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THEATER

'Bridges' brings a Redwood City set designer back home

By Sam Hurwitt
Correspondent

Set designer Wilson Chin is passionate about building "Bridges" — "The Bridges of Madison County," that is.

After getting a bachelor's degree in architecture from UC Berkeley and a Master of Fine Arts in set design from Yale School of Drama, the Redwood City native has gone on to a successful career designing sets in New York and at regional theaters and opera houses around the country, including the 2010 Broadway show "Next Fall." But he got his start at TheatreWorks Silicon Valley, and his current gig designing the company's production of "The Bridges of Madison County" at Mountain View Center for the Performing Arts came out of an impromptu conversation with company artistic director Robert Kelley a few years back.

"I live in New York, and I was seeing a show, and randomly Kelley was there watching it as well," Chin recalls. "I've worked at TheatreWorks a few times before. I did a play called 'Tokyo Fish Story' and a play called 'The Lake Effect.' I saw Kelley and I said, 'If you ever happen to do "The Bridges of Madison County," I want to do it.' I don't know why I said it; it was pretty random. But like two years later, he called me up to do it."

Chin didn't have a particular scenic concept in his head when he said that. He was just really jazzed about playwright Marsha Norman and songwriter Jason Robert Brown's adaptation of the novel by Robert James Waller, which won a 2014 Tony Award for best musical score.

"I just love the show so much," Chin says. "It's great music; the story is really compelling. We had all seen the original production, which was just one of the most moving, emotional experiences you could have in a theater, and to be in the room with that again was something I really wanted to be a part of."

Weathered-looking wooden rafters loom over the stage in Chin's TheatreWorks set, framing the action almost like a photograph.



KEVIN BERNE — THEATREWORKS SILICON VALLEY

Francesca (played by Joan Hess, center) performs in "The Bridges of Madison County," which has an evocative set designed by Redwood City native Wilson Chin.

'THE BRIDGES OF MADISON COUNTY'

Through: April 29

Where: Mountain View Center for the Performing Arts, 500 Castro St.

Tickets: \$40-\$100; 650-463-1960, www.theatreworks.org

"We approached it like a memory play," he says. "The play spans many years, and there's all these songs in which Francesca sings about her past in Italy and her first years in America. So we wanted to approach it all like it was this very dreamlike space in which scenes flow into each other mysteriously. The whole space feels a little bit like the bridge. We go to the bridge a few times in the show, and when we do go there you realize that you've been at the bridge the whole time. The world of the play is these wooden rafters that evoke Iowa, that evoke a farmhouse, but in particular they evoke being at that bridge again, which is the place where they first fell in love."

Another draw for Chin is that he

sees each return to TheatreWorks as a homecoming.

"Some of the first shows I saw were at TheatreWorks," he says. "They did this production of 'Once on This Island' in the mid-'90s, when I was in high school. That was a pivotal show for me to see. I fell in love with theater by seeing it at TheatreWorks, and eventually I started working at TheatreWorks. I was a follow spot operator when I was in high school and college. And I would work at other community theaters, like Palo Alto Players and Peninsula Center Stage."

It was passion for Chin until it became something more.

"I spent a summer at Williamstown in Massachusetts, where they have a theater festival, and I saw for the first time that there's actually all these people who do it for a living and it's a real career. But I still feel as though I'm just doing theater for fun. I just happen to make a living doing it. I feel like I just get to have fun all day."

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