



November 28, 2006 Edition > Section: [Arts and Letters](#) > [Printer-Friendly Version](#)

## Lighting Up the Stage Dance

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Pencil poised over his notebook, lighting designer Clifton Taylor watched intently from the side of a studio as choreographer Karole Armitage leapt into the air, then twisted around to face the opposite direction. "That's what I want," she said to the 10 dancers scattered about the studio learning the piece, "the feeling that you're boxing."

Ms. Armitage was rehearsing her new work "Gamelan Gardens" at the headquarters of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in midtown a few weeks ago, in preparation for the work's world premiere December 1, during the company's upcoming season at City Center. The work, set to Lou Harrison's atmospheric "Double Concerto for Violin and Cello with Javanese Gamelan," is Ms. Armitage's first dance for the company and Mr. Taylor, a 43-year-old jovial-looking man with sandy-colored hair and glasses, was there to find out how to light it most effectively.

"I come to rehearsals," he said later, "to listen to what Karole says to the dancers. It's during this process that I find out what's important to her or to any choreographer. Knowing how she directs them helps me do my work, such as where she puts her emphasis, and even the terms she uses. Choreographers and dancers speak a special language when they're working together. That's what I have to overhear to do my job."

"Clifton intuitively knows how to create a look," Ms. Armitage said. "He understands that lighting shouldn't be tied to the dance. It should be like weather. This work is very lyrical, with two of the three movements to gamelan music, which is gentle and percussive, with a sort of rippling energy. I want the feeling that the dancers are pushing against the air or under water."

"Gamelan Gardens" is not the first collaboration between Mr. Taylor and Ms. Armitage. They met in 1998 when Ms. Armitage asked Mr. Taylor to light a ballet for the company she was directing in Florence, Italy. Ms. Armitage then used Mr. Taylor's talents for her the first engagement of her company Armitage Gone Dance at the Joyce Theater in 2004. She plans to work with him again on her company's next season there, which begins February 6.

Few lighting designers today match Mr. Taylor's sensitivity to dance, as evidenced by his lengthy list of former clients: He has worked for American Ballet Theater, the San Francisco Ballet, Philadanco, Ballet Hispanco, and troupes in South America, Europe, and Asia, as well as for major arts festivals, including the City Center's Fall for Dance and Flamenco Festival USA. And he lights for theater too. Last year, he won the Lortel nomination — awarded to off-Broadway shows — for the play "Frozen," and this year he has been nominated for his work on the Broadway plays, "Jay Johnson: The Two and Only!" and "Hot Feet." He also creates lighting for opera companies, including the New York City Opera.

From the time he was growing up outside of Chicago, he loved theater, starting early in the field by assisting a magician with props when he was 15. After a brief period at Knox College in Illinois, where he was on a math scholarship, he transferred to New York University, where he earned his BFA in theater in 1986. "I just had an affinity for lighting," he said. "I think it has to do with my love of music. I'm a cellist. For me, doing lighting is another way of making music."

For "Gamelan Gardens," Mr. Taylor understood that Ms. Armitage wanted to duplicate a stream of consciousness by choreographing fluid, seemingly unstructured movements. "In Karole's ballet," he said "there's an unfolding, a metamorphosis as the main couple progresses through the three sections. The music is very important. I felt that green matched the Eastern sound of the gamelan, and I use a bluish-green throughout, with the shade becoming bluer in the second section, where the piece is orchestrated for Western instruments. I'm way into colored light," he said.

After he makes the lighting decisions, Mr. Taylor creates a lighting plot, a technical drawing showing where each light is to be placed in the theater. The lighting plot also clarifies how each light should be controlled and contains information about the lens type, such as the color, type of lamp, and whether it requires accessories to shape or manipulate its beam of light. The lighting plot for Alvin Ailey's run at City Center contains roughly 400 focusable lights.

There is no way, however, for Mr. Taylor really to know what his design will look like until the first technical rehearsal, which sometimes takes place only a few of hours before the first performance. The high cost to the company of being in the theater necessitates brief, lastminute tech time. "It's extremely nerve racking," Mr. Taylor admitted, "because at that point, there's not too much you can do to correct anything."

But that is Mr. Taylor's only complaint. "If you're a lighting designer, dance is the place to be," Mr. Taylor said. "It's the freest place in theater because there are no rules. In theater, it's necessary to see the actors' faces. That's where the content is. In dance, you're free to express many things about the environment ... I love them all," he said of the art forms in which he has worked. "But the greatest privilege is lighting dance."

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