

RESEARCH ESSAY

After the Final Curtain: Props, Repair, and the Ethics of Scenic Reuse

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A prop reaches the end of a production carrying more than material. A table may have been cut to fit a sightline, reinforced after a fall, stained for one lighting state, and handled nightly at the point where an actor changes a scene's direction. When the show closes, the object is often sorted by a blunt choice: store, discard, sell, or reuse. Sustainability rightly presses theatres to keep material in circulation. Yet reuse is not ethically or artistically neutral. It can preserve resources while erasing labour, history, cultural restrictions, or the conditions under which an object may be handled again.

Theatre's ecological transition has made this problem practical. The *Theatre Green Book* places reuse at the centre of lower-impact production and asks makers to plan what happens to materials after a show. Such planning is indispensable. It also becomes stronger when an object is understood not as interchangeable stock but as a participant in several systems: procurement, craft, rehearsal, performance, maintenance, storage, and memory. The question is no longer only whether a prop survives. It is what must travel with it for survival to count as responsible continuation.

Object biography offers a useful vocabulary. In Arjun Appadurai's account, things acquire social meanings through circulation, while Igor Kopytoff shows how classification can move an object into and out of commodity status. A stage object makes those movements unusually visible. Timber becomes scenery; a domestic chair becomes evidence in a drama; a fabricated document becomes a nightly cue; after closing, the same items may become inventory, waste, teaching material, an auction lot, or an archival object. Each change reallocates authority over use and interpretation.

Reuse programmes commonly begin with photographs, dimensions, materials, and location. These fields help an-

other designer find an object, but they do not tell the next team what the object has endured or what claims accompany it. A practical "prop passport" should add four kinds of information. The first is substance: materials, finishes, fixings, toxicity, flame treatment, repair history, load limits, and safe cleaning. The second is alteration: what may be cut, painted, disassembled, or digitally reproduced. The third is story: production, maker, performer-facing function, and changes discovered in rehearsal. The fourth is custody: owner, lender, communities or estates with an interest, consent conditions, and the destination intended after the next use.

The passport is not an argument for preserving everything. Storage consumes buildings, energy, staff time, and attention. An overfilled store transfers environmental cost into future indecision. Responsible deaccession may involve material separation, parts harvesting, sale, donation, or recycling. The record helps a theatre make that decision proportionately. It distinguishes a structurally unsafe object from one that merely needs repair, a generic item from one carrying a culturally specific design, and a prop whose meaning depends on a production from a tool that can circulate freely.

Repair deserves its own aesthetic status. Tim Ingold treats making as correspondence with materials rather than the execution of a fully predetermined form. Scenic workshops know this in practice: surfaces answer back, joints move, paint ages, and repeated handling discovers stresses that drafting did not predict. A repair can be concealed, displayed, or turned into the premise of a later design. These are artistic choices. When an inherited table retains a visible brace from an earlier production, the new work may accept a trace of another fictional world. When every trace is sanded away, reuse may save matter while demanding visual amnesia.

Neither choice is automatically preferable. Visible repair can romanticize scarcity or force a new production to advertise institutional virtue. Concealed repair can protect the autonomy of the later design. The ethical test is whether the decision recognizes the people and obligations attached to the object. Jane Bennett's account of material vitality is helpful insofar as it directs attention to the effects of things, but responsibility cannot be delegated to matter itself. Institutions still decide whose labour is credited, whose consent is sought, and whose risk is accepted.

Cultural specificity sharpens the problem. A costume, mask, textile, ceremonial form, or replica may have been created through knowledge that is not available for unrestricted reuse. Legal ownership does not settle cultural permission. A prop passport should therefore record not private personal data but relevant use conditions: who may handle or alter the object, whether public display is appropriate, whether photography is limited, and who should be contacted before a new context is proposed. If those conditions cannot travel securely, material reuse may be less responsible than controlled retirement.

Performance traces also raise questions of attribution. A prop is often credited to a designer while its usable form emerges through makers, buyers, scenic artists, armourers, stage management, performers, and maintenance crews. Reuse can make this collaborative history invisible because the second production encounters only the finished item. A short contributor record—names where consent exists, roles, and significant modifications—recognizes that durability was made. Credit should remain attached when a distinctive object is exhibited or reproduced, even if a later production transforms it.

The actor's relation to a prop is another form of knowledge. Balance, grip,

sound, sightline, and timing may not be legible in a store catalogue. A cup that appears ordinary may be weighted for a precise gesture; a book may open reliably to one page; a suitcase may contain an internal brace that makes a fall safe. Recording these features prevents the next team from destroying useful design intelligence. It also prevents inherited solutions from becoming unexplained rules. The new production should know why a feature exists so that it can decide whether the reason still applies.

Reuse changes rehearsal. A new object enters as possibility; a reused object enters with affordances already narrowed by its construction. Designers can treat this as a creative constraint by introducing available stock early, before a visual concept hardens. The workshop then participates in dramaturgy rather than receiving an order to approximate a completed image. Gay Hawkins argues that

relations to waste are ethical practices, not merely endpoints of disposal. In theatre, the moment of selection is one such practice: choosing from what already exists changes how novelty is valued.

Financial systems must support the change. Reuse is not free. Searching, testing, transporting, documenting, adapting, cleaning, and returning objects require paid labour. Budgets that compare only purchase price with retrieval price may make disposal seem efficient because waste costs are externalized. A realistic estimate includes staff time, future storage, hazardous processing, carbon-intensive transport, and the value of recoverable components. It also allocates time for designers to work with inventories before procurement deadlines.

Theatre organizations can begin with a limited pilot. Select one production; identify ten objects with different ma-

terial and cultural profiles; create passports; invite the next users to record what information proved useful; and follow the objects for one further life. The result will expose which metadata fields are burdensome, which safety checks are missing, and when an archival decision is needed. Success should not be measured only by kilograms diverted from waste. It should include labour recognized, repairs made safely, permissions retained, and new artistic choices enabled.

The final curtain is therefore not an object's neutral afterlife. It is a transfer point at which institutions decide whether matter, memory, and responsibility remain connected. Scenic reuse becomes more than efficient salvage when the next production receives not only a thing but the knowledge required to meet it well. A prop with a second life should not have to pretend it never had a first.