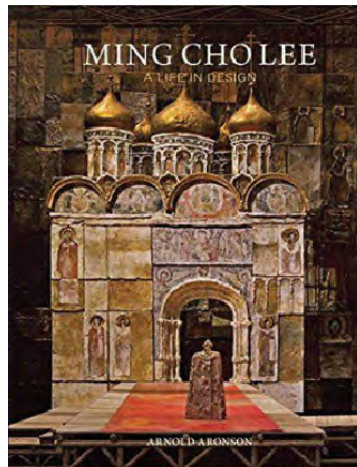


Ming Cho Lee: A Life in Design



by Arnold Aronson; New York, Theatre Communications Group. 336 pp. Cloth, \$75.

Reviewed by Marjorie Bradley Kellogg

How do you do justice to the humanity and brilliance of a creative giant? You write a comprehensive, compassionate, and intelligent book about him, just as theatre historian Arnold Aronson has done in *Ming Cho Lee: A Life in Design*, his definitive new study of the master scenic designer and teacher known to us all as Ming.

I spent several years as an assistant in Ming's studio, fondly referred to as The Mingery, so can hardly lay claim to objectivity. But this is a book of major importance, a must-read for all theatre folk, indeed for anyone drawn to the mysteries of making art. And for the myriad of us who have known, worked, or studied with Ming, the book offers especially absorbing, often poignant reading. As set designer Ralph Funicello (my fellow assistant way back then) notes, Aronson "was able to capture the Ming that we all love."

At once a factual and visual biography, this is a cleanly written, richly detailed account of one extraordinary man's life in art, complete with humor, shop talk, aesthetic analysis, portraits of directors brilliant or impossible (or both) and producers brave or clueless, and here and there, a glimpse of life at home with the Lees. Aronson based the book on extensive interviews with Ming and Betsy (like her husband, known affectionately to all by her

first name), as well as with many colleagues and collaborators. So much of it is in Ming's own voice, as he discusses his intent for a show, whether he thought it worked or not, and why. Best of all, the illustrations are extensive and gorgeous.

A good thing, as there is so much work here to see, from very earliest to most recent. Dozens



of full-page spreads, a visual treat on nearly every page: sketches rough and final, models, production shots, and a scattering of treasures from the Lee family albums. Most

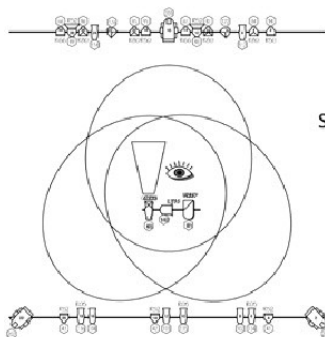
designers will agree it's remarkable to have a career so fully documented. For this we must thank Betsy Lee, Ming's inexhaustible wife, for saving everything.

But wait: not a ground plan to be found, not even a scrap of Ming's artful drafting. Aronson's clear choice is to leave the technical aspects of design execution alone and zero in on the question of where the design comes from. What are the roots of style and interpretation? How does the artist's personality and life history create, as it did in Ming Cho Lee, a most singular vision? More of that later.

The book's introduction supplies a mini-course in twentieth century American theatre production styles, laying out Ming's "artistic ancestry" and putting his work into historical context.

Next, the opening chapters set the stage for the future master, with a brisk evocation of the designer's youth in Shanghai, followed by a more in-depth look at his brief but formative apprenticeships with leading New York designers (most crucially, Jo Mielziner and Boris Aronson), before being hired to design for Joe Papp and the New York Shakespeare Festival.

Once past the forward logic of Ming's early days, Aronson abandons a strict chronology in favor of a more expansive, theme-driven structure. This allows room for a deeper analysis of the artist's profound influence on the evolution of American set design in the latter half of the twenti-



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eth century, as well as a comparison of work done within similar venues or genres: dance or opera, regional theatre, or Broadway. The discussion loops back and forth in time, always placing the work on the continuum of Ming Cho Lee's maturing vision, until it reveals itself as a tapestry, with threads of style and intent, borrowing and innovation, success and failure, all woven into a coherent and compelling whole.

This structure also allows for the many quotes that lighten the text with juicy theatre anecdote, co-worker comment, and Ming's wry humor. (Isn't it fun to know that Ming's helper while painting a drop for his first professional production at the Grist Mill Playhouse was Jerry Orbach?) Christopher, the Lees' middle son, provides particularly valuable insight. Gently folding the Lees' home life into his narrative, Aronson shows how family has been Ming Cho Lee's solid anchor throughout the unpredictable journey of making art in a business where too many can't see past the bottom line. One rarely thinks of Ming alone. It's always Ming-and-Betsy. While his mother was alive, she lived next door and was a daily visitor to the studio.

Aronson also gives steady attention to an essential aspect of Ming Cho Lee which he calls "rare in any American theatre artist: a passionate commitment to artistic freedom and social justice, and a concomitant dedication to instilling in his students the idea that art and politics are inseparable." Whether Ming's politics are visible in his designs might be arguable, but they are certainly evident in his reading of any script. Aronson views this liberal stance as a product of Ming's upbringing amid the tumultuous events of the 1930s and '40s in China.

A whole new book could be written about Ming Cho Lee as teacher and mentor, but this one is committed to the design work. So, while often mentioning Ming's dedication to his students as well as the reach of his influence beyond his own classroom, Aronson limits direct discussion of the topic to what amounts to two long side-bars: The Studio (training apprentices) and Master Teacher (teaching university students). Here the main points are touched upon, such as the large proportion of designers working today who were trained by Ming, or that an apprenticeship with Ming is a lifelong relationship, and finally, the phenomenal time and energy given by the Lees to the annual student portfolio review dubbed Ming's Clambake.

Aronson calls this storied event "perhaps the single most important catalyst in the development of design training in the U.S. from 1990 to 2009."

Perhaps another whole book could examine how Ming Cho Lee's strong influence has played out in the designs of those touched by it, with photographic comparisons, continuing forward a visual lineage to match the one Aronson traces early in

the book, from Appia and Craig, through Jones and Bel Geddes, to Urban to Mielziner to Ming Cho Lee.

Central to the book, of course, is Aronson's scholarly evaluation of the work itself, and it is generally an admirably honest appraisal. The author doesn't dispute that Ming's influence on American theatrical design has been profound and widespread. But he does take pains to point out, again



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and again, that much of what was labeled revolutionary here when Ming did it was already being done by designers in Europe.

This reviewer feels that Aronson returns to this trope perhaps too insistently, as if nothing in American design could ever be *sui generis*. None the less, it is interesting to see, in one case (*Electra*, with Ming's blessing), a photograph of the influencing "original." Ming admits to borrowing ideas now and then, but he is also famous for undervaluing his own work. And after all, no artist creates in isolation. Our past works on us and with us at every moment, all that we've read and heard and seen. Besides, any idea that Ming borrowed was so transformed by his process that it hardly matters where the inspiration came from. I often wondered if his eyes saw the physical world differently than mine did.

Aronson is easier on a more common complaint, that is, Ming's tendency to repeat certain of his own motifs from show to show—horizontal poles, miniaturized architectural backdrops,

floating blocks of architectural ornament, and so on, with whatever visual element he happens to be working with at the time. Grouping these motifs in stylistic periods, Aronson helps us to see how this repetition is the result of the designer's perfectionist nature working through an idea, determined to improve on it until no more can be done, and it's time to move on.

Aronson's book represents Theatre Communications Group's most ambitious publishing effort to date. As merits the primacy of their subject, they have produced an impressive large-format hardcover, with high quality paper, a clear and readable typeface, and a handsomely relaxed layout that gives proper space and focus to the crisply pictured work. While this glorious volume is worth every single penny, one might hope down the line for an equally handsome but more affordable paperback edition, so that every design student in the world (as well as anyone interested in the process of making art) can have it on their bookshelf—or their coffee table

Again quoting Ralph Funicello because he sums it up so well: "This book is, and will always be, the most important book written about the man who had the greatest influence on set design in America for the past forty-five years, and whose influence will probably last for the next twenty-five."

Get out there and treat yourself to a copy.

Marjorie Bradley Kellogg has designed scenery for Broadway, Off Broadway, opera, and regional theatre. Among her many honors, she received the 2006 Distinguished Achievement Award in Scenic Design from USITT and the 2014 Robert L. B. Tobin Award for Sustained Excellence in Theatrical Design. She is associate professor of theatre at Colgate University and the author of eight science fiction and fantasy novels.



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