

## INTRODUCTION by Ming Cho Lee

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WHEN I was approached to write the introduction to a forthcoming book on current American scene designers, I accepted without a moment of hesitation. After all, six of the twelve designers in the book were my students, and most of the others are friends whose work I admire. I am a natural for the job. This introduction would also establish my continuing presence in the world of design—an opportunity not to be missed. That was five months ago. Since then I have hardly had a moment of peace. This project hangs over my head like a mosquito droning in a summer night—forever present but elusive. I wanted to write something personal, something more than just a parade of generalities and clichés. I read the manuscript over and over again, as well as prefaces and introductions written by others, trying to find a shape, a theme, a key, anything to get the project started. I thought it would be a breeze. Wrong. The difficulties I have encountered so far in writing this article almost make designing scenery a piece of cake.

Twenty years ago, the great designer-teacher Donald Oenslager, on the occasion honoring his long history of teaching—some forty years—at the Yale Drama School, spoke of the bewilderment he experienced when faced with the new art of that time. He talked about the Pop and the Op in painting, the rock musical, the Happening in theatre, the mega-multimedia concerts, the emergence of soft sculpture reflecting the rising awareness of feminism, the fracturing and deconstruction of the linear narrative form in literature and drama. For him, the language, the landscape, the esthetics of the new art seemed strange and unfamiliar. The old rules, the old process, and the existing agendas seemed no longer valid. As much as Donald tried to keep in touch with the prevailing movements, he found himself on the outside looking in. Often he felt perplexed and somewhat left out. He thought that perhaps it was indeed the right time for him to step aside and leave the world for others to challenge. Then he paused and said, “Do I hear the bell? The class is over.” Thus ended this remarkable address.

Today, as I look at the stage design of the last decade, I find myself feeling very much like Donald Oenslager during the summer of 1970—perplexed, bewildered, yet with an odd sense of exhilaration. Much of the territory seems unfamiliar to me, the ground slippery and unsafe. It is not a time for anyone to be complacent. The landscape of American theatre has indeed changed since Aronson’s first volume of *American Set Design* six years ago, and it is still changing. I think this is all to the good, and reason enough to have another book about those designers whose work brought about those changes and whose sensibilities inform the American theatre of today.

What is it that separates today’s design from that of the immediate past? After all, many of the conditions and concerns that plagued us then persist today. It is

still a struggle to break free from the bondage of narrowly written, realistic theatre. There are still too few productions of the classics. The economy of the theatre and its near-poverty-level financial compensation still make it an enormous burden to make the choice to continue working in the theatre. (In 1990 at least one major New York theatre paid a designer \$1700 for what is a minimum of ten weeks' work.) Despite the 100 percent increase in the number of women over Aronson's book, and the inclusion of one African-American and one designer from the Pacific Rim, set design remains the province of the white male. And designers' isolation from each other continues—I doubt if the designers in this book know each other well, or much of each other's work.

So what is different? I think there is far more true diversity. The work which was exemplified in Aronson's book was certainly seasoned by individual differences, but it was still basically stew from the same pot. The designers whose work is shown here come from much more diverse backgrounds, drawing their inspiration from a bewildering variety of sources, references, styles, approaches, roots; it is eclecticism in the best sense of the word.

The visual imagery here is stronger and bolder. It can be unashamedly pictorial or illusionistic and still not literally representational. These are images which seem to touch the recesses of the mind: the hidden emotion, the barely aware consciousness, the dream world. These designers tend to be less bound by logical rules of esthetic formalism, or by the actuality of the text and action. Shaped by the theatre of Peter Brook, Pina Bausch, Robert Wilson, Julie Taymor, the later work of John Conklin, etc., their worlds, much like those of Magritte and Friedrich, are freed from actuality, are suggested obliquely and ambiguously. These are layered landscapes that reflect both text and subtext, in which

seemingly unrelated objects coexist, and interior and exterior are not mutually exclusive.

Finally, the interviews suggest that designers are no longer the ignored, unsung heroes—picture-makers who “get in the way of the action.” There seems to be a new joy in designer-director relations. We are hearing of the designer as dramaturg—the recognition of the designer as a real collaborator in formulating the approach to a production.

However, I wish that there could be more events at which designers and directors could gather for the exchange of ideas outside of a production, and that there could be more financial help so that attending them is not a burden for independent artists. There should be more books like this one so we can be better informed about what other artists are doing. These publications are the norm in England and Europe—why not here? Why not publications that include the director and the costume and lighting designers—books that center on the productions, truly showing the process of collaboration? Theatre, after all, is a collaborative art.

I hope that American theatre will regain its vitality; that our work in whatever form will be truthful, infused with passion, laughter, tears; that it will challenge the mind and the senses. I hope that going to the theatre will be a national activity for all ages, one that we cannot live without. I hope that theatre and the arts will eventually take their rightful place in this country, like elections to preserve our freedom and education to nurture our minds. Art is our connection to our past and the heritage for our future. More than an act of beautification or glorification of a cliché, it provokes, it questions, it celebrates. In joy and outrage, it is the true expression of our time. A life without art is a life unexamined, a life without meaning. A society without art is a society without a soul.

I enjoyed reading these interviews. I am amazed by how articulate and truthful these designers are. Their lives are reflected in their design, and their design responds truthfully and personally to the work. I am glad that they have committed themselves to the theatre. It's a hard life but a meaningful one. I hope they stay with it and that they continue to grow.

I wish them the best of luck.