



By ANNE BARAJAS HARP

Behind the lights on
BROADWAY



Adam Honoré's lighting design for the Manila, Philippines, production of *The Band's Visit*.

OU lighting design graduates are in constant demand in theatres from New York to Paris and are earning the awards and frequent flyer miles to prove it.

T

wo lifelong rivals face off in a deadly confrontation, frozen in stark spotlight with dueling pistols drawn. A circle of pure white light shimmers with the tension between them.

The climactic scene of “Hamilton” is familiar to millions, yet few recognize that actors aren’t the only storytellers on the stage.

“Lighting design tends to be the thing people don’t notice and take for granted,” says Seth Gordon, director of the University of Oklahoma Helmerich School of Drama. “But if you stop and think, you’ll find that lighting is as integral to a story as the sets and costumes.”

With Broadway recently emerging from the longest blackout in its history, stages across the theatre district have flooded back to life. A cadre of BFA graduates from the School of Drama are among those lighting the way.

Adam Honoré, a 2015 graduate, recently became the first OU alumnus to head the lighting design for a Broadway production with his work on the play *Chicken and Biscuits*.

OU 2012 graduate and lighting programmer Brad Gray is on the team of three current Broadway smashes—*The Lion King*, *Jagged Little Pill* and *Moulin Rouge! The Musical*. *Moulin Rouge! The Musical* won the 2021 Tony Award for Best Lighting Design of a Musical, and *Jagged Little Pill* was nominated in the same category.

Honoré and Gray join the 90% of OU lighting design alumni working in their profession, from plays to musicals, special events and museum exhibitions, Gordon says. He believes the School of Drama program has set itself apart from dozens of peers across the nation.

“What makes us different is the breadth of our program,” Gordon explains. “Most BFAs teach students how to design for plays and maybe a musical. By the time OU’s lighting designers have graduated, they’ve done a play, a musical, an opera and, often, the world premiere of a dance concert. I’m not sure any other university offers this kind of experience at the undergraduate level.”

In fact, he says, OU lighting design students can dive into nine productions staged across five theatres each year.

“I had so many opportunities at OU to try different designs, and even to fail at designs,” says New Orleans native Adam Honoré, who was nominated for both a Drama Desk Award and the Helen Hayes Award within the first six years of his career. “I was able to design large shows with amazingly talented directors in main-stage productions while still in college, and that’s not something a lot of students get to experience.”

“When lighting professor Steven Draheim and I met Adam, we knew that he was going to be successful,” says Jon Young, a long-time professor of scenic design and coordinator of the OU School of Drama’s design and production area. “He’s brilliant. He understands the world of a play and how to create what he wants it to look like.”

As a lighting designer, Honoré collaborates with the director to evoke an atmosphere for each scene. He and a team of assistants typi-

cally work six to eight jam-packed weeks to create a design communicated through a lighting plot—an intricate blueprint incorporating physics, electronics and math used to select and position lighting instruments that sometimes number into the hundreds.

Honoré, age 28, says his process begins with self-reflection. “Reading a script for the first time, I’m thinking about the emotions I’m feeling in that moment. My lighting designs are emotionally based storytelling, and if I can support a story with an emotional arc, then I think I’ve done my job.”

Renée Brode, a busy designer in her own right and OU assistant professor of lighting design, acknowledges that the work is not unlike composing a musical score. “I call lighting ‘my favorite mixture of art and math.’”

Brode says the OU program trains students to note how light changes their surroundings and emotions by maintaining a “lighting journal,” a collection of photos and notes from daily observances.

“I’m thrilled every time a student says, ‘Hey, I took this fabulous picture of light hitting a tree,’” she shares. “Then we’ve succeeded, because they are looking around and noticing beautiful things in the world around them—and they will forever. We add those moments to an arsenal we can apply to a script or song and understand the impact of lighting on an emotional, creative level, moving a story forward while influencing an audience.”

Honoré recalls learning such moments from Jon Young and while traveling to Austria as a student lighting designer for OU School of Dance performances during The Haydn Festival, one of Europe’s most important music events. But Honoré’s life changed when he met visiting professional designer and New York City-based OU 2000 alum Driscoll Otto, whose resume includes Broadway and Metropolitan Opera productions.

“Driscoll would give me a note, or direction, and I’d go do it, but then I’d think, ‘Well, he’s going to want this color and for the light to be focused this way,’” Honoré says. “Driscoll caught on that I was helping realize the design and told me, ‘When you graduate, give me a call.’”

Hours after OU’s spring Commencement, Otto offered Honoré a job. “By that Monday, I had my ticket booked,” he says. Honoré was Otto’s assistant lighting designer across multiple productions for five years.

Like most lighting designers and programmers, his career is almost exclusively freelance and racks up frequent flyer miles. “At any given moment, I’m working on four to six shows at a time,” Honoré says. He has projects booked six months out, including a stage adaptation of Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* and a musical adaptation of the 1983 comedy *Trading Places*.



Jon Young, director of the OU School of Drama’s design and production area, and Renée Brode, OU assistant professor of lighting design, steer students through lighting designs for a wide range of productions, including plays, musicals, operas and dance concerts.

Freelance lighting programmer Brad Gray spends as many as 270 days a year on the road. For the past several months, he has been shuttling between Paris, where *The Lion King* will soon open, and London, where he is helping to stage *Moulin Rouge!*.

“I just kept taking every opportunity,” says the 32-year-old, who spoke during a rare break of four consecutive days. “I’ve programmed shows in the basement of churches with 45 seats to *Moulin Rouge!*, which is currently the largest musical on Broadway.”

Gray started out performing in children’s musical theatre in his hometown of Bartlesville, Okla., and gravitated toward the technical team when he caught sight of their weekly potluck dinner.

“They’d bring in homemade tamales, chili, deer sausage, the whole Oklahoma feast,” he says wistfully against the distinctive background noise of a Parisian police siren.

With tutelage from local mentors, Gray began running light and sound boards for high school productions and off-Broadway tours. By the time he came to OU, he’d helped stage nearly 40 shows.

Gray briefly majored in business, but participating in University Sing reignited his love of theatre. Like each Helmerich School of Drama student, he took a sequence of courses in acting, makeup, stagecraft and costumes before delving into an area of concentration.

“I started jumping in on every project that I could. I took extra crew assignments and asked some of the older lighting design students if I could work with them,” Gray says.

Young and fellow lighting design professor Steven Draheim soon realized that Gray had a gift for the complicated computer syntax of lighting programming.

“Most of my job is collaborating with the lighting designer to realize their vision,” he says. “I take their ideas and translate them into the computer console. Sometimes, it’s only a couple of lights, and sometimes it’s hundreds of lights at a time that are all chasing, blinking and changing colors.”

Between technical rehearsals and show previews, Gray’s



Travis Caperton

A generous OU lighting design alumni network helps students like senior Natalie Shipley to connect with professional job opportunities. Shipley will be off to start her career in New York after graduation.



Surrounded by screens, Brad Gray programs stage lighting for the Sydney, Australia, production of *Moulin Rouge! The Musical* in the historic Regent Theatre.

work stretches from 60 to 75 hours a week. His responsibilities typically end after opening night. An electrician takes over the pre-set, computerized program and Gray moves on to the next show, occasionally circling back to make small tweaks when productions move to new cities. He will travel with *Moulin Rouge!* to Germany and Japan in the next two years.

Gray says two of a designer's or programmer's most important assets are being able to work quickly and keeping a cool head in a pressure-filled atmosphere.

"Costume and set departments are able to work months ahead of tech week. But we're not able to accurately render light that far ahead of schedule. So, the room is usually waiting on the lighting designer to make decisions and, in turn, that responsibility falls on me as everyone is waiting for me to input the designer's decisions into the computer and make the lights turn on."

"The reason Brad is so highly in demand is how well and efficiently he does his job," Young says of his former student. "There are a lot of lighting programmers out there, but only a handful who are as good as he is."

Gray has been the programmer of choice more than 15 times for lighting designer Justin Townsend, who won the 2021 Tony Award and has been nominated for the prize a total of four times. Townsend thanked Gray and fellow lighting design team members by name during his acceptance speech.

"It was an awesome, awesome night," Gray says, adding that Townsend joined his team after the ceremony at New York's Tavern on the Green restaurant. "We all got to hold the Tony Award and give each other a big hug."

Gray and Honoré, like dozens before them, are doing their part to make sure future OU graduates get their shot at a similar experience as members of a dedicated alumni network.

"Our alumni base keeps connected to OU," Young says. "I'm always inquiring what sort of projects they're working on and if they have opportunities for students to assist or shadow." Honoré has met with students through Zoom and shares his lighting plots with OU classes as teaching tools. Pre-pandemic, Gray taught a master class in computer programming at OU every other year.

Young recently connected OU senior Natalie Shipley of Sugar Land, Texas, with a short-term job for Michael Cole, a New York designer and OU 2009 and 2011 alum, during a run of *Twelfth Night the Musical* in Wichita, Kan.

Shipley spent a month working on the project from home and one week on site in Wichita while keeping up with classes online. She was able to stay with the musical for opening night, which was attended by two of Shipley's professors.

"It was really special, since I'm graduating soon and making the transition into the professional world," she says, adding that she will be moving to New York after graduation in hopes of kicking off her career in lighting design. "It's great knowing that I'll still have my professors cheering me on even as I leave OU."

Somewhere on the road between New York, London and Paris, Honoré and Gray's own careers are still unfolding.

"It never gets old," Gray says of a life in theatre lighting design. "When the bass drum drops and the lights go down, when the audience starts screaming, that's something you don't forget.

"It's a pretty cool job, I can't lie. I count myself very lucky." 🍷

Anne Barajas Harp is associate editor of Sooner Magazine.