



INTERVIEW WITH

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LIGHTING DESIGNER FOR HANS ZIMMER LIVE

HANS ZIMMER LIVE - THE NEXT LEVEL



The creative process often draws from a wide range of influences. Were there any particular artistic references, whether from theatre, film, or other disciplines, that helped shape the visual language of this show?

The creative process begins with Hans Zimmer's close collaboration with directors, often starting very early in a film's development. For example, when working with Christopher Nolan on *Interstellar*, Hans composed music based solely on a letter from Nolan before the film was even made. Unlike many

composers who score directly to finished footage, Zimmer captures the core essence of a story first, Hans writes and then curates the music to the film. For live performances, this process is adapted by distilling hours of music into shorter suites while preserving the emotional and visual tone of the original work. The team uses tools like style boards, film stills, and colour "barcodes" that map the visual arc of a movie to guide their design. Additionally, Zimmer draws inspiration from other artists—such as Kandinsky—whose influence can be seen in the visual style of certain suites, like those inspired by *The Lion King* and *African musical themes*.

The goal is that when someone listens to the music and opens their eyes, they feel instantly connected to the film, tapping into the same deep emotional bond that audiences have with the movies. That connection defines the work, so the team leans heavily into the rich visual language of each film to support it. At the same time, everything is ultimately in service of the music. By collaborating closely with Hans Zimmer's musical team and audio designer Colin Pink, they focus on highlighting subtle details and nuances within the score

—elements that might otherwise go unnoticed—enhancing the overall experience without overshadowing the music itself.



A lot of people talk about their favourite moments in the show, but from your perspective, which parts are you most proud of from a design or execution standpoint?

From a design perspective, the greatest success is when there is no gap between the movie, the music, and the lighting. The priority is for audiences to walk away saying the show was emotionally moving, rather than focusing on the technical aspects like the lighting. Everything is carefully crafted to keep people immersed in the moment - including avoiding distracting elements such as unnecessary big lighting effects that could pull attention away when not needed and take the audience out of the moment, ensuring the experience remains seamless and emotionally engaging.

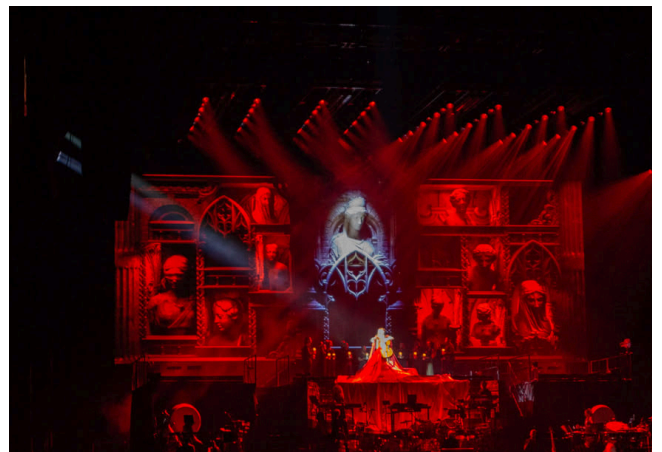
A performer I worked with 20 years ago once said, “John, the audience doesn’t

go home humming the lights.” He was absolutely right.

This show involves collaboration between many team members across different stages of the process. Can you talk about that and how responsibilities are shared?

Hans has a philosophy that good ideas can come from anywhere, which creates an open, collaborative environment where everyone’s input is valued regardless of role. This carries through to the lighting team—myself, my co-designer Hailey, Chris Herman, and Zach Boebel—where, despite defined roles, the process is highly collaborative. For this tour, we reinforced that approach by holding an early design meeting to map out the overall vision and structure of the show, then took time to reflect before developing ideas further.

Although Chris leads most of the programming, the process is highly collaborative. Everyone contributes ideas openly, prioritising experimentation and the best outcome over individual ownership.



With so much new technology constantly entering the market, how do you approach integrating modern lighting tools into a show like this, while still respecting the dynamics of a full orchestral performance?

It's easy to get distracted by new technology ("shiny object syndrome"), but the key is balancing innovation with practical needs. Fundamentally it's to always stay focused on light rather than lights. And what I mean by that is, of course, everybody has their favourites. Goodness knows I have my favourite fixtures. And it's always great to be excited and energised by the creative potential of what new fixtures can do. But 99.9% of the audience would not be able to describe the lighting rig, but if you're doing it right, 100% of them are affected by it.

Lightswitch's "pragmatic design" philosophy focuses on balancing creativity, budget, and logistics. Success comes from maximising the overlap between these elements to create shows that are both impactful and practical, using technology thoughtfully while ensuring the result is achievable and sustainable for everyone involved. And Neg Earth are very much a partner in this process.

So by focusing on the light rather than the lights, we can make sure that we have the right tools to create the light the way we want rather than focusing just on the lights, and assessing what does the quality of light of that fixture help me do? You should be able to create a show with those basic fundamentals, so we try very hard to not get too hung up on chasing the tail of technology.



There are moments where lighting and video feel very tightly integrated. How do you see that relationship evolving in the future?

It's about working with people who are creatively open to the whole show. And on Hans, we were fortunate to have Tom Bairstow and the team at North House, who I know have worked on a lot of previous projects with Neg Earth.

What Tom and his team are really good at is something that we aspire to be good at as well, is finding that ebb and flow and finding points for that dialogue back and forth. Because if the audience is seeing a needle skip and lighting and video aren't integrated together, or the video is green and the lights are red and suddenly it randomly feels like Christmas, then we've missed a huge opportunity to create something cohesive.

But there are around 50% of songs in the show that don't have video at all on the

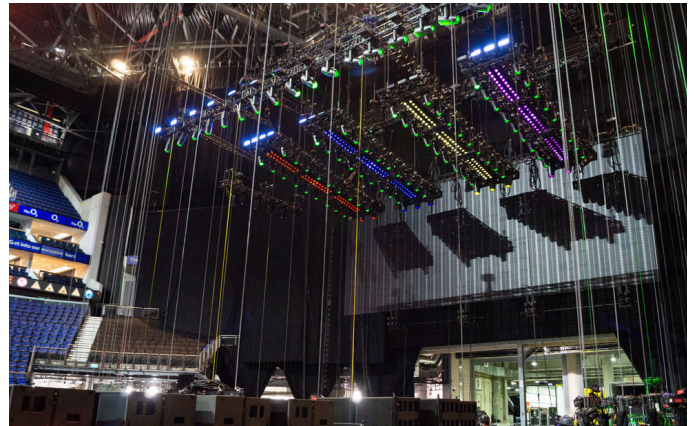
main screen, so we let that be all about lighting and use it as a surface. It's a blow-through screen, so we have lights behind it. We use the screen itself as an architectural object, just the physical screen without it emitting any light. And then when Tom steps up to the plate, it's all about video! So it's the great collaboration and dialogue back and forth between the two teams, which is essential.

This production makes strong use of follow spotting. Could you talk about your approach to that, both creatively and technically, and the challenges of maintaining consistent coverage across a large ensemble?

Hans makes a point of introducing his band members and showing genuine appreciation for them. It gives the audience a chance to recognise the core musicians behind his work, many of whom have collaborated with him for over a decade on major projects like *Dune*, *Interstellar*, and *Pirates of the Caribbean*.

So what we want to do is feature each member in a way that uses lighting and visuals to introduce them to the audience. So that's why of the 13 spots, 8 are on the front truss, the rest of them are either side or behind, so that we can get interesting kind of angles. We really try to use spots to visually breadcrumb the audience. So we start with the show consciously and intentionally quite dark, and that was

saying to the audience right from the beginning, "this is where you should be looking." You can look anywhere you want, but this is the feature for these numbers, so it's very tightly mapped out. It's a very complex call. Hailey and Zach do an amazing job of calling the show.



The show reveals itself gradually, rather than presenting everything up front. What was the thinking behind that pacing, and how does it support the audience experience?

It's a three-hour show with extended musical pieces, so the team deliberately paces the lighting and visuals rather than using everything upfront. The aim is to intentionally build gradually, keeping the experience mysterious and engaging so the audience remains emotionally invested visually interested throughout.

ADVICE FOR THE NEXT GENERATION

For those just starting out in the industry, what advice would you give? And looking back, is there anything you would tell your younger self?

One of the most important things that I would advise people starting in the industry to do is just to expose yourself to any avenues of creativity you can. Valuable lessons can come from anywhere, including what not to do.

Actively seek out experiences, try things, and connect with people in the industry - who are often approachable if you're respectful and engaged. Every creative encounter offers a chance to learn and grow, even if it's what not to do.

Embrace both positive and negative feedback, as "no" can be just as valuable to the creative process as "yes." So a "no" is super useful. We're not going to get offended by a "no" - that's part of the knowledge bank that we're building about you as a creative person. Okay, they don't like this. Great. That's gold that we can use to forge a more accurate product for our clients. So go enjoy it. Go marvel at the wonder of human creativity. And somewhere in every single show I've ever seen, I've learned something, even if it was, "oh my God, I'm not going to do that!!"



We're seeing more young people entering the industry. From a creative point of view, what do you think separates good work from great work, and what should the next generation be focusing on?

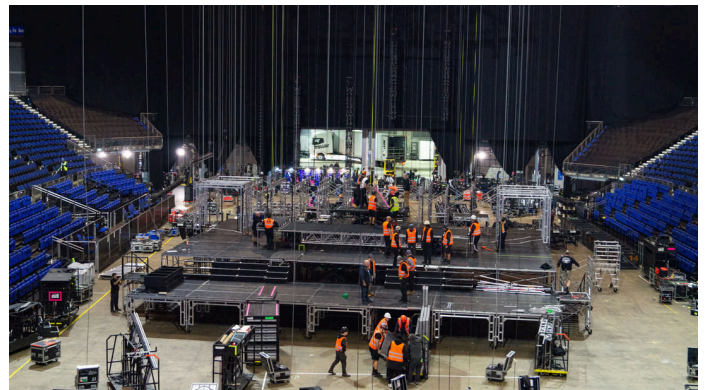
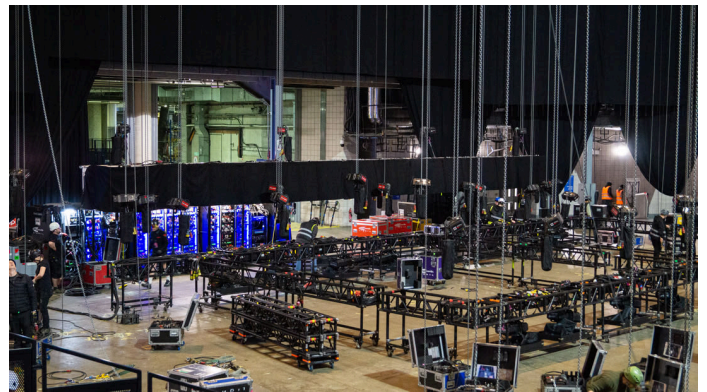
My advice would be, see as many shows as you can. Work that comes from the heart will always resonate. I love experiencing things that feel genuine—even if they're not to my personal taste. You can recognise when something is truly heartfelt, and that deserves respect.

For anyone finding their creative voice, the key is to follow what feels right and have the courage to stand by it, even if not everyone responds to it. That said, there's a balance. There's a spectrum between being an artist and a designer: an artist creates purely for themselves, while a designer shapes their work to

meet a client's vision.

In collaborative environments, like working with Hans, that balance becomes essential. Sometimes your ideas align, sometimes they don't, and ultimately you have to respect the overall vision while still bringing your own creativity and integrity to the work. It's about understanding your authentic creative voice and learning how to apply it within that collaboration.

I think to younger creatives, I would say this: Figure out who you are. Figure out what makes you tick, and figure out how to explain that to people, which is really important. So show up, be authentic, be honest, do good work, be aware of opportunity. As my grandmother used to say, when opportunity knocks, open the door.



Neg Earth Lights extends heartfelt gratitude to John Featherstone for his invaluable input and thoughtful perspectives during this interview.



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