INTERVIEW BY
SHELLEY BUTLER

REVEALING THE WORLD OF THE PLAY

LIGHTING DESIGNER DON HOLDER ON TAKING RESPONSIBILITY FOR WHAT THE AUDIENCE SEES AND HOW THEY SEE IT

During my time as features editor for *SDC Journal*, directors and choreographers have queried me about a wide range of stories they'd like to explore. The topic of the collaboration between directors and lighting designers is one of these oft-addressed subjects—with particular attention to finding common language when entering new collaborations. While I've had the great fortune to work with many gifted lighting designers, I have also encountered difficult moments in tech, often with a designer whose work was brand-new to me, and wondered what I might have done to better anticipate that challenge in advance. In pursuit of possible answers, I sat down with celebrated lighting designer Don Holder—a two-time Tony Award winner with a legion of Broadway, opera, and dance credits, but also a master teacher, to talk about the varied language of lighting design.

SHELLEY BUTLER | A director said to me this year that he knows what he likes in a lighting design when he sees it, but he doesn't have any idea how to get there. I would love to explore communication between lighting designers and directors. Where do both parties meet in understanding the world of a play?

DON HOLDER | Well, first of all, I have to go back to a basic definition of what I think a lighting designer does. And to quote my mentor, Jennifer Tipton, a lighting designer reveals the world of the play and we are responsible for what the audience sees and how they see it. So I think that lighting design, beyond the obvious functions, is responsible for perception; it's the lens through which everything is perceived. It's crucial that the lighting designer understands, more than anything, intention. What is the intention of the director and your other collaborators? What is the overall point of view? What is the story being told?

I think a lighting designer who's been hired for a professional production should have the requisite technique and technical skills already under control. The best directors I work with, don't necessarily talk a lot about the lighting; we talk about why are we doing the piece—what is the play about? What are we trying to say with this production? What is the overall frame in which this production lives? A question that I often ask myself is: where is the light coming from, and why is it there?

Now, sometimes it's clear. I mean, if it's a naturalistic or realistic moment, then those answers should be very easy to come up with. But if it's a more abstract environment or nonlinear script and space, the question's a little bit more difficult to answer. It's important that every show, no matter how abstract should be created with some kind of inner logic. There should be some kind of conceptual through line for a piece. It all has to have meaning.

SHELLEY | You're one of the preeminent lighting designers, and you also taught at the School of Theatre at the California Institute of the Arts, and have a lot of experience working with emerging artists as well. Among your student directors, have you observed that many of the major missteps for inexperienced directors working with lighting designers revolve around not articulating their point of view and the story being told?

DON | I think so. Somehow lighting designers are considered differently by less experienced directors. Perhaps they think that we require some sort of technical moment-by-moment feedback or description or walkthrough of what the lighting should be. It would be the equivalent if you were in a rehearsal hall and you said to an actor, "Okay, on this line I want you to cross here, and on this line I want you to do this, and this is the line reading I want for this moment."

That person will probably shut down. I've certainly been in situations, for example, where a director wants to go through the show page by page and beat by beat, literally put the light cues in the book and discuss what every light cue does.

As a lighting designer, so much of the job is reacting to what you're seeing and feeling in the moment. I tell my students [that] being a lighting designer is often like being a jazz musician, because the process can be quite improvisational. Now, improvisation doesn't mean it's arbitrary; a jazz musician follows a specific chord progression and creates something from that. So there are parameters within which you must work to create whatever it is. A lighting designer works in similar ways. You come into the process with an understanding of intention, of what you want to do, scene by scene, or moment by moment, and then you start creating.

And I find that less experienced student directors feel like they have to be either very specific with their thoughts or they're hesitant to say anything at all. And I think if they talked to a lighting designer like they might talk to an actor—for example: this is my objective for this scene or this moment—that would be more valuable for a lighting designer than perhaps anything else a director could say.

SHELLEY | Certainly, I think most directors know this intuitively or have been trained to work this way, but what if you enter into a process with that approach, but when you reach tech, you find that it hasn't been successful?

DON | So then how do you do it?

SHELLEY | Right. What are the next steps?

DON | I think every scene has to begin with a bold gesture or some strong statement of visual vocabulary. The important thing is to first establish the look of a scene. For example, this scene might be revealed in broad daylight, with the sun coming from stage left, or this scene is revealed at the bottom of the ocean. And so you create the opening gesture, which is a big visual statement, and then you carve everything out of that. If you start working on a scene with your lighting designer and you don't see that gesture, you don't see a big idea that's driving everything else, then I think you need to stop and discuss your objective for the scene. I've found that the farther you let things go, the more difficult it is going to be to dig yourself out of the hole you've created.

TOP
The Lion King on UK Zebra Tour in 2012 PHOTO Brinkhoff-Mogenburg

BOTTOM
Movin' Out at Richard Rodgers Theatre, NYC in 2002 PHOTO Jeanne Koenig

SHELLEY BUTLER since 2008

I think it's a tricky balance because during the first day or two of the tech process, the lighting designer is trying to manipulate the lighting rig for the first time, he's trying to figure out what works best, how the light reacts to the space, and he may be dealing with several unexpected technical issues. Lighting designers feel incredibly vulnerable during the tech; we're under a lot of stress because unlike anybody else, we do our work while everybody's sitting there watching us, and waiting.

As a lighting designer, it's important to understand that every choice you make affects perception, affects the success or failure of everybody else's work. It's a huge responsibility and you have to be sensitive to this fact. When I worked on *Bullets Over Broadway*, some of the color choices I made early in tech didn't make William Ivey Long particularly happy. He talked to me about his concerns and the result was that I never used those colors again. Of course he was right, and it's great to have collaborators who are confident and comfortable enough to say what they feel. The lighting designer has to understand that a request to change or to re-examine an idea should not be interpreted as passing judgment on his or her ability as an artist. Your collaborator is just saying, look, we're not on the right track in this scene and we need to re-think our approach.

In addition to all the other responsibilities that I've mentioned, a principal objective for the lighting designer is to create a three-dimensional living environment, or a 'living light' onstage. And three-dimensional is the key. You consider the space as a series of layers and the actors are like sculpture; if you study still lifes and the work of great photographers and great painters, you'll see that objects are rarely revealed in a flat, sort of monochromatic, uninteresting way. There's always a sense of highlight and shadow and three dimensions. That's how I feel light should be used in the theatre. Unless of course you're trying to make a very specific statement that might require the opposite approach. For example: you as the director could say: "I imagine a completely blank, fluorescent-lit room with no highlight and no shadow: an oppressive, unrelenting landscape." If that's the objective, then obviously a three-dimensional environment is not important. But if it isn't your objective, but that's what you're seeing onstage, you clearly have a communication problem that needs to be addressed.

SHELLEY | With regard to control and giving attention to choices, how do you feel about research, pre-visualization, and computer-generated images?

DON | Well, I think visual research is different than pre-visualization. Visual research is really useful if you're trying to articulate a particular idea, if there's a particular photographer or painter that you want to be influential in the choices that you're making. When I worked on the August Wilson cycle for example, Romare Bearden was always an artist that we referenced. His work was very organic to August's vision. Bearden was somebody who August was very familiar with and who he often suggested that we look to for inspiration.

There are times when you're trying to articulate an approach, like what does Southern Gothic mean in *Big Fish*—and what does that mean in terms of light? What does "impressionistic" mean to you? All these "isms,"—realism, naturalism, expressionism, cubism, dadaism—what do they mean in terms of the light? If you're able to bring in something that says "This is what I mean"; see how the blocks of color or the strong angular light or the quality of the light in the painting or the photograph somehow metaphorically or visually connect with what you intend. That is helpful.

SHELLEY | Did you do that on *Big Fish*?

DON | I looked at some photographs by Walker Evans. His work definitely inspired some of the choices I made. But you know, that show was more about fantasy than it was about reality.

Using pre-visualization in the lighting world means that you can literally create a virtual model of the scenery, show the beams of light, and actually render the lighting moment by moment or scene by scene. It sounds great in concept, but to be honest, I don't use a lot of this technology in the work that I typically do.

SHELLEY | Do you find it less effective in rendering the production in a practical sense?

DON | Pre-visualization is a digital simulation or digital facsimile of reality. A lighting designer's work is created in response to what he or she is seeing and feeling in the moment. The work and what we create is entwined and completely related to the emotional temperature and rhthym of a scene, the music of the language, and the way people move. And that's really hard to pre-visualize.

Now I do think there's a place for it; for example, in *Footloose*, the overture featured a spectacular moving light show (created by Ken Billington) that included electrics flying in and out, lots of complex movement and many color changes, all timed to a pre-recorded 'click track.' I heard that the entire sequence was programmed weeks before the tech rehearsals using pre-visualization, and that completely made sense to me. When you're dealing with a fixed idea, when there are no actors or live, spontaneous performance inolved and the music and tempos will remain consistent from show to show, then pre-visualization makes sense because it saves a lot of precious time in the theatre.

SHELLEY | Sure, you can see what is in front of you and sign off on the sequence in advance.

DON | Yes. And you know, when I worked on *Smash*, we often lit entire production numbers from beginning to end in great detail without anybody on stage because there was no time to do it in any other way. But that wasn't really pre-visualization; more like an elaborate and very detailed dry-tech.

SHELLEY | In real time, it makes sense. With that idea of artistic vision and expectations, it's sometimes the case that directors are paired with a designer whose work they haven't seen. I think it's a given that lighting designers have wildly different aesthetics—it might be a preference for saturated color or bright, bold color. If I look at how Howell Binkley lights, with cross focusing, it looks entirely different from another designer. If you're not familiar with the style of a particular designer's work, is there a part of the pre-production process where a director and a designer can get on the same page in how they are both approaching the project?

DON | That's an interesting question. I think that people have their techniques, and there's not a lot you can do to change that once you get connected with a particular designer for a particular production. I mean, the only thing you can do is be clear about what you want. Hopefully they're sensitive to the ultimate goal. The way I was trained and the way I taught was, to quote Jennifer again, there are no rules. The rules are established for each production. There's no rule of thumb and there's no specific way of doing anything. I think lighting designers should be like a chameleon and adapt their style to suit the needs of the production or the vision of that particular director.

Now, that being said, I think lighting designers, in the age we're living in, are often cast like actors. I believe that certain designers are hired because there is a perception that they are better at certain things. I assume that people have an opinion about what my strengths and weaknesses are, but I enjoy being stretched creatively and working outside of my wheelhouse, so to speak. I just designed a production of *Faust* with **Bart Sher** in Baden-Baden, Germany, and it was a very different experience than what I usually encounter and a kind of work that I don't typically do. I found the process to be very exciting and fulfilling because I felt free to spread my wings creatively, branch out and do something different.

SHELLEY | I think directors would love to have the same open consideration, to defy categorization and not be defined by a certain kind of theatre, necessarily.

DON | Let's be honest, when you're directing a show and you know it's a certain kind of play, of course you think about certain actors for specific roles, but it's possible you may also think about certain designers in the same way. It makes sense that a director would gravitate toward a designer with specific strengths to tackle a particular project. I think it's less likey that one would ask: "Well, who are the good costume designers? I'll just pick one of them, see who's available." That's not the way it works.

SHELLEY | Such an approach might yield some striking variations in how we seek out collaborations and the resulting work. Speaking of the nature of these partnerships, what do you think about the role of the director in terms of set and lighting interaction? What is the acceptable level of involvement from a director when finding solutions to specific trouble spots with the design?

DON | Yes, that's tricky. One of the catchphrases of my graduate school education was: "There are no problems, just solutions." I think that's the attitude that you have to embrace as a lighting designer. As a collaborator, you have to try your best to find a creative way to light every space, especially one that is very challenging and tricky to deal with. But you also have a responsibility as a lighting designer to make sure the director and the set designer understand how their design choices will influence your approach to lighting the show. For example, if there's a ceiling and 35-foot walls and no way to get any light into the space except from the fourth wall, this is going to impose a particular quality to the light and therefore the scene will be perceived in a particular way. And if the director and the set designer say, "Yes, that's exactly what we're looking for," no problem. But if that's not the intention, then you should begin the conversation about what aspects of the design need to be re-examined. The absolutely incorrect way to respond to difficult design challenges would be to state emphatically that "There's no way I can light the show with this set design". You have to say, okay, this is where the light can come from, so these are the implications, both conceptual and technical. And it may be fine, but then again it may not.

I can go back to *The Lion King*, for an example. One of set designer Richard Hudson's early ideas was to reveal the musical within a massive white surround, featuring tall white panels, with holes cut in strategic locations for light to shoot through. We had been meeting for months about the show and talking in detail about what the world of the play should be. Having worked with **Julie Taymor**, I knew that side light, or layers of light which create a great sense of depth would be quite important for her vision for the piece. So my response to the white box was: "It's very elegant and beautiful, but we have to consider that any time you turn on a sidelight from stage left, for example, the entire wall stage right will be fully illuminated." Julie hadn't really considered all the implications for this kind of approach, so a completely different scenic idea evolved as a result of this conversation. Richard created an open space, framed by self-illuminated masking legs that were intended to look like a continuation of the Lion King sky. These cyclorama-light legs are just one of several innovative visual gestures that remain part of the show's unique identity almost 17 years later.

So I would suggest that the director invite the lighting designer into the process as early as possible. Not only to add his or her particular perspective to what is developing design-wise, but because on Broadway in particular, overhead space (or real estate, as we call it) is quite limited and every inch really needs to be accounted for. It's important that the lighting designer has the opportunity to advocate for the necessary territory and lighting positions to get the show lit.

SHELLEY | As you mentioned, because you do have to plan ahead as early in your process as possible, who is usually proposing your practicals?

DON | From my experience, the set designer usually identifies the practicals and where they're located. Santo Loquasto and John Lee Beatty are two guys who love practicals. Because they know that they add sparkle and contrast to any room. I usually let the set designer make the intial decisions, but if the subject of practicals does not come up in the early design conversations and I think there's a legitimate need, I'll usually say something. Because considering practicals leads us back to that essential question: where is the light coming from and why is it there? By bringing up this subject, you're encouraging a larger conceptual conversation: Does the light need to feel motivated by real and visible sources, or is motivated or 'real' light not important at all?

SHELLEY | And so, as we both know, there are usually a plethora of questions to be asked to make the most of communication among the creative team. When you are teaching your design students, do you engage with the idea of speaking to the director about how staging affects the lighting?

DON | Yes, absolutely. If you're doing a show with a lot of low sidelight for example, you ask the director to stagger the actors so they're not blocking each other's light. Or a lot of really good actors are aware of this and they just make the adjustment themselves. Or if an actor is spending an entire scene up against a wall and looking a bit dark, then I'd ask the director to consider pushing him downstage a little bit into the light.

Now, with an accomplished director like Bart Sher, if somebody's been staged to lean against a wall and the light is clearly not good, he'll typically ask: "What can I do? Where should I move the actor-to get better light?" It's his way of saying, "We've got to do something about this moment. Tell me what the problem is and we can work together to fix it."

SHELLEY | With the designer keeping up with the director, and vice versa, how does this play into the sheer evolution of theatre technology? How familiar do you feel directors should be with these rapidly accelerating changes?

DON | I've heard that there are some directors who are really up on the technology and others who have no concept of it. Without question, a clear understanding of what the lighting designer's process is now, in 2014, would be really helpful. Most shows use moving lights. And they take more time to program because after you put the fixture where you want it to be and select all its parameters, you then have to create commands that allow the light to transition smoothly from one task to the next. So you're not just determining what a moving light does in the moment, you're also figuring out how you're going to get it into position for its next task. One moving light might have 200 jobs in a typical show, and there may be dozens or hundreds of fixtures that must be programmed in this way. All of this requires time and patience, but the end results are certainly worth the effort. With automated lighting technology, the designer can create work that is infintely more fluid and detailed.

And you know, the expectations for what lighting can contribute today in terms of telling the story and creating a complete visual landscape are vastly different than when I started working in the business in 1987. It's like a completely different world. The technological advances have given us greater flexibility and adaptability; you can accommodate almost any last-minute change that could possibly be thrown at you. At 1 p.m. on a typical day during the preview period for a Broadway musical, an ASM or Assistant Director will hand you new script pages, which might include a new musical number, completely new staging, shuffling the order of scenes, etc. You're often presented with monumentally complex revisions on very short notice, and they all have to be addressed before 5 p.m., when the tech tables are cleared for the evening performance.

BARTLETT SHER since 1996

JULIE TAYMOR since 1996

And there's no time to get ladders out to move or refocus lights. Almost everything must be accomplished from the tech table—automated lighting allows you to do this.

So I think it's important that the director understands that moving lights are absolutely essential in many situations. They can help the lighting designer manage the most complex of circumstances, but the time it takes to program them can slow the process down. The slower pace of tech requires patience, but everyone should understand that the payoff will be more than worth it.

SHELLEY | Are there any other ways that the advances in lighting technology can impact your work of which a director should be aware?

DON | Well, the push for a greener world, and a greener, more energy-efficient theatre is fantastic and long overdue. In stage lighting, the explosion of low energy and highly efficient LED technology has been at the forefront of this 'green' approach. I think LEDs can be incredibly exciting and useful, but they can also be very destructive in terms of perception and the kind of work you're trying to create. LEDs look quite artificial; they can produce an unattractive and unhealthy-looking pallor on human skin if not used correctly. And although they're energy efficient and you can mix many, many different colors, there's something about LEDs—because they are solid-state lighting—that can elicit an unintended subliminal response. I think LED technology, although incredibly exciting and useful, should be considered carefully like any other tool in the designer's arsenal.

If you see an array of electric and vivid background colors from an LED source in a production of a Chekhov play, for example, you might say: "It's fantastic that we can produce all these colors, but what do they mean in the context of this play?" LED or solid state lighting is not a poetic, subtle, lyrical source of light, and it certainly doesn't feel natural or like it's wrought by nature.

SHELLEY | Even with technical considerations, it all returns to intention. And you're making decisions about what's in the package before you get into tech, right?

DON | Yes, what's in the rental package, or if you're working at a regional theatre what's available in their fixed inventory, it's how you use what you have. We're living in exciting times in the field of lighting design, with new tools being introduced almost every day that offer more options, more capability, more flexibility. But I think it's important to remember that you should never lose sight of intention when making technical or creative decisions. All the technology in the world means nothing without a great idea behind it.

SHELLEY | Exactly, and a director's awareness of how those different kinds of light function can inform the creation of that idea. Has a director ever asked to see your lighting plot?

DON | Yes, **Robert Woodruff** asked, and **James Lapine**. Maybe I was a bit offended in my youth, but when I think about it now I totally get it. They didn't know me or my work particularly well. So of course they wanted to have some idea about what I was doing. I think, in retrospect, showing the light plot wasn't the important thing to James and Robert: they were creating an opportunity for me talk through what I saw—and the light plot was the catalyst to have this conversation. By discussing each choice I had made, literally lamp by lamp they gained a greater understanding of my objectives, and I learned a great deal more about theirs. I recently lit a production of an Arthur Miller play in a regional theatre where the director asked me to step through my design channel by channel. We sat down before tech rehearsals and I showed him each and every lighting idea. I was surprised by the request, but certainly not offended. Every director has their own process for creating work, and it's the lighting designer's job to respect and support it.

But let's be clear: I don't recommend this approach. I mean, I think if the director starts saying, "Okay, bring up channel 617 at 50—"

SHELLEY | Right, if the director interjects with, "Here's my magic sheet and I want to bring up channel 57—"

DON | I would strongly advise against that. But I think that the more you know about the technology and the process, the better you're going to be able to collaborate and have a more detailed conversation. So I think it's important to understand what moving lights can do. Color temperature is a very important concept. In other words, the color of the white light varies depending on the source. LED lighting has a different color temperature than tungsten lighting.

You're not threatening the designer's process and you're not micromanaging by reviewing a light plot or stepping through a show channel by channel. It's just that the more you know about the technology, you can get to the point faster instead of beating around the bush. I welcome and appreciate somebody who's really direct and really honest and to the point. And understanding the technology and how it works and how it affects the work. The more you know, the better the conversations are going to be.

SHELLEY | An informed conversation leads to a productive collaboration. Along with those words of wisdom, do you have any additional advice to impart to directors working with lighting designers?

DON | I think the important thing for me is what I said very early on: what's most important for us to understand is intention and the objectives and the director's vision because that drives all the other decisions that we make. If you don't like something, just say it. That's the thing I appreciate about a director like Julie Taymor: she's refreshingly candid and not shy about expressing how she feels. If she doesn't like something or if I'm veering off in the wrong direction, she'll make it known immediately. You'll have a response from her in the first 15 seconds of the process, and I personally appreciate the feedback: I understand how Julie makes theatre and how she likes to collaborate: we've been working together for 20 years.

SHELLEY | It's about establishing trust.

DON | You know, my early conversations with Bart Sher about *South Pacific* were focused on the intentions of the original creators, what was important to him about the piece and how he was going approach it conceptually. It was our first collaboration, but we spoke very little about the lighting. The most important thing he told me in those first meetings were the two simple words: "Surprise me."

DONALD HOLDER *has worked extensively in theatre, opera, dance, and architectural and television lighting for over 25 years. He has designed more than 40 Broadway productions and been nominated for ten Tony Awards, winning the Tony for Best Lighting Design for* The Lion King *and the 2008 revival of* South Pacific. *Broadway productions include* Spider-Man: Turn Off The Dark, You Can't Take It With You, Bullets Over Broadway, The Bridges of Madison County, The King and I *(2015),* Golden Boy, Ragtime *(2009 revival), and* Movin' Out. *Recent Off-Broadway:* A Midsummer Night's Dream *(TFANA, directed by Julie Taymor),* Blood and Gifts *(LCT). He has worked at many of the nation's resident theatres including Center Stage, Arena Stage, Goodman, Steppenwolf, Mark Taper Forum, Seattle Repertory, La Jolla Playhouse, Huntington Theatre Company, Denver Center, Cincinnati Playhouse, and South Coast Repertory. His television work includes the theatrical lighting for seasons one and two of NBC's* Smash. *Mr. Holder was head of the lighting design program at the California Institute of the Arts from 2006-2010, and he is a graduate of the University of Maine and the Yale School of Drama.*

JAMES LAPINE since 1988 | ROBERT WOODRUFF since 1986