



# Shining a *Light* on YULETIDE CELEBRATION

When the curtain rises on the AES Indiana *Yuletide Celebration*, an enchanting holiday wonderland is revealed to the audience. The music soars, the dresses sparkle, and the sounds of the chorus fill Hilbert Circle Theatre. What the audience may not realize is that hundreds of hours have been spent behind the scenes to make sure that everything looks as vibrant and magical as possible, and that's where the lighting design team comes in.

Lighting Designer Stuart Duke, Associate Lighting Designer Travis McHale, and Lighting Programmer Topher Stumreiter are the wizards who program and place every single light and cue for the entire show. Stuart has worked on every *Yuletide Celebration* except the first one, making this season his 35<sup>th</sup>. Stuart has designed lighting for dozens of large-scale shows during his career, but he says that *Yuletide Celebration* is the most intensive and complicated show that he works on.

"It's grown so massively in size and scope over the years," he says. "There are so many lights and smart lights and moving lights and it includes an amazing amount of technology."

Thanks to technology, Stuart and his team are able to start programming the lights for the show long before they arrive in Indianapolis the day after Thanksgiving. Cameras in the rehearsal room record each

practice, allowing the design team to start working weeks in advance. Stuart, Travis, and Topher have also been working together on *Yuletide* for four years, which is a great asset.

"The week before the show opens is so compressed and fast," explains Stuart. "But my team and the entire creative team and the performers are such professionals that the show is polished and ready to go by opening night. It's a testament to the talent of everyone involved and their ability to work well together quickly."

Prior to their arrival in Indianapolis, Travis works with Stuart to prepare the light plot, which is essentially a blueprint for the stage electricians to show where every light should hang, what kind it is, what color, and to make sure it can easily be controlled once the light cues are written into the show. More than 300 lighting fixtures are used in the show with more than 250 lighting cues.

"I view my role as allowing the designer—Stuart—to think about communicating with the creative team and 'painting with light' as he writes the cues," says Travis, who is in his eighth *Yuletide Celebration* this year. "There is so much technology and thousands of bits of information that are in constant flux to track, so a major task of mine is documenting all of this so that the show can run and look the same night after night."

Once Stuart and Travis have completed their work, Topher jumps in to provide the extra “holiday sparkle,” as he puts it, by making the lights dance and come to life. About a month before the show opens, Topher preps and folds in new equipment and technology to the lighting design. Once he arrives at Hilbert, he works with the lighting rig and starts to check the preproduction that he’s been working on at home.

“I love working with the lighting team,” he says. “The three of us have a good working rapport and have built trust over the years so that it’s truly a collaborative process.”

Once the three of them are satisfied with the lighting and the programming, they hand it over to the talented team of electricians and stagehands at Hilbert Circle Theatre to run and maintain the show for the month. After opening night, Stuart, Travis, and Topher pack up and head to their next gig. But all three men talk about the joy of working together and the magic that happens during each *Yuletide Celebration*.

“The lighting should carry the energy of the show,” says Stuart. “The show is born of the music, but the lighting and music are wed to each other in a marvelous way. And that’s what’s truly fun about *Yuletide*.”

*Top photo: View of the Hilbert Circle Theatre stage from the lighting console.*

*Middle photo: From left to right: Topher Stumreiter, Stuart Duke, and Travis McHale.*

*Bottom photo: A backstage view behind the Santatizer set in 2019.*

