

Tutorial: Children's Illustration

For a couple of years now, I've been doing the posters for all the kids' shows at [The Court Theatre](#) (about four a year). It's a fun little illustration job that brings with it its own challenges, and over time I'd like to think I've got pretty good at it, so I thought I'd detail a bit of my process in case anyone was interested in that sort of thing.

The most obvious challenge is that I'm limited to an A4 poster: that's 210 × 297mm, which isn't very big at all, and it's still got to be clear and have impact from a distance, so detail is at a premium. Big, bold shapes work well. Also, I'm limited to two colours plus black, and one of those colours has to be a particular shade of deep red so that the Court's logo is the right colour. I usually make the other colour either green or blue, and use overprinting to get browns or purples or whatever (although for *Badjelly the Witch* I used *purple* and red, and made heavy use of silhouette).

What might not be so obvious, if you're unfamiliar with the plays in question, is that at least half the time they're adaptations of **fairytale**s, which usually means Disney got there first, and have camped out on that particular part of the artistic landscape. In this case, the play is *Beauty and the Beast*, and it's hard to imagine anything other than their iconic, leonine creation. Nevertheless, I wanted to steer away from that as much as possible.

When I start out, I usually spend a few days thinking about what angle I want to take (the advantage of this job is that the seasons are planned out a year at a time, so I have plenty of lead time). I think about the crucial aspects of the story — the main characters, the mood, any key events, that sort of stuff — and think about how I can get the most 'flavour' across in that one little page (and remember, I have to fit dates, times, ticket prices, sponsors' logos and everything in as well). Then I start sketching.

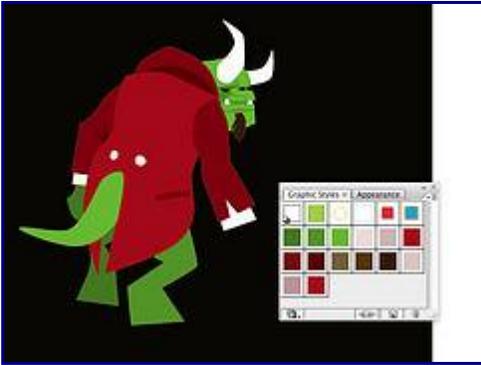
I immediately went for a more trollish, reptilian Beast than I'd seen before. I wanted him to look genuinely ugly, not cuddly like the Disney version. I had this sense that he should look really out of place in his fancy clothes. In early sketches I had Beauty standing behind him (and before that, it was her looking at the Beast in the mirror), but that all just got too complicated, and I realised that having her there was actually detracting from the mood of the piece, because if she's right there, you don't get any of Beast's sadness. So instead, I had him holding a rose, which kind of signifies the part of the story where Beauty's gone back to her father and left him all alone, which to me is kind of the crux.



So here's my sketch. I kept this pretty rough, because I do all my drawing in Illustrator. Sometimes I scan the sketch in and draw over the top of it, and other times not. It depends how complicated it is. You can see I sketch in blue pencil, which probably wasn't necessary here, but I like it if I'm inking a drawing because it's easy to remove. One thing, though: the blue pencil tends to rub off on the scanner, so make sure you clean the plate regularly or you get unsightly smudges.

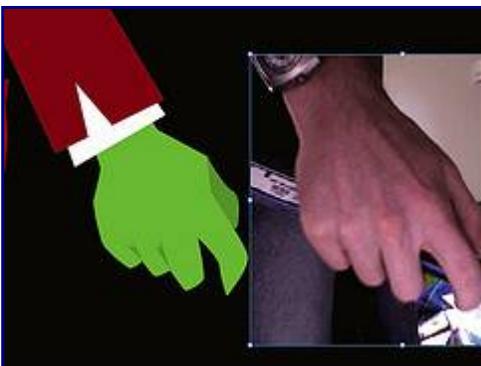
In Illustrator, I set up my spot colours (Pantone 1807 and 368 and some black) and a palette of graphic

styles for the different colours I'll be using. I used to do all the colouring at the end, but it made printing a hassle because I'd always miss something and some process colours would end up in the final document and the printers would yell at me. So now I make a few tones to use as a palette before I start. (Actually, the colours I used here are mostly from the last poster I did.) If you open up the Appearance palette, you can add multiple fills; if you give those fills varying opacity and set their mode to 'Multiply', you can blend the colours quite easily. For example, a mid-brown might have a base colour of 60% red, then a layer of green with 100% opacity, then a layer of black with 35% opacity. I used to do all this with extra shapes and clipping masks, but it just made editing such a pain. Now I start out with maybe three or four tones of each colour I know I'll be using (red, green, brown and so on) as separate graphic styles.



Next, I assemble the rough shapes of the drawing. I add detail at this stage only if it's necessary to get an idea of how the piece will look (for example, faces are big). I keep limbs pretty blocky, and group anything it makes sense to group (again, like faces) so that they can be moved and resized easily (because I always need to move stuff around to get proportions and perspectives right). In this case, I drew the body first, but when I'd drawn the face, it looked completely unnatural, so I had to tweak all the points on the body to 'turn' it so it was more side-on (the details in the back of the coat helped a lot with this, as I was able to suggest the curve of his back much more strongly).

Some people might use a tablet for drawing these shapes. I could never get used to it, so I draw each shape point by point. It keeps the lines nice and smooth, and means editing is much easier (since each shape has maybe a couple of dozen points at the most), but it does mean you need a lot of practice with the Pen and Direct Select tools. However, I would say that you need that skill anyway for cleanup, so it's a great way to learn! If in doubt, keep your shapes simple and angular: you can always add detail and refine curves later on.

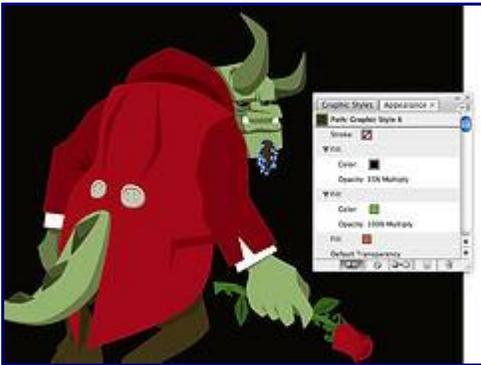


Here is my secret: there is no such thing as cheating (unless you mean straight tracing). Take all the reference shots you want. Here, I am holding an incense box, of all things, and standing on my chair so I can photograph my own hand in PhotoBooth. Once, when I was working on a Cinderella poster, I got really stuck trying to draw her dress, so I called my sister and asked if I could come round and take some photos of her in a skirt so I could get the fabric falling

exactly the right way. Google image search helps immensely, as do stock photo sites: as long as you're only using the pictures for a general reminder of how a particular object looks at a certain angle, it's not really copying. I don't have any real roses to take a picture of.

There are also mechanical shortcuts. A great one in Illustrator is the 'Roughen' effect, which essentially adds a bunch of extra random points to a shape. I drew the stem of the rose as a straight line with a thick stroke, used Roughen to give it a gnarled appearance, and then outlined the stroke and tweaked the points by hand: much quicker than drawing it from scratch, and just as effective.

If you want to add detail to a particular line, like I have here with the fur on the back of his legs, you can just select that line with the Direct Select arrow, delete it, and then use the Pen to add new points where the old line was. You can see I've also started to tweak the colours a bit (still using Graphic Styles) to make his skin greyer and more repulsive.



As a last step I go in and add shadows. I've never been very good with light sources (despite taking technical drawing classes all through high school), so I just do what looks about right. Quick tip: copy and paste in front are your friends here. Make a duplicate of the shape, fill it with the next shade darker, and then delete the bits that shouldn't be in shadow. You can also add larger shadows by making big black shapes and setting them to Multiply and about 25% opacity. (In this picture, you can also see the Appearance palette open, showing how I made that brown I was talking about).

And that's it! The important thing is to *know when to stop*. It's really easy to keep adding more detail and more shadows, but really, it ends up detracting from the impact of the design. So here's the finished piece, complete with a title and everything (but without all the show stuff, which I'll add later):



If anyone has any questions, feel free to leave them in the comments and I'll answer as best I can.

More