

SCENIC DESIGN HELPS TELL THE STORY

Meet Milagros Ponce de León



Written by [Natalie Clare](#)

The power of the scenic design often goes unrecognized as a key part of the storytelling in a theatrical production. The set design helps to sweep us up into a different world onstage. Rendering that onstage world starts with the production's scenic designer. They research the script and the world of the play and imagine ways to bring audiences into the characters' lives. For [Milagros Ponce de León](#), an [International Thespian Society](#) alum, the process hinges on details, curiosity, and lots of hard work.

Ponce de León is an award-winning scenic designer whose work has been seen on stages across the country. Notable productions over the years include *Ragtime*, *Sweeney Todd*, *Once on This Island*, *The Little Mermaid*, *Seussical*, and many others. She earned an M.F.A. in Drawing and Painting and an M.F.A. in Scenic Design, both from the University of Maryland. Prior to that, she earned a B.F.A. Studio Arts in Drawing and Painting from [Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú](#).

As a passionate educator, Milagros has taught for half her life. She is now head of the B.F.A. program in Theatre Design & Technology at Penn State University. "I love teaching. It is my way to communicate with the world and to talk about things I love, such as form, color, texture, composition, and space," she says.

Read more about Milagros's artistic work and perspective below.

THE POWER OF STORYTELLING

I design sets for theatre productions. That means that I read plays, talk about plays, draw, sketch, paint, draft, Photoshop, build scale models, make collages, and think about color, space, and texture all the time. As a set designer, I love that I am constantly learning about new places, different periods in time, and different people and how they lived. I love that I get to do unexpected research about very specific things — like wallpaper or the history of streetlights — and get to collaborate with a lot of different people who are experts in their own fields. I love that being a set designer demands 100 percent of what I know and can do, and then some.

When I started my M.F.A. in set design, I was an international student who knew a lot about color and painting, and I had studied drawing and painting for nine years. But I had never seen theatre, read a play, or used a scale ruler. I had limited knowledge of design software, had worked in the metric system of measurement for my entire life, and didn't know how to drive. In fact, I didn't even own a car nor had a computer.

My first months as a set design graduate student at University of Maryland were overwhelming, and I often asked myself if I was in the right place. Reading plays took me hours, I knew nothing about technical theatre, nor did I have the vocabulary to survive in a shop situation. Line-sets? Theatre winches? Tech? Crown molding? I knew none of that.

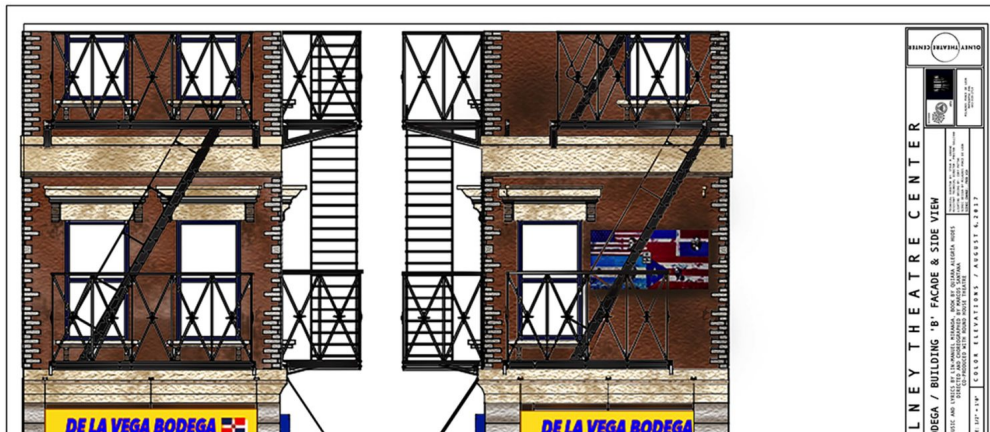
I had to learn from scratch, I had to learn quickly, and it was very difficult. But I also quickly realized that all my previous training in painting, drawing, and art history was the foundation I needed to become a set designer. Away from my family in Peru and the things and materials I was familiar with, theatre opened doors to things I had never experienced or imagined before. In that process, I found my voice in set design and grew as an artist.

SEEING IS BELIEVING

These photos show three different productions, along with the designer color elevations and color renderings. You can see how the visual elements created by the designer (such as form, color, line, texture, etc.) shaped the space for each featured production.



IN THE HEIGHTS / PRODUCTION PHOTO



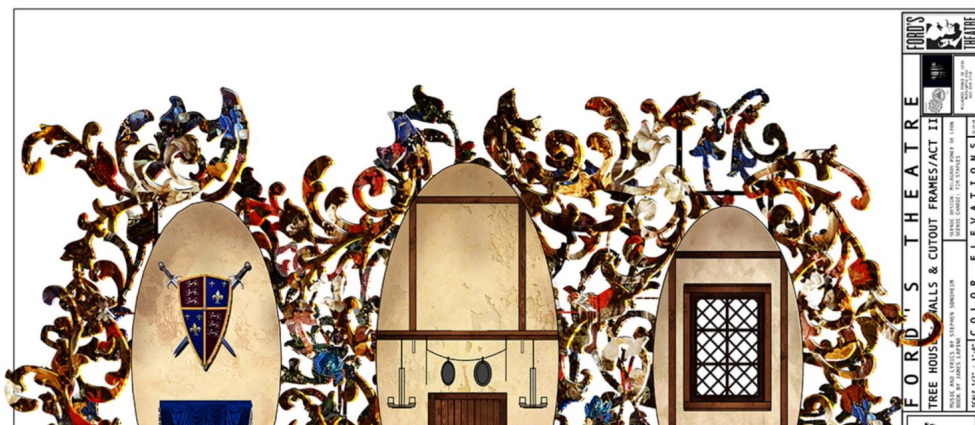


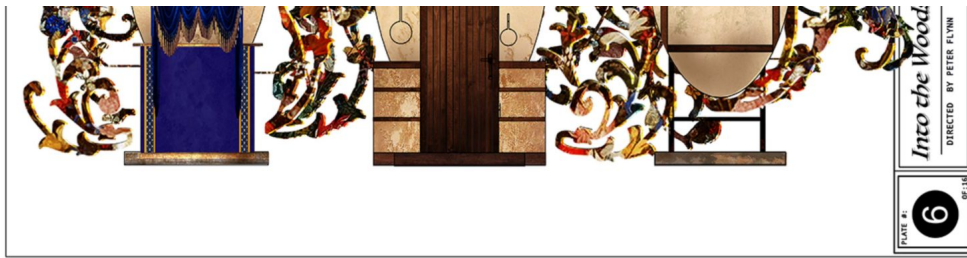
IN THE HEIGHTS / COLOR ELEVATION

(ABOVE) *In the Heights*, Olney Theatre Center (Photo credit: Cory Pattak) Design Credits: Scenic Design by Milagros Ponce de León, Lighting Design by Cory Pattak, Costume Design by Frank Labovitz, Sound Design by Matt Rowe



INTO THE WOODS / PRODUCTION PHOTO



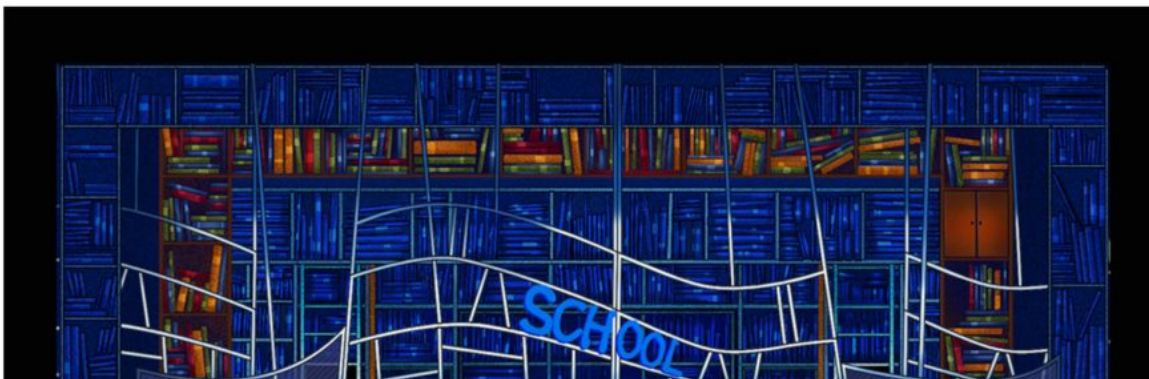


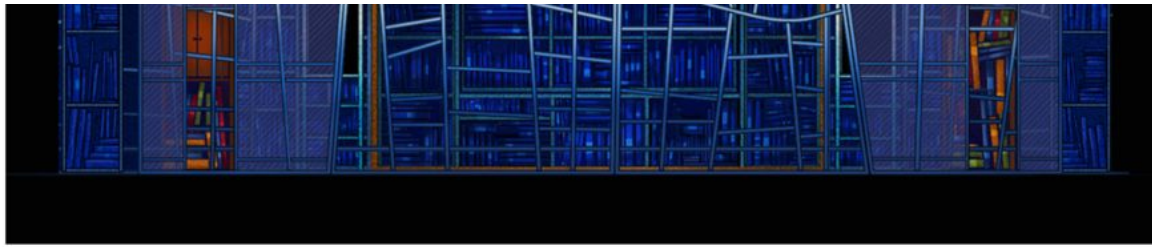
INTO THE WOODS / COLOR ELEVATION

(ABOVE) *Into the Woods*, Ford's Theatre (Photo credit: Carol Rosegg) Scenic Design by Milagros Ponce de León, Costume Design by Wade Laboissonniere, Lighting Design by Rui Rita, Projection Design by Clint Allen, Sound Design by David Budries



MATILDA, THE MUSICAL / PRODUCTION PHOTO





MATILDA, THE MUSICAL / COLOR RENDERING

(ABOVE) *Matilda the Musical*, Olney Theatre Center (Photo credit: Clint Allen)

Scenic Design by Milagros Ponce de León, Projection Design by Clint Allen, Costume Design by Pei Lee, Lighting Design by Nancy Schertler, Sound Design by Roc Lee

THE ARTIST AT WORK

I just designed the sets for *Quizote Nuevo* at [Round House Theatre](#) in Washington D.C., *The Thanksgiving Play* at [Olney Theatre Center](#) in Maryland, and *Steel Magnolias* at [Everyman Theatre](#) in Baltimore. I am currently working on *The Mountaintop* at [Ford's Theatre](#) in Washington DC.

In the future I would love to work on anything by Quiara Alegría Hudes [*In the Heights*, *Water by the Spoonful*, *Vivo*], Stephen Sondheim [*A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, *Sunday in the Park with George*, *Into the Woods*], Lauren Gunderson [*I and You*, *The Revolutionists*, *Ada and the Memory Engine*] or Tarell Alvin McCraney [*In the Red and Brown Water*, *Choir Boy*, *The Brothers Size*]. Also, *Richard III*.

To see more work by Milagros Ponce de Leon visit her website. [◆](#)

Natalie Clare is a Cincinnati-based writer who composes original content for brands, organizations, and publications. As a storyteller, she writes fiction and nonfiction, and she directs and produces works of film. Visit her at nataliecwrites.com.

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