Theater Lesson Plan
“Introduction to Set Design”

Subject:
• The Arts: Theatre Arts - Introduction to Set Design for the Stage

Level:
• Grades 9-12

Abstract:
• In this unit, students will explore the basic ingredients of creating a set design for stage.
• Students will begin by viewing and analyzing completed professional set designs.
• Students will then research (either online or in the library) other completed set designs. They will analyze it individually and share their finding with the class.
• In groups of four, students will read and analyze a ten-minute play.
• Students will create a Microsoft Word table of scenes, set pieces, and props needed for the ten-minute play they have read and analyzed.
• Students will make pencil sketches of possible sets for the ten minute plays based on the tables they have created, and on the play analysis.
• Students will share their initial sketches with classmates for input and modifications.
• Students will develop a color rendering of a final set sketch.
• Students will develop an estimated budget for the set using Microsoft Excel.
• Students will assemble a final portfolio of the project. Using a rubric, they will self-assess their work with the teacher.

Invitation:
I’d like you to think for a moment about all of the movies, television shows, and live performances you have seen. If you could estimate the total number you have seen, what would that number be?

For every one of those movies, television shows and live performances, there have been people whose job it is to design the visual set that the actors work on. They are the set designers. Their job is to design a set that will provide a suitable background for the action of the performance.

They have many requirements to meet. They must communicate the style and mood of the piece to be presented, allow for adequate space for the performers, provide variety and interest to the audience, and meet
the physical requirements called for in the script such as doors, windows, and stairs. The set they design must communicate the location, time period, and the cultural, social, and economical status of the piece. They must possess skills in art, creative visioning, and research, and must be able to translate those ideas into a technically practical and usable set.

In this unit, we are going to explore ways that set designers go about doing this. For the next few weeks, you will be drawing on your own creative visions and inspirations to experience what it is like to design a set.

**Situations:**
- **Where:** This unit will occur at school, with some assignments to be completed at home. Students will also be asked to either visit the library or conduct a web search to gather photos of set designs.

- **When:** This unit is designed to occur during a theatre arts class.

- **How Long:** Timing will vary, but this unit should take approximately three weeks to complete.

**Tasks:**
- **Task 1:** Before beginning the unit, the teacher will identify appropriate ten-minute plays for use in his/her classroom. Approximately 5 to 10 of these short plays will be needed to complete this unit. See Ten Minute Resources section for ten-minute play resources.

- **Task 2:** Before beginning the unit, the teacher will prepare two or three large poster size photos of set designs to be used for viewing by the class. A Power Point presentation could also be used. (See National Theatre Design Archive website noted in Web Resources.) An alternative to this would be to bring in a set model used for a previous production, if available.

- **Task 3:** The teacher introduces the unit by asking the students to view the photos of several set designs (or set model if available). The teacher then leads a discussion on the set designs. See Key Questions to Ask of Students when Viewing a Set Design attachment.
• **Task 4:**
The teacher introduces background information on stage composition. See "Background Information on Set Design" attachment.

• **Task 5:**
Students are given the homework assignment of finding one photo of a set design to bring to class. Using the "Background Information on Set Design" sheet, they are asked to identify the type of stage and the type of setting this set design might be. Each student presents his/her photo to the class. The photos are hung up around the classroom for further reference in this unit. (Photos of stage sets can be found on the web, or in libraries. Most play scripts have a photo of the set design in the script.)

• **Task 6:**
Divide students into groups of four students per group. Teacher assigns one preselected ten-minute play per group. In their groups, students will read the play out loud to each other. Students alternate reading the various parts. (Please note that it is important to read the play *out loud*, as this adds the auditory sounds and helps students to make meaning of the script). When completed, have students read through the play out loud a second time.

• **Task 7:**
In their groups, students brainstorm and write out their responses to the Play Analysis Worksheet.

• **Task 8:**
Each group of students presents their analysis of the ten-minute play to the rest of the class. At the end of each presentation, allow time for other students to ask questions of the presenters on their play.

• **Task 9:**
Individually, students create a Microsoft Word table with three columns. The first column is titled **Scene**, the second column is titled **Essential Set Pieces**, and the third column is titled **Props**. Each student fills in the table listing those items needed for each scene in the play that he or she has read. The students list the items in the order that they appear in the play. (Note: Although most ten-minute plays have only one scene and setting, some have more than one.)
**Task 10:**
Each student is asked to make a pencil sketch of each scene of the ten-minute play they have read, which will represent their first ideas about the set for that scene. Please note that individual students do this exercise by themselves. This will allow for different perspectives on each play selected. Each sketch should contain the set pieces and props listed in their table. The sketches should also reflect the ideas that they listed on the Play Analysis Worksheet. (See Sample Set Sketch). In the process of developing their ideas into sketches, the following questions will assist students in making choices about their set sketches:

1. How does my idea allow for the action of the script to take place?
2. Will this idea allow for the action to be forcefully projected?
3. Does it encourage desirable movement of the actors?
4. Does it provide for establishing focus?
5. Does it communicate the atmosphere of the play?
6. Does it establish the “world” of the play?
7. Is it dynamic?
8. Are all of the elements unified?
9. Does it have balance?
10. Does it have variety?

**Task 11:**
Students meet in their groups by play. They share their initial sketches with each other, much in the same way that a set designer would share his/her sketches with the director and design team. As they show their sketches to the other students in their group, they also explain their ideas for the set, and what has influenced them to make the choices that they have made regarding the set. As a group, students discuss modifications that might be made.

**Task 12:**
Now that the initial sketches have been made, presented, discussed and modifications suggested, the students will use them as a basis for creating a color rendering. A rendering is a finished representation of the set. Renderings can be made using paint, pastels, colored markers, colored pencils, or a computer graphics program. When finished, students share renderings with the rest of the class.

**Task 13:**
Students develop an estimated budget for their set using Microsoft Excel. See Step Sheet: Creating a Data Table. Items to be included in the budget are:
1. **Furniture and set pieces.** (List individual items). Include fabrics, furniture, curtains, and so on.

2. **Props.** (List individual items).

3. **Building supplies and hardware:** (List individual items). Some items to include in this category are paint, wallpaper, lumber, fabric, screws, nails, glue, tacks, staples, braces, joints, hinges, and so on.

   It is helpful to give students a total budget that they must work within, as this simulates what happens in producing an actual production. A set budget for a production would vary according to the type of setting the play is being produced in. For the sake of this exercise, I suggest a $500 budget for a school production, a $2,000 budget for a community theatre production, and a budget of between $5,000-$10,000 for a professional production.

   It is also helpful to ask students to price out actual costs of materials by visiting a hardware store, a fabric store and used furniture stores.

- **Task 14:**
  Students assemble their final portfolio for this unit. The portfolio will include:

  A. Photo of set design that identifies the type of stage and type of setting for that design.

  B. The Play Analysis Worksheet for the ten-minute play.

  C. Microsoft Word table of scenes, props, and essential set pieces.

  D. Initial pencil sketches of set for ten-minute play.

  E. Color rendering of set for ten-minute play.

  F. Estimated budget in Microsoft Excel for the ten-minute play set

   The student will complete a self-assessment of this portfolio.
Interactions:
- **Full Class:** The teacher will lead whole class discussions and reflections; students will present a photo of a set design to the class that they have researched; students will share final colored renderings with the class.

- **Small Group:** Students will read aloud and analyze 10-minute plays in groups of four to five. They will also complete a play analysis in these groups. The group will present the play analysis to the class. Students will work in groups to present their initial sketches of the set design and to receive feedback on them.

- **Individual:** Students will conduct research online or in the library to obtain a photo of a set design; students will complete a Microsoft Word Table of scenes, props and set pieces; students will complete pencil sketches of their ideas for a set; students will complete a final color rendering of their set design; and finally, students will complete an estimated budget of their set design on Microsoft Excel.

Standards:
- **THEATRE:** Artistic Perception
  - Students observe their environment and respond, using the elements of theatre. Students observe formal and informal theatrical experiences, film/video, and electronic media and respond, using the vocabulary of theatre.
  
  *Comprehension and Analysis of Theatre Elements*
  1.2 Document observations and perceptions of **production elements**, noting mood, pacing, and use of space through class discussion and reflective writing. (Proficient)
  1.3 Identify the use of metaphor, subtext, and **symbolic elements in scripts** and theatrical productions. (Advanced)

- **THEATRE:** Creative Expression
  - Students apply processes and skills in acting, directing, designing and scriptwriting to create formal and informal theatre, film/videos, and electronic media productions and to perform in them.
  
  *Creation/Invention in Theatre*
  2.3 **Design**, produce, and/or perform scenes or plays from a variety of theatrical periods and styles, including Shakespeare and contemporary realism.
Assessment:
The student will assemble a process portfolio of all work completed in this unit. They will complete a written self-evaluation asking themselves these questions:
A. Does my work show development? How?
B. Have I been effective in expressing myself and sharing what I know? In what ways?
C. What problems and challenges came up for me during this process and what strategies have I used in addressing them?
D. Is there evidence of my own creative expression?
E. Was I able to accept the input from my classmates and revise my work?
F. What insights have I made about myself and about set design my participating in this process?
The teacher will meet with each individual student to review the portfolio and self-assessment in a one-on-one conference. It is also helpful to have students pair up with another student prior to their teacher conference to assess each other’s portfolio.

Tools:
- Microsoft Word
- Microsoft Excel
- Access to Internet and/or library
- Supplies for colored renderings: paint, pastels, colored markers, colored pencils, or a computer graphics program.

Project Tips and Alternatives:
- Tip#1:
  This unit can be enhanced by having students complete a scale mechanical drawing of their final colored rendering. In this case, they would complete a ground plan, which is an overhead view of the set. This
is done most easily on graph paper. Students could use a scale of \(\frac{1}{2}\) inch to one foot, meaning that \(\frac{1}{2}\) inch of the drawing would equal one foot on the set.

- **Tip #2:**
  Another enhancement would be for students to complete a model of the set. Again, this would be done to scale with \(\frac{1}{2}\) inch equaling one foot on the set. Simple materials to use include foam core, balsa wood, glue, and cardboard.

- **Tip #3:**
  Some students may have difficulty in the actual drawing of sketches. Please note that the goal of the exercise is conceptual, and not about creating perfect drawings. However, it may be helpful for the teacher to present a basic lesson on drawing, showing techniques of perspective, contour drawing, hatching/cross-hatching, and shading. There are many resource books available on basic drawing which can be obtained in local bookstores, libraries, or from a Visual Arts teacher on your campus. Students who have taken visual art classes are also a valuable resource.

- **Tip #4:**
  If your school has a theatre it is helpful to give students a copy of the ground plan of the school’s theatre prior to completing the sketches. This will assist them in designing for a particular theatre space.

**Attachments:**
- "Background Information on Stage Design"
- "Play Analysis Worksheet"
- "Sample Pencil Sketch of Set Design for Arsenic and Old Lace"
- "Microsoft Word Table – Set Pieces and Props"
- "Budget for Set Design"
- "Key Questions to Ask of Students when Viewing a Set Design"
- "Step Sheet 1: Creating a New Document"
- "Step Sheet 2: Creating a Data Table"
- "Step Sheet 3: Creating a Table"

**Web Resources – Content:**
- Theatre Images Collections Online
- The National Theatre Design Archive
  [http://www/siue.edu/PROJECT2000/indexes/scendes.html#E](http://www/siue.edu/PROJECT2000/indexes/scendes.html#E)
- The California Educational Theatre Association
  [www.CETAweb.org](http://www.CETAweb.org)
• The California Arts Project
  www.ucop.edu/tcap

• Teaching the Arts
  www.TeachingArts.org

• Ten Minute Plays: For Students by Students

• The Ten-Minute Play
  http://www.wsu.edu:8080/~converse/oneacts.html
  Lists reasons to use ten-minute plays, offers many play listings of ten-minute plays, most noticeably the entire collection of Ten-Minute Plays from the Actor’s Theatre of Louisville, Kentucky, complete with ordering information.

**Web Resources – Excel:**
• A list of linked web resources for Excel can be found on the Excel Resources page.

**Assistive Technology:**
• Please refer to the Assistive Technology section for information on methods and devices to help ensure that all students have access to the curricula in the least restrictive environment.