

Theatre Designer

Introduction

Theatre Designers design or select exterior and interior scenes for theatrical, television and film productions. They prepare scale models or drawings and supervise the creation of their sets.

Also known as

- Designer, Theatre/Television
- Set Designer, Theatre/Television
- Stage Designer
- Television/Theatre Designer
- TV/Theatre Designer
- TV Set Designer
- Film Set Designer



Work Activities

As a Theatre Designer, you will design and supervise the creation of exterior and interior settings for theatre, television and film productions. You will carefully read and analyse scripts, then make decisions about the shape and size of sets, colour schemes and scenic features.

To begin with you will carry out detailed research and talk to the director of the programme or production. If you are working on a period drama, you'll need to find details about how people lived in the past - every detail will need to be accurate.

Details may include:

- what accommodation was like
- how people furnished rooms
- which colour schemes were popular at particular times

After the research stage, you will now produce scale models and detailed working drawings called 'ground plans' and 'elevations'. To do this you will probably use computer-aided design (CAD).

These models and drawings show how sets will look from above and from eye-level. Directors and performers can use these to work-out entrances, exits and positions. Television and film directors can also use them to plan camera angles and to decide where to put sound equipment.

While sets are being built, you'll now find, buy, or hire props, which you'll use to dress the sets. At this stage, Scenic Artists can add all the finishing touches. They'll paint the backcloths and floors, and create finer details such as paintings, tapestries and wall-hangings.

As a Theatre Designer, you will need to work out how much your design will cost, as you will usually have a tight budget to work to. You'll also need to carry out your activities to a given timescale. The show must be ready on time!

Theatre Designers work closely with Directors, Producers, Stage/floor Managers, Costume Designers, Lighting Designers, Craftworkers and Technicians.

The work may involve local travel, or more extensive travel in the UK and possibly overseas.

Being able to read, write and speak Welsh may be an advantage when you're looking for work in Wales.

Personal Qualities and Skills

To become a Theatre Designer you need:

- creative and artistic skills
- to pay great attention to detail as audiences will spot any inaccuracies
- knowledge of design-related software and model-making
- good communication, presentation and negotiation skills
- to keep up to date with new design developments
- problem-solving skills
- good organisation and planning skills
- to work to deadlines and budgets
- good research skills
- an interest in the performing arts

Self-employed or freelance Theatre Designers will need business and marketing skills.

Pay and Opportunities

Pay

The pay rates given below are approximate.

- Starting: £24,000 - £25,000
- With experience: £26,500 - £30,500
- Senior Theatre Designers earn £33,000 - £35,500

Freelance Designers can earn in excess of £2,000 for a particular production. Work usually takes 6-8 weeks.

Freelance rates in television vary depending on the type of production, but range from around £500 a week for an Assistant Scenic Artist to around £800 per week for a Senior Designer, and higher rates are possible.

Hours of work

Theatre Designers usually work 40 hours a week. However, early starts, late finishes, evening and weekend work may be required. You may also be required to work intensively for periods, especially in the run-up to a production.

Where could I work?

Employers include theatre, television and film production companies.

Opportunities for Theatre Designers occur with employers in large towns and cities throughout the UK, where major theatres/TV production centres are located, for example, London, Birmingham, Manchester and Leeds.

Self-employment

Most Theatre Designers work on a self-employed, freelance basis. They are usually employed on short contracts and may move from production to production in theatre, television and film. You can obtain this work through specialist recruitment agencies.

Where are vacancies advertised?

Vacancies are advertised in local/national newspapers, on recruitment and employers' websites, and on Find a Job (www.gov.uk/jobsearch).

Social media websites, such as LinkedIn, Twitter or Facebook, are a great way to network, find vacancies and get in contact with possible employers. Make sure that your profile presents you in a professional manner that will appeal to potential employers.

Take a look at our General Information Article 'Finding Work Online'.

It's a good idea to build up a network of relevant contacts, as not all theatre/television design jobs are advertised. Making speculative job applications to potential employers can be useful.

Entry Routes and Training

Entry routes

Many Theatre Designers enter the industry after a degree, foundation degree or HND in a subject such as theatre design, interior design or architecture.

Some people get on to degree courses via a Foundation course.

There are also specialist courses at postgraduate level.

A great way to get into this career is through an internship. Take a look at our information article 'Internships', for more details.

The Society of British Theatre Designers (SBTD) can provide a list of relevant courses. See below for more details.

Most theatre designers work as junior/assistant designers and work their way up, gaining skills along the way.

Work Experience

Skills gained as an assistant in a design studio or workshop, or in a design consultancy are valued. Commercial awareness and understanding of theatre and the broadcast industry are an advantage.

To enter the work or relevant courses, you usually need to have a portfolio of work showing your creative ability.

Training

The Society of British Theatre Designers offer courses that you could take. These include:

- theatre, performance and event design
- performance design and practice
- costume for theatre, film and television
- theatre design
- performance costume
- costume with textiles
- costume for performance

Other courses could be available in your area.

Progression

Many Designers become self-employed. With training and experience, it may be possible to move into managerial positions.

Qualifications

For entry to a relevant degree course, you'll usually need:

- 2 or more A levels. Many courses ask that you have at least a B grade in an art-based subject.
- 4/5 GCSEs at grade C/4 or above. A pass in English is often required. Subjects like art, drama, and design and technology are useful.

Alternatives to A levels include:

- BTEC level 3 qualifications

- a design Advanced Level Apprenticeship
- the International Baccalaureate Diploma

For the IBD, many courses will ask that you have art at Higher level.

Many other qualifications are also accepted so check college/university websites carefully for more details.

To enter any course in art and design, you'll need a portfolio of your work.

The usual entry requirements for a relevant Foundation course are:

- 1/2 A levels. You'll need an A level in art or in an art-based subject.
- GCSEs at grade C/4 or above in 4/5 subjects. Some courses ask that you have a pass in English. A pass in design and technology will be useful.

For alternatives to A levels, see above.

The entry requirements for relevant HNDs and foundation degrees are similar to those needed for the Foundation course mentioned above.

Some universities accept the Welsh Baccalaureate as equivalent to 1 A level.

Adult Opportunities

Age limits

It is illegal for any organisation to set age limits for entry to employment, education or training, unless they can show there is a real need to have these limits.

Skills/experience

Skills gained as an assistant in a design studio or workshop, or in a design consultancy are valued. Commercial awareness and understanding of theatre and the broadcast industry are an advantage.

To enter the work or relevant courses, you usually need to have a portfolio of work showing your creative ability.

Courses

If you don't have the qualifications needed to enter your chosen degree or HND course, a college or university Access course (eg, Access to Art and Design) could be the way in. No formal qualifications are usually required, but you should check individual course details.

They can lead to relevant degree/HND courses.

It's also possible to do a part-time Art Foundation course, which leads to a degree or HND course. Higher National Certificate (HNC) courses are also available part-time, often in the evenings and/or in the daytime.

Universities and colleges of higher education (HE) will usually consider applications from candidates who don't meet their usual entry requirements, especially those with experience in arts, crafts or design. You should check the admissions policy of individual universities and HE colleges.

Some employers prefer a postgraduate course in a relevant subject.

Distance learning

Rose Bruford College of Theatre and Performance offers a degree in Theatre Studies via distance learning.

Further Information

Contacts

- **Apprenticeships: Get In. Go Far**
National Apprenticeship Service (NAS)
Tel: 0800 015 0400
Email: nationalhelpdesk@findapprenticeship.service.gov.uk
Website: www.apprenticeships.org.uk
- **Skills Development Scotland - Modern Apprenticeships**
Tel: 0800 9178000
Email: info@skillsdevelopmentscotland.co.uk
Website: www.myworldofwork.co.uk/modernapprenticeships
- **ScreenSkills**
Skills for the creative industries
Email: info@creativeskillset.org
Website: www.creativeskillset.org
- **Creative Choices**
Publisher: Creative & Cultural Skills
Email: info@creative-choices.co.uk
Website: www.creative-choices.co.uk
- **Creative & Cultural Skills**
Skills for craft, cultural heritage, design, literature, music, performing arts and visual arts
Email: london@ccskills.org.uk
Website: ccskills.org.uk
- **Chartered Society of Designers (CSD)**
Email: info@csd.org.uk
Website: www.csd.org.uk
- **Getting into Art & Design Courses**
Author: James Burnett Publisher: Trotman
Website: trotman.co.uk/our-books/getting-into-art-and-design-courses/
- **Get into Theatre**
Email: info@getintothatre.org
Website: www.getintothatre.org
- **National Theatre**
Tel: 020 7452 3400
Email: info@nationaltheatre.org.uk
Website: www.nationaltheatre.org.uk
- **The Stage**
Entertainment and performing arts news
Website: www.thestage.co.uk
- **StartinTV**
Website: www.startintv.com
- **Equity**
Tel: 020 7379 6000
Email: info@equity.org.uk
Website: www.equity.org.uk
- **Equity (Scotland)**
Scottish enquiries
Tel: 0141 2482472
Email: scotland@equity.org.uk

Website: www.equity.org.uk

- **Federation of Drama Schools (FDS)**
Tel: 020 7529 8794
Email: info@dramauk.co.uk
Website: www.dramauk.co.uk
- **BBC Design**
Website: www.bbc.co.uk/design/
- **Association of British Theatre Technicians (ABTT)**
Address: 55 Farringdon Road, London EC1M 3JB
Tel: 020 7242 9200
Email: info@abtt.org.uk
Website: www.abtt.org.uk
- **Society of British Theatre Designers (SBTD)**
Address: Rose Bruford College of Theatre and Performance, Burnt Oak Lane, Sidcup DA15 9DF
Tel: 020 8308 2674
Email: admin@theatredesign.org.uk
Website: www.theatredesign.org.uk
- **Careers Wales - Welsh Apprenticeships**
Tel: 0800 028 4844
Website: ams.careerswales.com/
- **Wales Screen**
Website: www.screenwales.com
- **National Theatre Wales (Welsh Enquiries)**
Tel: 029 2035 3070
Email: info@nationaltheatrewales.org
Website: nationaltheatrewales.org
- **Equity (Wales)**
Address: Third Floor, 1 Cathedral Road, Cardiff, CF11 9SD
Tel: 029 2039 7971
Email: wales@equity.org.uk
Website: www.equity.org.uk
- **Hiive**
Hiive is the online professional network for creative people.
Website: app.hiive.co.uk/

Related Careers

- Medical Illustrator
- Design Assistant
- Fashion Designer
- Graphic Designer
- Artworker
- Metal Engraver
- Visual Merchandiser
- Commercial Illustrator
- Signmaker
- Ceramics Designer
- Footwear Designer
- Furniture Designer
- Product Designer
- Vehicle Designer
- Interior Designer

- Jewellery Designer
- Packaging Designer
- Textile Designer
- Costume Designer
- Musical Instrument Technician
- Picture Researcher
- Technical/Scientific Illustrator
- Model Maker
- Picture Framer
- Designer
- Illustrator
- Artist
- CGI Artist
- VFX Artist
- Nostalgist