

Steven Johnson  
Miller Arts Scholars  
Fourth Year Art Award  
April 6, 2018

## Theatre Through the Looking Glass

### Project Abstract:

To improve upon my portfolio with more accurate and expressive photos of my lighting design, and to study how the camera's chosen focal length and framing for a shot shapes the narrative of the image.

### Original Intent:

To purchase a Canon EF 24-70mm f/2.8L II USM Lens, a Canon EF 135mm f/2L USM Lens, and a Lowepro StreetLine Camera Carrying Bag. Compared to my current Canon 18-55mm f/3.5-5.6 the 24-70mm will allow me to get tighter and more focused framing for my images, as well as having a wider aperture, which will let more light in and reduce noise in the image. The 135mm lens will act as a supplemental tool for when I am stuck so far back behind the lighting tech table that I would need to do massive cropping even with a 70mm lens.

### Changes:

After continuing to do additional research, process more of my previous work, and crunch some numbers, I came to the conclusion that I had not chosen the optimal set of photography equipment to improve in the areas I aspired to. Specifically the ISO capabilities of my Canon EOS t6i camera body were not good enough to handle the low light environments of theatre while maintaining an acceptable lack of noise in the images. I did choose to purchase the 24-70mm f/2.8L lens, and its larger aperture has been a great assistance in combatting noise, but it wouldn't have been enough alone. So I decided instead of getting a 135mm supplemental lens, to upgrade my camera body to a Canon EOS 77D. This body has given me better ISO performance, as well as functional changes such as a dedicated autofocus button which is a great help when capturing moving actors.

### Process:

As a Lighting Designer, photography is mostly a tool for me, a means to an end, but not an end in and of itself. Digitally archiving theatre is a challenge, taking an experience that is designed to be interacted with live, and preserving it in a much smaller format moments at a time. So my goal is not to objectively

recreate the perspective of a single audience member, but instead create images that capture the mood and intentions of the moment on stage. Preserving details of the stage design so the photos can be used as tools of communication with other designers or in interviews when discussing my skills, processes, or philosophies of design. Before beginning on this project I was facing two main problems, framing and image noise; exemplified below.



Processed & Uncropped Image



Processed & Cropped Image



Unprocessed Noisy Image



Processed with Noise Reduction Image

It is a photographer's job to work creatively around the limitations they encounter, and certainly it is the photographer not their equipment that makes a good photograph. A great photographer can create a great image with a simple point-and-shoot or a phone camera. However when capturing theatre the variables a photographer is allowed to manipulate are reduced, and there

comes a point where equipment becomes a wall that can only be overcome with technology. This is where I was with my attempts to capture my lighting design, but with the better glass of my 24-70mm lens and the better sensor on my 77D camera body I was able to overcome that wall.



Photos from *Fun Home* at Live Arts

With the variable focal length of the 24-70mm lens I have the freedom to frame closer intimate shots and full stage shots without changing positions.



I can even choose to isolate a single character on stage without cropping the image and losing quality.

Photo from *Fun Home* at Live Arts



Photo from *Fun Home* at Live Arts

My camera now has a large enough dynamic range that I can capture all three characters on stage, simultaneously lit and in shadow, almost as easily as an audiences' eye can.



Photo from *Fun Home* at Live Arts

Dim moody scenes can be just as clear and communicative as bright bombastic musical scenes. It is now a choice of what I want to communicate,

not just what can I communicate. All of my work can be found on my website  
[stevenjohnsondesigns.com](http://stevenjohnsondesigns.com)

I would like to thank my peers and mentors in the Miller Arts Scholars program, as well as all supporters of the Miller Arts Scholars program, with a special thanks to Sandy and Vinie Miller along with Evie and Stephen Colbert.