Michael Yeargan’s Sets Inspired by Giorgio de Chirico

Born in Greece in 1888, Giorgio de Chirico was an Italian artist who, in his early twenties, was influenced by Symbolist painter Arnold Böcklin and began to produce a series of dream-like cityscapes drawn from actual places where de Chirico had lived. These were soon shown in Paris to wide acclaim by artists like Pablo Picasso, and caused de Chirico to found the Metaphysical movement, characterized by imaginative spaces with what historian Matthew Gale identifies as “illusionistic one-point perspective.”

Art critic Robert Hughes describes de Chirico’s city as, “one of the capitals of the modernist imagination. It is a fantasy town, a state of mind, signifying alienation, dreaming and loss... The ‘illusionist’ painters among them, Dali, Ernst, Tanguy, and Magritte all came out of early de Chirico, and in the 1920s George Grosz and other German painters used de Chirican motifs to express their vision of an estranged urban world.”

De Chirico’s juxtaposition of the ordinary and the fantastic suited set designer Michael Yeargan’s concept of the piece, so he used the artist’s odd perspectives as a basis for his set design. He states: “In the most simplistic terms, Rigoletto is about a father’s curse that fulfills itself. De Chirico’s paintings have a surreal quality that suggests a world of impending doom—that unsettling, airless feeling one gets before a huge storm is about to unleash itself. So when this production was first conceived, we unapologetically used elements from those paintings to satisfy the specific needs of the libretto, while at the same time preserving that feeling of an impending storm—when the father’s curse is fulfilled.”