

Episode 3 - Set Design: the Craft, the Style and the Inspiration

Editor's Note: *This episode of ThisGen Podcast is the first in the 8-episode series. If you are able, we encourage you to listen to the series [here](#). For reference, transcripts are provided. Please confirm accuracy prior to quoting, as typos may be present.*

RIMAH: Welcome to ThisGen podcast. With me today, ThisGen Fellowship participant, the set designer Echo Zhou from Toronto and her mentor Mimi Lien, the world-class set designer from New York. Welcome and how are you both doing?

ECHO: I'm doing okay. Thanks for having me.

MIMI: Yeah. I'm doing as well as can be right now, and I'm happy to be here.

RIMAH: Thank you. As this is an audio creation, I would like to get our listeners to a place I would like to ask you this question: if we haven't had this pandemic, and we would meet in person, where would you likely meet? And this place could be also emotional, as you are both set designers.

ECHO: Oh, I think it would be nice if it's in Mimi's studio. [laughs]

RIMAH: [laughs] Oh, nice!

MIMI: [laughs] I mean, I'm gonna say what may seem like a boring answer but is like, I just love a good café, you know? Like, and that's one of the things I maybe miss the most right now. And all through college I worked in a coffee shop. And so it's kind of my second home.

RIMAH: Oh nice.

MIMI: So I would meet in a nice, cozy coffee shop.

ECHO: I also, I do go to like a lot of café for work, and you know having coffee chat with directors and that, but I'm just very curious about Mimi's studio, that's all. [laughs]

MIMI: [laughs] It's very messy.

RIMAH: I would go to "the Theatre Centre" café.

ECHO: Yeah!

RIMAH: This is where I do my meetings usually when I'm meeting with people.

ECHO: Yeah, that's a great space! Teas are really good, the cookies are SO good.

RIMAH: And the atmosphere is really nice, and they always have some kind of exhibition out there in the café, which is really nice. I also really appreciate it when there is a theatre with a café or cafeteria next to it, which adds something to the vibe of the theatre. So let's go there!

ECHO: Great!

MIMI: Yeah.

RIMAH: Echo, I would like to know how did you get involved in ThisGen Fellowship?

ECHO: So I came back from China in 2019, and I was unsure about my future plan and my future career. So I was thinking about what to do for the next step, and then I saw Why Not posting about ThisGen fellowship and I just applied. I think it was a really great opportunity for me to figure out about myself, and what art I wanted to do. Yeah. And in my meeting with Ravi and Miriam, they told me that they wanted to give me an international mentor as well. That's when they tell me about Mimi. And I was like, "yes! Yes! 100 percent!" [laughs]

RIMAH: Mimi, what has been the role of mentorship in your own life, in general?

MIMI: Yeah. Yeah, like there's two people that come to mind: one is a set designer named Christine Jones. So I came to the theatre very late. It was really not until after college that I even thought about theatre, and it was really through design. So my background was in architecture and theatre was a way for me to create spaces, you know in this particular context. So I just didn't know anything about theatre. And so it was really so in terms of knowing who other set designers were, I didn't know a whole lot about famous set designers or people in the field. But I ended up meeting Christine, and she happens to be a female set designer, which as we know now, at certain levels of theatre it's not the majority, for sure. I assisted her for one summer while I was in graduate school and just felt a real closeness. She's never really been a formal mentor to me in a way; we really only connected during this one summer when I was working as her assistant. But somehow, spiritually, I felt like hers was a path that I wanted to follow. And she kind of recommended me for my first job, and so I sort of think of her as like a little bit of a fairy god — I mean, she's not really much older than me so god's mother, it's not the right term — but she's always been a kind of beacon for me. And then I guess the other person that comes to mind is my mom. She taught computer science at a university, and so she was a working mother. And I do remember her constantly coming back home to cook me dinner, and then going back to teach. And just seeing that growing up, and seeing a woman who was doing computer science in the 70s, which was very rare — she was like the only female in her department at multiple schools. So science and math, something that traditionally people think

that men are better at. So as I was pursuing architecture I always was really interested — I loved math and physics. And so that felt like it was something that I constantly was seeing as I was growing up.

RIMAH: I also started very late in theatre — I was already 30. And mentorship really opened for me many doors and helped. The mentorship I had took really different forms. It depends on the project, on the person who's mentoring me. And I'm really curious to know about your relationship with Echo. What is the nature of your relationship of this mentorship?

MIMI: Yeah, I mean, so we had an initial conversation where we got to know each other, and I think I asked Echo what her goals were during that. But even before that very specific question, I understood that she has been working as a lighting designer, and as a stage manager but really was least confident about set design — something that she had done in college and hadn't really done too much professionally since then. And it became very clear to me that she really wanted to have more exposure, just more practice, just in doing. And I am a person who really believes in learning through doing. Just doing something, and just getting it out there, and not feeling too precious about it — I feel like there's a huge value in that.

RIMAH: And for you, Echo, was it clear for you what you wanted to get from this mentorship?

ECHO: It became very clear to me when the pandemic happened, because it's supposed to grow differently that I was supposed to work on a project. But when the pandemic happened, Why Not told me that we're going to restructure the whole fellowship. That became very clear to me, this is a program that designed for me, for individual artists. That's when I started taking focus on what I want to do, or what I desire to get out from this fellowship program. So it became very clear to me and I set specific goals that what I want to learn, and what I want to be mentored on.

RIMAH: Yeah. Yeah, Mimi, you mentioned your mom was a working mother, and you're an artist — you work different hours it's not like the regular typical nine to five job — it's very challenging. And I know that you have a twin, they are two years old.

MIMI: Mhmm.

RIMAH: We were talking about parenting, especially for artists, female artists. We always have this question, where to start with the change? What do we ask institutions or organizations or the government to support female artists in their career who started the family, as well?

MIMI: Yeah, I mean there's different levels to answering that question. I think that there's an immediate solution which could definitely help, which would be child care. And in the U.S., the child care situation is terrible — there's no governmental subsidies at all. And so, on the one hand you say that the schedule of the theatre artist is irregular and challenging — I mean, on the one hand, it's sort of helpful because I am a freelance person. So I can make my own hours, so I'm flexible to a degree. But then there are the demands of tech rehearsal, which stretch for many, many hours a day, and so then therefore requires some more child care. So I think one

immediate solution could be like subsidized child care. But the second might be to rethink the schedule that theatre is made on. Do we *really* need 10 out of 12's? 12 hours, I think people stop being productive at a certain time. And I've worked at theatres in New York that are trying to create rehearsal practices that are more sustainable for people. And at that theatre, we did eight-hour tech days every day, and we got it all done. [laughs] You know? And it was great, and everyone felt much more healthy and less tired. And I think what that requires is a commitment by the theatre that maybe the tech process is going to last a week and a half, or two weeks, instead of one week, and the theatre has to build that into the budget and not be counting on ticket sales for that additional week, you know? And I think you can plan for that kind of thing.

RIMAH: I can relate to that, especially when I moved from Belgium to Toronto, I found these weeks different between here and there. It's really very short here, the time given to a production. It affects the technical schedule. And I completely agree with you. After eight hours, you can't really function anymore.

MIMI: Yeah.

RIMAH: Let's hope this will change in the future.

ECHO: So I had a chance working in China, and the working hours were just not — it's not a thing, because you are there 24/7. So because they have the resource, they have the money, they can afford you to work 16 hours a day. You know that after certain hours everybody just not there anymore, and it's not very efficient, and it was just a waste of time, waste of energy.

RIMAH: Yeah. Echo, in this fellowship you're almost done with your phase one and there is phase two. How do you see the fellowship will change or will influence your future?

ECHO: I can't end the fellowship. When I start with Mimi, I had a very specific goal of what I want to achieve, and I think I'm actually doing it, and I'm getting comfortable with my craft, and getting more confident with my craft every day. And that's what I'm so excited about, because I feel like I finally can say that I am a set designer, because I have what it takes. Yeah.

RIMAH: Did you already know you want to be a set designer when you went to college?

ECHO: Yeah. Before I went to college, I already know that. I wanted to do set design, but it was unfortunate because I didn't get to do much.

RIMAH: Yeah. How do you think of a set designer's relations with the director? Because I heard you talking with Mimi during the session, and I'm really curious about that.

ECHO: I think for the relationship between the set designer and the director is that you really have to click with the designer on dramaturgical level because set design has a dramaturgical approach. You're designing the environment. So on that level, it has to be able to communicate with the director's vision.

RIMAH: Yeah. I see that design and theatre is really very important, especially that the experience of spatiality and space, theatre is all about that. We are in this room, and we are all either audience, or actors, or everyone, experiencing and together sharing this spatiality. It's really essential. And I feel the set design role as important as the playwright and the director. Of course, it varies if the production is experimental or text-based. And I want to know from you Mimi, from your experience, did your role as a designer shift based on the project?

MIMI: It's an interesting question. I mean, yes and no. I think my gut response would actually be no, because of what you just said— because this is the thing about — the experience of theatre is a group of people in a space, and that never changes. So whatever the project is, you are dealing with that, and what should this space be, and how should it operate? But, depending on how we all — the whole team determines that it should operate, then the minutiae of my role does shift and sway. And also, depending on how the piece is made — maybe this is one way where it really is different — so the role of the set designer when you're working on a devised work, so in that case you're starting out with a group of people and there's no script, then your contribution, whatever you decide to say or do as a set designer, is sort of, almost like you're just another person in the room; basically you're another theatre artist, and you're not necessarily focused on just designing the set. So I think in a way, the beginning of the role is different; the role of the set designer in a devised process, because you're all creating this thing together from scratch, as opposed to responding to a script or a score.

RIMAH: Yeah, so you are all together the makers of the piece.

MIMI: That's right.

RIMAH: Echo, where do you get your inspirations for the set designs?

ECHO: The inspiration, if you're designing a piece, the inspiration comes from the script. That's because that's the foundation of the show, of the play. And then just from your daily life, the artwork you've seen, and your personal experience. I think the personal experience it does inspire your creation. Yeah.

RIMAH: Yeah. And for you, Mimi?

MIMI: Yeah, I was gonna say, kind of, the world. I feel like the theatre is really a vessel that contains everyone's responses to what's going on in the world. So many things, and of course it varies from project to project, but anytime that I'm walking around and see something or think of something, I think, "oh what would that be like if that were turned into a performance and framed in some way?" Or I just catalogue something that I see as interesting and draw upon it later. Inevitably things — I remember that thing, it feels like it connects to this thing. So it's all about connection. So for me, it's about just being open to receiving everything that I'm experiencing in the world.

RIMAH: Do you collect images, or on a notebook, or sketches?

MIMI: I collect images, yeah. So I collect a lot of photographs and, yeah. I would say the thing that I collect the most is probably photographs. I have an image repository or archive, and I take a lot of photographs. Also, I'm more of a three-dimensional person, so I tend not to do a lot of sketches. I feel the things that I'm writing in my sketchbooks are more thoughts and writing.

RIMAH: Mhmm. Echo, you are a newcomer to Canada, or you've been here for a long time?

ECHO: I've been here for 10 years.

RIMAH: Wow.

ECHO: Yeah.

RIMAH: Mhmm. And is this the first time you do an internship or fellowship?

ECHO: This is my first fellowship, but I had a few mentorships from the past from assisting senior designers. Or at school in the final year, you have this co-op opportunity. You call outreach call, so you can go to other companies or assisting other designers to earn that school credit.

RIMAH: If we will look back 10 years ago, and you would say something to the younger Echo, what you would say?

ECHO: I would say you have nothing to worry about.

RIMAH: Great!

ECHO: Yeah. I was always — there's nothing to worry about. [laughs]

RIMAH: I won't really keep you longer. My final question to you, I'm really curious about your projects, what you are busy with now or future projects?

MIMI: Mhmm. I am working on a couple of projects right now. I am working on a new musical about the suffrage movement, which was supposed to premiere this fall, but is now — who knows when it will happen? But maybe sometime in the spring. It will be at "The Public Theatre" and was composed by Shane Tau. And then the other thing that I'm in the middle of designing — I'm staring at the model right now — is a new opera called "Intelligence" composed by Jake Heggie that will be at "The Houston Grand Opera" in fall, October of 21. Hopefully. [laughs] And it's based on a true story about a female slave who was placed in the confederate white house towards the end of the civil war, and was instrumental — she actually was well-educated she could read, but they didn't know that she could — and so she collected all this information and

was instrumental in helping the north win the civil war. And her story isn't really well known at all, so yeah, so I'm excited about that.

RIMAH: That's really interesting. And for you, Echo?

ECHO: I'm hopefully will continue to tour "Mr/ Shi and His Lover" in 2021, if it will happen. And there are a few small projects that's in workshop and development. Then we just don't know when that's going to happen, but hopefully it happens next year. And mostly I'm just working on this fellowship.

RIMAH: Definitely there is a lot of uncertainty, but let's hope next year will be better, and things will be clearer. Thank you very much for this lovely conversation, and I wish you both —

ECHO: Thank you so much for having us.

MIMI: Thank you!

RIMAH: That was this gen podcast created by Rimah Jabr. If you would like to know more about ThisGen fellowship, please check Why Not Theatre's website at [whynot dot theatre](http://whynot.theatre). Thank you.