



THE INTERVAL

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.

There is an urban planning aspect to architecture; thinking about how buildings can grow over time with the community, and be part of the community. Do you think that's something theatre has been slow to incorporate?

The way theatre functions has stayed the same for a long, long time. I'd say it's maybe both. I think it hasn't really changed, but in that way has always been there. I think people feel they kind of know what it is. There's an expectation that hasn't really changed. I think in every era, different movements are forging change. But in general, the short answer is yes, I do think it's been slow to change, but it's always been this consistent thing in society.

(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.

(iv.) Process

What is your process like?

There's always the first meeting—sometimes just with the director and sometimes with other members of the team. I go to that first meeting having read the play and thought about it, but not necessarily bringing any visual ideas or any research. I feel like it's great to get on the same page with all the collaborators before we decide which direction we're going to go in. There are so many different ways you can interpret a text. I think the most important thing—and I think it's best—is when all the collaborators can get in the room and talk about the play and the nature of the event we want to create. Oftentimes, we'll leave that first meeting being like, "Yeah, I don't know." You don't necessarily know, but you've tossed out a lot of thoughts, and I feel like for me, that's the most satisfying. For me, I like to have that meeting, and then I also need to go away and think on my own. I like to think about things slowly. And then it can go in a few directions. Maybe I'll think of an image I've seen that reminds me of the play, and I'll go look in the library. That's a second key part of my process. There's this great resource called The Picture Collection and it's a room in the Mid-Manhattan Library that's filled with accordion folders and you can browse. I feel like there are things in the library that I don't find when I do an internet search. And, spatially, I feel like it's a place where I can think quietly. Then, I also just walk through the stacks and sometimes I see a book that I feel might relate to what I'm thinking about for the process. I like to cast a pretty wide net in terms of research. And then, the next part of the process, I'd say I do minimal sketching. If there's an idea that I'm perusing, I sketch it just enough so I know what to do to build a model and then I go immediately to the model. I think I am someone who thinks much more intuitively three-dimensionally than two-dimensionally. I feel like when I'm building a model, I'm thinking with my hands, and it's a more direct thing for me. I build several versions of models. With the first rough model I'm finding the shape, and then it gets refined a couple of times, and then I build a final model. And that's the design process for me—mostly in the model.

You do a lot by hand. Do you think, especially for designing for theatre, that you need that tactile, visceral thing that comes with designing by hand and not computer?

Yeah, I do. I do think it's really important to be in contact with your hands. Of course, there are a lot of processes these days, but ultimately it is a physical, tangible object. Even with drafting, I find that sketching a ground plan by hand, the results are different. When the first gesture is something you draw with your hand holding a pencil, it's very different than drawing a line on a computer. And I do think the end result is different. Humans are bodies moving in space. So, if you're designing something that is existing in space, there is something intuitive that your hand is going to do that's different.

(v.) Experience

The set isn't just for the audience. It's for the actors too. How much is that part of your design process?

One of the best compliments I ever get is when an actor says, "When I'm working on your set it helps me out so much." That's the best compliment I could get. For every play, there's a shape and a rhythm, and part of designing a space where a play takes place isn't just how it looks, but controlling the rhythm and volume of space. And so I think that's part of the whole thing. If there's going to be ten doors on stage, that's going to be a completely different rhythm than if it's just a huge ramp. That's definitely part of the initial design, and my hope is that because we're all making this thing together that those initial thoughts about volume and rhythm also get into the body of the actor.

One of the things that seems really interesting with design is how much is being evoked rather than shown, especially with sensory things.

There's a synecdoche going on where something stands for part of the whole, or you see a glossy plexiglass floor and it might make you feel cold because it looks icy. I'm really interested in materials. I often try to find the right material for a play that's going to evoke a feeling. For example, I did this ballet called *Petruska* and at one point, you're in these little rooms, and I ended up making this cube with mirrored surfaces, and that ended up unfolding to become the floor, because it called for an outdoor space in St. Petersburg that was icy. There was another play where the material was concrete. It was a play called *Milk Like Sugar* about teenage girls in low-income areas getting pregnant and a feeling of entrapment. The design ended up being a concrete wall that slowly moved downstage. It was about concreteness.

(vi.) Culture

What is the first piece of storytelling that had a major impact on you?

I feel like the first time I thought about storytelling seriously was actually my undergraduate architecture thesis where you could design anything you wanted. I decided to design a cemetery. I was reading a lot of Rilke at the time. What I realized in doing the project was that I was actually more interested in the idea of: What is a memorial? It ended up being quite theatrical and less about burial than an installation for the mourners. The idea was the mourners would walk through a sequence of spaces, and each space would evoke a different node of that person's life, and through space and memory they'd memorialize this person. I was also reading this book called *The Poetics of Space* about scale and proportion and how do you tell a story through manipulating volumes of space.

What other areas of culture affect your work?

Certainly visual art. Architecture and visual art was the dialogue I was engaged in before theatre, and my work is very influenced by that dialogue. I feel like architecture is the thing that informs my work the most and, actually, makes me question the work I'm doing in theatre from time to time. The social aspect of architecture and something that people encounter on a day-to-day basis rather than having to buy a ticket—the urban planning part of architecture and the idea of making an idealized society through designing space—feels like something I think about a lot.

That's interesting. Especially with theatre prices and the discussion of who theatre is for.

I'm interested in guerilla theatre and street theatre—like interventions. I'm interested in the blurring of the line of art and life; I've always wanted the two things in my life to be not separate. I feel like that's been the goal—to create things that can actually improve people's lives. Sometimes, I do think the separation of space in theatre is not facilitating that. As a result, I've been interested in doing site-specific theatre and public art projects, which I haven't had a chance to do yet, but I'm trying to steer my way towards.

Who are your top five favorite architects?

1. Liz Diller of Diller, Scofidio + Renfro
2. SANAA
3. Carlo Scarpa
4. Rem Koolhaas
5. Turner Brooks (one of my professors in college)

(vii.) Past

Who were your heroes growing up?

I wanted to be a scientist for a small time. And an architect, as well. When I applied to college, I applied as a biology major because I was really interested in genetics and neuroscience. I don't feel like I had a person I thought of as a hero.

There's something really interesting about doing something that's not that thing that you pictured yourself doing as a child.

Yeah, I don't feel like I had a [thought of], "I want to be like this person." I feel like I've always just been feeling my way through things. I mean, nine year old me was like, "I want to be an architect," and looking at house plans. And then tenth grade biology came along and I ended up really interested in that. Science is definitely the next biggest thing that informs my thinking. But it was kind of finding my way and not necessarily striving to become that far, unreachable thing, but instead seeing what the next thing that felt right was.

Do you think that helped you?

Definitely. The idea of being really aware of the present, as opposed to this unknowable future. Being in the present. Seeing what's next.

(viii.) Development

What was the first moment you felt like a grownup?

I still don't feel like that. I definitely felt more like a grownup fifteen years ago than I do now. But I think that was more of a fake kind of grownup. Like when I moved to New York, and the first time I went to work in an office. After college, I spent a year in Italy studying painting, and I thought I was going to go to architecture grad school, but while I was in Italy a teacher encouraged me to think about set design, and that's how that came about. So I moved to New York after that year and knew I wanted to pursue set design, but I didn't know anyone or how to do that. There was a temp agency specifically for architects, and so I went to work for this office for a few months. I felt pretty grownup at that point, but I think it was a fake sense of grownup-ness.

Was it overwhelming to be like, "I want to be a set designer," without coming out of theatre school or knowing anyone?

It didn't seem overwhelming at all. It was like, "Oh yeah, this seems like a good idea." I had an undergraduate architecture degree, but it was a liberal arts degree so I did a lot of other things while I was in undergrad. I took my first painting class my senior year of college, and when I was graduating I didn't want to be in school continuously for another three years, so I was looking for something else to do. I found this one-year post-baccalaureate program in Italy and I was like, "I think I want to do more painting." I ended up going to Italy to study painting, but then halfway through that year I felt like I was trying to convey three-dimensional ideas in two-dimensions and what was the point? So the second half of the year, I started building installations and objects. The teacher I had there had just come from Slade in London, and out of the blue one day he was like, "Have you ever thought about scenography?" It had crossed my mind, actually, the last year of college. I went to Yale and the architecture studios were right next to the theatre and we would pillage the dumpsters for model-making supplies. I knew about the graduate set design class, and I knew that you could audit as an undergrad. I tried to do that my last semester of college, but it was a year-long class and they wouldn't allow me to come in halfway through the year. So when he said that I was like, "Yeah, actually I had thought about that." He set up an interview at the school he'd come from in London, and I went and interviewed, and to my great surprise, got in. But again, I was like, "I don't know if I want to go into a grad program for three years for something I don't know anything about." So I thought I'd defer and work for a while. Then I moved to New York. I didn't know anyone in theatre, but I knew some people in film, so I actually started out doing design for film. It

didn't feel overwhelming because it didn't feel like a big decision. It just felt like, "I'm going to try and do this for a while."

(ix.) Representation

Did you have mentors? And, specifically, any female mentors?

When I first moved to New York and while I was temping, I was pursuing set design in film. I got this job on a feature film and the production designer was a woman named Penny Wish. She'd gone to NYU for theatre design and was designing for film. If anyone, she was the one I was like, "Your life is what I want my life to be like." She had this loft in Dumbo. Her apartment was a live-work loft and she had designed it, and her boyfriend was this performance artist and sculptor. I was twenty-two and had just moved to New York and this was my first job doing set design. It felt like she was this great merging of life and art that I idealized. That was definitely like, "Yeah, I'm going to keep doing this." And then, subsequently, almost all of the feature films I worked on were with production designers who were women, many of whom had theatre training. So I did immediately work with a lot of women designers. They were really strong and great and we were driving trucks around. That was another thing—I really loved driving trucks around New York. It involved a lot of driving around and picking up heavy furniture, and I really liked that. I liked doing physical work and I liked being the girl who knew how to use a drill. I think I've always found it really satisfying to do physical work and get my hands dirty and go home on the subway feeling sooty, but like it had been a good day's work.

How important do you think it was that you saw women being designers?

It was great. All the women were really inspiring. It was great to see that they were doing what they were doing. One thing I did notice, working in the film industry, is that it's a very gendered industry—more so than theatre. The hierarchal structures of film are just very particular, and certain jobs are just always done by guys. I mean, ultimately, I ended up getting out of film partly for that reason, and also aesthetically design-wise, film sets tend to be less abstract and I was drawn to more abstract work. Then, Christine Jones was a great mentor of mine. I assisted her while I was in grad school. Like with Penny, I saw the way her life and work was all intermingling, and that's something that I aspired to. I also thought she was a really great designer. I feel like I owe a lot to her, in that she recommended me for a few jobs right after I graduated, and one thing led to another. I feel like I can trace all of the work I've done back to those first key jobs.

Do you feel like, as a female designer, that people have a preconceived notion of what kind of designer you'll be?

I don't. I have not personally had that experience. I think people have seen my other work, and have some preconceived ideas from that. I do think there might be [some bias] in terms of me dealing with shops

and production managers and carpenters, who generally tend to be men. I think for a long time I didn't think about it much. I didn't feel like they were biased towards me until recently. Maybe working at bigger theatres and higher-level shops, I have sensed it a little more. I was always a tomboy when I was young, and in general, I've had a lot of guy friends. So working with guys in shops has never made me feel uncomfortable. And I always felt like, "I'm just going to do my thing." I actually tried not to think about it much earlier. Only recently have I started to feel a little bit of bias.

When you go in to meet with bigger theatre companies or some of these shops, do you feel like you have to be more aware of how you present yourself?

A little bit. It's something that—again, I feel like my nature is kind of not very feminine. So I just feel like I'm just going to go in as me.

There aren't that many female designers working on Broadway. Why aren't we seeing female designers getting those jobs?

I don't know. I've had just a little bit of experience with a commercial producer, and it feels like a very different vibe than a lot of the non-profits I've been working with. They're driven by different goals. Mostly economic. Personally I haven't experienced it, so I don't know. I was talking to lighting designer Jane Cox the other day, and she said, "Yeah, I never really felt this until working on Broadway," and now she's thinking about it a lot.

(x.) Future

What's something you think people can do to improve gender parity in theatre?

I feel like my approach to these types of questions, whether gender or racial, is to be as open as possible. I've been really lucky to work with a lot of really strong female directors. There hasn't been an imbalance in my working career so far. Not that I feel like there's not work to be done, but I feel like there are good examples.