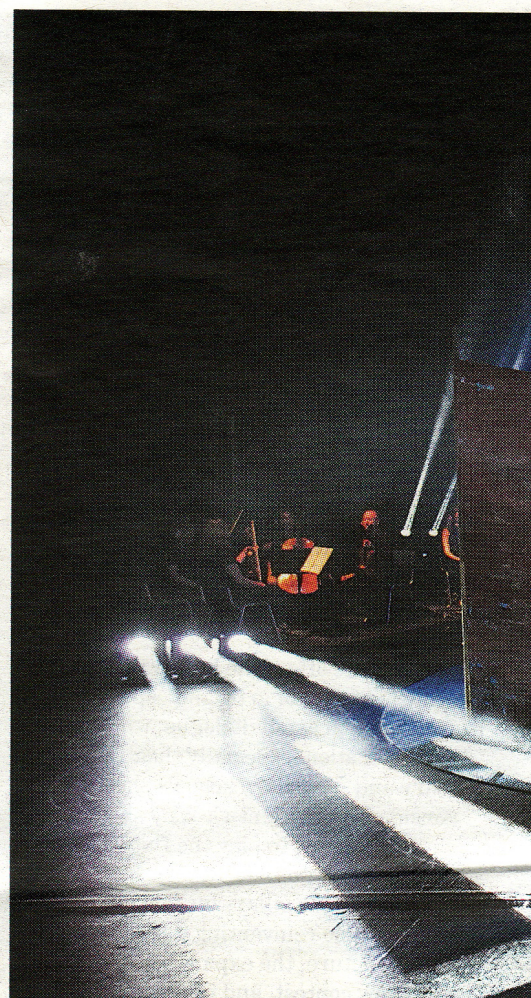


# BACKSTAGE AND TECH



Rebecca Brower



Struileag - Children of the Smoke, designed by Rebecca Brower, Glasgow, July 2014

# 'I like using traditional spaces in exciting ways'

Since winning The Stage set design award in 2011 Rebecca Brower has worked on the Olympic and Paralympic ceremonies and got a plumb role working with esteemed designer Jon Bausor. Jo Caird finds out what's next for the 26 year old

**"I**'m slightly addicted to work, I think," says set and costume designer Rebecca Brower, raising her voice to make herself heard over the morning rush in the busy cafe where we're meeting.

We're here at the distinctly non-showbiz hour of 9am because Brower has a job to get to. On top of freelance work for the likes of Theatre Royal Portsmouth and The Place, in London, the 26-year-old works full-time as an assistant to leading stage designer Jon Bausor.

"Jon's great because he's very open to me doing my own work," says Brower, gesturing towards her boss's studio across the road. "He said right at the beginning that he always likes taking on an assistant who's a designer. Every now and again he'll go, 'Oh, actually that's a bit of a clash', and then I'll think twice about taking on a show, but I've been able to manage it so far."

This sort of juggling is nothing new for

the young designer. Her first professional solo project – a 2011 production of *Hello Dolly!* at the Watford Palace Theatre – came along while she was already working full-time as a general assistant to the digital drawings and design office at the National Theatre. The month *Hello Dolly!* opened, Brower got the job of design assistant on the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic ceremonies. She had graduated from Central School of Speech and Design with a BA in design for the stage just four months previously.

It was at this point that she won The Stage design award 2011, with a speculative design for David Grieg's *Casanova* at the Olivier Theatre. Three years later and she is in no doubt about the impact the prize has had on her career: "It's something that gives me that boost on my CV. It's given me more of a chance [of working on] bigger shows than maybe I would have, because I already come with some sort of reputation."

The competition has also had a big practical impact. "I was very aware how important it is to be online as a designer, so that's what I wanted the [prize] money for: to start making an online presence," she says. "Six months later the Equity [Young Member] Bursary came up as well, so I was able to do the website that you see now [rebecca.brower.com]."

But if The Stage award has been influential in helping Brower build her freelance portfolio, her work for the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic ceremonies truly gave her career lift off.

At the time, Brower wasn't even sure if she should take the ceremonies job. "I thought: 'Okay, so I am taking myself out of the [theatre] world for a whole year – is that a really good thing to do?' But it was the Olympics and my parents were over the moon. When I actually turned up I was so shocked by how much of the team were from UK theatre." Including, of course, Jon Bausor, who designed the set for the Paralympics opening ceremony. Taking that role, says Brower, "was the best decision of my life so far".

Having worked intensively with Bausor on the opening ceremony, Brower asked if he would consider hiring her as an assistant at the end of the process. Bausor, "impressed by her confidence, independence and audaciousness," took the young designer on in September 2012.

Brower has since assisted Bausor on a huge range of projects, from *Hamlet* at the Royal Shakespeare Company to *The Little Mermaid* at the Bristol Old Vic, and from *Firebird* at the Oslo Opera House to *Ghost Stores* in the West End. She has recently made the jump to associate, which means that in addition to the model making and technical drawing she's been



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doing on Bausor’s projects for the last couple of years, she is now taking a more active role in the design process.

“I’ll be going to meetings with him, really understanding his thought process there, and his relationships with the production team itself, and being able to make my own relationships within the production team as well,” she says.

Brower was Bausor’s associate on The Roof, the Fuel Theatre LIFT show that

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took place in a car park opposite the National Theatre in June this year, and they are about to start work on a new production of the musical Bugsy Malone, which opens at the Lyric Hammersmith in April.

Taking on more responsibility on these shows is all about Brower developing her skill-set and building a portfolio in preparation for the day when she’s ready to go it alone. But though this is an exciting time, it’s also bittersweet.

“There are times when I’ll have work of my own that I just can’t stop thinking about and I think maybe I should start bridging this gap sooner than I thought. But then an amazing project, which happens more often than not, will come Jon’s



DOUGLAS ROBERTSON

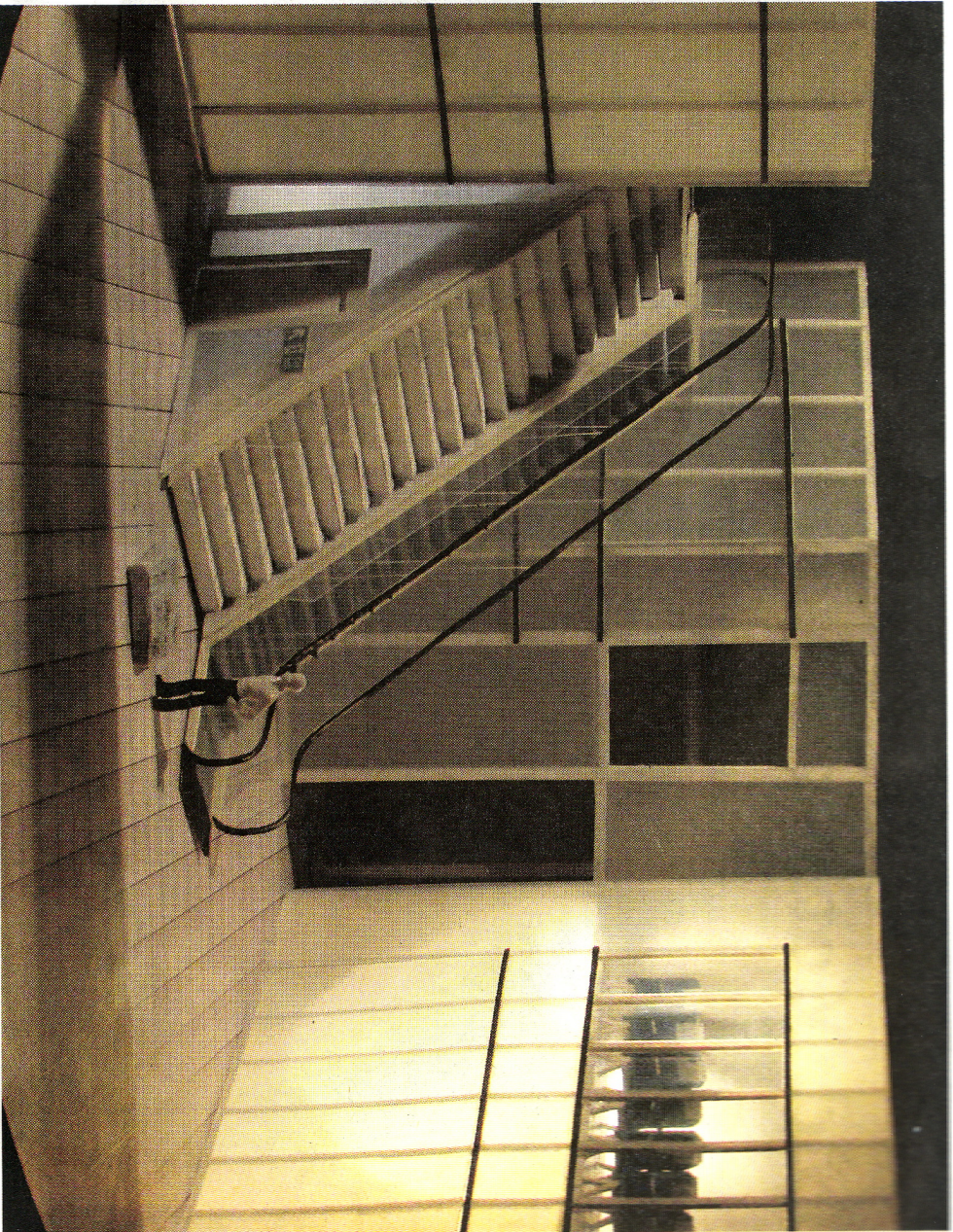
way, that I'll get really excited about," she says. "Why would you give up a job that you really love?"

Havill spent the last three years working on huge projects with Bausor – whether designing for the NT and RSC or creating sets for opening ceremonies – Brower's ambition is to design on a large-scale in her freelance career too.

She got her first taste of this with *Struelsegg* – Children of the Smoke, a one-off, outdoor spectacular about Gaelic heritage that took place during the Glasgow

2014 Commonwealth Games Festival. Brower's boat-prow set – manipulated by the 25-strong ensemble of dancers, singers and musicians during the 75-minute show – simply but powerfully evoked the challenges and thrills of the diaspora experience. The designer can't wait to work on this scale again.

But this sort of spectacular isn't the only thing that inspires her. Working with Bausor, as well as designing corporate events for the NT, has taught her to treat all sorts of spaces creatively.



Rebecca Brower's model for her winning design for *Casanova* by David Greig for the Olivier Theatre

"I feel most challenged by what you would class as traditional spaces – because I feel that now, just sitting on a red chair in the theatre, looking at a proscenium, is too old-fashioned. So let's take that, and make that really exciting."

That might mean positioning a running track in such a way that audience members fear the actors shooting off the stage into the auditorium (*Heartbreak Beautiful*, Watford Palace Theatre, 2013) or it might mean lifting a backdrop at a crucial moment to turn a small fringe venue into

an atmospheric Elizabethan amphitheatre (*Hamlet*, Rose Theatre, 2013 – a show that earned Brower a nomination for an Off West End award for best design). She says her work is all about "using traditional spaces in really interesting ways".

Brower's ultimate goal is to get her hands on the Olivier, the main house at the NT. "I'd love to design for the people that gave me a chance right at the beginning, and took me on just from coming to see my exhibition," she says. "I'd like to see where my imagination takes me."