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# BLACK MASKS

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Spotlight on Black Theatre

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**NOELLE JORDAN, ITOHAN EDOLOYI, RACHAEL N. BLACKWELL**



# Emerging Black Women Lighting Designers



Lighting Designer Noelle Soraya Jordan

by Kathy A. Perkins

D. Carnegie Harry, Jr.

**B**lack women in lighting constitute a small segment of American theatre designers. When I began professionally in the late 1970s, there was such a dearth of women that we all knew each other: Stephanie Johnson, Melody Beal, Antoinette Tynes, Roma Flowers and Sandra Ross. In terms of early academic training, Black women studied at White institutions as early as the 1950s, while most trained at HBCUs. It was the Black Theatre Movement of the 1960s and '70s that saw the emergence of more women due to the opportunities at Black theatres. Most Black designers worked only in Black theatre or dance companies, which is not a negative, but moving into mainstream theatres was difficult. Race

*Kathy A. Perkins has designed on Broadway, Off-Broadway, regionally and internationally with American Conservatory, Berkeley Repertory, Arena Stage, Goodman, The Black Rep, Yale Repertory, Actors Theatre, Stratford Festival (Canada) and Grahamstown Festival (South Africa). In 1995, she co-curated the exhibition titled Onstage: A Century of African American Stage Design at Lincoln Center. She is editor of seven anthologies and recipient of numerous research/design awards, including the Fulbright, National Endowment of the Humanities, Henry Hewes Design Award and NAACP Image Award.*

and gender have been the main factor as lighting has historically been perceived as a male, particularly a White male, area.

The earliest known woman designer was the Harlem Renaissance visual artist Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller (1877–1968), who designed in the Boston area from the 1920s to 1940s. Lighting designer Shirley Prendergast (1929–2019), the first Black professional woman designer, made history in 1973 as the first African American woman to design on Broadway (*The River Niger*). She became a mentor for the next generation of Black designers.

Toward the end of the 20th century, more Black artists began attending design programs, although the numbers are considerably less than for White artists. The increase was due in part to professors of color urging White colleagues and technical theatre organizations to be more inclusive. Also, there is an increasing number of design programs. With the advent of computerized drafting, moving lights, LEDs, and other growing technology, controlling equipment has become a specialized area. Many programs also incorporate projection design into the major.

Unfortunately, it took George Floyd's death in 2020 to open professional doors wider. Black theatre artists were represented on Broadway during the 2021–2022 season more than any time in history. Organizations newly founded during

the pandemic, such as Black Theatre United, among others, made agreements with Broadway houses and encouraged regional theatres to assure there would be no future all-White production teams. With these arrangements in place, I am hopeful that there will continue to be more Black women designing professionally.

In 2012, I created a Facebook page for Black theatre designers in all areas to network and display their designs. Members are multi-generational, and the more experienced designers are encouraged to mentor the younger ones. During the pandemic, membership grew, and I was able to connect with many designers. This article focuses on three unique designers: Noelle Soraya Jordan, Itohan Edoloyi, and Rachael N. Blackwell—all of whom are working in various areas of lighting. I've had the pleasure of meeting and/or working with all three. Each has a distinct story about her foray into lighting.

## Noelle Soraya Jordan

Born in Staten Island, New York, and raised in Newark, New Jersey, Noelle Jordan is one of a handful of Black women designing in the concert industry. Coming from a musical family, her interest in the arts began with music. Her parents were church musicians who also worked in var-

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ious areas of entertainment. As a child, she remembers running behind her parents backstage when they both worked on the production of Newark's *Comic Relief* (1996). Even so, it wasn't until high school that she first took theatre seriously. Injured as an athlete her freshman year, she explored the drama club as an alternative outlet, working as a stage manager and in other technical positions. For her first paid job, Jordan was hired to work with the Director of Communications for the City of Newark as a production assistant, where she learned a great deal about the entertainment industry.

In 2007, Jordan entered Howard University, majoring in television production while minoring in technical theatre/lighting design—thanks to her lighting advisor Prof. George Epting. In addition to working on numerous theatre productions in the department, she had the opportunity to work at Cramton Auditorium, the large touring house on campus, where major music artists and dance companies would perform. Starting as an electrician, console operator, and assistant stage manager, she worked her way up to assistant production manager, a role with multiple responsibilities. She fell in love with working on music concerts, and they became her passion.

In 2012, while still a student, Jordan worked at the Howard Theatre (not affiliated with Howard University). One of her greatest mentors was Theryn Knight, an earlier Howard lighting design grad. She states: "Theryn played a huge role in how I saw myself because I saw somebody that looked like me doing it. It didn't even occur to me how much of a rarity she and I were....I was assisting Theryn....That's how I learned best. And then someone had a no-show....They needed a designer! They called me, and eventually started giving me more shows, once they saw I could handle that." Working with Theryn Knight opened many doors for Jordan, eventually including Lincoln Theatre, as well as the Kennedy Center.

Noelle Jordan also taught herself a great deal about the latest technology, sometime staying in the Howard Theatre after hours to get a grasp of the equip-



D. Carnegie Harry Jr.

ment. Since there was limited training at the time in concert lighting, she learned by doing, immersing herself in information online. She says, "I would watch concerts on mute, so that I [could] focus on the light."

Although determined to complete her degree, Jordan experienced unfortunate health issues that had her leaving and returning to Howard from 2009 until she was able to graduate in 2017. She continued to work in the various houses in the DC area after graduation up until the pandemic. In 2019, she took a job at the Filmore Theatre, a major touring venue, to make connections as she was ready to go on the road as a designer. Being at the Filmore did pay off; her first North American tour was with Rod Wave (August 2021). That work led to her next tours with PJ Morton, Moonchild, and to work as a sub-LD on other tours. Her first international tour was to Saudi Arabia with Busta Rhymes. Her recent projects have been with Fantasia. Although usually the only woman in the group, she feels respected.

In terms of her design, Jordan has her personal style, but it also depends on the artist. She says, "It's interactive the way I light. I don't only light for what the crowd sees. I light for the whole experience, and everyone is involved....I light the audience, so that the artist can see. I'm a contributor to indelible moments. And that's what every concert is...an indelible experience—one that cannot be recreated....I preset my looks but that's it....I listen to the music and then from there I ask what colors am I feeling? I start off with my basic looks and then I move to my accents, beams and then effects....Lalah Hathaway showed up for a performance in LA with Moonchild and I had to go with the feeling...roll with the punches!"

During the pandemic she created a video podcast series called "What's Up Roadie, How You Doing?" (she owns the trademark name), which is a series of interviews with professionals in the live entertainment industry that focuses on normalizing the conversations about mental health and equity for BIPOC within the industry. She was concerned with the many artists out of work for over eighteen months and wanted to provide an outlet. Each episode has a mental health advocate for guidance.

Noelle Soraya Jordan also gives workshops and presentations to schools and various groups about the work she does. Five years from now she would love to teach and show young people that they too can create their own lane.

### Itohan Edoloyi

Itohan Edoloyi was born and raised in Brooklyn, New York. Her mother is from the island of Tortola in the British Virgin Islands and her father is from Nigeria. She spent time as a child with her mother in Tortola and later on, in England with her father. Neither parent was involved in the arts but they both felt it was important to expose their daughter to the world of the arts as young as possible.

Her introduction to the arts in middle school was a result of her mom taking her to the Brooklyn Museum, where she took arts and crafts classes and played the violin and clarinet. She also frequented the New Victory Theatre in Manhattan. She never thought of theatre as a career per se, but rather, as something that her family did on Sundays.

Edoloyi entered New York City College of Technology (City Tech) in 2011

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with the goal of studying sound in the Entertainment Technology program. Lighting was one of the required courses. According to Edoloyi: “There was a day that we were learning about color theory. And my professor pulls out this board of different color blocks, turns the lights off, and points a light on it of a different color and we saw the colors of the board change before our eyes. That unlocked something in me,” she remembers. “It was so mental; I felt that I needed to do this...I have to learn how to do this!”

During Edoloyi’s subsequent years at City Tech and beyond, she worked in the entertainment industry, and did lighting for corporate events, fashion shows, weddings, and parties. One of her professors saw her passion for design and realized she needed more training. In 2015 she enrolled in the MFA program at Brooklyn College, which helped her immensely. Explaining the areas of performance that appealed to her most, she says: “I found that I was interested in installation work, artwork, immersive and experimental theater—work that pushes against the grain, work not commonly seen on Broadway. I wanted to delve into that more.”

After graduation in 2018, Edoloyi was awarded the prestigious Gilbert Hemsley Award in New York City, becoming the first Black woman to receive this honor. She spent her award year in independent study working with several designers at the San Francisco Opera, Pittsburgh Civic Light Opera, New York City Ballet and at City Center with the Alvin Ailey Dance Theatre. Her internship work included focusing lights, calling spot cues, and other tasks. According to Edoloyi, it was “definitely an intense internship.”

The award also provided an opportunity for numerous connections. For instance, during her first year of graduate school, Edoloyi met Broadway designer Jane Cox, who invited her to work on Broadway and on other shows Cox designed. Edoloyi would later be hired by Cox as lighting director for the national Broadway tour of *Jitney* in 2019 because of her experience during the internship. At the same time, Edoloyi became close friends with another designer through the



Lighting designer Itohan Edoloyi

Alec Duffy

Hemsley program, who was an associate designer for the Broadway musical *Kinky Boots*. They took the show on tour on a newly built cruise ship for six weeks in Europe. Following the tour, she returned to New York City and continued to work at corporate events, at shows in Soho and at such venues as The Tank and The Shed.

Itohan Edoloyi has had a vast range of experiences as a designer and enjoys designing for performances onstage as well as integrating lighting design into installation work. Referring to live performance, she says, “I think it allows light to have a somewhat sentient presence...at least I feel that with theatre and sometimes dance....You look at lighting, and it has a life. And more often than not, it leaves an impression on us. But then it goes, and you can go back to the show, and you can see it again. But then it goes again. Whereas I feel lighting in an art form or an installation, it has a life force to it—especially when a person can interact with it, and it speaks to them almost as if there is an unspoken connection. And I feel very drawn to that connection.”

While she says she draws more inspiration from visual artists and curators than playwrights, she quickly adds: “Don’t get me wrong. I enjoy theatre and there’s nothing quite like live performance but I’m curious about the relationship between the audience and a tangible piece of work and how that relationship expands not only to the individual experiencing it but [to] the collective experiencing it at the same time. I’m very fascinated by that.” She has also had the opportunity to curate and light her own installations, so at this point in her career,

she is seeking a balance between live performance and installation projects.

Although Broadway is not her goal, she is happy to have had the opportunity to work on three Broadway shows: *Jitney* (2017), *Trouble in Mind* (2021), and *for colored girls....* (2022).

### Rachael N. Blackwell

Rachael N. Blackwell was raised in Newport News, Virginia in a musical and technical family. Her mother is an English professor, and her father is a contractor. Her mother would take her and her siblings to a campus theatre, where Blackwell assisted in the scene shop. As a result of this exposure, she knew she wanted to pursue some aspect of the arts.

It was at Alabama State University (ASU) in 2012 that Blackwell found her passion for theatre. After seeing a campus production of the musical *Crowns*, the next day she went to the admissions office and declared theatre as a major. She volunteered in the scene shop and worked on shows with the goal of becoming a technical director (TD). Her first professional job was as master carpenter for a summer stock show in Maine. Realizing she was too physically small to embark on a TD career, she began exploring other areas. It was her lighting professor, Mr. Davis, who encouraged her to try lighting, and she loved it. Provided with an excellent foundation, Blackwell went on to design several dances and plays, such as *Flyin’ West*. During the summers she worked with ASU summer theatre, in addition to taking lighting workshops in Las Vegas on the latest technology and interning at

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Joy Diaz

Lighting designer Rachael N. Blackwell

the Pacific Conservatory of Performing Arts (PCPA) in California as a programmer and then assistant designer.

Since ASU had limited lighting classes, her professors made technical theatre conferences available for students to attend, such as United States Institute for Theatre Technology (USITT), where they would be exposed to other students and manufacturers. After graduation she remained in Montgomery to gain professional experience, working with Alabama Shakespeare Festival (ASF) and the Montgomery Ballet.

In 2017 she enrolled in the lighting and technology program at Cincinnati Conservatory of Music (CCM), which appealed to her because of the moving light programming class that provided her the opportunity to work with the latest technology. She became the first Black woman to complete the program. The classes were incredible, particularly in computer technology and drafting—training that was not available at ASU. In addition to theatre tech courses, she took classes in business, aesthetics, and music. During her final semester, she was allowed to gain practical experience, assisting me on a production in addition to assisting Black designer Xavier Pierce.

Blackwell reveals that dance is her favorite genre. She says, “I prefer to design dance because dance is a great way of telling stories without necessarily using words.... I just love helping create and tell a story through dancers on stage, and framing those bodies, using different light-

ing angles. I think dance gives you a lot more creative license.” Musicals are her second favorite genre because of her family background. Favorite musicals include *In the Heights*, and *The Wiz*.

Covid brought everything to a standstill following her spring 2020 graduation. She was awarded New York City’s prestigious Gilbert Hemsley Award, giving her the opportunity to work with prominent designers in major venues, such as the Pittsburgh Civic Light Opera and San Francisco Opera. However, because of the pandemic, she was only able to work at San Francisco Ballet for their summer session. She also won Black Theatre Network’s Judy Dearing Design Competition Award that same year. Although, like many others in theatre, her work was put on hold or done via Zoom during the pandemic, Blackwell was still able to co-produce and light an original show, *Four Women & An Artist* with Zeiders American Dream Theatre (The Z) in 2020.

After the Covid pandemic receded, her design career took off with *Fountain of You*, also at the Z, and the musical production *Rathskeller* in New York City. Her first regional design was *Master Harold and the Boys* at Syracuse Stage. Other theatre productions included several at Orlando Rep., Nashville Rep., and Arkansas Rep. In 2022, she designed the lighting for *Romeo and Juliet* for the Florentine Opera in Milwaukee. She has also served as a lighting supervisor, touring in that capacity with dance companies, including the Urban Bush Women. She enjoys the travel and the problem-solving needed when moving a show from one space to another.

Blackwell is currently Lighting and Projections Director at the Alliance Theatre in Atlanta, the first Black woman to hold that position. This reflects her leaning away from design and more toward supervision: “Personally, it is less stressful, or stressful in a different way.... I am a very detail-oriented person and a perfectionist. And that can sometimes hurt me as a designer. I like things to look a certain way if they’re going to have my name attached to it. And I don’t always have the time,” she says, “to create what I think is a well-polished project.... It’s much easier being the one answering questions about what somebody else’s work should look like or something that’s already been created—and it’s just my job to re-create it and maintain the integrity of the design.” She also aspires to obtain a PhD in Drama as well as an MBA. While she will always continue in lighting, she feels that she can also combine other areas of the business.

Noelle Jordan, Itohan Edoloyi, and Rachael N. Blackwell are three of numerous emerging millennials, along with Gen Zs, who are making their mark in the industry, such as Jasmine Lesane, Stacey Derosier, Amina Alexander, Janessa Harris, Amber Whatley, and Erica Maholmes. They are entering areas that were not easily available or even existed for my generation. Yet, the industry is still witnessing discrepancies between the sexes, and even more so for Black and other women of color. I have experienced change in the theatre for over forty years where Black artists are in demand after a tragic event, and shortly thereafter situations tend to go back to “normal.” I am hoping this is not a “moment” but a “movement.” \*



Rachael N. Blackwell's lighting design for Florentine Opera's production of "Romeo and Juliet" in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

Traveling Lemur Productions