

read more...

Continued from November 2011 CTI Newsletter

A Conversation With Peggy Eisenhauer

Peggy Eisenhauer's lighting career has spanned theatre, music, and feature films, and she is internationally recognized as one of the all time great designers. Her unique design relationship with Jules Fisher has earned them both multiple Tony and Drama Desk awards for their work.

Those who know and have worked with Peggy know her deep love of entertainment lighting and an understanding of how music and lighting work together, based on her innate musicality and her years of music study.

I have gotten to know Peggy over the years first as an electrician on shows and later here at City Theatrical where we created a long list of lighting accessories that she and Jules needed on their shows. Many of our most challenging and most enjoyable projects have come from them.

I had the opportunity to ask Peggy some questions about how she began her lighting career, how the lighting world has changed since she began, and what blend of talents it takes to be a world class lighting designer.



Jules Fisher and Peggy Eisenhauer with Tony Awards®

CTI: Can you recall the first time you were in a theatre that made an impression on you? (Or can you recall any early theatre visits that left a lasting impression?)

PE: There were two experiences which stand out in my memory. I saw a local production of "The Roar of the Greasepaint, The Smell of the Crowd" in my hometown of Nyack, New York. I think I saw it three times – I was 12 and I had a crush on one of the boys in the show...he played one of the street urchins... Shortly after that I saw a professional production of "Stop the World I Want to Get Off" – coincidentally both written by Anthony Newley and Leslie Bricusse....I went on to work with Bricusse on Broadway in 1995 on "Victor Victoria".

CTI: How did you get started in technical theatre? First light focused, first lighting board, first design?

PE: At age 13 I joined the local theatre company – I thought I wanted to be a tap dancer. I was handed a paint brush and a bucket of black paint and told to paint the underside of some platforms...I continued to do theatre "chores" and over time the Scenic Designer at the theatre started to make jokes with me. One day the lighting guy didn't show up for a rehearsal and I was sent to the lighting board: 3 Century Edkatron "6-packs". I became the operator for all the shows and worked as an electrician hanging and striking. I was a crazy climber, all extension ladders. I quit my paper route and hung up my cheerleader uniform. My first lighting design was right after my 15th birthday, three one-act plays called America Hurrah by Jean-Claude Van Itallie.

CTI: Where did you get your training?

PE: The theatre company I worked at while I was in jr. high and high school was the Elmwood Playhouse in Nyack. At 16 I got into Carnegie Mellon University, College of Fine Arts in the drama department. Each year I worked in summer stock from 16-19 years old. After that I moved to NYC.

CTI: What was your first paying lighting job?

PE: My first paying theatre gig was my first season of summer stock on "the straw hat circuit", New York productions which toured summer theaters in the northeast. 10 shows in 10 weeks, changeover every Sunday night after the show, dress rehearsal Tuesday afternoon. The first production was "Ann Corio and This Was Burlesque". My job was to put out the fire after the fire-stripper "Luna, the goddess of love and fire" left the stage in a blackout at the end of her routine. Only got burned once that week.

CTI: When did you make the decision to be a professional lighting designer?

PE: It was creeping up on me but the precise moment is burned in my retina. Ben Vereen popping out from the proscenium downstage left all in black, white gloves, cane, and a purple followspot hit him POW! It was Pippin on Broadway, lighting by Jules Fisher, I was 13.

CTI: Who were your early role models or influencers in lighting?

PE: Living in the NY metro area, I saw a lot of Broadway musicals. Tharon Musser and Jules Fisher were my favorites. Bob Olson, the scenic designer from Elmwood taught me to draw, build scenery, and influenced my eye for the three years before Carnegie Mellon.

CTI: What was it like trying to make a living at lighting design in the beginning?

PE: I met Jules at Carnegie Mellon when I was 18 – he came to give a talk about producing and lighting. He put in a word for me at the Public Theatre in NYC for a summer job. I got a job as a spot operator there when I was 19 and it was the most money I had ever made. I met Richard Nelson there and worked for him later that year on Broadway as a second assistant. I worked with Rick for about three years. At school I had learned to be a very good draftsman. I made money drafting for Rick and when I was a little short on monthly cash, I cleaned lekos and coiled cable at Production Arts Lighting on 11th Avenue, now PRG. I worked for a big concert designer in the music industry, Stephen Bickford, drafting and assisting him which paid really well for that time and exposed me to the concert world.

CTI: Can you describe how you and Jules Fisher formed your design partnership, and how you work together?

PE: I began assisting Jules at 23. I assisted him for seven years every show. We just decided to stick with it, and began sharing billing around 1992. We incorporated a few years later. Our studio is Third Eye. The way we work together has found its way through the years...we do many of the same creative tasks but divide the chores.

CTI: Describe the office or studio where you do your design and drafting.

PE: I have three studios: Third Eye headquarters are in Manhattan, which we share with Jules' two other operations – Fisher Marantz Stone which is the Architectural Lighting Design company, and Fisher Dachs Associates which is the Theatrical Consulting company. I have a studio in home #1 and another in home #2, and I have a technique for working on the beach and on the plane.

CTI: How many weeks a year are you out of town with shows?

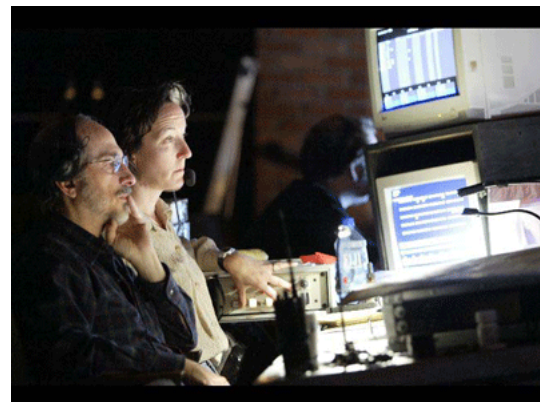
PE: I could be on the road anywhere from two weeks to 6 months, depends on the location of the job, movie studio, or touring requirements.

CTI: Do you have any favorite shows that you have worked on either for the production itself, the artistic team, or your own artistic work on the show?

PE: I have so many favorites it seems almost unfair to single out a few. Working with great directors has been the most fulfilling, and I tend to be music driven. I was trained to be a classical pianist and music has always been at the root of my work.



On set of the film *Dreamgirls*
Dreamgirls Production Design John Myhre
Dreamgirls Cinematographer Tobias Schliessler
 Photo credit: David James



Caroline or Change rehearsal
 Photo credit: Third Eye Studio



On set of the film *Burlesque* with programmer Harry Sangmeister
 Photo credit: Stephen Vaughan

A Conversation With Peggy Eisenhauer

CTI: How has lighting changed since you began your career? (Is it more fun now or less for designers? Has art been eclipsed by technology in some way? Is there anything you miss about the lighting world of 30 years ago?)

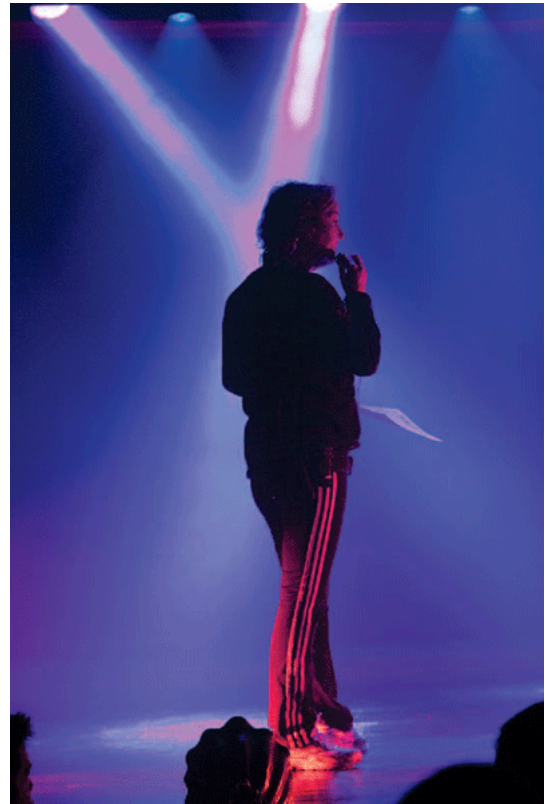
PE: The biggest impact since my edkatron days has been the development of lighting control. It was virtually impossible to manually control lighting in the way that is has been harnessed now. Digital headroom has been the unbridling for lighting during my career to date.

CTI: You are one of a very small group of professional designers at the top of the industry. What, besides the necessary talent, does it take to get there? (That might be a loaded question since "talent" is ambiguous and could include artistic talent, people skills, technical skills, stamina, etc. But . . . can you describe why even though there are a lot of designers with excellent training and artistic skills, very, very, few make it to your level?)

PE: My mother used to say "you have to look out for the main chance". William Arthur Ward said, "If you can imagine it, you can do it" I have that written on my mirror. Kathleen Marshall says, "When the coffee spills, there are people who run for the paper towels and those who don't." Opportunity is sometimes wearing a disguise. It may not seem apparent when it is in front of you. Always run for the paper towels. I work extremely hard, maybe I am proud to be onstage at 7:45AM "ready to rock". I want to solve complex problems. I am not interested in winging it or looking like I am. I want to go to sleep at night knowing I gave everything I could. In that way when I fail, I don't feel I have failed because I held back my effort.



On the set of the film *Chicago* with Jules Fisher.
Chicago Production Design John Myhre
Chicago Cinematographer Dion Beebe
Photo credit: David James



Peggy on the set of *Burlesque*
Photo credit: Stephen Vaughan