

SBTD GUIDE: BECOMING AN ASSISTANT DESIGNER



Assistant Designers Register

Becoming an assistant designer is not for everyone but for those with a strong range of the skills below it can prove to be an invaluable way of entering the profession, allowing you to earn money and gain experience of working on productions that are likely to be larger in scale and / or greater in than projects you might be commissioned to design yourself.

Through this process you are likely to gain a broad range of contacts and be recommended to others either as an assistant or as a designer in your own right.

Being on the register does not replace directly contacting designers you are interested in working with. Be persistent and patient. Designers might not always know they need help at the start of a job or the assistant they regularly work with may not be available. If they have heard from you regularly through going to see their work or to tell them what you are up to, it is much more likely that your cv might make it to the top of their pile.

Designers really need to be able to trust their assistants – sometimes you might be representing them at meetings, so it is really important to them that you have an affinity with their working methods and the aesthetics of their work.

Working with Designers

To create this guide and to relaunch the Assistant Designers Register on our website, we consulted with a number of established designers.

They all agreed that the most important skills of all were very good communication skills and the ability to work to a deadline.

Remember that you are likely to be working with established designers in this role because they themselves are dealing with deadlines, often combining a number of projects, so being calm and good humored are also key.

[We asked some established designers who have worked as assistants for their top tips:](#)

AN 'When I used to assist I often went out costume and prop shopping with the designer (sometimes with a costume supervisor as well) - this was a brilliant way of getting to know her style and tastes, as well as finding out about the best places to source stuff. She expected me to remember where we'd seen particular items, help keep track of expenditure as we went along, and once we'd been on a trip or two together, to go on my own to find remaining items. It was definitely of mutual benefit, and I've since asked assistants to work in a similar way with me.'

EB 'I definitely changed my style to suit different designers. The more minimal the design, the sharper the model needs to be. Some designers give you very accurate technical drawings; and other a sketch and some dimensions. Both ways of working are valid. The process becomes more challenging when the design isn't quite solved and you find yourself trying to rectify technical problems whilst creating the model pieces.'

What pointers would you give to designers starting out as to successfully building such relationships?

EB *'I'd say to try and understand the position and what designers need. Essentially you need to be accurate, quick and multi skilled. This includes technical drawing and some Photoshop, as well as model making techniques in card, metal (soldering), molding and casting, and sculpture. I found it helpful to have a specialism, in my case soldering, and to be clear about your strengths.*

Then, don't be afraid to ask. Most designers will give you a try out if you dare to approach them! Then just be a good houseguest, be on time, be friendly, be fun to have around. Make beautiful work but don't be precious about it, models are for a purpose. Make friends with other assistants as they will help you find assistant work and will act as a support network.

I got my first few contacts doing work experience. I lived in Leeds so my first assistant design opportunities were at West Yorkshire Playhouse and at Northern Ballet Theatre where I met Lez Brotherston. After that most work came by recommendation, often by other assistants. Once I had a bit more confidence I approached more designers who's work I respected and built a little network.'

And we asked some established designers who use assistants regularly for theirs:

AF *'I tend to prefer to find someone for long term as I think the relationship you build is so important. I only really feel I can hand over as much as I usually need to if I feel that then assistant speaks the same or at least similar language and can reliably represent me or when researching for example find what I would be interested in.*

One very big point for me is always reliability. I need to know that someone will be there on the days agreed. In our business you need to be sure of peoples commitment. I'd rather have someone with slightly less perfect model making skills who is fully committed and willing to go the extra mile.

JV *It is useful to know if the person has had any credits to their name as a designer/associate designer/co-designer on any production (costume/set/both). As well as studio work on model/ autocad etc, it's very difficult to find the right person to cover for you if necessary on stage, at fit ups, production week etc - they need to have initiative on these occasions and confidence in taking design decisions on your behalf, so a mutual interest in each other's design work & way of working is very important. Although it's very rare for me to be N/A for production week/at costume fittings, etc it can happen, especially on revivals - it's a very different skill to studio work, - the assistant/associate/co-designer is then credited in the programme accordingly.*

Identifying Skill Levels

No two designers are the same and the combination of skills needed to assist on a particular project are not always the same either.

Next to each skill you will see that you can indicate whether your skill level is

Excellent
Very good
Proficient

Please be honest.

Where you are available to work

We are often asked for recommendations of assistants based outside London. If you are willing to travel to London to assist, please bear in mind how this will impact on what you earn.

When working from a base outside London, consider how far you are prepared to travel on a daily basis, bearing in mind that hours of work may vary and run in to the evening.

Please do register in more than one region eg. East Midlands and West Midlands if you think being available for work in both is feasible.

Should you decide to join us, this is the information we will ask you to provide :

Name :

Email :

Mobile:

Short description (200 words) of assisting experience :

Training :

Date of graduation :

Referee 1 (Name, Job Title and email)

Link to online portfolio /website :

Referee 2 (Name, Job Title and email)

Photographic evidence of your model-making and/or other key skills which can be included in your Gallery on the SBTD website.

Geographical locations where you are available for work :

You will find examples of this on the Assistant Designers Register;

<http://www.theatredesign.org.uk/-pages/christiannamason/>

Drawing Skills and Programmes

Please indicate your skill levels in combinations of the following sufficient to produce working drawings, plans and sections as DWGs.

SKILL	EXCELLENT	VERY GOOD	PROFICIENT
Drafting by hand			
Vectorworks			
Autocad			
Turbocad			
Sketch Up			
Ability to note if this drawing is 2D, 3D or both			

Other Computer Aided Design Skills

Please indicate your skill levels in combinations for graphic presentations / renderings / Mood boards / 3D modeling and printing.

SKILL	EXCELLENT	VERY GOOD	PROFICIENT
Photoshop			
Illustrator			
InDesign			
Video Editing			
AV / Animation			
3D Printing			

Model Making

Please indicate your skill levels in combinations of the following to be able to produce 1: 25 and 1:50 models. It will be very useful if you can include some examples of your model-making skills in your online portfolio.

SKILL	EXCELLENT	VERY GOOD	PROFICIENT
1:25 model making			
1:50 model making			
Mould making and casting			
Figure making			
Sculpting			
3D Printing			
Painting			
Creating surfaces and textures			

Research/Sourcing Skills

SKILL	EXCELLENT	VERY GOOD	PROFICIENT
Period knowledge of costume and set			
Basic knowledge of construction methods and materials			
Ability to put together digital mood boards			
Prop and costume sourcing			
Knowledge of prop houses, hire shops, local knowledge of shops			
Ability to keep track of petty cash			

Practical Skills

SKILL	EXCELLENT	VERY GOOD	PROFICIENT
Paper prop creation			
Scenic Art skills			
Hand sewing skills			
Prop and costume Machine sewing skills			

Other Skills and Experience

These might include:

- Working within rehearsals
- Note taking
- Second Language
- Driving Car /Van
- Knowledge of sustainable practices
- Credits of your own as designer, co-designer or associate designer

Please specify.

[The Assistant Designers Register is available to view publicly on our website.](#)

You can join the Assistant Designers Register as a Graduate or Professional Member of SBTD.

<http://www.theatredesign.org.uk/membership/join-the-sbtd/>

We look forward to welcoming you.

If you have any questions, please get in touch via our administrator
admin@theatredesign.org.uk