

UC San Diego

UC San Diego Electronic Theses and Dissertations

Title

Navigating Career Paths: A Comparison of Theatre Industries in the U.S. and Taiwan for An Emerging Scenic Designer

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/42s531f3>

Author

Su, Tzu Yu

Publication Date

2025

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SAN DIEGO

Navigating Career Paths:
A Comparison of Theatre Industries in the U.S. and Taiwan for An Emerging Scenic Designer

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree Master of Fine Arts

in

Theatre and Dance (Design)

by

Tzu Yu Su

Committee in charge:

Professor Robert Brill, Chair
Professor Danielle Dean
Professor Mark Guirguis
Professor Victoria A Petrovich

2025

©

Tzu Yu Su, 2025

All rights reserved.

THESIS APPROVAL PAGE

The Thesis of Tzu Yu Su is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically.

University of California San Diego

2025

DEDICATION

Robert Brill

Daniel Capiro, Quinn Becker, Jacob Sampson, Jeni Cheung, Jenny Lee, Ryan Lewis,

Vicki Erbe, Danny Griego, Mike Doyle, Joel Britt, Andrea Ryan,

Laura Manning, Michael Francis, Joel De La Torre, Arlene Banuelos

Hui Chen, Yi-Hsuan (Ant) Ma, Yu-Hsuan Chen

TABLE OF CONTENTS

THESIS APPROVAL PAGE	iii
DEDICATION	iv
TABLE OF CONTENTS	v
ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS	vi
INTRODUCTION	1
Chapter 1 BRIDGING BORDERS: A COMPARATIVE LOOK AT U.S. AND TAIWAN THEATRE	3
United States	3
Taiwan	4
Chapter 2 VOICES OF EXPERIENCE: INSIGHTS FROM THE THEATRE JOURNEY	6
Hui Chen: “Returning to Roots: Scenic Design Journey in Taiwan.”	6
Yi-Husan (Ant) Ma: “A Journey Through American Theatre: Navigating the Stage in New York”	8
Yu-Hsuan Chen: “From Stage to Screen: Evolution from Theatre to Film Design.”	10
Chapter 3 CURTAIN CALL: FINAL INSIGHTS AND FUTURE SELF DIRECTIONS	13
REFERENCES	15

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Navigating Career Paths:
A Comparison of Theatre Industries in the U.S. and Taiwan for A Emerging Scenic Designer

by

Tzu Yu Su

Master of Fine Arts in Theatre and Dance (Design)

University of California San Diego, 2025

Professor Robert Brill, Chair

Starting my career in Taiwan, I gained four years of experience working as a freelance scenic designer and as an associate/assistant scenic designer in the Taiwanese theatre field. Seeking to expand my knowledge, I pursued an M.F.A. at University of California, San Diego. Now, as I approach the completion of my program, I find myself at a crossroads. As an emerging

designer, I am faced with a vital question regarding my future career path. Which country will offer the best opportunities for me to continue my journey as a scenic designer?

By analyzing the differences between the theatre fields in the United States and Taiwan, alongside the insights of scenic designers who have firsthand experiences, this paper seeks to provide a deeper understanding of the key factors that will influence my own decision-making process. Ultimately, it aims to guide me—at this pivotal decisive point—in shaping my career path as a scenic designer.

INTRODUCTION

A scenic designer in the theatre plays a crucial role in shaping the storytelling experience by crafting the physical environment that enhances the narrative and emotional tone of the production. Through a thoughtful use of space, texture, color and materials, scenic designers bring a story to life, creating a visual landscape that not only supports the script “where the story starts” but also puts the audience in the world of the production.

Building a career in scenic design typically begins with starting as an assistant or associate and then designing for a smaller project, gradually working up to a larger production. As you gain experience and expand your portfolio, you continuously promote your work and refine your skills, positioning yourself for greater opportunities. By staying prepared and open to new challenges, you are ready to seize the opportunities that come to you, advancing your career step by step.

I came to the United States to pursue my M.F.A. degree, building on four years of freelance scenic design experience in the Taiwan theatre field. As an international student approaching the completion of my program, I now face a pivotal decision about my future path: “Deciding where to take my career next, stay in the United States or return to my hometown Taiwan?” The theatre industry in Taiwan is smaller, offering fewer opportunities for growth and advancement. However, staying in Taiwan would keep me close to my family and loved ones. On the other hand, remaining in the U.S. would provide more opportunities as a designer, but would also mean being far from home. Additionally, as a non-U.S. resident freelance scenic designer, the visa requirement must also be considered. With so much uncertainty at this moment, I am eager to figure out which path is best for my future.

This paper explores the differences between the theatre industries in the United States and Taiwan. It examines how cultural, financial, and professional factors can shape the trajectory of a scenic designer's career. I reach out to the designers who have walked through a similar path. Through an in-depth analysis of the experiences of three interviewees—each originally from Taiwan and holding an M.F.A. in scenic design from the U.S. institutions—I aim to uncover the difficulties and opportunities they have encountered in both countries. Ultimately, this analysis will provide valuable insights into the factors influencing my own decision-making process, offering a deeper understanding of how these elements can shape the career path of a scenic designer.

Chapter 1 BRIDGING BORDERS:

A COMPARATIVE LOOK AT U.S. AND TAIWAN THEATRE

The theatre fields in the United States and Taiwan present distinct differences in structure, scale and artistic approach, creating both challenges and opportunities for freelance scenic designers seeking to establish their careers. These differences, shaped by each country's unique cultural, historical, and societal contexts, significantly influence performance styles, production methods, and audience engagement. As a result, freelance scenic designers face unique challenges in both regions, navigating diverse expectations and creative landscapes in their pursuit of success. In this section, I will explore the advantages and challenges of starting a career in both the U.S. and Taiwan's theatre industries.

United States

The United States is home to a vast and diverse population, creating a large and dynamic theatre market. From the iconic Broadway in New York City to regional theatres in cities like Washington DC, Chicago, San Francisco and Los Angeles, the country offers a wide range of theatrical experiences. In New York City alone, there are 41 Broadway¹ theatres and around 60 Off-Broadway² theatres (New York Theatre Guide, No date). The scale of the U.S. theatre industry translates into numerous productions each year, reaching a wide range of local and global audiences while providing a wealth of professional opportunities for the designers.

Demand by theatre-goers is relatively strong than in Taiwan and the commercial success of these

¹ A theatre is classed as a Broadway theatre if it has 500 seats or more and is geographically located between 41st Street and 54th Street and between 6th and 8th Avenues in Manhattan. The only theatre that does not follow this rule is the Vivian Beaumont Theatre, located at Lincoln Center by West 65th Street (New York Theatre Guide, No date).

² A theatre is classed as an Off-Broadway theatre if it has a capacity of 100-499 seats (New York Theatre Guide, No date).

productions attract financial backing, ensuring robust funding for new projects. Moreover, the thriving theatre scene in the U.S. fosters an environment where designers can collaborate and learn from others in the field. This richness of creativity and innovation not only offers stability but also presents significant potential for career growth and advancement.

However, despite these advantages, there are also challenges to consider. A large market also brings intense competition. Standing out in such a saturated industry can be challenging, especially in major cities like New York, where thousands of theatre artists are competing for the same opportunities. Furthermore, living costs in major theatre cities like New York, Chicago, Los Angeles are high. These cities also present significant financial barriers, making theatre production quite costly. Larger budgets are required to cover these higher expenses and labor costs.

Taiwan

The theatre community in Taiwan is smaller in scale compared to the U.S., the number of productions, audience size and financial support may be more limited. Taking the capital city, Taipei, as an example, based on my own experience about the venues I knew or I have worked in, Taipei has 16 theatres on a Broadway scale and around 20 theatres on an Off-Broadway scale. There are also regional theatres located in Taichung and Kaohsiung, which, along with Taipei, are the main three cities for the theatre performance in Taiwan.

On the other hand, the smaller field can foster a more intimate and collaborative environment. It may be easier to network, build strong and closer relationships, and work closely with local theatre companies, fostering a deeper sense of community. Additionally, the cost of living in Taiwan is generally lower than in the U.S. For example, the cost of living including rent

in Taipei, Taiwan is 64.6% lower than in New York, NY (Numbeo, No date), making it a more affordable location for personal and professional pursuits.

Considering the pros and cons mentioned above, the following interviews illustrate how these varied environments shape the role of a designer and provide valuable insights from individuals with firsthand experience in both theatre worlds.

Chapter 2 VOICES OF EXPERIENCE:
INSIGHTS FROM THE THEATRE JOURNEY

In this chapter, I focus on three individual designers, each offering a unique viewpoint. I first met both Hui Chen and Yi-Hsuan (Ant) Ma during the production of *Mulan: The Musical* in Taiwan in 2016. At that time, Hui had just returned to Taiwan after spending several years abroad, marking the beginning of her pursuit in the field. Ant, an emerging scenic designer close to my age who began building her career in New York a few years ago. Her journey is particularly insightful for me, as I am just starting out in the industry. Additionally, through a mutual connection, I was introduced to Yu-Husan Chen, a designer who has worked in the U.S. theatre field for a longer period. Her greater experience provides valuable perspective. The following interviews have been translated from Taiwan Mandarin, transcribed, and edited.

Hui Chen:

“Returning to Roots: Scenic Design Journey in Taiwan.”

Hui Chen, referred to as Hui, completed her M.F.A degree in 2015 and chose to return to Taiwan to begin her career as a scenic designer.

Su: What key factors or circumstances influenced your decision to either stay in the U.S. or return to Taiwan to continue your career as a scenic designer?

Hui: I pursued my degree with a Taiwanese government fellowship for studying abroad, which requires me to return to Taiwan after graduation. At the time, I didn't consider the option of staying in the U.S. long-term.

Su: Did you have any professional experience in Taiwan before coming to the U.S.? What are the key differences you've noticed between the two countries from the perspective of a scenic designer?

Hui: I returned to Taiwan immediately after graduation, so I didn't have the chance to work in the U.S. directly. However, I can share insights into the changes in Taiwan's theatre industry, comparing the past with the present. As you mentioned, you felt that the number of plays is decreasing which based on the promo you saw on the ticketmaster-like website, you're right. Now in Taiwan, the budget for theatre has largely remained the same, but the number of dramas has decreased as more investment shifts toward musicals. Overall, the number of productions is declining, with many transitioning to longer-term tours instead of the short, limited runs that typically lasted only one or two weeks. This shift impacts how budgets are allocated, as more funds need to be directed toward touring logistics, including transportation and storage. Additionally, set designs now need to be more versatile, considering factors like size and durability to withstand the demands of travel and extended use on the road. In the meantime, productions for Taiwanese opera³ have increased, as more Taiwanese opera companies are eager to bring this traditional local performance to the theatre.

Su: What are your long-term career aspirations as a scenic designer?

Hui: I run my own company, Huidesign & Co., where I continue to work on scenic design for theatre, production design for film, as well as exhibition design, installation design, and space design.

³ The Gezaixi (Taiwanese Opera) originated around the early 20th century in Taiwan's Yilan county. It is a local form of folk opera performed in the Taiwanese language to be close to the lives and speech of the local people (Xinterra, No date).

Yi-Husan (Ant) Ma:

“A Journey Through American Theatre: Navigating the Stage in New York”

Yi-Hsuan (Ant) Ma, referred to as Ant below, earned her M.F.A degree in 2021 and decided to remain in the United States (New York City) to pursue her career in the American theatre field.

Su: What key factors or circumstances influenced your decision to either stay in the U.S. or return to Taiwan to continue your career as a scenic designer?

Ant: Due to the small size of the industry, I’m not part of the previous generation to return from abroad, when there were more opportunities. I feel that the theatre field in Taiwan has become too saturated, with too many designers, which makes it challenging to find my niche. Additionally, with the OPT⁴ visa after graduation, I saw it as an opportunity to explore whether I could build a career and establish myself in the U.S., while keeping Taiwan as a backup option.

Su: Did you have any professional experience in Taiwan before coming to the U.S.? What are the key differences you've noticed between the two countries from the perspective of a scenic designer?

Ant: I worked in Taiwan for about two years. Sometimes, designers face bias based on their age, with others assuming they lack experience. However, once you build relationships, people tend to offer support with a more personal and understanding approach. In terms of culture, the U.S. places a strong emphasis on humanity and diversity as well. Designers are respected for their areas of specialization, and their voices are heard and valued in the workplace.

⁴ The OPT (Optional Practical Training) visa is a temporary work authorization for international students in the United States who hold an F-1 visa. It allows them to work in the U.S. in a field related to their major area of study after graduation (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, No date).

Off-hours are respected, and it's rare to receive work-related emails outside of working hours. If you do, you're expected to respond during office hours.

Everything is expensive in New York City, and sometimes a bigger budget doesn't necessarily mean you can do more. For example, if you're using the same scale for a scenic design, it will cost more to build it in New York City compared to other cities, due to higher material and labor costs.

Su: How do the U.S. and Taiwan differ in the level of support they offer to scenic designers?

Ant: There are many emerging scenic designers in the U.S., especially in New York City, so you really need to promote yourself and actively reach out to the other designers, directors, and producers for job opportunities. This can be challenging, especially for introverted individuals, as the culture often involves networking through coffee chats or small talk, which can feel difficult for some.

The career path for an emerging designer is quite similar in both the U.S. and Taiwan. You typically start as an assistant or associate, then move on to smaller-budget productions, where you'll need to take on multiple roles and handle many tasks on your own.

Question: What are your long-term career aspirations as a scenic designer?

Ant: Ultimately, I plan to return to Taiwan, though I'm not sure when, as my friends and family are there. For now, I'm staying in the U.S. because of the job opportunities and my continued desire to work on larger productions.

Yu-Hsuan Chen:

“From Stage to Screen: Evolution from Theatre to Film Design.”

Yu-Husan Chen earned her M.F.A. degree in 2016. She then stayed in the United States to pursue a career in both theatre scenic design and production design in New York City for nearly five years. In 2021, she relocated to Los Angeles to focus primarily on film production design.

Su: What key factors or circumstances influenced your decision to either stay in the U.S. or return to Taiwan to continue your career as a scenic designer?

Yu-Hsuan: The theatre market in Taiwan is smaller, and after establishing connections with people I met in the U.S., I felt it would be a pity to give up what I had built. So, I decided to stay and develop my career here first to see how things unfold.

Su: Did you have any professional experience in Taiwan before coming to the U.S.? What are the key differences you've noticed between the two countries from the perspective of a scenic designer?

Yu-Hsuan: Before coming to the U.S., I worked in Taiwan for about a year. It wasn't a long period, while it was the time I spent preparing for the program. However, I can share more experiences from my time in New York City, where I lived and worked for around five years after I graduated from M.F.A degree.

In my portfolio, 80% of my work has been with female directors or non-white directors. These collaborations often go smoothly, which in turn creates more opportunities for future projects with the same people. Sometimes, when the story focuses on Asian experiences, the question of whose story is being told and who is telling it becomes crucial. As a result, companies may prefer to assemble a creative team that resonates with the story. If diverse

perspectives or the voices of Asian and minority groups are more widely represented, it would be beneficial, as it would create more employment opportunities. This creates an opportunity for someone like me, an Asian from Taiwan, to offer my unique perspective. As an emerging designer, this can also serve as an entry point to help you build your network and establish your career.

Su: How do the U.S. and Taiwan differ in the level of support they offer to scenic designers?

Yu-Hsuan: I really appreciate the vibe that New York City creates for artists. When I say I'm an artist or a designer, I never feel lonely; the entire city—and the country as a whole—supports and values the entertainment industry. In contrast, being an artist in Taiwan is not considered a mainstream career, and the support for the arts is much more limited.

Su: What motivated you to leave New York City and move to Los Angeles to start a new career path?

Yu-Hsuan: In New York, I worked both in theatre and film, but when COVID hit, both the theatre industry and many projects shut down. That's when my husband and I started to think about our long-term plans for life and career. We both want to have a child in the future, but raising a kid in New York is challenging due to the high cost of living and the income from theatre work. So, I would say financial considerations were my biggest motivation.

Having both spent several years in New York, we felt it was time for a change and a new environment. In 2021, we decided to move to Los Angeles, and I chose to focus on film as my main freelance work. Film work offers more stability and higher pay. Additionally, as a film set designer, I can manage my time more effectively, typically working from 8 am to 6 pm, which provides a better work-life balance. It's difficult to imagine having a child while working in

theatre production, especially with late-night tech rehearsals, and without any backup support, since both my parents are in Taiwan.

Su: What are your long-term career aspirations as a scenic designer?

Yu-Hsuan: My main career now focuses on film and television, with theatre being more of a side job. I still love theatre, but I've become more selective about the projects I take on—only choosing those I'm truly interested in or when I really want to work with certain people or companies.

Chapter 3 CURTAIN CALL:
FINAL INSIGHTS AND FUTURE SELF DIRECTIONS

Through my interview with Hui, I was able to satisfy my curiosity about the current state of the theatre field in Taiwan, especially after having been in the U.S. for about three years. I learned that the number of plays has decreased, with more investment shifting toward musicals. The overall number of productions is declining, and many are transitioning to longer-term tours. This shift results in fewer opportunities for scenic designers, the already smaller theatre field in Taiwan has become even more limited.

Ant's story demonstrates that visa challenges can be overcome, serving as an entry point to new opportunities. "With the OPT visa after graduation, I saw it as an opportunity to explore whether I could build a career and establish myself in the U.S., while keeping Taiwan as a backup option (Ant)." I completely agree with Ant's perspective. It feels like a new beginning, whether I decide to return to Taiwan or stay in the U.S., especially in New York City. Why not start in New York first and keep Taiwan as my backup?

Yu-Husan's story shows that working and living in New York City can be incredibly exciting and inspiring. "I really appreciate the vibe that New York City creates for artists (Yu-Hsuan)." This statement reminds me of when I visited New York City and attended the technical rehearsal for the Broadway musical production of *Hell's Kitchen*, where my mentor, Robert Brill was the scenic designer. The surrounding theatre energy in that area truly inspired me. I'd say that was the key moment when the seed was planted in my heart to stay in the U.S. The city, with its variety of productions on Broadway and Off-Broadway, as well as the countless art exhibitions, created a vibrant atmosphere that deeply resonated with me.

I won't deny that it is harder to live and find a place as an emerging designer in the U.S. The challenges of navigating the competitive landscape and dealing with the high cost of living, especially in New York City, are not easy. Additionally, being far from home means I'll miss the people and the comfort of being surrounded by familiar faces in Taiwan. However, I've carefully considered all of these factors in detail and have been preparing myself to face these challenges. Nevertheless, based on the points I mentioned above, I've decided to stay in the United States and make the move from San Diego to New York City. I'll truly miss my loved ones, but I'm excited about this new start in NYC and the opportunities it holds.

REFERENCES

“Overview of New York Theatres.” New York Theatre Guide, No date.

<https://www.newyorktheatreguide.com/info/broadway-overview#>

“Cost of Living Comparison Between New York and Taipei.” Numbeo, No date.

[https://www.numbeo.com/cost-of-living/compare_cities.jsp?country1=United+States&city1=New+York%2C+NY&country2=Taiwan&city2=Taipei#:~:text=Cost%20of%20Living%20Comparison%20Between%20New%20York%2C%20NY%20and%20Taipei&text=Do%20you%20live%20in%20New,you%20rent%20in%20both%20cities\).](https://www.numbeo.com/cost-of-living/compare_cities.jsp?country1=United+States&city1=New+York%2C+NY&country2=Taiwan&city2=Taipei#:~:text=Cost%20of%20Living%20Comparison%20Between%20New%20York%2C%20NY%20and%20Taipei&text=Do%20you%20live%20in%20New,you%20rent%20in%20both%20cities).)

“Optional Practical Training (OPT) for F-1 Students.” U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, No date.

<https://www.uscis.gov/working-in-the-united-states/students-and-exchange-visitors/optional-practical-training-opt-for-f-1-students>

“Introduction to Taiwanese Opera.” Xinterra, No date.

<https://xinterra.com/opera/taiwan-intro.html>

Yi-Hsuan (Ant) Ma. Personal interview. 1 February. 2025.

Hui Chen. Personal interview. 1 February. 2025.

Yu-Hsuan Chen. Personal interview. 25 February. 2025.