



PROFESSIONAL PROFILE:

Name: Japhy Weideman
Profession: Lighting Designer
Experience: 20+ Years
Location: New York, New York
Website: www.japhyweideman.com
Recent Shows: *Dear Evan Hansen (West End)*, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory (US National Tour)*, *Lobby Hero (Broadway)*, *Coriolanus (Shakespeare in the Park)*

Japhy Weideman, is a five time Tony nominated lighting designer who works in theater, opera, and other live events. His designs have been experienced by audiences on and off Broadway, and extensively throughout the United States, Europe, and Asia. Originally from Asheville, North Carolina, Japhy studied lighting design at The University of New Mexico in Albuquerque before coming to NYC in 2001.

THE INTERVIEW:

City Theatrical (CTI): How did your interest in lighting design begin?

Japhy Weideman (JW): I grew up in Western North Carolina outside of a small city called Asheville, nestled in the heart of the Blue Ridge Mountains. We lived in a log house in a forest on 50-acres with a small farm. Naturally I spent most of my time outdoors, thus I've always been influenced by sunrises and sunsets, the change of seasons, and thus the observance of nature has always been a strong inspiration for my lighting.

CTI: Did you study lighting design?

JW: I left North Carolina at 17 and ended up in New Mexico, studying sociology,

political science, and dabbling in photography, painting, and drawing. In New Mexico, the sky is overwhelmingly expansive – completely different than what I had experienced in the Appalachians. The sunrises and sunsets are mind blowing – all color and ever changing sky.

While I was studying, I needed an elective. I came upon “Intro to Stage Lighting”, it was given through the Theatre Department, and I thought it could be interesting. I ended up studying under John Malolepsy, who became my mentor.

He taught a course that was a timeline of man's relationship to light: it started with caveman's quest for fire, and continued through other civilizations (Egyptians,

Druids, Anasazi) who recorded celestial and solar sun cycles, the Greeks and the birth of Western Civilization, and on in to the industrial revolution, electricity, and eventually the result of humans becoming numb to natural cycles. We even studied the physics of the eye. We took field trips to Chaco Canyon, descended into a Kiva chamber on winter solstice to witness the beam of light strike the center of an engraved spiral during sunrise. The course had us question everything: What is the life experience? How is it packaged? How is it that we experience theatre light?

From there, I started experimenting in the theatre with lighting design. I wanted to light anything I could get my hands on.

Every summer and between semesters,



Sam Tutty and the cast of *Dear Evan Hansen* London (Matthew Murphy)

“From there, I started experimenting in the theatre with lighting design. I wanted to light anything I could get my hands on.”

I went to the [Santa Fe Opera](#), where I was able to work with world-famous designers.

The first year there I worked on the stage crew because they didn't think I had enough experience to work in the lighting department. So I pushed scenery, ran shows, made friends, and slowly worked my way into the lighting department. This industry is all about getting along with people – it's a people business.

Eventually I worked my way up to being a lighting supervisor where I assisted Jennifer Tipton and Duane Schuler.

Everyone I met in Santa Fe told me to have other experiences, outside of the theatre, and apply those experiences as a designer. So I never majored in Theatre even though I had endless design opportunities at UNM in Albuquerque.

CTI: How did you start out in the professional lighting world?

JW: When I got to the end of school and had to survive, I went to the [Arkansas Repertory Theatre](#). I worked as a Production Manager/Resident LD for a few years. It was a great place to start out because it was an equity theatre where I could try ideas as a young designer. We created amazing looking shows with not a lot of money.

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Then in 2001 I moved to New York, about two months before 9/11. I had less than \$2,000 in my pocket.

For the first few years here, I worked as a console programmer, an electrician, assistant, off-off BWY designer, whatever I had to do to be in the theatre.

CTI: What do you think was your big break into show business in New York?

JW: There were a few key breaks I'm very thankful for. I would say one led to another; almost all interconnected. I can trace it all back to New Mexico if I really dig deep.

The first one: working in New York as an associate to [Duane Schuler](#), an opera lighting designer, who has done many many shows at [the Met](#), as well as opera all over the world. I learned a lot from him, not only in terms of aesthetics, but

also in terms of politics – how to handle complicated situations and personalities.

When I came to New York, Duane had a lot of jobs going on all over the world. I think about it now – when I was 27 years old, I was going around the world to re-create his shows for him, in Chicago to Japan, Germany, and France. I worked with him for a number of years, but the opera world doesn't overlap that much with the theatre world in New York. Because I was freelance, I was also starting to design off Broadway and for regional or local theatre productions.

CTI: What were your next key milestones?

JW: One key person was meeting and working with Director Peter Stein, one of the historic greats in German theatre, one of the original artists of the Schaubuhne in Berlin. We were designing with walls of fluorescents, stacks of 4K HMLs, and other big idea stuff that you don't see so much on Broadway.

The associate work I did then helped me build relationships with set designers, and get some of my own shows.

At the [Edinburgh International Festival](#), for example, Peter Stein and set designer Ferdinand Wögerbauer from Austria asked me about doing *Blackbird*



BLACKBIRD By David Harrower. Directed by Peter Stein. LONDON WEST END, MJE Productions.

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4000 MILES by Amy Herzog. Directed by Daniel Aukin. LINCOLN CENTER THEATRE at The Mitzi Newhouse.
Photo: Richard Termine and J. Weideman

“For me it’s about finding collaborators who are open and unafraid.”

at the Edinburgh International Festival. I was nervous as hell, but I guess I did a good job, because I went on to design with them for more productions at La Scala, Nederlandse Opera, Epidaurus, Royal Shakespeare Company, and others.

Blackbird transferred to the West End in 2006, and got a lot of good reviews. I ended up in that same theatre, then called the Albery, which is now the [Noël Coward Theatre](#). Full circle, 13 years later, here I am working at the same theatre with *Dear Evan Hansen* West End now.

CTI: How did you end up going from London back to New York?

JW: When *Blackbird* happened in London, another break happened for me. I had been assisting another fantastic designer named James Vermeulen, and he was starting to work on Broadway shows. One of the directors he worked with was with Philip Seymour Hoffman. I guess you could say I got in there early.

This particular production, *Our Lady of 121st Street*, we couldn’t hang lights because the ceiling was so low. We used lots of practicals: overhead fluorescents, wall sconces, table lamps, all in an attempt to only use light from the sources. Phil wanted stuff to look real; he was a film guy. We quickly learned if we turned off the theatre lights, blasted light through

a window, and used no other light other than backlighting from the fluorescents, those types of visual images were what held the tension of the scene.

Afterwards Labyrinth got a residency at [The Public Theater](#). Phil asked me to design the first LAB show there called *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot*, starring Sam Rockwell, John Ortiz, and many of the great LAB actors. It was really visible and led to a lot of other jobs. So now I had a show on the West End, another very special show at The Public, and so on. So right at 2005 was my first lucky break in New York.

CTI: How did you go from designing off-Broadway to Broadway?

JW: So many other things happened along the way. The next one that led to Broadway work was designing for Amy Herzog’s play, *4000 Miles*. It started at the Duke on 42nd Street, which holds 200 people, then moved uptown to Lincoln Center Theatre at The Mitzi Newhouse.

Jamie Lloyd, a director from London, saw the show and hired me to work on an adaptation of Edmond Rostand’s *Cyrano de Bergerac* for Roundabout at American Airlines Theatre starring Douglas Hodge. In addition, Jack O’Brien also saw *4000 Miles* and called me to ask if I would work on a project called *The Nance* starring Nathan Lane. That show brought my first Tony Nomination and other Broadway

shows followed: *The Snow Geese* (Friedman) with Mary Louise Parker, *Of Mice and Men* with James Franco and Chris O’Dowd, *Macbeth* (Beaumont) with Ethan Hawke, *The Heidi Chronicles* (The Music Box) with Elizabeth Moss, *Bright Star* (The Court), *Sylvia* (The Court) with Matthew Broderick, and *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (The Lunt-Fontaine).

Dear Evan Hansen started at Arena and then opened at The Music Box Theatre in 2016, and the rest is history.

CTI: It seems you’ve always had a lot of irons in the fire! What kind of projects do you really love working on?

JW: For me it’s more about the team; it’s about finding collaborators who are open and unafraid, and not caught up in their own ego persona. I feel really lucky – the majority of the shows I do are with people who are totally open to experiment in order to find the core essence of the story.

Also I love working on pieces with music whether it’s an exciting new musical, opera, or other event. Translating a composer’s work into a visual lighting experience is totally exhilarating!



CTI: How does lighting technology affect what you do?

JW: I love incandescent light. But, our eye has become attuned to a certain level of brightness these days. And it's hard to pull off a show with just incandescent lights anymore.

I'm always looking for light that's bright enough to carve out an actor in front of a video surface. Also, I simply love super bright beams of light! Many of the shows I work on these days have video and projection. Without an ArcSource moving light or LED source, it's almost impossible to get the key light you need.

And while the challenge is no doubt higher, it's a thrill to be a conduit for the work!

CTI: After working around the world, what's your relationship like with NYC?

JW: I love New York city, it inspires me in many ways and has been very good to me. I'm thrilled when I'm walking through midtown and looking up at the height of some of the new buildings under construction. Architecturally, it's incredible. And I'm deeply grateful for the network of collaborators and friends I've built here over the last 19 years. There's

moving piece that tells a tragic and deep-hearted story surrounded by the refugee crisis in America.

After that is *Bedwetter*, a hilarious new musical at the Atlantic Theatre Company written by Sarah Silverman and Joshua Harman, Adam Schleissinger music, Anne Kauffman directing.

And then *HOOD* at Asolo Rep by Douglas Carter Beane and Lewis Flinn, directed by Mark Brokaw.

All fun and exciting new pieces!

“Lighting Designers now must serve as cinematographers, creating live ‘camera shots’, kinetic environments, and ever changing stage pictures.”

For more information on Japhy Weideman, visit: www.japhyweideman.com/

Every lighting designer would tell you we were afraid of LEDs when they first came out, but now the way they're performing is incredible. It's an exciting time to be a designer and have access to LED technology.

CTI: Is the role of the lighting designer different now than it used to be?

JW: I believe the expectations of a lighting designer are increasing with technological advancements. We are a society of iPhone users who can choose what we see with the swipe of a finger. Everything is so immediate and theatre is naturally evolving with the culture and technology.

Lighting Designers now must serve as cinematographers, creating live 'camera shots', kinetic environments, and ever changing stage pictures.

no other city in the world that would have allowed me to become who I am and make a living as a theatre artist. But after long stints at work in the city, I retreat back to the mountains where I have long range views with incredible sunsets year round. I spend time planting rare conifers on my property.... But I seem to keep changing the design of the garden, constantly reworking rock and tree placement, always seeing a more visually perfect combination. Work or play, guess I'll always continue to obsess, shaping space in search of the most perfect composition.

CTI: What's in store for 2020?

JW: I'm working on some cool new musicals. First is at The Public (Newman Theater) called *The Visitor*. Tom Kit and Brian Yorkey music, David Hyde Pierce lead, Dan Sullivan directing. It's a very