



PROFESSIONAL PROFILE:

Name: Isabella Byrd
Profession: Lighting Designer
Experience: 11 years
Location: Brooklyn, NY
Website: www.isabellabyrd.design
Recent Shows: *Heroes of the Fourth Turning* (New York, Playwrights Horizons), *Sanctuary City* (New York Theatre Workshop), *Daddy* (New York; London – coming soon)

Isabella Byrd is a lighting designer based in Brooklyn, New York. Her design collaborations have been presented in New York City, across the U.S, and soon in the U.K. Recent recognition of her designs include the 2020 Lucille Lortel Award for Heroes of the Fourth Turning, as well as a 2019 Obie for her work on Light Shining in Buckinghamshire. She has received Henry Hewes nominations, as well as a Drama Desk nomination.

THE INTERVIEW:

City Theatrical (CTI): Congratulations on your recent Lucille Lortel Award win for Outstanding Lighting Design in [Heroes of the Fourth Turning](#)! What was it like to design this project?

Isabella Byrd (IB): Thank you! It was a wonderful process. This play takes place in a rural backyard in Wyoming. It is held by the darkness and the vast surrounding midnight mountains, rooted to a singular porch light. We really pushed the boundaries of darkness.

We really leaned into the geographic isolation and beauty and forced ourselves to calibrate our eyes to the softness of that darkness.

The pre-show and “house-to-half” event was fundamental to this, as it was a bright and surprising shift, then we immediately sank into true murky dark. In that moment, we gave the audience a very paced time to adjust, a literal corneal adjustment. We invited everyone’s eyes to strain, then relax, and then lean into that space with us. What we originally would have considered “too dark” became normal, and we learned to listen differently. There is both comfort and fear in the darkness.

CTI: How was *Heroes* different from other shows you’ve worked on?

IB: I have not seen as dark of a play ever in my life experience. As a team, we tried to stay true to our initial commitment to that dark. (It was tempting in tech to

gradually brighten, too much.) Something that was important to the playwright, Will Arbery, was seeing someone stand on the edge of dark, and almost disappear into it. That relationship to the unknown beyond summoned an emotional space key to the play’s intention. It was exciting to have his trust in this lighting design.

CTI: Did you always know you wanted to be a professional lighting designer?

IB: I was lucky to get tons of exposure to the arts at a young age. I had many years of training in ballet and modern dance, and then attended the [High School of the Performing and Visual Arts \(HSPVA\)](#) in Houston, Texas. There, I took my first dive into design. I learned the building blocks through friends and faculty and had the chance to explore composing



Heroes of the Fourth Turning | Photo by Sara Krulwich for the New York Times

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stage pictures really early.

From there, I went to the [College-Conservatory of Music, University of Cincinnati](#) (CCM) in Ohio. The theatre design program there is very robust and very hands on. I oddly knew I was committed to light at that time, and I was fortunate to build a large portfolio there.

One summer during college I interned at the [Alley Theatre](#) in Houston, which helped me build relationships and soon after spend some summers at the [Williamstown Theatre Festival](#) in Massachusetts. I made many lasting friendships and met designers, including lighting designers Philip Rosenberg and Jane Cox. Through those summer relationships, I found the confidence to move to New York and start working.

CTI: How did you get started in New York?

IB: My first job in New York was as an assistant to Philip Rosenberg and Hugh Vanstone on [A Steady Rain](#) in 2009 at the Gerald Schoenfeld Theater. That was a hoot! I was lucky to learn so much and so early, from people like them, who are brilliant at their jobs. I also discovered I was more thrilled by the downtown, new works circuit of shows in New York. I had the opportunity to work with Jane Cox again, and Tyler Micoleau, and Matt

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Frey, where I learned a lot about my perspective as a designer.

CTI: What would you say was your “big break” as a designer in New York?

IB: I would say it was [Light Shining in Buckinghamshire](#) at New York Theatre Workshop in 2018. Getting that job felt like it happened out of the blue, but if I trace the threads backward, I see all the relationships that I made along the way to help me get there. I am thankful for that journey.

That show gave me the opportunity to make something quite bold. It is an older play, by Caryl Churchill, and that production was directed by Rachel Chavkin. I am grateful for Rachel’s trust in my design for that show. I really admire Rachel for her commitment and action to diversifying creative teams. She, as well as Jane Cox, are wonderful role models

in providing opportunities for so many growing powerhouse women.

CTI: How would you describe your lighting design aesthetic in a couple of words?

IB: I would say it leans on contrast and poetry. I have developed a little tag, that is: I enjoy investigating the human scale as neighbor to architecture, poetry, and shadow play. I’m also interested in the uncanny.

I hope to create a conversation between dark and light in my work. I tend to start with singular gestures, and then build out from there. If my cue is muddy or overwhelmed, I dump back down to something smaller. Darkness is often a leading element, as it was for *Heroes*.

CTI: Do you have any “go-to” techniques for your lighting designs?

IB: I do prefer the “less is more” approach. I believe there is great power in restraint.

A recent example of this was in my design for [Sanctuary City](#) at New York Theatre Workshop, sadly a show that was stalled due to COVID-19. It begins with a whirlwind series of small scene-lets or beats. Although some of the scenes were only three sentences long, we were able



Light Shining in Buckinghamshire | New York Theatre Workshop | Photo by Joan Marcus

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to use simple light to inform the audience to quickly discern a time jump, as well as the new physical and emotional space. We only used warm to cool white light, keeping it inside that narrow color range. I like making rules, so then I can break them!

I also love hiding sources in sneaky places. I recently worked on a wonderful play called [Plano](#), also by Will Arbery, in which I hid teeny LED diodes and short tapes all over, like in the grass as surprise footlights, and let them tone or cast clean shadows. (I really hope for an easier to control and wire powerful LED diode. I haven't found the right one yet.) In nearly every show I work on with a scenic ceiling, I hide LED tape on ledges and behind objects. (Matt Frey does this too.) It is a fun thrill when one of my colleagues doesn't recognize where the light is coming from.

CTI: Who/what would you say are your greatest influences on your aesthetic?

IB: Jane Cox and Tyler Micoleau made a strong imprint on me. I love their beautiful use of color and sensitivity to angle. I also love spatial perception art, and poetry. I find poetry by Canadian poet Anne Carson to be inspiring. Her writing is sensitive to light transforming the banal. I also appreciate the work of light artists like James Turrell and Doug Wheeler, whose work has prompted a lot of thought about duration events in our work. We

are as much time artists, as well as light artists!

CTI: In the past 10 years, you've worked on numerous theater projects, as well as various lighting projects for retail, dance, festivals, historical societies, etc. What would you say are some of the most interesting projects you have worked on?

IB: *Heroes* was so specific in its visual identity. It is one of my favorite designs.

I also had the great gift of working with lighting designer Mimi Jordan Sherin at the Park Avenue Armory in New York. We got to light that enormous space and flex the muscles of that building, just with light.

Another interesting project was Associating for, and doing the research for, Jane Cox's lighting design for *Othello* at New York Theatre Workshop. I loved the research portion, and the military equipment, and modifying it all to work to our needs for theater. Working again with the director, Sam Gold, was amazing. I had the fortune to develop *The Flick* with them previously.

CTI: How did you start working at Chance Magazine?

IB: I've always had an enthusiasm for the artist-initiated non-profit sector. When I first moved to NYC, I volunteered for [13P](#)

(Thirteen Playwrights, Inc.), and through that admin work I ended up creative producing their website. After 13P ended, I learned about the magazine while working on a show out of town in 2013.

[Chance Magazine](#) is an attempt at unveiling all of the intellectual and visual processes that accumulate in our productions. It engaged photographers to enter our theatrical worlds, as artists who might capture the liveness of the work, and greater illustrate the creative processes. The images were exciting and illustrious. I was a contributor to the magazine while the project was active, and I still have an extreme interest in finding a way to explore and share that background work our audiences don't have access to.

CTI: We love the #thelightin curated collection of natural light photography and videos you have assembled on Instagram. How did this project come about?

IB: [#thelightin](#) came from a love of small things and travel.

It's an ever-growing project I started with [Alejandro Fajardo](#), a friend and fellow lighting designer. He and I were already seeing things in this way, and wanted

other people to see with us.

As we were traveling, working on projects, and with the rise of Instagram, the idea of building a visual, digital web of light in different places really struck us cool. We wanted to celebrate it. It's great to see other people using it. It's about capturing all degrees and contexts of light, and making others aware of what they can see these beautiful things, often hiding in plain sight. (#thelightinnewyork)

CTI: Are you inspired by NYC?

“My pride for New York is embarrassingly large at the moment. Our resilience is undeniable.”

IB: I love it! I can't imagine being anywhere else at this time.

The density of people and efforts that all sustain in one small geographic postage stamp is remarkable. There is a collective pulse in the city. COVID-19 has slowed it down a bit, but it's definitely active.

My pride for New York is actually embarrassingly large at the moment. Our resilience is undeniable. I'm exposing I'm a bit sappy when it comes to NYC. It makes me realize how much I miss audiences and crowds.

In Brooklyn, we cheer every night for the essential workers at 7PM. I look forward to that rooftop cheer every day. The camaraderie of the city is reassuring.

CTI: Have you faced any lighting technology challenges on recent projects?

IB: Shout out to fellow lighting designer and friend Jen Schriever, for our recent conversations we've had hoping LEDs will soon behave more like incandescent sources.

The challenge on *Heroes* was that the Lustr2's (or maybe ColorSources...) were operating at only 10-15% at its highest, and the curves were sometimes clunky. I'm waiting for the better inherit curve

of restraint, and how it might even strengthen design.

I also hope to continue prioritizing diversity among creative teams, and our support staffs working in the theater. I fear COVID-19 might negatively impact the diversity pool. I think that equity is fundamental to creating beautiful and moving pieces of art.

Some of the artists I look forward to working with again soon include: [Cheyenne Sykes](#), a lighting assistant I've worked with on many projects as well



Member of the Wedding | Williamstown Theatre Festival, Mainstage | Photo by Daniel Rader

control.

Last year I worked on a show called [Daddy: A Melodrama](#), a play written by Jeremy O. Harris. The set included a very large (and very real) pool on stage. I loved lighting the water; it always looked fantastic. I found, however, that it was hard to find the right IP68 sources [for underwater] so I am excited to one day work with better fixtures, and homogenized beams... all within those small Off-Broadway budgets.

CTI: Once the world opens back up again, what do you see for the future of lighting?

IB: It seems we are going to be working with necessitated frugality. I am excited to continue forward in this approach

as a brilliant lighting designer in her own right; scenic designer [Laura Jellinek](#); director [Danya Taymor](#); playwright [Annie Baker](#); and associate Aaron Tacy – he's so delightful, smart and organized, and I savor that. I like to work with people who make me think and laugh in competing measure.

For more information on Isabella Byrd, visit: www.isabellabyrd.design

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