



Interview with Wilson Chin

Storytelling Through Design

Meeting Wilson Chin was like starting out on a train journey: through the window complex scenarios materialized, layered on different planes, ordered landscapes, natural colours that are never artificial, flower-studded hills, frames within which even objects create an action and interact with the characters themselves.

Chin's sets shape harmony, define movement, imply a design method like a geometric construction, exquisitely architectural. The scene thus becomes increasingly all-encompassing, tending to embrace the audience.

PINTO: Can you share with us your design journey including, how it began and what led you to this creative career today?

CHIN: I'm from Northern California, first generation Chinese American. My parents ran a Chinese restaurant where I spend most of my childhood. My sister and I would do our homework upstairs from the restaurant and when it got busy we came downstairs to wait tables and take orders. I discovered theatre while I was in high school at a local community theatre, and what drew me in was how similar it felt to the nightly routine of running a restaurant. There's an intricately timed choreography between the waiters and cooks and customers that could easily turn into chaos, but when all the elements come together with perfect rhythm and movement, it's kind of a graceful magic. I love when all the elements of theatre: music, movement, acting and design, coming together in harmony to craft a perfect transition, or a beautiful musical moment. My relationship to theatre began as a spectator and I became an

avid theatre-goer, but had no idea it was sometime I could do professionally. In college, I studied architecture, because that seemed to be a real job, an actual profession. But I continued to do theatre for fun which led to a couple of summers at the Williamstown Theatre Festival in Massachusetts where I got to interact with theatre as a profession for the first time.

I moved to the East Coast to study theatre design at the Yale School of Drama under the guidance of Ming Cho Lee and Michael Yeargan, and then moved to New York working as an assistant and associate to designers I admired, mostly for the great set and costume designer Santo Loquasto. I did that for about three years. And, because I studied architecture, I was already pretty good at drafting and model making and it was during that time I learned how to really become a scenic designer by observing how shows get put together, from regional theatre, to off-Broadway to on Broadway.

P: The theatre industry can be difficult to navigate a successful creative career. How have you found your journey as a person of Asian descent? Can you share your experience of any situation that you have had to face but made it work and overcome it? It would be intriguing to find out what has tested you but made you stronger?

C: Having grown up in a home where we communicated mostly in Cantonese, English was something that I didn't really learn for real until I was in school. Even after all these decades, I still sometimes feel like I'm climbing a ladder to comprehend more complicated language. When I go to see, for example, a Shakespeare play, more often than not, it's a real challenge for me to follow along, which is why I think it's vital for every element of a production to contribute to the storytelling. It sounds like such an obvious idea but it's surprising how often it doesn't happen: when the staging isn't telling the story, or the choreography, or even a scenic transition. When I see a production where every element comes together and is telling the story beat by beat every step of the way, there's a clarity that shines through that allows for a riveting and emotionally rich experience. That's my favourite kind of theatre. As a Designer, I'm always trying to design towards the storytelling: What is the physical space that allows for the deepest, most emotionally rich telling of this story? How is every transition helping to tell the story? What is the best way to shape the space that allows for staging and movement that best tells the story? My parents have seen many of my productions, and when I sit with them watching, I can feel what lands and what doesn't land with them. There are times that I approach design through the parents' eyes. What is the physical space and progression of that space that tells the story?

As a person of colour in American theatre, which is for the most part, a collection of predominantly white institutions, I'm sometimes the only non-white person in the room and I have to fight to make sure my point of view is heard and given weight. Collaboration is about what you can contribute to the room and to the production and how it meshes with everyone else's contribution. It's a big stew. It's so vital artistically for every person in the room to be able to put a piece of their soul on stage. The more diverse a production, the more abundance of ideas, emotion and life experience, so what you get on stage becomes all the richer. I actively work with my union, United Scenic Artists Local 829, and with activist organizations like Design Action to get more people of colour in the room creating theatre.

P: Being presented a script, score or a libretto, can generate a wide range of design ideas. What do you look for when finding the mechanism that will drive your designs forward and inform the visualisation of the story? What techniques and how do you go about analysing the story?

C: I feel like it's really important to continually check in with myself while reading or hearing a piece of work for the first time. Those gut instincts during the first read should inform the rest of the design process. I always try to locate what speaks and connect to me personally in

the work. I want to approach every design with a point of view and let that point of view guide me through the design process. Also, the audience will only get one chance to take in this piece and I try to design with that audience in mind. Designing is like being a dramaturgical detective. For a new piece of writing, it's about taking a script that has never had a visual world attached to it before, and how to translate those words and emotional journey into a physical visual world. I also believe in making sure I create a physical world that makes the audience lean in, and not lean back. That means creating a space that maybe subverts expectations, or a space that feels overwhelming or surprising, in subtle or maybe not-so-subtle ways. I love theatre that forces or challenges its audience to engage in unexpected ways.

P: Throughout recent years, the techniques and software available to any Designer is immense. From Sketch Up to AutoCAD to creating scale maquettes, there is a version of creating a set design in everyone's budget. Each Designer often has a preferred 'tool' in order to communicate their conceptual designs. What approach do you take when communicating your designs? What works best for you?

C: I'm pretty old school. I still don't know how to draft or render by computer. I just use pencil and paper to draft and sketch. I make cardboard models by drafting elements and then placing them into a model box, usually first making rough white models, then adding colour until I have a finished model. When it comes time to make technical drawings of the show, I work with an associate to draft the entire package on computer based on my preliminary hand drafting and models. When I was in school, computer drafting classes weren't mandatory and I was already pretty good at hand drafting, so I never learned. Technology is so vital in the creation of theatre now, but I always try to make sure there is a human quality and touch to the work I put on stage.

P: Around the globe, our theatre industries have been impacted by the pandemic. You can say that live performances have been waiting in the wings for their cue to come centre-stage. What theatre productions do you have lined up? What are your thoughts on the impact of the pandemic on designing for the stage in the immediate couple of years? What is the answer to the survival of Designers and Producers for the immediate future?

C: There were many productions I was working on in various stages of development pre-pandemic that were postponed and will be coming back eventually. During the pandemic, I've been working on a couple of new productions, one of which is a 'King Lear' that is scheduled to open this summer at the St. Louis Shakespeare Festival. It's outdoors and will be one of the first tests of a real post-pandemic stage production. During this time, we all had a year to be absolutely still and not running the rat race. It's been a time of really deep self-reflection and connecting with the world in new ways outside of our own small communities. We've become more activated and political. A playwright friend said to me, "Now is the time to lead with your politics." I don't think there's a desire to go back to 'normal'. I think we've been working in an industry that we love so much, but has so many systemic problems that we never had the time or courage to fix. There will always be the need for escapism, but I think there's also a deep hunger for work that speak of our new time and existence. There is the metaphor of theatre as a mirror, but I believe instead that theatre should be a window. Theatre shouldn't just be a myopic reflection of its own audience, but a window that opens the audience to seeing the world outside of itself. There's probably going to be a few years of leaner budgets and production values, but as designers, we know how to deal with that because it's exactly what we do for a living. We excel at taking whatever budget we are given and creating a whole world that fits the narrative, whether it's two sticks and a piece of rope, or several million dollars. It's an art form to be able to create robust, dramatic and effective worlds at any budget level. Whether they know it or not, I think producers need us now more than ever.

P: ‘Pass Over’ takes place in a stark dark void yet every detail completely engages the audience to the story, the setting and the characters which is just extraordinary. The set feels close and personal, that it is just you as a spectator and the characters. What was your inspiration for ‘Pass Over’? How are the visuals in this piece relevant to the story-telling? Would it be fair to say that there is a certain cinematic approach to the design? There is an essence of ‘Waiting for Godot’ in the story and the visuals where every item has a significant story behind it, but with ‘Pass Over’ your design truly emphasises that. Can you talk more about this design decision?

C: When I first read the play, it was clear to me the story has allegorical layers and the characters could be seen as archetypes representing many things. The script references the Exodus story from the Old Testament, Southern slave plantations, as well as America today. I created different versions of the design where we put everything together from all three worlds like a collage. But we slowly started stripping away more and more, refining it until we came to this Beckett-like setting of a barren landscape. I knew I wanted a representation of a tree on stage to reference ‘Waiting for Godot’, which is why I added the streetlamp, and is now included in the stage directions but wasn’t before. The single streetlamp in a barren void with a hint of a sidewalk curb gave the space just the right amount of shape and movement. I wanted to create a world that felt visceral and elemental, which I think also makes it feel cinematic because it strips away anything that feels too scenic or illusionistic. Also, by stripping it down to its essence, the audience is forced to lean in and fill in the blanks with their own imagination and preconceptions.

P: When designing for operas, such as ‘Lucia di Lammermoor’ at the Lyric Opera of Chicago, you have a vast stage, a large chorus for epic possibilities to fly in backdrops and set pieces, to make multiple scene changes seamlessly. What was it like to design ‘Lucia di Lammermoor’?

C: Most of my designs for opera have been with one director, Catherine Malfitano, who is one of the great American opera singers of our time and is famous for her bold performance choices in acting and movement. We very much connected on that level so our design process together was always about storytelling and creating spaces that give singers the freedom and opportunity to make bold choices.

The design for ‘Lucia di Lammermoor’ is based on a Lucia’s descent into madness. We were interested to create a psychological space, a space of the mind, using the Scottish landscape and the Romantic paintings of Caspar David Friedrich with his twisted trees. These images were abstracted and distorted to become like Rorschach inkblots.

We designed a mirrored floor so there was always the double imagery of the world and actors, creating a floating psychological space which felt introspective, watery and dreamlike. The mirrored floor also bounced stage lighting everywhere on the walls and actors, creating a haunting, spectral glow. The production appeared to use projection design, but there wasn’t any. It was the mirrored floor that created lighting which looked like it was coming from below or from within. The painted scrim of Scottish maps also looked like they glowed from within because they were painstakingly painted like a photo negative, with a deep dark blue background and white line work. This gave the scrim imagery an inner, otherworldly glow. As for the Mad Scene with the spiral stairwell, I was inspired by Caspar David Friedrich’s painting of deteriorating castle remnants. The exterior side of the castle was used for the Wolf’s Crag Scene, after which the castle slowly rotates revealing the interior for the Mad Scene, with a vertiginous spiral staircase and a bloody Lucia sitting at the very top slowly climbing down as she sings. The Lyric Opera of Chicago is a massive grand opera hall and it’s very exciting working there because of all the capabilities available. It does make you feel like you have

unlimited resources but I actually find it sometimes challenging working in the repertory system, where one night it's our show onstage and the following night it's another production. I tend to think of design with a very grounded sense of permanence, as though the set design is melted into the fabric of the stage and proscenium. It's just how my mind works so when I consider the design, it's about the relationship of the design and the space it inhabits. To think of stage design as a temporary world that comes and goes for each performance can feel very foreign to me.

P: Can you talk about 'Oklahoma!' and what it was like to have an all-black cast to tell the story of the 'American dream'? And did this have an impact on your approach to designing it? It would also be wonderful to hear about how you created the endless sky and the house tapering off into the distance.

C: 'Oklahoma!' is such an interesting piece, because its old-fashioned simplicity hides a whole Pandora's box of unanswered questions will always feel timely and relevant. On the face of it, it's a simple love story. But at its heart, it is really about America: the formation of America, the idea of America, the promise of America and the American dream. There's terrible things that happen in this musical, things that are never reconciled. There's racism, xenophobia, a murder at the end followed by a sham trial. Yet, by the end of the show they're all singing a happy song and the musical is over. It's crazy if you really break it down like that.

This wasn't the first time I designed a production of 'Oklahoma'. My first was a couple years before with one of my favourite collaborators Jenn Thompson at the Goodspeed Opera House. It was at the time when Donald Trump was just elected so, in that moment, the idea of American glory felt really tainted and like the country was truly broken. The campaign election rallies were still fresh on our minds, so we filled the auditorium and the stage with American flags and red, white and blue bunting everywhere. It was intentionally over whelming and the audience could either take it as cheerful patriotism or extreme nationalism. It worked both ways. So, a few years later, I was offered to design a different production of 'Oklahoma!' with a new director at a different theatre and with a completely different lens through which to tell the story because we would be doing it with an all-black cast. It was vital for me that the design needed to be specific to the history of black migration and black Oklahoma townships, which is very different than the history of white migration. The Emancipation Proclamation and the end of slavery brought a huge migration of free enslaved people across the country. Many settled in Oklahoma, and they banded together for safety from lynch mobs, a fact which fundamentally raises the stakes on the theme of community in 'Oklahoma!'.

I wanted the design to have a tangible and visceral reality to it, no painted drops or flat painted scenery. For the design of Laurey's house, I made a model based on research photos, making sure to embrace the specificity of the architecture and the raw building materials. Typically, I always provide full design drawings to the scene shop, but for Laurey's house, the fantastic staff at Denver Theatre Center was able to build it just based on the model I gave them with some rough drafting and the research photos. It was quite a feat of engineering and construction, especially because the house tracks on and offstage in a narrow pathway.

As for the sky, I didn't want a painted backdrop but instead wanted something with physicality and depth. So, I designed a sky with layers. There was a plain white cyc upstage and, in front of that, a layer of physically sculpted clouds made from cotton batting. Lighting the clouds could be done separately from the sky behind, just a real sky, and this gave a real depth of field and texture. Most of the story of 'Oklahoma!' is told over the course of a single day from dawn, to morning, afternoon, sunset, to night. So, having a physical sky that gives you that transition over the course of a whole day helps a great deal with the story-telling.