Contents

Introduction _006

John Lee Beatty  
set design _008

Howell Binkley  
lighting design _022

John Conklin  
set and costume design _050

Beverly Emmons  
lighting design _040

Susan Hilferty  
costume design _054

Constance Hoffman  
costume design _070

Ming Cho Lee  
set design _084

Adrienne Lobel  
set design _104

Santo Loquasto  
set and costume design _116

Jennifer Tipton  
lighting design _128

George Troup  
set design _142

Robert Wilson  
set and lighting design _158

Acknowledgments _170

Index _172
Introduction

There can be nothing more exciting than the act of interpreting and creating a world. You take an empty space and shine a light on it; suddenly a form or shape is born. You look out the window and there are thousands of people in different costumes, walking up and down and across the street. You sit down in a café or restaurant or you look up at the sky at the universe and stars, and you find a world carved out and specifically designed. Regardless of the nature of that world’s creation—natural or made by human hand—and the time of its creation, your eyes meet space, time, and a world of design wherever they look.

The stage of the theater or opera is not that different. Imagination works as a facility of the human mind to carve, shape, and sculpt spaces, shapes, and forms. This creation process and its final realization are what is commonly referred to as design. The world of design in the theater and opera is vast and endless. For every piece, each designer will have a different approach, philosophy, style, and process. As a given designer brings his or her own voice and area of expertise to this book, the different designers have undergone since their early days, some muse on the radical changes they think? How do they actualize their visions and thoughts into a three-dimensional space? And how is design taught and thought about in advanced design classes and programs?

Looking at the visual world of stage design, the top designers in the fields of set, lighting, and costume design were asked about their philosophy, their approach, and their thoughts on design. The following interviews were all based on the same structure and questions, giving each designer full rein to answer as they wished.

Each interview began with the same questions: “What is your starting point for your design?” and “What are the elements that make for a good design?” The designers were then asked to elaborate on questions such as “How would you design Hamlet?” or “Waiting for Godot.” Designers who also teach and mentor students in design were asked to explain their approach and their philosophy of design. Looking at the interviews, the reader will notice how the different designers have informed and influenced one another across the generations.

Each of the designers described their understanding, process, and approach to design, and supplemented this with anecdotes and examples to make their design world more tangible for the reader. In some cases the designers reflect on the relationship between the set, the lights, and the costumes, and how the different elements interact with one another. Some muse on the radical changes they have seen, while others illuminate the differences between working with European and American directors and theaters. Each designer brings his or her own voice and area of expertise to this book, making them vivid and approachable.

It has been an immense honor to meet these designers in person and catch a glimpse of how they work and think. In most cases the interviews quickly became a substantial exchange and encounter, where the designers freely and generously discussed the art, craft, and philosophy behind their design. I am forever grateful to all the designers interviewed in this book—John Lee Beatty, Howell Binkley, John Conklin, Beverly Emmons, Susan Hilferty, Constance Hoffman, Ming Cho Lee, Adrienne Lobel, Santo Loquasto, Jennifer Tipton, George Tsypin, and Robert Wilson—for their time and willingness to discuss their understanding of design and its process. Without their generous contribution, this book would not have been possible.

Thanks also go to the Bryd Hoffman Foundation, the Metropolitan Opera, the San Francisco Opera, and the Shakespeare Theater Company for supplying images for the book; to Ottessa Moshfegh and Simona Schwindler for their work on transcriptions; and to Alex Young for supporting the project. I also wish to thank my editor at RotoVision, Lindy Dunlop, for her assistance and guidance throughout the process; her help and advice have been invaluable.

This book is for Esther.

The goal of this book is to emphasize and highlight the primary importance of design and designers in the world of theater and opera. Anyone with a love for these arts cannot but have a natural curiosity about their design. It is design that—along with the actors—fills the space and tells the story. Shakespeare or Beckett, Mozart or Wagner, small or large, simple or complex: the space of the stage will need a design, and designers tell the story as much as actors do. Without design, directors, producers, and actors would not be able to give full shape or life to the story. In short, design is instrumental to the creation, interpretation, and staging of any piece. How then are these questions addressed? Set, costume, and light design are the bold answers, but exactly how are they thought about, designed, and implemented for the stage?

Going back to the mid-20th century, stage directors and designers have often formed a close-knit unit: Bertolt Brecht and Caspar Neher, Giorgio Strehler and Luciano Damiani, Heiner Müller and Erich Wonder are but a few. In some cases, directors are also designers: this is true of Robert Wilson. In other cases, designers are not only theater and opera designers, but also design for movies: this is true of Santo Loquasto, who is a collaborator on and designer for Woody Allen’s movies. No matter how one looks at it, all great and memorable productions of the theater and opera stage have been the result of successful collaborations with designers. Finally, beyond the stage, many designers are teachers and mentors of design at some of the top design schools; they help shape the next generation of designers. This is true of Ming Cho Lee, who is co-chair of the design department at Yale School of Drama, and Susan Hilferty, who is the chair of the design programs at Tisch School of the Arts at New York University—to name just two.

How then does design work? What is the starting point? How do designers think? How do they actualize their visions and thoughts into a three-dimensional space? And how is design taught and thought about in advanced design classes and programs?

Looking at the visual world of stage design, the top designers in the fields of set, lighting, and costume design were asked about their philosophy, their approach, and their thoughts on design. The following interviews were all based on the same structure and questions, giving each designer full rein to answer as they wished.

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Sketches often hold the essence of John Lee Beatty’s designs. Here he discusses the emotional impact of his sets, and explains how—through a series of drawings and quick sketches—he designs materialize. The model for a production too, he explains, arises from the two-dimensional drawing.

Introduction

Two essential facts come out of this interview with John Lee Beatty. The first is that he is interested in creating an emotional response with his sets among his audiences; the second is that he works best through sketches and two-dimensional representations of the plays he designs. Models are built, but only after the two-dimensional sketches—for Beatty, models are too much like toys and do not give an accurate reflection of the dimensions.

Beatty, whose sketches often reflect a three-dimensional space, also talks about the importance of a ground plan and how that plan is a significant step for him in creating the set.

Approach

In the case of Hamlet, which is a familiar classic—slightly different from getting a new play—I read the play. I read it once only for content, and then I go back and read it again for what the designer needs to do. I break it into scenes, review what each scene has in it and what I think the problems are, and any questionable activities. When you read a play, as a designer, your approach is somewhat different from that of the author. It’s a huge collaboration: you are collaborating with the author and trying to present them properly.

Even with Hamlet you have to say, “What is the best way to make this author’s goal achievable, and is there anything we can do to accentuate the positives and ease our way through the more difficult phases?” How you are going to present the ghost is clearly one of the important decisions. How do you help the actor playing the ghost not to get laughed at? How do you enable today’s audience to accept the ghost? Is there any way the set can help that presentation of the ghost to be achieved by allowing the play to go forward without people saying, “Hold it a second, this isn’t working for me?”

At a certain point, whether that’s the designer’s or director’s job becomes a big blur. A successful relationship with a director and a script and a lighting designer is a collaboration.

The set designer’s role

I would say the job description of a set designer is what does it look like? How big is it? How does it sit in a theater? Very basic questions, and sometimes after answering those three questions, your work is basically done. Hamlet is an interesting one because clearly there is a real Elsinore. I was in Elsinore once when I was eight years old, so I have preconceptions of what it looks like. Also, Shakespeare did not visit Elsinore, that we know of, so what did he think it looked like? Was he using it as a metaphor for another court that might look much more English? Who knows? There is all that to explore. And if, for preliminary research, I were to fly to Elsinore to look at it, it might be very misleading and not really go to the heart of the play at all. Perhaps it would be extraneous information that is confusing.

And the time that I am living in right now also comes into play. I was looking at some stills of the movie of Hamlet recently, and thinking how interesting it was that their early Fifties romanticism permeates their take on Elsinore. They thought it should have a forbidding, slightly exotic Scandinavian history to it, while the Elsinore we know is plainer and more neo-classical. Their interpretation reflected their own time as much as the time of the play.
And in terms of size, how big is Hamlet? You could do an enormous amount of work. I could be designing an entire palace of Elsinore, and the director and I could look at it and say, ‘Look where that table is sitting, right there—on that good!’ And then we could decide that we don’t need the rest of it. That is entirely possible.

I mean, I will do an entire color sketch of something and we will decide not to do it, and people will say, ‘Oh, it’s horrible, all that work lost.’ But it isn’t work lost, because you went there in terms of the sketch and saw what the production might look like, and then you decided that’s not it, but you took away from it the sense of being there.

I do somewhere between two and 20 drawings in the process. In one particular show that had 17 we were very far along and the author disagreed with something. The director and producer and I agreed, but the author didn’t, so we went back and did it again, and everything seemed to be going okay. Then the director approved something and I said, ‘Guess what? We have a new problem. I don’t like it.’ So then I had to go back and find something that I liked, that the director liked, that we all agreed on.

Choice of play
I like a mix of plays and a mix of theaters. I think the biggest variable for me as a designer—and I am an American designer working in American theater, which is an important point if you look at my work—is whether it’s a play that’s been done before or whether it’s new. Certainly, with a play that has been done before, you become aware of other productions, or there is a general idea about how it should be done. But with a new play that is not the case, and you are floating out there by yourself. Personally, I find that situation fascinating. What I have
"Good design is when the fit of the design and the material is such that one can't tell where one stops and the other begins."

found is that people are far more willing to experiment on a classic, or on a play that has been done successfully before, than they are to experiment on a new play, because with a new play everyone is so nervous they would prefer to do something conservative just to get the play on. It’s not a time for experimentation. A lot of people think that doing a new play itself is, in itself, enough of an experiment.

On what makes a good design
For me, a good design is when the fit of the design and the material is such that one can't tell where one stops and the other begins, and where the physical and visual worlds are a perfect mesh. I don't mean mesh as in a picture of the perfect environment, but where the evolution of the movement of the actors within the scenery—and the light changing within the scenery—and the costumes—is on a parallel track with the play, without being redundant to it. So that the way that you feel about the space, and the look of the space, the same emotional richness the play itself has, without merely duplicating the author's work. People say that you don't really notice the details in the scenery, or that only the set designer recognizes them. I don't think that's true. I have done some productions where all I did was fix up the architecture of the building and the stage alone. I am very much aware that theater has a wonderful and horrible quality that it is totally evanescent, in that it is going to go away. I am a fairly classical designer, but I am aware that we live in the moment, and what you think about a set five years from now is really irrelevant. I am not designing for posterity.

I think I am an interpretive artist, so everything affects me. I designed Dinner at Eight, which took place on Park Avenue, and two or three times I walked up Park Avenue at night after another show; and I more or less realized that I wasn't researching the buildings, but was pondering what it meant to live on Park Avenue and how I felt walking down the streets. And I think it showed up in the design because there was a kind of odd darkness—a nighttime quality to the design—that came from that experience. And an appreciation of the play's interesting blend of comedy and sadness came from those walks.

On associative thinking
One of the fun things about being a designer is that you don't know where the designs come from—they just come out. I always say I am an associative thinker. I remember sitting with Harold Pinter once, and we were talking about a play that he was directing, and I told him the drapes were brown. It was a goofy thing to say, but I knew the drapes were brown, so I was sharing that information with him. And he looked at me rather oddly. How did I know the drapes were brown? I don't know, but I knew the drapes were brown. It is an interesting thing: you just have to let yourself go there.

For example, in the play Proof, which was a new play that I designed first off Broadway and then on, one day I said to the director, “Would you mind if I put autumn leaves all over the set?” He said that was fine, and I realized I brought to the play a sort of autumnal color scheme and an autumnal sense. But the play takes place in many different years and different times of the year. I clearly felt that the play was a bit of a romance in the sense that it was a fiction, and in the sense that it was a romantic story about love. It had an autumnal quality, and that is what came out of me.

Sometimes there are technical things that you have to do as well. There are quick changes that you don’t want to feel are quick changes. I was designing a technically sophisticated ground plan that looked simple from the front, but was actually more complicated when you dealt with the actors' needs, in terms of making the show seem effortless. And when you
I think some people would be surprised that I don’t prize emotion as virtue, so you can’t. I come from an ethnic group when I don’t feel like it, and times when emotional moments are going to go are the interesting. Those moments of knowing where you designing part, and the rest is execution. It is only three percent of my work, the designing is an emotional experience. On emotional impact just didn’t know about.

Good design is when you end up instinctively providing the proper space for the play. One play I think I did well on was Foxes by Lanford Wilson, where I instinctively added a fire escape and access to the fire escape. It ended up that the actors and director and author found ways of using the fire escape that weren’t in the script, but by the time the play came to life you would never do it without the fire escape—or the space that the fire escape was, in both senses: the literal space and the alternative space it provided for the actor. There was a need for an alternative space that you just didn’t know about.

On emotional impact

Designing is an emotional experience. It is only three percent of my work, the designing part, and the rest is execution. Those moments of knowing where you are going to go are the interesting emotional moments. There are times when I don’t feel like it, and times when you can’t. I come from an ethnic group that doesn’t prize emotion as virtue, so I think some people would be surprised to hear I have emotions at all. I feel as if I am communicating emotions through physical representations or environments, or the shape of the set we are looking at.

That is my basic feeling about what I do. An actor conveys emotion on stage. An author certainly conveys emotion, and a director creates emotion too. From my earliest experiences I have been fascinated by how an inanimate object can create an emotional response in the viewer. I create an emotional temperature for plays, and when I get it right it’s very good, and when it isn’t, it is wrong.

I have trouble doing plays to which I don’t have any emotional response. Gerald Gutierrez and I did a production of The Most Happy Fella on Broadway and it was very interesting. Musical theater has emotions built into it. There’s a place in the music, and he and I found out that if you moved a part of the scenery during a certain part of the music, the audience would cry. We learned to experiment with the moment that piece of scenery moved and whether the audience would cry. It turned out there were two places in the music when you could move it and they would cry—but some would only cry where the scenery moved as well as the music. Literally, a piece of plywood moving at a certain moment will create an emotional response.

People critique my work and they always say, “He does those rooms where you want to move in,” or “It reminds you of your childhood.” Certainly, those are emotions that I want to be there with the actor. Sometimes just a shape can create a certain emotional environment for the actor. It creates a tone for the way the performance has to be given, created, presented.

The designer’s signature

Some designers can be recognized by their designs. I once saw a musical in London, and I walked in off the street at the last moment and didn’t get to read the program. The lights went down and they started singing, and I was looking at the lights and thinking that whoever designed this had a lot of nerve. It looked just like … And I pulled out the program and, sure enough, it was Pat Collins. It was so stunning to me that I recognized her in her lighting. And that also happened to me with a costume-designer friend. I saw a brief clip of a movie—I didn’t know what the movie was. There was an actor leaving a car and going into a house. I called my friend, the designer, and said, “Was some movie that you designed on TV last night?” She confirmed that it was. Some designers’ personalities show up, as Ming’s does. You can clearly see Ming Cho Lee’s in things. You don’t really know what their personality is like, but you know what their artistic personality is. Having Ming as a teacher is like going into the
“Sometimes, being realistic about the theater, doing a not very interesting design job with an interesting group of people is more rewarding than creating a delicious set with less exciting collaborators.”

A Delicate Balance, Edward Albee. Plymouth Theater: New York, USA, 1997. Directed by Gerald Gutierrez. Approved final color design rendering of the living room of a wealthy house in Westchester. The set has nine visible areas, each painted cooler as they retreat and lit successively, that wasn’t the point in the first place.

On designing Beckett

If I was asked to do Waiting for Godot, I wouldn’t know how I would design it until I know what the production is and who’s working on it. I don’t have any predictions. I think I would be tempted to read the play again. That particular play, like Hamlet, is something that is fairly familiar to all of us. So it gives you some leeway. There would be the question of what to do about the tree. I would think about it for a long time. Start asking questions. I think the more interesting question would be: does the tree exist? Let’s slide into Hamlet again and ask if the ghost exists? I guess the author says it does in some form. The more interesting question is, if you thought the tree or the ghost was inappropriate, what would you do as a designer? This is sometimes the case with a new play.

Personal preferences

A play I would really love to design is The Way of the World by William Congreve. And I would like to design the musical Showboat. There are certain plays I am interested in too. Sometimes being in the room with a certain group of people working on a play can be as interesting as the design of the play. There are certain plays where the design isn’t as especially fascinating activity, but the play itself might be interesting to work on, so you have to measure one against the other. Sometimes, being realistic about the theater, doing a not very interesting design job with an interesting group of people is more rewarding than creating a delicious set with less exciting collaborators.

Opera has never come after me. And I don’t do many musicals. Another successful American designer in my shoes would have done more musicals than I have. The ones I have done, and that have been successful, have been incredibly minimal. I find that interesting, because knowing me as a designer, it is interesting to reconcile the designs of Ain’t Misbehavin’ and
"I have a classicist's sense of plan, and there is a clean plan to all my work."

The purity of the ground plan of Chicago and the ground plan of Folly's Folly is equally clear. I don't think anyone would consider the two in any way similar, but they are in their clarity of plan. You as an audience member, through the clarity of the plan, know where you are. I always want the audience to relax: not relax as in go to sleep, but more in the sense of knowing where they stand in the universe so that they can concentrate on what is being presented in front of them.

You can have plenty of detail and let people discover it later, but the basic information needs to be committed easily. In fact, I sometimes try to draw more quickly—in less than a minute, easily. In fact, I sometimes try to draw information needs to be committed.

On models and artificiality
I do make models. Oddly enough, I imagine in sketch form. I know that scenery is sculptural, but I do it all backward. I mean, I imagine in three dimensions clearly—an texture and sculptures—but I imagine all of that better in two dimensions. I go into it emotionally, but to me a model is a bit of a toy, because it is miniature. It is misleading because you can't tell how big things are. I am very concerned with scale and with the size of the actor and the size of the theater. Models don't help me; they help other people.

I almost surprised myself the other day. Somebody said, "We need to do this to get people to come to the theater," and I said, "If they don't want to come, don't force it. If they don't want theater, that's fine. There doesn't have to be theater." But it doesn't seem to be a problem so far. Theater just morphs into something else that people do want. The theater district is usually near the red-light district. It is a socially acceptable vice, really. I don’t think it hurts you.

I get off on the artificiality of it.

It is all an artificial construct. Even when you see a realistic play, it is still artificial. It is a fun thing in that way. I mean, art is artificial too. Art, you make a piece out of something. Oil paint is made out of chemicals. Theater is made out of different things too.

On changing theater styles
I am fascinated by the way theater changes; backstage and on stage. Our tastes and our goals as human beings change. Overall I think our theater, like politics, were left and right, but goes in a gradual arc. One of the more interesting things in my lifetime has been this "Oh, we hate the proscenium." "Now we love the proscenium." "Now we have to build everything in thrust." We have to do classical theater or angry theater ... And then all of a sudden you are doing plays with people sitting on sofas, talking to each other again, and the worst kind of theater to build for is a thrust theater [one in which a raised platform extends into the auditorium, allowing the audience to surround the stage on three sides]. I find that really interesting: how we have gone away from the proscenium and come back to it in my lifetime. It is fascinating the way styles and tastes come and go.

I don't like spaces that give the wrong information. I don't like working in theaters where it looks like there is a lot of backstage space when there isn't. On vice versa. I like it when the stage and auditorium space are either one or seem to be appropriately matched to each other. The most successful theaters I have been in have little to do with comfort, and more to do with a good fit between stage and audience. That's the best kind of theater; the format of the theater does not matter to me.

Biography
John Lee Beatty has designed some 70 shows for Broadway, and has been equally busy off-Broadway and in the regional theaters. He first gained recognition for his work at Circle Repertory, where he designed the premieres of many plays by Lanford Wilson. Later work has included premieres of plays by Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, Beth Henley, Terrence McNally, Wendy Wasserstein, Neil Simon, David Mamet, John Robin Baitz, and John Patrick Shanley, as well as numerous New York premiers of international works. On Broadway he has designed The Color Purple, Rabbit Hole, The Odd Couple, Daelin, Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, The Retreat from Moscow, Wonderful Town, Frankie and Johnny, Proof, Chicago, Twentieth Century, Major Barbara, The Last Night of Ballyhoo, Anna Christie, Bedroom Farce, and many others. For Lincoln Center
What makes Howell Binkley an outstanding lighting designer is his ability to design for Robert Wilson as well as for productions on Broadway and off-Broadway. Here he discusses lighting design and how, regardless of whether the production is a dance piece or a Broadway show, the two have certain basic elements in common. If lighting a dance piece is sculpting space in the abstract, then lighting a Broadway show is sculpting space in a tangible manner. Both approaches, however, have the same basic principles.

Introduction

Talking about lighting design, Howell Binkley starts off by discussing the knowledge acquired from designing the empty spaces of dance concerts. For him, lighting is “creating the scenery and the whole footprint for the choreography.” He then describes his work with dance concerts and dance companies, before talking about lighting a space like Broadway, which has scenery and is not an empty space.

When you get to a space with a lot of scenery, you have to “dissect” the “real estate” of the space in order to know where a light can be hung. Based on this real estate of the stage, designing the lights for a production is then made possible. But, as Binkley points out, what makes for a good design is ultimately the designer’s instincts and art as a designer.
Approach

Dance is pretty much my roots, but in the beginning, working alone on a dance piece, you’re really dealing with a raw space. A lot of the dance that I’ve done in my career has been with no scenery at all. So what the lighting is doing is creating the scenery and the whole footprint for the choreography. I think one of the most challenging things about being a lighting designer is being able to sculpt a space with no scenery at all, and being able to give it an environment that relates from the choreography to the music to what the audience is seeing.

I did a piece that David Parsons choreographed; I’m a co-founding member of his company—he and I started the company in 1986. He has a piece called Caught and it’s done with strobe lights, and he is always caught in the air; you never see the dancer hit the ground. So we’re sculpting a space with strobe lights that always show the dancer suspended in the air, whether he’s upside down or straight up, whether he’s walking or horizontal. We made this piece in 1982 with gracious grants from friends of ours, who gave us enough money at that point in our careers to make this piece happen.

There are other pieces that I do where there’s no scenery and I’ve got to establish a framework for the audience to see what the choreographer is doing.

And I think there are a lot of incredible dance lighting designers, and we all put that challenge upon ourselves: to create an environment for the choreography to be seen by the audience. It is really a collaboration between yourself and the choreographer about where you want this piece located—is it outside, inside, in a very isolated area? It’s all about what the audience is going to see. I think that’s the place to start, because they’re paying money for the ticket, and you want to give them an environment and let the choreography make that journey—that arc—through what the choreographer is trying to do with his work.

Dissecting the space

To me, it’s about more than sculpting. Before you get to the sculpting element of it, you have to dissect your space—your real estate on the stage. Where can you hang lights? Where do they hit the ground. So we’re sculpting a space with strobe lights that always show the dancer suspended in the air, whether he’s upside down or straight up, whether he’s walking or horizontal. We made this piece in 1982 with gracious grants from friends of ours, who gave us enough money at that point in our careers to make this piece happen.

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Maybe I’m using the wrong word—it’s really figuring out your real estate to dissect the way you can break up your stage. As lighting designers, we work for months and months on a model, and do final drawings and things get approved, and then we lay it down on a table and start drafting it. And that’s where the magic comes from, while you establish that real estate where you can hang your tools. Your lights are your tools in the sculpting process, and you’re designing, but it’s really dissecting your space and how you want to treat and move each scene along. A lot of the shows and musicals we do will have 34 scenes in the first act, whereas some shows will have 34 scenes in total. You have to be able to move the show on, to arc it from A to B, so that it’s seamless.

When I say real estate, I basically mean the stage, but when it’s full of scenery and drops, you have to be able to squeeze lights in between that, and sometimes we’re not given that. Sometimes—and it’s not a bad thing—it’s a battle just to get 50 inches here or half a pipe, or a boom in there or a sidelight position. Today there’s usually a deck of about eight inches, so that we can put a lot of lights in the floor cued up, which doesn’t affect the scenery at all, except for being out of the way of automation tracks that go across the stage, or up and down the stage. Today there’s a lot of scenery on stage.

I just did this production of Dracula at the Balasco—and there’s a lot of beautiful scenery that comes up through the deck, plus there are three fully flying rigs that each take up 30 inches. So three times 30 inches: I could have electrics in that, but I can’t, because there are humans flying in there, and they’ve got to mount, fly, and release from their harness. So today real estate is a key issue for us in doing our work. Sometimes we say, “Could you just scoot this upstage three inches?” And sometimes three inches might turn into two and a half—it does get to be a battle, but it is a collaborative battle.

On no-scenery and scenery sets

I love doing all the dance projects when there is no scenery and there is a lot of room for light and air, to light the air, to light the space ... to follow the dancer in a certain way. I think both the no-scenery approach and the scenery approach are alive and can coexist. In a lot of shows you will see a great deal of scenery and all this spectacular flying stuff. Then all of a sudden the scenery evaporates, and there’s just lighting: a quiet moment when all the scenery is gone—there’s a duet, there’s a solo ... And that is the magic of what we do. We can create a moment of tenderness out of nothing, just with the light and the actors.
The shows are so big now that we have to form a scramble; we have to do transitions, lighting-wise, where scenery is moving upstage and there’s a book scene downstage—we have to keep that book scene alive, and hide what’s happening upstage. We have to high-light, take the audience’s eye and focus it on a point, while behind them things are changing that we have to mask.

On lighting challenges

In Drowsy, in the beginning, the director said, “I don’t want to see any lines on any of the people flying.” And you did not see one line at all. The people were suspended in the air and flying, and you never saw a line to their bodies. And that is the kind of challenge that we’re up against—that’s a creative challenge between the lighting designer, costume designer, and set designer. That’s a design challenge. It’s where you put your lighting. It’s about your levels, your intensity, your color, your angle—especially with a body that moves. It’s not stationary, it’s a piece of cake. But when it’s going up and down, up and down, and flipping—that’s difficult. But that’s why we’re hired to do our craft, and that’s why we’re trusted by directors and choreographers to achieve their vision. But they’re also letting us bring our visionary tools in, to dissect a show.

Broadway is the crème de la crème of what we do, but we’ve all paid our dues through diverse projects that challenge us and make us the different types of designers that we are.

It’s amazing today, the scale at which we all work: being able to keep those nice tender isolated scenes, with just a chandelier and little chairs, and then suddenly it all opens up and you’re in a seaport. Is it the lighting—after you dissect a show you have to layer it, and that’s where that sculpting element comes in. You’ve got to give light to every scene, and you have to make it work where there is not a scene, which I call a transition.

Broadway and beyond

I do tons of regional work around the country, tons of off-off-Broadway work... but I take a Broadway element into it. Whether we’re in Washington, Walla Walla, or Chicago doesn’t matter to me. We’re craftsmen, designers, and we’re hired to be there, probably because of a director we’ve worked with for years. Whether we’re in a 10 x 10 space that has no fly system or whatever, you have to be ready to attack anything. And that’s what makes us who we are.

Going into a garage theater and doing a musical when you only have 20 lights, you’ve got to stretch your imagination. And less is more. It’s not like on Broadway, where you can have a lot of tools. Even here in New York there are very small spaces, but people are still coming to see the work and your name is involved with it.

I don’t think Broadway spoils us. I hope not. Maybe I’m speaking for myself, but I think I’m speaking for a lot of other people too. Broadway is the crème de la crème of what we do, but we’ve all paid our dues through diverse projects that challenge us and make us the different types of designers that we are.

Look at Jennifer Tipton, Kim Billington, Jules Fisher and Peggy Eisenhauer, Don Holder, Brian MacDermitt, Natasha Katz, Ken Posner... They’ve all had a journey, and they’ve all been different and taken a different path. But if you put them all together, you’ll see that there’s a lot of similarity between each person’s path and how they’ve gotten where they are today.

The secret of good design

When I feel good about my work when it’s a collaborative unity. I’m not in it for me. I’m in it for the product, for the show, for the work. We all spend very long hours in the theater, in a dark theater, even before the actors arrive. We spend hours and weeks and months, sometimes, on pre-preparation. A set could be designed and approved, but then it’s over budget. So there have got to be cuts, and we’ve got to redo. There’s revision after revision, re-meeting after re-meeting. There are conference calls, emails—there are a lot of components that happen before the show even loads into the theater. You get in, you do your craft and when it’s collaborative, it’s smooth—and that’s when I feel most gracious about what I do. And that happens almost 100 percent of the time. I feel that good about what I do and the people I work with. An outstanding design comes from your instinct, and your art as a designer.

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