



Performance!

The SAA Performing Arts Roundtable encourages the exchange of information on historical and contemporary documentation of music, dance, theater, motion pictures, and other performance media.

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PERFORMING ARTS ROUNDTABLE

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The Accidental Archivist: Cataloging the Martin Pakledinaz Collection

An Interview with Costumer/Archivist Valerie Marcus Ramshur by Tiffany Nixon

Valerie Marcus Ramshur is a costume designer in New York City. As an associate of Martin Pakledinaz, Valerie was involved with Martin during the last year of his life and was instrumental in preparing his estate. Roundabout Theatre Company's archivist Tiffany Nixon spoke with Valerie about working with the iconic Pakledinaz and the archiving process involved in organizing his collection and nearly 4,000 costume sketches.

Millie's "Gimme Gimme" costume for *Thoroughly Modern Millie* (2002), Marquis Theatre, Broadway

Today is December 12, 2013, and I'm here with Valerie Marcus Ramshur. Thanks for coming to talk about Martin. Would you introduce yourself, some background on your work with Martin, and the archival work you undertook toward the end of his life?

I'm a costume designer as well as an associate costume designer in New York City. I first met Martin Pakledinaz in 1998. He was a professor of mine at NYU's Graduate Program for Design for Stage and Film. Several years later when I graduated, I went to work with him in his studio for one year—it was a terrible year! Martin could be tricky to work for. One moment he was demanding, berating, and frustrating. The next moment warm, funny, and encouraging. It was [an] extremely intense environment and high stakes, high-pressure work that could reduce one to tears. However, in the midst of this emotional turmoil, it was also one of the greatest years because he was truly a design genius. Being in his presence, one was allowed to glimpse the depth of the craft. One learned theatre design on a very deep practical level. Ranging from fabric swatching, sketch rendering, garment fittings, and tailoring. One witnessed the master at work in the art of working with actors in a fitting—the discovery of character development. Nobody analyzed scripts like he did. He was constantly questioning and collaborating with everyone on the projects, from the director and the creative team all the way down to craftspeople and everyone in between. On a purely artistic level, working with him was like another year of graduate school. Grueling but deeply fulfilling.

After that year, we stayed very good friends. I went on to develop my own work as a designer and assist other designers, but he was very kind to me. When I was pregnant with my son and unable to run around town,



he would hire me to do special research projects on productions. I was able sit in one place and research in his amazing studio library or online, or as I call it “turning over stones”—we remained friends throughout the years.

In 2011, Martin was diagnosed with brain cancer. He was in the midst of chemotherapy and had had two surgeries in an eight-month time span. I was called in to be a theatrical project manager—to basically take care of the studio and the production teams on the myriad of work going on all at once. In the sixteen months Martin had from diagnosis to death, he worked on five Broadway shows, two operas, a ballet, and a film. There was a huge amount of work to be done within a very busy studio. He had an amazing studio crew of dedicated and loyal assistants, but not many

folks outside the studio and a very small circle of friends knew what was going on. I realized that I was also brought in to take care of Martin and quickly added the title of personal assistant and caretaker to my title. For nearly eight months we shuttled between chemotherapy, physical therapy, doctor’s appointments, and creating the costumes for these productions. We travelled to San Francisco for technical rehearsals on San Francisco Ballet’s production of *Don Quixote*. We had several opening nights and award season events to attend—while finishing the Broadway production of *Nice Work If You Can Get It*, which turned out to be his last show.

Did Martin know that *Nice Work...* would be his last?



Penelope at Spanish Party for *The Coconuts* (1989), Arena Stage, Washington, D.C.

No, he didn’t. He remained optimistic. He really did have an incredible amount of hope and humor. He thought at least another year. Martin was always someone who could do several jobs at once, but it became very clear where he could only do two jobs and even that second job was one too many. He just wanted to keep on doing “the work.” The hope was that he would last through 2012, but he died the summer of 2012. He had been nominated for a Tony and Drama Desk for *Nice Work*, and we were just trying to get him through awards season. Once Tony night passed, Martin started hospice the following day and died three weeks later. Only at that point [starting hospice care] were we finally able to tell people how sick Martin actually was. People were very surprised because they didn’t know how sick he was and actually even all of us were surprised, as we



Naraboth in *Salome* (1995), Santa Fe Opera

hadn't processed what his sickness meant. I suppose we all held out an incredible amount of hope. In the meantime, while this was happening, we started the process of cleaning out his apartment and studio.

Did Martin have resource/reference materials spread throughout the apartment as well as the studio?

No, his home was a home—there were no work materials there. There might have been one pad of paper and some pencils but nothing else—it was all at the studio. We had moved him to a new apartment closer to his studio so he could walk there. Every day he would walk to the studio, which was absolutely filled with research materials,

picture collections, books, tons of art work...

And his studio was located on 39th Street up until the end of his life?

Yes, but a few months before he passed away we had moved into a smaller office at the Tricorne costume shop to work on both *Chaplin* and the national tour of *Anything Goes*. The task of cleaning out the "big" studio was an incredible journey through his life and career. That I was blessed to clean out the studio with him there. Martin would lie on the couch, and I would show him various items and get his opinion as to what should happen with the various items. He had vintage garments, jewelry, fabrics, and an incredible collection of books, and it was a process of who got what. Vintage jewelry and accessories went to Helen Uffner Vintage Clothing, an incredible vintage rental house, an archive in and of itself of period garments. Many garments and jewelry went to NYU where Martin had taught. A huge number of books went to NYU and TDF costume collection to start a research library.

Was Martin thinking in terms of his legacy at this point, or was he just interested in giving back to the community, knowing there would be people who would appreciate and use the items?

I don't think that Martin fully understood his legacy or fully realized his contribution to our national performing arts. Community was extremely important to Martin; there was the theatre, dance, and opera community, of which he was so fond. There was also the community of Martin's family, friends, students, and young designers. All benefited from Martin and his constant generosity. He was always donating sketches, giving of his time to various charities and educational programs; he had so much knowledge to share up to the end. He was incredibly generous with his experiences and information, in a way that a lot of designers simply aren't. That's what made him a great teacher. He didn't start out as a good teacher, but he definitely became one. He was

passionate about letting the next generation in on the “secrets” of the craft.

Martin kept everything from his early college days through his last productions. He kept every opening night gift (which went to the Broadway Cares Equity Fights AIDS flea market auction), his correspondence, playbills, and most of his sketches. I learned later that he had nearly 4,000 sketches. They were in the back of his loft collecting dust. He had a portfolio that never got opened and never updated his resume. He got to a point where everyone knew who he was, [was] hired without showing his portfolio, and then, when the project was over, he would place the show binder on the shelf with the rest of the productions and move on to the next project.

I know when I met him and borrowed sketches from the Roundabout Theatre shows, he pulled off the folders and rifled through the sketches—he wasn’t precious about them.

No, the sketches weren’t precious at all. He gave away so many sketches over the years to Broadway Cares auctions, various actors, directors, and choreographers. He often gifted sketches to our community of costume makers and craftspeople, those who made the garments. He was always saying, “No one is going to want those (the sketches), do whatever with them, just make sure they don’t end up in the garbage—actually, no, go ahead and throw them away!” He never seemed to have had an attachment. It is important to note with designers that it is very easy ... [to] fall in love with their own work. When that happens, the sketch takes on preciousness and becomes this sacred document you cannot rework or change. Conversely, one can treat the sketch like the working document it is. Like a recipe card...

What a great metaphor.

I often think costume sketches at their best are recipe cards—you know: two yards of silk, three yards of pearls...it is like following a recipe or a good map on the journey of the production. It is what we have in costume design the tool to aid in the evolution of character and

story. I think Martin felt that way, too. So, the funny part is that when Martin passed away, I was left with nearly 4,000 “recipes,” but I soon realized they had transformed into precious pieces of art! I sat on them like a mother hen wondering what I should do with them. None of them had been cataloged, nothing had been scanned. There was never time for that. Martin would not have paid someone to inventory sketches when their time would be better-spent swatching or shopping shows. The honor was left to me to work with his family [to] figure out what to do with his amazing collection.

Martin had left me on salary for six months to close up the studio and to help his family set up the estate. I started first by creating a resume, which took a month and a half. There was no complete resume and to be frank even now I’m not sure I have a complete resume for him. I created the resume so that I could better understand the sketches I was working with.



English Lord in *The Pirate Queen* (2007), Hilton Theatre and Ford Center for the Performing Arts, Broadway



Portrait of Martin Pakledinaz

How did you build the resume? Were there legacy documents to use?

Well, I became a bit of a data detective. I had a few old files with out-of-date resumes and bios from the first twenty years of his career that I could piece together. I also found various Internet databases helpful such as [Playbill Vault](#) and the [Lortel Archives](#). Additionally, I relied on the growing number of cultural institutions that now have functioning online archives. So for instance, I knew that he designed *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as a ballet, opera, and a play, but the challenge was in figuring out which was which. The sketch file would just be labeled "Midsummer," and through process of elimination and knowing various subtle design choices that would have to be made to fit the genre that the piece was performed in, I was able to determine shows. So my design experience and my growing archival passion were working overtime.

So there were no additional documents with the sketches to help with identification?

No, and not all sketches were even labeled! So for the next six months, I felt like Nancy Drew. I had a picture of Martin pinned to the bulletin board in the office, and I would "talk" with him. Martin would "tell" me that I needed to brush up on my opera, or I had to think harder to remember my ballets. I went a little insane with those 4,000 sketches. The extraordinary part was that these sketches went back to his undergraduate work at Wayne State University in Michigan to his final sketches for *Nice Work*—and everything in between. The collection is not complete by any means—not everything is there and not all shows are complete—but to see one designer's huge body of work, to see how his rendering technique had changed, how his approach to a production through his sketches had developed over the years was a real revelation. In many ways it was like another year of graduate studies—studying Martin Pakledinaz.

I feel so lucky to have worked with this collection. This designer who was fearless in his need to constantly question the work

and dig deeper every time. As a student it was inspiring, as a fellow designer it was exciting. When I see these sketches, I wonder how they all came from one man's mind. He was the master of ballpoint pen. To me, some of the most "valuable" sketches—and not from a monetary standpoint—are the simple ballpoint sketches. Some that come to mind are *The Duchess of Malfi* that he did at the Guthrie in the 1980s, they are just ballpoint pen and a bit of color—they are just breathtaking. He had a mastery of the art, but it wasn't something that came easily for him—he struggled with artwork—so the fact that he was less attached to them was interesting. He pored over them—staying up late at night, holidays and weekends just drawing and drawing—and he could feel at times quite insecure about them.

When you were going through these sketches, you were creating a spreadsheet or inventory of the items?

Yes, once I had the working resume, I was able then to break into genres—Broadway, Off-Broadway, regional, dance, opera—and then listed the productions and how many color and black and white sketches were present. I started scanning the color sketches, and then we had the estate appraised.

What was that process?

It was fascinating. The appraiser took my paperwork, and we worked in the same room for a week—he counted, did some mysterious calculations, and would ask me information about leading actors and productions, and to the best of my knowledge I provided that information for him. We had different terminology for sketches—for instance, he would refer to a black and white sketch as an "unpainted sketch"—because he was approaching the collection from [the] viewpoint of a certain resale market. But I knew that the black and white sketches were generally never meant to be painted as Martin would simply take the sketch to the costume shop and pick out fabric—the sketch didn't need to be painted because the fabric was used instead.

After his death, did you hear from theatre repositories with an interest in the collection?

The family estate got more calls. I got a few but not as many as I thought. There were legal issues that needed to be cleaned up and now, a year and half later, much of the physical estate is being sold.

Your understanding and connection to these objects as artwork has prompted an interest in archives and special collections?

As we cleaned out the big studio, we had hundreds of production “bibles.” We call them bibles because they contain all the essential information that brings a production to life. We had so many of the bibles we didn’t know what to do with them, so we gave them to the New York Public Library’s Billy Rose Theatre

Collection. A year later, did I learn how valuable the bibles were when everyone started asking me what I had done with the bibles!

What started to happen was I became an accidental archivist. I came to realize there is a lot of

magic in these sketches, documents and garments. The spell was cast. I don’t know if it was working for months with all those sketches and talking to a dead man, but the magical spell was cast! I am fascinated by, have become completely absorbed in, what it means to become an archivist and how to create special collections. I feel so strongly about [the] need

to preserve our theatre design history and bridge the divide between the practitioners and the academics. It seemed after meeting people in academia, in special collections, and meeting with collectors in my community of designers, there is a gap. We as practitioners would love to get our materials in the hands of interested people, and they in turn want to get their hands on our work, but there is no common dialog. We’re too busy creating the work that “archiving” is unheard of, and when you do have down time between projects, there are so many other commitments with one’s time, the sketches just go into the closet or underneath your bed...

For me, I have this need, drive, call it what you will, to find my place in the already blossoming performing arts archives community and explore what I can offer from my unique perspective—it’s exciting.



It is very exciting! It is such a natural marriage of two worlds—designers and archivists working together to fill those obvious gaps. Once a show comes down, a designer working with his/her archivist would have a very clear idea of the scope of the artistic body of work.

Salome’s Slave in *Salome* (1995), Santa Fe Opera

As designers we already spend a huge amount of our time researching. Research and digital detective work have always been my favorite part of the job. The

research, the artwork, the story telling—all of these elements are so compelling in the design process. The gift—if there is a gift to be found in this very sad experience for me personally and the huge loss to our theatre design community—has been to find new ways of looking at our work while exploring new ways to preserve the work we do.