

Enriching the Humanities Through Opera

Title: Production Design Adaptation

Grade Level: 9-12th

Length: 45 minutes

Literary Work: *Into Thin Air: A Personal Account of the Mt. Everest Disaster* (Jon Krakauer)

Opera: *Everest* (Joby Talbot, composer; Gene Scheer, librettist)

Inquiry Question: How does production and visual design aid in storytelling?

Lesson Focus: Students will use critical thinking, creativity, social-emotional learning, and collaboration while exploring stage design and the visual world of storytelling in opera.

Prior Knowledge: Students have read *Into Thin Air: A Personal Account of the Mt. Everest Disaster*, analyzed characters and can name the Who, What, When, and Where, participated in the Exploring Story Adaptation lesson, and created an opera adaptation pitch.

Materials: Copies of *Into Thin Air: A Personal Account of the Mt. Everest Disaster*, presentation slides (includes *Everest* short opera synopsis with photography and video examples), libretto excerpts of key scenes, completed opera adaptation pitch worksheets (from Exploring Story Adaptation lesson), production design definitions handout, elements of design definitions handout, costume design worksheet, set design worksheet, production design questionnaire, student laptops/tablets, interactive board, paper, pens/pencils, and colored pencils.

Key Vocabulary: Production Design (set design, props, costume design, lighting design, projection design, and hair/makeup design), Elements of Design (color, line, texture, shape, texture, form, space, value, and pattern), Overture, and Prologue.

Definitions

- **Production Design:** The process of creating the visual aesthetic and environment for a film, television show, commercial, or other forms of media. It involves creating sets, props, as well as costumes, projections, and other visual elements that help bring the story to life and immerse the audience in the narrative. The Production Designer is responsible for overseeing the creation of these elements, working closely with the director, producers, and other key creatives to ensure that the visual style of the production aligns with the overall vision and tone of the project.
 - **Set Design:** The art and practice of creating the physical environment in a theatrical production, film, television show, or other visual medium. This includes scenic elements and design layout for sets, lighting, props, and

furniture to bring the story or concept to life. It involves arranging these elements in a way that enhances the audience's visual and aesthetic experience. Set design may also involve creating technical elements such as sound systems, special effects, and rigging to support the production. Set designers work closely with other production team members to create a cohesive and visually appealing environment complementing the production's overall vision.

- Props: A term commonly used in live performance and film production to refer to objects or items used on stage or on set to enhance the performance or scene. Props can include anything from furniture, decorations, weapons, hand-held objects, and more. Props are used to add realism and detail to a production and help bring the world of the play or film to life for the audience.
- Costume Design: The process of creating costumes and outfits for characters in theatre, film, television, or other visual media. It involves researching the time period, setting, and character traits to develop pieces that help bring the character to life. Costume designers work closely with directors, actors, and other production team members to ensure that the costumes accurately reflect the vision of the production. This can involve sourcing or creating garments, accessories, and props, as well as coordinating fittings and alterations. Costume design plays a crucial role in storytelling and character development, helping to enhance the overall visual and emotional impact of a production.
- Lighting Design: Refers to the art and practice of creating and controlling the lighting for a performance. This includes designing the placement and intensity of the lights and using different colors and effects to enhance the performance's mood and atmosphere. Lighting designers play a crucial role in enhancing the storytelling and emotional impact of the production, helping to set the stage, highlight performers, create a sense of place and time, and evoke different emotions in the audience. It is an integral part of the overall visual and artistic design of the production.
- Projection Design: The art of creating and manipulating projected images and videos to enhance the visual elements of a live event, such as a concert, theater production, dance performance, or installation. It involves using specialized software and hardware to project images, videos, or other visual content onto a surface, such as a screen, wall, or even the audience itself.
- Hair and Makeup Design: Refers to the planning and execution of hairstyles and makeup looks for performers and actors. This creative process involves analyzing the characters or themes in the performance, researching historical or cultural references, and designing hair and makeup that enhances the overall aesthetic and storytelling of the production. Hair and makeup designers work closely with directors,

costume designers, and performers to create a cohesive and visually impactful presentation on stage or screen.

- **Elements of Design:** The basic components or building blocks that make up a visual composition. These elements include color, line, shape, texture, form, space, value, and pattern. Each element plays a critical role in creating a successful design and influencing how the viewer perceives and interacts with the artwork. By manipulating and combining these elements, designers can create visually appealing and cohesive compositions that effectively communicate their intended message or evoke a specific emotional response.
 - **Color:** The visual sensation produced by the reflection or absorption of light. Colors can be categorized as primary (red, blue, yellow), secondary (orange, green, purple), or tertiary (colors created by mixing primary and secondary colors).
 - **Line:** The path of a moving point, created by a pencil or brush. Lines can be straight, curved, thick, thin, or dotted, and can be used to create shapes, patterns, and textures.
 - **Shape:** A two-dimensional object with a defined boundary. Shapes can be geometric (such as squares, circles, and triangles) or organic (such as leaves, flowers, and animals).
 - **Texture:** The surface quality of an object, which can be visual or tactile. Textures can be smooth, rough, shiny, matte, or any combination thereof.
 - **Form:** A three-dimensional object that is geometric or free form. Like shape, form has length and width, but also has depth.
 - **Space:** The area around, within, or between objects. Space can be positive (the actual objects in a composition) or negative (the empty or empty areas).
 - **Value:** Refers to the lightness or darkness of a color. It is a critical aspect of visual communication, as it can greatly affect the mood, contrast, and overall aesthetic.
 - **Pattern:** A repeated decorative design or motif. Patterns can be created through the repetition of lines, shapes, colors, or textures.
- **Overture:** A musical composition that is typically played at the beginning of a performance, such as a concert, opera, or ballet. It is usually a short, instrumental piece that sets the story and characters as well as the tone and mood for the rest of the performance, often including themes and motifs that will be repeated throughout.
- **Prologue:** A short introductory section that occurs before the main action of the opera begins. It can involve characters or narrators that provide context, background, or setting for the ensuing story. Unlike the overture, which is purely instrumental, a prologue often includes vocal parts and may contain dialogue or recitative to engage the audience directly in the narrative.

Objective(s): At the end of this lesson, students will be able to:

- Respond to the musical and storytelling elements of opera to develop criteria for visual artistic choices.
- Refine an adaptation pitch to demonstrate critical understanding of the visual elements of stage design and opera to tell a story.
- Create visual representations of their set and costume designs based on their opera adaptation pitches.

Assessment: Evaluate the production design questionnaire, which explains the choices in set and costume design visual representations created by each group, looking for evidence of critical thinking, creativity, and their ability to successfully communicate their adaptation pitches.

Assessment Rubric

4: Displays exceptional critical thinking and creativity in set and costume design choices. Clearly and effectively communicates adaptation pitch. Uses at least three elements of design in a highly impactful way.

3: Demonstrates critical thinking and creativity in set and costume design choices. Effectively communicates adaptation pitch. Uses at least three elements of design.

2: Shows some evidence of critical thinking and creativity in set and costume design choices. Partially communicates adaptation pitch. Uses at least two elements of design.

1: Does not demonstrate critical thinking or creativity in set and costume design choices. Does not effectively communicate adaptation pitch. Uses less than three elements of design.

Learning Standards:

Common Core State Standards

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.4: Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone (e.g., how the language evokes a sense of time and place; how it sets a formal or informal tone)

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.5: Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure specific parts of a text (e.g., the choice of where to begin or end a story, the choice to provide a comedic or tragic resolution) contribute to its overall structure and meaning as well as its aesthetic impact.

National Core Arts Standards

VA:Cr1.1.IIa. Use multiple approaches to begin creative endeavors.

VA:Cn10.1.IIIa. Synthesize knowledge of social, cultural, historical, and personal life with art-making approaches to create meaningful works of art or design.

MU:Cn11.o.T.Ia. Demonstrate understanding of relationships between music and the other arts, other disciplines, varied contexts, and daily life.

TH:Re7.1.I.a. Respond to what is seen, felt, and heard in a drama/theatre work to develop criteria for artistic choice.

TH:Cr1.1.I.a. Apply basic research to construct ideas about the visual composition of a drama/theatre work.

TH:Cr.2-II.a. Refine a dramatic concept to demonstrate a critical understanding of historical and cultural influences of original ideas applied to a drama/theatre work.

Procedure:

Introduction/Hook (5 minutes):

- Begin with a multi-sensory listening activity of an excerpt of the prologue from the opera *Everest* (libretto excerpt included below for reference).
 - [Everest - Scene 1. Prologue: 'Is this how it ends?' Excerpt](#)
 - As they listen, ask students to use their senses and invite them to write down any colors, mood, spaces/places, textures, foods, etc. they can associate with the music.
 - Have students share their findings as a class or with partners.
 - An example of a finding could be a student sees the color green which reminds them of the smell of fresh cut grass and the feel of grass under their feet.
 - Ask students to ponder how this all relates to storytelling.

Main Narrative/Sequence (10 minutes):

- Discuss how artistic processes often begin this way and inspiration comes from many different sources, often our own experiences, perspectives, and prior knowledge and research.
- Define Production Design as the visual world of the opera - enhancing the storytelling, context, emotional experience, and communicates mood.
 - Display the elements of production design and definitions, including:
 - Set design, costume design, props, lighting design, projection design, and hair/makeup design.
 - Creative team: collaboration of designers
- Show examples of the set design from the staged version of *Everest*. (Found in presentation slides.)
 - Discuss color, costume, props, set, location, etc.
- Introduce/define Elements of Design and discuss their use in provided examples.
- Explain we will be curating design ideas for our opera adaptation pitches we created in the Exploring Story Adaptation lesson.
 - Reference this lesson's introductory listening activity and ask students to consider all that was discussed when designing their adaptations: color, mood, textures, spaces/places, etc.
 - Students should use at least three elements of design in their work.
- Encourage students to find inspiration through the literary work, opera libretto, and research on their computers and/or tablets, but to be mindful of intellectual property laws.

Activity/Practice (20 minutes):

- Students collaborate to visually represent set designs and costume designs using their opera adaptation pitches. Instructor may choose one pitch for the whole class to adapt or have students work with their group’s pitch from the Exploring Story Adaptation lesson.
 - Students break out into their Exploring Story Adaptation lesson groups or may choose to work independently.
 - Pass out groups’ previously completed opera adaptation pitch worksheets.
 - Each group or independent student should receive a production design questionnaire to fill out and help guide the process.
 - Students can be assigned designer roles within their groups.
 - Students may use the set design and costume design worksheets to sketch out their designs or create collages using magazine cuts. Students may also choose to engage with the worksheets digitally by adding images.

OR

- Students may use a school district approved AI image creator to craft mood/concept boards.

Present/Share (8 minutes):

- Willing groups share their set and costume design sketches with the class using the questionnaire as a guideline for presentation.

Reflection (2 minutes):

- Ask students to reflect on the process of refining their opera adaptation pitches by developing set and costume designs in collaboration with their group or independently. Ask and discuss:
 - “How has your experience with adapting a story visually change your perspective on storytelling or your approach to developing ideas?”

Extension/ Follow-up/Next steps:

- Discuss the connections to professions in the opera industry and to other artforms, such as fashion, architecture, etc., and other music genres. Delve deeper into how designers get inspiration – how do they research and find imagery that connects to the storyline.
- Students can take their set and costume designs to the next level and create set models, involving scale, and use recycled materials and fabrics to make costumes.

Everest (2015)

Joby Talbot, composer; Gene Scheer, librettist

The opera is based on interviews with real life subjects conducted by the librettist - the same subjects as *Into Thin Air: A Personal Account of the Mt. Everest Disaster* - a 1997 bestselling nonfiction book written by Jon Krakauer. The same story was also adapted for the screen in 2015, also named *Everest*, directed by Baltasar Kormákur.

Short Synopsis

The opera *Everest* follows the harrowing true stories of climbers Rob Hall, Doug Hansen, and Beck Weathers during their 1996 attempt to summit Mount Everest. It shifts between the climbers' present struggles on the mountain, their past memories, and the perspectives of their loved ones, including Rob's wife, Jan, who is contacted in New Zealand about his perilous situation. As Beck battles delirium and Rob tries to save Doug during a fierce storm, the climbers confront haunting realizations and their deep connections to those they love.

EVEREST OPERA SYNOPSIS

Joby Talbot, composer; Gene Scheer, librettist

Everest follows the true-life stories of three climbers, Rob Hall, Doug Hansen, and Beck Weathers as they attempt to summit Mount Everest in 1996. Throughout the opera we move between the climbers' present realities on the mountain, that of their loved ones and their pasts as they slip in and out of consciousness.

From the shadows of Mount Everest, the spirits of all those who have died attempting to reach the summit sing to Beck Weathers, who is unconscious on the mountain's South Col, the final stop in the push to reach the summit. These ethereal spirits now turn their attention to Rob Hall, the expedition leader and guide, who is just reaching Everest's highest peak at 2:30 p.m., thirty minutes past the safe turnaround time. Rob sees his client Doug Hansen a mere forty feet below.

The scene shifts back to Beck Weathers. In his unconscious, dreamlike state, the stranded climber hallucinates that he is enjoying a Texas barbecue in his backyard. Beck holds court and begins to describe his experiences on Everest. Suddenly, from the edge of Beck's consciousness, the voice of his daughter Meg sings to him.

As we see Rob straining to help Doug reach the summit, time stops, and Doug sings an aria in which he describes the tormenting, deep-seated obsession that has led him to this moment. Rob takes a picture of Doug at the instant he has achieved his goal, and the guide is jarred by the memory of photographing his pregnant wife, Jan, before leaving their home in New Zealand for the Himalayas.

While Rob endeavors to get his client down from the summit of Everest, we see Beck lying, delirious, on the South Col. Once again, his daughter calls out to him in vain. From the depths of his consciousness, ruminations on his struggle with profound depression slowly merge with the memory of the events that took place on the climb earlier that same day. Rob is increasingly desperate. He has a disabled client on the top of the mountain as the storm begins raging around them both. Jan, Rob's wife, is contacted and told of her husband's life-threatening situation.

Beck, beginning to emerge from his coma, sees the climbers on the South Col huddling together in a frantic attempt to survive the storm. Beck's internal soliloquy slowly allows him to make sense of what is happening and comprehend the cold, hard truth: he is dying.

In a quartet, Doug, Rob, Jan, and Beck sing of their plight. As the quartet concludes, we see Rob propelling Doug toward a sheltered spot on the South Summit, where he hopes they can make it through the night.

Beck has finally awakened to the harsh reality that if he is going to survive another hour, he will have to save himself.

Synopsis courtesy of Opera Parallèle.

Introductory Listening Activity

Video and libretto excerpt courtesy of Opera Parallèle.

Everest – Scene 1. Prologue: 'Is this how it ends?'

Everest - Scene 1. Prologue: 'Is this how it ends?' Excerpt

On the heights of Mt. Everest, the lights come up on a dark mist enveloping the mountain. As the chorus and orchestra establish the mystical, mysterious sound world of Everest, the first dimly illuminated outlines of the mountain slowly emerge. From this shadowy opening, we see the chorus-- the spirits of all those who have died on Everest-- singing to Beck Weathers. Beck is seen lying in a fetal position, unconscious on the South Col of Everest.

CHORUS

Ah!

Is this how it ends?

How many steps... How many breaths
will you take in your life?

Will you only count the last ones you take?

The last ones you take...

The last ones you take...

Ah!

Is this how it ends?

The lights fade on Beck. Slowly the choral sound blooms into an entirely new texture. As this happens we slowly see the chorus of spirits of the dead, scattered over the surface of Everest, turn and watch Rob Hall as he makes the final steps to the summit of Everest. He is alone. It is a beautiful day. There's just a wisp of cloud in the bright blue sky.

Is this how it begins?

A wisp of cloud
in a clear blue sky?

It is something no one ever sees:

Dreams and contingencies

Spun into elegies.

One more step...

That is all there is...

It feels pure and beautiful.

Beyond answers...

Beyond questions...

Beyond...Is this how it begins?

Key Scenes in Talbot's Everest

Video and libretto excerpts courtesy of Opera Parallèle.

KEY SCENE #1: Scene 4. Doug's Ascent

Everest - Scene 4. Doug's Ascent Excerpt

Doug, nearing exhaustion, struggles to complete his ascent to the summit with Rob's encouragement. The chorus underscores the dangerous passage of time as Doug rests frequently, each pause marked by labored exclamations. In a climactic moment, Doug reflects on his arduous journey and determination before finally reaching the peak, only to realize the emotional toll of his quest.

Libretto Excerpt

Time stops before Doug takes the final step. With lighting and staging there is a sense, heightened of course by music, that time stands still before Doug takes the final step.

DOUG

One more step...

CHORUS

Three fifty-six...

DOUG

More than anything, I just want the pain
of wanting this so much to go away forever.

One more step...

I worked three jobs...saved...

...gave all I have...

One more step...

One more try...

One last try...

One more step...

Thank you, Rob...

After failing last year...

I stopped believing...

You never did...

A dozen phone calls,

Urging me to believe...

Earlier today I clicked out of the line...

I stopped believing...

You whispered to me...

"One more try...

One last try...

One more step..."

Look...one... more... step...
I did... not let you... down...

CHORUS
Three fifty-six...
Four o'clock...

Doug is getting weaker and his cognition is really beginning to fail him.

DOUG
Why do I climb?
Why am I... here?
I... don't... remember...
More than anything...
I just wanted... the pain of wanting...
This... so much to... go... away... forever...

When the chorus says "Four o'clock" time resumes, and the spell of Doug's reflective moment is suddenly broken.

CHORUS
Four o'clock.

ROB
You are on top of the world!

DOUG
Take a picture...I'm not coming back here.

KEY SCENE #2: Scene 9. The Storm Hits

[Everest - Scene 9 The Storm Hits Excerpt](#)

As a storm approaches, Jan anxiously receives troubling news about her husband, Rob, who is stranded on the mountain with Doug. Rob, desperate for help, radios for oxygen and assistance but is advised by Guy to abandon Doug and save himself. Despite the dire situation and Doug hearing the conversation, Rob resolves to stay and help his friend.

Libretto Excerpt

We watch Beck being prepared to be short roped by Mike as lights come up both on Rob and Doug, who has collapsed on the ground, and on Jan who, stunned, holds the phone as she continues to listen to the disturbing news of her husband's plight. She has just received word that there is a problem. Finally she responds. Lights fade on Beck and Mike.

JAN (confused)
Rob told you to call me?
So he's fine?
I mean...No one is fine...
that high... this late...
He should have been back
on the South Col in the tents by now.
I was the expedition doctor...
I've been there...
No one is fine...
that high... this late...

ROB / JAN
Please... Please...

JAN
...Call me...

Jan hangs up the phone.

ROB (on the radio)
...I need oxygen.
Send someone up.
I'm on the top of the Hillary step.
I can get myself down.
But I don't know how the fuck
I'm going to get this man down.
Is that you, Guy?

GUY (on the radio)
Rob, Rob, the storm is big,
coming from below.
Trust me, mate. There's no time...
No other way.
Save yourself. Leave Doug behind.
It's the only choice...I'm sorry...
But you must move now... Save yourself...

(pause) Doug has heard the radio transmission.

ROB
Doug can hear you.... I have to go. (to Doug) Come on...

KEY SCENE #3: Scene 12. The Phone Call

Everest - Scene 12 The Phone Call Excerpt

As the chorus counts the agonizing hours, Jan, at home in New Zealand, receives a phone call from her husband, Rob, who is stranded on the mountain. Despite their dire situation, they share a tender conversation about their love and the future, contemplating the name Sarah for their child. Rob reassures Jan, asking her not to worry, while Jan expresses her deep concern and affection, trying to comfort him from afar.

Additional Reference: [Phone Call Scene from 'Everest' \(film 2015\)](#)

Libretto Excerpt

CHORUS

Two a.m.

How many breaths will you take in your life?

Will you only count the last ones you take?

Three fourteen a.m.

How can you know when you gently started letting go?

Four nineteen.

Five ten.

Left for dead.

Lights up on Jan at home in New Zealand.

ROB

Hello Jan, my sweetheart.

JAN

Rob, my darling...

ROB

I hope you're tucked up in a nice warm bed.

JAN

How are you my love?

I can't tell you how much I'm thinking about you.

You sound so much better than I expected.

Are you warm, darling?

Are you warm, darling?

ROB

Sarah...Sarah...How about Sarah for the name?

JAN / ROB
Sarah... Sarah... Sarah...
Ours forever...
I love you.

ROB
Sleep well, my sweetheart.
Please don't worry too much.

JAN
Rob, my darling,
Don't feel that you're alone.