

Embracing Sustainable Theatre Design

by Soutra Gilmour

The future cannot sustain waste or negligence and we must look at ways of creating the new and innovative from the old and the used. So in theatre, like everywhere else, we must contemplate Eco Design.

It's about changing our materials, reviewing practices and being inventive. For me personally it is both the inevitable outcome of a journey that started a long time ago and a new, rich and stimulating challenge.

Inspired by my grandmother's rag dolls, my mother's homemade clothes and Christmas presents wrapped in last year's paper from the Aunts, it was a journey that began at home at the age of seven by making dolls house furniture from cereal boxes, old packaging and wire out of Dad's toolbox. By the age of nine, I was pulling old 1950's wire chairs out of skips and by eleven buying vintage scarves from jumble sales and secondhand Hawaiian shirts from Flip.

Fast forward 10 years and my early career in the London Fringe meant begged and borrowed, visiting charity shops and markets, and using leftovers from main house productions - all being pulled together to look twice as expensive. Productions at The Gate, Southwark Playhouse and the Arcola Theatre relied on low cost - low impact solutions with maximum impact visually .

And now there is a name for it - it has become a manifesto for ECO Design.

The solutions are different for every production.

It's buying vintage furniture from Ebay (*Three Days of Rain* in the West End). It is costuming from the company's costume store (*The Tragedy of Thomas Hobbes* for The RSC). It is using reclaimed and recycled materials (*Down By The Greenwood Side* at The Royal Opera House).

Sometimes it's sourcing organic fabric, using small independent local retailers, buying from ethical companies, borrowing from fashion houses, celebrating British design and finding new homes for the objects and furniture once the production is over.

Back at my studio it means recycling model boxes, using ecotricity, cutting out spray paints, recycling old scripts in the printer, reusing large envelopes and packaging, and putting energy bulbs in my anglepoise. Travel should mean using Public Transport to deliver models, visiting set builders and attending rehearsals.

We need to look across the world for inspiring solutions and share materials information with architects and product designers.

See the beauty and soul in objects that have already lived.

What is certain is that we know we are just at the beginning of the conversation. Now it needs to come out of the cottage industry and on to our main stages. We need innovation from manufacturers, a commitment from set builders and better understanding and knowledge throughout industry. It starts with the smallest of beginnings...the thought.

www.greeningtheatres.com

A new group for theatre professionals interested in tackling climate change.

www.clothhouse.com

A conscious approach towards fabrics.

www.retrouvius.com

Reclamation and salvage

www.ebay.co.uk

www.uk.freecycle.org

Matching people who have things they don't want with people who can use them, and so keeping usable items out of landfills.

www.ecowood.com

An alternative to wood.

www.ashdentrust.org.uk

A grant-making charity focusing on climate change, sustainable development and improving the quality of life in poorer communities.

www.ecotricity.co.uk

The world's first green electricity company.

www.doorsofperception.com

Weblog starting new conversations on design and innovation.

