

July 2015

A Lighting Design Concept for the Lighting for William Shakespeare's: The Merchant of Venice

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<https://doi.org/10.7275/6956169> https://scholarworks.umass.edu/masters_theses_2/181

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A Lighting Design Concept for the Lighting for
William Shakespeare's: The Merchant of Venice

A Thesis Presented
By
Michael Blagys

Submitted to the Graduate School of the University of Massachusetts, Amherst
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

May 2015

Theater

A Lighting Design Concept for the Lighting for
William Shakespeare's: The Merchant of Venice

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By
Michael Blagys

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my parents and to my extended family for their constant love and support, and especially dedicated to my long time mentor and friend Karel Blakeley, for providing me with the guidance and the tools to pursue my dreams.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I have had the privilege and honor to work with and study under four highly regarded designers while at University of Massachusetts. First, of course, are Penny Remsen and Margo Caddell whom I am forever grateful for their patience and commitment to my growth as a lighting designer and a theater artist.

The other two are my long time mentor Dawn Chiang, who has taken me under her wing showing me the best path to succeed, and Jane Cox, who provided me with a truly amazing experience.

I also would like to thank Michael Dubin and my fellow MFA candidate James Horban. You both have made these past few years memorable, to say the least. Also, a big thank you to all the undergrads who spent their time with the electrics department; your hard work and dedication made working on every project truly enjoyable.

ABSTRACT

A LIGHTING DESIGN CONCEPT FOR THE LIGHTING FOR
WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S: THE MERCHANT OF VENICE

MAY 2015

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Directed by: Professor Penny L. Remsen

I designed the lighting for William Shakespeare's complex piece, The Merchant of Venice, which was produced by the UMass Amherst Theater Department. In this thesis paper, I will discuss the creative process from start to finish, including relevant lighting paperwork and production photographs.

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CHAPTER 1

PRE-PRODUCTION

The Play

The Merchant of Venice by William Shakespeare is about putting relationships before material, physical, and religious possessions and practices. Shakespeare writes one of his most complex comedies around the relationships between mortal enemies, lovers, and estranged family members. He shows us that our relationships should be more important than our worldly possessions and beliefs.

Shakespeare uses the religious and social differences of his characters as a catalyst for the central conflict between Antonio and Shylock. The harsh mistreatment of Shylock and other unpleasant stereotypes including the princes who visit Portia this text causing many theaters to shy away from producing it.

Our society still believes that the world has forgotten or forgiven our differences as humans. This play reminds us that we still haven't evolved enough to ignore those differences. It also reminds us that we should ignore our differences unless we want to be stripped of our identity.

“The quality of mercy is not strained.

It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven

Upon the place beneath. It is twice blessed:

It blesseth him that gives and him that takes”¹

Portia's line is one that particularly sticks with me, as I believe it adequately describes the heart of this complex play. I feel that mercy and acceptance are a critical part of this story; acceptance of religious differences, gender differences, and even racial differences.

1 Shakespeare, William. Merchant of Venice. Act 1 Scene 4

This play speaks beyond generations because at the heart it touches on a notion that mercy should be doled out with grace and compassion.

Many choose to shy away from this particular Shakespeare because of its outdated crude language, and I don't mean Shakespeare's prose. Shylock is constantly called "Jew" making the central character an outcast much like Shakespeare's "Moor" Othello. This play has religious turmoil, but more basically it has hatred towards human differences. Despite all this negativity, Shakespeare also includes two internal love stories that provide laughter and relief from the anger and verbal violence. Bassanio's quest to win the heart of the heroine Portia provides the main relief. It's Portia's story as much as it is any other character. Her defiance of social norm for love is the primary example of putting relationships ahead of possessions and beliefs. Her story is the relief and she provides the voice of reason to the male dominated world she lives in.

While this play examines stereotypes and religious hatred, it has its funny moments. It is considered one of Shakespeare's comedies, because of the archetypes that can be portrayed as over the top. Finding the comedy was essential for this particular production as another form of relief from the verbal wars happening elsewhere in the text. However, even the comedy can be offensive because of its treatment of certain stereotypes. There is a fine line that this show walks. One step on either side and suddenly you've struck a cord that offends people, and takes them out of the heart of the story, making this play challenging to produce. It was this aspect that this production team initially choose to ignore in favor of letting the text of the play speak for itself.

Research

In order to better understand the sensitivity of the play, the production team all had to research the play extensively. Part of my initial research was to immerse myself in everything The Merchant of Venice. This included watching the Al Pacino movie version, a dark and harsh telling of the story that focuses on the hatred and separation of Jews and Christians. I found the hatred in this play to be a crucial element; not only the hatred, but also the power of the hatred towards different religions. . Shylock is a 'alien' to almost every other character in the play. He is mistreated and outcasted from the society he lives in. These elements of the play make it both challenging and relatable to audiences today; because our society still believes that be different is not normal.

After reading the play several times, I turned to my normal research routine. With any show I take on, I enjoy finding artwork from the period or a painter who evokes the colors and mood I want to replicate with my design. With this show I found a painter by the name of Paolo Bigazzi. Bigazzi is a modern painter who primarily paints the landscapes of Venice and the surrounding areas. His expositions of Venice have the perfect contrast of color that I was hoping to evoke for the show. His Venice cityscapes use deep drastic colors and plenty of shadows, while his countryside landscapes have vibrant colors that evoke beauty and life. These images provided me with a basis which coincided with something director Tony Simotes said about the show: he wanted the two primary locations that the play takes place in to have two distinct feelings. Venice has a factory town feel, and Belmont, where Portia resides, has a vacation getaway feel. My research images evoked both of these notions. With these images in mind, we had a great place to start conversations. After some thought into the Venice versus Belmont notion, I realized that I had another example of a factory town and a vacation town. I found this imagery easily relatable because my home in Bridgeport, CT is a place that is very similar to

that. I live in a community that has a vacation feel, however just down the street, a mere minutes away, are the somewhat grim, abandoned hulks of former factories, that once dominated the city's landscape.

With this imagery I moved forward establishing what would become my color palette and it was then that I found myself personally connected to the show. The more I immersed myself in the show the more threads I had to grab at. Unfortunately, I had limited threads; and I needed more. I settled however, with the few I knew I could design with. I didn't push the boundaries of what I could explore, and therefore, I didn't truly face the ramifications of ignoring that fine line. It wasn't until the audience's reaction to our production that I heard the first rumblings of dismay towards what they had witnessed. Many audience members could not get past the stereotypes and the hatred, thusly missing the true message of the play: basic human connection and acceptance should not be taken for granted.

The Design Process

As our production meetings got under way, ambiguity took a seat at the production table. Director Tony Simotes wasn't sure how he wanted to approach such a daunting show. We all talked rather quickly about the show and some of the issues with doing it. Everyone including myself expected Mr. Simotes to arrive with some grand plan, some brilliant way we were going to tackle this show. Instead we got 'let's just do the play.' We were all dumbfounded. I had no response to that, nothing that I could contribute. I had plenty of thoughts I wanted the team to explore, but nothing personally as a lighting designer that I wanted to offer. I didn't realize that I should have initiated further exploration and conversation with the team. I needed to realize I'm a member of this team not just a designer. I'm an artist – I had opinions but I didn't voice them out of trepidation. It wasn't until much later that I realized Mr. Simotes may have been trying to elicit collaboration by hoping we would grab the leadership reins and lead this production to the result we wanted.

Decisions started to be made outside of the production meetings, side conversations that inherently limited collaboration as a group. During production meetings Mr. Simotes expressed his uncertainty with this show and he looked to his team to help him grasp it. We however, were looking to him to provide a direction or vision. As meetings progressed, Mr. Simotes expressed a desire to have the scenic design be something simple yet project a powerful and expressive feeling. He wanted the costume design to be period accurate, and he wanted the lighting design to shape the space and define location and time of day. Mr. Simotes wanted to 'just do the play'. Simply put, he wanted the play to unfold as written; he wanted to let Shakespeare's words do the work of telling the story rather than sugar coating the story to fit some abstract concept.

My interactions with other members and Mr. Simotes were very limited during this time. In an environment where collaboration and discussions should be overflowing, they were not. For my part I

didn't seek answers or stir conversations. My passive, fearful self dominated early meetings. I grasped onto little things Mr. Simtoes said he was interested in. I didn't realize that he was offering these notions as a catalysis to spark more inspired ideas. Mr. Simotes' "apparent" lack of vision was something I had very little experience dealing with. I didn't realize that I should have stepped up and taken a more active role in engaging every member of the team individually and as group. A mistake I vow to not make again.

In the beginning, I was so worried about how the audience would follow this story. I felt it was my job to help them follow along by setting a natural environment. From the start I had notions of using shafts of light through windows as a way of defining the playing space. It was these thoughts that I should have abandoned from the beginning. I was so desperate to help tell the story through time and place that I got caught over designing it. I didn't realize that Shakespeare doesn't need a time or a place; his stories transcend time because they exist without that help. Therefore, from the very beginning, I got caught up in only one frame of thought. I didn't question why I was superimposing a natural environment onto what would become a explosively engaging piece of theater.

The set unfolded as a golden modeled bridge and three large sky-evoking panels. These panels dominated the stage picture. Their abstract shape framed a backdrop and created either a looming shadow or a ridged cloudy background. The biggest challenge that I had as designer were these panels of seemingly strange geometric shapes. The two big questions were how did they fit into the show and what where they? Unfortunately, I never truly understood why the set designer choose to design the panels the way he did. Therefore, I began imagining using the panels to be reflective surfaces that concrete images could be projected upon. These images being things like sun through clouds, water reflections, stars, and clouds. I also wanted to use reflected water images upon the golden bridge. At the time I was using all these very concrete images to help indicate place and time. I failed to realize that this set was far from realistic and therefore should have been amplified thusly from the beginning with

light. My frustration began to boil because I wasn't getting a clear picture for myself of how to treat this show and the other design elements. The give and take of collaboration was lacking within the team, and regrettably, I didn't attempt to facilitate it. Whether it was lack time or lack of vision internally, we weren't going to communicate; we were going to do our own thing and hope that it would all come together. It was no one person's fault, but I could have and should have done more to be a more active member of that team.

My fear, frustrations and confusion continued, I began designing a plot that would execute the basics of my design thoughts and add an excess of instruments to cover the bases of inevitable change. As I moved forward, I thought of using a 'glistening' effect on the panels something that might help the audience understand the human connections in the show. The human connections which are somewhat rare and provide a contrast to the negativity in the text. To do this I would have used light to shine a golden glimmering effect upon the panels. I would use this effect when I wanted to heighten the human connections that should be such a strong part of this show, and yet get lost because of all the greed and anger. Ultimately, I abandoned this idea in favor of making the show as simple as I could and as natural as I could. My frustration and confusion would not change until tech, where the show would take a radical turn and finally come together.

CHAPTER 2
PRODUCTION
Challenges

At some point it seemed that the sound and set designs were going to portray a stylistic show, while lighting and costumes were going to stick to the period realism. This divide would only be cured by the one design that had the ability to truly adapt itself to the production needs, and that was mine. As the lighting designer I think I would have liked to have seen my natural environment approach come to fruition. I'm not entirely sure what effect that approach would have had on the show other than perhaps helping to further focus visibility and set location. Initially I wanted to use light through 'windows' in order to establish interior verses exterior scenes. This realistic approach idea came from early conversations with Mr. Simotes, he too wanted to engage the audience by using light to help set the scene. He wanted to help the audience have a frame of reference in order to better follow the story. I believe that Mr. Simotes was looking for one of the designs to help him tell this complex story so the pressure could be removed from his young actors. He found that design element in the sound, where not only could he get the students involved in the process, but he could connect the their youthfulness to the show.

Throughout the process I found myself clutching at air because I was so unsure of how and when this show would come together. I struggled greatly with what Mr. Simotes wanted and more importantly what I wanted. I should have gone deeper, researched more, found more ways to connect to this show for myself. Perhaps then, I would have been able to present an engaging way of presenting this show to the team that would also engage our audiences and young actors and actresses. To that end, my collaboration with sound designer Amy Altadonna was very limited. If we all could have been on the same page from the beginning there's no telling how this show would have turned out.

As we moved into tech, my frustration with myself and my uncertainty with the process had begun to consume me. I had designed a plot with more lights than I probably needed, but my need to cover my bases was apparent as things in the rehearsal room kept changing. Ms. Altadonna's sound design provided Mr. Simotes and team with a new direction for the show.. They attempted to work together to make a soundscape that was rooted in the student's talents as musicians. The student's talents, however, were primarily rock and roll based. From this collaboration emerged a new way thinking about the show. We wanted to inject rock and roll music into the world of Shakespeare. With this shift in direction, it meant that my natural time of day, location, and humanity point of view would go out the window. It was this shift in thought that would change the very fabric of the show. It turned away from the 'do the play' concept to a 'do the play with flair and energy' concept.

A new set of challenges came about when I went to focus the lights I had in the air, especially the ones I had intended to be side light of different images on the panels, (ie; rays of sun, water reflection, etc). Unfortunately, the panel's construction did not lend themselves to look appealing with side light and I was forced to take my advisor Penny Remsen's advice and light them from the front. As appealing as they did turn out, it wasn't my envisioned goal. This, however, is only one example of instruments I would have to re-purpose or strike because of the switch from natural time of day to a high energy unconventional show. The first day of tech, mere hours before we began, after having a truly enlightening conversation with my advisor Ms. Remsen, I went into the theater and turned on a system of lights I had intended to be water reflections. I thought to myself, *why am I trying to evoke realism still? I just need to make a beautiful picture*. So last minute I grabbed new color, new texture, and some help and completely changed that system. It would become the glistening effect on the main platform that I had abandoned long ago in favor of infusing a natural time of day concept into this show. In this moment I realized that I had come full circle, but in a completely different and quite indirect way.

I realized I should just focus on making interesting pictures with light while highlighting the set and the scene.

Once into tech my seemingly impossible problems became surmountable challenges. During the three days of tech with Ms. Altadonna and Mr. Simotes, collaboration and creativity would become abundant. For the first time I was able to see and truly get on the same page of Mr. Simotes' vision. Of course that meant taking a plot that was meant to be naturalistic and using it in as many different and explosively interesting ways to support what was happening thematically; especially with the sound. Once the cues were written my last and most time consuming challenge was to focus the light around the action of the scenes. I pared down what was unnecessary to create complete and beautiful looks that highlighted the actors and not the massive set above them. I also needed to support what sound was bringing to the table, which meant using light to produce a hyper-stylized world and to create an explosive rock and roll punch from the very beginning to the very end. Looking back at the process I should have recognized subtle hints from Ms. Altadonna and Mr. Simotes that this show would become the high energy, hyper-stylized show that it was.

Successes

After many hours of painting a more elegant picture with light, this show turned into something that I never imagined it would be, it ended up becoming a truly successful design. It was a great practice in designing a plot that could be flexible enough to change on a dime when forced too. Once it was settled, I was able to enhance the uptempo rock and roll nature of the show with strong shifts in light, while at the same time being able to create individual scene looks that were inherently beautiful. I was able to give Mr. Simotes everything he was looking for; Ms. Altadonna and I created eye-popping and catchy transitions, and more importantly, explosive beginnings and ends to the two acts.

I was able to stick with my first instinct and create two fundamentally different places: Venice and Belmont. I managed to infuse a glistening look into pre show, post show, and transition looks. Lastly, I was also able to use light to hone into certain moments within the show, which I had originally intended to highlight human connections. I did not, however, end up doing those moments; instead, I choose moments that Mr. Simotes and I felt helped the audience understand the important plot points of the show. For example, we inserted a shift in light when Shylock tells the audience about how much he hates Antonino, the merchant of Venice.

Shaping the space and the architecture of the scenery became a challenge at some points, however, one I feel I was able to overcome in beautiful and interesting ways. By simplifying my thought process to creating unique looks that fit the show, I was able to achieve a very successful design. I stuck with my initial thoughts from the research stage and transferred those thoughts to create two different worlds. The first was the harsh stark lighting cascading from a certain direction indicating not only time of day, but also the coarse Venice street scene and comparatively the soft welcoming Belmont. To get the coarse Venice I used a harsh diagonal back light filling the space with heat and

aggression. I then contrasted that by using a front diagonal system in the Belmont scenes that brought a different kind of beauty, one that was warm and inviting. When it came to use my natural systems to help support the soundscape I used every system available cuing quick and rapid movement with them to support the uptempo rock roll nature of the sound.

Conclusion

This show, despite all its associated challenges became something I was very proud of. My lighting became something that was provocative and engaging. Mr. Simotes, as a director, is a true actor's director; he let me and my colleagues find what was best for the show on our own. Ultimately we had to struggle to understand what he liked, but once we had, seemingly last minute, we came together to present an entertaining show. I learned a lot about being a better collaborator and better team member through the process. I learned that its important to be a leader inside and outside of the production meetings, especially if no one else is willing to take on that responsibility. I learned how to draft a plot that would ultimately be flexible and versatile enough to adapt to the changes in mood and direction. A plot that had way more lights than I needed, but ultimately I would use all the lights in engaging ways to help support the new world Ms. Altadonna and Mr. Simotes came to create. I used what I had done conceptually in so many different ways that I never had envisioned. I would use different intelligent lights like color scrollers and LED PARS to bring exciting and new colors to pop the music driven transitions and scenes. I wish, in retrospect that I didn't have to depend upon fancy technology to adequately support the rock and roll up tempo pace of this show. I believe transfusing this concept ultimately helped the students and the audience be more engaged.

I would change many things about my design; but every show that I do, I feel same way. For me, however, it was my attitude and approach to this show in particular that I would change if I could. The process, as frustrating as it was, was ultimately a successful one and I should not have gotten so defeated by. This is a lesson that cannot, in my mind, be taught. The lesson is one of staying positive and doing your absolute best no matter how difficult or frustrating the circumstances may become. I forgot how to have fun and how much I enjoyed painting the picture with light to support the show.

I was reminded of something that's more valuable than any technical skill I can be taught: Making theater is meant to be fun, challenging and most importantly, a rewarding experience for all who are involved.