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Finding Links

Designer Jean Kalman invents space with light.

By Charles Shafaieh



Pierre Audi's production of *Guillaume Tell* at the Metropolitan Opera, 2016

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[*Eugene Onegin* at the Met, 2013](#)

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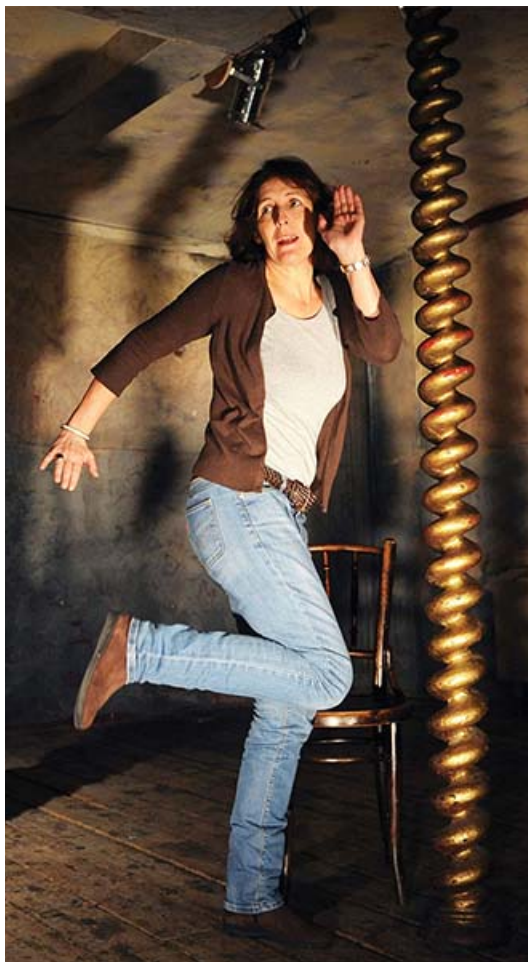
Kalman

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Calman

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Shaw in *The Waste Land* at London's Wilton's Music Hall, 2009

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Shaw in *The Waste Land* at London's Wilton's Music Hall, 2009

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WHEN ASKED TO EXPLAIN LIGHTING DESIGN, Jean Kalman often begins at *the* beginning.

“Genesis starts with a very spatial description,” he says over Zoom from his home in Paris, as he pulls a Bible from a nearby bookshelf. “‘In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters,’” he reads aloud. “It’s dark, but you get a feeling of the space. Then God says, ‘Let there be light.’ Next, he divides the light from the darkness. What does it make? Time.” What Kalman and his peers create in a theater is quite similar: “We invent a space by going into it with light,” he says. “We give it darkness and light, and, through this, we bring the dynamic of time.”

FOR MORE THAN FORTY YEARS, Kalman has developed this approach to a craft that most struggle to describe, either in practical or poetic terms. From La Scala to the Bolshoi, he has worked on operas with prominent directors such as Adrian Noble, Lev Dodin and Simon McBurney. He is a regular presence at the Met, including with his frequent collaborators Pierre Audi (*Attila*, 2010; *Guillaume Tell*, 2016) and Deborah Warner, whose *Eugene Onegin* will be revived this season. It is an opera he knows well, as he made his Met debut with Robert Carsen’s 1997 staging, creating a design that *TheNew York Times* called the “star” of the production.

Spoken drama, too, has been a major focus of his career since its commencement at Paris’s Théâtre des Bouffes du Nord, then run by Peter Brook, for whom he lit the original nine-hour *Mahabharata* in a quarry at the 1985 Avignon Festival. His awards include the inaugural Olivier for Best Lighting Design in 1991, for Richard Eyre’s *Richard III* and *White Chameleon*. When not occupied by traditional stage work, for which he also does set design, he collaborates with visual artists. Most notable among them is Christian Boltanski, with whom he created installations, operas and other pieces. Yet in conversation, the soft-spoken, elegant seventy-six-year-old gives no impression of the full schedule he has maintained, even during the pandemic.

Kalman’s understanding of his ephemeral métier can be traced, in part, to his years as a philosophy student at the Sorbonne. In the mid 1960s, his professors were a who’s who of star intellectuals—Emmanuel Levinas, Paul Ricoeur, Henri Lefebvre, among others. Although a future in the performing arts was not in his thoughts then, his avoidance of a technical education was vital. In agreement with the late American lighting designer Gilbert Hemsley, who considered a broad education essential for anyone in the theater, Kalman acknowledges that his coursework prepared him for what was to come. “You start thinking that whatever you create, whatever you do, has meanings and resonances. They’re not just gratuitous gestures,” he says. It provided him with a foundation for future dialogues with directors as well. “It’s important to understand the director’s language—what they mean, what they’re looking for,” he says. “Often, they have a literary background. When you learn philosophy, you learn to discuss and to understand something. You pay attention to that which, very often, people don’t pay attention to.”



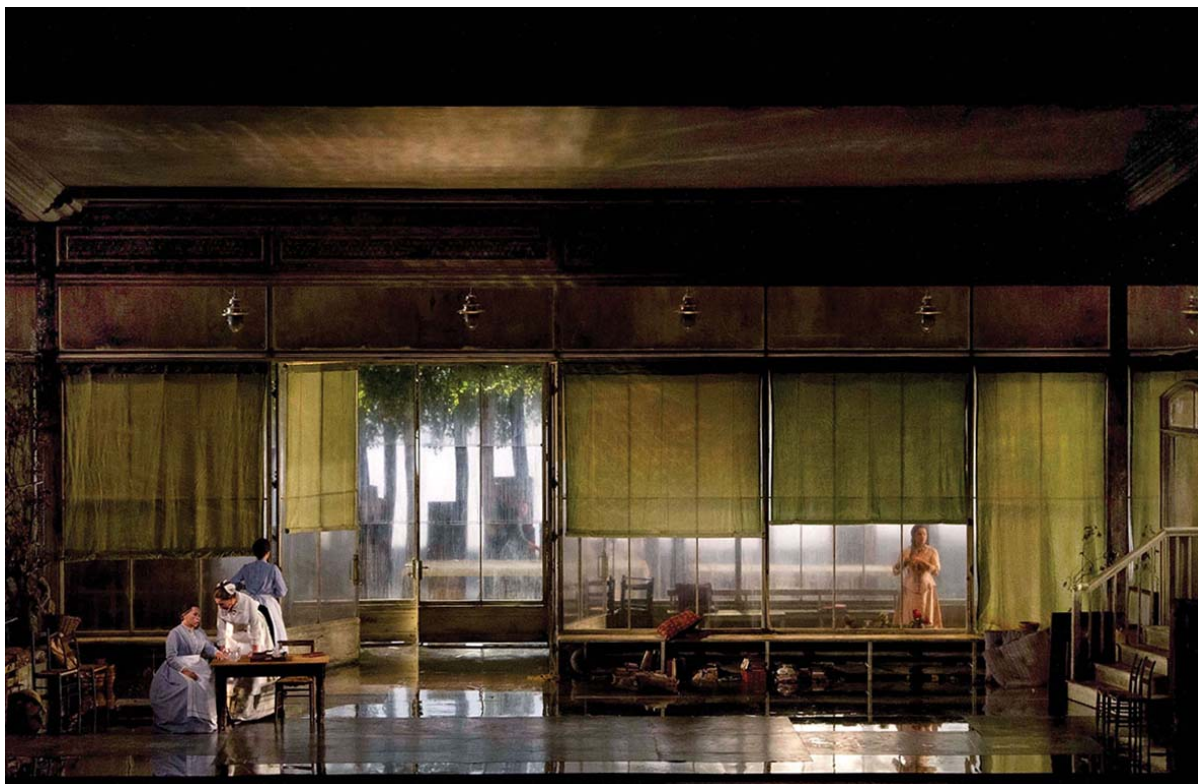
Pierre Audi's production of *Attila* at the Met, 2010
© Beth Bergman

It was not until after he finished a two-year stint teaching in Madagascar that he changed course. "I thought, 'I need to grow into the big world!'" he says with a chuckle. He decided to enroll at L'École Nationale Supérieure Louis-Lumière, a prominent school in Paris for cameramen and directors of photography. "I learned quite a lot about lighting there, but in relation to films," he says. As with his time at the Sorbonne though, the school's influences are apparent today. "It all relates to the eye," he says.

After graduating, he worked as an assistant cameraman on various films until he heard a local theater needed an electrician. "I knew what a lamp was and how to plug it in, so I thought, why not?" he says. Albeit banal, the job was at the Bouffes du Nord—a serendipitous opportunity that quickly led to his first lighting-design gig, Hans-Peter Cloos's acclaimed 1979 production of *The Threepenny Opera*. Cloos was aware that Kalman knew the theater and offered him the job. "It went very, very naturally," he says, a characteristic warm smile accompanying his recollection. Brook was impressed, and he hired Kalman to light his next production, *The Cherry Orchard*.

There is no regular system for when a director brings in a lighting designer. The designer is sometimes invited into the process late in the game, and the director may never attend a lighting session, seeing the plans only at rehearsal. Kalman prefers to join early and be involved in initial discussions.

Some designers start with sketches. While Kalman draws for pleasure, his drawings don't serve as origins for his work. "You're offered a space in the discussions between the set designer and the director," he explains. "Then you start to consider the energies of this space, how you can play with it. That often goes with suggestions by the director, so it's good to spend time looking to help them, because it gives you an indication about the dynamic for which you must look. Sometimes it's very interesting to have the set designer's storyboard, which can indicate how he thinks about the space." These opportunities help, too, when experimentation time is limited. This is often the case in opera houses, when singers, who frequently arrive only for short rehearsals, cannot wear finished costumes under lighting plans until just prior to a premiere. Working with an institution's repertory rig rather than introducing all lighting equipment from scratch also increases frustration—a typical problem in Germany, where different productions are staged nightly and a house's rig must suit each with minimal changes.



Deborah Warner's production of *Eugene Onegin* at the Met, 2013

© Beth Bergman

KALMAN'S DESCRIPTION of these polyphonic conversations and negotiations encapsulates a point that he stresses as he reflects on his role in the theater—that he must not be dictatorial, as he remains just one voice among many. “You learn how to be in relation with other people,” he says, gesturing again to the wisdom he learned at university. “Some designers get stuck on what they wish to do, but it doesn’t fit with what others wish. That’s a lesson I learned from Peter Brook, who once said to me, ‘Jean, one should not be sentimental. It is not necessary.’ What is fascinating is that we can come together and make something.” Though he acknowledges that territorial fights occur, he sees himself more like a geisha. “She is an artist, but her main role is to make people feel comfortable and to make links. A big part of lighting is about making links between elements—costumes, choreography, the audience, the story.”

Rather than work in opposition, Kalman seeks to “catch” the kernels of his colleagues’ ideas that will expand his work. He then responds, in real time, to what he sees. “I never think, ‘I should do this image, that image,’ and build my own storyboard,” he says. Instead, he assembles a palette as a painter would. “You build your own, with those things which you think would be interesting to use. It’s a palette of possibilities, which I sometimes use in very different ways than I originally thought.”

Still, he has his own aesthetic predilections. When he began his career, for example, he refused the “traditional approach to lighting” in which the stage was “divided” into multiple sections and lighting focused on each section, as necessary, to enhance it as actors traversed the stage. “I cannot just bring light because a person moves,” he says. “It has to have a dynamic in itself, in the image. Lighting has to build space, not ‘light something.’”

This is not at all to say that he lacks respect for performers. “In France, you sometimes had difficulty seeing actors’ faces, whereas I was concerned with lighting that gives strength to an actor, to make them shine,” he says. This position may explain why he had a fertile period with British theater, which focuses on the actor/audience relationship. “Lighting the actor is the main thing, and the set exists around them. It’s important to work with the set, but I don’t describe it.” To this end, Kalman states that his primary tool is

cross lighting, which, in its simplest form, can “go above the floor, catch the actor and nothing else, and disappear on the other side.”



Guillaume Tell at the Met, 2016

© Beth Bergman

He also enjoys such lighting’s potency. “Rather than carefully construct things, I like to use one strong light, which gives the first structure, and build in big directions from there,” he says. This boldness, which he refers to as “splashing light” and jests that it would not be considered “clean,” in part suggests why he has had good relationships with artists known for similarly declarative marks and gestures, such as Karel Appel and Anish Kapoor.

Actor and director Fiona Shaw sees no sense of a watercolorist in his work. “Jean dares to expose every atom of the place,” she says. “This is not lighting for vanity. He’s not trying to sculpt or manipulate you.” Shaw has received Kalman’s light on numerous occasions and worked with him as a director on multiple operas, including the Met’s current *Onegin*, which she took over from Deborah Warner at the last minute in 2013. Of their work together, both speak most fondly of *The Waste Land*, also directed by Warner, which had an international tour from 1995–2010 in derelict theaters and other atypical spaces. “The entire poem is about the fact that everything we do has its epic antecedent,” says Shaw, who performed the piece solo. She recalls one moment that encapsulates Kalman’s artistry. “As I said, ‘The Chair she sat in, like a burnished throne,’ you saw a twelve-foot-tall shadow, a Greek statue of my body, behind me. The language of the poem, which is modernist and domestic even though Eliot is playing into the fact that it is eternal language, was matched by Jean in lighting the small person and the epic meaning.”

The cumulative effect of Kalman’s understanding of the presentation onstage, his mastery of technique and his aesthetic sensitivity, has astonished performers and audiences alike. He remains humble though, citing the nineteenth-century French term for a lighting designer, *le lampiste*, which also means “an underling” or “a nobody.” “In some ways, I am a *lampiste* also,” he says, with another gentle smile. “One has to be very modest with this profession, because it is at the center of many people’s desires, and it would not make sense to be just in my own desire.” Shaw, whose sentiments are echoed by Kalman’s other collaborators and admirers, from Pierre Audi to Peter Sellars, can be less restrained. “A lot of what Jean does is still a mystery to me, except for his thoroughness and complete devotion to light as his entire tool. He doesn’t come in and ‘do a bit of lighting.’ He holds the thing,” she says. “He paints the essence. He paints the bones. He’s not a journeyman—he’s a master.” ■

Charles Shafaieh is an arts journalist and critic whose work has appeared in The New Yorker, The Irish Times and other international publications.