

Howell Binkley, Winston-Salem native, designing his way into the spotlight

By Lynn Felder Winston-Salem Journal

Oct 9, 2016



Howell Binkley, a Winston-Salem native, is at the top of his field designing the lighting for Broadway musicals.
Courtesy Howell Binkley
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When Howell Binkley was a student at Reynolds High School, he was dazzled by the road shows that played there on a regular basis: symphonies, dance companies and rock stars.

"I was working on the crew at Reynolds that did the load-ins. That's where I got my start," Binkley said. "I was fascinated as a young kid to see how a show was mounted. This big truck would pull in, and we'd unload all the sets and lights and instruments and costumes.

"It was so organized, so orchestrated. They would do this great show, and the next day the theater would be dark again. I'd just think, 'When's the next one coming?' At that early age, I started getting the bug."

Now he's the one doing the dazzling.

Binkley, 60, won a Tony Award last year for his lighting design of the musical "Hamilton."

"It was an honor to be voted on by your peers," he said. "There was some heavy competition. I was pleased and honored. 'Hamilton' has been such a great project for us all. I'm happy to see it be so successful, not only for the creators but also for the audiences."

He mounted a production of "Hamilton" in Chicago in September.

"It was a thrill to take the show and put it in Chicago," he said. "It's in a beautiful city and a beautiful theater. The tickets are selling fantastic. It's got a great cast."

Next year, he will design a "cut-down version" of the lighting for a national tour of the show.

"Jersey Boys," the show he won his first Tony for in 2006, closed on Broadway on Jan. 15 after an 11½-year run.

"It's the 12th longest running show in history," he said. "It was still selling tickets but not making quite enough money. The tour is still out there and kicking."

Binkley did the lighting design for "A Bronx Tale," directed by Robert De Niro and Jerry Zaks, which opened on Broadway Dec. 1.

He designed the lighting for "Come From Away," which will open on Broadway in previews Feb. 18. It's a musical about the re-routing of the American Airline flights to Gander, Newfoundland, on 9/11. And he's already working on shows for 2018.

"He's very busy," said Phyllis Dunning, 83, Binkley's 10th-grade teacher at Atkins and later at Reynolds.

Norman Coates, director of lighting in Design and Production School at UNC School of the Arts, described Binkley's technique.

"There's a dynamic use of color, and he cuts through that color with a purity of white light," Coates said. "The dynamic of being able to create the motion in light that matches the motion in the music and dance could be what makes his work so successful.

"In a lot of ways, he epitomizes the current state of lighting design on Broadway."

Life and work

Binkley lives in New York in East Harlem. He does a lot of work in New York, and travels a lot for work as well. "To mount a new show, I'm usually in Chicago, Washington, D.C. or Boston for four to five weeks. We're in tech for a good two weeks, previews for three or four weeks.

"Once the show opens, I'm done, and there's a whole staff that maintains a show and runs it."

He was on a short break when I spoke to him by phone from his beach house in Emerald Isle. He was walking on the beach, working on the house, playing golf, and hanging out with Joyce Storey and Hazel, a 150-pound, 11-year-old Saint Bernard. Binkley said that Hazel has a degree in politics from Paw U.

He has a daughter, Zoe, who graduated from Bryn Mawr last year and lives in Philadelphia.

Even at the beach, he was thinking about the shows that he's working on simultaneously.

"You've got to stay in touch with everybody," he said. "I'll work a little in the morning, then play a little bit. Hazel loves it here, and she loves it in New York."

Then, he drove back to New York before turning around and flying to Winston-Salem to teach a class in the Design and Production Department at UNC School of the Arts.

"I come back once or twice a year. My associate, Ryan O'Garra, and I will take turns

teaching the class for a half-semester while Norman (Coates) takes a break," Binkley said. O'Garra is a UNCSCA alumnus. As associate, he drafts all the lighting plots and rigs that will be handed over to the theater.

UNCSCA frequently brings in guest artists to work with the students. Binkley has taught at the school twice before.

"There are multiple benefits to the students," Coates said. "It gives them a contact with somebody who has high-profile success. They learn that he's just a regular person, another human being. They get to see another process and a current look at a Broadway design team.

"Everybody has their own process. The students get to learn Howell's process, which helps them figure out their own process."

Designing lights for a Broadway show is done in phases, Binkley said.

"In phase one, you get the job and you go through a series of meetings with the set designer and the director," he said. The show is formatted and scenes planned out. The designers have to learn the show and then start executing the designs. "It could be a year before a show goes into production in a theater.

"In phase two, you get approval and start drafting the design, but that can't be done until all the sets and scenery are approved."

In phase three, the designers put the light plot with the scenery and start doing tech, which means hanging the lights and getting everything in place."

Binkley started working on "Come From Away" three years ago.

"It opened in San Diego in a small theater and then moved up to Seattle," he said. "In D.C., it had a 12-week, sold-out run, and it sold out at the Royal Alexander Theatre in Toronto. It can take a while to build up investors and secure a Broadway theater."

Binkley said that technology introduced in 1986 dramatically changed the lighting designer and technician's job.

"In the beginning, we had fixtures that were fixed," he said. "We hung them. We focused them. They had one purpose - to light a chair, for example. Now, we have an automated fixture that we hang, and it's run by a computer. We can focus it on the chair, on the wall, on the audience.

"Automated lighting has become a huge part of the lighting rig that we use. They are very reliable. It's been a major change not only in lighting but also in scenery and in sound.... There are not a lot of guys pulling ropes, and actors wear wireless mics."

Long, winding road

Long before Binkley was a successful Broadway lighting designer, he was the Demon mascot at Reynolds High School.

"He was acting then," Dunning said. "He was my student when he was about 15 and was a 10th grader at Atkins that first year of total integration. I always encouraged students to go to fine-arts events: symphony, opera, theater. Any time I mentioned going to something, Howell's hand went up first. He said it was because 'You said we could get extra credit.' But, really, he always wanted to go.

"That year, the Little Theatre (of Winston-Salem, now Twin City Stage) did acting workshops for teenagers. I told him to go."

"I went to a summer session at UNCSA and learned a little bit of everything," Binkley said. "Acting, directing, designing - and I had a blast. It gave me a great education about theater - and I was doing acting in a little drama club.

"In my heart of hearts, I had a dream of being an architect. N.C. State had the best architecture school in the state, but I didn't get in. I got turned down at every major school in the state. I got turned down by the school of the arts.

"A lot of my friends said, 'If you can't go to college, go to East Carolina University.'

"It got me out of Winston-Salem."

His interest in the backstage part of theater that had been sparked by those road shows at Reynolds resurfaced at ECU.

He spent 1½ years in the theater department at ECU, then moved to Nashville for a couple of years to do the lighting at Opryland USA, an amusement park in suburban Nashville. It closed in 1997.

Shortly after he returned to school, he met the cast and crew of the John Houseman Acting Company when they came to ECU on tour. Houseman, probably best known as Prof. Kingsley in the TV show and film "Paper Chase," also ran the drama division at the Julliard School and founded The Acting Company in 1972 with members of the first graduating class, including Kevin Kline and Patti LuPone.

"It was a very prominent touring company," Binkley said. "They did shows in repertory. You'd hire the company, and they would present three shows.

"I got to know the people in the company, and they said, 'Send us your resume.'"

He was hired to be the lighting supervisor. "That was my open door to New York," he said. He moved to New York before graduating.

In 1992, Binkley got his big break to design a Broadway show, "Kiss of the Spider Woman," directed by Hal Prince. He was nominated for a Tony and won a Laurence Olivier Award in 1993 for best lighting design in the London production.

Since then, he has worked steadily on Broadway productions including "Avenue Q," "The Full Monty," "In the Heights" and "After Midnight," and has received nominations or awards almost annually. He co-founded Parsons Dance, based in New York, with David Parsons in 1985 and, as its resident lighting designer, has done more than 60 productions. He has also worked with the Jaffrey Ballet of Chicago.

He doesn't apply for jobs. They come to him.

"I am called by the director," he said. "I have a core of directors who I work with, and when they get a show they will call me first.

"There are some shows that come up with directors who want me that I haven't worked with before, and I will have a sit-down meeting with them."

Besides being his teacher, Dunning was a friend of Binkley's late parents and has received friend-of-the-family benefits for years.

"Whatever he was involved with, he always had tickets for my husband and me," Dunning said. "All the years that he's been in New York, he has been wonderful to invite me to all his Broadway openings and the Tony Awards."

She was in the audience the night he won Tonys for "Jersey Boys" and for "Hamilton."

"It's electric," Dunning said. "The broadcast starts at 8, but the Tony Awards start at 7. There is great entertainment.... It's such an exciting night - and the party after. The 'Hamilton' party was at Tavern on the Green (a famous glass-walled restaurant in Central Park). It looked great that night - inside and outside - all the music and the dancing and the food.

"He's an amazing young man, so talented."

And, apparently, a good friend to have. It's always best to have the guy wielding the spotlight in your corner.

Howell Binkley

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<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/02/theater/howell-binldey-dead.html>

Howell Binkley, Who Sculpted Broadway Hits in Light, Dies at 64

An in-demand lighting designer, he won Tony Awards for "Hamilton" and "Jersey Boys:"

By Nell Genzlinger

Sept. 2, 2020

Most audience members at shows that Howell Binkley worked on, whether Broadway smashes like "Hamilton" or dance performances in small spaces, probably never gave a thought to his contributions. That's the way Mr. Binkley; one of the most sought-after lighting designers in the business, preferred it.

"I always go back to my roots - simplicity, clarity, showing the text," he once said. "Not putting on a ridiculous light show. Lighting is to expand the words and music and dance, not distract from it."

Lin-Manuel Miranda, the creator of "Hamilton," for which Mr. Binkley won one of his two Tony Awards, first experienced Mr. Binkley's artistry on his earlier hit, "In the Heights," which made it to Broadway in 2008.

"I peppered the show with challenges," Mr. Miranda said by email, "songs titled 'Sunrise' and 'When the Sun Goes Down.' The first act ended with a citywide blackout and the company singing, 'Look at the fireworks.' Howell never batted an eye, evoking all these natural phenomena with subtlety, allowing the audience's suspension of disbelief to take them the rest of the way."

Mr. Binkley died on Aug. 14 in Jacksonville, N.C. He was 64.

His wife, Joyce Storey, said the cause was lung cancer.

Mr. Binkley, who had residences in Emerald Isle, N.C., and East Harlem, had more than 50 Broadway credits and was nominated for the lighting design Tony nine times. He won for "Jersey Boys," which opened in 2005, in addition to "Hamilton" a decade later.



From left, Daniel Reichard, John Lloyd Young, Christian Hoff and J. Robert Spencer in 2005 in "Jersey Boys" for which Mr. Binkley won his first Tony. Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

Often since his first Broadway credit in 1993, four or five Broadway shows he designed were running simultaneously. He also worked extensively in regional theaters and in dance, including a decades-long collaboration with his friend David Parsons, the choreographer.

Modern Broadway lighting booths are full of high-tech gadgetry, but what Mr. Binkley helped Mr. Parsons achieve with his "Caught" almost 40 years ago, using a strobe to make a lone dancer seem to float and fly against a black background, is legendary in the dance world for its searing, minimalist beauty.

In a 2015 interview with the website Live Design, Mr. Binkley expressed pride at how such minimal elements produced such an impact. "Nearly impossible, yes? And yet it is known as one of the premier dance works in the world;" he said.

That ability to realize daunting visions made Mr. Binkley a favorite of top stage directors, including Harold Prince and Des McAnuff. As Mr. Miranda put it, "There was no challenge Howell couldn't meet with light."

Howell Bagby Binkley was born on July 25, 1956, in Winston-Salem, N.C. His father, John Jr., was an engineer for the Western Electric Company, and his mother, Hattie Louise (Bagby) Binkley, worked at the Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts in Winston-Salem.

His interest in the backstage side of theater, and lighting design in particular, developed early. By eighth grade he was spending weekends helping to load and unload trucks for productions at Reynolds Auditorium in Winston-Salem, and in high school he participated in summer theater camps at the North Carolina School of the Arts.

In 1974 he enrolled at East Carolina University, where students studying lighting design, as he was, were paired with student choreographers, experience he found valuable. He took a break from college to do tech work for two years at Opryland in Nashville, then returned to the university, where John Houseman and Margot Harley's theater troupe, the Acting Company, had arrived for a residency.

That led to a summer internship for \$35 a week at the company's site in Saratoga Springs, N.Y., where new shows were rehearsed. Mr. Binkley never did finish college, eventually taking a full-time job with the Acting Company.

After three years there he joined the Paul Taylor Dance Company, hoping to learn from its esteemed lighting designer, Jennifer Tipton. She encouraged him to strike out on his own, and in 1985 he and David Parsons, who was also at Paul Taylor, founded Parsons Dance, with Mr. Binkley doing the lighting designs.

Resources are always sparse for a start-up, and Mr. Binkley learned to do a lot with a little, something he came to see as vital.

"I truly believe that if a lighting designer is able to sculpt a piece with passion, imagination and a limited amount of technology, the world will open to her or him;" he said.

He had ample opportunity to test that creed as the young dance company toured extensively both in the United States and abroad, performing in all sorts of spaces in the days before light boards were computer controlled.

"We loved the hardship;" Mr. Parsons said in a phone interview. "We would clean theaters if they were too dirty. Howell was up on ladders - it was all manual, all gels;"

Mr. Binkley often equated the art of lighting a dance performance to sculpture.

"You are sculpting the body from all sides in order to give definition to the body as it turns, as it's lifted, as it rolls on the ground;" he told The Winston-Salem Journal in 2012. "I try in my lighting of plays and musicals to use that same

carving tool."

His big break in theater came after he did the lighting for a gala on Theater Row in Manhattan. Harold Prince attended and apparently liked what he saw.

He asked Mr. Binkley to be the lighting director on a Broadway musical he was preparing: "Kiss of the Spider Woman;" The show ran for more than two years and earned Mr. Binkley the first of his Tony nominations. It also earned him the admiration of Mr. Prince, who used him on other shows, including "Parade" in 1998 and "LoveMusik" in 2007.

Mr. Binkley's second Broadway credit was the 1994 production of "Grease." By then his work had caught the attention of another top director, Mr. McAnuff, who recruited him for his revival of "How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying" (1995) and used him repeatedly thereafter, including on "Jersey Boys;" That musical ran for more than 16 years, one of the longest runs in Broadway history.

Among Mr. Binkley's most recent Broadway credits were "Come From Away," "A Bronx Tale: The Musical" and **"Summer."**

Mr. Binkley's marriage to Linda Kent in 1988 ended in divorce. In addition to Ms. Storey, whom he married in 2014, he is survived by a daughter, Zoe King, from a relationship with Anne King; and a brother, John.



From left, Anthony Ramos, Lin-Manuel Miranda, Daveed Diggs and Okieriete Onaodowan in "Hamilton" in 2015. (There was no challenge Howell couldn't meet with light," Mr. Miranda said. Sara Krulwich/The New York Times.

Mr. Binkley often said he particularly enjoyed the collaborative nature of dance and theater. Mr. Miranda recalled his calming, veteran presence on "In the Heights;" whose creative team was relatively youthful - Mr. Miranda himself was still in his 20s at the time.

"I'd gravitate toward his tech table, where he kept a small bowl of assorted chocolates," Mr. Miranda said. "He caught me picking out the peanut butter cups on the first day, a huge grin on his face. On the second day, I found another bowl of candy on his table: this one only full of peanut butter cups, just for *me*."

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A version of this article appears in print on , Section 8, Page 12 of the New York edition with the headline: Howell Binkley, 64, Lighting Designer Behind 'Hamilton' and 'Jersey Boys'