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**Bohème Bohème: Finding a Way Into New Design Using Disruption of
Design Method**

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Design Method**

by

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Abstract

Bohème Bohème: Finding a Way Into New Design Using Disruption of Design Method

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This thesis describes an exploration of creative process and a set of methods used to find new ideas for theatrical design. The project began with questions about repetition and disruption. Can altering a typical process of designing a show help when designing the same show repeatedly, as an opera designer needs to be able to do? Can new ideas be generated not from streamlining one process but using a diverse pattern of research methods? How does using one design of the same opera as a lens for another affect the sum of both works and the understanding of the work? Several methods of work process are examined and explained.

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Chapter 1: *Introduction*

This thesis describes my in-depth exploration of a creative process and a set of methods I used to find new ideas for theatrical design. This project began with a beloved, popular opera and the observation that, with the canon of performed opera being fairly small, it is possible one designer may be hired to design an opera many times over a career. At the time of this writing, *La bohème* is the third most-performed opera in the world.¹ A designer who intends, as I do, to focus her career on operatic design must not only be fluent in the story and character study of a work as popular as *bohème*, but able to bring new ideas and new life to each production she designs of that same piece.

This led to questions about repetition and disruption: can altering my typical process of designing costumes help when designing the same show again and again? Can new ideas be generated not from streamlining one process but using a diverse pattern of research methods? How does using one design of the same opera as a lens for another affect the sum of both works, and how does this help the understanding of the piece?

¹ <http://www.operabase.com/top.cgi?lang=en&>

Chapter 2: *La Bohème*

Giacomo Puccini premiered *La bohème* in 1896. It was based on a book by Henri Murger called *Scènes de la vie de bohème*, about a group of friends living in the Quartier Latin in 1840s Paris. Simple and modern in its themes of choosing an artistic passion and lifestyle over wealth, love, and happiness, *La bohème* is in the repertoire of most major opera companies.

When I was chosen to design the Butler School of Music's 2014 production of *La bohème*, I saw it as an opportunity to study and experiment with concept and process. The show is performed often because although it is one hundred and eighteen years old, its story of frustrated artists, young love, and death remain relatable to new audiences. It is an easy opera to watch: its four acts are quick, the music is catchy and well-known, and it has been updated into a musical, *RENT*, which in itself was wildly popular. It's an excellent "beginner" opera for an audience, and its frequency of production world-wide sparked ideas for me about how many ways it can be done.

What would I find if I designed not one, but many *La bohèmes* and used one design as the lens to view another? How would the research into different eras and personalities combine to further my understanding of the opera and my own experience, and would the quality and quantity of ideas benefit from this approach? How would this affect the path of discovery and the end result?

I began with looking into ways to organize and generate information and ideas, and ended up with not only a system of working on venerable operas, but several specific

and viable concepts for the design of *La bohème*. Over the course of one year, two of these concepts became the performances of my thesis project Bohème Bohème.

Chapter 3: *Process Mapping*

I began this experiment with an examination of my usual process and formulated a baseline design based on my current skill set, experiences, and how I reacted to the text. I drew a linear path from studying the opera's score, to image research, to character study and finally to costume design for a production in 1840s Paris as specified in the libretto of *La bohème*.

**DESIGN FOR Puccini's LA BOHEME thesis
iteration ONE**

1. The Start

2. Get to know the music

3. Inform myself on former designs

4. Inform myself on prior deviations

5. Begin to break down script: Time

6. Characters in time, research

*Use the *they're poor* formula*

7. BASIC STEPS:

8. Research fashion of the exact year

9. Research fashion of the exact place

10. Research fashion of surrounding areas

don't use any of these.

11. Research prior periods for long-wear items

12. Research economic factors

unfortunate, disinherited, unemployed, lazy...

13. Research reasons for any changes in dress

Illustration 1: Baseline Diagram of Personal Formula For Design Process.

Once I looked into and consequently understood more about how I worked, I began to look for ways to disrupt this formula. To achieve differing results from the above standard, I used a tool called mind mapping to explore potential paths.

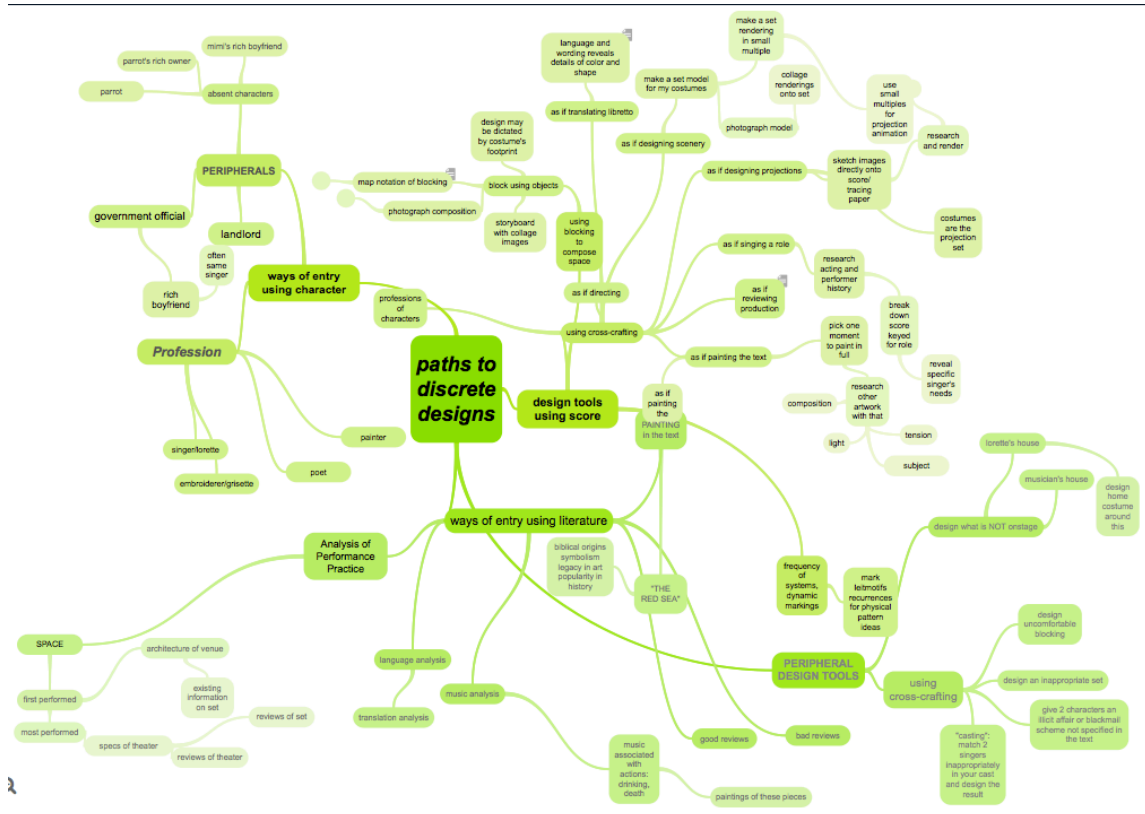


Illustration 2: Mind Map.

contextualize relationships within the whole. Laying out in graphic form the text of a piece and associations that I find in it, I began to create a visual architecture that informed design choices and re-imagined relatable relationships. In mapping I found context, nuance, and a certain respect for *La bohème*, its relationship to others I had worked on, and the potential this held for new productions.

Chapter 4: *Connections in Images*

At the same time I started mapping, I began pulling contemporary and vintage images from my bank of files saved during research into other projects. I made myself a presentation of comparisons between time periods to better understand my relationship to both my aesthetic choices and what I relate to the opera. The images below are two of many collages that helped me see a cohesive thread between my varied research and tastes, and inspired a further look into the histories of those images.



Illustration 4: *Grey Gardens/ Ziegfeld Follies.*



Illustration 5: Lillian Gish/ Louis Vuitton ad campaign.

I found these comparisons invaluable in asking myself why I was attracted to these images and why I personally found the photographs “bohemian”. In using a lens of one image to view the other, I found myself focused closely on the idea of what “bohemian” means, and had a new desire to look into the history of the term, the communities and the people who have been described as bohemian since the term was in common use, and how a modern audience would recognize bohemians from a costume design perspective. I was excited to discover the term, as it applies to people, was first popularized by Henri Murger, who wrote the novel on which *La bohème*'s plot and characters were based. I found a way into design from looking into the personalities he

described, and later other historical figures who subscribe to the bohemian lifestyle in the fashion he described.

In both Murger's novel and the opera *La bohème*, four friends with varied artistic talents and temperaments live and work in poverty in a Paris garret apartment. Murger based his Rodolphe character, later Puccini's Rodolpho, on himself, while Rodolphe's girlfriend Mimi (Mimí) was a composite of three of Murger's friends and lovers. Musette in Murger's *Scenes* (Musetta in *La bohème*) was Mariette of Champfleury in reality, and was a highly sought-after artist's model in Paris.

Finding this fact started me thinking about era and relatability—an artist's model is to this day a fringe career and an excellent example of a lifestyle choice that defines “bohemianism”. A look into painters and their muses was one path that led me to Tulane University in the 1920s, an art professor named William Spratling who had an author roommate named William Faulkner, and their circle of friends in Pirate's Alley in New Orleans that contained an artist's model nicknamed “Musetta”. This concept became one of the performances of my thesis.

This was a fount of information and inspiration; I will use this technique of *image comparison > history of key concept of opera > source material of opera > inspiration for characters in source material > comparison of these characters to those in other periods* to find future design. I find either a 2-D collage or Powerpoint presentation of a series of collected images focuses the magnifying glass on what about those chosen pictures attracts my attention, whether it is silhouette, or a similarity of composition, or pattern, or lighting. When I see the visual similarities, I then look into the history of the

photograph for any interesting connections to the text, and find why I was intrigued by the image in relation to the source material. The model in the photograph, or the photographer, or the painter may have a lead to an interesting life story for further research.

I used this method to delve into Giuseppe Verdi's *Un Ballo in Maschera* (The Masked Ball). While this production is not set in Verdi's specified settings of 1792 Sweden or 1833 Boston, I found looking into dualities in imagery, the true events that inspired this opera and its fraught production history, the people involved in both events, the censorship of theatrical regicide, and the history and meaning of masks all combined to make my design richer, more generative of ideas, and ultimately more useful to both myself and the director than my linear methods of direct research.

Chapter 5 : *The Lost Act*

< Between Acts III and IV, Puccini had originally composed another act for *La bohème* that explained plot points only referred to in Act IV. The scene is set in the courtyard of a principal character, Musetta's, house, where she is selling her furniture to support her choice to stay with the painter Marcello instead of one of her many other affluent lovers. The other main female character Mimi's defection from her poor beau to a wealthy man is discussed, and the act ends with a bonfire of unsold furniture. While the score of this act has been lost for more than a hundred years, the libretto remains. I found study into this dialogue and setting fascinating, and discovered that although it is never performed, it informed my understanding of the existing opera. I spent time researching and designing the scenery and projections of this act for performance as a silent film. This choice in particular is a viable option to bring to a director the next time I am presented with an opportunity to design *La bohème*, and I am very excited to have this original idea in my pocket for the future.

Chapter 6: *Workspace*

Satisfied with the results of new methods of idea generation and choosing the two options I felt were most viable for production, the next step was to physically draw the renderings for both shows and build a set model for the production I planned to set in 1926. I designed both iterations in tandem between November 2013 and April 2014. Initial sketching was done for both on 22" x 30" rag watercolor paper in pencil so I could examine the similarities and contrasts between the two.



Illustration 6: sketch of 1888 Mimi progression.



Illustration 7: sketch of 1926 Mimi progression.

Wanting to know why they had ended up looking so similar, I decided to evaluate my studio. I took stock of my workspace and listed the conditions I've become accustomed to, including area, light, environmental noise, and companionship. In my home studio, I work on at most three large renderings at a time, and can view perhaps ten more placed around the room. I work in a combination of incandescent and natural light depending on the time of day I have time to draw and limit noise and distraction. I designed my 1926 version of *La Bohème*, including the set and costumes, in this space.



Illustration 8: Home studio.

With the Butler School of Music's production came the unique opportunity to work in an unused dressing room of the Payne Theater in the Winship building at UT. I

immediately saw the differences in using this room: not only did I have the space to paint the 55 renderings for the 1888 *La Bohème* at the same time, but its theatrical lighting, quiet atmosphere, and solitude seemed to make the process faster. Because of the constancy of the bright artificial light on color and the ability to compare the whole set of renderings at once, each painting was consistent and made for a cohesive total design. I had the clothing I meant to use for the realized production with me in the room for reference, which enhanced the rendering of fabric and drape. Below is a photograph of my workspace at UT.



Illustration 9: Payne Dressing Room Workspace.

This change in environment proved an effective way to inspire design, and finding how useful a new space was inspired my continuing interest in finding varied studios for my future costume rendering work.

Chapter 7: *The Performances*

As described above, these research paths worked to lead me to several viable ideas for the design of *La bohème*; I chose the two iterations that interested me the most to offer to my director at the Butler School of Music. One I called *Bohème 1888*, set amid the Exhibition Universelle in Paris of that year through 1889: this setting was ultimately chosen by the director of the show to both feature our international cast and showcase projections of the building of the Eiffel Tower. This version of the opera had a cast of thirty-three singers and over a hundred costumes. The most basic benefit of my thesis research was being able to be the generator of the concept for this large production: my team looked to me as a *bohème* expert, and my director was impressed with the choices available. On another project I would likely have deferred to my team to come up with a concept, but having these concepts on hand and feeling confident enough to put them forward as viable designs was a very satisfying result of my efforts. Below is a production photo from the final dress of *Bohème 1888*, from May 24th, 2014.



Illustration 10: *La bohème*, the Butler School of Music, photo by Matt Smith.

The second iteration I called *Bohème* 1926; it became my thesis production. This version was based on the story related above of the brief period in the life of author William Faulkner, when he lived with a bohemian circle of friends in Pirate's Alley in the French Quarter of New Orleans, Louisiana. Set amid Prohibition, the rebellion and excess born of that time made for a fertile design project I found interesting to research, design, and direct.

Wanting to understand more of how an entire design concept is produced, I needed to learn more about opera direction and the other aspects of design aside from costuming. In the summer of 2013 I began directing and assistant directing with Spotlight on Opera, an Austin community opera and training program. I also began to think about

set design for *La bohème* as a playing space for the story and not a separate department from my own. In itself this is one of my research paths: I found learning the craft of my teammates on a given production helped me understand the choices that are made and the difficulties involved. I will continue to work with this company as time permits.

For the 1926 iteration, I found having a set built was a valuable learning experience. I used my directing experience as well as my desire to display my visual research to create a set that was both a gallery and playing area. I was also excited to delve into the details of New Orleans and 1926 in an architectural research path I don't normally use, and found that set research informs costume and character research alike. Display of architecture, research, and costumes became an environment for my performer, and she became an inhabitant of my space. It was a joy to make.



Illustration 11: Bohème 1926 set design in the Oscar Brockett Theater, April 5th 2014.

Chapter 8: *Conclusions*

I entered graduate school intending to find a method to design shows that would work throughout my career. I tried many methods of working on each project toward the goal of streamlining my process, attempting to find one simple way to design a show. Putting that aside and spending the latter half of my graduate career on this thesis, finding ways to alter that “ideal” method, proved valuable to both my current work and my future potential for theater making: I know myself better as an artist and a costume designer, and have also acquired skills in other areas of design and direction.

I continue to be excited about repetition as a meditative practice and a career choice. I see this excitement working out well for both opera design and for designing many productions of Shakespeare’s plays, which is my next working plan to test these methods. Using one design as the lens to view and design another iteration of the same piece does enhance the sum of both designs and refines the understanding of both.

Allowing oneself to research multiple time periods when only one is asked for gives a glimpse into the history of the garments and insight into character. When I knew what the character of Musetta would have worn in 1888, I became able to envision more clearly what she would have chosen to wear in 1926. Repeating the whole of a show’s design encouraged delving into research into world history, politics, geography, vocations, psychology, women’s history, and sociology. I believe looking at the whole of *La bohème* with a wide lens gave me the chance to focus on design choices I wouldn’t normally have seen and look at the overall picture. I became less stuck in the details I normally work on in a show and painted on a larger canvas. This worked well to get a

large show onstage, and for my smaller production I had the tools to think of the entire design of the space and movement. Thus far I have only noticed two drawbacks to this process, the first being a tendency to rely on one iteration's decision as gospel for the other. The best example of this is the chartreuse colorway I chose for Musetta in each *bohème* design, which was so appropriate for both the character and the periods 1888 and 1926, I decided to use it in both. Future *bohèmes* will need a new research path, one I may not have tried yet, to find other options so I don't begin to recycle design by default. The second drawback was in the workload; it's important when doing these types of experiments to reduce the outside influences of unrelated shows that divert attention and add in outside influences that detract from the research. It can be difficult to tell if the experiment is in itself overwhelming or if the unrelated work is causing the strain.

It was obvious before I began this journey that understanding more about an opera would help with the design of the opera—the excitement was in the type of information and ideas generated by process mapping, associative research, lateral research, and a change in workspace. Having the opportunity to do this type of research on my own way of making theater was not only a crash course in all aspects of design, but ensured I will never feel static in my designs for opera. I often design new works for theater and opera, and it is a completely different experience being the originator of a character's costume than it is designing an opera that is over a hundred years old. I found my research a valuable way to bridge the gap between those two worlds, old and new, of the career path I've chosen.

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