

# The Olympian



Steve Brill on a marathon career that has taken him from Brooklyn to Beijing. A conversation with Sonny Sonnenfeld.

*A member of the executive design staff of Lighting Design Group, a New York-based firm specializing in television lighting, Steve Brill has worked on top situation comedies, key political events, the funerals of presidents, and 16 years worth of Olympics coverage. Here, he recalls how a career detour—he originally planned to work in theatre—led him to the top of his profession.*

**SS:** What did your parents do?

**SB:** My mother was a homemaker; my father owned an appliance manufacturing business.

**SS:** Take us through your education.

**SB:** I went to Ithaca College for a BFA in design. I graduated in 1980.

**SS:** How did you get into lighting?

**SB:** I wanted to do lighting as far

From high school onward, there was never a question I would be a lighting designer, although I thought it would be in theatre, not television.

**SS:** How did you get into television lighting?

**SB:** I learned about a job opening up for a clerical position at NBC and applied—just to get my foot in the door. I ended up working for NBC for six years before leaving to start my own business.

**SS:** What were your jobs before you formed Berner & Brill?

**SB:** I got an entry-level clerical job in a scheduling office at NBC immediately after graduation. I had planned to travel for the summer, but this opportunity presented itself, and I jumped at it. After two years, I moved on, becoming the lighting director on *The Today Show*. Several years after that, an opening presented itself on the new sitcom *The Cosby Show*. Nobody expected it to succeed, but, obviously, it did. Around the third season, the show moved from NBC's Brooklyn studio to Kaufman Astoria Studios in Queens. That was my opportunity to start out on my own, and I left NBC to freelance. *The Cosby Show* was a great first client.

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**Sonny Sonnenfeld:** Where were you born?

**Steve Brill:** New York, New York.

back as I can remember. For the sixth-grade school play, I refused to be on stage; I did the lighting instead.

**SS:** Tell us about Berner & Brill.

**SB:** After a couple of years on my own, I decided the freelance life was not for me, that I wanted something a little more stable. I had known and worked with Bill Berner for a number of years and very much respected his work, so I approached him about forming a partnership. In the spring of 1989, Berner & Brill Lighting Design was created. Aside from *Cosby*, some of our early clients included *Sesame Street*, *The Late Show with David Letterman*, and MTV. For several years, the company operated out of my second bedroom, but then my son was born and it was time to find a real office. As the company grew, we rented shared space on 20th Street, followed by our own offices on 27th Street.

**SS:** Tell us about the Lighting Design Group.

**SB:** As Berner & Brill continued to grow, Bill decided it was time to move on. So we split up amicably, and the company name was changed to The Lighting Design Group. I very much wanted to remove my name from the company letterhead, as I wanted our expanding design firm to be about the designers, not about Steve Brill. Also at the time, Dennis Size joined the firm as the vice president of design. That has proven to be a winning combination, as the company has tripled in size over the past ten years.

**SS:** How many people are in the company?

**SB:** The Lighting Design Group currently has a full-time staff of 32, with an active freelance roster of 40 to 50 people. Our staff consists of designers, gaffers, production managers and coordinators, business managers and accounting staff, and corporate officers. Our freelancers are designers, gaffers, and crew.

**SS:** Is there one person that is, or was,

special to you in your personal life?

**SB:** I met my wife, Elaine Newman, working backstage in high school. She later went on to become an architect, but her understanding of my life in this crazy business has been nothing short of amazing. Through all the 18-hour days and 100-hour weeks, months out of town at a time, midnight calls, and missed appointments, she has always been there for me, and always been supportive. I can't imagine a more loving or supportive wife.

**SS:** How about in your professional life?

**SS:** Who is your boss at the Olympics?

**SB:** John Fritsche, senior vice president of operations.

**SS:** How do you interface with him?

**SB:** John is very involved with the logistics of virtually all of NBC's Olympic operations. We work very closely with him on schedules, budgets, manpower, equipment, logistics, etc.

**SS:** Who is the director, and how do you interface with them?

**SB:** Bucky Gunts is the coordinating director. Bucky is responsible for coordinating the look of virtually all of

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**SB:** Phil Hymes was and still is one of the original lighting designers at NBC, and he gave me my start on *The Today Show*. He took me under his wing and taught me the ropes of TV. I will be forever in his debt.

**SS:** What do you do at the Olympics?

**SB:** We handle all of the lighting for NBC's coverage there. This includes several studios and approximately ten venues. For Beijing, we brought a team of 19 people from the U.S., and hired an additional ten people locally.

**SS:** How many Olympics have you done?

**SB:** Beijing was my seventh Olympics.

NBC's Olympics broadcasts, and we work closely together to make sure lighting fits in with this vision.

**SS:** How long were you in China for the Olympics?

**SB:** Fifty-six days this summer, plus another 20 days or so during the past 18 months for surveys, meetings, and more.

**SS:** Was it a good experience?

**SB:** Yes, excellent. LDG had a great team working on this project, and it came off as planned.

**SS:** How much lighting gear do you use for the Olympics?

**SB:** Approximately 1,000 lights, plus

dimmers, cable, and associated equipment.

**SS:** Where do you get it from?

**SB:** The majority of our equipment came from PRG New Jersey and London, Salon Films in Hong Kong, and Starlight in Beijing.

**SS:** What are the major differences between working live and studio work?

**SB:** Well, the obvious major difference is that, with live work, you've got a real deadline. The show goes on at a certain time, whether you're ready or not. You also need to be more prepared with contingencies, because there may be little or no time available to resolve a problem. Taped shows may have a tight schedule, but there is more breathing room.

**SS:** Do you have a preference?

**SB:** I enjoy both, but probably prefer the energy and excitement of a live show.

**SS:** What do you look for in LDs who work in your company?

**SB:** There is very little training out there in television lighting, so we usually end up hiring theatrical lighting designers and then teach them about television. We look for designers who can see what lighting brings to a project. We also look for a great attitude and willingness to learn. Lighting can be a tough business; a good attitude is half the battle. Dennis Size is in charge of hiring our designers; he really has a great knack for identifying individual talents.

**SS:** What do you look for in assistants?

**SB:** We look for all the standard skills—such as CAD and working equipment knowledge—but we also look for an individual who can be proactive. Somebody who can sense what needs to be done without waiting to be told is a great asset.

**SS:** Tell us about your family.

**SB:** I have been married to Elaine for 22 years, and we have two great kids, David, 17, and Lauren, 12.

**SS:** How do you balance family life and your professional life?

**SB:** That can be extremely difficult in this business, and I'm afraid I haven't been as good at it as I would like. The hours are long and I travel a lot, so I do my best to be around when I'm in town. I also try to have the family visit me when I'm on location for an extended period. They all came to Sydney, Tokyo, and Beijing.

**SS:** What advice would you give to young people entering the profession?

**SB:** Do whatever is needed—fetch coffee or whatever—to get your foot in the door. Keep in touch with everyone you meet, because you never know where that next contact is going to come from. Maintain a great can-do attitude at all time, even when things are falling apart. 📶