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The Rose of Tacloban: Costuming "Here Lies Love"

Tragedy struck and the original post I made about *Here Lies Love* disappeared into the ether, so I'm going to do my best to reconstruct it here. Many thanks to the anons who suggested this production to me, and to @conradricamoras and @annbradleys for sending me information about the show itself!

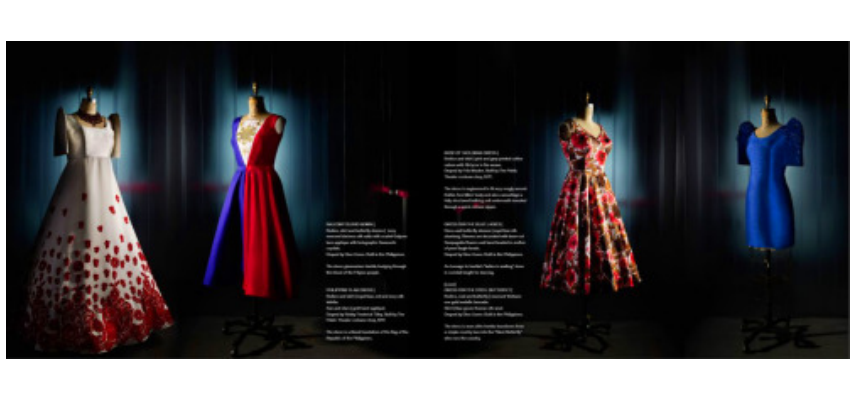
I have a confession to start off this review: until I got the Anon asks, I had never even heard of *Here Lies Love*, and that is a tragedy. Having now had the opportunity to look at the costumes for this production and listen to the music thanks to iTunes, I can safely say that this is an amazing show that deserves a full Broadway run. If you haven't come across it, there's probably a reason for that; while well-received and critically acclaimed, the show only had an off-Broadway run and a Seattle revival. But despite that, it attracted an amazing cast, including future Tony Award winning actress Ruthie Ann Miles and *How to Get Away With Murder's* Conrad Ricamore.

First, a little background on what this show is. The genesis of the show is in a concept album by British producer Fatboy Slim, based on the life and times of Imelda Marcos, the fashionista diva First Lady of the Philippines during the years of Ferdinand Marcos' dictatorship. Eventually converted into a musical, the production follows Imelda's life throughout a period of the dictatorship, including her dating of democracy icon Ninoy Aquino, marriage to Ferdinand Marcos, and her time as First Lady.

Imelda Marcos is still very much the subject of a disputed legacy in The Philippines, and I'll offer a few more comments on why the musical has been called problematic after the costume review. But to give you an idea of the dispute, on the one hand she has been frequently accused of robbing the country blind to sustain her lifestyle, but on the other hand is beloved enough to have been elected to the country's House of Representatives some four times, and is in office today. Contested legacies always make for the most interesting stories, so this is already quite a production.

The costume designer for this show is Clint Ramos, himself of Filipino origin, who relied on his memories of the Marcos regime (including, as a child, meeting Imelda herself) in crafting the production's rich costumes. He focused on bright colors to match with his memories of Filipino fashion and the woman herself, who was always styled to the nines. But in relying on traditional elements, the color scheme could come off a bit garish–and he notes that's by design. In an interview with the New York Times, he commented that when he found out *Vogue* editor Dame Anna Wintour would be in the audience for a show that, "If you say anything to her [Wintour], please tell her that it is intentionally tacky."

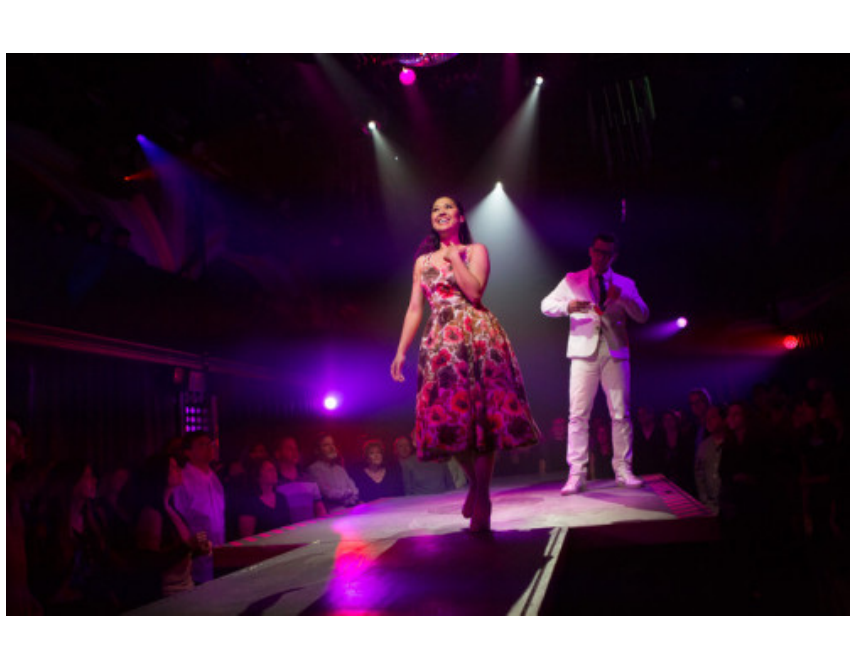
Some are indeed tacky, but others? Other costumes are a sheer delight. Let's take a look at some of them:



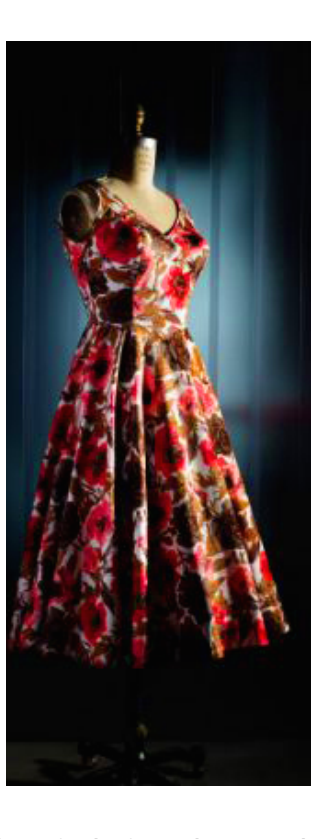
I'm starting with this group spread from *Chance* magazine because it features two designs (the far left and center right) that I want to talk about in detail, but also offers us a look at two of the simpler costumes. On the far right is a blue dress in a sateen fabric that has one of the trademarks of Filipino design and Imelda Marcos herself: powerful butterfly sleeves, that is, sleeves that resemble butterfly wings in the way they pop up above the shoulders of the dress itself.

The other dress just briefly touched on is the one at center left. Mr Ramos adapted the flag of the Philippines, and while some credit has to be given to the flag's designer, I love the way he made it work as a costume. The red and blue are rich and satiny, and the triangular element at the center is absolutely perfect for the bust of the dress. It's a simple, but tasteful, design that I greatly enjoy.

The dress at center right is the first I want to take a closer look at. This dress comes from the "The Rose of Tacloban" number, whence I took the title of this overall review. Let's take a look at it in the context of the musical and a bit closer up:

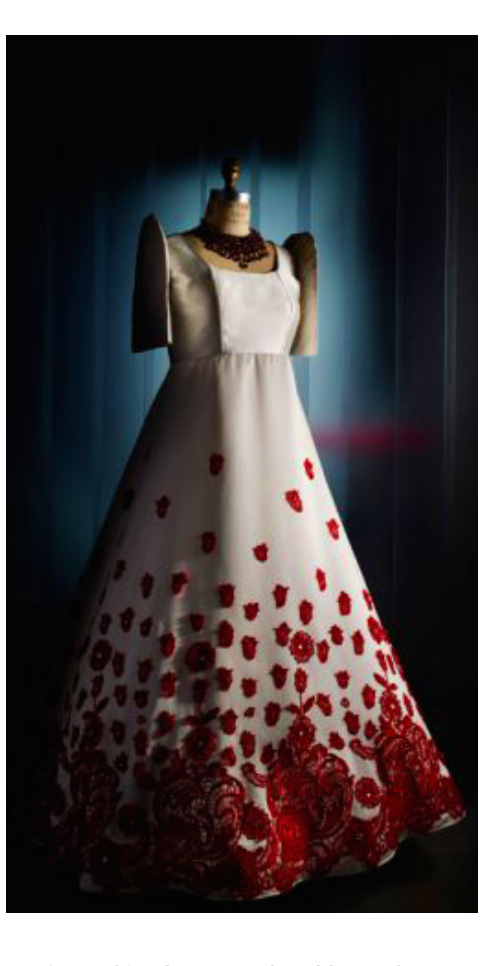


I've talked about patterned dresses before, and this is an example of a multicolored floral that absolutely would have been accessible to a Filipino women in the era of the musical. It's a classic A-line dress decorated sumptuously in a series of red, orange, gold, and purple flowers. What I really like about the dress is that it has a simple series of lines that allow the individual flowers to stand out against the white fabric; it looks almost like a set of wildflowers that have been arranged, rather than being a specific pattern, and that gives it a little bit more of a visual pop. Take a look at this closeup of the group shot for a better idea of what I mean:

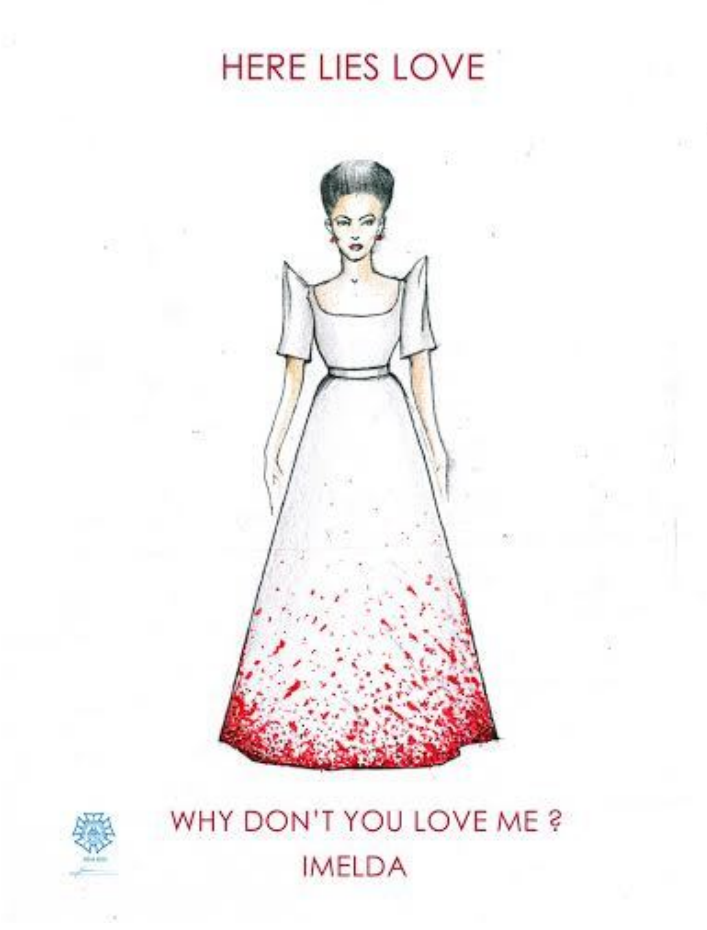


The dress is designed to stand out because of the pattern rather than any kind of adornment, and because the pattern is abstract rather than specific or geometric, the eye is able to sort of just take in the whole rather than focusing on specific parts. I like that, though I think there is something to be said for a repeating pattern; here, Mr Ramos' design works and makes the overall appearance quite pleasant.

I noted I also wanted to take a look at the far left entry in the above group shot. This dress is visually *stunning* and there's a clear reason why. Take a look at it in isolation first so I can offer some general comments:

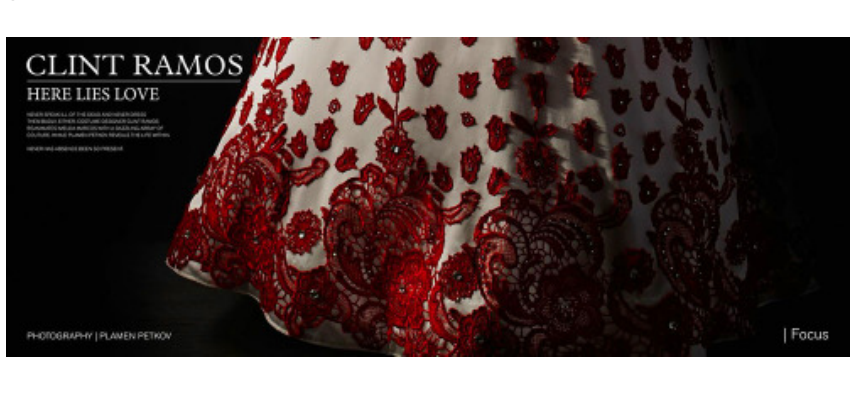


I've mentioned in the past that I love the two polar extremes in costuming: sleek and traditional, and overtly showy. This dress manages to combine both of those elements and makes it one of my all-time favorite costumes. We'll start from the top and go down. The dress itself is in a rich white fabric and has slight butterfly sleeves, smaller than those in the blue dress I referred to earlier, but nonetheless impressive. Below the waste, on the bottom of the dress, however is what makes this so visually stunning. The red elements resemble roses or rose petals falling to earth against a white background. The color is a rich ruby-red and is pretty clearly embellished with beadwork and sequining. I'd even go so far as to say that, under the right lighting, this could even appear to be blood red (and there is *definitely* metaphorical value there) Compare the finished product above with the original sketch:



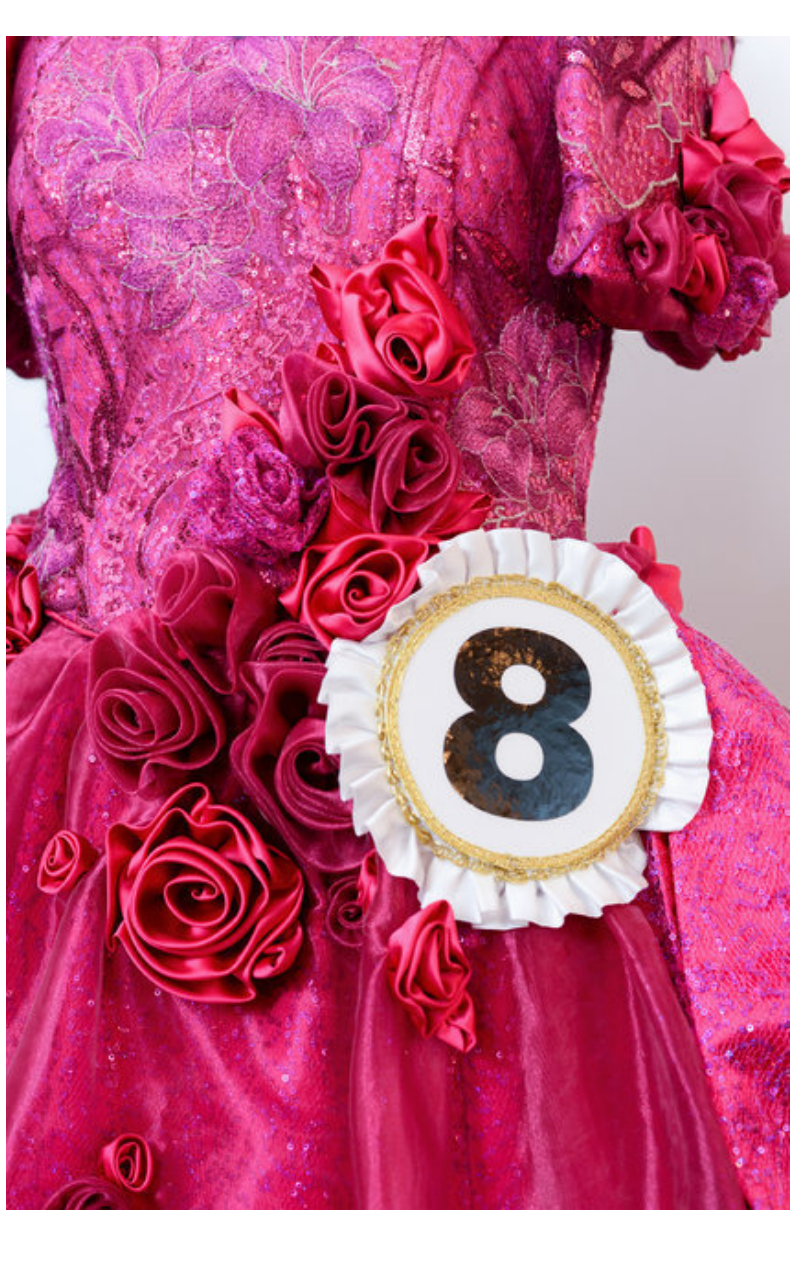
Many a time in the past, I have talked about how vital a costumer's sketch is to the overall costume design process, and how a dress will often evolve greatly from first draft to final product. Here, we see that the original envision was for splashes of red, and given the context of the end of the musical (where this costume appears), that idea of blood-red definitely makes sense; while the focus of the musical is definitely not on violence, there are references to Ferdinand Marcos' imposition of martial law and the repression that Imelda played a part in defending.

But Mr Ramos' design changed from spatter to beautiful pattern over the course of the costume's construction, and while elements of the original design were retained–the flower petals I talked about earlier definitely feel like the splatter of the original design–the hem of the dress became far more rich and detailed, and is what instantly elevates this costume in my mind. Take a look at the sketch above, and then take a look at the finished hem of the dress:



The flower petals continue to fall until they intersect with a series of paisley-like lozenges that run along the entire circumference of the dress, in a stunning, rich red color that matches the upper design elements. There is clearly some sequining and beadwork evident in these pieces, which adds a little bit more sparkle and heft to an already weighty dress. I love the way there's an almost lacy quality to the lozenges themselves and the way they are linked into a chain by the hem of the dress. Each lozenge also has a single rose rising out of the top, which I think has to be seen as a tie to the earlier Rose of Tacloban dress.

These two dresses together offer a view of some of the more classical looks that are used in the musical, but so far, we haven't seen much in the way of what Mr Ramos described as intentionally tacky…so let's take a look at one of those dresses now. Prepare for a stunning shock of color (and design work!):



You really cannot beat the shocking electric pink of this dress for WOW factor, even if you are not a huge fan of the color itself. Pink is a color that was associated with Imelda Marcos, and so costuming Ms Miles in it in various scenes makes quite a bit of sense. There is a lot going on besides the color, however, when looking at this dress. There are layers of satin fabric with an almost sheer chiffon tone to parts of it, lacework in the bodice, sequins on the body of the dress and the bodice itself, and then there are *those roses*.

The sateen roses are my favorite element of this dress, even if they add to the overall over-the-top feel of the number. Having worked with fabrics before, it is *not* easy to create the look of a realistic flower and fix it to a dress in such a way as to avoid it being cumbersome, or the design effect being lost. The roses run up the side of the dress and form a bouquet that the eye absolutely *has* to drink in; what I also like about the roses themselves is that they are in differing shades of pink rather than just the electric of the dress itself.

Looking at the bodice, we can see the overlaid netting or lace work, which comes together to form another floral pattern that I am almost positive has a plastic element to it; plastic isn't used a *lot* in dressmaking, but it can sometimes offer a stiffness to a piece of design work that you could not get otherwise. The bodice gives way to butterfly sleeves that are richly patterned with flower petal-like elements and capped off with yet more sateen roses. The overall effect is akin to a beauty queen dress (which makes sense given the character of Imelda Marcos in real life and in *Here Lies Love*). It's ostentatious, it's showy, it's dramatic, and it's memorable.

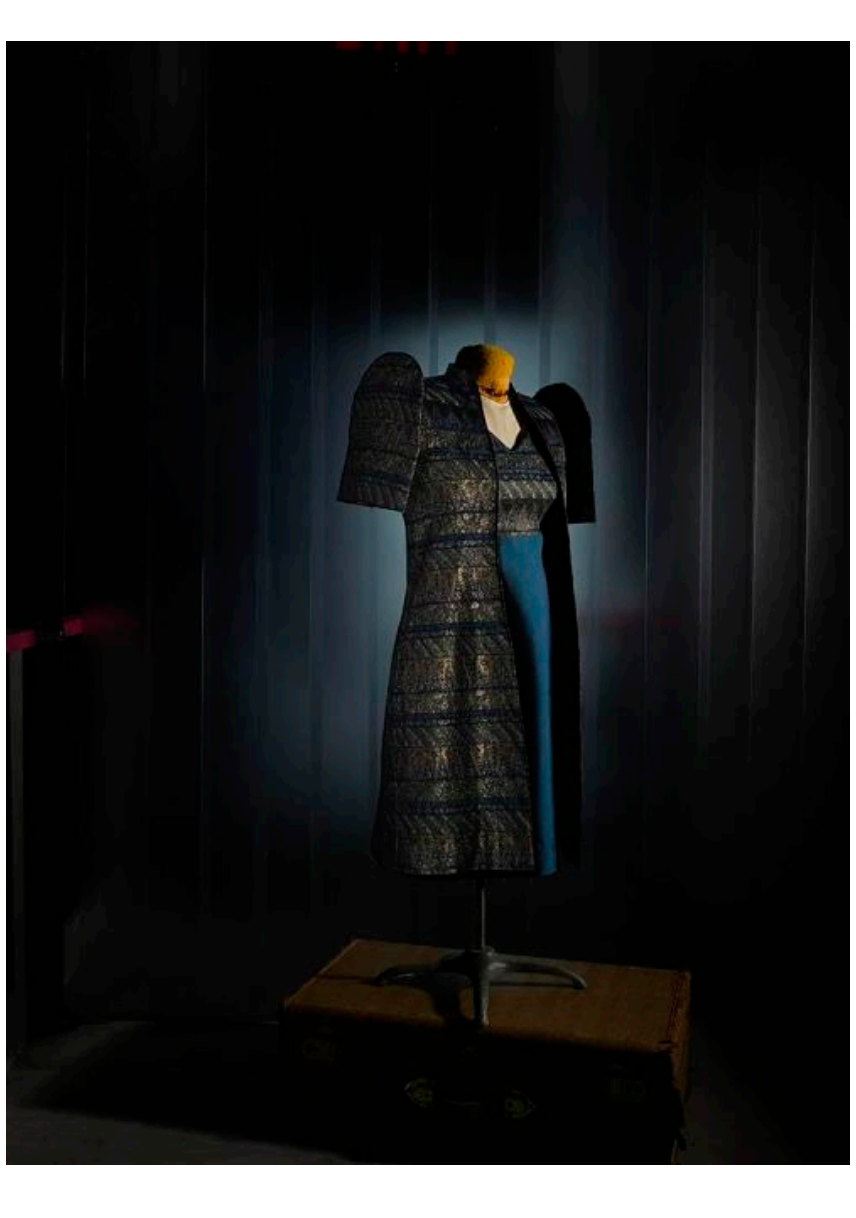
Mr Ramos uses pink for another costume, which is no less beautiful or interesting in color, which is far more reserved. Take a look at this dress in a scene where Imelda is pictured alongside her husband, Ferdinand Marcos (played by Jose Llana):

If you looked at this and immediately thought of Jacqueline Kennedy's classic couture and Chanel suits, you are not alone; that was my first thought as well, and it makes sense. In this scene, there is even a lyric referring to the Marcos' as "our Jackie and John." The idea behind this pink dress is to show off Imelda as the chic, sophisticated spouse next to her politician husband. The lines are simple, the pink is strong but feminine, and it does not distract from anything around her.

The pink changes color depending on the lighting (as most costumes do, as I have noted in a multitude of reviews). Take a look at the dress in motion, which also lets us look at the few detail elements that the outfit possesses:

The hat is clearly a pillbox type in the vein of Jackie Kennedy and the perfect roundness of it matches the buttons that are the only real adornment to the dress itself. It is a business suit, designed for a woman playing a supporting role, and the color and sheen of the fabric is what is allowed to do most of the work. That's a good design choice on the part of Mr Ramos; there can only be so many overpowering costumes at once, after all!

Another understated but beautiful dress can be seen here, in shades of blue and purple, with stitching that is reminiscent of traditional design elements in Filipino fabrics and textiles:



I'll start with the easiest part of this costume to review: the skirt itself. It's a pretty teal blue that would cling to the figure of the wearer and accentuate their femininity, while not detracting from the coat element of the dress.

The coat itself is richly designed in grays and blues, with a metallic thread designed to catch the light and look different depending on the context. Here, with neutral lighting, it looks very much like a dull gold or silver depending on the layer of the dress. The embroidery is replicated in rows, which gives an interesting, almost geometric look to the dress overall. But it's when the costume is viewed in the context of the lighting of the show that it's most interesting. Take a look at how the metallic threads in the embroidery help the dress to almost *glow* with purple:

This is not an easy effect to muster, and I love the way that the purple lighting hitting the dress causes the dress–itself gray and gold and blue–to light up in purple as well. The metallic threads used for the design work catch the light and reflect it, softening it a little bit but still retaining the purple hue. The effect is to make the actress really be the center of the audience's attention. You cannot help but pay attention to Ms Miles in this costume, because every movement makes her look *just* slightly different as more or less of the metallic embroidery is illuminated by the stage lights. It's an effect that is subtle, but with a monumental impact.

The last two costumes I want to look at are a study in contrasts, one extraordinarily tacky by Mr Ramos' own admission, and the other far more muted and somber. First is the discotheque dress that Mr Ramos designed for Ms Miles to wear in her guise as Imelda Marcos. This is one that has to be seen to be believed, but it absolutely *screams* 1980s tackiness and club culture:

Hel-lo, plastic! And yes, I do mean that literally; this dress is constructed *entirely* out of plastic elements stitched together with thread. The overall impact is one that shimmers with even the slightest movement. Each plastic circle is capable of independent movement, and the coloring of each disk is slightly different, though overall the dress is a gold color. I've talked about dresses catching the light a lot, but in this case, the dress itself basically becomes a disco ball unto itself, and it really is the peak of Imelda's character Not Getting It. It's the "let them eat cake" dress, the privileged Imelda dancing the night away as her country is oppressed by her husband's regime.

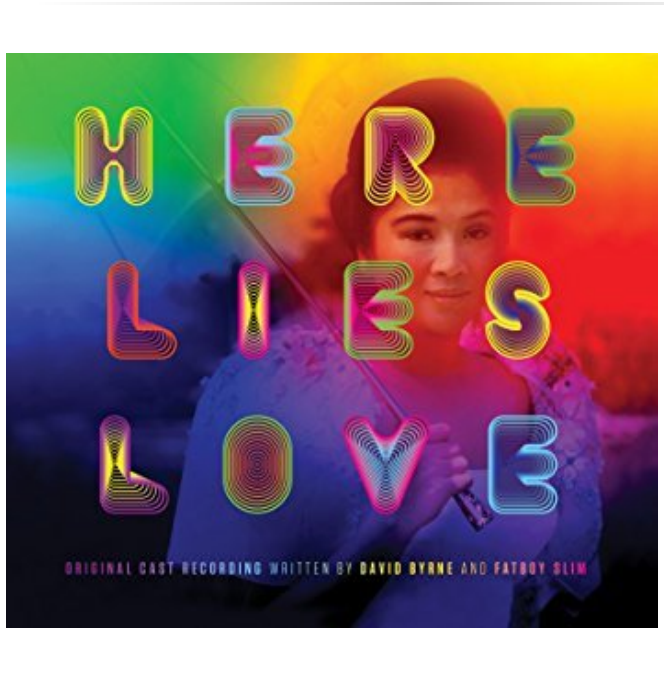
Compare that tackiness to one of the most somber, elegant pieces in the musical, and the one I'll conclude the costume portion of the review with:

Gone are the garish colors, gone are the adornments, gone are the design elements. Instead, we have a simple (if elegant) cream frock that imbues the character–stunningly–with a sense of innocence or naïvety. That's an interesting choice on Mr Ramos' part; there's a mournful quality to this piece that isn't present in any of the other costumes. The buttons harken back to the buttons of the Pink Suit from earlier, but otherwise this dress is utterly demure.

The richness and elegance of the dress are brought by the circular design elements that are part of the fabric itself. It swirls and flows all over Ms Miles' figure, as though mapping the whirlwinds of change surrounding the character at this point in the musical. There is, however, a little bit of the metallic threading seen on the gray and blue dress from earlier. But whereas that helped the character to stand out, this time they make the dress glow in a way that shows that despite every event in The Philippines, Imelda is a victim in her own mind, and the dress reflects the innocence *she* feels, rather than any innocence that exists in reality.

Overall, I find Mr Ramos costume choices to be absolutely perfect and beyond beautiful. Even when they run towards the tacky (the beauty queen dress and the gold disco number), they still have something that makes them enjoyable to behold. The red and white dress definitely made it into the pantheon of my favorite dresses, and I think there is a lot of symbolism there that only adds to the beauty that the audience is able to appreciate.

Since this was an off-Broadway production, Mr Ramos was not eligible for a Tony Award for his design work, but he was the recipient of the Lucille Lortel award, and it was absolutely deserved in my opinion, and I would like to see these designs get some wider exposure.


HERE LIES LOVE
ORIGINAL CAST RECORDING WRITTEN BY DAVID BYRNE AND FATBOY SLIM

As promised earlier, I'm going to offer a few thoughts about the musical generally at this juncture, because Mr Ramos' designs and his own comments are *so much* a part of what makes this musical interesting.

People often draw a comparison between *Here Lies Love* and *Evita*, and I think those comparisons make a lot of sense. Both musicals deal with a woman who was in a supporting role to a husband whose government was dictatorial and repressive, both deal with a woman known in large part for her style, fashion, and outsized personality, and both musicals try to address how we should view these women. But whereas *Evita* makes one feel sympathy for the character of Eva, the effect is much more muddled in *Here Lies Love*.

Imelda Marcos is portrayed as very much a creature and product of her circumstances, happy to play a key role in her husband's regime while still trying to retain some distance and play the innocent. Whereas the 11 o'clock number for *Evita* is "You Must Love Me," a love song to the people of Argentina and her husband, Imelda's last song is "Why Don't You Love Me?" and she's costumed in the red and white dress for it.

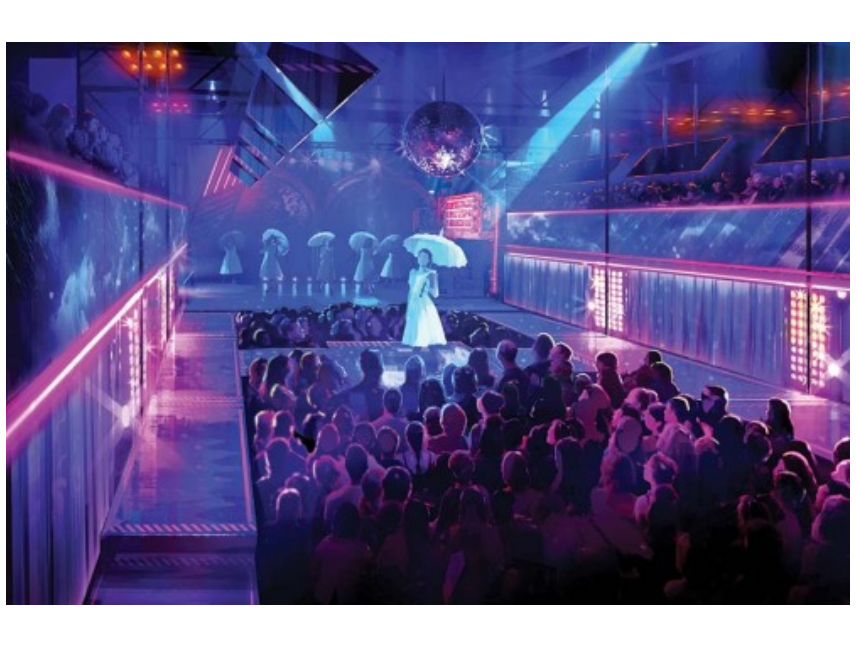
The song itself makes clear that the character of Imelda doesn't understand why she is so reviled by so many of the people. After all, what more could she have done to show them love and affection? And that is where the design of the dress comes in and plays a key role. As Mr Ramos himself said, he wanted to give the audience the idea of Imelda having reached the pinnacle of fashion and beauty while wading through the blood of the victims of her husband's regime.

And she simply doesn't understand that. She doesn't understand that she was the public face of the regime, and that the victims of the regime were numerous. Even her former boyfriend, democracy activist and Senator Ninoy Aquino, is slain as part of Ferdinand Marcos' effort to hold onto power. She thinks of herself as the people's heroine when the reality is that she is a hero only in her own mind, and maybe a few others.

I think this is an important story to tell because it allows us to see this woman as more than a one-dimensional character. She *believes* in her own purity, all the while not seeing the rot and horror around her. There's an innocence in that which is captured well in the elegance of most of Mr Ramos' designs, while her devil-may-care attitude towards the repression she is happy to reap the rewards of is displayed in the tackier costumes.

As I said at the start of the review, *Here Lies Love* is a musical that has been criticized as problematic because it does not portray Imelda Marcos as singularly evil. But that's part of the point. Still alive today, her legacy is still *being debated*. The audience should walk away questioning what they just saw, and questioning whether a person can ever truly be innocent when they play a role in a regime that could be as repressive as the Marcos government. As Mr Ramos said in the interview I linked earlier, the audience should leave asking "Why the hell was I dancing to that?" And why, in fact, was Imelda dancing at all.

This is an important production that deserves to be seen by a wider audience. The biggest problem with staging it as a Broadway show might be the stage design, which encourages audience interaction and is unique in theatrical productions. To give you an idea what I mean, the people standing in the pit at stage level are all members of the audience, and the actors are able to interact with them when warranted:

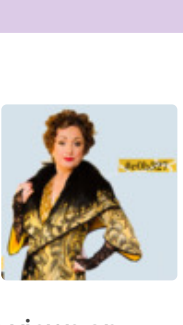


Three years ago, when this production was being staged off-Broadway, stage design was still rather traditional and audience participation or the audience being close to the action was still a rarity. But the runaway success of a production like *The Great Comet* makes me think that Broadway theatres might be willing to take a chance on customizing their staging for a production like this.

As longtime readers of my blog(s) know, I am a huge advocate of diversity in theatre, and it's one of the other reasons I would love to see a full Broadway production of *Here Lies Love*. This is a musical that features (or should feature) an all-Asian cast in serious, non-stereotypical roles, which is something that we really don't see much of (I don't particularly see *The King and I* or *Miss Saigon* as offering Asian actors non-stereotypical roles, for instance). I hope that in the future, this beautifully costumed, musically interesting, and innovative musical will get the full run it deserves.

Phew! That was a *long* review, and thank you for sticking it out! I really enjoyed this review, and I hope you all enjoyed it as well and have the time and the inclination to check it out if you can.

As always, dear readers, I want to hear your feedback, so feel free to reblog with comments, drop an Ask or Submission, or message me here or on my main account. Until the next review, stay tuned!



Zach's views on costumery, design, and trends on Broadway, brought to you by the author of What a Masquerade! Call it a family legacy if you want, but I've always enjoyed costumery and fabric design, and the same family who worked in textiles for years introduced me to my love of Broadway. This blog is dedicated to the costumes and designs of the Great White Way in all their glory, complete with your daily dose of snark when warranted. Suggestions and submissions always welcome! Follow-backs from @fancynewaddress.

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