



PROFESSIONAL PROFILE:

Name: Michelle Poley
Profession: Lighting Designer
Experience: 34 years
Location: Alexandria, Virginia
Website: www.lightcue.com
Recent Shows: CBS Democratic Debate in Charleston, SC; CNN Debate in Detroit, MI; Studio 11 D CNN Washington; Superbowl LIV Fox Sports in Miami Beach, FL

Michelle is a five-time Emmy nominated, three-time Emmy Award winning lighting designer. Michelle was CNN Washington's Director of Lighting, creating the first design group outside of Atlanta. For 20 years, she managed the daily programming and designed CNN's largest productions around the world, creating designs for Presidential Debates, town halls, and special event programming.

THE INTERVIEW:

City Theatrical (CTI): Thank you for joining us, Michelle. We are very excited to learn more about you, your career, and your new venture, LightCue. So first, when did you start your new business, and how did you transition to entrepreneurship from your role at CNN?

Michelle Poley (MP): October 2019, officially, was when LightCue became the woman-owned design firm that it is today. I had just decided to retire from my role as Director of Lighting at CNN after almost 20 years.

When I first started at CNN, I was only supposed to be in Washington for three years. Viacom had acquired TNN in

1999, and that was when I was offered a job. I had been doing a lot of work with legendary television lighting designer Bob Dickenson. One of his partners, Ted Wells, was my boss in Nashville. They had a contract to improve the look of the network, and Larry King was looking for an LD. So I went up for an interview, and they offered me the job.

CTI: How did you get started in lighting? Is it something you always wanted to do?

MP: I'm originally from Madison, Wisconsin. As a kid, we moved to Nashville. I started working full time as a photo journalist at 15 years old in Lebanon, Tennessee, right outside of Nashville. It was also around then that I found community theatre.

I attended Middle Tennessee State University and studied photojournalism. I went through high school and college, and realized my career/studies and theatre hobby flipped... and I started working out of college at Opryland USA, a theme park where I worked as the Master Electrician for the theatre part in 1985. It was a "show park"; we even had a real live show boat. In that role, I managed 18 lighting folks, and there were a total of 350 technicians working on live shows.

CTI: How did you go from working on live shows for themed entertainment to television work?

MP: Opryland Productions, which became TNN, The Nashville Network, had started doing network TV award shows, specials for ABC and CBS,



CBS Democratic Debate in Charleston, South Carolina (February 2020)

“How do we create lighting that the camera sensors will respond to? Being light on your feet, understanding how the technologies work, and making it work for you.”

among others. Lots and lots of syndicated shows and programming for TNN. Lots of production work would be produced in the theme park, and I would be on set helping them on these shows.

A position opened up at the Nashville network. They had five LDs on staff there, and I would join them. I had applied for the job, and Bob Hope's NBC Christmas Special came to Nashville, in one of our theme park's theatres. Ted Wells, head of lighting for TNN, made sure I was on that production. I was mortified the first day when I overslept the call... but I eventually saved myself, when the show's lighting console had died – the guts of technical theatre – and I was able to fix it. That helped me become known for the technical stuff I do as part of my lighting design. But for the next 10 years at TNN, I was reminded of missing that call.

From there, I worked on television projects for CMT and TNN. Viacom bought CBS, and CBS had owned those cable networks. The networks were re-formulated by Viacom, and many of us went freelance. I was working on TV programming in 1999; the last show I did as staff was the Country Music Awards in October 1999 as the conventional lighting director, with Andy O'Reilly, the moving light lighting director. Bob Dickenson was the designer. I went freelance for the same production companies a week later, as was the case for many of us in the 90's.

“The difference between my theatre and TV work has been breaking out of that fourth wall, and treating the room with light to let the viewer visualize what you want them to see or not.”

CTI: How would you describe your lighting design aesthetic?

MP: Painting a picture. Treating the visuals as a 360-degree experience, especially with TV work. In theatre, you don't break the fourth wall. The difference between my theatre and TV work has been breaking out of that fourth wall, and treating the room with light to let the viewer visualize what you want them to see or not.

CTI: What was it like creating the first design group outside of Atlanta as CNN Washington's Director Of Lighting?

MP: CNN lighting department never had an office outside of Atlanta, and now, in Washington, there is a lighting staff of four, and they're able to cover very interesting projects. One day, you might be doing a special interview, with the White House or a world leader. The next day, you could be covering breaking news either with a live anchor on the street

or studio, or set up a town hall event. The next could be a special event, or just handling the various hours of studio programming, that originate from DC. With Larry King, for example, a lot of our work was done in the studio, but certain times required travel. UN week in New York, for example, there was an interview with the President of Iran, and then we went out to Los Angeles, for an interview with Tom Cruise for *The Last Samurai*. Or sometimes, as world events unfold, we'd travel to cover events at a moments notice, like Pope John Paul's funeral in Rome. Travel meant working with local grip companies and setting up TV for the six different networks that CNN provides services and production.

CTI: With 34 years of experience lighting, you've worked on some incredible projects for CNN and beyond. What would you say are some of the most interesting project you have worked on?

MP: As somebody who loves technology, "skunk-work" projects have been some of the most interesting projects for me, but in addition to normal TV and theater operations, I did quite a bit of venue system design work.

At TNN, I helped manage new venue construction like the [Ryman Auditorium](#) renovation, and systems / lighting designer to the [Wild Horse Saloon](#)

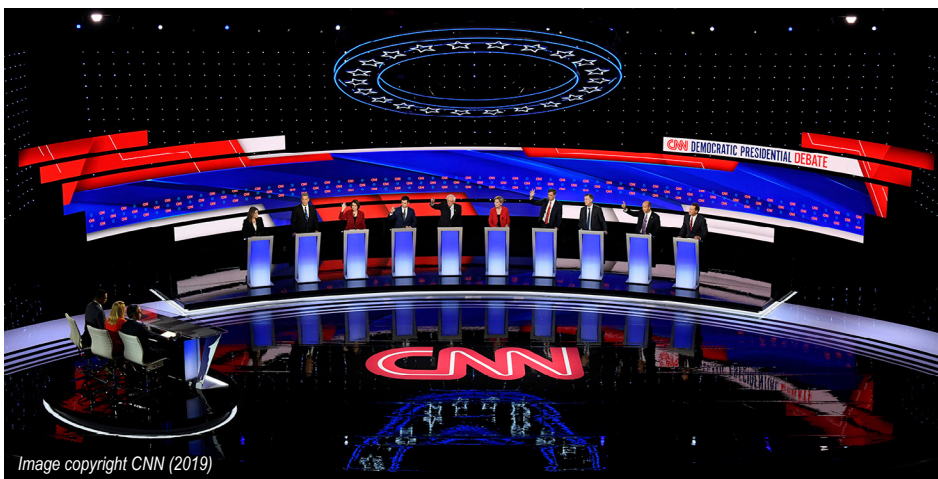


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“Developing solutions for people has been some of my most interesting work.”

entertainment venue in Nashville, that were built with Television in mind.

At CNN, we built a bus, the Election Express. We had multi-feed satellite transmission on it and featured some of the first LED lighting. I was lucky enough to be included in the design team for that project.

We experimented with and built so many wonderful things at CNN. For example, the photojournalists needed special rigs to be able to do live reports. We would build them and figure out ways to hook up the gear. We partnered very closely with the engineering teams or photojournalist teams to accomplish this. A good example is on the White House north lawn, where everybody was going towards LEDs, but the networks were experiencing issues, and they were difficult to control. So we prototyped and designed a waterproof touchscreen lighting control systems used to control waterproof LED fixtures. Developing solutions for people has been some of my most interesting work.

CTI: What was it like lighting the CNN 2020 Democratic Presidential Primary Debates?

MP: With that design and all large CNN Debates, it was not only about creating a 360-degree visual, but also it's very important to light the closeups and the reaction shots the directors need.

We worked with set designer Eric Ulfers

and his team at [Clickspring](#) to create a classic header that modernized the look of the show, but also paid attention to the past debates we've done. We tried to make cleaner lines this time.

With the angled structure, we created linear lines in the back, and created small points up in the grid. All of the blue is little ACL dots, to carry the layers further out. The design doesn't end at the star drop; the idea is to keep the look going.

And that's one character. Then you have the venue – and Detroit's [Fox Theatre](#), for example, is a true playground to light with its Byzantine interior design.

CNN is there of course for a presidential debate, but it's also in Michigan. Our story was, here we are in Michigan, for a Democratic debate. Candidates are talking about people's lives, what concerns them, not only in the state, but around the world. As it was a worldwide broadcast, we wanted to reinforce the idea of an iconic look, with a bit of nice step and repeat, branding that shows the event, but also tell the viewers a bit about its historic location.

This all costs money to do, I was very grateful to be with a television network that cares so much about the visuals and is willing to invest in them.

CTI: What is LightCue about?

MP: Lighting design for television is our

DNA... but we do so much more, and we always keep our eye on the technical.

Part of our group, LightCue labs, develops technology, parts and programming solutions, like a timing light system for CBS news' Presidential Debate, with both video and lighting indications. We also do product consultation / testing for Vitec and other worldwide companies.

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

MP: Given the current pandemic, I think we're all looking for different opportunities. My calendar was fully booked with election and sporting work, and now that calendar has cleared.

We're looking for opportunities these days in other places by partnering with manufacturers to do product testing and consultations. I used to be a beta tester for ETC's Obsession consoles and helped other companies with product design. We're also putting bids and proposals out for building construction, to do lighting design for new builds.

We're looking at opportunities other than TV, and also trying to stay relevant and up to date, providing training for folks. Whatever we can do in this new normal.

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CTI: Have you faced any lighting technology challenges on recent projects?

MP: I'm spending a lot of time with LEDs right now, on how we're building it. How do we use the new LED to our advantage? How do we shape light as we have done in the past with LEDs? There's an expectation that tungsten shapes in a certain way. How do we create lighting that the camera sensors will respond to in a way that we expect them to?

The LED tape light is the Wild West

“Content is going to be king. How we consume it will change. It’s all about embracing change.”

right now. How cameras work with them. And cameras, how do you photograph with this ever-changing set of standards and technology? With photo 10 stops of dynamic range, to now 20 stops of dynamic range? Don't forget the new limiting (energy) standards / requirements within the architectural world as well.

Being light on your feet, understanding how the technologies work, and making them work for you, is the challenge.

CTI: Once the world opens back up again, what do you see for the future of lighting?

MP: I'm not sure what the new normal is. I think for a while, there are some good and bad things that will happen. I think bad is, the producers are going to

try to do productions with less people. Streaming will be more important for entertainment, which is both good and bad. I worry about the big shows being able to spend a million dollars on an hour of prime-time programming. The other side is there is a lot of content that needs to be created. And there are a lot of companies that are doing amazing things. There are more shows out there, and the quality, and being agile, are going to be very important aspects of our community going forward. Content is going to be king. How we consume it will change. It's all about embracing change.

Designers. She was such an innovator.

Ted Wells, my old boss at TNN and partner at [Full Flood](#), is the Zen master. When I was first out of college managing 18 people at a theme park, I was so overwhelmed, and I met Ted, who was THE man. Such a talent, but so nonchalant about it. Ted was across the way, working at the Opryland Studio Complex, as the head of lighting for TNN, and the Grand Old Opry, and he was my inspiration, and rock. When I went to work for Ted, I could see how he took care of his people, and the clients. It



Studio 11 D CNN Washington - Systems and Lighting Design (2019)

CTI: Who are some of the key people who have made a difference in your career along the way?

MP: My mentor is [Bill Klages](#), the master. I had the honor of being personally assigned to Bill when he came town to do productions when I was very new to the TV side of lighting. He taught me so much, just by hanging out with him, like AutoCAD in the early days. He has an electrical engineering background, and his left and right brain qualities were such an inspiration to me. You can balance the technical and still have an artistic eye.

For Theater, it has to be Tharon Musser. *Dreamgirls* on Broadway, the first Broadway show I saw, was so inspiring to me, it really made we want to get into lighting design. Tharon truly was, as many say, the Dean of American Lighting

was a master class in people skills, that I never would have learned had if I did not work with Ted. He (and Bob Dickenson) are the reason why I'm at CNN. They were consultants for the network and recommended me.

These folks have inspired me and my love of doing what I do. It also taught me to help others I have worked with and help them become successful. I am so tickled when I see people who I have worked with go on to do bigger and better things. That's the biggest success.

For more information on Michelle Poley and *LightCue*, visit: www.lightcue.com

