

Lighting Director David Grill Sits in the Spotlight

Known for shining the light on such icons as Lady Gaga and Michelle Obama, we put David Grill in a spotlight of his own.

Published: 01/28/2019
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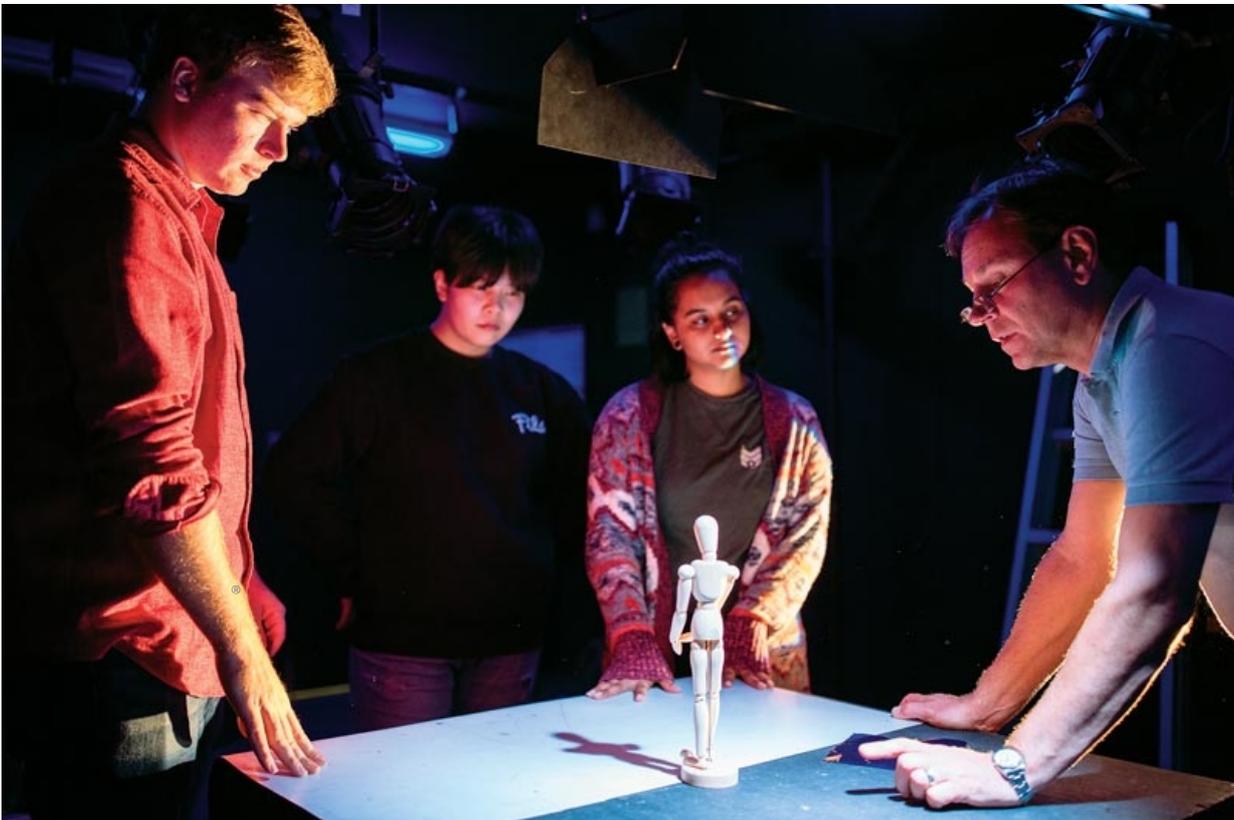


PHOTO BY BRYANT ALEXANDER

David Grill has a living room in his house in Mahwah, NJ, much like others you've seen. But glance in one corner, and you'll find something you probably *haven't* seen in a living room before: four golden

Emmy Awards. And if they shine especially brightly, it's fitting — in addition to being an associate professor of theater design/technology at Purchase College, Grill is a world-renowned lighting director and designer.

In fact, Grill has earned 12 Emmy nominations in all. The latest is for his work on an rather obscure event known as the Super Bowl, where he made sure a worldwide audience saw with crystal clarity Justin Timberlake's every pop and twerk. He also directed the lighting for last year's Super Bowl ("the one with Lady Gaga," he says, as if trying to keep them straight himself) and picked up another Emmy for his trouble. "It's a good career," he says, in characteristically modest fashion. "There's lots of work."

Grill, 56, didn't wake up with a giant light bulb over his head one day, giving him the idea to go into this field. He eased into it, first discovering his knack for lighting as a teen in Waldwick, NJ. Back then, Hot Dog, as his friends called him ("They also called me 'Hamburger' and 'Barbecue,' because they go with 'Grill,'" he shares)

helped out his middle- and high-school drama clubs, running the lighting on productions such as *You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown*.

Yet, while he enjoyed putting the spotlight on everyone's favorite lovable loser, Grill never stopped to consider that lighting might make a winning career. When higher education beckoned, he headed to Manhattan College, to major in electrical engineering.

David Grill's Emmys

2017 Outstanding Lighting Design/Lighting Direction for a Variety Special

Super Bowl LI Halftime Show Starring Lady Gaga

2015 Outstanding Lighting Design/Lighting Direction for a Variety Special

Super Bowl XLIX Halftime Show Starring Katy Perry

2013 Outstanding Lighting Design or Lighting Direction for a Variety Special

Super Bowl XLVII Halftime Show

2002 Outstanding Lighting Direction (Electronic, Multi-Camera) for VMC Programming

XIX Winter Olympics Opening Ceremony

Still, Grill continued to explore his love of lighting, staying active in theater from practically the moment he arrived on campus. In his spare time, he made extra money lighting wedding receptions. Finally, the dean of students noticed Grill's passion and made a suggestion that would change the freshman's life: "He said, 'Why don't you go to school for lighting design?' I was shocked to be told that that was something I could study," Grill remembers.

Research led him to discover SUNY Purchase and its first-rate theater program. Grill had a concern, though: How would his parents take the news that their only child was abandoning his safe career path? "I told my mother my plan, and she said, 'As long as you're happy, that's all,'" he remembers fondly. "So I interviewed, got the bug, got in, and never looked back."

Grill would graduate from SUNY Purchase in 1986 with a BFA in lighting design. But the connections he made while at school would prove to be just as valuable as the degree. "I started networking and getting referrals," he says. "It's a word-of-mouth business, and I met the right people on the way up."

Indeed, he won his first major client, The Dance Theater of Harlem, when the company came through the theater complex at SUNY Purchase. "I was really interested in lighting for dance," he says. "I think you have a larger voice in terms of lighting in dance — it's just the dancers and the lighting a lot of the time, and not a lot of scenery, necessarily. It opens you up to a much more interesting collaboration."

His association with the esteemed theater company introduced him to still more people in the dance world, such that to this day, "I do a ton of dance," Grill says. One of his largest clients is the Milwaukee Ballet — in fact, Grill's wife of four years, Kara, is a ballerina he met while on the job there.

Other promising connections soon presented themselves, as well. When taking his union exam, "I met people there who thrust me into Broadway," Grill remembers. Before long, he was helping put the twinkle in the Christmas Spectacular at Radio City Music Hall. Musicals followed: "I've associate-designed a bunch of things, most notably *The Who's Tommy*, which won a Tony Award, a Canadian Dora Award, and a British

Olivier Award, all for the lighting,” he shares.

While working on *The Who's Tommy*, Grill became close with noted director-choreographer Wayne Cilento. The two have continued to team up over the years, including creating shows for cruise ships. Cilento, for his part, is a huge fan of Grill's. “What makes David so exceptional is that he's a really good lighting designer, and he comes from the dance world; he has a certain aesthetic that enhances choreography on a Broadway stage,” says Cilento. “He sculpts the body, and he understands music. The music changes, he changes. He has really good taste in color and lighting and knows how to keep me simple and in control. And now look at him, doing halftimes and getting Emmys and all that stuff!”



Were you to find yourself seated next to Grill on a barstool — or more likely you'd be facing off with him on a golf course, since he's an avid golfer — you might think your new friend was telling tall tales. “I did the lighting for the Olympics in 2002 in Salt Lake City,” he says. “That was the first Olympics after 9/11, so it was really sort of amazing, the first time the world got together. It was outside an ice rink, and there were fiber-optic stars in the ice.”

Grill might also tell you how some of the lights he uses weigh 500 pounds each, or how fun it was to light Andrea Bocelli in Portofino for PBS. Or how he lit Michelle Obama when she presented an Academy Award. In addition, Grill also lit the 2016 Republican National Convention.

How has lighting changed since he first began? “Things are more computerized. It’s maybe more of a business now than when I started,” he says. “You need to be on your A-game. You have to have done your homework. The producers are spending a tremendous amount of money.”

If there’s anything else that Grill takes a shine to, besides his wife and his rescue dog, Faith, it’s teaching his students at Purchase College, which he’s been doing since 1998. “Teaching tomorrow’s lighters is so important to me,” he says. “I want the kids in Purchase to have a better education than I did. Not that I didn’t have a good one myself, but in the sense that you always want your children to have more than you did.”

And what advice does he give students who are interested in getting into his field? Words not unlike those his mother said to him all those years ago: “If that’s where your heart is, you should go,” he says, putting a demanding but rewarding career in the best possible light.

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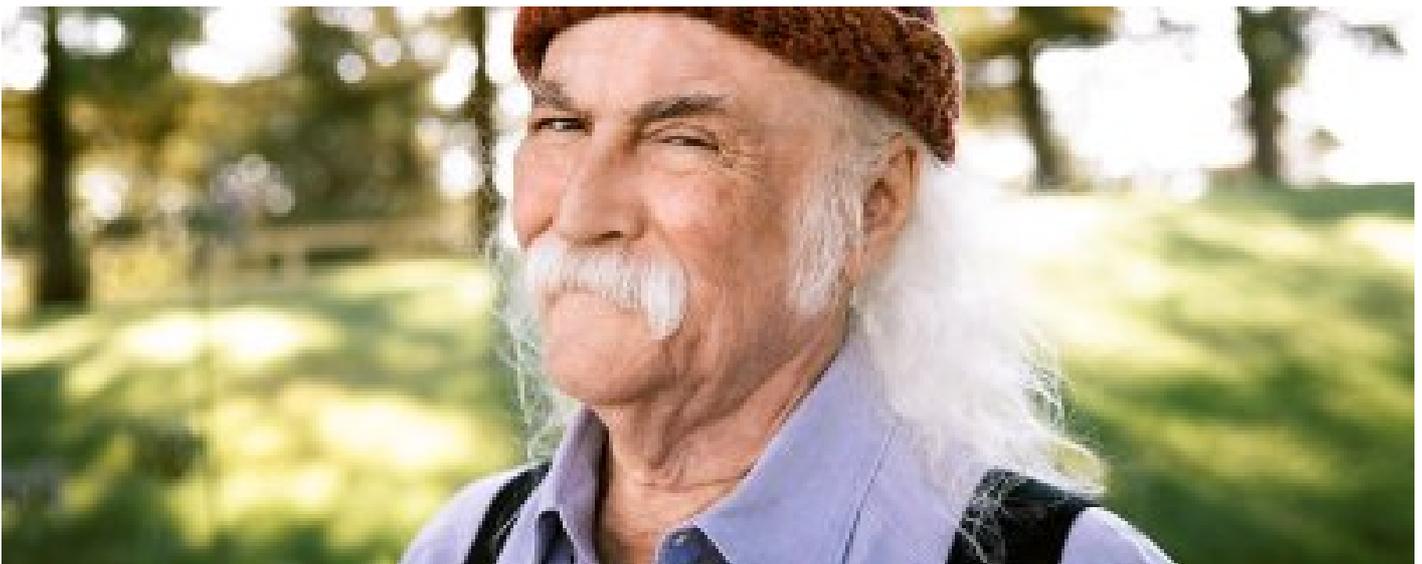
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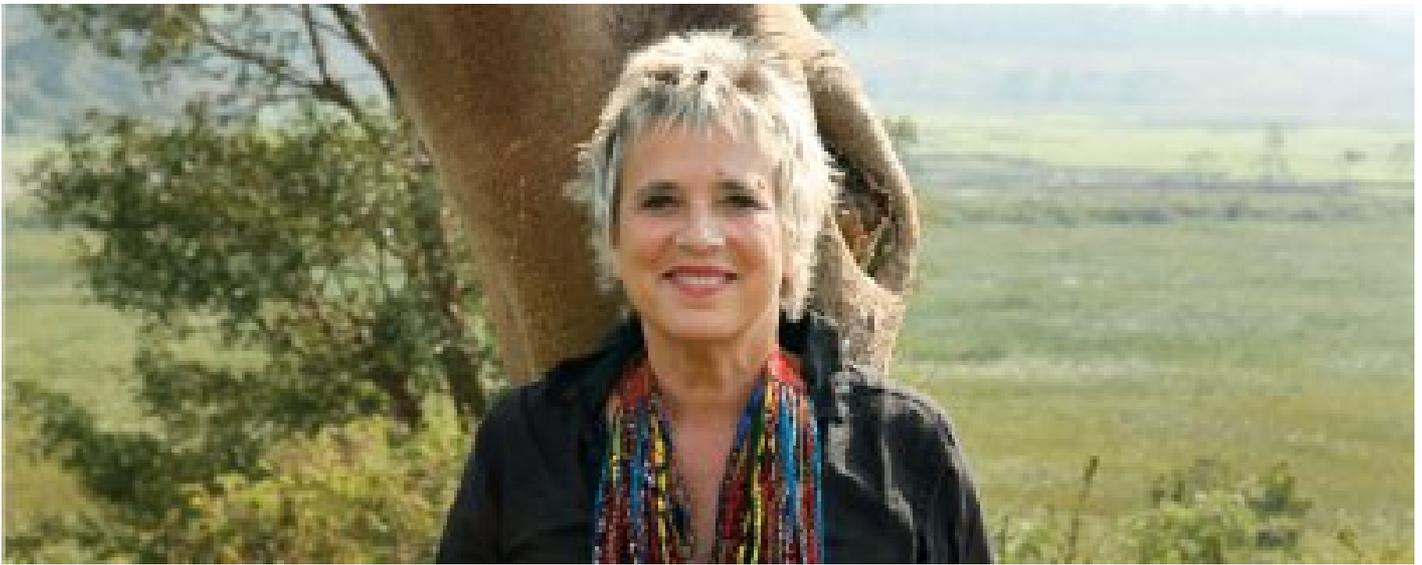
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