

Pictures come first

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It is interesting to look at all the technical departments that make up theatre and contrast the balance of artist and technician in each. It is easy to dismiss the electrician or the carpenter, the cutter or the painter as a mere technician without any creative sense because they are usually employed to carry out the creations of others. Their interpretation does however rely on an innate aesthetic sense even if they prefer not to display it. But what of the balance in those who can only realise their creations through their own, and others, technical efforts? The question whether they are practical artists or gifted technicians is an old one and we seek not to find an answer here but to debate the matter with particular regard for the lighting designer.

Few members of the creative team have to communicate their ideas as thoroughly as does the lighting designer. A good cutter, painter or carpenter can produce excellent work from the skimpiest of models or sketches but a chief electrician cannot produce a good rig without a plan. The costume designer must sometimes think in vague terms if the show is not yet cast and in any case the wardrobe people will deal with sizes. The carpenter can work from a model if that is the best way that the set designer can express his desires. But the chief electrician needs decisions, which spotlight, which colour, which dimmer, which barrel. These answers can come from applying logical questions, the outcome is definable.

We all know that the best lighting may be based on extensive calculations but that it is the spontaneous creativity of the designer that will elevate the picture from the technically correct to the theatrically superb. This is exciting for both the

operator and audience alike but spontaneous rigging or focussing does not have the same guarantee of success. These things need to be calculated. On the whole the positions for lights are known, so we can calculate the throw to the various acting areas. We can calculate the beam angle for the relevant area and select the correct spotlight and we can predict which spotlights will be used in each scene so we know what needs individual control and what can be grouped if necessary.

Up to this point we could produce a list of precise instructions which could enable almost anyone to design a basic lighting rig. Lighting by numbers. In the the same way a recipe enables anyone to cook. But a recipe book does not make a cook any more than a calculator and ruler make a designer. Up to now the process has been largely objective but once we sit at the production desk and start painting pictures then the process becomes subjective. Which colour, which level? Here there can be no definable approach because there is no correct answer.

For most people doing lighting, time is very tight and results can only be guaranteed by adhering to the predictable, the calculable. We have all worked in situations where time restricts us to lighting totally from something we have proven in the past. Lighting like this has its place and will do as long as schedules are tight but it is certainly not lighting design. There is no creation, only recreation.

Wherever I lecture I find in the students something ego boosting about being responsible for a complex and intricate arrangement of computer controlled illumination. Lighting seems to attract people who are technicians first and designers second. Lighting should not be

left to those who have mastered the art of programming and photometrics. Lighting is about giving life to pictures, it is about movement, colour and people.

I am disturbed that the process of being a lighting designer is too much oriented around the technical and too little around the creative. It is possible to light a show on a mathematical basis but this will not produce the spark that marks real theatre from the rest. The technical lighting man either doesn't notice shadows or obliterates them altogether but the designer uses them. The technical lighting man abhors variety in colour, everything is either all colour or all white, the designer makes white a part of his palette alongside the other colours. The technical men are everywhere. They like tidy plans, neat rigs, firmly focussed lanterns, clear choices. There is nothing wrong in this but just try and make some alterations, technical men hate change. They look on the plotting process as the completion of the designer's job. In fact it is almost the beginning. The plotting session is the first time the designer has had access to the canvas and his paints. Lights, colours and dimmers are not fences to restrict movement they are vehicles for the creation of movement. The plotting session is not the icing that completes the cake, it is the mixing of the ingredients.

Within obvious limitations it is accepted that scenery can be rebuilt and repainted before it reaches the stage. Costumes can also be altered before the first night. But why do I feel guilty when I want to change a colour or refocus a lamp? The freedom to make mistakes is a vital component in the creative process and on the whole lighting men are denied this opportunity. For most lighting men the design stage is not innovative because they do not have the time to push against the barriers of their imagination by experiment. Hence their creative abilities are corsetted.

Lighting men also lose out by rarely being in at the birth of a production. If they lose so must the audience. It is a grave error to believe that the lighting man must not be engaged until the model is made because until then he cannot start work. He is not there to apply his paints to someone else's drawing. He is there to help create the picture in the first place. These early stages can be immensely exciting and rewarding if one relaxes and swims with the stream. The journey can be unpredictable but it is likely to be valuable. In my experience set designers think of light in a more abstract way than do lighting designers. Unfortunately they often have difficulty in communicating this to the lighting man who frequently responds with pure jargon and delights in the consequent confusion and embarrassment. If a lighting designer can be engaged whilst the set is still in embryo then he can tap the rich vein of ideas the set designer will display at this stage. All will benefit. The secret of course is to think in terms of pictures right from the start and let the nuts and bolts come later.

Experienced lighting designers can more easily think in terms of pictures because they have a wealth of productions behind

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