

## Studying for an MFA in Lighting Design in the US by Paul Davies



After many years of working in small theatres and doing small scale designs or relighting I sought out something to move me forward. I studied at the College Conservatory of Music at the University of Cincinnati. It has 1300 lights between 5 theatre spaces, \$50,000 show budgets, moving lights, Obsession II, Strand 550, a lighting lab with 96 dimmers, plus scene and costume facilities bigger than all but the major theatres here. There is plenty of show support from faculty, professional support staff and students. Even smaller state colleges such as Chico, where I was teaching after the Masters, has two theatres, an Obsession 2, VL1000s and many S4s.

The majority of the better colleges will offer some full scholarships upon which one can live sparsely, all my academic fees were paid (at \$22,000+ per year this is a must) and I had opportunities of paid work as crew or teaching the introductory classes. Obtaining student visas is an easy but painfully long process - one cannot legally work outside the university on a student visa, but have one year afterwards to do “practical training”.

There is a wide variety in the 200 or so Masters degrees in the US. Most involve a broad spread of teaching, students will have to take a second design area and also take classes in such things as direction, script analysis, rendering, aesthetics, CAD etc. The Masters of Fine Arts are longer than Masters here, usually being 2½ or 3 years long. It varies as to how many designs one will execute in different theatres, I did 3 main stage (large sets designed by final year masters students or faculty, professional directors, 250 – 400 lights, pros theatres 10m openings and 40+ flying lines, 600+ audience etc) and 3 studio, or rep designs, in my two years there (the studio shows had 100 – 200 lights, good sized sets and were directed by Masters students). One has to get used to a different style of working, paperwork and design; one sees fewer Fresnels, must learn “6 bys” beam angles, and change ones vocabulary to include Twofers, Pipes, Instruments etc (although they love the accent they will laugh when one calls out that Bars are coming in). I visited the USITT show, LDI and Broadway Master Classes.



Particularly after Sept 11<sup>th</sup> the USA is a bit of a scary place. One has to deal sometimes with a blinkered American view of the world and themselves, heritage history culture and art are sometimes marginalised, and there are at the same time both limited freedoms and great opportunities. Fees are better than in the UK, yet most US designers still combine

design with teaching. Most students and staff fill out there summer holidays by doing summer rep theatre, “summer stock” usually brings in some equity actors, guest directors and professional designers, some of very high standard.

Americans generally like the idea of British students joining their courses. Getting information means searching the web and contacting individual courses. One option for graduates is URTA, an umbrella organisation which allows one to show case ones portfolio in one of three cities to 36 universities (<http://www.urta.com/>). One must build up a portfolio with plenty of plots, pictures and general art work. There is a general admission test one probably will have to take. I would encourage graduates to consider study there if they want to combine design and education, or like me were making a slight career change. I am less sure that undergraduates would get anything they do not get at the well established courses here.

So what comes after a Masters in the US? The comprehensive teaching and experience on big shows gives one confidence to take on nearly any show, and opens many doors in the US, but there is also a large pool of qualified, but not necessary good, labour. Here it is more about who you have met and has confidence in you. Now I am in London trying to design or work with designers – any advice or help from the members is gratefully accepted.

Paul may be reached at [paul@wovenlight.co.uk](mailto:paul@wovenlight.co.uk) and his portfolio including many pictures and plots from Cincinnati and Chico are at [www.wovenlight.co.uk](http://www.wovenlight.co.uk).