



PROFESSIONAL PROFILE:

Name: Jane Cox
Profession: Lighting Designer / Director of Theater at Princeton University
Experience: 25 Years
Location: Princeton, NJ, USA
Website: <http://janecoxlight.virb.com>
Recent Shows: *The Secret Life of Bees* (Atlantic Theater), *The Three Sisters* (NY Theatre Workshop), *The Color Purple* (Broadway)

Jane Cox is a lighting designer for theater, opera, dance and music. Recently nominated for a Drama Desk Award for outstanding lighting design for a musical for her work in the world premiere musical of The Secret Life of Bees, Jane's love of lighting design and theater is only matched by her love of learning, as seen in her role as director of the theater program at Princeton University.

THE INTERVIEW:

City Theatrical (CTI): Congratulations on your recent Drama Desk nomination for Outstanding Lighting Design for a Musical for *The Secret Life of Bees*! Knowing that this is one of many award wins and nominations during your career, we thought we'd take it back to the beginning: How did you get started as a lighting designer?

Jane Cox (JC): Thank you! I suppose it started in Ireland, where I grew up. The light is so different there. It is such a small island, and always wet. The light changes much more quickly there than here in the greater NYC area, from bright sunlight, to clouds, to rain. It cycles through changing light all the time, constantly bouncing light around different directions. It is incredible.

Growing up I was not a theater kid. I loved music. I went to college to be a music major at the University of London, as a flute player. I soon found that the classical musician crowd was not my social group, and the school had a fabulous theater program.

It was there that I worked behind the scenes on a production of one of Caryl Churchill's plays. It was a time when we still pushed sliders up and down in lighting design. I was running the board for another student's lighting design, and it felt like I was in control of the sun and the moon. I found lighting design to be like music, only in a visual medium.

From there, I spent a year abroad at UMass Amherst to study lighting design with [Penny Remson](#), who I believe is

one of the unsung heroes of the lighting industry. I'll quote my colleague and fellow lighting designer, [Ben Stanton](#), who once said, If Penny Remson told me to be a plumber, I would be a plumber. And so from her and her wonderful teaching, I knew lighting design was for me.

During that year in Massachusetts, I realized I wanted to live in America. It felt clear to me that you could have a better career as a woman here, in the Northeast USA, perhaps than other places. Penny had so many women around her that were excited about lighting design. It was a social community of creative people.

I managed to stay in the country, then, after a couple of years of making pizza and working as an electrician for a living. I went on to the Graduate Department



The Secret Life of Bees | Photo by Ahron H. Foster

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of Design at Tisch School of the Arts at NYU. There I met so many incredible artists who continue to inspire me.

CTI: How did you transition from learning about lighting design to building your career in the industry?

JC: Although I had always been interested in the arts, it hadn't occurred to me that you could get paid for this until I started working overnight changeovers, literally laying cable at [Hartford Stage](#). That was the first time I got paid to do theater. I had a great time, and got into that circuit.

The first lighting design job I had was for a little theater under the [Wadsworth Antheneum](#) art museum, also in Hartford. I worked with John Dias, who now leads the [Two River Theater](#) in Red Bank, New Jersey as Artistic Director. One of the reasons theater suits me is that it is a field built upon unique relationships... that I could work with John twenty years ago in Connecticut, and circle back last summer to work with him again to light a show at his theater in New Jersey.

CTI: What is your favorite part about lighting design for theater?

JC: The fascination for me has always been about working with individual artists and collaborative creative groups. I get

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an enormous amount of inspiration from the people I work with and I've built my career around particular relationships.

For example, I have an amazing longtime lighting design associate, Tess James. We met when she was the lighting supervisor at NYC Opera, when my Broadway career was just getting started. She and I have a complementary set of skills in the theater, and a shared set of morals, work ethic, and focus on mentorship. In addition to lighting shows, we've worked together to introduce young people to theater, and make a difference in their lives. Tess also teaches with me at Princeton University, and is the Job Developer and a teaching artist for the Workforce Development Program at the Roundabout Theater Company, which focuses on bringing new populations into the theatrical workforce.

CTI: In addition to your role as a professional lighting designer, you're

also the Director of the theater program at Princeton University. What is that like? Does your work there enhance your life as a designer?

JC: I started working as Director of Princeton University's theater program and the Artistic Producing Director of the theater and music theater season at Princeton four years ago. This job allows me to flex a lot of creative muscle outside of the shows I work on as a lighting designer, working with students who are writing, directing, producing and performing.

I've taught as an adjunct at different educational institutions for many years, which has allowed me to be selective about the theatre projects I take on. I learned early in my career that trying to make a whole living designing for not for profit theater (which is where I like to be) is a recipe for burnout - I like to be able to spend more time on a show than nonprofit design fees allow.

I've found my home at Princeton partly because it's a STEM-focused school, and I've found that theater design is a great creative education for STEM students. The design classes at Princeton can connect the dots between computer science, engineering, and other hard science areas of study, to the arts.



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The Color Purple | Photo by Matthew Murphy

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In addition, when students who come into theater through performance see that the Director of the program is a lighting designer, I think it may give them a different relation to the field of theater; and a deeper understanding of the many and various roles that they can pursue. I often say, a class in theater is a wonderful training for life.

CTI: How is the theater program different now than before you started?

JC: We are fortunate to have recently built, just 2.5 years ago, a gorgeous new [Lewis Center for the Arts](#). When we were making decisions about the building, about 7 years ago, we decided that all our theaters and rehearsal spaces would be all LED.

We felt that Princeton could and should be on the forefront of using LED technology in educational theater. We took the opportunity to build a beautiful and flexible 150-seat black box theater, where we put 80 MAC Auras under the catwalks as a flexible rep plot, and allow the students to add the rest of our LED inventory as needed. The Auras allow our staff and students to press a button to light a show in a different seating configuration. This makes life very easy, and has been especially important with a growing list of productions per season.

We are now up to 20 shows per season, fortunately we have a ton of students

interested in lighting and sound who are excited to design our shows!

CTI: What is your typical day like, as both a professional lighting designer and educator?

JC: Every day is different. I am currently teaching the last weeks of my courses remotely in this “new normal” that started after our Spring Break at Princeton.

Before that, I would spend most mornings at the university, making decisions with students about the upcoming theater season. In the afternoon, I would go into tech rehearsal for a show I was working on, like *The Secret Live of Bees*, usually with a whole new crew of young people.

CTI: How would you describe your lighting aesthetic?

JC: I would say I’m most interested in exploring the interaction of angle and color of light on surfaces and how that affects us emotionally – how the interaction of light and space affects the relationship between the performer and the audience. Every show I have worked on explores that in a different way. I am interested in bold choices on the lighting rig. I’m interested in coming up with a select list of lighting tools to help make those bold statements.

For example, when I worked on *Othello* at the New York Theater Workshop with

Director Sam Gold and set designer Andrew Lieberman, we decided that there would be NO theater lighting in that show... we used almost exclusively explosion proof military lighting equipment. I think it’s hard to have an interesting aesthetic without a selective tool palette.

I also love color – I’m especially interested in yellows and greens and golds. My favorite painting as a child was a painting by the Irish Painter William John Leech called [The Sunshade](#), which is still my favorite kind of palette. I’ve also always been obsessed with the color palette of Toulouse Lautrec. And I’m much inspired by the work of James Turrell, and how he understands light as the living and energetic force that it is.

CTI: What are some of the most interesting projects you have worked on?

JC: I loved working with John Doyle, who I designed [The Color Purple](#) with and many other shows. At the theater where he is artistic director, Classic Stage Company, we enjoy coming up with a new architectural lighting rig for the whole season each year. For example, last year we asked ourselves, what can we do with three rectangles of light?



We made the lights part of the set. This year we asked ourselves what would a ceiling of pars that mirrored the footprint of the set look like for the whole season? I tend to gravitate towards directors who are interested in making those kinds of choices and then living within them.

My longest collaboration is with [Monica Bill Barnes & Company](#) dance company (I met Monica in grad school). Designing projects for her company requires me to think about how you can make lighting come out of a suitcase... her shows have to be able to go into a high school gym as well as into the Atlanta Symphony Hall! We make amazing use three of Rosco's

for an audience in a way that is not about narrative storytelling, but is about creating a space that resonates with all aspects of the emotional life of a story. And that's what she did, for every one of the 199 seats in New York's Atlantic Theater.

The show's lighting design included another somewhat simple light plot. We used PARs, and went without a lot of color changing equipment. Our true "Aha!" moment was when we took the rectangular space of the Atlantic, and added diagonal pipes above the stage with lights on them. These diagonals of light helped evoke church, or mystery, in contrast to the more domestic

person, I wanted to be making art and theater, and wanted my gender to be unimportant. And along the way found that for me, theater was more about the people than anything else.

As I've grown older, I've become very conscious of the dearth of female designers and even more so, designers of color. I have been given so many exciting artistic opportunities by writers of color and creatives from diverse backgrounds along the way. I feel it's my responsibility to help mentor the next generation of young female designers, and especially young designers of color. My position at Princeton allows me more

"Theater is a business of relationships and I make my choices around those relationships."



Miro Cube® 4C fixtures to light her more mobile performances, using them as footlights. This vaudeville aesthetic lives in the show *One Night Only*, a two-woman show in which we used three footlights, a follow spot and a lot of confetti.

CTI: It must have been very interesting to light *The Secret Life of Bees*, as a world premiere musical. What was it like? Were there any key learnings?

JC: Working on *The Secret Life of Bees* was a total treat. There were so many interesting questions discussed around the story telling. It was a pleasure working with Director Sam Gold, set designer Mimi Lien, and the entire creative team, not to mention the brilliant singers and the most enjoyable team of lighting support, including my associate Stacey Derosier. I love working with Mimi Lien, a set designer who can transform a space

environment of the room.

For this and every show I work on, I'm interested in the interaction of light and surfaces... in a very visceral way. How does the interaction of lighting and surfaces make you feel? It never gets old to me to turn lights on and find out.

CTI: There are a LOT of collaborators listed on your site; almost 20. Are there any creatives you had an especially great experience working with, in addition to those you mentioned, or have worked with for multiple productions?

JC: Theater is a business of relationships and I make my choices around those relationships. I moved to America because I was a woman who wanted a career in theater, and felt this was the place I could achieve it. As a young

access to decision making power, and my focus has shifted to, what's theater going to be like in 20 years? How can I help make it a better place?

I think that many of the most exciting artists of the next generation are directors who are women of color – I'm thinking of directors Shariffa Ali, Whitney White, Awoye Timpo and Lileana Blain-Cruz and others... I appreciate each of their unique sets of ideas about the world, how they interact in the theater, and their ability to change the world of theater. I'm thrilled when I get to be in conversation with these kinds of minds and souls and it keeps me excited and engaged.

For more information on Jane Cox, visit: <http://janecoxlight.virb.com>

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