Inigo Jones: Building Better Theatre

One thing that we can truly be sure of about the origins of most theatre is that we are missing a lot of information. Many of the aspects of live theatre that we hold to be the standard today are extremely recent and developed within a very short time. One clear predecessor to the majority of today's staples of theatrical design, however, were the works of Inigo Jones. Jones was born in Smithfield, London in the year 1573; aside from the world of the theatre, he is known as one of the most significant architects and designers in early England and was responsible for introducing new and vital French and Italian Renaissance ideas of building and designing to London and Britain at large (Inigo Jones). Jones was a producer of the English court masques from 1603 to 1640 and collaborated with playwright Ben Jonson to create some of the most extravagant and entertaining works of the era. Without the innovative designs Inigo Jones brought to English theatre, the way we see designs in theatre today - including both scenic and costume design - would be fundamentally different.

Perhaps the most vital reason that Jones' designs reached such heights were his travels. Jones traveled to France and Italy many times and observed the ways of the European Renaissance theatre before bringing many of the same ideas to the English stage. Influenced largely by the Italian designer and architect Palladio, Jones began to design buildings and spaces that were much larger, more extravagant, and more costly than anything England had previously seen (Inigo Jones). These Palladian structures can be easily identified by features such as a rich, highly decorative interior, as was replicated in Jones' scenery, a symmetrical and precisely proportional exterior, a Palladian window, and a front façade in the appearance of a temple (Waters). Some remaining examples of these influences on Jones' architectural work include London's Chiswick and Queen's Houses; direct replication of this architectural style continued

until the 1930s and has yet to fall completely out of fashion today, proving the lasting significance of Jones' work. In addition, some sections of the theatrically famous West End in London were also modeled after the designs of Inigo Jones.

Jones first found his way into the world of designing for the theatre by working on a masque in the year 1603, a venture which eventually culminated in his designing for "twenty-three masques, three pastorals, and two plays" (Simpson and Bell 2), which coupled with his other designs to total 470 scenic creations (Peacock 7). The masques frequently caused Jones to partner with playwright and prolific masque writer Ben Jonson. The duo initially appeared to be a perfect pairing of playwright and designer, but the relationship soon fell apart as arguments arose concerning whether the design and staging or the writing and acting were the most important elements of the theatre. Jonson argued that scenic and costume design were merely the body of a production, where the acting and writing were the soul (Flatmo). Despite this fundamental disagreement, Jones and Jonson continued to work together on the masques, with each taking any opportunity to disparage the other's creations.

Despite Jonson's disapproval, Jones is credited with some of the staples of today's scenic design elements, including the curtain and the proscenium. According to Percy Simpson and C.F. Bell, authors of *Designs by Inigo Jones,* Jones' architectural and stage technique drawings "directly influenced the later theatre" (Simpson and Bell 7). These drawings contain the first considerations of providing a separation of the space for the actors and a space for the audience through the use of a curtain. Simpson and Bell also note that if the "complicated scenery [of the court masque] was to be shown effectively, it must be screened at the outset, hence the employment of a curtain" (Simpson and Bell 7). This aspect of a theatre's design, often

overlooked nowadays but essential to depicting changes in time, place, and action as well as the beginning and ending of a show, owes its existence to the ideas of Inigo Jones.

In addition to the introduction of a curtain, what is known today as the modern proscenium is also credited to Jones. It evolved from a decorative border that Jones placed around his stage drawings, and later the masques themselves, to frame the action onstage. *Designs by Inigo Jones* notes that the earliest recorded usage of this primitive proscenium occurred in a production of *The Haddington Masque*. The scene was described by a firsthand observer as appearing to be "a high, steepe, red cliff, aduancing itself into the clouds, before which, on the two sides, were erected two pilasters, chardg'd with spoils and trophees" (Simpson and Bell 7). Behind this proscenium lay another change from the theatrical settings of the past: unlike the Greek scenery of nature and the open air or the imposing high walls and statuary of the Roman theatres, the designs of Inigo Jones called for some of the first recorded painted scenery. The scenic designs for an early production of Ben Jonson's *Masque of Blackness* were described as having "first, for the Scene, a Landtschap [landscape] consisting of small woods, and here and there a void place fill'd with huntings, which falling, an artificiall sea was seene to shoote forth" (Simpson and Bell 7). As Jones' designs grew more advanced, these scenic paintings eventually evolved to include archways to create depth and layers of trees to develop a sense of continuation of the scene into the background. As these scenic elements grew more and more advanced, they still retained Palladian concepts of proportion and construction, leading the scenic design of the plays and masques to appear similar to the buildings of the time.

Another notable aspect of Jones' scenic design work calls upon the past yet again by utilizing a theatrical device that originated in Greece as the ekkyklema: a moving piece of scenic structure that could be used to transport actors and masquers on and off stage. Jones's version of

this device, called the machina versatilis, was used in many masques. George Chapman, author of many masques such as *The Memorable Masque of the Middle Temple and Lincoln's Inn,* worked with Jones and witnessed the effect of the machina versatilis firsthand. He described that "after the speech of *Plutus*... the middle part of the Rocke began to move, and being come some five paces up to the King, it split in peeces with a great crack" (Simpson and Bell 9). Other accounts of the use of this movable device claim that in one masque, it was used to move the Queen herself along with her ladies-in-waiting, twelve torch-bearers, and more (Simpson and Bell 10). This reintroduction of the movable scenery both contributed to the evolution of a staging from fixed and stationary to responsive and dynamic. Another important aspect of Jones' scenic designs were the early incarnations of the modern backstage area, including sets of shuttered spaces that can be likened to today's wings. According to *Designs by Inigo Jones,* these shutters accommodated five entrances and exits as well as the space for six scene changes (Simpson and Bell 15). Unlike the simple structures seen in theatres such as the Globe, Jones' buildings were complex and intricate.

Inigo Jones is not only notable for his advancements in the world of scenic design, but in the realm of costume design and creation as well. Jones' renderings for costuming in the court masques feature clothing more extravagant, bawdy, and risqué than had been previously seen. They performed well in competition with the eye-catching new developments in scenery and were lavish and bold enough to stun audiences, as Thomas Campion, author of *The Lord's Masque,* claims. When witnessing Jones' costume designs for his show, Campion described one costume in particular as "[fiery spirits]… dressed in clothes composed of flames, with fierie Wings and Bases, bearing in either hand a Torch of Virgine Waxe" (Designs for Masque Costumes). Despite the increased wealth and luxury of the costumes, the ornamentation and

exorbitance of the styles still largely depended on the social class and financial status of the actor or masquer, but since the majority of participants in the court masques were of relatively high class, there was much opulence. Torch-bearers and other smaller characters were often portrayed by less wealthy individuals (Uusitalo 18). This information shows that not only did Jones' costume designs succeed in communicating the message of the play or masque being performed, but they also served as markers to determine the ever-important social status of the people participating in masques, a fact that no doubt kept Jones in good standing with the royals.

Jones was also a frontrunner in the realm of progressivism as well as luxury. According to the research of Maarit Uusitalo, costume designs did not always replicate the conservative garb worn in the time period. Some outfits featured abnormally low cuts, shockingly short hems, and dresses designed without petticoats beneath them, a fashion faux pas normally taboo at the time. Surprisingly, the majority of the audience at *The Masque of Blackness* in particular showed as much revulsion to the concept as we might today. One observer notes both the inappropriate skin-painting and lack of clothing by recalling, "Their black faces, and hands which were painted and bare up to the elbows, were a very loathsome sight, and I am sorry that strangers should see our court so strangely disguised" (Uusitalo 20). The court masques were an environment in which excessively wealthy nobles partied and engaged in what would have been considered very unorthodox behavior at the time, and so the costumes of Inigo Jones rose to the occasion of providing well-crafted and yet mesmerizingly strange clothing to the reveling royals.

Though it may seem that costume design was a secondary occupation for Jones when observing his immense body of work in the architectural realm, this is not the case. Jones approached the creation of costumes and costume renderings with the same precision he did his architecture plans: he placed great emphasis on precision in the drawing of the human figure. In

later iterations of Jones' designs, figure drawing becomes more and more prominent (Peacock 115-6). In the creation of these depictions, Jones again draws on his knowledge of the methods of the European Renaissance, basing his approach to drawing the figure on Italian painter, engineer, and architect Giorgio Vasari's ideas of the two qualities of "Disegno… the imitation of the most beautiful aspects of nature in all figures… the ability to reproduce everything that the eye sees on a level surface" and "Maniera… the practice of constantly portraying the most beautiful things and joining together all of these… so as to make a complete figure of all these fine features" (Peacock 116). The drawings Jones created formed a bridge between the worlds of costume and scene design, juxtaposing the Renaissance ideals of the human figure with those of the constructed edifice.

The importance of the design work of Inigo Jones cannot be understated to anyone exploring the world of set and costume design. His research, drawings, and completed works spearheaded the movement of new ideas from France and Italy, the origin locations of the Renaissance, to England and finally to the world at large. By developing new ways of presenting location, framing, and scenery on stage through the use of innovative architecture and the introduction of the curtain, the painted scene, and the proscenium, Jones brought new methods of staging and viewing theatre to the world. He also revolutionized the world of costume design and created renderings of the human figure that formed the basis for how we recreate the human form today; therefore, without Inigo Jones, theatre as we know it would not exist.

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