

Maria Garcia, Costume Designer

Madison Brito for Middlebury College Costume Shop, February 2021

For Maria Garcia, much of her work is about storytelling. “It’s playing, experimenting, building... [it’s] always different,” she tells me. And she really does make it sound anything but dull. Garcia’s work as a costume designer and artist spans theater, opera, film, and dance, her career narrative a testament to the flexibility of her work. She is always pushing the boundaries. Her work teems with life force, bringing air into the stories she tells. And the key to such visionary projects? “Take that mindset as advice, and be your own storyteller, invent your own work.”

Garcia attended FIDM and was instructed to study product development, a “safer” alternative to design. But truly, this was not it for her. She found herself interning at the Western Costume Company in research and was enthralled by the clippings she cut out every morning. She jumped at the chance to earn a degree in theater studies in the UK just after graduation. “There’s a magical element [to theater],” she says, “you can use design as a sort of magic trick.” She makes it sound as if you get to play wizard, and it’s the most exciting role you can inhabit.

Charting out her own path, away from the ‘safer’ waters of her degree, she began working at opera houses and the theater company Cardboard Citizens. Here, she says, she “learned the idea of invention, how it’s about creating opportunities for the people wearing the garments.”

Garcia’s career is all about invention - carving out your own work and doing the work to create more room for play. That playfulness subsequently generates more momentum for greater invention. It is all cyclical, she remarks, “you can learn things in every art form and take that to the next.” Even carnival arts, she tells me, gave her a larger vocabulary for work from film to opera.

Creating and teasing things out from what you have seems to be half the enjoyment for Garcia. She tells me with a smile how even with a clear job, “you have a concept, but then you have to sort out the puzzle.” Even those less-than-ideal components (time, budget, resource constraints and the like) can “create more opportunities” for invention and innovation, becoming part of the play itself.

Another level of her storytelling? Designing for dance. “It allows you to be experimental, you don’t have to be grounded in reality,” she says with excitement palpable in her tone. “You’re often existing in the absurd or abstract realm, and plus, you’re working on a moving body that *needs* to be able to move,” and what else would a moving body do but create more puzzles to solve and generate new ways of building on the body. Garcia has constructed costumes solely out of old ballet shoes, or even out of hair. Here, the constraints can serve as encouragement; in a performance where the sets were only plastic, she decided she could use that as a chance to make

the costumes plastic themselves. Boundaries in her line of work become blurred, and the more you allow them to, the more that opens up to you.

Beyond not fearing limitations within a project, she tells me, “don’t be afraid and think you can’t do multiple things.” Being a dynamic, multi-faceted artist is a key to creating valuable art. Garcia herself is a performance artist, having created shows in which she herself acted, describing it as a “way to investigate questions you have yourself.” Being your own storytelling entails a selective blind eye at what is ‘safe’ or what is within your line of work. “What are you interested in, who you admire. Just reach out, offer them things. Create your work.”