

## THE SET OF *BLACK EYED SUSAN*

**Scenic Artist and Theatre Set Designer Kit Surrey explains how he approached the daunting challenges of designing an authentic Regency theatre set and restoring the auditorium's beautiful decor.**

**To start at the beginning, can you take us through the process of designing a theatre set, and particularly one which had to adhere to a Regency aesthetic?**

It's always the same process really: it sounds very obvious, but you read the script, again and again, and you have discussions with the Director. And knowing the way that the Theatre was being restored, we wanted to design it in that style.

I went away and started sketching every scene, very tentatively, working them up into much greater detail, and I suddenly realised that the kind of design that was in operation at that time suited the auditorium perfectly. This play, in particular, seemed to call for what now seems to be a very old-fashioned style of design. And I make no bones about that at all. It does consist of painted back-cloths and a series of wing flats, in perspective, that slide on and off stage. It's old fashioned theatre technology, but the shape of the stage said to me, 'do this'.

You finally get to the stage where you have to produce the model box, and that always takes time, because you're working to scale – the model box isn't a toy, it's a working tool. That process is the same whether it's producing painted scenery or three-dimensional scenery.

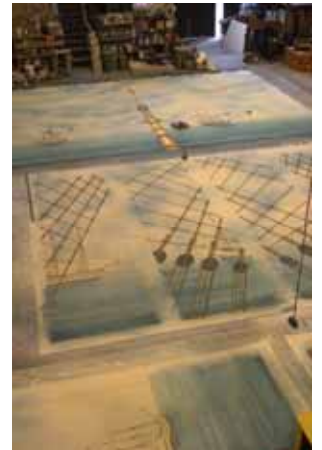
**How much information remains about the original set designs of the early 1800's, and were you able to draw inspiration from them?**

There are only engravings and illustrations (of the Theatre Royal) from the period, but I was hugely helped by images of the still-existing scenery of two famous Swedish theatres, Drottningholm and Gripsholm. There are colour photographs of painted backdrops and painted sliding flats, and that was an enormous influence.

**Contemporary theatre design has clearly changed a great deal since the Theatre Royal opened in 1819, so did this particular set present any unique challenges to you?**

Yes, because I haven't designed this kind of set for years and years. Theatre design has moved on in leaps and bounds, and this kind of painted scenery is something that I was doing when I became a designer, over 30 years ago. In a way, it was nice to re-discover those skills, of drawing and painting.

You're consciously not using modern images, and there was also that fine line of not wanting it to look too pantomimic, in a way. So the style of the design was quite important, it was much more of an illustration. These days if you want to do a backdrop of a sky or a forest, quite often people use a technique called 'Scanachrome', which is taking an image and enlarging it – almost like a huge printer – so there's almost no skill involved. Whereas this is very different, because you're using the skills of the scenic artists to the full.



Nineteenth century Stage Management in the theatre was done by seamen – the sets used such a complicated system of ropes and capstans and pulleys that they were the only guys who knew how to do it.

**There are some elements of this set that people won't have seen before, simply because the methods have become out-moded – it must be quite exciting to bring these to a new audience?**

Yes. The difficulty is that audiences have become so sophisticated that you hope they will suspend their disbelief when they see the wave machine, for example. And you hope that people will take delight in that rather than saying 'oh...'. In the nineteenth century, theatres became very spectacular – Sadler's Wells used to flood the stage for some sea battles – whereas nowadays, of course, you'd probably project it onto a screen. But that's against the spirit of the play itself.

**To some people, working with their wife would be their worst nightmare, but how have you found working on this project with Meg?**

People often ask that, and they're always surprised when I say it's been an absolute delight. Partly because you develop such a shorthand between each other, Meg is a scenic artist and designer as well, so you don't have to have these lengthy discussions about what you want. And she also always feels that she has to put in that little bit of extra effort! But equally she also curses, because I can be demanding, and in some ways it's easier to be demanding with a painter that you don't know. If you talk to your wife like that, sometimes she'll just say, 'well, you do it then!' But it's been a huge advantage.

**You have also painted the auditorium in the Theatre – did you feel a lot of pressure, given its history and splendour?**

We had to rely on experts doing their research about what had been there originally, and the knowledge that we had about the original scenic artist, George Thorne, who painted the auditorium in 1819. A lot of research was done into theatres of that period, and by the National Trust about the colours that were used.

The biggest problem, funnily enough, was that nothing in the building is square, and we'd done all our pre-painting on a canvas in our studio and when we got here we realised that we couldn't just glue it up and walk away. Every piece had to be adjusted to fit. It was almost like dress-making in a way, we had to make big paper patterns to make sure that they work and then cut the canvas!

I think the whole building looks absolutely beautiful, and both Meg and I are very thrilled by the end result. It was an extraordinary job to have been asked to do, and a great pleasure.



Questions by Marketing Manager Steve Gibbs  
Images © Theatre Royal,  
showing Kit and Meg Surrey painting the set of *Black Eyed Susan*