

**Etudes:** an online theatre & performance  
studies journal for emerging scholars

## **Constructivism Meets Disney: A Scholar-Artist's Directorial Approach to *Newsies: The Musical*** By Lucas Skjaret

### **Abstract**

In the business of commercial directing, certain productions become so deeply embedded in the cultural imagination that they set the standard for all that follows. As directors, we must navigate these influential works, either by engaging with their legacy or consciously diverging from it. In my own practice, I explore this dynamic using a director's concept. This article examines that concept and considers how to approach what I call "haunted texts." To illustrate my process, I discuss a hypothetical, unrealized production of *Disney's Newsies: The Musical*, created in collaboration with professional scenic designer Leazah Behrens. For this experiment, I adopted Constructivism as my guiding concept, discussing how that choice informed our creative decision-making and led to the development of initial scenic design renderings. In doing so, I propose one way the director's concept can be used to expand and refine the professional practice of directing.

## Constructivism Meets Disney: A Scholar-Artist's Directorial Approach to *Newsies: The Musical*

By Lucas Skjaret

In the business of commercial directing, there is a portfolio of shows in which a single production has become so ingrained in the zeitgeist that it serves as the industry standard that all future productions must acknowledge. From black tights and sheer tops in the 1996 revival of *Chicago* to a turntable stage from the *Les Misérables* premiere, these original artistic choices are irrecoverably tied to those texts; they are, as Marvin Carlson would say, haunted by that specific past production (Carlson 97). As stage directors, we must contend with these past productions, either by actively including or excluding them from our artistry. Within my work as a stage director, I implement the notorious director's concept to facilitate this exchange.

I define a director's concept as the visual anchor that supplies unity within the production. This unification not only affects the visual aesthetics and scenography but also the staging decision, marketing, and all other key production choices. In other words, the concept is a visually rich metaphor that all the creatives in the production interpret for inspiration and guidance. As Anne Bogart wrote in *A Director Prepares: Seven Essays on Art and Theatre*: "Decisions give birth to limitations which in turn ask for a creative use of the imagination" (Bogart 59). The concept, in turn, is the primary decision a director must make. While many directors find the idea of a director's concept unnecessary, an effective concept imposes a clear boundary for the creative team. The concept's limitations are a wellspring to draw from; its parameters are guiding, not inhibiting. However, I feel the

use of concept falters when it is employed as a superficial aesthetic for novelty rather than a visual metaphor grounded in the text.<sup>1</sup>

To explore my use of a director's concept and how to contend with such haunted texts, I sought to collaborate through an unrealized, hypothetical production. By doing so, I would document my practice in applying a director's concept and ensuing collaboration. I partnered with professional scenic designer Leazah Behrens<sup>2</sup> in this experiment-exercise. When deciding which script to explore, I turned to Disney's robust portfolio of titles, as they are among the most notorious (or, one might say, infamous) texts haunted by their past productions. The choices made either by the original filmmakers or stage adapters have become so intertwined that any future productions must acknowledge them, often opting to include that iconography as it is 'what the people want.' From a redheaded little mermaid who wishes to visit the surface, to a bibliophilic French beauty in a wide yellow dress, to a platinum-blond Nordic woman unpinning her hair in a climactic act of letting go, those first choices have become almost as prescriptive as the text itself.

---

<sup>1</sup> For other writings on the director's concept, see Robert Knopf's *The Director as Collaborator* and *Collaborative Stage Directing: A Guide to Creating and Managing a Positive Theatre Environment* by Jean Burgess. I should note that Knopf argues against the use of concept as it is commonly associated with auteur directors whose heavy-handed choices often counter the playwright's intention. Instead, Knopf argues for directors to find a "core action" of their script. Despite this different vocabulary, both my perspective of concept and his core action are meant to engender unity and logic within the overall final production.

<sup>2</sup> Leazah Behrens (she/her) is a freelance scenic designer based in Minneapolis, MN. She has worked with over 20 theaters as a designer, scenic arts or Technical Director, Behrens is also a member of IATSE (International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees) Local 13 working as a stagehand for live events (Broadway tours, concerts, corporate events and many more) throughout the Twin Cities area. She has taught at Southwest Minnesota State University Willamette University, The University of North Alabama as well as for her union. She holds an M.F.A. in theatre arts: Scenic design from Wayne State University's Hilberry Repertory Theatre and a B.S in Theatre Arts and Art: Graphic Design from Southwest Minnesota State University. You can see more of her work at [LeazahBehrens.com](http://LeazahBehrens.com).

I settled on Disney's *Newsies: The Musical* because it is one of the few Disney scripts with which I am least familiar, both as an audience member and as a theatre director. Despite my personal distance from the text, I still began the project with its ghosts whispering in my ear: descriptions of ludic city boys sporting smudged, grinning faces, adorned in earth-toned trousers and suspenders, alongside unbuttoned vests, with their apropos-named newsie caps thrown midair in defiance of authority. I knew the show centers on dance, male talent, and old-timey New York City charm as its key selling point for producers. I have personally never met a tenor who has not considered a song or two for their audition book. Despite my lack of familiarity with the piece, these associations—however blurry—remained within me throughout the experiment.

Based on the 1992 musical movie, *Newsies* was adapted for the stage in 2011, with Alan Menken as the composer, Jack Feldman as the lyricist, and Harvey Fierstein as the book writer. It became an overwhelming success on Broadway and has since enjoyed a robust life in the regional circuit, consistently being selected by professional companies, community theaters, universities, and high schools. *Newsies* was also the fastest Disney musical on Broadway to turn a profit. Within seven months, the producers recouped their initial \$5 million investment (Healy). The musical's story is based on the real-life Newsboy Strike of 1899. It follows 17-year-old Jack Kelly, the informal leader of a group of rag-tag and plucky boys at an orphanage who pay their way as newsboys. The story's conflict begins when Joseph Pulitzer, the editor of the *New York World*, imposes higher circulation requirements to increase profits, despite the labor abuse this will cause among the newsboys. Eventually, the newsboys strike against Pulitzer for his mistreatment. The musical ends with the boys' victory as Pulitzer concedes to their demands.

As stated earlier, director concepts must be mined from the text. Their efficacy is not valued by novelty—such as setting *Hamlet* on the moon—but rather by how well it unifies all production facets. Its holistic efficacy stems from the director’s interpretation of the playwright’s words. After listening to the recorded soundtrack and reading its libretto, I pulled a series of quotes that I believe encapsulate the text’s overarching thematic idea. I have discovered that quotes are a strong first step when creating a director’s concept.

Friends of the friendless seize the day  
Raise up the torch and the light the way. (“Seize the Day”)  
Wrongs will be righted if we’re united. (“Seize the Day”)

Even though we ain't got hats or badges,  
We’re a union just by saying so  
And the world will know! (“The World Will Know”)

Just look around at the world we’re inheriting  
And think of the one we’ll create  
Their mistake is they got old, that is not a mistake we’ll be making  
No sir, we’ll stay young forever! (“Watch What Happens”)

For me, these quotes set the strongest foundation for my understanding of the narrative. *Newsies* is a musical that investigates social injustice, exploitative labor practices, and the young as they learn to harness their collective power against the corrupting forces of the American bourgeoisie. To put it in a more distilled statement: *Newsies* is a musical about community, revolution, and reconstruction.

As I processed the quotes and weighed them against my understanding of the narrative, the notion of Constructivism came to mind.

This early-20th-century cultural movement had an abstract, austere aesthetic that reflected the modern, industrial world. It is part philosophy, part political theory, and part artistic style. However, all ideas require me to balance the artistic equation of sorts, that is, to test how strongly the concept aligns with the piece's core. A "cool idea" does not necessarily mean the best idea, so more research is needed to ensure that it as a concept is truly guiding rather than purely unique.

Cubism and Futurism heavily influenced constructivism. Often attributed to the abstract, geometric constructions of Vladimir Tatlin, it quickly spread through Russia during the early 20th century. Its rise coincided with the Russian Revolution of 1917, as the same ideologies and beliefs of its revolutionaries echoed amongst the Constructivists. Followers of this philosophy were often called "artist-engineers" with Alexander Rodchenko and Eli Lissitzky being two of the most well-known. In *Russian Avant-Garde and Radical Modernism*, Dennis Ioffe and Frederick H. White explain: "The name with its Latin root, was meant to signify technical, productive creation. This was a logical development of the recurrent modernist obligation to construct art, to reconcile art with a modernist lifestyle" (Ioffe and White 13). The 1920 publication of *Realistic Manifesto on Constructivism* by sculptors Naum Gabo and Antoine Pevsner gave mechanized wings for the 'ism to spread.

By 1921, Constructivism was fully intertwined within the field of fine arts and architecture. This artistic approach "intended to provide a blueprint for the new society that was to emerge after the World Revolution" (Ioffe and White 16). For Constructivists, the world needed to be destroyed and rebuilt, as Russian Constructivist designer and theorist Aleksei Gan wrote in 1922. This publication superseded earlier treatises and became the leading guidebook for the growing roster of artist-engineers; Gan was a primary influencer in shaping Constructivism's aesthetic. In his

view, Constructivism was the creative agency of the Revolution, and he called for all artistry to be maximized as a political weapon while simultaneously minimizing the actual artistic output; for him, art needed to be reduced to its most simple, functional form, such as street signs, posters, and clothing. Gan also argued that the workers themselves should create a new theatre within this Constructivist mentality. He wrote that “contemporary proletarian theatre—is not art. It is vital creative work” (Gan XV). For Gan, all artistic expression should be under the domain of the proletarian workforce as a means to rebuild for that better, more efficient tomorrow.

Shira Wolfe’s<sup>3</sup> article on Constructivism in *Artland Magazine* distills the cultural theory of Constructivism down into a far more manageable ideology useful for communicating with my fellow theater makers:

In Constructivism, the role of the artist was re-imagined – the artist became an *engineer* wielding tools, instead of a painter holding a brush. For the Constructivists, artworks were part of a greater *visual* program meant to *awaken the masses* and lead them towards awareness of *class divisions, social inequalities, and revolution*. The Constructivists believed that art had no place in the hermetic space of the artist’s studio. Rather, they thought that art should reflect the *industrial* world and that it should be used as a *tool* in the Communist revolution. (Wolfe; emphasis added)

From this definition, the similarities between Constructivism and *Newsies* start to align – or as I like to put it, the equation is balancing. Both center

---

<sup>3</sup> Shira Wolfe is a Dutch-American poet, writer and translator based in Amsterdam, whose work is situated within a multilingual space. She teaches poetry at an asylum seekers center in Leersum, the Netherlands, and has worked extensively with refugee communities in Belgrade, Serbia, where in 2018 she co-founded the creative therapy organization Talas Creative Therapies. She is a contributing writer for *Artland Magazine*. [www.shirawolfe.com](http://www.shirawolfe.com)

around revolution and mass engagement; the Constructivists and newsboys react through collective solidarity against oppression. They are also both responses to capitalism and its exploitation of workers for the benefit of a select few. Both call to act for revolution and change, with *Newsies* performing a storybook ending to that revolution. Cathy Turner echoes Wolfe's emphasis on reconstructing the future in *Dramaturgy of Architecture: Theatre, Utopia and the Built Environment*. Turner explains that this type of "theatre was conceived as part of the architectural project of building a new society, a project that involved the orchestration of people, buildings and spaces, and the inscription of meanings and memories onto the streets" (84). On a larger, philosophical stance, Jack and his gang are interpretations of Soviet artist-engineers.

Wolfe continues with a clear explanation of the Constructivist's style that augments theory with visuals, helpfully translating cerebral ideas into practical points of reference for collaborative conversation:

Constructivist art focused on *industrial production*. Constructivists used stripped down, *geometric forms* and *modest materials*. Their visual language existed of forms that they could draw with *practical instruments* like compasses and rulers. Materials like *wood, glass* and *metal* were analyzed and judged on the basis of how suitable they were for use in *mass-produced objects and images*. (Wolfe)

From Wolfe's explanation, I started to see the visual potential of this concept beyond the more intellectual association. Any concept that lives solely in a logocentric form will falter in practice. As the saying goes, "A picture is worth a thousand words," and while it may be jejune, the adage's simplicity applies to the effective use of concept in theatrical production. I needed to ensure I could find engaging imagery of Constructivism that not just inspires me but could inspire a creative team.

Research, however, can be a dangerous trap for a director. As Pamela Howard and Pavel Drábek advise in *What is Scenography*, research can easily become far more engaging than the production itself. They foreshadow that when research overwhelms the creative process, “Programmes become small books, lavishly illustrated with the fruits of the research, archive photographs of previous productions and erudite semi-academic articles”(Howard and Drábek 79). While their advice is intended for student scenographers, this warning holds for directors: if we become too caught up in research, all we will be able to do is stage research—and no one wants to pay money for that show. For my own personal inquiry into Constructivism and its history, I investigated a smörgåsbord of Constructivist inquiry: manifestos written by artist-engineers, journal articles that dissect its historical context, and specific scholarship on how it has influenced other artistic forms. However, I eventually narrowed my efforts to articles in which the authors’ heavy academic parlance is made readable and accessible dramaturgy; the sciences have their communicators, and I sought out individuals who do the same for the arts. My past experiences have taught me that such saturated texts often weigh down the creative team, drowning them in discussions of the writing rather than synthesizing the research for the stage. For me, armchair scholarship tends to be the most useful, pragmatic, and cited in collaboration; everything else is for my own private directorial practice.

After researching the actual works produced by the artist engineers, four images became my keystones: Lyubov Popova’s scenic model for *The Magnanimous Cuckold*; Alexandra Ekster’s rendering for *The Satanic Ballet*; Eli Lissitzky’s painting *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge*; and Henryk Berlewi’s *Reklama Mechano*. Although I acquired more photos and images, I selected these four to represent my concept. Initially directed by Meyerhold, Popova’s set for *The Magnanimous Cuckold* is the

quintessential example of Constructivist scenography. Constructivist scenography emphasizes the human body; it is meant to be engaged with, not around. It should be jumped on, slid down, and climbed up. It should be a mechanized jungle gym to showcase the actor's athletic expertise, and Popova's scenic design celebrates that kinetic functionality. Alexandra Ekster was also an exemplar of the Constructivism movement, and I found the implied visual movement within her *The Satanic Ballet* conversed well with the movement of a traditional musical like *Newsies*. As both Ekster and Popova's pieces are akin to scenic design renderings, I choose the last two by Lissitzky and Berlewi as their contributions are more abstract art pieces that embody the aesthetic values of Constructivism as larger visual style: geometry, graphic typeface, visual harmony, and rejection of bright color. While I cannot deny the robust scenographic examples of Constructivism, I can also provide other visual examples to help alleviate any concern about pure historical replication. By curating the visual aids this way, I sought to provide open inspiration rather than a direct prescription to the creative team.

With this concept and its four images in hand, I returned to the text for one final balancing of the equation—a recap to ensure alignment. The newsboys are children who lack the luxury of play but still have the age-appropriate impulse to do so. Instead of having free time to play, they have repurposed New York City into their own jungle gym; they see it not as a true jungle gym but as a concrete jungle gym—a playground of cement and steel. They must play while they work. The entire city becomes their neighborhood park. In other words, *Newsies* is like a jungle gym.<sup>4</sup> Given how Constructivist scenic design was their own version of a jungle gym, the concept aligns with the text and my own artistic impulse.

---

<sup>4</sup> The idea of using a simile to present a director's concept is drawn from Harold Clurman's *On Directing*.

I created a dossier with the curated scholarship discussed earlier and visual aids consisting of the aforementioned four keystones and historical images from the musical's time I found visually engaging for the scenic designer, Leazah Behrens. After our initial meeting, where we discussed my perspective on the play, shared highlights of my research, and explained my concept using visual aids, we met again. This time, she provided me now with a series of images, including selected ones from my dossier which she was particularly drawn to, alongside her own research images and thoughts. Behrens focused on the actual architectural building style and construction of the time. She wanted to highlight the turn of the century's rapid urbanization within the design as it thematically aligned with our textual interpretations; in other words, the real-world historical industrialization of late 20<sup>th</sup>-century New York City shared commonalities with Constructivism, social change, and the working class. Behrens additionally responded to my concept with research images of early 20<sup>th</sup>-century jungle gyms. This contribution was very effective as a director because it provided me with a visual history inspiration for staging; I began to see how the *mise-en-scène* could develop with unifying Constructivist aesthetics, early 20<sup>th</sup>-century New York City architecture, and jungle gyms.

After discussing her contributions and collaborating further, Behrens created a series of preliminary scenic design renderings. We met and discussed the designs more thoroughly, exchanging feedback and ideas on how to scenically marry Constructivism to Disney. We began to use the phrasing of either "leaning into" the text's historical period requirements or Constructivist aesthetics as a way to communicate conceptual balance; that is, it became a shorthand for us to determine how much we should or should not highlight the Constructivist concept. A director's concept is best when it guides and provides through creative limitation. If the director and designers ignore creative impulses born from the concept, then the

production becomes about the concept. We wanted to ensure artistic harmony between our creative impulses, the demands from the text, and the concept's parameters.

Using the base idea of a playground, Behrens constructed the basic shape of the scenic design. Following direct inspiration for Popova's scenic model, Behrens included a series of raised platforms connected by ramps, ladders, a slide, and movable staircases. She also included numerous bars for performers to climb up and around. Behrens added smooth metal plates for projections around the proscenium arch. Additionally, the backdrop would also be a place for potential projections. As the musical occurs in multiple locations, the projections would state which location the characters are currently in, drawing from Epic Theatre's use of plaques and how Constructivist art often included graphic design. We also discussed the idea of replicating Constructivist typography—bold yet simple geometric shapes positioned alongside prominent graphic text—within period-appropriate newspaper imagery as the visual base for said projections. If this conversation continued, we would have brought in a projection designer for further collaboration.

The projection design was not where our need for other designers ended. Eventually, this conversation reached the point where we needed to include other designers to move forward fully with any unrealized design. For example, for the current color palette, we debated how far “to lean into” either typical Constructivist color schemes or more historically accurate colors associated with the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century New York City. We concluded that to fully agree upon the scenic design's color palette, we would need input from the costume and lighting designers.<sup>5</sup> Additionally,

---

<sup>5</sup> Regarding costume design, a preliminary idea I had was leaning into Popova's costumes for *The Magnanimous Cuckold*. Those designs replicated a version of blue workman's smock, connecting them to the real laborers of the time. I would do the same for *Newsies* but finding inspiration

Behren's scenic design would be under choreographic approval. As neither she nor I is a choreographer, we would need to include a choreographer's sensibilities in the scenic design to ensure that our ideas work with their artistry.

Concerning choreography, I often came across Meyerhold's biomechanics and Constructivist dance records during my initial research. While Elizabeth Sourtiz comments upon the contradiction of applying Constructivism to choreography, she notes in *Theatre in Revolution: Russian Avant-Garde Stage Design 1913-1934* that:

Constructivism could exert its influence first of all through stage design, then also through stage movement, and through music of the mechanistic kind, which reproduced the rhythm of industrial machines in action. Moreover, in stage design constructivism, was rarely encountered in a pure form but rather in a combination with other styles— cubism cubofuturism, suprematism, etc.—and it instinctively tended toward representation, toward theatrical illusion. (Stouritz 129)

As a director's concept should inform choices beyond just the design, the idea of Constructivism would be key in creating the movement language of *Newises*. I would focus on choreography that highlights the actors' athleticism, either taking direct inspiration from biomechanics or Constructivist dance aesthetics; while it is not as common as scenic design or visual arts, there is a fair amount of historical documentation on Constructivist dance, particularly with George Balanchine's (1904-1983) portfolio. Using the set design as a playground, I would collaborate with the choreographer on having the actors climb, slide, and jump all over their

---

from the American factory workers' use of overalls and the like. They would, of course, also sport the iconic newsies cap as a nod to the original.

Concrete Jungle Gym—musical theatre dance meets parkour.<sup>6</sup> I would decenter more traditional musical theatre dance styles and instead focus on movement associated with acrobatics, gymnastics, and what one would expect to see on a neighborhood playground. Yet, just as with the scenic design, the choreographer and I would engage in a balancing act between concept, the text, and our artistic impulses.

This focus on the performers as athletes would then carry into my staging as a director. For example, within *Newsies*, there are multiple locations. Using the movable ladder and other simple set pieces, we would transition between locations smoothly with the aid of projections, rather than wheeling on more location-specific set pieces; in other words, what we have on stage at the top of the show is what we use. For the remaining key stage properties, we would utilize the actors' bodies as those necessary scenic elements. For example, when the newsboys use a printing press to mass print their own paper—the *Newsies Banner*—we would follow Constructivism's call for austerity and privileging of an actor's physicality to embody the printing press itself rather than adding one more set piece or stage property. This human printing press is just one example of how Constructivism, as the production's concept, could guide additional directorial choices beyond simply design ones.

As directors, it is our job to visually tell the story, guiding the creative team in creating a shared, unified world. A concept authentically drawn from the text can provide a visual anchor for that collaboration. With the concept under the director's purview, all creatives have an agreed-upon keystone that serves as both a muse and an arbiter in decision-making. Any creative team can take a script, even one haunted by Disney, and artistically

---

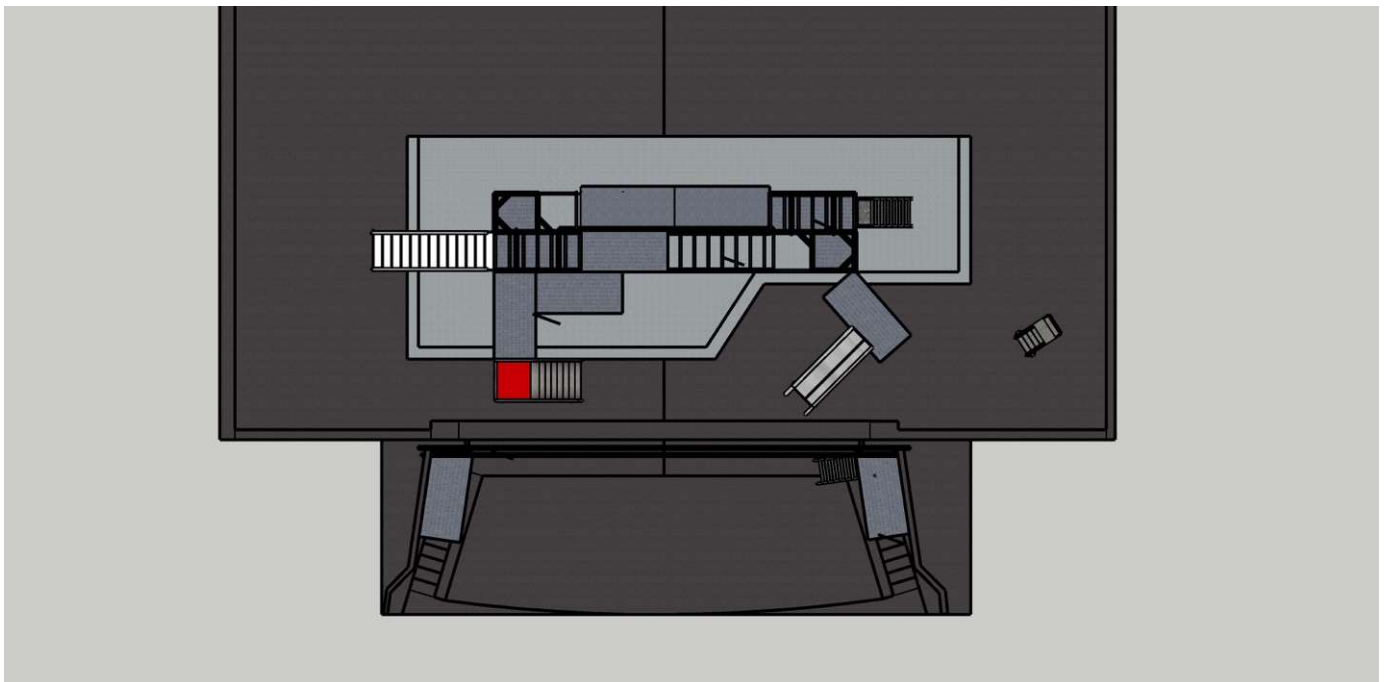
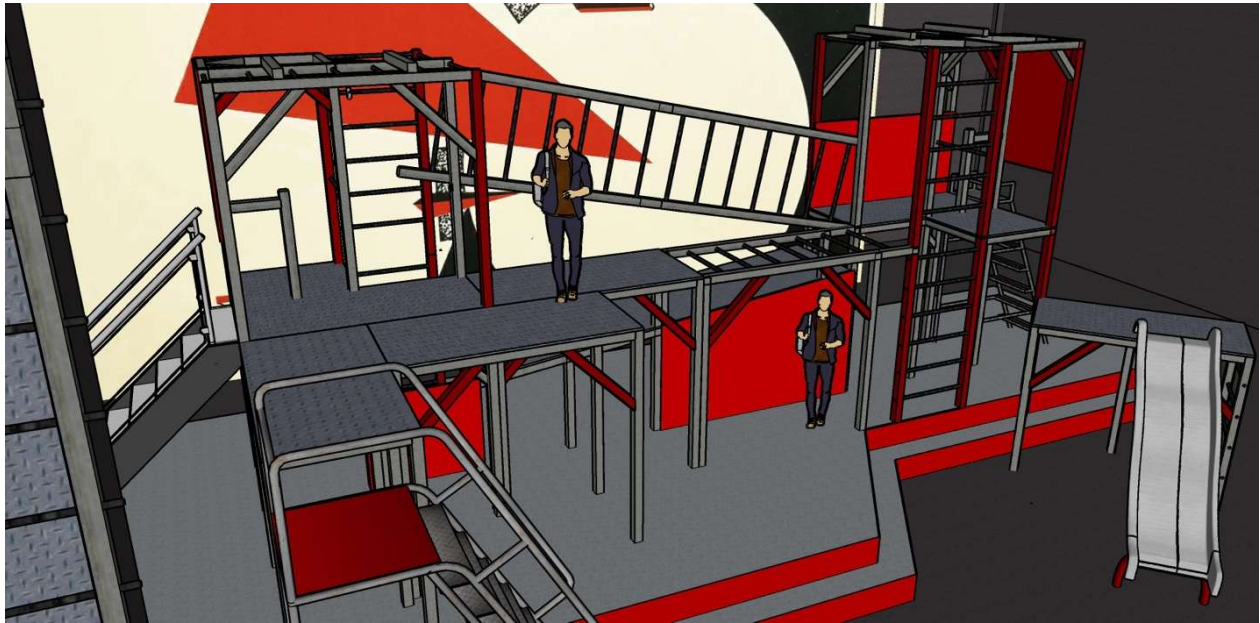
<sup>6</sup> I have capitalized Concrete Jungle Gym to indicate that this phrase has evolved to be a proper noun. It has become referenced throughout the design process and in turn has heightened it—it has, in a way, become the title of our design scheme.

fulfill their desires while also honoring the script and its demands. My approach to *Newsies: The Musical* involved examining the score and libretto to identify textual elements that encapsulate its narrative. From there, I drew connections to Constructivism based on their shared philosophy on community, revolution, and reconstruction. Through collaboration and the sharing of visual aids, the designer created preliminary scenic renderings that branched out from that concept. In doing so, I share a part of my ever-evolving director's craft.

### APPENDIX

#### Preliminary Scenic Designs for *Newsies* by Leazah Behrens





**WORKS CITED**

- Bogart, Anne. *A Director Prepares: Seven Essays on Art and Theatre*.  
Routledge, 2001.
- Carlson, Marvin. *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine*.  
University of Michigan Press, 2002.
- Healy, Patrick. "“Newsies’ Recoups Initial Investment.” *ArtsBeat, The New York Times*, 20 Dec. 2012, <https://archive.nytimes.com/artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/12/20/newsies-recoups-initial-investment/>.
- Howard, Pamela, and Pavel Drábek. *What Is Scenography?* Third edition,  
Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2019.
- Ioffe, Dennis, and Frederick H. White. "An Introduction to the Russian Avant-Garde and Radical Modernism." *The Russian Avant-Garde and Radical Modernism: An Introductory Reader*, edited by Dennis Ioffe and Frederick H. White, Academic Studies Press, 2012.
- Lodder, Christina. Introduction. *Constructivism*, by Alexsei Gan, Tenov, 2013, pp. IX-LXIII.
- Stouritz, Elizabeth. "Constructivism and Dance." *Theatre in Revolution: Russian Avant-Garde Stage Design, 1913-1935*, edited by Nancy Van Norman Baer, Thames and Hudson, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, 1991.
- Turner, Cathy. *Dramaturgy and Architecture: Theatre, Utopia and the Built Environment*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.
- Wolfe, Shira. "Art Movement: Constructivism." *Artland Magazine*, 15 Aug. 2019, <https://magazine.artland.com/art-movement-constructivism/>.