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A vision for video

LSi talks to video and projection designer Nina Dunn, who projects the needs of video design in theatre . . .

UK - Nina Dunn is an award-winning video and projection designer, working internationally across opera, dance, theatre and live events. She is also among the first group of designers and programmers working in video to join the Association of Lighting Designers (ALD) since it broadened its membership.

The group recognises a large gap exists between the practical requirements of video as a design tool in theatre, and the expectations and understanding of the medium on the part of both producers and those being educated to enter the discipline for the first time.

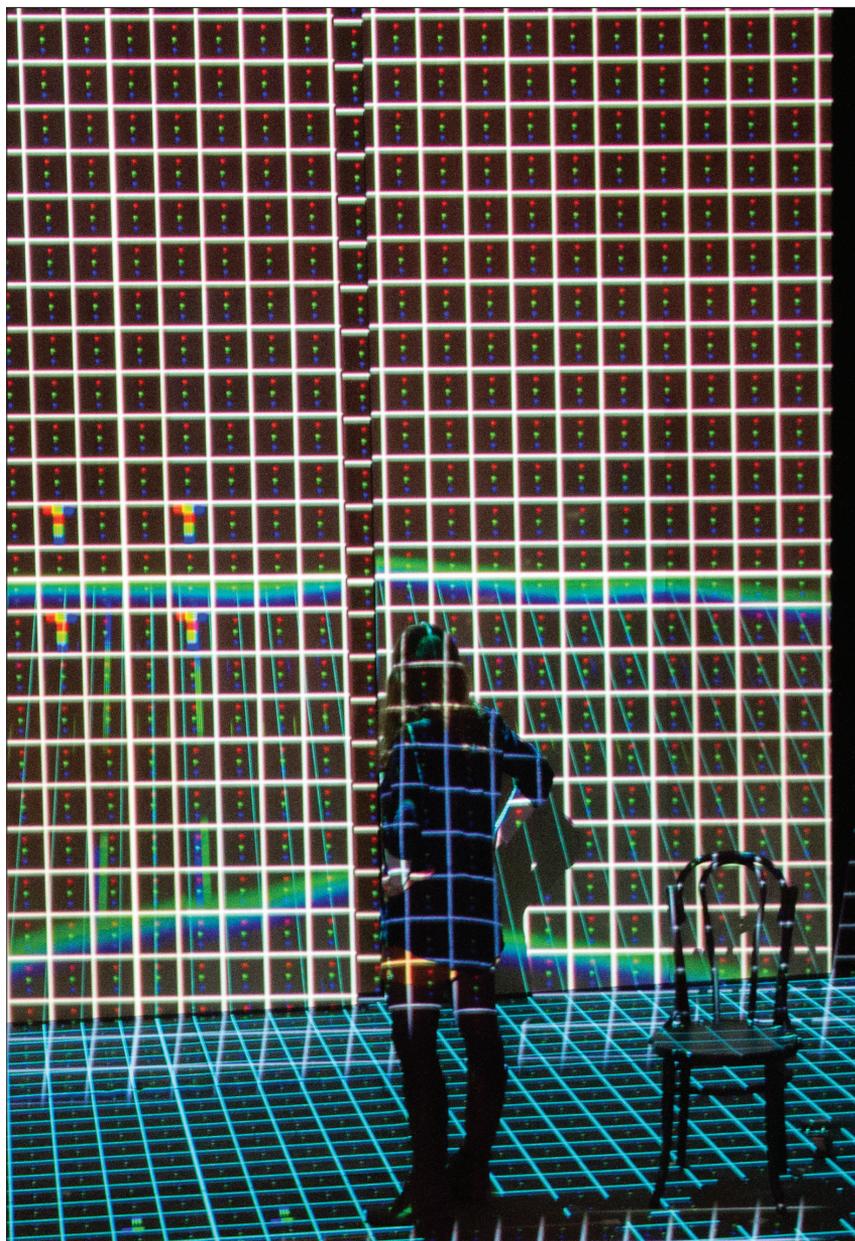
It's a gap Dunn would like to see bridged. She asserts: "We need more video designers to join the conversation. It's one of the reasons I joined the ALD and I would encourage more video designers to do the same. Engaged as solo entities, video designers face the same working vacuum as lighting designers. However, knowledge sharing and communal skill development within the discipline of video design is not as accessible as it is in more traditional spheres of production. Students are also hard-pressed to find the hands-on development - specifically in content creation techniques - that they need for the job."

For Dunn, collaboration is the keystone to progress. Over and above 'virtual team' collaborations, she passionately maintains that, "the studio environment engenders learning and the sharing of ideas that lead to fresh, new work. Video designers are now setting up their own studios for both content creation and technical exploration with innovations in theatre practice often supported by the commercial work that they engage in."

Formal training for video design simply didn't exist when Dunn was starting out. Her route to theatre came via broadcast, where she worked on projects for very little money to gain experience and skills. She comments: "Broadcast is a very collaborative environment, because everyone is working with the same or compatible integrated software and often on the same project, so they share their experience through hints and tips."

Corporate production work paid the bills, and one such job - which she remembers as "very dry, really!" - unwittingly aided her career transition. Creating content for and programming the early wave of OOH advertising screens, trained her to "create fit-for-purpose content and I discovered the cue-ability of live data."

Those skills prepared Dunn for her first



role in the theatre industry, where she was asked to be the go-between for talented animator, Charles Peattie, and the theatre programming team. She explains: "Neither side had the right skill-set to join A to B, so I came in between, as the person who could turn this sort of hand-drawn animation into something viable for the programming side."

However, ten years on, Dunn says, producers still occasionally fail to put in place that bridge. She continues: "Video a multi-disciplinary role like no other in theatre, as no hybrid skill-set exists. When

time is short and expectation high, a team approach is needed and must be budgeted accordingly."

Dunn's concern is that the obvious routes available today are problematic and indirect. Often, those who *do* know how to create quality and engaging content from the film, broadcast and gaming worlds, "frustratingly, don't know enough about theatre to make it work". She explains: "Live content must be flexible because it needs to be broken down into cues and adjusted to lighting, choreography and set changes."

So, what are the answers? Dunn sees

the solution in three-fold action: "First, we need to further educate producers about the video designer's role, and the costs and manpower that needs to be involved. After all," she says candidly, "the best way to land up with the kind of poor and failing video design that producers fear is to not man it properly!"

Secondly, Dunn would like to see a permanently hosted forum or virtual studio with resources to help producers and content-makers alike understand the process of putting together a video design. She envisions a place that would "encourage more video designers to share experiences, flag pitfalls and give advice. We should encourage shared knowledge and best practice because innovation is one thing, but we don't all want to be reinventing the wheel on the basics."

As more video design roles than video designers currently exist, Dunn believes best-practice and knowledge sharing should be encouraged.

"Live content must be flexible because it needs to be broken down into cues and adjusted to lighting, choreography and set changes."



She maintains: "With an online forum, designers could publish their portfolios so producers or directors can easily take their pick from the different styles and levels of experience within the community." Dunn would like to see video designers chosen primarily on their portfolio rather than their availability. She says: "I'd rather be picked for a job that is right

for my approach than because nobody else is available!"

The final piece of the puzzle for Dunn is the involvement of students via a forum and the ALD itself. She adds: "It would be great for students to learn and ask questions via a forum, and it's important they get access to video designers and that tool set."

With frustration, she admits:

"I don't have all the answers, but for me it comes back to collaboration every time. More people with an interest in video need to join forces for the greater good. To assist us and the ALD to provide training, bursaries and a more creatively enhanced future for technology in theatre." ✕

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