

Es Devlin on moving from thoughts to words to actions, fast

 By [Leigh Andrews](#)

26 Feb 2018

You know you're in for a treat when the final speaker reaches the Design Indaba conference stage, as they tend to save the best for last - here's how 'kinetic stage sculptor' and large-scale theatrical experience set designer Es Devlin wowed us in sharing how she makes global musical performances more visually appealing.



Es Devlin © image from the [Es Devlin website](#).

We've all seen her visual voice, said MC Lebo Mashile, in introducing Esmeralda 'Just call me Es' Devlin to the Design Indaba stage.

Mashile's right, as Devlin's work has likely already permeated your subconscious. Perhaps you saw her work on the opening ceremony of the London Olympics and the Rio Olympics opening ceremony, or the HZ Austria's 'floating opera on a lake' version of *Carmen*, featuring rotating cards seemingly suspended in mid-air for two years, whatever the weather:

Most likely though, it's from her fascinating kinetic stage constructions for global superstars, the likes of U2, Rihanna, Miley Cyrus, Lady Gaga, the box-on-head Pet Shop Boys, Kanye West, Adele, The Weeknd, Take That and Beyoncé.

Devlin recreates the way we experience some of the world's biggest performances and productions in the realm of opera, film dance, theatre, runway fashion, and her own solo work, by meshing the expected with unexpected light and film, to create something otherworldly.



Es Devlin announced as speaker at Design Indaba 2018

Juanita Pienaar 12 Feb 2018



Her lilting British accent a little raspy near the end of her showstopper presentation, Devlin 'excavated her sketchbooks' – something she's never done before – to show how she brings her ideas to life and left many with that classic Design Indaba hangover and deeper understanding of why she says, "As a designer, my clay to sculpt with is the audience's anticipation."

She dives into that anticipation by providing a much-needed dose of realism, explaining the magical impact of the Catholic church 'stations of the cross' from her upbringing as props, the power of congregation and translating word into song, as well as that she played the violin when she was younger and went on to study music and set design.

But it's only when she realised she was quite literally bored by theatre performances and music concerts and expected more from those – visually, at least – that she truly found her calling.

“ Es Devlin is a poet in every way imaginable. From the visual voices she creates, to the very way she eloquently speaks about her work. Here's a summary of her [#designindaba](#) talk, but you had to be there! pic.twitter.com/SrdlHS06np— Design Indaba (@designindaba) [February 24, 2018](#) ”

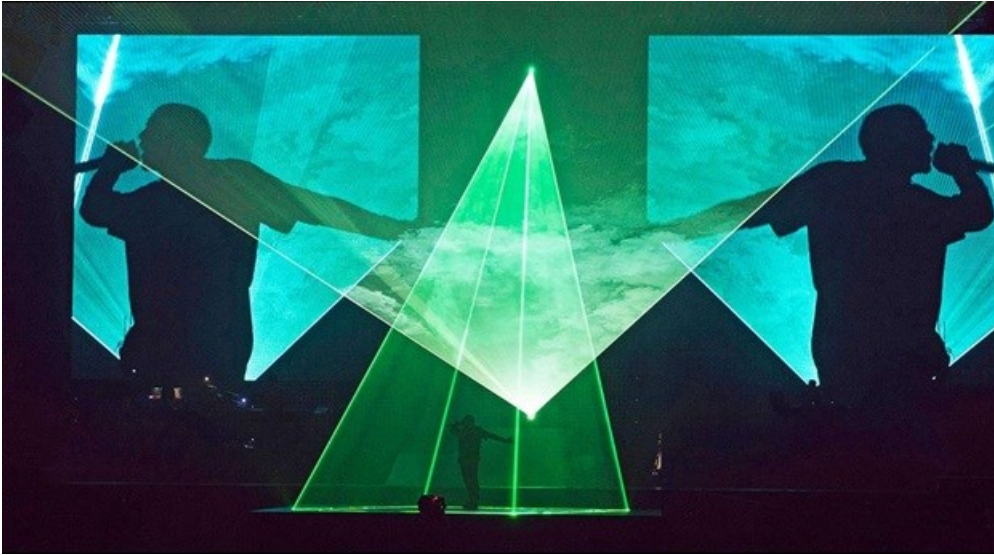
She learned from the abstract designs of certain opera designers and the way projection could be used to “envelop film and theatre together”.

Working with Kanye West: Making live music an authentic visual experience

Devlin shared a few sketches of her ideas, taken into practice when Kanye West commissioned her to work on a project for his *Touch the Sky* World Arena Tour in 2005. Speaking at Design Indaba, Devlin explained she studied his previous work and found it fascinating that he had a voice that quite literally couldn't get out when his mouth was wired shut following a near-fatal car accident, hence his song *Through the Wire*.

Devlin says West didn't like any of the sketches she showed him, he preferred what he'd seen on her website – the show was just 10 days away so they started over. His instinct was to bring nature into the theatre arena, requesting trees and rocks and volcanoes, but Devlin faced a dilemma in this as there's the art of presenting is in itself a very vulnerable art form

as it deals with the pretend.



Scene from the Kanye West and Jay-Z 'Watch the Throne' arena tour. © image from the [Es Devlin website](#).

So claiming honesty and speaking the truth when making or placing fake things on stage is a contradiction and Devlin aims for reality where possible –

“ How can you put a fake tree on stage and expect the audience to believe another word you're saying? ”

So if you see a tree in one of her sets, it's likely the real deal.

They iterated away, shares Devlin – often in a 'big black wagon' on the street as West didn't 'love' Devlin's stereo system – and found back in 2011 that Afrofuturism was the answer, seen through a lens of Americana.

Working with Adele and Beyoncé: Helping the audience see the voice

On the evolution of the topic of self-portraiture in her work, Devlin spoke of the fact that there were always two screens in her sketches with a beautiful thing in the middle that actually splits the audience gaze in two. And for female artists in particular, their mask is their face, so Devlin said, “Let's just declare that.”



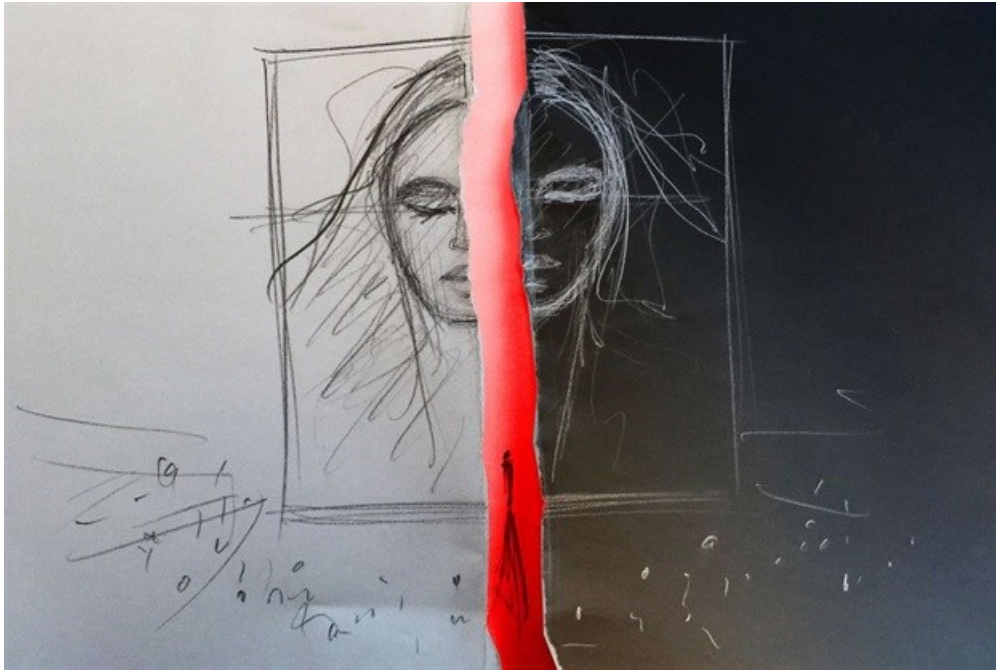
Adele's World Arena Tour. © image from the [Es Devlin website](#).

For Adele in particular, her mask is her eyes and when she sings, she takes on a huge personality. And that audience has been waiting to see the voice as her voice had packed up and there was anxiety over whether she'd make it to the stage.

“What I am crafting, my clay is the audience’s anticipation,” says Devlin. “Every moment they queued on the phone for tickets, every moment they queued outside to get the best seat... that dedication is a thing to not be squandered. My craft lies in how to look at that anticipation and deliver on it, to not f*ck it up.”

Having learned the lesson to put the face front and centre, Devlin worked with Beyoncé while she was writing the autobiographical *Lemonade*. It was clear that she needed to express the conflict of this huge persona and the tension between that persona and the real human person caught in the *maelstrom* of all that and she decided to do that with the start of hands that transitioned from the grand-scale to the human, with the big popstar hand letting the little human fall.

Instead, they made a big revolving object that Devlin likens with **thinking in series** and of the stations of the cross of her youth, she says that she only ever draws one thought leading to the next as a process of kinetic sculpture.



Sketch for the Beyonce Formation world stadium tour 2016. © image from the [Es Devlin website](#).

Devlin says the worse her sketches get, the better the idea they express. But in real life they’re big, beefy pieces that need to withstand wind and rain, and take enormous manpower to install while also factoring in the technical aspects such as lighting, moving parts and other technology.



Devlin demonstrating the outcome of that sketch on stage at Design Indaba 2018.

On working with Miley Cyrus, Devlin shared much of the discourse around the diva at the time of her Bangerz tour was around her tongue and what her tongue did, and so she suggested doing the whole show on Miley's tongue, to which the response was 'sure'. For a moment while sketching, the tongue became a house, which Devlin says happens quite often, in that something abstract becomes something concrete.

“ But once you've said someone will slide down their own tongue into the show, you have to make it happen no matter the humiliation, don't you? ”

So they did:

“ Beyoncé, Kanye and Miley's set designer, Es Devlin, is going global <https://t.co/DB5VSnYRH6> [pic.twitter.com/cmQDhFyFb2](https://t.co/DB5VSnYRH6)— Creative Bloq (@CreativeBloq) February 18, 2018 ”

The need for creatives to congregate with camaraderie

Mashile shared that Devlin was impressed by the humility and generosity of spirit that exists in the Design Indaba room in sharing their personal processes and inspirations before letting Devlin take the stage herself.

It also struck Devlin throughout Design Indaba that often there's a question of whether to be rigorous or generous. If you decide to be rigorous, there will be less idea-sharing. So generosity rules as we want places to congregate with support and camaraderie *en masse*, much as happens with the tribes supporting the musical acts at the sets she designs, but also at Design Indaba.



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Louise Marsland 21 Feb 2018



Devlin ended by referring to Sunu Gonera's opening presentation of Design Indaba 2018, in which he invited attendees to find and share our voice – she reiterated: “Can you translate from a thought to a word or an action, almost immediately?”

“ Es Devlin musing on how her early works may be considered "old and done" had the audience in awe today - some creativity is just timeless. Like seeds in the earth, creativity will bloom where it is planted. Let your ideas bloom, South Africa! [#designindaba](#) [pic.twitter.com/lfojmr88pE](https://t.co/lfojmr88pE)— Platinum Seed (@platinumseed) February 23, 2018 ”

“That was magical and we all become children again,” concluded Mashile. The audience agreed:

“ [#DesignIndaba](#) Es Devlin was magical [pic.twitter.com/McRb54ZkX2](https://t.co/McRb54ZkX2)— Sbu (@SbuDaBuddist) February 23, 2018 ”

Visit the [Es Devlin website](#) and her [Instagram feed](#) for more information and inspiration. Also keep an eye on our Design Indaba [special section](#) for our coverage throughout the Festival, which will all feature in our Design Indaba newsletter.

ABOUT LEIGH ANDREWS

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