



FRONT ROW

Costuming Imelda Marcos in ‘Here Lies Love’

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Clint Ramos, the costume designer, has Imelda Marcos appear in “Here Lies Love” in a hot pink ball gown embellished with a swirl of satin roses. Casey Kelbaugh for The New York Times

By Ruth La Ferla

Clint Ramos was a boy of 13 when he first encountered Imelda Marcos. She alighted fairylike at his high school in Cebu in the Philippines, a beacon of munificence pinning medals on deserving lads.

“I’ve been this close to her — she smelled good, she was really beautiful,” Mr. Ramos said the other day. “There was a myth around this woman, and when you met her, she delivered.”

Not long ago, Mr. Ramos, the winner of a 2013 Obie Award for Sustained Excellence of Costume Design, was asked to resurrect those boyhood impressions. As the costume designer for “Here Lies Love,” David Byrne’s disco-inflected biography of the Philippine first lady, at the Public Theater, his job was to conjure Imelda’s spirit, with all its glamour and tawdriness intact.

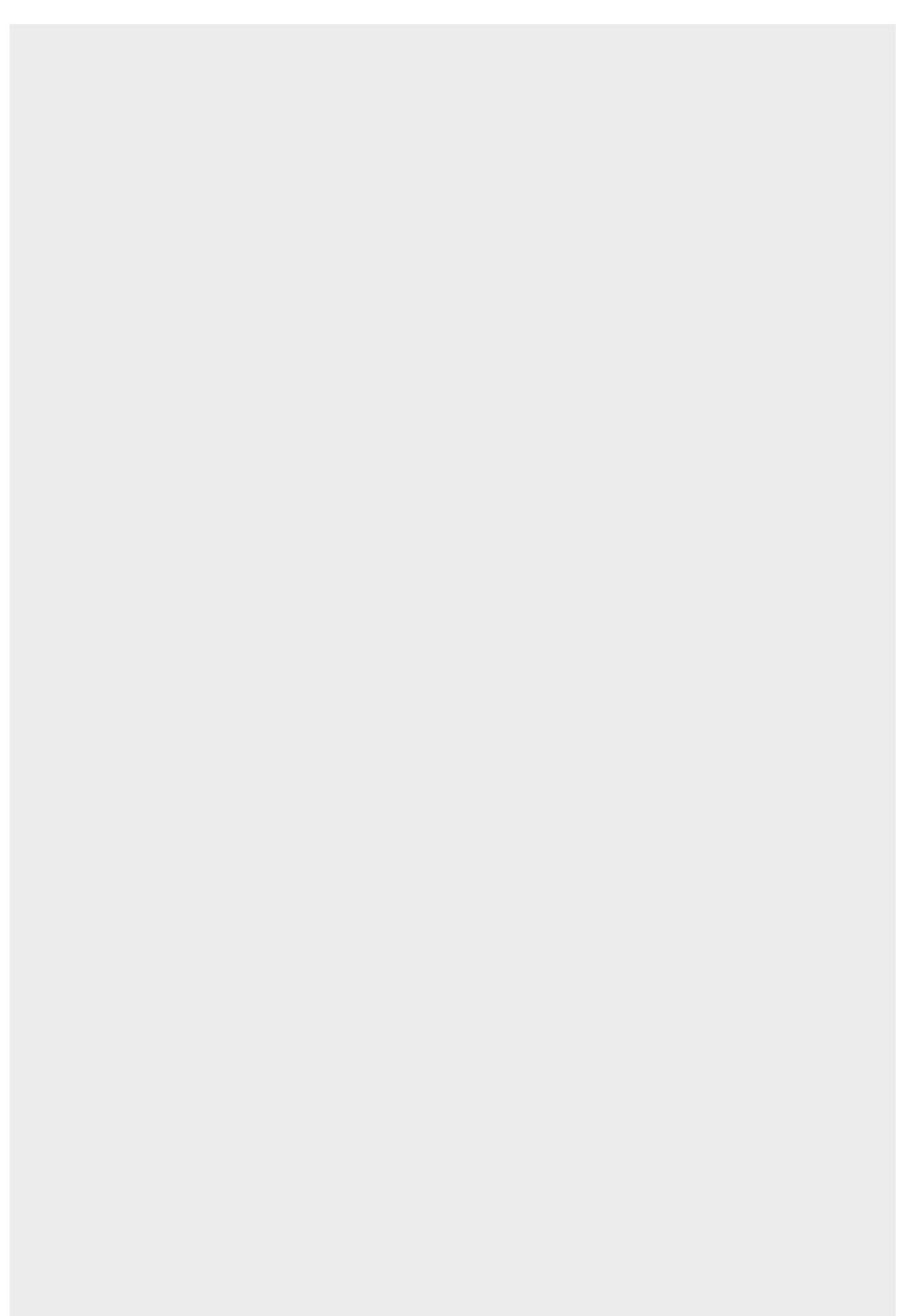
In the production, which simultaneously celebrates and excoriates the Marcoses and the era that spawned them, Imelda first takes the stage as an aspiring young beauty queen in a fetchingly modest frock. “We were so poor, we had no shoes,” she warbles in a show that otherwise skips any mention of her notorious footwear.

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But in the space of 90 minutes, Imelda is utterly transformed, Mr. Ramos having supplied her with a crazy profusion of costumes intended, as Ben Brantley wrote in his review of the show in The New York Times, to “signal the waning of the years and the waxing of Imelda’s ego.”

Indeed, as she has been portrayed both on stage and in life, Imelda’s ambition was matched only by her appetite for finery. A youthful variation on Eva Peron, she begins to indulge her taste for flamboyance, one often shared, Mr. Ramos noted, by her besotted countrymen.

She sashays onto the stage in a hot pink ball gown embellished with a swirl of satin roses. She marries Ferdinand Marcos in a cream-colored version of Madame Marcos’s actual wedding dress; in a pink shantung suit and matching Jackie Kennedy pillbox, she greets cheering crowds, and later appears in a succession of brocade day coats and silk taffeta gowns, each showing off her signature butterfly shoulders, a nod to the national costume that the real Imelda ardently embraced.



A detail of a dress designed by Mr. Ramos for “Here Lies Love.” Casey Kelbaugh for The New York Times

Was she over the top? Not in the eyes of her public, which revered her early on as, among other things, a luminous fashion idol. Mr. Ramos said, “I remember my mother saying, ‘Whatever she does, I’ll follow.’ ”

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The crowd’s infatuation swelled at a time that, he said, “was about being very drunk by the alcohol of politics and personality. We wanted to be complicit in that.”

Boyishly subversive in a baseball cap, he explained that he had set out to capture theatergoers’ ambivalence toward the power couple and their overripe times. “We wanted the audience to party, and later walk out of the theater, asking themselves, ‘Why the hell was I dancing to that?’ ”

Mr. Ramos, a self-described child of the ’80s, regards fashion’s last great period of excess with a combination of affection and distaste. “Growing up, I always watched ‘Dynasty,’ ” he said. “The theatricality of those everyday clothes was fascinating to me. It was the first time we invented a style that was not heavily based on an earlier period.”

His own love-hate feelings are reflected in the first lady’s wardrobe, by turns sleazy and enviably opulent. When Mr. Byrne alerted him that Anna Wintour would be attending a performance, Mr. Ramos remembered pleading, “If you say anything to her, please tell her that it is intentionally tacky.”

Tacky, as in the gold-spangled disco dress Imelda wears as she dances the night away, a frock made of pure plastic, Mr. Ramos said gleefully. “I wanted to have fun with image of Imelda but at the same time not demonize her.”

But also grand, an example being the white taffeta gown she wore to bid her people farewell, appliquéd at the hem with red lace flowers. “We wanted that dress to be a glamorized version of her tramping through the blood of the Philippine people,” Mr. Ramos said.

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We still hunger for Imelda’s brand of extravagance, he added, the sort that today is celebrated during red carpet season and, on a more rarefied plane, in the current Charles James exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

“That show is all about color and yards and yards of fabric,” Mr. Ramos said. “Part of me wants to see all that return.” Though we may not revert any time soon to the lavishness of the Marcos years, never say never, Mr. Ramos suggested. “There is always an appetite for more.”

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