

## Launching the Welsh National Opera Design Challenge 2023

An online panel discussion for FE/HE tutors to explore the design challenge and its impact on the future talent pipeline.

Date of event: Wednesday 4<sup>th</sup> May 2022

### Event transcript:

#### **Anthony Skates, Partnership Manager at Creative & Cultural Skills:**

Right. So we're recording now. Well, thank you very much for joining us. We were expecting slightly more people, but what we'll do today is record this session and then send it to other colleges that are interested in participating. The message was sent out to several dozen colleges and other providers, and we were hoping for a larger attendance, but people are obviously zoomed out.

So the plan today is to run through an introduction to the WNO, the WNO Set Design Competition / Live Brief, then go through some sessions where people have any questions over that project. We'll explore the history of the project and then we'll go through the running order of the project for this year, for the coming academic year.

So 2022-2023. So the plan is for submissions to be in the next academic year, and we'll run through all of that towards the end of the session. So I thought we would start off, we could just sort like do some introductions. So I'll kick off if that's OK. My name is Anthony Skates and I'm the Partnership Manager for Creative & Cultural Skills in the South West and the West Midlands.

And I'm looking after this design brief project until Sarah Hughes, our manager in Wales, rejoins us later in the year. So Jan, could you give a quick introduction to yourself?

**Jan Michaelis, Technical Director at Welsh National Opera:** Yeah. Hi, I'm Jan Michaelis, I'm the Technical Director for Welsh National Opera and we just relish the chance of having the opportunity to work with CCSkills and the colleges on the design brief.

#### **Darren Joyce, Managing Director of Cardiff Theatrical Services for Welsh National**

**Opera:** Hi, I run Cardiff Theatrical Services on behalf of Welsh National Opera. We are the scenery building workshop, we employ project managers, illustrators, carpenters, welders, drafting team, scenic artists, a whole range of really useful sort of craft skills. And I think hopefully you've got those kind of students in your, in your building. And I think this challenge is really important that it sort of just opens up the possibilities of the world we live in.

**Robert Pagett, Head of Production at Welsh National Opera:** Afternoon. My name is Bob Pagett. I'm Head of Production with the Welsh National Opera, responsible for the production management of all the productions and the making departments for those productions.

**Anthony:** Brilliant. Thank you. And Ian and Jane, would you be able to introduce yourselves just so we know where you're from?

**Jane King:** I'm at City of Liverpool College, I teach the costume course here, but there is a set so I can pass on information if it's only set design, the competition. We do have a technical theatre as well. So I teach level three first year and second year students costume design.

**Anthony:** Thank you, Jane. And we'll come back to the ability of other people from other design disciplines to enter the competition later because last year we had a really healthy set of applications from previous people from across the spectrum of design courses.

**Ian Teague:** I'm sorry, I cut out there, I missed Jane entirely, but I'll tell you about what we do. I'm Ian Teague and I'm the Assistant Director of Production at the Brit School. So we work with 16 to 18 year olds and we do a range, we do all the production art, so we do set design, costume design, lighting, sound and it's a very practical based course. And our students sort of move on to either go straight into industry or onto higher education to do design courses of one sort or another.

**Anthony:**

Thank you very much Ian. Yeah. And would it be possible to sort of like have a chat with you about just, just 2 minutes? Just giving an overview of the WNO for people who perhaps are not...we throw these acronyms about and assume people know who they are, but just an introduction, a brief introduction.

**Jan:** Yes, of course. So we're the Welsh National Opera. We have been in existence for over 75 years now, originally founded by miners, singing miners as it were, turned professional later on. We've got a lot of history of producing, of producing well known shows, as well as the slightly less well known shows, a long tradition of offering up world premieres within WNO and creating our own productions. We are the largest arts company in Wales and we have the largest touring opera company, at least in the UK, and occasionally we aim to be larger than just the UK company.

We tour regularly in the UK twice a year. So in many respects we are also the opera company for places like Birmingham, Southampton, and Plymouth, Milton Keynes, Liverpool, and we really relish that thought that we can get around the country and we're not just set in one theatre. Of course within that lies the slight predicament that whatever we create as a production needs to be able to fit both into the Cardiff venue, a huge venue, the Wales Millennium Centre that we are in, and much smaller venues around the country.

So from the word go, as a touring company, we need to keep an eye on our productions, being able to fit a very large space and a very small space. We are a full time ensemble company, we have about 70 people within the technical department on a permanent basis across all sections in the department and it's a huge range of skills. And is anything, Ian I guess you will relate to that, if you're teaching in all of these disciplines, it's anything from truck drivers, through to carpenters to costume makers, wigs, makeup people, and of course the stage electricians, stage management people - so it is quite a large department that work together on the production of our shows. That's the very potted history of WNO.

We do about 90 of these productions a year plus events and ancillaries. So it's a busy company as well. But we are always, always, always looking for new talent. And this is one of the major opportunities for us to see really young, raw talent and perhaps people who haven't even decided yet to come into theatre design, but certainly into our business and our industry.

**Anthony:** Thank you very much Jan. And so to move on from that and talking to Darren now, Darren, what is the design challenge?

**Darren:** I've no idea! The design challenge is an opportunity, I think, for students to take on the role of an operatic or a theatre designer and do and go through their process. So they are given three synopses of one of the acts of the opera to read and to understand. They get to choose which of these three synopses they wish to design a set for.

And then what we want to see is, is how they do their research, how they how they sort of decide that they want to tell the story that's presented in that synopsis. So we asked them to do, I guess, the historical research that is looking at a lot of people tend to look at some of the other productions that have been done, I guess in some ways it's useful as a point of reference.

But I think actually sometimes those photographs of other people's work can sometimes heavily influence, and that's not always a good thing. I think it's useful to be able to run with your own ideas. It's developing a storyboard so that we can see the sort of the logic of how their interpretation of the act unfolds.

And then there's the sort of technical aspects of it in terms of designing something which is actually physically achievable. There are lots of things you can achieve on stage, and one of the joyous things about this project is that we don't encumber it with any kind of financial budget. So you're allowed to let your imagination run wild.

I think if you can physically produce a physical model of what you're asking to see on stage, there is a 90% chance that it could be achieved, whether the three of us have the ability to be able to actually achieve that, what we do have is a wealth of knowledge and contacts with people who probably could transfer it.

And I think what we find really interesting is when someone comes to us with a presentation or the translation of a story or a synopsis, it's how... we immediately jump into trying to think about how we would actually achieve that on stage. And I think that's always

a really interesting moment for us when someone who isn't necessarily in theatre design all the time manages to come forward with an idea that challenges three relatively seasoned professionals who've been in this industry for, well, let's say, a long time.

That's a that's a really stimulating thing. And I think it also opens up to those individuals that take part, the range of possible career paths and options that are available in this slightly mad industry in which we work in. And of course, we are very much ensconced in sort of theatrical production. But there are so many transferable skills in terms of theme parks or general TV, film and the commercial branding sector.

So the disciplines that someone would pick up and use doing this challenge are hugely transferable across a really wide range of creative disciplines.

**Anthony:** Thank you Darren. My personal experience of working with WNO and Cardiff Theatrical Services is that the skills are definitely transferable because I once had some people on placement with you in my last job who were TV and film set design, weren't they, rather than theatrical set design. So definitely transferable. Just to follow on from that with all three of you, last year we, we did, as part of the design challenge, just to let you know Jane and Ian, we did Tosca and the young people who entered the program created a scene that was based on a scene from Tosca. What was your feedback from last year? Because we did it slightly differently in that obviously everything was submitted virtually and we also allowed people to involve enhanced and virtual reality in their concepts.

What was your feedback from that and how does that feed into our plans for this year?

**Darren:** I think, so last year we... can I jump in Jan? So last year we talked at length about the sort of the traditional model or the traditional version of the challenge, which was research based and very much a sort of a traditional physical model presentation. And that could have been photographs or drawings.

But alongside that, we also we wanted to try and appeal to people who might be on gaming courses or ensconced in a more digital environment. So we separated it out into two different classes. We had the sort of traditional challenge and then the separate group of people who wanted to submit their design as a virtual reality headset or digital presentation.

And in all honesty, it threw up some really interesting ideas. But I think upon reflection, what we realized is that separating them out into different categories was slightly to the detriment of the challenge, because what we're looking for is, is how effectively someone is able to put their ideas across and so we want them to be able to do that in any medium that they feel comfortable working in.

And as such, rather than segregating, actually, we should be able to pitch the sort of traditional presentation against the more developed digital presentation. And there were lots of really interesting ideas thrown up because we had a good number of applicants. So it was good, it feels like with everything that's gone on over the last 12 months or so that it was a very, very long time ago.

And I think that's why we're keen to try and make sure that the challenge picks up a bit more momentum this time.

**Anthony:** Great. Jan have you got any feedback on that?

**Jan:** Yeah. Just to jump in, I think for students to submit their designs in whichever way is absolutely fine. And I think absolutely right, there does not need to be a separation. However, the one thing that was really noticeable is that in terms of containing the scale and making it something that we can actually, could put into practice theoretically, some of the digital world just went a little bit too far in terms of, in terms of scale and potentially weren't entirely anchored in something that you could physically achieve.

So I think the brief to the students, you know, even if you present it digitally, try and keep it at a point that could actually be presented on a stage in the physical realm. And vice versa. If you present a physical model it is quite important for us also to understand finishes. But our main thing from all of this is that we can follow, someone said earlier, that we can follow the logic of design, that we understand what the emotion is behind the design rather than potentially the finished article itself and that's really important to us, is that narrative.

**Anthony:** Right. Thank you very much. Bob, do you have anything to add to that?

**Robert:** The only thing I would say and I think it probably comes from us more than anything, is that I think what would help the students if we provided a sort of footprint that we wanted them to work within. I think if we say think about putting it on a stage, that could mean any stage.

I think we need to probably give those guidelines. And I think Jan's absolutely right, the thing, the only thing that I thought was lacking from last time was maybe understanding the thought process as the ideas developed, because you could sometimes see a very reasonable thought process that suddenly changed to a design, that you couldn't quite understand where it came from.

And it was very different from where it started. And I think just being able to follow that story through is really important from a design point of view.

**Anthony:** Great. I think that's an important point and perhaps over the next couple of weeks, because obviously this is a very early launch, over the next couple of months before we have the formal launch and everything is sent out to the colleges that are interested in participating in this. But I'm sure we will develop some specific guidelines for this year which will be sent out to all of the entrants and I look forward to working with you on that and Sarah when she comes back.

So that's the project, that's the WNO, that's their history, that's the feedback from last year, which was Tosca obviously. So we're not sure which opera it's going to be this year yet, but it's obviously going to be something within the WNO repertoire. Jane and Ian, at this point, I've got a few questions that I've prepared just to sort of like define the discussion, but do

you have any questions that you'd like to sort of like just butt into at this point? Ian over to you first.

**Ian:** Definitely. And so first of all, I'd like to know what the dates are, what the timeline is on it.

**Anthony:** Yeah, I'll I'll be running through that at the end. Ian Brilliant.

**Ian:** I've written down 'what is going to be the opera?' You said it will be announced, that's fine.

**Jan:** It's likely to be either La Bohème or The Magic Flute. So it's a standard repertoire piece.

**Ian:** Right? OK, that's great. You talked a little bit about a footprint. Is it going to be a specific venue? From my point of view, that would be quite helpful. If it was a real venue, we could have ground plans and stuff, or is it going to be like, it needs to tour to this venue and that venue or, you know, that would be useful to be clear in the brief.

**Robert:** Yeah, I don't think it'd be a problem we can choose a venue and provide the plans that you require for that.

**Ian:** And... it seems like you're sort of fairly open in terms of the format in which they submit it. Is it a physical model? Is it... you've talked about storyboards, are we physically submitting things? Is it going to be digital? Is there going to be an exhibition or anything? I'm not quite sure how that works.

**Jan:** I think you can probably do either. I mean, we wouldn't be expecting a full model at this stage. I would say the designs can be either hand-drawn in a folder and sent to us. They can be they can be digital. But, you know, having said that, it is really up to your students how they want to translate or explain the idea to us in the best possible way.

Practical things, of course it's much easier to send an electronic file, but an electronic file is always got a little bit of a drawback because it doesn't quite, I haven't seen one so far that translates the personality of the student into the set design to be honest. With more handmade or hand-drawn things you tend to get a little bit more of a feel for the students.

We've had some in the last year that was a mixture of both where the final model was digitally created and printed and put into a folder, together with the scrapbooks and thoughts and all of those things. We don't want to be too restrictive OK, it's fine.

**Ian:** I mean, I'm looking at this as this is something we can sort of fit into our curriculum or on our timeline and so it might be that if we internally set some sort of guidelines and say we want to model one scene or whatever, then you say it seems that you're fairly open to what it is they submit.

**Jan:** Yes, I think normally in the brief, when it comes out, the brief will have a design brief within it. We would normally be asking, depending on the offer, we would say, take La Bohème for example, we would be asking just for one act and not the whole opera.

To focus on say yes, but we can absolutely work with you on what you need it to be to fit into the curriculum.

**Ian:** It all sounds really exciting. And do they win anything?

**Jan:** They have in the past. When we originally started, we were giving tickets or access to WNO work placements. Now these things never quite worked out. What we have done in the most recent history is to go back to the tutors of the winners, of people who've been nominated to see if we can find an individualized gift for them. So they've been different gifts, but there's a prize at the end.

**Ian:** OK, that's brilliant, that's all my questions. Thank you very much.

**Anthony:** Thank you Ian, very useful. Darren, you wanted to interject to that point.

**Darren:** I did. Very, very quickly. I think it's more as a bit of feedback in some ways, because the range of sort of HE and FE institutions that we try and get attracted to this kind of challenge, it may be we try to steer really clear of putting too much theatre lingo in.

And so with you and the courses that you've got, you're quite specialist in quite an early age. And so I think there is if, if the Brit School is interested in taking part in the challenge, it probably is a slightly different dialog with you and your students about what the expectations are just because of the environment that they are in, compared to someone who may be doing a costume course at a different college which is maybe a little bit more general.

I think we've tried really hard over time to sort of make it as accessible to as wide a range of colleges as possible. So it may be because you are more specialist that there's a slightly different, different level of communication with you, so that it fits with your curriculum.

**Anthony:** And what I would say in previous iterations, while I've been at a distance, I've noticed there has been quite a lot of dialog during the period of it. You know, that if questions, you know, once the competition has started, if there are still questions that you need to ask to define issues that come up, I mean, everybody involved in the project is more than happy to have a conversation about that.

I think it's not a closed door by any means. Jane, do you have any questions?

**Jane:** I think Ian's probably asked most of them, but I think all I was going to ask was if so you would want all of the students to say, I've got 18 students in a class, you'd want all of their work, we wouldn't choose one of them as our finalist, because I've worked on competitions where that's what we would do.

You know, as a college we would choose a finalist and then that would go into sort of, you know, a finalist against all of the other colleges. I don't like doing it. I'd prefer that it was other people who are looking at my students work, you know, from our point of view, that's a nicer way of doing it. If you've got a good body of students.

**Jan:** I think, you know, from my point of view, the competition has never been overrun that we didn't get the time to go through the entrants. I would probably prefer more students rather than somebody who has been selected because we might be looking for a

completely different thing. So far, hope I'm not going to live to regret this - the more the merrier!

**Anthony:** I've got one question here for the three of you. In the past entrants, we've had a couple of entrants, well every year, where the submissions seem to reflect more of their coursework that they've tweaked towards the competition rather than being specifically focused on the live brief that you've set. Would you have any guidance around an approach to that? About specifically focusing on the brief rather than trying to fit it into the coursework?

**Jan:** I think when the Director's vision comes out, there will be three visions for the piece, which we ask the design students to fulfill. Those three briefs are generally open enough that they will fit within whatever the current coursework is, so they can range from traditional to contemporary to slightly off the wall, I think would be the right name for it.

So they can, they can fit in there. But there needs to be an arch back to explain how it actually fits together with the brief that we've given. Say if it's a specific opera and we've all been to, to see opera and they they've got a wide range of interpretations and the interpretation needs to be there and the logic behind the interpretation needs to be there.

**Anthony:** And another question I've got I suppose is that opera is obviously a, you know, a performance based art form. It's within a performance venue, is there anything that the young people who are participating in this program need to think about in terms of opera as being unique within a performance space? Any particular characteristics that they need to be aware of?

**Darren:** Yes, the singers, the performers would need to have sight of the conductor, is something to sort of think about. And as much as we're not asking them to direct the piece, there is an element, I think, when you're sort of talking about the narrative and the rationale behind your design, where you sort of take on that role.

And you select an opera where for example, a soprano who has a huge solo in the middle of that, but in the real world, that singer is going to want a direct line of sight to the conductor. So that they can perform I guess, in a way that is technically suitable for them. And the same with opera, you wouldn't necessarily look to have a whole load of surfaces in your environment which are going to absorb every bit of sound.

In some ways, what you don't want to get people so bogged down in this, but you want to try and create an environment that allows a single singer standing on the stage to be able to sing at 100% and know that they're going to be heard over the 50/60 piece orchestra and a full a 2000 seat auditorium. So there is something to be considered in terms of physical surfaces what happens to sound, direct line of sight to a conductor I think is useful. I mean none of these things are absolute dealbreakers but it is if we were going to put a professional production on, it is something that the designer would consider to an extent.

**Anthony:** Thanks Darren. And just to come back to one point that you mentioned earlier, Jane, which we need to consider. Last year we had a very wide range of entrants and one of the winners was actually I believe, a fashion designer on a fashion course from I think Swindon College. So perhaps can we have a few minutes about those students who perhaps are not on specific stage courses but might be interested in entering?

Are there any things that they you know, obviously, we are going to be sending the brief to them and the guidelines. Is there anything that they need to consider that perhaps they're not aware of, that a student on a specifically stage based course might be aware of?

**Jan:** This comes back a little bit to the to the actual design brief that they will be given. But just the physical elements of it I mean, over the years we've had certainly had somebody from costume design, we've also had a graphic designer who have won the competition before. And again, it shows that it is the interpretation of the brief and taking that director's vision into a coherent design. I believe we are going to have a CPD day with the tutors as well.

I think it will be really important for the tutors to attend that day so that we can outline physical space a little bit better and how that works and try and translate through to the students irrespective of their of their backgrounds. And, you know, if you wanted to put it really, really easy, it's a space that has got a certain size in which these elements need to fit and translate the story.

So yes, we can we can give more guidance. And of course, as we're going through the process, Anthony, there's a constant feedback. If there is a particular course of students who want to explore more with us or their tutor isn't certain about the design brief, then we are there to give those answers and to some degree sort of take them through the process.

**Anthony:** Thank you very much. Bob, you wanted to say something.

**Robert:** I was just going to follow on from that I think it's also about the vision and interpretation the student has about the piece. I don't think any of us would expect any student at this age to know technically that everything they're thinking about and hoping to do within their idea would work necessarily. But I think the vision behind it is equally as important at this stage.

**Anthony:** Great Bob. That's I think that's covered almost everything that I thought would been of interest to the participants this year. Jane and Ian, do you have any more questions before I move on to the next section which is running through the running order of the competition as it's going to work in the current iteration?

**Ian:** No, I just want to know the dates really.

**Anthony:** Yeah, OK, right. So we'll go through that bit now, which is the final bit of the session. So, this is obviously an informal sort of almost pre-launch, but running through some of the issues which allows some of the tutors to discuss that. We'd hope for more people today, but this video will be sent out to other people.

So in June 2022 we're going to be formally opening the sign up for the design challenge. So there will be an email coming out to say 'are you interested in participating?' And that will be a formal commitment to take part. And at that point as well, Sarah Hughes who is our Welsh manager will be returning to line manage the process as she'll be coming back from maternity leave.

Then by the end of this academic year, which will be June/July obviously, we'll have confirmation of participating colleges and universities and all of the CPD events that we're planning to run next year to support the program. So that will be coming to you by the end of this academic year. September 2022, obviously the start of the new academic year and all of the resources will be sent out to the participating colleges and universities and there will be confirmation of the CPD events because we'll know who signed up to the events.

There will be a CPD event for the tutors probably in October 2022 about how to make best use of the design challenge. And the plan is this year that if possible, that will be held in person in Cardiff, I believe. But those are my notes from Robert.

We ran it virtually last year, but I think everyone agreed that if we can do it in the real world, it is a much better experience for the tutors.

December 2022, we'll be sending out all the additional resources for universities and colleges obviously based on feedback from that CPD event and then the challenge will open in January 2023 which is obviously what you're interested in Ian and Jane, to make sure it fits in with your program, your curriculum. And the program will close in March 2023.

So there's a two to three month period where the actual development will be happening next year. Judging will be in May 2023 and the winners will be announced in June 2023. So as you can see the bulk of it is a formal program that's running through next academic year. And as I said, this was part of the process of making sure that we could really launch it early this year and get and get our minds around it.

What do you think about those timetables Jane and Ian?

**Ian:** From my point of view, it's not great in that I'd be looking at this as a design project, as a theoretical design project, because we do a lot of realized productions. I was sort of hoping it would be a little earlier in the academic year, that we could maybe start it because the January to March period is likely to be quite a busy time for us students on realized productions. So I'd have to look at the brief and see how we could fit it in, if it was at that point. To be honest.

**Anthony:** There is nothing to prevent you though Ian, you'll have most of the information after the CPD event in October, so you could start a lot your prep and the students could start thinking about it from that period and even beforehand, because you can think about the stages, but we can have that discussion later.

**Jane:** So I mean, for me to fit in with us, I would prefer to sort of like to start like the beginning of the academic year because October they will be actually designing shows that will happen in January. But I mean, I'm very keen that we could take part, so when the information comes out, we'll do our best to see how we can work with that.

**Jan:** I think so from our point of view Ian, if they're the drivers in that academic year because you won't be the only one in that position, we can we can adjust that. I'd much rather adjust the timescale to have more participants rather than to exclude participants. So it's really important that you keep feeding that back to CCSkills.

**Anthony:** We can adapt, I mean the CPD day is down in the agenda for October but it's not fixed yet or anything like that.

**Ian:** So yeah I mean I think because we are such a specialist institution I don't know whether I mean I, I would be very happy to run this with my students in the early part of the academic year without having done the CPD. You know, so in a sense, if we started early, we might feel that my students were getting longer, but they wouldn't because they would only have a certain amount of time on it before they moved onto other projects. And so anyway, it would be nice to see how that transpires.

**Anthony:** And Jane, how does that work for you?

**Jane:** I'm probably similar to Ian where it's like earlier in the year is better because it's more of an introduction to what we do. And then quite often you have that sort of January time, I have a live brief that I work with a local youth theatre, so we quite often have that space for making costumes or, you know, they have a lot of shows and stuff downstairs as well. So there is a lot going on from January onwards, really. The first term is where I introduce them to the sort of themes and stuff like that. So it would work probably better in the first term.

**Anthony:** OK, well we'll have a chat about it and see how we can best process it. And well, I think that's as much as I need to cover in today's session. I hope that's been of use to you both in attendance and Jan, Darren and Bob. I hope, has that helped you clarify some of your thinking about it?

As I say, this will be available as a recording, so it will be available for follow up. We'll make sure we send the link through to everyone and to other people who couldn't be here today. And I suppose that's... unless anybody has got anything else to say, we can start thinking about closing it down.

Thank you very much.

**Jan:** Thank you for attending. I really appreciate very much. Looking forward to it. Yeah.