

Scene Design Portfolio Review Tips *for April 2020*

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Portfolio Reviews are a great opportunity for you to practice showcasing yourself and your work. Whether you are freshman B. A. undergrad student who is still considering which area of theatre makes you tick, a seasoned M. F. A. candidate, or a professional who wants some input on presenting your best self, portfolio reviews are for YOU! Each year, professionals and educators volunteer to review many portfolios from all areas, so this is a thriving, valuable resource to all of us in the institute. ***Please refer to online instructions as to the location and other information specific to this year's conference.***

The Scene Design Commission offers reviews for anyone with a portfolio in Scene Design, Scenography, Scenic Art, Props or a combination of these. Other commissions offer reviews in Costume areas, Technical Direction, Lighting, Sound, Stage Management, and more! If you are interested in more than one area make sure to check out the portfolio review schedules and sign up for a slot with them as well.

While we always see a wide range of portfolio development, everyone has in common the need to practice their portfolio presentation skills and being comfortable with putting their best foot forward.

Technology and trends change frequently, but we often hear the same questions and make similar observations about portfolios, from year to year. As a result, the Scene Design Commission offers, here, some helpful nuggets of advice you might consider.

If you are fortunate to attend a school where portfolio development is emphasized and practiced or are already professionally connected, then you already know how important this is. If you are not in such a situation or are just starting out, then perhaps you will find this helpful as you prepare for reviews.

The actual portfolio, digital or physical:

- 3 C's: Clean, clear, concise. Keep your portfolio streamlined – it is not a scrapbook or a haphazard collection. If it's messy, sloppy or juvenile, skip it. Be clear about the importance of each item you present. Crystallize your articulation of each item into one or two sentences max. If we want to hear more, we will ask. Be concise. We don't need a day-by-day explanation of a build process. We DO want to know why a particular item's build was challenging for you or how it helped you grow as an artist.
- Never apologize for your work or the condition of your portfolio. It is what it is. If you don't like something that you have done, then don't show it. If you only have a few things to show, then find the most positive way of explaining the work and then listen to the commentary.
- Keep things affirmative. Present things as challenges and explain how you learned something, rather than mentioning how you failed. We have all failed or done something poorly at one time or another. How you discuss it is often more telling of your professionalism than your ability to admit it. Never disparage a coworker or colleague. Just don't do it. Find the silver lining and focus on that.
- Turn your work so it faces the reviewers, not yourself. You should know your work, so you should not have to keep looking at it yourself. You look at the reviewers and let them look at the work.
- You don't have to cram everything you have ever done into your portfolio. Be selective and let us focus on your best work.
- Keep images as large as possible.

- Make sure images/objects are labeled.
- Clearly indicate what your work is and what others' work is. Give credit to the appropriate person – for instance, if the work you are showing is someone else's design and you assisted.
- Be prepared to take notes for improvement
- Proofread your resume
- Proofread your portfolio
- Show more process shots. Students and young career artists especially need this – the final product is often less important than your growth through the process of getting there.
- Show your best work first
- Have something to say about everything in your portfolio. You do not have to say much, in fact, it is best to be brief, but know why each item is in the portfolio. Is it an example of a specific skill, or an expression of an idea? Be prepared to say why you have included it in your portfolio.
- Clearly indicate what your responsibility was on a production or with a specific item.
- Consider both "PACKAGE" and "PRODUCT." Hopefully, you have quality work, and will show this. Regardless of where you are in your career, present work that shows the level of skill you have, the quality of the work you do and the scope of the companies/colleagues with whom you have worked. Use your sense of design to create a 'good looking' presentation. Be consistent in your methods. For instance, if you use printed labels, choose a consistent font or fonts, and coordinate the positions of labels. Don't use handwritten labels for some and printed labels for others. If you include artistic statements, be consistent with your layout, font, and size. If you have mastered a style of presentation and/or have content that is good 'eye candy,' this is likely a good thing. But fancy photos or presentation techniques for the sake of 'packaging' does not necessarily make a strong portfolio.

You, your interview, discussion, and how you present yourself:

- Be honest. Part of showing your portfolio is "showing" who you are. Anyone who might want to see your work is also interested in determining if you are the kind of person with whom they want to work.
- Don't be afraid of not having the "right" answer, since there is seldom one anyway. Explain what you did and why. Beyond that, listen to the reviewer and try to glean what they are saying. You may not agree – that is fine – but at least have the courtesy to listen.
- If you don't understand what a reviewer is telling you, ask for an explanation rather than just nodding your head, "yes..."
- Feel free to ask questions. Portfolio reviews are meant to be helpful, not intimidating. You may well get asked questions that surprise you or that you have never been asked before. This should be a learning experience.
- Let the reviewer(s) know if you are interested in getting comments about the way you show your work as well as the work itself.
- Watch your time. Your review will likely be a 30 minute time slot. In this time you must present your work as well as leave time for feedback and discussion. Practice what you are going to say.
- Practice your presentation with distractions – there will likely be another person reviewing with other reviewers in the same room as you. Learn to deal with this so it doesn't throw you off balance or make you afraid to speak up.
- Consider how you dress. This is truly a tricky area to advise, but in general, be comfortable and professional. If you are trying to wear 'professional' clothes that are so out of character for you that you are distracted, obviously uncomfortable, or can't walk, then choose something else. On the other hand, as comfy as frayed jeans, that pub t-shirt and sneakers are, they aren't going to

win you any points for decorum, either. Find that balance of what works for you and if you have to err, then err on the side of caution.

- PUT YOUR PHONE AWAY and be sure it is on silent. We all know important phones are but an interview is NOT the place for them to be an interruption or distraction. Even if the reviewers have phones, keep yours away.

Frequently asked questions:

How much should I have in my portfolio?

You certainly don't need everything you have ever done, in your portfolio, just your best work. This may be many things or just two or three things. Gauge your quantity and presentation for the 30 minute time slot you will have.

Know which portfolio items you will present, even if you don't get to show everything. Reviewers may want to look at additional items if time permits. This is especially true if you have scenic designs, scenic art, props AND design assisting all in one portfolio. You decide whether you want to hit on all areas or just one. Then plan your presentation accordingly with your best work.

What if I am just beginning and I have basic work in multiple areas?

Choose the best items from each category you wish to present. Reviewers know that undergrads in early years have a vastly different portfolio than graduate students. The important thing is to be able to articulate what your goals are, and how your portfolio represents the journey you are pursuing.

Are the reviewers looking for specific design and technical information about my work or do they want more 'philosophy' about what I have done?

Ask! Maybe some of each. One reviewer may be more interested in your verbal skills, as they relate to your work while the other reviewer will want your visuals to stand more on their own. Your best bet is to have good, clear visuals and practice your presentation to address those elements of design and production that you wish to convey.

What size portfolio is best?

There is no "best" size for everyone. It depends on what you are comfortable carrying and presenting, whether you are taking this on a plane or not, and what size images you typically present. While you should try to have images as large as possible, if the largest size you can do is 8x10, then 36x48 folio may be too big.

Try to keep individual projects or designs as concise as possible, while still showing the scope of your work. If you find that you are using three or four spreads to show one design, then you may need a bigger folio or you may need to be more discretionary with your choices.

Should I have a digital portfolio or an actual one?

Good question. There are as many opinions on this as there are portfolios. The safest bet is BOTH. In today's market, everyone should probably have a digital portfolio, even if it is just a simple slide presentation. If you choose a website, make sure you can access it readily and quickly. You don't want to waste time in a review or interview fumbling with navigation. Naturally, if you can bring your own laptop, you are better off than relying on someone else's computer or access. No matter how basic or

tricked-out your online portfolio is, it is still very nice to see artwork and 'hard copy' portfolio material. We make every effort to have internet access available for you, but it is not guaranteed.

How should I orient my portfolio?

Landscape or portrait, either one is fine, but try to keep mostly or all to one or the other. It is hard for reviewers or interviewers if they have to keep shifting orientation by turning your whole book for every page.

Should I include drafting?

Yes! But not to the exclusion of other items that show your growth as an artist. Again, there are as many opinions about hand drafting vs. computer drafting as there are portfolios, but if you have at least one good example of each, this should suffice.

Should I pick one good photo of a design or have several small ones?

Try to get a really good, large image of your work. Or at least have your images as large as the quality ratio will allow. It doesn't help to have an 11x14 if it is blurry or not especially clear. That photo may work better as a 5 x 7. Note to self: next time get a better photo for enlargement.

What is the best way to label my work?

Neatly, consistently, and clearly. Name of production and your contribution are essential. From there, you can add other designers, name of producing organization, year, and other information as is fitting. Don't let your labels overtake your images or drawings. If the picture was not taken by you, make sure to give appropriate credit.

Stay tuned to Sightlines and check the USITT website for more specific information about all portfolio reviews happening at the conference. Please check the signup genius for open time slots, if available.

We'll see you at USITT!