

# Shop Front Theatre

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## A safe space where writers and audiences could explore, debate and make sense of things

As 'resident designer' for the *Are We Where We Are* and *Humanistan* bodies of work produced by Theatre Absolute at the Shop Front Theatre, I got to explore the space again and again. I would look at it from a different angle every time, consider it afresh - thought I knew it, and was always surprised that it could still surprise me. I suppose it helped that I was always looking at the space through a different lens – a context aligned with, or directed by, the ideas, words or thoughts put down by the writer of each individual piece. I had a bit of a quest to configure the Shop differently each time, of finding yet another way to pretend the frankly awful scratchy green carpet didn't exist.

For me, design thinking is about problem-solving, about finding a way to suggest or say something about a piece through the placement of objects and people in space that the words or the piece, by themselves, cannot convey. It's about providing visual shorthand indicators for an audience that help frame, inform or illuminate something (and maybe something extra) about the writer's ideas/the actor's words or actions – and to help anchor these in memory.

With *Humanistan*, as with other cumulative projects that build and weave a themed body of work in a space through time, there was also a need to provide a holding frame and logic for the pieces even before they had been written: something that could grow and change to accommodate and showcase each piece as it arrived. Something that solved the challenges of staging that piece authentically, whilst simultaneously building on/echoing/hinting at the visuals of the preceding pieces. Something that would do all the things design can do, whilst also honouring the space's delicate onion skin layers of previous stories - a nuanced layering, allowing for a different kind of iterative or cumulative informed understanding of each piece within the arc of the whole season, deepening and enriching the experience for returning audience members each time.

The provocation of *Humanistan* was to imagine a new 'country' where people could come together to share ideas and skills, and take action to shape a fairer life for all. This led to a design logic for the season that involved building flexible 'elements' that could suggest *Humanistan*-ness, and provide things to work with and build on. Atmospheric without being prescriptive. A set of functional modular elements that could be moved round or reconfigured to create different zones within the Shop Front Theatre - for performance, workshops, ad-hoc sociable encounters – and all the things we didn't yet know we would need.

Over a number of years working with Theatre Absolute, we've established an ethical theatre-making framework around our shared values. Rejecting the often wasteful nature of traditional theatre brings a different kind of challenge: to find different ways to create visual coherence across a number of shows where each show has an echo of the others but they are very much individually designed: the season will be cumulative, but not accumulate. This means that, when beginning a project, we always look first to what already exists, what we can do with the four walls and the objects and materials already in the Shop.

The modular staging elements created for *Humanistan* (a pair of armchairs, library shelving, mini desks for writing or printing zines or placards, and a one-person stage/threshold/doorway) used repurposed OSB sheets that had been knocking around in the Shop since 2014, and that we had moved around a fair few times. It was good to finally make (re-)use of them – and it felt strangely appropriate, given the number of (crafted and spontaneous) stories they must have absorbed in their time there.

Of course, *Humanistan* didn't work out exactly as we'd expected, but the beauty (and challenge) of making a body of work that builds over a number of years is that, as it progresses, it must accommodate changing local, global and political situations (and pandemics) and continue to provide a safe space where writers and audiences can explore, debate and make sense of these things.

In a way, the provocation of *Humanistan* (and of *Are We Where We Are* before it) was: Can we not do this with our political systems too? Can we not challenge our feelings about the inevitability of everything, that feeling that we are small cogs that can change nothing? Can theatre help humans regain our agency? Systems, like stories, are (to a greater or lesser extent) examined, evaluated, reformulated and rebuilt by every pair of hands they pass through. Their value, purpose and meanings change, their new configurations say different things to different people. They can provide comfort, hope, knowledge; inspire curiosity, anger, courage, action. Stories are our bulwark against fear and uncertainty, our way of testing things out, our insight into how other people think or respond: they nurture us in our determination to do things better.

Perhaps the scraps of wood and stories we repurposed to build the set elements for *Humanistan* were the ideal building blocks for our new world: the background, or foundation upon which the ideals, hopes, dreams and plans could be tested and built. And maybe their strong and storied presence helped bring a sense of continuity and hope to the Shop when it was most needed? In the dark days of the pandemic, the Shop remained a beacon of the power of stories, togetherness and community – cumulatively, surely the strongest of foundations for the building of a new world?

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