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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SAN DIEGO

Choreographing Light: The Influence of Movement and Mentorship in Lighting Design

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

in

Theatre and Dance (Design)

by

Taylor Olson

Committee in charge:

Professor Christopher Kuhl, Chair
Professor Ana Maria Alvarez
Professor Mark Guirguis
Professor Shahrokh Yadegari

2025

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University of California San Diego

2025

DEDICATION

Thank you to my family, friends, cohort, faculty, production staff, undergraduate students, and mentors for shaping me as the person and designer that I am today.

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VITA

2020 Bachelor of Arts in Theatre Arts Specialization in Design and Technology, California State University Fullerton

2025 Master of Fine Arts in Theatre and Dance (Design), University of California San Diego

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Choreographing Light: The Influence of Movement and Mentorship in Lighting Design

by

Taylor Olson

Master of Fine Arts in Theatre and Dance (Design)

University of California San Diego, 2025

Professor Christopher Kuhl, Chair

This thesis examines two key elements that have shaped my journey as a lighting designer at the University of California San Diego: the influence of body movement as a source of creative inspiration and the essential role of active mentorship in fostering effective team collaboration for successful design execution. In my creative process, I draw inspiration from the fluid physical motion of performers, actively exploring how light interacts with their movements.

This relationship encompasses blocking, everyday actions, and choreography, inspiring my lighting design's emotional and visual aspects. Additionally, I emphasize the importance of mentorship within a collaborative environment that promotes technical and artistic growth. Trust, communication, and creativity among all team members—the designer, associate, and assistants—are vital for executing a unified design, especially under the pressures of live performance. My thesis highlights the synergy between movement and mentorship by weaving these concepts together. It illustrates how they contribute to the captivating joy of lighting design that resonates emotionally with the designer and the audience.

INTRODUCTION

In performance art, every element is crucial in conveying emotion and storytelling. From the actors on stage to the music that sets the atmosphere, each component contributes to the overall experience. Among these elements, Lighting is a powerful tool that can dramatically influence how a narrative unfolds. One particularly engaging approach to lighting design is known as choreographed light. This technique illuminates a performance and becomes an integral part of the storytelling process, weaving together visuals and emotions in a way that captivates the audience.

Choreographed light is the deliberate synchronization of lighting cues with a performance's actions, rhythms, and emotional moments. Like choreography in dance, where movements are carefully planned and executed, choreographed Lighting works harmoniously with the performers, music, or narrative arc. This creates a dynamic visual experience that enhances storytelling. This approach goes beyond simply illuminating the stage; it involves changes in intensity, color, direction, and timing that mirror or contrast the piece's physical and emotional journey. Essentially, choreographed light turns the lighting design into an active participant in the performance, responding to shifts in energy, mood, and space. This deepens the audience's connection to the work.

My path into the realm of lighting design unfolded gradually, shaped by years of exploration and discovery. As a child, I was captivated by the power of light, often daydreaming about how it could sculpt an atmosphere and elevate a scene's emotional impact. This fascination persisted into my adulthood. When I embarked on my professional journey in San Diego,

focusing on lighting design for dance and experimental performances, I felt an immediate and profound connection to the artistry involved. It became clear that simply participating wouldn't be enough; I needed to dive deeper and immerse myself fully in this enchanting world. To truly nurture this budding passion, I sought out opportunities that would allow me to collaborate with other artists, learn from seasoned professionals, and expand my creative horizons. The more I engaged with the craft, the more I understood its nuances and its vital role in storytelling and expression.

In my early designs, I noticed that the structure of my lighting sequences was often influenced more by the performers' physical movements than solely by the text. I focused on the critical moments of action and emotion, allowing those moments to guide the timing and flow of my cues. While many designers I've spoken with say that the script primarily informs their design choices, the physical motion on stage provides the initial spark of inspiration and drives my creative process. The concept of choreographed Lighting, where Lighting becomes more than just a source of visibility, fascinates me. This dissertation explores the relationship between movement and mentorship in lighting design. It focuses on how performers' physical movements inform the structure of lighting sequences and how active mentorship enhances collaboration and execution within a design team. Drawing from my experiences in dance, theatre, and experimental performance, I analyze how choreographed Lighting becomes an extension of the performer's body, creating a more profound emotional impact.

Additionally, I reflect on the mentor-mentee dynamic, illustrating how guidance, trust, and shared learning contribute to technical and artistic growth. By examining these two elements together, this thesis emphasizes how movement and mentorship work in tandem to create

lighting designs that are deeply connected to the performers on stage and to the collaborative team working behind the scenes.

Chapter 1 Year 1

At the beginning of my career at UCSD, I learned the value of being an assistant lighting designer working alongside Bryan Ealey. I had the opportunity to assist Bryan in two productions, *Machinal* and *Bunny Bunny*. This mentorship gave me a jump-start in the fast-paced world of production, as I was immediately immersed in the responsibilities required over a typical ten-week production timeline. During pre-production, I was tasked with creating essential tools to support the design process, including a magic sheet, attending all design meetings, taking detailed notes, and running light lab tests with Bryan to refine our choices in color and angle. A magic sheet, often called a "cheat sheet" in lighting design, is a quick reference guide that organizes all the lighting channels in the plot, allowing designers and assistants to quickly access critical fixtures and effects during technical rehearsals and performances.

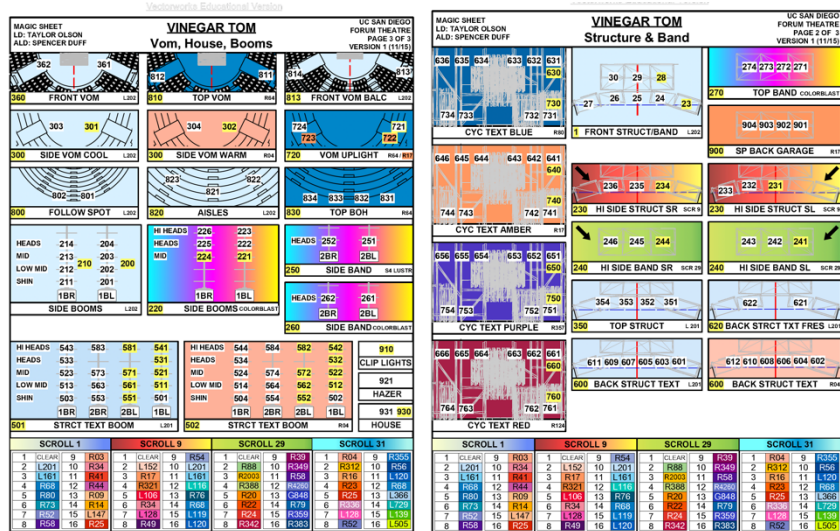


Figure 1.1: Magic Sheet from *Vinegar Tom*.

Once we moved into the theater, the pace intensified, and I quickly adapted to an even broader set of duties. I constantly updated cues in our cue sheet to reflect any last-minute

changes, relaying lighting adjustments to stage management, and documented detailed work notes to pass on to the electrics shop. This hands-on experience was challenging as I was learning Bryan's workflow on the go. However, it taught me the critical qualities of adaptability, accountability, and responsibility—not only for my tasks but also for understanding and anticipating Bryan's needs as the designer. This experience helped me recognize that effective communication, proactive problem-solving, and a willingness to adjust are essential for a successful collaboration. The insights I gained from working alongside Bryan continue to shape my approach to lighting design and my role within any production team.

The spring quarter of my first year in the MFA program marked a significant turning point in my journey as a lighting designer. Transitioning from an assistant lighting designer to the primary designer for a play came with many new challenges. Starting work on a new play is akin to embarking on an endless television pilot, filled with raw material that needs to be explored and fine-tuned in the rehearsal room. This experience was not just a learning curve; it was overwhelming in ways I hadn't anticipated. The pressure of leading my design amidst the rigorous demands of the program made me question my place in it. I faced self-doubt, exhaustion, and the weight of expectations, at times contemplating dropping out.

As we progressed from the rehearsal room to the performance venue, integrating technical elements into the storytelling, I wrestled with my commitment to continue. Yet, through the chaos, I pushed through. This defining moment of growth as a designer challenged me to adapt quickly to new scripts and unexpected changes from the playwright. I learned the importance of reworking cues, adjusting transitions, and ensuring my lighting design enhanced the evolving narrative. Before this, I had taught myself lighting design as an undergraduate, focusing primarily on dance while collaborating on new works across San Diego. My journey

began unexpectedly after I graduated in May 2020, initially enrolling in a local community college. Although the program was more dance-focused than Lighting, it connected me with choreographers like Terry Wilson and Zaquia Mahler Salinas. They later provided me with an internship to design their outdoor production, which honed my skills and broadened my network.

When I joined UC San Diego, I encountered new challenges that shook my confidence. I sometimes felt like an outsider in the rehearsal room, uncertain about voicing my ideas or whether my vision would resonate on stage. Unlike dance, with its inherent rhythm and movement, theater demanded that I navigate complex texts, character arcs, and the interplay of design elements. The transition felt overwhelming, leading me to doubt my path. Determined to succeed, I focused on creating the lighting design for my first production at the Wagner New Play Festival. This experience was pivotal, helping me establish my presence within the UC San Diego community and reinforcing my commitment to lighting design. I discovered how powerful my work could be—how lighting shapes narratives, evokes emotions, and brings visibility to essential stories. In a world where theater serves as a vital space for reflection and transformation, my role extends beyond mere aesthetics; it is about creating experiences that resonate with audiences and invite them to challenge their perspectives. By the end of my first year in the MFA program, designing for the Wagner New Play Festival solidified my growth. It marked my first experience crafting Lighting for a new play, compelling me to adapt to the evolving script and collaborate closely with the playwright to shape the visual storytelling. This journey has equipped me with essential skills in adaptability and problem-solving that continue to inform my approach to new theatrical works.

One person who helped me build my confidence was my assistant, Aunya Graham. We started as strangers and grew into respected colleagues who learned from each other. Aunya

played a key role in managing the lighting console and tracking intelligent fixtures, which are automated stage lighting tools. Working together allowed me to trust my abilities more, knowing I could lead a team while learning from those around me. These fixtures enable precise control over settings like pan, tilt, color, intensity, focus, gobos, and effects without manual changes. A gobo is a stencil used inside or in front of a light to create specific shapes or images, often adding textures or effects on stage. These fixtures are usually controlled by DMX, which is a standard communication method for managing Lighting and impact in theaters, concerts, and buildings. DMX lets a lighting console send digital signals to multiple fixtures, controlling settings like brightness, color, movement, and effects. It connects fixtures through a single cable and simultaneously manages up to 512 channels.

Aunya's attention to detail and proactive approach exceeded my expectations. While she learned how to use intelligent fixtures and DMX control, I taught her the importance of paperwork, documentation, and pre-programming—essential parts of the lighting process. I helped her with cue notation, organizing channels, and troubleshooting systems, highlighting the discipline needed for successful lighting design. This also made me appreciate the value of preparation and paperwork more. Watching Aunya develop in her role reminded me of my journey. It reinforced that lighting design is not only about creativity but also about communication, structure, and turning artistic ideas into workable plans.



Figure 1.2: Production photo *I Found A Zipper*

In theatrical storytelling, lighting design plays a crucial role in shaping the emotional landscape of a scene, guiding the audience's focus, and reinforcing the narrative's themes. The image above was taken during the dress rehearsal for *I Found a Zipper*, capturing a moment where light and shadow work together to heighten the emotional depth of the performance. The lighting design in this scene creates a compelling contrast between intimacy and isolation, emphasizing the characters' emotional states and the dynamics of their relationships on stage. I used a warm, focused light to draw our eye to the two characters, highlighting their expressions and the tension in their exchange while the surrounding darkness isolates them in an undefined space. This interplay between light and shadow enhances the theatricality of the scene, emphasizing a dimly lit waiting room with a warmer color palette. The golden hues of the light soften the scene, contrasting with the dark, cool-toned background. By selectively illuminating only essential elements, the lighting design captures a moment that feels suspended in time—intimate, mysterious, and deeply evocative.

Chapter 2 Year 2

After a refreshing summer break, during which I recharged and reset, I ultimately decided to stay in the program. This choice came after deep reflection on what leaving would mean for my artistic and personal growth. As an artist, I recognize that actual development comes not from avoiding challenges but from confronting them head-on. While remaining in the same environment can sometimes lead to stagnation, stepping beyond our comfort zones fosters meaningful transformation.

The summer break allowed me to reassess my goals and envision my future as a lighting designer. I had to ask myself some difficult questions: Was I genuinely passionate about this path? Could I see myself thriving in this industry? More importantly, was I willing to push through moments of doubt to become the artist I aspired to be? I found that the answer to all these questions was yes. I recognized that every challenge I faced—every late night in tech, every moment of uncertainty in the rehearsal room, and every unexpected adjustment to my design—was an opportunity to strengthen my creative problem-solving skills and refine my artistic voice. I felt deeply committed to my growth as a designer, knowing that setbacks and frustrations were an inevitable part of the process. I wasn't going to let feelings of defeat define me. Instead, I chose to use them as motivation, proof that I was still pushing myself in ways that mattered. Ultimately, staying in the program was not just about completing a degree but proving that I had the resilience, dedication, and passion to keep growing, learning, and evolving as an artist.

WinterWorks at UC San Diego is an annual dance showcase that brings choreographers, dancers, and designers together to explore movement and visual storytelling. One of this year's most compelling pieces was *Open Your Eyes*, choreographed by Kara Mack. More than just a

dance performance, it offered a deeply personal and historical exploration of resilience, identity, and the internal struggles of Martin Luther King Jr. While every piece carries personal significance for its creator, *Open Your Eyes* was unique in its ability to peel back layers of vulnerability, revealing an often-overlooked aspect of an iconic figure. Kara challenged the audience's perception of Dr. King, moving beyond the polished public image typically associated with his legacy. The lighting design needed to reflect this complexity, illuminating both his external presence as a leader and the internal battles he faced in private.

Kara's words included in the audience program captured the essence of the piece:

Open Your Eyes is a choreographer's journey into the internal and external battles of Martin Luther King Jr. as a man. The man, the leader, and the icon are often remembered in a one-dimensional light. Mack delves into King's internal world in this work—a place we rarely can explore or consider. Through this piece, the performers and audience gain a deeper understanding of the strength and fortitude he needed to deliver his final speech just one day before his assassination. The work reflects the courage and resilience we must possess when using our voices for change.

This idea of King being remembered in a "one-dimensional light" became a critical foundation for my lighting design. I wondered how light could expand this narrow view, revealing his public strength and private vulnerabilities. My approach centered on contrast—using light to shape the space in ways that mirrored his experiences' duality. Deep shadows created moments of isolation, while rich, saturated hues generated an intimate atmosphere suggesting his thoughts' weight. At times, the Lighting was stark and deliberate, mimicking the

rigid external expectations placed upon him. In other moments, the light flowed fluidly, moving with the performers and emphasizing the internal turbulence beneath his composed exterior.

One of the most compelling sequences in the piece revolved around the moments leading up to King's final speech. The Lighting transitioned into fractured planes, creating a visual fragmentation that reflected the immense psychological and emotional strain he endured. Silhouettes and shifting crossfades underscored the tension between his public duty and personal fears. By the time the piece reached its climax, a single, rising beam of white light cut through the darkness, symbolizing both the weight of his sacrifice and the enduring impact of his message. This project reaffirmed my belief in the power of Lighting to shape perception. Light is not merely a tool for visibility; it is a medium for storytelling, capable of transforming a narrative and guiding an audience's emotional journey. Working on *Open Your Eyes* challenged me to think deeply about how Lighting can dismantle historical myths and add depth to figures whose legacies have been oversimplified. The design was not just about illuminating the performers but about revealing unseen truths—shedding light, quite literally, on the complexities of a leader often confined to a single, unwavering image.



Figure 1.3: Production photo *Open your Eyes*

The image above captures one of the most striking moments in the production. The lighting design is crucial in shaping the atmosphere and directing focus. Tight, isolated pools of light create a sense of intimacy, drawing attention to the central figures while leaving much of the surrounding space in darkness. The soft, diffused edges of the light contribute to an organic, fluid quality, reinforcing a sense of enclosure and protection.

This collaboration between Kara and myself was built on a foundation of deep trust, and I felt a strong connection to the work. Its open-ended nature—where every element, from movement to music, invited interpretation—captivated my desire to understand the piece. As a lighting designer, I sought to create an evolving visual language that supported storytelling without imposing a rigid framework. The design concept centered around amplifying different literal and metaphorical universes using light on stage. This was especially crucial during the moments leading up to Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination, when the boundaries between his public and private self-began to blur. My goal was to use Lighting to create layers of reality, revealing and concealing different emotional spaces within the performance. To achieve this, I

designed a dynamic interplay between the foreground and background, manipulating light to guide the audience's attention and shape the emotional arc of the piece. In specific sequences, the dancers in the foreground were brightly illuminated while the background remained shrouded in darkness, creating a stark visual contrast that emphasized their presence and immediate actions. As the tension in the choreography built, the Lighting gradually shifted; dim, atmospheric Lighting in the background began to reveal figures in the shadows, representing the unseen forces weighing on King's psyche. This technique created a haunting effect, reinforcing that his inner struggles were ever-present, even during public moments.



Figure 1.4: Production photo *Open your Eyes*

Light can do more than just illuminate; it can move, react, and resonate with the story unfolding on stage. In the lighting design for *Open Your Eyes*, light becomes an active force that reflects the duality of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s journey—his internal struggles and public presence—through a dynamic interplay of light and shadow. Deep shadows create a sense of

isolation, while rich blues and purples foster an intimate and introspective atmosphere, symbolizing the weight of his private thoughts. Low, angled side lighting accentuates his form, emphasizing the solitude of his internal battles. In contrast, sudden bursts of sharp amber beams illuminate his public moments, particularly during "Jericho Road," representing his moral urge to assist those in need and bridge societal divides. Jericho Road refers to King's final speech, "I've Been to the Mountaintop," delivered on April 3, 1968, the night before his assassination. In this speech, he referenced the biblical parable of the Good Samaritan, set along the perilous road from Jerusalem to Jericho, to stress the importance of helping those neglected by society. He urged his audience to adopt a broader, selfless commitment to justice, reinforcing his philosophy of enduring service and moral responsibility.



Figure 1.5: Production photo *Open your Eyes*

The transitions within the lighting design are deliberate, mirroring the rise and fall of speech, the urgency of a call to action, and the quiet resolve of introspection. Silhouettes and fractured light textures convey the weight of history and expectation. Shifting crossfades—

gradual transitions from one lighting state to another—reflect the cadence of the speeches. As the performance builds toward the final address, a single rising white beam signifies the transcendence of the message, fading into a lingering afterglow that testifies to a lasting impact. The design breathes with the performance, choreographing light to reinforce the tension between struggle and hope. Each cue is more than just a change in illumination; it represents a step in a more significant movement, visually embodying a journey toward transformation. The use of gobos, layered lighting planes, and dynamic contrasts is essential for conveying the tension between hope and despair in *Open Your Eyes*. These techniques create a textured visual landscape that reflects Martin Luther King Jr.'s complex journey as both a public leader and an individual bearing the weight of a movement.

Gobos project patterns that symbolize the psychological and emotional forces surrounding King. In moments of solitude, fragmented gobo patterns cast shadows that represent the pressures of his personal life, hinting at feelings of entrapment amidst systemic oppression. Layered lighting planes differentiate aspects of King's life, highlighting his public presence and obscuring his internal struggles. When backgrounds come alive with color, they reveal the historical weight of expectations behind him, illustrating the contrast between his determined exterior and inner turmoil.

Dynamic contrasts in Lighting enhance the emotional impact, as stark, cold hues emphasize despair while bursts of warm light represent resilience. These shifts echo the rise and fall of his convictions and his sacrifices for justice. Overall, the interplay of gobos, layered planes, and contrasting lights shapes the emotional landscape of *Open Your Eyes*, immersing the audience in King's struggles and honoring his enduring legacy.

Working with assistants has taught me the importance of adapting my leadership style to fit their needs and strengths. One significant experience was with Stephaney Knapp, a senior undergraduate student. We met while I was in my second year at UCSD. We collaborated on small projects outside my program and gradually developed a strong working relationship. We shared similar perspectives and aesthetic preoccupations in lighting design. Throughout our collaboration, Stephaney and I fostered a cooperative and mutually beneficial learning relationship that extended beyond the structured environment of technical rehearsals.

The dynamics of sharing a design aesthetic in collaborative art involve balancing individual expression, collective vision, and practical execution. Research suggests that shared visual and conceptual values can streamline decision-making and enhance cohesion, aligning with Arnheim's theory of visual perception, which emphasizes that "perception organizes sensory input as a unified whole, rather than as a collection of separate parts. The human mind seeks patterns, relationships, and structures, shaping our understanding and interpretation of visual elements." (Arnheim, 1974). This principle is particularly relevant in lighting design, where aesthetic alignment can create a cohesive and impactful visual world.

Additionally, Kevin Dreyer, in *Dance and Light*, reinforces this idea by stating, "Lighting for dance is not just about visibility; it is about sculpting space, defining movement, and supporting the emotional arc of a performance. The relationship between light and movement must be symbiotic, with Lighting acting as an extension of the dancer's expression rather than a separate element." This perspective highlights the importance of shared artistic intent in collaborative lighting design. Designers and collaborators who work with a unified visual language can shape a production that seamlessly integrates movement, emotion, and space,

ensuring that Lighting becomes an active force in storytelling rather than an isolated technical component.

Power dynamics significantly influence how shared aesthetics function in teams. Research shows that effective creative teams thrive in a psychologically safe environment where all voices are valued and supported by clear leadership to manage disagreements. Examples from long-term artistic collaborations, like those of Robert Wilson and Jennifer Tipton, demonstrate how a shared aesthetic can push boundaries while respecting individual expertise. Robert Wilson, a visionary director known for his avant-garde, visually striking productions, frequently collaborates with Jennifer Tipton, a pioneering lighting designer whose nuanced and sculptural use of light enhances his work's dreamlike and meditative qualities. Key strategies for navigating shared aesthetics include establishing a common visual language, defining influence boundaries, and allowing flexibility within structure. Successful collaboration requires balancing unity with individualism and enhancing artistic cohesion through effective communication and mutual respect while avoiding stagnation or conflicts over authorship.

Meaningful support was evident in creating an environment where we could listen, learn, and challenge one another's perspectives. I often recognized a younger version of myself in Stephaney—eager, ambitious, and ready to step into the professional field—making it profoundly fulfilling to guide her through critical career decisions. I took great care in helping her navigate the industry, offering insights and advice to help her make choices aligned with her goals and aspirations. Our connection strengthened our working process and reinforced the importance of mentorship, collaboration, and the value of uplifting emerging designers in the field. At its core, mentorship is not just about providing instruction but recognizing potential, nurturing confidence, and offering the tools for success. I see in her the same eagerness and

curiosity I have. She encouraged me to refine my leadership skills, reinforcing the importance of adaptability and patience. Our relationship thrived on open dialogue, constructive feedback, and willingness to teach and learn from each other.

This summer, I had the opportunity to complete my residency at La Jolla Playhouse on *Velour: A Drag Spectacular*, which was truly spectacular. The residency is an immersive professional experience designed to provide artists with hands-on engagement in a production. It allows lighting designers to work closely with industry professionals, refine their technical skills, and make meaningful contributions to the creative process. For me, this residency was a chance to fully immerse myself in theatrical Lighting for a high-energy, dynamic performance while collaborating with an incredible team I've known for some time. The Lighting Designer was Amanda Zieve, and the Associate Lighting Designer was Brandon Rosen. Brandon received his MFA in Lighting Design from UC San Diego in 2017 and has successfully navigated the industry alongside respected Broadway designers. I met both designers before starting the MFA program. I first met Brandon while he was working on a show at La Jolla Playhouse called *Bhagnin It*. That project marked my first credit as an assistant lighting designer, with Brandon as the associate designer. I applied for the Howell Binkley Fellowship, which supports emerging lighting designers by providing mentorship and professional development opportunities. Although I was not selected for the fellowship, it led to my introduction to Amanda Zieve, with whom I have since maintained a positive relationship. The theater industry is deeply interconnected, and professional opportunities often arise through relationships and shared experiences—it's a field where who you know can be just as important as what you know.

During my residency, I took on key responsibilities that contributed to the overall execution of the lighting design. My role involved updating paperwork and documenting follow-

spot tracking, which is essential for maintaining the precision and consistency of the show's lighting cues. Ensuring that the followspots aligned seamlessly with the dynamic movements of the performers required careful coordination and attention to detail. A followspot is a manually operated, high-intensity lighting fixture designed to track and illuminate a performer as they move across the stage. Unlike static lighting fixtures, a followspot requires an operator to adjust its position, intensity, color, and beam size in real time. This ensures the focus remains on key moments and performers throughout the show. Followspot tracking meticulously documents every movement, color change, and timing cue associated with the followspots. This paperwork serves as a critical reference for the followspot operators, enabling them to execute seamless transitions, maintain uniform Lighting across multiple performances, and ensure that each performer is illuminated precisely as intended by the lighting designer.

For *Velour: A Drag Spectacular*, followspot tracking was particularly vital due to the high-energy nature of the performances, quick costume changes, and dynamic choreography for the lead performer, Sasha Velour. Sasha Velour is a drag artist and performer known for her avant-garde aesthetic, theatrical performances, and innovative approach to blending drag with visual art and storytelling. She is also the winner of RuPaul's Drag Race Season 9.



Figure 1.6: Production photo *Velour: A Drag Spectacular*

Drag performance is inherently theatrical, blending elements of fashion, dance, music, and storytelling into a bold and expressive art form. Followspots are integral to this genre, as they emphasize the performer's presence, heighten dramatic reveals, and create an immersive spectacle that draws the audience's focus. Lighting is not just functional in a drag show—it is part of the performance itself, reinforcing the energy, glamour, and heightened personas that define the art form. The show demanded precise timing and coordination between the lighting team and the performers, ensuring that each spotlight hit its mark precisely as intended.

BenDeLaCreme, a well-known drag performer, frequently incorporates spotlighting into her theatrical acts, enhancing her campy, narrative-driven performances. In this genre, the followspot becomes an extension of the performer, reinforcing their star power while elevating the visual storytelling that makes drag such a captivating experience. By maintaining clear and detailed followspot documentation, I helped the crew deliver a polished and visually striking experience, reinforcing the importance of organization and communication in theatrical lighting design.

VELOUR: A DRAG SPECTACULAR
 La Jolla Playhouse & Teatro Theatre
 3840 La Jolla Village Drive
 La Jolla, CA 92037
 619.434.1234

SPOT 1
 FOLLOWSPOT CLIP SHEET

SHEETS FROM:
 8/17/24 OPEN

1 HEAD: FACE ONLY
 2 HEAD: HEAD & SHOULDERS
 3 HEAD: BOTTOM SPOT AT NEAR
 4 HEAD: BOTTOM OF SPOT AT NEAR
 5 FULL BODY: INCLUDE FEET

LG	ACTION	INT	CHARACTER	FRAMES	SIZE	TIME	LOCATION	NOTE	
1. FLIGHT - "GLORYBOX" (PORTSHEAD)									
17		0%	SASHA	HES				SPOT ON: SET FADER TO FULL	
	BUMP UP	FL	SASHA	CP	HES	0s	AM AT SASHA'S LEG	PANEL SPOT HARD- (HAVE FADER AT FULL)	
	BUMP OUT	0%	SASHA	CP	HES	0s			
	BUMP UP	FL	SASHA	CP	HES	0s	AM AT SASHA'S LEFT ARM		
	BUMP UP	FL	SASHA	CP	HES	0s	AM AT SASHA'S RIGHT ARM		
	BUMP OUT	0%	SASHA	CP	HES	0s			
36	BUMP UP	FL	SASHA	C	HES	1s		FOURTH BUMP IN MUSIC / SASHA ON GROUND	
	FADE OUT	0%	SASHA	CP	HES	1s		ON FINAL DESCENT OF FALL	
54	FACE UP	30%	SASHA	CP	HES	2s		W/ VOCAL AFTER CLIP OFF FLY	
	IRIS OUT	60%	SASHA	CP	3/4	1s		MUSIC BUMP	
60	FADE OUT	0%	SASHA	CP	122	3/4	0s	FACE OUT BREAK OF BUTTON	DONT LINGER

8/19/2024 8:34 AM SPOT ON PAGE 1

Figure 1.7: Followspot Tracking photo from *Velour: A Drag Spectacular*

In conclusion, my residency at La Jolla Playhouse for *Velour: A Drag Spectacular* was an invaluable opportunity for professional growth and highlighted the importance of collaboration within the theater community. This immersive experience deepened my understanding of theatrical Lighting and its crucial role in enhancing performances, especially within the vibrant realm of drag. By carefully documenting the followspot tracking and maintaining strong communication with my colleagues, I contributed to the seamless execution of a show that celebrated artistry, expression, and the unique stories brought to life by drag performers. This experience reinforced my commitment to the craft and emphasized the significant impact of thoughtful lighting design on storytelling in theatre. As I move forward in my career, I carry with me the lessons learned, the relationships built, and a renewed passion for the transformative power of theatre.

Chapter 3 Year 3

I'm currently in the final stretch of my MFA journey. It's hard to believe that I once considered dropping out during my first year. That memory feels distant now, especially after all my progress. I'm still exploring my aesthetic, as I previously thought my style was only acceptable within the realm of dance due to my background. However, I've realized that my style can easily be integrated into various multidisciplinary platforms, including music, visual installations, and theatre. Dreyer emphasizes the flexibility of a lighting designer's aesthetic across disciplines, stating, "A designer's style is not confined to one genre; rather, it can evolve and adapt to various performance mediums, from dance to theatre and beyond" (Dreyer 215). This aligns with my realization that my style, initially rooted in dance, can seamlessly integrate into music, visual installations, and theatre.

This realization became particularly clear during my work as the lighting designer for *Vinegar Tom*, directed by Allie Moss. In this role, I had the opportunity to experiment with bold contrasts, expressive light play, and movement-inspired design choices that enhanced the play's themes of oppression and resistance. *Vinegar Tom* is not merely a play about witches; it addresses the persecution of women who resist social control, drawing unsettling parallels between 17th-century England and present-day systemic oppression. The production explores how patriarchy, capitalism, and organized religion combine to instill fear and punish those who do not conform. The lighting design was crucial in reinforcing these themes, creating stark visual contrasts between moments of seclusion and solidarity while using shadow and harsh illumination to reflect the play's rigidity and dehumanization the characters endure.

The play's punk power ballads, performed by the women in the cast, were particularly striking, serving as moments of defiance and reclamation of autonomy. Through the Lighting, I

aimed to amplify these moments of resistance—whether through bold color shifts, sharp transitions, or movement-driven Lighting that echoed the energy of the music. This production reaffirmed my belief that Lighting is about visibility, power, and emotion. It deepened my conviction that my aesthetic can transcend any medium, making a meaningful impact across multiple artistic disciplines.



Figure 1.8: Production photo *Vinegar Tom*

The lighting design was created to reflect the play's surveillance, judgment, oppression, resistance, and solidarity themes. It uses stark contrasts and bold visual choices to heighten the tension between control and defiance. Harsh, directional Lighting casts deep shadows, reinforcing the constant scrutiny that the women endure, mirroring the unrelenting gaze of societal and patriarchal forces. Cold, sterile tones strip the characters of their agency, visually embodying the dehumanization and emotional detachment imposed upon them.

In contrast, warm and saturated hues appear during moments of solidarity, providing brief but powerful glimpses of safety and resilience and emphasizing the strength of collective

resistance. As the narrative escalates, the Lighting also evolves, with abrupt shifts in brightness, erratic light movement, and dramatic color changes that heighten the fear and chaos of persecution. The design is intentionally raw and visceral, exposing the women's vulnerability while amplifying the oppressive structures that seek to break them, ultimately intensifying the emotional weight of their experiences.

In theatrical lighting design, lighting systems refer to specific groupings of lights that serve distinct purposes in a production. These systems include front light for visibility, side light for sculpting figures, backlight for separation, and texture or effect lighting to create mood and atmosphere. Each system is carefully planned and positioned to interact with the set, actors, and the overall stage composition to achieve the intended artistic vision. One of the most significant challenges I faced during the production was managing the timeline of resources while dealing with some deflections in the design process. When it was time for me to conduct my focus call—where fixtures are aimed and adjusted according to the finalized design—I encountered a major obstacle: the set was not entirely constructed. This posed a significant issue because my lighting systems had been designed and plotted with scenic elements that were either incomplete or altogether missing. Without the complete set, it became challenging to position lights in their precise locations. For instance, some of my lighting angles depended on walls or platforms that weren't yet installed, making it impossible to confirm how the light would interact with the space. Additionally, some fixtures required fine adjustments based on how they would illuminate the actors within the set environment. Without the completed scenery, I had to make educated guesses rather than definitive choices. This uncertainty greatly affected my mindset as I entered the process. Instead of executing a well-planned vision, I had to adapt to an evolving environment, adjusting placements and angles on the fly. It was a test of my patience and

flexibility, as I repeatedly modified my focus choices to accommodate changes in the set's construction. This experience challenged my confidence, but it also reinforced the importance of problem-solving, communication with the production team, and maintaining the integrity of my design despite unforeseen obstacles.



Figure 1.9: Production photo *Vinegar Tom*

This experience highlighted the importance of working in a dynamic production environment, where adaptability is as essential as technical precision. In theatre, adaptability involves the ability to quickly adjust to unforeseen changes—whether it's modifying lighting positions due to a delayed set, reworking cues to accommodate changes in blocking, or making creative decisions that uphold the integrity of the design despite shifting circumstances. For instance, rather than strictly following my original lighting plan, I needed to reconfigure key angles based on the available scenic elements and anticipate how shadows and textures would

interact once the set was completed. I also had to collaborate closely with the scenic and stage management teams to monitor construction progress and adjust my focus strategy accordingly. Despite the challenges, this adaptable approach ultimately allowed the Lighting to integrate seamlessly with the final scenic design, creating an environment that felt both isolated and exposed reflecting the oppressive, watchful atmosphere that Caryl Churchill creates in *Vinegar Tom*.



Figure 1.10: Production photo *Vinegar Tom*

During my collaboration with the director, I faced significant challenges due to deflection and the incomplete set, which hindered my ability to implement the lighting design fully. Despite my requests for clarity on how to proceed, our discussions often revolved around uncertainty regarding the set's progress and evolving staging choices rather than providing concrete solutions for moving forward with the Lighting. For example, instead of addressing specific spatial concerns—such as the placement of walls, platforms, or entry points that would affect lighting angles—we repeatedly revisited what could not yet be established, like whether certain scenic

elements would even be built in time or how staging might change depending on construction delays. This lack of definitive answers meant I had no clear reference points for sculpting light within the space, making it challenging to ensure that my systems would effectively highlight the actors and storytelling. As a result, I was forced to make assumptions about design choices, anticipating the production's needs without a fully realized environment. Instead of implementing a cohesive lighting vision from the outset, I had to tackle my work in fragments, adjusting individual lighting systems as elements of the set were completed. While I adapted to these evolving conditions, the poor communication and lack of direct problem-solving added to the complexity of the process, challenging both my patience and confidence in my design decisions. I recognized that deflection was a challenge in my collaboration with the director, so I consciously navigated our conversations with patience and persistence to maintain a productive working relationship. Instead of pushing for immediate answers that weren't available, I adjusted my approach by asking targeted questions that encouraged more precise direction. For instance, I inquired about mood, movement, or emotional tone rather than focusing on specifics related to the unfinished set. I also worked to translate broad or uncertain feedback into actionable design choices, presenting options that allowed for flexibility while still upholding my artistic intent. Acknowledging the constraints we both faced, I aimed to foster a dialogue that kept the process moving forward instead of getting frustrated. Though the lack of definitive guidance tested my patience, it taught me how to work within ambiguity, advocate for my design without creating conflict, and ensure that my creative contributions remained valued and integrated into the final production.

In this experience, one of the most favorable outcomes was the dynamic between my lighting team, the assistant lighting designer Spencer Duff, and Jackson Nataga, the lighting

programmer. Spencer brought a wealth of Lighting and scenic design knowledge, which became invaluable during one of my most recent research projects. When unforeseen obstacles arose with repositioning lighting due to new additions to the set, Spencer became an enormous resource. He took on the task of drafting the updated lighting sections to accommodate the scenic changes, seamlessly adapting to the evolving demands of the production.

One of the most valuable aspects of my collaboration with Spencer on *Vinegar Tom* was how our partnership strengthened the lighting design through mutual trust, clear communication, and shared problem-solving. Although I was the lead designer, I relied on Spencer's keen eye and technical expertise to help refine and execute our vision. Initially, I approached our collaboration with an inclusive mindset, treating Spencer as a creative partner rather than just an assistant. I communicated my overall design goals, emphasizing that the Lighting should evoke a sense of isolation and exposure, reflecting the play's oppressive atmosphere. Given the changing constraints of the production, our discussions remained fluid, focusing on how to adapt and effectively implement these ideas. During focus and technical rehearsals, we worked closely to ensure that every lighting system achieved its intended effect. I provided clear guidance, set priorities, encouraged problem-solving, and offered real-time feedback. For instance, while refining the shadow play in key scenes, I directed Spencer to experiment with different angles while inviting his perspective on the most effective approach. This exchange of feedback was a genuine collaboration; rather than simply pointing out issues, I framed my notes with technical precision and artistic intent, ensuring that our adjustments enhanced the overall design. By fostering this dynamic and interactive process, we created a lighting design that was intentional and responsive, reinforcing the emotional core of the production. At the same time, Spencer wasn't hesitant to offer insights and critiques, highlighting details I might have overlooked and

suggesting alternative solutions. One of the most rewarding parts of working with Spencer was realizing how much I could trust and rely on his instincts. His ability to take initiative and anticipate needs made our collaboration incredibly fluid, often pushing me to rethink and refine my choices. By the time we watched the show, I wasn't just seeing my vision; I was witnessing the strength of our collaborative effort. Spencer's contributions ensured no detail was overlooked, and I knew I had a reliable, creative partner throughout the process.

I met my lighting programmer, Jackson, much later than my assistant. While collaborating with my assistant throughout the production, I didn't meet Jackson until Week 7 of the 10-week timeline. A lighting programmer is a technician who operates and programs lighting control systems, translating a designer's vision into precise cues and sequences for live performances, events, or broadcasts. Meeting so late in the timeline presented an extra challenge, as we had to quickly establish a workflow and ensure that the programmed cues aligned with the artistic intent of the design, all while working within the constraints of our limited time. Having Jackson Nataga as the lighting programmer for *Vinegar Tom* was essential in bringing the production's lighting design to life. Jackson's role extended beyond simply executing cues; he was a creative collaborator who helped bridge the gap between my artistic vision and the technical precision needed to bring it to life. His adaptability and problem-solving skills proved invaluable in an environment where scenic and directorial decisions were often fluid and uncertain. Jackson programmed efficiently and actively engaged in discussions about timing, transitions, and the emotional impact of the Lighting, ensuring that every cue enhanced the world we were creating. His deep understanding of the EOS programming language allowed us to refine the design in real-time, adjusting intensities, timings, and effects to create the stark, oppressive atmosphere that mirrored the play's themes. Jackson's ability to translate my design

intent into a functional, responsive system allowed me to focus on refining the overall aesthetic, knowing that he could execute changes with precision and creativity. His technical expertise and willingness to engage in the storytelling process reinforced my belief that lighting programming is not just about executing commands—it is an art form that plays a vital role in shaping a production's final visual language.

As I near the conclusion of my MFA journey, WinterWorks serves as a fitting capstone production, bringing me full circle to where my passion for lighting design first began in dance. This event offers emerging choreographers, dancers, and designers a valuable opportunity to collaborate and experiment with movement, Lighting, and stage composition in an entirely produced performance. The cast primarily consists of undergraduate dancers, allowing them to perform professionally while working closely with faculty and graduate student designers.

Participating in this production allows me to reconnect with my roots in dance lighting while applying the skills and experience I've gained throughout my time in the MFA program. Before venturing into theatre, I discovered my artistic voice through Lighting for movement, using light to shape space and enhance rhythm, emotion, and energy. As I conclude my time at UC San Diego, this feels like a homecoming—a chance to reconnect with the foundation of my journey in Lighting while showcasing everything I've learned over the past three years.

Collaborating with two choreographers on this project has highlighted the fluidity and teamwork that dance requires, reinforcing my adaptability and creative problem-solving skills, which have been crucial to my growth as a designer.

Lighting design is inherently storytelling—it creates mood, guides focus, and reveals or conceals elements within a performance, shaping how an audience experiences a piece. In dance, where there may not always be a straightforward narrative, light becomes a language of its own,

capable of expressing tension, release, urgency, or stillness. It can transform a space from intimate to vast, from oppressive to liberating, and from real to surreal in an instant. The WinterWorks production has reinforced my passion for Lighting and its storytelling ability. In dance, a crucial aspect of being a lighting designer involves supporting the choreographer's vision by changing textures and tones or creating an environment that allows movement to resonate more profoundly. As I transition into the next phase of my career, this production serves as a reminder that Lighting is not just a technical skill but a dynamic and expressive force that brings performance to life.

The choreographers I am working with for WinterWorks are Daunte Fyall and Holly Johnson, each offering a distinct perspective on the creative process. Daunte Fyall is a contemporary choreographer whose work blends fluid movement with structured improvisation, often exploring themes of identity and resilience. In contrast, Holly Johnson focuses on interdisciplinary dance, integrating theatricality and abstract storytelling elements to create emotionally driven pieces. Their differing approaches to movement have presented unique challenges and opportunities in shaping the lighting design. This has resulted in a more instinct-driven process, where I make bold choices quickly and adjust them based on our limited but productive discussions.

In contrast, my collaboration with Holly has been more interactive and evolving. Since I spent more time in the rehearsal room, our process became more dynamic, characterized by ongoing discussions about the role of Lighting in her piece. Instead of waiting until later to incorporate Lighting, we worked together, shaping the design alongside the choreography. Holly's method included storyboarding and sketching visual ideas, which helped us visualize how she envisioned the Lighting interacting with the movement.



Figure 1.11: Storyboard ideas from *roots of loving us*

These drawings became essential for communication, acting as a visual language that translated abstract ideas into practical lighting choices. For instance, a sketch of dancers emerging from darkness with streaks of light cutting through the space inspired a cue sequence in which isolated beams highlighted their movements before expanding into a fuller wash as the piece intensified. In lighting design, a "fuller wash" refers to a broader, more evenly distributed illumination that covers the entire stage or performance area, ensuring visibility and enhancing the overall atmosphere. This dynamic process reinforced my ability to see Lighting as a responsive and living element, constantly shifting to reflect the energy of the dance rather than functioning as a static layer.

The contrast between these two approaches is significant as it highlights the versatility required in lighting design. Working with Daunte required me to make swift, intuitive choices due to our limited rehearsal time, refining the design in a more instinctual and reactive manner.

Working with Holly allowed me to develop a more intricate visual language, allowing for a deeper exploration of how light and movement evolve. Both experiences pushed me to adapt my process, proving that lighting design is not just about technical execution but about finding unique ways to communicate and collaborate with artists across different creative approaches.

Working with Holly Johnston on *roots of loving us* was an incredibly fulfilling experience. It allowed me to see Lighting as a tool for creating atmosphere and as a choreographed element that moves and breathes alongside the dancers. Holly's storytelling approach, which is rooted in the physicality of movement and the emotional depth of personal histories, resonated with my belief that light is more than just illumination; it is a vital part of the performance.



Figure 1.12: Production Photo from *roots of loving us*

In this photo, the lighting design is crucial in shaping the atmosphere and directing focus. Tight, isolated pools of light create a sense of intimacy, drawing attention to the central figures while leaving much of the surrounding space in darkness. The soft, diffused edges of the light

enhance the organic, fluid quality of the scene, reinforcing a sense of enclosure and protection. I was particularly interested in evoking the concept of a womb—a space that feels both nurturing and isolating and brings forth themes of birth, transformation, and vulnerability. The warm, reddish undertones in the Lighting contribute to this idea, subtly referencing the natural warmth and safety of the womb. The interplay of light and shadow across the dancers' bodies heightens the physicality of their movements, making the Lighting an active participant in the storytelling rather than a passive backdrop. Additionally, the dappled texture on the floor adds a layer of depth, resembling amniotic fluid or a pulsating, organic environment. This effect heightens the sense of immersion, reinforcing that the dancers exist within a contained yet dynamic space, echoing themes of emergence and rebirth.

Through our discussions and time spent in the rehearsal room, I started to engage with Lighting as if it were a form of dance. In my collaboration with Holly, I explored how light interacts with bodies, space, and emotion, shaping the atmosphere like choreography shapes movement. The process of choreographing light became a partnership built on trust and intuition, like how a choreographer refines movement with their dancers. I had the opportunity to create a design that resonated with the rhythm of the piece—whether capturing the flickering memories of nostalgia, the frantic overstimulation of modern life, or the organic heartbeat of new beginnings. This project encouraged me to move beyond traditional theatrical Lighting and embrace a more fluid and expressive approach. This experience deepened my connection to lighting design, highlighting its ability to transform emotions into something visible and immersive. It reinforced the power of light to shape a world where movement and atmosphere are inseparable, extending storytelling beyond words into something visceral and deeply felt. Light is more than just illumination; it is a living, breathing part of the performance. Reflecting

on WinterWorks 2025, I recognize how this process has challenged me to think beyond conventional lighting approaches and trust the organic rhythm of the work. It served as a reminder that Lighting is not just about visibility or effect but about presence—an active force that moves with the performers, shaping the story in ways that words cannot express. This project reaffirmed my belief in Lighting as a profoundly intuitive and collaborative art form, existing in conversation with the movement, space, and emotions it illuminates.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this thesis emphasizes how movement and mentorship are foundational to my development as a lighting designer, influencing my artistic approach and professional philosophy. Through choreographed Lighting, I have discovered that light can transcend its traditional function as mere illumination; it can actively engage in performance—responding to motion, emotion, and shifts in narrative. My work has been significantly shaped by performers' physicality, drawing inspiration from their movements to create Lighting that breathes and evolves alongside the action on stage. This approach allows me to bridge the gap between Lighting for dance, theatre, and experimental performance, reinforcing the concept that light is not just a tool but a storytelling force.

Equally important to my journey have been my experiences as a mentee, learning from seasoned professionals, and my role in mentoring emerging designers. These experiences have reinforced my belief that lighting design is not a solitary pursuit but a collaborative art form that thrives on shared knowledge, trust, and communication. From my initial days as an assistant lighting designer to leading major productions, I have witnessed firsthand how mentorship fosters technical growth, builds confidence, and cultivates a sense of community within the field. Throughout my MFA journey, I have navigated the challenges of balancing creative vision with practical execution, working within changing production environments, and adapting to unforeseen obstacles. Whether refining my approach to choreographed Lighting in productions like *Open Your Eyes* or addressing design complexities in *Vinegar Tom*, each experience has reaffirmed the importance of flexibility, resilience, and creative problem-solving. My time at UC San Diego has enabled me to develop a distinct aesthetic transcending genre, allowing me to

integrate my design philosophy into various artistic disciplines, from theatre to music to visual installations.

As I advance in my career, I profoundly appreciate the symbiotic relationship between movement and light, the invaluable impact of mentorship, and the collaborative spirit that defines live performance. Lighting design is more than a craft; it is a language, a dynamic medium that shapes perception, evokes emotion, and enhances storytelling in powerful and meaningful ways. My journey has been one of continuous learning. As I enter the next chapter, I am eager to continue pushing boundaries, fostering new collaborations, and using light to inspire, provoke, and illuminate.

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