MAKING THE

Impossible

Perspectives on Design and TYA

by Jeff Sachs
Designers working in Theatre for Young Audiences struggle with a variety of questions relating to children and aesthetics: What does it mean to design a play that is specifically for young people? Is it different than designing for adults? What is the balance between fun and imaginative and kitschy?

TYA Today asked these questions to five designers working across the United States and internationally at various stages of their careers. Inevitably, each of these designers raised a variety of new questions, including dealing with familiar adaptations, collaboration with directors and playwrights, audience interaction, the role of sensory engagement, and the theatrical potential for the impossible.

Describe the first play you ever designed for young audiences.

**Scenic Designer, Carey Wong**
I spent my first 10 years working in opera before coming to Seattle Children's Theatre. In 1994, Naomi's Road was my first project for SCT. I've done a lot of shows with them, and the great thing about working in TYA for me from working in grand opera is that those two worlds are very similar. The great thing about working in grand opera is you have that opportunity to do visual expansion because of the lyrical quality of the artform. It allows you to do things that are bigger, imaginative, and more enveloping. Designing for TYA has also been that for me. I feel that young audiences are not so literal in the way they need to see the world depicted on stage.

**Scenic Designer, Eric Abele**
James and the Giant Peach in 2007 at Lexington Children's Theatre. It was a cast with young people and adults, and it was the second show I'd ever designed. We looked at Aunt Spiker and Sponge as punk rockers so we did interesting grubby things with them. For the insects, I had this idea that the little green worms metamorphosed them so they only had the colors of those worms: magenta and lime green. They were fairly human-like with just some quirky touches here and there.

**Scenic & Costume Designer, Claire de Loon**
My first show for young audiences was a traditional British pantomime in a fortnightly repertory theatre. It was 1969 and my first season as a professional designer. The panto was Sleeping Beauty, and I designed the costumes while the head of design did...
the set. As well as the principle characters, there were six dancers who had several changes of costume, including a black light ballet. It was a baptism of fire.

SOUND DESIGNER. AARON QUICK The Phantom Tollbooth at Northwestern University in 2010. That show was a great first big design for young audiences. It has narration, a lot of whimsical things, and a lot of different locations and worlds and fantastical elements. The general design concept became very music heavy with the real world being kind of simple pentatonic music on childhood instruments like the glockenspiel. The opening sequence was the entire cast with kazoo, ukulele, a tiny xylophone, echoing the later musicality of the world within the play. Once we got into the play, the different worlds had different music references. One was atonal Schoenberg kind of stuff, one was a lot of drones.

LIGHTING DESIGNER. WILLIAM C. KIRKHAM My first design in TYA was Bud, Not Buddy for Chicago Children’s Theatre in 2013.

This was one of the first shows they did at the Ruth Page Center. It was an entirely African American cast, and it was a wonderful show about finding a way home and finding a family. It was my first experience working on a professional TYA show, and we approached it so honestly. We approached it from a place of, what is the best way for us to tell this story? Not what is the best way to get our children to enjoy the story, just what is the best way to tell this story. And that led us to a giant 30-foot ramp and musical instruments on stage.

What do you think distinguishes a play for young audiences from one for adults?

WILLIAM KIRKHAM Plays for young audiences give license to go further and explore bizarre worlds. I think young audiences are much more willing to grab the brass ring immediately at the entrance and go on the ride as opposed to adults who seem to want a lot more exposition leading up to something. I think the prime example of the shows that I’ve worked on at Childsplay is The Boy Who Loved Monsters and the Girl Who Loved Peas, because within five minutes there is a monster on stage with no explanation, with nothing before that in the text that would say that there should be except for Boy saying he wishes for a monster.

CLAIRE DE LOON At Oily Cart, we create shows for various young audiences. Babies and toddlers are one group. Another is roughly 2- to 4-year-olds. We also specialize in shows for young people with profound and multiple learning disabilities and young people on the autism spectrum. Our latest show, Kubla Khan, was written with a deaf/blind audience in mind as well as audiences with severe learning disabilities.

What the shows have in common is that they start from the audience’s perspective. When Tim Webb, our artistic director, writes the shows, he asks what interests,
excites, and delights this particular age group or ability level. All the shows are for small audiences. They all have live music and multi-sensory elements. The cast is always made up of people of different ages, genders, and ethnicities.

Describe how you approach designing a TYA play. Is it different from how you approach plays for adults?

AARON QUICK  Every play is a unique thing, and you have to approach every play from its text, whether your audience is full of younger or older ages. I’m very conscious for musicals to not be too loud, and I get pushback from producers or directors. I’m trying to protect young ears instead of throwing energy at the audience and hoping they connect simply because it’s loud. If there’s any specific change, it’s that you can’t reference the same things you can for adult audiences. I’ll sometimes throw in subtle quotations of music in sound design and that doesn’t help. For example, when I was mixing The Cat in the Hat, we used “Girl from Ipanema” for an elevator moment. For anyone over the age of 12, that song has a connotation. I don’t know if it read for the younger kids, but it might have because “Girl from Ipanema” has a quality that is just perfect for that moment.

ERIC ABELE  No. I think it’s all done the same way. What I do keep in mind is that a lot of times with TYA shows we’re dealing with an adaptation that has a visual history. So I try to stay sensitive to visual associations the audience might be coming in with about the piece. I think it’s important to understand audience expectations and then you need to ask, are you going to meet these expectations? Well that’s never good enough for me, I want to exceed. But you want to make sure the audience isn’t going to be angry because you went too far away.

Theatre for Young Audiences has also led me to increased use of puppetry. Puppetry has its advantage because in the right script that’s how you get to go full-on non-human. You can really be transported into another way of knowing the story. For example, I did Goodnight Moon at Lexington Children’s Theatre, and it made more sense for the bunny to be a bunny rather than an anthropomorphized costume. So not only do you change the humanity, but also the scale. And your focus can be eighteen inches and the scale of everything can change beautifully.

CLaire de loon  Another attraction of designing for young audiences has been the freedom to work in a multi-sensory way. The design of an Oily Cart show extends from the publicity and preparation materials, through to the foyer or approach to the performance space into the show itself. We often give the audience a small souvenir to take away afterwards. One of my favorites were the paper bags in If All the World Were Paper, a show for 2- to 4-year-olds. The bags were used to make sound effects and for other purposes during the show. At the end, the children were asked to whisper their favorite bit of the show into the bag and take it home with them.

AARON QUICK  Very specifically, kids seem to have not as much of a societal pressure about how to watch a play. So they will clap along with music even if they’re very bad about it; it’s almost intuitive to them. They would really try clapping along and sometimes it would be in rhythm, but that’s something I’ve never seen an adult audience do.

WILLIAM KIRKHAM  It’s so variable depending on the age of the audience. From the little littles, 3 to 5, who can start in this very nervous quiet place because they’re being bombarded by lots of new people and lots of new imagery, but by the end of a 30-minute show are bouncing up and down in their chair. To the slightly older children ages 5 to 8 who are so excited about the prospect of a blackout and are sent into screams of joy. When I was working on The Yellow Boat at Childsplay, we had a group of high school students, and they were absolutely wrecked by this show. I think it’s difficult to separate an audience’s reaction to design from other aspects such as text or acting. And the question that they asked at the talkback was, “What is it like to work on such emotional material?” As a 30-something I think of people younger than me as emotionally separated, that they are more interested in the phone in their hand than what’s in front of them. But in this moment these high school students really connected with the story that was in front of them and took it into
themselves to understand from the actor’s perspective what it was like to work on this show and to touch this emotional place every single day.

What advice do you have for designers working on a TYA show?

**CAREY WONG** I would just say to young designers working in TYA to bring your A-game to it and be really flexible, really resourceful. Be as imaginative with the script and the resources as you can. There are always ways to solve problems. I've always been in love with solving problems, whether they have been quantitative or spatial, and I think that's the love of being a designer, that's the fun we get to have.

**CLAIRE DE LOON** You have to remember that young children can be very small and adventurous so you have to look at everything from a different eye level when considering the look and the safety perspective. If kids can touch a thing, they are likely to a) break it, or b) eat it. They will want to go “behind the scenes.”

**AARON QUICK** Don’t talk down to the audience, let the kids come up to the design. Maybe they’ll hear something inspired by Schoenberg in a show and then ten years later make the connection. Treat it like you would any other play.

**WILLIAM KIRKHAM** Come into the process with ideas and don’t be afraid to come in with ideas that seem like ideas.

**ERIC ABELE** I think Lewis Carroll says it best, that you have to believe seven impossible things before breakfast. Because very rarely is there any strict adherence to reality; there is always some very impossible thing that has to be overcome. You must have in the forefront of your mind, “How do I solve the impossible in this script?” A friend of mine has this rule: any time you have an impossible challenge, the solution needs to be simple, clever, and unique. I think those solutions are the most theatrical and the most engaging.

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