

2020 MFA Graduation Testimonials for Scenery, Costume, Lighting and Sound Design

Hsi-An Chen

Wonderfully spectacular! That was my first impression of Hsi-An's design for *Peer Gynt*, a class project that she created during her studies at National Taiwan University. Paired with her design for Brecht's *Seven Deadly Sins*, both assignments were smart, inspired and beautifully crafted. That same attention to detail and thoughtful collaboration has been central to our understanding of Hsi-An as both an inspired designer and a caring thoughtful colleague.

With a penchant for architectural structures, Hsi-An's last theoretical design in class delivered a re-imagined *La Boheme*, inspired by the brutalist movement and set within the walls of a Communist landscape. Hsi-An's impressive manipulation of concrete structures provided both contrast and context for Puccini's story of love amidst a complex political and social climate. Bravo to Hsi-An for her courage and artistry!

Outside of the classroom Hsi-An's realized collaborations include *Monster*, *WinterWorks*, *53% Of*, *GradWorks: The Human Body Time Machine*, *The Misanthrope*, *Duchess! Duchess! Duchess!*, and this season's *Balm in Gilead*.

In 2018, Hsi-An devised an alley playing-field setting for *A Beautiful Day on The Banks of The Greatest of The Great Lakes*, directed by faculty member Vanessa Stalling. "Imaginative, highly original, and thoughtful are the words that come to mind when I think about Hsi-An," says Stalling. "It was a true delight to collaborate with her on *Beautiful Day*. A play that flipped traditions on its head required a designer who could think out of the box, as well as one who could give the audience a place to find their heart. Hsi-An did this every step of the way. And I say "every step" because Hsi-An was a constantly inspiring collaborator, from our first brainstorming meetings, during our problem solving sessions in tech, through to opening night. She is a true talent and I'm excited for her future!"

Hsi-An flexed her muscles in the world of gritty realism in her realization of Frank's greasy spoon café, in faculty director Kim Rubinstein's production of *Balm in Gilead*. "Hsi-An's final set for my production of *Balm in Gilead* was a beautiful merge of documentary and poetic realism," says Rubinstein. "This was a feat of design and adaptation within the complex demand of the play and the Forum theatre. I was particularly impressed with Hsi-An when we got into the theatre and I observed her hands-on relationship to the details of the cafe and the NY streets surrounding it. Her loving, nuanced touches created a living space the actors could thrive in."

Hsi-An works tirelessly to bring her best self to the table, while providing a safe harbor for collaboration and discovery. I'm excited to see her emerge as one of our gifted artists, as her wise and thoughtful brilliance continues to expand with every project she encounters.

Samuel Keamy-Minor

Who would've thought a Geological Science major turned Theatre designer would be so enamored with fun-fur? Sam Keamy-Minor arrived at our program by way of Brown University in 2017, and in three short years has explored the wonderful intersection of performance, plastic, and plasticity! His knowledge of the worlds of art and society make Sam a rich find for any director who wants to deeply explore a visual landscape that mines every opportunity for wit and intellectual rigor. In the classroom, his design for *The Marriage of Figaro* featured wall-to-wall green topiary, pink marble, and of course a yellow forklift! He set his inspired design for *The Martian Chronicles* in a 1970's living room whose décor was entirely red like the planet itself. Sam reached the pinnacle of theoretical exploration with his inspired design for Puccini's *La Boheme*, where he merged the world of art and artifice by placing the world's most popular opera on a studio back lot in the golden age of Hollywood. A million-dollar idea Sam! Bravo!

WinterWorks, New Directions, S.E.R.E., Shame Spiral, Life Is A Dream, Duchess! Duchess! Duchess!, and *An Object Screaming* were just some of the many UCSD collaborations that tapped into Sam's restless imagination. Had we escaped COVID-19, we would have been treated to Sam's treatment for LAB2020's *The Bitter Tears of Petra Von Kant*, featuring nothing more than an assemblage of plastic dry-cleaner bags! Resourceful and fearless!

Inspired by the texture of skin (and sutures), Sam's design for this season's *Man in Love* inhabited the voluminous Weiss stage with a muscular hand at film noir. "Sam is a Theater animal. He is consumed by it in the best of ways," says faculty director Stephen Beuscher. "I was overjoyed when I heard that we were working together on *Man in Love*. I admired his dynamic use of space in *Life is a Dream* and his playful sense of whimsy in *Shame Spiral*. When he laid out his research for *Man in Love*, talked about his ideas, and finally showed me his model and renderings . . . I was blown away. He had solved all of my staging challenges with his beautiful, epic, scenic gestures. Stunning artistry. Deep talent. I cherish that project and my collaboration with Sam. I know it is the first of many."

As we send Sam into the industry as a hungry, anxious, emerging artist, I have no doubt that he will find other Theatre makers and other creative outlets for his diverse and extraordinary imagination.

Judy Dolan: 'A few years ago, I encountered two gifted people: Dorottya (Dodi) Vincze and Christopher Flagstad. They came from two vastly different parts of the world: Dodi from Hungary, Chris from Los Angeles. They could not be more distinct from one another. One of the greatest gifts they gave me was witnessing their growth as theater artists.'

Chris Flagstad

A directing candidate, Nicholas Rapp, had suggested I might meet with Chris as a potential graduate student in costume design. It took a bit of persuasion to coax Chris to consider UCSD but I vividly remember the day he walked into my office, his portfolio tucked under his arm. That portfolio consisted of several six-foot-long painted canvas drops for carnival sideshows – one I recall was “Owl Boy.” The eccentricity of his work and our ensuing conversation was evidence that Chris would bring unexpected creativity to the costume area – a creativity that has been manifested in a wide range of productions. Joe Hendel’s bold version of *Life is a Dream* was a clear invitation to Chris’ humor – a multicolored mashup of 17th century Poland and Party City. That raucous production provided a counterpoint to Chris’ delicately stylized *Tartuffe*.

Kim Rubinstein’s production of *Balm in Gilead* presented Chris an opportunity to exercise one of his major attributes: working collaboratively with actors as they evolve their characters.

Kim notes, “What a rare and wondrous being and artist is Christopher F.

I have worked with many a gifted costume designer in my life, but there is no one like Chris. Each costume design is a beloved to him: he is in deep relationship with the costume, the character and the actor inhabiting them. He conjures detailed stories (along with me and the actors) for each design so that the costume becomes like the skin of the human being. Chris was my costume designer for *Balm in Gilead*, a massive play with 27 unique characters. I would sit marveling at each character as they appeared before me on stage; it was if I could not imagine them wearing anything else. And the actors' relationships with their characters deepened in relationship to what Chris gifted them--both in conversation, in fabric in minute details sometimes the audience couldn't even see.

Chris is a genius, and I am so honored that I got to work with him as director and mentor.”

His skill and support of actors is reiterated by director Vanessa Stalling who collaborated with Chris on *A Beautiful Day in November on the Banks of the Greatest of the Great Lakes*: “Chris is a shining star who emanates joy, kindness, and is inspirational to his collaborators. Theatrical characters come to life only after the details of their existence is fully given shape. Chris' designs demonstrate a great capacity to fall in love with characters and all of their various qualities that make them who they are. Good storytelling is in the details, and Chris has a true talent for creating looks with a

specificity that makes characters real. Chris' unique talents, his charming personality and generosity will take him far.”

Chris' talent, his generosity to all his collaborators, his unique insights and deep kindness are exceptional in the world of theatre. I will miss his warmth, his spirit, his giving nature and his unique vision of the world.

Dorottya (Dodi) Vincze

I have New York City Opera to thank for my meeting Dodi: she assisted me on Hal Prince's last revival of *Candide*. The costumes were built in Hungary, where she slid sideways into my view. I was struck initially by her insightful intelligence and her ability to “read” the room – no small task when the room was multi-lingual. Her costume design portfolio at that time demonstrated an artistry that was just waiting to explode.

Dodi's learning curve was daunting: adjusting not only to an American university system, but also the theater and dance department culture; honing her English and where to find fabric in Los Angeles. Whether working dramaturgically in class on a variation on *Lolita* or delving into Adrienne Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, Dodi fearlessly dove into understanding the peculiarities of our American culture.

Her design work at UCSD with the graduate directors, choreographers and faculty has incorporated all her very strong creative instincts. Spring-boarding from the feisty fashion pinks of *Mothers* to the restrained elegance of *The Misanthrope*, Dodi never ceased to refine, adjust and completely commit her artistic soul to every production. Working in dance was a new experience for Dodi. Her beautiful costume designs for *Miko* were ethereal, anchoring the site-specific piece in a Zen-like world that balanced light with movement and texture. Dodi's extraordinarily deep work on *Man in Love* for director Stephen Buescher challenged her not only to capture the work of artist Jacob Lawrence's Migration series into the costume design, but also to husband her resources to the ever-expanding demands of the production. Her designs were bold and Brechtian in approach. She discovered astonishing research of African American culture in 1930s Chicago within a film noir aesthetic while simultaneously, supporting the storytelling within dance. Director Buescher shares his thoughts on Dodi's unique contributions on a personal level: “Working with you has been a dream. I was blown away by your initial thoughts, illustrations, and impressions for *Man in Love*. You really transported my thinking and expanded the world of the play for me and the whole creative team. I was beyond delighted by your work, in every stage, culminating in tech and performance. I would work with you again in a heartbeat and I hope that I can promote you and your work in the future. Congrats on your well-deserved degree and I can't wait to see your artistry in the field. Much Love and admiration. Stephen.”

The fearlessness that Dorottya Vincze displays is a hallmark of a great collaborative artist. I will miss her tenacity, her emotional depth and her commitment to learn, to

always try and to aspire to be the best that she can be. Her future is as bright as her glowing artistry.

Mextly Couzin

Since her introduction to the UCSD Department of Theatre & Dance in 2017, Mextly has consistently proven herself through her artistry, her collaborations, and her resilient desire to explore the field as a thoughtful and emerging lighting designer. As an animated and high-spirited presence in our theatre community, Mextly strives to hone her sense of dramaturgy and to develop herself as an articulate and supportive member of every collaboration.

Some highlights of Mextly's collaborations here at UCSD include *S.E.R.E.*, *53% Of*, *WinterWorks*, *New Directions*, *A Beautiful Day on The Banks of The Greatest of The Great Lakes*, *Everybody Black*, *Balm in Gilead*, and the most recent blissful fantasia of sensory overload, *Orestes 2.0*.

“Mextly uses a lovely blend of intuition and technique in her lighting designs. Her design for my production of *Balm in Gilead* synthesized a documentary-like realism with the quality of a psychedelic musical in exciting, innovative ways,” says *Balm in Gilead* faculty director Kim Rubinstein. “The world of play requires many shifts in time and space which Mextly negotiated with a deft touch. I had great trust in the gradual blooming of her design in tech—she has keen reception moment to moment and an impressive willingness to respond to the many changes and additions made during tech. She is a true joy to work with and has a unique design sensibility that intrigued me.”

“When first meeting Mextly, I remember finding out that her undergraduate studies had been in theoretical mathematics,” notes lighting designer Chris Rynne, who has taught and mentored Mextly over the past year. “It was exciting to me to have a student who went into the program not only without a long history of involvement in theatre but had a background studying a realm that blends logic and artistry. In my time here this year, I've gotten to witness Mextly's continued growth in her ability to pursue lighting ideas – colors, textures, angles – that thoughtfully, and often boldly, support the stories being told. Additionally, I was fortunate that she wanted to join me last quarter as TA for my undergraduate class. I think the students benefitted from hearing our individual approaches to theatrical lighting and she was always a source of great energy for the class environment. Mextly's creative soul, her dedication to artful and meaningful collaborative storytelling, and her rare addiction (for a lighting designer) to watching as many rehearsals in the rehearsal space as possible all will contribute to what I anticipate will ultimately be a successful journey in theatre-making.”

Justin Beets

Self characterized as off-beat and eccentric, Justin has explored the landscape of theatre and dance with unbridled creativity. Since his arrival here in 2017, he has harnessed his unique energy and enthusiasm and channeled that into his own process of finding design through sculpture and color.

“My first takeaway from meeting Justin was that he was vibrant and eclectic character who was obsessed with color, loved to talk, and was starving for some good design challenges,” says lighting designer Chris Rynne who has taught and mentored Justin over the past year. “I was happy to see that right away he was taking on the numerous projects I gave him with great enthusiasm and was using those opportunities to hone his observation and communication skills. Over the last two quarters, Justin’s design work has shown his passion for trying intriguing color combinations, creating playful pops of graphic textures using light, and painting stage pictures with strong editorial perspective. I’ve been impressed with his ever-increasing attention to details with projects - paying careful attention to how timing and sculpting focus to heighten storytelling. Justin’s playful and inventive approach to design combined with his practical knowledge of the tools used to compose strong visuals will serve him well in his theatrical endeavors.”

That sense of play is always present in Justin’s work. *Mothers*, *WinterWorks*, *New Directions*, *Crossing Boundaries*, *Tartuffe*, *Life Is A Dream*, *Monster*, and *Elektra* are just some of his many collaborations. Having just completed his work on *The Underground*, a dynamic and wonderfully complex fantasia of color and form for dance, choreographer and dance maker Marcos Duran muses on Justin’s artistry and their artistic relationship:

“His LIGHTING! It transported me, transported all of us through countless dimensions of color, trajectory, atmosphere, and mood. Quite literally, I know what it is like to bathe in his light, to dance in it, to transform in it - and I have to tell you, It. Is. Always. A. DREAM. He helped me tell so many stories, helped me shape shift, helped me dissect and transcend our reality over and over again.

Justin is so much more than a lighting designer. He is a creator and facilitator of the most magical worlds. Performing with Justin in our *Crossing Boundaries* course was the most unexpected highlight of my graduate experience. Together, we worked with his flawless moving set design made entirely out of video tape. He was my director, collaborator, set designer, scene partner, lighting designer, and dance partner all in one. How does he do it?”

“For his magic and for these memories, I will always be thankful, says Duran. “So happy to know this person as I do, Justin Beets, and his inexhaustible ability to give his entire self for the wonder that is the creative act.”

MaeAnn Ross

Since arriving at UCSD by way of Texas State University, MaeAnn has displayed her fearless sense of collaboration through her artistry, her creativity, and her resilience as a confident and dynamic emerging theatre artist.

MaeAnn’s many collaborations here at UCSD display a healthy and fearless sense of play, as she created sonic landscapes for *GradWorks: The Human Body Time Machine, Revolt. She Said. Revolt Again., ThesisWorks: Before The Horses Crash into The Ground And Then The Ground, S.E.R.E., 53% OF, Life Is A Dream, An Illiad, Shame Spiral, Monster, Man in Love*, and most recently for the wild and wonderfully ambitious *The Underground*, a monumental collaboration whose complex sonic landscape was imbued with Ross’ fearless sense of unbridled creativity.

“MaeAnn Ross is an adept collaborator and creative sound designer to work with on production,” says faculty director Natalie Robichaux, with whom MaeAnn collaborated on last season’s *Shame Spiral*. She helps a director shape the world of the play with ease and inspiration. I cannot wait to witness her future work and to collaborate with her again.”

Composer and sound designer Michael Roth has mentored and taught MaeAnn over the past two years. “I’m delighted to say a few words about my now former students and - truly now – my colleagues, MaeAnn Ross and Stephen Jensen,” says Roth. “In the two years I’ve known them and been their principal teacher, it’s been a great pleasure to watch them develop their unique idiosyncratic vocabularies of sound and music, to challenge themselves as thinkers and young artists, pushing themselves to places where they might not find easy answers, and compose and design projects that were both personally exploratory and forward looking.

I’m particularly proud of how they both developed as compositional sound designers, developing a vocabulary interestingly dissonant (more uniquely dissonant than other more trained composers of their generation might be, not a small thing) and sophisticated, a vocabulary that I think they both know they can continue to develop and expand upon for the rest of their careers.”

Roth adds, “This is a challenging time - theatre has a future but no one reading this knows when or precisely how that future will start or what it will be. We’re

likely looking towards a time when younger artists, through circumstances not of their creation, will likely have to redefine the parameters of their own profession. Those of us who care about these things will have to count on a new generation to re-create a future fearlessly. Will this lead to a golden age? Who can say, but if young artists like MaeAnn and Stephen move ahead fearlessly, showing the way as I think they will - well ... we have a shot.”

In the field of sound design, MaeAnn also represents the next generation of female artists dedicated to making a difference in this country’s growing theatrical landscape. Without hesitation, she possesses the talent, fortitude and ambition to lead that charge and to model a positive force in transforming our industry.

Stephen Jensen

Driven by an immense desire to explore the commercial theatre industry and the craft of making musicals, Stephen has worked ambitiously over the past three years to knock on as many doors as possible. His self-advocacy has paid-off, and in a short span of time Stephen has found enrichment by learning from seasoned masters both here at UCSD and in the regional and Broadway theatre communities.

Projects like the hit Broadway musical *Tootsie*, or last season’s world premiere musical *Diana* produced by La Jolla Playhouse, and this season’s electric *Jagged Little Pill*, inspired by the music of Alanis Morissette, are now prominent entries in Stephen’s resume. *JLP*, which Stephen served as sound design intern, is a project that he shepherded from it’s premiere at American Repertory Theatre to it’s production on Broadway earlier this year. Labeled as “Redemptive, rousing and real” by the NY Times, a production of this caliber offered Stephen a prime opportunity to connect the dots between academic research and making new and substantial work in the commercial theatre industry.

In addition to having opened a few doors for himself, Stephen also experienced inspired collaborations on many productions here at UCSD, including *Raisin in The Sun*, *Everybody Black*, *The Gradient*, *Jefferson Middle School Monthly*, and this season’s ambitious megamix collage, *Orestes 2.0*.

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The New York Times says, "Jagged Little Pill stands alongside the original musicals that have sustained the best hopes of Broadway." We share those same hopes for Stephen as he continues to open many more doors on his incredible journey.