



A CONVERSATION WITH CAMERON ANDERSON

BY ISAIAH MATTHEW WOODEN, PHD. (*Director, Dramaturg and
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CAMERON ANDERSON IS AN INTERNATIONALLY ACCLAIMED SCENIC DESIGNER WHO CREATES ENVIRONMENTS FOR THEATRE AND OPERA RICH IN EMOTIONAL RESONANCE AND SYMBOLIC MEANING. IN A PROFESSIONAL CAREER SPANNING MORE THAN TWO DECADES, ANDERSON HAS DISTINGUISHED HERSELF AS A VISUAL STORYTELLER PAR EXCELLENCE. THE VIRTUOSITY OF ANDERSON'S WORK IS EVIDENCED BEST BY HER EXPANSIVE PORTFOLIO, WHICH INCLUDES DESIGNS AT MANY OF THE WORLD'S LEADING THEATRE AND OPERA COMPANIES. A HALLMARK OF ANDERSON'S DESIGNS IS AN EVOCATIVE PLAY WITH SCALE, EXAGGERATION, DISTORTION, AND EMBELLISHMENT. THESE MORE EXPRESSIONISTIC ELEMENTS SERVE TO DEFAMILIARIZE THE FAMILIAR FOR SPECTATORS, THEREBY INVITING THEM TO GRAPPLE WITH, SAY, THE INTERIOR LIFE OF AN OPERA'S CENTRAL CHARACTER OR A LATENT THEME IN THE TEXTUAL UNCONSCIOUS OF A DRAMA IN UNEXPECTED WAYS. THE ENVIRONMENTS ANDERSON CREATES REVEAL A KEEN UNDERSTANDING OF THE TREMENDOUS IMPACT THAT THE VISUAL IMAGES WE PLACE ON STAGE CAN HAVE ON AN AUDIENCE. SPECTATORSHIP, OF COURSE, IS A SOCIAL PRACTICE, ONE THAT WE HAVE COME TO RELY ON HEAVILY TO MAKE SENSE AND MEANING OF OUR WORLD. ANDERSON FULLY EMBRACES THE IDEA THAT AUDIENCE MEMBERS ARE CO-CREATORS OF PERFORMANCE EVENTS AND BRINGS A SIMILAR UNDERSTANDING TO HER WORK WITH COLLABORATORS. IN THE INTERVIEW THAT FOLLOWS, ANDERSON REFLECTS ON HER ARTISTIC JOURNEY, OUTLINING SOME OF THE KEY QUESTIONS AND THEMES ANIMATING HER DESIGN WORK AND PROCESS. SHE ALSO CONTEMPLATES HER EFFORTS TO PUSH THE BOUNDARIES OF WHAT'S POSSIBLE ON STAGE VISUALLY. ANDERSON'S COMMITMENT TO USING DESIGN AND VISUAL STORYTELLING TO HERALD NEW THEATRICAL HORIZONS AND, INDEED, MAKE NEW WORLDS IS ESPECIALLY REVERBERANT IN THE EXCHANGE. SO TOO IS HER BOUNDLESS CREATIVITY, ARTISTIC INTEGRITY, AND PROFOUND HUMANITY.

ISAIAH: What inspired you to become a stage designer? What were some formative experiences that influenced your path?

CAMERON: My interest in scenic design was born out of an interdisciplinary undergraduate experience at Wesleyan University, where I majored in English. I studied architecture and drawing and wrote a thesis that looked at representations of the closet in Renaissance drama - such as the famed closet scene in which Hamlet kills Polonius. Under the mentorship of Professor Natasha Korda, I argued that the closet was an architectural metaphor for privacy as it emerged out of the Middle Ages and became a fixture in the early modern wealthy home and was known as the most "private" room in the house. I argued that privacy emerged not as evidence of the further civilization of the early modern subject, but as a performance of social distinction meant to distance the elite from the newly emerging middle class. To make my case, I looked at plays, poetry, and paintings and also analyzed architecture.

At the point in this process when I was studying Inigo Jones and the psychology of the space of the Renaissance stage, I began to think about the scenic designer and how the profession brings together all the elements that I love: a text, fine art, the psychology of space, installation art, architecture, and storytelling. The theater department at Wesleyan gave me an opportunity to design despite having no practical experience, and when I walked onto the Wesleyan stage and saw my first design realized, it was like walking into my own mind. This liberal arts environment, where I was encouraged to seek connections across disciplines in order to come to a fuller understanding of the topic at hand, helped form the basis of my life as an artist and eventually lead me to teach at Brandeis University.

Wesleyan also nourished my developing interest in social change and in drawing people, places, and ideas on the margins to the center of attention. Looking back on my thesis project, I see it as the seed of my artistic life, containing all the elements I strive to explore in theater: a critical lens on an unjust society, the psychology of space, and approaching theater from an interdisciplinary focus.

After completing my degree in English at Wesleyan University, I moved to New York City and assisted G.W. Mercier, a prominent scenic and costume designer who tragically passed away in 2021. I also worked in the props department at The Public Theater. It was during that year that I decided to attend the College-Conservatory of Music (CCM) at the University of Cincinnati to pursue my Master of Fine Arts degree in Scenic Design. CCM is a prestigious music conservatory that provides wonderful opportunities for designers who are interested in opera. During the final year of my degree, I was hired by a recent CCM directing graduate Jose Maria Condemi to design two operas, one at the San Francisco Opera, which was a major coup for a young designer. Upon graduation from CCM, I had a strong portfolio of bold academic and professional designs for both opera and theater.

I.: Can you speak to some of the touchstones from your days as a student or early in your career that continue to sustain you and your work?

C.: Because I came to set design at the end of college, I approached every step of my journey with an open mind about what things could be, as I didn't understand the process through its limitations. This is a mindset that many artists and innovators try to inhabit. This allows me to approach plays and operas as works of art and not as theatrical problems to be solved.

I started my career working at large opera houses, and this openness enabled me to take on massive stages with my own perspective built from an artist's mind. I was fortunate in a way to be able to approach everything with a purity and freshness and without being afraid of asking why we couldn't do the ambitious thing. I didn't know what had been done before, and my mind went to "why not?" I entered into these and similar moments with curiosity and without expectation for what things should or needed to be.

I remember an undergraduate theater professor at Wesleyan, the late great William Ward, encouraging me to go sit in the theater and look at the stage. I had never looked at a stage as a space I could fill. The project Wesleyan gave me to design was a play entitled *One x One = One, but One + One = Two*. I made something abstract and sculptural. It wasn't an intellectual choice to lean into abstraction. Instead, it was a visceral response to the ideas of the play. If I had taken many theater classes and understood how my work fit into the arc of theater tradition, I might have missed the urge to make something that was coming purely from the gut. The possibility and openness of that early experience remains a touchstone.

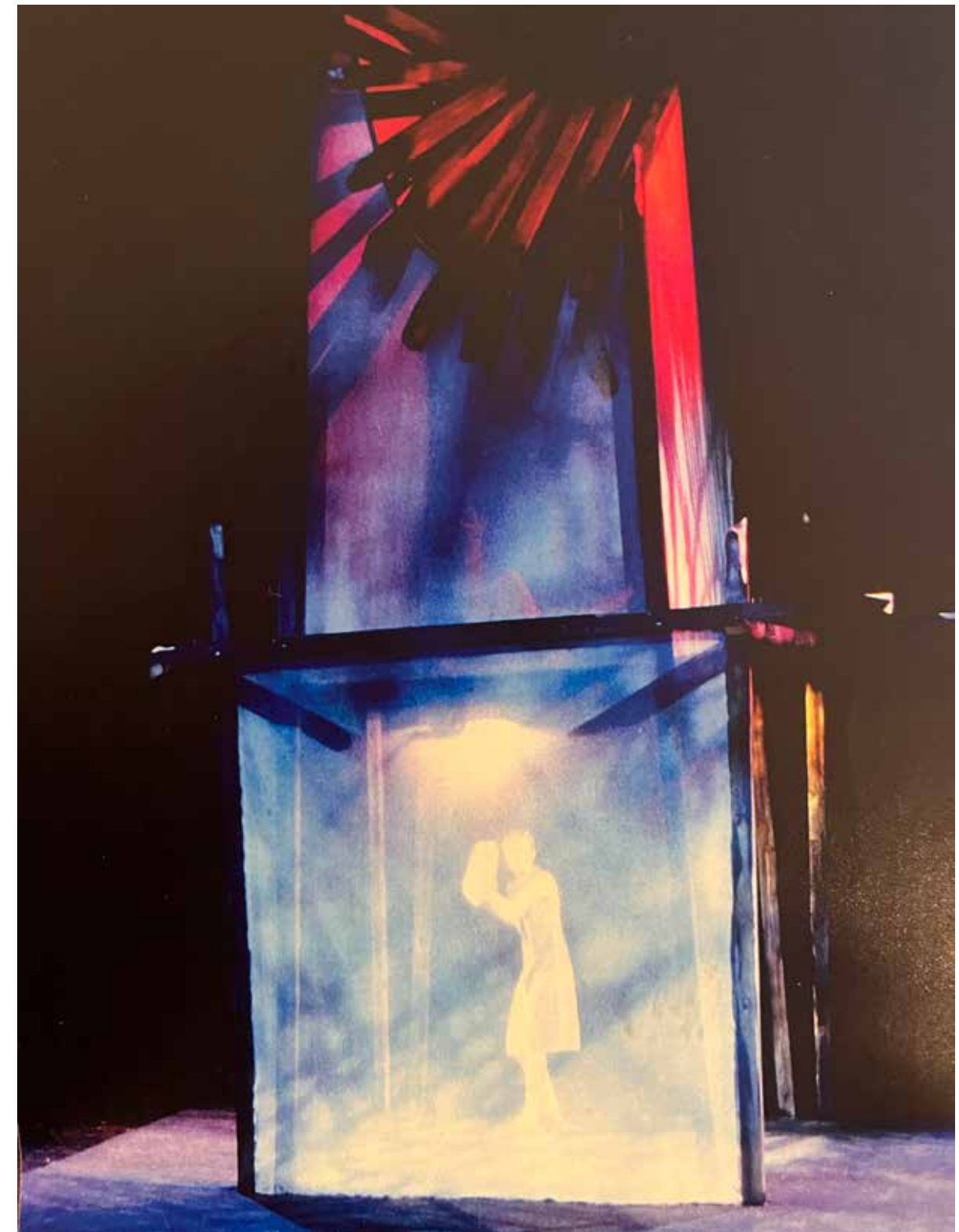
I.: How you would describe your approach to the design process? What are some of the distinguishing features of your design philosophy or aesthetic?

C.: I designed *The Tempest* for my thesis project in graduate school at CCM and that process helped coalesce my approach to the design process. I was given great resources for the production and was able to work on a large scale. My design for *The Tempest* is one of the projects that people ask me about most frequently, despite it being more than twenty years old. Reading the play, I was moved by the sense of magic and the poetic possibilities of the island, the ocean, and the cave. I became interested in exploring the poetry of the language and how I could distill it into a visual vocabulary that would allow the actors to inhabit a single sculptural space that would transform without physically moving. I created huge interlocking curving shapes that felt like waves, a ship, a cave, shards of shell, and the ocean all at once. The experience was formative because I was given the space to create something wild, abstract, and impractical. When I look back at that project, I can see that it really marks a beginning for my cultivation of my design philosophy.

Describing the desired atmosphere for his Dream Play, famed Swedish playwright August Strindberg writes, "Everything can happen, everything is possible and probable. Time and place do not exist; on a significant bases of reality, the imagination spins, weaving new patterns; a mixture of memories, experiences, free fancies, incongruities, and improvisations." I have been drawn to this quote as a way to illuminate my scenic design work and creative philosophy over the past two decades. In my work, I create visual metaphors to communicate a play's themes and ideas to the audience. This metaphor often takes the shape of a symbolic abstraction - a glass shadow box closing in around a woman to suggest both objectification and suffocation - or uses composition to create an emotional response - an attic space with a looming angled ceiling which elicits a feeling of claustrophobia and impending doom. I seek to create an environment on stage, not a background, that acts as a bridge to the audience's imagination. I do not seek to illustrate reality but to elevate the real to a plane that is suggestive, non-imitative, one that allows us to dream, or as Strindberg puts it, where time and place do not exist. This often means stripping away detail, making bold sculptural spaces that create the skeleton upon which the play, like a skin is stretched. Or it may mean exaggerating a single detail to express a character's obsession.

To express *Simon Boccanegra's* life as a sea captain and his failure to unite his divided peoples, I designed his titular opera at the Teatro Colon in Argentina as an enormous abstract ship carcass, surrounded by walls of black plexiglass, which created reflections of both the set and the characters - who despite constantly being able to see their reflections, were not able to truly see themselves. This process involves creating an environment that is specific enough to tell the story at hand, but that also creates an emotional doorway to something more essential and universal.

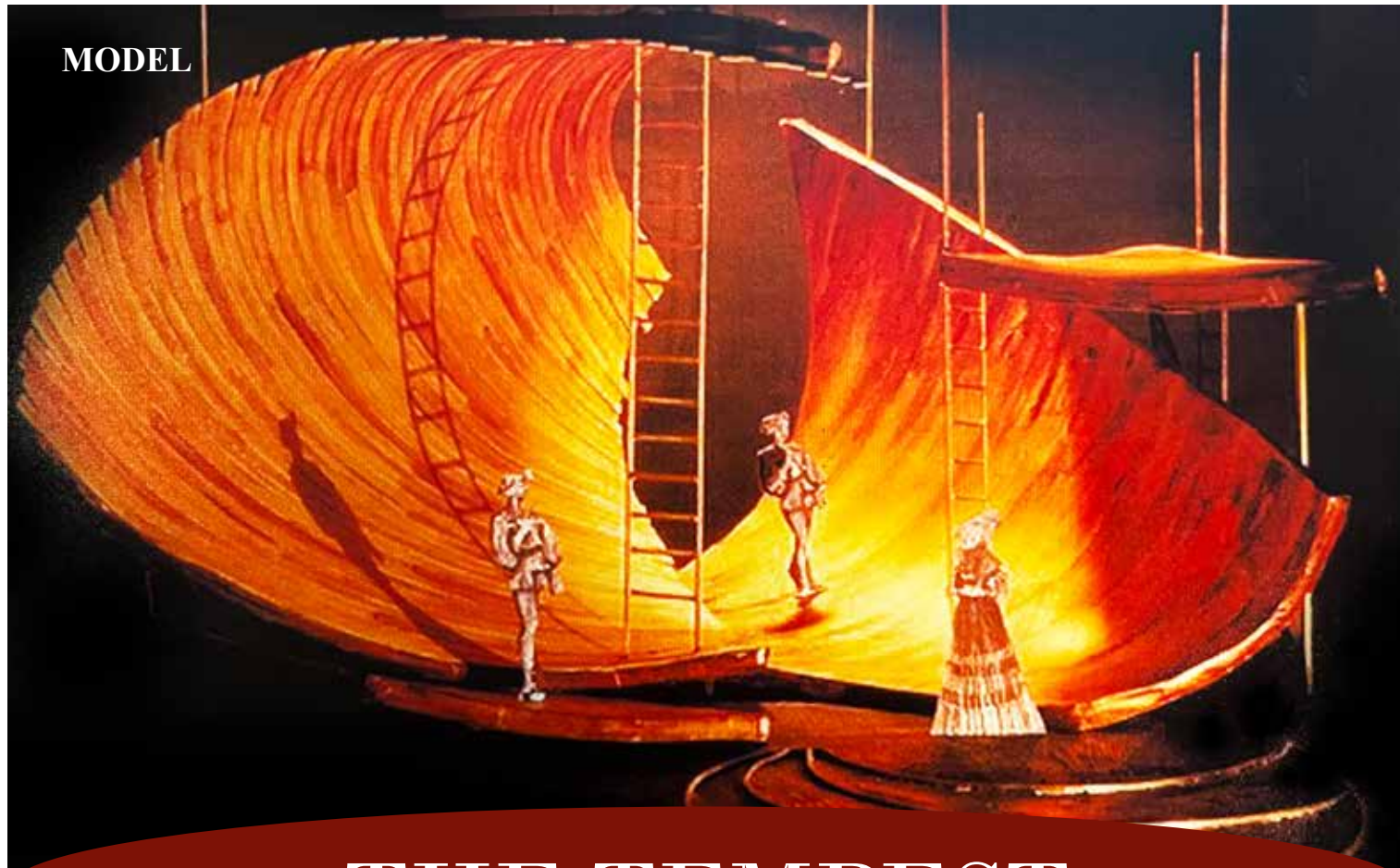
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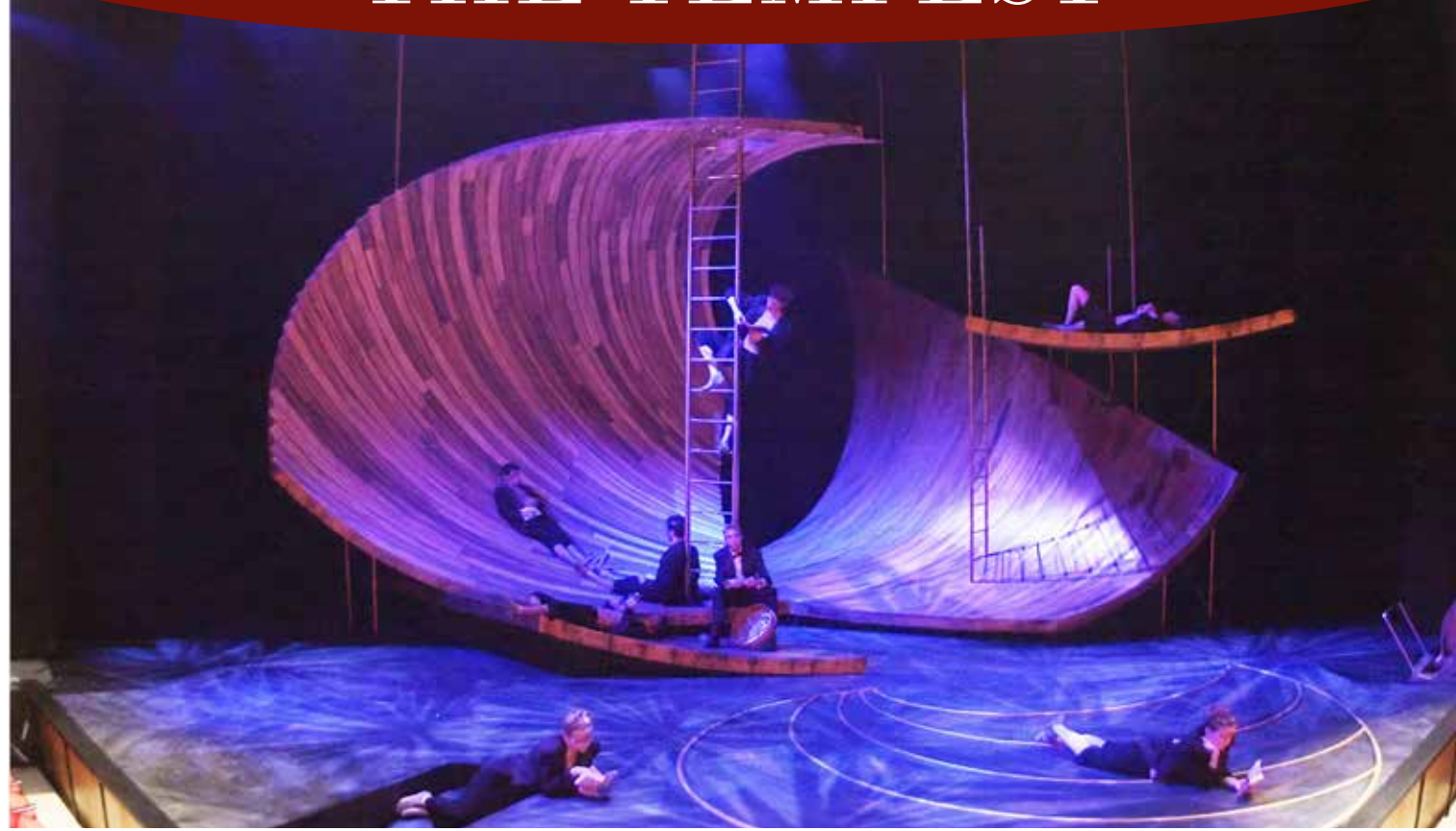
"WALKING ONTO THE STAGE OF THE FIRST SHOW
I DESIGNED IN COLLEGE WAS LIKE WALKING INTO MY OWN MIND."

1 X 1 = 1, BUT 1 + 1 = 2. Play by Lucía Quintero. Direction: Mark Wade.
Set designer: Cameron Anderson. Lighting designer: Jack Carr.
Wesleyan University, CFA Theater, 1998.

MODEL



THE TEMPEST



THE TEMPEST. Play by Wiliam Shakespeare. Directed by Michael Burnham. Scenic design: Cameron Anderson. College Conservatory of Music, 2001.



Concurrent with this design philosophy, I strive in my work (and in my teaching) to elevate and bring to the surface untold stories of marginalized people and to root out and expose patriarchal and oppressive forces that dominate many classical texts in the canon. I am able to do this metaphorically through design concepts that highlight the inherent misogyny or racism of a classic text like, say, Puccini's *Madame Butterfly*, which tells the story of a fifteen-year-old disenfranchised Japanese girl, Cio Cio San, who is purchased by an American soldier, abandoned, and eventually commits suicide. In a recent production at The Pacific Symphony in California, I designed a pantomime that takes place before the overture that shows Pinkerton, the American soldier, choosing her from among a line-up of similarly impoverished young girls in tattered nightgowns. The production refused to create the romance the audience is expecting when they come to this opera. Instead, it asked them to confront the reality of the colonial power dynamics at play in this story, that is, in reality, about child sex slavery. After this uncomfortable sequence, which is usually left to the imagination, the girls pull back a drape to reveal an idealized version of a Japanese house to lure Pinkerton, while all around this artifice, we see the impoverished reality of a fifteen-year-old geisha living in a Japanese ghetto.

I have been fortunate to be able to make work both for the theater and opera for major companies across the United States and abroad. Opera allows me to make epic metaphoric landscapes that express bold perspectives about human extremes - the depths of humans' greed, narcissism, and desperation. It also allows for the creation of sweeping gestures of hope. Because the artform itself is abstract and outside the quotidian as performers fill the hall with virtuosic singing accompanied by large orchestras, design for opera is expected to be spectacular and match this heightened experience. I strive to move beyond spectacle, to create a visual world that both supports the storytelling and challenges audiences to digest these operatic stories as more than an excuse to hear the music. I ask myself, and the audience, why we should want another production of *Madame Butterfly* that ignores its offensive colonialism, sexism, and racism. In other words, as artists it is part of our job to bring works from the past into our present and to ask the questions that will make them relevant to a modern audience.

After two decades of designing opera, the violence enacted upon its leading ladies has led me to inquire what we can learn about gender from opera and to wonder why we return to see these horrific images played out - spectacularly, to be sure - over and over again. This inquiry led me to the work of the scholar Catherine Clement. She calls opera "the undoing of women" and discusses the ways that the majority of the standard repertory features the violent and often eroticized endings for women who are often depicted as living outside of accepted gender roles and deriving a degree of agency from doing so. I started to wonder what we would find if we could pull the daggers from the chests of Butterfly and Carmen, breathe back life into the lungs of Violetta and Mimi, and unclasp the hands from Desdemona's neck. This inquiry has influenced my conceptual interpretations of the operas I am hired to design, but it has also inspired me to create my own project entitled *Tosca Rediviva*, or *Tosca Revived*, an in-progress site-specific work based on Puccini's *Tosca*. This project seeks to bring *Tosca* back to life and invites audiences to move from location to location in Rome experiencing a series of theatrical installations exploring gender, opera, and violence.

I.: Can you talk about how your process unfolds practically?

C.: At the core of my design process is a deep respect for the texts that I'm exploring. Whether it is an opera libretto, the music of an opera, or a play, I start by spending time in the initial stage trying to understand what the play is about, what the opera is about. I do that by reading or listening to the work closely. I then carry out deep dramaturgical and historical research. What have other people said about this work? How does it sit in the context of whatever country it comes from or the culture from which it emerges? What was the playwright, librettist, or composer attempting to convey or communicate? Then, with a deep sense of both humility and courage, I think about what I, as an artist, want to say about the work, which can sometimes be complicated.

The American theater right now is very invested in what the playwright wants to say. Traditions from other parts of the world are more interested in how the director and the scenographers refract the work through their personal lenses. I think I sit somewhere in the middle. I am not necessarily interested in taking something and stamping my vision onto it. I view the process as a deep, profound meditation on the work that I filter through my own artistic vision and sensibility. Why are we doing the project now? What is interesting about it in this moment? What can we say about this work that can positively contribute to the world? Is there something profoundly problematic about the piece in terms of its depiction of, say, women or people of color? How can we at once respect what is there and comment upon it in a way that will make it resonate with contemporary audiences?

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RENDERING



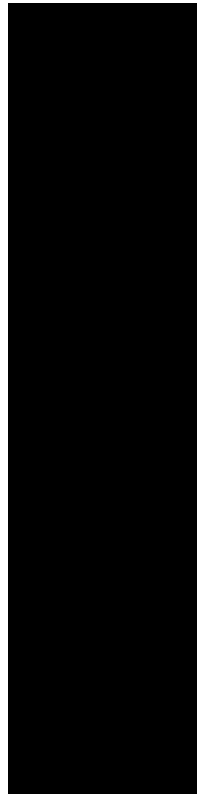
Madame Butterfly

Music by Giacomo Puccini. Libretto by Giuseppe Giacosa and Luigi Illica. Conductor: Carl St. Clair.
 Directed by Eric Einhorn. Set designer: Cameron Anderson. Costume designer: Katie Wilson.
 Lighting designer: Kathy Pryzgoda. Pacific Symphony, Costa Mesa - California, 2019.



SIMON BOCCANEGRA

Music by Giuseppe Verdi.
Libretto by Francesco Maria Piave.
Directed by Jose Maria Condemi.
Set designer: Cameron Anderson.
Costume designer: Eduardo Caldirola. Lightitng
designer: Roberto Traferri.
Teatro Colon, Buenos Aires, 2011.



After I have spent time reading and thinking about a piece, I then do visual research. I begin an intense research period which involves gathering both hundreds of visual images and reading supporting dramaturgical and period texts. During the research phase I draw upon my interdisciplinary background to search for images that express the ideas, questions, or themes of a text. I pour through installation art, sculpture, and paintings and have a series of meetings with the director, sharing visual research and conceptual ideas until I am ready to begin to put a design on paper. I then create a series of highly detailed renderings in photoshop and then move onto a scale color model. I become attached to images and metaphors. I do feel like part of my job is to bring people into the fold of my mind, soul, and thinking, which is to say bring them into my vision of the story. I have my students present their work as if they're facing a room full of people who have no idea what they're talking about. How do you tell the story of your idea in a way that feels illuminating? It can be difficult if a director or your other collaborators are not on board. It goes back to that sense of humility I mentioned, when you sometimes must let go of things. If you close things off and you insist that there is only one way to solve a problem, you can miss good ideas that can make your ideas better. This is something that theater artists in general struggle with because so much of our work is deeply personal. What we're doing, what we're bringing to the table, it's intimate, it's vulnerable. How do you continue to protect the little seed of your idea, which is also a little piece of you? How do you bring that into a group? Once my collaborators and I have settled on key ideas/concepts, I then move on to making a model and drafting. Once the model is approved by the director, I create a detailed package of scale drafting. Concurrent with this process, I am collaborating with the lighting, costume, and sound designers to create a unified visual world.

I.: How does your work in theater converge with or diverge from your work in opera? Is there a difference in the way you approach your process for the different mediums?

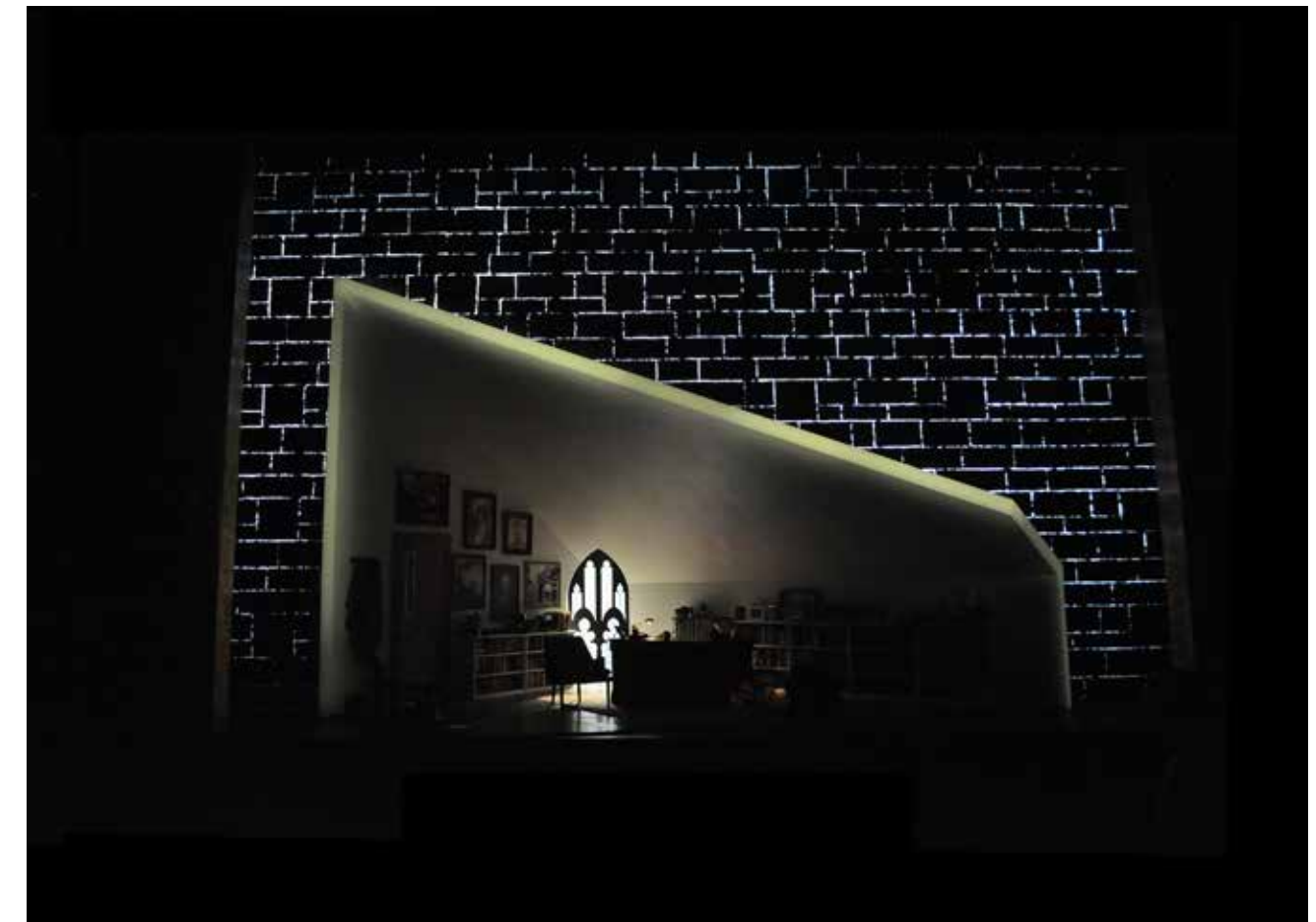
C.: It's essentially the same approach. However, what makes me the designer that I am is that I bring operatic thinking to theater, and I bring theatrical thinking to opera. There is a tendency towards spectacle in opera that's not always deeply connected to the text because there's an audience expectation for a sense of the epic. One of the important things I bring to the opera world is a design process deeply rooted in dramaturgical research, which allows me to create meaningful spectacle instead of making epic images for the sake of epic images. Instead, the images I create are always connected to the story. There can be a tendency towards realism in American theater. Something I bring to the theater, then, is a sense of working on an epic scale when appropriate, even if the play is realistic. Take, for example, the production of *The Niceties*, which I designed recently at The Huntington Theater, The Geffen Theater, The McCarter, and The Manhattan Theater Club. The play is an exploration of race and academia, and it takes place in a very realistic office of a professor at an Ivy League university. For the production, I created a very real space, but I placed it in an abstract container. I had the idea that the professor at the center of the play had been placed in an attic office space because she was a woman, and I created a huge angle cutting across the stage to embody both the realistic space of the attic and the metaphoric embodiment of the emotional tension in the piece. The angularity of this space was able to communicate the realism needed and also communicate the tension between these two very smart women. I am interested in realism when it contributes to the storytelling. Finding the exact right molding is not what theater is about. Instead, for me, it's about what that molding might say about the characters and the story. It is more interesting to me ultimately to say something with the envelope of the space that allows the audience to feel something about racism or about the problematic situation of who ultimately has access to very expensive university educations. And, of course, it's always a balance of how you spend the budget. We spent a lot of resources making this expansive space for *The Niceties*, which another designer may not have chosen to do. I did hear a lot of feedback, however, about the last three seconds of the play. I designed a large black wall made of massive stones surrounding the angled attic - the kind of large, intimidating walls you see on Ivy League campuses. In the final moments of the play, after the tension had built up to a point where the rift between the women had left both suffering, all of the cracks between each stone illuminated just before suddenly going out. It communicated the danger, the fault lines, the rifts in our society that have formed surrounding racism and sexism and a lack of empathy in academia. It was a large investment in a single moment, but it told the story in a way that I would argue the words alone could not. It was something that didn't need language. It was something that told that story in a way that connected to your heart and soul.

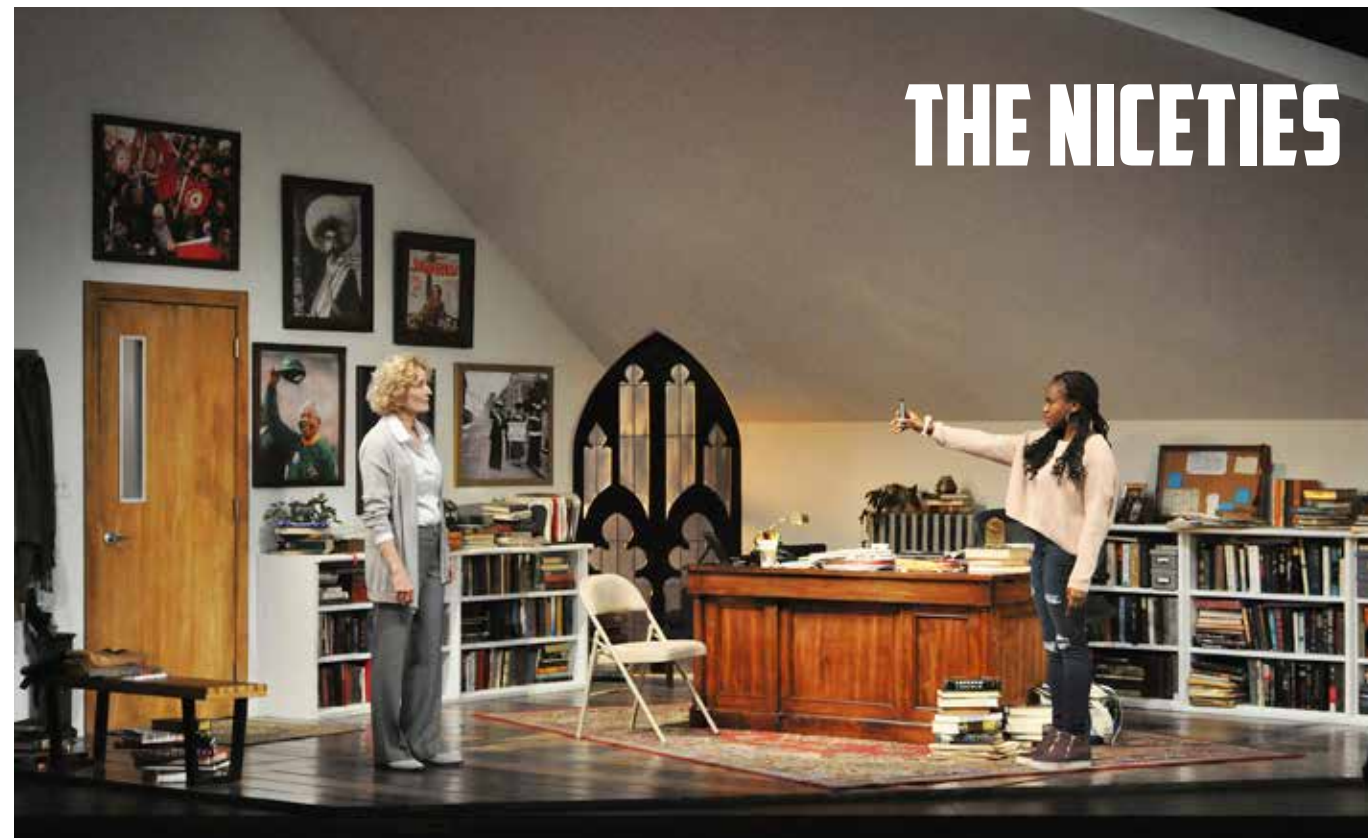
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Cameron and I worked together on the world premiere production of *The Niceties*, which went from the Huntington Theatre, to Manhattan Theatre Club, to McCarter Theatre and to the Geffen Playhouse. On its face, *The Niceties* is a very traditional, "well-made" play, written in the realist style. And yet it is also a play that at its core questions traditional values, narratives, and realities. Cameron's design prepared audiences for this contrast from the moment the lights went up, with a picture-perfect recreation of a professor's office that was punctuated by a dramatic slash across the top - a sense of tension, challenge, menace, and artifice that told the audience to expect that this play would not be what it seemed or uphold the traditions it seemed to embody. Cameron also had the idea of a final lighting cue that illuminated the cracks in the "stone" walls around the set, giving the audience a profound sense that a crack had formed in the foundations of settled ideas and institutions. This was so effective that I ended up cutting two pages of stage directions from the play, as that one scenic gesture said everything there was to say. My collaboration with Cameron taught me how profoundly scenic work can frame a play, determine its genre, clue an audience in on how to watch, and often, replace words with an indelible image.

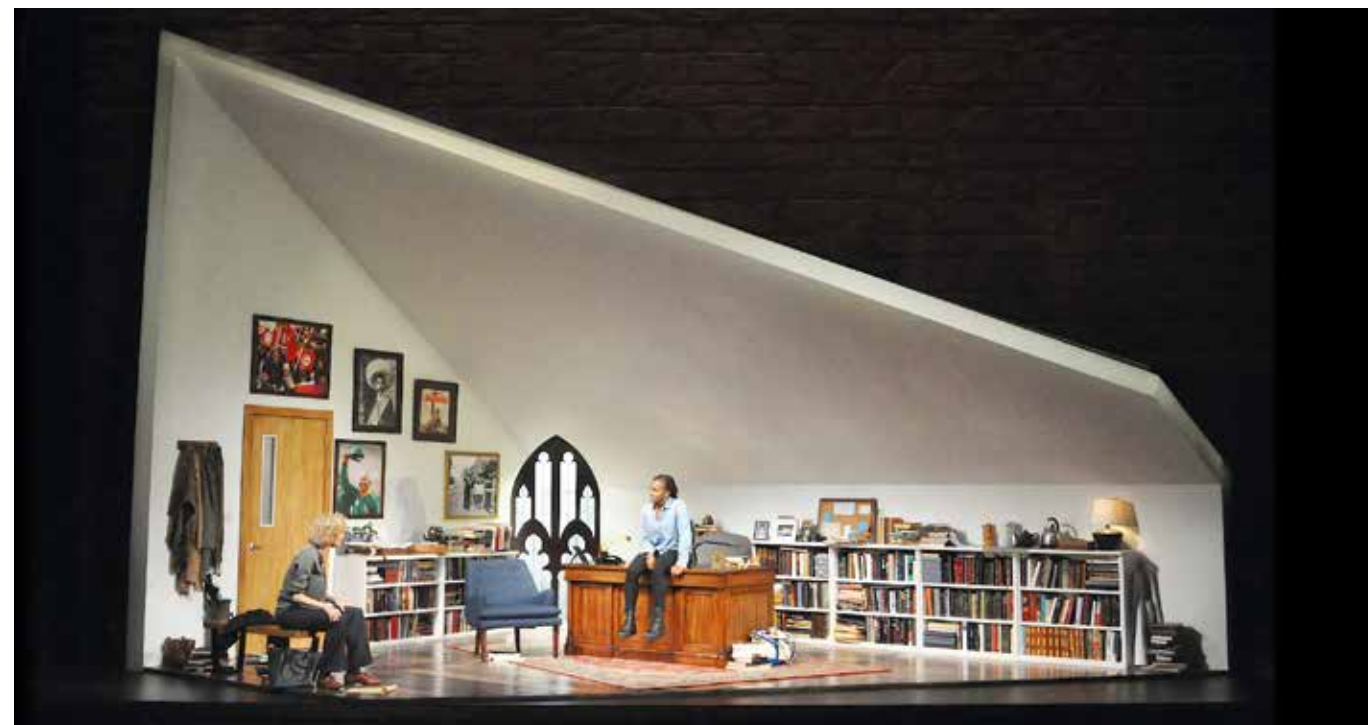
ELEANOR BURGESS (*Playwright*)

THE NICETIES





Playwright: Eleanor Burgess. Director: Kimberly Senior. Scenic Design: Cameron Anderson. Costume Design: Kara Harmon. Lighting Design: D.M. Wood. Original Music and Sound Design: Elisheba Ittoop. The Geffen Theater, 2019. Other Productions: McCarter Theater, 2019; The Manhattan Theatre Club, 2018; The Huntington Theater Co., 2018.



I think often about the larger-than-life, emotionally charged environment Cameron created for the productions of Eleanor Burgess' *The Niceties* that had runs at the Huntington Theatre Company, the Manhattan Theatre Club, the McCarter Theatre, and the Geffen Playhouse. Burgess sets her play in the office of a sixty-something professor who teaches at an elite university in the northeast part of the United States. While Cameron outfitted the office at the center of the play with various realistic details, including a wealth of books and other personal effects, she took a more expressionistic approach to the shape of the room, stretching the tip of one of its corners unpredictably into the air. This rendered the space at once capacious and claustrophobic, which served to heighten many of the debates about race and higher education the play stages and activates.

Especially striking about the design for *The Niceties* were the ways it reflected some of the questions animating Cameron's creative process, including essential inquiries about how to make a production feel relevant and resonant for audiences. Cameron pursues these questions with rigor and vigor and, in doing so, consistently expands how we think about what's possible on stage visually. At stake in many of her design projects are vital ideas about the ways the past and future can be remade and renegotiated in the present—both for characters on stage and for spectators.

Among the many things I have valued about working with Cameron as a collaborator are the ways she presses me and other colleagues to think outside the box artistically, aesthetically, and organizationally. She always poses the kinds of generous and generative questions that engender fresh ways of thinking about a script and what it means to be an artist working in collaborative community. Her inquisitiveness is boundless and creates important space to rethink the very rigid approaches to production practiced at many theatres in the United States and, concomitantly, to experiment with strategies that allow for greater flexibility and agency. The resulting processes and projects often prove transformative, and as the production of *The Niceties* beautifully demonstrated, remind us that building new worlds is always within our reach.

Isaiah Matthew Wooden, PhD (*Director, Dramaturg and Assistant Professor of Theater at Swathmore College*)

I.: Are there particular projects that helped push your design aesthetic/process/practice significantly forward? Are there notable ideas/concepts/principles that reverberate across your design work?

C.: I want to talk about a few different projects here. I am going to start with one of my early productions. It was the second show that I designed professionally. I was still in graduate school when I was asked to design a production of the opera *Susannah* by Carlisle Floyd. It's an American opera about the oppression of the church upon women. Looking back, I can see I was exploring techniques and curiosities that have stayed with me throughout my career. For that production, I chose not to put images or architectural pieces representing the church on stage. Instead, I created a translucent drop that came down from the grid and then swooped forward. It was an abstract painting composed of rich greens and blues and looked poetic and beautiful, echoing the music. With lighting, the drop could also appear ominous. I put the shape of a church steeple upstage of the drop, and we lit it with shadow such that audiences never saw a cross, but it was always lurking in the shadows. We would move the flat of the church closer or further away from the drop so that the shape of the steeple would become more or less sharp. This enabled the audience to see the opera as a commentary on the troubling nature of institutions that try to control people. Because it was not physically present in a real way, and it was coming in and out of focus, it became about power structures controlling individuals.

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SUSANNAH

Music by Carlisle Floyd. Conductor: Michael Morgan. Direction: Jose Maria Cordemi.
Scenic Design: Cameron Anderson. Festival Opera / Dean Leshner Center for the Arts, 2002.



I was exploring the idea of something lurking in the shadows that no one will say is unfair because it's just a part of the fabric of the culture. This project speaks to something that I strive to do in my work, which is to make the design deeply specific to the play and also resonant with larger ideas or broader themes. I am interested in creating something more iconographic. How can it be both specific to the story and also to a person sitting in the audience who has experienced something similar in their culture or life? *Susannah* was a project that marked the beginning of my exploration of ideas of translucency and abstraction and playing with scale to create visual metaphors that take a life of their own on stage. For me, the metaphor isn't always something that I want an audience to see or understand from the moment they enter the space. It is something that I want them to realize over the course of the production. I'm interested in the temporality of that.

Another project that was a touchstone for me was a production of *La Traviata* with director Jeffrey Buchman. I mentioned in discussing my design philosophy that I strive to elevate and bring to the surface untold stories of marginalized people, and to root out and expose patriarchal and oppressive forces that dominate many classical texts in the canon. I am able to raise up these stories through designing a particular play or opera focusing on one character's perspective. In my production of *La Traviata* at The Indiana Jacobs School of Music, I used the image of a shadow box to point to the ways that courtesans in the eighteenth century were worshiped for their beauty and often left penniless to die alone once their looks faded. By choosing to focus the opera on Violetta's perspective, we were able to create the metaphor of a suffocated butterfly inside a shadow box to point to this patriarchal practice. Glass walls hovered around the stage throughout the opera, and, in the final death scene, a literal glass box made of twenty-five-foot walls enclosed Violetta and as she died. A huge pair of butterfly wings appeared behind her out of the darkness during the final chords.

The butterfly shadowbox represented our culture's desire to objectify women and contain them to the point of suffocation and death. My work in the theater enables me to connect with living playwrights and to make work that resonates with modern audiences. Many of the projects I am drawn to ask difficult questions about race and gender and other marginalized voices. While design for theater in the United States tends to be more realistic and less expressive, I bring my aesthetic to these works as well. I always remind my students of a quote from Robert Edmund Jones's influential book on theater design: "There is no more reason for a room on stage to be a reproduction of an actual room than for an actor who plays the part of Napoleon to be Napoleon, or for an actor who plays Death in the old morality play to be dead."

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My collaborations with Cameron Anderson have proven to be some of the richest and most rewarding of my career. When going through the preliminary research phase of our design conversations, I have learned to expect that Cameron will bring some element to the process that is going to spark incredibly creative conversations and ideas that will ultimately result in forever changing the way I experience a piece. There is no better example of this than the new production of Verdi's *La Traviata* that we created for the Indiana University Jacobs School of Music. Our process began as an exploration of what aspects of the demi-monde of the courtesan we wanted to explore in the visual treatment of the production, but at one point, Cameron introduced the idea of the butterfly as a symbol, and it ended up influencing almost every facet of the production. The metaphor of something that society saw as an object to be idolized for its beauty, yet without regard for it as a living being was a beautifully touching way to tell Violetta's story. Cameron has a wonderful sense of humanity in her designs, and an aesthetic that makes one long to dive deep into the human condition. There is no more powerful testament to the work of an artist than to say that the impact of their creativity, and the poetic power of their creations live on long after the curtain has come down on their productions, and this is most certainly the case with Cameron Anderson.

JEFFREY BUCHMAN (Director)



Music by Giuseppe Verdi. Libretto by Francesco Maria Piave, based on "La Dame aux camélias" (1852), a play by Alexandre Dumas fils. Director: Jeffrey Marc Buchman. Set Design: Cameron Anderson. Costume Design: Linda Pisano. Lighting Design: Patrick Mero. Indiana University Jacobs School Of Music, Bloomington, 2014.

Our production of *La Traviata* explores the metaphor of a butterfly in a shadow box. Violetta's community worships her only for beauty, and like a butterfly in a shadow box, through her objectification she is suffocated.

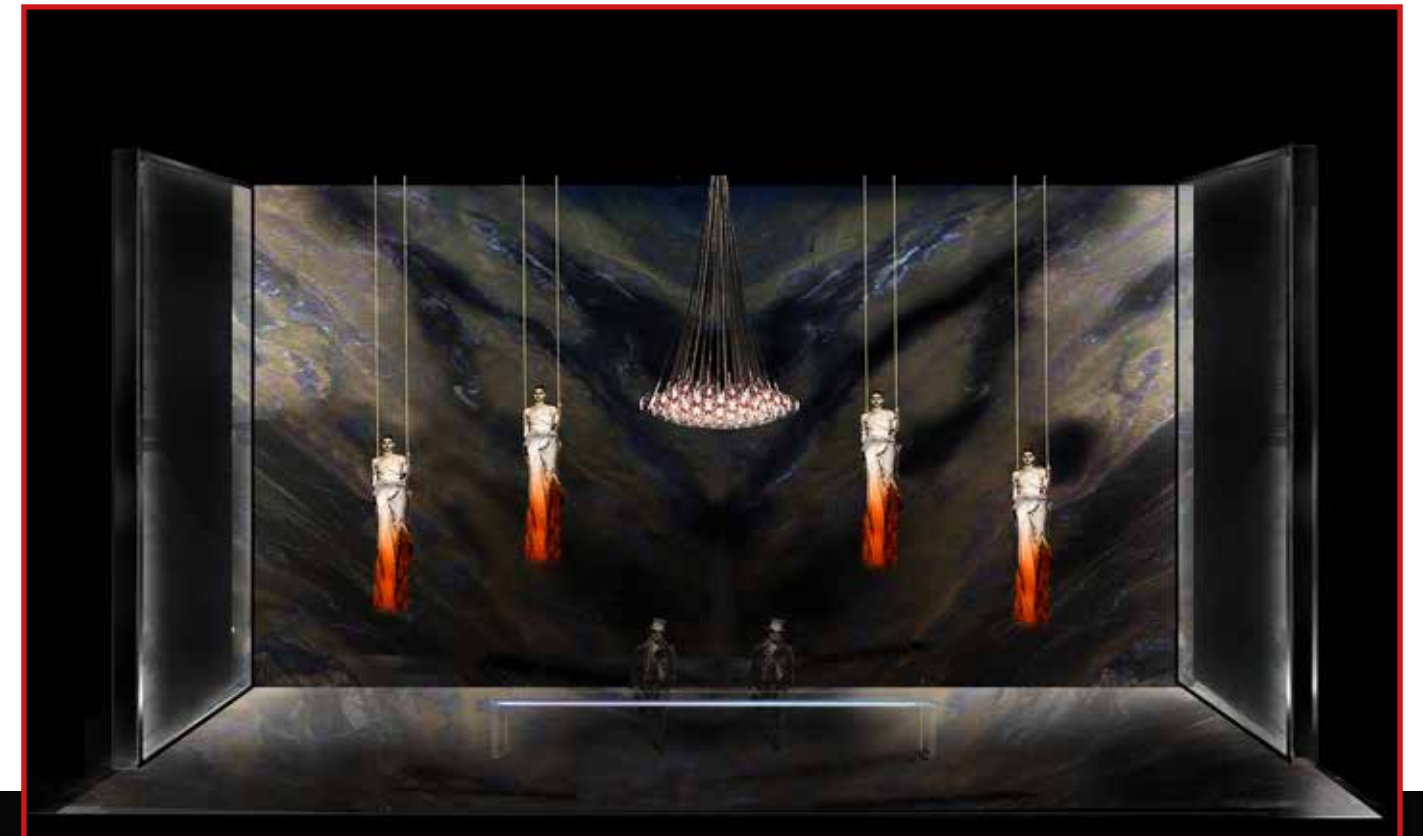


Act 1. A salon in Violetta's house - A large wall upstage begins to hint at the butterfly theme, we see a reverse and repeat pattern in translucent marble. Glass walls enclose the space.



Act 2. The Country House. We find ourselves in an indoor/outdoor space. The reverse and repeat pattern is continued on the walls. The scene takes place inside the plexi side walls.

RENDERING



Act 3. A Party at Flora's House. We see four women hanging from chairs - to emphasize the place women occupy in this world, here they are literally turned into decorations.

LA TRAVIATA

RENDERINGS OF THE FINAL IMAGE SEQUENCE OF THE OPERA



1. The male members of the chorus close the glass walls around Violetta.



2. A glass box been created for her death scene.



3. At the moment of her death the tree scrim wall transluces and we begin to see wings



4. Final image. Violetta has become a butterfly contained in a glass shadow box. Her community worshiped her only as an object and in so doing has suffocated her.

An illustrative production from this period that helped to propel my aesthetic forward was my design for *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at South Coast Repertory, directed by the late Mark Rucker. This was a project that allowed me to draw upon my research into the Renaissance from my thesis project at Wesleyan University. The director asked me to create a world in which the fairies could have a recycled look. Through my research, I discovered that people in the Renaissance believed in fairies and thought they were responsible for every-day mishaps or things that went missing. I designed a fairy world that was dominated by all of the mortals' stolen items, or the items that the mortals had misplaced. The fairies were artists and made art and magic out of the trash from the mortals. In contrast, the mortals were overly concerned with the size and the ornate quality of everything. The first scene in the play featured a full-stage white draped fabric with a twenty-five-foot-long couch, set up as a royal news conference. We saw reporters taking photos of the royals as the scene progressed. For the scene change into the forest, the fabric was magnetically released and sucked down into a hole in the floor revealing the fairy forest, which was dominated by wooden walls covered in textured moss. For the queen of the fairies' entrance, a round section of the wall flew out revealing a chandelier made of hundreds of light bulbs, bulbs discarded by the mortals and made magical by the fairies.

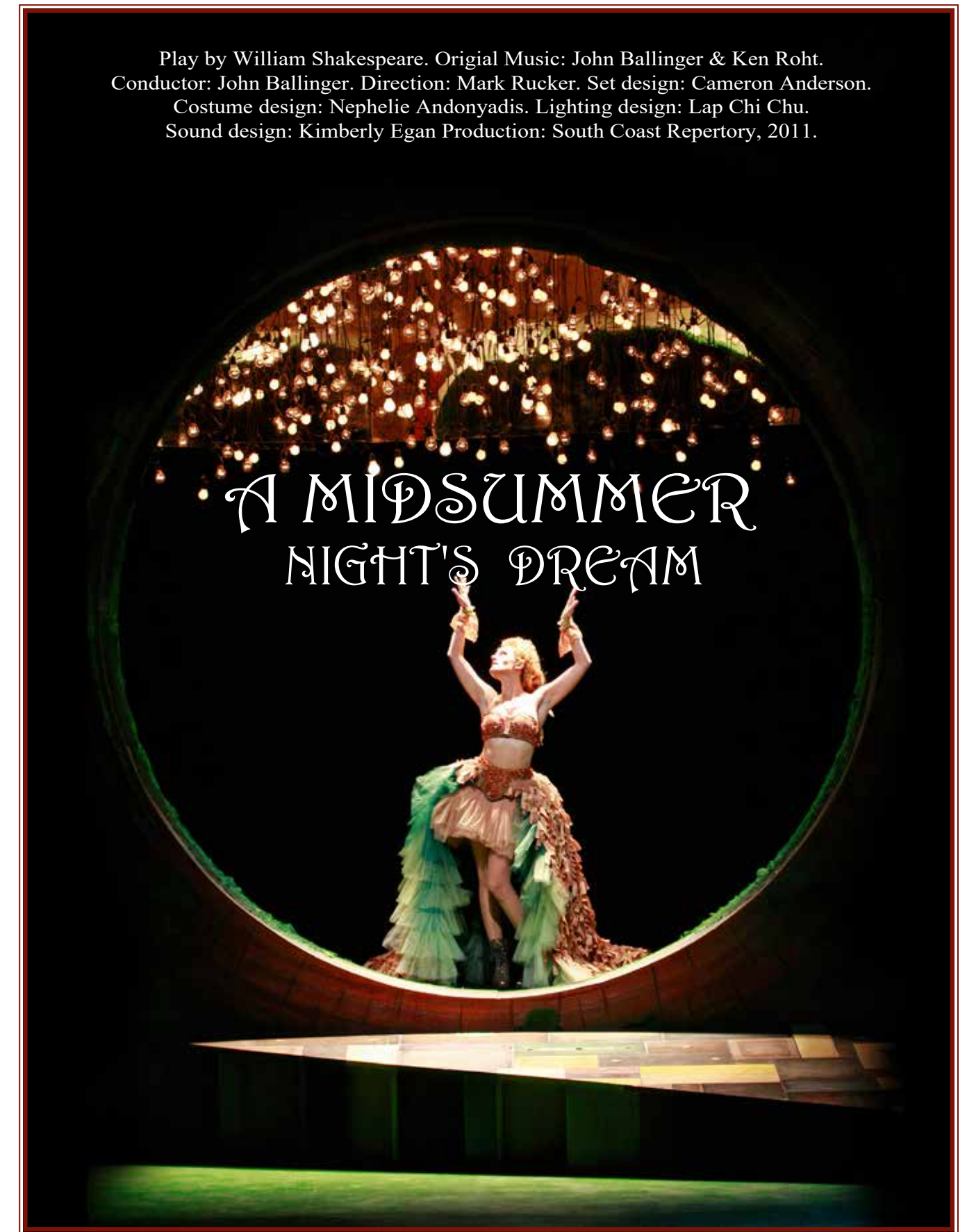
The floor featured a path made of drawers which would open and transform into seats. They were also the places where fairies would stash things plucked from the mortals during the staging of the play. The mechanicals were also collectors - but they weren't as elegant as the fairies. They came onstage driving a huge truck that was pulled by two motorcycles and a bathtub. The truck was decorated with wine bottles and found objects; the stairs were made of drawers. For the scene at the end of the play, umbrellas with light bulbs inside appeared and became the decorations for the wedding.

The production really touched people, which again, for me, was a testament to the fact that audiences often want to see Shakespeare in a modern context. Through scenography I am able to distill key themes and images of a work in accessible, abstract, epic, and exciting ways. I often wonder if there can be something democratizing about the images we put on stage. Someone who has never seen or read a Shakespeare play might enter a space not understanding the language or story as well as other people who've had the privilege of studying the work. Can design bridge that gap? Is there a level of understanding that design can make possible? Can it help bridge the gap to make theater and opera more accessible for audiences? Empathy is so important to the work that I do in theater. When I am searching for the images or metaphors I want to explore, I see it as a process of trying to understand how others might experience something. It's not just about what I like and what I think is interesting and beautiful. What will a diverse audience think about this? I feel like that's part of my responsibility. How do I create work that resonates with humanity, with our community? These are questions that are very important to my process.

I.: What kinds of projects are you especially drawn to? How do you choose what projects to design?

C.: There are different reasons why I choose the projects that I do. Sometimes I want to work with a particular collaborator, a specific director or designer, who comes attached to the project. Sometimes the piece itself is of particular interest to me. It could be a work like *La Traviata* or *Carmen* that is well-known and loved, and I become interested in digging into it and exploring why there is an obsession with telling the story. What is it about us that wants to see these stories repeatedly? How can I provide a new way of looking at the work? I might choose something because it's challenging. Or it may be a company or a playwright that excites me. I am constantly interested in thinking about social issues and working on productions that address head on issues of racism, sexism, and classism. New plays and operas often do that. I love working with living playwrights and composers. Getting to be the first person to design a new work is really exciting because you can help shape how the play goes out into the world.

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RENDERING



A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM

RENDERINGS



A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM



A recent project that reflects many of these interests was my design for the groundbreaking world premiere opera that integrated technology, immersive theater, music, and video design. It is inspired by Karel Čapek's 1920's science-fiction play *Rossum's Universal Robots* which introduced the word "robot" to the English language and was a much-anticipated immersive opera experience featuring newly patented and designed theater technology. Composer Nicole Lizée's and writer Nicolas Billon's *R.U.R. A Torrent of Light* grapples with one of our generation's most fascinating questions surrounding the ethics of artificial intelligence. This production is a dynamic and immersive collision of opera, physical theatre, and spectacle that asks: Are we ready to create an intelligence far beyond our own? The opera was produced in May 2022 at Tapestry Opera in Toronto, a leading producer of contemporary opera, directed by Artistic Director Michael Mori; it will embark on a world tour that will begin with a production at Vancouver Opera.

Normally a set designer is given the opera to design after it is complete without offering any input on the music and libretto. Mirroring the innovative nature of this opera, the process has upended the entrenched creative hierarchy, and the designers worked with the composer and librettist over a year, designing the visual world as the music was composed. The result of this kind of collaboration is a production that is truly immersive and in which the visual and sonic worlds are in deep conversation with one another. I participated in two workshops in Toronto with the full cast and creative team, hearing the music played and performed for the first time. The opera grapples with themes and ideas at the core of my creative practice.

The opera tells the story of power-couple Helena and Dom Kilner, founders of the tech company R.U.R. which dominates the A.I. software market and powers the now-ubiquitous androids that serve their human owners. As Dom continues to consolidate R.U.R.'s power in the marketplace, Helena's research leads to an A.I. breakthrough that pits their visions for the future squarely against one another. *A Torrent of Light* is the re-telling of events leading to the emancipation of robots and serves as a creation myth, as it were, told from the point of view of the robots. Rather than reproducing the original 1920 story and its dated imperfections, the opera positions Helena as an emancipator, and the libretto has adapted Čapek's original play into a modern feminist piece of music theater. For the design, I divided the world diagonally. I created the concept that Helena's practice was deeply inspired by the living plant world, while Dom is obsessed with power and prestige. This is reflected in the set by the living carpet of red flowers that cover Helena's studio, which is contrasted with Dom's cold, grey, harsh world. The set was designed with spaces for video to emerge organically embedded into the set. The center circle created a negative space that centered the projected video but also made the images feel integrated into the architecture instead of layered on top. Over the past ten years I have begun to explore designing projections and video to integrate into my sets. Video represents some of the most exciting and cutting edge technology in the theater world, however, it is over-used and becomes a visual crutch for expressing emotion or conveying information. In the video design projects I have undertaken, I have explored how video can be integrated holistically, surprisingly, and as an added layer of conceptual texture.

I.: What energizes you about the collaborative process?

C.: Collaboration is hard but also deeply rewarding. I think of myself as a visual artist, so collaboration can be a deeply vulnerable experience for me. If you're a painter, you paint and put it into the world, but you don't have to consult with other people. You make it, then you put it out. Of course, the things in life that are most difficult are also often the most rewarding. I tell my daughter that all the time when she's struggling with something. The things that frustrate us the most are often the things that make us feel the most accomplished. There are few things more exciting than finding a kindred spirit on a project. The moment when you start talking to someone and you see a light of recognition between you, there's nothing more invigorating than that feeling of potential. You know you're going to make something amazing together.

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R.U.R.

Photos by Cameron Anderson.

OF LIGHT A TORRENT

Libretto by Nicolas Billon. INSPIRED BY KAREL ČAPEK'S 1920'S SCIENCE-FICTION PLAY *ROSSUM'S UNIVERSAL ROBOTS*.
Composer: Nicole Lizée. Conductor: Gregory Oh. Direction: Michael Hidetoshi Mori. Choreographer: Jaime Martino.
Set design: Cameron Anderson. Costume design: Joanna Yu. Lighting design: Michelle Ramsay. Sound design:
Debashis Sinha. Projection design: Cameron Davis. Tapestry Opera in collaboration with OCAD University, 2022.



Working in the arts has its fair share of rewards, but for me none is more exciting and fulfilling than the discovery of a creative kindred spirit. Such relationships happen no more than a handful of times in one's career, and I am honoured to count Cameron Anderson amongst those few names. From our very first meeting about *R.U.R. A Torrent of Light*, Cameron adeptly engaged with the text and the big questions it was asking. Her comments showed a deep reflection of what the story was trying to achieve, while her suggestions - always incisive and articulate - were effective nudges that helped clarify and sharpen the narrative. For a writer, this kind of feedback is a gift. As Cameron worked toward finalizing her design, she shared her lookbook. The breadth of references was staggering, but more surprising (to me) was that many of the images I would have expected to see relating to an opera about robots and artificial intelligence were absent. There was not an android in sight! Instead, there were several images of workspaces and nature. Her workspaces were sometimes in outdoor settings, but always sealed off, hermetic; other times verdure was inside the workspace, but then always artificial. Images that underlined the tension between capitalism and nature. The dichotomy at the heart of this opera. Though it takes place in a future where humanoid robots are ubiquitous, Cameron's final design is less *Star Trek* and more *Garden of Eden*. A startling choice, certainly. Yet it is a perfect reflection of the opera's core concern - that the creation of a new life (in the form of A.I.) returns us to a primordial paradise where now humans are the ones playing God. That connection was hinted at in the libretto; Cameron helped push it to the fore, providing substantial focus to the opera.

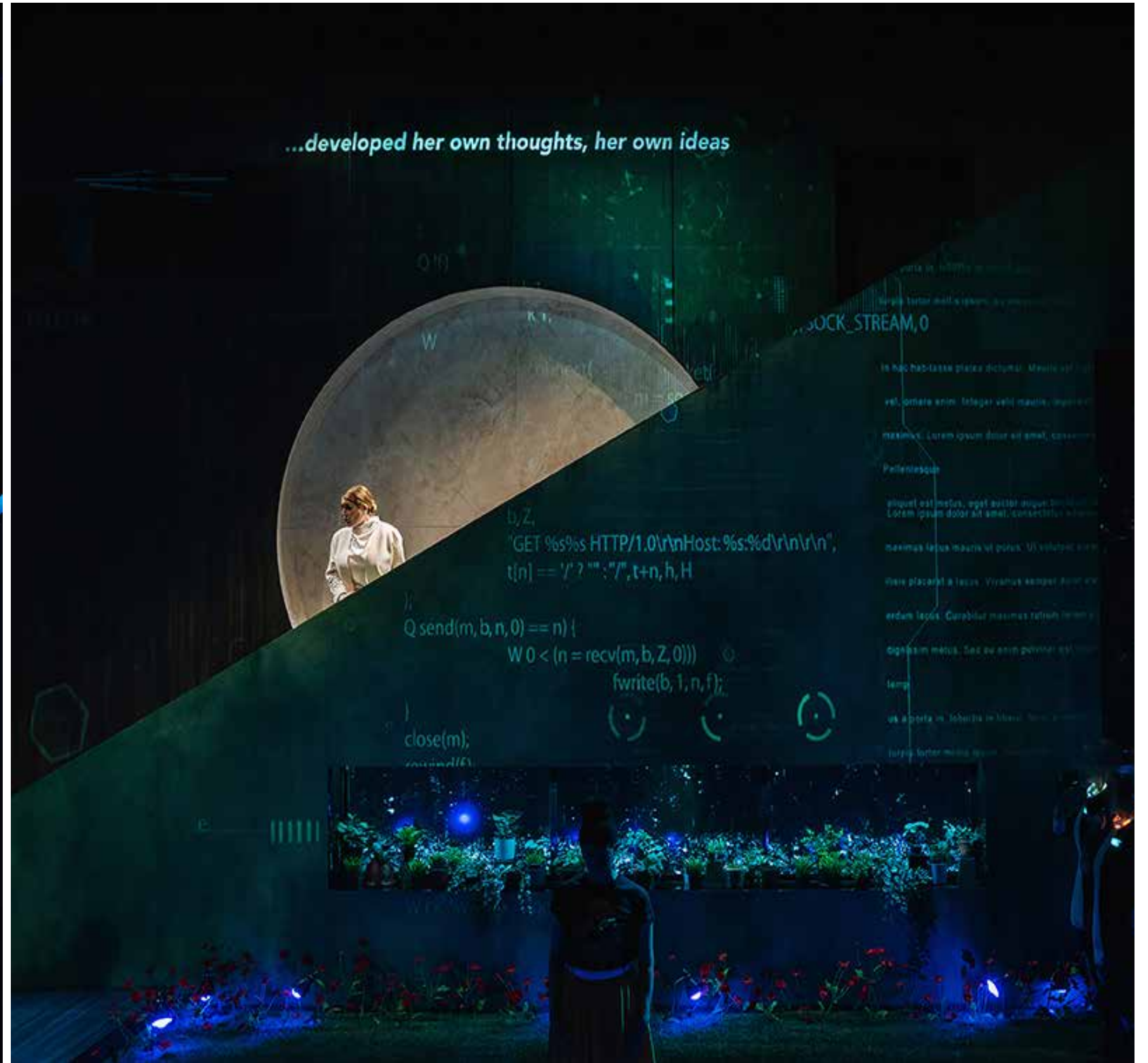
NICOLAS BILLON (*Librettist*)

I have always had tremendous respect and admiration for designers, initially stemming from my love of film. Certain films became my favourites due in large part to the design elements. I could watch these films without the sound on; being enthralled by the sets, props, and costumes. As a composer of orchestral, chamber and electronic music, design elements at this scale were not part of my process until my foray into opera. The opportunity to collaborate with designers was one of the things I was most excited about. A designer is an integral part of the work and what they do can elevate the musical and textual ideas into something transcendent.

Workshops for my 2022 opera with librettist Nicolas Billon, *R.U.R. A Torrent of Light*, began in the spring of 2021. It was the middle of the pandemic and so initial meetings took place over Zoom. This is how I first met Cameron Anderson, our scenic designer. While I much prefer first meeting in person, in this case it didn't matter. I was immediately inspired by Cameron's imagination, energy, open-mindedness, intelligence, ambition, and adventurousness. The conversations were wonderful. The ideas were flowing. It is always a long road from that first meeting to the final production, with the many months of discussions, endless possible scenarios, challenges, rumination, pressures, and detours. This was one of the most productive processes I have experienced. Conversations and sessions with Cameron were consistently forward thinking, respectful, and creative. The feedback and exchange of ideas was thoughtful and considered. When I finally saw Cameron's set and designs in person on site it was breathtaking. I was moved. The meticulous details, craftsmanship, vibrancy, depth, colour, humour were on full display; the space was transformed in every sense of the word. Above all else - it was singular. I am most drawn to designers and designs that strive for a place all their own; embracing risk and surprise while maintaining the highest standards. This set was that very thing. The subject matter of the opera - artificial intelligence, robots, laboratories, scientific advancement, merging the real world with artifice and imagining the future certainly has its challenges. So much has come before. There is the fear of cliché, stereotypes, derivation, and of being clinical. But this set was far from that. Cameron rose to the occasion to create an organic and utterly gorgeous world. It is always a good sign that once a work is complete thoughts and conversations excitedly turn to the next potential collaborations with that artist. This is indeed what took place even before *R.U.R.* wrapped. I relish the thought of working with this wonderful artist again.

NICOLE LIZÉE (*Composer*)







Theater requires that a group of talented people come to the table with something that they are deeply invested in and figure out a way to make it into something cohesive. That push and pull requires that you approach the process with humility. You must have both humility and courage. I have had some of the most profound experiences of my life working in community with collaborators. It can be complicated, though, in terms of who has power or whose voice is given power in the conversation.

I.: How has being a woman in a male-dominated field shaped your ideas about the profession?

C.: Being a woman in a male dominated field has been a long journey.

Women have not been able to make mistakes, to grow, to not-know in the way that men are able to.

This is not conducive to creativity, curiosity, wellness, or fairness. As I have gotten older, I have learned how and when to take up space in the room. I also feel strongly about helping other young women and designers of color advance in their careers, and make space for them in the room. I want to help create a theater that is welcoming to people who have been historically left in the margins.

I.: What is the relationship of your professional design work to your teaching--what are some of the ways they have proven mutually enriching?

C.: I teach because I want to give young people the experience I was offered at Wesleyan. The possibilities felt limitless when I was a student, and I want my students to know what that feels like. I know that I would not be where I am if I was not given that chance and the resources to explore. From my time at Wesleyan, I knew I wanted to teach at the undergraduate level in a liberal arts environment. That's why I teach at Brandeis, in particular. I love bringing my students into the spaces where I'm working and learning how they feel in those spaces. Being around young people and watching them navigate many of the ideas and questions that I also negotiated during important moments of inspiration and discovery enriches my life and work. When you see their eyes light up as they start to understand the power of the visual image or a visual metaphor, or the way you can use theater for social change, it is renewing. I learn from them as much as they learn from me. It is not a one-way street at all. I receive creative nourishment from them that I don't think comes from anywhere else in my world.

I.: What are some of the things that inspire you? How does your design work reflect these inspirations?

C.: I find inspiration from theatrical or performative fine art. I am especially drawn to site-specific work or work where the venue holds metaphorical resonance for the art. Two examples that come to mind are Kara Walker's *A Subtlety* (2014) and Christian Boltanski's *Personnes for Monumenta* (2010). What both pieces have in common is a focus on materiality. They both raised the question of how something becomes a metaphor and iconographic. What is that process? How does something go from being a chair, couch, or t-shirt into an image that moves people? Walker created a massive 100-foot-long Sphinx made from sugar that she displayed in the Domino Sugar factory in Brooklyn. The prowess to do something like that is remarkable. She studied the history of sugar and the slave labor and exploitation necessary for its production. The sphinx had exaggerated, stereotypical African American features and provoked the audience to confront both her power and their own racist assumptions. Smaller statues of Black children made of sugar inhabited the space and melted over the course of the exhibit. I am always interested in the materiality of the object. What stories can objects tell us and why are some of them instantly iconographic?

Like Walker, Boltanski is drawn to the real materiality of objects. Boltanski's *Personnes for Monumenta* was a project composed of a massive pile of old clothing several stories tall inside a huge open warehouse-like space.

An industrial red crane came down and picked up a single piece of clothing, lifted it up, and then dropped it into the pile again. Around the pile, and separated with walking paths between them, were many squares of clothing on the ground. They were like flat encampments of clothing lit with fluorescents. You heard heartbeats as you were moving through the space. Boltanski was considering genocide in this work. I am fascinated by the way each piece of clothing comes to feel like a single soul. How does an object make the leap from something mundane to something deeply meaningful? In Boltanski's project, the t-shirt transformed from being a t-shirt to representing the soul, an individual, a person. And in the context of the larger pile, it became representative of the loss of individuality. Scenography considers how an old t-shirt can come to feel like a lost soul.

These are great examples of where I find inspiration. I think of my work as an installation that comes to life when it is inhabited by performers. I strive for my work to have something both unexpected and inevitable about it. I want my work to be unexpected in a way that is surprising and astonishing, but also feels completely right. I want my work to take your breath away. In the theater we often talk about good design work becoming invisible. I disagree, I want my designs to communicate something difficult to communicate. I'm interested in how the visual metaphors I create can connect to this idea of astonishment and inevitability while encapsulating the themes and the ideas of the story.

I.: How can design/visual thinking help address some of the challenges facing the theater and opera worlds in the twenty-first century?

C.: One of the big problems facing the theater and opera world is lack of accessibility. I am thinking about financial accessibility but also the emotional accessibility of people not feeling like they belong or people who experience racism, sexism, or other forms of discrimination in these spaces. Theater doesn't feel like it's woven into the fabric of American culture in the way that it is in many other cultures. I think this is connected to many of the challenges the profession is facing in the United States.

I do think that design and visual thinking can provide opportunities to create languages that, hopefully, can reach people in a way that may be democratizing. Can visual metaphor reach across these divides of different life experiences, backgrounds, and cultures, and welcome people? The artist Fred Wilson is known for going into predominantly white museums and, as he puts it ironically, "exorcizing" them of their racist and colonialist pasts through working with their collections and creating installations that comment upon them. Perhaps moving into the future, scenography can do the same for American theater.

It is possible to do this while bringing beauty and astonishment into the world. Like the mast that stabs the heart of my design for *Simon Boccanegra*'s ship and the cracks in the walls that surround my design for *The Niceties*, my work seeks to illuminate the human experience through images and metaphor that resonate with something deep inside of us. When we see something that moves us through evocation instead of literal description— especially on the epic scale of opera - whether it is light translucing through a bright green leaf, train tracks winding through an empty landscape, or a butterfly pinned inside a box, this feeling represents an opening, a small window of connection, and the profound possibility of change.