

BENTLEY MEEKER

By Suzanne Wright

Forty-year old Bentley Meeker is the founder of Manhattan-based Bentley Meeker Lighting & Staging, Inc. During his 26-year career, he's done lighting for such A-listers as *Sex & The City*, *Sports Illustrated's* swimsuit issue party, Michael Douglas & Catherine Zeta Jones' wedding, Adidas, Ralph Lauren, *The Sopranos*, Billy Joel and Rolex.



How long have you been a special event lighting designer?

Since I was 14. I've never had another job besides scooping ice cream and folding clothes at a retail store.

How'd you get your start?

I got thrown out of four schools. My mom was living in Canada and got fed up with me and sent me to live with my dad in New York. He got fed up, too, and said I had to get a job. One of our neighbors was a photographer, so and I left the 10th grade to start working with him. I put up battery-powered strobe lights, I took them down. It was grunt labor, but I was doing lighting.

So you had on-the-job training. Do the best people in this field need education?

I'm of two minds about that. I have people working for me with no training who are incredible and some with masters of fine arts who are incredible.

How's business? How many people do you employ?

We're as busy as we've ever been. We have about 50 [employees], altogether, in lighting design and production, operations, equipment management, accounting and audio-visual. I have another 500 that I hire on a freelance basis for onsite, daily work.

What don't we know about lighting?

Lighting is its own language. Lighting permeates everyday life.

What do you mean?

Light creates atmosphere more than anything else in a room. But it's the only thing you can't touch; it's visible and intangible at the same time. Everybody can see if it's too bright or too dim or the quality of light is harsh. You can recognize if lighting is "off" in an office or

restaurant or lobby; you know whether you feel good. I sculpt the environment with lighting.

So what are guys' biggest mistakes in lighting their own homes?

They don't think about it. For \$10, every light switch can become a dimmer. If you are with a woman you can create a romantic mood. Or if you are having the guys over for a game, you can make it feel like a movie theater with your big-ass plasma. Whether you live in a mansion or a trailer, you can give a room atmosphere.

What do you think about compact fluorescent light bulbs?

They are a colossal mistake. Your energy bill goes down \$20 a month, but the quality of light is so atrocious and it has negative subliminal effects. The technology is inadequate.

So what's the future of green lighting?

I use \$30 LED bulbs in task areas, like the hallway or the garage or under the kitchen cabinets. You will have them forever. And I mean forever—you will literally pass them down to your grandkids. In five years, they will replace everything else, incandescent and compact fluorescent bulbs.

Why is your job so cool?

You'll never interview a dude that has a cooler job than me. I love what I do and I love who I do it for. I love that I get to be an artist and I get to be a business guy. I meet such a cross section of people. I have access to people I would never [otherwise] have. When you do lighting, whether it's at your son's bar mitzvah or your daughter's wedding, it's such a connection.

What kind of living do you make?

I'm comfortable, but lighting ain't making me rich. There are so many variables and it's capital-intensive, so I also do real estate investment in Manhattan. This is a passion job.

Do you have a dream project?

There's an hour when you walk into a project and it all comes together. That's the elixir moment, whether it's a \$1,000 job or \$750,000 job. It doesn't matter the context—the magic is there. The dream project is when that happens.

You've traveled the world lighting events. What countries "get" lighting?

They really understand the power of lighting as a tool and how to manipulate it in the Middle East, places like Dubai, Riyadh, Doha. They are starting to do interesting things with illumination and decoration. They need to work on taste a little bit.

What keeps you inspired?

I draw a lot of inspiration from technology. There are gigantic upheavals; it's shifting tectonically. It's fantastic.

You've got a nine-year old son. Does he have any interest in dad's job?

He could care less. But if he comes around, I'll take him in.

Ever been to a HOOTERS?

I had Dom Perignon and wings in Indianapolis. That was great.