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Hamilton Dramaturgy's TheatreNow!
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[Hamilton Dramaturgy's TheatreNow!](http://theatrenow.wordpress.com) is a podcast series featuring some of the most exciting women artists working in the theatre today. Anne Hamilton is the producer and host. You may listen to the podcasts and read the transcripts at <http://theatrenow.wordpress.com>



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Interview with Jennifer Tipton, Lighting Designer
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AH: Welcome to Hamilton Dramaturgy's TheatreNow! This is a podcast series featuring some of the most exciting woman artists working in the theatre today. I'm your host Anne Hamilton. Today our guest is [Jennifer Tipton](#). Ms. Tipton is well-known for her work in theatre, dance, and opera. In theatre, her recent work includes AUTUMN SONATA by Ingmar Bergman, directed by Robert Woodruff at Yale Repertory Theatre, and The Wooster Group's version of Tennessee Williams' VIEUX CARRÉ. Her recent work in dance includes Alexei Ratmansky's THE NUTCRACKER for American Ballet Theater and Paul Taylor's THE UNCOMMITTED. Her recent work in opera includes Gounod's ROMEO ET JULIETTE directed by Bartlett Sher at La Scala and LA CLEMENZA DI TITO for the Festival in Aix-en-Provence directed by David McVicar. Ms. Tipton teaches lighting at the Yale School of Drama. She received The Dorothy and Lillian Gish Prize in 2001, the Jerome Robbins Prize in 2003, and in April 2004, the Mayor's Award for Arts and Culture in New York City. In 2008, she was made a United States Artist "Gracie" Fellow and a MacArthur Fellow. Welcome, Jennifer.

JT: Thank you, Anne. Glad to be here.

AH: Well, my first question is: What drew you to the light?

JT: I came to New York having graduated from college, to be a dancer. And I danced with the company called The Merry-Go-Rounders for a while. And, I think, about the third year, I became the rehearsal mistress, which meant that I didn't dance, but I sat in the audience to observe the performances so that I was able to critique the dancers. And I looked at the bigger picture, and that was light, and I fell in love with it. I've been in love with it ever since.

AH: That's wonderful. What kind of dance troupe was it?

JT: Modern dance. It was called The Merry-Go-Rounders. We danced for children, so we performed every weekend.

AH: And then, did you go on to train in a university, or did you just go into the field?

JT: I just went into the field. There were a couple of things I did before joining the Paul Taylor Company. But one of the first things is that I became the stage manager for the Paul Taylor Company, recreating the lighting of Thomas Skelton. And then there was a Broadway season. I loved it in those days. Four performances were called a season. And the producers somehow convinced Paul that it should not be Thomas Skelton who lit the four performances. And I, at the end of that, said to Paul, "I'm perfectly happy to do this other person's lighting on our tours, but I'd love to do my own." So he said, "Why don't you do your own?" So I started lighting for Paul Taylor. And I am lighting for Paul Taylor right now.

AH: What a wonderful collaboration.

JT: Yes, it has been.

AH: I think as an audience member, I don't necessarily perceive the light, or the way that light artists work.

JT: Yes. Well, I think that's the way that it should be. I always hope that critics are knowledgeable and perceive what's going on. But the audience in general -- for some reason or another, human beings just don't pay much attention to light. They expect it as if it's somehow a birthright for it to be there so that they can see, but they don't analyze it.

AH: But it can create such a wonderful atmosphere.

JT: Absolutely. I always say, or have said in the past, that ninety-nine and forty-four-hundredths of the audience does not pay any attention to the lighting, but one hundred percent is affected by it.

AH: Yes. That's wonderful. And you have a marvelous project coming up at Lincoln Center.

JT: Well, Lincoln Center's White Light Festival is going on right now. This week, we're doing NECESSARY WEATHER. I'm collaborating with Dana Reitz and Sara Rudner, who will dance in it. And Dana and I did the lighting for it. It's about seventeen years old and it's a beautiful, beautiful piece. No music, just light. Interestingly, when it was originally done seventeen years ago, Adam Gopnick wrote a review, and the sentence that I remember is "I whistled the chiaroscuro all the way home." I always thought that was just wonderful.

AH: Yes, it's poetic.

JT: And then next week, I'm lighting SPECTRAL SCRIBIN, which is just the opposite. It's music and light, and no movement, no acting. Just the music and the light.

AH: What is it like to be in the rehearsal room with one other artist, or one or two other performers?

JT: It's wonderful to be able to be so specific in collaboration. Usually, I have the set designer, the costume designer and, of course, the director or choreographer, and the sound designer and we're all sort of trying to make it a piece. I call the art of theatre a "dirty art", since there are so many people involved who have needs and whims to be satisfied. But when there's only one other person, you can go quite deeply into the project.

AH: Do you ever consider your work a duet? Do you think of it in terms of musicality? Or how do you think of it?

JT: I've often called the lighting for the stage the "music for the eye", because it has the same way of making an atmosphere, making a landscape, changing fluidly from one place to another without seeming effort. And I feel that the same rules apply as in music: variation, structure and form, and statement of theme, and development of theme, et cetera, et cetera. And I feel also that the rhythm of a production is made by the lighting. If it feels like it's too long and too slow, it may well be because the light is changing in a way that makes the audience feel that way. Definitely I feel that light and music are very closely related.

AH: When a show is light and music, or light and dance, do you ever feel like you enter into the collaboration, in a duet, or a trio, or do you kind of distance yourself?

JT: No. I'm definitely involved.

AH: I mean in your mind?

JT: There is no difference between my mind and what's actually happening. Yes, definitely I'm involved.

AH: Do you have a color palette that you like to use?

JT: Not really. It may seem that way in looking at it, because I work with light and shadow a lot, so that means source, and the shadow side, which is cool. [I work with the contrast between] warm and cool. I love painting with color, but that's often not appropriate. So, yes, I love all colors.

AH: Do you have any thoughts about darkness?

JT: I once wrote to Robert Rauschenberg, who I had known when he lived in New York, asking him a question about light and he replied with a statement about darkness. It's definitely always possible [to design with darkness], but I find most often on the stage that the darkness really is the shadow side and therefore there's a little bit of light there. These days when there are exit signs, and aisle lights, and all of this sort of random light around, just as there is no true silence, there is no true darkness in the theatre, sadly.

AH: Do you feel that your eyes are able to perceive gradations of light in a particular way that may be different from the rest of us?

JT: No, not at all. I'm human and tend to ignore it on some occasions, but I am always very sensitive to it. It seems to me I'm much more sensitive to sunlight, moonlight, star light, natural light. I walk outside and am immediately aware of a full moon, and other people

around me don't seem to be aware of it at all. So, in some ways perhaps, but I'm mainly just human.

AH: [Laughter] You're not superhuman? Oh, gee. But all women in theatre wish that you are and we are. Well, has your life changed very much since you won the MacArthur Award?

JT: Not really. I mean it's been great. I've been very comfortable in these financially fragile times, which is a lovely gift from them, but I'm still overworked and loving every minute of it. So, it has not really changed things much for me.

AH: In your last piece that you designed, the piece about Scriabin, how did you develop as an artist? Did any new ideas present themselves to you?

JT: I don't know that it's really new, but I had to find the form of rendering what we were thinking and talking about, the pianist and I. But that's the process that really I go about every time I do something. And you know, I certainly got to know Scriabin a lot better than I had before that. He's a kooky guy. That was a pleasure.

AH: Do you keep a studio here in New York other than what you have here [in your home]?

JT: No, I have over there in the corner a drafting board. So, now everything is stuffed into a rather small loft.

AH: I see.

JT: It's large in New York standards [Laughter] with everything. After years and years of accumulating papers, I keep feeling that I should give them to the library or something because they are beginning to overwhelm me.

AH: And when you were young, when you were growing up, what kind of artistic activities did you take part in?

JT: I call myself a university brat. I was born in Columbus, Ohio. My father taught at Ohio State at the time and he was a zoologist. He couldn't decide whether he wanted to teach in medical school or in a university. So, he taught at Ohio State and then decided he wanted to go to the Wayne State Medical School in Detroit. So, we moved there when I was about two and a half. And my parents were not very happy in Detroit during World War II, so they decided to go back South. They were both Georgian by birth. And so, they ended up at the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa, where my father was in their Zoology Department. Then, he decided he wanted to teach in med school, so we moved to Birmingham. So, we were moving around quite a bit every couple of years, actually, in those days. Finally, at the age of twelve, we moved to Knoxville, Tennessee where my mother went to work as well. She was a physicist, so they were both teaching at the University there. And the wife of a man in my father's department had been interested in dance, and was taking her daughter to Oak Ridge, which was nearby. So, I tagged along and really came to adore dance. In my junior year in high school - the summer after my junior year in high school - I went to the American Dance Festival, which was in New London, Connecticut, at Connecticut College in those days.

I spent the summer there, and my parents, they were fantastic. They allowed me to come to New York by myself the winter of my senior year in high school. Yeah, I was sixteen, I guess. And I had two weeks with the Martha Graham Christmas course all by myself in New York City. So, I was madly in love with dance. As a matter of fact, I went to Cornell University and my mother said that my application letter sounded like Cornell was a dance school. And dance was only part of the Physical Education department in those days. Oh, it was not prominent on Cornell's radar but it definitely was in mine. Anyway, so I got there. But I went majoring in Physics because I wanted to be the first person on the moon, an astrophysicist. But I soon decided that I wanted to dance. But coming from an academic background, I knew that I could not leave college. I had to finish. So, I finished college and came to New York to be a dancer.

AH: You could have danced on the moon.

JT: Yes, I guess. It would have been great.

AH: I have a question about your artistic process. Do you have one method by which you approach a new project or do you have different approaches?

JT: Probably, I have just one approach. Because I do feel that light is the same for everything; for opera, for theatre, for dance. It varies because of the particular situation. The scale of opera, of course, is much bigger, though the time is just about the same. They give you very little time in opera. They give you very little time in dance. In theatre there's more time. There are previews which you don't have in dance and in opera. First performance is the world premiere and the work is over. But anyway, the process begins by working on the plot, what I call "the light landscape" of the production. I put it on the stage and then use that landscape -- use the vocabulary, use the light language, if you would to make sentences, paragraphs, whatever, in making cues on stage, and that's true. Of course, it's channeled by different circumstances, but that's true of everything that I do.

AH: How do you notate lighting designs?

JT: Well, you have plots, and you have hook-ups. You have a record of what light was plugged into what channel, so you have numbers attached to every light. You have colors attached to every light, you have a focus note. Hopefully, there is time to get good notes on the focus, but I've generally developed a good way to record it and to remember it. The Royal Ballet in London decided fifteen years after it was done originally, to bring back a production of GISELLE, and the house did not have a good record of what the cues had been, but I did.

AH: Oh, very good.

JT: So they were able to recreate it.

AH: Do you work with a computer?

JT: Of course, I have a computer, but I guess I use it for email mostly. [Chuckle] I'm quite an old fogey. [Chuckle] I like to do my drawings by hand, my plots by hand. I will then give it to an assistant to draft it on a computer. I use a computer but not for my work.

AH: Well, there's a certain amount of excitement and pleasure [to be experienced] from writing.

JT: I believe in the hand-brain, pencil-to-paper-brain connection. In fact, I teach and I have the first year students do all of their drafting by hand to remind them that there is this physical connection between the two.

AH: Yes, and so that it's not a lost art; so that this hand-work, hand-drafting is not a lost art. I asked Paule Constable a question about theatre criticism and lighting design, and I'm interested in hearing your thoughts on it. I was trained as a theatre critic at Columbia, and we were taught to comment on the lighting design without ever having been taught by a lighting designer. So, I just wondered, do you have any thoughts on how theatre critics can better interpret or perceive lighting design?

JT: Well, I feel that they should really take it upon themselves to learn a bit about it, just like they learn a bit about everything else that has to do with the theatre. It isn't just by the seat of your pants. I feel it's unfair, but then I'm not sure that the critics writing today are trained in any sort of way. There is a way to support the art and to allow and encourage the art to flourish while being critical. In fact, I find in teaching that self-critique is one of the best ways to have your art grow, but if you start tearing yourself down then, it's not going to go anywhere. I feel the same about critics. I feel that's happening all too often. They point out the flaws rather than the positive sides of things. And it's true with lighting as well as the other aspects of theatre.

AH: Yeah, I think an acknowledgement of what is working and what is great is important. It's important to start with that, because often that's the foundation upon which the one little thing rests. The one little thing that may be a little off can sit on top of a ninety-five percent success, and that should be acknowledged.

JT: Yeah. I know too many playwrights, or would-be playwrights, or would-have-been playwrights, that are around my age, who were bitter or have gone to something else because they got such a raw deal from critics, and some are quite wonderful writers. So, I find criticism here in this country sad, particularly in this city, I might say.

AH: We talked in graduate school about theatre criticism now becoming a consumer journalist job rather than a job as an artist, and it didn't use to be that way. And I think theatre critics are very, very important, they're making a public statement.

JT: And they should be a guide for the audience rather than telling the audience, "You're going to like this," or "You're not going like it, so don't go."

AH: Yes.

JT: They should be the guide about the ideas that are talked about or explored in the production, and it should stimulate the audience to be curious about how they personally might interact with those ideas and feel about those ideas, rather than just putting them down.

AH: Do you have any young lighting designers coming up who you think are wonderful?

JT: Well, I teach at Yale School of Drama and we take two lighting designers into the program every year. I started teaching there in 1981, and at this point I have a very good track record. There are many, many, many of them out there working, doing wonderful work. So, I don't want to point out one over the other because they're all I think terrific. And one of the things I pride myself on is that they're each different. I really encourage them to find their own voice rather than just copy me.

AH: That's the mark of a master artist. An artist can respect another artist. Do you have any words of advice for young theatre artists coming up now?

JT: Always. Only come into theatre if there's nothing else that you can possibly do. If you are totally hooked [Laughter] and crazy about the art, yes, come on in. But, otherwise, it will not treat you very well. [Laughter]

AH: Do you have anything else you'd like to add?

JT: No. I've had a lovely time talking to you, and I think we've covered just about everything.

AH: Good. Thank you.

JT: Thank you.

AH: You have been listening to [Hamilton Dramaturgy's TheatreNow!](#) We have been speaking today with Jennifer Tipton. You may read more about her on the MacArthur Foundation website, which is www.macfound.org. You may read a transcript of this interview and download this podcast on my blog, which is <http://theatrenow.wordpress.com>. Our theme was composed by Nancy Ford. Otto Bost is the sound designer, and Cate Cammarata is the program assistant. I am Anne Hamilton, your producer and host. Thank you for listening.

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