

In Profile...

L&S Talks to the Industry Trend-setters

While some lighting designers specialise in design for rock or theatre environments, or build a reputation for architectural lighting, Anne Militello has excelled in just about every conceivable discipline; from theatre to theme parks, from club to opera and from film to architecture, nothing seems beyond the scope of her abilities. The key to her success is that she is, first and foremost, an exceptionally talented artist.

Lee Baldock speaks to lighting designer Anne Militello

We met for lunch at The Venetian, Las Vegas, during LDI: Anne had a dual purpose for being in Vegas that week - her design for Pearl Jam was in action at the MGM Grand the day

after the exhibition closed. At that time, her stunning architectural installation for New York's 42nd Street Studio on Times Square had been winning enthusiastic praise from all quarters; she was shortly to head to San Francisco to light Sam Shepard's *The Late Henry Moss* - but before that, she was back off to New York, where the BBC were to film a documentary about her work.

Growing up in Buffalo, New York, Anne displayed very early an artistic flair, and was naturally attracted to theatre. After school, she took to hanging around Buffalo's theatres, volunteering to help with whatever was going on. "I loved the atmosphere of these places - the illusion," she recalls. By High School age, her love for the arts and her strong desire for creative expression led her to specialise, and she enrolled at the State University of New York at Buffalo, taking courses in acting and lighting. It was during her time here that, through friends, she first became involved with touring work ("I would tell my mother 'I'm just off with Steppenwolf for a few weeks!'").

After High School, Anne moved to San Francisco and between touring with the likes of Carlos Santana and Eddie Money, took lighting jobs in rock clubs. She hoped that crewing would be a

stepping stone to design work, but the touring scene in the late seventies was just too male-oriented. Anne recalls how on one tour she was spotted playing around on the lighting console during sound-checks, and her obvious skills were noted. "They went and told my boss, and he immediately fired me," she says - and is sure of the reason. "I don't know how to put this nicely, but he didn't want to stop getting laid. The control desk was his ticket."

Following this knockback, Anne approached Bill Graham, promoter at the legendary Fillmore in San Francisco, looking for work at his company, FM Productions - and was turned down. "He said he didn't want me getting hurt, but I knew it was crap. I was good at my job . . . I just don't like being told 'no!'"

At about this time, a chance meeting with the playwright Sam Shepard at a party in San Francisco led to Anne rediscovering her love for theatre. "He told me he was a truck driver who wrote plays," she remembers. "He asked me to read a play he had written, and I loved it." Although once again filled with enthusiasm for theatre lighting, the ambition to light a live tour remained.

Theatre led her back to New York, where she stayed for 13 colourful years, lighting avant garde off-Broadway productions, and taking lighting jobs at venues such as Studio 54, CBGBs, The Rock Lounge and The Ritz. The success of her work took her to Broadway, lighting *Cuba* and *His Teddy Bear*, which starred Robert De Niro; at the same time, it also introduced her to environmental and architectural work: "People would see my lighting in the theatre, then ask me to light their shopfront or their restaurant." Aside from her work with Sam Shepard, she also collaborated on a number of projects with Cuban playwright Maria Irene Fornes - someone who left an indelible impression as both teacher and mentor.

The spell in New York ended suddenly when, to everyone's surprise, Anne swapped the creative



freedom of the Big Apple for the corporate ties of the Big Mouse, returning to California to spend four years with Walt Disney Imagineering. "I enjoyed it - it was a good time," she recalls, "but I wasn't a good corporate person." But it was mainly an artistic limitation that shortened her stay with Disney, as she reveals: "Theme parks are not a well-rounded art form - you can't explore the dark side of

emotions, which I like to do!"

In 1996, Anne established Vortex Lighting, based in Los Angeles, and has since completed many varied and successful projects under the Vortex banner. Her lighting design for Tom Waits' *Get Behind the Mule* tour in 1999 received a fantastic response; it used a combination of intelligent and antique lighting fixtures - some 40 or 50 years old. Anne says: "I'm not really impressed by gadgets - I'm looking for effect, and low-tech effects can be just as impressive. Equipment can be distracting. I'm fond of hiding lights so that people can't see what I'm using - it should all be about the magic and the atmosphere."

Get Behind The Mule led directly to design work with Lou Reed, but certain differences - I'll leave it at that, although Anne is far more entertaining on the subject - have put an end to that relationship (Mark Risk had taken over the reigns for Reed when we reviewed the show last October). And then along came Pearl Jam, a band who, in contrast to Reed, she describes as "Sooo nice! Well-adjusted, reasonable people." Among her other varied lighting credits to date are *The Amazing Adventures of Spiderman* at Universal's Islands of Adventure in Florida, the *Avalon Hotel* in Beverly Hills and *Industrial Symphony No. 1* for film director David Lynch. With a string of awards to her name (and doubtless more to follow) and a reputation as one of the most talented designers around, Anne Militello is undoubtedly now firmly in the control position. ■

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Lighting & Sound INTERNATIONAL

January 2001

The Entertainment Technology Monthly

www.plasa.org/news

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