

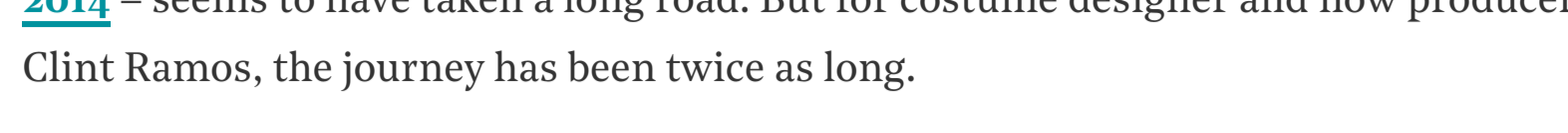


Clint Ramos. Photo: Marc Franklin

Here Lies Love costume designer Clint Ramos: 'I was yearning to be seen differently, not to be pigeonholed'

FEATURES JUL 12, 2023 BY HOWARD SHERMAN

Costume designer Clint Ramos has been on a two decades-long journey with Imelda Marcos musical Here Lies Love, which opens on Broadway this month – now he's one of its producers. He tells **Howard Sherman** why, as a Philippines native, it means so much



Considering that the David Byrne-Fatboy Slim musical Here Lies Love had its world premiere in New York at the Public Theater in 2013, its Broadway debut this summer 10 years later – with interim productions including at [London's National Theatre in 2014](#) – seems to have taken a long road. But for costume designer and now producer Clint Ramos, the journey has been twice as long.

Ramos, who won a Tony for outstanding costume design of a play in 2016, first became involved in the show in 2003, when Talking Heads frontman Byrne sent him two CDs, with 24 song tracks and Byrne doing all the vocals. The disco-set story tells of the regime of Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines and the rise of his first lady Imelda as a cultural icon. When he heard it, Ramos, a Philippines native, says simply: "I fell in love with it."

At that time, there was no certainty as to what the piece might ultimately be. Initially, it was going to be performed by theatre company the Builders Association at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in 2005, but that didn't come to pass. Then, Byrne explored it as a series of concerts, which Ramos says didn't work. It was only when director Alex Timbers came aboard that the show truly began to coalesce, he says.

Ramos says the 2023 staging, which boasts Broadway's first all-Filipino cast, is substantially the same as in earlier incarnations, though his designs have adjusted along the way. "Arielle [Jacobs] is our fourth Imelda," he notes, "and she has around 20 costume and ensemble changes. There are references to where we are now. It felt right to root it in the contemporary, the aesthetics of the zeitgeist."

Despite its various iterations and long gaps between productions, Ramos says the show has stayed with him throughout. "In my consciousness", adding: "It has really influenced my identity, both as an artist and as a Filipino."

Here Lies Love has garnered some criticism from those who accuse it of sugar-coating the Marcos regime, but Ramos, describing himself as a "martial-law baby" born in the late stages of that government, denies that. He thinks that people who are not Filipino don't fully appreciate the nuances in this account of the Marcoses, whose rise to power he describes as the direct result of 350 years of colonialism, under Spain and later the US, noting that the Marcoses emerged from a very specific strain of nationalist myth-making.

Q&A Clint Ramos

What was your first non-theatrical job?
Working the counter at a pizza shop.

What was your first professional theatre job?
Designing a poster for a theatre company.

What's your next job?
Designing Malcolm X at the Metropolitan Opera and the film Tropical Gothic, and at Encores!, likely overseeing one project, Jelly's Last Jam.

What do you wish someone had told you when you were starting out?
There is no schedule or directory. That I shouldn't expect anything.

Who or what was your biggest influence?
George C Wolfe, as artistic director at the Public Theater, and Paul Steinberg, Susan Hillery, and a lot of my teachers.

If you hadn't been a designer, what would you have been?
A horticulturalist.

Continues...

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Archie McNamara and Sullivan Jones in Slave Play at Broadway's Golden Theatre in 2018. Photo: Matthew Murphy

"Democracies all over the world are in peril through misinformation," he says. "These tyrants don't just come out of [nowhere]. They are little girls first, they join beauty contests, they get their hearts broken, and through a long, protracted regime where they acquire power every year, those personal issues play out on a national level, even a global level. Humanising doesn't necessarily mean glamourising. To me, there are oceans of difference between those two things."

On the Broadway production, Ramos is one of the lead producers, an evolution in his work that includes his role as producing creative director at New York's City Center Encores! series of concert musicals. "I saw it as a cultural project for me, and it has become that for a lot of us, the Filipinos on the lead-producing team, but also in our co-producers. It was really about making sure somehow that ownership and authority were holding each other's hands as this project is being put forth on Broadway."

Despite having designed more than 200 productions and having worked on Broadway for a decade, Ramos says he's discovering a great deal in the producing role, which he took on in part to see whether he could "get under the hood and see how broken Broadway really is and if there was any insight that I could contribute, or I could learn, towards making it better".

He goes on to explain: "I'm still confused by some of the labyrinthian processes of doing things and things that are codified that probably made sense in the 1960s or 70s, but to me on face value don't make sense." Comparing changing Broadway systems to turning a large cruise ship, Ramos speaks with optimism arising from his colleagues: "I'm working with producers, who are also new to the business, who are also struggling with how the system operates and their new awareness of their involvement in that system and their desire for change."

Continues...

Archie Jacobs and Jose Llusa in Here Lies Love at the Broadway Theatre. Photo: Billy Bustamante/Matthew Murphy and Evan Zimmoman

Archie McNamara and Sullivan Jones in Slave Play at Broadway's Golden Theatre in 2018. Photo: Matthew Murphy

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Continues...

Akshay Bahl and Laila Hyatt in Eclipsed at New York's Public Theater in 2016. Photo: Joan Marcus

Alia Williamson, Alex Newell and Haley Kilgore in Once on This Island at Circle in the Square, New York (2017). Photo: Joan Marcus

Ramos' love for theatre emerged during his youth in the Philippines, where he was selected for an elite high school based upon his aptitude for science, benefiting from a programme set up by the Marcos government. But it was there he met a drama teacher who was also a political activist, and Ramos' earliest involvement in theatre was participating in street theatre against the regime, actions kept short enough that they could be finished before riot police could arrive to end them. He went to college with the intention of becoming a director but, believing he was insufficiently articulate, he gravitated to design, which would allow him to interact with other artists but also afford him a level of privacy.

While the work in college included both Filipino and American stories, with the same productions often performed alternately in Filipino and English, his professors were all US trained. Their example prompted him to pursue graduate education at the Tisch School of the Arts at New York University, which he believes opened up more possibilities for work after graduation. Yet school in New York also prompted Ramos, for the first time, to consider race as part of his experience. "All of a sudden, I was brown."

In the first part of his career, he says he was the conventional immigrant, working to assimilate and putting his heritage on a metaphorical shelf. But his outlook ultimately changed. "In the past 10 years, I have come to the realisation that I need to actually undo a lot of that. Not by choice, but because when I got out of grad school, the things that I had put on the shelf started to fall off the shelf. I am so grateful and influenced by [playwright, director and former Public Theater artistic director] George C Wolfe, because George had had a group of artists of colour and designers of colour."

In the US, it is more common than in the UK to separate scenic and costume design. Ramos has had the opportunity to do both, perhaps most notably with Danaei Gurira's Eclipsed – for which he won a Tony – though instances have become limited. "I rarely do both anymore," he explains. "There are more opportunities if I only do one. And in recent years, I've been co-designing, which I firmly believe in. I think it's just exhausting doing both."

As to whether there is a Clint Ramos aesthetic, the designer demurs, saying: "I consciously made a decision that whatever I do needs to look different, feel different from the last show I did. I was yearning really to be seen differently, to not both be typecast or pigeonholed. I almost wanted to be a chameleon in terms of a style."

Ramos instead speaks about what drew him to each project: For Jeremy O Harris' [Slave Play](#), the draw was what the play said "about race in America and how that intersects with desire". For the revival of [Once on This Island](#), the appeal was "love as seen through this particular society that's been ravaged, not by natural disasters, but by years and years and layers of colonial history".

He goes on: "Almost every project I have, it's my responsibility to find a way in personally." When working on the Broadway revival of [Sunday in the Park with George](#) – starring Jake Gyllenhaal in 2017 – he asked himself: "Is there a way that I can actually mirror the questioning that not only Sekar but Sondheim and Lapine were doing, asking: 'How does one create things? And what is this push towards something new?'"

'Can we create meaningful representation that holds not only the bodies, but the ideas and hopes of all these young designers of colour? I think yes'

Active on many boards of not-for-profit organisations, including Design Action, described as "an intergenerational coalition of BIPOC and white designers working to end racial inequities in North American theatre", Ramos has also been teaching, though he recently stepped down from leading the design programme at Fordham University in New York. He remains committed to advancing artists of colour in theatre, noting that "designers are mostly white on Broadway".

"Can we create meaningful representation where it actually holds not only the bodies, but the ideas and hope of all these young designers of colour? I think yes. I just feel like we haven't asked enough questions."

CV Clint Ramos

Born: Cebu, Philippines, 1975

Training: BA (hons) in Theatre Arts, University of the Philippines Diliman, 1992; MFA in Design, New York University Tisch School of the Arts, 1997

Landmark productions:

- Here Lies Love, Public Theater, New York (2013-14); National Theatre, London (2014), Broadway Theatre, New York (2023) (costume design)

- Bootycandy, Playwrights Horizons, New York (2014) (scenic/costume design)

- Eclipsed, Public Theater, New York (2015); Golden Theatre, New York (2016) (scenic/costume design)

- [Once on This Island](#), Circle in the Square Theatre, New York (2017) (costume design)

- Slave Play, Broadway, New York Theatre Workshop, Broadway (2019 and 2021) (scenic design)

Film:

- Respect (2021) (costume design)

- LOVE, National Theatre (2016)

- Faith, Hope and Charity, National Theatre (2019)

- A Death in the Family, Odéon – Théâtre de l'Europe, Paris (2022)

Awards:

- Lucille Lortel awards, costume design, So Help Me God! (2016); scenic design, Wild With Happy (2013); outstanding costume design, Here Lies Love (2014)

- Tony Dangal Presidential Medal for Dramatic Arts, the Philippines (2014 and 2017)

- Tony award, best costume design of a play, Eclipsed (2016)

- Obie awards: sustained excellence (2013); scenic design, Wild Goose Dreams (2019); scenic design, Wild Goose Dreams (2019)

- Drama Desk award, outstanding scenic design of a play, Grand Horizons (2020)

- Outer Critics Circle award, outstanding scenic design for a play, Grand Horizons (2020)

- United Scenic Arts, fellow for theatre (2020)

Agent: Patrick Herold, United Talent Agency

Here Lies Love is at the Broadway Theater, New York until November 19. For more information see: [herelieslovebroadway.com](#)

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