



Long, William Ivey (b. ca 1947)

by Linda Rapp

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.
Entry Copyright © 2006 glbtq, Inc.
Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>

William Ivey Long is among the most prolific and respected of contemporary costume designers in America. His extensive list of credits includes an astounding fifty productions on Broadway and many more for other stages. He has also designed for films.

His brilliantly conceived and constructed costumes have earned him the admiration of actors and directors, and have brought him numerous honors, including Tony, Maharam, Drama Desk, and Outer Critics Circle Awards.

Early Life and Education

"Theater was the family, the family passion," stated Long, who was born around 1947. It was also the family home for the first three years of Long's life: his parents were living in a dressing room at the Raleigh (North Carolina) Little Theater, where his father, William Ivey Long, Sr., was then working as a technical director, and his mother, Mary Wood Long, as an actor and costume designer.

Long's father later became a professor at Winthrop University in Rock Hill, South Carolina, and founded the college's theater department. He was also a playwright. Long's mother had a career as a high school drama teacher.

Long's two younger siblings also pursued careers related to theater: his brother, Robert, is a theater architect, and his sister, Laura, works with a troupe founded by their mother that brings the mentally challenged into the theater.

It was inevitable that theater would figure in Long's life as a child. His first venture in costume design came when, as a small boy, he made an Elizabethan collar for his dog, a "black-and-white mutt" named Manteo. His theatrical career began at the age of eight, when he appeared in Paul Green's *The Lost Colony*, about the early settlement of North Carolina. As a teen, Long worked as a technical director and propmaster in regional theater.

Despite the family connection to theater and his own experience, Long planned to become a historian. He earned a bachelor's degree in history from the College of William and Mary in 1969. He credits his instructors there for teaching him how to conduct historical research, which he would later use to advantage in creating appropriate costumes for shows.

Long pursued graduate studies in art history at the University of North Carolina. While there, he met visiting professor Betty Smith, the author of *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, who recognized that Long had not found a calling as an art historian and suggested that he apply to the design program at the Yale School of Drama, where she had been a playwriting student.

Family Disappointment



Costumes designed by William Ivey Long for a 2008 production of Paul Green's *The Lost Colony*. Photograph by Walter Gresham. Image appears under the GNU Free Documentation License v. 1.2 or above.

Long was delighted to be accepted at Yale, but his parents saw his decision to pursue a different career as "quitting." "They were very disappointed in me," he said.

Long stated in a 2006 interview, "I'm guilty because I haven't made everyone happy and everything perfect," but admitted the impossibility of that in view of his home situation. He compared himself to Tennessee Williams, saying, "I feel like I'm related to him. Southern. Dysfunctional family."

Of his parents' reaction to his being gay, he stated that "it was never mentioned." Neither, apparently, was it accepted, since he went on to note that his mother on her deathbed in 1998 had said, "I still hope you find some nice girl and settle down and have children." He further commented, sardonically, "Not that this seared itself into my soul or anything."

Despite the chilly reception of his parents to his acknowledgment of his homosexuality, Long has always been open with his friends and equally candid with the people he encountered in his professional life.

Yale and New York

At Yale Long studied set design under Ming Cho Lee, whom he called "my great teacher" because he was a person who "sparked all the thinking, all the questioning, all the doubting" necessary to succeed as a creative artist.

During his years at Yale, Long befriended a number of other students who would also go on to highly successful careers in the arts. His housemates included Meryl Streep and Sigourney Weaver. He became close to playwrights Wendy Wasserstein, Chris Durang, Albert Innaurato, and Paul Rudnick.

After his graduation in 1975 Long moved to New York City and into the Chelsea Hotel, which was home to couturier Charles James, whom Long described as "a living master." "For three intense years" Long worked as an unpaid apprentice to James, from whom he learned that "clothing is architectural . . . it's construction, just different construction methods."

When James died in 1978, Long needed a job. He crafted designer dolls that Wasserstein and Rudnick helped him sell. Another friend from Yale, Karen Schulz, the set designer for a 1978 revival of Nikolai Gogol's *The Inspector General*, suggested that Long be hired to do costume designs for the production, and his brilliant career was launched.

Costume Designer

In 1979 Long's work on Walton Jones's *The 1940s Radio Hour* earned him a Drama Desk Award nomination, the first of many accolades that he would receive.

Long believes that a costume should be "invisible"--"so appropriate that you see the person and not the costume." He has stated that "the worst thing on earth you can do as a costume designer is have the costumes wear the person."

To that end, he studies the script and compiles reference materials in preparation for meetings with the director and sometimes also with the playwright. He next makes sketches to offer for their approval.

When he showed his ideas for the over 300 costumes needed for Marc Shaiman and Scott Wittman's *Hairspray* (2002), John Waters, on whose 1988 film the musical was based, stated that "it was the most professional, beautifully drawn, well-prepared presentation I've ever seen. When he presented the

drawings, everyone was moaning in ecstasy."

Long gives meticulous attention to crafting every garment, scouring costume shops and fabric houses for the right materials, and also observing the actors who will be wearing the clothes. By studying their body language both during rehearsals and while they are not performing, he is able to create costumes that are precisely appropriate for the character and the person playing the role.

Long does three fittings for each of the costumes--of which there are often hundreds--in a show. He first works with the fabric on a dummy, then on the actor, and finally he has a second fitting with the actor to tailor the costume exactly.

Color is a crucial element in Long's designs. In his Broadway debut, Maury Yates's *Nine* (1982), he used all black costumes that contrasted with the white set. The stark color scheme, he said, "heightened the presentational stylization of the piece and made the whole thing feel like a film noir." The striking apparel earned him his first Tony Award for Best Costume Design and also the Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Costume Design.

Long faced a different challenge with the "Technicolor" set of Frank Loesser's *Guys and Dolls* (1992). He put leading man Nathan Lane in black so that "you [could] find the main character in front." He used bright colors--including orange and magenta--to make secondary characters "disappear" into the vivid set.

For the second act, he used similar but darker costumes "to pull the intensity down" for a night scene. The difference was successful but so subtle that, he noted with amusement, even some of his friends did not realize that there were two sets of garments.

In other productions his costumes have been anything but subtle. For Stephen Sondheim's *Frogs* (2004), Alex Witchel noted, Long "gave the chorus girls in Hell headdresses that flamed up like cigarette lighters."

Long's costumes have set the style and mood in a wide variety of productions, including Sir Noël Coward's *Private Lives* (1992), John Kander, Fred Ebb, and Bob Fosse's *Chicago* (1996), Kander and Ebb's *Cabaret* (1998), Meredith Willson's *The Music Man* (2000), Jerry Herman's *La Cage aux Folles* (2004), and Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire* (2005).

For the wit, creativity, and artistry of his costumes, Long has won four Tony Awards and five Drama Desk Awards and has earned other nominations for both on numerous occasions.

Long was chosen by the National Theatre Conference as its Person of the Year in 2000 and was honored with the Legend of Fashion Award by the Art Institute of Chicago in 2003. He was inducted into the Theater Hall of Fame in January 2006. He had far exceeded the five Broadway credits required for consideration: he had fifty, with more projects in the works.

As well as doing costumes for New York productions, Long often outfits touring companies. In one year, he noted, he costumed the troupes for an American tour of *Cabaret* and for tours of *Chicago* in Australia, Vienna, Stockholm, and Holland.

Long has made few forays into Hollywood, but among them was Susan Stroman's film version of Mel Brooks's *The Producers* (2005), which called for a daunting 7,000 costumes.

He has also designed for a wide range of artists, from the singers in Leonard Bernstein's opera *A Quiet Place* (1986) to dancers in various productions by the New York City Ballet, as well as Mick Jagger for the Rolling Stones' Steel Wheels tour (1989). His spectacular costumes enhanced the dazzling performances of

magicians Siegfried and Roy at the Mirage Hotel in Las Vegas.

In partnership with Wendy Wasserstein, Long planned to launch a line of ready-to-wear fashions for women. Although their 2002 show was well received and brought orders from retailers including Neiman Marcus, Bergdorf Goodman, and Saks Fifth Avenue, they abandoned the enterprise when the coordination of manufacturing and distribution proved to be impractical. Long continues to design for private clients.

Architectural Restoration and Preservation

Despite the great demands of his design work, Long also finds time for his passion, architectural restoration and preservation. He has restored twelve houses and is the president of the Eastern Seaboard Trust, a not-for-profit organization dedicated to historic preservation and economic development in the small town of Seaboard, North Carolina, where one of his Long ancestors settled in 1676 and the Ivey family is also well established.

Long owns five houses in Seaboard, as well as a farm, a storefront building, two grain silos, and an abandoned public school that his father once attended.

In 2001 Long brought in a team of students of urban planning at North Carolina Central University to canvass the residents about their opinions regarding the development of the town. He then had graduate students from the College of Design at North Carolina State University lead public discussions of the findings.

The community chose to turn the storefront into a doctor's clinic. The North Carolina State students volunteered to return to refurbish it.

When hiring vendors for his projects, Long insists on giving jobs to local firms. He has been working on the restoration of the school building to provide Seaboard residents with a gymnasium, classrooms, and an auditorium. He has turned an old smokehouse into a popular gathering place, a pool hall called the Swinging Ham.

For his consistent support of his home state, Long received the Roanoke Island Historical Association's Morrison Award in 1992 and the North Carolina Award in 2004.

Long has decorated his houses with furniture owned by his family since the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and since 1998 he has hosted a picnic in Seaboard for the Long and Ivey families and their friends that now brings over six hundred people together. Invitations to the event are highly prized.

In 2006 Long stated, "It's encouraging to have [the family's] things around. I have a great sense of history, which I learned from them. I think that's why in the South, you hold onto things. Because they remind you." In his case, the reminders are a mixture of pride and pain, with pride winning the day.

Bachelor and Activist

Long has never found a life partner. He calls himself "a bachelor in the old sense of the word, meaning I flirt, I have many close relationships, but then I come home and like to read my book."

His friend playwright Paul Rudnick has remarked, "I think to a certain extent that the world is William's significant other. That's why the projects keep expanding. You wonder if there's a sadness or a lack there, but it's hard to imagine him being satisfied with one person, one Tony Award, one town. But he's not that old, so you never know. I would love to see who that match might be--but they're probably buried in Westminster Abbey."

Long's candor about his homosexuality itself amounts to a kind of quiet activism. He has participated in Live Out Loud's series of panel discussions that give glbtq youth the opportunity to speak with "accomplished LGBT people who are passionate about their life's work, who are making a difference in the community, and who are interested in sharing their inspirational stories."

In 2002, Long was named one of *Out Magazine's* 100 most influential gay people and gay allies.

Bibliography

LaRue, Michelle. "William Ivey Long, Invisible Man." *Backstage* 33.3. (January 17, 1992): 19-20.

"NC State University News Clips for July 12-14, 2003." <http://www.ncsu.edu/news/dailyclips/0703/071403.htm>

Pinard, Melissa V. "A Cut Above: Costume Designer William Ivey Long '69 Dresses Broadway." *William & Mary* (Spring/Summer 2003): 42-45.

Rothstein, Mervyn. "A Life in the Theatre: William Ivey Long." *Playbill* (July 1, 2004). <http://www.playbill.com/features/article/print/87124.html>

"William Ivey Long's Costume Designs for the Broadway Musical Guys and Dolls." *Fashion Finds* (June 1999). <http://www.fashionfinds.com/june/pages/william-ivey-long-1.htm>

Wilson, Eric. "So Long to Ivey Long Collection." *WWD* (April 8, 2002): 2.

Witchel, Alex. "William Ivey Long Keeps His Clothes On." *New York Times* (January 29, 2006): 6, 34.

About the Author

Linda Rapp teaches French and Spanish at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. She freelances as a writer, tutor, and translator. She is Assistant to the General Editor of www.glbtq.com.