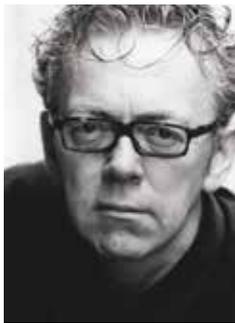


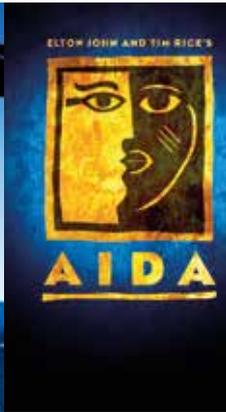
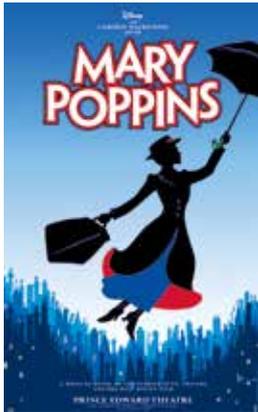
# Practitioner profile: Bob Crowley



**Nationality:** Irish

**Expertise:** Scenic design, costume design, theatre, musicals, opera, ballet, film

**Notable productions:** Aladdin, Mary Poppins, Aida, Tarzan, Once, Les Liaisons Dangereuses, An American in Paris, The History Boys, The Year of Magical Thinking, Carousel, Alice's Adventures In Wonderland (Royal Ballet) and La Traviata (Royal Opera)



**Training:** Crawford Art School  
Bristol Old Vic Theatre School

**Other influences:** Childhood theatre visits including Oliver! designed by Sean Kenny  
MGM musicals (film)  
Photography & paintings

**Frequent collaborators:** Nicholas Hytner (Director)  
Richard Eyre (Director)  
Natasha Katz (Lighting Designer)  
Royal Shakespeare Company  
National Theatre  
Royal Ballet  
Royal Opera House  
Disney Theatrical Productions

## Key elements of style and approach:

- Often designs both costume and set.
- Many productions include an element of fantasy or childlike play.
- Uses photography as a starting point: "Scenery is usually based on something I've found in a photograph. It has its basis in some form of reality."<sup>1</sup>
- Considers himself simple in his approach, using pen and paper, seeking advice from other aspects when potentially using new/innovative technology.
- He also credits 19th and 20th century paintings with influencing some of his productions, either in set and/or costume.

<sup>1</sup> Talking about his production of An American in Paris <http://www.broadway.com>

## Design in Key Productions:

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### ***Carousel* (musical) 1990**

- Research trip to Maine inspired the design, for example the blue hue used as the predominant colour in the production.
- Also inspired by paintings by Winslow Homer, Grant Wood and Andrew Wyeth (American artists born in late 19th and early 20th centuries).
- Uses the metaphor of the circle – the carousel, the mill's clock, mound where Billy and Julie sing *If I Loved You* – as life going on and around.

### ***La Traviata* (opera) 1995**

- Very detailed, sumptuous set; used hugely contrasting colours of grey/black with the brightness of gypsy dances and a green baize gambling table.
- Highly detailed set, included an ice sculpture in the first act. Set helps to track the downfall of a character.
- Placement of props used to signify increasing poverty of Violetta, for example paintings are lent up against a wall rather than hung.
- Use of tall mirror to 'reflect' Violetta's downfall even further. (Look at the use of mirrors in *Once* (2013) – a musical set in a pub).
- Creation of a semi-circular bullring for the party scene.

### ***The History Boys* (play) 2004**

- Simple set, use of display boards with film posters on walls of classroom. Realism used here, in keeping with Alan Bennett's tendency to be naturalistic.
- Series of different classrooms. Use of school room furniture, such as two-person tables, orange plastic chairs, researched and sourced from real school suppliers.
- Strip lighting suspended above stage to emphasise school setting – casts interesting shadows on the floor at points.
- Motorbike never used on stage: pre-filmed projection at key points in the play.

### ***The Year of Magical Thinking* (play) 2008**

- Very sparse stage, with one chair centre stage for the majority of the performance.
- Six abstract painted cloths, original watercolours by Bob Crowley, hang behind the actress (one woman show).
- Wooden flooring, reminiscent of decking (character talks of living in Malibu).
- Use of projection on cyclorama at close of performance – photo of Joan Didion, her husband and daughter.

### ***Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (ballet) 2011**

- Had to use perspective and illusion to create sense of growing and shrinking.
- Inspired by the words in the original book, as well as Joby Talbot's score.
- Use of projection at key moments of performance e.g. Alice falling down the rabbit hole.
- Aimed for childlike imagery and sense of fantasy – look closely at Madhatter's Tea Party: bright colour palette, characters defined by colour, and combination of colour.

### ***Mary Poppins (musical) 2004***

- Use of silhouettes (a common theme throughout his work), such as the bank – pen drawings on watercolour paper echoing Mary Shepard’s illustrations in the books by P L Travers. The bank scene is an excellent example of this, which includes the silhouettes of mechanised bank clerks working at desks.
- Realistic scenery was used in the West End version. For the touring version, locations such as the children’s nursery and kitchen were illustrated.
- Incorporation of costumes into set, for example the top hats worn by performers in silhouette depict chimneys in *Step in Time*. The set also plays a part in the choreography as dancers stand and jump and create tableaux on the skyline.
- Costume is used to denote context of Edwardian middle-class family. Also used to contrast characters, compare Mary Poppins with Miss Andrew.
- Uses costume to show gradual changes in characters as the story progresses e.g. Mr Banks. Also uses costume to create a backstory for characters e.g. the Bird Woman whose ragged dress was once very elegant.

### ***Aladdin (musical) 2014***

- Use of silhouette (cyclorama depicts ‘palace in the distance’).
- Bright palette of colours inspired by research into Middle Eastern fabrics, use of geometrical forms, flowers and fretwork.
- Influence of MGM/American musicals in *Friend Like Me* – towers of gold rotate to reveal New York-style skyscrapers, with windows in the shapes of minarets.
- Frequently uses perspective and staggered portals within the main proscenium (e.g. the marketplace and the Cave of Wonders).

### ***An American In Paris (musical) 2015***

- Describes his production design as impressionistic.
- Inspired by photographs of the period which have a grey-green tinge. This makes the use of vivid colours (such as the red of Lise’s raincoat in the opening sequence) stand out to the audience.
- Stage needed to clear quickly for dance numbers.
- Uses the Morris pillars – instantly recognisable feature of Paris streets but less clichéd than Eiffel Tower.
- Inspired by block paintings by Piet Mondrian (Dutch painter) for some of the ensemble costumes.

## **Top Tip for further study...**

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**You might also research *The Audience* in which Crowley has created set and costumes for Helen Mirren who plays The Queen, but does not leave the stage even though she changes costume at various points.**

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# References

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Material and some recordings from shows such as The History Boys, The Year of Magical Thinking, and The Habit of Art are available to view at the National Theatre's Archive: The Cut, London.  
**nationaltheatre.org.uk**

Thanks to the National Theatre for providing poster artwork for this resource