

**NOTABLE USERS**

Beverly Emmons | New York, New York

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# notable

## **Beverly Emmons: Lighting Broadway, Enlightening Tomorrow**



Tony Award® winning lighting designer Beverly Emmons was an undergraduate when her dance studies took her to the American Dance Festival at Connecticut College. There, she encountered lighting designers Tom Skelton and Jean Rosenthal and became fascinated by their profession, finding herself far more excited about supporting and illuminating productions than performing in them.

Emmons studied at Sarah Lawrence College and in her junior year attended a Saturday lighting class at the Lester Polakov Studio taught by Jean Rosenthal, Thomas Skelton, Tharon Musser, and Chuck Levy, some of the brightest stars in the business. Early in her senior year, Emmons was offered her first lighting design job with the legendary Merce Cunningham Dance Company. During the three and a half years touring with his company, she also assisted Broadway lighting designer and producer Jules Fisher, who has won a record eight Tony Awards for lighting design. Over the years, Emmons has lit Broadway and Off-Broadway shows, regional theater, dance, opera, and even a Disney World show. She says, "It's a privilege to work with many different artists and all kinds of theatrical styles."

Her lighting won a Tony Award for the 1980 Broadway production of *Amadeus*, and she has received seven Tony nominations for her work on other productions. She also earned a Lumen Award, shared with Robert Wilson, for *Einstein on the Beach*, an Obie for Distinguished Lighting, two Bessie Awards, and five American Theater Wing Design Awards. She has worked with many interesting directors over the years, from Graciela Daniele, Tommy Tune, and James Lapine on Broadway, to the prominent Romanian directors Lucian Pintilie and Liviu Cuilei at the Arena Stage in Washington, DC. "In dance I worked with both

Martha Graham and Merce Cunningham [the innovators of modern dance]," remarks Emmons. "They were wonderful."

A freelancer, Emmons brings in assistants and associates with specific skills for each project. She teaches her own workshops and has also lectured at Columbia University, Pratt Institute, New York University, Yale, and other institutions. Her philosophy is simple. "I like to call lighting design a secondary art form," she says. "We support and reveal the work that somebody else is making."

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— Beverly Emmons, Lighting Designer,  
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*Embattled Garden from Martha Graham Dance Company.*

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### **A MASTERPIECE SHINES ON: THE MARTHA GRAHAM DANCE COMPANY**

The legendary modern dancer and choreographer Martha Graham founded the Martha Graham Dance Company, which moved audiences for much of the 20th century, in 1926. When Graham approached Emmons in 1982 to light the entire repertory, Emmons was honored to carry on the renowned tradition. "It's not my lighting as much as a continuation of lighting designs done by Jean Rosenthal, the original lighting designer who worked with Graham from 1936-1969. I'm making the lighting modern for now, but keeping it within the vocabulary of the period because Graham is period work," says Emmons. "People say, 'there's nothing new here,' and my answer to them is 'you don't go to a museum and throw out the Picassos because they're out of date. They are the treasures of their period.'"

The company tours many countries across the world, moving constantly from theater to theater. In collaboration with the touring lighting supervisor, Judith Daitzman, Emmons uses computer-driven technology to communicate the lighting needs of the company in advance of their arrival. She relies on Vectorworks® Spotlight software with Lightwright® to manage it all. Whether the company is performing in Tel Aviv, Istanbul, Milan, or Honolulu, the show needs to look the same. Emmons and Daitzman continually adapt the lighting to new theaters, new architecture, new equipment, and new countries' crews. "There's a tremendous amount of information going back and forth between the touring lighting designer and the venues and they can be explicit about what they have. They send drawings to us, we send drawings back to them, and we can

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*Beverly Emmons and Judith Daitzman collaborate on lighting design for the Martha Graham Dance Company.*

conference] that I've been doing lighting for 45 years and we've had new technology every step of the way. In each case, you absorb what the new vocabulary is and you make it work for the show, because that's what lighting design is for: theater, dance, opera, whatever it is." Emmons believes that ultimately the technology that wins is the one that works reliably and in the context of how speedy and accurate lighting designers have to be. "In the case of Vectorworks software," she states, "it is also how widespread the communication is, and that's what makes it successful."

### ILLUMINATING THE PAST FOR THE FUTURE

Modern theatrical lighting has been a growing industry for the past sixty years. Big commercial productions have always kept elaborate documentation in order to maintain long-running shows. Yet until now, these documents, including plots, focus charts, cue sheets, and other information from past shows, have been saved in the designers' personal storage. Emmons, with the support of several notable lighting designers, conceived and created two very important efforts to digitally archive historic documents for future generations of lighting designers and students of lighting design. To preserve and make accessible the lighting documents for many shows from Broadway and beyond, she is building the Theatrical Lighting Database ([lightingdb.nypl.org](http://lightingdb.nypl.org)), an arm of the New York Public Library, and The Lighting Archive ([www.thelightingarchive.org](http://www.thelightingarchive.org)). The latter even features a 1948 Martha Graham *Errand Into the Maze* blueprint by Jean Rosenthal, among other high-profile show documents such as Ken Billington's *Sweeney Todd*, Gilbert Hemsley's *Porgy and Bess*, and soon-to-come Natasha Katz' 2006 adaptation of Tharon Musers' *A Chorus Line*.

Emmons explains the mission: "The whole idea is to show what people did as the technology of lighting design got more complicated and enabled far more sophisticated aesthetic choices. We're trying to include not only the preproduction paperwork—the big drawings, the hookups, and shop orders...to order the equipment—but the actual results of the process in the theater. We're making accessible the focus charts and the cues so that these works can be reproduced and we can see this lighting." Emmons herself has used

be certain of the drawings' accuracy even when they're coming from abroad and they're metric. Vectorworks works very well for dance that must use an ongoing light plot that can change only slightly, but must support the lighting for many different ballets. The [program's] layering function enables the lighting designer to turn layers on and off for specific works, so that the specials and color for a single evening of three ballets is instantly available, emailable, or printable."

### EMPOWERED THROUGH TECHNOLOGY

A Vectorworks Spotlight software user since 2001, Emmons wishes the program had been available when she started in the industry. "You're constantly making changes and the documentation is fabulous—to be able to quickly fill in all that information is great. Drawing by hand you had a blueprint and a little tube of Wite-out®. You erase the thing that is different and you draw on it again." Conversely, Emmons can make changes quickly and easily with her software, whether she's designing around an air conditioning duct that wasn't mentioned up front, or an architectural feature that wasn't anticipated.

On a recent visit to China for the International Lighting Design Conference, Emmons noticed that the focus was on how new technology would be used and what it would change. "I said [at the

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Lighting for *Twelfth Night*.

the Rosenthal *Errand into the Maze* paperwork to cue her Martha Graham show. “I could see what lighting then looked like, and how exactly it looked different from now. It’s not only the equipment, it’s also its location, focus, and how it is used. In 1948 you didn’t see any light rays, shafts—you only saw the dancers, whereas now we expect to see light rays in the air, moving lights,

and strong colors. None of that was possible then, but therefore none of that was in the aesthetic either—you didn’t need it. In modernizing it, I kept the simpler look with the same colors, but made it brighter and more rounded with the same subtle cues.”

With her rich background, Emmons can chronicle the evolution of lighting design in the theater industry—from resistance dimmers to LEDs, and from paper and pencil through computer-aided design. “Computer drafting became most efficient when it could combine with the Lightwright program and go back and forth between Lightwright and Vectorworks,” she says. “I think what’s wonderful about all the computer work is that it’s quick, it’s easy, and it’s accurate. Once the documents are created they are easily amendable as the project evolves. And that’s great.”

What’s next? “Always, the limit is the time to work, the human capital to make it beautiful,” Emmons muses. “Lighting design is like a painter standing in front of a painting except that painting changes every time an actor takes a step and a lighting designer is deciding whether or not to make a new painting there. So for absolutely every moment on a stage the lighting designer has decided how you should see it. The time to program all of that and to do all of that work is what is deeply costly. The technology that shortens and simplifies that process is the technology that is successful.”

One thing is certain. The technology will keep evolving, and the best will always rise to the top. With Emmons’ talent and her drive to save the ideas of prominent lighting designers, the field of lighting design will continue its brilliant evolution.

### Profiled Designer:

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### Credits:

Headshot, photo courtesy of Blanche Mackey.

Embattled Garden, photo courtesy of Michele Ballantini. Martha Graham Dance Company dancers: Maurizio Nardi and Carrie Ellmore-Tallitsch.

Beverly Emmons and Judith Daitzman at work, photo courtesy of Peter Angelo Simon.

*Twelfth Night*, courtesy of University of Tennessee. Scenic design by Kevin Rigdon, photographer unknown.

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### BROADWAY SHOWS WITH LIGHTING DESIGN BY BEVERLY EMMONS:

- *Amadeus* (Tony Award)
- *Annie Get Your Gun*
- *Jekyll & Hyde*
- *The Heiress*
- *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*
- *Stephen Sondheim’s Passion*
- *Abe Lincoln in Illinois*
- *High Rollers*
- *Stepping Out*
- *The Elephant Man*
- *A Day In Hollywood/ A Night in the Ukraine*
- *The Dresser*
- *Pilaf*
- *Doonesbury*