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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO

The Lighting Design Processes of the Past Three Years

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Master of Fine Arts

in

Theatre and Dance (Design)

by

Brandon H Rosen

Committee in charge:

Professor Alan Burrett, Chair
Professor Robert Brill
Professor Shahrokh Yadegari

2018

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The Thesis of Brandon H Rosen is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

Chair

University of California, San Diego

2018

DEDICATION

This is dedicated to everyone who has supported me. They know who they are.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge all of those who have given me opportunities to learn: Alan Burrett, Howell Binkley, Philip S. Rosenberg, Amanda Zieve, Ken Wills, Mike Doyle, Shawna Cadance, and Chris Lewton. Thank you all.

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

The Lighting Design Processes of the Past Three Years

by

Brandon H Rosen

Master of Fine Arts in Theatre and Dance (Design)

University of California, San Diego, 2018

Professor Alan Burrett, Chair

The following is a guideline to the processes and thoughts of each show I designed and worked on while attending the University of California San Diego (UCSD). This was written primarily as a guide for myself to reflect and review on the past three years in graduate school. They are all thoughts to help guide me through each step and how each show was treated differently based off the show's needs and creative team. Ideally this reveals how I have learned and grown as an artist through my three years, but really shows how each show must be treated differently based off of the people who are a part of the show and the story that you are trying to tell. There are no set rules on how to design a play. Enjoy.

I. Designing a New Play

The first show I designed at UCSD was during the 2016 “Wagner New Play Festival”, a series of plays that help promote new scripts from graduate student playwrights. For the festival, I had the privilege of designing *Damascus*, a road trip psychological thriller written by Bennett Fisher and directed by Charlie Oates. The play is considered a “road trip” play because it is set entirely within an Airport Super Shuttle Van as it transports a passenger from Minneapolis-Saint Paul International Airport to Chicago O’Hare International Airport in the dead of winter. What we quickly learn is that the passenger, Lloyd, is a young, Al-Shabaab inspired white terrorist who detonated a bomb at the airport in Minneapolis. In order to escape, Lloyd attempts to frame the black Somalian van driver, Hassan.

One major feature Fisher wrote into the play that pertained to lighting was the time of day. At roughly 5 am, Lloyd boards Hassan’s van and begins the trip towards O’Hare International Airport. The audience observes the sunrise as they approach Eau Claire, Wisconsin and stay in the morning sun for the remainder of the play where we learn that the pair never make it to Chicago, but finish the road trip outside of Damascus, Illinois.

Among my various duties, was filling in gaps corresponding to specific times of day. My aim was to accurately represent the appearance of a Super Shuttle Van trekking its way across the Midwest in the dead of winter. Google Maps was a huge help in aiding my design decisions. Using Google Maps, I pictured the road trip, figured out how long it would take for a van to drive from Minneapolis to Chicago, and visualized the location of various scenes of the play based on context clues. To help set a timeline, I approximated the time of the sunrise near Eau Claire, Wisconsin in the winter. One of the tools I used was what I call a “Lighting Score” (Figure 1.1). Using the Lighting

Score, I broke down the scenes as well as other elements such as various weather patterns, time of day, and location of the road trip; all while filling in the gaps from my own research.

Damascus

Brandon H Rosen

Act	Scene	Pg.	Action	Mood	Color	Weather	Time	Inside/Outside	Loaction
1	1	4	Hassan struggles to pay for his franchise. Diaz tries to help.	Mellow	Cool	Light snowfall	Late Night	Outside	Parking Lot. Minneapolis
	2	8	Hassan waits for a fare	Mellow	Cool	Light snowfall	Shortly after 5:00AM	Inside	Minneapolis Interntl. Airport Curbside
	3	9	Lloyd convinced Hassan to drive him to Chicago (airport).	Anxious	Cool	Light snowfall	Sometime between 5-5:30AM?	Inside/Outside	Minneapolis Interntl. Airport Curbside
	4	14	Hassan and Lloyd start to get to know eachother. Lloyd explains why he needs to get to California and reveals his knowledge on Somalia (Hassan's birthplace).Lloyd's anxiety is also revealed and gets sick in the van	Anxious	Cool	Light snowfall	15-20 minutes later. 5:45ish?	Inside (eventually pulls over)	I-90. East of Minneapolis. Eventually pulls over on the side of the interstate.
	5	34	Lloyd cleans up after himself. Hassan learns of an explosion that has occurred in the Minneapolis airport.	Anxious	Cool	snowfall	15 minutes after previous scene ends? 6:30AM?	Outside	Gas station off I-90. Just across the Wisconsin Border
	6	41	Hassan and Lloyd argue over the events that have occurred in Minneapolis. Hassan hears something heavy within Lloyd's duffel bag.	Tense	Cool.	Hail	Shortly after they leave the gas station. Just before 7:00am?	Inside (eventually pulls over)	I-90. Nearing Eau Claire, Wisconsin.
	7	54	Hassan and Lloyd fight over the duffel bag and Hassan discovers what is inside	Tense	Dark	Hail and Lighting Storm?	Around 7:15am.	Outside	Near Eau Claire, WI
	8	55	Lloyd speaks from another time	Mysterious Empty	Dark		Timeless?		Placeless?
	9	55	Hassan learns that Lloyd is a terrorist and that Lloyd is blackmailing him.	Tense	Cool	Snowfall. Hail storm is over	Between 7:15-7:30am	Outside	Near Eau Claire, WI
	10	57	Lloyd tries to explain his reasoning as to why he bombed the airport, but once Hassan tries to call for help, Lloyd beats himself with a rock and blackmails Hassan.	Anxious	Cool leading into warm	Snowfall	Just before sunrise ending at sunrise 7:30-7:40am.	Inside (eventually pulls over)	I-90. East if Eau Claire, WI
2	1	68	A Witness from the airport explains the scene.	Mysterious Empty	Dark		Timeless?		Placeless?
	2	69	Hassan tries to beg Conklin for help while Lloyd is away but fails. He thinks that it backfired.	Desperate	Mixture of Cool and warm	Light snowfall	Around One hour later? 8:45am?	Inside/Outside	Gas station off I-90. Near Madison, WI
	3	71	Hassan and Lloyd argue over the ethics of terrorism while Hassan reveals that Lloyd is not a true Muslim because he did not pray during the sunrise	Anxious	Mixture of Cool and warm	Light snowfall	Shortly before 9:00am	Inside	I-90. Outskirts of Madison.
	4	78	Hassan still tries to maintain a clean Van	Anxious	Mixture of Cool and warm	Light snowfall	Shortly After 9:00am	Inside	Highway 69
	5	79	Hassan and Lloyd try to reason with eachother and Hassan offers pills to releave Lloyd's pain from the rock beating.	Anxious	Mixture of Cool and warm	Light snowfall	Shortly before 10:00am	Inside	Highway 69. Near the border to Illinois.
	6	88	Lloyd become ill due to the pills that Hassan gave him. Hassan regains control of the Van.	Tense	Mixture of Cool and warm	Cold. Maybe snowfall?	30 Minutes Later. Between 10:20-10:30am	Inside/Outside	Highway 69 on the on Illinois - Wisconsin Border. 17 Miles from Damascus, IL
	7	93	Hassan is driving as a police drives by. He tries to get their attention while Lloyd jumps out of the van to his death	Tense	Mixture of Cool and warm	Cold. Maybe snowfall?	A few minutes later. 10:30am-10:40am	Inside	Highway 69
	8	96	Lloyd speaks from another time	Mysterious Empty	Dark		Timeless?		Placeless?
	9	99	Hassan explains to the police officer, Whitaker, that he found Lloyd's dead body on the side of the road. Whitaker belives him and vows to protect him. Hassan then prays.	Relieved	Warm	Cold.	Between 10:45am-11am	Outside	Highway 69. Damascus, IL

Figure 1.1 - *Damascus* Lighting Score.

My next step was researching how light appears both inside and outside of a car in the dead of night vs. how it appears in the cold morning sun. For this, I had to research the interior and exterior of the car to represent how it would look when Hassan and Lloyd pulled over and stepped outside of the car. An idea that arose from my research, was the concept of color draining as the sun rose. This concept coincided with the tension and suspense of the play. A major turning point in the play occurred alongside the sunrise. Hassan, a born and raised Muslim, proves that Lloyd is not a true Muslim as he gets out of the car to pray to the sunrise. To represent this spiritual revelation, we chose

to exaggerate the colors of a sunset and wanted the colors to be rich and refreshing to help emphasize this feeling.

Ultimately, *Damascus* was a challenging show and a great study in exaggerated realism. I conducted a lot of research to accurately represent different times of day which helped me create a timeline. This timeline was a helpful tool in allowing Bennett Fisher and the design team to visualize where we were in the play. Fisher's script created a unique opportunity to conduct timeline-based research to help inform design decisions.

II. The Bitter Game – Lighting a Show Without Theatre Lights

The second play I designed while attending UCSD was through the La Jolla Playhouse, a close partner of UCSD's Department of Theatre and Dance. This next production was a new play called *The Bitter Game*. Although the play was produced through the La Jolla Playhouse, nearly everyone involved was affiliated with UCSD. The play was written by a former UCSD acting graduate (Keith Wallace), directed by current playwriting professor (Deborah Stein), and stage managed and designed by past and present UCSD students.

The Bitter Game tells the story of an African American child being taught the rules of how to be black in America: meaning how to do everything society tells you to. The main character's mother teaches that in order to survive as a black man, you must listen to what the cops say. "Don't ask why, always comply". As the black child grows up, we learn that one day he is pulled over for an innocent traffic violation, forcefully pulled out of his car, and killed by the cop. He followed the rules of the bitter game, yet still lost.

The challenge with this production was that unlike most theatrical plays, this was a site specific project – meaning that the play was going to be performed in a location unique to the play and not done in a traditional theatre. The location for *The Bitter Game* was set at a local San Diego graffiti

park called Writerz Block. This was appropriate for the show as its themes discuss youth in urban living situations. As the lighting designer for this production, it was part of my duties to figure out how to add lights in an outdoor environment while maintaining show control to provide different light cues as the play progressed.



Figure 2.1 - *The Bitter Game* Production Photo. Photo by Jim Carmody.

Instead of renting theatrical lighting fixtures, I decided to embrace the idea of the outdoors specificity and purchase a variety of industrial work lights of various color temperatures (as seen in Figure 2.1). I used the natural color temperatures to help emphasize the different moods of the four different acts (referred to as basketball “quarters”). Additionally, I had to go around the site itself to find places to hide the various work lights and their cables to avoid any issues with audience members

or actors walking around the site. Once this technical challenge was resolved, the remainder of the process was a breeze. We were able to create shape on the actor from the various angles of light as well as using the work light's color temperatures to our advantage giving us either a cool, LED white light for the harsher moments, or the warm glow from halogen work lights to emphasize softer moments of the play.

The show opened to great reviews and was a powerful play for the community to watch. It was a very important play to be done at that time and for those audience members who frequently visited Writerz Block. The play was so powerful that other companies throughout the country wanted to take part. The Public Theater in New York City was *The Bitter Game*'s next stop.

The Public Theater hosts an annual festival called "Under The Radar Festival" to help promote smaller productions like *The Bitter Game*. Now a new challenge arose: instead of presenting the play at a site specific location like Writerz Block, we now had to translate everything into a theatre. How could we take the play from a dusty, graffiti filled park to the Public Theater in New York City?

Ideally, we would have loved to continue lighting the entire show with work lights, but the intensity and control of them were not the best so we had to rely on good old-fashion theatrical lights. The goal of this production was to recreate the moods and the feelings that we had at Writerz Block but with theatrical fixtures. Instead of relying on the lights to be strategically hidden, we had the lights hung throughout the space in systems of cool blue lights (to mimic the cool tones of the LED work lights) and no-color warm lights (to mimic the halogen work lights). Additionally, we were able to bring some of the halogen work lights with us to New York to keep as footlights. They didn't

necessarily do much of the story telling as they did in San Diego, but being able to see the work lights as an audience member is an exciting add to the scenery (as seen in Figure 2.2).



Figure 2.2 - *The Bitter Game* at The Public Theater. Photo by Brandon H Rosen.

Although it lost the same feeling that it had at Writerz Block, the show was equally successful in New York City. Once the show left the East coast, it traveled back West and did a few more productions in the Los Angeles area and continues to travel throughout the world.

III. What is Your Vieux?

Vieux Carré is one of Tennessee Williams' later plays which is often referred to as the sequel to *The Glass Menagerie*. It's an autobiographical play about Williams' life living in New Orleans after leaving St. Louis. The character that portrays Williams is referred to as The Writer and goes through a transformative experience in New Orleans where he ultimately learns who he is as an artist, human, and lover.

Just as the play is Williams' autobiographical story of self-discovery, director Will Detlefsen felt like the play was his autobiographical story as well. While Williams' discovery happened in the Vieux Carré of New Orleans, Will's discovery happened within the theatre. The team for this production often tossed around the phrase "where is your Vieux Carré?" meaning where did we discover artistry, and where did we grow up and learn who we were? Like Detlefsen, our "Vieux Carré" was also the theatre.

This discovery led the design team to remove New Orleans as the setting and take an "Epic Theatre" approach to this production to emphasize the function and use of the theatre space as is. This was achieved through various methods from everyone on the project. For the set, we kept it very minimal and had no masking to hide backstage; for costumes, we watched as the actors changed and got into wigs; for sound, microphones were not hidden or taped down and were visible on all the actors; for video design, we had Will onstage the entire play with a camera filming a live-feed video that was projected onto the back wall of the theatre; and for stage management, their tech table was kept in the house for the audience to see them call and operate the show. The approach to lighting this production followed a similar method.

The lighting design consisted of a very unconventional light plot. We added specials throughout to emphasize things not typically lit for theatrical productions. We had specials on the tech tables where the stage manager and operators sat and even on the followspot which we moved closer to the stage to be in audience view. We created various shapes and sizes of booms placed throughout the space that actors could interact with. We even added cyc lights pointed to the grid (which was completely visible due to the absence of masking). Our intent was to show the audience the function of the theatre and invite them into our "Vieux Carré".

Additionally, we needed to help tell the story of The Writer through his journey and transformation. We achieved this through a subtle shift from the beginning of the show to the end. In the beginning, The Writer's world is dark, hot, and unknown but as he grows and interacts with the people of the Vieux Carré, the world becomes clearer and cleaner. Lighting also followed this pattern through lighting everything with warm colors and blurry edged units. As we progress and meet newer, life changing characters, we end up in a cooler white light world with sharp edges to help the audience follow The Writer through his artistic transformation (Figure 3.1).



Figure 3.1 - Vieux Carré Production Photo. Photo by Brandon H Rosen.

One of the most unique and rewarding aspects of this design process was the addition of co-lighting designer, Joel Britt. Will wanted this production to be a collaborative process with as many minds as possible and insisted that Britt and I work as a team. Because of this unique approach, we had to trust each other artistically. We were lucky to have Will as a director because he made it clear

from the start that we were all working towards a single goal and that trust was a huge factor. Honestly, it's hard to remember whose ideas were whose. When someone had an idea, we trusted each other to put it together and once an idea was onstage, an editing process would launch until we collaborated on the final image. Though it was a co-design, I felt ownership over the design as I'm sure Joel did as well.

IV. Machinal(ia)

Following the 2016 Presidential Election, I was approached by Will Detlefsen (the director of *Vieux Carré*) who wanted to produce and direct a modern adaptation of Sophie Treadwell's *Machinal*. *Machinal* tells the story of a woman forced to follow society's stereotypical role for women. During the play, we see the central character (referred to as The Woman) treated like an object rather than a human. Her frustration and loss of freedom ultimately force her to murder her husband and becomes sentenced to death by electric chair. Will wanted to focus on the oppression of women throughout the play. The 2016 Election served as a predominant point of inspiration and he approached the process from a politically charged mindset. A quote that was commonly referenced during the process was: "a highly-qualified woman lost to a highly-unqualified man."

UCSD's Initiative for Digital Exploration of Arts and Sciences (IDEAS) Grant provided funding for this low-budget, unstaffed production. The production took place in the Engineering Department's black box space called the CalIT² Vroom. It contained a giant video wall that consisted of 32 42" HD TVs. Because of this constraint, the design team had to rely on the technology given along with little resources and time. The design team's goal was to use our limited resources to convey the feeling of "constraint" and "oppression" as the show progressed.

Throughout the show, The Woman was treated like an object who is forced into unwanted actions. She married a man she didn't love, was forced to clean the house, and eventually had a baby

for The Man. She didn't have a say in what happened in her life and ultimately paid the price once she finally broke free. The Woman's costume represented stereotypical duties assigned to women. For example, she wore yellow rubber gloves to represent cleaning duties. The gloves also constrained her as she was unable to move freely. For the set, the scenic designer included just one chair. The Woman was ultimately duct-taped to the chair for her execution. The video designer used the giant wall to emphasize the center of the stage where The Woman's chair was. These design elements helped guide my lighting as I attempted to symbolize further constraint of the actor.

I created a sense of oppression by being selective with the amount of light that hit the actor's body. Knowing that I had very limited inventory and only had one day of tech, I relied heavily on sidelight placed on two booms on either side of the chair with lights focused to center. In the beginning of the show, the woman was initially fully lit: "Full Body" (Figure 4.1).



Figure 4.1 - *Machinal* Production Photo "Full Body". Photo by Brandon H Rosen.

As the scenes progressed, The Woman continuously became more oppressed, losing more of her body. This led to the use of the sidelight only lighting half of her body (Figure 4.2).



Figure 4.2 - *Machinal* Production Photo "Half Body". Photo by Brandon H Rosen.

When we reach the final scene, the execution, I hung two low Source4 10 Degrees and tightly focused them on The Woman's head (Figure 4.3).



Figure 4.3 - *Machinal* Production Photo "Head". Photo by Brandon H Rosen.

As The Woman sits in the chair delivering her final monologue, we slowly pull to the image of just her head lit and nothing else – resembling women’s oppression in our society and ultimately leading to the final blackout: a representation of The Woman’s death, but also her freedom.

The IDEAS funding for this project was an amazing and successful lab where we were able to try different things and approaches to a style of theatre and found its success rewarding. The show eventually changed its title to *Machinalia* with new text and we were lucky to continue with the lab and put on more performances outside of UCSD. Over the summer, we took the show to Oakland with the Ubuntu Theatre Project and continued to Brooklyn, New York where we put the show on at JACK Theatre. Maybe in the era of the “me too” movement and Trump, shows like this can be seen more frequently and help push and challenge audiences.

V. Waiting for Godot – Using L201

My next project was a new production of Samuel Beckett’s famous play, *Waiting for Godot*, directed by graduate directing faculty member, Professor Gábor Tompa. In preliminary design meetings of this show, it was clear that Gábor had a clear “concept” of what he wanted. This was a new approach to designing a show that I’ve never experienced. In previous processes, I have been fortunate to help come up with any conceptual ideas that pertain to the show and provide ideas of what the play could turn into, but Gábor knew exactly what he wanted. He was so specific that in one design meeting, he told me exactly which gel color to use (a gel I rarely used called L201. I often avoid this color because I find that when the gel burns, it creates a gross tint of green). Because of his clarity, I knew that I had to have trust in him and agree with everything he said, even if it was a crazy idea.

Gábor’s “concept” for this production was to envision the world as a post-apocalyptic environment where technology has taken over and controls everything. Initially, he had the idea

of the entire floor of the set being covered in cell phones and that the Little Boy character shows up on a broken television screen instead of physically showing up. Due to budgeting reasons, we had to cut the cell phones, and used rubber tire shreds to cover the entire stage instead. We were able to keep some cell phones scattered throughout and because of that, I helped out by adding small LED modules and LED tape hidden within the tire shreds, which was used towards the end of the play. Additionally, the moon that appears at the end of the play was be constructed out of an LED tape light box. Basically, the general idea of the lights throughout the play is that the lighting technology evolves with the set into a world that is completely consumed by LEDs.

In the end, *Waiting for Godot* had two looks: one for the beginning of each act as Vladimir and Estragon wait and kill time; and one for the end of each act as the Little Boy arrives to tell the men that they have to wait another day for Godot to arrive. Due to minimal lighting cues, I had to be very clear and strong with my ideas to help make a bold statement. The first look was primarily lit with a bank of PAR 64s in a no-color blue hanging from the corner of the theatre blasting their way across the rubber tires creating strong shadows of the actors and emphasizing the texture of the floor (Figure 5.1). The second look mirrored this idea from the stage right of the theatre. Instead of using PAR 64s in a no-color blue, I used Martin Mac Auras in a dark blue to help resemble to feeling of night (Figure 5.2). The only thing these two looks had in common were the use of white side light to light the actors and other scenic pieces.

In the end, I think designing *Waiting for Godot* was a good opportunity to fine tune specific looks for a show. The minimal amount of lighting cues gave me the opportunity to purposefully chose the correct lighting angles and colors that I wouldn't have otherwise. It also gave me satisfaction knowing I successfully lit the show without using L201. Gábor never noticed.



Figure 5.1 - *Waiting for Godot* Look 1. Photo by Brandon H Rosen.



Figure 5.2 - *Waiting for Godot* Look 2. Production Photo by Brandon H Rosen.

VI. *Escape to Margaritaville* Residency at La Jolla Playhouse

As my second year at UCSD came to a close, I finished the school year at the La Jolla Playhouse as the Assistant Lighting Designer for their new musical *Escape to Margaritaville*. Despite working as an assistant rather than a lighting designer, I chose to mention this show because working through its process taught me how a new musical comes to life at a commercial level.

Unlike the process of designing a show at the university level with one week of technical rehearsals, one preview, and then opening; *Escape to Margaritaville* had two weeks of technical rehearsals, three full weeks of previews, and finally opening. This was highly educational because I was then able to observe how detail oriented theatrical designers get to be. The process of refining every single look for a huge musical becomes exhausting, but ultimately rewarding.

My primary duty as an assistant on *Escape to Margaritaville* was to keep track of the followspots throughout the show. This was a huge challenge as there were four main characters in the musical, but only two followspots. It was my job to design when the followspots turn on, turn off, what color they are, and how bright they are without the audience ever noticing. Fortunately, the five week process from the first tech rehearsal to opening gave me the opportunity and plenty of time to figure this out. I designed a document using a program called “Spot On” that helped me design the followspots and generate paperwork that I could give to the operators as they continue to learn their track from the very first time a light turns on to the end of the show when the actors walk off the stage for the last bow (Figure 6.1).

It was great to learn the process of a highly detailed musical that was Broadway bound prior to my final year in graduate school. I learned a lot from the rest of the lighting team that gave me

new ways to approach lighting a show. Ultimately, I was able to take the knowledge that I learned from this process and apply it to the remainder of the shows that I would be designing at UCSD.

LQ		ACTION INTENSITY	CHARACTER	FRAME SIZE TIME	LOCATION NOTE	ACTION INTENSITY	CHARACTER	FRAME SIZE TIME	LOCATION NOTE
"LICENSE TO CHILL"									
49	OFF					Pick Up 60%	TULLY	1+2+5 HB 2s	ENTER SL W/ LQ 49
60	Pick Up 20%	FEMALE TOURIST	1+2+5 HB 2s	DS CENTER W/ LQ60 (DANCE BREAK)		Fade Down 30%	TULLY	1+2+5 HB 1s	W/ LQ 60 (DANCE BREAK)
70	Fade Out 0%	FEMALE TOURIST	1+2+5	W/ LQ 70		Fade Up 60%	TULLY	1+2+5 HB 2s	W/ LQ 70
80	Pick Up 50%	FEMALE TOURIST	1+2+5 HB 2s	DS CENTER W/ LQ80			TULLY		
84	Fade Out 0%	FEMALE TOURIST	1+2+5 1s	EXIT SL W/ HER TURN TO EXIT (AROUND LQ 84)			TULLY		
86	Fade Up FL	MARLEY	1+2+5 HB 1s	SL UNIT W/ LQ 86		Slide to 60%	J.D.	1+2+5 HB 1s	SITTING AT BAR W/ END OF LINE JUST AFTER LQ 86
87		MARLEY				Fade Out 0%	J.D.	1+2+5 HB 3s	W/ LQ 87
87.5		MARLEY				Pick Up 40%	TULLY	1+2+5 HB 1s	SR BAR W/ LQ 87.5
89	Dmp & Rst 40%	RACHEL	1+5 HB 5s	ENTER SR W/ LQ 89			TULLY		
90		RACHEL				Fade Out 0%	TULLY	1+2+5 HB 3s	W/ LQ 90
1.2 Cincinnati Apartment									
11		RACHEL				Pick Up 50%	TAMMY	1+5 HB 3s	ENTER SR W/ TAMMY'S ENTRANCE
12		RACHEL				Dmp & Rst 50%	CHADD	1+5 HB 2s	CENTER SOFA W/ TAMMY EXIT SL

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SPOT ON

PAGE 1

Figure 6.1 - An example of the Followspot track used in *Escape to Margaritaville*. Only showing Page 1 of 19.

VII. What of the Night? – Using Art History as Inspiration

The first show I designed in my final year of graduate school turned out to be my biggest yet. UCSD hired outside director, Katie Pearl, to come and design a new production of María Irene Fornés' play *What of the Night?*. This play was a collection of four short plays that each had a different time periods, settings, moods, and themes. The only thing the plays had in common were the repetition of characters.

Immediately after reading the play, I knew it was going to be very challenging. My research process consisted of watching documentaries about María Irene Fornés, learning about the various time periods, and reading a variety of articles that Fornés wrote or was involved with. There was one interview that stood out to me as Fornés expressed her interest in Edward Hopper's paintings. She felt that his paintings had a sense of reality while portraying the feeling that there was something uncomfortable happening. This led me to conduct visual research on all of Edward Hopper's paintings. I also paid a special visit to New York City's Whitney Museum of American Art where a large collection of Hopper's paintings reside. Once I gathered all of this research, I learned that I could draw inspiration from Hopper's paintings to guide me in terms of lighting each of the four plays in *What of the Night?*.

Another idea that I kept from the beginning of the process throughout, was that each of the four plays start in the day and ultimately end at night to resemble the concept of the sun setting and hope being lost. Each of the four plays ended with a sense of sorrow and sadness and the best way for me to emphasize that was to give each play's world a final look set at night.

The first of the four plays was called *Nadine*. It's the only one of the plays to be set outdoors and tells the story of a mother would do anything to keep her children alive, happy, and healthy. The play ends with her son's fiancé running away and leaving him home alone to take care of his

younger sister. I was inspired by Edward Hopper's *Railroad Sunset* (Figure 7.1) to guide me throughout *Nadine*. The sunset in the background of the painting inspired me to light the set that contained a painted cloud skyline on scrim. The play was set in 1938 in the Southwest United States and I took advantage of the play being set outdoors by mimicking sun beams with the use of Very Narrow Source4 PARs and haze. All three scenes in *Nadine* had the Very Narrow Source4 PARs creating beams in the air coming from different directions (as seen in Figure 7.2) until the end of the third and final scene where we reach night time and the characters have become hopeless and lost.



Figure 7.1 – Edward Hopper's *Railroad Sunset*. 1929.



Figure 7.2 - *What of the Night?* Production Photo "Nadine". Photo by Brandon H Rosen.

The second play was called *Springtime* and was set entirely within an apartment in 1958 in a small Eastern city. Unlike *Nadine*, there are many more scenes within this play and are all relatively short. The only sense of sunlight that we get is from a window that is often mentioned in the script. Because all of the sunlight comes from the window, I plotted a new light for each scene. The lights were hung on a tall boom offstage of the window. The first light on the boom started from high above the stage for the first scene in a warm light and ended low on the ground in a cold blue light to resemble night for the final scene. This way, I was able to gradually show light coming through the window in a high and warm light and progress to a low and cold light as we reach night at the end of the play. The Edward Hopper painting that inspired me for this play

was *Woman in the Sun* (Figure 7.3). This piece shows a nude woman looking out of her apartment window. This relates to the innocence of the women in the scenes and their longing for hope as the sun sets. The director, Katie Pearl, seemed inspired by the painting as well and would often stage moments to have the women staring out the window (as seen in Figure 7.4).

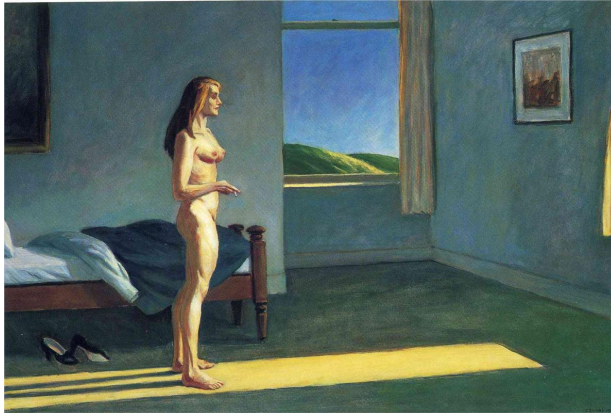


Figure 7.3 - Edward Hopper's *Woman in the Sun*. 1961.



Figure 7.4 - *What of the Night?* Production Photo "Springtime". Photo by Matthew Herman.

Lust, the third play, was set in a major city from 1968 to 1983. In this play, we are set in an office building and an apartment complex and follows the story of a man who is willing to do anything to get above in his career. He successfully achieves this by marrying his boss' daughter and blackmailing him. Edward Hopper's *Conference at Night* (Figure 7.5) was a major inspiration and helped give myself and Katie Pearl a clear understanding of the character's intentions of office life and greed. In this play, the only sense of sunlight comes from a large window upstage, but all of the light is completely blocked by window blinds. There is no sunlight coming through except for cracks through the blinds. I was able to emphasize this through the use of window blind gobos from above to cover the entire stage (as see in Figure 7.6). The biggest challenge with *Lust* was the addition of a dream sequence in the middle of the play. This dream is filled with Freudian expressions of the main character's consciousness and reveals his insanity and vulgarity to the audience. I lit every scene in *Lust* monochromatically aside from the dream sequence. Within the dream, we are taken through multiple scenes in multiple places in an abstracted form that is unlike

the rest of the play. I used a great variety of colors and saturation that I did not use throughout the rest of the play to great success.



Figure 7.5 - Edward Hopper's *Conference at Night*. 1949.

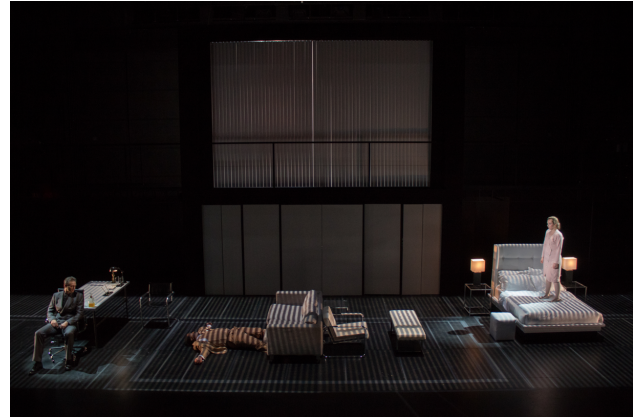


Figure 7.6 - *What of the Night?* Production Photo "Lust". Photo by Brandon H Rosen.

The final play in *What of the Night?* is a two scene play called *Hunger*. Fornés describes the setting of the play as a warehouse after an economic disaster sometime in the future. As it is impossible to understand what the future looks like, I wanted to evoke a feeling of sickness and create a world unlike any of the previous three plays. The idea of sunlight in a world post-economic disaster had to feel like something that we are currently not accustomed to. Additionally, the sunlight for this scene would be coming through “windows” that are already built the theatre’s architecture. We made it seem like all of the sunlight hitting the stage came from the theatre’s architecture and used a gross, lime green color. We took inspiration from Hopper’s *Chair Car* (Figure 7.7) and used green tones for every light until the final image of the play, where an angel appears and feeds the hungry characters bile and human remains, is consumed by full green light (Figure 7.8).

The unique challenge of designing the four individual plays within *What of the Night?* was ultimately rewarding and one of my proudest accomplishments at UCSD. I felt as if I was able to create a clean and coherent language that helped tell the story. Working with an outside director

also gave me the confidence that if I could design in a university setting, I could successfully design shows outside of school as well.



Figure 7.7 – Edward Hopper's *Chair Car*. 1965.



Figure 7.8 - *What of the Night?* Production Photo "Hunger". Photo by Brandon H Rosen.

VIII. Revolutionize the Process [take everything you learned and throw it out]

My final design as a student at UCSD was a contemporary feminist play called *Revolt. She Said. Revolt Again.* by Alice Birch. Similar to *What of the Night?*, *Revolt. She Said. Revolt Again.* was directed by an outside director, Sean Graney. My initial challenge with this show that I struggled with was that I was a male designing a feminist play. The rest of the design team consisted of all females, yet here I was, expected to design a show regarding feminism. Of course I consider myself a feminist, but the show was challenging, especially considering there's a scene that mocks the idea of men who consider themselves feminists. I initially felt unqualified to help tell the stories of these women. Fortunately, I was comforted by Sean Graney and the actors and design team that we would all work together to create a strong feminist play. I made it clear to all of the women working on the show that I was open and

willing to accept any criticism and insight as to how to properly represent what feminism means for this production.

The way that Sean Graney works is very unique compared to all of the processes I've ever been a part of. When I initially showed Sean research photos or inspirational photos, they never really registered to him. He works in a way that every design element gets layered on one piece at a time with lighting being the final touch. He had this interesting approach: we tried out his ideas first and if they did not work, we were free to try what we wanted. Due to the way that Sean worked, I took everything I learned in school regarding research, process, and even design choices and basically threw it away.

Usually when I enter tech, I have a general idea for how each scene and cue will look, but with this approach, the only thing I could do was instinctually guess what each cue would look like. Whenever we would start a new scene or act in tech, I always went with my gut instinct of what the scene would look like. Because of that, most of my notes from Sean were actually quite useful. They were notes about tweaking colors or intensities here and there throughout the show. The only time I was asked to do something completely different was in one of the acts that is arguably the climax of the show. Instead of designing that act with theatrical fixtures, we started off turning on the work lights and sitting in them throughout the progression of the act. Naturally, this was a challenge for me to accept, but we tried it. We stuck with it for a few days until the preview where we learned that it was in fact killing

the energy of the actors. Just prior to opening, we adjusted the cue and added an extra step to slowly add in theatrical fixtures to help match the energy of the actors.

Because I was able to see how Sean worked with all of the other designers on the team prior to tech, I learned that the best thing to do was always say “yes” to his ideas or requests. When I noticed another designer challenge or confront Sean’s ideas, I could tell that a small amount of trust was lost between the two and in order to avoid that, I never said “no” or challenged his suggestions. I think because of this, I was able to gain Sean’s trust in a way that not many other actors or designers on the team were able to achieve. I noted that whenever Sean’s idea didn’t work, he was completely open to my ideas or tweaks of a cue



Figure 8.1 - Revolt, She Said, Revolt Again. Production Photo. Photo by Brandon H Rosen

(much like the work light cue that was previously mentioned). Overall, a process that would be typically considered challenging ended up being quite pleasant and fun.

The design itself was also really unique to my aesthetic or “style”. I never really feel that I have much of a “style”, but there were things that I do often in my designs that I completely avoided in this show. As mentioned before, lighting was the last thing that Sean thought about in his process so being able to come up with a light plot was a huge challenge. I had to make it completely flexible and be able to light anything in the theatre, in any color, in any shape possible. As I started to draft, I found inspiration through the art of Roy Lichtenstein and Yayoi Kusama. These two artists use a variety of dots and circles in ways that I noted the scenic designer, Samantha Rojas, used. Because of this, I added as many “dot” gobos throughout the space wherever I could, in as many colors as I could, which I was able to use in a variety of ways to help accentuate the scenic design (Figure 8.1). Additionally, I was able to work out a deal with High End Systems and demo a variety of their moving light fixtures to use in the show as well. The combination of the High End Systems moving lights, UCSD’s personal LED inventory, and color scrollers throughout the space gave me the flexibility required to design a well-rounded show.

As crazy as the process was, *Revolt. She Said. Revolt Again.* was one of the processes where I learned the most. The flexibility required to design a show and working with a director who doesn’t necessarily think about lighting until tech starts is something that will

happen quite often in my career. I was happy to be able to try something like this and see how it works so that I can be prepared for something like this in the future.

IX. Conclusion

In the end, my time at UCSD was a huge success. Designing and working on shows ranging from small productions such as *Machinal* to a large, commercially enhanced and Broadway bound musical like *Escape to Margaritaville* was such a successful way to learn. The amount of hands on opportunity that UCSD provides is unlike any other graduate program and because we had so many opportunities to work, I now feel more prepared than ever to enter the real world.

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