

## Broadway's Master Lighting Classes – July 2008

Today I am at New York University's Skirball Center for the 14<sup>th</sup> annual Broadway Master Lighting Classes. These lecture demonstrations showcase the very best of Broadway design talent in a week of non-stop creative insights, stories, critiques and visual images. Anyone who is seriously pursuing a career in professional theatre must attend one of these events at least once in their life. And if you do, you will come back just to experience that feeling again.

The list of designers at this year's event were:

Kevin Adams, who has designed lighting for Broadway, Off Broadway, regional theatre, opera, pop concerts and solo artists across the US. His Broadway credits include Spring Awakening, Take Me Out, John Leguizamo's Sexaholix, Eve Ensler's The Good Body, Hedda Gabler, A Class Act, and An Almost Holy Picture, a solo play featuring Kevin Bacon.

Christopher Akerlind won a Tony, Drama Desk, Hewes Design, and Outer Critics Circle Award for his lighting design of The Light In the Piazza. His current Broadway projects include Shining City and Awake and Sing! Akerlind has designed more than 400 productions at theatre and opera companies across the country and around the world.

Howell Binkley's current designs on Broadway are Lovemusik, Jersey Boys, and Avenue Q. He co-founded The Parsons Dance Company for which he has designed over sixty pieces.

Peggy Eisenhauer has been collaborating for over 20 years with her partner and world-renowned lighting designer, Jules Fisher. They received the Tony Award for Stephen Sondheim's Assassins, and for Savion Glover's Bring in 'da Noise, Bring in 'da Funk.

Beverly Emmons has designed for Broadway, Off-Broadway, regional theatre, dance, and opera in the US and abroad. Her Broadway credits include Annie Get Your Gun, Jekyll & Hyde, Stepping Out, The Elephant Man, and The Dresser.

Jules Fisher is the Broadway Lighting Master Class creative consultant. He has lit over 200 Broadway and off-Broadway shows, as well as film, ballet, opera, television, and rock-and-roll concert tours. He has received 18 Tony nominations and won 8 Tony awards for Lighting Design.

Donald Holder has been nominated for five Tony Awards and won the Tony for Best Lighting in 1998 for Disney's The Lion King. His work is also being seen at Lincoln Center with the revival of South Pacific. Other shows he has designed include Cyrano de Bergerac with Kevin Kline, Movin' Out, The Times They Are A-Changin', A Streetcar Named Desire, and Prelude To A Kiss.

Vivien Leone has an impressive roster of productions both as lighting designer and as an associate LD, including the Broadway productions

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of Little Shop of Horrors, Fosse, Titanic, as well as the revivals of Into The Woods and Follies.

Brian MacDevitt is a prolific, award-winning lighting designer for theatrical productions. He has worked extensively on Broadway and Off Broadway, as well as touring, regional theatre, and Industrial productions.

Clifton Taylor has created lighting, projection, and scenic designs for theater, dance and opera companies around the world. His Broadway credits include: Jay Johnson: The Two and Only, Frozen and Hot Feet.

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The people listed above are truly the most talented designers and creative artists working in entertainment today. They have much to offer us in their talks and demonstrations. And I will talk to you about just a few of them today.

Each day of the Master Classes begin promptly at 9am. We take a meal break around Noon where lunch is provided. We are then introduced to manufacturers' representatives from many internationally know companies (Selecon, ETC, Rosco, Lee Filters, Lycian, Martin, Vari\*Lite and many others). They are available to talk to you about their newest lighting equipment and materials. And of course they have many technical flyers that you can take with you. After meeting with these representatives we return to the lecture hall where the next speaker fills us with more ideas of how to approach lighting design. The day ends at 5pm for the lectures but on at least one evening you receive a ticket to see a Broadway show. The best part is that you will also get a chance to hear from the show's lighting designer the following day about how the design was accomplished.

The first day's speaker is Jules Fisher. Mr. Fisher's career spans over four decades as a lighting designer and consultant. I first saw his work on Jesus Christ Superstar on Broadway back in the early 70's when I was entering college. Since then, he and I worked together on a backer's audition that did eventually make it to Broadway but did not survive for many weeks beyond its opening night. I was the stage manager for that show. Its name was High Rollers. And the year we opened we were competing against Jelly's Last Jam and Smokey Joe's Café and so, as with so many other good shows, we closed.

Mr. Fisher will be speaking to a group of students, teachers and working professionals about his perspective on lighting design practices. As well as regaling us with past and present theatre stories, complete with PowerPoint slides.

For new designers these words should resonate with truth. "Art lies in the 'WHY' not the 'HOW'", Jules Fisher. The amount of knowledge you have about the differing types of lights, dimmers, special effects, tools, colors and technical "toys" is useful but not as important as the reasons why you chose to use them.

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He then went on to explain the uses of light in a theatrical presentation. (My comments are highlighted.)

- To communicate you must convey your message visually. The audience must feel the affect of lighting without it being separate from the play.

Communicating your message means more than just turning on a light and seeing an actor and some scenery.

- Remember that the audience thinks it sees something but it is really just what you reveal to them that they see.

If you light the entire stage, the audience wouldn't know where to look or even what might be important to look at. You and the director decide what the audience should see.

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- Another job of the lighting designer is to evoke emotion. Look for a color, intensity or quality of light that feels real to you. Leave the mundane world behind. Theatre is a place to insight awe and wonder.

How could you have an intimate, romantic moment on a stage with bright, cold lighting? You can't really. So how you light a scene needs to belong to that moment.

- Designing is a deeply personal experience; for the designer as well as the audience. Make it interesting. Not just in the acting area but the overall stage image.

There is no right way to light the stage but there are better and worse ways. Don't be afraid of either. Just do what feels right to you. You are the artist. Paint with your lights.

- Provide a variety to your lighting. For example, you might have a backlight that differs in some fashion from your front light.

The balance between light and shadow is like the balance of musical notes to the silence between them. Without the silence it would all be just so much noise.

- Light the shadows because they reveal form. Color them. While lighting the actor is primary, lighting the negative spaces will add texture to your work.

For example, if there are shadows on some curtains in your show try lighting them from an opposite direction with a color that highlights them. Or maybe try using a gobo to add texture to the curtain.

- On a more practical level you need to light using all the qualities and dimensions that are in the physical world. A designer does not merely light in 3 dimensions but in four. How could a cue happen if not for time? It therefore is inseparable from the other three. And light has

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four properties as well. They are intensity, color, form and movement. Movement can be any change in the first three properties and it can also be the physical movement of the light itself like a Vari\*Light.

Remember if it were not for your lighting, your audience would be sitting in the dark watching radio.

- Some questions to ask yourself are: “What is the intention of the play?”, “What do I do to accomplish my design?” and “What do I do to accomplish my director’s ideas?”

Your answers to the above questions are important because they give you the “why” to your choice of “how” your design will be created by you.

The first day passed too quickly. I haven’t taken so many notes on practical and conceptual lighting design since I was in college. And what I have written in this article are merely the highlights. I am sure that I will write more about this event in future issues.

On the morning of day two, the speaker at the Master Classes was Mr. Fisher’s long-time collaborator, Peggy Eisenhauer.

Creating eye-pleasing and fluid lighting for a musical is one thing but reinventing it for the film version of Dream Girls was a challenge that only the team of Fisher and Eisenhauer could handle. From the detailed rhythmic cues to calling the lighting for each film “take”, Peggy showed off her considerable talents and abilities. She combined her musical training and sense of timing with her ability to call those cues over and over again, from one take to another, until the director was satisfied with each scene. In fact, as part of her lecture she called those cues “live” to a DVD moment of the movie so that we as the audience could see, hear and understand the complexity of what she had created.

Then Peggy explained to the audience her views on the importance of properly structuring a lighting cue. (Once again my comments are highlighted.)

- The timing structure of a play can be accomplished by using the rhythm of music or words as written by the playwright and/or composer. As a designer you need to determine what the essential timing structure is, in order to create your design.

Is the play a fast paced comedy or a tragic drama from classical theatre? Or perhaps it is a singer in a concert that you are lighting. It is in the words and ideas of the script or song that you find the answers.

- Theatre is a collaborative art form. As a result, you have to be able to communicate your ideas to directors, colleagues and technicians using every method at your disposal.

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For example, you could try acting like a musical conductor to convey a sense of time. Do whatever it takes to communicate how a transition in a play should happen. Then explain “why”.

- As designer for a musical listen to the style of the music to help you create your lighting design. But don't forget to listen to similar music from other shows. It just might trigger your creative side in ways you hadn't thought of before.

A designer is a student. There is always more to learn.

- Unless you have worked with the director before you will also need to gain his or her confidence. One way to accomplish this is to complete the opening cues of a show as quickly as possible. The first five to ten minutes of any production will set the tone. Remember that the technical rehearsal is the time when all the show elements; actor, dancer, stage manager, conductor, musicians and crew come together for the first time. The more prepared you are, the less likely it is that you will be the cause of a delay in the creating process.

You can never be too prepared to do your job. If you have a clear idea of what you want to accomplish and you have taken the time to write down your intentions on paper, you will not fail.

After the Master Classes were completed I got an opportunity to meet with Mr. Fisher for a tour of his studio. And because of his kind permission I have big news to tell you about a new musical coming to Broadway in February of 2009 to a theatre yet to be named. Ms. Dolly Parton has written a musical version of the film Nine to Five. And not only are Jules Fisher & Peggy Eisenhauer doing the lighting design but I got an opportunity to see the first draft of the light plot. I can't give out too many details but since I am only telling you, I think it will be alright to talk about some of the new technology that will be used in this production.

The most impressive of which is the use of a product from Element Labs called Stealth. It is a modular LED system that can project color, graphics and video signal on an impressive scale. Its other feature is that it acts like a scrim so it can be used in front of a cyclorama to add texture to it. You could have a blue cyclorama with an accent of green coming from the Stealth LED wall. This adds a whole new dimension to the stage as it can be a static color, a moving color or effect, a video or a combination of any of these elements. These can then be used to draw the audience's attention to or from one area of the stage to another. Other ideas for using Stealth include triggering it from selected instruments in the orchestra.

Other than that I can tell you that this high technology show will use moving lights over the stage and in the wings while adopting a more traditional use of ellipsoidal spotlights from the front of house box booms and balcony rail positions. The side panels on stage will contain moving lights and PARs that shoot through a lattice to complete the visual look of the show. And these same panels will be computer controlled to fly in and out to allow scenery to be moved on and off the stage.

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I will be devoting the next issue of Revista Backstage to explain how modern designers are keeping track of their lighting using computer programs and digital photos. This will be a pictorial article with some explanatory comments by me.

Another "Master" of the Master Classes is Vivien Leone. She has a visual sense and extraordinary ability to create paperwork that tracks every detail about a show's lights, colors, templates and effects. I will talk more about her work next month.

After three concentrated days of listening to articulate comments and ideas; seeing amazing imagery and meeting talented and creative individuals, I am re-energized as a designer and as a teacher.

For those who might be interested, I give a lecture/demonstration each year in Rio de Janeiro. In it, I talk about the history of lighting from the Greek stage to present day theatre and TV. You cannot know how lighting is done today if you don't know where and how it began. And you can be sure that the ideas and images that were imparted to me at this year's Broadway Lighting Master Classes will be incorporated in my next series of lectures along with many of the actual slides they used.

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

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