

PROFESSIONAL PROFILE:

Name: **Marcus Doshi**
Profession: **Stage Designer and Associate Chair of Theatre, Northwestern University**
Experience: **26 Years**
Location: **Chicago, IL**
Website: **www.marcusdoshi.com**
Upcoming Shows: ***La Traviata*, Canadian Opera Company (April 2022); *The Seagull*, Steppenwolf Theatre (May 2022); *Champion*, Boston Lyric Opera (May 2022)**

Marcus Doshi is an international theatre maker, Professor, and Associate Chair of Theatre at Northwestern University. He designs lighting and sets for theater, opera, and dance, and collaborates with artists and architects on a variety of non-performance-based work. His work has been seen on and off-Broadway, extensively at most major opera companies and regional theatres—including longstanding collaborations with Theatre for a New Audience in New York and Steppenwolf Theatre in Chicago—and internationally in 18 countries across five continents. He is a graduate of Wabash College and the Yale School of Drama.

THE INTERVIEW:

City Theatrical (CTI): Marcus, we're excited to hear you've been working on a new book! What is it about?

Marcus Doshi (MD): It's provisionally titled *Towards Good Lighting for the Stage*, with an anticipated release in Fall 2022. The best way to describe it is that it's a book of aesthetic philosophy that hangs its hat on lighting design. There are many books about making light plots from a technical perspective, but not many that discuss aesthetic theory and what that means towards our work as lighting designers. I wanted to explore that space, from a designer's point of view, to explore the connective tissue between the broader art world and design for theatre, something that occupies a great deal of my focus at Northwestern. The first half of the book based on concepts of art theory; setting forth definitions for art, artist, spectator and beauty and mapping them

to the theatre—I don't know how we can be good designers if we aren't concerned with these ideas. The second half begins by dismantling "realism" and advancing a sort of theatrical abstraction as a primary design vocabulary of the stage, and then continues by taking the theoretical ideas and showing how I use it in my studio and in-theatre practice. I think lighting designers are artists, and their work contributes to the artwork that is the production. Everybody on the creative side of a production has to be an artist to create a unified work of art. My hope is that the language in this new book is accessible enough that all sorts of theatre people can read it and learn from it, not just lighting designers. It will be published by Routledge and I hope you can find it at drama bookstores in the Fall.

CTI: How/when did you get started in the world of professional lighting design?

MD: I didn't know I was going to be a lighting designer. My mom was a big fan of the American song book, all the popular mid-century musicals, so that music was always playing in our house.

My parents took me to see shows. We moved to Indiana when I was in second grade, and I remember seeing *Cats* when I was in the fourth grade. It blew my mind! I saw it three times, and I fell in love with the show and with theatre.

My father is Indian and on that side I am first-generation so a career in the arts wasn't on the radar. In high school, I was thinking about following my brother into the military. Then I read a book called *Johnny Got His Gun*, by Dalton Trumbo. It inspired me, and I knew there was no way I could go into the military. So, I decided to become a neurosurgeon! I ended up being a sports trainer in high school and early on committed to going to Wabash College in Indiana to study pre-med. But,



Pass Over on Broadway (Joan Marcus)

“In college, I asked if I could help out around the theatre. I became master electrician, just like that, and I worked on every show. I did any kind of backstage work that I could do, and I loved every minute of it. I was hooked.”



Pass Over on Broadway (Joan Marcus)

“What I like about being a lighting designer is that you have to use both sides of your brain at all times. On one side it is collaborative, creative work, on the other it’s working with all the technical aspects. When you’re in the groove, it’s just great.”

the summer before my senior year in high school, I grew a mohawk. The night before the first football game, the head trainer told me to cut my hair, or quit. So, I quit! And then I had all this time... So my art teacher sent me to the theatre to paint sets for the annual production of *A Christmas Carol* and the next thing I knew I was running a followspot. When I made it to college, I took three science classes, and one Introduction to Theatre Design class in my first semester. I showed up at the Technical Director’s office door to ask if I could help out around the theatre as a volunteer. She made me the master electrician, just like that, and I worked on every show. I did any kind of backstage work that I could do, and I loved every minute of it. By the end of the semester I changed my major to theatre, and my minor to art. I was hooked. I spent a semester off campus at the [Vineyard Theatre](#) in New York City as an intern,

and summer stock in the summers.

CTI: What’s your favorite part about being a lighting designer now?

MD: What I like about being a lighting designer is that you have to use both sides of your brain at all times. On one side it is collaborative, creative work, on the other it’s working with all the technical aspects. When you’re in the groove, it’s just great.

Another thing that’s great about the theatre is that it is such a social artform. While writing my book was a satisfying process, it was done at my office, mostly alone. The social aspect was reinforced while collaborating on this production of *The Merchant of Venice* that I’m doing with director Arin Arbus. She and I have done 9 million shows together and we came up with the idea for the lighting

design together, in a way that just wouldn’t have been possible by myself. That’s the best part of theatre to me – the collaboration. The idea generation. Then it becomes a very satisfying process of experimentation, evaluation and adapting.

I have to say that focusing the lights is my least favorite part.

CTI: What’s it like to collaborate with you on a production?

MD: You should probably ask the directors and designers I work with on that one...

Truthfully, I like working with people who are passionate enough about the work to get mad at each other. And also, passionate enough about the work to stop being mad and try new ideas. Otherwise, what’s the point? Our work traffics in high emotions and the difficult parts of being human. It’s hard not to be affected by that. Artists are passionate about the work that they do and I constantly remind myself of that, in tech, light cues are free, and we can always adjust. Sometimes as a lighting designer you just have to put it up on stage and look at it to see if it’s right, so I really try to be receptive to what anyone cares to bring to the tech table. I am fond of saying that the best way to show a collaborator that their idea is terrible is to execute it perfectly. And then



Linda Vista on Broadway (Joan Marcus)

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King Lear produced by Theatre for a New Audience at Polonsky Shakespeare Center (Carol Rosegg)

more often than not, you see that it's not so bad after all or it leads to a newer idea. Truly, it all has to work together—light is nothing without whatever it is that it is lighting. A very good set designer builds the light into the set, and when you're involved with collaborative discussions from the ground up as a lighting designer, what you want the light to be gets built in. So, hopefully working with me means a really tight integration between lighting and everything else.

CTI: How would you describe your lighting design aesthetic?

MD: I'm an essentialist. I only want the essential elements on stage that are necessary to tell the story or make the lighting design. Although, essential is one thing for one production and something very different for another, i.e. a play like *Hamlet* stripped down, vs. a musical like *Wicked* for Broadway. For example, I did a play called *Party People* at [The](#)

[Public Theater](#) in New York, which was a completely baroque design, with tons of color, textures, angles, movement, etc., and I did an opera at the Festival d'Aix-en-Provence with 18 lights or so. Each design had exactly what it needed and no more. I try to avoid visual pollution at all costs.

With minimalism, less is more. But with essentialism, to quote one of my influences, it's less but better. It's all contextualized; the design needs to make sense for itself and for the production. The “rules” of making sense are different for every production. But I try to be rigorous in the application of the production's aesthetic.

I like to think of my lighting designs as music. The idea for the design is a tune and my job is to take the tune and orchestrate it around the production. The light flows in the same way music does—I don't like the idea of static pictures—

and evolves as the piece goes on in a carefully orchestrated manner. The great thing about collaborators is if when they scribble a whole note in the wrong key within the “score,” it's my job is to figure out how to work it in. Sometimes if you change one thing, it changes everything. Lighting is a hard thing to talk about, so any surrogate language like musical vocabulay is helpful... there is a common understanding of terms like staccato, legato, etc. that can be very useful for us.

Another great example essentialism in practice is [Pass Over](#). For the first 80% of the show, we kept the design very crisp with a side light and very few other lights on. The only changes were within a very narrow band of color. This didn't require much in the way of gear. However, the end of the production is the coming of biblical plagues followed by a massive scenic reveal of a forest. In order to make that moment a real coup d'théâtre, it required a ton of gear. You do what's right, no more.

CTI: Are there any key learnings you'd like to share about designing during the COVID-19 era, on a show like *Pass Over*, the first new play back on Broadway?

MD: Well, it wasn't easy with all the protocols, but it's always hard to make theatre and I think everyone was so damned happy to be back in the room



King Lear produced by Theatre for a New Audience at Polonsky Shakespeare Center (Carol Rosegg)

that we were happy to do whatever it took. But it's not just COVID that has changed the landscape of how we work, it's the long-overdue movement for social justice. This hits home as a brown person who spent a lot of time trying to get a seat at the table. A lot of people and organizations are making effort on that front and I hope they'll be sustained and not superficial.

I am also delighted by moving away from doing 10-12s, and doing things in a more sustainable way; sustainable for our bodies and souls. A big personal take away from COVID is that it's not healthy for me to work as much as I was working before, or in the same manner. How can we figure out what that means, and also allow people to make a living, while still getting the job done? It's not called show art after all, it's called show business. This is a business, and we all have to make a living. It makes me sad to see that so many people left the industry during COVID. We have to be able to get people back, or we'll lose those voices. For instance, I feel a strong responsibility to my students, to put them into a world of theatre, and keep them there.

CTI: What about *Pass Over's* show lighting was unique or meaningful?

MD: *Pass Over* was meaningful to me on many fronts. First, from a social justice perspective. It's been great to get this show out in front of audiences and to feel like my voice is contributing to moving the needle. Second, it is a team full of folks I respect and like so it was always fun to be in the room with them. Third, we helped re-open Broadway! And fourth, I felt like I knocked that design out of the park.

CTI: Who/what are some of the greatest influences on your lighting aesthetic?

MD: My teachers at the Yale School of Drama of course and my #1 influence is Jennifer Tipton. There is an art critic and theorist Dave Hickey who is a huge influence of mine. Jennifer introduced me

to him. He is the reason I think beauty is so important. There is Lois Tyson, who has written a lot about literary critical theory that I've co-opted in my own work. I would also say Deiter Rams, the chief designer for the Braun Corporation. He designed everything, including coffee makers! His style mid-century modern. Extraordinary minimalism. And of course, director Arin Arbus. These are the people who have influenced my whole brain thinking.

I would also mention Stephen Strawbridge, another lighting teacher at Yale, and Robert Wierzel, who I worked for over the course of a few years, both of whom really taught me about commitment and how to make a life out of this mayhem.

CTI: What is it like, teaching at Northwestern?

MD: It's great. First of all, I'm surrounded by amazing theatre makers. Committed amazing theatre makers who want the best for their students, and it's very exciting. Northwestern is a research university, it's not a conservatory, and we're encouraged to think theoretically about the work that we do. There's a lot of space to think expansively. It's a great environment to be in. There are 400 undergraduate and 50 graduate students in the theatre department, so there is a ton of energy and work happening. I feel lucky to be able to be part of this program! Also, when you're freelancing, it's tough to find time for projects like writing. The school supported me while I was writing the book, and I am thankful.

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

MD: Everything changes so fast. For example, whatever LED technology I'm using today will change tomorrow, likewise with moving lights. So on that front, I actually don't try to keep up with every little change. Rather, I approach the design by outlining the needs I have for a particular piece of technology, and then

try to find the best fit. There are so many smart people out there who are experts, so I rely on them to help me figure out what to use. Then there are more stable technologies, i.e. ETC Lustrs or CT LED tape where I know the color gamut, and can rely on it, and the EOS operating system. That's kind of fun for me. I enjoy nerding out about the programming! It's that left brain thing.

CTI: Do you have any advice for students on the future of lighting?

MD: I tell my students: It's up to you to make change and it's also important to be realistic; it is a hard industry. Everybody knows as an LD you're going to be working 14- or 16-hour days sometimes. You have to make sure you can you handle the ups and downs of the schedule.

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

MD: My hope has to do with more critical investigation of the form and what that implies for understanding the art of the theatre. One of the things in my book I talk about is, how do we use insights gained from that kind of critical investigation to talk about lighting design? For example, if you have a practical lamp on stage, but there is other lighting on to light the scene, the lamp functions as an icon of "lampness" and makes all the other light in that room believable. The practical lamp sells the rest of the light. So that other light is indexed by the lamp. This is a take on semantics right from Lois Tyson. So, I suppose my hope is that we talk about lighting differently and discover the connective tissue to broader art theory.

For more information on Marcus Doshi, visit: marcusdoshi.com