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Interpreting “American Life” in Scenic Design

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Publication Date

2020

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SAN DIEGO

Interpreting “American Life” in Scenic Design

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Master of Fine Arts

in

Theatre and Dance (Design)

by

Hsi-An Chen

Committee in charge:

Professor Robert Brill, Chair
Professor Judith Dolan
Professor Victoria Petrovich

2020

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The Thesis of Hsi-An Chen is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

Chair

University of California San Diego

2020

DEDICATION

To my Father, who open my eyes to the world of art.

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File 2. A Beautiful Day photo 1, Chen_ABD_photo01.jpg

File 3. A Beautiful Day photo 2, Chen_ABD_photo02.jpg

File 4. Balm in Gilead photo 1, Chen_Balm in Gilead_photo01.jpg

File 5. Balm in Gilead photo 2, Chen_Balm in Gilead_photo02.jpg

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge all the technical staff in UCSD Theatre & Dance, without all your diligent effort, none of my design will come true.

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Interpreting “American Life” in Scenic Design

by

Hsi-An Chen

Master of Fine Arts in Theatre and Dance (Design)

University of California San Diego, 2020

Professor Robert Brill, Chair

Theater has always reflected the life of the people that surrounds it. Therefore, being able to understand, absorb and expand the “American experience” as a first-generation immigrant was one of the main challenges during my time at UCSD. I start these projects assuming I'm distanced from the theme. Turn out there are multiple access points in each production. Those design processes are valuable to me as an emerging set designer in the US because they immersed me in the culture that is around me now and will always be part of American theater.

The three productions I designed that deal with “Americanness” the most are *53% Of, A Beautiful Day in November on the banks of the Greatest of the Great Lakes* and *Balm in Gilead*.

Each of them presents different aspects of American Life. *53% Of* is about 53% of women voted for Trump, a microscope on the grand US political scene. *A Beautiful Day* is a Thanksgiving dinner narrated by sports commentators, portraying the marrow of family in stylized acting. *Balm in Gilead* is about the low-life in the decaying 1960s New York City center, harsh realism poses the question of how to be compassionate in the bad times.

The world has become closer and relationship between people has always been universal. When designing *A Beautiful Day*, I relate Thanksgiving dinner to Chinese New Year: awkward conversations between generations and that Aunt who is always late. Globalization has also affected our collective memory. Growing up reading tons of US home decoration magazines, I was able to produce the stereotypical living space in *53% Of*. One lesson I've also learned is that personal experiences are valuable research. The nuanced design of *Balm in Gilead* comes from early discussions with the director about her experience being a young artist in New York City and the fine-tuning during technical rehearsal when the whole team absorbs the space and developed the details as collectives.