

# The Man from Nautilus

A conversation with Sonny Sonnenfeld



## Jim Tetlow on a career that has ranged from cruise ships to Presidential debates

*One of the industry's most accomplished lighting designers, Jim Tetlow has enjoyed an extraordinarily diverse career that spans television, live events, and theatre consulting. He's an entrepreneur too, having started Nautilus Entertainment Design, which serves a variety of markets. Earlier in the year, he spoke to Sonny Sonnenfeld about the many aspects of his life in lighting design.*

**Sonny Sonnenfeld: What is your present position?**

**Jim Tetlow:** I'm the president and principal consultant for Nautilus Entertainment Design, a company that my wife and I founded 22 years ago.

including lighting design for corporate theatre, A/V design for military and government facilities, A/V and architectural lighting design for hospitality and commercial installations, and theatre/entertainment consulting in the cruise ship industry.

**SS: What are you working on now?**

**JT:** We are designing theatres and other entertainment systems for Carnival, Costa, Princess, and Crystal cruise lines. We are designing lighting for projects for General Motors, Chrysler, Toyota, and Pepsi, and also all four broadcasts of the Presidential debates this fall. Last year, we received the PRO AV Spotlight Award

al casinos and government/military facilities.

**SS: Let's go back in time. Where did you grow up?**

**JT:** I grew up in Lakewood, Ohio, a suburb of Cleveland.

**SS: What did your parents do?**

**JT:** My father was an attorney in private practice with his uncle. My mother was a nutritionist working in public health until I was born.

**SS: What did they want you to be when you grew up?**

**JT:** I think that they would have been very happy if I'd continued in the family law firm, which would presumably have been named Tetlow, Tetlow, & Tetlow. However, in reality, there was no pressure for a specific career, as long as I went to college.

**SS: What schools did you attend?**

**JT:** The public schools in Lakewood.

**SS: When and how did you get into entertainment?**

**JT:** Somehow, during my sophomore year in high school, I became interested in theatre, probably because some of my friends were involved in the school productions. I was immediately intrigued by all of the technical aspects, not just lighting. I read everything I could find on scenery,

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**SS: What exactly does Nautilus do?**

**JT:** Originally, just lighting design, which is how I started my career. However, we have expanded into theatre consulting, A/V system design, and project management. Although we do a large variety of different projects, we have niches in several areas,

for Best Corporate Project, for our A/V designs for the Qualcomm 25th Anniversary Museum. Recently, the Illuminating Engineering Society awarded us for the lighting design of the same project. We are currently working on the A/V system designs and/or architectural lighting for sever-

rigging, and lighting, and jumped into backstage production with both feet. Lighting fascinated me, because you couldn't touch it, feel it, smell it, or taste it. You can't even see light until it hits something. Lighting became my primary interest, and I also discovered I had an affinity for it, but it was impossible to pursue just lighting at that point.

Coincidentally, my high school auditorium was the home of the Great Lakes Shakespeare Festival. At the beginning of the summer after my sophomore year, I walked into their office and asked if I could volunteer to work backstage. The receptionist passed me on to Larry Carra, the director of the festival and also the head of the drama department at Carnegie Mellon. Larry took me backstage and introduced me to Fred Youens, the [technical director] for the festival and an associate professor at CMU. Shockingly, they put me straight to work building scenery and changing scenery between productions. For some reason, the electrics department was covered under the stagehands' contract, but carpentry was not, so I was an apprentice carpenter. By the end of the season, I was being paid \$15 a week. They hired me the next summer as a carpenter at \$35 a week, and, after my senior year, I was promoted to stage carpenter at \$50 a week. Fred Youens suggested that I apply to Carnegie Mellon, which I did and subsequently attended.

**SS: Did you do any lighting in college, outside of school?**

**JT:** In college, I had a roommate, Michael Doherty, who was descended from a long line of Pittsburgh stagehands and who frequently worked on calls for IATSE Local 3 in Pittsburgh. During the busy summer season, they were looking for more extras, Michael recommended me, and I ended up working on a wide variety of shows, concerts, spotlight calls, etc. I've got some great memories from this time.

One involves working spotlight calls in the old Pittsburgh Civic Arena, operating a Genarco carbon arc spotlight. The spot positions were just a few feet from the clamshell roof that was opened on summer nights; when they did that, the spot platform would shake, and I'd get vertigo because almost everything around me was moving. Once the roof was open you were essentially on the top of the building, with a perfect view of the downtown skyline. Another memory involves an eight-hour call at the Warner Theatre (now the Benedum Center), where you would start the day in the hot, dirty attic by hand-cranking a winch with the chandelier down to the floor, then cleaning the crystals and replacing all the lamps. Finally, you would end the call by hand-cranking the chandelier back into position, which took about an hour. If you were lucky, they might keep you on for a show call to run the Hall & Connolly arc followspots.

Later, I started working for a local Pittsburgh television production com-

wanted to go, and I began to focus on TV lighting rather than a career in the theatre. Ideally, I wanted to light variety shows for TV, which would blend the two interests.

**SS: You, as did so many successful people in the lighting profession, worked with and for Imero Fiorentino. Tell us all about that.**

**JT:** In 1981, I was living in L.A. and working freelance for Fiorentino's West Coast office. However, the options were limited, because I couldn't crack the camera union, which at the time had jurisdiction over perhaps 90% of the TV work. Meanwhile, the New York office, which was overbooked, called the L.A. office looking for an LD for a videotaping of a burlesque show revival. I flew to New York, and, while working on this show, the office also booked me on an MTV concert, an interview show, and the lighting of the new CNN studio in the World Trade Center. There was an explosion of cable television in New York that year, when MTV, CNN, and

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pany as a freelance electrician and grip, and I was instantly hooked on the video technology. At the time, we thought that the 1970s Plumbicon tube camera technology was great, but there was still a big challenge in making the video image look dramatic, theatrical, or, dare I say, film-like. I decided that this was the direction I

many other now-forgotten channels went on the air, creating demand for content and work for many of us struggling to move up in the business. After about a month of working non-stop, Linda Hobkirk, the VP at IFA [Imero Fiorentino Associates], said something to the effect of, “We are paying you too much freelance; are

you interested in a full-time position?" Of course, the answer was yes, and that led to ten years working for Immie.

This was the best on-the-job education imaginable, as I was exposed to all different types of television lighting. There was no formal training process, but there was a safety net in place by way of the older LDs, who were mentors to all of us younger LDs. The studio projects included soap operas, sitcoms, talk shows, and children's shows, including *Sesame Street*. Shows on location included concerts, political events, beauty pageants, and daytime exteriors. Beyond television projects, I was also assigned to light industrials (now known as corporate theatre), exhibits, and permanent installations.

**SS: After Immie, then what?**

**JT:** In late 1990, I decided to strike

Branson or Shoji; I met with the show's producer, Dorothy Tabuchi, and this is my 21st year with them. The other call was from the director of entertainment at Carnival Cruise Lines. At the time, I didn't know that there were shows on cruise ships, but I was interested, so I flew to Miami, did a short cruise with the production team, and we hit it off. I started lighting shows on their new ships, which led to consulting on theatres and other entertainment facilities, and now this is a large part of our business. I now concentrate on the facilities and system designs on projects for eight different cruise lines.

**SS: What do you consider to be the best job you ever had?**

**JT:** Without a doubt, my current job. Although there is a high level of stress in dealing with the business, personnel, and financial aspects, there is a

Hong Kong handover ceremony. In the corporate world, I've been involved in some really creative productions for clients such as Mercedes Benz, Chrysler, and GM.

**SS: The Presidential debates are about to start. I understand that you are lighting them.**

**JT:** Yes, I'm lighting all three of the Presidential debates and also the Vice Presidential debate.

**SS: Did you ever light the Presidential conventions?**

**JT:** Yes, I've designed the lighting for both the Democratic and Republican conventions. I enjoy them because they are a different type of challenge in terms of scale, but what's great about the debates is the up-close-and-personal contact with the candidates during their private rehearsals.

**SS: When and how did you start lighting the debates?**

**JT:** In 2000, I was contacted by Janet Brown, the executive director of the Commission on Presidential Debates (CPD) about lighting the four debates that fall. Evidently, it worked out well, because I've been doing them since then, this being my fourth election cycle.

**SS: Are the assignments stressful?**

**JT:** As with many projects, the lighting is the easy part. You need to make each campaign happy with how their candidate appears on camera, and you also need to work with a different network team at each debate, as the responsibility of TV coverage rotates between the networks. So yes, it can be stressful, but I knew that going into the project the first time.

**SS: Are both sides secure with you lighting them?**

**JT:** The Commission on Presidential Debates was founded to provide a nonpartisan platform where voters have the opportunity to see and hear

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out on my own. I still did work for IFA, but I started working on more corporate productions. In 1991, I designed the lighting for *Enter the Night*, which replaced the *Lido de Paris* show at the Stardust in Las Vegas. I used 48 of the new state-of-the-art High End Systems Intellabeams, which helped define the look of the show. I thought that this would lead to more work in Las Vegas, but it was not to be, as the first of the Cirque du Soleil shows opened shortly thereafter. However, *Enter the Night* did lead to two other projects, one of which has defined my career ever since. First, I was contacted by the Shoji Tabuchi show, in Branson, Missouri. I'd never heard of

tremendous amount of satisfaction in having built this company with my wife. We have been able to provide jobs for some very talented people, and many of our staff have joined us just out of school and have professionally matured with us.

**SS: What is your favorite lighting job that you ever did and why?**

**JT:** Tough question. In television, it would probably be a show for the BBC, the premiere of Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Requiem*, conducted by Lorin Maazel and featuring Plácido Domingo and Sarah Brightman. In the political sphere, I'd say the Presidential debates or possibly the

the candidates respond to questions from a moderator. Everybody working on the debates is dedicated to the non-partisan approach, and I think that the campaigns respect that.

**SS: Do the candidates bring their own lighting consultants?**

**JT:** Occasionally yes, and it can actually be easier when they do, because then there is somebody knowledgeable who can understand the situation.

**SS: Can you briefly describe the lighting design approach?**

**JT:** It's really very simple portrait lighting, using all conventional fixtures controlled from the simplest memory desk we can find in rental stock. Although 90% of the shots are close-ups of the candidates, the positions of the lighting fixtures are determined by the wide shot of the set and the architecture and rigging points of the location. This means that the key lights can be anywhere from 25' to 45' away. Because of the throw distance and the desire to isolate the lighting for each candidate and the moderator, I use primarily profile spots, specifically Source Four units. The exception to this is the town hall debate, where the candidates respond to questions from the live audience, and they can wander around a large center area, requiring true 360° lighting. In that case, I use primarily 5kW Fresnels with diffusion and diffused PARs for blending between the 5Ks.

**SS: How much time do you get?**

**JT:** The normal on-site schedule for each site begins with a rigging and electric's hang day, with the set starting to be installed at the end of the day. During the second day, the set is completed, and all of the lighting focused and cues written. On the third day, we rehearse camera shots with stand-ins, and each campaign has a walk-through to look at the set, lighting, camera angles, etc. The

fourth day has the debate in the evening, preceded by rehearsal time for each candidate and his team. Day five is the load-out. Then we travel to the next location and do it again.

**SS: What about on-site security?**

**JT:** Understandably, it's very tight, which makes getting into the convention hall time-consuming. When I first

and if you don't acknowledge that fact, you may not last long. On a TV show, certainly the producer is your boss, because he hired you. The director is another boss due to his responsibility for the final cut of the show. The production and costume designers are also your bosses, sort of, because you need to make their work look good, or they will recom-

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started lighting the debates, I'd work from the TV truck outside the building. However, any time I needed to be on the set, I'd have to go through security. Recently, we have set up a control position backstage, within the secure perimeter, where I have switchable monitors and an intercom connection to the truck.

**SS: What is unique about lighting the debates?**

**JT:** Although the lighting design has to be right and meet a variety of needs, in and of itself it's not really unique. What's unique about this type of project is the opportunity to be present and participate in a potentially historic moment. When you think about the contact with the candidates and your involvement in an event that can change the course of an election—that's unique.

**SS: When you do a TV show, who do you consider to be your boss?**

**JT:** This is a really interesting question and needs a detailed answer. The truth of the matter is that we all have multiple bosses on any given project,

mend somebody else in the future. Then there is the host's or star's management and the network or sponsor's representative.

**SS: A cruise ship?**

**JT:** This gets even more complicated. First, we answer to the vice president of corporate shipbuilding or the director of new builds, as they are responsible for these capital expenditure projects. However, we also need to make sure that we meet the needs of the entertainment department, because they are the end-users of the entertainment venues. Because we design the technical systems for a variety of venues, we also need to make sure that the team and executives developing the concepts for the bars, restaurants, and other venues are happy as well. And, last but not least, we need to make sure that the architect who has designed the interiors is happy with how we have integrated the technology into the spaces.

**SS: An architectural lighting job?**

**JT:** Generally, in this case, it's the architect. But in some cases we have

been hired directly by the owner to interface with the architect. In short, we have a lot of bosses on any given project, and it is part of the job to try to keep them all happy.

**SS: How do you get new business?**

**JT:** At this point in my career, most of it is because of long-established relationships. Some of it is also reputation and referrals, and, believe it or not, some inquiries are based on people browsing our website. We do pursue some work and try to arrange presentations for architects or other potential clients, but there is rarely an immediate result to those types of calls.

**SS: Do you have a lighting style?**

**JT:** I hope not. I'd like to think that my style of lighting for any given project is appropriate for that project. It's very easy in this profession to become pigeonholed into a specific genre of work or be known for a specific style. Personally, I prefer working on a variety of projects and treating each one independently.

**SS: How do you approach a new lighting project?**

**JT:** To begin any project, you start with a needs analysis, which is a term used in the architectural world but is applicable as well to shows. If it's a show: What's the time of day or moods to be created? Are there dancers? Do we need to provide lighting fixtures for internal lighting of the scenery? Once we know the lighting needs of the production or project, we move forward with the design and budgeting on a parallel path. We can't afford to redesign projects multiple times, so we rough in the design, generate an equipment list or bill of materials, and send it out for pricing. Once we know we are on budget, we proceed with the rest of the design.

**SS: Of all of the different kinds of projects that you do, which is your favorite type and why?**

**JT:** I don't have any specific favorite type of project. Rather, I like the variety of projects that we do, and I feel fortunate that we have such a variety. Having said that, I prefer projects where there is a strong creative leader—whether director, producer, or architect—and somebody who appreciates creativity and design and the other aspects that we bring to the project.

**SS: Tell us about your family.**

**JT:** My wife Laura has degrees in art history and museum studies and manages all of the business aspects of our company. We met in 1981, while we were both working at IFA in New York. Our son has an M.A. in international relations and does research and analysis for a Japanese consulting firm in Washington, D.C.

**SS: What do you do for recreation?**

**JT:** If I'm not working, I'm probably exercising (running, swimming, or biking) or working on photography. I shoot both large-format and digital, but I print images using traditional and alternative photographic processes, including platinum/palladium, cyanotype, bromoil, and other traditional analog forms of printing.

**SS: Do you see any new light sources on the horizon?**

**JT:** Obviously, we are in the midst of a revolutionary change in light sources with the introduction of LED lighting sources. In terms of theatrical applications, LEDs are now in the transition from effects sources and wash lights to collimated focusing fixtures. There are a number of lessons we have learned on the way, including the fact that we can't reduce the wattage by as much as we thought; we can't yet replace long-throw fixtures; and the lamp life is not as great as we initially thought. Other than that, I'm very optimistic about the long-term possibilities.

**SS: Any new fixtures?**

**JT:** Certainly the Philips Vari\*Lite VLX is a big step forward, and I'm watching closely the development of LED profiles and automated fixtures. I think that Robert Juliat was first to market, followed by Coemar, and now ETC with an LED profile. A couple more generations and I think that we will be there. Or, as one of our LDs said, LEDs are the future of lighting and always will be.

**SS: Any new techniques?**

**JT:** I think that when you consider all of the different genres of lighting, including architecture, theatre, television, film, etc., any technique or method of applying light to people, scenery, or air has probably already been done. If you only work in one genre, a technique may be new to you, but I'm pretty sure that somebody has tried just about every technique imaginable. Where I've seen progress recently, and hope to see more, is in control desk programming and editing. The tools that are available now allow you to rethink how you compose and edit lighting cues, and I hope to see more progress in this area.

**SS: If you could do it all over again, what would you do?**

**JT:** The problem with thinking about this kind of hypothetical question is that you can't take into account factors beyond your control. Earlier, I said that, coming out of school, my goal was to light television variety shows because of the combination of theatricality and technology. My career was progressing well in that direction until they stopped producing variety-type shows for television. It was never my intention to start a company and expand into all of the areas that we have, but the opportunities were there; we took advantage of them, and it has all worked out for the best.



**SS: One question that I ask everyone, that I think is very important, is what advice would you give to young people entering the field today?**

**JT:** Nobody is going to hire you straight out of school for your creative ability, fantastic as it may be. It's important to develop useful, marketable skills that will differentiate you from the other hundreds of young people entering the market. Some possibilities include: Learn a foreign language and, if you are technically inclined, consider getting your network certification. Everything is going on the network, and the ability to design and operate networks is only going to become more valuable. Get as many ETCP certifications as you can. Being certified in rigging and electrics may not be a prerequisite for an LD, but it will give you an advantage, and possibly open some other doors until you have a chance to design. If you are creatively inclined, develop your skills in Photoshop, Google SketchUp, or similar rendering programs.

The trend for theatre designers may be to draft in Vectorworks, but we are 100% AutoCAD because we need to interface with the real world of architects and engineers. We are also working in Revit, which is a native 3-D architectural program that is now being mandated by the federal government and some architects for certain projects. If you are interested in architectural lighting, you need to learn AGI32 or a similar modeling and photometric program. Most of these programs have 30-day free trials that you can use.

Finally, it's important to apply for internships and entry-level jobs by emphasizing the skills you have that differentiate you from everybody else. 📶

