



Peter Butler's set design in *Shut Up, I'm Dreaming*

Ready, set, go!

Despite being the backbone of many productions, career paths for set and costume designers are often not discussed at length in the Drama classroom. Hattie Fisk meets up with Peter Butler to put a much-needed spotlight on the profession

When I think back to the shows that ignited my love for theatre, I land on a handful of productions that I can still recall with detail.

Of course, I can remember some standout performances from actors, but what stays with me year after year is the impact of set design and its potential to transport an audience.

As an A Level Drama student in 2014, the National Theatre's production of *A Small Family Business* blew me away. A life-sized replica of a detached house sat in the centre of the Olivier Stage's famous revolve, sliced open on one side so you could see the actions of the family inside. In the same year, the immersive set of Punchdrunk's *The Drowned Man* made the impossible possible, with a large room full of sand on the top story of a warehouse in central London, alongside a makeshift saloon, 60s television studio and a labyrinth of dimly lit green-tiled dining rooms.

Such elaborate shows tested the limits of set design, inspiring me to consider the theatre industry as a career option. But, like

many students, I had no idea what roles were involved in the technical side of theatre. One early-career set and costume designer who is paving the way for future generations is Paul Butler, a recent graduate from Central Saint Martins who was awarded the Linbury Prize for Stage Design in 2021. Butler started off as a technician in regional theatre: sweeping the floors, rigging the lights and unloading wagons. From there, he worked his way up to lighting departments in West End shows, before deciding to study a degree in Performance Design in 2016.

Shut Up, I'm Dreaming

Since then, Butler has been involved in a number of amazing projects as assistant

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designer, model maker, and as a member of technical teams on various productions. Most recently, he was the set and costume designer for *Shut Up, I'm Dreaming*, a collaboration between the National Theatre and The Pappy Show, which is currently touring 50 UK schools and will be seen by near to 12,000 students. The creative process for this production lasted over eight months and involved a collaborative research and development process in schools across the country to find out more about what the children wanted to see on stage.

The show was completely devised, and Butler tells me that he only received the final version of the script within the last week of rehearsals. 'That was really freeing because it meant that I could respond to it by way of feeling, rather than having a script and responding to the emotions evoked from the text,' Butler says. 'Theatre in the UK is married to the concept of script, so I am really interested in what placing objects and set in a space can do independently.'

When it comes to the set design in this production, Butler says that the team took a unique approach: 'We really leaned into the fact that when we go into schools, we aren't trying to create a theatre for them.'

He explains that largely the actors were playing themselves, rather than set characters, meaning that instead of training to imitate a play they were instead trying to create something impactful that would connect directly with the students who were seeing it.

Routes to access

Butler is extremely approachable and has a passion for demystifying the technical roles in theatre. 'Set and costume always run in tandem for me, but some people just do one or the other,' he tells me. 'There is no one linear route for design in theatre.' This is something he really wants people to know. While he started in lighting and then later retrained, Butler assures me that many people in the industry haven't trained formally and find themselves in the role after some trial and error in technical roles. 'We are told from a young age that we have to study and do degrees to find our way into theatre,' he tells me. 'But I hope that in the future young people will slowly realise that theatre is fundamentally just people getting together, telling stories and putting costumes on! We shouldn't forget the joy of that.'

Top tips for students

- While winning awards can be brilliant



Molly Walker in the NT schools tour of *Shut Up, I'm Dreaming*

stepping stones to future projects, they are not a direct signifier of a 'successful career'. Many creatives are working at the top of their game, but may have never won any awards.

- Collaborate with the people around you – and create things with your friends. This can ensure you gain some experience, while also allowing you to have fun and be creative.
- Go to as many productions as you can, and always ask yourself how you would design it, as well as what works and what doesn't in the production you're seeing.

'The theatre design world can seem like a really big thing, but it is actually quite small,' Butler says. 'It is brilliant that we are shining a light on performance design; I hope that this feels more reachable for those who may not have the opportunities that others do,' he continues, encouraging students to join projects like the National Theatre's Young Technicians scheme (p21).

A journey

When asked about why he loves the medium of stage design, Butler says: 'It's that age-old thing of presenting an idea or story to someone, and the alchemy of watching them respond to something that you have crafted.' Even for Butler, a career in the technical side of theatre is always going to be a journey, alternating between passion projects and ones that he might not be as excited to be.

'A lot of people don't realise that there is one role as a set designer or costume designer. The sooner students find out, the sooner they become inquisitive about it, the sooner they give it a go.' D&T

Read more about NT's Young Technicians course on p21.
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