph, I have long felt the need to promote and encourage understanding of theatrical design as an art form in its own right. Initially, I had intended to focus my research on design collections contained in archives across the country with particular emphasis on the theatre collection at the University of Guelph in order to give proper attention to this relatively new field of study. Collaboration with the Canadian Adaptations of Shakespeare Project (CASP) has broadened the range of my inquiries to a reflection on the adaptive nature of this art form.

Shakespeare’s work is unique in that his staggeringly broad understanding of humanity lends itself so readily to various interpretations—

what some might call adaptations—that fit local, regional, and national contexts. By its very nature, theatrical design is adaptive: directors and designers synthesize external influences to create the world of the play, tailoring their research to suit the concept of a particular production. The visual aspects of any theatrical production are central to communicating an adaptive context; this exhibition illustrates how these elements come together in a completed work of art.

It also represents the initial stages in an exploration that asks how we communicate our understanding of the world to our contemporaries: Are we merely the by-product of our colonial heritage? Are we developing our own Canadian ways of interpreting theatre and the works of Shakespeare in particular? Are we finally moving beyond the past to acknowledge our multicultural reality in the creation of a uniquely Canadian vision?

## **Our Colonial Past**

IT IS IMPORTANT to situate a discussion of Canadian theatrical design in relation to its time. Attitudes toward theatre artists, specifically designers, have changed considerably since the early years of theatrical production in Canada. This is, in part, because the notion of assigning responsibility for the creation of the visual aspects of a play to one individual is a modern concept. Early “theatricals” of the eighteenth century would have had rudimentary scenery and costumes produced by anyone who was handy with a hammer or a needle and thread. It wasn’t until the late nineteenth century that a need for an artist to create a cohesive visual interpretation of the play script was recognized in Europe. Consequently, it is extremely difficult to find any record of stage designs or designers for any of Canada’s early theatre productions.

The production of plays in Canada dates back to the days of the early colonists. In fact, performances of plays by British authors, Shakespeare in particular, could be viewed as a form of cultural imperialism. In 1759, after General Wolfe defeated Marquis de Montcalm on the Plains of Abraham, the British needed to take control of the many towns built around the military garrisons that had been established by the French. Amateur theatre, usually performed by members of the British military, featured the work of playwrights such as Shakespeare. It was only natural that the large majority of new settlers from the British Isles would

embrace the ideal of the theatre they knew from home and would wish to produce the works of great British playwrights. But the British also realized that power lay in the hands of those able to dominate this new land, culturally as well as physically.

The legacy of this domination continues today: witness the predominance of a British model of theatrical practice in Canada. Our position as an English colony meant that touring productions by professional British actors, directors, and designers dominated our theatres until the Great War. Canadian theatre artists, particularly designers, only began to work as professionals in the 1940s. This colonial heritage was formative in the early development of theatre artists in Canada. Inevitably, it was essential to overcome, if not critique and revise, this colonial inheritance in order to change perceptions and enable the creation of a distinctively Canadian theatre—a theatre that told our stories through playwrights, directors, and artists who both created their own work and reimagined the works of European writers, such as Shakespeare, from their own perspectives.

Guelph-born artist Rolph Scarlett (1889–1984), the earliest designer represented here, would have found very little training or opportunity as an aspiring designer in Canada in the 1920s; consequently, he chose to live and work in the United States. The circumstances of the Canadian theatre world would have been somewhat better for Herbert Whittaker (1910–2006). Whittaker was fortunate to have worked with the Canadian Players, one of the first and most influential theatre companies of post-World War II Canada. Unlike the theatrical touring companies from Britain and the United States that were the norm in the early part of the century, the Canadian Players, founded in 1954, was made up primarily of actors, directors, and designers who had made the commitment to live and work in Canada. Senior members of this company were sometimes born and trained overseas, but they wished to create theatre as Canadians, thus giving aspiring artists the chance to work and learn in their own country.

The Canadian Players and companies like it made creative theatrical work in Canada viable from both economic and aesthetic points of view. Colonial artists could not only produce their own work, but they could build on the background of their British predecessors and create a unique vision of theatre as a function of local, regional, and national realities. Canadian Players gave many of our most prominent actors

their start in a company that toured throughout North America. For example, Whittaker's 1961 design for the Canadian Players production of *King Lear* is historically important in its attempt to forge a distinctly Canadian adaptation through the use of images we recognize as part of our world—far removed from Shakespeare's Britain. Whittaker was an important figure from the formative years of Canadian theatre; his large body of work can be seen at the Canadian Theatre Museum, which he established.

Even as late as the 1980s, many Canadians viewed themselves as colonial offspring of the British Empire. It was still believed that artists of any significance in Canada had to be born in or, at the very least, educated in the United Kingdom. Only recently, we've crawled out from under this largely self-imposed colonial mentality to assert ourselves and develop as theatre artists in our own right. This shift in attitude has applied particularly to Canadian designers of Shakespeare, but of a Shakespeare remade in Canada.

Sir Tyrone Guthrie (1900–1971), the eminent Shakespearean director from the Old Vic Theatre in London, England, was invited in 1953 to Canada to establish the Stratford Shakespearean Festival. He brought with him Tanya Moiseiwitsch, a young British designer of Russian descent, to design the innovative, highly influential thrust stage, and to establish a design tradition that permeates the work of many contemporary Canadian theatre designers across the country. We owe a great debt to the talent and generosity of British designers like Moiseiwitsch, Desmond Heeley, and Leslie Hurry, three of Stratford's early designers, who each shared their knowledge, trained many Canadians, and set the high standard of design that is practiced today. It is ironic, however, that this benevolent presence at one of our two major theatre festivals further reinforced the perception that only foreign, preferably British-trained designers could design for Shakespeare, who was, after all, the epitome of British cultural achievement.

Susan Benson, whose evocative designs for *Romeo and Juliet* appear in this exhibition, has made a significant contribution to changing this attitude. Born in England in 1942, she recently celebrated forty years of living and working in Canada. As head of design at the Stratford Festival from 1980 to 1983, she established an apprenticeship program to train and encourage Canadian designers to work as equals with the international artists at the Festival. Three designers in this exhibition— Patrick

Clark, Charlotte Dean, and John Pennoyer—have all benefited from this program. Canadian designers now share the stage at Stratford on an equal footing with their international counterparts.

## **“Myself in different circumstances:” The Ephemera of Design Aesthetics**

THEATRICAL DESIGN IS often ignored as an art form, possibly due to its collaborative nature and the fact that it often references the work of other visual artists—painters, sculptors, and so on—in its execution. Collaborative work has long been recognized in the art world. Few would question the artistic merit of teams like Christo and Jeanne Claude, for example, whose collaborative environmental installations such as the wrapping of the Pont Neuf in Paris or the recent *Gates* project in New York’s Central Park have been recognized as innovative artistic achievements. In contrast, theatrical design is often thought of simply as an elaboration of a director’s ideas or as a technical solution to a problem, rather than as artistic vision.

Designers are, in fact, visual directors whose work, at its best, supports the work of actors and clarifies the playwright’s text through the languages of colour, light, proportion, and dimension. Theatrical designers approach their work through careful analysis of a play text and, when possible, through collaboration with the director and playwright, arriving at a visual interpretation of the images and metaphors of the script. These images are sometimes inspired by the work of other artists, reinterpreted through the designer’s own vision of the world of the play. A designer collaborates further with actors and technicians in the realization of this vision since the ultimate goal is not to create a static image, but to breathe life into the world of the play. This rendition of a play script is one of the most important possible avenues for generating an adaptive context that brings together a particular production’s vision with the playwright’s words. Set renderings, models, and costume sketches are a mid-point in this process, not the culmination of the work.

A theatrical design exists on two levels: the rendering, where the designer’s skill in creating a discrete work of art can be appreciated in its own right; and the design itself. This second level is at the core of a designer’s art. It is subtle as it deals with the creation of fleeting mo-

ments in time and space—ephemeral conceptualizations that are much harder to understand, appreciate, and document.

I have borrowed the title for this portion of the Shakespeare—Made in Canada exhibition from the play *Possible Worlds* by John Mighton, winner of the 2005 Siminovitch Prize in Theatre for his contribution to Canadian playwriting. “Possible Worlds” so aptly describes the design work represented in this exhibition. The actor William Hutt, in conversation, has described one of his approaches to acting as “myself in different circumstances.” These changing circumstances are also a designer’s currency as they create possible worlds onstage. The Possible Worlds gallery, then, attempts to illustrate the high level of imagination and creativity Canadian designers bring to their work as it relates to Shakespearean productions. It also explores the many possible visual responses to one text. These responses are often a reflection of the times and contexts in which the work was staged.

It is important to preserve and archive the work of designers. Since the nineteenth century, photographic records of productions have been the primary source of information about specific design and directorial interpretations of a play; they have also served as a visual record of theatrical movements or schools of thought. How different to read the staging ideas of the great Russian theatrical innovator Constantine Stanislavski (1863–1938), for example, then to see the “realism” of his *mise en scène* which seems very artificial to modern eyes and far from the ideal he describes in his writings.

Archived designer drawings and production photographs are a window into the past. They are not the production itself, but these artifacts do recall and evoke the evanescent world that was created far better than words alone can describe; they allow the viewer to make his or her own conclusions—to imagine what might have actually taken place in a particular setting. But, as this exhibition shows, theatrical designs also stand alone as creative work in their own right.

## **Intercultural Design: The Canadian Multicultural Context**

MUCH HAS CHANGED in Canada’s cultural make-up over the years. Theatre in Canada has grown from the British tradition to embrace the in-

fluences of a much larger cultural mosaic. Astrid Janson's work on *Harlem Duet*, seen in this exhibition, is an example of an adaptation of Shakespeare that arises from another cultural tradition. Janson is a Canadian of German descent working with an all-Black company on a play inspired by *Othello*. It is, in many ways, a typical Canadian multicultural convergence, inspired by Shakespeare yet adapted to a specifically Canadian context that addresses issues of diversity.

Cameron Porteous, whose designs for *King Lear* and *Twelfth Night* appear here, has done significant work to open our eyes to the perspective of countries such as Germany, Poland, Russia, and the Czech Republic. As head of design at the Shaw Festival in Niagara-on-the-Lake from 1980 to 1997, he invited European designers to the Festival and promoted the exchange of ideas between Canadian and European theatre artists. He recognized the need to look beyond our established traditions and ways of working to explore new directions in and attitudes toward production. The result has been an attitudinal shift that has opened our eyes to European scenography and to a multicultural and intercultural world that more closely reflects contemporary Canada.

My starting point for imagining this exhibition was a photograph that showed William Hutt as King Lear in Inuit costuming. Fascinated by the photograph, I sought out the original designs by long-time *Globe and Mail* theatre critic and designer Herbert Whittaker, whose importance to twentieth-century Canadian theatre has already been mentioned. One of the challenges of designing *King Lear* is to create a believable world where the extreme events of the play can take place. Whittaker writes on the back of one of his drawings:

In 1946, David Gardner invited me to design the two plays for The Canadian Players Tour he was to direct—*King Lear* and *The Lady's Not For Burning*, to star William Hutt. We agreed that the primitive society Canadians recognized best was not Early Britain's but our own Eskimo Tradition: So grew "The Eskimo Lear."



Production photograph from *King Lear* (Canadian Players Tour, 1961–1962)



This Canadian Players production of *King Lear* was heralded as a uniquely Canadian interpretation because it used imagery from a culture that was part of the “Great White North”—images of a supposedly “primitive” culture, then assumed to be within the purview of a Canadian sensibility. Although it may now be seen as a form of cultural appropriation, this production was created at a time of new awareness and curiosity about the peoples of northern Canada, a time when the art of the Inuit was still unknown to a majority of North Americans. Whittaker’s “Eskimo Lear” was, in its own way, revolutionary in its attempt to shed light on this world. The set for the production makes use of a distinctly theatrical style of representation. This was partly dictated by its function as a touring set, which had to be assembled and taken down easily while the Canadian Players toured through Canada and the United States. In the performance space, Whittaker’s abstracted iceberg-like designs would also have brought to mind the northern landscape of Canada as seen through the eyes of Group of Seven painter Lawren Harris (1885–1970).

As we will see in other examples, the notion of creating a design through the appropriation, reinterpretation and, sometimes, misuse of visual images from another culture is not uncommon when designers and directors seek a means of presentation that will clarify the text to a varied audience.

Compare the image of the “Eskimo Lear” to Rolph Scarlett’s 1928 designs for *King Lear*. In addition to designing for the theatre, Scarlett was an abstract painter, an industrial designer, and a noted jeweller. His designs for *King Lear* show the influence of the great theatre theorist and director Edward Gordon Craig (1872–1966). Scarlett’s design aesthetic is reductive, the performers dwarfed by staging that relies on the use of light and movement to express the themes of the play.

Consider also Patrick Clark’s 1996 design of *King Lear* at the Stratford Festival, once again starring Hutt as Lear. The original concept had the play set in the Edwardian period, but Clark suggested a change to England of the 1880s. As he puts it, “I just couldn’t see those nice Edwardian ladies doing all those horrible things and it seemed to me



Patrick Clark, costume design for *King Lear* (Stratford Festival, 1996)

LEFT Herbert Whittaker, set design for *King Lear* (Canadian Players Tour, 1961–1962)

Rolph Scarlett, set design for *King Lear* (1928)

that a darker, industrialized world made so much more of the play understandable. The shapes of the 1880s are also sexier and allow the women in the play to have strength as well as a sensuousness that was

essential for their characters.”<sup>1</sup>

There are two more interpretations of *King Lear* for further comparison in this exhibition: Cameron Porteous’s costume design for Powys Thomas as Lear at the Vancouver Playhouse (1976); and Charlotte Dean’s designs for a non-gender-specific version directed by Richard Rose for Toronto’s Necessary Angel Theatre Company (1995). Over the years several great Canadians have played King Lear and Welsh-born Thomas, a veteran Canadian actor and co-founder of the National Theatre School, was renowned for his acting ability. He died in 1977, shortly after this production of *Lear*, but designs and photographs survive to honour his memory.

Charlotte Dean’s production of *King Lear* is set in a non-specific northern climate with rigid moral structures. It was influenced by research into both early First

Nations American and early European cultures. The combination of cassock shapes and fur over-garments was inspired by the paintings of Quebec artist Jean-Paul Lemieux (1904-1990), known for his abstracted, archetypal figures standing in harsh, northern landscapes. Dean’s design was further informed by the Royal Ontario Museum’s publication of works from its collection entitled *Cut My Cote*—an important reference on the historical manufacture of garments. A third major influence was the multi-faceted cultural experience of Canada itself—from the Québécois Roman Catholic church, to downtown Toronto’s army surplus stores, to Winnipeg’s Fur Exchange where Native and European cultures have been conducting commerce for over three hundred years.

Dean’s early work as a dyer and painter informed the method of creating both sketches and costumes. The sketches are collages of rice



Charlotte Dean, costume design for *King Lear* (Necessary Angel Theatre Company, 1995)

paper, using the same dyes later used to colour the cloth and chamois skins for the actual costumes. The furs were a combination of purchased pelts and second-hand coats from thrift shops across Toronto. The play began with a large banquet scene where all of the characters appeared in their furred regalia, including headdresses, capes, and cassocks. By the time Lear—played by actress Janet Wright of *Corner Gas* fame—appeared on the heath, all of her protective furs were stripped away leaving only animal hide for her clothing, thus underscoring the raw emotion and the fight for survival so integral to the play's progression.

Dean's drawings for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, produced by the Canadian Stage company in 1995 and 1996, again made use of dyed rice paper; in this case, the garments and props were rendered in a more traditional graphic form, influenced by both Dutch-born classicist painter Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema and sixteenth-century Flemish artist Pieter Bruegel the Elder. The work of these two artists was reimagined in the pastoral setting of Toronto's High Park where the play was performed outdoors, framed by two massive oaks and with a soundtrack augmented by live crickets, tree frogs, and dogs.

Other examples of contrastive designs are represented in three versions of *Twelfth Night*: one by John Pennoyer at the Stratford Festival (2006) and two by Cameron Porteous, produced at the Vancouver Playhouse (1979) and the Citadel Theatre in Edmonton (1999), respectively. Pennoyer and Leon Rubin, a British director who has worked frequently at the Stratford Festival, saw the world of Illyria as an orientalized land where the dialogue and behaviour remained very English. They chose to set the play in nineteenth-century India during the Raj, the time of the British occupation. As with the example of Whittaker's "Eskimo Lear," the appropriation of the culture of an exotic "other" becomes a problematic context for gaining a perspective on our own so-



Charlotte Dean, costume design for *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Canstage, 1995–1996)



John Pennoyer, costume designs for *Twelfth Night* (Stratford Festival, 2006)

ciety, as one colony's interpretation of Shakespeare relies on another colonial situation for the basis of its design. The irony of this situation—in which colonial influences in a colonial setting produce further colonizing gestures—is perhaps also characteristic of Canadian theatre as it works through its own history toward more decolonized models of theatrical expression.

## Masked Identities / Spectral Worlds

THE L. W. CONOLLY Theatre Archives at the University of Guelph is fortunate to have a significant number of designs by Cameron Porteous. A large amount of work in this collection was created during his extensive time as resident designer at the Shaw Festival in Niagara-on-the-Lake (1980–1997). His work is represented in this exhibition by costume renderings, set models, and maquettes of two of Shakespeare's plays.

In the 1979 Vancouver Playhouse version of *Twelfth Night*, Porteous and director Derek Goldby set the play in eighteenth-century Venice, a carnivalesque world well-suited to the sense of intrigue integral to the play. Inspired by a silver-framed mirror given to him by the director, Porteous designed a set made entirely of reflective surfaces, creating a “now you see it, now you don't” world of masked identities and illusion. (The Plexiglas for the set was recycled from a structure built for a United Nations conference on world housing that was held in



Vancouver at the time the play was in rehearsal.) The set model for this production no longer exists, but the costume designs survive to illustrate the intriguing, spectral world that Porteous created.

Cameron Porteous, costume designs for *Twelfth Night* (Vancouver Playhouse, 1979)

Prior to designing the Citadel's *Twelfth Night*, Porteous found himself designing a film in Croatia on the shores of the Adriatic Sea. Here, he realized that the mythical world of Illyria was, in fact, a real Croatian province. In the towns in this area, houses rose up the sides of the steep cliffs that ran down into the Adriatic. Ships frequently crashed on these cliffs, as does the ship carrying Viola and her brother Sebastian at the start of *Twelfth Night*. His set design, which can be seen in maquette form, was further inspired by the work of an unnamed Croatian artist who created miniature towns out of stacked boxes. Imagine Sebastian climbing the boxes to Olivia's balcony or hiding in the drawers to spy on Malvolio. Look closely at the maquette, see the fountain containing a model boat at centre stage. The play opened with a spotlight on this model boat as it tossed on the stormy seas of the fountain, eventually shipwrecking. The lights faded to black and came up again on an overturned full-sized rowboat. Characters appeared from under the rowboat to begin the play.



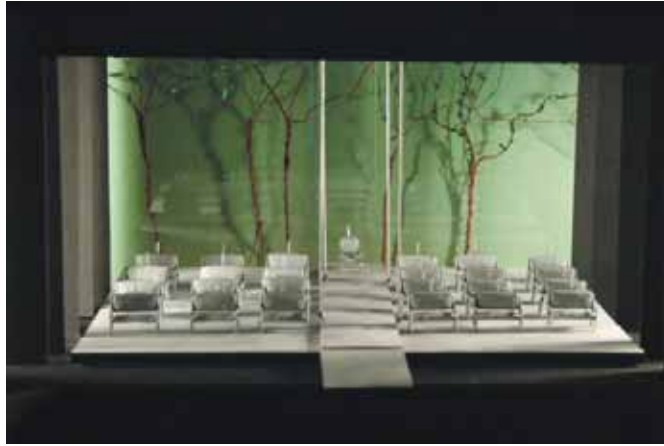
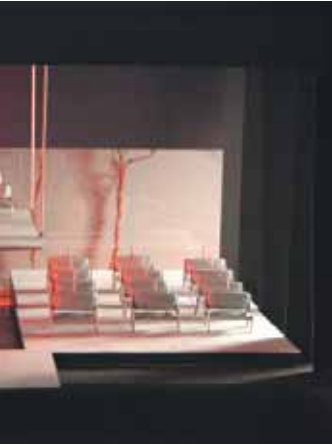
Dany Lyne, storyboards for *Macbeth* (Canadian Opera Company, 2005)

### Emotional Realism: The Poetic Power of the Visual

DANY LYNE'S SET MODELS for *Henry V* at the Stratford Festival (2001) and for Verdi's adaptation of *Macbeth* at the Canadian Opera Company (2005) offer another point of comparison. Lyne was born in Montreal but developed an interest in theatre and opera in Toronto. She explains:

I think it is my interest in opera (a less realistic theatrical medium than theatre) and my love of metaphors that has led me to a non-realistic design approach. I studied with Dr. Paul Baker, an English scholar who focused his attention on text analysis. The poetry and images in the texts we studied, coupled with the fact that I was a fine arts student with a major in painting, inspired me to explore an imagistic approach from the onset. More recently, the work I saw in Berlin theatre informed my imagination and pushed my vision of an emotionally-charged theatre closer to an image-based theatre. I often refer to my work as emotional realism.<sup>2</sup>

Lyne's design for *Macbeth* takes the form of a minimal yet evocative set that expresses the emotional reality of the text: the set changes colour and shape in response to the inner lives of the characters; blood runs from its walls. Lyne's model for *Macbeth* is accompanied by a storyboard that shows selected scenes as the designer envisioned them



changing through space and time. As mentioned earlier, the design for a performance is not a static creation. The concern for the performance, not mere decoration, is the starting point of a design. Designers must think creatively of the interaction among performers, light, and space as the world of the play unfolds. Storyboarding scenes from a play—a process adapted from film and television production—is becoming a more and more popular way for designers to express their vision, to demonstrate to director, cast, and technical crew how a set will change throughout a production.

By understanding the profound power of an actor in an empty space, designers can enhance a production by simplifying their design, leaving room for the audience to participate actively by using imagination to “fill in the blanks.” Teresa Przybylski’s *Comedy of Errors*, designed for the Tom Patterson theatre at the Stratford Festival (1994), is a good example of this approach. Constructed of simple frames placed in strategic locations, the set is so minimal that it seems hardly there at all. Yet director Richard Rose and the actors used these simple structures to conjure rooms, walls, and doors so effectively that at one point in the production, when an actor was pushed through a frame that had previously represented a wall, the audience gasped. Designers are pleased to be complemented on the look of a design, but their real success is in the creation of a believable world in the minds of the audience.

Przybylski immigrated to Canada from Poland and currently teaches in the theatre department at York University. Przybylski’s approach to



Teresa Przybylski, costume design for *The Comedy of Errors* (Stratford Festival, 1994)

RIGHT Susan Benson, costume design for *Romeo and Juliet* (The National Ballet of Canada, 1994)

theatre design is based in the Polish theatre tradition, a valuable intercultural addition to the Canadian perspective in counterpoint to a historically English directive. Her costume sketches are particularly fascinating as they depart from a realistic style of rendering. The British tradition grew out of nineteenth-century realistic movement focused on the importance of the text, interpreted by the actor at the centre of the play; other European cultures, including French and German, have a less reverential attitude towards the text and have evolved a “theatre of images” that is more open to the poetic power of the visual. This approach can also be seen in the work of many French Canadian designers.

Among Canada’s most prominent designers is Susan Benson. Her design for the National Ballet’s *Romeo and Juliet*, remounted in 2006 for the National Ballet of China in Beijing, creates a disturbing world for the star-crossed

lovers. Benson designed the ballet at the time of the war in the former Yugoslavia. She was reminded of how history repeats itself by the story of a young couple of differing religions who were killed in Sarajevo. Benson reflected this dangerous atmosphere by layering time periods and showing the disintegration of material goods over time. She states:

The set treatment was also influenced by how I did the costume designs, where I used black ink dribbled on to water to achieve the backgrounds. I always tend to design the costumes first and then create the world around the people. The music is not pretty—it is wonderful but quite dark, gritty, and disturbing. It was written in the same period as Picasso and Georges Braque. I wanted an asymmetry to the set reflecting the music, but it was pretty difficult to achieve with the needs of the choreography. I deliberately went for a lot of black for the grittiness.

The asymmetrical aspect that I felt in the music, I used in the diagonals that are in the dyeing of the costumes. It also reflected the heraldic influences on costumes of the period but in an abstracted way.

-Harriet Basset of Canada  
Romeo and Juliet  
Juliet Ball



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Juliet is the butterfly caught in the web of darkness, and Romeo has the same sort of innocence, shown in their colours and textures. I always think of the Capulets being the stronger and more menacing group, and the Montagues perhaps being more earthy and closer to the people in their colours. The Montagues, texture—wools—and the Capulets, leathers and velvets—more ornate fabrics. Their colours are in the red/gold/black range. The Montagues are in the green/grey range.

The gypsies, Carnival King, and clowns are the exceptions, as they are all these colours but in a more vibrant range—but never pure contemporary primary colours. There is always an edge to them that tips them away from this. Black is the link between all these groups either as bindings, linings, or under layers—like the black lines and backgrounds in the costume designs. The people of the town are neutral in their colours, a more natural palette, and the fabrics are more homespun and textured. More colour is added in the carnival by straw, autumn flowers in headpieces, rosettes, and diagonal sashes.<sup>3</sup>

Benson used colors and form to express the poetic power of Shakespeare's story. In addition to designing for the theatre, she is a member of the Royal Canadian Academy of Art and is an accomplished painter who has created portraits of many famous Canadian actors. Her practice of designing costumes before the set, using character development as the foundation of the onstage world she is creating, reflects her attentiveness to the role of the actor. The relationship between character development and design aesthetic is palpable in Benson's productions. Benson's conceptual method is somewhat unorthodox; many designers begin creating the world of the play by first designing the physical setting.

## Crossing Cultures

ASTRID JANSON'S DESIGN for the 2006 Stratford Festival version of *Harlem Duet*, an adaptation of *Othello*, is the only work included in the exhibition that is set in a contemporary time period. It is also the produc-

tion that most aptly reflects the process of Shakespearean adaptation by Canadian artists. Written by Djanet Sears, a Canadian playwright and a Governor General's Literary Award winner, *Harlem Duet* is set in Harlem—"the Soweto of America," according to Winnie Mandela—and, perhaps not coincidentally, features a hopeful yet flawed character named Canada. The 2006 production was the first all-Black play produced at Stratford.

Sears states that she used Shakespeare's *Othello*, influenced by an early memory of Laurence Olivier in blackface, as a departure point for the creation of a prequel to *Othello*, one that challenges societal status quo and encourages people to consider Black perspectives. Conscious thematic choices have been made in order to encourage people to examine their preconceptions of race and racism. *Harlem Duet* signifies changing times in a Canadian theatre practice that has not always embraced diversity or respected difference. Just as Canadian designers have struggled to have their talent acknowledged in a post-colonial world, artists of non-white descent (including First Nations peoples) have fought a far more difficult battle for recognition.

Janson's design was inspired by the collage work of Afro-American artist Romare Bearden (1914–1988). Bearden was born in North Carolina but lived in New York's Harlem most of his life. He trained in New York and Europe, and his work was influenced by European artists Georges Braque (1881–1963), George Grosz (1893–1959), and Fernand Léger (1881–1955), among others. Bearden was a central figure in the Harlem Renaissance, a cultural movement of the 1920s characterized by manifest pride in Afro-American heritages that resulted in a profuse expressive outpouring of art, music, dance, theatre, and literature. Although Bearden's work itself was not used, Janson felt it important to adapt his collage style to represent images of important people and events



Astrid Janson, costume sketch for *Harlem Duet* (2006)

from Afro-American history on the set of *Harlem Duet*. His influence can be seen in Jansen's costume sketches and in two collages that were mounted on the walls of the set. (Coincidentally, Janson also designed a production of *Othello* in 1987 starring Howard Rollins (1950–1996), the first non-white actor to perform this role at the Stratford Festival.)

THE POSSIBLE WORLDS EXHIBITION offers a rare public forum for the public presentation of work by contemporary Canadian theatre artists. As a relatively new field of study, theatre designs are rarely seen outside of archival collections. Canadian theatre practitioners engage, produce, reinterpret, and adapt the work of Shakespeare, in the pursuit of personal, regional, and national identities. In the context of Shakespeare—Made in Canada, the adaptive nature of design practice illuminates the seminal role of theatre artists in the adaptation and (re)invention of Shakespearean productions in a multicultural Canadian context. In this exhibition, the renderings, set models, and storyboards by Canadian theatre designers are works of art, skilfully rendered, stylistically rich, and distinct.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Pat Flood, interview with the artist, July 2006.
- 2 Pat Flood, e-mail correspondence with the artist, September 2006.
- 3 Pat Flood, e-mail correspondence with the artist, August 2006.

**Pat Flood is a theatre, film, and television designer and assistant professor in the School of English and Theatre Studies at the University of Guelph. She has designed for theatres across Canada, including the Stratford Festival for seven seasons. Her most recent work has been as the set designer for Atom Egoyan's film *Where the Truth Lies*. Her television credits include art direction for *La Femme Nikita* and *The Kids in the Hall*.**