



Designer Q&A: Mike Baldassari on *After Midnight* at the Signature Theatre

Ever wonder what it's like to design a new theatrical production for a digital audience? We talked to lighting designer [Mike Baldassari](#) to learn more about his work on [After Midnight](#), which was filmed at the Signature Theatre in Arlington, Virginia, and is available for global streaming through August 4, 2021. Here's what we learned about his experience.



Photos by Christopher Mueller

Q&A:

City Theatrical (CTI): Congratulations on the recent opening of *After Midnight*! Tell us about the show - what was it like designing the show during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Mike Baldassari (MB): The show was shot in February 2021, so it was pre-vaccine time for many people working on the project. We went into this show knowing it would be pre-recorded for digital streaming. *After Midnight* is a cool hybrid: a Broadway-style theatrical show that was performed on stage at the Signature Theatre in Arlington, Virginia, but designed for broadcast. Having designed for theatre, television, live concerts and combinations thereof, the hybrid format for *After Midnight* was right up my alley. It was the kind of 'blended media' stuff I love to do.

The show was released June 13, 2021. Tickets are available through the [Signature Theatre website](#), and also via [Broadway on Demand](#), to watch through August 4, 2021.

CTI: What was your design process like for this show?

MB: We put the lighting design together like a normal theatrical production, but I took the approach like we were doing a quick television 'SNL-type' pre-record, of which I've done quite a number. I knew everything had to be able to go in and be lit very quickly... we lit 28 musical numbers in just two days! We were able to move at that pace mostly because we didn't have to light the transitions between songs. We weren't trying to 'adapt' the theatrical lighting from a preexisting production; this was conceived specifically for digital capture.

In order to reduce the density of people in the rehearsal hall, we were able to record rehearsals, which were uploaded every night to a secure server. I was then able to watch them from home through the process, and pause the video to write cue notes, etc. That was a super helpful benefit to working within the very strict pandemic protocols that were in place. One of the things I said from the beginning was that we were not going to write 700 light cues, as we might have with a typical Broadway-style theatrical production. This show was directed and choreographed by Jared Grimes, who is incredibly

talented. Since it was really the first show back for so many people, everybody poured their heart out on stage.

Having done numerous movies with directors who are also choreographers, I knew they always put the camera cuts right where I would put the light cue anyway. Because we took this 'less is more' approach, the whole show could be teched and shot within a week. Just as importantly, we were not tied to running the show sequentially and instead came up with a shooting order that was the most efficient use of time. Thereby we could shoot a number or two, stop, change costumes, and pick back up again. We used the shooting model of film to get the best capture for streaming.

CTI: Where there any challenges you were able to overcome with your design for the show?

MB: *After Midnight* had no set. We essentially built a pretty simple, yet versatile wall of lights to create the color and mood of each scene. All I had to start with was the platform plan that the Signature Theatre had put together for the show. So all of the visuals were built between the lighting and the costume design teams.

We used four follow spots with City Theatrical Follow Spot Yokes, Handles and Boomerangs. We only had two Follow Spot Operators, but were able to have them move between all four follow spot lights. Since there was no audience, we put the follow spot fixtures on dollies in the balcony, so they could be rolled to where we wanted them for each shot. This method gave the team lots of mobility and flexibility and I was able to move them number to number depending on the placement of the cameras.

Because the Director wanted a super shiny floor, I worked with the show's Director of Photography, Justin Chiet, to adjust the iris of the camera to lose the bright light bouncing off the floor and onto the walls and ceiling. Worked like a charm and saved the Editor a lot of time in post.

CTI: How did you use QolorFLEX RGBWW LED Tape?

MB: QolorFLEX LED Tape gave us a way to light up the modesty panels for the band that were custom-built light-boxes with an 'AM' logo. I thought it was important to give the bandstand something custom - so we could 'brand' the stage with a logo specific to our production of *After Midnight*, and not just something that felt generic. Furthermore, having light up modesty panels meant the bandstand could be a different color for each song.

We were able to reuse existing QolorFLEX RGBWW LED Tape from a previous production at Signature. It was a great recycling of a customizable City Theatrical product they already had plenty of on hand. It helped the budget as well of course!

CTI: Did you feel differently working on this show as opposed to pre-COVID-19 shows?

MB: At one point I found myself in the space with just me and the killer band. I was close to tears realizing how much I had missed hearing live music. I made sure to say something to the band and they said, 'Hey man, we've missed it too!'. It was a nice moment for all of us. The music in this show is so moving. I didn't know I missed it so much. We are all here because we love what we do and it's been far too long since we've been able to do it. I'm so grateful that we're on the road back!



Photos by Mike Baldassari