John Spradbery obituary

Lighting designer who worked with radical choreographer Lindsay Kemp

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The lighting designer John Spradbery, who has died aged 83, was a key figure in the company of the radical choreographer and director Lindsay Kemp, notably from the moment in 1974 when Kemp's Flowers, his avant-garde "pantomime" based on Jean Genet's erotic novel Notre Dame des Fleurs, began its 20-year world tour.

Like Kemp's performance as the transvestite Divine and in all his other roles, John's lighting was never the same from one night to the next, because he always created it manually. As lighting technology became ever more electronically controlled, John astonished admiring technicians all over the world with the way in which he operated his old-fashioned three-preset manual lighting board every night, swaying to the music in the dark at the back of the house as his fingers played on his hundred sliders, like an organist improvising ephemeral paintings with light, shunning the spotlight himself but spectacularly illuminating others.

The collaboration was an unlikely blend of opposites, John's discipline and reliability pairing with Kemp's extravagant daring. He was company manager and technical director, too, with Kemp's first company, at the Lyric Hammersmith in 1965, on the Edinburgh Fringe and at the Traverse theatre, and worked with him on the staging of David Bowie's Ziggy Stardust tour at the Rainbow theatre, Finsbury Park, north London, in 1972, adding to the revolutionary new ways of lighting rock concerts.

From 1975, John began to concentrate exclusively on lighting. The dream-like aesthetic of Kemp's productions prompted totally non-naturalistic illumination, with bold chiaroscuro effects and astonishing colour intensity and dynamism uniting with the flow of the music.

Other collaborations around the world and at Sadler's Wells theatre, north London, included Salomé, A Midsummer Night's Dream, Mr Punch (in which he also played the roles of the Policeman and the Tree), Duende, Nijinsky, Façade, The Big Parade, Alice and Cinderella. John was an understated but energetic senior member of a flamboyant young company of many nationalities, and contributed greatly to its team spirit.

He received numerous invitations and commissions, including Cendrillon choreographed by Maguy Marin for Opéra du Lyon, a staging of Couperin's Leçons de Ténèbres for Opéra National de Paris and the New York Met, Christopher Bruce and Kemp's Cruel Garden for Houston Ballet and Berlin Deutsche Oper, and flamenco programmes in Seville and New York.
But he was also always happy to light small shows by young performers whose talent he believed in. During breaks from his work abroad, he was happy to be at home in Islington, north London, involved in projects in the capital.

Brought up in Epping Forest, Essex, John took part in concerts, dance and drama performances in the garden put on by his father, Walter Spradbery, an artist and poster designer who was an active and lifelong pacifist, and mother, Dorothy D'Orsay, an opera singer and actress. He studied acting at Rada (1950-52), and then acted in and/or stage managed weekly and monthly repertory shows, while also involved with various London ventures, notably the Valery Hovenden theatre club.

In the early 60s he was company manager and stage manager for many provincial tours, several for the civic theatre movement, whose ideals of socially committed theatre strongly appealed to him. Until the early 70s he continued to play many parts, mixing roles on the stage with off-stage technical and organisational roles. He also did West End shows and small productions by then little-known young talents, among them Kemp and Steven Berkoff.

In his 60s, John moved to Worthing, West Sussex, with his wife, Elizabeth, whom he had married in 1967, after they met working together on a production of My Fair Lady.

He campaigned for the rescue of the William Morris Gallery in Walthamstow, north-east London, which his father had helped to establish in 1950 and which reopened in 2012. His father was the subject of his book My Dear Jim (2010), and he wrote two about his experiences with Kemp – Memories (1990) and Lindsay Kemp: A Renegade of the Theatre (2011). They were followed by Theatrical Diaries (2012), and Icons, Heroes and Heroines of the Silver Screen (2013).

Elizabeth survives him.

John Spradbery, lighting designer, born 3 August 1930; died 6 June 2014

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