



PROFESSIONAL PROFILE:

Name: Mitchell Fenton
Profession: Lighting Designer
Experience: 15+ Years
Location: New York, NY
Website: <http://mitchfentonld.com/>
Recent Shows: *MsTRIAL (Off-Broadway)*, *Swing! (NCL)*, *Dublin Nights (European tour)*, *Ballet Revolution (London, Germany, Dubai, Australia)*, *Prohibition The Musical (NCL)*, *Legends in Concert (NCL)*

Mitchell Fenton is an Australian-born, NYC-based lighting designer. His work has been seen all over the world. Credits include: MsTRIAL (Off-Broadway), Swing! (NCL), Dublin Nights (European tour), Ballet Revolution (London, Germany, Dubai, Australia), Prohibition The Musical (NCL), Legends in Concert (NCL). As an associate lighting designer, recent credits include: Harry Connick, Jr. – A Celebration of Cole Porter (Broadway), Waitress (Broadway), Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? (Broadway), Caroline or Change (Broadway), West Side Story (Stage Around Tokyo), Kinky Boots (National Tour), Rock of Ages (tenth anniversary U.S. tour).

THE INTERVIEW:

City Theatrical (CTI): Can you recall the first time you were in a theatre that made an impression on you?

Mitchell Fenton (MF): Yes, I was doing a production of the Australian play called *Così* in high school. I was running the light board. We had 24 dimmers, two Martin CX-2s, and a Jands Preset 60 Board. What fun it was!

CTI: Where did you get your training?

MF: I started my training as a lighting apprentice whilst I was in high school. I would work one to three days a week at the local theatre where I would get most of my practical experience and then take classes after school. After graduating high school, I went to study lighting at the [Western Australian](#)

[Academy of Performing Arts](#) (WAAPA) in Mount Lawley, Australia. On my final year of my degree, I emailed David Grill at the State University of New York, Purchase. I said I wanted to complete my senior year at [SUNY Purchase](#). After doing an interview with Dave, I packed my bags and moved to New York.

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

MF: After a year of hanging out in the theatre in high school and playing with lights, I asked my theatre teacher, Sharron Cronin, if I can do lighting design as a career. Sharron handed me [Richard Pilbrow's](#) book, *Stage Lighting Design*. After reading the book, I emailed one of the lighting designers in Richard Pilbrow's book, Ken Billington. Ken wrote back to me and told me exactly what the industry

was and what a career in lighting design would be in a very long email. He even told me to stay and work in Australia because of how hard it is to move to the United States. As soon as I found out that being a lighting designer was a career possibility, I was convinced I needed to move to America and be a lighting designer there.

CTI: What was your first paying lighting job?

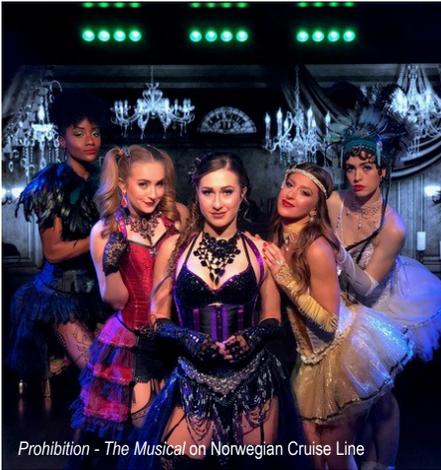
MF: My first paid design job would have been lighting a show in the local theatre's show room / dinner theatre. I was lighting dinner theatre shows once to twice a week whilst in high school. An act would come in for the weekend and I would light it, it was great fun.

CTI: What was it like trying to make a living as a lighting designer,



Sound Of The Silk Road Tech Table, Xi'an, China

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especially in the beginning?

MF: In the beginning it was very hard. You have to work extremely hard for not much money and go to every social occasion you can to meet people. I would email and call lots of people to go and observe them light shows at the tech table to learn how it's done. Sometimes a job would come out of that and sometimes it wouldn't. I always used being young and fresh out of school as an excuse to walk into a big place with important people.

CTI: Who have been your role models or influencers in your lighting career?

MF: I was fortunate enough to make contact with [Ken Billington](#) 15 years ago now and started working for him

around 10 years ago. Ken has helped me a lot and I'm very grateful for that. I've worked as an Associate Lighting Designer on many of Ken's shows and wouldn't change that for the world. I've also worked with some other fantastic designers such as Kenneth Posner, Marcia Madeira, Michael Buenen, Mike Baldassari, Paul Miller, Jules Fisher + Peggy Eisenhauer. I consider all of them to be strong role models and as a result have had a big influence on my career.

CTI: Describe the life of the professional lighting designer today.

MF: Life as a lighting designer often involves a lot of creative meetings, production meetings, rehearsals, technical rehearsals, previews, travel and long hours. Apart from the typical

technical rehearsal days, the life of a lighting designer is constantly working with other creatives to realize the concept, design and feel for a production. There is also a lot of travel involved. Prior to the pandemic, I was averaging about 40 flights per year for work. It is extremely long hours and hard work but the payoff of creating good work makes it all worth it.

A typical long day in the theatre would be arriving at 8am for the morning work call where you would get as many notes done as possible, focus notes, cue notes, lamp swaps etc. We would then break for lunch from 12pm to 1pm. After lunch we would return to technical rehearsals and rehearse with the cast from 1pm to 5pm. Dinner would be from 5pm to 6pm, cast back on stage at 6:30pm and finish rehearsal at 11:30pm or midnight. We would then gather for a quick production meeting, work out our schedule for the next day and then rush home to get to bed.

CTI: Describe the space where you do your design work.

MF: I would say there are two main spaces for design work. The office and the tech table. At the tech table there is often about 4 monitors to show me the cues, magic sheets and



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other important information about the lights, my laptop, magic sheets, and a script.

As for all the preparation design work that gets done before you get to the theatre, if I am lucky, I am at home at my desk working away. But the reality is that most of the time it is done in a hotel room or at the tech table over lunch and dinner breaks.

CTI: What has been your biggest thrill as a designer?

MF: I love the preview process and sitting next to audience members to hear their reaction. It's quite fascinating to hear people's responses and how they perceive things. I enjoy listening to audience members deconstruct what they have just experienced and how it relates to their personal experiences or other

productions they have seen.

CTI: Are there any skills or areas of knowledge (either lighting related or not) that you hope to develop in the future?

MF: As lighting design is creative, I think and hope that I am always developing new skills and knowledge within the field. I have a strong fascination with light itself and particularly the psychological and physical effects light has on people, this is something that I continue to research and learn about.

CTI: Thousands of young designers want to do what you do. Besides the artistic ability and technical craft of being a professional designer, what other skills or traits does it take to achieve success in your field?

MF: Being personable is important, you spend so much time around fellow designers and other production people, no one wants to work with someone who isn't friendly or fun. You also have to be willing to give it your all and keep going after 5 hours of sleep.

CTI: What is your advice for young lighting designers?

MF: On a show I did recently a student was asking us all for one piece of advice, to which a handful of us said the classic, "Shut up and listen". One of the other designers elaborated on that by saying that there are three questions you should always ask yourself before talking:

- 1 - Does it need to be said?
- 2 - Does it need to be said by me?
- 3 - Does it need to be said now?

I think this is great advice.



Apart from that, take care of yourself, we work 80-100+ hours a week whilst in production, selfcare is important when working this many hours in a week.

For more information on Mitchell Fenton, visit: <http://mitchfentonld.com/>

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