Creative Conversation: Douglas Clarke, Scenic Designer

If you have attended a production at The Phoenix Theatre Company in the past eleven years, the name Douglas Clarke may ring a bell. Douglas has graced The Phoenix Theatre Company stages for 37 productions and will be joining the theatre for a 38th production this season with *Unlock'd*. No, he doesn't stand center stage belting out high notes and he doesn't call the show from the stage manager booth; he has created endless worlds for the theatre through his scenic design. His skill set extends past creating transformative sets, he has also worked as a costume, media, and props designer for several of the productions he scenic designed.

Douglas took the time to share his journey to becoming a scenic designer, what it is like to design for a large stage versus small, and the advice he would give other creators looking to start a career in scenic design.

You have been designing sets for The Phoenix Theatre Company since 2015 what did your journey to this career look like?

Growing up I was always making things -- crafts, art, anything that came to mind. I pursued fine arts throughout my schooling and during my senior year of high school was asked if I wanted to design a few sets. I had no formal design training but my parents had always taken me to performances so I had a sense for the theatrical. I started at Arizona State University focused on fine art but added theatre as a dual major. After undergrad, I spent a season as a scenic intern at Kalamazoo Civic Theatre, and then a season at Phoenix Theatre as a properties intern. As an intern at PT, I worked on building props and running shows; it gave me an understanding of how the company functioned and the relationships that would later be the foundation of my career; so The Phoenix Theatre Company played a major role even before my design career. I then went to The University of Maryland in College Park

and earned my MFA in theatre design. Adriana Diaz, who had also worked at PT, was a year ahead of me at UMD for costume design (so, small world!), and we got to know each other while working on shows together. After I graduated, I reached out to the production manager at the time about designing at PT. He asked Adriana if I would be a good fit and she vouched for me. My first show was “End of the Rainbow” with Adriana, and my design won my first Arizoni Award. The rest is history.

How do you approach designing a set for a well-known and beloved musical like *Les Mis* versus a new work like *Unlock’d*?

Les Mis’ is such a beloved iconic show, an audience has certain expectations for what they will be seeing on stage. With such an established aesthetic and its iconic moments, Director Brendan Stackhouse and I wanted to stay true to that world rather than creating a high-concept version. It was an opportunity to welcome our audience back to this classic work that was familiar and exciting to see in the new Stephenson space, playing with height and scale not previously available. With a newer work like Unlock’d, the audience is coming with no preconceived expectations. It’s an opportunity to establish the show’s aesthetics and determine what best supports our production through the world we are creating from scratch. Navigating what the world should be is like using a divining rod; there’s no Broadway production or original cast recording available for reference; the overall energy of the show has to be extrapolated from the script itself. This presented both a formidable task and a special opportunity for me to lean on my design abilities.

Is there a difference in your design process for a two man show like *Murder for Two* or *Churchill and Roosevelt* versus a production with a larger cast?

The only real consideration for cast size is filling the space appropriately. A big venue with a small cast may require the design to fill the space so the characters don’t look lost in a void of emptiness while a larger cast in a smaller venue becomes trickier, where I need to create the elements of the world while still allowing room to breathe and providing the actors sufficient space to perform. The biggest impact on my design process isn’t the cast size but the size of the venue, whether staging is for a single location versus many locations, the elements needed to tell the story, and the actions of the actors-- these have much greater impacts on my process.

Do you prefer to design for smaller stages like the Judith Hardes Theatre or bigger spaces like The Dr. Stacie J. and Richard J Stephenson Theatre? What do you enjoy about each space?

I don't really have a preference; both provide their own challenges and have their strengths. I enjoy the closeness of the Hardes cabaret setup. The intimacy creates a limitation in scale that calls for a more straightforward approach, sometimes reducing the overwhelming question of what to design to fill the space. The Stephenson provides an expansive playground to fill -- the biggest blank canvas providing countless design opportunities. Surprisingly, once I've envisioned the design for the show, I often wish the stage were even larger to fit everything I'd like to include. In completing a design, my goal is to create a sense of intimacy regardless of the size of the stage; it's what provides the audience a better connection to the characters and a greater investment in their story.

Do you have a signature style or something you incorporate to every set design that audiences can look for and say "Oh this is a Douglas Clarke set?"

While I adapt my designs to create the look and feel needed for each show, others have observed similarities in my body of work. While I enjoy curves and angles, bold yet controlled use of color, airy compositions, and considerable detail, everything I put on stage is grounded in my research, making my designs feel like real, credible environments for the story being told. All the elements already exist; it's a matter of curating and combining them in the best way. One of the greatest compliments I got was from scenic designer Carey Wong, who said my designs were neither uniquely masculine nor feminine, but balanced in a way that didn't impose a tone on the production.

You have a MFA from the University of Maryland, College Park, what would you tell young Douglas to take away from that experience in school?

I would tell my younger self that UMD is the right choice and best fit for what I need to grow, both artistically and professionally. Every moment is an opportunity to help you evolve as a designer, not only the work of designs themselves, but navigating the interpersonal world of theatre too, which involves collaborating with the director and producers and the other designers to create an integrated, cohesive concept, and

the trade-members who create all the things that bring the design to life. Take time to foster relationships that will aid you in your future. You (and others) will make many mistakes – the important thing is to learn from them.

Do you have any advice for people wanting to enter the world of set design?
Make all the art; explore your creativity; learn world history, art history, and design history. Dream big; stretch your imagination; create, create, create! But in a more practical sense, figure out the best path for you to gain the knowledge and ability needed to be successful. You will need to learn many technical things: drafting, software, budgeting, time management. You will need to develop your abilities to express yourself assertively and respectfully; assess ideas, priorities and constraints; justify, balance and integrate your ideas with what others bring to the table. You can pursue learning through higher education and or assisting; you can take time to intern and take part in professional theatre before going to college or grad school. There is no singular path that is best for everyone: it's what will enable *you* to grow towards achieving the goals you have for yourself.

View some of the spectacular sets Douglas has designed over the years!

AN AMERICAN IN PARIS (MAINSTAGE THEATRE, now HORMEL THEATRE)

LES MISERABLES (Dr. Stacie J. and Richard J Stephenson Theatre)

THE BOOK OF WILL (Hormel Theatre)

LOOKING OVER THE PRESIDENT'S SHOULDER (Judith Hardes Theatre)