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From Student to Set Designer - Building the Skills to Build the Business

An exploration into the personal transition from an academic environment to a 'real world' working position: An investigation into the viability of creating a small-scale business building sets, on a low budget.

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My journey of developing the skills to build the business of creating worlds...

This dissertation shall explore what steps it would take to start out as a freelancer in set design and construction, with little to no budget as a basis. For this I will research into what skill requirements and attributes are needed for the roles and compare them with what skills I have myself at present, so that I can isolate what I would need to work on and develop further, both practically and in a socially-based context. I will undertake a SWOT analyses as part of this process and reflect upon my time at *Bay Productions* in the capacity of work experience.

Next, I will investigate what the minimum physical tools I would need for the job when starting out, and costs, plus what I would need regarding a workshop set-up as a minimum requirement - if a workshop is needed. Areas such as health and safety and other working practices will be explored in detail.

I will also find out about starting the business and what are the steps needed within this process. This will include areas such as taxation, legal responsibilities and networking/promotional activity.

Finally, I will then use my skills, minimum tools, and a small workspace with set pieces, that I will repurpose to build a small moveable set as an experiment for the practical element of my project; as well as undertaking a collaborative element for a short film sequence using the set.

After going through all these processes and research this will hopefully lead to me putting it all into practice and begin my journey by starting my own business as a freelancer within the industry.

Set design and construction skill requirements

In *Creative and Successful Set Designers* (2018), Todd Muffatti takes you through the whole process for designing sets, from knowing the space, the play, to undertaking the research and designing the set. For this I would need to learn about scale, colour theory, architecture, different time periods; as well as taking into consideration of how it would be lit. It is not just about these elements though, as you (as a set designer) need to have a creative imagination and also making a model of the set may be required. Muffatti (2018) also discusses drafting for the structural measurements of the set. He talks about using accurate and measured drawings, most often quarter inch or half inch to the foot scale are used, and furthermore making sure the floor plan and front elevations are in the same scale as there is less room for mistakes. Muffatti (2028) also states that the floor plan is the most important document that accompanies any design, so, this in mind, the sooner it is drawn the better; the elevations and set model are generated from this plan. In *Past, Present and Future of Set Design*, Scott Fleary (2022) talks about the changes that are happening within set design practice. In the future, Scott Fleary (2022) mentions the more common use of green screen technology, LED screens and CGI for the use of building sets and creating worlds. If this is the case of what the future will be, then skills in technology would have to be something I think about seriously to increase my skill set. Although, I feel there will still be a place for physical sets, as it gives the actors something to interact with and potentially looks a lot better when it comes to staging, as the audience would rather see something physical on stage rather than just a large LED screen at the back. This is based on watching a performance of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* at *The Lyric Theatre* in Carmarthen where they used a large LED screen to create the backdrop, rather than having a complete physical set. Of the people I spoke with after the performance, many commented that it would have been a lot better with an actual set; the background was just too flat and the set pieces there were lost in the space.

On the website *Framebox* (2026) it gives examples of the advantages and disadvantages of virtual and physical sets. Physical sets are far more costly to create but does make it easier to work with actors and get their best performance. Virtual sets give the

opportunity to be more creative with endless possibilities, but can lack in originality and have continuity errors when relying on AI assisted tools to create. There is no far gone conclusion to which one is better, as it ultimately depends on the budget and what you are trying to achieve.

A large LED screen can affect the viewer's experience of a production, especially if there is too much glare from the screen (brightness), the animations are too busy and over stimulating in a visual context, or that the overpowering effect of the screen can reduce the presence of the actors on stage. Contrast levels can also be high, and this may impact upon the audience, notably potential eye strain when watching for an long period of time. LED screens can also distort and pixelate at the edges, so that viewers at the sides may see these imperfections, once more potentially affecting their viewing experience and the authenticity of the performance. An LED background can also feel like watching a television screen, a less natural experience and akin to being in the cinema, rather than in the theatre environment. Physical sets and backdrops have been used for centuries to help bring a performance to life, the use of LED screens may not be conducive to this natural and hand-made aesthetic, maybe not offering an audience an authentic experience set within the traditions of theatre (advantagedigital, 2025; Bigscreen Solutions, no date; Churchfront, no date; Tomkins, 2026).

Moving away from the actual performance, digital technology has been used within pre-production for many years, and successfully. Scott Fleary (2022) mentions the use of, and benefits of *AutoCAD* (Autodesk Inc., 2026) as a design software package, which is used a lot in construction design for all the measurements concerned, so this would definitely be something to learn from, from a design point of view, and being able to read these drawings from a construction point of view also. Scott Fleary (2022) also mentions *SketchUp* (Trimble Inc., 2026), a 3-D modelling software where the designer/viewer can undertake a digital guided tour of what a set would look like, this is important as the feel of a set can be experienced before construction begins; this has many benefits as the

director can visualise the set beforehand, make changes and potentially save on wasted materials and other processes.

After graduating there are many avenues that I could venture down. One particular role is that of a Set Designer, and all the varied aspects that this would involve. As previously mentioned, CAD will be one of the key skills needed in this area. In the book *Stagecraft* (1992) by Trevor R. Griffiths, he talks about the role of a set designer, notably you need to read the script and approach it with an open mind without considering any physical or technical problems. The second read should be the time to take notes to get an idea of the characters and environment. Griffiths (1992) then talks about the third read, where you could use plans and elevations of the stage so you can work out exactly how it is going to take place. This process is vital within set design, although there are some historical examples where this rationale is much looser, notably in Robert Wiene's film *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920) (see image below). In the book *Caligari's Cabinet and other Grand Illusions* (1976), Leon Barsarq, discusses the film; a film made during the period of the German Expressionism movement. The set was made up of random pieces of old sets to create a brand-new set, which did not have to be to an exact design as it could evolve as it was being built.



Still image taken from Robert Wiene's film *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920).

The image presents the extreme visual distortion of the sets

The practice of reusing sets, costumes and props/materials is growing in the current theatre world, notably the RSC (Royal Shakespeare Company) have been engaging in this practice (RSC, 2026). The RSC are working in line with the Theatre Green Book. Theatre Green Book is an initiative that is industry-wide, its mission is to encourage theatres and companies alike (everyone in the performing arts) to be more sustainable in their practices, in response to the climate crisis. It is a free resource which shares best practice, covers all roles and scales, and can help to build scaffolding for planning, guidance, and sharing standards. (Theatre Green Book, 2026).

The National Theatre are also operating a 'Green Store', an initiative to store and then loan out old theatre elements to other performances; encouraging a circular economy and reducing carbon footprints (The National Theatre, 2024).

This 'green' practice is an interesting concept to me, as being able to reuse old sets is what I would want to do, especially on a near zero budget and knowing that when sets have been used, they usually get thrown away. In my practice I would want to collect them and reshape them into a brand-new concept.

In response to looking at a career in set design and production I decided to do a SWOT analysis (see Appendices) to work out what my strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats are when it comes to my skills that I already have, the ones I need to develop and anything that might affect me when starting my own business. My full SWOT analysis is in the appendices at the end but what I take from it is that although I still need to work on my skills with technology my biggest threat would be my location but saying this I am able to drive so this is not as big a problem as long as any job I undertake either is drivable day by day, has accommodation if it is too far to travel daily and also does not take me away from my son too long.

Work placement

I have recently forged links with *Bay Productions* (Bay Productions, 2021), based in Cardiff, and while talking with them I decided to ask if they facilitated work placements for students. They agreed and I spent 5-weeks working with them, learning many new skills, forging new links and experienced a real-life environment working on a project from start to finish. During my time I worked on elements for productions of *High Society*, *The Bank of Dave* and *Something Rotten!*

Bay Productions is a 'one-stop' facility that create sets for the opera, theatre and also TV, working to a high standard as well as strive to create the client's vision. They have over 50-years of experience in the industry through their body of professionals. Their portfolio includes the London 2012 Olympics, Somerset House, The V&A, X-Factor final (2017), Just Dance US Tour, and artists such as Adele and Katy Perry to name a few. They have worked with a wide range of clients, both small-scale to world-renowned organisations and can work on-site, on-location or within their own facilities. They have four main

departments, of which I got to explore, including a design department where they use their 3-D design software to create digital scale models which is then passed on to other departments. The other departments include a welding and fabrication area as they use materials such as steel and aluminium to create strong frameworks which is then passed onto the carpentry department where they will create cladding for the frame structure. The final department is the scenic art department where they use their skills to transform things like plywood to look like stone or any other type of material that is required for the design using special painting and texturing techniques which I was lucky enough to get to try (Bay Productions, 2026).

I was delighted when they said yes, and I would be welcome to come and volunteer for their company. This presented an opportunity for me to work in a company that specialises in what I want to do. In mental preparation for this, I needed to become a sponge and absorb every bit of knowledge I could while in Cardiff. For my 5-weeks work placement at *Bay Productions*, I was based in the scenic art department. This opportunity offered me a most valuable opportunity for gaining knowledge as a set designer. Furthermore, as a company with multiple departments they were kind enough to say that they would let me go into different specialisms, in order to learn other skills over my placement time. See Appendices for placement images.

During my time at *Bay Productions*, I developed a reflective working journal and this forms part of module ADPA6013 Work Placement, which will be submitted in unison with my Independent Project work.

In my placement I have learned about the order things get done but they don't always run smoothly in that order as things can get held up but seeing this in a real-world setting is very interesting as my previous experience was from an educational environment which is a different experience along with the fact there is a lot more people involved in real work environment and they have all been doing their jobs for a while. As part of my placement I did a lot of texturing to make things like plywood look like stone. Texturing gets used a lot within the scenic art department. I also got a chance to do some canvassing within a different department where instead of wooden frames

that I'm use to they use metal box section. These were made from aluminium as they would be flown so need to be light weight. Another thing I got shown was the drawing room where all the designing and modelling takes place and I had a go at the 3-D modelling software they use which is called *Rhino – Rhinoceros* (Robert McNeel & Associates, 2026) which is complex, but can be used to take measurements in a similar way to *AutoCAD* (Autodesk Inc., 2026). I also had the opportunity to go into the welding and fabrication department to learn about how the frames are put together; as well as getting a chance to learn some welding techniques for myself which is something I really wanted to have a go at when first arriving on placement. I don't want to limit myself to building only with wood, especially when some sets are built with steel frame (which all of the ones I have seen on my placement have been). I found that my fabrication skills are good which I was told after doing a test frame which is what they give new people to do when entering that department, but that is because this transfers from my woodworking skills with the measuring and cutting, but just with a different material and tools that cut metal rather than wood. The welding is the part that will take some more practice, there is a key focus on speed, distance and the angle at which you hold it while aiming at the thickest part of the metal, this is because I found it can blow holes in the metal if the heat is concentrated on the thinner part for too long.

Tools and the workshop

On my placement I experienced using many different tools. I looked at the book *Scenic Construction for the Stage* (2023) by Mark Tweed. Firstly, it consists of a variety of measuring and marking out tools, followed by other hand tools such as countersink drill bit, screwdriver bits, handsaw, chisels, hammers and spanners to name a few. I will also consider whether to purchase from new, or balance this with second-hand options.

An essential power tool is a cordless drill/driver which would be followed by a rail saw, jig saw, router and sanders which could slowly get added to the kit. Once a workshop is established things like chop saw, table saw and even a band saw can be added.

From my placement at *Bay Productions*, it came to my attention that the sets they build are primarily built with steel frame, rather than wooden, so as well as a woodworking department they also have a welding and fabrication department. While working in this department, and if I was to build sets in the same way, I would definitely need a MIG welder and all the safety equipment that comes with it. To accompany it I would need a tool for cutting steel like a chop saw and many clamps. There are many other tools for different things, but these are the basics that I worked with.

The whole purpose of the placement was to consider my future plans. For me, with what I have learned on my placement and what resources and funding I have, I plan to travel to different scenic workshops like *Bay Productions* and other on- location jobs; if I am lucky enough to find some. My intension is to put the idea of having my own workshop to work from on hold, as it is not realistic for me at the present moment and I believe I will be better off using workshops of companies instead. This is not to say I won't build my own toolkit, but I think it makes sense to focus on building on my skills and maybe building my own workshop in the future.

In *Small Stage Sets on Tour* (1987) by James Hull Miller, they discuss building small sets that are easily transportable with the use of folding screens that can be put together in any configuration; and are also made using canvas so are very lightweight. This got me thinking about the size or workshop that would be required if I needed one.

In *Stage Crafts* (1975) by Chris Hoggett, the book talks about the use of flexible wooden rostras, which are basically used for making staging and can be built in many configurations; these comprising sections are then all bolted together. This makes it possible for someone, like me, with no giant workspace to be able to build a stage that can also be easily transported and assembled on site.

If those working for a company on a freelance basis have a workshop (or access to one) to build in, how is this applicable to people who work from home? The price of building a workshop can be expensive and it varies a lot. Plus, there is the added complication of building regulations, which when followed correctly could get rid of the need for planning

permission. Along with this there is also things like insurance to consider when running a business from home especially if you have things like tools and computers for example that might not be covered under the house insurance. In some cases you would also need to find out if you are even able to run a business from your home if you don't actually own it but for my case that's something I don't have to worry about but if I do plan on having customers visit the shop then there would be different insurance and health and safety regulations to be looked at and put into place(more information on this can be found in the appendices from Gov.uk.. no date). Based on my own personal circumstances and needs I would only need a small workshop and wouldn't have anyone come to my workshop. I looked on *planningportal.co.uk* and on there it gave me information on what registrations I would have to stay within to not require planning permission which based on my needs would be easily achievable. I have put the information in the appendices at the end that goes into more detail what these regulations.

Shipping containers are an option as there are those out there that have converted them into workshops and even homes. They are also transportable and very durable. They also come in standard sizes. They are 8 ft wide and 8ft 6inch high with lengths that include 8, 10, 15, 20, 30 and 40ft. The height is the only issue, as a standard length of plywood is 8ft, which is used in building flats for sets. This would not leave a lot of wiggle room for a working environment. I did however come across high cube options of containers, which are 9ft 6inches tall, which would give a lot more space for working and manoeuvrability (*Budgetshippingcontainers.co.uk.. no date*). On my placement at Bay Productions I did notice that shipping containers where used a lot for outdoor storage due to their durability and the fact they are weather proof so they are definitely a viable option for a possible workspace in the future but for anyone else it depends on what kind of access they would have to where they would want it like in a back garden for example as a shipping container would be transported on the back of a lorry which needs to be taken into account for anyone considering this but for me this option is fine.

Starting a business

I always try to attend the careers fairs that come to campus and the last one I attended I joined Enterprise, which is to help students with employment and business start-up, etc. Through this I get emails about different workshops that pop up and I noticed a 4-week course on business start-up and freelancing, so I joined the course to give myself more knowledge on how to go about this process. I had a 1-2-1 with one of the teachers of the course, who gave me advice on the financial element of freelancing, as this is an area that confuses me. They also answered questions on how I register as a sole trader. Speaking to people on my placement it became clear to me that many of the employees are freelance and only called in when there is a lot of work to do, which is often when a project gets going. It made me think that maybe this is the way as I would not want to be in one location for too long, and this way I would have variety and more options. My first step before finding employment is registering myself as a sole trader on the GOV.UK (GOV.UK, no date) website, which needs to be done if earnings are over £1000 in a tax year and if I am subcontracting my services. At the end of every tax year, I would need to undertake a self-assessment to see what my earnings are and what tax I would need to pay.

From reading the tax rates on Gov.com as a sole trader I can earn up to £12,570 in a tax year and not have to pay tax. Above that the tax rate goes from 20% and upwards depending on how much I would earn. I have put the basic tax rates in the appendices at the end.

Practical build

For a practical experiment I wanted to build a set that could easily be moved, could be built in a small room and could be created using an old set, as my budget was low and I do believe in recycling sets as much as they can be. Out of reused flats and boards I wanted to create a pirate shipwreck. I didn't always have access to a workshop, so any work with power tools had to be planned out. The ship was made in small pieces which I could assemble in the space, this was pre-booked for the set to be used in. To add to it I

also built a cannon from off cuts of polystyrene, which I 'fibre glassed' to make it durable. A lot of other methods could have been used, but again there was a lot of epoxy resin in the workshop, so I only had to get the fibreglass material. Part of the ship and the cannon were displayed at a student showcase we put on at the *UWTSD* campus in Carmarthen, which also showed how transportable it was and then was brought back and put with the rest of the set to be filmed. This did prove to myself that it could be done and I feel I could of done a better job of this if I hadn't all the tasks I had to do also for the rest of the group within this project.

I revisited *Small Stage Sets on Tour* (1987) by James Hull Miller, as it is a very informative and interesting read. It talks about methods of building Broadway flats, but as bifold sections that can be used to cover doorways and placed in all manner of different configurations. What this means to me not having access to a large workshop it means I could build small sets in a backyard workshop that could be used in small productions that I could also transport myself which would cut down costs a lot.

The books content had given me an insight into what can be done within the theatre industry. Although not large theatre productions but small theatre which would be a good starting point for someone like me that is new to the industry and want to go about it on my own. Being able to run a business on my own is my goal as I don't want to have to employ others to help me with my builds any time soon. It's not to say that I wouldn't in the future but this is not my plan within the next few years.



Images of my practical build

Collaboration

For a collaborative element of this project, I also worked with five of my peers who would add extra elements for a short film sequence. There would be a castle, a jungle and a shipwreck, of which a performer would travel to each in a dream sequence using only body movements. I built a structure for a castle window, so that a member of the team could create the scenic art for it. Stone tablet props were created by another member to be placed in the set; I created the jungle by hanging dyed muslin as vines; there was a member who built a model, designed the lighting and filmed it; a puppet creator added a creature into the story; and of course the performer.

Each member of the group had their own particular skill set that they are strong in so it made sense to collaborate with them although it was a challenge tackling different tasks at one time and being chased up to do tasks which wasn't necessarily a priority and could be dished done easily by another member of the team. We had meetings every Monday morning to discuss what point we were at with our part of the project and what our plans were from that day. Questions would get asked and answered within these meetings but sometimes the meeting seemed unnecessary as there was no new

information to add and there was constant communication through messaging on a WhatsApp group chat that we had created at the start of the project.

Between building each set and having to use the workshop, when I could, I found it very difficult to prioritise at times, as it was not a little job. Workshop time was used first, as it was something that could only be done when it was free and the power was on. Then the castle set was the next priority, so that the scenic art could be done on that as soon as possible, before being able to develop the ship - which was my own personal part of this wider collaborative process. Doing this on such a small scale enabled me to do these things on my own when it came to the build which made it easier to do things without have to organise when to get help to do things which is the whole purpose of working as a builder by myself and not having to employ someone else to help when it came to starting my own business. That's not to say that having help wouldn't be useful as it's always handy to have a second person especially when trying to work something out but for the purpose of what I am trying to achieve, going solo is where I need to be.

Conclusion

This dissertation element discussed my topic of: *An exploration into the personal transition from an academic environment to a 'real world' working position: An investigation into the viability of creating a small-scale business building sets, on a low budget.*

I chose to do this as it affects me on a personal level as I plan to start my own business for real and everything I am looking into within my research is because I plan to actually do this for real. Skill building was a very important part of my process which is why I am glad that I did my work placement to learn new techniques, learn how they go from design to a finished set within the real world and also the chance to network with industry professionals gaining different kinds of knowledge from each person I met. Although my ideal area to work would be in film and tv the skills in set design and construction is transferable so gaining skills wherever I can will only benefit me as well as strengthen those connections within the industry.

When and if I do build my own workshop to build small scale sets it will be for theatre as sets for film would be far too much for the size workshop that I would have so I would only really be able to build props for that and would stick to small theatre for sets.

Starting a business as a small-scale set builder is completely possible and I will put into practice everything I have researched as a 5-year career plan. Firstly, networking is my biggest ally, and I will continuously build my tool collection as well as developing my skills further. I will eventually build my own workshop of which to work from but I will aim to work as a freelancer travelling to locations to work on skills and make new contacts firstly as I believe working in other companies workshops firstly would be more beneficial before committing to building my own as I lack the initial funding to start and it will get my foot in the door as to establish myself as a set designer and builder.

Developing new skills is also a good way to create more specialisms as not to confine myself to a small selection of jobs but to expand myself in the market. For the first couple years I will establish myself as a freelancer working for as many companies as I can and slowly build those relationships that will get my name out there before I eventually build my own workshop so I am able to do my own small builds. I will always

freelance for other companies as it's definitely a good way to keep growing and I think this will be the main focus of what I do for a living which I will revisit in my second year but it does give me a lot more variety moving about but I also have to take into account that I am a father and I can't always be away for too long so it's also about finding that work life balance but also being able to provide.

The first thing I plan to do is register myself as a sole trader so that I am able to do freelance work which then I will contact Bay Productions to see if there is any work that I can do which will start the ball rolling with work. Along with this I will do many online searches for other jobs in the hope that I can work a couple weeks at a time to get an income.

Starting a business straight out of university I have found from my research that it is completely achievable and it is only the scale of the business that will take the time to grow and establishing those contracts of which to be able to do it. The key is just to take those first steps and start the process to make the dream a reality.

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Appendices

Appendix I

S.W.O.T

Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats

Strengths • Construction • Making • Can drive • Life experience	Weaknesses • Technology • Organisation • Written work
Opportunities • Can drive • Have transferable work experience • Work placement	Threats • Housing after graduation • Location because of son • Funding

Income Tax rates and bands

The table shows the tax rates you pay in each band if you have a standard Personal Allowance of £12,570.

Income tax bands are different [if you live in Scotland](#).

Band	Taxable income	Tax rate
Personal Allowance	Up to £12,570	0%
Basic rate	£12,571 to £50,270	20%
Higher rate	£50,271 to £125,140	40%
Additional rate	over £125,140	45%

Outbuildings are considered to be permitted development, not needing planning permission, subject to the following limits and conditions:

- No outbuilding on land forward of a wall forming the principal elevation.
- Outbuildings and garages to be single storey with maximum eaves height of 2.5 metres and maximum overall height of four metres with a dual pitched roof or three metres for any other roof.
- Maximum height of 2.5 metres in the case of a building, enclosure or container within **two** metres of a boundary of the curtilage of the dwellinghouse.
- No verandas, balconies or raised platforms (a platform must not exceed 0.3 metres in height)
- No more than half the area of land around the "original house"* would be covered by additions or other buildings.
- In National Parks, the Broads, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and World Heritage Sites the maximum area to be covered by buildings, enclosures, containers and pools more than 20 metres from the house to be limited to 10 square metres.

- On designated land* buildings, enclosures, containers and pools at the side of properties will require planning permission.
- Within the curtilage of listed buildings, any outbuilding will require planning permission.

Running a business from home

You may need permission or separate insurance to run a business from home. You'll also need to check if you have to pay business rates.

Permissions

To run a business from your home, you may need permission from your:

- mortgage provider or landlord
- [local planning authority](#) - for example, if you're planning on making major alterations to your home
- [local council](#) - for example, if you're going to get lots of customers or deliveries, you want to advertise outside your home or if you need a licence to run your business

Insurance

You may need insurance for your business. Home insurance may not cover your business (such as stock, computers, customers visiting your premises).

You can [find an authorised insurer](#) on the British Insurance Brokers' Association (BIBA) website.

Tax allowances

You can include your business costs in your [Self Assessment tax return](#) if you're a sole trader or part of a business partnership.

You can claim a proportion of the cost of things like council tax, heating, lighting, phone calls and broadband. You can use a flat rate to [calculate your simplified allowable expenses](#).

You may need to [pay Capital Gains Tax](#) on the part of your property you used for your business if you sell your home.

Business rates

You may have to pay [business rates](#) on the part of your property that you use for your business.

This depends on whether the Valuation Office Agency (VOA) (local assessor in Scotland) has given a rateable value to a part of your home.

You'll still have to pay Council Tax on the rest of your property.

To check if you have to pay business rates, [contact the VOA](#) (or your [local assessor](#) in Scotland).

You may qualify for [small business rate relief](#) if your property has a rateable value of £15,000 or less.

Health and safety

You'll need to manage [health and safety](#) as you would with any other business.



Images from my work placement at Bay Productions