



## Designer Q&A: Ken Billington on *Waitress the Musical* Japan Tour

Ever wonder what it's like to work on a theatrical production during the COVID-19 pandemic? We talked to Tony Award winning lighting designer Ken Billington of [KB Associates, Inc.](#) to learn more about his work on [Waitress the Musical Japan Tour](#), which opened at the Nassay Theatre in Tokyo, Japan, in early March 2021. Here's what we learned about his experience.



Lighting *Waitress the Musical* from London (left) with programmer Rob Halliday, New York (center) with lighting designer Ken Billington, associate lighting designer Aaron Porter, and production supervisor Mahlon Kruse, and Tokyo (right) with the lighting production team.

### Q&A:

**City Theatrical (CTI):** When did you start working on the *Waitress the Musical* Tokyo production?

**Ken Billington (KB):** We received the dates on February 11, 2020. The shop order was sent out on March 4, 2020. Load in March 2, 2021. Tech March 5, 2021. Opening was March 9, 2021 at the Nassay Theatre in Tokyo.

**CTI:** How was working remotely in NYC with your lighting console programmer being in London, while the production is operating in Tokyo? What are some challenges you had to overcome?

**KB:** On February 8th, I learned team lighting could not fly into Japan for the production. The biggest challenge was creating  
(Continued on page 2)

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- Ken Billington, Lighting Designer, *Waitress the Musical* Japan Tour

a system that allowed our lighting programmer in London to fully control the lighting rig half a world away. This included turning the encoder wheel in London to control a moving light in real time in Tokyo, and provide the read out in NYC. The second challenge was visual communication. We needed a system that connected the creative team, lighting team, and audio team to the various teams on site in Tokyo. In addition to verbal communication, broadcast quality cameras and microphones were needed to be our eyes and ears in the theatre. The last challenge was Covid and working in a confined space in New York we decided to be tested daily. Whereas the advantage of working at home in London is no masks, no tests.

Although the entire team was separated by oceans, continents, and time zones, everyone committed to the process to work together to get the show up.

**CTI: What was it like working with the production team in Japan?**

**KB:** I had worked with many of them on *West Side Story* last year in Tokyo and it was just like working with friends. 100% with us and helpful in any way to make the project successful. It never would have happened without the brilliant local crew in Japan working with Aaron, Rob and myself.

**CTI: What has your process been like, day to day?**

**KB:** NEW YORK:

Morning work notes 8PM-10PM.

Technical Rehearsals: 11PM-7AM.

End of Day: 8AM.

LONDON: 1AM to 1PM for the full working day.

**CTI: What's it like now, behind the scenes?**

**KB:** We have learned that video cameras can never replace our eyes to see the nuances of lighting in a live theatre performance. The show file was existing and the equipment was the same as a previous company so I trust that it all looks good. The new items were LED tape and Neon, which needed to be added into the show. We solved a real problem at the moment though this is not a solution for not traveling to light a show.

**CTI: How did you overcome the color limitations in the monitor, for an audience who would be viewing it live?**

**KB:** We could not. I had to believe the show file from the last company with all the color palettes that I usually use for my shows. For the LED Tape products, we tried to match the LED to the preexisting color palettes from the moving lights. I had to ask the electrician in Tokyo if it looked like it matched. The assistant choreographer who was there would give me levels on the light bulbs. It is not in any way a fulfilling way to do the art of stage lighting.

**“I had worked with many of [the local production team] on *West Side Story* last year in Tokyo, and for [*Waitress the Musical* Japan Tour] it was just like working with friends. 100% with us and helpful in any way to make the project successful. It never would have happened without the brilliant local crew working with Aaron, Rob and myself.”**

- Ken Billington, Lighting Designer, *Waitress the Musical* Japan Tour