



Cosmos+ 2015 (Roberto Fortuna)

Interview with lighting designer Jesper Kongshaug

By Kathrine Winkelhorn

How did you basically become a lighting designer at Hotel Pro Forma?

I still remember the evening in 1992, at Gentofte City Hall close to Copenhagen, when I first discovered the possibilities in Kirsten Dehlholm's work. I was aware there was an untapped potential, and that specific evening has led to many years of cooperation and investigation about lighting. My first collaboration with Kirsten Dehlholm was in 1992 at the New Carlsberg Glyptotek, where the Japanese performance group *Dumb Type* showed *Enigma of the late afternoon* in cooperation with Hotel Pro Forma. It was exciting and Dumb Type had a technical expertise and some graphic elements, which was very refreshing. We became friends, and I decided to go to Kyoto to follow *Dumb Type*. Something happens when one is staying in a strange place for a longer period of time. In Japan, I got an artistic anchor and I learned something that became decisive for my work with lighting. In the Japanese language and culture, the word for *no* does not exist. When a Japanese has to comment on something he or she will remove the item and then say: Now, I like it. Thus, there will be more active opt-out and this provides a greater openness, as you work your way up to a scenic space. This thinking matches the process of lighting extremely well. What is on — is on and that is exactly the volatile nature of lighting.

How do you work with lighting?

In a traditional text-based workflow all work meetings use the text as the point of departure toward a common focus, which you try to hit or reach at the premiere. There is already a given hierarchy and lighting and scenography must be subordinate to the written work. This means that the scenic expression and the lighting get a functional role to serve the text. Hotel Pro Forma works very precisely with visual expressions and the process is particularly evocative. If we are doing a performance about the cosmos or war, all partners involved relate to the overarching topic. Then the theme becomes the overall architecture, which is embodied as a common source of inspiration in the many conversations and work sessions. The inspiration that comes along the way, for example, comes from the lighting —this include the darkness that exists in the cosmos between the planets. Alongside, music will be composed and a written script will be developed, which the lighting and the stage set must address. As the work proceeds, the inspiration may come from the lighting. Finally, there will be a number of costumes that relate to the work, the lighting and the scenic architecture. For *War Sum Up* (2011) the fashion designer Henrik Vibskov made the costumes. During our many experiments with lighting and matter, Vibskov discovers that the color white is made up of many colors. In this process, I think we tried 14 different fabrics, until we found the white color and the specific fabric that could speak through the bobbinet, which the lighting is filtered through. This interaction between light, costumes, music, and text create a sort of agreement, wherein the hierarchical structure has nothing to do with something that

serves something else. It has to do with the fact that we inspire each other and subordinate the best idea to fit into the whole. In *War Sum Up* (2011), we used contemporary technology to deploy more media-borne and more dynamic images. Nowadays we travel abroad with a very advanced computer and with fairly simple lamps. The new digital technology means that the lighting can be linked much more precisely with music and image. Between these meetings, there have been meetings in other artistic constellations and these meetings offer in the same way new ideas for the staging of the performance. When new information shows up at the next lighting meeting, it may influence the content of the visual material and perhaps mean that the visual concept is modified or refined. Each meeting is part of a large upward spiral “looking down” on the previous meetings with threads back to all the meetings we have had.

This vibrant and dynamic process creates a kind of organism that constantly moves towards a final result. It is another flow chart and a different architecture. I believe you can feel the openness of the structures when you see the work. A lot of theater has a quite practical, logical focus and in my eyes seems a little old-fashioned. In contrast, Kirsten Dehlholm productions are very impractical and have a more abstract approach and often we are, in principle, completely lost. It is not certain that there must be stairways and chairs everywhere, so the actors have something to sit on or run down at. It's a whole different approach to the performing arts.

When I mention a stairway, it is not without reason. The stairway in *Operation: Orfeo* (1993) was not in any way practical and was not created from a premise that this will turn into a performance. It was a visual tool for horizontal and vertical movements, which the scenographer, Maja Ravn had initially created at the *Danish National Theatre School*. She was inspired by the Swiss architect, *Adolphe Appia* (1862-1928), who has been a significant source of inspiration for an architectural approach to lighting in the scenography. His theories transformed the concept of scenography and made a key contribution the development of the performing arts. Adolphe Appia categorized stage lighting under three headings: 1) ordinary furnished with a diffused lighting, 2) formative lighting that casts shadows and imitates light effects painted on the landscape, and 3) imitating lighting effects painted on the scenery. Appia discovered that the illusion theater only dealt with the first and the last of these categories of lighting. It was Appia, who replaced the illusory scene painting with three-dimensional structures that could change appearance by varying the color, the intensity, and the direction of lighting as a medium. That we could bring contemporary lighting into the “Appia mindset” was due to a lucky and happy timing. It was a shadowless light, the powerful light, the sodium light, and the laser light. Technically, the light became powerful enough to be applied in *Operation: Orfeo* (1993). Some 25 years later we have got a brand new LED technology and more sophisticated laser light and with this technique, we can create very complex illuminations. Initially with *Operation: Orfeo*, we traveled with a rather primitive computer for lighting. Technology has a major influence on what we can do on stage, and Hotel Pro Forma has been good at using the latest technology. Implementing the latest techniques into a conceptual framework fascinates me.

Likewise monochromatic lighting settings appeal more to me than multi-colored, as the color of each act appears before the senses in relation to the next, rather than all colors being

present at once to entertain as much as possible. The traditional theater often suffers from fear of boring, which paradoxically provides predictable expressions, instead of surprising on a more sensuous level. *Operation: Orfeo* combines different lights from various light sources. The yellow streetlights familiar from many countries is in this case a lamp from an oil platform, a daylight lamp from the film world, a high performance slide projector, complementary colors, the laser and a series of line-shaped lamps, which together created the light directions with soft shadows, as light through the architecture. Together with the set designer Maja Ravn, we had a fantastic week with extras simply to try out the light. This took place in Copenhagen Harbor in an abandoned industrial building where the stage design was fitted with all the lights on. 12 extras were numbered and in different “lighting postcards” and we tested how the positions of the extras in the set design were best combined with light. By placing them on a line, they could shade off light from one side, so half of the scenography was dark or when they lay over one another under a daylight lamp, it looked as if there was absolutely no depth in the picture or that they sat on a staggered line; there was no shadow in the image. All this was noted and the combinations of light and the position were then introduced to the singers, who learned them by heart. In the last 4 minutes of *Operation: Orfeo* a “sea of laser light” is thrown towards the audience. Getting this to work in was incredibly challenging. I had worked with a far less powerful laser that seemed convincing, so I knew that laser light would be magical. But it was difficult to get it to work on the large scale and because there was a lot of money at stake, there was a strong pressure to abandon laser light. Only because of Kirsten Dehlholm’s trust in me did we maintain the decision to test the ability of the laser to draw a clean sine wave (U shaped wave) at the audience and this sea of laser light, billowing towards the audience became the production’s aesthetic climax.

While we were doing *Operation: Orfeo* I was still a lighting designer for a small Copenhagen-based theater, where I had the opportunity to experiment with all sorts of light sources, laser light and equipment from the film industry, etc. It has become very important for my thinking about light. In collaboration with set designers I created a series of performances in which the lighting was conceptual rather than narrative. It created a space between staging, sets, and lights giving the audience possibilities for a more free and associative perception. One could say that this approach became a break in the sense that text, actors, set design, and lighting tell the same story at the same time, giving sometimes a claustrophobic feeling and leaving no space even to interpret and reflect.

You work with many different light sources and light projections. Can you give a concrete example?

In 1996, the Arken Museum of Modern Art opened south of Copenhagen. Hotel Pro Forma was invited to mark the official opening and a rowing club next to the museum was the inspiration to invite the rowers from the club as performers. In principle, they were simply required to row, but each rower was equipped with large oars made out of transparent acrylic in which light was installed so that all edges of the oars were lit. Moreover I developed a small slide projector that was mounted on the their backs and which would then rock back and forth as they rowed. They could choose whatever photo of what they liked the best. Many came with a picture of their child or their wife. Some came with a picture of a fish they had caught.

Luminous laser beams transmitted light onto the ceiling which we could not control, since complete precision among 50 rowers is not possible. These reflections created a turmoil in the room just like that the surface of water would have created. It was completely unintentional but it worked.

How do you think about lighting as a form?

Lighting needs to have architecture, interfaces, structures, materials, and colors to be visible. This may involve a staircase, a semitransparent plastic backdrop, a wall of smoke in the air, gravel, or costumes. It is not so important what it is, as long as the material is selected to surprise and to create images, which can be perceived. The slow or rapid changes in the light are an investigation of the possibilities we have generated and which we share with the audience. It is rather rare for psychological reasons that an image emerges. It may be from dramaturgical causes but most often it is in the successful encounter of light with the space. This is when the role of the light in the scenic space becomes part of the architecture so the space communicates the individual arrangements of the performers.

What is it that fascinates you about lighting?

I chose to create lighting rather than sound because I had to make a choice. The interactions between the different partners when producing light, is completely different from when you are doing sound, which mostly means that you are on your own. It is the interactive process that generates the lighting. This means that my eyes and my voice are important since what I say and do add something for the performance. I find a single powerful lamp with a distinct shade drawing more trustworthy than stage lighting with numerous small points of light and shadows around the actors, where the scene is often more reminiscent of a football stadium. The recognition of situations from people's lives in the scenic space is crucial and meaningful to people. When it comes to the color, monochromatic light settings are more attractive to me than multi-colored settings, as each act stands out more clearly rather than if all colors are present interchangeably at one and the same time; this happens most often in attempts to entertain as much as possible.

I like it when the lighting is saying something different from the rest of the images. There must be some kind of observation, so that the lighting may comment on what is happening on stage. This makes the scenic imagery less theatrical, but also more real when, for example, you see "real" daylight on a stage. This can be very magical. It makes much more open images, which is compelling to the viewer. When you first have been touched by the lighting, it is hard to put up a barricade. Sometimes when we talk about the lighting in Hotel Pro Forma's performances, sometimes the lighting enters into the creative process and is quite decisive and critical. We have had some images that did not work at all and needed to be discarded. Then we start all over again and find the image in which the lighting and materials are friends. One cannot get scenic lighting to interact with the work if it is not developed in collaboration. We have also researched into shade and shade cannot be overruled. Shadow is pretty much from where we read the light. We talk about the shadow where the light, so to speak the light articulates itself. It may be in *Operation: Orfeo*, where the stairs are forming the shadows or it may be shadows in media-borne images. Some of the shadows we make as tricks. And we always have an eye on where darkness places itself.

What did it professionally mean for you to work at Hotel Pro Forma?

Often at a reception, an exhibition preview, or a premiere Kirsten Dehlholm has introduced me to a number of people. I could easily say that Hotel Pro Forma represents the most international and most generous environment within the theater world in Denmark. Very often, you got work friends through these informal meetings. Kirsten Dehlholm has a very specific idea of who can do something together, and this has created quite a robust network around Hotel Pro Forma. It has strengthened our cooperation that in other contexts I develop other skills that comes into play when I return to Hotel Pro Forma. One of the gifts from working at Hotel Pro Forma is that you are never quite sure where ends meet to reach the ultimate scenic expression. The cooperation with Kirsten Dehlholm is never predictable and it is always surprising what comes next. This provides an exceptional joy in the work, which means I surprise myself in the process. Every performance is a great gamble and this is liberating and life-giving. I wish that the traditional theater could once again get the opportunity to develop new ideas and new theatrical experiments leading who knows where.



Chinese Compass 1998 (Roberto Fortuna)