

City Theatrical Talks with Lighting Designer Jake DeGroot

[Jake DeGroot](#) is a freelance designer based in New York City. Jake has collaborated with theaters, companies, directors, designers, and artists all over the world. Jake will be designing his first Broadway production, *Oh, Hello* opening October 10th at the Lyceum Theatre in NYC. We sat down with Jake to learn about his experience lighting his first Broadway show, and the journey he took to get where he is today.



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

Jake DeGroot: I consider myself very lucky that I have known what I wanted to do since I was very young. I decided I wanted to be a lighting designer when I operated the light board for a community theatre show when I was 10 years old and I have been able to stay busy doing it ever since. My drive to get involved with lighting at such a young age certainly came from some theatrical experiences I had as a kid. I would say there were two extremely memorable moments in theatres that led me in the direction of design and specifically lighting. The first was seeing *Peter Pan* in the Colonial Theatre in Boston with my grandparents. I remember being totally transfixed by the scrim bleed-through at the top of the show and trying to figure out how it was done. Then of course when Kathy Rigby flew out over the audience, they had me. The other experience was a couple of years later when I saw the sit-down production of *The Who's Tommy* in Toronto. To this day, I have vivid memories of the incredible lighting and video designs by Chris Parry and Wendall K. Harrington. I could describe the cues to you. That show also remains one of my favorite to this day and I have never had the chance to light a professional production of it. I look forward to the day I get that call!



CTI: You created the lighting design for *Oh, Hello* on Broadway. What was your concept? How did this opportunity present itself? How was the experience working on your first show as a lighting designer?

Jake DeGroot: I have been a long-time fan of Nick Kroll and John Mulaney (and their characters, Gil Faizon and George St. Geegland) through their appearances on comedy podcasts and *The Kroll Show*. I first heard from a friend of mine (also a comedy fan) that they were bringing *Oh Hello* to New York City last winter as an off-Broadway show at the Cherry Lane Theater. I was so excited to have the opportunity to see it live, but when I looked on the website to buy tickets, it was already sold out. The next week, just as I was getting over my disappointment, I got a call from Alex Timbers about this funny little project that he was directing that was going to just be a few quick days downtown. I couldn't say, "yes" fast enough. Little did we know, at that point, that it would be such a success downtown (and later in venues all over the country) and that it would go on to become my first Broadway design. It is incredible to be designing on Broadway and I am so grateful to Alex Timbers, Patrick Catullo, and Marcia Goldberg for the opportunity. It is also wonderful to be back at the beautiful Lyceum Theatre where I previously worked as an associate designer on last season's *A View From the Bridge*. Between having worked in the theatre before and having done the show before with this team, it was great to feel a real sense of family in the theatre. Plus, just being in the room with performers as smart and funny as Nick and John is always thrilling. So much of the show is improvised and unpredictable that it never gets old, no matter how many times I see it.

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

Jake DeGroot: There are big differences in my daily routine when I'm working in town, such as this project, versus working out of town teching a tour or a regional show. I appreciate the travel opportunities that this career affords me, but there is always something nice about being able to go home to your own bed every night. I also really value my commute when I'm in town. I ride my bike everywhere in the city (including to and from the theatre every day) and the time I spend cycling and listening to podcasts is such an important part of my day. When I'm out of town, the hotel is often just a few minutes' walk from the theatre and while it seems nice to be able to sleep in a few more minutes, I always end up missing the commute which allows me to clear my mind, think about things that aren't the show, and get some exercise. But once I'm in the theatre, the process of lighting a show is not dramatically different than it is in other cities.



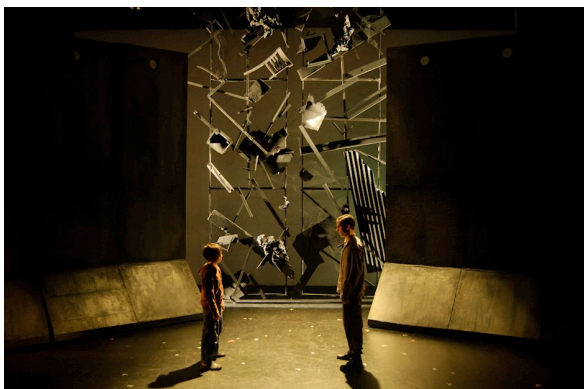
SeaWife



SeaWife

CTI: What has been some of the most memorable projects that you've done over the years?

Jake DeGroot: I have been lucky to work on many exciting projects as both a designer and an associate designer. I think the two factors that can most contribute to my feeling especially engaged and excited by a project are the show's content and the collaborative spirit of the team. My absolute favorite work is when I feel like the show has something important to say about the world. I am very engaged politically, and I like to say that theatre done well is politics and politics done poorly is theatre. Not every project I work on is a big political statement but the ones that are thrill me. I remember fondly a project many years ago called *Neither Heaven Nor Earth*, which was a piece of documentary-style theatre about the Israeli occupation of the Palestine. While it wasn't the largest show or fancy equipment, it was dealing with topics important to me and even was a catalyst for changing the political stances of some of my friends and family who saw it. I also love when a process allows me to have a deep collaboration with the other designers and the director from the earliest stages. When working with smart, engaged designers, I love how each designer can bring so much unique perspective to the table even outside their own realm of scenic/costume/sound/video/lighting design. It is always so satisfying when we feel like we have the time to really discuss and address the questions and challenges of a piece as a team. A recent new musical I lit called *SeaWife* had a wonderful collaborative creation process. I'm currently in the middle of a similarly exciting process on an upcoming design for *The Temple Bombing* at the Alliance Theatre in Atlanta, which is a new play dealing with a local historical event and devised in the style of Tectonic Theatre Project. That process has already been rewarding and I'm confident it will continue to be so as we progress.



Neither Heaven Nor Earth



The Robber Bridegroom

CTI: You were nominated for your first Drama Desk Award this year. How was the experience working on *SeaWife*? Were there any challenges on the project?

Jake DeGroot: I touched on this in a previous answer, but *SeaWife* was a thrilling project to work on due to the incredibly collaborative spirits of the other designers, the director (Liz Carlson of Naked Angles) and the writer/performers (Seth Moore and The Lobbyists). We had several developmental phases prior to the production last summer at South Street Seaport including presentations at Ars Nova's AntFest, workshop productions at New York Stage and Film, and a design retreat in the middle of snow-covered the Connecticut woods where we dug deep into the show. This rich process really paid off in the end with a very cohesive fully considered production. We were able to mount the show in the historic Melville gallery which could not have been a more perfect setting dramatically and energetically (short of doing the show on an actual whaling boat) but that space was certainly not designed for theatre and it presented many logistical challenges (big wooden columns, low ceilings, limited electrical power, etc) when laying out the light plot. Despite these challenges, I was very happy with the design and I thought it did a lot of visual storytelling to help render the world of the play. That said, I never imagined it would earn a Drama Desk Nomination. It was such an honor to even be on the same list as Jane Cox, Ben Stanton, Justin Townsend, Jules Fisher, and Peggy Eisenhauer.



The May Queen



Fly

CTI: How was working with [SHoW DMX Neo®](#) on *Oh, Hello* on Broadway? Have you worked with City Theatrical gear in any past productions?

Jake DeGroot: City Theatrical gear seems to find a place on almost every show I design. For *Oh Hello*, we have some automated moving set pieces with several practicals and foggers mounted on them and the automation system did not include cable management infrastructure so the ability to get data to those units wirelessly proved invaluable. There are some jokes in the show based completely on our ability to get [wireless DMX](#) across the theatre accurately and it's great to have CTI gear making it work. We are also using [AutoYokes](#) with 5° Source Fours on them, [Lightwright® 6](#) for paperwork, and CTI [accessories](#) throughout the light plot.



A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum



Island Song