

In Profile...

L&SI Talks to the Industry Trend-setters

As a lighting designer, Marilyn Lowey has one of those CVs that would make the Angels weep; some truly great performers, some mighty events. No mean achievement by any standard, but an even greater one in what is a misogynistic industry at worst, and just another male enclave at best. A

compulsive worker it would seem, in a varied career she's lit more TV specials, hotels in Vegas, and singers of stellar magnitude than is seemingly; yet for all this, her roots are planted in the fertile soil of theatre.

"I always liked theatre as a kid," she says. "Being brought up in New York, my folks did take me to see shows. It wasn't about

lighting back then, it was just the theatre that attracted me." Early awareness proved a powerful influence, even when she went to High School and found they didn't run a theatre class, her ardour wasn't diminished.

"My folks were really worried that when I came to leave school, I decided to look into theatre and arts." So worried in fact, that they sent her to see a vocational guidance counsellor to undergo some thorough testing.

"The results indicated a career in either arts or the military." Lucky for Saddam she chose the former. "It wasn't an uphill battle; my mom was a painter, she took me to galleries, the ballet, museums - her worry was understandable." Her mother also instilled some fire in her daughter. "I believe that if you have a passion, then you'll succeed in what you're passionate about." An

aphorism that many would do well to cleave to their ambition.

The compunction that took Lowey to Boston's Emerson College for a BFA, and later on to Carnegie Mellon, Pittsburgh, for an MFA, was founded on direct experience. "I had been working on Summer Stock - seasonal theatre - out of High School, first at Pennsylvania State University, and later over on the West Coast with PCPA." That experience, and a post-graduate spell spent teaching her favoured subject at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, saw her in good stead; by the time she returned to her beloved New York determined to begin her career, she was already well connected.

"Within two weeks I was assisting the lighting designer for two shows on Broadway, and designing off Broadway." Sounds easy? "It's about who to call - you pay attention to the business, you read all the magazines, Theatre Crafts, the New York Times. You get the names, get into the mainstream and use your contacts."

One of those contacts was Imero Fiorentino, a graduate from Carnegie. "His company had a lot of talented lighting designers in the late 70s, early 80s. Working there really gave me an insight into what was possible." Fiorentino's was a who's who of lighting at the time: "I stayed there about six years and in that period I worked with the likes of Red McKinnon, Bill Klages and Greg Brunton. We did all sorts - lots of TV, live shows, concerts, big corporate events, even the odd stadium show." Armed with such a breadth of experience, it was no wonder that Lowey felt empowered to fly the nest. "I knew I needed to do my own thing - I knew I had the strength as an LD, and I also had the strength as a business person."

That last phrase is telling: for designers of Lowey's stature it isn't enough in the modern world to be superbly talented, you must also be able to work the levers of control. "That experience at Fiorentino's was critical."



Marilyn Lowey and some of her team on location in South Africa for the World Cup Cricket (see main feature for full details).

Since 1980, Lowey has designed every live show performed by Neil Diamond and all his TV specials - it's her major claim to fame. To sustain a client over 20 years is no mean achievement in itself, least of all in the fickle music industry. Add in such luminaries as Harry Connick Jr, Liza Minelli, Johnny Mathis, Whitney Houston, Diana Ross and Bette Midler and you begin to get a measure of her talent.

Having climbed such mountains does she still have wishes for the future? "That's a loaded question. I like what's happening now with the increasing sophistication of gobo technology. Brighter, faster lights is always good and getting rid of some cables is something I'd like to see."

Which just leaves one question: add together Lowey's substantial canon of work on corporate events, architectural design, live concerts and special events - including the Goodwill Games and the opening ceremony of the Cricket World Cup (see main feature on page 49) - and you'll notice one omission - theatre. When will she apply her skills to her first love? Time will tell. ■