

Do you have an interest in set design or lighting? Not sure what's involved? Read below from the set designer and lighting designer of *The Constant Wife*.

From mind to stage: the evolution of a set design

My starting point for any set I work on is to Google previous productions. There weren't many for this play and all were quickly dismissed, apart from the professional Gate Theatre, Dublin's version. This was set on a massive stage, with 14-foot walls, sumptuous curtains, and solid walnut throughout. I loved it!

But ... we have a much smaller stage and budget, so needed to scale back. I then look at the playwright's directions. W Somerset Maugham was quite prescriptive. Discussions with the director, Chris Harris, followed, and we quickly dispensed with a grand piano and some furniture.

My next step is to fix on a design route by viewing endless images of interiors of the period. I didn't want to go 'over the top' Deco, like some of the amateur productions I'd seen. Maugham is clear that the action is all set in the drawing room of an eighteenth-century Harley Street townhouse, so the basic structural elements would be of that period.

I knew that Constance Middleton was an avid interior decorator, so I felt she would have kept the key basics but 'Deco'd' the place up. In my case, I altered the doors, door architraves, wall decoration, fireplace, and window treatments.

I decided on key Deco elements – the very popular 'sunburst' motif and ziggurat shape. I wanted to use rich Deco colours and was pleased to find a very Deco-style geometric wallpaper much reduced in a sale – so a feature wall came into play.

I create mood boards for each set, showing the actual paint colours and the style of furniture and furnishings I wish to incorporate. Fortunately, Chris Harris loved it all, so the next stage was to produce a scale model or 'maquette'.

The crew met and we made a few changes to take construction and lighting issues into account. I was lucky to have David Simmons as my Head of Construction, as he is very thorough – asking me loads of questions and producing some wonderful scale drawings to pin down exactly how it would all work.

Then the build begins. I get involved in decision-making but leave it to the experts. Greg Ryder (Sinodun Players Master Carpenter) is always inventive and solved the problem of making a Chevron floor stencil, plus a chandelier made from spray-painted footballs and bendy wire!

I work on sourcing furniture and furnishings – scouring local charity shops, making any extra props that might be needed, and (usually) creating modern artworks. For this play my talented artist friend Alison Williamson painted five pictures in the style of various 1920s masters – in just one week!

Once the set is built, I'm busy for a week to ten days taping and sealing, painting, cleaning, arranging furniture and making it all look perfect. Once done, I like to take photos of the empty set and pride myself on how close I can get it to my original maquette. Then, it's a case of sit back, enjoy, and watch the cast create the magic!

Lighting *The Constant Wife*

I've worked on a number of lighting projects since joining the Sinodun Players as designer, rigger and operator. I try to learn from everyone, but everyone does it differently; that means you can practically invent your own methodology, which no one will criticise. Although they may fault the end product! Design is so subjective!

On this production, the first rule is to understand the play and the action, so attending key rehearsals to observe the director's take is crucial.

I also meet with the set designer. That's the second rule, to understand what the set is like, dimensions, how important areas can be lit and crucially how lights can be rigged alongside the set build on stage. Pay special attention to colours as they have to be aligned with the tones in the set and costumes. Before the lights are fixed in place, gels (colours) and gobos (patterns) need to be attached. Then the beams are focussed into the right place.

Finally, all the cues have to be programmed into the lighting board, a feat of software engineering that makes the final performance a mere breeze of pressing the GO button at the right time. Oh did I mention that fade-in, fade-out and intensity have to be programmed hitting the exact point in the script? This is where the design really comes to life.

Lighting Design is a combination of artist, project manager, technician and diplomat!