



## PROFESSIONAL PROFILE:

Name: Allen Lee Hughes  
Profession: Lighting Designer / Associate Arts Professor at NYU Tisch  
Experience: 53 Years  
Location: New York, NY  
Website: <https://tisch.nyu.edu/about/directory/design/92900459>  
Recent Shows: *A Soldier's Play* (American Airlines Theatre), *Toni Stone* (Laura Pels Theatre)

*Allen Lee Hughes is a lighting designer for theater and dance productions worldwide. His Broadway credits include Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, Clybourne Park, Having Our Say, Mule Bone, Once on this Island (Tony nomination), K2 (Tony nomination, Outer Critics Circle Award, and Joseph Maharam Award), Strange Interlude (Tony nomination), Accidental Death of an Anarchist, Quilters, and A Soldier's Play (Tony nomination).*

## THE INTERVIEW:

**City Theatrical (CTI):** Allen, you've had an incredible career, lighting shows from Broadway to dance to creative projects around the world, and inspiring young minds as a professor of the arts at NYU Tisch. And congratulations on your recent Tony nomination for your design for *A Soldier's Play*! As we enter a new world of theater in 2021, we're curious how it all started for you, what you're working on, and your thoughts as to where we're going. So, how did you get started in theater?

**Allen Lee Hughes (ALH):** When I was in ninth grade, a guy walked into my homeroom and pointed at three of us, and said, "Come, you're going to run a follow spot." We protested, of course, and said we didn't know how to run follow spot. He insisted, and said, "I'll teach you." And he

did. I liked it, and started doing follow spot.

Over time, I became an audiovisual nerd. I can say that, because, I think by this time, I've proven I'm interested in and able to tell a story, and know how technology relates to that. So I don't mind saying that I once was a nerd.

In high school, I had the choice of joining the AV crew or backstage crew for theater. I chose theater.

My high school, [McKinley Technology High School](#) in Washington, D.C., had a stage comparable to a Broadway stage, as well as the equipment of a Broadway stage – a fly system, an autotransformer lightboard, lights, etc. During my second year of high school, I was given the task of asking a company that came to use the high school theater if there were any professional tech rehearsals that we could attend, as

students. Their response was that they could do better than that, and may even have jobs for some of us. (Little did I know, that meant jobs for no money.)

So for my last two years of high school, I ran a lightboard one night a week for this company in Georgetown, called the Garrett Players, which was run by a group of Catholic University alumni. When they went to [Summer Stock](#), I went and became an apprentice where I learned to build scenery and lit my first Actor's Equity show.

I went on to study at [Catholic University](#), which had a great reputation for drama. So I got a liberal arts education there, with a focus on speech and drama.

**CTI:** How did you know that lighting design was for you?



*A Soldier's Play* | Photo by Joan Marcus

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**ALH:** I'm still wondering. Every time I do a show. I never take what I do for granted.

I always say I've done every job in the theater except professional costume design. (Even directed and did some producing on a show during college.) I was one of those people who grew up putting on shows in my basement. As a kid, I once played the wizard in *The Wizard of Oz*.

After *Summer Stock*, I met the resident lighting designer at [Arena Stage](#) in Washington D.C., and I was fortunate – he offered me jobs. In those days, they did overnight changeovers. They closed the show on a Sunday and previewed the next show on Friday, so they would hire extra people to change over sets and lights overnight. I used to do that during my college days for extra book money.

So, after I finished college, I was, as all graduates do, wondering what I would do with life. Then I got a job running follow spot at Arena Stage.

Once there, I asked if there were any permanent jobs, thinking that would mean I would be in lighting. Instead they asked me to work in the shop. I worked in the shop for a year, and there I learned all about stage machinery, and building scenery. The second year, Arena Stage did a three-week tour to the Soviet Union, and it really was a once a lifetime

**“Zelda [Fichandler] wanted to diversify the audience, the acting company, and creatives, and also start an intern program for minorities. Over 700 people have been called fellows through the program, and serve and work in theatre around the country.”**

opportunity. From there I finished that second year in the shop and was ready to move on. When the Lighting Associate position (what we would call a Lighting Supervisor today) opened up, I went for it, and ended up working with some wonderful people, including Billy Mintzer, Arden Fingerhut, and Hugh Lester, to name a few, in that role.

My relationship has been long and rewarding at Arena where I've designed 70 productions.

**CTI: Do you still have a relationship with Arena Stage?**

**ALH:** I am scheduled to do *Toni Stone* there, which I did at the [Roundabout Theatre Company](#), and then at [American Conservatory Theater](#) (A.C.T.) in San

Francisco. That's where the show opened on a Wednesday, and then closed on Thursday, due to COVID. The show, written by Lydia R. Diamond and directed by Pam MacKinnon, is about a woman baseball player who played with men in the Negro leagues and will be produced when theaters in Washington, D.C. reopen.

**CTI: How did the fellowship in your name start at the Arena Stage?**

**ALH:** The [Allen Lee Hughes Fellowship and Internship Program](#) was started by Zelda Fichandler around 1990. It started out as a desire to diversify the theater. Zelda wanted to diversify the audience, the acting company, and creatives, and also start an intern program for minorities. The program includes playwrights, directors, administrators, lighting people, costume designers, etc. Over 700 people have been called fellows through that program, and serve and work in theater around the country.

**CTI: Did you always know you wanted to teach?**

**ALH:** Actually, no. I spent 15 years freelancing, making my living just



*Toni Stone* | Photo by Joan Marcus

**“I would say that I’m a storyteller. I’m very much a performer-based designer. I like to see the actors, dancers and singers. I feel lighting should enhance the story, but the first function of lighting is selective visibility.”**

designing. It’s hard to do. I kind of fell into teaching, in that an adjunct position became open at [NYU Tisch](#) in 1997. Someone suggested I apply. I ambivalently applied, and got the job.

In 2001, [ML Geiger](#) and I were up for a fulltime position at NYU Tisch. [Susan Hilferty](#), the Department of Design for Stage and Film’s Chair, decided to hire both of us. We also teach with [Robert Wierzel](#), so there are three of us teaching lighting design at NYU. Lots of mentorship opportunities there.

The primary class I teach is called Lighting 2, and it is taken during the second year of graduate studies. I also advise on second year productions, and dance productions. I’ve also been fortunate to teach a course called “Play Reading” with ML and Robert, which is a course for all three years of the lighting designer program, in which we read a play each week and discuss from a dramaturgical point of view.

**CTI: How would you describe your lighting design aesthetic?**

**ALH:** I would say that I’m a storyteller. I’m very much a performer-based designer. I like to see the actors, dancers and singers. I feel lighting should enhance the story, but the first function of lighting is selective visibility. Then you get into the other elements that deal with storytelling, like mood, revelation of form, naturalism,

and others.

I would say that is the best way to describe my aesthetic.

**CTI: Who or what would you say inspired your aesthetic, or way of working?**

**ALH:** I’ve been inspired by so many; this is certainly not the whole list. I would say John Gleason, Arden Fingerhut, and Jennifer Tipton. Those are the three designers I assisted.

Then people I observed include Gilbert V. Hemsley, Jr., Tharon Musser, and William Mintzer.

And Shirley Prendergast. She’s in a class of her own. The first African-American woman lighting designer on Broadway. She took all the minority lighting designers under her wing, and provided guidance. Her dedication to building the profession still inspires me.

**CTI: What inspired you to make the move from DC to NYC?**

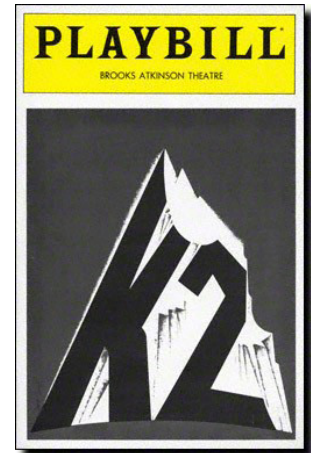
**ALH:** After doing a mainstage show at Arena Stage, I decided to move to New York and to get a Masters Degree, in case I ever wanted to teach. I applied and was accepted at New York University.

I’ve lived in NY since I went to school

here, in 1976. I say that I even drive like a NY taxi driver!

**CTI: How did you get to Broadway? What was your big break?**

**ALH:** My big break was definitely a show I did at Arena Stage, called [K2](#), which moved to Broadway. Ming Cho Lee designed the scenery and won the Tony for his famous mountain. I was nominated for a Tony, but lost to *Cats*.



**CTI: How has your experience been in New York during these uncertain COVID times?**

**ALH:** I love New York. COVID was interesting. It felt like it did every once in a while, when we’d have a great blizzard, and Broadway would be deserted (when it was empty enough for people to ski down Broadway). For a while there it was totally deserted, with very little traffic. Now New York is full of people – lots of people in the streets, in the subways. It feels like it has gotten back to a semi-normal place. Not back to normal, in terms of the look of it, but getting closer.

At NYU, our classes are blended. I was on Zoom for most of the semester. I have received my vaccination, so I’m now going in for some classes as needed. So



now we're doing some classes on Zoom, especially those too large to fit into a space. Most of my lighting classes are on Zoom, but some are in person, especially those in the theater. We've managed to

we had done our jobs right, we have something special that the audience enjoys, and a show we can be proud of.

**CTI: Are there any memorable**

**“Over the years I’ve worked with a lot of people, and it’s been fun. But when I’m working on a show, I do take it very seriously. It’s all about bringing the story to light.”**

have in-person classes where needed, where students are doing light labs and setting up looks.

**CTI: What’s a typical day in your life like now?**

**ALH:** This morning, for example, I was on a Zoom meeting for school, then answered student emails. My typical day is usually filled with schoolwork. I must say, I’m designing fewer shows than I did when I was a freelance designer.

**CTI: What were some of the favorite projects you’ve worked on, along your road to success?**

**ALH:** I know it’s a cliché but, they’re all my favorites when I’m working on them.

It’s true. Whenever I’m working on a show, it’s my favorite. I did [A Soldier’s Play](#) back in the 1980s, and I did it on Broadway. That was fun. Over the years I’ve worked with a lot of people, and it’s been fun. But when I’m working on a show, I do take it very seriously. It’s all about bringing the story to light.

I once shocked Jennifer Tipton by saying that my favorite part of the process was the opening night party. It’s because if

**experiences you would like to share, from behind the scenes of a show you worked on during your career?**

**ALH:** I worked on a show called *Sophisticated Ladies* with Jennifer Tipton in Philadelphia. The set was designed by Tony Walton, and it included a lot of neon, which they farmed out to various shops. Some of the neon wasn’t packed very well, so it broke. At one point during the load in, someone turned on the circuit for a piece of neon that wasn’t there, and the flames set the border of the set on fire! One of the stage hands went to put water on it, when our Production Electrician, Joe Monaco, said not to do it. He climbed up a A-frame ladder with a fire extinguisher and put the fire out himself. He saved the day, the set, and the theater! Thank goodness.

It was a scary situation! It really looked like the theater was going to go. Jennifer and I were sitting right there in the house when this happened... ready to run out the front of the theater. Fortunately, Joe Monaco was there.

The funny part is, later on Broadway, that section of the border could be seen from the audience, if you knew to look for it, still a bit charred.

**CTI: Are you involved in any student productions as well as your professional work and teaching?**

**ALH:** I just finished advising on two student productions. They are only for in-house people, due to COVID. But NYU is, as far as I know, one of the only places that has been doing live student productions, albeit with masks and social distancing.

Next week, I am advising on a dance concert in which three departments – choreographers, composers, and designers – collaborate to put on [CC&D](#), an annual concert for a workshop course. We didn’t do it last year, and we are excited to collaborate this year, even with COVID restrictions.



**CTI: Where did you meet and work with City Theatrical’s Gary Fails?**

**ALH:** Gary was the Production Electrician on *Quilters* at the Jack Lawrence Theatre in 1984. He was extremely inventive and helpful with this show that featured all women in this small Broadway space.

**CTI: You are one of lighting designers that our City Theatrical product catalog credits for inspiring products, with the [Drop-In Boomerang](#). What were you working on at the time that inspired this product, and what was the process like?**

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**ALH:** I was working on a musical at Arena Stage. We were using Source Fours as follow spots from the four corners of the catwalks. I just needed to be able to change color in a more efficient way.

At Arena, in the Fichandler space, named after Zelda and her husband Tom, the follow spots were going to be over the audience's head. Therefore, we didn't want anyone changing gels, taking one gel out and putting another in, with the chance it might fall out onto the audience. (Before the invention of the Drop-In Boomerang, we tied the gels to the follow spots before changing them manually.)

Chris Lewton, who was and is currently the Master Electrician at Arena Stage, came up with this solution of the Drop-In Boomerang and created a prototype, which City Theatrical then built.

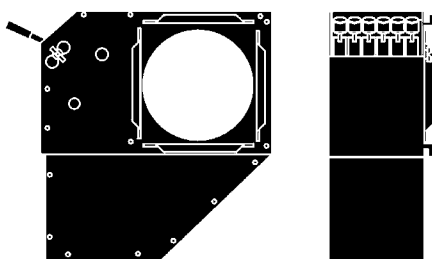
Since then, the [Drop-In Boomerang](#) has been used for many shows, and we use them at NYU for our second year Cabaret.

**CTI: When the world of theater reopens, what would you like to see?**

**ALH:** Certainly more diversity. We need to really look at diversity. This is a country-wide problem. We need to decide to do the right thing, and accept and embrace diversity.

**CTI: Do you think that theater will be different in a post-COVID world?**

**ALH:** I don't know that I have the inside answer here. I have no idea as to the future of theater, and what that's going to be. In a certain way, I'm waiting for the



Drop-In Boomerang, diagram and product

**“Theater is changing. The demand, the requests by people, even the working habits in the theater, are on the plate. We’ll see what happens.”**

people I teach to invent “the new theater”. Theater is changing. The demand, the requests by people, even the working habits in the theater, are on the plate. We’ll see what happens.

**CTI: Do you think lighting design as a profession will be different in years to come?**

**ALH:** Certainly lighting is changing. LEDs are the wave of the future. I miss certain things about lighting. On *Toni Stone*, for example, in its three incarnations at Roundabout Theater, ACT and Arena Stage, we used a bunch of PAR 64s, and I miss those. That's not necessarily going to be equipment I can get easily in the future. And we know mini strip lights are also in question.

I would caution theater consultants to put some dimmers in their new buildings, if for no other reason than practicals. You need a house lamp on stage that dims sometimes.

And I think things will also change as we



turn to Multiverse, controlling multiple universes with wireless DMX.

A lot of the new technology is good. Theater is such a small industry in terms of what we can get that's designed specifically for our unique needs. For example, PAR 64s were basically designed as car lights, or airplane landing lights. A wonderful piece of equipment, but not invented for the theater.

**CTI: Is there any advice that you offer your students and colleagues, that you would share with up-and-coming lighting designers?**

**ALH:** My advice is, everybody's career is different. Just be ready when your opportunity knocks.

**CTI: Are there any additional collaborators you would like to recognize?**

**ALH:** [Josh Benghiat](#). Josh was my associate on *A Soldier's Play*, *Toni Stone*, and other projects. He is a wonderful lighting designer in his own right, and an extremely helpful person.

For more information on Allen Lee Hughes, watch his *I AM THEATER* video: <https://youtu.be/JCcG5tDfXs>

Or visit his webpage at NYU Tisch: <https://tisch.nyu.edu/about/directory/design/92900459>

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