



Nexstar Media Group's "NewsNation" on WGN America in Chicago, Illinois
Set Design: Clickspring Design | Lighting Design: Eastern Lighting Design | Lighting Package: Barbizon
Fabrication: Chicago Scenic Studios, Inc.; Showman Fabricators | Display Technology: AOTO

BACKGROUND

[Eastern Lighting Design](#) is a leading international design firm specializing in broadcast, location, and special events lighting. With a keen eye on the latest technology and industry trends, lighting designers and entrepreneurs Matt Gordon and Mick Smith have taken the industry by storm, designing innovative news studios in Dubai, Chicago, Beijing, and everywhere in between. City Theatrical talked with the team about the design and technology that has gone into some of the projects of this budding company's past, present, and future, in this designer interview.

Q&A:

City Theatrical (CTI): How did you get started in the world of professional lighting design?

Matt Gordon (Matt): For me, lighting really is the only thing I've ever done. I started running followspots for high school musicals during my sophomore year, and immediately fell in love. I pretty much forced my local community theatre in Massachusetts to give me a job however they could, and they did. I was obsessed. I decided I didn't want to do anything that wasn't lighting.

I studied at the [State University of New](#)

[York at Purchase](#), which had a really great conservatory for theatre arts and film. At the time, it had the highest turnout for Broadway lighting designers of any school in the country. Initially, that's where I was headed.

I graduated Purchase, and did a lot of theatre. I landed on one Broadway show as an assistant. I realized it wasn't what I wanted to do, and kind of stumbled into television in 2006 and stayed there. I had discovered this other world of artistic lighting design outside of theatre.

When I tell people I work in broadcast television, they think I just turn the lights on for TV... but it's always been about telling

a story through lighting. If you flip through television channels, you know what you're looking at without stopping to read the guide. Lighting helps you easily identify the content and aesthetic you're looking for.

Mick Smith (Mick): Funny enough, my story is almost identical to Matt's. I ran a followspot in high school, because a friend was in the drama program at school, and I wanted to help out. I grew up in Portland, Oregon, and a lot of larger tours were coming through at that time. When *Phantom* came through, I snuck off to talk to the Front of House Engineer, and he took me backstage showing the stagecraft that blew my mind. That was the spark for me.



MATT GORDON

Company: Eastern Lighting Design
Role: Owner/Principal Designer
Location: New York, NY
Experience: 19 years
Recent Projects: Beijing Meteorology Studio; BBC News Studio in Washington, D.C.



MICK SMITH

Company: Eastern Lighting Design
Role: Vice President of Design
Location: Los Angeles, CA
Experience: 24 years
Recent Projects: NewsNation on WGN America, The Tonight Show in Austin, TX

I then studied at the [University of Arizona](#), and received a BFA in Theatre Design. Here's the fun part – a friend of mine had moved to New York to work at City Theatrical. So Gary Falls gave me my first job in New York after graduating, as a Research Associate, working with new products, which at the time was the [EFX Plus2™](#) and the [AutoYoke®](#), our big push.

While I was at City Theatrical, Jules Fisher + Peggy Eisenhauer, Paul Gallo, and all of these great designers would have custom products that they came to Gary for. I had the opportunity to leave the Bronx, and go into the theatre, and have a peak into that world. I learned a lot. I was very energized to work in theatre, and soon found my way into that world.

My first Broadway show was *Saturday Night Fever*, with Andy Bridge and Vivian Leone. I started as the Moving Light Assistant. I met other people, like Philip Rosenberg and Paul Miller, tremendous talents in the industry. From there, I got into *Rocky Horror Picture Show*, with Paul Gallo. Then went straight into lighting *The Producers*, as Peter Kaczorowski's Assistant, then Associate, and got to travel with the show around the world. It was fun, and I feel incredibly lucky for the connections I had made early on.

At around that same time, I saw an ad for [New York City Lites](#), needing drafting help. I answered it, and carried my Broadway

“When *Phantom* came through, I snuck off to talk to the Front of House Engineer, and he took me backstage showing the stagecraft that blew my mind. That was the spark for me.” - Mick Smith

paperwork and portfolio with me. That was when I started to do TV lighting as an Assistant. It was never a thing we even touched on at school. I immediately found it very interesting.

CTI: When/how did [Eastern Lighting Design](#) come to be?

Matt: The company was formed in 2017. I was working a full time design job for another TV design firm in NYC. I decided it was time to go off on my own. Honestly I had no idea what the plan was... sort of just jumped without thinking. I just knew I wanted it to be a company, with a brand, and a team.

We got really lucky right out of the gate with some big projects. In the first year, we had a new studio installation in Dubai. Part way through the pre-production process, they threw in a second studio in Washington, D.C., which would happen simultaneously.

Mick mentioned his work in NYC, and I had also worked in NYC at the same time. He had actually interviewed me to work as a freelance project-based Assistant at NYC Lites. That's initially where we met, then we went on to work together for years.

So I reached out to Mick, told him about the project in DC, which was going to be at the same time as I would be in Dubai. Thankfully, he said he would help. First, he came in on a freelance basis, and things started to string together pretty quickly. We asked him to come aboard full time. The rest is history.

Mick: It's been a fun ride, and we've been fortunate. Before we had Eastern Lighting Design, we had our own histories, and contacts, which has helped us generate some new independent work.

CTI: What's the typical day in the life of a lighting designer at your design firm like?



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- Mick Smith

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- Matt Gordon

Mick: Wake up. Drink coffee. Design projects. Walk the dog. Repeat.

Matt: Depends on the day. If we're in production for a project, we're on site. Depending on the project, we could be spending huge amounts of time away from home. Mick, how long was our last project in Dubai?

Mick: Six weeks at a stretch.

Matt: When there are projects happening, that is life. It can be all consuming. The silver lining is the people you work with - most of which have become our friends. Especially with long out of town projects, we want to hire people who are going to be the best for the job, but also good people at the end of the day. When you're stuck in Beijing or Dubai, that's your life - the people you work with are the people you're with all day, every day.

Mick: That's something I learned early on: having the right dynamic of people is super important.

Matt: When we're not on site, we don't have an office, we're able to work together remotely. We spend enough time away from our homes when we have to be, so we don't force people to go to an office to go to work. That approach has sort of proved itself now, being in the middle of COVID-19. We do so much through Zoom.

In fact, Mick and I just lit an entire studio in China via Zoom.

CTI: What are some of the strategies you

use in working together to get the best creative results?

Mick: It depends on the size and scope of the project. Some projects include a lot - multiple studios, different locations, lots of crossover work. We try to crack open what the scope of something is going to be, and from there try to plan out the best way forward.

So much of it has to do with bandwidth. We've known each other for such a long time, and the shorthand that comes along with that is invaluable.

Matt: Exactly. I think, Mick, in a lot of ways, you and I share very similar design approaches. Even a lot of the same aesthetics. That makes the tag-teaming of projects really easy, whether it's splitting up studios, or if one of us can't be somewhere, passing it on to the other. There is very little explanation over what needs to happen, and that makes it easy.

CTI: What is the most interesting project you have worked on together?

Matt: That one is tough. Perhaps it was the Asharq News studio in Dubai. Mick, remind me, when did we start work on that project?

Mick: January 2019. We started designing in January and then installing August last year.

Matt: Right. It's a brand-new facility, with four floors of an office building, turning into a multi studio broadcast facility. It was a lot of spaces - four studios, multiple newsrooms, and stand ups all over the building. The goal

was to be able to broadcast from anywhere in the building. There are lots of windows, and that meant the sun would be an issue. And the timeline was excruciatingly short - less than a year, and working concurrently with the construction of the building.

We designed the full lighting control system as well as the lighting; really anything that involved lighting. We were able to turn it around quickly, and get the budgets approved. Then Mick and I, as well as additional members of our team, flew out, and walked into one of the heaviest working construction sites we've worked on.

Mick: The scope of our end of the project was supposed to last six weeks. We walked into the facility what felt like six months early, and tried to start lighting.

Matt: We started loading in while they were building the building around us. No exaggeration. We started hanging lights, and getting our data in place. The scenic folks came in soon thereafter, starting to put in the scenery.

Mick: Yes. We were able to make good use of the 12 foot ceilings in the building.

Matt: Right, it was all ladder work. No huge deal, although it may have slowed us down. There were a lot of logistics to deal with, like how to work around the other trades on site. The first six weeks, our job was to load in and

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get the show on air. But by the time we left, we had fully operational studios – the lights were in, and focused.

CTI: How would you describe your lighting aesthetic in three words?

Mick: Concise. Crafted. Clean.

That's always the goal – crafting something that's clean and visually stimulating, that makes you want to stay on that channel.

Matt: A lot of times, when we're brought in by production designers, it is for our clean



aesthetic. A lot of other studios have a sea of lights hanging down on sticks, and blocking pieces of scenery. Our goal is to keep the lights hidden or architecturally integrated as much as we can to have these wide sweeping shots and showcase these two story sets that aren't blocked by the light.

CTI: What are some of the challenges of technology you face in our world of high tech lighting?

Matt: The biggest challenges of technology, are the changes of technology. Things are evolving so rapidly. We all want to stay on top of it, and we all want to be the first to use the new thing. When you're that on the forefront of cutting-edge technology, sometimes you get cut.

What would we like to see? More standardization. Protocols, features. Everyone is heading in a good direction, but a slightly different path. We see so many different protocols and connectors on each type of light fixture.

Mick: True. When you try to teach a team member how your lighting rig works, they don't all have the same obvious way to work,

due to experience with different technologies. That makes it more difficult to troubleshoot.

Matt: In terms of quality of light, I have to say, all of the manufacturers are in a great place. Especially for high CRI, and frequency response. It took a while, but it feels like we are here.

CTI: What do you see for the future of lighting?

Mick: The world seems so completely turned on its head, it's hard to see where the next thing is. As we said with regards to

shout out to Dennis Parichy and Dave Grill, who were my professors in college at SUNY Purchase, and helped to shape a lot of my abilities. Without both of them, I wouldn't have a lot of what I have. My television mentors were Fred Bock, Bruce Ferri, Mitchell Bogard, and Alan Blacher, and I thank them for all they have done.

Mick: I'd like to thank Gary Fails of City Theatrical for giving me my first gig in NYC! Here's to him for taking a chance on a kid from the University of Arizona. He is a huge part of what I've become, as well as the folks Matt mentioned. Working with Peter

“Lighting for camera is different than lighting for an audience, and the traditional designer’s skillset will have to shift. People will have to learn what it takes to make something look good on camera.” - Matt Gordon

some of the challenges, everyone wants to use the next latest and greatest thing, and I wonder what that will look like with capital expenditures and rental shops going forward. Now that so much equipment has sat around unused during this pandemic, I wonder how that will affect development as rental shops and manufacturers struggle to invest.

Matt: As far as what we're experiencing right now, it's a dark time for our industry. It's going to come back, it's a matter of time. And perhaps it will come back in phases. We're not going to go full swing into live events, but what we're seeing now, trying to do more live events straight to stream without an audience, will be more of our normal for the foreseeable future. And that's hopefully where we will come into play more.

Lighting for camera is different than lighting for an audience, and the traditional designer's skillset will have to shift a little bit. People will have to learn what it takes to make something look good on camera.

CTI: Any people you would like to give a shout out to for helping along the way?

Matt: There are so many people. I will give a

Kaczorowski was a real treat, he's such a talented and kind individual. Thank you! For teaching me the business side of TV, and how to treat people, I'd also like to thank Deke Hazirjian and Chuck Noble from NYC Lites.

To find out more about **Eastern Lighting Design**, visit: easternlightingdesign.com

