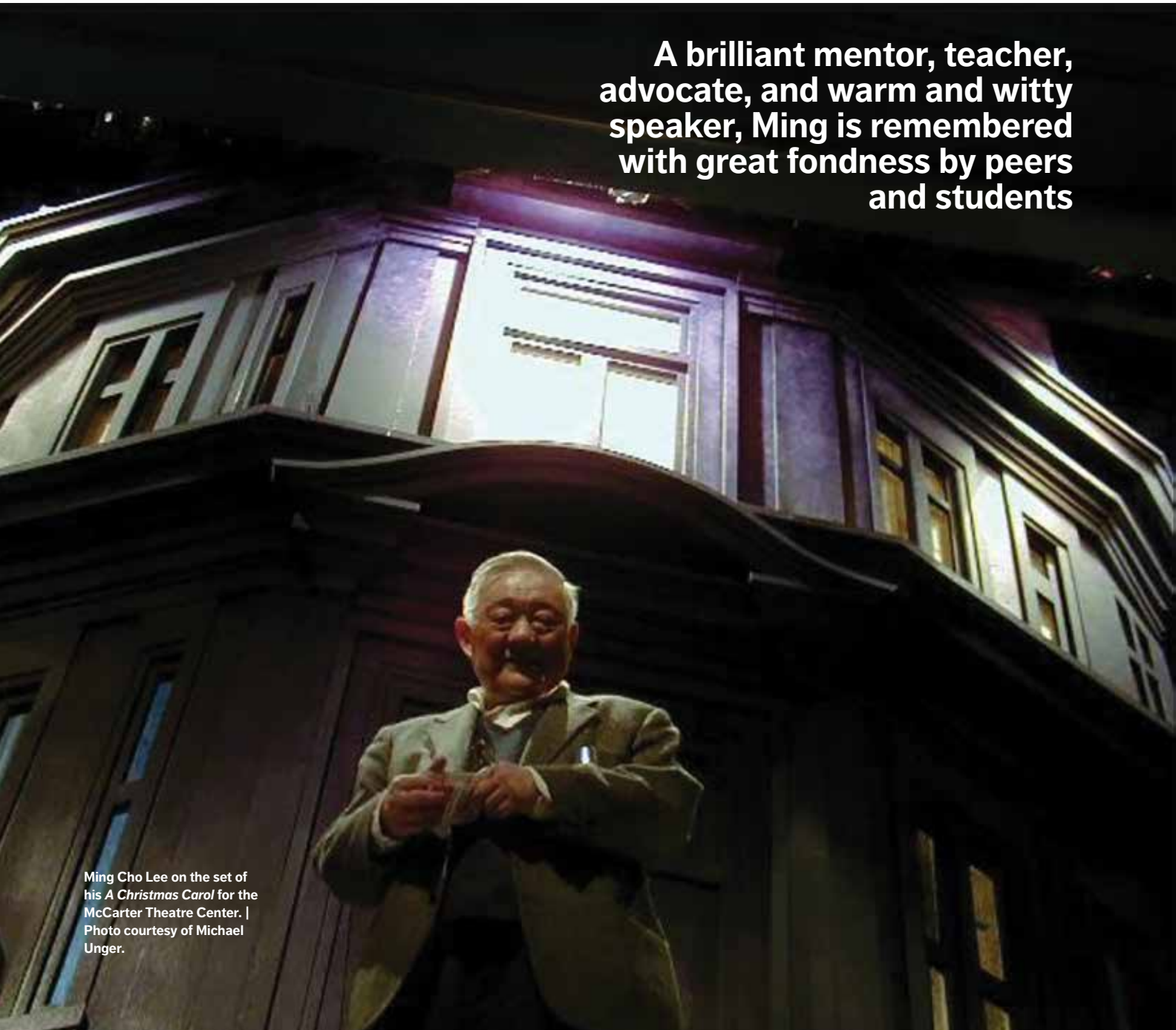


In Memoriam: Ming Cho Lee (1930-2020)

A brilliant mentor, teacher, advocate, and warm and witty speaker, Ming is remembered with great fondness by peers and students

A photograph of Ming Cho Lee, an elderly man with white hair and a mustache, wearing a light-colored jacket over a dark shirt. He is standing in front of a dark wooden building with a large arched doorway. The building has several windows, some of which are illuminated from within. The lighting is dramatic, with strong highlights on the building's facade and deep shadows in the recesses.

Ming Cho Lee on the set of his *A Christmas Carol* for the McCarter Theatre Center. | Photo courtesy of Michael Unger.

News of the passing of Ming Cho Lee, scenic designer and Donald M. Oenslager Professor in the Practice of Design at Yale School of Drama, spread informally through social media in late October 2020. As is the norm now, theatre professionals and students joined together on threads to share memories and joyous tales of chance conference encounters, long-standing mentoring relationships, and wisdom passed along in adjudication sessions. These spontaneous stories spoke of his commitment to the people he worked with and to the artistry of theatre.

TD&T has chosen to memorialize his lasting legacy on theatre through similar stories of personal encounters, shared by USITT members, his former students, and his colleagues. The vignettes below honor Ming Cho Lee's impact on the discipline through his impact on us, the people working and learning alongside him for decades.

Cheryl Mintz
Yale School of Drama, MFA - Stage Management (1987)

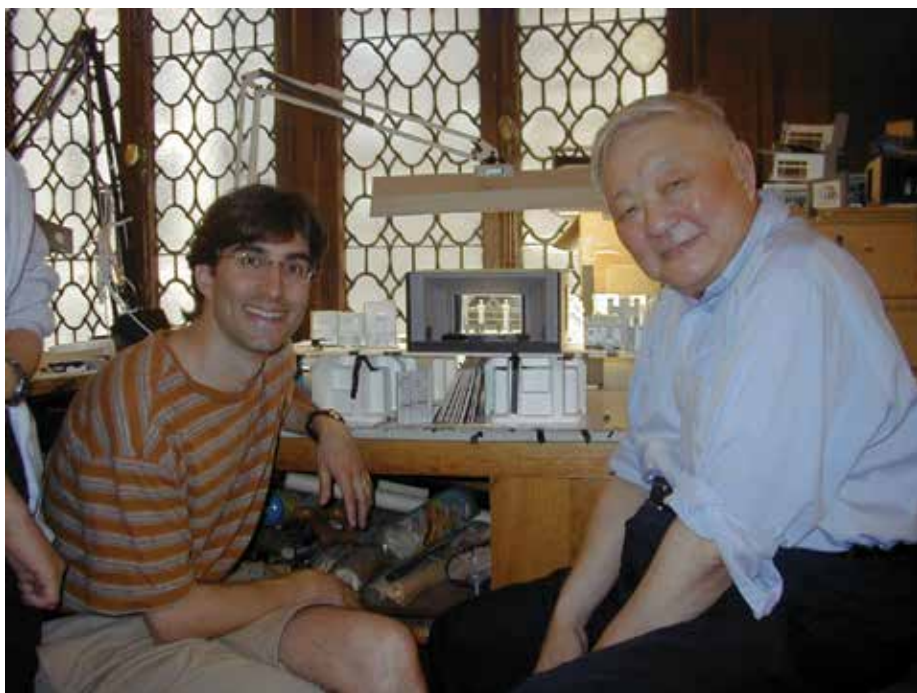
Rest in peace, Ming. Your impact was felt by thousands of students and multiple generations of designers. I was a total failure in your Saturday morning design class, but I grew and learned how to listen to designers so I could represent their

goals in the rehearsal hall. I will cherish tech at McCarter Theatre in 2000 when I was actually your peer for a brief moment of your career. With Michael Unger and David Thompson's *A Christmas Carol*, we were blessed with your design because, as you said, "No theatre ever asked me to design a production of *A Christmas Carol*." You designed a set the Met should have built, but McCarter production department 2000/2001 did it and the production ran for 16 seasons. Anything you politely asked for we all jumped to fulfill. After over a dozen years of being accomplished professionals, we were all your students again. We became the stewards of one of your final designs. Love to Betsy and all the designers that are your legacy.

Riw Rakkulchon
Set Designer, Yale School of Drama (2019)

As a Thai immigrant set designer, I couldn't be much more humbled to be one of a handful of—four to be exact—Thai designers to have studied with Ming. Growing up, you hear the name Ming Cho Lee as an influential set designer, you study his designs, watch videos of interviews with him, but never had I thought I would be able to study with him.

At Saturday classes, as we waited for him to arrive to New Haven from New



Ming Cho Lee in his studio with director Michael Unger during the 1999-2000 design process for the McCarter Theatre Center production of *A Christmas Carol*. | Photo courtesy of Michael Unger.



Fezziwig's holiday party from *A Christmas Carol* at the McCarter Theatre Center, scenic design by Ming Cho Lee. | Photo © Charles T. Erickson.

York, the sounds that filled the room would always go silent when we heard the words “Ming is here.” Sitting in class feels like a lucid dream—or nightmare, depending on how you look at it. Moments with Ming were filled with banter, ideas, never-ending arguments that took some time to digest and several tissues for tears later. These experiences are something one can honestly say are the most valuable assets one owns. Ming critiques were brutal, but for a good reason—for you to really look and investigate what you are producing, and when we overthink and over-design, all Ming had to say was “Just do the goddamn play!” All I can say is အဝေအရမ်း ချဉ်း

Pamela Howard, OBE

*Director and Scenographer,
International Chair in Drama, Royal Welsh
College of Music and Drama
Visiting Professor, Arts University Bournemouth
Professor Emeritus, University of the Arts
London
Honorary Fellow, Hong Kong Academy of
Performing Arts*

I knew Ming from the mid '60s, initially through OISTAT. In the mid '70s I was in New York working in a small theatre in Greenwich Village on behalf of the great late Theatre Director Roger Planchon. It was deep snowy winter. I was living in Lyon and at the Théâtre Nationale Populaire as an “assistante à la mise-en-

Asked to define his concept of space, Ming wrote, “An arena where the great issues—of values, of ethics, of courage, of integrity, and of humanism—are encountered and wrestled with.”

scène.” This was the first and only play of Planchon’s that he has ever allowed to be done outside France. As soon as I arrived in New York, I saw it was potentially a disaster and absolutely nothing had been done. Planchon was due to arrive the following week for final rehearsals and the opening.

The only thing I could think of was to call Ming and Betsy and ask their advice. Within 20 minutes, they arrived, assessed the situation, and took me in the car round Central Park where we picked up fallen tree branches, collected some nylon wire from their apartment, went back to the theatre, and with some minor tech help hung the branches over the performance space to create the required forest. Planchon never knew how this potential disaster had been avoided. We often laughed about it. Later, Ming invited me several times to Yale to talk about theatre making and he related this story.

In 2002, the first edition of my book *What is Scenography?* was published in Britain and the U.S. On page 1 of Chapter 1, I asked Ming to define his concept of space, and he wrote, “An arena where the great issues—of values, of ethics, of courage, of integrity, and of humanism—are encountered and wrestled with.”

Those words define the indefinable Ming Cho Lee.

In 1999, as part of the Prague Quadrennial, I convened a debate between Ralph Koltai, Josef Svoboda, and Ming Cho Lee on the stage of the Prague National Opera. I called it “The Three Great Horsemen of the Scenographic Apocalypse.” I was astonished to discover that these three great Titans had never met each other. The event was completely sold out and people were standing to hear them discuss. A table covered with a white cloth was put in front of the opera’s red curtain, and Koltai was seated at one end, Ming at the opposite, and Svoboda in the middle next to me. The three had headphones to hear the translations. The night before, I spent time with each one going through the questions I would ask them, so that the event would have some structure. However, when it came to it, no one remembered the briefing, and nor did the three communicate with each other, and it almost became the greatest comedy show on earth. Now these three great horsemen are riding the Golden Triga in the sky.

Linda Fisher
Costume Designer

Ming was on the Tony nominating committee the year I did *Tuna Does Vegas*, a show with only two actors but something like 30 very quick-change costumes. Later, he told me that he and Betsy had roared with laughter at the show and he had tried to convince the committee to nominate me but couldn’t. He was such kind and generous classic gentleman in addition to being a brilliant teacher and designer.

Arnold Aronson
Professor of Theatre, Columbia University

In 2010, I began work on the book that would become *Ming Cho Lee: A Life in Design*. This “work” consisted of interviewing Ming about his life and each of the more than 300 productions he designed. Over the next three years, I had the incredible privilege of meeting with him regularly, usually for sessions of about three hours each. We sat at the dining table, I would turn on the recorder, mention the year or production we were going to start with that day, and Ming would be off and running, discussing each production in enormous detail. We usually had photos or sketches (he insisted that even his most beautiful renderings were sketches) to refer to, but his



Ming Cho Lee's last critique session at the Yale Design Showcase 2019, critiquing Riw Rakkulchon's design of *Twelfth Night* for Yale Repertory Theatre. | Photo by Samuel Chan, courtesy of Riw Rakkulchon.

memory for detail was phenomenal.

Betsy, of course, was always in the room or close by, filling in any blanks in Ming’s narrative and occasionally disputing a date or the details of an event, which led to bit of bickering that clearly had gone on lovingly for their entire marriage. Ming liked chocolate chip cookies and there was always a box on the table. I gained quite a bit of weight during those years. Our sessions, however, would usually begin with a discussion of both theatre and politics. By this point, Ming was not able to go to the theatre much, if at all, so he would ask me for details of anything I had seen. And we always talked about the week’s news and politics (which always seemed dire at the time but seem so benign in comparison to our current situation). At a certain point, I often had to steer the conversation back

to the discussion of his designs or risk spending the whole afternoon on current events. I also learned, early on, not to shut off the recorder until I was out the door and in the elevator. As I would be packing up to go, Ming seemed to remember details he had forgotten, or ideas that needed further elucidation, and some of his most remarkable observations would emerge during those minutes. Although I was never a student in Ming’s class, I felt that I was receiving a three-year private tutorial—though thankfully without having to submit a design for one of Ming’s famous critiques. One of my fondest memories, however, is from 1989 during a design conference sponsored by the Shanghai Theatre Academy. Joel Rubin, who was then head of USITT’s International Liaison Committee, asked Ming to represent the U.S., but also



Attendees at the 2019 Prague Quadrennial looking at the model for Ming Cho Lee's scenic design for Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov* for The Metropolitan Opera in 1974. | Photo courtesy of USITT/ David Armelino.

asked Susan Tsu and me go as well. Ming gave a presentation about contemporary American design (illustrated by slides I had brought). The conference was in late May, and as some sessions were rescheduled and we could see our hosts conferring in serious tones, it became clear that something was amiss. We got bits and pieces of news of something happening in Beijing, but it was not until we returned home and had full access to news that we learned about what was happening in Tiananmen Square.

Part of the pleasure of that trip was experiencing Shanghai, where Ming grew up, with him as a guide. One afternoon there was a reception on a terrace of a building along the Bund. At the time, the tallest buildings in the city were there, now dwarfed, of course, by some of the worlds' tallest skyscrapers. From that vantage point, Ming pointed out certain landmarks of his youth, including his high school. We also saw a performance at the Shanghai Art Theatre, which had been the Lyceum Theatre when Ming

"Although I was never a student in Ming's class, I felt that I was receiving a three-year private tutorial—though thankfully without having to submit a design for one of Ming's famous critiques."

was growing up, and where his mother had frequently taken him to see performances. This was my first trip to China, so it would have been memorable under any circumstances, but to spend that time with Ming and see the city through his eyes was something I will always treasure.

Patrick Finelli
Professor of Theatre, School of Theatre & Dance, University of South Florida

It was a privilege to host Ming Cho Lee at an FTC/SETC scenography workshop at the University of South Florida in the 1990s. Our undergraduate design majors, along with other student designers, were anxious and excited about his critique of their work.

As I spoke with him before the session, he asked, "Who taught Shakespeare here?" It made sense because wherever we go and whatever we do in theatre, Shakespeare is there. Ming's designs for Shakespeare's plays range from the tapestries of *Twelfth Night* at the Stratford

American Shakespeare Theatre to his memorable *King Lear* as the principal designer for Joe Papp's New York Shakespeare Festival in the '60s and early '70s.

The next question he asked was to see our theatres, a 600-seat proscenium hall, a 250-seat laboratory theatre, and an 80-seat black box. Later in the workshop, Ming spoke about "theatre of two rooms" and "theatre of one room" and how that affects design choices and sightlines.

Many of the students presented designs that featured floors and walls and decorative elements. Ming emphasized that they needed "something to stop the eye from wandering up," suggesting scenic elements such as a ceiling or beam that would frame the setting. Students fortunate enough to be in that design studio on that day had an experience tantamount to a class at Yale School of Drama with a master scenographer of the 20th century.

Ashley Bellet

Assistant Professor of Costume Design, Purdue University

When I was in graduate school, my scene design professor always raved about Ming Cho Lee. I didn't have a lot of historical or contemporary context at the time, but I understood how influential he was. To me, he was a legend—a name that carried weight because of an artistry I admired but did not fully comprehend yet.

My cohort and I decided to go to USITT that year for the first time, and of course it was in snowy Toronto! I was filled with energy and confidence—wandering from session to session carrying my giant portfolio and a pile of resumes for the employers I was sure were eager to meet me. When I sat down in the back of a large session hosted by the Education Commission, chairs filled, and I quickly got caught up in the high-spirited discussion about maintaining flexible deadlines. An older gentleman at the side of the room pointed out how a designer's preparedness could deeply influence a director's commitment to a concept. I had just completed what I considered to be a successful project that had evolved multiple times over the design process, so I thrust my hand in the air, leapt to my feet, and began a counterdiatribe on designer flexibility. The room grew quiet and I realized that he and I were the only people standing, staring at



Ming Cho Lee in 2004. | Photo courtesy of USITT.

Ming was a "humanitarian who always loved and respected art and craft and was never disappointed in the theatre."

each other—myself and Ming Cho Lee. The realization hit me and I sank back into my chair mid-sentence. I had loudly and quite determinedly told one of the greatest American scenic designers that he was wrong, and I'd done it in front of more than 100 people.

All it took was a single raised eyebrow and suddenly I knew my place in the great history of American theatre design. I was young, new, and passionate. I was determined and confident. I had bumped heads with one of the greats. After the session, I shook his hand, thanked him for engaging in such lively discussion, and went about paving my own way in theatre. That day I learned to stop and listen and to see great designers as future colleagues and inspiration, not just

names to drop or read about in textbooks.

James DePaul

Director of Undergraduate Theatre Studies, 1993-1996, Yale School of Drama

Ming was a great friend and colleague. I first met Ming when I was a junior faculty member at Oberlin College in 1986. He was touring liberal arts colleges and presenting an inspiring lecture about the importance of theatre. In his lecture, he told a wonderful story about disappointment. He said in your lives as young artists and citizens, you will be disappointed in many things. You will be disappointed in your work, your personal progress, your colleagues, your politics, your life, your relationships, and your contributions to society. But in those times, remember the theatre. You will never be disappointed in the theatre.

Ming was wonderful. He recommended my production to the New York Shakespeare festival and Joe Papp. It showed me the importance of a mentor and colleague who was so supportive of the theatre and the process of creating important work. Later, when I was the executive producer of a project at Southern Methodist University, I engaged Ming to be the one of the keynote speakers for the Southwest Theatre Conference. Again, he was a brilliant inspiration to an eager group of colleagues in Dallas where he talked about the importance of our art, teaching theatre, and being a theatre maker. His talk centered around his work as a designer, and he candidly critiqued his own journey as an artist.

Finally, when we were colleagues at Yale, Ming came up the street to Theatre Studies to give a lecture (with Michael Yeargen and Mel Gussow from *The New York Times*) to the undergraduate students, some of whom had been invited into Ming's design class. The room was packed with about 80 inspired theatre studies majors. Mel Gussow was writing about Ming and, as usual, Ming was extremely generous when complimenting the work we were performing and accomplishing in theatre studies. He started his lecture by looking over at me and saying, "I remember where I met your teacher. It was at Oberlin and James had directed a production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. And I remember it was very good."

I thanked him and said, "I am going to leave you with these students." He had



Ming Cho Lee at a mentoring session at the Long Beach USITT Conference and Stage Expo, 2004. | Photo courtesy of USITT.

done it again! He had raised my status with my students and the status of the program with the world by including us in Mel Gussow's *New York Times* article about the importance of theatre and the work we were performing in the liberal arts undergraduate program.

Ming was a brilliant mentor, teacher, and fierce advocate of his colleagues, and students, positive progress in life and art. He was a warm and engaging, witty speaker. And a humanitarian who always loved and respected art and craft and was never disappointed in the theatre.

Laura Crow

*Professor Emerita, Costume History & Design
Department of Dramatic Arts, University of
Connecticut*

While we were designing *A Long Day's Journey into Night*, Ming and I were having dinner with our director, Marshall Mason, and he reminisced about having been approached by Jim Rado with a script that he was working on with Jerry Ragni writing the lyrics for a new musical. Marshall read the script and turned it down. It didn't have much of a plot and the lyrics were strange, "Do wee do wee bop, bop, do we do we wan, wan, wan

"If there is one thing I learned from Ming that has always stayed with me in everything that I do, it is his statement, 'Start strong. End strong.'"

oh, etc." Ming remembered that he felt much the same, but he needed the work and was obliged to design for the Public Theater.

"Good morning starshine. The earth says, 'Hello'" and other lyrics that are now etched indelibly in everyone's memory were, at the time very odd, compared to favorite musical of the day, *Hello, Dolly!* The script they were perusing turned out to be the first version of *Hair*. Ming stayed with the project long enough to hear Galt MacDermot's music and then the magic began. Ming's statement: "Never judge a play on the first reading and always wait to hear the music!"

Christopher Carter Sanderson

*Directing, Yale School of Drama (2005)
Founding Artistic and Producing Director,
Gorilla Rep NYC
Managing Partner, Willy, Nilly & Pell-Mell LLC*

Entering the Yale School of Drama to study directing, I had a long-established professional side hustle as a visual artist. I'll never forget the time I handed in a large painting as a scenic concept for Ming's famous day-long Saturday class. I had done a few doodles along the bottom of the canvas in extra-black graphite pencil as I thought about the play we were

working on. I think it had something to do with the fall of Troy. I thought of the doodles as decoration, really, or maybe just a little context for the concept. Ming looked at the painting quietly for what seemed like forever, and then calmly delivered a few serious problems with the painting as a set concept. And then he gave me a smile, looked right into my eyes, and as he pointed at one of the doodles said cheerfully, “I think you are really onto something here, though. I like this a lot.” The painting is long forgotten, but could still draw that doodle for you from memory.

Mark Shanda

*Past-President, USITT
Dean, University of Kentucky
Emeritus Professor of Theatre, The Ohio State University*

Ming Cho Lee was a generous respondent to student work in many a forum. One of my favorite memories of his engagement with aspiring designers was at a regional Kennedy Center/American College Theatre Festival that we were hosting where Ming was serving as the guest design respondent. Work had been gathered from college students from the five-state region and was proudly tacked up on 4x8 painted plywood panels in a make-shift gallery. During the review session, Ming would carefully approach each student’s display, invite the exhibitor to come up and discuss their work, and then with great candor he would express his response. Other aspiring designers and their related faculty were afforded the opportunity to eavesdrop on each of these remarkable conversations.

Ming’s exchange with one highly confident, young costume design student will forever hold a special place for me. With each of Ming’s comments about her work, the student attempted to counter with a defensive statement. Ever the gentleman, Ming exhibited extreme patience with her defensive posture, but continued to hold firm on his advice. At one point, he seized a pencil, and sketched a small example of what he was trying to explain directly on the painted panel adjacent to her designs. Ming was trying to get the designer to “see” a different way and to encourage her further development of drawing skills to improve the communication of her solid design ideas. Exasperated, the student finally said, “Well, I have had seven years of life drawing classes.” Ming, as he

began to shift to the next student, pivoted to look the “life drawing” artist directly in the eye and uttered with a smile one of the best lines I have every heard, “Well, next time, let it show!”

P.S. During the strike of the festival, the student returned to the gallery and while taking down her drawings, asked if we could cut out Ming’s drawing from the plywood so that she could retain his work as inspiration for her continued improvement. It was an unusual request to which we complied.

Rob Perry

Lighting Design, Yale School of Drama (1999)

If there is one thing I learned from Ming that has always stayed with me in everything that I do, it is his statement, “Start strong. End strong.”

At the time, it seemed like a statement about drafting techniques and making a great corner, but as my years went on after graduation, it always stuck in my mind, eventually finding its way into my everyday life. Whatever project I

approach—whether in the professional world or my personal life—my mantra is always, “Start strong. End Strong.” Even as a professor of theatre design, I remind my students to always, “Start strong and end strong.” I often tell them not to sit on the fence with their ideas, as people will know. It’s better to make a decision and then have it fall apart, rather than not make a choice at all.

I also loved that Ming treated all of us like set designers even if our forte was in another area like lighting design or costume design or sound design. We all had something to say visually and verbally and he encouraged us to say it.

Lastly, I will always remember Ming’s stamina in Saturday’s class. He stood up all day, never seemed to get tired, and went on forever like the Energizer Bunny. Ming was and still is such a hero to me and continues to inspire everything that I do—a real-life mentor. I have been lucky to be blessed by his knowledge and strong sense of design.