



in profile

Margie Heymann talks to fourth generation lighting designer **Lucilla Baroni**

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Delegates to Showlight 2017 who toured the Florentine theatres saw spaces in which the Baroni family has worked since the end of the 19th century.

The fourth generation is represented by Lucilla Baroni, lighting designer, consultant, rental house owner who dreams of publishing a lighting text and of eventually curating a museum dedicated to the history of theatre illumination.

As Lucilla explains: "My name is derived from 'lux/light'. People often say that my name meant I was destined to work in lighting, while others say that my family history ruled out any other name."

It all began with her great grandfather, Niccolò who installed electric lighting systems in an era still dominated by gas. His business card read 'electric door bells, lightning rods and door-opening systems', but his speciality was the conversion of theatres from gas to electricity. He became responsible for lighting productions in the Regio Politeama Fiorentino, the opera house and the Teatro Verdi - theatres which he had converted - and eventually became one of the first film production technicians.

Lucilla has childhood memories of running across the stages of the three major Florentine theatres where her family members were lighting managers. Later on, her grandfather Mario took her to operettas at the Teatro Verdi; uncle Sergio introduced her to prose at the Teatro alla Pergola; and her father Guido - often called 'the wizard of lighting' - instilled in her a love of opera and art with frequent trips to the Teatro Comunale. In their home, the family listened to classical music and enjoyed a library full of theatre texts. Love for theatre was hereditary.

Lucilla continues: "I may have had the theatre in my blood, but I never dreamed of working in the family occupation. I had other ideas - and besides, lighting was not a profession for a woman."

After experiences as an actress and assistant director, Lucilla enrolled in the theatre programme at university in Bologna. By combining her academic studies with hands-on projects she learned

how to integrate lighting with set design, costuming and make-up - crafts which fascinated her. "As an aspiring director, my goal was to study the past in order not to copy or repeat it, and to develop a complete vision of the theatre." She graduated with the highest grades after submitting her thesis entitled *From Gaslight to Lasers: Four Generations of Theatre Lighting as Witnessed by a Child of Art*.

Lucilla quickly discovered that it would be very difficult to enter the relatively closed world of opera as an assistant director - a difficulty compounded by being a woman. Entering the family business was almost automatic, "perhaps out of laziness or necessity". She began to help organise productions and assist with the administrative aspects of the company. In those days, the Baroni family spent almost the whole summer lighting the Puccini Festival in Torre Del Lago; this required a massive coordination of equipment and manpower.

Like all apprentices, Lucilla began by cleaning lenses and operating followspots. Her father Guido was the most acclaimed lighting designer in Italy. After long collaborations with Luchino Visconti, Giorgio Strehler and Lilliana Cavani, he had become head of lighting at the Teatro Comunale, designing and supervising the lighting for opera and ballet during both the regular season and the Maggio Musicale Fiorentino - Europe's oldest summer music festival. Guido transformed her working days into a series of masterclasses. "My father not only instructed me in the basics of electricity and optics, but taught me to observe nature, study works of art, and know and respect the rules and conventions of the theatre. I learned to relate the principles of stage illumination to the other theatre arts and, above all, to give meaning to the language and sentiments of the text through my lighting choices. I learned how to define the scenic space with lighting in the absence of scenery, which proved very important when I began to light ballet. Above all, my father transmitted his passion for the theatre to me along with our family's artistic tradition of inventing lighting effects and projectors that were not yet commercially available."

"My freelance lighting career began with the Balletto di Toscana," she continues. "I loved and still prefer the field of modern dance because it allows me to experiment with a variety of effects and express my creativity. Lighting contemporary dance has taken me all over the world, introduced me to other theatrical realities, forced me to adapt my lighting to alternative spaces and given me the gift of working with talented performance artists like Elizabeth Vittoni, whose improvisation with movement is inspirational. I was lucky enough to work with Micha Van Hoecke, a great master of dance and theatre and his company, Ensemble, for two years. The productions debuted at the Ravenna Festival and then toured Italy and abroad.

"I designed an original production of *Prometheus Unbound* in the historic Teatro Olimpico, Vicenza with director Roberto Guicciardini which we followed with *Antigone* at the Cairo Opera. I have worked with Riccardo Massai, a director whose work embraces prose and opera, for 30 years. We enjoy an open exchange of ideas that have led to exciting projects which sometimes break theatrical traditions."

Her trademark, developed over the years, is the bold use of colour to create "pictorial or symbolic environments" and what she calls "to see and not see" - the play of light and shadow which she achieves with gobos, narrow beams and modelling effects. "I believe in creating images that leave room for the perception and fantasy of the spectator."

These days, Lucilla combines her freelance career with a wide variety of lighting projects handled by her lighting rental and service company, which she runs with her husband, Mauro Bigiol. She finds that uncertainty is a constant in a field which depends to a large extent on ever-shrinking budgets.

Inevitably, Lucilla is frequently asked about the difficulty of following the career path of such a famous father. She admits that being 'Baroni's daughter' meant working to very high standards which took constant effort, but today she is delighted to be the descendant of the Baroni family and recognised as probably the only fourth generation lighting designer working in the world today. ☘