

# The Partnership



From Pittsburgh to Prague, the remarkable partnership of Cindy Limauro and Chris Popowich. A conversation with Sonny Sonnenfeld.

*Cindy Limauro and Chris Popowich are partners in the firm C & C Lighting—but then, they’re partners in everything. Married for a number of years—they met at the Broadway Lighting Master Classes, the annual three-day workshop with Jules Fisher and Peggy Eisenhauer—they are also members of the faculty of the design department at Carnegie Mellon University. As the following interview reveals, their partnership, and their remarkable openness to new experiences, has led to down unusual paths.*

**Chris Popowich:** I thought it would be a great way to get to New York and see some shows. It was easy to convince the head of my school of the educational benefit, so he agreed to help fund my trip.

**CL:** Of course, for me, being head of the lighting program at Carnegie Mellon, and Jules and Peggy being alumni, I wanted to support the BLMC because I thought they were a great idea. Registration for the classes was a social event at the Mayflower Hotel. Over drinks, Chris

and technicians. We thought it would be a fun project to produce two plays and expose our students to a different way of working.

**CL:** So in the intense planning we fell in love and got married in Scotland that summer. I always tell my students to be open to the opportunities around them. Little did I know it would include finding my personal and professional partner.

**SS:** Is that when you formed C & C Lighting?

**CL:** Not at first. After we got married, Chris moved to Pittsburgh and started teaching part-time at Carnegie Mellon and freelancing full-time. I was on the opposite balance, teaching full-time and freelancing part-time.

**CP:** We each had our own independent careers as theatrical designers. When architects started to approach us with projects needing a more dramatic flair, Cindy and I decided to co-design this work.

**CL:** Part of the decision was based on logistics. Architectural projects can take a long time to complete and involve a lot of meetings with clients and electrical contractors. We didn’t want to jeopardize our theatre work, which has a definite schedule of deadlines.

**CP:** Working as partners, we can say yes to every project and know that one of us will always be available to take the lead.

**CL:** As work increased, we decided to become our own company. Chris

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**SS:** It’s unusual to have two lighting designers in the same family. How did the two of you meet?

**Cindy Limauro:** It was October of 1995. Chris was teaching at the Central School of Speech and Drama in London when he heard about the Broadway Lighting Master Classes.

and I formed an immediate bond and came up with a plan to get our students together.

**CP:** The idea was for Cindy to bring a group of students over to London in the summer to form a theatre company with my students. This included directors, actors, designers,

left teaching to focus full time on the business.

**CP:** We weren't sure what to call the company until one of Cindy's graduate students came up with the name for us: C & C Lighting. Of course, we all know who the first C is.

**SS:** Is there ever competition between you?

**CL:** Honestly, no. In fact, I'm amazed at how seamlessly we have blended our professional lives. Being two lighting designers is actually an asset. It's great to have someone to brainstorm ideas with. Because we trust and respect each other, we can be completely honest in our opinions.

**CP:** It also helps to balance the workload. When Cindy started teaching a lighting course in Antwerp, as the time commitment and commuting got to be too much, I went in to help share the teaching.

**CL:** We have an unwritten family rule. If one of us gets a project in an interesting location, we try to bring the other one in. The only drawback is that we really blur the lines between work and vacations.

**SS:** What brought you into theatre lighting?

**CL:** I came late into theatre. Since I was a small child, my ambition was to be a writer. I wanted to change the world through my writing. Impatient to get started, I graduated early from high school and went to the creative writing program at the University of Michigan. Arthur Miller, who was an alumnus of the school, visited my playwriting class. That event changed my life. I was drawn to the theatre and wanted to find out more about dramatic space, so I took some design courses. I fell in love with lighting. It had the same emotional connection that my writing did. I went on to a double major in theatre and writing for my last two years. By the time I graduated, I knew I wanted to be a professional lighting designer. I

worked for two years to get more experience and then went to graduate school at Florida State University. I have been lucky enough ever since to make a living as a lighting designer.

**CP:** I got interested in theatre when I was in high school. My best friend's father was Oopsy the Clown [a Detroit television personality of the 1960s]. I then started lighting shows at my school. I tried to find out as much as I could about lighting design, and read Richard Pilbrow's book cover to cover. He was my mentor growing up. I then went on to study lighting at St. Clair College in Windsor. Besides lighting all of the shows there, I would light whatever rock concerts performed at the school. One year, the Ann Arbor Blues Festival was banished from Ann Arbor, so the concert happened in exile in Windsor.

knew that I was interested in teaching some day, because I had enjoyed it in graduate school. I wasn't sure this was the right time, but I was intrigued to find out more. They were looking for someone to expand the program, and I could keep working professionally. When they offered me the job, I thought I would stay a few years to get some teaching experience, move back to freelancing full time, and then, in another 20 years, go back to teaching. But life has an interesting way of working out. I was designing a show in Cleveland with Barbara and Cletus Anderson; he was head of the design program at Carnegie Mellon School of Drama. Bill Nelson was retiring after 45 years and Cletus wanted me to apply for the job. To make a long story short, they hired me and I've been teaching at

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I couldn't believe I was lighting such greats as B.B. King, James Brown, and Junior Walker and the All Stars. After graduation, I started lighting for theatre companies all over Canada.

**SS:** How did you get into teaching?

**CL:** Teaching sought me out. I was focused on my professional career. I had been freelancing since graduation doing summer stock, regional theatre, opera, and dance. The head of the program at Ohio State called me up, saying that he had a teaching position open in lighting design and that I had been highly recommended to him. I

Carnegie for 21 years. I found that I loved teaching as much as I loved designing. The students at CMU are so talented and committed. I feel I have the best job in the world.

**CP:** I also got into teaching because of an opportunity that presented itself. I was a freelance lighting designer in Canada and felt I wanted a change of scenery. Since my grandparents were born in the U.K., I had what they call ancestry status, allowing me to work there. So, on an impulse, I moved to London. I had saved up some money to tide me over until I found a job. One day I was reading a newspaper

called *The Stage*. The Central School of Speech and Drama was advertising for a master electrician. I thought, this is work I can do and it's at least something in the theatre. After a few months there, the head of design asked me to teach lighting design as part of a new graduate program they were starting called Advanced Theatre Practices. He knew I had a strong design background and had done some teaching at the Banff School of Fine Arts in Canada. So I took the new position and found that I loved teaching. I would probably still be there if I hadn't fallen in love with this woman sitting next to me.

**SS:** What are you working on now?

**CP:** Besides Cindy's list of house projects, we just finished designing some temporary lighting for the historic St. Nicholas Croatian Church in Pittsburgh, with wall-to-wall and ceiling murals by the well-

pens every four years in Prague. During the Cold War years, it was a way for people in the theatre to transcend the politics of their countries and share ideas. Countries from around the world create a design installation that is then judged for awards. There is a student component, called Scenofest, organized by OISTAT, the international counterpart to USITT. Chris and I are both involved with the scenography and education commissions of OISTAT. I'm the USITT representative on the education commission, which means I'm a voting member, and I've just been asked to lead the planning of Scenofest 2011. Chris will also be a part of the executive planning committee. At PQ 2003, Scenofest promoted a more hands-on approach to include lighting and sound as a live design element. Carnegie Mellon was the only school to create a lighting design installation that year. My graduate students used LED fixtures

design. This was then viewed by the public for a couple of hours.

**CL:** Each time we did the workshop we would use a different site in the city and a new team of students. They came from all around the world and were a mixture of lighting designers, scene designers, and architects. Our first landmark was to light the famous pendulum overlooking the city. It has become a symbol for the fall of Communism and has no lighting on it at night. In fact, the movement of the pendulum didn't work. The city was so supportive of our project that they sent someone out to repair it the day we did the lighting. The students did a great job lighting it, as well as the other sites in Prague. I hope this is something we can repeat again.

**SS:** Is this a model you can use in other cities?

**CL:** Absolutely. In fact, the lighting design course Chris and I teach in Antwerp uses city sites for the students to design and do full-scale lighting mock-ups.

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known artist Maxo Vanka. It is part of Pittsburgh's celebration of 250 years as a city. The church is undergoing intensive fund-raising efforts so we can create permanent architectural lighting.

**CL:** We're also involved in planning Scenofest for the next Prague Quadrennial, collaborating with a British director on an opera, and proposing a master plan of light to Carnegie Mellon's administration that will involve students collaborating across disciplines.

**SS:** Tell me about your work with the Prague Quadrennial.

**CL:** The Prague Quadrennial is an international design exhibit that hap-

to create an ever-changing color landscape to complement the mood evoked in the changing design images of student production work.

**CP:** For last year's Prague Quadrennial 2007, Cindy and I worked with teams of international students to light famous landmarks in Prague. Thorn Lighting donated the use of a lighting fixture package, took care of the transportation of the equipment to each site, and dealt with all of the electrical power issues. The students had four hours to create a design. They would discuss the historical impact of the landmark, brainstorm ideas for lighting it, experiment with all of the different fixtures, and then settle on a final

**SS:** How did that course come about?

**CL:** The head of the school of architecture at Carnegie Mellon had recommended to the dean of the architecture school in Antwerp to invite me to teach a lighting workshop as part of an international seminar called ADSL. Every year, they create a theme and invite professionals from around the world to do a workshop or seminar based on this theme. I was the only lighting professional and, like most architecture schools, there are no lighting design courses in the curriculum. So I agreed to do a workshop, but said I needed to create a makeshift light lab for the students to explore and experiment with light. I contacted a theatre school in Brussels and borrowed all of the equipment I needed. At the end of the week, the students in each workshop put up their work for a walk-around design exhibit. All of the other sessions

had models or drawings on a wall. For my workshop, people walked into a darkened room where light controlled their experience in the space, and told a story based on a haiku poem. The students had never worked in a hands-on way before. After ADSL ended, the students went to the dean and asked to have a permanent lighting design course in the curriculum. That's when Richard Foque, the dean, asked me to create the new course. With my full-time teaching position at Carnegie Mellon, he realized I wouldn't be able to teach a weekly course, so we devised a structure modeled on the intensive week-long workshop, where I would meet with the students 20 hours in a week, five times throughout the school year.

**CP:** Mark Vassallo and Fred Foster, of ETC, generously donated a permanent light lab to the school in Antwerp. With the number of students wanting to take the course, Cindy brought me in to team-teach with her. It helps to have two people, given the ambitiousness of the projects. While the light lab is great for the students to experiment with design concepts, there is still the need for full scale lighting mock-ups to test the success of their design ideas.

**CL:** During that first year I was attending a champagne reception at the mayor of Antwerp's office, when I heard him speak about the need for the city to partner with universities on urban redevelopment. I immediately approached him, explaining the lighting design course I was starting and the importance of giving students real-life experience. I asked him if there was a space in Antwerp that he was thinking of redeveloping. If so, the students could use it as a design project, show the city some possibilities which could be helpful in fundraising. I was thinking of a dilapidated space. Never in my wildest dreams did I imagine that he would give us the opportunity to light

their most famous museum, the Royal Museum of Arts. The city had commissioned an artist from Spain to design a fountain in front of the museum. It was an in-ground fountain that created a mirror-like reflecting pool. The water would recede and flow, like the waves of the ocean. When the water receded, the bottom of the pool was made of 2,200 squares of sculptural relief artwork. The success of the concept for the fountain was having beautiful lighting on the museum front facade being reflected into this mirror of water. Unfortunately, the only lighting on the museum was some ugly flood lights. Most of the architectural magnificence was not seen because it had no lighting on it. I had three months to work with students with no experience in lighting. I immediately brought Chris into the course to team-teach with me.

**CP:** Cindy was great at structuring a step-by-step process to the project that wouldn't overwhelm the students. They did historical research about the museum and the neighborhood, research about the artist designing the fountain, and lighting visual research to inspire a design approach. We divided the students into groups to work on problem solving the lighting for different parts of the museum after they had agreed on a unified concept.

**CL:** Chris and I would alternate some visits to Antwerp but were both there for the final presentations. He was responsible for organizing the preliminary lighting mock-ups and working with the students on their early experimentation of ideas. Chris is a wonderful teacher in encouraging the students to take creative risks. He also has a great eye in giving them suggestions for improving the work.

**CP:** Zumtobel has an office between Antwerp and Brussels. They were fantastic in supporting this project. They loaned us any

architectural lighting equipment we needed and even came on site to help with the set up of the final lighting mock-ups.

**CL:** The students presented their final design to key people in the city of Antwerp and from the museum. It was an incredible experience for them. They produced a very slick PowerPoint presentation with compelling renderings and design ideas. At the end of the presentation, all of the guests were invited outside to see the lighting mock-ups. It definitely succeeded in the "wow" factor. The committee liked the students' design so much that it was permanently installed that summer, beating out some professional design proposals.

**CP:** Now, every year we choose a different site for the course. If the funding can become available, they are interested in having us light five major churches in Antwerp.

**SS:** What would you do if you could do it all over again?

**CL:** Not a thing. I'm quite happy with the path I've taken.

**CP:** It's the same for me.

**SS:** What would you say to young people starting out in this business?

**CL:** As I said earlier, be open to opportunities around you. Take everything you can find, even if it doesn't pay much money. I've gotten so many design jobs from someone seeing my work. And never forget your manners. I tell my students that if they interview with a designer or if someone comes to school to give a master class to always write a thank-you note to that person. It does make a difference, because professionals always let me know when they get a note from my students.

**CP:** Always be true to yourself and the show. Remember that you are an artist of light. Give 125% to the production and be a generous collaborator. 