

FACT SHEET:
STAGE SET
CONSTRUCTION
& DISPOSAL

By Helen Heathfield
Julie's Bicycle



Sets are often used to enhance the performance platform for the artist on tour, embodying the show's artistic vision. Current industry practice is to transport the set with the artist whilst on tour around the world and dispose of it when the tour or specific leg is over (unless the set consists of aluminium staging or rental gear which is usually hired and returned at the end of the rental period – one example of this is LiteDeck by LiteStructures). The transporting and disposing of stage sets and designs can produce a large amount of GHG emissions and can end up being very costly in the production budget. This makes the construction and planning of sets a significant consideration when preparing budgets, and hiring the production team and crew. Be it the materials sourcing, the construction process (including painting and decor), or the storage and disposal methods, the lifecycle of a stage set under current industry practices is wasteful and poses a challenge to environmental sustainability that has so far been overlooked by the industry.

Challenges

Materials

Live music events have more varied sets than any other industry, ranging from metal and aluminium structures consisting of several floors, hydraulic lifts and turning circles, to hand-made props and set backdrops made from woods and fabrics. When determining the sourcing and the type of materials used to construct stage sets, props and backdrops, the main consideration is the budget available to realise what the artist or event producers want from the show.

Whether it is hand-crafted or specialist props, or stage sets and backdrops, each material used comes with its own environmental credentials and associated costs. For example, whereas wood would be considered biologically carbon neutral, aluminium and steel are associated with an energy-intensive manufacturing process which requires electricity – this translates into the burning of fossil fuels and the generation of GHG emissions. When wood is being used for set construction, different species will have varying environmental credentials; for example, plywood, depending on the method of harvesting, transportation and processing, can be very environmentally destructive, but if used in whole sheets and Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certified, then it can be both sustainably sourced and recyclable.

It is this complexity that means early engagement by the creative teams and production managers is crucial in creating and delivering an environmentally sustainable set, whilst remaining true to the creative vision of the artist or the event producers. A lack of awareness means that construction materials end up being chosen regardless of their environmental credentials, with production managers and creative teams resistant to switch to newer, more sustainable materials.

Storage

A critical consideration related to budget is storage of the set when not in use. A tour will often run on a tight budget which cannot accommodate storage facility fees, particularly when the possibility of re-using the set in the future is uncertain. An artist might not know at the end of a tour, when he/she will next tour, and even if they do, the tour is likely to have a completely different look, making the set unusable or an unnecessary expenditure to keep. The end result is usually landfill disposal as most production managers of tours and events are unaware of local recycling centres, or locations where sets can be suitably recycled or reused.

Local sourcing

An artist and their production team are also constrained by practicalities when planning a tour, such as the need to transport the set with the artist as opposed to sourcing the materials and

constructing it locally. With short performance periods in each locale, it is often unfeasible and impractical to construct the set locally. The end result is the generation of GHG emissions produced by the various modes of transportation (e.g. planes, ships, trains, trucks) carrying the set around the world.

So what can be done?

Scenery Salvage, based in London, is creating a pioneering model of set storage, re-use and recycling for theatre and TV industries that could be extended to the music industry. The company buy props from companies that no longer need them, and re-sell them at reduced prices from a centralised online catalogue. They are also able to pick-up, store and recycle sets, which customers pay for per tonne of weight. Scenery Salvage are looking to expand capacity and reach, by relocating both office and reclamation centre to one site that will be more centralised, with potentially a biomass boiler and biodiesel generator on site and possibly creating regional satellite hubs around the country. Until then however, artists and their production teams have an obligation to do what they can to ensure that the set construction and disposal process becomes as sustainable as possible.

www.scenerysalvage.com

Set-Exchange.co.uk is an online “freecycle” website for theatre in the UK. Members can post props, materials, furniture, equipment and other items which they no longer need for the benefit of the community, making it easier to source and reuse materials for productions.

www.set-exchange.co.uk

General advice

- › In the case of larger tours, where a whole creative team is involved, the team should be employed early on to develop and share an artist’s sustainability and creative vision for an event or tour. Becoming involved early on in the process will enable them to source sustainable materials and/or where possible, rent components.
- › Renting stage decking and structures can easily help to reduce brand new manufactured aluminium and steel components. Particularly in the case of steel and aluminium construction there are several suppliers who provide steel deck and stage construction on a rental basis. This means once the pieces are manufactured, they are purchased by a rental supplier, who then rents the components (in different sizes) to production companies according to their specifications. The parts are then returned, and sent out on the next job as and when booked by the rental company.
- › For companies working in creative design and set construction on behalf of the music industry, owning storage space will save the costs and carbon emissions of constructing and manufacturing the same sets (or similar) in the future, by simply re-using older sets.
- › If disposal is the only option, production teams need to learn about the different disposal options available, including the potential use of companies such as Scenery Salvage. The production team should also liaise with local partners (whether they are promoters or venue staff) in advance of the touring date or event in order to ascertain local recycling centres and dispose of stage sets in the most sustainable way possible.
- › It is also important to carefully consider whether all parts of the production are worth freighting while on tour or whether certain parts can be constructed locally.