

Lincoln Center – South Pacific – Part 2

Revista Backstage – June 2008



I wanted to meet with the show's lighting designer. And because the show was still in previews I was able to sit down and talk with Donald Holder for a while. I had just a few questions for him which are listed below with his answers.



1. What is your main area of expertise in Lighting? Theatre-Dance-Concerts-Events?

The bulk of my work has been in the theatre, but I've also designed a lot of dance, opera, a bit of television and a few concert tours.

2. What are some of the most common challenges you face as a lighting designer?

The most frequent challenge I encounter is an ever-decreasing amount of time available to actually create the design in the theatre. This is particularly prevalent on Broadway, where labor is very expensive, so time is at a premium. We're often expected to produce a great deal with little or no opportunity to explore an idea with our collaborators, or to even consider an alternate approach. Given the pressure of the clock, it's crucial that you prepare as much as possible in advance, and have a very clear point of view about the light: scene-by-scene, or in some cases moment-by-moment. New musicals present even greater challenges, because you're often expected to adapt your design almost instantly to the complicated changes that are put into a show on almost a daily basis during the preview period.

Another challenge I frequently encounter is the negotiation for space in the overhead hang for lighting positions. Commercial productions are getting larger and more complex, yet the theatres in which they are produced were designed many decades ago for a different (more 2-dimensional) scenic approach. This makes it imperative that every inch of space be accounted for, and there's constant pressure for the lighting designer to work with less and less room. Automated lighting has certainly helped: on Broadway today, the high premium for overhead space has made automated lighting an essential part of every production.

3. What is the most useful development you've witnessed in technology that's applicable to lighting design?

The most important overall technological development has been the introduction of digital versus analog data transmission. This has vastly improved the capabilities of dimming and control systems, so it's now possible to create a fluid and completely seamless movement of light: something that was very difficult to accomplish when I entered the profession full-time in 1986. Digital data transmission has paved the way for the development and control of extremely sophisticated automated lighting fixtures, which have become an invaluable part of the lighting designer's toolbox. And finally, digital transmission led to the emergence of the internet and the world wide web, which has vastly improved our

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ability to communicate, research ideas, and maintain a high level of productivity no matter what part of the world we happen to be in.

4. What decision making tools do you use to create your designs? Concept-Graphic Image-POV?

Several thorough readings of the play or musical and concept meetings with the director and design colleagues are of course essential. I am often inspired by studying and absorbing the set and costume designer's visual research, and depending on the play, I may do some research of my own. For both, The Lion King and South Pacific, for example, I felt I needed to immerse myself in the world of the Serengeti and the South Pacific, respectively to get a sense of the light, the air, the weather, and most importantly the skies, as both shows feature spectacular skylines that required a detailed and specific treatment, lighting-wise.

At the conclusion of the meetings and research, I usually have a pretty good idea regarding how the lighting fits into the production's overall point of view. Using the scenic design as a guide, I then create a detailed list of lighting ideas and a series of rough magic sheets that define the lighting design in schematic terms.

Working in plan and sectional views, I determine the location and trim heights of all lighting positions and then begin to layout the lighting for the show (lamp-by-lamp) based on this schematic list.

I create the rough plot for every show using pencil and paper, drawing sections through the focus plane of every lamp, calculating coverage using a protractor. I find that I acquire a certain intimacy with the space and make many discoveries during this process that further inform and enrich the design. The completed rough drawings are then converted into a Vectorworks file by one of my assistants.

5. What piece of gear in production is your workhorse of late?

The Source4 Ellipsoidal Reflector Spotlight is of course the workhorse, but I've also been quite enamored lately with the light from the Arri 4kw HMI Fresnel. It's been incredibly useful for making bold, single source statements in large spaces (The Magic Flute: Metropolitan Opera, South Pacific and The Times They Are A Changin', to name a few), and it produces saturated color washes with a purity and intensity unequalled by any other automated or conventional fixture.

In terms of automated lighting, I've been using the VL1000AS luminaire quite frequently: although there are some significant limitations with this fixture, I feel they are more than out-weighed by the quality, intensity and color rendering of the light, the programmable shutters, zoom optics, and most importantly the extremely quiet operation (virtually no fan noise). This makes them uniquely suitable for plays and book musicals (like South Pacific) that don't feature heavy sound reinforcement which would normally overcome the high ambient noise levels produced by a multitude of cooling fans.

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6. What is the most challenging project you have ever designed and why?

I'd have to say Movin' Out was the most challenging project I ever designed. Unlike a musical or play, there was no clear narrative (or text of any kind, beyond the lyrics to Billy Joel's music), and the piece often operated on an emotional level. It required a lighting approach that moved fluidly between story ballet, rock concert, and abstract performance art. The scenic design created a spare and kinetic emotional space, but it was conceived as an environment where the light defined the style, told the story, and created a frame of reference so the audience could connect with the characters and their journey. I was essentially presented with a blank canvas within which an entire world had to be created. On one level, I found the challenge to be exciting and exhilarating. On another level (especially early-on in the process) I found it to be terrifying.

7. What idea did you have that looked good on paper but not in reality?

There have been many throughout my career. One I recall was my first attempt at creating the idea of a single source using multiple fixtures (sunlight/moonlight) on several very high walls in a small theatre with limited lighting positions (A Streetcar Named Desire: Studio 54 in New York). I had painstakingly calculated the perfect position of each source so that every wall was grazed from exactly the same angle, but the end result was pretty unsuccessful. In the middle of my struggles, the worklights were turned on at the start of a crew break, and I noticed that 2 PAR64's hung on a high fly rail actually grazed the walls exactly as I had imagined. I immediately plugged them into dimmers, and they became my new wall lighting idea. This was a VERY lucky accident.

8. What inspires you?

I find the work of the impressionists, such as Degas, Monet, Corot, John Singer Sargent, Edward Hopper, etc and the Dutch Masters (Renoir, Vermeer, Van Gogh) to be incredibly moving and revelatory. When I spend time with their work, I feel myself re-energized creatively, and inspired to create light onstage with the same sensitivity, clarity, and integrity that these great artists have rendered on the canvas.

9. What advice would you give beginning lighting designers?

Become the most well-rounded, well-read, articulate person you can possibly be. Pursue a liberal arts education in the best college or university you can. Read books, newspapers, go to the cinema, museums, theatre, anywhere that you can expand your exposure to the arts and culture. A theatre artist must have a frame of reference and a body of knowledge in art, literature, theatre, opera, history, music, film, etc from which to draw in order to create work that somehow is a mirror of the human condition. Above all, a lighting designer must be an excellent communicator, and must be able to describe and defend artistic choices, and distill what he or she reads into a clear and concise conceptual approach. The more

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fluent you are in the world of art and literature the more effective communicator and designer you will become.

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Stage Automation



South Pacific's stage has a turntable which is computer controlled by a system developed by Production Resources Group. This system controls the flying lighting positions and backstage masking as well. The system is so sophisticated that it can be set to stop within 1/10th of an inch of its desired position. And the settings can be as complex as the show requires. And it offers the flexibility and functionality designed into all PRG's automation packages.

The front end of the system uses a touch screen which controls the winches and motors. Show cueing can be accomplished in either velocity or timed based mode. Winch parameters, real time status and auto follow operations are standard screen offerings. The show system also has a manual control panel in the event of a computer system failure.

Audio



Sound is not one of my specialties. So I had a conversation with sound engineer, Marc Salzberg about what he's using in this production. And below is the list of equipment currently being used.

Yamaha PM5D console for the performers' microphones

Yamaha DSP5D console for the musicians in the pit.

Q-Lab sound effects on 2 Mac systems

Sennheiser mics are used on Sennheiser 5212 wireless packs

D&B D12 Amplifiers

D&B C-Series monitors

Q-1's used for under balcony fill

EAW's JF80 for surround fill

Infra-red audience headset system

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South Pacific uses 2 audio consoles, an analog and a digital board connected to each other by a KADAC J-type custom midi interface. This permits the analog board to control the digital board; making it easier for one operator to run the show from the front of house.

Lincoln Center is “Home” to the arts. It has something for everyone. And it also has a program that could easily be duplicated in Brazil. Each year Lincoln Center presents free to the public, concert & performance events that last an entire month. “Lincoln Center Out-of-Doors” takes on a different theme every year. But whether it is a hot evening of Salsa, a cool Jazz jam session or a chamber orchestra, Damrosch Park is the place to be in August.

I had an opportunity to design and manage an event for the “Out-of-Doors” Series. It was a great experience. It was one of my first *tgcn* budgets too! At that time I was told that my budget was mine to use anyway I saw fit. I had been working in theatre for about 6 years so I knew stagehands who would work within my budget. And I also knew of several scene shops where I could have a design built. Within a few weeks I had set, lights & stagehands for my event. I acted as my own electrician on this project. And except for one lighting cue that I totally ruined, all the performances went as planned.

Since the Out-of-Doors Series, I have been back to Lincoln Center several times at the Metropolitan Opera and New York State Theatre. There were also some benefit performances where I was stage manager. But these stories are for another article.

In future articles I plan to bring you my impressions of the 2008 Broadway Master Classes that take place in NYC. This year some of the featured designers are Jules Fisher and his long time design partner, Peggy Eisenhauer. I may have some other surprises as well.

And I'll have an interview with Brian “Pappy” Clark. He's a Rock & Roll lighting director who I met during my years working at DisneyWorld in Orlando.

This is my promise to you, the Brazilian entertainment professional, I will continue to find the latest technologies and pass it along to you. And I will make my email address available to you so you can ask me questions or suggest areas that you want me to write about.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'D. ...' with a stylized flourish.

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