



AN INTERVIEW WITH MIMI LIEN

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"Have you talked to Mimi Lien? You *really* should talk to her." We heard this not once or twice, but from multiple people we've interviewed. Well, we are oh-so-glad we listened and had the opportunity to speak to set designer Mimi Lien. Mimi will make you want to build a set model (or, for those of us who are design-challenged, at least go out and do something visual). Her work can currently be seen in *The Oldest Boy* at Lincoln Center, and her past work has been seen in productions at Playwrights Horizons, Ars Nova, La Jolla Playhouse, Williamstown, and many more. Plus, she's won an OBIE Award and a Barrymore Award. We were lucky enough to get to speak to her in her studio in Brooklyn surrounded by her models (one of us is studying architecture; the other had to refrain from making the people in the models have imaginary conversations). With a background in architecture, Mimi's approach to design is sophisticated and wide-ranging, but it's clear from speaking with her why she's such a fabulous designer for the theatre.

[...]

(ii.) Space

The locations of spaces in New York affect the experience of going to the theatre. How do you think the psycho-geography of the space affects design?

That's actually something I've been thinking about a lot. I've been thinking about some of the downtown theatres where you have to know where you're going—you have to almost have a secret password to gain access. It doesn't feel like it's an open space. A lot of spaces are a little hidden. I've been thinking about that a lot lately because my husband, Alec Duffy, and I actually started a space here in Brooklyn called Jack. The mission of the space is to be a space that engages with the community and feels like a space that the surrounding neighborhood can access. We're both interested in experimental work, but also interested in how to bridge that kind of work with community

access. The space that we have is kind of like a storefront, and the thing that I discovered is that people would walk in whenever I was in there doing something and be like, "Hey, what's going on? What is this?" and I'd never experienced that before in any other theatre I'd been in—probably because there are levels of barriers; there are vestibules and lobbies and what not. Our space is one room with doors onto the street. So that's something I'm interested in. I'm also interested in the 3D spatial experience of an audience member. It really starts the moment they walk in off the street—what is their journey through the lobby to their seat? I'm interested in doing a lot of environmental work, so I really try to think a lot about that and not just what's on the stage. It's always difficult because people don't budget for anything off the stage, so it's always a stretch to try and create that experience and curate it.

[...]

(iii.) Environment

It seems like theatre has been slow in terms of addressing environmental issues.

For a long time sets, including film sets, have been one of the most wasteful industries because it's a temporary thing—you build it, it's up for however many weeks or months, and then it gets trashed. And in New York, where storage is so expensive, it's definitely cheaper and easier to trash your set than to store it. This is something small theatre companies have rehashed over and over again since they're like, "We should try and save this." Most of this stuff is reusable, and it would be great to be able to store them and recycle them, but it's traditionally been very difficult to do that. This is one thing that I think has made great strides actually. There's the Broadway Green Alliance, and I feel like the advent of places like Build It Green and Film Biz Recycling and Materials for the Arts have been a great resource for many years. I do feel like the tide is shifting a little bit. I'm on this list called Art Cube, which is a great resource. Basically, set designers, prop designers, and art departments, across both theatre film and media design, post things they're giving away or selling for cheap. I have successfully recycled several sets. It's actually become this great community. I feel like that's a great change.