



# SPOTLIGHT ON Women in Lighting

BY BETSY ADAMS

WITH AUTUM CASEY, VICTORIA FISHER,  
MONIQUE NORMAN, AND VICKIE SCOTT

2015 USITT session raises  
critical issues for women in a  
male-dominated profession

**A**ccording to the U.S. Department of Labor: “Nontraditional occupations are those in which women comprise 25 percent or less of total employed.” That means every single woman working in the field of entertainment lighting is working in a nontraditional occupation.

The 2015 USITT National Conference and Stage Expo, held in March, addressed the issue in a session titled “Women in the Profession of Lighting,” yet it quickly became clear to the panelists and participants that an hour and fifteen minutes was simply not enough time to tackle the issues raised. The session was co-chaired by Autum Casey, assistant professor at George

Mason University, and Victoria Fisher, sales representative for Barbizon Lighting, and featured panelists Betsy Adams, a New York-based lighting designer for theater and corporate events; Amy Edge, lighting director and assistant stage manager for Spirit Productions; Monique Norman, dimming and controls specialist at Ardd + Winter; and Vickie Scott, lighting designer for theater, dance, and themed entertainment and director of design in the Department of Theater and Dance at the University of California Santa Barbara.

Discussion topics ranged from why women have such low representation professionally to whether a female designer should change her name or dress in a particular way. Stories were shared by both panelists and participants that ran the

gamut from cases of obvious discrimination to uplifting moments of support. What was most clear to all involved was that this was a multi-layered discussion and that the session had only scratched the surface.

## ENTERTAINMENT LIGHTING CAREERS

How many lighting careers can you name? Beginning with careers that include “designer” in the title, some of the possible domains are TV, film, concerts, corporate and special events, museums, themed entertainment, architecture, landscape architecture, and CGI. Next, the technical side of the industry includes careers such as production electrician, programmer, or systems designer. Finally, consider the corporate world of deal-



ers, manufacturers, and consultants; both panelists Fisher and Norman, for example, use their training in lighting design every day. Other prominent women with lighting design backgrounds who work in the corporate world are Ellen White, ETC outreach and training specialist; Wendy Luedtke, Rosco's color and lighting product manager; and Jane Rein, regional sales manager at ARRI.

Opportunities in the corporate world of lighting may be the least known to early career lighting designers. The breadth of career options can be surprising. The following list provides an overview and introduction to fields within the industry well suited to the lighting designer's skill set:

- **Manufacturers** offer many avenues for employment, including research and development, product area specialists, training, and service. All of these areas may involve local, national, or international travel. Manufacturers typically have a lot of interaction with all of the other fields in this list.
- **Dealers** sell products that are not sold directly to the public by the manufacturer. They may have multiple departments including product and expendables, service, and systems integration, and they often employ project managers to oversee ongoing installations or renovations.

tions. Dealers offer a place where people in the industry can come locally for demos and product information.

- **Reps** (short for representatives) are individuals or firms who are usually contracted by one or more manufacturers to sell their product line. The reps may offer design and application assistance to a variety of people whose job it is to specify lighting equipment including theatrical, architectural, and landscape lighting designers; contractors; engineers; and others. They work closely with both manufacturers and dealers and can provide an interface between manufacturers and end-users.
- **Rental Houses** employ people in many of the same positions as dealers, with the addition of an equipment maintenance staff. Many rental houses are now providing turnkey packages for special events, which means they will often supply labor and design services in addition to equipment rental.
- **Theater Consultants** deal with the design and specifications of both new theaters and renovations to existing ones. They work with architects and general contractors who may have no knowledge of how a theater operates. Many of the finest theater consultants

began their careers as lighting designers.

All of these fields have some overlap with each other and are worth exploring as you build your career. The skills you develop as a lighting designer—creativity, organization, and collaboration, among others—can be stretched and honed to lead you in directions you may never have considered.

## HOW WE GOT HERE

Abe Feder, Jean Rosenthal and Peggy Clark were the first to be given program credit as Lighting Designers on Broadway. Their design credits began in the 1930s, decades before the United Scenic Artists recognized "Lighting Designer" as a distinct category. Jean Rosenthal is widely credited with revolutionizing the field and was arguably the best known of the three pioneers, perhaps because of her wonderful book, *The Magic of Light*.

Peggy Clark was a graduate of Smith College whom I had the privilege of meeting and getting to know while I was a student there. When I graduated in the late 70s, many women were represented on Broadway, including Tharon Musser, Pat Collins, Jennifer Tipton, and Beverly Emmons, among others.

I moved to New York with the certainty that I was entering a career that was not just open to women, but welcoming. That was true. What I did not expect was the discovery that the field of lighting design was not dominated by women, or even close to a 50-50 split. Frankly, it was shocking. However, it never occurred to me that bias had anything to do with the disparity. I didn't delve into it; I just dug in and went about building a career.

Peggy Clark stressed how important it was to persevere. She talked about how difficult the career of a designer was, but never spoke about gender as an issue (at least not to me). Neither did Tharon. I have known almost all of Tharon's assistants who came before and after me, and most of them were male with the notable exceptions of Marilyn Rennagel, Vivien Leone, and me. It never occurred to me to ask why. Now, I find that most of my assistants have been male as well. This is not a personal choice. When I am looking for a new assistant, and send feelers out to fellow designers, the majority of names I get are male. I have hired several female assistants in the past few years, and was more than happy to find them.

Traci Klainer Polimeni, owner of Luce Group, specializes in exhibit, architectural, themed entertainment, and theatrical lighting design. Luce Group is a certified WBE (Woman Business Enterprise). Polimeni recently mentioned that she had not found any women to work at Luce Group. Happily, she met a young woman at the Hemsley Portfolio Review who was interested and whom she has since hired. Ellen White, from ETC, recently said her firm had zero applications from women for recent job openings and internships in any technical areas.



## Zeal and Zen: Autum Casey

Assistant Professor, George Mason University

"In my second year of graduate school when January rolled around and the idea of summer stock sounded less than appealing, I began looking into other options. My mentor suggested I look into architectural lighting, which had simply never occurred to me. I researched firms and their work, and ultimately contacted a small firm at the top of my list. My apparent zeal was intriguing to them and although they didn't have an internship program (the company was only 10 strong), I met with the owner. I convinced him that my skill set in theater would be directly applicable and I reported back for my three-month internship a few months later.

"I truly enjoyed the internship and returned to the firm post-graduation. Architectural lighting had many benefits that my work in theater so far had not. My hours, for the most part, were 9-5. I spent most of my day drafting, which I find to be a Zen-like activity; I had the opportunity to write proposals in response to RFPs (requests for proposals); and I focused on sales and marketing when projects were slow. I was also able to travel all over the world to focus lights after construction was complete. Unlike theater, architectural work would last forever, not just in production photos and that appealed to me."



## The Corporate Events World: Betsy Adams

Lighting designer for theater and corporate events

"The bulk of my work remains in the theater, but I have also spent a good deal of time designing industrials (aka corporate theater) and special events. I knew nothing of this area of the industry when I was in college, and judging by the questions I fielded after the panel ended, it is not an area of discussion in many colleges and universities. It is a very specialized field and even more male-dominated than the theater, but it can be very rewarding in many ways. The community is small and tightly knit and the fees are substantial.

"I don't suggest that corporate theater be taught by non-practitioners, but I think it should be mentioned as a field of opportunity. The money that is occasionally available for guest speakers would be well-spent on a designer who is active in the field. An article I wrote for Protocol, the Journal of the Entertainment Technology Industry, resulting from a seminar I taught at InfoComm 2006 titled "Integrating Lighting Design and AV Services in Corporate Event Production" is available at <http://tinyurl.com/q3qh7zt>



A very informal poll during and after the USITT conference seems to indicate that the ratio of male to female undergraduates studying lighting design ranges from about 70:30 to 50:50; in grad school the ratio is often lower. After graduation, the numbers for women working in the profession paint an even grimmer picture. A study conducted by the League of Professional Theatre Women, *Women Hired Off-Broadway 2010-2014*, showed that women accounted for less than 20 percent of the lighting designers working in the theaters surveyed. Only composers and conductors had less representation. The percentage of women lighting designers in USA 829, the designers' union, has remained fairly steady for the last few decades, ranging between 19 percent and 22 percent.

### UNCONSCIOUS BIAS AND THE CONFIDENCE GAP

Research studies have found that men tend to overestimate their abilities and performance, and women tend to underestimate both, although their performances do not differ in

quality. This issue can manifest itself in all areas of the entertainment industry in a number of ways, including not applying for a job that would be a stretch of your perceived abilities; not speaking up in a meeting; not negotiating a higher fee; and others.

Organizations like leanin.org and campaigns such as banbossy.com are bringing focus to unconscious bias and societal trends that have contributed to gender inequality. The front page of banbossy.com reads, "When a little boy asserts himself, he's called a 'leader.' Yet when a little girl does the same, she risks being branded 'bossy.' Words like bossy send a message: don't raise your hand or speak up." It's difficult to work toward a leadership position if you're afraid that voicing your opinion or taking a stand might lead to being disliked, belittled or otherwise retaliated against.

The entertainment lighting field is incredibly competitive and advocating for oneself is imperative. A paradigm shift occurs when students leave a university and go out into the work force. Students in a university setting are normally as-

signed shows to design by their department, but the world of freelance design requires a designer to actively seek work. It is difficult to shift gears from the relatively passive world of academia to the active world of a freelancer. Many jobs are landed via word of mouth but if you don't get your name out there and keep in touch, you won't be on anybody's mind.

Sheryl Sandberg in *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead*, remarks that "Career progression often depends upon taking risks and advocating for oneself—traits that girls are discouraged from exhibiting." Awareness is the first step to combatting the status quo.

### WORK/LIFE BALANCE

During the USITT conference session, audience members were invited to text questions during the session. An enormous number of questions were asked about whether it is possible to have a career as a lighting designer and also have children. Several women shared their positive stories about working and raising children. There is, of course, no easy answer; nor is there a single answer for everyone, regardless of gender. You will need to tap into what gives you your strongest sense of purpose; but you must recognize that early in any competitive career, that career may have to be your priority for a while. There is virtually no calling in sick during tech unless you have a competent assistant. Once you are established in your career, you may decide to re-evaluate your priorities.

There's no question that the United States lags behind many countries in providing maternity and paternity leave and workplace childcare, and the situation for freelancers is significantly worse than that of the full-time employee. A search online for child care in the arts yields information on programs that offer childcare to theatergoers, but not one hit on child care for theater artists. Until workplace child care becomes the norm, a strong support system is vital. This could mean a partner, a nanny, grandparents, or friends who are willing to be a big part of your child's life.

For those who are planning to have children in the very near future, consider looking for a full-time job in the industry that includes benefits. Those jobs exist, but you have to be flexible and open to a path that is somewhat different than the one you may have imagined. If having children is a long-term goal, pursue your dream and keep all of your options, career and family-wise, open and flexible. Raising children while working in the theater will never be easy, but it is not impossible. Many studies are now showing that children benefit from having a working mother. Kathleen McGinn, the author of a new study from Harvard Business School says "what we're finding in adult outcomes is kids will be so much better off if women spend some time at work." The life you

### Creative Process: Vickie Scott

*Lighting designer for theater, dance, and themed entertainment, and director of design, Department of Theater and Dance, University of California Santa Barbara*

"Most of my days are filled with undergraduate students, the classroom, and educational theater—all things that I really enjoy. That said, I also balance a pretty active professional career working around the world as a lighting designer, primarily in theme parks/themed entertainment, theater, and my ultimate co-loves, lighting design for new works in theater and lighting design for dance. New works and dance both allow me to be involved with a project from the very beginning, the germination phase. I sincerely enjoy being a part of the creative, collaborative, and growth process of a project from day one.

"My students often ask me how designers get jobs. While other designers have scale models and renderings as an entrée to their work as it will appear on the stage, lighting design doesn't 'really' exist until you get into the performance venue with all of the elements present. In my experience, lighting designers get jobs based on hard work, preparation, respect for collaborators, networking, and word of mouth. This is true of women in lighting in general, and it is especially true of women lighting designers.

"Students, and not just women, also need to be educated and enlightened as to just how many different positions there are in lighting. In 2009 I compiled the *USITT Lighting Commission's Lighting Job Descriptions* document. See <http://tinyurl.com/p9qh9m>.



### Freedom of Expression: Victoria Fisher

*Sales representative, Barbizon Lighting*

"When I was a lighting design graduate student, it seemed like the ultimate goal was to become a Broadway designer or a college professor. I knew about the corporate world of lighting dealers and manufacturers, it just never occurred to me that I would have a job there. Today, I am a sales rep for Barbizon Lighting in the product and expendables department. We handle all of the things that you would install on your own, like fixtures and gel. My customer base includes regional theaters, film and television folks, and event companies, all of whom know the industry and the language, and it includes people without the industry vocabulary who are learning as they go. I also work with many product manufacturers on a daily basis.

"I travel to conferences and conventions. I visit my customers to see what equipment they are using and how they are using it, so that I can help them determine the best way to grow. Manufacturers call and ask whether we'd like a demo of their new products. Would I like to see the latest gear? Yes, Please!

"I think the biggest misconception about working in this part of the industry is the belief that all we do is sit at a desk and push papers. Yes, I spend a lot of time at my desk. However, I work in a much broader field of lighting than I could have imagined. I still freelance as a lighting designer, but now I have the freedom to take on only the projects that interest me and I can use tools I might never have known about to solve whatever puzzle I have in front of me. The number of resources available to me has grown exponentially because of the relationships that I have developed with manufacturers. Sure, my schedule gets a little tricky at times, but I also have these fantastic things called weekends that were once a rarity for me."



plan for in your early 20s will rarely turn out to be exactly the life you lead; ask anyone over 40.

## THE PROVING HOUR

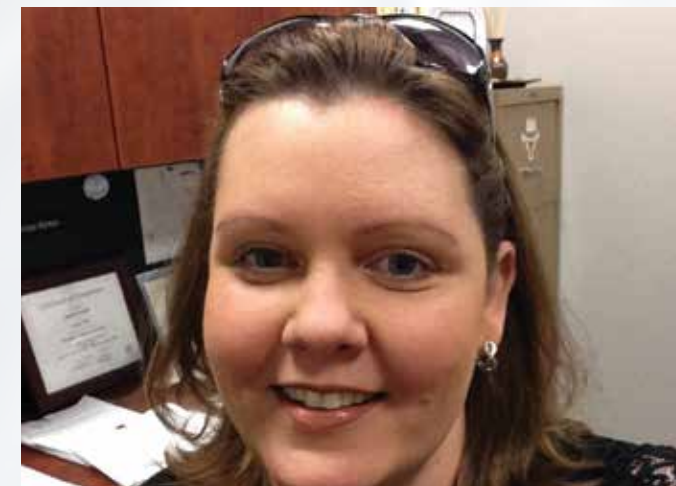
The phenomenon of the proving hour is an important issue that applies to all designers, regardless of age, gender or ethnicity. I first experienced and recognized the existence of the proving hour while still in college.

When I was a senior at Smith College, we brought our production of *Learned Ladies* to the American College Theater Festival. In those days, there were no design awards, and the festival was held at the Eisenhower Theater. It was my first time working with an IATSE crew. I was the lighting designer; the costume designer was Kiki Smith, the professor of costume design; and the scene designer was Bill Hatch, the professor of scene design. Everybody else involved from the college were students, and all of us were women. When we arrived at the theater the evening before load-in to talk to the local crew, their first response was “What is this, an all girls’ school?” Well, yes,

as a matter of fact, although none of us would have phrased it that way.

I was understandably nervous when I arrived the next morning for the focus call, but I knew my design well and was confident that it would work well in the space. It was clear I was being tested as we began. None of the electricians were blatantly mean or even disrespectful. They were somewhat gruff and primarily very skeptical. I did my work; they did theirs. I answered their questions politely, and said please and thank you a lot. After I had focused a position or two, everybody relaxed.

Before long, the electricians began to tell me stories as we worked. It turns out that the lighting designer who preceded me (a female professor) had complained to them that the box booms weren’t bright enough. Her choice for color? Neutral density. The electricians thought that was hysterical. I imagine the rest of her day did not go too well. They also shared other colorful anecdotes about professional shows they had worked on. All in all, it turned out to be a wonderful experience in



## Life Changes: Monique Norman

*Dimming and controls specialist, Ardd + Winter*

“Between undergraduate and graduate school, I was diagnosed with Type 1 Diabetes. It was late on-set, but I had one of the highest blood sugar readings ever seen in a Texas hospital. I’m now a very brittle Type 1 Diabetic (brittle diabetes is characterized by particularly volatile blood sugar levels). Becoming diabetic was life changing. When something like this happens, all of a sudden you have to start thinking about career options. Insurance becomes a necessity; job security is a requirement; and many times a change in hours is also needed.

“My doctors pushed me to have less stress on my body and sleep a more regular schedule. A freelance theater life is not typically conducive to a regular schedule of any kind. So, while in graduate school, I kept doing freelance lighting design but began exploring new opportunities. I ended up writing my thesis on “Lighting Themed Entertainment: Designing outside of Traditional Theatre and Dance.” I freelanced for an AVL design firm (Clark), which primarily designed audio, video, and lighting for churches. By the time I graduated, I was hired as its lighting designer, designing theatrical lighting for churches across the country, and moved to Atlanta.

“After working for Clark, I was hired by Ardd + Winter as a dimming and controls specialist. I now have the opportunity to work with architects and engineers, helping them specify lighting and control systems. Every day is a new challenge with new projects. We have the opportunity to assist on schools, auditoriums, zoos, aquariums, hotels, stadiums, performing arts centers, and so much more. I am working on projects similar to what I wrote about in my thesis every day. It is truly exciting! Becoming diabetic helped lead me down a path I never would have expected, but I am thankful for the adventure and glad to still be working in the lighting industry.

many ways, but the lessons I learned during focus that morning have stood me in good stead for many years. I have learned many more lessons along the way:

Expect to be tested, but don’t anticipate prejudice. Most of the time, the reason you feel you are being asked to prove yourself is not because you are female or young or Hispanic or anybody who might be considered “other.” You are being asked to prove yourself because you are new. A house crew knows the venue better than you do. When it is appropriate—meaning you don’t have a strong feeling one way or another about a question that is being asked—answering a question with “What would work better for you?” will go a long way to shorten the proving hour. Remember that while you may have to adapt to

the particular working methods of a new crew, they also have to adapt to yours.

- **Keep your shoulders back**, be confident, and project your voice. Don’t be afraid to ask a question. Don’t try to bluff your way through something that you really don’t have an answer for. It will show. On the other hand, if you are asked to make a change (such as “Do we really have to overhang every unit on this position?”) that you are absolutely sure will not work for you, stand your ground. If you are unsure, be honest. In any event, be reasonable. Never begin the day expecting that the crew is your adversary. Show respect. Expect respect.

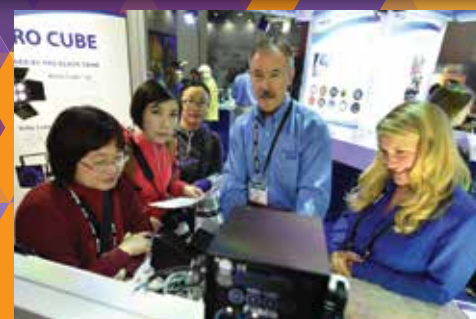
# 2016 STAGE EXPO

THE BEST QUALITY FOR THE BEST PRICE

280+ EXHIBITORS

MARCH 17-19, 2016  
SALT LAKE CITY, UTAH  
USITTSHOW.COM

usitt



BOOK YOUR SPACE TODAY. CALL RON PROCOPIO // (800) 938-7488 ext 107



- **Be prepared**, or better yet, over-prepared. You work in a profession where you are expected to think on your feet and make snap decisions. One of the best examples happens with some regularity on corporate events: In preparation for hanging the trusses, the rigger and electrician discover that the hanging points are not where the venue told them they were. You are asked to choose between two new sets of points (if you're lucky). The more familiar you are with your plot and the event you will be lighting, the easier it will be make a decision. It's always going to be a compromise, but it's best for everyone, including those paying the bills, if you're able to make a quick and informed decision. And, you'd better have plenty of spare lenses in your shop order.
- **There is no such thing as too much communication.** If you send your plot to the electrician and hear nothing back in a day or two, get on the

phone. Many years ago, I designed 12 breakout rooms (rooms where smaller meetings take place apart from the main event) for a pharmaceutical meeting on the west coast. I had been very busy in the weeks leading up to the event and made the serious mistake of assuming that since I had heard nothing from the electrician, everything must be fine. I arrived at my hotel and called the (local) production electrician in charge of my rooms. His first response when I told him I was onsite was "uh-oh." When I asked what the problem was, he told me he had not expected me to come, and that because they didn't usually use top hats, he hadn't brought any. That turned out to be a comparatively minor issue. The major problem was that there was no cable on any of the trucks. When he read the shop order he didn't understand what "jumpers" were. Evidently, in his world, what we call jumpers on the east coast, he knew as "stingers." Instead of calling or emailing to

clarify, he chose to ignore that part of the order. Most of the rooms used booms and goal posts, requiring miles of cable and jumpers. A middle of the night run to the shop was required and hours of time wasted because he hadn't taken the time to ask a simple question, and I hadn't taken the time to check whether he had any.

- **Respect the labeling system of any space with a house crew.** No matter how much it may go against the grain or seem illogical to you, if you receive a groundplan from a space that has all the positions labeled, use their system.
- **Remember that theater is a collaborative art form.** Your collaborators include everyone on the production from the performers to the producers, directors, choreographers, designers, assistants, stage managers, department heads, and the crew.
- **Cultivate other interests outside the theater.** This was a great piece of advice I got from Gilbert Hemsley when I was a young designer. He said it didn't matter what it was—cooking, sports, music—but that you need the ability to carry on an intelligent conversation at dinner about something other than the long day you just spent at the production table. When I interview assistants, one of the most important criteria I look for is whether I would enjoy having dinner with that person every night for weeks on end.
- **Last and most important, remember to say "Thank you."** To everyone. Twyla Tharp gives Milos Forman credit for teaching her the power of "thank you." "At every opportunity, dozens of times a day—you just can't say 'thank you' too often," Tharp said. Thank your crew at every break and at the end of the day. Thank the director. Thank your assistant. Thank the security guard who lets you in the stage door in the morning and out at day's end.

Ideas abound, including creating internships and organizing a core group of women who are willing to speak with students at either conferences or as visiting speakers at universities, creating a website that includes links to articles of interest, and creating a forum for networking.

Former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright said, "There is a special place in hell for women who don't help other women." You men are encouraged to help as well. ♦

## Further Reading

While researching this article, we looked at a number of interesting books and articles, both old and new. Consider taking a look at them:

"On Their Shoulders: Women in Lighting Design" by Linda Essig, TD&T, 2005

"Not There Yet: What will it take to achieve equality for women in the theatre?" by Marsha Norman, TCG, 2009, [www.tcg.org/publications/at/nov09/women.cfm](http://www.tcg.org/publications/at/nov09/women.cfm)

*Lean In* by Sheryl Sandberg, Knopf, 2013

"The Confidence Gap" by Katty Kay and Claire Shipman, *The Atlantic*, May 2014

"Women Hired Off-Broadway 2010-2014" by Martha Wade Steketee and Judith Binus, August 2014, <http://theatrewomen.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/lptw-women-hired-off-broadway-august-2014-2014-8-6.pdf>

*The Collaborative Habit* by Twyla Tharp, Simon & Schuster, 2009.

*Where Are All The Women In Our Biz?* By Meghan Perkins, <http://livedesignonline.com/theatre/where-are-all-women-our-biz>, Jun 15, 2015

*Adventures as Woman/Scene Designer* by Linda Buchanan, <http://howlround.com/adventures-as-a-womanscene-designer>

## WHAT'S NEXT

All of the panelists and many of our colleagues got quite fired up about all these issues after the session ended. The big question is, what can we do about it? There's no quick fix, but if we do nothing, nothing will change. I have been speaking with Paule Constable and Sarah Rushton-Read about their work with WISE (Women in Stage Entertainment) in the United Kingdom. Perhaps this will lead to the formation of a U.S. branch of WISE or a separate organization that draws from some of their great work. There are also discussions happening about starting a "women in lighting" group hosted on the USITT Lighting Commission site later this year.

# 2015

# LINK

Your Connection to Advanced Theatre Degrees

## SAVE THE DATE

November 13 - 15 // Atlanta, GA

Auditions & Interviews









## Find Your Perfect Match For Grad School!

LOW-COST REGISTRATION // GREAT HOTEL RATES

ONE CONVENIENT LOCATION

[www.usitt.org/link15](http://www.usitt.org/link15)