

FEATURES • Q&A AND INTERVIEWS

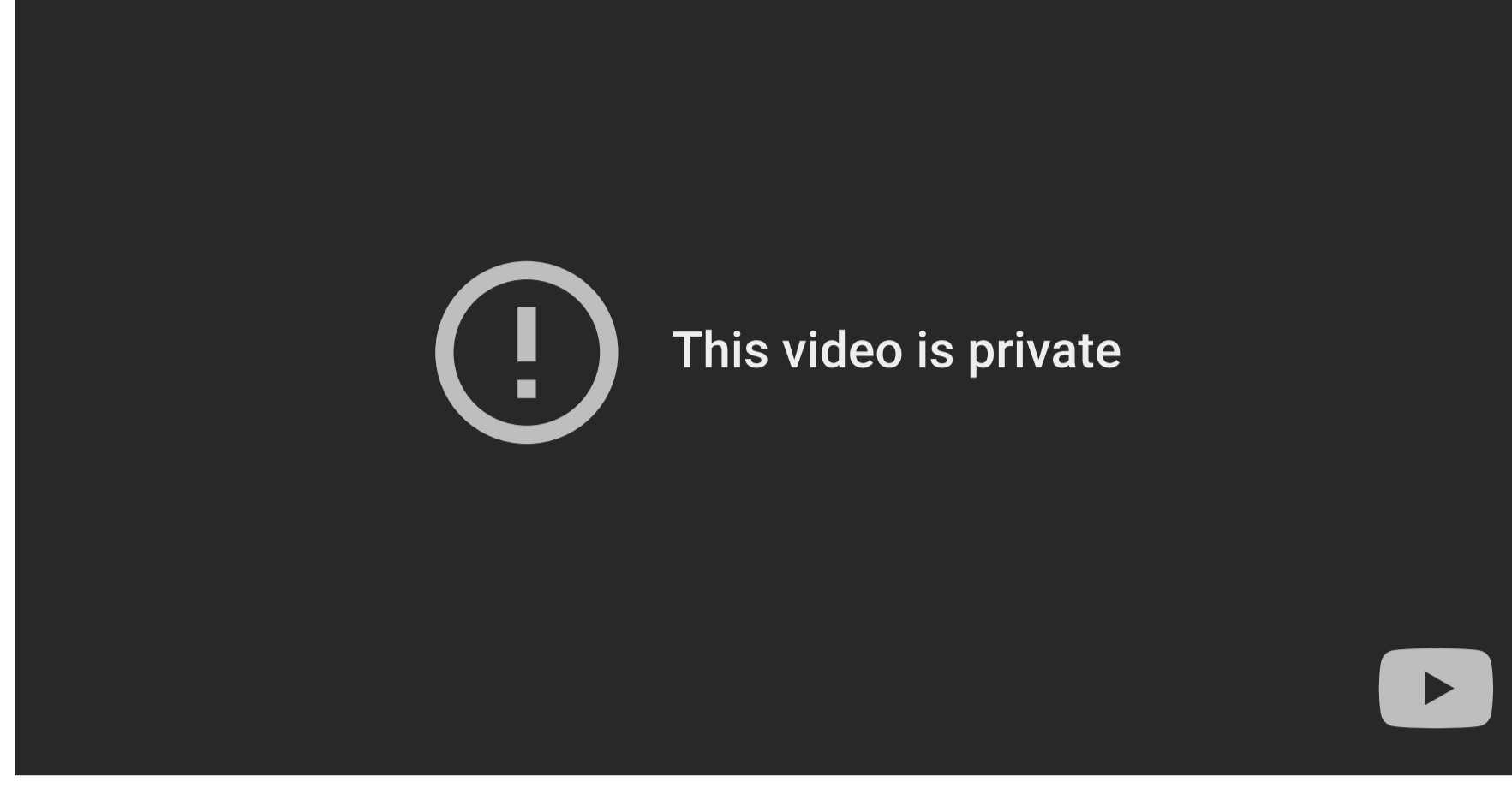
The Butterfly That Stamped

In the latest installment of our series of features on design, Emily McMahon talks to Clint Ramos about meeting Imelda Marcos, the New York club scene, and creating the costumes for *Here Lies Love*, the disco-inspired immersive musical extravaganza by David Byrne and Alex Timbers.

EMILY MCMAHON

Clint Ramos grew up in the Philippines and first met First Lady Imelda Marcos at the country's Cultural Center as a secondary school pupil. It was, he tells me, towards the end of the regime, but he remembers Imelda's grace, her scent and her porcelain skin. He also remembers, half-scandalised, half-awestruck, the way she handed her purse to the Minister of Education while she distributed medals to the young Arts students. "I was like, oh ok, this shows me the dynamic of power here. And it was fascinating, and quite hilarious," Ramos says, illuminating what becomes the first of Imelda's many contradictions that he illustrates with enthusiasm over the course of our interview.

Here Lies Love is a musical based on the life of Imelda Marcos, first written as a concept album by David Byrne and featuring the vocals of Florence Welch of *Florence + the Machine*, Cyndi Lauper, Martha Wainwright and Tori Amos. Fatboy Slim collaborated with Byrne on the album, and two time Tony-nominated director Alex Timbers developed the project for the theatre.



ADVERTISEMENT

Ramos is a multi-award-winning scenic and costume designer and a child of the New York club scene who himself lived with the Marcos myth until moving to New York after college. Ramos remembers his mother admiring Imelda's dress sense, and the ability to be many things to many people. "She was this enigma"; I think she was a fashion icon, a fierce champion of the national costume. The latter earned her the 'Steel Butterfly' moniker, a reference to the butterfly sleeves of the national dress she "staunchly" wore, the *terno*. "She was no gentle flower", Ramos remarks. The former rural beauty queen of the 1940s became one of the most controversial figures of the 21st century, making deals with some of the world's most notorious leaders — including Colonel Gaddafi, Saddam Hussain and Fidel Castro — with Filipino butterfly sleeves rising "architecturally" from her shoulders.

Ramos, however, is passionate about his presentation of Imelda as a woman, as a First Lady on a global political stage, a wife, a mother, a party animal and a politician. With Byrne's thumping disco beats driving the 90 minute performance, Imelda gets through no less than 16 costumes, four decades of fashion and five consecutive onstage costume changes. He wanted to give the audience a sense of the breadth of her influence, and to provide as complete a portrait as possible of the 40 year rise and fall of the Marcoses.

Like Imelda, who loved disco so much she had a club built on the roof of the presidential palace, Ramos also became 'intoxicated' by New York night life when he first moved to the city. He describes performances he witnessed at the New York Palladium where performers, drag queens and singers would turn up unannounced and take the club by storm. "It was larger than life and it was colourful and it was absurd. And it was addictive". One such memorable performance was given by Grace Jones, who arrived unexpectedly, and completed a full costume change on stage in front of the packed club. "It just seemed like these guys hovered around her and then within seconds she was in another costume", Ramos says. The "gaudiness" and "tawdriness" of the New York club scene in the 90s spoke to the extravagance of Imelda, and this, Ramos tells me, is what he "latched on to for identifying a visual language for the design in the show."

HERE LIES LOVE



WHY DON'T YOU LOVE ME ?
IMELDA

He speaks of a collaborative process, working with director Alex Timbers on a shared aesthetic and vision for the piece, with Timbers supporting the theatricality of Ramos' costume change ideas. Making these a reality led him to study magicians who transform in front of the audience's eyes, and the speed changes of Kabuki theatre in which costumes hang together on a single thread. Ramos also worked with Annie B, the choreographer, to incorporate Imelda's trademark pose into the choreography. The stance, forefinger at shoulder height and pointed skyward, parallel with the peak of the butterfly sleeve, was in fact born out of practicality. Ideally, one's peaks were high and stiff, and Filipino ladies would often pose in this manner in order to hold up their sleeves for pictures. In reality the sleeves, a hangover from the Spanish occupation of the Philippines, were wildly impractical, wilting in the country's heat and humidity.



As you would expect, butterfly sleeves feature heavily in Ramos' designs for Imelda's costumes. The sleeves act as a motif and appear in different forms in a number of outfits, on a beautiful blue/green and gold brocade dress coat, their shape echoed by a huge, architectural, shoulder-height hot pink bow on a striking piece with blue underskirt, and, hauntingly, in the last dress of the show. This final piece is a cream gown, almost bridal, were it not for the scarlet red flowers splashing up from the hem, petering out before the waist. This is the 'Balcony Blood Gown', and the intricate, applique flowers, highlighted with sparkling rhinestones, Ramos' expression of the blood of the Filipino people.

Dress and politics have been, and arguably always will be, inextricably linked, and never more so than in this show. With Imelda Marcos still a congresswoman in the Philippines and two of her children occupying political positions, I asked Ramos how he felt a Filipino audience would react to this show. He considers my question carefully, and starts to speak before stopping himself and gazing into the distance. In the intervening moments I worry I have been distasteful, barrelled into a complex issue, oversimplified the suffering of the Filipino people under the Marcoses. However Ramos returns to me with a reassuring smile and articulately and honestly explains, "I think to answer that question I have to think about where the country is in terms of their relationship with the Marcoses"; there is still much love for them as there are those people that think they are the worst human beings that walked on this earth. I think any Filipino audience would have mixed feelings about it, as I did creating it, because" in a way it reflects how a nation was blind to how things developed over 20 years."

In essence, that is what the piece seeks to do. It creates an intoxicating mix: the power, the personality and the politics. We as the audience get swept along in the exhilaration of fabulousness, fabulous music, wonderful performances and joyous excesses, and it's not until afterwards that we wonder at ourselves. Ramos himself likens it to meeting a reality TV star for the first time. He remembers working out of town and staying in a hotel when Kim Kardashian and her entourage walked through the lobby. He tells me he doesn't believe she has done anything to particularly merit her fame, and yet he recalls standing there with everyone, in awe, magnetised. He laughs at himself and shrugs his shoulders. "You feel kind of dirty!"

HERE LIES LOVE



STAR AND SLAVE. PRESIDENT'S FINE.

Ultimately, he says, "David Byrne and Alex and I, we set off to present a human being, and not a caricature, in this fascinating club environment"; you walk away from this show having had a tremendous time, marvelling at the music and the performers, and there's a little part of you that says, why was I dancing with these people? Why was I so enthralled by this? And I think that represents the way people were fascinated by Imelda. Here is this woman, she and her husband did these awful things and yet people are just endlessly fascinated by her."

Through this work Ramos poses a timeless question. A question dressed in brocade and embroidery, butterfly sleeves and couture, asked by post dictatorship peoples the world over. Why was I dancing with these people?

TWEET SHARE G+

EMILY MCMAHON is a contributor to Exeunt Magazine

Read more articles by Emily McMahon

ADVERTISEMENT

MOST POPULAR ARTICLES

in the past seven days

Edinburgh fringe review: *Baby Reindeer* by Richard Gadd
Tom Moyser

Oh Pomona
Exeunt Staff

Three Short Plays About Video Games: *PRESS START*
Gareth Martin

Mark Ravenhill
Billy Barrett

Stewart Lee: "The most controversial thing you can do is be sincere in a world of irony."
Andrew Haydon

Ponyboy Curtis at The Yard
Catherine Love

Pippa Nixon: "There are so many more mouthwatering parts that I think women would smash."
Rafaella Marcus

A Grumpy Feminist's Guide to Enjoying *Pretty Woman the Musical*
Alice Saville

Review: *Cabaret at the Kit Kat Club (Playhouse Theatre)*
Frey Kwa Hawking

Core Values
Shiv Paul

THE Exeunt NEWSLETTER

Enter your email address below to get an occasional email with Exeunt updates and featured articles.

Subscribe

ADVERTISEMENT

FEATURES

Q&A and Interviews
Essays
Opinion
Podcast

REVIEWS

OWE & Fringe
West End & Central
National
NYC
Performance

exeunt

About Exeunt
Staff & Contributors
Contact Us
Subscribe