

Enriching the Humanities Through Opera

Title: Production Design Adaptation

Grade Level: 9-12th

Length: 45 minutes

Literary Work: *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (William Shakespeare)

Opera: *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Benjamin Britten, composer; Benjamin Britten and Peter Pears, librettists)

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 the literary work, 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 *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by William Shakespeare, presentation slides (includes *A Midsummer Night's Dream* 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), and Overture.

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. It often includes themes and motifs that will be repeated throughout the opera.

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:Cn11.0.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 with an excerpt of the introduction “Over hill, over dale” from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.
 - [Act I: Introduction – “Over hill, over dale”](#)

00:04 – 1:35

- 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 set designs from multiple productions of the opera. (Found in presentation slides.)
 - When highlighting the multiple ways the opera has been designed, discuss color, costume, props, sets, 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.

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.

A Midsummer Night's Dream (1960)

Benjamin Britten, composer; Benjamin Britten and Peter Pears, librettists

A Midsummer Night's Dream, an adaptation of Shakespeare's play, was first performed in 1960 at the Aldeburgh Festival. Benjamin Britten, alongside his partner Peter Pears, condensed the original text, emphasizing the interplay between the human world, the fairy realm, and the comic mechanicals. The opera is renowned for its dreamlike atmosphere, haunting orchestration, and innovative vocal writing. Britten's music amplifies the fantastical elements of the story, blending ethereal sounds with playful moments, making it a hallmark of 20th-century opera. Benjamin Britten and Peter Pears made significant adjustments to streamline the narrative and enhance its musicality by reducing the text, paring down Shakespeare's five acts into three. Many of Shakespeare's lengthy monologues and dialogues were either condensed or eliminated to suit the musical pacing. The opera emphasizes lyrical moments, focusing on emotional intensity rather than the intricacies of Shakespeare's wordplay. The opening scenes in Athens, including Theseus and Hippolyta's early interactions, were cut entirely. Instead, the opera begins directly in the enchanted forest, reinforcing the dreamlike atmosphere from the start. This shift heightens the sense of magic and otherworldliness, placing more focus on the interactions between the fairies, lovers, and mechanicals.

Creative casting decisions were made as well to enhance the fairy world's strangeness. Oberon, for instance, was reimagined as a countertenor rather than a traditional male baritone, giving his character a delicate and ethereal quality. Tytania (Titania) also sings in high, shimmering lines, emphasizing her supernatural nature. Meanwhile, the mechanicals' music is comic and earthy, highlighting their humor in contrast with the elegance of the fairies. The opera focuses more on mood and atmosphere than on the play's intricate subplots. Music plays a key role in distinguishing the three distinct worlds—the dreamy textures of the fairy realm, the passionate but confused emotions of the young lovers, and the bumbling comedy of the mechanicals. Britten's adaptation emphasizes the emotional essence of Shakespeare's work, enhancing the surreal, poetic quality of the story through music. The result is an opera that distills the original's humor, magic, and romance into a compact, dreamlike experience.

Short Synopsis

In the woods outside Athens, Oberon, King of the Fairies, quarrels with his queen, Tytania, over a boy she refuses to give up. Oberon sends his servant, Puck, to retrieve a magic flower to enchant her and distract her. Meanwhile, Lysander and Hermia flee into the forest to escape a forced marriage, pursued by Demetrius and Helena. Puck accidentally enchants Lysander instead of Demetrius, creating chaos. A group of workers also enters the forest to rehearse a play, and Puck further complicates matters by turning one of them, Bottom, into an ass, causing Tytania to fall in love with him. In the end, the enchantments are undone, the lovers are reconciled, and they all return to Athens for Theseus's wedding, where the workers perform their play.

A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM OPERA SYNOPSIS

Benjamin Britten, composer; Benjamin Britten and Peter Pears, librettists

ACT I

Night has fallen in the woods outside Athens. Oberon, King of the Fairies, is quarrelling with Tytania, his queen, over a young boy who is under her protection. She refuses to give him up. Oberon sends his servant Puck to find a magic flower, whose juice, sprinkled on Tytania's eyelids, will make her fall in love with the first creature she sees upon waking. He plans to steal the boy while she is under the spell.

Lysander and Hermia have escaped from the city and its law, which allows Hermia's father to force her into marriage with Demetrius. They decide to elope and set off into the woods. Demetrius, who loves Hermia, chases after her, himself pursued by Helena, who is hopelessly in love with him. But Demetrius scornfully rejects her and runs off into the forest. Oberon, who has witnessed their argument, orders Puck to seek out Demetrius and make him fall in love with Helena with the help of the magic juice.

Six working men have also left the city to discuss in secret a play they hope to perform at the wedding of Theseus, Duke of Athens, to Hippolyta, Queen of the Amazons. There is some disagreement over casting, with Bottom, the weaver, and Flute, the bellows-mender, finally agreeing to play the parts of Pyramus and Thisbe, the star-crossed lovers of the play's title. Quince, the carpenter, as well as the author and director of the play, hands out scripts, and all agree to meet later that night to rehearse.

Exhausted and lost, Lysander and Hermia lie down to sleep. Puck, who thinks he has found Demetrius, sprinkles the juice of the magic flower on Lysander's eyes. Demetrius appears, still pursued by Helena, and angrily abandons her. Alone and in despair, she sees the sleeping Lysander and wakes him. Under the effect of the spell, he immediately declares his love. Helena is furious and runs off, thinking he is making fun of her. Lysander follows. Hermia awakes from a terrible dream to find herself alone.

In the heart of the forest, the fairies help their mistress Tytania to sleep. Oberon steals in to put the juice on her eyes, hoping she will "wake when some vile thing is near."

ACT II

Later that night, Quince and his men meet to rehearse. Puck, seeing them at work, decides to amuse himself by turning Bottom into an ass. At the sight of this strange and terrifying transformation, the others run off. Bottom sings out loud to keep his courage up. This wakes Tytania, who immediately falls in love with him. With the help of the fairies, she manages to coax him to bed.

Oberon is delighted to find Tytania in love with an ass. But when Demetrius arrives, still in pursuit of Hermia, he realizes Puck has made a mistake. Demetrius falls asleep, and Oberon pours the juice on his eyes. The arrival of Helena and Lysander wakes Demetrius, who now declares his passion for Helena. When Hermia appears as well, only to be rejected by Lysander, Helena is convinced that the men have planned it all to mock her. The four quarrel furiously. Enraged at Puck, Oberon gives him an antidote to

administer to Lysander. Puck leads the lovers away through the forest until they fall asleep and puts the herb on Lysander's eyes.

ACT III

Shortly before dawn, Oberon releases Tytania from the spell. Daybreak rouses the four lovers, who are finally reconciled—Demetrius with Helena and Lysander with Hermia. Bottom, restored to human shape, wakes from what he thinks was a strange dream. He wanders off while his friends search for him. They're about to give up when he returns with news that their play has been chosen to be performed at court.

Back in Athens, the four lovers ask Theseus's forgiveness for their disobedience to the law. Theseus decides that they shall be married together with him and Hippolyta. Quince and his players finally give their performance of "Pyramus and Thisbe," and the three couples retire to bed. Oberon, Tytania, and the fairies bless the sleeping household—with Puck having the last word.

Synopsis courtesy of the Metropolitan Opera.

Key Scenes in Britten's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*
Video excerpts and timestamps are pulled from YouTube.

KEY SCENE #1: Act II, Scene 1: Puck "makes an ass" of Bottom

[Act II, Scene 1: Puck "makes an ass" of Bottom](#)

06:19 – 8:50

The mechanicals rehearse their play. Puck transforms Bottom by giving him the head of a donkey (an "ass").

Libretto Excerpt

QUINCE:

Why, you must not speak that yet;
that you answer to Pyramus:
you speak all your part at once,
cues and all.
Pyramus enter:
your cue is past;
it is, 'never tire'.

FLUTE

O, as true as truest horse,
that yet would never tire.

*(Enter Puck and Bottom with an
ass's head upon his shoulders.)*

BOTTOM

If I were fair, Thisbe,
I were only thine.

(Puck flies off.)

THE OTHERS

O monstrous! O strange!
we are haunted.
Pray, masters! fly, masters!
Help!

*(Exeunt Quince, Snug, Flute, Snout,
and Starveling.)*

BOTTOM

Why do they run away?
this is a knavery

to make me afeard.

(Flute reappears.)

FLUTE

O Bottom, Bottom,
thou art changed!
what do I see on thee?

(Exit Flute.)

BOTTOM:

What do you see?
you see an asshead of your own,
do you?

*(The rustics reappear from behind
the trees.)*

ALL

Bless thee, Bottom! bless thee!
thou art translated.

(They disappear.)

BOTTOM

I see their knavery:
this is to make an ass of me;
to fright me, if they could.
But I will not stir from this place,
and I will sing, that they shall hear
I am not afraid.

(Singing)

The woosell cock, so black of hue,
with orange-tawny bill,
the throstle with his note so true,
the wren with little quill,...

KEY SCENE #2: Act 3, Scene 2: Pyramus and Thisbe

Act III, Scene 2: Pyramus and Thisbe

00:06 – 2:01

The mock-tragic play-within-the-play, Thisbe, portrayed by Flute, discovers the lifeless Pyramus (portrayed by Bottom), who believed Thisbe to have been killed by a lion. Thisbe sings the aria “Asleep, my Love?” as a lament and stabs herself.

Libretto Excerpt

THISBE

Asleep, my love?

What, dead, my dove?

Pyramus, arise!

Speak, speak. Quite dumb?

Dead, dead? A tomb

must cover thy sweet eyes.

These lily lips, this cherry nose,

these yellow cowslip cheeks,

are gone, are gone:

Lovers, make moan:

His eyes were green as leeks.

Tongue, not a word:

Come, trusty sword;

come, blade, my breast imbrue:

And, farewell, friends;

thus Thisbe ends:

(She stabs herself.)

Adieu, adieu, adieu.

KEY SCENE #3: Act III, Finale & Puck’s Epilogue

Act III, Finale & Puck’s Epilogue

0:03 – 3:02

The various stories have been resolved: the lovers are united, the mechanicals presented their play, and the fairies have restored order. Puck then breaks the "fourth wall" and talks openly to the audience, apologizing if the performance has offended anyone.

Libretto Excerpt

OBERON AND TYTANIA

Hand in hand, with fairy grace,

Will we sing, and bless this place.

OBERON, TYTANIA, FAIRIES

Now, until the break of day,
through this house each fairy stray.
To the best bride-bed will we,
which by us shall blessed be;
and the issue there create
ever shall be fortunate.
So shall all the couples three
ever true in loving be.
With this field-dew consecrate,
every fairy take his gait;
and each several chamber bless,
through this palace,
with sweet peace;
ever shall in safety rest,
and the owner of it blest.

OBERON

Trip away; make no stay;
meet me all by break of day.

(Exeunt all but Puck.)

PUCK

If we shadows have offended,
think but this,
and all is mended,
that you have but slumber'd here
while these visions did appear.
Gentles, do not reprehend:
If you pardon,
we will mend:
Else the Puck a liar call;
so, good night unto you all.
Give me your hands,
if we be friends,
and Robin shall restore amends.

(He claps his hands.)

Libretto excerpts courtesy of [opera-arias](#).