



Les Misérables at Haldane High School in Cold Spring, NY
Director: Martha Mechalakos
Technical Director/Photographer: Damian McDonald
Scenic Designer: Craig Roffman
Lighting Design: Quinn McDonald
Lighting features SHoW DMX Show Baby® 6 wireless DMX receivers

BACKGROUND

At City Theatrical, we are always looking forward. When we found out about the professional-grade lighting design work being done by high school students across the Northeastern USA, we wanted to find out more – from their perspective. The following interview with high school students **Quinn McDonald** and **Jack O'Connor** takes a closer look at their experiences as a preview of the next generation of professional lighting designers.

Q&A

City Theatrical (CTI): Why were you drawn to lighting rather than other backstage technologies, or to acting?

Jack O'Connor (JO): I didn't want to act – that was the first thing I knew. Friends were joining the drama club when we started high school, so I decided to give it a try. I didn't know what I wanted to do at first. It just so happened that on my first show freshman year, *Mary Poppins*, I was placed as a Spotlight Operator. I started getting hands on with the equipment, and became more involved in theatre. I saw more shows,

and found out how important lighting could be for a show. I saw good lighting, bad lighting, and how this can affect how theatre is done. From there, I was drawn to lighting design. Since my sophomore year of high school, three years ago, it's been my passion.

Quinn McDonald (QM): I also knew that acting was not my thing. I started out in theatre in middle school helping the sound department. Then there was a vacancy in the lighting department, and no one to run the lights. I gave it a try and fell in love with lighting design. It all started with *Into the Woods*, which I worked on with a recent graduate and a few

professional advisors. Since then I've done lighting design and was stage manager for my last show. And every time, it's a collaboration to get the design right.

CTI: What's it like to work as a lighting designer at your school?

JO: It's challenging. Being a designer on your show, doing your own creative work – and being judged on it. It's a challenge. But my school has provided a great environment to learn and hone in on my skills. I've had a lot of creative freedom, and ability to implement what I thought would be best for the show. It's all based on collaboration with the director,



QUINN McDONALD

HALDANE HIGH SCHOOL
COLD SPRING, NY

Drama Club Role: **Lighting Designer/
Stage Manager**
Recent Shows: **- Curious Incident of the Dog in
the Night-time**
- Les Misérables
Anticipated High School Graduation: **June 2020**

Quinn has designed lighting for numerous productions at her school during her middle and high school years. Her work has been published online and featured in several local papers, including the Highlands Current.



JACK O'CONNOR

READING MEMORIAL HIGH SCHOOL
READING, MA

Drama Club Role: **Lighting Designer/
Technical Director**
Recent Shows: **- Freaky Friday**
- Anything Goes
- The Addams Family
Anticipated High School Graduation: **June 2019**

Jack has designed lighting for 29 shows on middle school, high school, and community theatre stages. He has won several school awards for his work, and was nominated for Best Lighting Design by EMACT DASH Program.

scenic designer, technical director, and others. My school has had some amazing mentors, all with hands on skills. They know a lot about design, but step back and let students like me do a lot of the creative work.

QM: I agree – it’s challenging but also rewarding. Sometimes it’s tough creating a design that is fully in sync with the director’s vision. We also have a K through 12 campus, with one auditorium, which is inside of the gym. It makes getting time at the stage tough, and has meant lots of late nights and weekend work, depending on the school schedule. We are fortunate that our community has a lot of theatre professionals, even a local Shakespearean organization, who are willing to lend their time and expertise, with everything from lighting to rigging to choreography.

CTI: What was your favorite production to work on, and why?

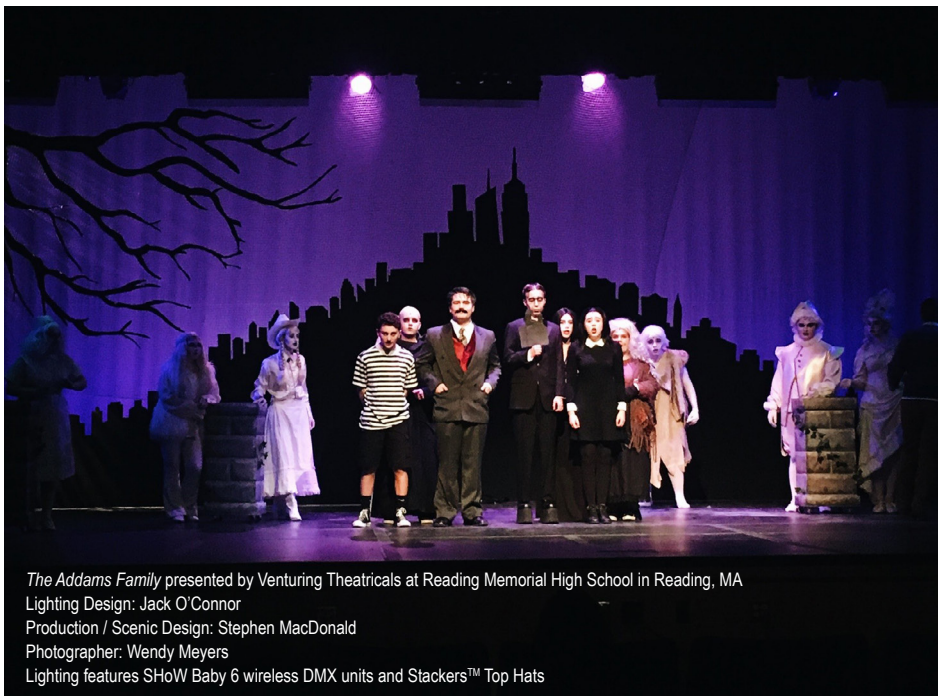
QM: *The Curious Incident of the Dog*

“Our community has a lot of theatre professionals who are willing to lend their time and expertise, with everything from lighting to rigging to choreography.” - *Quinn McDonald*

in the Night-Time for sure, which we presented in December 2017. It was a technically heavy show. Our stage floor is wood, so we had the challenge of lighting the actors without lighting the set. We embedded the set with 540 individually addressable LEDs, which was set up as a grid on three walls behind the stage to convey the thoughts of one of the characters, who had autism. We had to figure out how to use these LEDs without detracting from what was happening on stage. Each LED became a pin point in the grid – they took on their own “personality” in a way – when it was raining, we created white sparks

to mimic rain, when the character was on the train, we added fading swipes to show the motion. We used the lighting grid to convey order and show that everything had its place.

JO: For me, it was *The Addams Family* musical, which I worked on with an intensive summer program that rented out my high school auditorium in August 2017. I had previously done some assisting and co-designing, but it was the first time I had the freedom and responsibility to create the lighting design. I think it’s still the best design I’ve done. It was a fun show, with lots of things



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- *Jack O’Connor*



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“While every show is different, one thing is the same – the ‘buzz’ – the happiness we all feel backstage.”

- Jack O'Connor

happening, and the lighting reflected that. Because of the darker style and tone, I got to play a lot with vibrant colors and textures, which didn't have to necessarily look like real light. We used lots of purples and blues, and cool angles of light. It was nominated for Best Lighting Design by Eastern Massachusetts Association of Community Theatres (EMACT).

CTI: What was it like backstage?

JO: As a designer, it's really nice to sit back and be able to appreciate all the work that everyone put in and the completed show as a whole. Before I was a designer I had been used to running a spotlight on the catwalk or running scenery, but I love being able to see the show.

In general, I love being backstage, in the wings, with the crew or actors. It's always high energy and exciting. While every show is different, one thing is the same – the “buzz” – the happiness we all feel backstage

QM: I have a very different experience

than Jack in that I have designed the lights, hung the lights, and been running the board backstage as well for my shows. It's always stressful, but a lot of fun. It's high energy. Everyone enjoys being backstage. It's a very family-oriented thing, theatre. But it's high stress for the designer because everything must happen at the right time. You have to make sure the actors are hitting their marks and look good, and coordinate with the stage manager and sound department. And it all has to be seamless.

CTI: What was your favorite lighting fixture, accessory or technique to work with?

QM: My favorite is atmospheric treatments – hazers and foggers, as well as gobos – to create different moods. I love ETC ColorSource as an ellipsoidal spot fixture. As a small school, being able to use one fixture is very important for us, and that fixture is perfect for our needs. We use SHoW Baby for wireless DMX control of everything.

JO: At our school we used to have a rig of all conventional fixtures, like ETC Source Fours and Altman Fresnels, but we recently purchased a few Altman Spectra Star PAR Cans and Spectra Cyc 200 fixtures. With any of the LED fixtures I use, PAR or Cyc, I love the option to have multiple colors from one fixture. I especially love the vibrance of the colors, and gives me the option to use color to serve the scene as best as I can.

CTI: What factors enable your schools to accomplish such an artistically high level of work?

QM: Our community. We have a great network of professionals who are willing to teach us anything and everything. Our director, Martha Mechalakos, always says, “There's only one bar for theatre – not one for high school, and another one for Broadway.” She inspires us to do our best every day.

JO: I agree with Quinn – the success of our school's drama program is also due to our amazing community.



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It's a long-established program in my town, being around for 25+ years. We've also been fortunate to have great mentors. Stephen MacDonald, for example, was the director for our recent production of *Freaky Friday* and has taught me so much about theatre and design, and provided me with many opportunities.

CTI: Which professional designers inspire you?

JO: I like big Broadway shows, especially musicals designed by Natasha Katz. I loved her design for *School of Rock*, *Aladdin*, and *The Addams Family*. When I designed our version of the show, I was very inspired by her work.

QM: I love how Howell Binkley uses color, shape, and motion to move the story. It really influences your emotions while watching his shows.

CTI: What's your favorite show to watch, on Broadway or otherwise?

JO: I loved *Moulin Rouge*, which

“Our director always says, ‘There’s only one bar for theatre – not one for high school, and another one for Broadway’. She inspires us to do our best every day.” - *Quinn McDonald*

I recently saw in Boston. Justin Townsend’s design used color in such a beautiful way. It was well written and the music is amazing, but it’s his lighting design and the scenic design by Derek McLane that was most incredible for me.

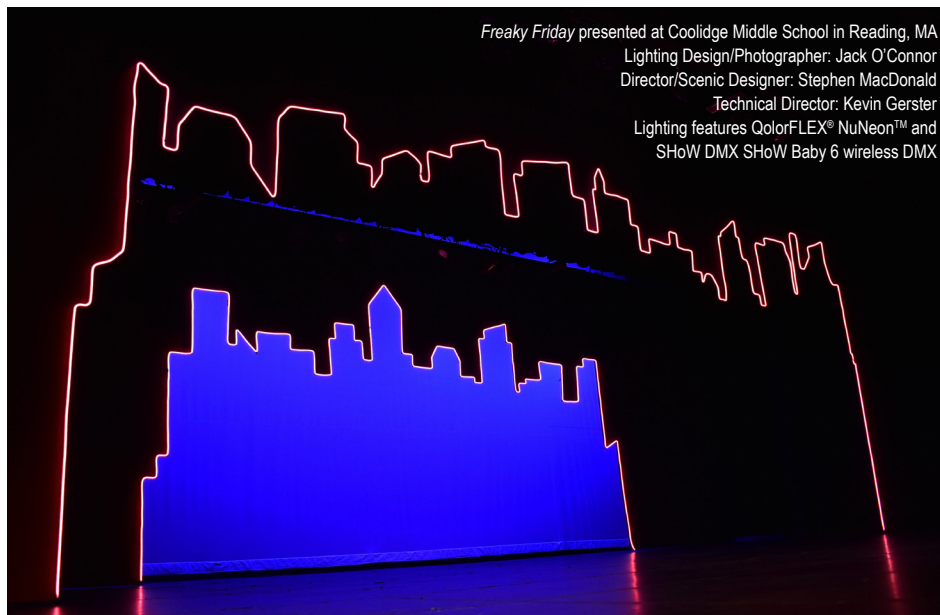
QM: I really liked *Wicked* on Broadway for how they used LEDs in their set, and all of the atmospheric. I loved *Hamilton*, but that kind of goes without saying. I also loved the color lighting in *Matilda*.

CTI: You are already working at a high level of skill and technology. Where do you go from here?

JO: Applying to college for lighting design, or theatre design. No decisions yet. I’m hoping to learn all the skills I can, and after college, work on Broadway. That’s the goal. But there’s so much amazing theatre out there. Anywhere I can express myself through lighting, I’ll be happy.

QM: I’ve also been looking at colleges with lighting design and theatre design programs, as well as internships to enhance my skills. I keep learning that there’s so much more to learn, and ways to grow in this field.

For more information, visit the portfolio websites for [Quinn McDonald](#) and [Jack O’Connor](#).



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- *Jack O’Connor*



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