

## DANCE AND LIGHT

*Dance and Light* examines the interconnected relationship between movement and design, the fluid partnership that exists between the two disciplines, and the approaches that designers can take to enhance dance performances through lighting design.

The book demystifies lighting for the dancer and helps designers understand how the dancer/choreographer thinks about their art form, providing insight into the choreographer's process and exploring how designers can make the most of their resources. The author shares anecdotes and ideas from an almost 50-year career as a lighting designer, along with practical examples and insights from colleagues, and stresses the importance of clear communication between designers, choreographers, and dancers. Attention is also given to the choreographer who wants to learn what light can do to help enhance their work on stage.

Written in short, stand-alone chapters that allow readers to quickly navigate to areas of interest, *Dance and Light* is a valuable resource for lighting design classes wishing to add a section on dance lighting, as well as for choreography classes who want to better equip young artists for a significant collaborative partnership.

**Kevin Dreyer** is a freelance lighting designer and an associate professor at the University of Notre Dame.



**Taylor & Francis**

Taylor & Francis Group

<http://taylorandfrancis.com>

# DANCE AND LIGHT

The Partnership between Choreography and  
Lighting Design

*Kevin Dreyer*

 **Routledge**  
Taylor & Francis Group  
NEW YORK AND LONDON

First published 2020  
by Routledge  
52 Vanderbilt Avenue, New York, NY 10017

and by Routledge  
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*

© 2020 Taylor & Francis

The right of Kevin Dreyer to be identified as author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with sections 77 and 78 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilized in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

*Trademark notice:* Product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

A catalog record for this title has been requested

ISBN: 978-1-138-33823-4 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-0-367-25944-0 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-0-429-29069-5 (ebk)

Typeset in Baskerville  
by Swales & Willis, Exeter, Devon, UK

# CONTENTS

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	vii
<i>Author's Note</i>	ix
Introduction	1
1 Why Do We Need a Book about Dance Lighting? Or, if It Is All Done with the Same Lights, Why Is Dance So Hard to Get Right?	5
2 What's It All About? Or, Dance, Meet Light; Light, Meet Dance	14
3 Learning about Dance	25
4 Dance and Light	35
5 Dance and Space	47
6 Talking with the Choreographer	60
7 Communicating with the Dancer	73
8 A Conversation I Wish I Had	81
9 Learning the Dance Work	87
10 Understanding the Piece or How to Approach Cueing	101
11 Why Did You Put That Light There?	111

## CONTENTS

12	Dance and Color	122
13	Color as a Storytelling Tool	133
14	The Designer as Storyteller	144
15	Sharing Your Ideas for the Dance	155
16	The Designer's Toolbox	166
17	The Dance Light Plot	176
18	Changing Technologies and What They Mean	188
19	Simple Rules	199
20	Limitations as Design Ideas	209
21	On Being the Only Designer in the Room	219
22	Advice for the Choreographer Who Has to Go It Alone	229
23	My Partners in the Theatre	240
24	A Little Help from My Friends	251
25	Practical Examples	262
	<i>Index</i>	273

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This project was many years in the making both figuratively and literally. I have been training or working in lighting design for over 50 years now and all of that went into this book. The actual work of putting it on paper was a challenge that I first contemplated almost ten years ago. The final part of this undertaking happened in the last 12 months. That means there are a lot of people I feel I need to thank, but don't worry I have already made peace with the idea that I will not remember nor be able to include all of them.

My journey down this path began even earlier when my father, as the story goes, took me to a theatre where he was working on a production. I was an infant in arms and he walked me around backstage pointing things out, saying: "This is a batten and that is a Fresnel and that is a flat, and you have to hurry up and grow up so you can help me with this because I don't understand it all." To my parents' credit I was not told this story until I was in college at Carnegie Mellon studying Technical Production. I also grew up in a house where we had a bookstand, usually in the dining room, with an unabridged dictionary on it. Any time a new word came up we all knew the drill – "Look it up."

My father Bill directed and produced theatre that involved all of us at one point or another and my mother Donna Jean, a published author herself, wrote all her life. My brother Robin writes and takes wonderful photographs for a craft school in North Carolina where he handles their publications and my sister Melissa founded an arts focused newspaper. So, to my parents and my siblings I say thank you – for the love of theatre and of words.

I thank all of the teachers I have had in my life, both formal and informal. Some of them have made their way into the pages of this book, but whether they did or not they were all a part of my journey. I also thank my colleagues in the arts because I believe we all learn from each other, even if we don't realize it. The chapter with thoughts from fellow designers is included because of that belief. I could have written other chapters with input from directors, choreographers, and scenic, costume, and projection designers because I have learned from all of them. I also want to thank my students because a good deal of what is here I put into words as I answered questions and shared my perspectives. Which brings me to Notre Dame and the many people who deserve to be included here.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I begin with Mark Pilkinton because he hired me and got me started on this improbable path in academia. I must also thank Jim Collins and Peter Holland who were both my champions and my challengers along the way. Their faith in me has always been humbling, and it was their conviction that I could write this book that kept me going more often than I would like to admit. In reality every member of the Department of Film, Television, and Theatre over my 30 years at Notre Dame had a hand in this as well. They were the ones who I talked things out with, went to for advice, shared with in successes, and figured out how to grow from missteps. I include faculty, staff, and students in this group because they were all a part of it. If it were not for a sabbatical leave funded by the University I am not sure I would have ever gotten started, no matter how many people believed in the project.

I want to thank Ellen Lampert-Greaux and the folks at LDI who gave me a platform from which to speak to my colleagues in the field of dance lighting. Ellen's faith in my ability to lead large seminars and panels in dance lighting gave me a forum where I crystalized many of the concepts in this book. I thank Stacey Walker and Lucia Accorsi who have walked me through the process of getting into print, Christina Watanabe and Nicholas Fox, who provided editorial support, and I thank Stacey Stewart who is always ready to talk about ideas and who was one of the first people who read any of what I wrote. Her comment that she had learned something about both dance and lighting after two chapters showed me that I was on the right track.

Most importantly I want to thank my three daughters, Natalie, Lydia, and Wilhelmena who all listened, and supported, and encouraged me. Finally, I thank my wife Indi who did all of the above and more. Who danced into my life at the American Dance Festival, who brought me to South Bend, Indiana when she took over the Program in Dance at Saint Mary's College, who shared a sleeping mat in the room that was the Kurt Jooss archives in the Netherlands, who has always been my biggest fan and believer in what I have chosen as my life's career. She was my partner in some of my favorite collaborations. I truly would not have been able to write this without her. She had to put up with the research trips, the out-of-town design gigs, the LDI and USITT conferences, the constant refrain of "I have to go write" as each deadline approached. I was the most concerned about her response to my writing and an offhand comment on the phone one day, when she said she wished she could be spending her time reading my beautiful words, made all the difference at a moment when I didn't think I would get to the finish line.

For those of you who have made it to this point, thank you. Thank you for caring enough to see who I care about, for being invested enough to take the time to read this, and for being understanding enough to realize I cannot include everyone who actually got me to this point without making the acknowledgments as long as the book itself. I realize there is something rather indulgent and self-involved in acknowledgments, so I thank you for accepting that as well.

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

One of the things you may notice about this book is the absence of photographs. This was a deliberate choice on my part. I believe one of the barriers to better collaborations between lighting designers and choreographers is the absence of clear, jargon free, communication. If either party uses words that are not commonly understood they put their artistic partner at a disadvantage. On the other hand, when we can directly describe what we are looking for without relying on terminology, we level the playing field. In this book I seek to balance the knowledge on both sides of the conversation. While photographs can create a lovely counterpoint to words, they can also feel like established goals. Goals that can get in the way of individual creativity and short-circuit the process of refining language. What I hope this book will do is to create a new way of discovering what role each partner in the creative process is being asked to fill. I also hope that it will be a step toward the goal of helping the Jeraldyns of the world find the next Tom Skeltons. Read the book, you'll understand.



**Taylor & Francis**

Taylor & Francis Group

<http://taylorandfrancis.com>

# INTRODUCTION

For quite some time now I have been encouraged to write down why I do what I do. Not because it is so unique or because no one else does it but rather because I have a unique point of view and it seems to illuminate work which I have discovered many find quite mysterious. Of course, those who are not mystified by what my colleagues and I routinely do tend to dismiss it as technical stuff. To the few of you out there, not involved with this profession, who view what I do with respect and even acknowledge that it is an art form, perhaps you will find what I have to say interesting.

Much of my work life has been spent in the world of dance. I find this is a very comfortable place for a lighting designer to reside. Dancers tend to value what we do very highly. They seldom take it for granted and generally are openly appreciative of lighting. Dance lighting is a partnership of art forms. Yes they can and do exist separately but I for one find each benefits greatly from the other's presence. Much of what people admire in contemporary theatrical lighting – acute angles, strong color choices, isolation, quick changes, embracing shadow, etc. – has its roots in the theories of dance lighting. Either there or in rock and roll lighting, where the money is always rumored to be.

Stanley McCandless started things off quite simply and directly with his wonderful little book *A Method of Lighting the Stage*. People have been trying to ignore it ever since but the truth of the matter is that in that little book, which was never intended to be *the* definitive way, rather simply *a* way of lighting the stage, is a logical approach that allows the novice to be confident that they, like the physician, will first do no harm. Lighting is there to make things visible so of course the first thing we need to make sure of is that things can be seen. The how and what and when of the making sure things are seen is where the art begins. As I have been thinking about what I do and how I do it, I have come to realize that as a lighting designer what I am most proud of is when I have helped to successfully tell a story. I think all designers are storytellers, it is simply that the way the story is told in each profession is a bit different. If the costume designer and the set designer do not do their jobs well we will not understand the place or the characters.

## INTRODUCTION

These are essential to a successful story and so we are all partnering in that process. In theatre early conversations with the director routinely center around what story we are telling and how we intend to tell it. Choreographers often shy away from using the term “story,” but communication is just as important in dance – we simply use different words.

So why do I single out lighting and what keeps me doing it? I believe the lighting designer is essential to the entire story-telling process. This is not to diminish what the other design professionals accomplish; far from it. My work would be significantly harder without theirs. What is different is that I am involved in the moment-to-moment story telling, just as the choreographer and dancers are. My work remains active and can, and often does, evolve as the work of the performers becomes more specific and refined. The set designer tells the story of place and often that is not a singular story. The costume designer tells the story of character, and again that is not a single story – even in most one-character shows there is change. But both of these artists, because of their medium, must commit to a final (or near final) version well before the play (or other performance) is set before an audience. It is simply the nature of the process. Sets must be built and painted and installed. Costumes must be built or purchased, fitted and altered, before they can go on stage. All of that takes time.

I am not trying to say that lighting does not take time; far from it. Lighting takes time to install and to plan. It needs to be designed and drafted, hung and focused, all of which takes time. But now the ability to alter the sequence in which lighting is triggered or to change the actual number and intensity of lights with the push of a button has allowed lighting to become as fluid a medium as the imagination of the performing artists. This means that I have to move as quickly as they do, I have to plan a design that is malleable, that is mutable, that has room for additions or changes. It is why so many lighting designers want moving lights and LED fixtures and color changers. It isn't just about having more toys, at least not with the really good designers; it is about being able to join in the creative dance that happens during the final push toward an opening night. I have to be ready to recognize where I am needed as a partner in the story and where I need to stay out of the way. I have to be ready with a concrete idea that can be shown to a director as soon as technical rehearsals begin; but I also need to be ready and willing to chuck it in the face of a better idea. I also need to help the director understand my process and make sure they know that I do not consider a cue complete until the whole show is in place. No matter how wonderful a moment may look, if it is out of step with the story it is wrong.

I realized as I was writing the previous statements that I am describing a process that is now very easy for me. I wish that I could say that it was always the case; and in truth there were shows that I worked on early in my career where it was that way. There were also a number of times when I stubbornly stuck with an idea that did not help the story telling. There

## INTRODUCTION

were also times when the story changed during the process, and it was not until we were getting into problems in tech rehearsals that I realized it had. I also know that my effectiveness is not just a reflection on my preparation and my understanding of the story – it is also dependent on the trust I am able to build with the rest of the artists. Building this trust happens in big and little ways. It starts with the first conversations you have and it continues through the kinds of questions you ask and your ability to honestly and clearly respond to those asked of you. It requires that you are confident in yourself and what you can bring to the process. It also requires you to say so when you are not up to a task. In a profession where we are trained to never say no to a job (otherwise you may never get asked again) this is a very hard lesson to master.

So how do you go about doing what I do? First – you don't try to do what I do. I realized a long time ago that if I ever went to see a show and there was not one cue I would change or one moment I would handle differently then I needed to quit. Because it would mean that I was no longer unique. I have grown up a bit since then and I realized that even if someone executes the moment on stage in the same way I might have, they will never do it the same way I would have. Because it is in the doing, the working through a moment with fellow artists, that we are most uniquely ourselves. No matter how much we may wish to emulate someone else's approach, we are not someone else and the process is inexorably changed by that simple fact. So I am not writing this to teach you how to do what I do. I am not even trying to teach you to think about design the same way I do. I intend to share what I have discovered over the years. Some of this is what I was taught in school; sometimes I even realized how important it was when I learned it. Some of it is what I learned in school even though I wasn't taught it, but most of it is what I have realized through the process of doing.

I have tried to present the material in a logical fashion, moving from broad concepts into more tightly focused ideas. Anyone who has ever taken a class from me knows I am a non-linear thinker, but I usually get back to the point I was making; digression as a method of teaching. Each chapter was written as a stand-alone piece so while there may be some referencing back to other sections, for the most part you could look through the Contents and pick the topics that you are most interested in. In time I would hope you would read all of it but really the order is more an organizational tool than a proscriptive way to move through the material.

I could not have done this without a lot of help, but then again if I am honest that same statement holds true about my design work as well. I have had people who offered me time to write, have given advice, have read early drafts, and who have constantly encouraged me when I needed it. I have discussed ideas with colleagues and have discussed what I was doing with a few. I have drawn on many experiences that are not mine alone and have tried to be as fair and honest about them as I can. So I hope anyone who

## INTRODUCTION

recognizes themselves in any of the stories feels as if they have been fairly treated. I honestly believe that we get nowhere in life or in art by ourselves. Even if we are alone when we are working on a project, at some point someone helped us with something that got us to that point. What is singular is the way we assemble the parts.