



PROFESSIONAL PROFILE:

Name: **Matthew E. Adelson**
Profession: **Lighting Designer**
Experience: **24 years**
Location: **Great Barrington, MA**
Website: **www.matthewadelson.com**
Recent Shows: **Godspell (Berkshire Theatre Company); Curve of Departure (Chester Theatre Company); Shrek The Musical (BTG)**

Matthew E. Adelson is a lighting designer for theater, musical theater, dance, opera, concerts and live events. His work includes long collaborative relationships with the Berkshire Theater Group, the Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey and Burning Coal Theater (Raleigh, NC), as well as many productions in New York and regionally. Recent projects include the first productions to be presented in 2020, in a COVID-19 safe environment.

THE INTERVIEW:

City Theatrical (CTI): Congratulations on lighting Godspell for the Berkshire Theatre Group safely during the COVID-19 pandemic, and on it being named a NYTimes Critic's Pick!

Matthew E. Adelson (MEA): Thank you! I think it was an important thing to be part of. I hope it's a harbinger for things to come. I had so many projects that were cancelled, or postponed. The fact that this one show survived, is wonderful. It's been a big experiment. I hope it can be a model for how to do theatre safely during this pandemic.

CTI: What was it like designing for the nation's first union-sanctioned musical to be produced during the COVID-19

pandemic?

MEA: The show is set up in a 200 foot long tent that covers an entire parking lot. The stage with the set is on one extreme side of it. The audience is made up of all individually placed chairs, all 6 feet from each other. The closest seats to the stage are 25 feet away, as agreed upon by the state of Massachusetts and Equity, due to people singing, and the question of how far particles could go.

CTI: How was designing this show different than others you've worked on in the past?

MEA: For the most part, the process was no different than a show I would do anywhere else. For instance, the process of creating the the plot was similar to

other shows I might be working on. There were, however, very strict rules about interacting with anyone. The actual tech had the usual procedures of other shows I've done. We had a small crew, but within the approved guidelines. I was able to first plan remotely and then be present at the theatre, and I lit it like I've always done before.

CTI: Were you able to work collaboratively with the other designers?

MEA: I've done many shows with Randall Parsons, the set designer, and Nathan Leigh, the sound designer, but this was my first collaboration with Hunter Kaczorowski, the costume designer. A lot of the work we'd normally do leading up to tech would be remote anyway. People



Godspell - Full Company and the Tent | Photo by Emma Rothenberg-Ware

“Based on the reaction of the audience, you can really understand the importance of the arts in society, and how empty and hollow things would be if it didn't exist.”

are often in different cities, working on different projects. That wouldn't be very different between this show and any other. But the realities of COVID-19 required us to wear masks in live meetings, and sit 6 feet away from each other – something we got used to.

CTI: What is the experience like for the audience?

MEA: I was originally hired to design two productions for Berkshire Theatre Group this summer, back in January. This production of *Godspell* was going to be on their mainstage in Stockbridge, MA. It would have been another show in their season, with an audience capacity of 300 people per show. Now it's being done for an audience of 75-100, significantly less, due to social distancing. Essentially anyone who buys a ticket and comes to see the show must get a temperature check at the door, and keep their mask on throughout the show. There is no paper program, audience members can download it from the theatre's website. There are concession sales, but they are being handled in a different way as well. There are specific paths to the restrooms, and requirements to enter/leave the facility in a certain way.

CTI: How did the audience react to the show?

MEA: Based on the reaction of the audience, you can really understand the

“I think being a lighting designer is sort of like sushi – it's an acquired taste. I would be scared of the 5-year-old who tells his or her parents about wanting to become a one.”

importance of the arts in society, and how empty and hollow things would be if it didn't exist.

CTI: Any other key learnings from *Godspell* you'd like to share?

MEA: The production in the tent had certain limitations. If there had been no coronavirus, it would have been in the theatre, with all the bells and whistles. In the tent, the positions of the scenery and the lights had to abide by the COVID-19 agreement. There were choices I had to make, based on these limitations. The essence of what we wanted to do when we met with the director and choreographer back in January is the same, but certain things are different, and we're doing it all in a very responsible, careful and safe way. There were a series of health regulations set by the city of Pittsfield, MA, and theatrical unions, and they've done a very good job of keeping everyone safe.

CTI: How did you get started as a

professional lighting designer?

MEA: I think being a lighting designer is sort of like sushi – it's an acquired taste. I would be scared of the 5-year-old who tells his or her parents about wanting to become one.

I grew up in New York City. My mother had been a dancer with New York City Ballet, so I was exposed to the arts from an early age. I saw a lot of theatre, and had done a little theatre during my high school years. Then in college, I was both a theatre and history major. I got a very strong undergrad theatrical education as part of a larger broader liberal arts education. It was not at all a conservatory, and that was a great thing for me. Then, I wanted to learn more about being a designer.

I interned at the [Williamstown Theatre Festival](#) in 1991, the summer before my senior year of college, and that solidified that I wanted to be a lighting designer. I then worked a lot as an electrician, and lit a lot of shows in downtown NYC. I found when getting started as a lighting designer, there are lots of ways to do it – your path has to be the right choice for you. For me, going on to grad school was the next step.

After grad school at Yale, I returned to NYC and worked there from 1996 until 2005, when I moved up to



Godspell - Jesus, Beautiful City | Photo by Emma Rothenberg-Ware

**CITY
THEATRICAL**
NEW YORK • LONDON



Godspell - Preset and the Tent | Photo by Emma Rothenberg-Ware

“I’m very proud to be part of the *Godspell* team to make this musical successful, in a safe way.”

Massachusetts. Even while I was in NY, I was also working in the Berkshires. Between now and when I finished graduate school, I’ve designed about 50 theatrical productions in the Berkshires area.

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

MEA: I had seen a lot of Jennifer Tipton’s work. She teaches at Yale, and that was the grad program I was very interested in. That year I was working after college, I got into Yale, and it was tremendous. It was very hard work, but an amazing three years. I learned a lot from Jennifer, Ming Cho Lee, Jane Greenwood, and all the people who taught there. It is a collective design education. Although I went there to become an LD, you take the other design courses, scenery, etc. and are expected to do the same work as those who study those areas. I think the entire experience has influenced me.

CTI: What would you say is the most interesting project you have worked on – anywhere?

MEA: I think the most interesting project I’ve worked on is the one I just finished right now, *Godspell*. The importance of what this show is, in the world of theatre, when everything is still shut down, is not lost on me.

I’m very proud to be part of the team to make this musical successful, in a

safe way. The show looks and sounds beautiful, and tells the story in the way we wanted to, even with the pandemic. I think they will talk about the fact that this production was able to happen during this time for a very long time.

I’ve worked on shows with more complicated lighting issues to solve, but this show would be the most interesting, and possibly the most important. And this show did have several unique lighting challenges.

CTI: What were some of the lighting challenges for Godspell?

MEA: The first is, because of the pandemic. The show had to be in an outdoor tent, and the stage space had to be quite large, to accommodate the actors on stage all the time, each occupying a six to 10 foot space between them and any other cast members. The stage is 46 feet wide, but only 18 feet deep. It’s a much larger stage than we’d normally have in a tent. We included large rolling plexiglass V-shaped barriers to separate the actors from the others while they’re singing.

No crew members were allowed on stage, due to social distancing. The stage had to be all the way at the end of the tent, to allow as much space for the audience as possible. This also meant that the ceiling of the tent slopes up and down, and even though I desperately wanted one, we were not able to have

any over stage lighting positions. Any over stage truss positions would literally be right on top of the actors’ heads... and it might not be safe, as a 50-foot long unsupported truss above their heads. So there is no normal or over stage lighting positions for *Godspell* at all... it’s quite something not to have.

To alleviate this, I did have three lighting positions, a traditional FOH front light truss and two sidelight truss positions that run 2 feet off the stage, each one 12 feet upstage to downstage, like a truss goal post. It provides good low side light, almost dance light, but not any high cross light.

There are also 12 fixtures on the floor, six on either side of the stage. Three of these are ETC LED ColorSource PARs, and three are conventional ETC Source Four ellipsoids with a Rosco 77780 break up template, which adds textured space above the actors, making a ceiling above them that isn’t just the tent. All of this creates a lighting dynamic that’s really unique.

One was a non-fancy piece of lighting: Strip lights, originally used to down light the words on the wall. I realized if I tipped them up, I could use them to back light the stage and actors. I talked to the set designer and discussed it with



the production manager and master electrician. So we installed the lights as we normally planned, but focused them downstage.

There were three colors of backlight, with nine channels. Each does a million things for the actors, the floors, the space. They don't light into the audience's face, but they can see the sources, and it adds an element of interest. It also allows us to use effects, like bounces and chases during the songs. Very dynamic.

The second thing is, I had this giant space between the stage and the

constraints, and the need to have as few running crew on the show as possible. Each of the 10 actors has a home base that they kind of live in during the performance, and sing their songs from. For these, we have 10 tightly focused specials, from the front of house truss. Each is a 26 degree Source Four, to create a follow spot-like isolation, which does carve and pick people out from the space. I think this somewhat solved the follow spot issue.

Normally, I would want to have haze... but the effects of atmospheric effects on

socially distanced production. Some shows require actors to be closer than 6 feet from each other from stage. I think this production shows people how to do it in a successful way, but we have to find a more traditional way of being around each other in a theatre.

In terms of lighting, the big issue is the movement to LED sources. The wave of the future, with brighter light, vivid colors, dimming curves that are better... it's getting closer to what we'd consider tungsten light. I don't know if it will ever be 100% the same, but LED is the way

“We found a beautiful timely way to do this show, but perhaps not every piece will lend itself to this socially distanced production.”

audience, where I could put all of these foot light fixtures. I used three straight on foot lights, 50 degree Source Four Ellipsoidals, to uplight the actors on the white background of the tent, and on the wall.

There were also 12 fixtures on either side of the truss, six on either side. Three of these are ETC LED ColorSource PARs, and three are conventional ETC Source Four ellipsoidals with a Rosco 77780 break up template, which adds textured space above the actors, making a ceiling above them that isn't just the tent. All of this creates a lighting dynamic that's really unique.

I knew from the very beginning stages of lighting this show, we would not be able to include follow spots, due to budgetary

spreading the virus were unknown. Also, haze works best for picking up sharp back and high side light beams, and there are no such angles in the show anyway. We were able to find a way to do the show without this effect, and I think it worked.

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

MEA: I would love to do the show again, of course. I think everyone needs to figure out what the new rules of theatre will be, and how human beings can be comfortably around each other. How can we experience live theatre, and be safe?

We found a beautiful timely way to do this show, but perhaps not every piece of theatre will lend itself to this kind of

things are moving.

CTI: Are there any key people who made a difference in this show?

MEA: I'd like to thank the entire lighting team, who did a great job in a very complex situation, including Studio/Drafting Assistant Nathaniel Wiessner, Master Electrician/Programmer Jay Foster-Grover, Programmer/Board Operator Allison Hannon, Electrician Lucas Pawelski, and Technical Director Savannah Relos.

For more information on Matthew E. Adelson, visit: www.matthewadelson.com



Godspell - Crucifixion | Photo by Emma Rothenberg-Ware