

INTERVIEW WITH

the set **DESIGNER:** Alexander Dodge

UPSTAGE RECENTLY INTERVIEWED SET DESIGNER ALEXANDER DODGE ABOUT CREATING THE WORLD OF *THE UNDERSTUDY*.

What made you want to design settings for the theatre as your profession?

I was born in the Swiss Alps to an American father and a German mother. When I was 6, we moved back to the states and I was up at Taliesin West in Arizona. My father is an architect who studied with Frank Lloyd Wright and still teaches at Taliesin. I wanted to be an architect myself throughout my childhood. However, at some point I became interested in theatre and figured set design was a good combination of architecture and drama. I was able to have my cake and eat it too, so to speak.

Who are you influenced or inspired by as a designer?

I am influenced by anyone and everyone. I get very excited by some contemporary architects, especially the work of Zaha Hadid, Santiago Calatrava, and Frank Gehry. I am always interested in how volume and the experience of spaces affect one's perception and emotions. What do you feel when you walk into a certain, room, space, city street, public square? Good set design can do that as well and bring a performance to another level. I am fascinated by the body within a three dimensional volume.

What kind of research did you have to do to design *The Understudy*?

I started with looking at early 20th century photographs of Prague. The black and white images all had the dark brooding quality of the Kafka's play-within-the-play. I also looked at many of M.C. Escher's optical illusions. His work was very influential in the final stage picture of the play.

What was most challenging about designing this show?

The scenery is essentially the fourth character in the play. Not to mention a character with a distinct personality. I knew identifying the right combination of "Broadway" and "Kafkaesque" would reveal what the design would ultimately need to look like. The scenery required some gritty reality but also needed some sense of surrealism. Therefore the mechanics of the transformations from scene to scene took on particular significance.

What do you think *The Understudy* is about?

I think it looks at the irony and often bittersweet humor that life, especially a life in show business, can throw at you. However, the play is often so funny that it can just feel incredibly amusing and entertaining.

What do you think the play within the play is about?

For me the interesting thing about the piece is that both plays parallel each other. It feels like the line between reality and fantasy is frequently blurred and sometimes their positions are swapped entirely.

What do you look for from a director when you begin your design process?

The design process is the most rewarding and satisfying when it is a collaborative endeavor. I enjoy the experience the most when the director is involved in how the design evolves. I think my most interesting work has come out of good collaborations with directors.

What advice would you give a young person who wants to design settings for the theatre?

See as much theatre as you can, including opera, modern dance, ballet, etc. Look at installations, sculpture and art exhibits at museums and galleries. Travel as much as you can and see the world. Do everything you can to continually broaden your perspective. 

