



Myrna COLLEY-LEE

MYRNA COLLEY-LEE IS THE KIND OF PERSON, WHOM, AFTER YOU'VE SPENT FIVE MINUTES WITH HER, YOU WANT TO SPEND FIVE HOURS MORE. AND IN THAT FIVE HOURS THAT YOU WILL HOPE TO SPEND, NEVER WOULD YOU GET A GLIMPSE OF ANYTHING OTHER THAN HER INFECTIOUS AND CHARISMATIC SMILE. SHE'S BEAUTIFUL, GRACIOUS, QUICK-WITTED AND HAS A LAUGH TO MAKE THE TOUGHEST NUT CRACK A GRIN. WHAT MORE COULD YOU WANT?

by *Clare Lee Arnold*

Well, how about this. She's an artist, a businesswoman and a designer. Not to mention an art director, set designer and costume designer for film and television, a philanthropist serving on several boards, and she's held faculty positions at multiple teaching institutions. She is a world traveler, a giving friend, and the proud mother of a literary and theatrical daughter. Oh, and Morgan Freeman is lucky enough to have been married to her for the last 23 years.

A self-proclaimed "college brat," the 63-year-old designer lived in college towns where her father taught all over the country. She even spent time in Liberia, West Africa, before returning to her native North Carolina (she was born in Hamlet, N.C.) after contracting a case of malaria. The time in Africa as a youth sparked her appreciation for the primitive quality and the wide variety of art the enormous continent has to offer, and her interest in art and design began to thrive.

"Every space that is presented to me, whether it is a home, office or a stage, is an opportunity to create something unique and beautiful. It's what being an artist is all about."

Colley-Lee's company, GladRags Designs, which recently launched its new Web site, www.gladragsdesigns.com, specializes in theatrical design, but additionally offers custom design services for homes, businesses and wardrobe consulting.

"My interior designs are based on my knowledge of set design," says Colley-Lee, "so my interiors are very dramatic and theatrical." Indeed. Located on a former cotton patch in the Mississippi Delta, her Mediterranean-style home is not architecture one typically sees in the South. The inside is a mixture of European antiques with African and modern design elements, scattered with various objects from her family's travels. In addition to her home in Mississippi, she has also designed a home in the Caribbean, and recently designed the commercial interior for Revelations Entertainment, a production company in Los Angeles.

Colley-Lee's first love, however, is theatre. She received a B.E.A. in art education from the Women's College of the University of North Carolina, and a M.F.A. in Scenic and Costume Design from Temple University. While living in New York City as a young college graduate, her then-roommate started a theatre company. She started off making posters for the company, then painting a few flats and sewing a few costumes. As they say, one thing led to another. Now she is an internationally renowned costume designer with a string of impressive shows under her belt. From the Shakespeare Festival to the Black Theatre Festival; from New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Rome, Italy and back home to the South, Myrna has designed for dozens of

theatre productions.

"The exciting thing about theatre is the constant design stimulus," shares Colley-Lee. "Each play is different. Even if I happen to have designed costumes for the same play before, the director and actors are different, making it an entirely new project. This makes for the perfect career for a highly A.D.D. person!"

And just to name a few of those projects: Colley-Lee was chief costume designer for the CableACE Award-winning production of Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night*, the premiere of the opera X: Life and Times of Malcolm X performed in Philadelphia, Pa., and *Mother*, a project performed at the Crossroads Theatre Company in New Brunswick, N.J., and commissioned by Bill Cosby.

Colley-Lee is assisted by GladRags Designs Office Manager, Benjamin Douglas. Benjamin was working at the Performing Arts Center at Delta State University in

Cleveland, Miss., when he first worked with her during a production. Graduating with a Bachelor of Arts, Benjamin works with her on a variety of theatre and design projects. "Working with Myrna is like a box of chocolates," laughs Benjamin. "You never know what you're going to get, but it's all good!"

Recently, Colley-Lee designed the Off-Broadway production of *Bronx Little*; the St. Louis Black Repertory Theater assembly of *Ain't Misbehavin'* and is slated to work on the independent film project *The Reprise* this year. An exhibition of her work entitled "GladRags: Sketches, Swatches and Costume Designs" exhibited at the Mississippi Museum of Art in 2006, and is currently touring the state, appearing in affiliate museums.

Outside the busy life of the theatre and GladRags Designs, Colley-Lee serves on the board of the Mississippi Arts Commission; the board of the Governor's Commission for the National Civil Rights Museum in Mississippi; and the board of the Mississippi State University Department of Art. She is a member of the Acquisitions Committee for the Mississippi Museum of Art, the steering committee of the Charleston Arts Center, and numerous philanthropic organizations for the arts, including the Ford Center for the Performing Arts at the University of Mississippi.

As she does with all areas of her life, Colley-Lee takes on each project with passion. "Every space that is presented to me, whether it is a home, office or a stage, is an opportunity to create something unique and beautiful," she reflects. "It's what being an artist is all about."