



Photo by Chara Berk Photography

Mexican-born Carmen Alatorre designs costumes for theatre productions in Vancouver.

Costume calling

Carmen Alatorre has found a career she loves as a theatre costume designer — something she says would have been more challenging in her native Mexico

By Lisa Evans

Growing up in Mexico City, Carmen Alatorre was surrounded by fabrics. Her mother's home-based sewing business meant Alatorre often spent her summers working the sewing machines. Although she actually hated sewing, Alatorre was fascinated by the variety of textiles that surrounded her and credits her childhood home with her success as a costume designer in Canada.

Although she loved the artistic potential of textiles led her to study art history in Mexico City. But it wasn't until she took a class in theatre that she found her true calling and discovered she could combine her sewing skills with her artistic flare and passion for history into one career.

Although she loved the artistic vibe that is ever-present in Mexico City, the thriving arts scene means local artists are challenged to stand out. "Mexico City has about 20 million people and the arts schools are still accepting the same amount of people that were accepted 50 years ago," says Alatorre. To get into an arts program or theatre school is a daunting task, and for those lucky enough to get accepted, they then often struggle to make a living out of their

artistic work.

Canada had always appealed to Alatorre. "I had a fascination with Canada for a long time," she admits. She visited Vancouver and fell in love with it. "It was this beautiful big place where the arts were flourishing," she says. The fact that it was one of the least cold places in Canada helped, too. The mountains of Vancouver were also incredibly inspiring. "I think that your environment affects your creativity a lot," she says. She applied and was accepted into the University of British Columbia's masters of fine arts program in theatre design.

Although she does occasionally miss the vibrant colours of Mexico City that once inspired her designs, Alatorre says the opportunity to go on a long hike and surround herself with the serene natural landscapes of British Columbia now helps her to become unblocked.

While she struggled for the first couple of years to make a living out of her chosen career, Alatorre says the potential for artists to thrive at doing what they love is much greater in Canada than in her native Mexico. "The country still gives an importance to the arts so there's funding available to artists," she says.

While studying at UBC, Alatorre made connections with professors and other students who were working in the arts community to build her network. She took on as many jobs as she could while in school to get exposed to other artists, yet she still found it difficult to get a steady lineup of gigs. Upon graduation, she took a part-time job at a box office.

Working in the box office helped her to see another side of the theatre industry. "I got to learn what the audience expected to see in a show and what they did or didn't like. It gave me a lot of perspective," she says. Eventually, Alatorre's calendar filled up with costume design gigs and she was able to leave the box office. "I now make a living just from costume design," she says, clearly proud of this accomplishment.

Learning to adapt to the conservative aesthetic of Canadian theatre was also a challenge. "Canadian theatre is very Anglo-Saxon. You have to follow a certain design style, reproducing what has been done in the past. In Mexico, we have the great writers from Spain, but we also have a lot of experimental theatre; companies that have almost no funding so designers get to be very daring in their designs," explains Alatorre.

Although not always possible, Alatorre enjoys pushing the boundaries and mixing elements of her Mexican aesthetic with her designs. "You have to listen to what the play is trying to say and if there are opportunities to do something outside the box then you go with it in conjunction with the director," she says. ✨



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