

# Setting the Stage

Award-winning scenic designer **Christine Jones** shares the artistic process behind her enchanting Broadway and Metropolitan Opera productions.

by Allison Malafronte

A groundbreaking set designer must possess not only the imagination to create the ideal environment for a specific performance but also the ingenuity to make every seat in the house feel intimately connected to the stage. In a sense, a scenic designer is part artist, part scientist and part magician, combining elements of engineering, architecture, fine art, acoustics and lighting into one seamless presentation. Christine Jones—the Tony Award-winning scenic designer of the play *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child*, as well as the upcoming production of *La Traviata* at the Metropolitan Opera (the Met) in New York City—has all of these skills in spades. Over the course of her career, she has managed to create larger-than-life sets that still somehow speak to an audience of one.

## CONNECTING ACTOR AND AUDIENCE

Growing up in Canada, Jones was introduced to the stage through dance, an art form she practiced passionately throughout her adolescence. Her love of dance performance led her to study drama, and she eventually became as involved and interested in what was going on backstage as in what was happening onstage. Jones was fortunate to have mentors and teachers early on who introduced her to set design as a profession, specifically scenography—the art of creating theatrical scenery through architecture, design and painting. Jones went on to receive her B.A. in English literature and theater from Concordia University in Montreal, followed by an M.F.A. in design for the theater at New York University.



 **BROADWAY PRODUCTION**  
Lyric Theatre marquee

PHOTOS: EXTERIOR: JENNY ANDERSON; INTERIOR (DETAIL): MANUEL HARLAN



## STAGE SET

The grand stage of Broadway's Lyric Theatre, where *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child* is currently showing

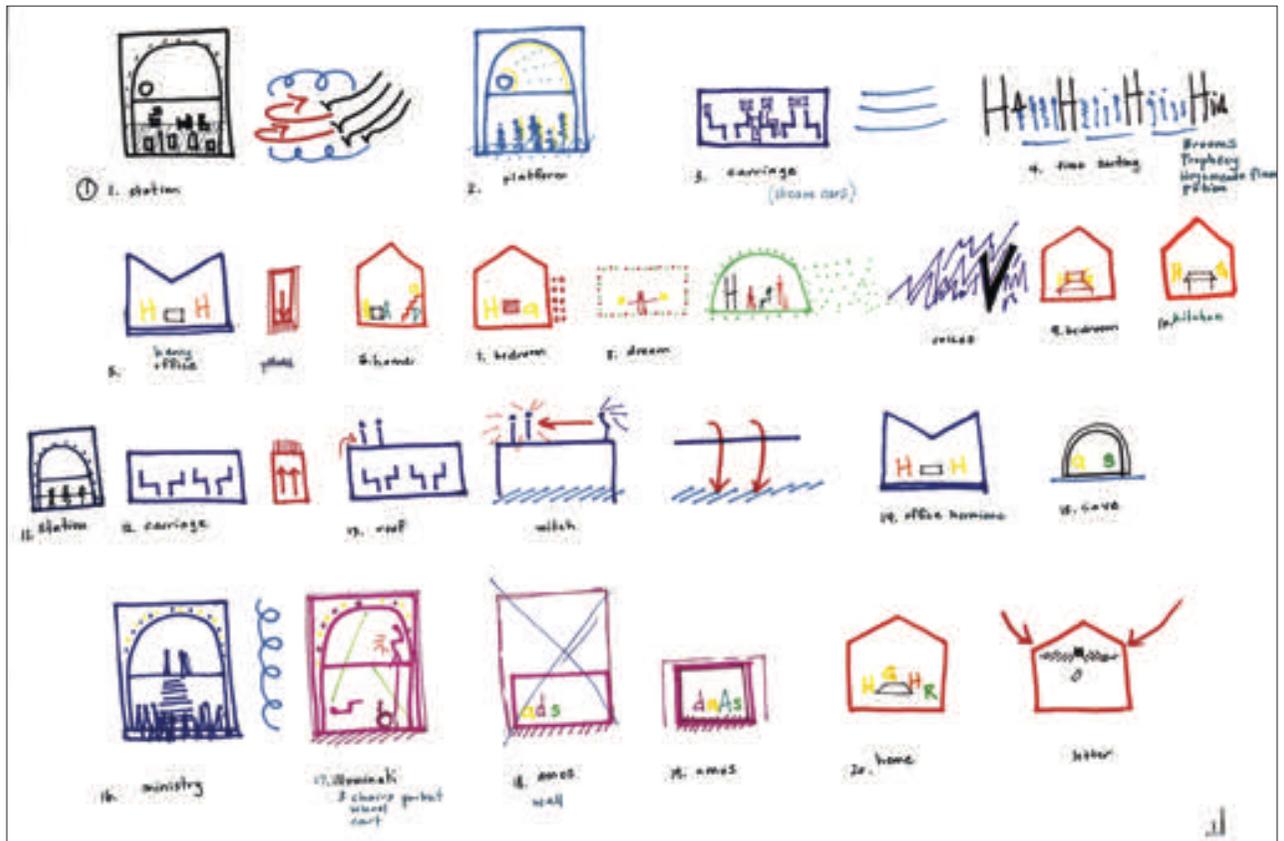
“In set design you’re essentially creating a three-dimensional painting.”  
—CHRISTINE JONES



## HARRY POTTER COLLAGE

A collage of photos and sketches provided inspiration and reference material for Jones' set design of *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child*.

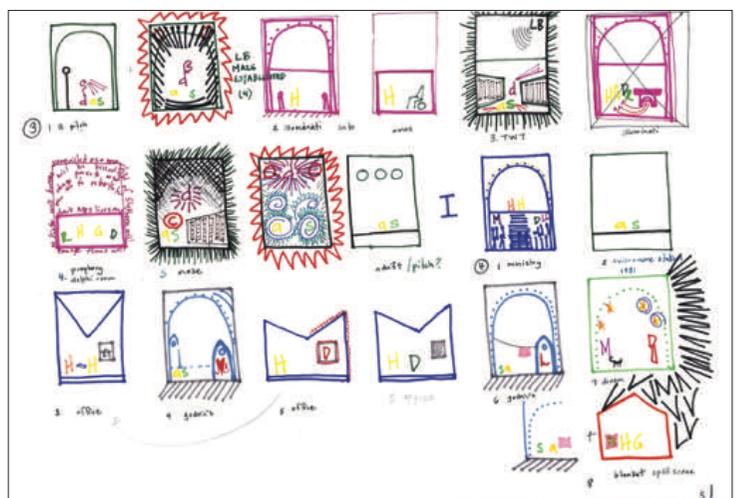




As Jones’ professional work in scenic design progressed from small regional theaters to major national and international productions, she became particularly interested in and adept at what she calls visual acoustics: the spatial and experiential aspects of a theater performance—specifically, how the actors and audience connect to each other. It has been Jones’ desire to break down the theater’s fourth wall—the invisible divide between the stage and the audience—in order to create more authentic and personal connections between actor and audience. To further unpack the potential of this concept, in 2010 Jones launched the Theatre for One™ project, a portable performance space designed for one actor and one audience member. By working on this critically acclaimed project, she gained an understanding of small-scale spatial relationships and sight lines, which she then used to inform the creation of her large-scale set designs.

### SCULPTING A SET

In explaining her process of scaling a story to the stage, Jones likens the set designer’s approach to that of a sculptor working in the round or an artist painting on canvas. “How you organize space on stage and how you place each element



### HARRY POTTER STORYBOARDS

Simple diagrams on storyboards, like these that Jones created for *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child*, enable Jones to envision chronological stage sets for successive scenes.

has a profound effect on how the audience experiences and processes what they see and hear," she says. "It's actually a very sculptural endeavor. You're thinking about carving space with shapes and light and considering how light affects the appearance and color of the structures. In many cases, we also have the proscenium, which acts as a frame around the stage. In set design you're essentially creating a three-dimensional painting, designing the composition to fit within that framework and factoring in how the environment and figures look in relation to each other from various perspectives in the theater."

Whether Jones is building a Theatre for One™ or a major production for the West End or Broadway, her design process begins with the script. This first step happens in collaboration with the production's director, and Jones dives right in with an in-depth dissection of the dialogue. "I read the text several times carefully and note paragraphs or series of phrases that have some sort of poetic relationship to each other," she explains. "I then create a series of sketches, which help me untangle the movement of the story and understand how the bodies are moving through space. A significant amount of research comes next, and I turn research boards into collages to begin visualizing the ascendant themes. Last, I make a three-dimensional scale model (usually out of paper and cardboard), which becomes the blueprint from which the craftspeople begin building the scenery."

## CHOOSING A FOCUS

Jones' latest scenic-design endeavor finds her pairing up once again with her longtime creative partner Michael Mayer, the director of the upcoming production of *La Traviata* at the Metropolitan Opera in New York City.

## SEE THE SETS (AND SHOWS!)

*Harry Potter and the Cursed Child* is currently playing at the Lyric Theatre, in New York, and at the Palace Theater, in London. In 2019 it will open in select other cities, including San Francisco. For more information, visit [harrypottertheplay.com](http://harrypottertheplay.com).

*La Traviata* opens at the Metropolitan Opera in New York City on December 4 and runs through April 27, 2019. For more information, visit [metopera.org](http://metopera.org).

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## MODEL AND SET

The actual stage set for the Metropolitan Opera of New York's upcoming production of *La Traviata* (above) is based on Jones' scale model of the set (left), complete with cardboard standups of the cast.



In the staging of classical opera—the librettos and music of which were predominantly written in the 18th and 19th centuries—contemporary directors and scenic designers have the artistic liberty to set the story in any time period they see fit. In the case of Verdi’s 1853 *La Traviata*, the Met’s 2005 production created a contemporary-design precedent with its modern, minimalist setting and staging à la Marilyn Monroe’s 1953 performance of the song “Diamonds Are a Girl’s Best Friend.” Mayer and Jones, however, decided to build the scenery around the emotional crescendo of the tragic story, creating a beautiful, elaborate set of the style of the 18th-century that changes with the seasons. “We wanted to focus on what is happening emotionally and musically at the time of Violetta’s death, as she flashes back to various defining moments of her life,” Jones says. “Ultimately, a set will reflect the aspect of the story you most wish to convey.”

Whether designing for *La Traviata*, a Harry Potter play or another project, Jones has always aimed to match the scale of the set to the scale of the story. She does this by combining the artistic principles of composition, color and light with the theatrical principles of dramaturgy, scale and visual acoustics in unexpected and aesthetically impressive ways. Add to these qualities Jones’ sincere concern about how each audience member sees and experiences a production, and you have a show with a guarantee that every seat in the house will be a great seat. ♡

*Allison Malafronte is an arts and design writer, editor and curator based in the greater New York City area.*



## ▲ SET CHANGES

At top is Jones’ actual stage set during a rehearsal of *La Traviata* at the Metropolitan Opera. Below that image is Jones’ cardboard model. Comparing these images with those on page 19 reveals changes involving props, lighting and the spectacular skylight.

▶ FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT CHRISTINE JONES, VISIT [CHRISTINEJONESWORKS.COM](http://CHRISTINEJONESWORKS.COM) AND [THEATREFORONE.COM](http://THEATREFORONE.COM).

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