

# Lighting: A Real-World Guide

Reviewed by: Seth Jackson

*Lighting Design Beyond Theatre*,  
by Allen Branton and Sharon Huizinga.  
Published by Routledge,  
a Taylor and Francis Group.

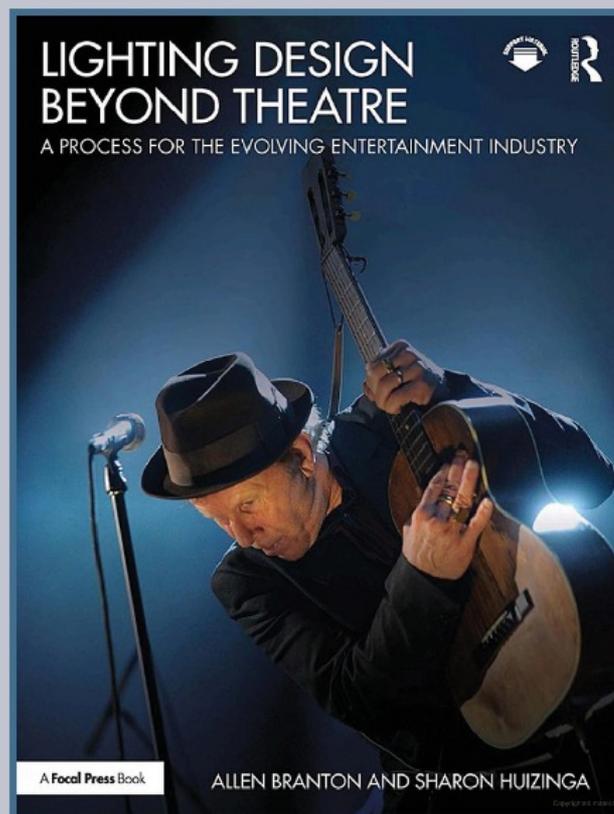
If the cover were large enough, this book should have been called *Everything You Wanted to Know in Theatre School but Were Afraid to Ask or Nobody Could Answer*. Allen Branton and Sharon Huizinga have given today's students, both the up-and-comers and the just-getting-started, a powerful tool. They have also handed teachers a training mechanism by which to expand their classrooms into the ultimate real-world laboratory. The word "design" in the title doesn't really do justice to the power of this book. Design certainly plays its part, but this is a quantitative answer to the question (as Huizinga notes) that every parent asks when their child wants to be a lighting designer: Will they be able to get a job doing this?

With Branton's exhaustive experience from nearly the start of the concert industry, combined with Huizinga's innovative development of the modern lighting design curriculum and pedagogy, it is akin to ripping the ceiling off the room and seeing the sky for the first time. The book is a master class in all the genres available to the modern lighting designer. When I was in theatre school in the early 1990s, there were four options: opera, regional theatre, dance, and education. The idea that I wanted to do rock and roll was abhorrent to my faculty and simply crazy to my class-

mates. Oh, that this book would have existed. The reality is that lighting design encompasses a multi-lingual, multi-faceted world of opportunities—all with their own languages, disciplines, positions, and sets of challenges.

Focusing primarily on live concerts and televised events (Branton's cornerstones of experience), we begin in the days of the Wild West. The first few chapters, detailing the development of the live touring industry, are a remarkable presentation of a rather undocumented history. Adding to the narrative, numerous photographs of early touring shows and production elements fill the book's landscape. Adding to their exploration, Branton and Huizinger include interviews with industry pioneers like Michael Tait, Rusty Brutsche, Tom Littrell, and others.

After these tales, the book really gets down to business. As I said, it isn't as much about design style as it is about being a designer in today's world. Whenever someone has asked me, "What should I take in college?" I have always answered, "Child psychology, business, and read *How to*



*Win Friends and Influence People.*" I'll change that going forward: Read *Lighting Design Beyond Theatre*, but still take child psychology (after all, you'll still have to work with artists, producers, and musicians). In every chapter, there are wonderful sidebars of life wisdom that deal with everything from how you present yourself, how you work with a team, and how you keep the job. It is a signature element of a pragmatic book that understands the "design" part of lighting design is the smallest part of the equation. This brings us to the book's core, what Huizinga and Branton call "Our Lighting Design Process."

Unlike theatre, opera, or dance, we don't have centuries of refined process and specific job titles and procedures. As Branton puts it, the

theatre lighting designer rarely makes the major decisions. There is the work (that dictates time, place, etc.), there is the director (who dictates mood, emotion, etc.), and there are the other designers (who dictate the world you exist in). In special events, there are often none of these. In that absence, it comes down to you committing to making the show the best it can be and letting everything flow from there. The bulk of the book dives deeply into these areas; one chapter even reveals in its title the deep secret: “Nobody Knows Anything, You Decide.” Even when some questions seem obvious, we realize that most people won’t ask, won’t take the reins, and won’t dig in to get the job done. Branton and Huizinga unpack what seems simple on the surface in sections or chapters titled “What Does It Look Like?” “What Is It?” and “Counting the Beans” to create a great road map for tackling the project at hand. Once the mechanics have

been dealt with, a more powerful narrative emerges—people. Having come up from rock and roll, Branton understands the necessity of getting along with people (both clients and co-workers), celebrating your team, taking the heat, and whatever else is needed to get the job done. This is fleshed out in detail in chapters titled “Client Relations” and “Leadership is an Act of Love.” A quote that absolutely floored me is a two-sentence statement summing up everything about being the designer, the creative director, or any major leadership role in the live entertainment industry:

“Leave no doubt who is the accountable party in the design process, while wasting no energy pretending that you have all the answers. Functioning in this environment is not Solitaire.”

Much of this material was developed through online classes taught by Branton, Huizinga, and their longtime

collaborator, Kevin Lawson, to Huizinga’s students at the Cincinnati Conservatory of Music during COVID. This brings me to the utility of the book in a classroom setting. Each chapter closes with an exercise to be used by an individual, small group, or full classroom for discussion. Some are thought-provoking and discussion-starting. Others are practical, real-world scenarios to game out, such as using online pricing guidelines and cutting your lighting budget by 20%.

This is a text I wish had been available when I was a student, when I was a teacher, and when I was just finding my way. It is fun, it is a celebration of an industry from formation to today, it is encouraging, and it is immensely practical. 📖

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