

2017 Orpheum High School Musical Theatre Awards
Bolton High School: Zombie Prom
Lily Donaldson
Creative Achievement: Lighting Design

Last year, I was the light tech for my theatre's spring musical, *Weird Romance*. I asked for the job because I thought the booth looked cool and because my class duet partner, Jeremy, was the lighting designer. That show, he decided that he was going to teach me how to design lights. This year, I directed our first fall mainstage, *'Night Mother*, and designed lights for our second fall mainstage, *Witness for the Prosecution*. When the musical came around, I jumped on the opportunity to design lights for it; designing for a musical was something I had been waiting on since I watched Jeremy do it the year prior, and, despite all of the mishaps, craziness, and lost lights, it has been one of my favorite theatre experiences ever.

When *Witness* ended in November, I began my concept lighting design for *The Elephant Man* for the Tennessee Thespian Conference in January and I began forming my ideas for my lighting design for *Zombie Prom*. By *ThesCon*, I had *Zombie Prom's* preliminary lighting plan and plot done, and I found out that I was cast in the ensemble for it.

Being cast in the show and working tech for it was certainly an interesting experience. Many times my (amazingly wonderful) director Mrs. Dean would explain to the actors what was going to happen during technically complicated scenes, and she would explain how the lights were going to do this or that (usually something that I did not know she wanted). So, my script for the show has my original lighting notes, my blocking, and barely legible paragraphs taken during rehearsal on what my director wanted. I did feel like this was beneficial to our 'director-designer' communication, though, because had I not been in every rehearsal, I would have missed out on a lot of things, even if just little things, that helped my director achieve her vision for the show, and that made her happy with my design.

The other thing that made this experience interesting was the balancing act of it. I was in rehearsals every day, so I had to do my lighting design and then hanging/focusing on my own time. On top of that, I'm in my senior year of the International Baccalaureate program, so during the show (and until May 18th), I am constantly bombarded with school assignments, exams, and assessments. The balance among designing, acting, and school work sometimes made me feel like a tightrope walker, but I wouldn't trade any of my experience for the world.

Now, the actual lighting design was the most fun (and most difficult) part. For my last show, *Witness*, there were two settings, one had a full wash, the other had a half wash with backlights, and one special. But, wow, musicals have a lot of settings, specials, and light cues. The biggest struggle I had with my design was working with the resources my theatre had. In my original design, I had 4-5 sets of scoop lights in order to differentiate settings, but soon I realized I was going to have to cut some of the lights out of my plot due to an insufficient number of dimmers. I ended up cutting all but one set of scoops (the R89 Moss Green ones) and figuring out which lighting areas didn't need to be isolated. In doing this, I could have three

lighting areas share two circuits (three fresnels in each) so that I could have another circuit open. I ended up putting 12 fresnels on our front batten (which usually only holds 8-10). One day I came into the theatre, and my technical director was just looking up at the batten, and he turned to me, very confused, and asked, "How did you fit that many up there?"

Concerning the back batten, I had to take one of our Source Fours out of my wash for the atom gobo, but I found an old Altman up in the catwalk and replaced it with that. I actually found several lights up in the catwalk, hidden under dust, curtains, and miscellaneous tarps and boxes. I found some ERS', a strobe light, and a club light that I ended up using in the show. I still can't figure out why no one had picked them up in ten years.

Anyway, during Witness, I had a dark spot problem. There was a dark spot on the house left front corner of our stage's proscenium, but I ran out of lights (and I did not know about the hidden lights in the catwalk), so I figured the actors wouldn't go in that spot anyway. During tech rehearsals, though, my director repeatedly asked me to fix the dark spot after I told him I didn't have any more lights to fix it with. So, I ended up taking lights from another part of the stage and focusing them on the dark spot, essentially creating another dark spot, which my director asked me to fix. For the entirety of tech week, every day I switched the lights from dark spot to dark spot, until finally, he realized the problem, and just told the actors not to walk there. I found it curious that they had never encountered a dark spot like that before, as every show I've worked there (to my memory) hasn't had that problem. It seemed like that batten was just missing a set of Lekos. I tell this story because its resolvment came at the first hang and focus for Zombie Prom. I was working on the electrics on our infamously terrible ladder, "Rickety", when I looked to my stage right, and I saw an ERS behind the front curtain, hanging on a support beam. I remembered the platforms in Weird Romance and realized Jeremy must have taken that missing set of lights from the back batten. Sure enough, I looked behind the curtain on the other side of the stage, and found the other light. I tried to get them down, but I could not reach it. Jeremy and Mr. White, my technical director, are both one or two heads taller than me, and they have a habit of hanging lights on fake battens (AKA ceiling support beams and pipes) where I cannot reach. I had to get Mr. White to take the lights down, and then I had my full wash with no dark spots, finally.

Mr. White's height came in handy many more times in hang and focus. I didn't have batten space for a light on Whoville (the half circle platform built on our stage left during Seussical), so Mr. White made another 'fake batten' and hung it there for me. Our stage electrics hang very low, and generally the front half of the audience can see them, so when I tried to put scoops on the back one, it was extremely ugly. Mr. White taught me a trick, though, to disguise that by hanging the scoops upside down and pointing them down so instead of hanging from the batten, they sort of 'stand' on the batten. This was another thing I could not reach on Rickety, so Mr. White hung both of those and reminded me that one day, I would be lucky enough to work in a theatre with full catwalks.

On the back electric, I had six backlights, the two scoops, the two Baby Color LED lights, and a red special for the 'parent scene'. In the parent scene, we thought we were going to use a

scrim to make the parents and Ms. Strict shadows (adding to the nightmarish effect). I remembered a trick I learned from my Elephant Man concept work about shadows, though. I angled the light on the door behind the parents instead of directly down on them, so the wall reflected the light and made them shadows. During tech week, my technical director pointed out that the effect looked the same with or without the scrim, so we got rid of it, after the builders spent a week on it, of course. I think that cursed the scrim, because I tried to use it in a one-act recently, and the light I attached to it got unplugged in the middle of the show.

Choosing gel colors is one of my favorite things about light design, and for this show, I wanted my main color to be Roscolux 4360 CalColor 60 Cyan. It reminds me of the 1950s. It's the color of a 1952 Cadillac and a nuclear family's kitchen and bathrooms and typewriter. It also has a bit of a green tint, which I felt went great with the zombie theme in the show. I originally wanted to pair it with an orangey amber color, but after sitting in the dark with a swatchbook and a flashlight, I realized that the orange would take too much of the color away from the blue. So, I figured it would be best to start with a color wheel. The complementary of cyan is red, but I didn't want to drown the cyan out all the way, so I went one or two left of red (towards cyan) and ended up on pink, and I loved the effect. It did make my tech director a bit nervous (he's an adamant proponent for amber and surprise pink), and when I gave him the list of the gel sheets I needed, he looked at R4360 and said "That's not a real gel." I had to get the swatchbook out to show him that it was in there. He, of course, got the gels, as he's got a tendency to support my crazy ideas sometimes to both of our demises. But the colors looked great and we were both happy with them. Not to mention, they decided to paint the set nearly the same cyan I chose for the gels, so they complimented each other beautifully, and I used leftover cyan to light the set's walls.

Once the set was built, we started working out the lighting kinks. I had to put more lights on the walls, and I ended up literally taping a can light to the back of the center stage door with electrical tape for the suicide scene. At one point during show week, an actor ran into that light's extension cord (the tape came undone from it somehow), and unplugged the light, so unfortunately, Johnny's jump into the nuclear vat was in the dark one night. Another night, the LEDs came unplugged before a show, but we found out before it started and plugged them back in. One problem we faced in tech week (and subsequently the rest of the show) was getting the actor that played Jonny, the zombie, to look green enough. On top of not having enough green makeup, the actor sweated a lot of it off throughout the show, so I had my spot ops change their spots to a green gel every time they were on him. This can especially be seen in "Blast from the Past" when both spots were on him nearly the entire song.

I wrote all of my cues in the two days before tech week, and then fixed them as we went along. Granted, I already had them all written out in my lighting plan, just not written in the lighting board program. 162 cues later, dress rehearsals began, and on the last dress rehearsal, there were no lighting notes.

My technical director Mr. White was extremely helpful to me the entirety of this experience. He helped fill in gaps from Jeremy's teachings, and he helped guide me the entire process. He

helped tweak some of my cues, especially the original disaster that was the ending song “Zombie Prom”. In it, the kids come back out as zombies, but they didn’t have time to get makeup save some smears of stage blood, so I thought it would be a good idea to make the wash very green and very dim during the song so that the audience couldn’t see that. However, I accidentally made the last cues so dim that the audience couldn’t see anything. Thankfully, we corrected them by the end of tech week.

Overall, I loved my entire experience designing lights for this show. I am proud to call lighting design my theatre niche, and I hope to continue it in college and my career. In the fall, I will attend American University in D.C., and I plan to double major in Film and Media Arts and Computer Science. With this, I hope to eventually design lights for film, theatres, or museums, and use that computer science background to help move the practice forward technologically.