



"I want to give something back to the school where I learnt my craft and I can do this by teaching. I also believe we should nurture the new talent and pass on the experience we have to future generations."

Julie Harper talks to lighting designer **Philippe Berthomé**

France lost an acrobat, trapeze artist and dancer but gained a prolific lighting designer when Philippe Berthomé - the only male dancer in his dance company, Force Jazz - was asked to light one of the dance pieces. "I found I liked it!" says Berthomé who, with his early ambitions as a pilot scotched on medical grounds, was searching for an alternative career.

Two years (1989-91) of training at the Ecole Supérieure d'Art Dramatique (Advanced School of Dramatic Arts) at the Théâtre National de Strasbourg followed, specialising in Lighting Design before finishing at the National Conservatoire in 1991.

Based in Paris, today he works internationally lighting opera, theatre, musical productions and spectaculars worldwide with the Festival D'Avignon, Covent Garden's Royal Opera House, London's National Theatre, Paris's Opera Bastille and the Oslo Opera House just some of the venues on his resumé.

On graduating from the National Conservatoire, Berthomé joined the National

Youth Theatre (Jeune Théâtre National) where he met director Stanislas Nordey at Théâtre de Sartrouville. This meeting was to prove the beginning of a long collaboration which, along with set designer Emmanuel Clolus, has been a creative force for nearly 20 years.

Through Nordey, Berthomé became associated with the Festival D'Avignon (the biggest classical theatre festival in Europe) lighting Hervé Guibert's *Vole Mon Dragon* in 1994 - which proved his first of many Avignon productions.

From 1997, as Nordey's directing career branched out into opera, so Berthomé's lighting career followed suit, taking his designs to opera houses in Chatelet, Hamburg, Paris and London, as well as lighting Nordey's productions at the Festival de la Ruhr Triennale in 2003 and the Osterfestspiele in Salzburg in 2006.

"1997 was a good year!" states Berthomé. It was also to be the year he met directors Eric Lacascade and Jean Francois Sivadier. Lacascade was to introduce him to the grand, dramatic venue of the Cour D'Honneur at the Festival D'Avignon where, in 2002, he lit Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* and to which he returned in 2006 with Gorky's *Barbarians*; Jean Francois Sivadier meanwhile introduced him to large scale outdoor 'spectaculars', for whom he designed the lighting for *The Marriage of Figaro* at Beaumarchais in 2000 and Brecht's *La Vie de Galilee* in 2002 at the Théâtre Nanterre Amandiers, before returning to the Cour d'Honneur in 2007 with Shakespeare's *King Lear*.

Berthomé claims his lighting involves a lot of instinct and a 'not very academic' approach: "I don't see myself as having a particular lighting style," he says, "or if I do, I don't want to

realise it! I prefer a fresh approach in what I see, what I think, for each production. I always start from nothing and try out the maximum number of techniques within the time allotted! This needs a lot of energy but I try not to fall back too quickly on what I know.

"Because we [Berthomé, Nordey and Clolus] have worked together so often there is a lot of trust between us and I have a lot of autonomy in what I do. Trust is very important and I couldn't work without it - it gives me the leeway I need to experiment.

"I love my job and am very passionate about light. I defend my lighting but it is also important to have a good balance between the director, sound, light, set, costume etc. I do not often find myself fighting with the others, although I will stand my ground and it can be a day or two before any of us gives in!"

Berthomé is known as a 'hands on' lighting designer, often unable to resist the urge to join his team in focusing and experimenting with equipment.

"I like the simplicity of standard lighting equipment and, for example, the quality of light you get with PARs. And I love a bare bulb - the colour, the quality, the filament! I use it a lot for installation work for its appearance. It is not very environmentally friendly maybe, but I take short showers and switch off the TV standby light to compensate! Maybe something new and more efficient will be discovered, as happened with gas light or halogen.

"I am also very excited about LEDs and new technology but these are very expensive at the moment. Laser light is also something I would like to experiment with - again it is expensive - but perhaps

explains why I feel I am leaning towards concert lighting!

"In an ideal world I would change my style for every production but this is not always necessary and, in the end, I am happy if I have achieved something that is right for the style of the production. Ultimately, it is not a case of spending money on technology and toys - it is a question of what you need to create your design. Equipment should fit the concept, not the other way round."

Berthomé is also passionate about helping the next generation of lighting designers. He returns to Strasbourg whenever possible to speak to the students and hold workshops, and frequently employs students from the school to work as his team.

"I want to give something back to the school where I learnt my craft and I can do this by teaching. I also believe we should nurture the new talent and pass on the experience we have to future generations." 2009 saw Berthomé and Nordey return to light and direct the final year students in Fabrice Melquiot's *399 Seconds*.

For himself, Berthomé is attracted to maritime events and exhibitions, working on the *International Festival of the Sea* in Portsmouth in 1998, *The Pleasures of Sailing* exhibition at Douarnenez in 2004, and the *Boat People* exhibition at Rennes in 2007. He returned this year to the Douarnenez Boat Festival (where he finally used lasers for the first time) and professes a desire to expand into museum work in future.

It seems Berthomé is set to continue exploring as many areas of lighting as possible: "There are no rules and regulations in lighting," he says. "That is the difficulty . . . and the freedom!"