



Scene Shift: U.S. Set Designers in Conversation

Edited by Maureen Weiss and Sibyl Wickersheimer

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Review by Naoko Skala

The nature of the theatrical art form requires in-person interactions, so during the worldwide pandemic, many theatre practitioners faced new challenges. In *Scene Shift*, editors Maureen Weiss and Sibyl Wickersheimer reveal the true voice of U.S. set designers by providing space for their conversations. The designers in the collection discuss shifting their perspectives while living their passion between June 2020 and January 2021, and they share their experiences, bold ideas, and struggles with the “shift” of U.S. society, politics, and the theatre industry.

At the beginning of the book, 50 questions are listed as a preliminary survey. Throughout the book process, however, the editors discovered these questions consistently led to more questions, and the “shifts” continuously affected the designers. Some designers continue to make the decision to “shift” today. That is why they continue collecting and sharing the answers in an online

format at www.scene-shift.com as a survey, and it is a fascinating way to interact with the book.

The rest of the introduction, “Program Note,” also includes a first conversation, “Transition,” which was conducted on Jan. 19, 2021, with 13 set designers, including the editors. Here, they discuss the U.S. political transitions, how the pandemic caused the transition of the theatre industry positively and negatively, and how they work as a designer. This grabs the readers’ attention and it sets the tone of the book successfully. Some designers were emotional and showed their passion vividly during the conversation because the editors created a safe virtual space to have conversations. As a female Asian American designer, some conversations were difficult to read emotionally.

Chapter one is titled “Dialogue Between Decades,” with conversations conducted in July and August 2020 and January 2021. These designers are the early career designers, designers who shifted their careers to other industries or focused on only educational theatre to pay the bills. The editors sorted the conversation by the career stages, which was a wise choice because it encouraged all participants to speak their thoughts more openly.

The following chapter, “Pattern and Systems,” focuses on how to balance careers and lives. Four separate conversations were conducted in June and July of 2020. Some designers took the pandemic as an opportunity to shift their working approaches and expose their creativity in a different format, because they realized that some industry standards, systems, or theatre traditions were no longer appropriate for their life and interest. For instance, some participants mentioned that most of their work was like a charity or they could not break even because they generally paid somebody else (i.e., assistant designers) to do the work. These are not realistic or sustainable work methods.

Chapter three, “Perspective,” focuses on the designers who work internationally and regionally in the U.S.. The two conversations were in June 2020. The three designers who were working abroad shared European perspectives as set designers and scenographers. The five regional designers plus two editors discussed the struggles with the “restructure” of the theatre industry during the pandemic and the transitions of design approaches, including video projection and more. This chapter asks readers to review these perspectives at this moment in 2020, with conditions which have changed constantly over the years. It also provides some perspectives on how to thrive as a collaborative artist and can make readers feel that we are not alone.

“Space,” chapter four, contains five conversations. Some designers included in this section left the theatre industry because they realized they could not work within bad theatre traditions anymore, and the pandemic also helped them to be aware of healthy working environments. On the other hand, some of them appreciate the theatre as a collaborative art form, especially those working with other theatre designers in different areas. The conversations make readers aware of how to shift and create the “space” with or without other practitioners for a restructured theatre industry, which might be a key to thriving in the post-pandemic society.

The final chapter, “Navigating Boundaries,” contains one conversation between six designers, including the editors, held in October 2020. Their conversation offered ideas of how to break the boundaries with their experiences during the “shift” of the U.S. society, and the possibilities they share are hopeful.

This conversation approach is effective in exposing the set designers’ true voice in difficult moments, and the format might allow these ideas to reach the U.S. society and American theatre industry more effectively. Because the website

is still active and the survey is open to anyone, readers can visit the site to appreciate more voices and see how the U.S. set designers' perspectives shifted throughout the years.

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