

Enriching the Humanities Through Opera

Title: Production Design Adaptation

Grade Level: 9-12th

Length: 45 minutes

Literary Work: *Knock Out!: The True Story of Emile Griffith* (Reinhard Kleist)

Opera: *Champion: An Opera in Jazz* (Terence Blanchard, composer; Michael Cristofer, librettist)

Content Warning: While the selected scene excerpts from *Champion* contain minimal inappropriate language, please be aware that the full work includes themes of adult content and language. Please review the material and provide appropriate context to ensure it aligns with the needs and maturity of students.

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 *Knock Out!: The True Story of Emile Griffith*, 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 *Knock Out!: The True Story of Emile Griffith*, presentation slides (includes *Champion* 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.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 the Act II “Interlude” from *Champion*.
 - [Met Opera on Demand](#): Track #45. ACT II: Interlude
00:00 – 01:36
 - 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.

***Champion: An Opera in Jazz* (2013)**

Terence Blanchard, composer; Michael Cristofer, librettist

Champion is an opera by composer Terence Blanchard, with a libretto by Michael Cristofer. Premiering in 2013 at the Opera Theatre of Saint Louis, it is a contemporary opera that combines elements of jazz and classical music, which reflects Blanchard's background as a jazz musician and composer.

The opera is based on the life of boxer Emile Griffith, a six-time world champion who became famous in the 1960s and 70s. The central theme of *Champion* is Griffith's internal struggle with his identity and the consequences of a tragic incident in the ring. In 1962, Griffith accidentally caused the death of his opponent, Benny "The Kid" Paret, during a championship fight. This event haunted Griffith for the rest of his life, and the opera explores his emotional turmoil, guilt, and the complexities of his personal life, including his relationships with family, friends, and his own sexuality.

The music in *Champion* blends Blanchard's jazz influences with traditional opera elements, creating a distinctive and powerful soundscape that enhances the emotional depth of the story. The opera's libretto examines issues of masculinity, identity, and the consequences of violence, both within and outside the boxing ring.

Blanchard, along with librettist Michael Cristofer, drew inspiration from various sources to shape the narrative and emotional depth of the opera, and Kleist's graphic novel was one of the key texts that helped inform their understanding of Emile Griffith's life, with its combination of vivid imagery and poignant storytelling, offered valuable insight into Griffith's complex character and the psychological aftermath of the tragic Paret incident, themes that are central to *Champion*. While Blanchard did not directly adapt Kleist's graphic novel into the opera, the book's exploration of Griffith's identity, guilt, and emotional turmoil played an important role in the opera's development, particularly in portraying Griffith's personal and psychological journey.

The work was praised for its bold approach to opera and its exploration of contemporary themes, blending elements of American history, culture, and the challenges of the human condition. It has been hailed as an important contribution to modern opera and a reflection of Blanchard's vision as a composer.

Short Synopsis

The powerful and deeply personal story of Emile Griffith, a six-time world champion boxer, whose life was shaped by triumph and tragedy. Griffith rose from a hat factory worker to a boxing legend, culminating in his infamous 1962 fight with Benny "Kid" Paret, which resulted in Paret's death. Haunted by this event and grappling with his identity, Griffith seeks forgiveness and reconciliation in his later years.

CHAMPION: AN OPERA IN JAZZ OPERA SYNOPSIS
(Terence Blanchard, composer; Michael Cristofer, librettist)

ACT I

In his apartment on Long Island in the present day, Emile Griffith struggles to dress himself, suffering from dementia and confused. Luis, his adopted son, and caretaker, helps him get ready for an important meeting, and Emile's memories intensify...

In the 1950s on the island of St. Thomas, Emile is a young man who dreams of reuniting with his mother, Emelda, and becoming a hat maker. He moves to New York City and finds her, and though she doesn't recognize him, she is overjoyed to reunite with one of the children she left behind. She brings him to meet Howie Albert, a hat manufacturer, hoping to find Emile work. Howie sizes up Emile and immediately recognizes his potential as a boxer. He offers to train him as a welterweight, and Emile quickly develops his natural talent and physique, as Emelda urges him to give up his other dreams. But Emile is lonely and struggles with his identity. He goes to a gay bar in Manhattan and meets Kathy, the owner, who welcomes him into an exciting but scary new community. Emile opens up to Kathy about his childhood and the cruelty he experienced from a fundamentalist relative.

In 1962, Emile is set to fight Benny "Kid" Paret in a high-profile match. When they face off at weigh-in, Paret taunts Emile, calling him "maricon," a Spanish slur for homosexuals. Emile is furious, and they nearly come to blows right there. Howie pulls him away, but when Emile begins to explain why the insult hit so close to home, Howie refuses to have the conversation, telling him that the boxing world is not a place where he can be open about his sexuality. Alone, Emile wrestles with his sense of manhood and self. The fight begins and quickly becomes heated. Paret continues to mock him, and as the fight escalates, Emile delivers seventeen blows in seven seconds. Paret collapses, falls into a coma, and later dies.

ACT II

Back in the present day, lost in his memories, Emile thinks that he sees Paret and speaks with him. Luis reorients him and reminds him that today, they will go to meet Paret's son.

As the 1960s continue, Emile amasses more wins, more fame, and more notoriety, but internally, he is haunted by memories of Paret and grapples with his identity. He marries a woman named Sadie, going against the advice of Howie and Emelda. In the 1970s, however, his luck changes. He is on a losing streak and starting to show signs of "boxer's brain" due to chronic traumatic brain injury. Emile rejects the support of his family and Howie, returning to Kathy's bar, where he is brutally beaten by a group of bigots.

In the present, overcome with memories of the attack, Emile becomes agitated and confused; Luis calms him, reminding him all of that is in the past. They go to meet Kid Paret's son, Benny Paret, Jr., and Luis tells Benny about Emile's condition. Emile expresses regret and asks Benny for his forgiveness, as voices from Emile's past intensify and crescendo in his mind.

Luis takes Emile back home. Alone once more, Emile's memories recede and hush.

Synopsis courtesy of Boston Lyric Opera.

Key Scenes in Blanchard's *Champion: An Opera in Jazz*

Video excerpts and timestamps are pulled from the Metropolitan Opera on Demand.
Performance Date: Apr. 29, 2023

Content Warning: While the selected scene excerpts from *Champion* contain minimal inappropriate language, please be aware that the full work includes themes of adult content and language. Please review the material and provide appropriate context to ensure it aligns with the needs and maturity of students.

KEY SCENE #1: Act I, Scene 8: Hey Mr. Albert

[Met Opera on Demand](#): Track #12. ACT I: Hey Mr. Albert
00:00 – 3:43

Emile relocates to New York from the U.S. Virgin Islands in search of his mother, Emelda. When he finally finds her. Determined to help Emile find work, she introduces him to Howie Albert, a hat manufacturer. Howie quickly notices Emile's athletic build and, seeing potential, decides to train him as a boxer.

Libretto Excerpt

EMELDA
Hey, Mr. Albert,
Look what this boy can, Mr. Albert.

HOWIE
You telling me
You made this hat, kid?

YOUNG EMILE
Oh, yeah. I make hats all the time.

EMELDA
Hey, Mr. Albert,
You give this boy a job, Mr. Albert.

HOWIE
You telling me
This is a boy, lady?
This ain't no body, lady.
Where'd you get a body like that, kid?

YOUNG EMILE
Cinder blocks.

HOWIE

You telling me
Cinder blocks, kid.
What does that mean, cinder blocks?
What do you mean saying cinder blocks, kid?

EMELDA

Hey, Mr. Albert,
Never mind what he means, Mr. Albert.
This boy with the body
He needs a job, Mr. Albert.

HOWIE

You're telling me
A kid with a body like that,
Built like a brick shithouse,
You're telling me
This kid wants to fiddle with felt
And lace and little fake flowers,
You telling me
That's what this kid wants?

EMELDA

Hey, Mr. Albert
If that's the job you got, Mr. Albert,
This boy with the body
Will take that job, Mr. Albert.

Then SPOKEN....

HOWIE

Let me change the subject for a minute.
Let me as you this.
You ever done any boxing, kid?

YOUNG EMILE

Sure. I make them hats and then I
put them in a box. Like that.
You need a boxer?
I can box a hate like nobody's business.

HOWIE

Yeah. But can you box a man?

YOUNG EMILE

I can box a man, too,
if you got a big enough box.

Howie laughs.

Then SINGING again....

HOWIE

What I got is a big enough idea.
And what you got is a killer smile.
But do you got the killer instinct,
The will to get the job done right?
Cause I'm sick of making hats, boy,
And I'm telling you now that's
What it takes to win a fight.

YOUNG EMILE

I ain't no killer, Mr. Howie.

HOWIE

Do you have the killer instinct?
Do you have the killer rage?

YOUNG EMILE

I ain't no killer, no way.

Howie smacks Young Emile in the face. Young Emile doesn't respond. Howie smacks him again. And again. And again. Finally Emile blocks one of the swings. Howie swings again. Young Emile blocks Howie's arm and swings back at Howie. Howie ducks. And smiles.

HOWIE

Well...that's a start.

EMELDA

You teach him, Mr. Albert.
And you be a smart boy and learn the ropes
Like Tarzan on the vine.

KEY SCENE #2: Act I, Scene 22-23: Don't listen, Emile. Don't think—In my head it happens fast

Met Opera on Demand: Track #27. ACT I: Don't listen, Emile. Don't think—In my head it happens fast

04:56 – 07:03

During the weigh-in, Benny “Kid” Paret taunts Emile about his sexual orientation, provoking tension between the two fighters. Once in the ring, Paret continues to antagonize Emile. In a burst of fury, further encouraged by Howie’s coaching, Emile delivers seventeen blows in less than seven seconds, knocking Paret into a coma.

Libretto Excerpt

YOUNG EMILE AND EMILE

There is no sound.

There are no people I could see.

In my head, the place is empty

And there is no one there but me.

HOWIE, EMELDA AND CHORUS

There is nothing else to hear,

Nothing in your ear

But the sound of the bell.

There is no one else to see

But one man in the ring, facing you.

Only you, only me.

No one else in the world.

Nothing you can hear.

Nothing in your ear...

But the sound of the bell, now!

There's the bell.

Close your eyes, close your ears

Close your mind, and send him to hell! Now!

Round 7 bell rings. Fight resumes up until round 12. Benny “Kid” Paret is knocked out by Emile.

RING ANNOUNCER

Medic!

Young Emile is declared winner of the match as Benny “Kid” Paret lays in the ring lifeless. Medics run over to Paret. Action slows to a freeze with Young Emile realizing what has happened. Emile watches from above as if he is reliving the moment.

CHORUS

Seventeen blows in less than seven seconds, etc.

EMILE

In my head, it happens fast.

Something good turns into something that don't last.

Something good turns into something bad so fast.

In my head, it comes and goes.

One day when you have everything

One day when everything you have is gone.

Hold on to everything that's good.

Don't let it go. Don't let it disappear.

Don't let it turn around...turn around...turn around bad.

In my head...

Bell rings. Blackout.

KEY SCENE #3: Act II, Scene 20: What is it you want from me? (I'm sorry)

Met Opera on Demand: Track #47. ACT II: What is it you want from me?

00:00 – 03:02

Emile, suffering from brain trauma from his boxing career and haunted by his past, faces Benny Paret Jr. seeking forgiveness for the fatal fight that took the now young man's father.

Libretto Excerpt

BENNY PARET JR.

What is it you want from me?

Why did you want to see me, Emile?

EMILE

They never let me in to see him

To say I'm sorry, Benny.

I want to say I'm sorry.

BENNY PARET JR.

What is it you want from me?

Why did you want to see me, Emile?

EMILE

I never wanted harm to come to no one.

No, no, no.

I never wanted harm to you.

BENNY PARET JR.

Not me, Emile. Not me.

EMILE

To ask you to forgive me, Benny.

BENNY PARET JR.

Not me, Emile. Not me.

EMILE

Forgive me, Lord.

And take me to Your kingdom.

Like this, I pray.

Every day, I pray.

Every day, I went to see you

And pray, every day, I pray.

BENNY PARET JR.

Not me, Emile. Look at me.

It's not for me to say—

EMILE

To say, “forgive.”

BENNY PARET JR.

It's not for me to say, Emile.

Only you can say, “forgive.”

They embrace. Emile playfully fake boxes with Benny Paret Jr.

Libretto excerpts courtesy of Boston Lyric Opera.