

SFGATE

Theatrical lighting designer embraces ‘ethereal art form’

Marcus Crowder

Oct. 20, 2022 Updated: Oct. 21, 2022 9:21 a.m.



Lighting designer Stephanie Anne Johnson sets up the lighting for a film shoot in Oakland. Laura Morton

Each part of designer, artist, educator Stephanie Anne Johnson tells a different story with the whole being dramatically more than simply a sum of its parts.

Johnson is a theatrical lighting designer who also co-creates installations based on original lighting designs. She's a respected educator and a Black feminist activist. Johnson is also a creative writer and performer of original theatrical work. Her energy and enthusiasm are inexhaustible.

Drama, as an artistic form, has been central for Johnson since she was a child in Englewood, New Jersey.

“My mother worked with the American Negro Theater before I was born,” Johnson said.

The ANT was a legendary and influential Harlem-based Black theater ensemble that was active from 1940 through 1951. Its Studio Theatre school of drama graduated such major talents as Sidney Poitier, Harry Belafonte, Isabel Sanford and Alice Childress.

“All my life she had a pile of plays that she was reading,” Johnson continued. “She talked about theater as the greatest profession and theater people were the best people on earth.”

Young Stephanie took those messages to heart.

Johnson was born in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Her family moved to the Bronx when she was 2 years old, and she was raised there and in New Jersey.

She joined the high school drama club where a pal was the actor Clarke Peters (then known as Peter Clark) who has gone on to become a big time film (“Da 5 Bloods”) and television star (“The Wire”). They remain friends.

As mother had wished, Johnson studied theater at Emerson College in Boston and in her next to last semester, she took a lightning design class.

“I fell in love with it and now I’ve been doing it 48 years,” Johnson said.



Lighting designer Stephanie Anne Johnson has worked in theater productions around the Bay Area and in other counties, including India, Holland, Belgium, Paris, Italy and Canada. Laura Morton

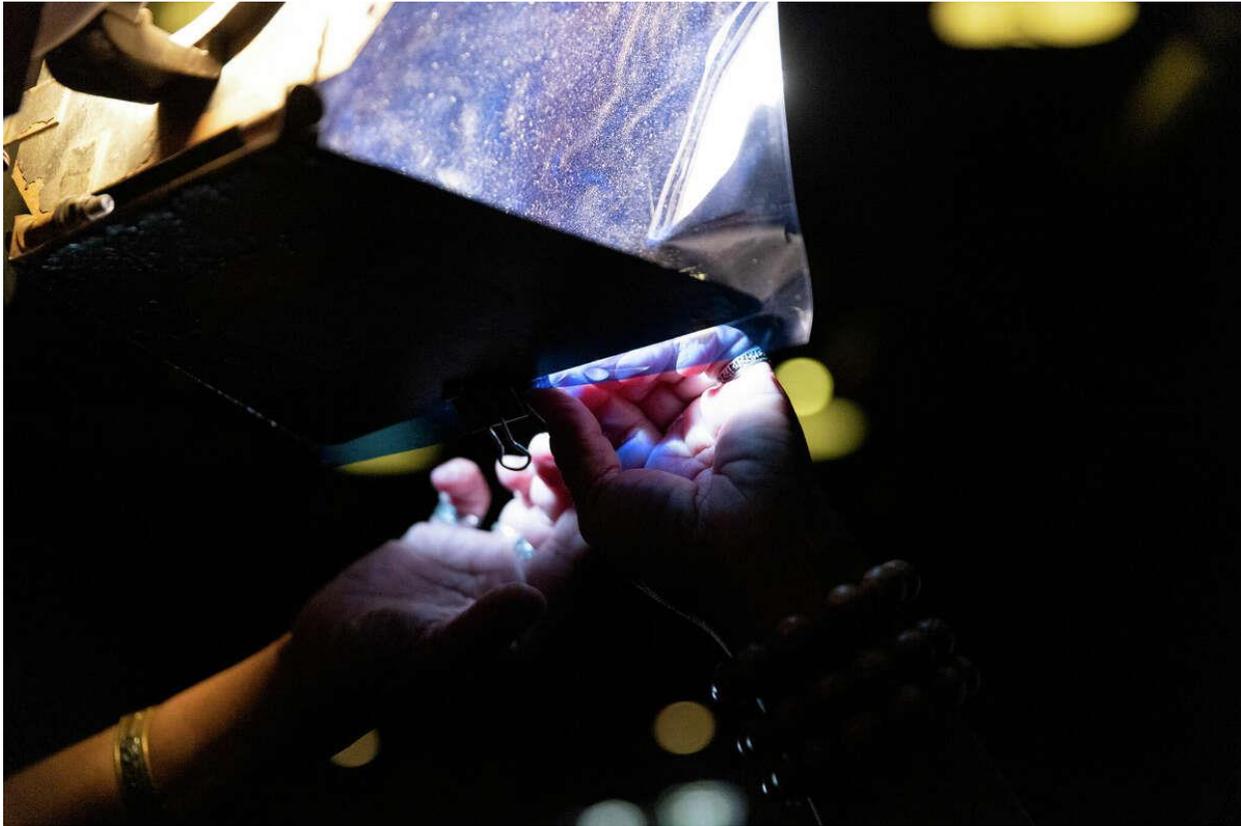
Lighting designer Stephanie Anne Johnson has worked in theater productions around the Bay Area and in other counties, including India, Holland, Belgium, Paris, Italy and Canada. Laura Morton

Nationally, she has created designs for La MaMa Experimental Theatre Club in New York, Black Moon Theatre in New York and Paris, Telluride Theatre in Colorado, Arizona Repertory Theatre, National Black Theater and the Apollo in New York.

Around the world, Johnson has worked in India, Holland, Belgium, Paris, Italy and Canada.

As to what inspired her to “fall in love” with it, she said, “It was the fact that you could get a job and get paid, as well as the fact that it’s a very ethereal art form. You can both do — general illumination and light people — but you can also use color and get a message across.”

In the beginning, she got a one off job in Boston lighting a play called “Black Dad” written by a Black woman named Evelyn Moore. It was Johnson’s first professional assignment.



Stephanie Anne Johnson works on lighting for a film shoot in Oakland. Laura Morton

After stops in Canada and Europe, Johnson eventually made her way to California where she’d always wanted to live. There was no email back then so she took her “pitiful little resume” around on foot and was able to do some work at Zellerbach Hall at UC Berkeley and then with Oakland’s Black Filmmakers Hall of Fame annual gala. The event was held at the Paramount Theatre, which was a big deal and a staunch union hall.

“When I walked in, those guys on the crew were still looking for the lighting designer,” Johnson said. “They couldn’t believe that it was a young black female and you know they just weren’t having it.”

The crew chief was not amused and gave Johnson a message.

“He sternly said to me ‘If you don’t get on them, I’m getting on you.’ He said, ‘You get on their ass,’ so I did. That was probably my first really professional gig,” Johnson said.

Johnson, who lives in Berkeley, began working with many of the smaller Bay Area theater and dance companies such as the Cultural Odyssey, AfroSolo Theatre Company, Ubuntu Theatre Project, TheatreFirst, African-

American Shakespeare Company, the Marin Theatre Company and Anne Bluethenthal's ABD Productions to name just a few.

Her consistency, talent and numerous successful collaborations over the years have earned her not only professional respect but more opportunities than she can accept.

"All of a sudden, I've gotten very, very popular and have to turn down work," Johnson said. "I like working on my own side of the bay and I spend a lot of time working with companies with whom I worked in the past."



Stephanie Anne Johnson has worked as a lighting designer for decades and is also an artist of large-scale slide projection installations and mixed media sculptures. Laura Morton

Johnson also started a parallel track in higher education re-inventing her professional life in the process. Johnson earned a Master of Arts, a Master of Fine Arts and a PhD in Interdisciplinary Studies. In 2013, she became a full-time professor in the Visual and Public Art Department of Cal State Monterey Bay. She has been lecturing there since 1994.

In 2013 she wrote and began performing a one woman stage piece called "Every Twenty-One Days: Cancer, Yoga and Me."

"I wrote it when I was doing chemotherapy nine years ago for ovarian cancer and I was kind of writing my way out, you know what I mean?" Johnson said.

She's performed the work at the Marsh Theaters in Berkeley and San Francisco, the AfroSolo Arts Festival and the Los Angeles Women's Theatre Festival.

“Theater’s my first language, and so I wrote it into a play and performed it at the Marsh,” Johnson said. “It’s great to be in your home court and be really appreciated and people really appreciated the play. People were weeping and it was just very emotive for me.”

Johnson has written and performed a staged reading of her autobiographical play “Mrs. Reiff & The Counterfeit Shop” about her relationship with Bola Reiff, which celebrates the special bond and friendship between a Black teen and a European Holocaust survivor. The play received staged readings at the Jewish Community Center of the East Bay in Berkeley and the Kehilla Community Synagogue in Oakland.



Stephanie Anne Johnson set up lighting for a small independent film shoot and regularly works on local theater productions.
Laura Morton

In 2019, Johnson was instrumental in a lighting design workshop for people of African descent supported by the Dance Mission Theater and the Afro Urban Society.

“It was a six-week class and it was very hands-on. I gave them the theories and then had them make a design for a five-minute scene,” Johnson said. “I would love to do that again.”

Johnson has continued evolving as an artist, taking her craft and profession and turning it into something magical.

While working with Dimensions Dance Theater, she started using slide projections in her designs. Then she started creating slides as their own pieces of art.

“I would like to do more of that because that intersection was important,” Johnson said. “I was still using light but I was stepping off into the world of art and projected images. I really would like to do more slide projection work especially about the history of African Americans.”



Lighting designer Stephanie Anne Johnson has been a lighting designer for 48 years. Laura Morton

Though Johnson has recent productions with Berkeley’s Shotgun Players and Aurora Theatre, she is especially excited about her latest project, a lighting installation for the Autumn Lights Festival at Lake Merritt with co-creator Kevin E. Myrick.

“We’ve been in three exhibits together. We speak the same language,” Johnson said. “We don’t always agree on everything, but we always include whatever the other one would like. It’s truly, truly a blessing of the last two years.”