Interview with Arnulfo Maldonado

By Dana Pinto

The Scenographer begins its "'overseas journey" to discover contemporary American theatre, as experienced by young protagonists who, from the 1980s to the present, have represented the New York theatre scene with vitality and originality, a multicultural galaxy made up of a diversity of ethnic and social influences that well represent the vibrant current artistic panorama.
We delve into the personal story of Arnulfo Maldonado, a New York City based Set and Costume Designer, a story crowned by success, studded with works that represent precisely this composite and multi-ethnic universe.
Among the many awards that Maldonado has garnered for his profession as a set designer, we mention a Princess Grace Fabergé Theater Award and a multiple Henry Hewes Design nominee. He was recently awarded the 2020 Obie for Sustained Excellence in Set Design, as well as a Special Citation Obie as part of the Creative Team of the Pulitzer Prize-winning 'A Strange Loop' by Michael R. Jackson.
Maldonado's 'world', an outward expression of all his creative potential, which now emerges through this long and intriguing conversation.

PINTO: Your design for *Indecent* by Paula Yogel at Guthrie Theater (2018) is an astonishing set because we are in a theatre looking into a dilapidated theatre. The comfy

seats of the real audience facing the old tattered theatre seating makes such a strong statement of us looking in and engaging with the theatre troop. All the characters dance, everybody sings that hurtles through time. It is a real representation of immigrants, censorship, women and exploring what it is to become and be an American. As a play about a play, designing for the thrust stage makes the audience feel closer and almost part of the performance. What was your inspiration for the set and how, if any, did you explored these themes in the design?

MALDONADO: This production was produced at the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis, one of the largest regional theatres in the country. This was my first time working at the Guthrie and I was particularly impressed by the make-up of the space, the story the architecture was telling, and the history this theatre held. The site visit was particularly loaded for me.

I love an early site visit, even before I've thought of the design, because it often informs the design, even on a subconscious level - it helps me be informed, analyse the story and to figure out the play. And with this play, a play so rich with storytelling, it was important to me to avoid negating the history the Guthrie carries while trying to unlock the design of the play. I really wanted to focus on the makeup and architecture of the space.

The Wurtele Thrust Stage, where *Indecent* was performed, has a very deep thrust, it's almost like being in-the-round. This configuration of the stage, paired with the very present, rich, beautiful red theatre chairs of the Wurtele were very inspiring - I remember standing on stage that first time and looking out at the red seats while simultaneously thinking on the history of the space and making a connection between both the history of the institution and the ghost story found within *Indecent*. I wanted the set design to be in direct conversation with the Wurtele.

In early discussions about the show, Paula Vogel, the playwright, informed Wendy Goldberg, the director of our production that the original impulse for all of it came from the famed Polish director Tadeuz Kantor's piece *The Dead Class*.

In *The Dead Class*, we see a classroom in a provincial town where older people carry the vestiges of the past with them. In fact, the idea is they themselves are dead, and are re-enacting the past through images, actions, repetitions, objects and tempo that mirror the visual and aural structure of memory, and that the function of art is to express life through an appeal to death, absence and emptiness. I found that concept of an appeal to death so powerful.

Using *The Dead Class* as a means of understanding the structure of *Indecent* was helpful in coming to a metaphor and environmental container for this new production. This troupe of actors are essentially spirits or ghosts that inhabit this history-filled, and, in the case of our set, dilapidated theatre. I was struck by the idea of the Guthrie audience mirroring what they were seeing onstage and the Wurtele space presented this opportunity. I started by taking almost identical seats that made up the house of the theatre, and flipping that image onto the stage.

I definitely wanted to have a juxtaposition of old versus new and so I did a deep dive into older, abandoned theatres around the country, delving into hundreds of images and blogs (there are many) that dedicated themselves to documenting old, deserted, dilapidated structures and old abandoned theatres.

These structures make for very striking beautiful images, that only become that much richer over time. And so, this impulse to research theatres/public spaces/assembly halls that carried with them a sense of age and history became the catalyst for setting the context of how we would treat our design of an old theatre onstage. We gave this space a narrative tied to what was happening in *Indecent* – the space had been war-torn as a result of numerous incidents of violence and it was important that was evident in the design.

The troupe of actors in our story repeatedly enter this space despite the destruction, despite the violence inflicted on it, and come to share stories, repeat the tradition of story-telling. This retelling, this ritual, is what is at the heart of what this troupe of actors do and what they know they must do in order to survive.

The overhead ceiling, that mirrors the footprint of the design below took some convincing (in terms of execution) because of its sheer scale. By creating an equally grandiose, but balanced, mirror image of the Wurtele and the theatre design of the set, the audience would be more easily able to transport themselves through time.
The audience coming to see *Indecent* would be simultaneously the modern audience who bought tickets to spend a night out, and also the spectators of the past that our acting troupe in *Indecent* would play to. It became an immersive, all-encompassing world, partly in thanks to how much it felt like an in-the-round space. I wanted the audience to feel drawn in and be very much part of the exchange between performers and audience when seated under the ceiling that hovered overhead.

P: *Mojada* by Luis Alfaro staged at the Public Theater in New York City in 2019 is a story of struggle in maintaining tradition and the cost of coming to a country that exploits Mexicans and rejects their culture. Playwright Luis Alfaro aligns the Mexican/American migrant crisis and retells the story of *Medea* by Euripides in a modern setting of a backyard. After the tortuous journey from the Michoacán Region in Mexico to the U.S. to fulfil their American dream, how did you capture the sense of isolation and desperation in the set design?
M: This particular piece remains very close to my heart partly because I am Mexican and very much like the family in Luis' play, my family immigrated from Mexico to the United States. Both my parents (and their brothers and sisters) all had a journey much like the one the play describes. It was not as arduous, or as horrific as the one this beautiful family is put through, but my father did cross the Rio Grande river illegally to come into the U.S. in an attempt make a better life for himself and his family. I was particularly passionate about this project, because I also grew up on the border between Mexico and the U.S. (in my case, Texas).
'Mojada' or 'mojadita' as I remember hearing as a child, is a derogatory term meaning 'wet back', referring to the act of crossing a body of water, a river, to cross lands and you cross over with a wet back and body. I grew up in a very small town called Eagle Pass, Texas where there was a constant border control presence ensuring that people from Mexico were crossing over through legal channels and keeping those out who did not. Growing up on a border town one was prone to witnessing crossings or you'd hear of a crossing from the night before while chatting with your classmates at school the next day. These crossings would occur in the dark as it was seen as the safest time to traverse and not catch the attention of anyone or anything. These images, growing up along the border, of human beings walking through the night, journeying in the darkness, is something that has always stuck with me. A seemingly simple journey but full of danger and risk. And equally ripe with hope and potential.
In early talks about the play with Chay Yew, the director, I spoke about my childhood and connection to this story and we discovered that we approach design in a similar fashion, we shared a commonality in terms of aesthetic. I do not necessarily have a design 'style', but I do have a way of approaching design that almost always starts with creating a fully detailed world and then I work to distill it down to the most essential. This of course is always dependent on the script but my designs tend to fall on a polar-opposite spectrum -- either the design evolves into a very rich, detail-oriented world or, on the other end of that: a minimalist, 'simple' space, depending on the needs of the play. This design meets those two approaches in the middle.
At the center of *Mojada* is the arduous journey the family must take from Mexico into the States. The earlier production, before it landed at the Public, took place in Los Angeles. Luis Alfaro, the writer, changed the setting to a neighbourhood in Queens, Corona in Jackson Heights. Corona, similar to Los Angeles, has a large Mexican population, and many who made a journey similar to Medea and her family in the play. Queens is beautiful. The make-up of these homes, the architecture, it's such a reflection of its residents and the hard work it took to claim space for themselves. I wanted to make sure we wouldn't lose the realism, the reality of what these homes

carried with them, down to the Virgen Guadalupe prayer card stuck to the window on the back entrance to the home (as one example). In the end we erected a richly-detailed realistic exterior of a home as the anchor for the design.
We juxtaposed this beautiful, detailed Corona, Jackson Heights home with open space. From the audience's perspective, the home appears to be floating, acting as its own island. The house structure lived atop a raised concrete slab that hovers over a high gloss black floor. This 'island' effect creates a tension by positioning the home as both a safe space and an isolating/dangerous one too. The high-gloss black floor, in the darker moments of the play, when our family is navigating pitch darkness across the border, acts as menacing waters. The raised concrete slab extends fairly severely downstage and it's this bare concrete slab that also helps to raise the tension in their journey, making them vulnerable to the darkness. The experience of making the journey from Mexico into the States is dangerous and often done in pitch-black darkness. That in itself is something that we were trying to capture, seeing how gruelling and difficult that journey often is.

P: **This production is a wonderful example of being able to work alongside the Writer in creating this production. What was it like as a Designer to be able to work with the Playwright? And is there a relationship between the Designer and the Playwright?**
M: As a designer who primarily works on new plays, I am always invested and involved with the playwright in early talks, especially in the conception of a brand-new piece.
With *Mojada*, Luis and Chay worked together on the world premiere production of the play in Chicago (at Victory Gardens) prior to its New York debut. They already had an understanding of what the play required and I came in as a new designer with a different lens. Once it was decided that for our new production the setting would be relocated to New York City, my home of twenty years, I wanted to bring both what I know about the history of people coming from Mexico to New York City, and my childhood experience witnessing the struggles of Mexican migrants at the border, to the design. There were many conversations revolving around this; Luis, the playwright, and I both shared this insight as we both grew up in Mexican households.
I always work to gather as much knowledge as I can from both the director and the playwright and invest it into my work. How does one create both a safe space and a dangerous one simultaneously? The home that Medea makes for herself and her family once she lands in New York is one of pride and one anchored in security and independence. But to what extent is that independence still locked into systems that are bigger than you? Is this safe haven a danger? Is that danger heightened by having this home 'float' on an island surrounded by luring and tempting 'waters'? These were at the root of our exploration while designing and coming up with the world for *Mojada.*

P: ***An Octoroon*** **by American Playwright Branden Jacobs-Jenkins who adapted Dion Boucicault's 1860s play** ***The Octoroon*** **alters the Victorian melodrama set on a Louisiana plantation into an impressive reinterpretation and deconstruction of racial representation as a Play within a play. With a play that would cause a stir actively placing performers in blackface, whiteface and red-faced, that reaches out to the audience to make them to feel uneasy, how did you feel you had to design the set to accommodate these provocative scenes? Can you describe how to go from analysing the script to creating the final set design? What are the tools you use to communicate your design ideas?**
M: This is one of my favourite plays and I was fortunate enough to see the world premiere production at Soho Rep in New York, another favourite downtown theatre space that is always pushing the boundaries in an exciting way. Because I had some knowledge of how this play flowed, I had a keen sense of what the audience-performer interactions were like and how they needed to be structured, given the conflict and tension that arises by presenting themes of race and power dynamics in such an up-front way.

The beauty of theatre is that it is LIVE. Every show, no matter how many times it's performed by the same actors, same script, day after day in its run of the show, every show is different. Part of that live experience could include being confronted with difficult material in real time. I saw the initial productions a few times and that gave me a working knowledge of the tension we would be exploring in our own production.

The production I designed was for Berkeley Rep Theater, a regional theatre on the West Coast in the Bay Area - this was the West Coast regional premiere of this play. I say that because it was a far stretch away from the 99-seat institution known to do edgy experimental work, where it premiered in New York City. We knew going in we would be staging it for a much different, much larger, audience. There were certainly a lot of walkouts - there were people just not willing or able to sit in the same space with these themes. It was jarring. I knew there was going to be tension there, especially at the top of the play where the black actor playing the playwright (a version of the real playwright, Brendan Jacob Jenkins, or BJJ as he's listed in the script) is talking about how he, as the playwright, tried to put on an earlier workshop production of said show, but then all the white actors quit, which leads to him applying white makeup, thus putting on white face.

The beginning of the play is presentational, very direct-address to the audience. While talking with the director, Eric Ting, we wanted to strip away any sense of being sat in front of a 'set', of course there would be a set (in this case an 'empty theatre') but our 'theatre set' needed to be as bare, as empty a black-box-theatre could feel, given that we were in an expansive thrust space (with the audience and thus the show). So the top of the show has little design, nothing that calls attention to itself, it was in fact an empty theatre. That choice allowed the collective that was made up of both the audience and the performer to engage in a dialogue, both spoken and unspoken - *"Here I am and I am talking to you."*

As the play continues, the playwright ushers us into Dion Boucicault's *Octoroon*. We the audience are thrust into the melodrama of the 1800s - a sea of cotton balls descends from the sky and floods the stage, ratcheting up the tension by transforming the pristine black-box space of the 'empty theatre' into a mess-filled cotton ball-engulfed melodrama full of conflict and drama.

We continually and deliberately subverted the expectations of what the audience would see and experience. When the platform overhead drops (and with it come thousands of cotton balls) in that beginning moment, audiences were pleasantly shocked because those not familiar with the play had no idea that was coming. I love being part of creating theatre where theatre and design feel like they are contributing to a larger conversation, where design can start to feel and become a political act, where a theatrical production becomes a direct conversation with your fellow humans.

Designing *An Octoroon* is how I would compare designing a Russian Doll play set. There are many layers to the design but what form do these different layers take on? It's not as simple as shrinking each of these 'dolls' to fit within the layer that came before it. And what happens when the script asks that you destroy all the dolls at the end? I'm very much a maquette/scale model designer (meaning I tend to work in physical form, versus digitizing the design via a render/computer program) and with *Octoroon* it involved many versions of torn up pieces of set model pieces being relocated/reconsidered elsewhere on the set, knowing that the deconstruction (and eventual staged destruction) of the set was very much in conversation with the story unfolding on stage.

P: It would be wonderful to have a further personal insight into your design process and ask whether you can share with us how you know when your design is completed? Is it ever complete? At what point do you 'draw the line'? Are you still changing and adapting after opening night?

M: I am of the generation of designers that entered the professional world just as hand-drafting (and to an extent physical modelmaking) were being phased out of an educational training

practice, so my training very much straddles both methods. There is a new generation working primarily with computer renderings and digital drafting, and I utilize those tools, but for me, as someone with an Art background (I went to art school fresh out of high school and studied Painting), the best way to approach a space is in three dimensions. I tend to always start 'sketching' with a white-card model while simultaneously working out a series of sketches that help me formulate the movement and footprint of the design. This is before I get into the specifics/details of whatever location will need to be considered. I view it more like sculpting an environment in a rough, messy, "sketchy" way. Working with a scale model is, for me, the key into any play.

There is never a point for me where I consider the design to be finished or complete. There is a point that I remove myself from its evolution and that's partly out of necessity, but it also turns into a very different thing once the actors start to inhabit the space and make it their own. During tech and preview performance there are, of course, constant changes and modification, the design, as I mentioned, continues to evolve. The audience is a key player in its evolution, seeing how they will react. It is constantly changing. There have been a few rare times where I am still tweaking after the show has officially opened but almost always my brain is on to the next world on the horizon and so there has to be a point where I step away and have it live with the actors and the audience.

P: You have designed for contemporary plays to classics such as *Macbeth*, but particularly excited at the design for *A Strange Loop* at Playwright Horizons in New York because of the ingenious spatial use of your design especially when it comes to the domestic setting when you feel like you have been bombarded with visual information. Can you take us through the settings for this piece and the impact you wanted to give the audience?

M: Michael R. Jackson has been working on his musical *A Strange Loop* for over 10 years now; I came into the project in its later years once Playwrights decided to produce. I was lucky enough to spend time cultivating a world with Stephen Brackett, the director, and Michael from the moment I was brought on. Up until that point almost all of the work had been done behind music stands so the design process was as much for them to figure out the movement of the piece as it was for me to create a world in which the characters could live. There was no preconceived notion of what *A Strange Loop* world would look like - the piece itself is very cerebral and takes place, for the most part, in Usher's (our protagonist) mind as he navigates his own creative journey with his Thoughts (the other cast members in the piece). Each Thought takes on different personas in Usher's universe.

The musical has a natural build-up and you walk hand-in-hand with Usher, in his journey of self-discovery, in real-time. There is no intermission so the pace of the piece has to continually be on stride, picking up speed. Each Thought also takes on different personas in his life: they play his family, his doctor, his hook-ups. This rapid pace required that we not labour over any large gestures/set transitions until later in the show, when we finally get to the climax and we've allowed ourselves to slow down enough to earn that transition. When that 'eleven o'clock' number happens it's very satisfying, partly because the design up until that point has been so strict about its literal and figurative boundaries. Thus, up until that 'eleven o'clock' set change there was this idea in my design of distilling the worlds that Usher navigates down to the essence of only what was essential for any particular moment. The moment of catharsis where he comes to terms with who he is as a person builds into a gut-wrenching moment of confrontation and confession with his parents. This moment takes place in a black void, the world has essentially disappeared, and we are left with Usher and his parents contained within this darkness. The climax comes when he finally confronts his family.

Up to this point we have seen the set (the most consistent element being two sections of entryways, one for each Thought, made up of bricks) undulate and move but in very subtle,

small ways. And it's at this moment with Usher and his parents, when he decides to create the show that has been percolating in his mind, subconsciously and consciously, and as he comes to terms with his family, the set explodes into a Tyler Perry-style environment showing us everything that has been bottled up inside of him.

The audience goes from being surrounded by darkness, in a minimal space to the juxtaposition of being thrust into a domestic interior dripping with references from Usher's mind. It's a very theatrical gesture: the upstage masking kabuki drops, and we reveal a theatrical version of what his parents have wanted him to write all along and that gets further manifested into church, into a 'sacred' space that houses the number "AIDS Is God's Punishment".

The entire set up until this point had been living upstage of our black void. Once the kabuki drop happens and we reveal our Tyler Pery set, the entire thing slowly starts to move downstage until it basically sits in the laps of the audience. This world presents itself as loud, and as close, as possible before it recedes back upstage, back into Usher's head, because after all, it's all a loop, the creative process begins again…

Playwright's Horizons (the theatre that produced *A Strange Loop*) is a company that is dear to my heart; I have had the privilege of working there many times so having a good understanding of how that particular space where *ASL* was produced was a big advantage in terms of unlocking the design. This was a design informed by its environment, the make-up of that particular theatre and knowing that we would have to utilize almost every square inch of that space to get what we wanted.

P: **What are your next steps in theatre post-pandemic? Are there productions you are currently working on? Or ambition to design a particular play, musical, opera, ballet or dance? What is next for you? And how do you view the post-pandemic theatre world (if any)?**

M: It's certainly been a very productive time during this pandemic, albeit very little in terms of theatre and performance. My colleagues and I have very much felt the series of 'false starts' during this, and ultimately those starts got prolonged or got rescheduled. I'm hopeful that we are now in the early beginnings of actually starting work up again with realistic timelines and vaccines readily available. That said, there have been many shows paused and many still in limbo. *A Strange Loop* will be coming back, so I am very excited about delving back into that world as we were beginning to revisit it right before the pandemic hit. I'm also really excited about a couple of new projects I have coming up that are stories centred around marginalised peoples whose stories haven't been told fully, or at all.

In general, during this pause, there have been extensive discussions of diversity and inclusion within American Theatre that I hope will lead to some significant changes in the industry. We have lived in a white supremacist culture, and I am excited that these conversations are happening now while the industry as a whole is paused, and has the time to focus on the possibilities that allow for systemic change. There is no better institution to model what we as a people can become -- should become -- than the theatre. Our livelihoods are built on holding a mirror up for our audiences and allowing them to examine the truth of what they see. We can be an industry successfully creating opportunities for marginalised people who have not been given the chance to work and must make progress toward that goal.

My hope is that once theatre returns, we will see positive change begin, change that stemmed from difficult conversations we are currently having about ensuring our place and voices within this larger system. I hope American Theatre in a post-pandemic world will allow room for the marginalised and the under-represented. I hope industries will be able to look at the work we have done to address systemic inequity in American Theatre and be inspired.