American stage design as assemblage: Ming Cho Lee’s rendering for the New York Shakespeare Festival’s landmark musical *Hair* in 1968.
the designer as THINKER

SIX AMERICAN DESIGNER-EDUCATORS wrestle with the diverse roles stage designers must play in a changing world

MODERATED AND COMPILED BY RANDY GENER

THINK OF IT AS AN ASSEMBLAGE.

Imagine, as you leaf through this sundry collage of words and images, an impressionistic composite. Picture a young artisan at once technically proficient and intuitively creative. This storyteller must be so visually oriented as to have a strong flair for the theatrical, a detective who uncovers the clues that reveal the inner life of a play's characters and the exterior environment in which they live. Imagine an inventor of made-up worlds so transparently constructed as to look and feel deeply real or symbolic or poetic or abstract, a communicator of clear ideas who somehow enhances the points of view of other dreamers involved in a project. If you can piece together all these facets, you will begin to discern a portrait of the stage designer as thinker.

In gathering together six current practitioners of design with varied backgrounds, we are touching on a shared experience. We have located a commonality in their training—their studies with master designer Ming Cho Lee—from which to launch a spirited, thoughtful and at times contentious discussion. The talk will take us from coast-to-coast, to graduate and undergraduate programs at CalArts of Los Angeles (Christopher Barrea), Ohio University (Ursula Belden), San Diego State University (Ralph Funicello), New York University (Susan Hilferty), Winston-Salem State University in North Carolina (Charles McClennahan) and University of Massachusetts (Miguel Romero).

And because theatre is primarily in the performance, and what's important is the realization of design ideas, we have devoted space to an assemblage of notes, sketches, computer renderings, a painted drop and photographs of models. Out of these scraps and drafts—originally intended for creation and not for reproduction—we hope to tell some stories. We wish to re-capture the thoughts and impulses of designers at play and retrace their artistic journeys in specific collaborations. But in grasping this notion of a thinking designer as a whole, we should realize that design always gestures outside the space of two dimensions; its processes cannot be prescribed or contained. So we must construct an image that fits in a frame, but not only in its frame. —R.G.

THE DESIGNER AS CRITIC

RANDY GENER: Is there such a thing as lineage in design? Robert Edmond Jones and Lee Simonson were mentors to Donald Oenslager and Jo Miellizer. Oenslager, who helped found the Yale School of Drama, was a mentor to Will Steven Armstrong, John Conklin, Eldon Elder, Santo Loquasto and Jean Rosenthal. Ming Cho Lee was a disciple of Miellizer, Boris Aronson and Rouben Ter-Arutunian. How important are the legendary stage designers in the training of young designers?

SUSAN HILFERTY: I am disturbed about trying to make a connection between my teaching and Ming’s teaching, or my design work and Ming’s. If this group was selected to celebrate Ming and his contributions as a teacher, I’m in all the way. As my teacher, Ming was incredibly valuable, but my work as an artist is incredibly different from his approach. Each of us has not only our own approach to training but also our own approach to design; they are probably two separate things. A teacher is absolutely an essential ingredient in terms of influencing and mentoring young artists. But I don’t see myself as training anybody to become another Susan Hilferty. My goal is to nurture whatever talents artists have and take them in whatever direction they can go, not create cookie-cutter versions of the mentor.

MIGUEL RODRIGUEZ: I think it’s important, though, to acknowledge the truly dynamic contribution—in passing on an oral tradition—that Ming is part of. The history of American theatre design goes back to Adolphe Appia and Edward Gordon Craig, who made their innovations in Europe. Jones went there, brought what he saw back and used it as the foundation for defining an American “dramatic imagination.” Miellizer assisted Jones and absorbed some of his creative energy impulses and passed them on to Ming, who in turn influenced each of us and gave us something to pass on to our students that isn’t in the “how to” books or theatre-history texts.

RALPH FUNICELLO: When we start teaching, the examples at our disposal are the teachers we’ve had; therefore, we start either by reacting to how we were taught, and do not do what they did—or we teach using the methods we were taught. All of us, of course, have since gone in different directions, finding out over the years what works and what doesn’t.

URSULA BELDEN: That’s absolutely part of the equation, but I don’t think it is the major thrust. What I’ve discovered about my
The unbearable coyness of being; costume designer Susan Hilforty sketched 30 variations of Milky White to arrive at the right cow for the Broadway revival of *Into the Woods*.

faculty members is that almost all of them start teaching not from the basis of who their mentor was, but of who they were when they were students—how they learned, how they took in information.

Funicello: I had had a certain amount of training at Boston University when I arrived at New York University, where I studied with Ming, and what I really needed was to be turned upside down and shaken—that's what NYU did for me. But I had had a certain grounding in what putting on a play was all about: I had an approach and a certain amount of summer stock work. But some of the other students in my program didn't have an approach or experience, and they were completely at sea. Some people had a lot of trouble. I think NYU eventually found its feet, probably by the time you were there, Miguel.

Romero: When I was in Miami, I saw some of Ming's works illustrated in Theatre Arts magazine and knew immediately that I wanted to go to NYU, where he was then teaching, to study with him. I arrived in 1971 to the news that he had moved to Yale, so our paths did not cross until I became his assistant in 1973. I remember my fondest memory is of being thrown into the deep end of the pool at NYU. That suited me temperamentally really well, because I paddled furiously so I wouldn't drown. It is a way of teaching, and for me it was suitable at the time. But it would never occur to me to do to a student what was done to me at NYU.

Funicello: There was great anarchy there at the time.

Christopher Barreca: I've found that my interests—and how my interests have changed over the course of my career—have affected my teaching far more, oddly enough. I love Ming, and he is definitely my mentor. I came to Yale with little experience—I was a music major who had built some scenery at a Broadway scene shop to make extra money—so I learned a lot at school. But it's my professional work that's influenced me more as a teacher. I've become much more interested in performance: having my students actually create work, and designing classes that relate to that. I don't feel that I'm either a reaction against or a synthesis of various approaches. It's the 20 years I've had since school that have fed my interest in teaching, oddly enough.

Belden: Having had a good 15 years as a freelance designer before I did any teaching, I would say the same thing applies to me. Of course when I walked into the classroom for the first time, much of what I did was based on the way Ming ran a class. However, the content of the teaching is probably far more shaped by what I've done in the intervening years.

Hilforty: One of the things that I advise students or people applying to a program to do is to explore as many different programs as possible. I describe it as a blind date. NYU was the right one for Ralph, but it might be the wrong one for somebody else. The ingredients of a good program are reflected in who the students are, who the fac-

**MING'S DYNASTY**

*In his footsteps, rebels with a cause*

The main thing about Ming Cho Lee is that he is a giant.

If a hundred years from now a sculptor starts to chip away a monument to designers on a side of a mountain, Lee's chimeric visage will no doubt roost among the craggy likenesses of America's most influential masters. Through the example of his groundbreaking art and his incalculable impact on generations of designers since he joined Yale University in 1970, Lee casts a long shadow on 20th-century American stage design.

But while a Mt. Rushmore of maestros would give a visible face to these off-stage artisans, it would also be a tragic mistake: For it would advance the wrong-headed notion that Lee's style and method are somehow carved in granite.

"Design is an act of transformation," says Lee in an interview in his cluttered Upper East Side studio. "Working with a director, a designer transforms words into a world within which actors are engaged in human action. It might be a metaphorical world, an emotional world or an architectural world, but it is a process of bringing design ideas into a place where they can be executed."

That process is as artistically supple and restless as it is intellectually rigorous. Its force and resiliency issue directly from the way Lee has refined and adapted what he inherited from past designers. In a radical departure from his painterly mentor Joe Mielziner, Lee insists on the three-dimensional value of finished models over polished renderings. Drawings, he feels, "are a waste of time." Unlike that of his Yale predecessor Donald Oenslager, Lee's approach forces designers to think like a director: "You have to let the visual transformation come out of what you think the director's goal is [in terms of] how the story will be told."

Lee expects his own students to stage the same rebel
utility is, how everybody works together. So even though you may have sprung from Ming’s loins—what a terrible expression that is... (Laughter) Even though we were taught by Ming at one point in time, I would imagine that our programs are completely different, and the way we teach is completely different.

CHARLES McCLENNAHAN. I must confess that, given where I’ve arrived right now, these great designers mean very little to me in terms of historical significance. I am an African American. I studied with Ming at Yale. As far as teaching is concerned, I found myself at Winston-Salem State University, where it’s predominantly black and the emphasis is put on African-American history and culture, so in a way I’ve come kind of full circle here. But a lot of these great design names—Appia, Craig, Jones, Mieliizer, Oenslager—mean very little in terms of the connection with my culture and my experience as an African American. I can see the significance of these great designers, but how do I connect these names with my students and their cultural experiences? In training a crop of young black designers, I’ve had to rethink how I approach theatre, how I approach design and how I approach teaching it. I can’t teach my students the way I’d teach in a predominantly white school, where these names have made an impact.

HILFERTY. As a woman, one of the things that’s very clear to me is that while we’ve had some great role models, theatre design has been historically a white male world. Oenslager, for instance, felt that any woman in design class was taking up space that should have gone to a man. But the bigger question we’re touching on is history: How much is the historical part of design important in training a designer today? Theatre design is a living and breathing thing. The theatre is only alive at this particular moment. We may get some things from the past, but I’m not sure if theatre history is what influences my work right now.

BARRECA. In art school, art history can dictate the artworks that are produced. So in my classes, when students ask me about the history of design, I always say, “I want to find your aesthetic first.” I resist this idea of studying theatre-design history when I work with young designers, because I want them to explore from the ground up.

BELDEN. I assume that they have gotten it in their theatre-history classes. I assume they can learn it on their own. I will occasionally say, “You should be aware of how Mieliizer designed A Streetcar Named Desire in 1947, if you’re designing this show,” so that they’re aware that there is literature, that people have expectations about it—and that they can either ignore the past or pay attention to it.

McCLENNAHAN. At certain levels you understand that as you evolve as a designer, you have been influenced by these men, but that influence is not to make you become like them—it is to release you to become who you are, who you really are.

FUNICELLO. I do think, however, that all of us can trace our design history back to Robert Edmond Jones. That’s interesting and kind of wonderful. It’s a fact. It is not something one operates on as an artist; it certainly doesn’t affect me or what I teach on a day-to-day basis.

McCLENNAHAN. I’m sorry to disagree. It’s just that I can also trace my design history back to the quilt designers, during the escape of slaves from before Reconstruction, before emancipation. I can trace my design history back further than I can trace my theatre history.

BARRECA. Just to confirm what Charles...
CHRISTOPHER BARRECA
Head of design at California Institute of the Arts School of Theater in Los Angeles; head of design, CalArts Center for New Theater. A music and theatre major at the University of Connecticut, he entered Yale as a technical major. He recently designed Richard Greenberg's *The Violet Hour* at South Coast Repertory.

URSULA BELDEN
Professor of scene design and head of the production design and technology department at Ohio University's School of Theatre. A Yale graduate, she is co-curating the American exhibit at the 2003 Prague Quadrennial International Design Exposition and designing a new Off-Broadway version of *Othello* for March 2004.

RALPH Funicello
Don Powell chair in set design at San Diego State University; associate artist at the Globe Theatres in San Diego. *Romeo & Juliet* opens in March 2003; *Three Sisters* for San Francisco's American Conservatory Theater opens in May 2003; and *Henry IV*, starring Kevin Kline, opens at Lincoln Center Theater in fall 2003.

SUSAN HILFERTY
Chair of the department of design for stage and film at New York University's School of the Arts. She has collaborated with Athol Fugard in more than 30 productions. In addition to the Broadway revival of *Into the Woods*, she designed costumes for Alfred Uhry's *Without Walls* and Richard Nelson's *The General From America*.

CHARLES McCLENNAHAN
Assistant professor at Winston-Salem State University's fine arts department and film production design instructor at University of North Carolina. With a master's degree from Yale, he became an innovator in visualization for the theatre, designed for Spike Lee's films and created sets for important black theatres across the U.S.

MIGUEL ROMERO
Associate professor of scenic design at University of Massachusetts at Amherst. He worked as an assistant to Ming Cho Lee for three years after earning a BFA in scenic design from NYU. He designs extensively for opera and ballet productions and recently studied puppets and mask-making in Japan and Indonesia.

sent in two dimensions, it's from a particular time, so what may have been a meaningful production in 1950 would be a museum production in 2002. When I teach, I rely more on what I heard on National Public Radio that morning than on anything else, probably.

THE DESIGNER AS APPRENTICE
What is more important for young students to possess before entering a graduate design program? Is it production work, knowledge of theatre, a deep connection with literature or art-making skills?

BELDEN: A broad liberal arts education is the single most important thing. After that, a passion for theatre. Almost everything else can be taught.

ROMERO: When it comes to graduate students, I much prefer to have someone who doesn't have a theatre background.

BELDEN: The less theatre they've had, the less we need to start from scratch.

BARRECA: I would look for someone who has gone through the rigors of a liberal arts education, the intellectual tradition of exploring something deeply. That can mean architectural training, for instance, or music training. At CalArts, I have struggled to create a program that is more intellectually based for the undergraduate students, but I'm afraid that they are getting the kind of production-heavy education that would make it difficult for them to get into my graduate program.

HILFERTY: The critical ingredient in a student is somebody who thinks of themselves as an artist. Knowledge of art, religion, politics, history, literature are essential ingredients to an artist's work. I prefer a student who has taken a class on the Bible, instead of a stagecraft class. But I think that most undergraduate theatre programs that focus only on production techniques are irresponsible and, in some cases, immoral.

BELDEN: I'm looking for a connection with the world we live in, a passion for seeing that [connection] translated in visual terms. What I'm trying to train is the ability to translate text or music into meaningful images.

McCLENNAHAN: Students aren't stupid. They find out before they even apply to colleges who teaches there, what kind of designs that person would want to see. They go and research that instructor's designs. What we don't do is train students to become independent thinkers. I don't know how many times after leaving Ming's class I thought, "What can I bring in that he will like?" I found out, after years of thinking about myself as a student and teaching myself how to teach, that I don't want students to bring back and show me what they feel will satisfy me, what they think I'd find appropriate. That's dangerous. When I look back at my designs that were not so successful, I begin to cherish them: That's who I was—not what other people wanted me to be.

HILFERTY: It's the level of our critiquing that identifies us as better teachers: finding the right ways to allow students to realize that they can improve. We have to do it in a way that doesn't dismiss their work, so we can find their identity in their designs.

BARRECA: I often say to the students, "Can we get past the adjectives?" There's a way of getting students to actually articulate what they're seeing in their own work.
In rehearsal for Chronicle, I created objects—fragments of memory, or evidence in the investigation of a murder. I drew an ominous black shadow of a man remembering, leaning over the evidence. Objects floated in space as if projected from his mind out of the café wall where he was seated. In performance, as the painted shadow on a white scrim became transparent, a huge door appeared. The man walked into a shadow light—his shadow matched the one on the scrim. In Marie Christine, Graciela and I explored the epic and intimate nature of Marie's story, which she re-tells to fellow prisoners on the eve of her execution. My design was a spatial reconstruction of the theatre: a 1/2-inch model of the Beaumont, using the circular thrust as the playing area, surrounded by the audience and chorus.
Iguana is set in a seedy little Mexican hotel, the Costa Verde, on the eve of World War II. Larry and I wanted to reveal two themes in Williams's classic play: "the gathering storm," which in the play means everything from personal tempest to impending Holocaust, and the play's parallels to Christ's last journey. Shannon, the defrocked priest in Iguana, undergoes a final, painful pilgrimage. It begins with a public condemnation and ends with a descent into a borrowed resting place. Like the Roman soldiers at the crucifixion, the Nazis serve as tormentors. They are to the world what the Mexican boys are to the iguana—what Shannon's private demons are to his conflicted soul. As a constant doom-laden reminder, we kept the Nazis on an upper-level veranda. We placed the Costa Verde Hotel high on a hill, on stilts—precociously perched above the road on one side and the ocean on the other. A steep and rocky path led down to the beach. A small spring-fed pool provided an intimate area where Maxine (like the prostitute in the Stations of the Cross washed Shannon's feet) or where Hannah (like Veronica) moistened her veil to bathe his perspiring face. The violent storm at the end of Scene 2 was nothing compared to the tempest within Shannon's soul, or the Holocaust the world was about to encounter.
RAHLE Funicello

JULIUS CAESAR
By Shakespeare
Directed by Laird Williamson
Oregon Shakespeare Festival’s Bowmer Theatre, Ashland, Ore., 2002

TEN UNKNOWNS
By Jon Robin Baitz
Directed by Daniel Sullivan
Lincoln Center’s Mitzi E. Newhouse Theater, New York City, 2001

Dan and I felt that Ten Unknowns needed to be believably realistic. The setting is the studio of an aged, burned-out, alcoholic American painter living in an old Spanish Colonial house in Central Mexico in the early ’90s. I decided that his studio was once a chapel, located off a courtyard. The walls were a very rich blue, which helped to establish the Mexican location. The set was dressed with 30 years of squeezed-out paint tubes and dried-up cans of color. In Caesar, Laird and I created a harsh, authoritarian world echoing the Weimar period in style and theatricality. Scenic elements shifted to reshape and confine the performance space. Black birds fell from the sky. Rag-bound, human forms dropped, hanging over the stage and audience when the dogs of war were let loose.
VALLEY SONG
Written and directed by Athol Fugard
Manhattan Theatre Club, New York City, 1986

With Athol, my work as associate director and designer of sets and costumes has always been clear: Trust the audience. Trust the words. Don’t illustrate. Imagine—surely the most magical word that can be spoken to an audience. Athol and I have developed a language over our 20 years of working together. He encouraged me to find my directorial voice—to become his eyes, so to speak.

In Valley Song, our co-directing effort evolved to bring more emphasis to how actors occupy the space, move within it and change it with their actions. One actor played both the white author and the aged coloured grandfather opposite the glorious young voice of Veronika. No costume changes; no makeup.

And yet we believed. We believed that Lisa Gay Hamilton was a 14-year-old coloured girl in a small village in Karoo in South Africa. We believed that Athol, who played the Author and Opua, was truly both characters. Our imaginations filled in the picture, even as our eyes told us it was the same person.

The set consisted of three drops, a floor cloth and two benches. The drops reflected the colors of the semi-arid desert, as their theatrical nature—drops with ties and pipes—was revealed. The depth of the painting backdrop in concert with the clarity of the performances made every audience member whom I spoke to believe that they had been transported to the real Karoo.
THE OEDIPUS PLAYS  
By Sophocles in a translation by Nicholas Rudall  
Directed by Michael Kahn  
Shakespeare Theatre, Washington, D.C., 2001

Design has a spiritual impact, whether implied through color, light and texture, or expressed through architectural replication. In *The Oedipus Plays*, I still took the traditional route of creating model and sketches, but my collaborators understood the connection I had made with the play more through my computer graphics than the model. Using 3D Studio Max, a modeling and animation software, I created an animated movie that helped the construction team see my vision exactly the way I saw it. I attempted to infuse my design work with a sense of the spiritual nature of history and of primitive culture. My journey led me to the ancient culture of the Dogon tribe of Mali in West Africa. A sense of the spiritual pervaded the tribe’s earth-toned dwellings: carved wattle-and-daub siding (walls created out of sticks, reeds and poles with a clay mixture) supported by large beams called “torons.” Each wing was dominated by 14-foot wooden walls. A tall golden door, placed upstage center, served as an altar space. Carved figures and animal motifs covered large gauze nets that were hung between the chorus and the walls. In *Oedipus Rex*, the set functioned as the king’s palace. In *Oedipus at Colonus*, the scene shifted to a holy village where Oedipus sought refuge. Torons moved into place, piercing the village walls; the upstage door was removed. In *Antigone*, the torons disappeared, returning to the original state, but a stream of light poured through the holes left in the walls. Computer graphics is a powerful tool to express the link between the architectural and the religious in three-dimensional form on the stage.
Miguel Romero

SPRING AWAKENING
By Frank Wedekind
Directed by Joanna Adler
Williams College, Williamstown, Mass., 1997

Joanna and I wanted to make Frank Wedekind's 1891 play about the beauty and pain of adolescent sexuality relevant and immediate to audiences. I designed a permanent metal structure, recalling a jungle gym, that suited the playful physicality of youth—the theme emphasized by the onstage business the director gave the actors and by Deborah Brother's costume design.

Lit expressionistically by Sabrina Hamilton, several moveable elements of the unit structure I created quickly established various locations in the play. A love scene between two boys took place under a curved ladder, after it was dressed with vines and transformed into a romantic grape arbor. Later in the play, that same ladder was inverted, and it became an abortionist's operating table. The young actors scrambled and climbed up and down the scenic structure and gave variety and energy to the production. Their performances were set off by a permanent cyclorama that was used for atmospheric projections and lighting effects.
and in other people's work, a way of describing their inner mental process during the act of looking. There are ways in which we can draw out a process that works for them, as opposed to imposing or laying a process on top of them. Ming's approach was actually a different school of teaching. His approach is a traditional one, much like Oenslager's. What you come in contact with is a very powerful mental process—Ming's process—and you either react strongly to it or not. Those of us who reacted strongly to Ming's process ended up being, in some ways, the more successful people in life. There is validity to that.

What's interesting is that we're articulating something about our generation that is exciting, because it's different. This is not to demean or cut down what Ming does—it's just interesting to note how our relationship to design, to the work we have been doing over the years, and to the people we collaborate with, has led us to think in our own way—and to teach in our own way.

ROMERO: For my beginning students (theatre majors who may not think of themselves as designers), I stress the process of translating ideas into visual images before I get into any of the nitty-gritty of how you design specifically for the theatre. You have to identify the designer's tools: shape, form, color, space, light and shadow, proportion, etc. Before I ask these students to design for the theatre, I make sure they make a drawing or model of a dream or in response to a favorite piece of music. Then we move on to doing research for a specific play: clippings, photos, art and other images that somehow capture some kernel of a response to the text. Only gradually do we get into creating an inventory of physical requirements for a specific play—storyboards and developing ground plans, and so forth.

Funicello: I don't mind when a potential candidate knows how to build models and draft. I've never found that anyone's undergraduate training from a BFA program has ever gotten in the way of our graduate training. Sure, it takes a few weeks for them to realize that they don't know everything, but I've never had that problem.

HILFERTY: I find, Ralph, that for me the loss is literally art and history. Applicants will often say, "I couldn't take a drawing class, because drawing is in the fine arts department." Or they haven't taken American history. I wouldn't want to dismiss all undergraduate programs. There are certain programs that have great strengths. I look for a real mix in my class—somebody who comes from an art background or an architecture background or a sculpture background or new media, or somebody who comes from a theatrical background.

McClenahan: Regardless of whether you are computer savvy or media savvy, unless you have a background in drawing or visual arts, it's going to be very difficult for you to use those tools to even articulate what you're doing with a pencil. I just need to find an artist. If I find an artist, I've got a designer. It's as simple as that.
The Designer as Thinker continued from page 102

ingredients in the mix is text—a passion for understanding and working with text. Often I interview young, exciting students who come from an art background, and they have started to move into the idea of dimension and time in their storytelling, or they’re immersed in new media. (In my generation we were into Happenings.) So these young designers come to me to find out whether or not NYU is the appropriate place for them to go to school. And I find that, unless they are interested in exploring the relationship of text to their work, they are going to be completely unhappy in the department.

BELDEN: I do think, however, that it is possible to train young fine artists in theatre design; it’s just that the approach is different. I just spent the past spring quarter teaching on exchange at London’s Central St. Martin’s School of Art and Design, where I had 53 art students. I found it very exciting. Some in that group probably won’t want work with text in the end, but there were many who were in the performance-art program, so obviously their work was going to have some basis in text. Some were unhappy with text, but, by giving them a little bit of leeway, I found that there was a phenomenal energy of creativity.

The main thing I found was that the art students start with a visceral gut reaction to the text. I did not choose the play to teach; I was told I had to do Miss Julie. I’d never dare to assign Miss Julie, certainly not to first-year students, because I’m afraid I would get a bunch of kitchens with all the doors in the proper place and the kitchen table in the proper place. It might have mood, it might have tone, or maybe I’d get some psychoanalysis. But this group of artists came at it with very exciting use of images, and they showed a total disregard for the text, to begin with. So the training process was to teach them to find a way to keep what was exciting in their initial gut response and yet allow the play to happen in some way. The idea of performing Miss Julie under a bridge in the water just doesn’t come up in my theatre-design classes, but there was one art student in London who actually did that, using the text as a springboard. With my theatre-design students in Ohio, by contrast, I find that, on the whole, what I have to do is take them from a relatively narrow theatre-trained focus, make them open up visually—to get at the guts of the play and the ideas in it and explore its relationship to the world that we live in today.

HILFERTY: The spine of my department at NYU is text, which could start from a piece of music, a play or opera. It’s about incorporating all the other artists involved in a project, and their reactions to the text. I find that the students who want to be individual artists expressing themselves through these media are very different from those who want to be part of a collaborative art form. That’s really the dividing line. It’s not that these artists have ideas that are not original and exciting, but somehow they feel they’re betrayed by having to work with a director and actors in support of a specific text.

BARRECA: You don’t have a theatre designer, then—you have a fine artist. The definition of a stage designer is a member of a team. And isn’t that the most exciting thing about it?

HILFERTY: Laurie Anderson was a big influence on my work. I started at art school and then I went to theatre; Anderson’s performance art was really the result of Claes Oldenburg and Happenings. At the same time, I would never have recommended her that she go to a theatre-design program, even though she is also a designer. It’s the same with Robert Wilson. If I had a student like Wilson or Anderson in my design program, I think I would tell them to go somewhere else....

BARRECA: ....or nowhere at all.

HILFERTY: It’s not that I think that they
The Designer as Thinker continued from page 104

can't work with design, but I think it's a different vocabulary.

McCLENNAHAN: I don't see theatre as strictly confined to the stage. Theatre goes into the medical industry in terms of visualization now, and to the architectural industry, because they want enhancements—they want immediacy, and they want to sell products in the same way that we are selling them visually when we look at a stage. The delineation is not so clear anymore—especially as I now interact with young designers who are going to take this industry into the future. We are poised now to help define that future or we can inhibit it, as we work with new minds in our classrooms that are trained with interactive devices like video games. What we know as traditional theatre will be combined and absorbed in that industry, and the boundary lines will become artificial. And how will we deal with that?

THE DESIGNER AS DIRECTOR

One of the components of design is a sense of the theatrical event. What do we mean by "a thinking designer" or a designer who can creatively solve problems?

HILFERTY: I've found that I have to bring directors into the classes, and I have my designers take acting classes, get them into the rehearsal; the scariest thing is this vacuum.

BELDEN: I certainly have student directors in all my classes. Occasionally I have faculty or other guest directors come in and work with the students. And my students all take directing classes.

ROMERO: At least directing theory, if nothing else.

BELDEN: No, they take a basic directing class, at least one, in which case, at our school, they are then asked to actually do some directing. And when they're approaching a project I also want them always to think in terms of the directorial: Why are you doing this play today? What's the purpose? Why is this of interest to you or the audience? What about its importance today? To me the connection to the here-and-now—to the news of the day, the New York Times, NPR, Iraq, to whatever is going on—is as important as anything else when I talk about the thinking designer.

BARRERA: This idea that designers are somehow separate from actors and directors is wrong. My whole process is about being in rehearsal. My ideas grow out of what I see in the rehearsal process.

So when you talk about creating a thinking artist, it's about developing a designer's eye. A lot of my training has to do with allowing students to trust in their instincts—to discover it from the act of seeing, so they can say, "This needs to be juxtaposed to that" or "This is moving here and that isn't"—those are similar choices an actor makes in rehearsal.

My process morphs to fit the needs of each work. I try very much to be involved in the creation of a piece from the beginning. I'm always looking for some action inside the work that will key me into an overall visual image uniquely.
The Designer as Thinker continued from page 106

sulted to that action. This is different from developing a “concept.” I’m afraid a concept often leads to illustrating the text, explaining it away. Illustrating, by definition, means to show something because you don’t believe the viewer will “get it” without it.

ROMERO: In teaching, I’ve started introducing puppetry, because it’s a way of making visual theatre in a way that can be done without the whole paraphernalia of the technical world. I don’t consider myself a puppeteer, but I’m attracted to the potential of working in different scales and having greater control over the entire visual event, including the puppet performer. In the classroom I can better communicate the total visual impact of theatre through practical applications in puppetry than through the traditional didactic exercises and paper projects usually associated with the scene-design curriculum.

The keys to this are the all-important element of time, working in three dimensions and incorporating movement. The other tools—form, color, perspective, mass, texture—apply equally in the live actor and puppet media, but with the puppetry, the results (and the budget) are more manageable for design students who don’t get the mainstage assignments.

THE DESIGNER AS ACTOR

As theatre designers, what do you want from actors?

McCLENNAHAN: For me, a good experience for an actor is to have a set that they can look at and be creative on. When I see an actor exploring things about my set that I somehow didn’t get or didn’t see when I was designing it, that really makes me feel good. I mean, to use it almost like a jungle gym or an amusement park. That shows the actor’s inventiveness and the actor’s desire to go with the designer to wherever the set will take them.

HILFERTY: For me, it’s about the power of the imagination. When I asked James Lapine [the director of the original and the revival of Into the Woods on Broadway], I expected him to balk when I asked if we could realize Milky White, the cow, as a character in our production and not just a prop. He thrilled to the idea but insisted on finding the exact balance: neither a real cow nor a jokey version of it. We explored 30 variations until we found the right “cowness,” the current one-person cow on Broadway. Standing next to real people on stage, Milky White is clearly “not real.” But every night when she dies, the audience moans with pain, then cheers as she is resurrected.

BARRECA: If I relate it to my experience in jazz, people get confused. They think jazz is improvisation: You’re doing your own thing. It isn’t that at all. “Jazzing” literally means taking somebody else’s idea and riffing on it, expanding on it and getting excited about their idea. What you’re describing, Charles, is exactly that process. It was actually in the student productions that I did at

Ithaca College Theater
The Undergraduate Choice

Create, design, perform

2002-3 Audition Dates

Ithaca College
October 26
November 16
January 25
February 15
March 1

New York City
February 1
February 2
March 8

Chicago
February 4
February 5

Las Vegas
February 6

San Francisco
February 13

Los Angeles
February 9

Washington, D.C.
January 11

Houston
February 24

Dallas
November 25

B.F.A.
Acting

B.A.
Drama

B.S.
Theater Arts Management

For more information, contact
Lee Byron, Chair, Department of Theatre Arts
Ithaca College
201 Dillingham Center
Ithaca, NY 14850-7293
607-274-3544 Fax 607-274-3672
theatrearts@ithaca.edu
www.ithaca.edu/theatre
Yale that I got the most out of the school, because of the fact that they leave you alone there. More and more these days I see myself being pressed by the constraints of time and resources into a role that I find very uncomfortable.

Belden: I'm finding the same thing in the regional theatres over the past 20 years; it's become very much a machine rather than a place to explore. They're on their schedule. They know exactly when they're going to have you in town. They know just exactly how to do it. In the earlier years they were much more open to allowing more exploration.

Because of the economic pressures of the last, what, five, eight years or so, theatres have joint productions; it becomes more about solving technical things. They want their drawing six months in advance or eight months in advance, and the director is off doing something entirely different, and even getting the director's ear or attention is a problem. It's become very mechanized.

Funicello: There have been circumstances where I've been able to react to what I have seen on stage or seen in rehearsals. It enabled me to change things—not necessarily the walls or the environment as it was built, but certainly the way it was dressed or used. If I had the time to do that. But often (laughs) we all must admit that the reality is Load in on Sunday, first preview on Saturday, open the following Saturday, at most of the places where I work. You don't have time to make enormous changes.

Barreca: So what are we preparing young designers for? I've come down to saying, "Alright, you're going to create your own theatre—but I'm also going to prepare you to do this other work." This means: I'm preparing them for what I hope they will do, and at the same time I am, in theory, giving them the skills to do what I have to do a lot of the time.

One of the major influences on me was (director) Mark Lamos's work with (the designer) John Conklin during the late '70s and early '80s. I noticed in John's work—and it blew me away—that he designed the potential for change into Mark's productions. When I started working for Mark, I realized that in order to work with him, I had to be ready to completely reinvent the piece when it got on stage. We were going to go on some journey—and who knew what it was going to become?

Funicello: Well, we must admit that as the artistic director of the Hartford Stage Company he could do that. It became much more difficult when he worked as a freelancer in other places, where they're not set up to build the set in the last two weeks of rehearsal. The reality is: I can teach people to work in the theatre as it exists today. I can hopefully prepare them to work in a theatre that I can't even imagine yet.

Belden: The stronger designers come in with this desire to change the world, to throw out the past, to be revolutionaries. To the extent that we don't just facilitate, we're teaching a craft. The dreams, the essence, the ideas—those are
The Designer as Thinker continued from page 110

things I don’t know whether we really teach. I hope I allow them to happen. I hope I encourage them to happen.

ROMERO: Group dynamics plays an important role in the process, and the better you are at dealing with other people, the more effective you will be at getting your ideas across and maintaining a positive collaboration. Some things you don’t have to learn; they’re just common sense. The student who can’t meet a deadline or complete an assignment correctly is going to have a hard time in the real world. I stress portfolio presentation and project presentation with my students, but I probably could do more in helping them acquire skills in listening, reaching consensus and knowing how to satisfy a client. Understanding the work of one’s collaborators—lighting, costume, painting, construction—helps one be a better collaborator and ultimately a better designer.

BARRECA: If we’ve seen Expressionism, Impressionism, Modernism and Postmodernism, what is the next “ism”? Perhaps it’s “Commercialism.” (Laughter) There’s no doubt there’s been commercialization, and it started with Ronald Reagan. (Laughter) It may have even started with Andy Warhol. I love Warhol. He made it okay for artists to say, “I’m a visual artist in a commercial world. This is the culture I live in. I’m in it for the commercial aspect of it.”

So on one level with my students, I will say, “All mediums are there for you, and you should explore all mediums.” But the question is: What influence do we have over that? How do we influence their relationship to those media? How can they move us from commercialism to something else? If I look at the ‘80s and ‘90s, what was considered avant-garde was Disney. (Laughter) It’s frightening on some level, but that was what was coming. I got into this business when the work of artists was very political. I was interested in the politics of culture and how it influenced performance. But I find very little of that ethos existing in the world today.

ROMERO: The way the greatest designers work in the theatre is to develop a method and a visual vocabulary that enable them to synthesize a wide assortment of visual influences and styles and create a design that is right for the play and the director’s approach to it. The designer Boris Aronson may have been partly a product of Russian Constructivism historically, but he would not have been the great designer he was if all he could do were set designs like Company. In fact, he was a master of creating very powerful moods within whatever style he was working. I prefer to leave it to painters, sculptors and architects to create the “isms” that I can absorb as a designer when I need them. AT

For an expanded version of this conversation, including a discussion about “The Designer of the Future,” visit the American Theatre webpage at www.tcg.org.