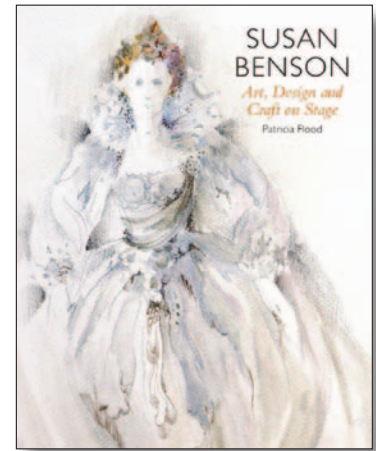


BY PATRICIA FLOOD

Susan Benson: Art, Design and Craft on Stage



THE INITIAL IMPETUS FOR THIS BOOK was as a celebration of the career of a renowned designer, teacher, and mentor who is widely recognized as having a major influence on Canadian theatrical design over the past forty-plus years. It was also inspired by a need to preserve an important part of this history.

I first met Susan Benson when she was Head of Design at the Stratford Festival in the 1980s and I was a young assistant designer. We have kept in touch over the years, and the idea for this book evolved slowly as time passed. One of the challenges of this project was to shed light on Benson's creative process. She is very much an artist who chooses the theatre as her medium of expression. Many books on theatre design acknowledge some kind of creative, collaborative



The Marriage of Figaro – Set Photo Act I, The Banff Centre 1990

PHOTO BY MONTE GREENSHIELDS

process as part of a designer's work, but tend to focus on the technical perspective involved in the realization of a design. This

would be an easy trap to fall into with Benson as her work with colour and texture, particularly in costume design, is unique and fascinating to write about. However, I also wanted to



Madama Butterfly – Design for Cio-Cio San
Canadian Opera Company 1990



The Magic Flute – Prop Design
Minnesota Opera/Dallas Opera 1997



The Golden Ass – Design for Pamphilea
Canadian Opera Company 1999

focus on the research, consultation, and inspiration that lead up to a final design. This work, completed prior to any technical intervention, illustrates how her creative input plays an important dramaturgical role in the shaping of a production.

I also wanted to look at the crucial link between the creative and technical in the production of a piece of theatre and recognize the invaluable contribution of the many talented technicians and fellow artists who have helped bring Benson's work to the stage. One of the great pleasures of researching this book has been the conversations I have had with many theatre technicians and fellow artists who have worked with her and have great respect for her work.

The book itself is a detailed and lavishly illustrated look at Benson's career and covers a wide range of work for many different stages. Featured throughout the book are full-page photographs from both the live stage and the production process. Behind the scenes commentary and analysis reveals the challenges of mounting a large stage production while Benson's working design sketches reveal the artistic process and the remarkable range of her talent.

The first part of the book focuses on Benson's early, formative work, influenced by her youth in a theatrical family. The second part concerns her theory of set, costume, and prop design, and her problem-solving methodology for approaching a show. This is followed by a third section on the "craft" of building shows: how art, design, and craft transform the theatrical work on paper to the imagined world that the audience sees—costume fitting, prop building, and collaborating with the many talented artists that bring her designs to life.

The book closes with an in-depth look at Benson's most significant productions: Robin Phillips' 1976 Stratford Festival production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* with Jessica Tandy and Jeremy Brett, remounted in 1977 with Maggie Smith; in 1979, the Trojan War play *The Woman* starring Martha Henry; and the celebrated



***The Gondoliers* – Design for the Duchess of Plaza-Toro Stratford Festival 1983**



***The Woman* – Design for the Chief Architect Stratford Festival 1979**



***Iolanthe* – Design for Fairies Stratford Festival 1984**

Brian Macdonald productions of Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Mikado*, *The Gondoliers*, and *Iolanthe*. In addition to Benson's work at the Stratford Festival, the book looks at designs for many other theatres across Canada and the US, including *Romeo and Juliet* for the National Ballet of Canada; and *Madama Butterfly* and *The Golden Ass* for the Canadian Opera Company.

My hope is that it will be a valuable contribution to the understanding of the work of a theatrical designer and will be useful to both students and professionals.

The launch of Patricia Flood's book, Susan Benson: Art, Design and Craft on Stage was held at the Arts and Letters Club in Toronto, Ontario on May 26th, 2019, with support from the Canada Council for the Arts, Associated Designers of Canada, CITT/ICTS, and Theatre Museum Canada. The author would like to acknowledge the support of the Ontario Arts Council and the University of Guelph in the creation of this book. ■



Patricia Flood is a theatre, film, and television designer and a past President of the Associated Designers of Canada. Her credits include set design for the films

Ararat and *Where the Truth Lies*, directed by Atom Egoyan, art director for *The Kids in the Hall* television series, resident designer for Theatre Calgary, and many seasons at the Blyth Festival in Blyth, Ontario. She worked as assistant to the head of design (Susan Benson) at the Stratford Festival where she spent several seasons assisting designers Desmond Heeley and Tanya Moiseiwitsch. In addition to her book on Susan Benson, she also co-created a touring exhibition of the *Scenography of Cameron Porteous*. She taught Design for the Theatre at Concordia University in Montreal and has recently retired from the School of English and Theatre Studies at the University of Guelph where she was an associate professor.

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