

imitating the dog: Set and Costume Design

Abby Clarke on designing for imitating the dog

introduction

Abby Clarke has designed sets and costumes for imitating the dog. Her work with the company includes *War of the Worlds* and *All Change*, the opening event of the S&DR200 festival marking 200 years of the Stockton & Darlington Railway. Here she explains how a set is designed around projection and live cameras, what happens when a design decision doesn't work, and what she would want a student designer to notice.

This document is based on a written interview. Abby's answers have been edited into continuous prose; the words are her own. A short glossary at the end explains the technical terms.



Abby Clarke in *War of the Worlds* (2026) rehearsals

the design process

Where a design starts

With ITD's shows, innovative use of technology is at the forefront of their way of storytelling, so the first practical problem to solve is facilitating those elements within the stage space. Working closely with Simon Wainwright, the video designer, to understand the practical requirements was a key first step.

In *War of the Worlds*, a big priority was creating a set-up that would work for the Pepper's ghost effect for the wide shots, as well as projection backdrops for the mid and close-up shots. Working with Si, we discussed what we needed for the projection and the Pepper's ghost: at least one back-projected screen for visual backdrops, and another light-absorbent black screen that could work as a backdrop for the Pepper's ghost effect.



War of the Worlds (2026): white card session

In the second R&D, we used a trapezoid structure of two angled side screens and one black backdrop to help shift between the different shots. Because it's important not to light the floor when creating the Pepper's ghost illusion, I suggested gaps between these screens to allow for side-lighting to pick up the performers. Once we'd found a layout that supported the technology, I could work on how the set could reinforce some of the themes and ideas that had been developing in the piece.



War of the Worlds (2026): fit-up at Cast, Doncaster

When a decision doesn't work: the costume change

One of the biggest design changes in *War of the Worlds* was the costume. Travers' costume was set from the beginning, but I'd originally imagined that the three medical staff who manipulate the world around Travers would be in 1960s civilian clothing, initially with white lab coats and then with small costume additions throughout as they inhabited different characters. But we found that it felt too theatrical as a convention, and also that the performers wouldn't have time for those changes amongst the live filming, setting up shots and acting. There was a lot of discussion with Pete and Andrew about the right approach.

Late in the process we tried 1960s hospital scrubs instead of lab coats, and this surgical uniform made much more sense of Morgan, Amy and Bonnie's characters as hallucinations of Travers' nightmare. Aesthetically it felt really right: the green with red blood stains knitted together with the colour grading on the video design and the lighting design. It did mean saying goodbye to some beautiful period costume items, though.



War of the Worlds (2026)

Making the set and the projection cohere

The hardest thing to get right between the set design and the projection is for the theatrical worlds to feel cohesive. In *War of the Worlds* we had two distinct visual worlds: the theatrical world on stage, and the apocalyptic world of the film we were creating. The filmed moments were often made up of a mixture of the live filming of the actors, who were interacting with 2D 'cut-out' props, detailed 1:25 scale models, and digital cityscapes and landscapes in the background. These are distinct elements that have to come together to make a believable image when filmed and projected above the stage. A lot of this is achieved with clever lighting design from Crofty (Andrew Crofts) – lighting the actors and props from an angle, and with tones that match the video design and camera angle – but it also relies on communication between the projected and 'real' elements of the design.

Simon, Davi Callahan and I were communicating before the rehearsal period to establish a distinct aesthetic for the world: a greyscale, model-like environment coloured with harsh neon tones. Some of the digital world was created from photographs or sketches of the set world, and some of the props were created from screenshots of the digital world, to tie them together on screen. A late change we made was to the Morris Minor car door prop, which the performers would stand behind against the digital background for the road-trip scenes. We'd made a grey one with silver relief detailing, but on camera it felt jarring against the stylistic aesthetic of the video, and wasn't reflecting the lighting in a way that matched the rest of the shot. We ended up photographing the 1:12 model car under the miniature lighting rig, enlarging it and using a cut-out of that image instead, which suddenly brought the whole film shot together. That continued dialogue and adjustment between the different departments is what brings all the shots together.



Projecting the model car for *War of the Worlds* (2026)

specific challenges

Materials, colours and surfaces

Designing a set that works as both a theatrical environment and a projection surface puts particular demands on materials. For *War of the Worlds* we'd initially designed the space as a trapezoid structure of three black screens: two black back-projection screens at the sides and a black serge screen at the back. We wanted the screens to be able to disappear into a void-like space, like the depths of Travers' mind. When it got to the tech rehearsals, however, we found that the black back-projection material was dulling the projection too much, and not giving us the visual punch we needed for the majority of the scenes. We ended up switching them for grey screens and always having content on them, including the continuation of the surrounding mesh pattern, which brought out more of the cage-like aspect of the space. One of the things that makes the R&D and technical rehearsal processes so valuable is the ability to try different materials and ideas, and make those changes.



War of the Worlds (2026)

Costume built for the work

Costume for ITD performers has to serve physical demands – crawling, camera operation, extreme movement – that conventional theatre costume doesn't. The costume design is often the first element of a character the audience will encounter, before any dialogue is spoken, so it's important that the costume visually supports the storytelling as well as practically allowing the performers to achieve their storytelling on stage. In *War of the Worlds*, the biggest demand on the performers was time, so we removed any costume changes from the track. That kept the uniform divide between the hospital staff in the operating theatre, dressed in blood-stained scrubs, and Travers in his hospital pyjamas, but it also removed a practical demand on the performers that would have taken away from their ability to operate the cameras and set props. Because the costumes are shown up close on camera, the level of detail needs to be convincing: in this case, the vintage fabric for Travers' pyjamas and the blood-spatter patterns on all of the characters' clothing.

In *All Change* – ITD's opening ceremony for the S&DR200 festival – the practical demands were multiple quick changes, ease of movement (the performers had to run across a 100m-wide field as part of the performance), and coping with very cold outdoor temperatures. Working with the costume supervisor, we built in extra layers, found comfortable vintage shoes, and had pockets and pouches for heating pads built into the costumes. This was all hidden under period costumes that worked for the detailed shots on the video wall, but also had a strong, consistent visual theme of blue to help the audience follow the characters within the large performance space.



All Change (2025) for the S&DR200 Festival

for students

What isn't obvious from the auditorium

The most important thing for a student designer to understand – and it isn't obvious from watching the productions – is how collaborative the process is, and how different the rehearsal process is from many rehearsal rooms. If you were to walk into ITD rehearsals at the start of the process, it would look more like a set-up for tech: the majority of the set is in place from the beginning, and all of the creatives and technicians from the different departments are represented in the room at all times, including set and costume design, sound and composition, video design, lighting design, production management, direction and acting. Because the video, projection and technology is integral to every part of the performance, and so intertwined with the other departments, it's vital to have everyone in the room working together to problem-solve and build each other's work into their own element of the production.



War of the Worlds (2026) rehearsals

What to pay attention to

What most people don't notice is the level of detail that goes into incredibly fleeting moments. In shows like *War of the Worlds*, where we are creating a film on stage, you are thinking about the performance in shots rather than scenes, which means there can be elements, like some of the scale model world pieces, that have taken days to make but only appear on screen for eight seconds. It mirrors the way the show itself works: each of the performers and design elements working incredibly hard to get into position to make a single shot work, then immediately dismantling it to make the next moment work. A big joy of watching those ITD shows is seeing the endeavour of the performers to make these impossible-seeming shots over and over again.

Another aspect is the way scale is constantly being played with. Pete, Andrew and Si often talk about the enjoyment for the audience being in the disparity between the shot you see on the film and how the performers are actually making it on stage. The model and Pepper's ghost elements are one of the extreme examples of this: using these tiny-scale elements to create our widest shots.

A favourite moment

The Battle at Ashford

One of my favourite moments from *War of the Worlds* is the Battle at Ashford, which came about from playing around with ideas as a team on stage. The model table gets brought out centre stage, and we have Morgan as the Artillery Man performing this wild monologue, narrating the war as he looms over a model battlefield. Bonnie and Amy's shots cut between the miniature battlefield, puppeteered with tiny soldier silhouettes on sticks, with the Tripods roaming across the screen behind; the Artillery Man's monologue; Travers against a backdrop of flame-lit far-right rallies; and close-ups of a model battlefield from above. It's a complete blend of old-school theatre tricks, powerful acting, clever camera work, analogue model-making, lighting, sound and video design that is incredibly satisfying to see work, and powerful to watch as an audience member. As well as being a brilliant visual moment, I think it really captures the ambition and the collaborative nature of the company.

glossary

Pepper's ghost — A Victorian stage illusion that uses an angled sheet of glass or film to make a brightly lit subject appear as a ghostly reflection floating in space. ITD used it in *War of the Worlds* to composite live performers into filmed shots.
Back projection — Projecting an image onto a screen from behind, so the performers and audience are on the other side and don't cast shadows on it.
R&D — Research and development: short exploratory workshop periods used to test ideas before full rehearsals begin.
Black serge — A dense, matt black wool fabric used in theatres because it absorbs light rather than reflecting it.
Track — A performer's complete sequence of tasks through a show: entrances, costume changes, camera operation, prop moves, and everything they are responsible for, in order.
Scale model (1:25, 1:12) — A miniature built at a fixed ratio to the real thing: at 1:25, one centimetre on the model represents 25 centimetres in reality.

» Try it yourself: Miniature World Building (Exercise 7) in Adaptation and imitating the dog: Practical Exercises (Section 4).

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Photography of *All Change* and *War of the Worlds*: Ed Waring. Photos of the *War of the Worlds* white card session and fit-up: Abby Clarke.