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fOCUS

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Lighting Design: From Source to Subject



My Spoiled Five-Year Plan

Or...

“How I Ended Up Working as an Assistant to Richard Pilbrow And Then Became The Production Manager For A Major Performing Arts Centre”

Working for a major producer of live theatre in a world-class venue was not a part of my “five year plan” while I was in graduate school. While completing studies for a Master of Fine Arts degree in Lighting Design and Technical Direction at the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (commonly known as Virginia Tech), a student’s five-year plan was a required portion of the curriculum. This plan was updated each year during the three-year program. My five-year plan upon my final review had me working as a lighting designer for regional theatre and stock and travelling throughout North America.

In reality, I did not complete many elements of my five-year plan as it was written. Year one of my life after graduate school saw me working as the Resident Lighting Designer and Technical Director for the largest professional theatre company in the State of Arkansas. Not to say too many disparaging things about the city of Little Rock, suffice it to say that one should be a bit leery of a city whose tallest building is owned by a frozen yogurt company. While the product of the company was good, and the facility in which I worked was more than adequate, I spent the worst year of my life while in this job. The one bright spot in this year was

reconnecting with the woman who would later become my wife.

After quitting my job in Arkansas, my second year out of grad school saw me mostly unemployed. While I was able to pick up a couple of free-lance assignments, I made no headway in nailing down jobs that would get my plans back on track. In fact, I found that my degree was a detriment to me in finding work. “Overqualified” was a word that often made its way into conversations that I had with prospective employers. With finances dwindling, I had to move back in to my mother’s house. Even though I was unemployed with few, if any, prospects, my recently reconnected lady friend accepted my proposal of marriage. Because she was Canadian and I was from the United States we had to strike a deal.

Said deal was the agreement that the one who had the better job would decide in which country we would reside. Now, approaching my third year out of graduate school, my five-year plan was in a total shambles. Because my wedding took place while I was unemployed, I basically had to move to Canada by default. This move totally destroyed any hope of getting my plans back on track. With no contacts in Canada in the industry, I was pretty much at a loss to even know where to start. Luckily, my new sister-in-law had a few ideas.

One of the first things that she suggested was to contact PACT, the Professional Association of Canadian Theatres. She also suggested that I contact Theatre Ontario. I



did both. Through PACT and Theatre Ontario I was able to get listings of all of the professional theatres in Canada. By contacting the Associated Designers of Canada, I was also able to get some leads on Canadian designers who might be in need of assistants. I sent out literally hundreds of letters and resumes. The result of this barrage of mail was FOUR replies! Two of said replies were of the “Thanks but no thanks” variety and the other two were requests for more information. Neither of the two asking for more info ended up panning out. Things were looking bleak.

One of the many letters that I sent out was to a company that was then called “Live Entertainment Canada.” This letter although it drew no response was to be a key element in my future. One day while scanning the Help Wanted section of the newspaper, I happened upon an ad seeking crew for a production of Show Boat at the new North York Performing Arts Centre. This came as a bit of a surprise to me as I figured that any show on this scale would be using an IATSE (International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees) crew. Surprise or no, I fired off a letter and resume telling the producers that I was willing to do any job available with the production. A few weeks later, I saw on the local news that the IATSE and Live Entertainment Canada had reached a collective agreement regarding the new North York Performing Arts Centre. I figured that was that, but I figured wrong.

Several weeks after the news report, I

received a telephone call from a gentleman at Live Entertainment asking me if I would be interested in working as an assistant on the lighting design team for Show Boat. My first question was “Who’s the designer?” When I heard the answer, I could barely choke out my next question; “Where and when do you need me next?” I was told that Richard Pilbrow’s associate Dawn Chiang would call me to arrange for an interview. This call came a few days later, and I soon found myself in what would come to be known as “Livent World Headquarters.” I guess that I came off better than I thought I had during my interview with Dawn, as Show Boat Company Manager Paul Shaw then soon contacted me. When asked if \$500.00 a week would be acceptable pay, it was an effort to keep from blurting out that I would have been glad to work for free.

Getting the chance to work with Richard Pilbrow was an invaluable experience for me. Everyone should be so lucky. I had a great time during the production period. I learned many valuable lessons, but am sure that with all that has happened since that time there is still an accountant out there who is still thinking that there was something fishy about those over \$300.00 in receipts that I turned in for ‘M&M’s!’ I was thinking that the opening of Show Boat would spell the end of that chapter of my life, but it turned out to be just the beginning.

Long story short, my tenure as Mr. Pilbrow’s 2nd Assistant led to a job offer by



FAME! The Musical

Livent to be the Technical Supervisor for the North York Performing Arts Centre's 200 seat Studio Theatre. That job led to an offer to be the Associate Production Manager for the facility, and that in turn led to my promotion to Production Manager. So, five years out from graduate school I found that my five-year plan was a total disaster. However, working on such shows as Show Boat, Sunset Boulevard, Ragtime and Fosse as well as being able to work with dozens of international stars was something that I didn't dare dream of while I was doing my studies.

Things in my life have changed dramatically since the heyday of Livent Inc. But that is a different story.

Charles Kaiser

FAME! The Musical

I threatened you with my write-up on Fame the Musical in a previous issue.....so here it is folks.

Tour, tour and tour again

"Fame The Musical" has been running for years in the UK. The production as we know it appeared in London at the Cambridge Theatre several years ago. It was a hit and audiences loved it. So the producers took it on tour around the UK and asked me to light it for them. So I did and was grateful for the work. It toured and toured. Then it went to the Victoria Palace for a Xmas run. Then it toured again and eventually parked up for the winter at the Prince of Wales

Theatre. Then it toured again. It went in for its MOT test a couple of times and has had a few face-lifts. Now it has been moored up again at the Cambridge Theatre, London.

Hammers and Chainsaws

Then, guess what? It was launched again for a UK tour as well as staying at the Cambridge. This time the tour has a very different look. The set is a lot different and fresher and the lighting rig is even bigger! I have swapped out most of the generics for moving lights and the result is bigger, brighter and far more dynamic than before. I upgraded the London rig with some enthusiasm as I was allowed to shovel a considerable number of extra movers into the rig to give it a certain wobbliness never experienced before on Fame. The resulting effect was worth the effort and sweat and a rather heated production week. We had a few problems with the 8no MAC 2000's, as they were playing up rather and caused some consternation with the ever patient LD and the deeply concerned Production Electricians! We had Martin Professional hanging about with screwdrivers and test gear for days. When they weren't looking, we had Electricians hanging about with Hammers and Chainsaws just in case something needed fixing quickly! Still, all that's another story.

The remaining movers are MAC 600's and strike me as an incredibly versatile and very reliable unit. Congratulations to Martin. It is bright, vivid and pretty quick. Extra facilities like diffusion and beam shape are very useful indeed.