

**Imogen Clarke: "Little did I know how much my life was going to change when I received that thrilling phone call back in February telling me that I had been chosen as 2024's Lumière!"**

My placement would start in April with three months at Glyndebourne. Up until that point I had worked in dance and theatre but I had never worked in opera before, I'd never been to Glyndebourne and I had no idea what an extraordinary place it was and just how much I would learn from my time there.

My first opera experience at Glyndebourne was *Die Zauberflöte* (The Magic Flute) and it certainly felt as if I had no time for nerves as I was thrown in at the deep end. I had communicated with the designer, Guy Simard by e-mail and knew he was not going to be there on day one as he was travelling and so, my first day started with me behind the production desk with the lighting supervisor, looking out for all the bits that the LD might have been catching and sitting out front talking to the programmer.

To experience the value of the Glyndebourne archive at first hand (we had MLA and a recording) was an education and prompted an interesting debate. The greens looked totally different on both, so we had to make a call about what the in-

tention was and what actually worked. It was a good opportunity to be in the hot seat without too much pressure.

It was fascinating to see the kind of support that Glyndebourne gives to revivals of works. The amount of time that the archive coordinator and lighting supervisors are able to spend on the prep is astonishing and borne out in the quality of the productions. These were key resources enabling me to get as prepared as I possibly could. Not only did I have access to videos from years ago but also I had old focus photos and detailed focus notes. Amy Clarke, head programmer, was invaluable in her flawless preparation of exquisite show files from the past.

Working with Guy was amazing because he had very clear ideas about how he wanted the opera to look. At one point I was even told off for checking the evenness of the light when I was walking on stage: "it should always be uneven" he said! I really appreciated his generosity towards me in terms of his time and experi-

ence and after he left we had some long zoom conversations discussing light and colour. I did not study lighting at University and these conversations were thought provoking. One of the things that Guy said which has stayed with me is that lighting design is all about having ideas. I interpreted this as meaning how important it is to try things out, to try to understand the work, what is needed, decide on an interpretation and to be clear what one's approach is.

The next work I was involved with was *Carmen*, directed by Diane Paulus with Malcolm Rippeth as Lighting Designer. I was fascinated to see Malcolm at work; his knowledge of the opera itself was of such depth and he had a really clear vision of what he was trying to do. He created this wonderful opening for Act 2's big dance scene, painting the stage in lots of different, beautiful primary colours, (some of which I would never have put together!). It was stunning to see and really complemented the set - this kind of seedy, sloped

roof bar, filled with smoke. At first the director was not quite sure of Malcolm's vision and it was invaluable for me to see Malcolm listening to Diane and trying out ideas according to her suggestions but remaining very flexible and calm. Then it got to the point where Malcolm was able to say "No, I think it really works actually" and Diane responded well to that because she trusted him and saw that he was clear about his idea. This for me was an interesting lesson in how a trusting collaboration can work.

The other new production at Glyndebourne this season was *The Merry Widow*, lit by Ben Cracknell, with the most beautiful, ornate, dreamland set and opulent, pastel costumes by Gary McCann. Ben really understood how to light this and bring it to life. He had thought about every portal and edging, all of these lights were focused to bring out the detail in the set which added to the feeling of utter opulence. This was an interesting production for me to work on and a big learning curve. Not only was I in charge of follow spot wrangling but working out how the new macula system worked combined with their conventional followspots. We had to do a fair bit of swapping around and find how to integrate both smoothly. It was a really fun puzzle to get my head around!

The production was also filmed for the BBC and watching Bernie Davis work was a master-class in how to light for TV. I had never experienced how much light changes under the lens of the camera and how to balance getting the colours to look the same as to the eye whilst also balancing for skin tone. I was also fascinated to see the way that Bernie would skilfully anticipate levels by tweaking exposure and counting this out with the camera operators. Meanwhile I was managing spot levels whilst looking at a monitor and pulling them around.

*Giulio Cesare*, a revival of the 2005 production lit by Paule Constable was to be my next project. It was such a beautiful production, the light at times reminding me of a Rembrandt painting. I loved



Imogen (right) and Lucy Carter, Royal Ballet & Opera

watching Paule work; how cleverly she worked with the new rig, matching it in with the generics she had kept for the show. She explained she could really see the plasticity of light that the LED was giving and she was missing the life an all tungsten rig gave to the production.

What she achieved was a real lesson in how to hold and focus the space, not just adding extra light in but creating and shaping a look to support the scene and its emotion. I also learnt working alongside Paule how to build and nurture a team. Paule was always so generous with her time and I really enjoyed watching her interact with the crew.

The Glyndebourne crew are incredible, so supportive and proactive, enabling the lighting designer to engage with the production and create their vision with less distractions than might be the case elsewhere. Everyone who works here is so invested in the artistic vision that it makes for a unique working environment. Members of the crew will come and sit out front and look at something; they will compliment the lighting designer or ask questions. Everyone seems interested in what's being made and invested in the process. The creative process benefits from being able to focus on and engage with a production without needing to worry about

some of the technical details (the kit/ activation notes for example) and you can see what this support does in the quality of productions Glyndebourne are putting out.

The final opera for me to work on at Glyndebourne was *Tristan and Isolde*, designed by Robin Carter. This was totally different to all the other operas with a much more static performance. The set, designed by Roland Aeschlimann, consisted of a single, really strong sculptural shape suggesting a vortex that seemed to pull you in to its centre as if to an iris. It required a different kind of lighting

and by the very nature of its shape the LD was cut off from using some of the rig. *Tristan and Isolde* hadn't been revived for

the longest out of all these revivals and so there was a big jump between the rig they would have had and what we were working



Photo: Glyndebourne

with now.

In some ways this worked to our advantage - Rob Marsh, the lighting supervisor

had prepared a HMI profile in the wings as well as an Encore on a stand. When he turned on the HMI against the Encore you

of pars washing across the gauze and we replaced these with Dalis flown and groundrow. Interestingly, in retrospect, in a production which sometimes lives in a world of blues, this felt like a blessing as the clarity and intensity we could achieve with the LED's in dark blue brought a vibrancy to the production that Robin had initially wanted but had been unable to achieve with the kit he had had.

There are so many things to praise about Glyndebourne and being there taught me an extraordinary amount. Initially my mind was blown by the sheer scale of it all and just couldn't see it any more! As a result we ended up using the movers and the new kit quite a lot. Originally they had lots

the way that the Glyndebourne machine worked. Before April not only had I never worked on an opera before but also I had

never worked in rep. I learnt that it's a very different skill set to light opera in a place where you are sharing a rig and sharing time. I love the fact that, unlike the tech for a stage show or musical where you might say "just hold those positions", there's just no stopping in opera rehearsals! You have to keep up and so it means you have to be really well prepared. You have to really know the work and what is coming. I love the process of layering; starting with sketching out a general shape, then filling in more and more detail and so on until you create a show. The fluidity of that process is lovely. This also means that you quickly have to get a handle on the shape of the space and how you want the light to behave. Watching five different people approach this in very different ways was extraordinary - such a privilege to sit beside and be part of.

Here I have to say thank you to the team at Glyndebourne. They make that building a brilliant place to come and work and for me made the first half of my Lumière scheme incredible. I was so well supported and I am so grateful to the generosity of everyone for their time, patience, going down the rabbit hole with me about revivals and chats about lighting design or whatever and really listening. It couldn't have been a better place to start the

scheme.

The second half of my journey as *Lumière* started at the Royal Albert Hall with the *Carmen* prom with Bernie Davis. This was a real shift: still a bit of opera, but how to light it in a concert setting, in and up in one day without a full rehearsal? It was great to be part of the team working out how to condense the concept of the design into a totally new rig but keep the emotional essence of Malcolm Rippeth's creation.

After this I ventured on to *Now That's What I Call A Musical*, with Ben Cracknell, a new 80's Jukebox touring musical, in and up in a week in Aylesbury, moving after its first preview to Sheffield Lyceum, a smaller venue, where we would support the touring team and stay with it to do our notes. What was amazing about working with Ben is his understanding of the music and how he pulls apart a track in a detailed way and has parts of the rig in and/or cues about the kick drum or a bass line or guitar slide. At the beginning before we went into rehearsals I was given the task of watching all the original music videos and taking some lighting ideas from these. I was also Followspot wrangling for the tour and keeping track of all of our specials as we wouldn't have time to MLA the show before the first move. Then in Sheffield I

played the ensemble standing in place off the VOR with the cue numbers we had and also making this into a list of specials which the stage management and lighting team would have to do with cast for each move. Working with Ben in this environment was a real lesson in how to work at speed, how you have to be so concise: prioritising notes, detailing what the notes are and creating a workflow in order to achieve the best and most effective result.

1984 with Paul Pyant at Theatre Royal Bath was a shift again, working on a straight play with video and live feed that would need to tour through various venues. A mostly conventional rig supplemented with some movers and some lusters, it really showcased what a skill it is to put together a rig that works and supports

the show but also is tourable on the right scale. I managed the Vectorworks for the show keeping it up to date as things changed and watched previews taking



notes and discussing them with Paul. Paul was brilliant at framing each location, instinctively knowing how to turn one light on to solve a problem. He had a clear idea

of what world we were in and the mood we needed to provide. His prep was exemplary, noting all the blocking and when or where anything is happening in the show. This gives him an extensive understanding



Photo: Glyndebourne

of the piece before putting in his lighting cues. You really see this in the results.

Benjamin Button with Zoe Spurr was my first experience working on a musical in

the West End. We were at the Ambassadors navigating a tiny space. It had been first produced at Southwark Playhouse but with an entirely different rig so we had a cue structure but no information in it. The lighting works very hard in this piece with one beautiful, mainly static set - so Zoe is doing place, mood and focus - often pulling in to specific narrators in the moment to cover all of the instrument changing and swapping as the company barely leave the stage.

It was also my first experience of a long preview process, experiencing how much a show can change through this time and also learning how on top of the changes you have to be. We'd be doing our notes but keeping an ear out for any changes to blocking or music that would affect us. I was scrubbing along with the vor to keep up with our notes and David Stone the programmer doing a great job of "imagine someone's there" or me running up and "imagine I was taller". There was also the game of chasing the specials around, as it's a show full of actor musicians and there are so many nooks in the set and so many switches in musicians positions/instruments. We'd be sitting in different seats and watching a different bit of the stage: who's at the piano and when and are they lit, drums next etc etc. It was really inter-

esting to see how to balance smashing through notes and keeping up with the changes on stage, relying on a strong team to get it all done.

My next stop was the Royal Opera House, working with Lucy Carter on Wayne McGregor's *MaddAddam*. It was fascinating to witness the benefits of their long term collaboration. The understanding, the trust and even the language: you're not talking about 'brighter' or 'darker', you're talking about 'is it factual enough?'. Their ability to communicate in such a particular way was extraordinary. Lucy is also someone who is flawlessly prepared; she really understands the work on a conceptual level and gets under the skin of it. I was very grateful to her for sharing her amazing notebooks about the project with her ideas that aren't all about lighting but sometimes about feelings, and knowing places that the work goes.

The production had come from Canada (there was a new section added to it for the ROH performances) but the piece had not been performed for a couple of years and never before at the Opera House. It was a challenge to convert the information we received from Canada on to the rig at the ROH (different kit/ different numbers/ and different types of units). There was a Pre Vis process to maximise the usefulness

of our time on stage. It was fascinating watching the lighting supervisor and the programming team unpack that show file and seeing Lucy unpick her ideas, comparing our rig with where the set had been before. I was given the job of keeping the cue notes up to date to facilitate the process in reverse for when the piece goes back to Canada. In one of the acts it was very tricky to achieve an effect from the original Canadian performance due to the new set and the constraints on lighting positions on the Opera House stage. After playing with several options Lucy created something quite different but which had a similar emotional resonance. It was so interesting to watch Lucy work through a solution laterally - I felt this could only happen because of her deep knowledge of the work.

*Ballet Shoes* was my final assistant role on the scheme, working with Paule Constable at the National on the Olivier stage. It's a beast of a space - a brilliant place to light but a challenge because of its shape. Early on Paule spoke of the importance of being aware of the views from the very different seats' perspectives and I spent some time looking at the stage from extreme seat positions.

Paule talked to me about the necessity of supporting the action and how easy it is

in this space to push the actors into the floor. It was a thrill to see her collaborating on a new production; she looks at the piece as a whole through a dramaturgical lens. So she was able to give a note about more than the lights and engage with the director and creative team about aspects of the show that weren't quite working. I really enjoyed the preview noting process. I watched from many different views in the theatre, typing up my notes and then working through the list with Paule to see what we had both noticed, what we agreed on, what we didn't and why - a great way to learn.

The team at the National were amazing, so caring and attentive to all the detail. For example an integral part of the set design were infinite set practicals which would light up all the nooks and crannies of this immense, intricate set. The crew had thought ahead to the movement of these almost before they were asked! Their skill, knowledge and enthusiasm made such a difference to the production as a whole.

It was an honour to be asked back (as Lighting Designer!) to Glyndebourne to light two of the Christmas concerts. What fun, after eight months of assisting to be in the hot seat driving the car, trying out some of the ideas and practices from the

different lighting designers I had been with, (e.g. from prep, to communication, to backing an idea and so on). I was moved watching the final concert by how much I had learnt and what a privilege it's been to have had this journey; it was really lovely to end it back at the place where it all began.

One of my main realisations is that there is no one right way. I have seen the extreme diversity of working styles of these brilliant creatives, from communicating with directors, to preparing to light a show, to how people shape and paint with light. The things they have in common are having a clear visual concept, the ability to make decisions quickly and with conviction and above all, serving the needs of the work.

I have been so aware throughout this year of the generosity of the people we work with, despite us being the department who are working live and delivering it in front of everyone for the first time. I feel so lucky to have had the opportunity of being Lumière, and there is not space to mention everyone by name but I am very thankful and grateful to all of the LDs, the venue and production staff, cast and crew for their time, inclusion and knowledge. It was a brilliant eight months and this scheme has really developed my craft and built my confidence." #



Photo: Glyndebourne