



## **Interview with Carla Janssen Hofelt - Set Designer for Elizabeth the Musical**

### **What do you consider the main advantages of LED technology for theatrical productions, and what motivated this investment?**

For this particular production, the director chose a fixed scenic form in which the story unfolds. This decision not only enhances the narrative atmosphere but also improves the portability of the set, making it more suitable for touring. The set design strongly reinforces the emotional tone of the story.

LED screens have proven to be an efficient and versatile "tool" in this setup, allowing for **seamless scene transitions often requiring fewer physical set pieces**. From a logistical standpoint, this is very appealing. Furthermore, LED screens can add a new dimension to the visual presentation when used in harmony with lighting and other set elements. They can create stunning effects that blur the line between physical scenery and digital imagery, offering a sense of depth that fully immerses the audience.

### **Working with LED screens changes the production process. How did this influence planning, creative decisions, and production?**

For me, the overall sequence of work remains essentially the same. I collaborate with the director on the concept and visual style until we have a clear storyboard. The more detailed the storyboard, the more effective the communication becomes in the subsequent phases.

After the technical drawings of the set—showing screen positions and dimensions—were completed, I worked closely with Arjen (Klerkx, Video Design) to review and refine all the visual content. In a theatre context, this feels like an additional discipline, where attention to detail is crucial for the set and props. Now, we must also give the same level of precision to the LED screens. That means carefully composing the digital visuals and, in tandem with Arjen, determining the light intensity, transitions, and timing. It's a collaborative effort that **merges traditional set design with new media to enhance the storytelling without overshadowing it**.

## **The Creative Power of LED in *Elisabeth***

## **What creative decisions and opportunities did LED technology bring to a production like *Elisabeth*?**

LED screens play a central role in this production—they are a key element of the set design. Since Elisabeth was famously known for having herself portrayed in many paintings, director Frank van Laecke placed the entire story in a black-and-white painter's studio. The LED screens, all framed and integrated into the walls of the set, represent these paintings. They begin in monochrome, gradually introducing colour to the stage.

These digital paintings depict everything from court life to landscapes and architecture—acting as windows into palaces, churches, and vast estates. From a design perspective, I aimed to reflect Elisabeth's sense of confinement. The walls angle inwards menacingly, and the LED panels follow that same slant. The entire stage sits on a sloped floor, creating a perspective that draws the eye toward a vanishing point deep upstage. Nothing is truly straight—except for a central rotating platform.

We also included a ceiling framework from which chandeliers, draperies, and banners can be lowered. This ceiling enhances the sense of enclosure and allows the space to transform into a mausoleum by the show's end. Large openings high in the walls let in light, while two large entrances and a rear passage provide access. The central rear LED screen is the only one that changes—rising to let "Death" step out of the picture frame and eventually carry Elisabeth away.

## **How has working with LED screens influenced your creative process and production workflow?**

The use of LED screens aligned beautifully with the chosen painterly style. I had access to an extensive image database, diving into Elisabeth's era to find period-appropriate visuals. I design my sets digitally, using Cinema 4D to create 3D models. This made it easy to apply specific content to each screen per scene, allowing for the creation of a detailed digital storyboard that I could share with our content designer, Arjen.

Our collaboration ran very smoothly—we exchanged visuals quickly and efficiently. Arjen developed various transition styles between scenes, which we tested live in the theatre, side by side, synchronizing them with music and evaluating textures, timing, and light dynamics. A particular challenge for him was animating the textures of the painted visuals without losing the look and feel of a traditional painting.

Video content and lighting had to be perfectly balanced. LED isn't like physical scenery—you must account for how the light appears *within* the content. For instance, if the scene lighting comes from the right, the imagery must reflect that to maintain realistic shadows and continuity with the physical set.

We also used projection mapping on fabrics and the set, even layering projections *over* the LED screens using the same visuals. **The clarity and deep blacks of the LED panels allowed us to use them as "voids" onstage**—appearing like dark openings, only to slowly reveal swirling mist or depth when content fades in.

The most exciting part? The audience doesn't experience the LED screens as screens. They're seamlessly built into the set—no visible outlines. The set design included slanted, trapezoidal wall openings where the LED panels are tucked behind framed canvases, blending completely with the physical scenery.

**Carla, you've worked with LED screens before, often in combination with traditional scenery. What inspired your choice to use LED backdrops in *Elisabeth*?**

LED screens offer immense creative freedom in set design—particularly in how quickly scenes can transition and the nearly limitless range of visual environments they can present. They work best when paired with substantial physical set pieces to create a unified visual world.

I was instantly inspired when Frank shared his concept with me and suggested incorporating LED screens. The scenic concept took shape quickly, and from there, the screen content became the driving element for each scene. Dozens of visuals were created for scene changes and transitions. Again, my 3D model was essential—it allowed me to position content precisely and create visual compositions that enhanced the physical space.

This led to a strong collaboration with Arjen. He would develop transition effects, and together, we would test them in the theatre—refining texture, transitions, and sync with music. Lighting and video had to be meticulously aligned in terms of brightness and colour temperature.

Using LED requires a different mindset than working with physical sets. You must simulate natural light and shadow within the screen content to ensure coherence with the physical world onstage. We also used projection on fabric and set elements, including projection mapping over the LED screens.

Today's LED technology is outstanding—the visuals are incredibly sharp, and the panels offer deep black tones that allow them to disappear when needed. You can create moments of infinite depth simply by introducing a slow-moving layer of smoke-like visuals from total blackness. The best part? You no longer perceive them as screens—they are fully integrated into the world of the play.

**At what point in the creative process was the decision made to use LED screens?  
Was this a collaborative or designer-led choice?**

In this case, it was the director's idea—he already had a clear concept that involved framed paintings. Before I begin a new project, I'm often asked to assess whether LED screens are a feasible part of the design.

**When did you first work with LED screens, and how has your use of this technology evolved?**

My journey with integrated video began during *Ciske de Rat*—also in collaboration with Arjen—though we used projection at the time, as LED was too expensive. We used six projectors stacked vertically, creating overlapping visuals. A horizontal line in the set helped disguise the projector split.

We continued with projection for *Petticoat* and *Hij Geloof in Mij*, but my first major LED set was for *Moeder, Ik Wil Bij de Revue*, which included LED flooring. Another milestone was *40-45*, where eight large LED panels move dynamically throughout the performance. For the revival of *Hij Geloof in Mij*, we finally opted for LED—it was now financially viable, and the results were vastly improved.

Since then, the technology has evolved immensely; resolution is much higher, pixel pitch much finer, and the panels are lighter—ideal for touring. Today's LED screens offer subtle gradations in brightness and colour, allowing for smooth fades from black and soft imagery transitions, something previously prone to banding or colour distortion.

I love integrating screens directly into scenic elements. Even at extreme angles to the audience, today's LED displays maintain excellent visibility. I feel incredibly fortunate to work with this technology—I already know it will be part of my next production. I'm also very excited to see where this fast-moving innovation will take us next.

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