

Arts in Mind
Steve Coleman: Making Theater Magic in Mill Valley
Part 1 of 2

By Suz Lipman

If you've been in Mill Valley even a short while, chances are you've seen Steve Coleman's artwork. Steve grew up here, attended Tam High, and now, from his studio at the 142 Throckmorton Theatre, designs and creates sets for the Marin Theater Company, the Mill Valley Middle School Drama Department, Pied Piper Productions, Curtain Theater (Shakespeare in Old Mill Park), the Ross Valley Players, 142 Throckmorton, and more. He also creates miniatures and other art pieces, like his whimsical "Mole Opera", which has been displayed at the Mill Valley Public Library. Steve received a Milley award in 2002.

Upon entering Steve's studio, one is engulfed in a world of gilded clocks, baroque Italian paintings, Balinese puppets, rococo set pieces, palm fronds, work tools, book-lined shelves, a filled china cabinet, work surfaces, and signage. Sculptures stare out; A realistic donkey's head rests on a chair. It is clearly the space of someone who has spent his career synthesizing various influences and thoughtfully going about the task of creating magic for the stage. I recently asked him some questions.

What have been some of your influences?

The deepest influence, in terms of color and pattern, and using lavishness and gold, comes from having lived in India when I was little. We lived in Madras, which specialized in textiles, and I remember the open markets and the colors and the spices and the thousands of acres of beautiful textiles. We came back when I was about 7 ½. Much later I got drawn into European and Western painting and sculpture, especially Italian Renaissance and Baroque. After a trip to Italy, I began to study art history. Although I took art in high school, I never studied formally beyond that. And, of course, a lot of my formal sets, say for the Marin Theater Company, are not Baroque at all, but non-representational and modern. I'll do whatever fits the show.

How did you get started in set design?

I started with miniatures, which I've been doing since I was a kid. My brother and I used to make villages and cities and animal characters in the garden, out of the adobe from the soil. We would make years of civilization, and then everything would wash away each winter. The idea to make things out of earth and clay came from India, too. I've also always liked animal characters, especially rodents. My dad (a reporter for the IJ) used to make little characters out of clay and he would make up stories about them.

I was selling models and miniatures to pay my rent, when someone asked me if I had ever thought of doing set design. I realized then that set design would combine everything I was interested in – history, literature, design, color, painting, and sculpting. In addition, there is the storytelling. The set enhances the story, and also tells it to the people who inhabit that set. From there, I studied acting to learn about theater from the inside. I wanted to know how it worked -- not just technically, but philosophically. I then got involved in an ensemble theater group in the city.

How did you start working in children's theater?

While I was working with Marin Theater Company, I got involved with Sharon Boucher and Pied Piper Productions (children's theater in Mill Valley). I've always wanted to treat children's theater the same way I do adult theater. As a kid, what touched me was when I saw a production with credibility on all levels. In India, I saw a Russian puppet company. The puppets were as big as I was. They were so real, and you could tell the actors believed in the characters. The production had tremendous integrity. To this day I can still remember it. That's the kind of thing I want to create so that the children have something to remember their whole lives, even if they never do theater again. They should have something that supports them in their performances, a background that makes the imaginary place something that's out of the ordinary.

What are some challenges in your work?

In adult drama, the sets are usually minimal, yet they must say a lot without intruding. Children's theater presents an opportunity to go back into my childhood and experience what I loved – what touched my imagination and made me want to enter into the world of the play. I'm still trying to reach for that, still trying to stimulate my own imagination.

Scenery is supposed to be subordinate to the play, but there's got to be a life that's going on onstage. The audience should wonder what's behind a door. This is especially challenging when you only have two feet of depth. Many of the theaters I worked in in the city were tiny black-box spaces where you had to stretch the imagination and pull the audience into believing that this world went into imaginary space.

How do you typically prepare for a show?

Months before a show, I'll begin doing research and immersing myself in the world of the play. I jot elements down in a sketchbook. Instead of reading the paper first thing in the morning, I read poetry and other writing that has a visual presence. That puts me in the right frame of mind to liberate my imagination. The visual end product starts with the word, so I read a lot of literature and stories.

What's next for you?

I'm preparing for a show of my work in 142 Throckmorton. Also at 142 Throckmorton, I've been creating panels for the side walls of the auditorium. I like the intellectual

challenge of doing something I don't do every day. I'm also doing the sets for the Pied Piper Productions' "Aladdin".

A retrospective of Steve Coleman's work runs through December in the lobby of the 142 Throckmorton Theater. "Aladdin" runs Fri.-Sun., December 8-10, at the Tam Valley Community Center. For information, call 383-1370.

"Arts in Mind" is a series from Kiddo! that explores arts and arts education. Suz Lipman is a writer and a parent in the Mill Valley School District.