

EXCERPTS FOR AUDITIONERS

LIGHTING MARTHA

A One-Act Play About Jean Rosenthal

By Carolyn Gage

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The cover art is from Rosenthal's lighting plot for Martha Graham's "Errand into the Maze." The original is at The Rosenthal Collection in the Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research. The document can be accessed online at The Lighting Archive. (www.thelightingarchive.org)

Dedicated to Pearl Weinstein

Summary

A One-Act Play

The play opens the night of April 30, 1969, after the final dress rehearsal for Martha Graham's 35th season opener at New York City Center. Legendary lighting designer Jean Rosenthal, dying of cancer, arrived in an ambulance and on a gurney for the final lighting check. She has just left to return to the hospital. Her life partner and lighting assistant, Miki (Marion) Kinsella, is alone on the stage. A lighting technician, Ben, notices her behavior and expresses his concern. Miki is agitated and displacing her anger onto Martha Graham for allowing Jean to attend the rehearsal. Jean has forbidden Miki to talk about her disease or her dying, and Miki's grief and resentment have reached the breaking point. Ben leaves Miki with a pint of whiskey. She turns on the ghost light, lies down on the stage, and falls asleep.

The ghost of a healthy, younger Jean shows up, and Miki challenges her over what she perceives as excessive loyalty to Martha Graham. Jean's explanations only exacerbate Miki's rage, and, in desperation, Jean pulls the plug on the ghost light, retreating to the shadows. In the darkness, the women begin again, and this time, Miki is able to understand the forces that have shaped her partner and her choices. She arrives at an appreciation of the quality of her partner's defects, and Jean is able to demonstrate her love for Miki in the best way she knows how.

The play is a reflection on denial and dying, intimacy and artists, seeing and being seen, and—of course—on light.

2 women, 40's and 50's; 1 man, 60's
Single set (bare stage)
45 minutes

Introduction

Lighting Martha has traveled a long way from the first draft, written in 2004. The play was originally inspired by a passage in *Staging Desire: Queer Readings of American Theatre History*, where the author described how lighting pioneer Jean Rosenthal, just weeks from dying of cancer, was brought to City Center in an ambulance and on a gurney in order to supervise the final lighting check for Martha Graham and her dance company's thirty-fifth season.

In researching the first draft, I studied Graham's classic dances in detail, read Graham biographies, researched Rosenthal's life, studied her light plots and her book *The Magic of Light*, and met with Tony-award-winning lighting designer Beverly Emmons, who took me on a tour of City Center. I discovered that Jean's life partner Marion (Miki) Kinsella was still alive, in her 80's, and living on Martha's Vineyard.

I had two phone conversations with Miki. The first one was very promising. I told Miki upfront that I was a playwright who specialized in writing about the lives of famous lesbians, and that I wanted to write a play about Jean Rosenthal, incorporating her lesbianism. When Miki expressed concerns about this, I shared information with her about how Jean's lesbianism and their partnership were already being written about in books and in articles. I told her that this project would provide her with an opportunity to help shape a narrative that was already public. Miki began to open up about networks of lesbians in her and Jean's life. She told me she had photographs that she could show me, and stories she could share. I recognized many of the names

from decades of research into lesbian theatre history. We made plans for me to come visit her on the Vineyard.

Several weeks later, I called Miki again, this time to confirm the date and time of the ferry I would be taking. This conversation was so different from the first, it was as if I was speaking to a different person. This Miki was angry and suspicious. She opened by telling me that she had found my website (I had given her the URL), and that she now knew the “kind of work” I did. She appeared not to remember that I had told her about this “kind of work,” nor did she remember her invitation to me. She spoke to me as if I was trying to trick her or take advantage of her somehow, dragging her and Jean’s name through the mud. And then I heard the clink of ice cubes.

In my career, I encounter homophobia on a weekly basis, and it’s often quite virulent. I have lost housing and jobs, and I have been involved in lawsuits because of homophobia. Miki’s attack, comparatively minor in terms of material consequences, was still profoundly upsetting to me.

In the end, I did write a draft of a play about Jean Rosenthal, and it was incredibly dull. The play was structured around recreating Jean’s lighting design for Martha Graham’s “Errand Into the Maze.” I had decided to use lighting as a second character. Moss Hart used to say that playwriting was the only profession where one could achieve a level of proficiency and success, and still turn out a project that appeared to have been executed by someone who knew nothing at all about the craft. Such was that draft of *Lighting Martha*.

I put the play away for fourteen years, even as I continued to tell the story of Miki and the ice cubes. Gradually, the pain of that conversation began to recede, and, eventually, I read that Miki had died.

In 2018, I began putting together a second collection of monologues and scenes excerpted from my work. It occurred to me that I might be able to salvage something from my long-abandoned draft of *Lighting Martha*. Working with this material again after so many years, I remembered the hundreds of hours that had gone into the researching of it. Feeling it was a shame to let all that work go to waste, I began to envision a much shorter play that incorporated my experience of Miki, designating her—instead of light!—as the second character.

One of the things that Miki had shared with me in that first conversation was that Jean had arranged for her doctors to have all their consultations with Miki. Jean did not want to know anything about the progression of her cancer or her prognosis. She had left Miki to field all of that information, and Miki was never allowed to talk to Jean about her partner's impending death. When she shared this with me, she expressed a tremendous sense of pain from lack of closure, as well as a lingering resentment.

This dynamic would become the heart of the play. I spent the summer of 2018 studying dying and writing about it in other contexts. I realized that my earlier version of Jean on the gurney was some kind of Disney fantasy. A woman, days from dying of cancer, is not going to be making dramatic speeches that express complex and charged emotions. She cannot possibly take stage

in any meaningful way, except as a kind of ghoulish sideshow. In my sixty-seventh year, I was getting real about dying.

The skeletal and heavily medicated Jean has left the building when this version of the play opens. The dialogue is between the angry, grieving, and overwhelmed Miki and the ghost of a younger Jean. The play is about a lesbian who was most comfortable in the shadows, throwing her meticulously designed lighting onto others—the performers. It is especially the story of lighting Martha Graham, the woman who was Jean’s first inspiration and perhaps an early crush. It is the story of a life partner who feels she has had to take second place to her lover’s all-absorbing career, and who is attempting to confront that before it is too late.

Writing this version of *Lighting Martha*, I could see so clearly that I did not have the maturity in my early fifties to take on the subject of dying. Over the last fifteen years, most of my mentors and many of my colleagues have died. I have attended services and written many memorials. My own mortality is no longer an abstraction, but a distinct, ever-present possibility. I have begun the process of putting my house in order, and part of that has included coming to terms with whom and what I have loved, and how I have expressed that love. The primary commitment has always been to the work—the plays. In *Lighting Martha*, I plead my own case before some imaginary bar, that this love of, and total commitment to the art is also worthy and deserving, a counterweight against manifest deficiencies in my relationship histories.

Notes on Jean Rosenthal's Approach to Lighting Design

By Mitchell Jakubka

Jean Rosenthal was not only one of the first lighting designers, and a true trailblazer in her field, but her lighting techniques and status as a lesbian Jewish woman have continued to guide our industry in the decades after her passing. Known for her subtle work with color, and emphasis on crisply sculpted light, she revolutionized the way performance of all genres, and particularly dance, is illuminated. Further, her methods of subverting the blatant sexism and homophobia in the industry have shaped the way lighting designers now work as collaborative artists. She was a master of defeating prejudice with kindness, maintaining an unshakeable calm and giving spirit that endeared her to even her toughest critics. These tactics of personality carried into the work of today's designer, as we strive to maintain gracious, collaborative communication and unending flexibility.

While Jean's personality and lesbian status were major influences on her and our work, her technical prowess was equally important. Across performance media, there are a few key traits that carry through her work and identify something as "a Jean Rosenthal Plot." Generally, each of her systems used a "three color mix," using blendable tones of lavender, a warm, and a cool to mix a variable range of colors and whites. Her cool tones were crisp, pure blue, and slightly more saturated than the other gels in her palette, which helped to combat the fixtures' naturally warm output. Her lavenders and warm tones both tended toward the pinker side of the spectrum, and the lavender was often so pale she referred to it as her "white." The lavender served both to desaturate and blend the other fixtures' color and

add sharp intensity. She occasionally used amber tones, but with care, as she believed they could make a scene feel “tired.” Though she kept her palettes from straying into super-saturate colors, her mixing system meant that she could sneak in bold color gently (usually in backlight or diagonal backlight), without washing out scenes or performers. She also relied on strong sidelight—particularly from booms, which was a revolution for her time—to shape the performer’s bodies and provide a sense of edge and contrast. These bold statements in direction were tempered by the incredible subtlety of her palette and timing. Her cues would fade effortlessly, often using the slowest timing possible, attempting to make the light breathe and flow in a way tied kinetically to the action onstage.

In lighting and performing *Lighting Martha*, one should consider the same aspects that Rosenthal did in her lighting. She was a woman who *felt* light, with each color and angle combination eliciting a different emotional response. Rosenthal may have perceived top light as repressive, pushing downward, and low sidelight as harsh or upliftingly buoyant, depending on context and color tone. For the climatic final moment of this play, a designer should consider Rosenthal’s signature palette—and her physical relation to the angles and colors of light—and pull from this to create a languidly fading display of angle and color combinations that spur the performers to feel a range of emotions.

The difficulty arises when trying to present a tribute to a master’s work on a limited stage. In producing *Lighting Martha* in a blackbox theater or other small venue, the designer faces the challenge of creating a wide range of colors, moods, and angles with a small set of lighting tools. To solve these issues, we can

again turn back to Rosenthal’s original techniques. With her career spanning the early years of lighting design, she too had limited lighting control, and often limited fixture inventories. She solved this issue through careful blending, again using her “three color mix,” of warm, cool, and neutral tints. Though modern color changing fixtures may lessen your need to hang many instruments to achieve multiple colors of light, we can follow her example of overlapping a few tones to create a wider range than is possible with just one color per angle. Further, the use of tungsten fixtures allows for the “red shift” of dimming, shifting to a warmer color output of a light as it dims, creating a different tone from the original given at a brighter intensity. This is particularly helpful for the final moment, as we can create multiple colors by choosing to mix (or not mix) multiple fixtures at different angles and intensities, creating many looks from creative use of even the smallest rig. By manipulating blending, brightness, and direction, a designer should be able to create Rosenthal’s evocative light in any venue.

Online Resources

http://thelightingarchive.org/show.php?show_id=11#!docID=157
<http://www.susanscharfman.com/genius-passion-and-the-magic-of-light.html>
<https://www.nytimes.com/1996/10/27/arts/lighting-the-way-into-a-sense-of-space.html>
<http://www3.northern.edu/wild/jr.htm>

Mitchell Jakubka is currently a Lighting Design MFA student at Carnegie Mellon University, and a theater and dance lighting designer. His work also spans into queer theater history, and his thesis “A Love of the Whole” examines Jean Rosenthal’s historic techniques and her influence on today’s lighting designers. MitchellJakubka.com.

Cast of Characters

JEAN ROSENTHAL: The legendary lighting designer, 55. Fem, deeply private.

MIKI KINSELLA: Her partner and assistant, 45. Butch, aggressively devoted to Jean.

BEN: Lighting technician, 60's.

Scene

The stage of New York City Center.

Time

April 30, 1969, late night after the final dress rehearsal for Martha Graham's premiere of *The Archaic Hours*.

Excerpt pp 3-4:

BEN: (*Nodding.*) Oh, yeah. Jeannie gets her way.

MIKI: (*On a tear now.*) Weeks to live...*weeks!* Maybe *days!* And *Martha!* (*She begins to pace.*) I just... I can't even... Martha could have stopped it! She is the only person who could. She's the boss. Martha could have told Jean that she would not allow her in the door at City Center. But did she stop it? No! She *encouraged* her! Standing there, next to that goddam gurney... and Jean—Jean, what—? Weighing seventy pounds and barely able to hold herself up, and Martha's got her bending backwards to check the positions of the lights! I never saw anything so selfish in my life! Like there couldn't be anything more important going on in the universe than lighting Martha Graham. That woman is the most selfish, the most egotistical—

BEN: Hey—hey, Miki! Let me call you a cab.

MIKI: No, no... (*Still pacing furiously.*)

BEN: C'mon Miki... It's been a long night.

MIKI: (*Turning on him.*) Where would I go, Ben? Where would I go? Back to the apartment? Her stuff all over the place, and she's never coming home. (*Her voice begins to get shaky.*) What am I supposed to do with it all? (*Suddenly switching back to rage, as a more comfortable emotion.*) God knows, I can't ask Jean, because *nobody* is allowed—

BEN: (*Cutting her off.*) Hey! How about we go somewhere and I buy you a beer?

MIKI: (*She stops and look at him, suddenly drained.*) No, you go on. You have a show tomorrow.

BEN: So do you.

MIKI: Yeah...

BEN: You know Jeannie's gonna be okay...

MIKI: Ben, she's *dying*.

BEN: Yeah, she is, and she knows it. But she's tough. (*Passing her a flask.*)

MIKI: (*Ignoring the flask.*) I don't know that she's as tough as you think.

BEN: (*Taking a drink himself and then holding it out again.*) How long have you known her?

MIKI: Since 1956. Thirteen years. (*A beat.*) My lucky number. (*She looks at the flask, reconsiders, and takes a swig.*) I worked with her on *West Side Story*.

BEN: (*Nodding*) Yeah?

MIKI: (*Remembering as she takes another drink.*) *Cabaret, Hello, Dolly!, Barefoot in the Park...* You? (*Passing the flask back.*)

BEN: I've known her thirty years. (*He takes a drink.*) ... thirty years... the Depression... I met her over at Federal Theatre 891... with Orson Welles. Jeannie was just a kid, but, boy, she stepped right up. Houseman had made her his assistant. And then, when we all lost our jobs for doing that show... uh... (*Searching his memory.*)

MIKI: *Cradle...*

Excerpt pp. 7-9:

MIKI: *(She paces around the stage for a minute, and then lifts the flask.)* To all the ghosts. Don't mind me. *(She takes a long drink, lies back on the stage, emotionally spent, and falls asleep. JEAN ROSENTHAL enters. This is Jean from 1967, before the cancer. She's in her mid-fifties and in good health. She walks up to the ghost light, holding her hands, palms outward, as if she was warming them in a fire. JEAN, who experiences light as tactile, caresses the edges of the light. She looks toward the sleeping MIKI, smiles and crosses down to her. Sitting cross-legged on the floor, she looks at MIKI. Slowly MIKI opens her eyes. She is momentarily confused.)* Jean...? *(JEAN waves a hand.)* This is a dream. *(JEAN smiles.)* Yeah, this is a dream... You weigh too much. And you're not dying. The real Jean is back at the hospital.

JEAN: "The real Jean...?"

MIKI: Yeah. The nightmare Jean. The Jean that isn't even Jean anymore. *(Looking at JEAN.)* But she is.

JEAN: I know. I see her, too.

MIKI: So what are you? *(JEAN smiles and turns toward the ghost light.)* Yeah. The ghost light. *(Pause.)* Yeah.

JEAN: *(Looking at the lighting.)* We did a nice job, didn't we?

MIKI: We? *I* did most of the work. You were too sick.

JEAN: I know.

MIKI: *(Angry.)* I wish to hell I *hadn't* done it!

JEAN: Why?

MIKI: Because you wouldn't have taken the job! You were too sick to do it without me, and I knew you weren't going to try to break in a new assistant. *(Pause.)* It was too much. *(Shaking her head.)* It was too goddam much...

JEAN: But I promised Martha. I couldn't let her down.

MIKI: You couldn't let her down? Why not? Why the hell not? You don't owe that woman a thing! She owes *you!* Thirty-five years of lighting her shows. She should have come to the hospital tonight, instead of you and that damn ambulance coming to City Center... Thirty-five years is not enough, but that vampire has to drain your last ounce of lifeblood, your last... your last... *everything!* *(MIKI is so angry she can't find words.)* You don't owe Martha Graham a goddam thing!

JEAN: *(Quietly)* Miki... I do.

MIKI: No! I don't want to hear it. Not after tonight... Not after this... this... ghoulish pageant... ambulance, gurney, a Greek chorus of orderlies and nurses... everything but the professional mourners... Oh, I guess that was *me*, because it certainly wasn't Martha! *She's* got a show to do! God forbid your decaying body should get in the way of *her* dress rehearsal. *(JEAN looks away.)* *What?* What the hell could you possibly owe that woman?

JEAN: Being "Jean Rosenthal."

MIKI: More like she owes you for making her "Martha Graham."

JEAN: Miki, she—

MIKI: No!

JEAN: All right... *(Long pause.)* ...But—

MIKI: No! (*Long pause.*)

JEAN: Just one—

MIKI: I don't want to hear it! Not tonight... (*Long, long silence. JEAN rises and starts to leave. MIKI capitulates.*) One thing. Just *one*.

JEAN: I danced with her.

MIKI: No, you didn't.

JEAN: She said I had peasant feet.

MIKI: No.

JEAN: It was a compliment.

MIKI: I don't believe you. (*JEAN looks at her.*) When?

JEAN: Before you were born.

MIKI: When?

JEAN: 1929.

MIKI: (*Defensively.*) I was five years old. (*JEAN smiles. Long silence.*) All right. Why were you dancing with Martha Graham?

JEAN: Because I couldn't get into college. None of them would have me, because of all those experimental schools I had gone to. So my parents sent me to the Neighborhood Playhouse School. They thought it might broaden my horizons. (*JEAN smiles.*)

MIKI: And you signed up for Martha's dance class...

JEAN: I didn't have a choice! They made me! Everybody had to take everything. That's how the Playhouse was... The set designers had to study dance, and the dancers had to study voice, and they made all the actors learn musical composition. It was crazy... You should have seen us—

Excerpts pp. 11-13:

JEAN: She told us that we were not here to please the audience. (*She turns to MIKI.*) Imagine a young girl hearing those words in 1929... “We are not here to please the audience.” She said that ugliness, if it had a powerful voice, was beautiful. She was so incredibly strong.

MIKI: *You’re* the strongest woman I ever met.

JEAN: I remember that first day so clearly. She told us to take off our shoes and lie down on our backs. And then suddenly, we hear “Contract!” She was shouting it... “Contract!” And so we did. And then, “Release!” And we did. Twenty-five girls lying on the floor, contracting and releasing, over and over... and all the time, Martha is lecturing us about “the house of pelvic truth” (*Smiling playfully at MIKI.*) Well, I thought I had died and gone to heaven.

MIKI: (*Returning the smile.*) No doubt.

JEAN: (*Teasing.*) There’s no going back from that house of pelvic truth.

MIKI: (*Teasing back.*) Don’t I know it... (*She and JEAN look at each other tenderly for a long moment. MIKI starts to take her hand, JEAN pulls it away, and MIKI, remembering her admonition, pulls hers back with a sigh.*) So you had a crush on Teacher.

JEAN: Huge. I fell down a flight of stairs for her.

MIKI: That’s pretty bad.

JEAN: I accidentally on purpose injured myself so I couldn’t dance in her class. Martha took pity on me and made me her assistant.

MIKI: According to plan...

JEAN: It was my job to get her whatever she needed. And one day, it just so happened that the thing that Martha needed was light. (*JEAN is overwhelmed with wonder by the memory.*)

MIKI: (*Turning away suddenly.*) I don't want to talk about her anymore. (*JEAN lowers her head and looks at her hands.*) What about us... You? Jean, you're *dying*, but you won't let us talk about it. (*Starting to pace.*) It's killing me. And now it's too late. You're drugged and sleeping all the time. There's nothing but pain. There's nothing left to say. (*JEAN doesn't say anything.*) *You're leaving me!* Do you even love me?

JEAN: (*Protesting.*) Of course.

MIKI: What do you mean, "of course?"

JEAN: (*Pleading.*) We live together. You're my assistant... We've been working together for—

MIKI: *Exactly!* Your *assistant!* I'm your *assistant!* And how handy to live with your *assistant!* Just like Nan Porcher before me... Why, it's almost like having your own personal employee seven days a week, twenty-four hours a day...!

JEAN: Miki—

MIKI: No, I'm serious.

JEAN: We're lovers!

MIKI: Maybe that's just part of the job description.

JEAN: Don't be cruel, Miki.

MIKI: Me? Me “don’t be cruel?” How about you making all the doctors talk to me? *I’m* the one who has to hear about the tumors and the blood tests, and where it’s metastasized to, and how sick the radiation is going to make you, and how long you have to live. You don’t want to hear any of it, so you make me hear it.

JEAN: Stop, Miki!

MIKI: You know how long you have to live?

JEAN: Stop! (*Covering her ears.*)

MIKI: Two weeks. (*Raising her voice.*) *Two weeks!* And maybe less than that after tonight—all that goddam drama around the rehearsal. (*JEAN has retreated. For MIKI, a dam has broken.*) I’m not sorry! I’m sorry I didn’t say it sooner! Jean, we’ve been living a goddam lie... Pretending I’m your roommate, pretending I’m just your assistant... pretending you don’t have cancer, pretending you’re not dying! (*She looks at JEAN defensively.*) I don’t care! You know what it’s like? It’s like the time you were hired to light the tour of those Russian ballet dancers... Nijinsky’s sister... remember? You told me her choreography was all in the first ten feet of the stage, because that’s how they lit dancers in Europe, because of the gas footlights. First pipe and two booms... That’s what they asked for. But you... *you* wanted to light behind them and around them and above them, because Martha had taught you that all the areas of the stage are equally important! She taught you that wherever she was on the stage, *that* was center stage. But what would be the point with these Russian dancers, because they couldn’t dance where you wanted to light them? And in the end, you got your ass kicked out of the theatre! And now you’ve lit just this narrow, little strip of your life—what’s left of it—and you’ve made both of us dance in that strip. Jean, you are dying! You are leaving! There is so much space—*so much space*—behind us and around us and above us, and we can’t move in it! This flat little dance of denial right out in front of everybody...

that's all you want to light! I can't do it anymore! I have things to say and do that are all over the place! All over the place, Jean! I can't do the goddam footlights dance anymore, and you won't move the booms for me!