



Here Lies Love

“ You have to see it!”
Everyone’s talking about *Here Lies Love*, a groundbreaking triumph that is changing the way people experience a Broadway musical. Based on the rise of former Filipina First Lady Imelda Marcos and her subsequent fall at the hands of the Philippine People Power Revolution, *Here Lies Love* is an intoxicating party of Studio 54 meets Imelda Marcos and Filipino pride.

The show began as a concept album by David Byrne (Academy Award, Grammy Award, and Tony Award winner) and Fatboy Slim (Grammy Award winner). Fourteen years ago, Tony Award-winning director Alex Timbers pitched Byrne the concept of a production with an innovative and transformative design that brings audiences into a dance club with moving platforms and sets intertwined throughout the standing room dance floor. “I was inspired by thinking about Studio 54 and nightclubs,” remembers Timbers. “I liked the idea of a place where there were moving stages and light sculptures and the show would just wrap around you. It was one of those things where you go in and pitch something and it could be a suicide mission because no one is going to do something as crazy as this! But David said I saw it exactly as he saw it.”

Once Timbers and Byrne had fleshed out the music, he and his team, which included *Beetlejuice* and *Hamilton* scenic designer David Korins, began the design phase. They mounted their first production in a black box theatre at New York University, splitting the room in half to experiment with using two different spaces. That led to a workshop at PS 122 where *Here Lies Love* grew to having stairs and a rotating platform. “At that point it didn’t resemble anything like a stage design,” says Timbers, laughing. He and Korins began plotting the shape of the show with cardboard blocks, before trying it out at Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (MASS MoCA) in a co-production with Williamstown Theatre Festival and the Public Theater. “We were in a giant warehouse and we taped out the

David Byrne, Fatboy Slim and Imelda Marcos Hit the Disco

walls of what we would do Off-Broadway at the Public. We did all of our staged platforms and confined ourselves to that in a very DIY way as we road-tested the design and the evolution of how the platforms moved for very little money over a couple of weekends.” Thus, *Here Lies Love* was officially on its way to becoming a Broadway marvel.

According to Korins, the path to Broadway was incredibly circuitous, in part because they needed to find a venue that could be redesigned to uphold their vision—not to mention, they had to contend with the pandemic. “This was not a project where part of the audience could stand next to each other and dance while they’re huffing and puffing,” he says. When the show was a hit Off-Broadway, everyone’s immediate thought was that it would ultimately land on Broadway. “We didn’t

know how we could possibly fit our design into a Broadway theatre with the amount of people who would have to see the show to make it a success,” Korins remembers.

There were very few theatres in which *Here Lies Love* would actually fit. “Alex and I made a deal with each other ten years ago that come hell or high water, we were going to combine and figure out a producing organization, the producers and the theatre. We did that!” says Korins. After a lot of searching, they found the Broadway Theatre, which also housed the behemoth *King Kong*, and was the appropriate size. “To the producers’ credit, they championed the original design of *Here Lies Love* and the DNA of the show, which was incredible,” says Korins.

Broadway production photos by Billy Bustamante, Matthew Murphy, and Evan Zimmerman

“One of the things that’s also great about David’s design is that we did not knock down walls or bore holes through the ceiling of the theatre,” says Timbers of the massive production that has more than thirty scenic moves that involve a tremendous amount of reconfiguring. “Seats have been pulled out and carefully stored, there is nothing that we’ve done that is destructive to the theatre itself.”

Conrad Ricamora, who has been playing Ninoy Aquino (a leader of the opposition party during the Marcos administration), since the Public Theater production in 2013, has enjoyed experiencing the many incarnations of the show. “I think the elements around the storytelling—the projections, the sound design, etc.—have become clearer and sharper,” he says. “I remember when projections were rarely used in theatre and now the technology around the storytelling has really improved. They can do remarkable things and *Here Lies Love* showcases that.”

After working on the immersive Van Gogh experience and

feels relevant in this moment.”

As part of the first all-Filipino cast, Ricamora proudly considers his reasons for continuing to work on *Here Lies Love* throughout its journey to Broadway. “It is such an important story about the pitfalls of following an idol or idolizing anyone, especially a politician who has the ability to steal from their citizens and set self-serving policies,” he says. “If I can be a part of that message I will always come back to it.” Many audiences know very little about Imelda Marcos and her regime, so Ricamora recognizes the importance of bringing awareness as well. “Since the 2016 election, we’ve seen how precarious our own democracy is. Also, the fact that Imelda’s son is now president of the Philippines makes it more important that we not forget this history so that it doesn’t repeat itself.”

Korins understands that *Here Lies Love*’s powerful messages even resonate differently since the Off-Broadway production in 2013. “The fact that Bongbong Marcos is president of the Phil-



Love] really asks all of us as actors to commit to the people we are portraying more. We are a part of the audience so there is no hiding or faking it because we are literally face to face with them.”

People who have the shared experience of seeing *Here Lies Love* frequently ask the same question: “Where did you sit?” Audiences are flocking to see the show more than once, vying for different perspectives each time. “It’s like a Rorschach test of how people think they want to experience it,” describes Korins.

Andrew Defrin, a theatre directing major at Fordham University, immediately knew that he had to

THE SHOW IS ULTIMATELY ABOUT THE FRAGILITY OF DEMOCRACY, AND IT’S A CAUTIONARY TALE OF WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU GET SEDUCED BY DICTATORS AND WHAT THAT FEELS LIKE.



an immersive Disney experience, Korins is easily able to compare *Here Lies Love*’s presentation to that of another, well, minor hit. “*Phantom of the Opera* signified a massive seismic shift in the theatrical landscape when it came to New York. I think *Here Lies Love* also signifies a pretty major direction that theatre and theatergoers are going in with regard to immersion. Everyone is looking for more powerful, poignant ways to experience storytelling and to story-tell.”

Korins describes *Here Lies Love* as history-making for a number of reasons. “We did not invent immersive theatre, but we did invent environmental theatre,” he says. “In a lot of ways, it is going to become a seminal theatre-going experience for people. It’s introducing them to a piece of history that I don’t think they’re even aware of, but it’s incredibly meaningful and super poignant right now. The show is ultimately about the fragility of democracy, and it’s a cautionary tale of what happens when you get seduced by dictators and what that feels like. It

ippines again, and the Marcos’ are back in power, that is a crazy, extraordinary bizarre turn of historical events, and it really makes the show a zeitgeist moment on stage,” he says.

The audience feels *Here Lies Love*’s impact in a number of ways. In some moments, *Here Lies Love* casts the audience as rioters, as people who are at election rallies, as people who are at a funeral, and as people who are at a wedding. “It’s not, however, audience participation,” says Korins, with a reminder that audiences get to choose how to experience the show, whether seated or standing. “It really is pretty darn epic. People have never had the experience of standing up and having the scenery literally move around you, and it is powerful.”

Timbers recalls the complexity of Broadway previews, when

his team worked to make sure audiences were getting a full experience from all seating options. “We constantly re-staged,” he says. “Every day in previews we would pick three musical numbers out of the 26, and we would restage those numbers to embrace the mezzanine and the side galleries.” Incrementally, every day made the show better for audiences sitting in all sections, as the theatre is loosely in the round. “If you saw the show at the first preview versus the final preview, it was drastically different. Everyone was like, ‘We were not expecting to work this hard!’” Timbers says, laughing.

“Preview performances are always about big changes and re-staging and re-writing,” says Ricamora, whose Aquino, the leader of the opposition party during the Marcos administration, has some of the most emotionally devastating moments in the show. “It’s thrilling and terrifying. [*Here Lies*

see *Here Lies Love* a second time after enjoying it from the rear mezzanine. “So much action happens in the mezzanine!” he says. “Seeing the show through different viewpoints gives it entirely new meaning at each performance.” Defrin watched the standing audience members and realized how much fun they were having, so he purchased another ticket. “When I was standing, I felt like I was in a nightclub. You’re dancing, up close, intimate with the actors, and it was a truly insane experience!”

“When I see a piece of theatre I want to be transported, whether that’s something like *Moulin Rouge*, where you walk in the doors and you’re in 1900s Paris in this experiential nightclub, or somewhere else,” says Timbers, who also transformed the Winter Garden Theatre for *Beetlejuice*. “I get excited about leaving the everyday and going somewhere else. I also love when the audience is acknowledged as a participant in the drama. I like to know I’m part of the collective storytelling. Those are all of the things *Here Lies Love* celebrates. It’s looking at a provocative topic and political theatre through a pop music video lens. I hope that for other people *Here Lies Love* feels like having a conversation with not only what’s happening in the political world today, but also the visual and music world.”

“I feel like there’s never a real sense of urgency to see something,” says Korins when considering the state of theatre. “People wait and see. What’s happening at the Broadway Theatre is incredibly special. There is an urgency to this that I want people to take seriously. More than any show I have ever worked on, the word of mouth is extraordinary. When you walk out of that theatre, there is no qualifier.”*

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