

Case Study:
Donald Holder
Lighting Design, Inc.



TONY AWARD WINNER DON HOLDER LIGHTS *THE BRIDGES OF MADISON COUNTY*





Holder lit the cornfield and horizon detail on a translucent sky using backlight reflected off a bounce drop.

For Donald Holder, a two-time Tony Award® winner with 10 nominations under his belt, there's nothing more exciting than being in the theatre. After all, it's where he gets to reveal the world of a great play or musical and help create something special that transports audience members to a magical place, allowing them to forget their cares for a few hours each night.

It's a love born from spending his youth seeing Broadway shows, opera, ballet, and symphony orchestra performances, and studying violin, tuba, and string bass. "The first musical I remember seeing was *A Fiddler On The Roof*," Holder says. "I was profoundly affected by it, even at the tender age of five or six, so I'm incredibly excited to light the upcoming revival in the fall of 2015." Another positive influence was Lighting Designer Tharon Musser. "I'll never forget seeing her incredible work on *A Chorus Line* when I was a teenager," recalls Holder. "It was her work that really allowed me to see the power, beauty, and poetry of stage lighting for the first time."

As he neared college, Holder was equally passionate about theatre, music, and the outdoors, so he attended The University of Maine, where he majored in forestry while pursuing theatre and music in a vibrant performing arts program. After graduating, he spent three years as a technical director and lighting designer at Muhlenberg College before earning a master in fine arts from the Yale School of Drama. "It was at Yale, under the extraordinary mentorship of Jennifer Tipton, where I developed a clear understanding of technique and process that would serve as the foundation for my career," he recalls.

Today, Holder has one full-time employee at Donald Holder Lighting Design, Inc., and he hires freelancers when needed. About 75% of his work is in theatre, opera, and dance, and 25% is in other disciplines, including architecture. In the last 18 months, he's designed the lighting for seven musicals, five plays, three operas, a season of episodic television ("Smash" on NBC), one episode of "Law and Order," and two restaurants.

Holder's Tony Award-winning projects include *The Lion King* directed by Julie Taymor and the 2008 Broadway revival of *South Pacific*, produced in the Vivien Beaumont Theatre, Holder's favorite place to work. When reflecting on these projects, he says, "they were memorable for different reasons, and each had its own particular challenges. These shows represent moments in my career where all the elements were in place for me to do my best work with an extraordinary group of collaborators."

Case Study: Donald Holder Lighting Design, Inc.

Creating Iowa's Plains

Holder's success with past collaborators led him to one of his more recent projects as the lighting designer for Broadway's *The Bridges of Madison County*. Based on a novel written by Robert James Waller, *Bridges* is a romantic musical that gives two strangers, a photographer and an Iowa farm wife, a second chance at love. Holder's work on the production earned him a 2014 Tony Award nomination for Best Lighting Design in a Musical.

"We see the world of *Bridges* through a photographer's eye, so light plays a key metaphorical and storytelling role," says Holder, who was hired for the project in late 2012, based on his long, collaborative relationship with the production's director, Bartlett Sher, as well as other designers on the team. The musical had a developmental

production the following summer at the Williamstown Theatre Festival, so design work began in earnest in late spring of 2013. The Broadway production period began on January 2, 2014. Opening night at the Gerald Schoenfeld Theatre was six weeks later.

"The scenic design was sparse and elemental, conceived to allow light to do a large part of the storytelling," Holder says. "The lighting was responsible for creating shifts in time, weather, season, location, and interior versus exterior, and there were often multiple locations revealed simultaneously. So the biggest challenge for me was to find the large 'brushstrokes' of light via variations in angle and color that could reveal this single space in a multitude of ways."



The scene and Holder's communicative lighting design capably suggest the vast Iowa landscape.

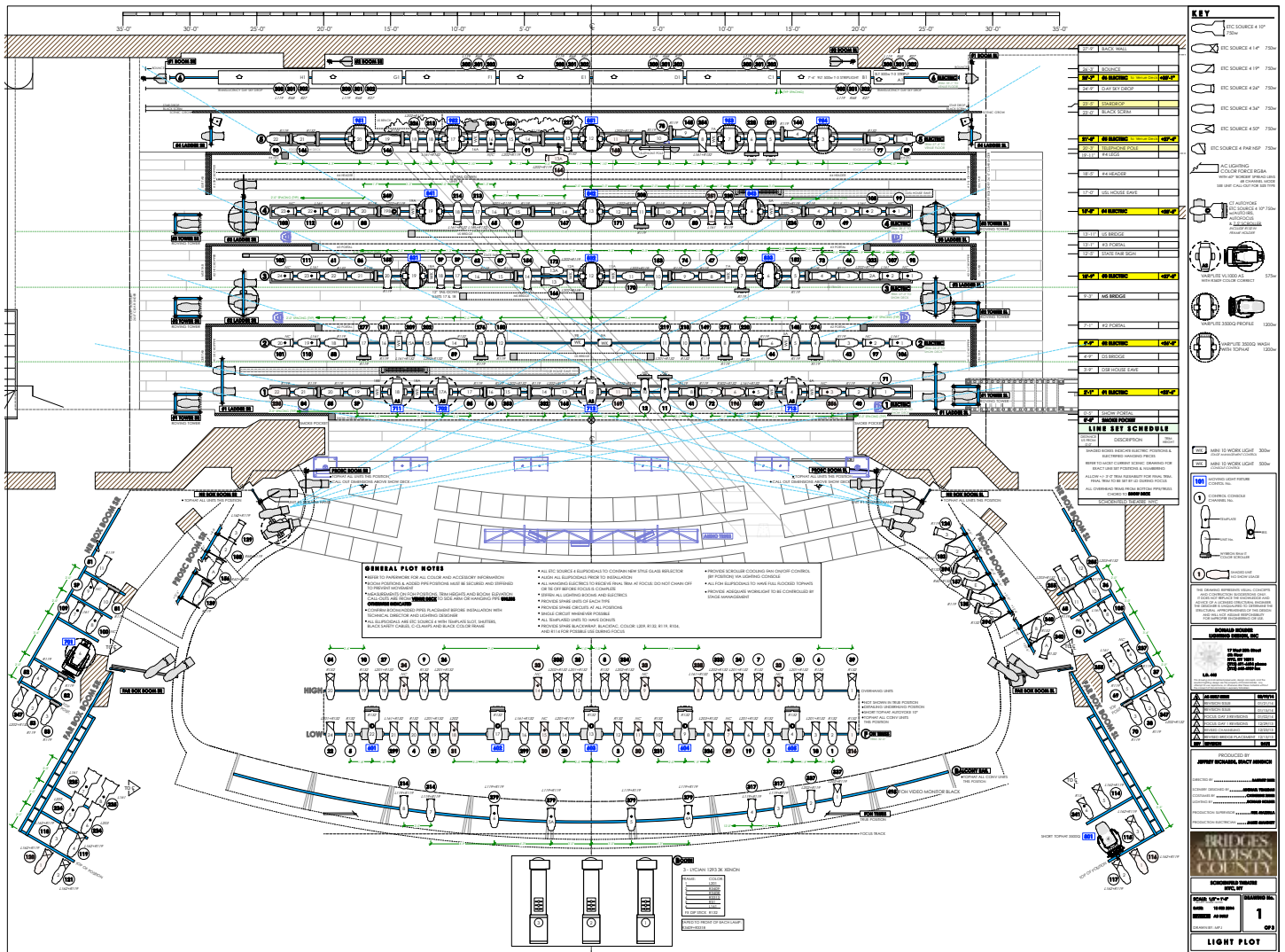


To meet the play's fluid staging needs, Holder's cueing was nonstop. Scenes shifted quickly among minimalist sets like the kitchen shown here, the bridge, the Iowa plains, Italy, the state fair, and more.

The set featured a large painted cyclorama evoking the endless horizon and cornfields of Iowa. This horizon drop needed a substantial amount of depth in order to be properly illuminated. "Unfortunately, the shallow confines of the Schoenfeld Theatre did not allow for this, so I had to develop some rather unusual solutions to create the illusion of a vast, unending horizon with about half the space typically available," says Holder. "I've been developing techniques for lighting the cyclorama that stretch back over 15 years with my work on *The Lion King* [for which he won the 1998 Tony Award for Best Lighting Design and the Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Lighting Design]. "Some of those techniques, with variations, of course, were quite useful in tackling similar challenges I faced with *Bridges*."

For example, the painted detail on the translucent sky drop is revealed using backlight reflected off a white bounce, or reflector, rigged about 20' upstage of the sky. "By evoking the hazy glow of the sun behind a lone tree that was featured prominently in the scenic design, we were able to achieve an even greater illusion of depth," Holder explains. He created this second layer of light using a position (fitted with PARS and color-changers) squeezed between the bounce and the back wall of the theatre, painted white for the production. "The white brick surface reacted just like a second bounce, and the reflected light created a localized soft glow on the sky exactly as I had hoped," he adds.

As another example, a fantasy sequence at the top of Act Two required that the image of Iowa magically fade away to reveal a more abstract and distant landscape. "We accomplished this by simply shifting from backlight to deep indigo front-light on the drop, which created a sky of a very different quality," Holder says.

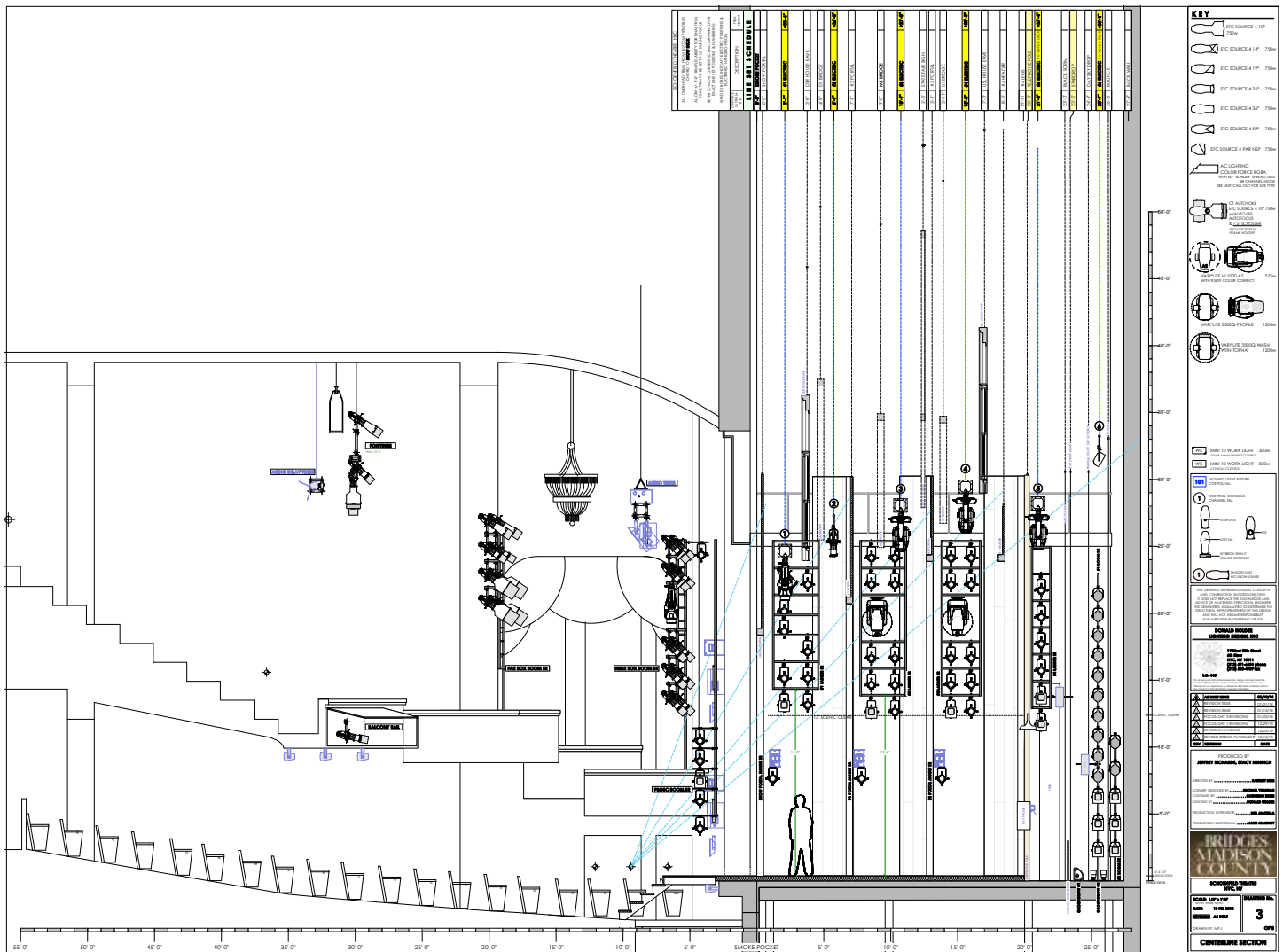


Don Holder's lighting design groundplan for the Schoenfeld Theatre production of *The Bridges of Madison County* done in Vectorworks Spotlight.

Vectorworks Creates a Build-Ready Reality

To create such build-ready realities, Holder turns to Vectorworks Spotlight software, having started his career with its earlier version, MiniCAD, when creating multiple productions of *The Lion King*. "Hand-drafting almost identical versions of the same show in different venues seemed terribly inefficient, so we moved to Vectorworks in the 1990s and have never looked back," Holder says. "I personally use Vectorworks quite often and draft smaller projects on my own, but typically I'm making edits versus creating large drawings from scratch. I often accomplish a lot of 3D visualization in my head, sketch out ideas on paper, and then translate them into a digital format."

For *Bridges*, Holder enlisted Associate Lighting Designer Michael P. Jones, who used the data exchange with Lightwright® v5 to translate Holder's hand-drafted lighting layouts for the Williamstown production into the Schoenfeld Theatre-specific light plot. Transferring a majority of instrument attributes, including purpose, color, and templates, from the earlier show through the lighting production tool enabled the information to seamlessly integrate into the Broadway version's Vectorworks Spotlight light plot.



This section view from the Schoenfeld Theatre production of *The Bridges of Madison County* shows light and audio positions, as well as the tightly packed bounce lighting.

“Vectorworks has become such a reliable standard in the theatrical design industry in expressing our theatrical visions into build-ready reality,” Jones says, noting that *Bridges* benefitted from having three disciplines all using the program to execute their designs. Scenic Designer Michael Yeargan’s associate Mikiko Suzuki McAdams and Sound Designer Jon Weston’s associate Jason Strangfeld both drafted their designs using Vectorworks, “which made the scenic, lighting, and audio integration into the master build schematic easy, as well as updates and revisions simple without having to convert from DWG/DXF. I am continually pleased with the powerful productivity features that Vectorworks Spotlight provides in helping me draft an aesthetically pleasing light plot out of which became a beautifully realized design element of a wonderful production.”

The workflow went like this: Jones sent the preliminary Vectorworks drafting to Sound Designer Weston, who then inserted the speaker locations he required in those areas not already occupied by lighting gear. Weston shared this information with Holder and Jones, who incorporated both speakers and lighting into the final “build” documents. There was a similar process for scenic design. “We inserted our lighting positions into the scenic plan and section, also created using Vectorworks, and shared these details with Mikiko,” Holder explains. “This made her aware of the exact location, footprint, and dimensions of all our lighting equipment, so she could adjust the location of flying elements, tracking units, masking, etc., to avoid any conflicts.”



The design team's restraint enabled them to deliver a romantic Broadway show.

Holder's Future Playbill

Looking to the near future, Holder is working on *Faust* by Charles Gounod at the Festspielhaus Baden-Baden, Germany's largest opera house and concert hall with 2,500 seats. He's also acquiring skills in 3D rendering—"not necessarily 'new technology,' but new for me and an increasingly important tool," Holder adds.

He's also excited about emerging technology. A good example is *Spiderman Turn Off The Dark*, for which Holder employed over 1,000 LED fixtures of various types and description. "In every case, I felt the LED source was really the only choice that would do the job," he says. "I'm a firm believer that the design must always drive the technology. Technology makes big ideas possible, but without that great idea, all the bells and whistles ultimately add up to nothing."

There is indeed a lot to learn in the area of LED and phosphor panel technology and the digital control systems that drive them. However, Holder is uncertain whether all this progress is positive. "I worry sometimes we're losing sight of the fact that the theatre can and should be a safe haven from the barrage of unrelenting 'noise' we encounter in our daily lives," he says. "I hope that despite the inevitable changes we will confront moving forward, we won't ever forget that less can still be more."

Acknowledgements

Profiled firm:

Donald Holder Lighting Design, Inc.
17 West 20th St., 6th Floor
New York, NY 10011

Images:

Photos courtesy of Joan Marcus.
Vectorworks drawings courtesy of Don Holder Lighting Design, Inc.
Photos feature Lead Actress Kelli O'Hara, Lead Actor Steven Pasquale, and Supporting Actor Hunter Foster.

Original text and publication by:

Nemetschek Vectorworks, Inc.
7150 Riverwood Drive
Columbia, MD 21046 USA

Phone: 410-290-5114
Fax: 410-290-8050
Web: www.vectorworks.net

Find your distributor:

For sales information and to identify your local distributor, visit www.vectorworks.net/international

© 2014 Nemetschek Vectorworks, Inc.
Vectorworks is a registered trademark of Nemetschek Vectorworks, Inc.
Lightwright is created by professional designer John McKernon.
All rights reserved.