



PROFESSIONAL PROFILE:

Name: Jay Woods
Profession: Consultant, Lighting Designer, and Planner
Company: Jay Woods Design, Inc.
Website: www.jaywoodsdesign.com
Experience: 20+ Years
Location: Greater New York Area
Current Project: *The Great Jack O'Lantern Blaze*

Jay Woods is a graduate of the Conservatory of Theatre Arts at Purchase College. After gaining experience in varied aspects of the lighting industry, Jay's design approach is based around the idea that the design concept is a fluid and vital element of any production. Jay works to balance design with cost for the greatest production value for his clients.

THE INTERVIEW:

City Theatrical (CTI): *How did you get started in the world of professional lighting design?*

Jay Woods (JW): My interest started with high school musicals, then I went to SUNY Purchase to get the best training for what I wanted to do with my life. They have a design technology program with a great reputation. I spent 4 years there, studied under Dave Grill among other lighting professionals, and he's still my mentor today.

From there I had a brief stint in the architectural lighting world. After 9/11, with the building industry shrinking, I revisited my passion for theatre.

I started freelancing as a lighting designer at that point, and started what would be my company, Jay Woods Design.

CTI: *What made you start Jay Woods Design?*

JW: I was working my way up through the hotel ballroom and dance school circuits, and was fortunate to work alongside Dave Grill again, with lighting projects like the Florida Museum of Natural History and Salt Lake City Olympic Museum.

I started Jay Woods Design and took on projects in the most holistic way I could. I wanted to create lighting experiences that were fully curated. My interest was in protecting the

design intent.

Through the years, it's just grown and grown, through all manner of projects. For example, we just finished a theatrical installation at a private school in Connecticut. Sometimes its architectural projects, sometimes dance, sometimes cool special events like *The Great Jack O'Lantern Blaze*, which we've been working on every year for a decade.

CTI: *You have a very diverse background. What is your favorite project to work on?*

JW: Whatever's next – I don't have a favorite child. Different parts of me are served by different pieces of work. When I work on dance, I work on the



Redeemer Church – Utica Campus (Jay Woods)

“I wanted to create lighting experiences that were fully curated, and protect the design intent.”

deepest core of design – it gives my design aesthetic a bigger chance to be heard. It’s a language of color, angle and movement – all the juicy parts of lighting design. Whereas massive-scale commercial projects like *The Great Jack O’Lantern Blaze* help me get in touch with the organization of the project, building a team, seeing the big picture – it’s a great intellectual challenge.

I also enjoy technical design work, like what I’m now working on for tours. I love to sit down and think about a problem, and solve it efficiently. Efficiency makes me happy. If I can solve a challenge like tiny set pieces with tight angles or complex controls more efficiently, I take professional pride in that. I love producing high quality drawings that are technically specific.

So, they’re all kind of the favorite. I crave not doing the same thing all the time.

CTI: What is the process for working on larger technical projects?

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JW: For live televised events, for example, I’m taking all the pieces of information provided - designer drawings, notes from the client on design intent, and 3D technical drawings for the scenery – to get the designer’s intent built on the shop floor. It’s recognizing where there are conflicts and laying things out so they can be controllable. Conversations with the lighting designer to optimize how we build the products for them. Using all the facets of my background to find an optimal way.

CTI: How do you balance the creative with the technical?

JW: The balance comes from trying to do both in equal parts. Trying to get enough variety that it’s not all left

or right brain. If it’s not both, I lose touch with what I’m trying to do. Often while I’m working on big projects that include a lot of project management, like *The Great Jack O’Lantern Blaze*, I’m also working on smaller dance projects, so I can spend some time at a tech table. And after the crew leaves and it’s quiet, it’ll be me standing alone in a field and making artistic decisions.

CTI: What’s the typical day like working on Blaze?

JW: It starts at 5:30AM with coffee – the common thread that gets me going. Crew starts at 8, so there’s some time to catch up on email, payroll, etc. Then I jump in the car, head down to the job site, so I can be there as the crew is working all day. The focus is getting the crew working in the morning, and I’m usually operating a few days ahead of where we actually are, trying to pave the way for what we’ll be doing three or four days to a week from now.

Since it’s a big outdoor event, if something moves, or you need to get around a tree, it may mean buying additional equipment. Lunch almost always sneaks up on me. Sometimes our team goes out for lunch, and radios are quiet. Maybe



The Great Jack O’Lantern Blaze (Nathan Avakian)



“There are a lot of tools in the designer’s toolkit, and color is my first. I would say it is my big brush.”

The Great Jack O'Lantern Blaze (Nathan Avakian)

I’ll walk around the pumpkin patch, focus on what needs to happen for the afternoon.

A lot of times I’ll try to leave at 3PM from the job site, so I can sit in the office and work, with all quiet by 5 or 6PM. I try to make time for things I enjoy in life that aren’t work related.

On days when we’re programming, however, it’s a long day. We program for *Blaze* overnight because we can’t turn the house lights off! It’s a 7PM start, 8-hour night. It’s important to see it in the dark to understand the project and what it needs.

CTI: How do you put your team together for a project like Blaze?

JW: I look at people’s strengths. I still have good contacts at SUNY Purchase, and I’ll often take on talent from there. There are a lot of seats to fill on a project like *Blaze*. Those capable as project managers, and lighting designers themselves, who can be lighting directors. I also need people who are good with people. People who are organized, to keep track of hours and payroll.

This business allows you to meet a lot of people. When I have a project, I look at what skillsets it needs to be successful, then I consider what other projects we are working on, and then start making phone calls to figure the team out. I’ve been lucky to find and work with a lot of super talented folks.

CTI: How would you describe your role on larger vs. smaller projects?

JW: A large project for me is me flying at ten thousand feet the whole time. It’s making sure everyone else is successful. It’s critical on larger jobs. And letting them do it, resisting the urge to dive down and do it at ground level.

Smaller projects are usually me +1. I try to keep them to pure design as much as possible. Then managing the load in. We try to make them the best experience ever – they’re really fun for me. They’re sort of designed to be fun.

CTI: How would you describe your design aesthetic?

JW: Colorful. There are a lot of tools in the designer’s toolkit, and color is my

first. I can look at a final project photo, even if it’s blurry, and know if it’s mine based on the color. The projects where color has been dictated are the hardest for me. I like to make those decisions.

Then angle. Where the light is is super important to me. It needs to be in the right place. Then quality of the light. Then very next in line is timing. In dance, especially, timing is critical. That’s when working with a good team becomes massively important. Putting the human element in place. The reveal, light to darkness, darkness to light. If I had all day, I could just tweak cues for timing.

So I would say color is my big brush, timing is my detail brush, allowing bold statements and gentle ones through light at the same time.

CTI: What are the greatest influences on your lighting aesthetic?

JW: I think the mood of what I’m working on is what influences my aesthetic. I don’t like being too influenced – I like my work to be what it should do for the project.

Outside influences I would take are natural, like the colors of a sunset. For texture, I love Frank Lloyd Wright's architecture, especially his stained glass.

CTI: What is one of the most interesting projects you've ever worked on?

JW: It might be the Copa America Centenario Gala – to celebrate the 100-year anniversary of the American Soccer Cup –at the Hammerstein Ballroom in 2017. That project was interesting because it was a mix of everything I'd ever done up until that point, including some complicated 3D scenery that needed lighting installed within it.

The project came with major television viewership – about 100 million worldwide people watched it. And it was live – so your first choice is the only choice, so it had to be right. Stakes were very high. Every union was there, there was a huge moving light rig, fly overs over the whole ballroom, and all scenery was illuminated. It was like an awards show in a way – big entertainment

musical sections, with a huge fan base – like doing a rock concert that included draft picks in a corporate ballroom event setting. It stretched me in every direction.

CTI: What are some of the challenges of lighting technology you currently face?

JW: The amount of data is the biggest technical challenge I've had. I've witnessed a world where more dimmer racks are used as a method of control, into now having more universes in control.

As a designer, a lot of these decisions used to be made before you even step into the theatre. Now, most of these decisions can't be made until you are there. It means designers must take extra steps to make sure the design intent is actually happening on stage. A key stroke can change what you wanted to do. It's all in data.

The hardware side and the software side of design are so much more capable every couple of months. Every year, 12 new doors are put in front of me, and it's my job to open

them all, and try them out, so I can use them the next time I have a problem to solve.

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

JW: In a single word, video. I don't think video will replace lighting, but lighting is becoming more content-driven in the world I'm in. Projects are being built to support social media. There's a new competitor to the live experience, and it's the social experience.

Where do we draw the line between the live and social experience, and how do we integrate the two? Elements that are being built now are being crafted to look good on camera, or look good on Instagram. For the future, I believe the industry has to decide where we land – on one side, an unconnected performance, the other side says experiences should be shared with more people. Where they come together, and what opportunities present themselves, will be interesting to see.

For more information on Jay Woods, visit: www.jaywoodsdesign.com

“A key stroke can change how you wanted to do the lighting design. It's all in the data.”



COPA/US Soccer/MLS Centennial Playoff Draw (Nathan Avakian)

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