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Continued from June 2012 CTI Newsletter

## Interview with Jeff Croiter

Designers live an interesting and challenging life in the entertainment industry. At the end of a difficult production period, just as the cast and crew are starting to relax and settle in for the run of their show, the designers are off to their next load in. The cycle goes on and on, and it takes a special combination of talent, energy, perseverance, and personality to be able to excel.

We have watched the career of Jeff Croiter grow over the years from a young Broadway assistant to a full fledged Broadway lighting designer in his own right, to a Tony Award winner for his brilliant lighting of *Peter And The Starcatcher*. The entire City Theatrical team sends our congratulations to Jeff for his accomplishment.

And in his effort to let no minute of the day go unused, Jeff is also one of the producers of a web series called [SUBMISSIONS ONLY](#). It's a behind the scenes look, in sitcom format, at what actors do when they aren't in shows, centering on the auditioning process.

We asked Jeff a few questions about his lighting life:

**CTI:** Can you recall the first time you were in a theatre that made an impression on you

**JC:** Hard to say. Both of my parents were involved in local theatre groups when I was very young so I found myself in theatres and rehearsal rooms from a very young age. The whole thing made an impression over a number of years.

I can say that the first Broadway shows to make an impression were BARNUM and PIRATES OF PENZANCE with Kevin Kline. And Off-Broadway, LITTLE SHOP. The first play in NY that made an impression was probably PRELUDE TO A KISS.

**CTI:** How did you get started in technical theatre? First light focused, first lighting board, first design?

**JC:** As previously mentioned, my parents would bring me along to hang out (or sleep under a table) when they were doing theatre. My mother was in shows; my father would help out building scenery or hanging lights or running the lighting board. I would do all sorts of things. At first I was in shows, then I started helping with backstagey things. That became more interesting to me.

The theatre in my high school was rebuilt after being destroyed by fire, and the new building reopened with a state of the art lighting system, as I entered junior high school. So there I was at 14 years old in a room with new lights, dimmers, and a computer lighting board (Mini Light Palette.) And only a handful of people (one of them being Ken Posner's younger brother) who were interested in any of it. It was a new kind of playground for me. And, at that very impressionable time in one's development when new concepts really stick.

I also had incredibly inspirational teachers in high school who loved what they did and took it very seriously. Pro designers were hired in to do the big musicals and students designed everything else.

**CTI:** Where did you get your training?

**JC:** SUNY Purchase – studying under Billy Mintzer and Brian Macdevitt  
 -Interned for Jeff Davis at The Berkshire Theatre Festival  
 -Hemsley Internship: worked with Jeff Davis, Mark Stanley, Mitch Dana, Ken Tabachnick, John Gleason, Jennifer Tipton, and others.  
 -I learned a tremendous amount assisting various designers through the early part of my career. I worked for Ken Posner for several years.

**CTI:** What was your first paying lighting job?

**JC:** In high school I worked as an electrician on events and fashion shows in Westchester. My first professional paying job was as the assistant lighting designer at the Berkshire Theatre Festival.

First NY job was either assistant to Tom Sturge at The American Jewish Theatre or Ken Posner at Playwrights Horizons. Not sure which came first.

**CTI:** When did you make the decision to be a professional lighting designer?

**JC:** During my summer as an intern at Berkshire Theatre Festival. It was my first professional experience and I loved everything about it.

**CTI:** Who were your early role models or influencers in lighting?

**JC:** Billy Mintzer: taught me how to read a play and talk about light; the idea that lighting and dramaturgy CAN work together. Brian MacDevitt: composition, how to look at the stage, how to see the big picture. And he introduced me, and everyone he taught, to the idea of using research for lighting inspiration. Jeff Davis: how to organize it all. I still, 20 years later, use so many of the tools I learned from Jeff. Ken Posner: so, so much. He reinforced all of the above. And how to behave like a professional.

**CTI:** What was it like trying to make a living at lighting design in the beginning?

**JC:** I was fortunate to be chosen for the Hemsley Internship. It was easier to get started in NY with a steady, albeit small, paycheck. And it trained me to be a hireable assistant so I was able to get work post internship.

**CTI:** How did you get chosen for your first Broadway show?

**JC:** A producer named Jared Geller, whom I'd been working with on and off, asked if I was interested in designing Kiki and Herb on Broadway (as if I was going to say I wasn't). At the time I had a few shows running off-Broadway. The creators went to see JACQUES BREEL and loved the lighting. I met with them at a restaurant in Chelsea and they decided to hire me. I didn't tell anyone, including my wife, until I knew it was official. It was a great experience.

**CTI:** Describe the office or studio where you do your design and drafting.

**JC:** For years I worked from home. Had this huge drafting table in my living room. Then had a great studio in the basement of the Ars Nova theatre.

At a certain point I stopped needing a giant drafting table and really just needed a table to unroll drawings and a laptop. I got married around the same time and decided that I enjoyed spending time with my wife more than I liked carrying my laptop to another location just to sit at a desk so I moved the office back home.

I have a big table that I use for marking up scenery drawings. After years of saying it would never happen, I now do my rough plots in Vectorworks instead of by hand. It definitely took some getting used to. It helps to have drawings of the set sitting under the laptop but, it's hard to do that on an airplane.



Jeff Croiter at the 2012 Tony Awards



Focussing

In reality, my office is the tech table in the theatre wherever I happen to be working. I spend my work time in theatres (or café's and hotel rooms.), not in offices.

**CTI:** What role do your assistants and associates play?

**JC:** It's VERY important for me to have a great assistant. Makes my job and my life so much better when I have someone good working with me. There isn't ever enough time to light a show so having someone next to you who is fast, smart, knows the plot, knows the equipment, knows the console is invaluable.

**CTI:** What role does your production electrician play and how is it important to your show?

**JC:** The most important person on the lighting team. It isn't just plugging the show in and making everything work. I remember focusing lights in a theatre in NY and the carpenters started noisily building something on stage. It was distracting but I wasn't in a position to ask them to stop, especially at that point in my career. Without my having to say anything the electrician started yelling at everyone to stop making noise. That's just one example; there are so many similar stories.

I want to worry about lighting the show. The great electrician lets me.

**CTI:** How do you balance the technical vs. artistic sides of your job?

**JC:** There are lighting purists who say that the lighting designer should only worry about the art part. To each his own. I can't program a console; can't setup a moving light rig. But I like knowing how the console works and what a moving light can do. There's a TON of technology available to us right now and its growing exponentially. Why not learn how to use it?

**CTI:** How many weeks a year are you out of town with shows?

**JC:** Different every year. I used to love to travel and was lucky enough to be able to have gone all over the world to do lighting (London, Paris, Moscow, Siberia, Singapore, Buenos Aires, Shanghai, Beijing, and more). These days my preference is to stay closer to home but I still definitely do my share of work out of town.

**CTI:** Do you have any favorite shows that you have worked on either for the production itself, the artistic team, or your own artistic work on the show?

**JC:** Right now I love NEWSIES, PETER AND THE STARCATCHER, OLD JEWS TELLING JOKES, RAPTURE BLISTER BURN, and SILENCE THE MUSICAL (all currently running), and the shows I have in preproduction.

**CTI:** How has your perspective on lighting changed since you began your career? (Is it more fun now or less fun? How does the career compare to what you thought it would be when you started out?)

**JC:** Having been brought into the world of lighting by people like Ken and Brian, the bar was set high.

I'm in no position to complain about the state of my career. It took me longer than I would have liked to get my first Broadway show. But it did happen. And now I want more. I love it.

As for perspective, as stressed out about things as I get now, I was WAY more nervous about everything as a young designer. In retrospect I probably didn't need to be. Some things just have a way of working themselves out. But, some don't...

**CTI:** You have worked hard to get to the top of the lighting world. What, besides the necessary talent, does it take to get there? (Can you describe why even though there are a lot of designers with excellent training and artistic skills, very, very, few make it to your level?)

**JC:** Patience. The ability to listen. An interest in collaboration.

There were some very talented designers in school with me who did not end up pursuing a career in lighting design. For some it was money; more lucrative opportunities came along. For some it was an inability to adapt. The lighting designer has to work quickly and roll with the myriad changes. Others had a hard time working with directors.

**CTI:** If you had it to do all over again, would you do anything differently?

**JC:** Yes...

**CTI:** Do you have any advice for young designers?

**JC:** Ask questions.

Work for people who know more than you.

Love what you do.



Jeff on the set of *Submissions Only* with Kate Wetherhead



"Tip it up a bit more, please."



*Peter And The Starcatcher*



*Newsies*