

Episode 5 Audio Final Lights.mp3

Hattie: Welcome to our Smoking Apples podcast as we get ready to release our first ever digital tour of our show Flux. In this series, we bring you an exclusive behind the scenes insight into our theatre company, including embarrassing stories, feminist chat and all sorts of puppet related content. Enjoy.

George: Hello everyone, and welcome to today's Smoking Apples Flux podcast, your host today is me, George Bellamy. I've been working with Smoking Apples since 2012, so almost 10 years now, it's pretty crazy. We'll be talking with two designers from Flux today, Sherry Coenen; lighting designer extraordinaire, and Matthew Lloyd; set designer, actor and co-artistic director of Smoking Apples. But first, let's describe ourselves. I'll go first. I'm George and my pronouns are he/him. I'm a 30 year old white man with dark brown hair, which is in need of a trim, a short beard, also in need of a trim and brown eyes. I have a straight nose with a slightly bulbous tip, which I found out online recently when trying to figure out how to describe my nose best. Cosmo magazine has told me what that means about my life and said i'll be in my 40s. So but that's neither here or there. I have fairly broad shoulders and I'm wearing a blue jumper today. So let's hear from Sherry.

Sherry: Hi, I'm Sherry Coenen. My pronouns are she/her. If I were standing up, I would be a relatively short female. I have brown hair, large glasses to go on my large nose and I have, and I basically always wear a bright orange fleece. So you can see me in tech. That's kind of me.

George: Lovely. And finally, let's hear from Matt.

Matt: Hello, I am Matt, he/him pronouns. I have got brown hair. I've got a brown beard that's got flecks of gray as I slide towards my 40s. Joe, i'm 32! I wear glasses on my nose. I don't have a description seeing as everyone else mentioned their nose, so i'll just go with my nose. I'm wearing a grey jumper and I've got the last of the evening's rays shining upon my face, tanning me, slowly, ready for my summer body.

George: So, can you describe the Flux set for everybody, please?

Matt: Sure. So the main, the main part of the set is three blocks, block like structures, varying in size that can connect together to make one back wall, as it were. But it's what's inside the set, which I fear Sherry will be able to talk more about. But that's it, that's the key. So to look at it, it's quite clinical. It's very white, but that is merely a disguise.

George: So you've teased it already, you're going to have to tell us now, what's on the inside?

Matt: OK, so what's on the inside is around 4, 20, nearly 60 individual bulbs that are encased into what can only be described as a wine rack-style system, which means that we're able to light up and isolate individual boxes. So the idea being, is that it can look like the periodic table, hence the show being about science. And then on the two two side screens, they also have got a floodlight behind, which we use for shadow puppetry.

George: Nice. So one of these is also, how did you come up with the idea of the set there, as well?

Matt: Ha ha

George: It's a big question!

Sherry: So I vaguely had an idea, I was working on these earlier and I thought at one point, there was something about there was going to be drawers and we were going to light the drawers. And then the drawers would light up and then those kind of went away but the light didn't, you know.

Matt: Yeah, it was, um. Yeah, because we were looking at different ways of, basically I had, we had the idea quite early on in the very early R&D. We were just using lots of cardboard boxes and writing the elements on them and we were trying to spell words with the elements and we were trying to put them in different categories and then open the drawers and basically, it was originally, it was going to be that they were like clear perspex boxes. Right, with, like, something that would represent, say, for example, like Potassium, there would be a banana or, you know, something like that Uranium, big green throbbing... or Kryptonite or something like that, you know, um, so that's where it went. But then we kind of went away from that because it, yeah, it became more apparent that it would be cool that we didn't know that they were there and it just looked like, the first time the audience see the set as well, they're already connected. So you don't, I mean, if you studied it really closely, you might be able to see the break lines in the set. The whole idea is that, you know, it can interconnect and in certain formations, makes the rough shape of the periodic table. I do remember the conversation when I went to Sherry and, um, I think it was at the old Theatre Deli, you were rehearsing and I came upstairs, I built this little model box and I was like, basically right, I have got this idea, how do we put hundreds of lights in them, which obviously got scaled down to 60. But still...

George: How does it work this? How does this set work? Yeah, go for it.

Sherry: OK, so it works because Clancy, who I believe you are speaking to or have spoken to, is magic. Clancy is our lighting designer/ production electrician/LED Whisperer. And they were at the original meeting and immediately said, oh, this is easy, we will just fill it with LEDtape. So each box would be outlined with LED tape, which would then be wired down to a controller. And that gave me the world's greatest case of the heebie jeebies because I just tried to tour a show with LED tape that we had to pull the LED effects from because it wasn't tourable and it just kept breaking. But I just used what's called digital festoon. So festoon are the strings of lights that you see in marquees and outside of pubs but instead of being one color and glass, these ones are plastic and have a red, green and blue LED in each unit. They're waterproof and they're incredibly resilient because they're designed to be interacted with by the public, basically. So we figured out a route that you could use. Each box would have its own string of LEDs and Matt, in his wine rack, drilled little holes and we unscrew the bulb. We couldn't do this anymore, the bulbs don't come out anymore. So you unscrew the lamp, stick the holder through and then reinsert the bulb. And then Clancy found mobility scooter batteries and wireless dimming systems. So there are massive batteries that work as basically, as a ballast in the bottom of each piece. And they power the festoon, which is stepped back up to 240 with an inverter and then wireless DMX. So, it's a massively complicated system that my brain can barely understand or explain. But the Clancy, magician that they are, said, I got this and it appeared.

George: Well, that almost lends itself to the next one because it sounds so complex. I mean, what have the biggest challenges when making this set and designing the lights for it?

Matt:] I mean, one of, one of the things was getting the lights into the set. And also that, that was, that was the biggest challenge. Originally the set had kind of like a wooden structure in the centre of it, clad with, kind of like, a plastic, very thin plastic, so it's quite light on its own. So when I built it, I was like, these are great, these are really light and then we put some wood in the centre, we drilled all the holes, we added the lights, added the battery. And suddenly, this thing is now, like, super heavy. Actually in one show, it tipped over, part one of the bits of sets tipped over. So then we had to go back and strip out the wood in the center and replace that with, basically, plastic. Um, so, yeah, that's been the biggest challenge, is playing with the weight ratio, so it's easy for the performers to move around on stage.

Sherry: For me, the biggest challenge was we had this amazing wall that could do all of these amazing things and it was not allowing the audience to become complacent with it, so holding our nerve and holding back, truly showing what it could do for as long as possible so that the the use of the wall could follow the narrative arc. And as the tension was building and the story was building, we could put the wall into greater and greater effect. But once you do what we call Battenberg, which is basically the lights flashing through a Battenberg cake pattern across the whole thing, no matter where they are on the set, there's not really a lot that the audience won't go, oh, well, it can do that, obviously. You know, it was kind of stealing our nerve around, holding it back. And then also the lights and the wall are bright but they're not as bright as the stage lights, so it was figuring out the balance. Um, this might have to get cut but it's going to be really interesting because we're going to try and film this show in a couple of weeks and the camera reads, like, really differently. And we need to make sure that the wall is bright enough to do what it needs to do while also still being able to not have it be overpowered by the stage lights that we need to make sure that the performers and Kate can be seen fully.

George: and showing up on camera, showing up what you want to show, the backlight of it. Yeah, that is. Sherry, you've worked with Smoking Apples on a few shows now. It's a question of how does the process work for you, when you come in?

Sherry: It's changed. The first time I worked on a Smoking Apples show, um, Matt and I met at the Carluccios in Waterloo Station, I believe, or one of the upstairs cafe things to have a quick chat. But the show pretty much already existed at that point and I was brought in very, very late and just gone, here is a thing, make it look better. Um, so it was very much, come in, light the show and you're done. With In Our Hands, which was the second one, I was brought in a bit earlier. Don't know if I was on, we did the show at the Vaults, I'm not sure if that was the first time you guys had really worked on it. But I came in again a little bit later. I had more run in with that because we toured it in an unfinished, very low amount of lighting version before, I think, for three venues, before we finally got to a venue that had enough lights to see if the design worked fully. Um, and then with Flux, I was involved much, much earlier, before the set was even built. Normally, I kind of get told roughly what the set is going to be, whereas this one was, this is our concept, how do we make this happen? How do we put lights into this? So that was really nice because it meant I got to have a lot more kind of contribution earlier on this.

Matt: So just to summarize, it was, we had no money at the beginning, so Sherry, here's the show, light it. Then it was, we've got a bit more money, join us at this point. And then it was like, no, we've got money, join us right at the beginning. So hopefully if we keep going on that arc, you know... Although to be fair, my, like, one of my first memories of you when we met at Carluccios, I think you had seen a video of CELL, because we filmed it but we didn't have the end at that point. And you said, spoiler alert if anyone hasn't seen CELL,

you were like, oh, by the way, I think he should give her a fish. And I was like, I told the others and we were like, THAT'S THE END, that's the end of the show!

George: That is always good. It's always great having Sherry in the rehearsal room. I always think, whenever we go to a venue or something, we always talk about, there are usually, two specific lighting cues that are very much attributed to yourself Sherry. So I think it's time maybe people need to hear about this. So we've got, what is a Sherry fade and what is a Sherry special? I think it's a good way...

Sherry: Those are Matt-isms! I'd like to point out, those are Matt-isms!

George: Oh, it's a Matt-ism

Sherry: So Matt coined that

Matt: I'd say that's industry wide now. I'd say that's industry wide.

George: Every place we go. Oh, Sherry, yes a Sherry fade.

Sherry: So, a Sherry Fade. I think I mean, I don't actually know you guys have named it. But I think a Sherry fade is probably a fade that is between five and nine to fifteen minutes long. It will be a complete aesthetic change across the space, but it should be imperceptible until the final moment. It's usually something that then creates a massive visual tension. Probably the best one is at the end of Cell, when Ted goes back into his chair, that's one that usually gets a small gasp from the audience, which is really nice. Um. And then a Sherry special, that one probably is known everywhere, and hated. That would be a perfectly crisp line, either rectangular or square, usually from above, from a place you can't put the ladder properly, and it has to be exact, because it's dimensioned where it has to sit on the set, from the back and the sides and. And it probably shows up all by itself at a really key moment, so if you get it wrong, everybody knows.

George: I think having some experience of being in In Our Hands, particularly, again, spoilers, at the end, with a very tight, very, very tight special on the answering machine that we have at the end is

Sherry: Between 15 and 10 centimetres squared?

George: It's tiny, it's the size of that. Yeah. Yeah.

Sherry: And occasionally it has to be lit from like seven meters in the air. And you have to have it be perfectly crisp because it is the only thing on stage and the final piece of information for that

Matt: Yea, it's a tight, it's tight. Yeah. That's, that's created fear on tour! I mean it's fine, you know, when we're on tour, we're like, you know, for a couple of centimeters, Sherry's not here, but as soon as Sherry's coming, right, we need to actually properly mark this now and get this within millimeters of the right size

Sherry: That's why you're no longer allowed to play Keepy Uppy! There was one shows where you smacked that light about 2 minutes before the show!

Matt: And there was another show where Luke caught his foot on the cable for the birdie. Yeah and threw it across and Flynn, who was touring with us, got pretty angry. That's the angriest i've ever seen them get.

Matt: I love that we've blamed Luke on that while he's not here and he's not here to defend himself. It was definitely Luke, how could he?!

Sherry: There is a back up for the In Our Hands ones. Because Hattie has the lantern. Yeah. If it really goes horribly wrong, Hattie can pop up!

Matt: And what's great is, if we know we've messed it up, we like 'Hattie get the lamp, get the lamp!' or venues where we have to cut that special. And then you just see Hattie running and she's just slid along the floor and then she just holds the lamp up. I actually, I don't mind either aesthetic to be honest, um, I mean, it is nice when it is spot on and it's on a slight tilt and that light is there and that's the only thing you see.

George: Another staple of Smoking Apples in particular, might be shadow puppetry. What is shadow puppetry and why is it in Flux?

Matt: So what is shadow puppetry? Shadow puppetry is puppetry that's done, or object manipulation that is done, behind the screen or in blackout, using lights to create silhouettes or shadows on another surface. So I'd say, that's the textbook. But of course that opens it up to varying, you can play with perspective, you can play with distance, with sizes. You know, there's lots of things you can do. So you asked me, that's what is shadow puppetry and why?

George: Why is it in Flux?

Matt: Why is it in Flux? So, the good thing about shadow puppetry is it creates or can create quite a specific atmosphere. So I think in Flux, we needed to be able to explain Kate's thought processes. We wanted to go inside her head. So, the set, in a way, kind of plays with her, like, mood and also the scientific side of it. But the shadow puppetry, I think, really shows us what's going on in her head, in terms of working out equations, but it also is used as a location setter. So obviously, we've got this blank set so we can create limited scenes but what the shadow does is it allows us to also travel to locations. So to a record shop, as we're seeing a shadow, the set moves, the lights change. We're in the record shop. We can change locations and we can go inside of her head. So there is also, like, because obviously the show's set in the 80s as well, and like 80s style music, 80's style lights, the shadow also allows us to play with that, like, video game element. Um, so the kind of Tetris, which comes more from the set, but the kind of like Mario style. Um, so yeah, the shadow for Flux allows us to make the world bigger. The world of the show, not the world in general.

George: Haha, expanding the planet, one shadow at a time! And Sherry, I guess the follow up for that is how would you light shadow? What the challenges with it

Sherry: Shadow is a relatively, kind of fixed form, in terms of if you have, you need to have a single point source from a distance that can fill your screen and give you a flat field. So normally it's some kind of floodlight rigged, high up, but coming, well, coming in as flat as possible, because just like when you walk down the street, past a streetlight or on a sunny day, your shadow moves and changes and stretches and shrinks. And so you need to be able to make sure that the image that the performers are creating is crisp. Um, so that's

why, like, we've tried it with LED's and multiple point sources, LED torches and all the rest of it, you get multiple images. That might be useful for something, if you're trying to do a distortion, but in general, the way Smoking Apples works is they're giving important information through shadow, so it needs to be visually readable, I guess is how I would explain it. So we tend to use just one flood, find the perfect height, make sure it's just about face height with the puppeteers, so it gets nice and hot and when they get too close to it, they know they're in the wrong place.

George: I was going to say, there's definitely a challenge of making sure they're not in the way!

Sherry: And then frosting it enough so that you don't see the, because the other problem is because it needs to be centered on the screen, you can see it, so it's also about playing with the intensity of it and frosting it, so that the audience aren't being blinded, while they're trying to look past it to the shadow.

Matt: I think a clever technique as well, or I mean, it might not be made up for Flux, but something that I think has become very important for Flux is that there are a lot of shadows, right. And we have to, there's only, there's only limited time that we have and shadows can take a lot of time to set up. So sometimes when there's no scenes going on, other shadows are being set up. But when you put a shadow up behind a screen and there's general stage light on, that suddenly starts to get lit, right. So in Flux, we then have two lights that hit it from the front, that are on, that are very, you know, Sherry precise, very

Sherry: special, very special

Matt: So that you can't see them. But they're on, so that we can set shadows and they're not backlit. The light from the front is more intense, right. So it stops, it stops that from happening, which I think is really key. Otherwise you would just see us scrambling around all of the time

George: It can be a bit of a scramble. I guess also that sort of ties in with, you talking about the audience's perspective, how they feel is quite a big thing when they're experiencing what you're showing them.

Matt: I think I think with Flux, it kind of, I think the world developed the more that we went on in the process, so we had Kate, you know, that was the the key thing we started with Kate and actually there was a conversation that we'd had on tour previously with Sherry being like, you know what? Why don't we have a strong female character in the next show? Right. So that's where we started from. And then the set was kind of then important in relation to her, so that came and then came the shadows and then well, I'd say the lighting was in there and then came the music. We had the music composer in quite early on as well. So we started and actually I'm going to steal a phrase from our composer that was very much a "throw spaghetti at the wall" situation. Right. Just get it out there. What's working, what's not working. And then bang, suddenly we got the 80s vibe and a lot of the stories were coming from there so that suddenly, you've got your time frame, that then gave us scope for the lights, gave us scope for the music. Suddenly we're in that era. And obviously there's certain cliches of that era in terms of the music and, you know, that kind of thing. So, yeah, I'd say that's how it was. Yeah. Sherry help me!

Sherry: Once we picked the 80's that did dictate a lot of the color palette because there is that kind of Top of the Pops, I think that was a reference that coming up, with like Top of

the Pops in the 80s, the neon pink, the bright yellow, the garish electric green. And we wanted to put all of those into the lights. And also with this, with the wall, the lighting wasn't, lighting can be making pretty pictures, it can be giving locations, there's a lot in this where the lighting is just about passing location like, this is a record shop. This is cold because it's the science lab. This is warm because it's a house. But the wall specifically was supposed to help explain very complicated physics problems. So there was also quite a lot of like, how can we explain nuclear fission in a Tetris pixel, in block formation? And that kind of thing, it was about trying to explain science through light.

George: Yeah, that is well, lighting design. And the set design, I guess, as well, because of the periodic table box and everything like that. What advice would you give someone who is keen to get into set design?

Matt: OK, so I came to set design from a performance side. Right, so I trained as a performer first. I'd always liked making stuff with my, you know, hands and stuff like that. But very quickly, it's quite hard sometimes to find people that you're like, so this is the idea I've got, and they're just like, I'm going to leave you now because I don't understand what you're saying. So, then it became like or, you know, sometimes it becomes a money thing. So you're like, OK, well, we just need to knock this stuff up. Right? So the first prototype of CELL1 was very poor quality, compared to where I ended up being, and that's because the skill was developed over time. So, the other thing I really struggle with, the whole set design thing, is I literally can't draw. I can't, I literally can't draw, I can draw boxes. I can draw rough shapes of what stuff needs to be. But I struggle with that design side. So I'd say, you know, if you've got these kind of creative ideas of what you want things to look like, you don't necessarily need to be able to put them on paper. You can make a model box out of bits of cardboard. That's literally the Flux set that I took to Sherry and Clancy. It was literally like wooden sticks that I stuck together, the plastic on the front to give the general impression. Um, so, yeah, so, I have no no specific training, I didn't train for three years in art design or design training as a performer, and I came into the set stuff purely from that. So, yeah, have a go at it. That's what I'd say, have a go.

George: Yeah, give it a go.

Matt: What's the worst that can happen? You just won't have a set for your show?!

George & Sherry: Hahahaha

George: And I guess, the same question for you, what advice would you give to someone who wants to get into lighting design?

Sherry: Lighting is everywhere, in our daily life. In set design, yeah, you have bits of your house, but there's not a lot of set just running around. Like lighting is everywhere. Like currently I am horrifically toplit. There's a light right above my head and it is just lighting straight on my face. Matt is side lit from his window. George is slightly silhouetted if he moves towards the picture because the light behind him is quite bright. So that's the kind of stuff you can pick up everywhere. What it looks like outside, what the colors of the sky are, all of that, how there's the magic light time at about an hour before sunset where everything turns kind of peachy pink, if it's a clear day. Um, be really observant of that kind of thing. Don't restrict yourself just to what the lights are, if you are now into lighting design and you're in a venue and it has a specific set of equipment, don't restrict yourself to that. Feel free to use torches or desk lamps or anything else that can emit a glow, is still entirely possible to use in lighting design. Watch a lot of shows, see what other people do that you

like. I definitely 'homage', AKA steal, quite a lot of really, if someone does something that's amazing, if you can figure out how to reverse engineer it, you're allowed to put it in your own shows. Um, so, yeah, I mean, I, I came at it differently. I did go to university for lighting design. Um, by accident I wanted to be a performer, um, so I did, I did train. But then when I came out I learned probably more by working in the theatre and watching other designers and figuring out what their processes were and absorbing the bits of it, that work. So, watch TV, there's loads of lighting, design and TV, see what you think is interesting, and then try and figure out how they did it.

George: Yeah, very good, very nice advice. I like that one. And finally, favourite set moment, Matthew, from the show. Would you say you have any favorite particular bengers?

Matt: Yeah, um, there's the, like, right at the beginning, um. And I've never seen it really, only on film, but in my, you know, what you see, the set's creeping forward. You've got these blocks lined up where it looks like it's being done by shadow puppetry, its shadow puppets. It looks like it's being done by lights, but actually it's part torch, part lights in the set. And it's a very, like, easy taster. And then the set opens out and there's Kate. And similarly, we have the symmetrical of that, right at the end, where the set basically comes around her and it connects perfectly. And as they connect perfectly, the lights all change. That's a very satisfying moment. Um, so, yeah, I'd say, yeah, there's lots of cool moments on the set, but yeah, they're the two that when I'm doing it, in the show I'm like, oh, this must look so good. I have no idea.

George: I often find that moments synched up exactly, with light changes, light and sound as well, but like specifically light changes for moments, they're always really satisfying when you hit it. And when something changes like that, there's just like, almost in your head, you go, boom, Hell yeah! Like, as it, as it, like snaps, you're like, yeah, smashed it. And for you, Sherry?

Sherry: There is an amazing bit where Kate falls and we chase, it's like a reverse... in Les Miserables (stealing stuff) there's a bit where the floor swirls and Javer jumps off a bridge and the bridge flies up, and even though he's basically stepping because the bridge is flying, you really believe he's falling for a good 30 seconds and he's literally just standing on the ground doing this. Um, so what we did is steal that basically. And so they lift Kate, but we cause the wall to run in bars, alternating between color and dark, up behind her for the whole time. So because we are creating the motion, aka the flying bridge, it really looks like Kate's falling. And we side lit her, so she floats in a channel of light, while the puppeteers are much darker and they're just these silhouetted shapes. She falls and that's probably my favourite moment.

Matt Yeah, that's a good bit. Amazing.

George: Well, great

Matt: Thanks for your questions.

Sherry: Thank you.

George: Thank you very much for joining us today. Or whenever you're listening to this podcast, be sure to check out Flux when it comes out online.