

The Philadelphia Inquirer Job Column.

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By Jane von Bergen, The Philadelphia Inquirer Knight Ridder/Tribune Business News

Jan. 21--Sometime tonight, less than 24 hours before tomorrow's opening of Neil Simon's Biloxi Blues at the Walnut Street Theatre, Troy A. Martin-O'Shia will suffer a crisis of confidence.

Everything, everything, he has done to create the right lighting for the comedy is bad. It is terrible. How could he have thought it would be artistic? Was he even thinking at all? Everyone will hate him. He hates himself. He will never land another lighting-design job in this city.

"Then my wife says to me: 'Troy, you do this with every show, and you always hit it. Shut up, and go to sleep.' " So he will shut up. He will go to sleep. When he awakens tomorrow, it will be opening day -- the culmination of months of work.

"The magic starts when we turn on the lights and we start creating," he said.

In each new production, Martin-O'Shia, 37, hopes for that moment of clarity. "It's when the actor moves, and the light moves with him seamlessly, and it heightens the emotional mood they are in. Then it's just right."

Martin-O'Shia is not the guy who turns on the spotlights. In fact, he won't flip a single switch. That is done by a master electrician carrying out Martin-O'Shia's instructions at a computer console in the lighting booth.

What Martin-O'Shia does as a lighting designer is to use lights -- just as an actor uses voice and gesture, or a set designer uses scenery and props -- to illuminate the meaning and mood of the play.

Like most lighting designers, Martin-O'Shia works freelance. He typically designs about 10 to 15 productions a year, plus he has a stage-management job at the University of the Arts, where he also teaches lighting design.

"Being the designer makes me one of the really big wheels in the play," he said. "I'm one of the people who helps steer the boat.

"The best way to visualize what I do is to think of a painting. I'm painting using light, but my painting has to be done 150 times in a show."

Another analogy? Think of Martin-O'Shia as a conductor.

But instead of cuing musicians, he's cuing lights. In this play, his orchestra consists of 220 different lights, many of them with multiple capabilities, including different color filters. Putting together the fixtures plus their capabilities, Martin-O'Shia has about 400 variables to consider for each moment of the play.

Besides that, he must set an intensity for each light, from bright to dim, and figure out how long each fixture should be lighted at that intensity, if at all.

For example, if the play's action is shifting from stage right to stage left, he might decide to bring up the lights to illuminate stage left in 10 seconds, while dimming the lights stage right in 15 seconds. Staggered times create a smoother transition.

Usually it takes months to design lighting for a play.

His work on Biloxi Blues, which continues through Feb. 29, began in early November when he received his copy of the script. It will end Thursday, on the official opening night, when the play is "frozen," and no more changes will be made. Then his work is done, and there is no need for him to show up at the theater.

When Martin-O'Shia got the Biloxi Blues script, he read it twice, and, as he read it, he began to think of the lighting. Next, he met with the set designer, the director and the production manager, and they hashed out their ideas.

"It's a collaborative art," he said.

The director's vision rules, but "part of my job is to have an opinion," Martin-O'Shia said.

As his ideas jelled, he began to put lights on paper. Sitting at a drawing board in his Center City home, he drew up a 3-by-4-foot blueprint of the theater with each light penciled in and numbered.

That lighting plot, as it is called, becomes the work sheet for the electricians -- all part of the stagehands union -- who started stringing the wiring and rigging the lights on metal poles called trusses as soon as the Walnut's previous production, Annie, closed last Sunday.

That's when Martin-O'Shia moved into his spot: a long, temporary, plywood desk placed on top of the seats midway up the main theater floor. He shares his "tech table," an island of light in a semi-darkened hall, with the stage manager and the assistant lighting designer.

While the stagehands handle the physical details, Martin-O'Shia needs to create commands to activate the lights in sequence.

Initially scribbled on sheets of yellow tablet paper, they eventually end up being entered into a computer where they, in turn, trigger the lighting sequences as they move through the play.

Still, it's all theoretical until all the lights are in place and focused. "I haven't created one thing yet," Martin-O'Shia said Thursday.

"Our business is pretending, but you don't want to pretend in a tech rehearsal," he said.

Oh yes, the show must go on, and Martin-O'Shia sounds very confident. "The show's got to open, and we are going to solve all the problems, and I take comfort in that. I don't know what the problem is or what it will be, but I know that, when it comes, we're going to solve it."

Last week, unfortunately for him, Martin-O'Shia had lots of time to philosophize. That's because much of the stuff that was supposed to happen by Thursday morning during the stage setup hadn't happened.

The two cameras that were to project scenes on the stage's backdrop -- part of the central lighting scheme for the whole play -- weren't working. Lights that were supposed to be mounted and hung so they could be focused before the actors came onto the stage for their first on-stage run-through hadn't been completely hung.

It would be much better, and do much more to ease his anxiety, if he could focus the lights and adjust the filters without the actors on stage. But they were due the next day at noon.

"I'm entering the stage of nervous energy," said Martin-O'Shia, who professed to be calm and anxiety-free, despite rampant pencil-tapping and knee-jiggling. "There's so much physical work to do, and we can't do it. I can't control it. I can only help motivate it."

So instead, he told stories. Once upon a time as a 14-year-old high-school freshman, he was asked by his science and theater teacher to work a spotlight for the high school play, Gypsy.

Martin-O'Shia's job was to follow the star, a classmate named Marthe (pronounced Marti). "She was really cute," he said. "So I guess I did it for the love of Marthe, certainly not for the love of money, although I didn't know that then."

Soon, Martin-O'Shia liked being on stage more than running the lights. But the science teacher offered him \$100 to work the lights, "so I guess I did do it for the love of money." God knows what happened to Marthe.

While Martin-O'Shia talked, it looked almost like a play on stage.

Workers entered stage left and stage right. A young woman in black painted part of a train prop. Above, through a screen that's usually hidden by curtains during the performance, two crew members on scaffolding rigged some lights. Below, stagehands in jeans hoisted a wooden-like wall made of styrofoam. Master electrician Rick Nordaby shouldered a bolt of black velvet for draping near the light fixtures to cloak the wiring from the audience.

Martin-O'Shia used the time to work his lighting cues.

For example, when the play opens, lead character Eugene Morris Jerome and his buddies are train-bound for boot camp in Biloxi, Miss.

There's some dialogue as the guys kid each other. Martin-O'Shia illuminates the train at stage right, with the rest of the stage mostly dark. Cameras will project a blurred image of passing scenery on the backdrop. (Those projectors weren't working on Thursday -- but the show must go on.) "I want to light the train windows with a little bit of pulse," he said, "something that will give it more motion. I'm hoping I can do it subtly enough so it gives it shape, but I don't want it to be a distraction."

The play moves between Jerome speaking in the present and his memories. The train scene is a vivid memory, but about halfway through it, Jerome "breaks the fourth wall." That's theater lingo for the actor coming out of the scene to address the audience directly through the invisible wall that separates the watchers from the watched.

Jerome turns to the audience and begins: "I'm Eugene Morris Jerome of Brighten Beach, Brooklyn, New York, and you can tell I've never been away from home before."

When that happens, "I'm going to pull him out with a tight, tight special," a light that focuses on his face, while the lighting illuminating the train will dim.

"This is going to be our convention" for that type of shift, Martin-O'Shia said. "The first thing you want to do is set up a convention, and then, as soon as you set up the convention, I guarantee that it'll be broken later in the play.

"There's nothing better than doing something to the audience when they don't expect it."

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