

Penny Remsen

TEACHING PHILOSOPHY — A PASSION FOR THE WORK

Passion is the guiding principle behind my work as a teacher of lighting design—it is not one of technique, nor of theatrical concept. When, at the completion of a first course in lighting design, a student comes to me and says, "I will never look at light the same way again," I know that I have accomplished a great deal: I have managed to communicate the passion I feel about lighting design, about the professional work I do in my field, and about teaching my students. These three things are closely related and the key to my effectiveness as a teacher.

My focus on communicating my passion stems from my own time as a student taking my first lighting design course — I never looked at light the same way again. This is the experience I draw upon whenever I attend a student production meeting or rehearsal, teach a class to new theater students, or meet with visiting prospective students.

I make a personal investment in my students that goes beyond teaching them the must-know techniques and the how-tos of going from creative spark to finished design. My responsibility is to create a supportive, safe and yet challenging environment in which they are encouraged to follow their own passions.

When I am working with undergraduates, my primary goal is not professional training but bringing students to a new-found appreciation for and understanding of light. If I manage to impart this to them, then my task becomes to help them find — and articulate — their artistic voices and learn to work together as a team in this very collaborative art.

To my graduate students, I must impart a different set of skills. By the time they leave the department, if I have done my job, they will be prepared for the rigors of working in the professional theater. This includes training in multi-tasking, professional decorum, and preparing for the inevitable financial instability of the profession.

Mentoring and advising are inherently an important part of my approach to teaching and training my students at both levels. When I started in the field, I benefited greatly from my work with the professional lighting designers I assisted. They mentored me as I moved up in the field. I have since found that much of the successful work in theater happens through relationships built this way, as the more experienced professionals extend a helping hand and a listening ear to those starting in the field. For me, being a good mentor to my students is a chance to continue to build that network of established professionals helping up-and-comers.

This is part of the reason I remain artistically active myself. I take on design projects both in my own department and in companies and departments around the country. This allows me to keep abreast of the latest technological development, and it also allows for a cross-pollination of artistic ideas that proves valuable when I return to the classroom. Being a mentor is an important facet of this professional work. I give current students a chance at "real life" experience by hiring them to work with me on those projects whenever possible.