

Tharon Musser

Remembering one of Broadway's greatest lighting designers

By: David Barbour

Tharon Musser, one of the greatest Broadway lighting designers of her generation, and a pioneer in lighting control technology, died on April 19. She was 84 and suffered from Alzheimer's disease.

In a career that covered four decades, she established herself as the consummate professional, whose aesthetic and technical innovations proved deeply influential to generation of her successors. She also mentored many of today's leading lighting designers, and was beloved for her gruff, no-nonsense manner and her generous nature.

Born Kathleen Welland in Roanoke, Virginia in 1925, her parents died when she was a toddler; she was placed in an orphanage at the age of two. In 1929, she was adopted by the Rev. George Musser and his wife, Hazel, who renamed her. After graduating from high school, she attended Berea College in Berea, Kentucky, and applied to the graduate technical design and lighting program at Yale Drama School. There, she became deeply interested in lighting design, despite being told by the educator Stanley McCandless that she had no aptitude for lighting. At Yale, she met the husband-and-wife designers William and Jean Eckert, who helped her get her start on Broadway.

After Yale, she moved to New York, where she helped to start Studio 7, an experimental theatre. She also began lighting dance programs at the 92nd Street Y. This led to a number of tours with the choreographer Jose Limon. She joined United Scenic Artists in 1956 and quickly picked up her first Broadway credit, lighting the first U.S. production of Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night*. She assisted the Eckerts on the hit Broadway musical, *L'il Abner*, then began her prolific Broadway career in earnest.

The notable productions Musser lit included *The Entertainer* (starring Laurence Olivier), Archibald MacLeish's *J.B.*, *Once Upon a Mattress* (starring Carol Burnett), the smash-hit sex comedy *Any Wednesday*, the musical of Clifford Odets' *Golden Boy*, *Flora, the Red Menace* (Liza Minnelli's Broadway debut), *The Lion in Winter*, *Mame*, Edward Albee's *A Delicate Balance*, Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party*, and the Lauren Bacall vehicle *Applause*.

Musser arguably entered a new phase of her career in 1970, when she lit the groundbreaking Stephen Sondheim-James Goldman musical *Follies*, directed by Harold Prince and Michael Bennett. For the next dozen years, she spent much of her time working with artists who were taking the

American musical apart and putting it back together in a more modernist format. These productions included *A Little Night Music*, *Candide*, *Mack and Mabel*, *The Wiz*, *Pacific Overtures*, and *The Act*.

She also became part of the Michael Bennett "dream team" of designers (including the set designer Robin Wagner and costume designer Theoni V. Aldredge) who contributed to *A Chorus Line*. This examination of the dreams and fears of chorus dancers auditioning for a show became one of Broadway's great landmarks, running 6,137 performances. The show is well remembered for Musser's lighting of Wagner's darkly glittering black-box set. It is also a landmark in lighting history as the first Broadway show to use the LS8, a memory lighting board, which prefigured today's modern automated consoles.

After working with Bennett and the rest of the dream team on the unsuccessful *Balroom*, they got together again for *Dreamgirls*, a sensationally effective musical melodrama about the rise of a Supremes-like girl group. Again, Musser dazzled audiences with her innovations, including an upstage wall of lighting units. The design, which paced the furiously fast-moving show with cinematic effects, such as wipes and fades, was one of her greatest achievements.

During the '70s and '80s, Musser also functioned as a kind of house designer to the playwright Neil Simon, lighting *The Prisoner of Second Avenue*, *The Sunshine Boys*, *The Good Doctor*, *God's Favorite*, *California Suite*, *Chapter Two*, *They're Playing Our Song*, *I Ought to Be in Pictures*, *Brighton Beach Memoirs*, *Biloxi Blues*, *Broadway Bound*, *Rumors*, *Lost in Yonkers*, *Jake's Women*, *The Goodbye Girl*, and *Laughter on the 23rd Floor*.

Other notable productions lit by Musser were the long-



Photo Courtesy of Ken Billington

running comedy *Same Time Next Year*, the Jack Lemmon vehicle *Tribute*, the assisted-suicide drama *Whose Life is it Anyway?*, Mark Medoff's Tony Award-winning, *Children of a Lesser God*, the blockbuster musical *42nd Street* (another dream team collaboration, this time without Bennett), Tom Stoppard's *The Real Thing*, and the long-running musical *The Secret Garden*.

Musser fostered a generation of lighting designers through her assistants, many of whom went on to notable careers of their own. These include Ken Billington, David F. Segal, Jeff Davis, Richard Winkler, Curt Ostermann, Rick Belzer, Kirk Bookman, Betsy Adams, Vivien Leone, Paul Palazzo, Brian Nason, David Lander, and Marilyn Rennagel. Rennagel became Musser's life partner, living with her until Musser's death.

Musser won Tony and Drama Desk Awards for *Follies*, *A Chorus Line*, and *Dreamgirls*. She earned Tony nominations for *Applause*, *A Little Night Music*, *The Good Doctor*, *Pacific Overtures*, *The Act*, *Ballroom*, and *42nd Street*. She also received a Drama Desk Award for *Dreamgirls*, as well as several Drama Desk nominations, for *They're Playing Our Song*, *Ballroom*, *Children of a Lesser God*, *The Real Thing*, *Artist Descending a Staircase*, and *The Secret Garden*.

Musser remembered

A number of people recently spoke to *Lighting&Sound America* about Musser. Ken Billington who was her assistant from 1967-70, said, "There was no nonsense with her. She turned the lights on; when it looked good, she stopped and went on to the next cue. She knew her plots intimately because she drew them herself, she hooked them up herself, and she talked to the board ops and the followspots." Billington notes that a hallmark of Musser's style was "a great economy. She always had a few spares around, but everything was thought out. The best-lit show I have ever seen in my life was *Follies*—and there were no smoke machines, no moving lights, no color changers, and no memory console."

Musser's total professionalism also endeared to her colleagues, says Billington. "She never raised her voice in the theatre, never got angry. Once we were out of town, focusing a show, something went wrong—I don't remember what—and she got angry. Nobody else heard her, but she said to me, 'You finish focusing this; I'm leaving.' I continued working and, about a half an hour later, she came back and started focusing again. I said, 'Where did you go?' She said, 'I had to walk around the block a few times.' That was a great lesson to learn."

Musser was instrumental in launching the career of the projection designer Wendall K. Harrington, recommending her to the set design Douglas W. Schmidt for *They're Playing Our Song*, which featured an ambitious projection design for the period (1978). "She really appreciated subtle-



The wall of lights for "One Night Only" in *Dreamgirls*.

ty," Harrington says. "When we did the bus-and-truck of *Song*, many lighting instruments were eliminated, so I was making effects with projectors that, on Broadway, we had done with lighting. There was this water effect, with just the tiniest little glimmer of moonlight, and she said to me, 'I thought I was subtle, but this beats me. That's when I knew what my goal was; you didn't see the effect, you felt it. It was the same with her—you didn't see the light coming on, you felt it.'"

Tony Walton, who worked on several shows with Musser, ranging from *Golden Boy* to *The Real Thing*, also cites her blunt honesty, adding, "She as always able to make her point mischievously, rather than seeming to attack." He cites the disastrous *1600 Pennsylvania Avenue*, a musical about race relations in America; Leonard Bernstein who composed it, called for a finale with black members of the cast. Musser was alone in pointing out to Bernstein that the number was unintentionally demeaning. "She was able to speak to Lenny in a way that Alan [Jay Lerner, the show's librettist and lyricist] couldn't. It had a very powerful effect."

In Delbert Unruh's monograph, *The Designs of Tharon Musser* (published by USITT), Walton recalls that when he worked with Musser on the musical *The Act*, which is set in Las Vegas, he asked Musser for more garish effects and blowsier colors. Musser's response: "I don't have that in my palette." Unruh quotes Walton as saying, "She wouldn't do anything vulgar, and I was impressed and amused by that."

When that quote is read back to Walton, he laughs and says, "She probably would have hated to hear that, because she prized rough edges. But she was innately the most extraordinarily tasteful person. Her color sense was just remarkable. I was awed that, on even something as seemingly straightforward as *The Real Thing*, she found the color that was exactly right for each moment."

Steve Terry, who worked on *A Chorus Line* for several



A *Chorus Line* was one of Musser's greatest achievements.

years—first as an assistant electrician, then as sound engineer—while building the gear supply house Production Arts, cites Musser's inventive nature. "In *Ballroom*, she created this moment in one number, in which the female dancers wore huge skirts that flared out to maybe 3' in diameter at the bottom. She said, 'I've got a projection screen with those skirts,' so she created a set of color-changing downlights using indexing color wheels, which Richard Logothetis, of Lycian, built for the show. You could stop the color wheel at any color. Michael Bennett put a dancer in each downlight, and she went to town on them as color-changing projection surfaces."

Robin Wagner notes that Musser treated her fellow Dream Team members with humorous brusqueness. "Tharon was deeply interested in color. Working with us, she always said the color was dictated by 'the rag lady,' meaning Theoni, and 'the schmattes,' meaning me with my backdrops. She'd say, 'This color might work with the rags, but not with the schmattes.' But she solved the real problem on *A Chorus Line*, which was, how do you know when the scene is taking place now, or when it is someone's memory or some other subconscious thing. When we went to a flashback or some other idea, it was done in lavender, and with backlight—and it was beautiful."

Musser's color sense and sharp wit were on display in a story I wrote for *Theatre Crafts* in 1991 about *The Secret Garden*. The show is a sentimental musical based on a Victorian children's classic; it begins with a choreographed sequence set in India, establishing the fact that young heroine's parents die in an epidemic. The scene featured a heavy amber wash. Musser recalled, "Theoni Aldredge said, 'I've never seen you use so much amber,' I said, 'Of course, it's amber; they've got cholera!'"

Nobody knew it, but after *The Secret Garden* opened, Musser was five shows away from the end of her career.

She was deeply skeptical of changes in her world, having little or no use for moving lights or the trend toward more technology. "I keep looking at these shows that have 800 instruments and think, how did they get designers to give them that kind of space?" she told me in 1991. And were other, deeper changes in her life. Marilyn Rennagel says in Unruh's book that Musser began showing signs of Alzheimer's as early as 1990. The disease strengthened after 1994, although she still worked occasionally, assisted by Rennagel. Her final Broadway show, *The Lonesome West*, was in 1999. She is credited with lighting the 2006 revival of *A Chorus Line*, but her work was recreated and reshaped by Natasha Katz. (In a strange coincidence, Musser's death occurred nearly simultaneously with the release of *Every Little Step*, a documentary about the casting of the 2006 revival of *A Chorus Line*; the film also delves into the musical's unique development process.)

Musser continued to live at home, under Rennagel's care, until her death. On April 21, the lights on Broadway were dimmed for one minute, in her honor.

Though the years Musser spent in a retirement dictated by illness, she was always deeply missed—and not just for her work. "One often thinks that the best collaborators are obsessed, but that's not entirely so," says Walton. "She was able to attain a parallel life, a life filled with fun. It allowed the work to be richer." Wagner recalls the sharpness of her mind—how, wherever she was with a show, she worked the *New York Times* crossword puzzle every day, adding, "She'd get the Sunday puzzle done in a couple of hours."

Terry remembers her honesty: "Tharon didn't have a lot of guile. When you talked to her, you knew what was on her mind; you never had to wonder what she was really thinking. That's an admirable quality as far as I'm concerned."

"She was a consummate artist," says Harrington. "There are so few people like that." 🍷