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S1E4: How do you get from the Maine woods to Broadway?

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The Maine Question podcast transcript

S1E4: How do you get from the Maine woods to Broadway?

[Repetitive, pulsing background music]

00:00:03 Ron Lisnet

Hello and welcome to The Maine Question, a podcast series from the University of Maine. I'm your host Ron Lisnet. In this episode we explore the unique career path of lighting designer Don Holder, UMaine Class of 1981, who has worked on Broadway, in film and television, opera and dance across the globe. His lighting designs have earned 13 Tony Award nominations and two wins, most notably for Disney's *The Lion King*, which guarded him his first award in 1998. That show continues to fill the seats on Broadway and around the world.

In 2008, he won a second Tony for lighting the Broadway revival of *South Pacific*.

The unique part of the story begins in the late 70s when Don Holder was, of all things, a Forestry major at the University of Maine. He graduated with that degree, but he also took full advantage of a broad education in the Liberal Arts. He pursued his lifelong passion for the Performing Arts, playing in music ensembles and lighting numerous productions for Maine Masque, the theatre group at UMaine. Earlier in the fall of 2019, his unique career path brought him full circle back to where his artistic journey began and Hauck Auditorium on the UMaine campus. He was back to speak to students and faculty about the art of lighting and the world of Broadway. An unfortunate spell of bad weather cut short some of his interactions with the UMaine theater community, but he did find time to talk to us about his work, the state of Broadway today, the role of a lighting designer, and the answer to our Maine Question for this podcast: how do you get from the Maine woods to The Great White Way of Broadway?

[Music swells, then begins to fade]

00:01:45 Don Holder

I mean, it's amazing to be here; the last time I think it was 38 years ago.

[Music ends]

00:01:50 Don Holder

It just seems, well, you know how people always say time has flown by. It seems like a long time ago, but the memories are quite vivid. I just remember Maine Masque Theatre parties on the stage and all the friends I had and all the hours I spent here and all the joyous times I shared.

I think that the greatest thing that came out of my experience at Maine Masque was understanding that making theater was about being part of a community, and it's the community aspect of theater making that has always been what has attracted me more than anything else. And it was really here where I learned that in a profound way. And it's the only time, here, that I acted—was at the University of Maine. And that was fun.

00:02:39 Ron Lisnet

So, you did lighting, you did...you played music, you acted a little bit. Just talk about some of the...you remember some shows or experiences?

00:02:46 Don Holder

I think the first show I worked on here was a lighting operator for *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* and it was an amazing production, at least I remember it vividly. I couldn't tell you who was in the cast now, but my experience here was quite extraordinary. When I think back, it was sort of a self-designed Liberal Arts education. I was a Forestry major, but it turns out that my lighting mentor, Al Cyrus was also a Forestry major at the University of West Virginia before he studied theater. So, he had...he really was interested in mentoring me and sort of nurturing my interest in lighting, which was always a big interest of mine since I was 13. So, I had huge opportunities here in the theater program, and I was equally passionate about making music. Um, I was a bass player and a tuba player. I played in many ensembles. I took...I studied privately. I was a soloist with the University bands and with the 20th Century Music Ensemble. So, I have, like an extraordinary sort of training in formal training and experiences in the arts, as well as the Sciences. I don't know if I would have gotten that anywhere else. So, it was sort of a perfect place for me.

00:03:59 Ron Lisnet

You majored in Forestry. How did that affect your journey to any of that creep into your endeavors in the arts?

00:04:07 Don Holder

It was interesting having a degree in Forestry and then pursuing a career in the arts. I mean, the crossover from what you learn in Forestry. There's not a lot of direct referential material to the work I do now, but what was interesting is especially early in my career, it was very helpful.

It was very...People were intrigued by the fact that I was a Forestry major and that it really separated me from the crowd, from all the other graduates with a BA in Theatre or a BFA in theater. I was sort of the one person in the pile of resumes who had a very different background and, um, but the one time it really served me well was: I worked for two summers with the National Park Service and I was a guide in Mammoth Cave National Park, and they hired me because of my dual interest because I had had experienced in the theater and also in the outdoors. So, I was a guide. I took people on guided tours through the cave system because they figured I must be a good public speaker. I knew about the theater and performing and also Forestry, so I guess that's a good example, yeah?

00:05:20 Ron Lisnet

You talked about having a fascination with light from the time you were a boy. Where did that come from?

00:05:26 Don Holder

I don't know why I was fascinated with light, I just always was I. I was always drawn to it. I remember my parents taking me to the theater. Maybe I was five or six, and I remember, I remember the lighting from *Fiddler on the Roof*, which was the first show I saw. And I remember feeling the light change and how it made me feel as an audience member. That, that was sort of a palpable experience, but in... throughout

my childhood, I seem to be the person who was the manipulator of light even in Boy Scouts. I was the kid who built the campfires and the bonfires and lit the ceremonial trails for the *Order of the Arrow* ceremonies and sort of...I just kind of fell into lighting in every sort of aspect of my life.

00:06:14 Ron Lisnet

Talk about the role you play as a lighting designer and that collaboration. What, how? How does what you do contribute to telling the story?

00:06:23 Don Holder

Well, I think that if you had to define what a lighting designer does, is we... a lighting designer reveals the world of the play. We're responsible for what you see and how you feel about what you're seeing. We, as a lighting designer, we sort of provide the lens through which a theatrical event is experienced by an audience, and so it's a very important role.

Without proper lighting that reveals scenery, costumes, and the world of the play as intended, you can shift perception and shift the audience reaction in ways that aren't helpful to the work. I think lighting designers, not only they influence how the audience feels about an event, but they also ... assist lighting can be really, really helpful in helping tell the story and locating the piece informing the style of production. It's a very powerful fluid, and yet ephemeral tool that seems to be used more and more as the principle design element and a lot of work that I do these days.

00:07:38 Ron Lisnet

I heard one of your talks you gave online, and you talked about, from your mentor, that she said 99% of the people don't know they're being affected by lighting but 100% of them are. So, just talk about that and do you want your work to be invisible? But then also have the intended consequences that you're going for?

00:08:00 Don Holder

I think yeah. I mean Jennifer said that 99% of the audience is unaware of the light, but 100% is affected by it, which is, which is true. It goes back to what I was saying that the above all, everything else, lighting has a powerful influence on perception. I mean, we as human beings respond chemically to the quality of light, the intensity of light, the color of light and a lighting designer needs to understand this about the medium so that you can manipulate it to achieve certain creative objectives.

So, in terms of your question about whether lighting should be invisible or should be more overt, I mean, it really depends on the play, the production, but I think that often the light should be invisible. I think in most cases, we work sort of underneath everything else. We're kind of the glue that holds everything together but the lighting I think, when it's most powerful, is invisible and the audience is unaware what it's doing but it's doing things that are very powerful and potent.

00:09:10 Ron Lisnet

Can you talk about some of your you've had a lot of experiences on Broadway, but anything that stands out? Certainly, *The Lion King* has to be right up there. *Spiderman* was, must have been an interesting experience, as well. So, what stands out to you from the many shows you've done on Broadway?

00:09:24 Don Holder

I've been really lucky. I've done some. I think I've been involved with some amazing productions on Broadway. There have been so many.

The Lion King is special in my heart 'cause I think it was...it was my first Broadway musical and I I think at that point in my life I was starting to think I'd never get to design a musical on Broadway, which was my big dream. And it really changed my life. But beyond that it was just an amazing collaboration. I feel like it's the most unified production, in terms of design, that I've ever seen, and the most satisfying experience in terms of making a piece of theater and just the fact that it's endured for over 20 years all around the world, is kind of incredible.

But there have been other productions, such as the one that sticks out, also is *Moving Out*, which was a collaboration between Twyla Tharp and Billy Joel. It was a piece without text about the ravages of the Vietnam War era. About the how the kids going to war were felt came back feeling disenfranchised and the people left behind equally in pain. And it was performed with the music of Billy Joel. And Billy Joel was my idol as a teenager growing up. So, not only did I get to work with Twyla Tharp on this amazing piece, but I got to light a full-length piece with the music that I love. More than anything else, that was pretty amazing.

00:10:55 Ron Lisnet

You're speaking to the UMaine community about the state of Broadway, and the students and the faculty and folks here. What's your message on this topic? Is Broadway at the cutting edge of theater? Or is it too big to fail because there's so much money involved?

00:11:09 Don Holder

I think that Broadway is not too big to fail, certainly. I think that, uh. I mean, if you're. If you're thinking about individual productions. I mean, as a entity...as a community in New York, I think it will always be there because people love going to the theater and, from my perspective, there's nothing more exciting about being in a place where something is unfolding right there, and you can see it and practically feel it. That's a different, very different thing than seeing a film or seeing something on a screen.

But I don't think the best work is necessarily done on Broadway. It could be done in a, you know, an old garage in some other city in the United States or across the planet somewhere. I've seen amazing work in the most unexpected places. I think that some work on Broadway is incredible and other work is, um, not. And I think that's the case everywhere. I think that there's a certain energy and a certain history, and a certain level of artists that is attracted to Broadway that attracts many people who want to see it. So, it's a...It's an amazing place to work. There's this unique kind of energy about Broadway that I love, but it's not the only place to do great work. Hardly.

00:12:42 Ron Lisnet

You talked about the experience here and being able to do so much as part of the theater program here, um, for kids that are interested in the technical side of theater, what do you tell them about how to pursue that?

00:12:55 Don Holder

For kids who are interested in the technical side of theater. If they are interested in design, I would say the best preparation you can engage in... early on in college and high school, really is to become the most articulate, well-read person with the broadest exposure to the widest range of topics you possibly can. You know study art, history and study history and politics and philosophy and psychology. Anything that can feed your brain and make you understand the human condition in a more profound way.

Because what designers do is, we essentially crystallize work into something very, very precise that speaks profoundly to the human condition. And in order to be articulate designer you have to have a lot to draw from, you know. Either it's life experience or it's... It's experience in intellectual pursuits and intellectual curiosity. So, that's the main thing I would urge. Read the newspaper, go to theater, go to see films, and talk about that work with your friends. And for technicians, I feel like that preparation is good, but to be a

lighting, electrician, or a costume maker, or a technical director who creates the scenery for productions, it requires a real passion for the art and an understanding of collaboration, and how your role is to be an artisan, but also to support the artistic process. And, um, I think you have to follow the area, you have to get as expert as you can in the whatever area it is that you have great interest in.

00:14:47 Ron Lisnet

You've designed for opera and TV and for corporate spaces is the job essentially the same, or are there just shades of variation to the, you know, the application that you're putting it to?

00:14:58 Don Holder

I think whether you designed for opera or any other kind of theatre event, I mean live, theatrical performance, the objectives are usually the same. The way you think about light is the same. The process is usually different from genre to genre.

In opera you are dealing with large physical productions with very little time to accomplish the work at hand. So, you have to work in broad strokes, large brushstrokes of light as opposed to really detailed specific little, little brushstrokes. In film and television, I found that people who work with light do have the same objectives, but the tools are very different, and the process is different. I have really enjoyed the work I've done in those forms, but it's a different experience because you're only working on a small part of the whole, whereas in the theater you get to see the entire thing in sequence.

00:15:58 Ron Lisnet

What's next and what's on your bucket list? What? What do you? What would you love to do that you haven't had a chance to do yet?

00:16:05 Don Holder

[chuckling] That's a good question. My bucket list?

I mean, what's next is I'm doing a new musical based on the film, the Universal Film, *The Tale of Despereaux* out in Berkeley, California. It's where I've done several musicals recently, in the last few years, and it's a great place to work, and it's... I'm really excited about it.

I'm also working on a musical *Knoxville* with Lynn Ahrens and Stephen Flaherty, who are probably my favorite composer/lyricist team. They wrote *Ragtime* and *Man of No Importance* and *Rocky* and *Anastasia* which I just did in New York. So, I'm really excited about getting involved on the ground up with them in terms of what I want to do.

What's on my bucket list? That's a hard one. I feel like I've been so fortunate. I've done... I've sort of done the things that are that I've always wanted to do: work at the Metropolitan Opera; travel the world; light my first Broadway musical. I feel very fortunate about that, so what I'd like to keep doing is wonderful collaborations, challenging work, things that really push me, and sort of take me outside of my comfort zone and force me to make creative choices that I probably wouldn't have done before. And that's what I get excited about.

00:17:33 Ron Lisnet

What's it like now to come full circle? I mean you sort of cut your teeth a little bit in this space we're setting in right here, and here you are, 10 these many years later. What's that like to come back to where a lot of this began?

00:17:47 Don Holder

It feels great to come back to where it began. If you had asked me when I was 18 years old, a scared freshman working on *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, if I would come back here 38 years later and be talking to you right now? There's just no way I could even conceive of it. It's thrilling, you know. I wanted to be a lighting designer when I was 13 years old. I mean, I, I sense that that's what I wanted to do. And it took a while to get there, but I feel like every day I'm living the dream. So, to come back and sort of revisit where it all began for me is very special and very exciting.

[Repetitive, pulsing background music begins to fade in]

00:18:28 Ron Lisnet

Well, thanks for taking the time to talk to us.

00:18:31 Don Holder

Thank you.

00:18:33 Ron Lisnet

Thanks for joining us. You can find this and all of our podcasts in most of the places that podcasts are available: iTunes podcasts, SoundCloud, Stitcher, Google Play and Spotify. We welcome your feedback on this show and on our series in general. Drop us a line at MaineQuestion@Maine.edu.

This is Ron Lisnet. We'll catch you next time on *The Maine Question*.