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An Interview with Dawn Chiang

Dawn Chiang is one of the world's busiest and most talented designers and her work spans both lighting design and theatre consulting. Her career has taken her all over the world and she has worked with many of the biggest names in the entertainment industry. She is a smart and fun person and truly enjoys her profession. CTI had the chance to catch up with Dawn recently and to ask her some questions about lighting and how she got to where she is today.

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

Dawn Chiang: I was in junior high school when I saw the American Conservatory Theater perform at the Stanford University Summer Festival in California. I was taken by the power of their work and their dramatic flourish. ACT's elaborately staged curtain calls were a signature for some of their most popular works. They went on to become a resident company in San Francisco where I saw many productions over the years.

CTI: How did you get started in technical theatre?

Dawn Chiang: I studied classical piano for 16 years, including 4 years at Oberlin Conservatory. I also studied ballet for 8 years. I have a strong math/science background. My father was an inventor and engineer in Silicon Valley and made math and science learning fun, and a natural part of growing up. I thoroughly loved studying music and dance, but did not want to be a performer onstage. I also loved math and science, but felt that math and science were too "dry" for my tastes.

In college, I responded to a friend's invitation to help finish building some scenery for a production of "Don Giovanni". When I started working on the scenery and then on run crew, it was love at first sight. Backstage theater combined technical knowledge in service of an aesthetic end and called on all my interests and strengths. I walked in off the street my sophomore year and never left.

CTI: Where did you get your training?

Dawn Chiang: I attended Oberlin College in Ohio and earned a double major in Theater and Psychology. My classmates included Julie Taymor, Bill Irwin and Eric Bogosian — quite a stellar crowd.

CTI: What was your first paying lighting job?

Dawn Chiang: Just after graduating from Oberlin, I was the assistant lighting designer on the original production of "Shadow Box" by Michael Cristofer at the Mark Taper Forum. The play went on to win the Tony for best play and the Pulitzer prize for drama.

CTI: When did you make the decision to be a professional lighting designer?

Dawn Chiang: When I was a senior in college, it was clear that I wanted to work in theater professionally. I started working both as a set and lighting designer. Within a couple of years out of college, I realized that I was most strongly drawn to lighting design.

CTI: Who have been your role models or influencers in lighting?

Dawn Chiang: I have been fortunate to have a number of mentors throughout my career including H.R. Poindexter (who had been an assistant to Jean Rosenthal), Tharon Musser, John Gleason, Jennifer Tipton, Jules Fisher and Richard Pilbrow. From these major designers, I learned a great deal about the art and craft of lighting design, the business of being a designer, how to handle the politics of working on Broadway and the importance and value of bringing a high professional standard to each production.

CTI: What was it like trying to make a living at lighting design in the beginning?

Dawn Chiang: Exhilarating and challenging. The first few years, I was lucky enough to work steadily as the assistant set and assistant lighting designer for the Mark Taper Forum and the Ahmanson Theater in Los Angeles. As I started to branch out into my own designs, reaching out into the theatrical community to find work felt like a very foreign and awkward skill. Learning how to make that process feel comfortable and work for you and your personality is a rite of passage that all freelance individuals must go through.

I was fortunate to be hired by South Coast Repertory as a lighting designer. I designed ten productions for them in three years. Having an artistic home like that at the beginning of my design career was invaluable and allowed me to continue to hone my skills in a concentrated period of time.

CTI: You have done a lot of work on Broadway both as a designer and as an associate. What is it like working on Broadway compared to other theatres?

Dawn Chiang: The focus is very much on "time is money". You are expected to know your craft and deliver the goods, on time. These priorities operate in non-profit theater as well, but the stakes and therefore the pressure on Broadway can be much higher.

Doing production on Broadway is its own unique system and process. If you understand this system and process, it can work very well for you and the show, and you can get a lot accomplished. If you do not understand this specific process for doing production, it can feel like a steamroller where you are not in control of the process.

CTI: Richard Pilbrow wrote about "The art, the craft, and the life" of the lighting designer. Please tell us about the life of the professional lighting designer today.

Dawn Chiang: Lighting designers are often itinerant — we will travel anywhere to light a show.

Things that you need to enjoy in order to be a successful freelance lighting designer:

Nurturing your artistic side and pushing the envelope of your creative work

Continuing to find enough work each season to make a living

Juggling and organizing your schedule to multi-task between pre-production on a number of shows while also being in tech

Designing a light plot for show #2 coming up — on the kitchen table of the apartment where you are staying on the road — while teching a completely different production (show #1).

Keeping up with the latest technology

Staying in touch with colleagues in the industry — work often comes from your working relationships within the performing arts community



Designer Dawn Chiang

Lighting designs by Dawn Chiang:



Enter The Guardsman at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival

Having fun doing all of the above

CTI: Describe the office or studio where you do your design and drafting.

Dawn Chiang: I have always enjoyed working out of my home. I enjoy the fluidity of shifting back and forth between working on a light plot and taking time out to ponder a lighting idea while folding the laundry, making lunch or doing the dishes. Doing simple, manual tasks is a great way for me to incubate an idea — simple manual labor allows my mind to wander and develop a new thought. It is a variation on that classic notion of coming up with a new idea while taking a shower.

I also enjoy looking at my light plot under development just before retiring for the evening. I find that in looking at the questions that I still have about my light plot just before going to sleep, I often wake up the next day with a fresh solution to my questions. The painter and designer David Hockney speaks about having discovered this great process as a young painter. It works for me, too.

CTI: You have been with Theatre Projects for a long time. What is that experience like?

Dawn Chiang: It is a great adjunct to the work that I do as a lighting designer. My work at Theatre Projects started more than 20 years ago. I typically consult for a finite amount of time on specific projects. Examples include helping to assess the needs of Lincoln Center from a production standpoint as they looked ahead to the next 30+ years of operation or serving as project manager for the design and planning of "House of Dancing Water" at City of Dreams casino resort in Macau, China.

Working on complex, high-pressure productions with significant time constraints is good training for working as a theatre consultant. Strong skills developed in production involving logistics, communication and coordination are valuable tools to use while consulting on major theater facilities. My background as a designer also helps me to advocate for and look after the creative and technical requirements of theater consulting.

For all the planning, designing and specifying that is done in the creation of the performance facility, it still comes down to how well does it work for audiences, production and creative staff, and those who manage and run the building. Effectively staying that course throughout the process of facility design, value engineering and construction is the challenge on each project.

CTI: Which do you prefer more, working on the design of theatres, or lighting shows?

Dawn Chiang: Although I enjoy both theater consulting and lighting shows, I will always be a lighting designer. Production work and lighting design are my deep roots. For me, the work of theater consulting springs from the experience and understanding that we as theater practitioners (technical directors, designers, production managers and so on) bring to the work of theater consulting.

CTI: How many weeks a year are you out of town?

Dawn Chiang: As a lighting designer, I am on the road anywhere from 3 to 7 months a year. As a theater consultant, I was overseas for 12 months while I was onsite in Macau supervising construction for the "House of Dancing Water", created by Franco Dragone Entertainment Group and theater consulting by Theatre Projects Consultants.

CTI: Do you have any favorite shows that you have worked on either for the production itself, the artistic team, or your own artistic work on the show?

Dawn Chiang: A production of "Rent" at Syracuse Stage is a recent favorite for the production itself, the great artistic team and the lighting design. The show is sold out and the reception has been terrific.

Another standout includes serving as associate lighting designer on the original Broadway production of "La Cage Aux Folles". The production itself was groundbreaking at the time (the first musical comedy about a gay couple on Broadway), and an incredible production team that felt very much like a close family. The creative team did a terrific job, which included Jerry Herman, Arthur Laurents, Harvey Fierstein, Jules Fisher and David Mitchell.

Working on "Show Boat" with Richard Pilbrow, Harold Prince and Eugene Lee (and the rest of the creative team) was also a highlight. As associate lighting designer and lighting supervisor for all five companies of the production worldwide, it was great to live with that show for 5.5 years, travel to over 30 cities worldwide to set up the production, and get deeply inside the music of the remarkable Jerome Kern.

CTI: You recently spent a year in Asia opening a new theatre. What was that like? What new technology did you work with?

Dawn Chiang: In essence, I traveled halfway around the world to work out of a construction trailer. It was a great experience and it was a challenging experience. Although the engineers, construction managers and Dragone creative team all spoke in different native languages, the common ground were drawings — everyone could read drawings.

In meeting with the Hong Kong engineers and mainland Chinese vendors, I would always bring a stack of blank paper and a handful of colored pens. When our collective command of English, Cantonese or Mandarin would limit the nuance of what we could discuss, I would turn to sketching out the topic under discussion in schematic drawings. Everyone could immediately see and understand the question at hand and soon, everyone would be reaching for different colored pens to convey different solutions on top of the initial sketch. It was great fun.

There was great passion and energy in the room. The challenge always was to frame the question in the right context to engage everyone's strengths and energy.

In terms of new technology, putting 11 hydraulic lifts in a 3.6 million gallon swimming pool is still a new technology, even though it has been done a few times before in various configurations. Creating a lighting position at the perimeter of the pool that accommodates moving lights both above the water line and other moving lights below the water line is new, innovative, and presents a number of technical challenges.

The technologies are known and leading edge, but placing those technologies into a pool and wet environment are the new challenge that requires ongoing fresh thinking and problem solving. The team on "House of Dancing Water" all lived for those kinds of challenges.

CTI: You are one of a very small group of professional designers at the top of the industry. What does it take to get there?

Dawn Chiang: Persistence, commitment, imagination, networking and connecting with others, delivering consistently strong work, collaborating and working well with others, keeping up with new developments in the industry, doing what you love and continuing to focus on developing your work and your business.

CTI: What are the biggest changes you have seen in your lighting career? How is it different now than 30 years ago?

Dawn Chiang: Biggest changes include the advent of computerized lighting control, moving lights, improved dimming and conventional lighting fixtures, such as the Source 4. LED's in all their permutations, video projection and media servers are all part of the biggest changes that have come along. The toys are different, but the idea remains the same — tell the story, engage the audience in the experience and make magic happen.

CTI: If you had it to do all over again, would you do anything differently?



The FDNY Fire Zone at Rockefeller Center on W. 51st Street. A permanent installation for the Fire Department of New York that teaches visitors about fire safety and fire prevention. Using video, lighting and theatrical smoke, it teaches people about the five most common causes of fire in the home, how to prevent those fires, and how to successfully escape those fires.



Rent at Syracuse Stage (photo by T Charles Erickson)



Salome at the Orlando Opera

Dawn Chiang Interview

Dawn Chiang: Become fluent in multiple languages. As I work internationally, I continue to see the value of being multi-lingual as a basic, background skill.

CTI: What is your advice for young lighting designers?

Dawn Chiang: Give it all you got. Aim high. Work in the best professional situations that you can find.

Do your best, always. And by all means, have fun!



Three Sisters at the Guthrie Theatre



Twelfth Night at the Guthrie Theatre