Theatrical Design –Something to Think About...

A Tale of Two Cities: A Musical | Jill Santoriello

Designers, give yourself permission to imagine beyond the expected. As you read the script and explore this year's directorial prompt, consider not only what a revolution looks like, but what it does to the people who experience it.

The story in a nutshell

Set in London and Paris before and during the French Revolution, the musical follows Lucie Manette, who is reunited with her unjustly imprisoned father and falls in love with Charles Darnay, an aristocrat who rejects his family's cruelty and privilege. Sydney Carton, a troubled lawyer who also loves Lucie, struggles to find meaning in his life. As the revolution turns from a pursuit of justice to one of revenge, Darnay is condemned to death. Carton ultimately takes his place, sacrificing his life for the family he loves.

Think transformation, not just revolution

The story explores the ways good and evil can transform individuals, relationships and entire societies. Consider these contrasting journeys:

Sydney Carton – Self-destruction to self-sacrifice.

Madame Defarge – Victim of injustice to perpetrator of injustice.

Charles Darnay – Inherited privilege to personal responsibility.

Dr. Manette – Imprisonment and trauma to recovery.

Lucie Manette – Isolation to connection, family and hope.

The revolutionaries – Oppression to rebellion to vengeance.

What if...?

What if this story happened 200 years in the future? What if wealth depended on access to technology, water or energy? What if the two cities were separated by social status rather than geography? What if the revolutionaries became indistinguishable from those they overthrew?

The script's staging notes (pp. 8–9) emphasize the conceptual relationship between the two cities, cinematic transitions and duality. Think about how your designs can communicate those ideas.

Find inspiration through film

Watch through the eyes of a designer. These films share themes, character journeys or visual ideas with the musical. They are starting points for research, not models to copy.

PARENT PERMISSION REQUIRED: Not all films are rated G or PG. Some are PG-13, R or unrated. Research ratings and content and ask your parent or guardian for permission BEFORE viewing. None are required viewing.

Similar stories and themes:

The Dark Knight Rises (2012) – Class warfare, revolutionary tribunals and self-sacrifice; draws on Dickens' novel.

Les Misérables (2012) – Poverty, rebellion, redemption and compassion.

The Hunger Games: Mockingjay – Part 2 (2015) – When a rebellion risks becoming as ruthless as its enemy.

The Count of Monte Cristo (2002) – Wrongful imprisonment, reinvention and revenge.

V for Vendetta (2005) – Oppression, resistance, trauma and political symbolism.

Snowpiercer (2013) – Class division and the dangers of revolutionary power.

Atonement (2007) – Wrongful accusations, love, guilt and consequences.

Gladiator (2000) – Corrupt leadership, honor, vengeance and sacrifice.

Futuristic and alternative worlds:

Myth of Man (2025) – If you are considering a future revolution, seek out this visually stunning film! Study its surreal architecture, textures, machinery and world-building.

Metropolis (1927) / Mortal Engines (2018) – Industrial societies, machinery and class distinctions.

Dune: Part Two (2024) / Elysium (2013) – Power, rebellion, resource inequality and contrasting worlds.

Equilibrium (2002) / Brazil (1985) – Government control, conformity and oppressive environments.

Wicked (2024) – Prejudice, propaganda and imaginative visual storytelling.

Imagine a world of your own-

Consider combining research into a historical, contemporary or imagined revolution with a distinctive visual aesthetic. Here are a few directions to investigate—not assigned concepts.

Steampunk revolution — Industrial machinery, labor exploitation, gears and weathered metals.

Technological revolution — Surveillance, corporate control, cyberpunk and digital privilege.

Post-apocalyptic revolution — Scarcity, survival, salvaged materials and rebuilding society.

Art Deco dystopia — Geometric luxury, monumental architecture and economic disparity.

German Expressionism — Distorted shapes, shadows, psychological trauma and fear.

Environmental revolution — Resource inequality, climate instability and contrasting habitats.

Five questions every designer should ask:

- **Power** — What separates those who have power from those who do not?
- **Oppression** — What does injustice look like in my world?
- **Revolution** — What causes people to finally fight back?
- **Transformation** — How do the characters and their surroundings change?
- **Duality** — How can I visually communicate hope and despair, wealth and poverty, justice and revenge?

Take it one step further-

Collect images, textures, colors, symbols and research that speak to your ideas. Consider how scenic design, costumes, hair and makeup, lighting, properties or marketing could express your concept. Document your sources and bring your ideas to Eagle Time so we can discuss them.

Inspiration is not imitation. Create an original design and consult the official UIL prompt and category rules before developing your entry.

Don't simply design something beautiful.
Design something that has something of substance to say!