

## What It's Like To Be A Young Moving Light Programmer On Broadway

### *An interview with moving light programmer Alex Fogel*

How does a young designer, right out of college, work his way up to becoming an in demand moving light programmer on Broadway?

Alex Fogel was raised by parents involved in the arts and his passion for theatre started at a very early age. The opportunity to work on numerous productions in the New York area reinforced his interest in theatre and led him to North Carolina School of the Arts where he received his B.F.A. in lighting design.

Upon graduation Alex had the good fortune to work as an assistant designer with Kenneth Posner on *The Royal Family* for the Manhattan Theater Club and more recently on *The Winters Tale* and *The Merchant of Venice* for the New York Shakespeare Festival as well as the Alvin Ailey City Center season 2009 with Al Crawford.

Alex has done what every lighting graduate wants to do: create a growing career in professional entertainment. CTI had the opportunity to ask Alex some questions about how he has gotten to where he is today, and where he is going.

**CTI: What was it like growing up in an entertainment family?**

**AF:** My mother was a Broadway dancer and my father, a stagehand. They were passionate about their love of theatre and they took me into the city to see everything from a very early age. Their friends were colorful and interesting. I remember, as a kid, listening to all the stories that they would tell about the shows they were in. I wanted to be a part of that.

**CTI: Can you recall the first time you were in a theatre that made a major impression on you?**

**AF:** My father, Ron Fogel, worked at Bash Theatrical Lighting during the day and was the Production Electrician at *Cats* at night. I was 3 or 4 years old and he let me hang out with him on the jump. I spent hours watching the show and trying to figure out how it all worked.

**CTI: How did you get started in technical theatre and where did you get your training?**

**AF:** I became the "lighting guy" at various Middle and High School productions in and around my hometown of Verona, New Jersey. We did full scale musicals and plays where I would design, program and run the show. I also worked as a stagehand at Bergen Tech, a rental house in New Jersey and then spent summers at Theatrefest, Montclair State University's summer musical theater series.

Naturally, I chose to major in Lighting Design and after graduation, headed to North Carolina School of the Arts. The education I received there was demanding. It provided practical production experience while also giving me opportunities to design.

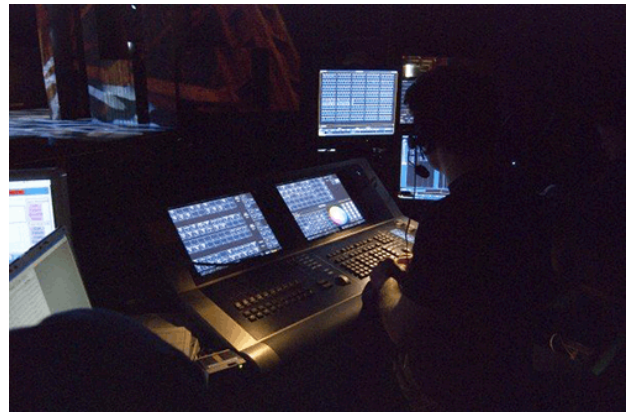
**CTI: What was your first paying lighting job and what steps did you take to get the job?**

**AF:** When I was at NCSA, I was asked to research a repertory dance plot. I had seen Alvin Ailey and met their Lighting Director, Al Crawford, when the company was passing through North Carolina. So I called him. We had a long conversation about lighting design and several weeks later he offered me an opportunity to intern/assist on a few upcoming summer musicals that he was working on. It must have gone well because he offered me my first job as an LD. It started the day after my NCSA graduation... and yes, I drove all night from North Carolina to New York City to make my 8:00 AM call the following day.

**CTI: How did you break into to programming moving lights?**

**AF:** In my sophomore year at NCSA, I was chosen to program the moving lights for the first all school musical to celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of "*West Side Story*." It was directed by Gerald Freedman, who was the assistant director of the original 1957 Broadway Production.

The EOS hadn't been released yet and we were offered the opportunity to beta test it. Anne Valentino was kind enough to walk me through the console, and that was the only official training I got. I was asked to review the performance of the console, report any bugs and recommend improvements based on my experience. This heightened my interest in all aspects of moving light



Alex Fogel working on *West Side Story*. This was his first show as a moving light programmer.



Alex programming moving lights for *Out Of Town*

programming. When I got to the city, I took every programming job available to me.

One day, Ken Posner called and gave me my first break. First taking me on as an ALD on *The Royal Family* for MTC, followed by *Winter's Tale* and *Merchant of Venice* for NYSF and finally, *The Columnist*, my first programming job on Broadway.

**CTI: What exactly is a moving light programmer? Describe what you do.**

**AF:** Technically, the moving light programmer is the person who programs the required data into the lighting console, which controls the cuing of a moving light rig. His job is to produce the intended look, as directed by the designer.

When I'm sitting behind the console, I am generally the intermediary between the designer and the numbers. A moving light programmer can alleviate the designer of the technical details, allowing him or her to focus on the look of the show. The process, however, can vary from one designer to another. My goal is to be flexible and competent with my approach in order to accommodate each designer and his or her preferred style.

My knowledge of lighting design is helpful, especially when working with larger rigs.

Most importantly, I need to be fast, clean, accurate and of course, make the job for the lighting designer as easy as possible.

**CTI: What does your daily routine look like when working on a Broadway show?**

**AF:** My tasks vary, depending on where we are in the process. For me, load in is about setting up and preparing for tech. I'll get the console loaded up with all my tools (macros, views, color pallets, etc.), ring out the rig, making sure it's responding properly and implement a system for organizing referenced information. I'll also bank as many presets or looks as possible. The idea here is to anticipate what focuses the designer might need so that they can be accessed, adjusted and implemented as quickly as possible during tech.

Once tech begins, the average day starts with notes in the morning then tech with actors in the afternoon, which continues late into the night. This is when the light cues get built and everything comes together.

Once performances begin, mornings are used to tackle notes and on most afternoons, there's a rehearsal call in which we make improvements to the show. After the rehearsal, all the tables and consoles get struck before the evening performance. This continues until the show freezes and no more changes can be made. Every show is unique and has its own special needs, but in general, that is how my days pan out.

**CTI: What's it like being a young programmer on Broadway and trying to make a living?**

**AF:** Well, it's great when I am working. However, it's sometimes unsettling not knowing when the next job will come. I have been fortunate to have a good amount of work but I never take it for granted. It is one of the uncertainties that all theatre professionals have to deal with.

**CTI: What is most rewarding about what you do?**

**AF:** I love being a part of the team and the collaboration involved in the creative process. A perfectly programmed show, anticipating the designers needs, getting the most out of the given technology and then watching it work are all things I enjoy. It makes all the hard work and long hours worth it on so many levels.

**CTI: How does your career compare to what you thought it might have looked like when you started out?**

**AF:** After college, I knew that I had to pay my dues and work up the ladder to becoming a designer. The moving light programming was always an interest, but I didn't imagine I'd be programming as much as I am today. I still design shows as much as I can, but find myself programming more often. I have no complaints because I am learning so much from the designers that I work with and I am still pretty young and patient. It's all good.

**CTI: What is a common misconception people have about what you do?**

**AF:** People often think I stay with the shows that I program. Often I would like to because you get attached to the cast and crew, but the nature of a programmer's job is to work during the technical rehearsals through the opening night. Then, hopefully, moving on to the next job.

**CTI: What types of lighting projects have you worked on and which were the most fun to work on?**

**AF:** I've worked at "Shakespeare In The Park" several times now. You just cannot explain the experience of waiting till it gets dark to light the show and then



Alex during a rehearsal for *A Night With Janis Joplin*



Programming for an Encores! production of *Fiorello* at City Center



Alex demonstrates Moving Light Assistant for LD Don Holder

working all night long. Dealing with the heat, the rain. It is always a challenge and always so much fun to be a part of a show in that space. I enjoy straight plays, but I have always had a love of music. Really nailing a beat or responding to the feeling of the music adds another level of creativity and skill that interests me. I recently programmed *A Night With Janis Joplin* and *A Gentleman's Guide to Love and Murder*, both of which were very musical but in vastly different ways.

It is always fun to return to City Center to do the Encores shows because I get to work with a terrific group of professionals and the shows are wonderful.

**CTI: Who have been your role models or the most influential people to your career?**

**AF:** Wow, so many people have influenced me along the way. I would have to say that my father supported my interest in lighting with his guidance and knowledge. Ken Posner was and still is a mentor to me. He not only took a chance on a newbie, but also was a teacher and someone who cared enough to listen. Victor Seastone has given me much appreciated guidance regarding all aspects of being a freelance programmer. I am so grateful to all of the designers that I work with as well as the folks at ETC.

**CTI: Where do you see yourself in five years?**

**AF:** I see myself working in the theatre. There are so many aspects of lighting design and technology that interest me that it's hard to say where I will land. But I'm excited to find out!

**CTI: What advice would you give to a young person wanting to pursue lighting design as a major in college?**

**AF:** If you have the passion and talent, then go for it. Keep an open mind and be a team player. Seek out opportunities and follow through with hard work and dedication.



Alex programming for LD Ken Billington for an Encores! Production