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Find Your Light

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SAN DIEGO

Find Your Light

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

in

Theatre and Dance (Design)

by

Mextly Couzin

Committee in charge:

Professor Robert Brill, Chair  
Professor Judith Dolan  
Professor Lisa Porter

2020

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Chair

University of California San Diego

2020

## DEDICATION

*Dedicated to the little girl from México, who had to learn how to embrace all the beautiful things that made her unique. To the young girl who wanted to make her parents proud by getting a degree in Pure Mathematics. To the young woman that had the courage to be the first in her family to pursue a graduate degree. For taking the risk on embarking on a career in the arts even when she felt that there was no place and no way for her.*

*Si se puede, pero no lo hice sola. Gracias a mi familia por todo el apoyo.  
Y el amor.*

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Thank you, thank you, thank you.



ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Find Your Light

by

Mextly Couzin

Master of Fine Arts in Theatre and Dance (Design)

University of California San Diego, 2020

Professor Robert Brill, Chair

I started with three questions and a list of lighting designers.

1. From the time you were 25 years old to where you are now, what have been the major high and low points in your life?
2. What were your goals when you were 25 and what was important at that time?  
How have your goals developed and changed through the process?
3. What would you say to your 25-year-old self? About anything, either advice, encouragement, criticism, etc.

And as a bonus question, *is there a secret formula for being a happy and successful lighting designer?*

More than a research paper, I wanted to have conversations with lighting designers at varying career stages. The responses helped me understand and appreciate the process, collaboration and endurance of working as a theatre artist and freelance lighting designer. Most importantly, I reflect on what “success” means to me, and the differences between current and future goals.

Amazingly enough, right when I am getting ready to graduate and all the showcases, portfolio reviews, and graduations have been cancelled due to COVID-19, I found comfort and hope in the community and mentorship of the designers I interviewed. This paper is a curation of some of the most impactful quotes from the interviews; framed by a reflection on my process and goals through the start of my career.

## FIND YOUR LIGHT

### Process

*“Design is part of a whole, and in service to the production not a standalone art form... [have a] willingness to throw out those perfect ideas which aren't helping the direction the production is going”*

James F. Ingalls

Design is creative problem solving. As a designer, I always want to figure out how to make the most “correct” choices. I think about beauty, simplicity, boldness, and intentionality. Every time I get caught up in trying to make an idea work, I have to remind myself to let go of just about everything I’m holding on to. Sometimes my bright idea isn’t the brightest, and sometimes the whole concept of the show has to change the day before opening. That to me is the best and scariest part of working as a lighting designer. I love that lighting can drastically change the whole world of the production depending on angle, intensity, color, shape, time, and texture. Important as it is for me to be in control of my lighting plot, it’s equally important to not have an ego about all the work that has gone into it. As Anne Bogart wrote, “hold on tightly, let go lightly.” Words of wisdom that have helped me move through processes and collaboration in and out of the tech room. I believe that we as designers are in service of the production, and it doesn’t do any good to hold on to an idea or concept that isn’t helping.

Taking risks and trusting that I have good artistic impulses has been one of the most difficult aspects of my work to embrace. It is easy for me to feel like I don’t know what I’m doing, and that I am a phony in some way. Or somehow, I feel less than and I start to doubt my abilities. I find that when I start to feel insecure, it is important to me to find encouragement, but

more than that, I lean into over-working and over-checking my work. I thought graduate school was going to help me feel more comfortable as a designer, but what I learned was how to cultivate different study habits to approach different productions and situations.

*“Study, study, study, be the one that studies the hardest, don’t dismiss any ideas, explore and embrace who you are... being prepared, being a nerd, being ahead of everyone else. That to me makes the difference and helps in defeating walls”*

Maria Cristina Fusté

### **Everybody Black**

In the winter quarter of my second year of grad school I was assigned to design the Quinn Martin production of the year. That year the department chose *Everybody Black* by Dave Harris and brought in Steve Broadnax III to direct. I was so scared to fail that I was a nervous wreck for most of the process. Failure for me at the time meant being a disappointment; worst case scenario was that I wasn’t ready to take on a show of that capacity and that I wouldn’t be able to deliver a design that would rise to the expectations of Dave and Steve.

I prepped for weeks, I spent hours and all-nighters in my studio working on understanding the script and creating a lighting plot. I double and triple checked all my photometrics on the 300+ lights, and 3-D drafted to make myself feel more comfortable in the systems I was trying to create. Through that process I was able to learn to trust myself and believe in my ideas. I learned that no one mentor, or lack of, was going to help me feel more secure. I learned that preparation helps more than stressing out about making beautiful art,

because there is no amount of preparation that can help or predict what we, as a creative team, are going to come up with.

Every time I feel scared, I remember:

*“There is no failure.”*

Mary Louise Geiger

### **Collaboration**

*“Theatre making is a collaborative field that hinges on the generosity of the collaboration. Be mindful but not fearful of your own vision and careful not to confuse confidence with arrogance.*

*Be fearless about starting over. Your greatest strength may be your flexible agility. Your instincts may be good but temper your own reactivity with what you know to be true.”*

Tom Ontiveros

### **Balm In Gilead**

I never go into a production having preconceived notions of what a scene has to look like. I love the discovery of the world while in a dark room where all the elements can come together. I am a collaborator. I thrive from engaging in conversation and collaboration. *Balm In Gilead* by Lanford Wilson directed by Kim Rubinstein taught me about giving and being generous. I felt trusted by the director, designers, actors, and production staff. All the work I had done led me to believe that I would be able to deliver a product that would make me proud.

I realized that working in an environment where I didn't have to second guess myself was amazing. I felt that I could spend less time on criticizing my work, and more time being in the room and soaking up how the world wanted to feel. Working on that show felt like being in

a company of artists with a common goal: to tell the best story we could about people’s lives, the journey and connections, but also just the grim reality of daily life. I wanted to make beautiful images that related to each other and to help lead the audience through a journey of the play. Through that process I discovered that I love storytelling. I also began to trust that I never stop having notes, and I will always want to keep editing and refining.

### **Orestes 2.0**

*“You get what you want, not what you think you want.”*

Stephen Strawbridge

What I thought I wanted was another big show to design, what I received was so much more than a production. *Orestes 2.0* by Charles Mee was the thesis production of MFA Directing Candidate Joseph Hendel. This was the first time that I worked on a production with a director as hands on as Joe. I was grateful for the opportunity to explore working with a director that was so visually and rhythmically attuned and I was pleased to deliver a product that made me feel I was serving their vision. I love creating work that comes purely from an idea I thought up, but I equally enjoy developing a look with the director. I appreciate feedback and I like taking a director’s notes and translating them into something we can see, together. I didn’t mind receiving direct feedback from the director during my notes session in the empty theatre.

*“Embrace not having a regular schedule: working nights and weekends... embrace not needing to be in the same place every day.”*

James F. Ingalls

Given the nature of the content, the play itself was challenging for me; I felt that the production demanded much from the artists involved, both physically and emotionally. I had to

take extra care when it came to organizing my time and compartmentalizing tasks. However, all life aside, when I was in the theatre, nothing else mattered. Not the next show I was behind on, not my schoolwork, not my personal life.

*“So much about this particular career path is about endurance. If you are feeling happy and secure in the work, carry on! If you are not, make a change!”*

Isabella Byrd

### **Endurance**

*“Take everything you can get your hands on. Don't pass up once in a lifetime opportunities for the ones that are career milestones... Put in the extra effort to make the good impression. Pull all the all-nighters working and drinking you can, because that gets a lot harder as you get older. Be careful not to burn out.”*

Amanda Zieve

Over the last two and a half years at UCSD, I designed eight department produced plays, two dance shows, and a handful of student-produced studio projects. My second year was particularly heavy with classes, productions and outside work. In 2019 I said yes to all the work I was offered and that meant working in and around San Diego, around the country, and summer work. It totaled up to nineteen productions as a designer or assistant/associate in eleven months. I didn't realize how over worked I was because I was happy and excited to be a part of all the projects I was offered. I think it is easy to build endurance through the long hours and demanding

schedule when I'm passionate about the work, but the question remains, how does one endure when you're not excited.

Hard work, craft and talent, and luck. Is that the formula for being successful? I know there isn't anything I can do about being "lucky" and I believe that it is the smallest part of the puzzle. What I can do is embrace happy mistakes and stay open to opportunities. I am a hard worker, and always have been. I always want to be the best student. Being in grad school has been the perfect place to push myself more than I thought I could and practice a craft that I had no idea I could specialize in. Some mentors would say that it isn't about luck at all, but it is about being badass.

### **Current Goals**

*"I was mostly miserable. The work was very hard and paid very little; although I was often working with interesting people, I was always exhausted, broke, and had no time to read, go to art museums, walk by the river, have a beer or actually have friends or real relationships. It kind of sucked."*

Jane Cox

Jane Cox is a renowned lighting designer that I have admired for a long time based on her reputation and her work. To hear from her and many other designers about how difficult and glum the career can be, especially when you're an "emerging early career designer," is notable because it puts into perspective the endurance and hard work that goes into trying to survive in the industry.



*“It’s going to take a while. Hunker down for the duration... this career is not normal/basic. The further down you go, the higher and tougher the grass, so the sharper your sword must be.”*

Alan C. Edwards

Somehow, the worst case senecio after graduating has happened. Not only do we, the graduating classes of 2020, not have jobs coming out of grad school, there actually are no jobs to take and nowhere to showcase our work. The whole entertainment industry has gone dark due to COVID-19 and that means we as theatre makers are out of work, indefinitely. Before this pandemic broke out, I thought being successful meant being busy, working show to show, all year long. Now I’m forced to reevaluate how I look at success post-graduation. The plan was to move to New York City right away, and now from one day to the next, that’s not the wisest option for the time being.

*“I do strongly believe happiness is about balance, but that there is no answer to being successful, as that is a perpetually moving target... I’ve been lucky, but I also believe one can make their own luck.”*

Isabella Byrd

The current dream is to live as an artist, to have a shoe box apartment filled with roaches and to hustle in NYC. The main goal is to not give up. It is a frightening time to look at the future and wonder what opportunities and options might be available. However, there is some comfort in the fact that it has never been simple for anyone, and it won’t be any easier for me. There is no guarantee that I, or anyone, will have a career just because they have finished a training program. We are not entitled to anything, and the main take away from all of this is that

if I really want to do be a working lighting designer, I just have to not give up. And I have to be prepared to keep trying. The goal is to never stop learning, growing, and practicing.

## **Balance**

### **“Easier said than done” – Every Lighting Designer Everywhere**

*“We are often encouraged to push our physical limits beyond what is healthy in this business. People find it acceptable to do sixteen-hour days of sitting a tech table with 30-minute meal breaks of bad take-away food, but this kind of schedule is unsustainable and often unproductive. A healthier lifestyle leads to better focus and better productivity so push to make healthy choices whenever you can. Similarly, try to work with people and with companies that are supportive and community oriented. Life is too short to spend it with people who are jerks...”*

Scott Bolman

Personal life, hobbies, selfcare. Plot twist, being a successful lighting designer means trying to be a good and healthy person. To answer my question from earlier about enduring long hours while energy is low and the work is possibly not exciting, the answer is community and connection. Who do we make work for, and what is it for? Seeking comfort in community and connection gives energy and life force to our work. In a field that is project based, balance might be a myth, but the idea of a healthy life might be the only objective.

## Future Goals

*“Balance is a lifelong pursuit. Inherently it has to swing more one way and then another at times but the goal keeps you happy.”*

Lonnie R. Alcaraz

Years from now, I want to think fondly of the time I was in grad school worried about writing a thesis about a craft that I was just beginning to develop. The future dream is to no longer live in a shoe box, and to not have to take all the shows. The goal is to have some balance and to enjoy life outside of a dark theatre. Travel outside of the country for work is a major goal. I want to do everything, I want to be a regional lighting designer, I want to go on tour with a dance company, I want to work on Broadway, I want to make a movie, tv shows, music videos, I want to design operas in Europe. I want to collaborate on new plays in México, in Spanish. Mostly the goal is to be happy, to hopefully work with people that bring me joy all the time, and to work on cool and interesting projects in strange and odd places.

*“Don’t be afraid to want stuff... have the confidence to do it”*

Mary Louise Geiger

Lastly, I hope I can live by the advice these amazing designers have spelled out so generously. It was beautiful to hear everyone’s journey and path to get to where they currently are. It was even more beautiful that the responses were so rich with hope and kindness. Below are some of the miscellaneous advice quotes on all thing’s life that I want to hold with me as I look to the future...

## General Advice

On perspective:

*“I would say “To thine own self be true”; but the thing is, what Polonius and everyone else forgets is that a 25-year-old doesn’t have enough insight or self-knowledge to put that advice to use in a genuine way. It’s only much later that a person has the perspective needed to be truly true to themselves”*

Stephen Strawbridge

On growing:

*“You are capable and worthy, you have much to learn, but you have value. Don't stay anywhere where your value is not respected.”*

Sherrice Mojgani

*“It’s okay to go have fun once in a while... It’s okay to try to do something that’s not lighting design.”*

Porsche McGovern

On maturing:

*“Get an accountant early and pay your estimated taxes! Ask questions. Be curious. Find ways to be less shy. Smile and laugh as much as possible. Never stop learning. Stay young at heart.”*

Tyler Micoleau

*“Your self-worth can’t be tied to how many shows you are designing each week, month, or year”*

Jen Fok

On living as an artist:

*“The people you think you're going to be working with forever,  
you're very likely not going to be! And that is completely ok. Don't  
take it personally, no one has an easy ride.”*

Masha Tsimring

*“Tend to your life as an artist... You're either working as an artist  
or you're not, and if you're an artist then you have to care.”*

Mary Louise Geiger

I love turning lights on, and I hope I get to do it for the rest of my life. In times that are hard, I will forever try to remind myself that:

*“The secret formula is YOU! Trust yourself!”*

Jane Cox

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