# And then there was light

## Influential Design

## Katherine Graham

I grew up in Galway, a small city in the west of Ireland with a vibrant arts scene. When I was a child, the annual Galway Arts Festival (now the Galway International Arts Festival) opened my world to a wide range of performance events. I simply have no idea what the first piece of theatre I saw was, but I do know that having a tangled mix of experiences with performance and visual art very early on was certainly formative to my later development as a designer, theatre maker, and researcher.

Alongside performances in theatre buildings, many of my early experiences of performance will have been attending street theatre, particularly the work of Macnas, a Galway-based company specialising in street and spectacle theatre. Macnas Parades were (and continue to be) a fixture of the cultural life of the city, and by extension of my early engagement with the arts. I have a number of early memories of watching this processual street theatre from various vantage points in the city centre, and being, alternately, captivated, discombobulated, elated and sometimes frightened by the succession of fantastical puppets, creatures in streams of colourful costumes, stilt walkers and drummers on display. These parades were visually exciting, but also cultivated a particular kind of attention. The themes or narratives of these parades were often drawn from mythology or cultural history, the kinds of narratives often delivered in written or spoken word, but here you could piece these stories together through the sensory invitation of materials, movements and rhythms.

In 1999 the Macnas Parade was, for the first time, performed at night. The piece, entitled *Cargo de Nuit,* moved through the streets of Galway in the gathering darkness of a night in July and, in so doing, completely transformed the feeling of the city and of the performance itself. The parade had a loose narrative premise, of a world plunged into darkness and populated by strange night creatures, but it is the *feeling* of an event rendered through light and darkness that was most captivating at the time, and that has remained with me since. It took a slightly different route to previous parades, but nonetheless took what was a familiar phenomenon of street spectacle in my home town and transformed it into something that felt new, and strange, and other worldly. Performers were mostly lit by small concealed lights that made them glow against the framing darkness, with lots of flaming torches, and performers breathing or juggling fire. The surrounding darkness seemed to form a kind of connective tissue around the whole event – suspending individual figures or groups of performers and marking their passage through both space and time.

I watched *Cargo de Nuit* long before I turned to theatre design or started to think about light in particular, and so it took me a long time to recognise the influence of this event on my design practice. And yet, it seems that so many of the things that I find so fascinating about light were seeded in that event. At the heart of that parade was a sense of the materiality of light as a felt encounter; a play of light and dark, where the dark was made meaningful, and bodies and structures were made to glow in contrast. Light shifted and moved through space, and beats of performance were punctuated by changes in or eruptions of light. Most significantly, the transformative experience of the parade being transposed to a setting of darkness showed that light not only illuminated the action, but utterly changed the nature of the experience.

Though the majority of my design work has been in indoor settings, and mostly in conventional theatre spaces, the transformative potential of light that was revealed in *Cargo de Nuit* would later become integral to my fascination with light as a lighting designer. More than anything, what the night time setting of that Macnas parade taught me was about how light could become a distinct language of performance, that it could do something transformative, and this felt so radically distinct from the more conventional uses of light in the theatre that I was seeing elsewhere.

In a way, this experience of seeing a familiar form of work transformed by the presence of light and dark, went some way to set me up for the creative challenges of designing light in performance, where much of the job involves curating the transition from the rehearsal room to the stage. Sometimes, as work is taking shape in the rehearsal room, it’s extremely clear to me how a scene or a moment can – and often needs to be – held or supported by an intervention from light. At other times, there is much more of a process of discovery to find how light and action might come together. When something works without theatrical light then I try always to drill down into core principles, to be led by a sense of whether and why light needs to be there. For me, these principles are about light’s material properties (brightness, colour, shape, and shadow), its rhythmic properties (shifting in time, working in in dialogue with body, space, and sound) and the conjuring power of light’s immateriality (its transience and its createdness).

A process that comes to mind in this vein – though it is about as formally distant from Macnas’ spectacles as I can imagine – is a show called *BIRTH,* a piece I made with Theatre Re, first performed in 2019. This was a collaboratively devised performance which began with questions about consciousness and memory, and became a performance about family and the intergenerational weight of family secrets. One of the storytelling motifs that emerged from the rehearsal room was a physical gesture, where actors would fly enormous sheets of fabric across the stage, to change the time or the place of the story. It felt immediately clear to me that light could suspend the flight of this fabric, that carving the movements of the rippling fabric against the darkness would work not only visually, but metaphorically to change the world of the story. Other, more intimate, moments of that piece, however, started to emerge from the rehearsal room almost fully formed. There were electric moments in rehearsals as the actors (Eygló Belafonte, Claudia Marciano, Andres Velasquez, Vyte Garriga, and Charles Sandford), composer (Alex Judd) and director (Guillaume Pigé) unlocked key aspects of the story. I knew that I didn’t want light to overpower the delicacy and dynamism of what was unfolding between the performers onstage, or to intervene in these scenes for the sake of it. The beating heart of the story was about the bond between three generations of women in same the family and the, unspoken, parallels between their experiences. Here, it was the transience of light, its slippery immaterial materiality that helped me to unlock moments of intimate family connection. As the performance took place on an almost bare stage, with only a large dining table and the aforementioned sheets of fabric, the light worked to open and close the space, so that actors and moments between actors, could be suspended against larger or smaller pools of darkness. These subtle spatial shifts were much less about a visual gesture of light in space, and much more about trying to track the characters’ journeys so that the rhythms of shifting light made the flow of memories ever so slightly unstable.

The magic of light, for me, is in its ability to transform everything it touches. Though light is often beautiful – in the theatre, and in life – I am always more driven by felt experiences of light than by anything else. I think for this reason, the influences I draw on in my work tend to manifest as questions that I ask or possibilities that I try to hold on to. So, though I have never made a show that looks anything like the work that Macnas produce, I feel indebted to their visual storytelling, and the way their outdoor events play with light and dark.