

# INTERVIEW WITH *The Set Designer:* MICHAEL YEARGAN

UPSTAGE RECENTLY INTERVIEWED SET DESIGNER MICHAEL YEARGAN ABOUT CREATING THE WORLD OF *THE GLASS MENAGERIE*.

## **Why did you choose to design theatre sets for a career?**

Growing up in Dallas, Texas, in the '50s, I was privileged to have a great music teacher who took us to the Met when they came through on tour. Later, the Dallas Opera was started. So I really came to set design through opera. I remember the first thing I was taken to was a Met production on tour of *La Boheme* in the late '50s. I was blown away. I thought it was the greatest magic trick I had ever seen. I loved the music and was taken in by the whole thing, but it was mainly the sets that drew me in. At that time I read this magazine that was published weekly that had pictures of all the sets, and I would religiously copy them. That's how I got started.

## **Where did you get your education?**

My dad thought I was a terrible student except in art, theatre, and English. I was terrible in math. I wanted to go to a small university. I wanted to get out of Dallas. My dad traveled for his job, and we discovered that there was a very small university in Florida called Stetson University that John D. Stetson had endowed. They had a small theatre program. It was a good liberal arts school, so I went there for undergrad. I loved it and was very active in the theatre department there. Then they had a junior year abroad program, so I spent my junior year at the University of Madrid and did a lot of traveling around that summer. When I came back, I finished up at Stetson. I taught high school for a year out of college because I was sick of going to school. If you were interested in set design, you really had to go to the Yale School of Drama, which at that time was the only game in town. So I applied to Yale. I was accepted and went. After I graduated, I came back and taught and was a resident designer at Yale starting in 1973. I am still teaching there now.

## **It sounds like the opera was an influence or inspiration; can you tell me about other influences?**

I got into ushering—I ushered for anything that came through Dallas or anything that I could get to. In the summers there were the Dallas Summer Musicals, which were fully mounted, huge productions. They ran for two weeks each, and I would watch

every performance. I learned so much about basic stagecraft and about how things shifted, especially when things went wrong and I got to see them cope with that. Then the Dallas Theatre Center was also cranking up, and I remember seeing a production of Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party* in a very small 75-seat experimental theatre, which completely scared the hell out of me. I thought it was one of the scariest plays I had ever seen and I was disturbed by it. When I was traveling and seeing things in Europe, I saw *Servant of Two Masters*. I went to everything I could get into in Madrid at the time. I went to Germany. I went to La Scala in Italy. I saw *Mother Courage* and *Waiting for Godot*. These were extraordinary performances. This was very exciting stuff. Those productions were a huge influence. Another influence was when I was at Yale as a designer and Andrej Wajda, the great Polish film director, came.

## **As I understand it, the set you designed for *The Glass Menagerie* is not traditional. Is this true?**

No, it's not traditional in terms of what is usually done for *The Glass Menagerie*. There's hardly any set at all, actually. What's usually done is that it starts on the fire escape outside. It was originally designed by Jo Mielziner, who designed practically everything in that period. Jo was kind of a 19<sup>th</sup> century romanticist in that his sketches were just unbelievably beautiful. He lit his own shows and was very interested in the atmosphere of the piece. He designed *Streetcar* later, and he loved scrims, that atmospheric feeling you get when you look through gauzy material. *Menagerie* was very impressionistically set in Tom's memory, which put it in an apartment in St. Louis. Our director, Gordon Edelstein, said, "I want to do *The Glass Menagerie*, and I have this idea that instead of being in that apartment, really Tom walks into a hotel room with a bottle and a typewriter, sits down, starts writing the play, and says, 'I have tricks up my sleeve.' It all happens in the hotel." I said, "That's a fantastic idea. Let's do it that way." And we did. But it is not a very realistic hotel room; it is a psychologically empty room. By putting it in the hotel room, and having it all happening around him, the characters come into the story. You don't question it because it



is all in that one space. I think it was revelatory for us to realize how beautifully the play is written and how it doesn't depend on an elaborate set to convey it. It puts more focus on the performances.

**What kind of research did you have to do?**

I looked at a lot of pictures of hotel rooms. We were very specific about wanting to set it in the '30s, so the hotel room in the film *Barton Fink* that the Cohen Brothers made was very influential for us. Because of the small space we were in, we really needed to deal with one wall of the hotel room. It was open on the sides, because there was audience there at the Long Wharf Theatre where we first produced it. Moving it to the Roundabout, we had to complete the sides, but not do it in such a realistic way. Ninety-nine percent of this production is Jennifer Tipton's lighting, which is really magical. So, we have an impressionistic view of a hotel room. The furniture is all extremely real. It is all based on bad art deco hotel furniture from the period that I saw pictures of.

**It sounds like the challenge was to figure out how the scenes in the house could happen in the hotel room.**

The biggest challenge at Long Wharf was that we were using the downstage entrances as, I think, the entrance and exit to the kitchen. It was a little far, so we needed to make adjustments in the timing. Here the entrances and exits are stage right and stage left; it's not a thrust stage like at Long Wharf, it is a proscenium. It is almost more challenging to try to design the set as it is written, with the apartment, the fire escape and exteriors and all of that, than what we came up with. I think what we came up with liberates the play a bit.

**What do you look for from a director at the beginning of your process?**

I don't think there is anything specific, but I loathe when a director says, "I think the room should be green and it should have shag carpets." I'm not real happy when it becomes: "The wall paper should be this or that." I like the director to have a sense of

the play, to discuss what the play means and who the characters are. I'm contradicting myself because Gordon came to me with a very specific idea. With Gordon, we have worked on several projects together, so we have a common vocabulary, and he brought this idea up to me when we were working on something else. When you have these meetings with directors, ninety percent of the meeting is gossip and talking about the politics of the day. Then you get down to doing what you are supposed to be doing, which is the play. So in one of those sessions, Gordon told me he had this great idea for *The Glass Menagerie*. That's when he first mentioned it. With *Menagerie* we both knew the play. Sometimes you work on a play that's a new work that you don't know very well and you must talk about the play. When you say, "A hotel in New Orleans," everyone has an image of what that might be. As a designer, you try and take that image and get it down on paper or communicate it to the director to see if that's what they were thinking. They may say, "Well, no, it wasn't what I was thinking, but I love this." Or "This isn't at all what I thought. I think it should be this." It's starting from the general and working to the very specific, which I like.

#### **Do you have a sense of why this play gets produced so often?**

It is a little like *Our Town* in that it means something different to you at different points in your life. I think that the other thing that strikes you when you read it is that it is so beautifully written. Tom's descriptions of the scenes and Laura's pain are poetic. It's a very universal play. *The Glass Menagerie* deals with this pain among Tom, Amanda and Laura. Amanda wanted everything perfect for her daughter and was not able to achieve that because her daughter is unconventional. Everyone has experienced, no matter how pretty or how ugly they are, rejection. It's just so devastating. You can usually hear an audible sob at the end when Tom says, "Blow out your candles, Laura."

#### **Do you have any advice for a young person who might want to design sets?**

When I started out I was fanatic about making theater models. I wanted to go directly from high school to some school where I could go right into set design. At the time, the Goodman Theatre was not affiliated with the University of Chicago, but it had its own theatre school, and you could go there and study set design. I was convinced that that was the

thing to do. My father actually made an appointment with the designer of all those musicals that I was in such awe of in Dallas. I went to see him, and he said that the thing you should do is not go right into a specialty school, but go get a good liberal arts education. Study English, study art history, study architecture. Then if you are still interested in theatre, go to the Yale School of Drama, which is where he had gone. So that's what I did. I find that some students want to go right into Yale after they graduate and we tell them not to. Theatre is about life, theatre is about understanding characters. The more you can become a well-rounded human being, the better. Have a knowledge of art history or architecture, travel to London or see the Mona Lisa or the Leaning Tower of Pisa or St. Peter's Square. Study drawing, study figure drawing. All of that stuff feeds into your visual vocabulary. The director is always going to gravitate first toward the set designer to start talking about the play. In a way, a set designer is also a really good dramaturge, and that's why when you first start talking about the play, you should bring something to the table, rather than just saying, "Uh huh, uh huh." That's why you should get a good liberal arts undergraduate education. People should keep sketch books. Live a little, analyze. Then go to a good graduate school where your mind is stimulated and you are with people who are all interested in the same thing; hopefully then you'll become a great theatre artist.

#### **It sounds like your father was supportive of your decision to be a set designer.**

He was a military man, and he had never come across this before. And he didn't really have a college education, so he was puzzled as to what to do. But he was very proud and very happy that it all worked out. **UP**