

# The moon is impartial

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The moon has always struck a note of awe and superstition in mankind since time unrecorded. It's influence sometimes malign, sometimes beneficent, cannot be denied. Although she cannot blind us with her dazzle, sear us with her heat, or leave us to freeze in her absence, she can—literally—move mountains. She can also bind more spells than a thousand suns.

Anciently believed to be both the portal into new life and the dark cavern of death, the moon is now treated with an endearing offhand flippancy. The abode of Diana/Artemis now has a new set of tenants who use her as a sort of celestial golf course, and although the rumour that the moon was made of green cheese has been thoroughly discredited, the belief that the rays of the rising moon will resurrect a vampire lives on.

Theatrically, the moonlit scene, whether conjured up with words or candlepower, has been the godsend of authors and playwrights from Aeschylus to Ayckbourn. If it's a mood that needs to be engendered, be it romance or terror, the calmness of familiar surroundings or the third dimension of fairyland, why then, set it in the moonlight and you must be at least halfway there! And what lighting man does not know that if there is a moonlight scene in the script, he is assured of at least one moment in which he can make his presence felt?

There are many ways of representing moonlight on our stages as there are scenes written where night is indicated, ranging from the highly stylised and traditional blue wash for 'Giselle' to the harsh menace of night in the 'Scottish Play': and from the softly romantic lambency of Verona to the thick, almost gluey texture of the night before the battle of Agincourt: or the steaming tropical heat of 'Treasure Island' contrasted with the wild desperation of the endless night in 'King Lear'.

Real moonlight, it is true, has an infinite variety of moods. But in not one of those many manifestations has it any counterpart with any stage moonlight effect of my own or anyone else's devising that I have ever seen. Most people who attempt it seem to have had to fall back on providing an impressionistic version of what their audiences will accept as moonlight rather than attempting to show the reality of moonlight. Actually, it is amazing how much an audience is willing to suspend its disbelief. Take for example the *colour* of moonlight. The early Victorians were convinced that it was a sort of greeny-

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*Objecting to the fact that whereas his protagonist seemed to attract a personal moonbeam wherever he went, he himself always seemed to be in the dark, William Terriss, pitted nightly in a fight to the death with Henry Irving, was constrained to protest 'Hang it all, Guv'nor the moon is impartial!' It is not recorded whether or not he got his lime.*

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yellow, this being the dominant colour of limelight seen against unmantled gas burners. Later on, when carbon arcs were introduced the rays of the moon were conventionally bluish-white. Harold Ridge insisted in 1930 that moonlight was not green, an assertion that Fred Bentham found it necessary to repeat thirty-five years later. Cinemoid no 16, Blue-Green, used to be officially called Moonlight Blue. At the same time Messrs. Digby featured a 'No 13, Moonlight Green' in their catalogue. Recently we have seen moonlight as a variety of shades of blue or steel, often in double or triple layers. Lately we have tended where appropriate towards naturalism, and open white in a truly amazing range of candlepowers. Naturalism, obviously is not always what is required, (Imagine 'Aloma of the South Seas' in operatic steel!) and neither is it everybody's cup of tea.

To quote Edward Gordon Craig:

*'The reproduction of natures' lights is not what my Stage Manager ever attempts, neither should he attempt such an impossibility. Not to reproduce nature, but to suggest some of her most beautiful and most living ways . . . nature will be neither imprisoned nor allow any man to copy her with any success.'*

I, too, feel it most unlikely that an utterly realistic moonlight can be produced. The main reason for this is that the difficulty lies not in the apparatus used, but in the human eye, and the special way that it perceives low levels of light. During the day, or other periods of relatively high intensity, the scotopic, or night vision system is virtually blind, inhibited by the bleaching-out of the photochemical substance on the outer portions of the eye. When the amount of light entering the eye falls below a certain threshold, this substance, Rhodopsin or 'Visual Purple' regenerates and the rod receptors round the periphery of the eye become very sensitive. At the same time the overall sensitivity of the foveal cones, the ultra-sensitive part of the retina used for daytime vision is

decreased. Now the rods take quite some time to adapt fully to the dark vision, and even in their most sensitive condition are totally incapable of discriminating colour or fine detail. The cones at the retina centre are supplied with optical nerves on a one-to-one basis. The rods in the rest of the eye may be connected by the hundred to a single nerve. For this reason tiny movements in one's peripheral vision at night are apt to be noticed. This originally may have been intended as a defence mechanism, as the deep shadows produced by the highly collimated scatter-free light of the full moon probably housed all manner of sudden beasties or ghosties!

The moon itself, of course, is merely a large diffuse reflector, and not a particularly efficient one at that. However the primary source has such a tremendously high brightness and colour temperature that even by the time it has travelled ninety three million miles and undergone reflection losses, it is still very bright and the colour rendering capability of the light is unimpaired. By the time it has punched it's way through the atmosphere and gets busy working it's magic on Verona or Biggleswade the old Inverse Square Law has decreed that its brightness has decreased to a measly 0.02 footcandles or (in the case of it shining on Romantic Brussels) 0.2152 Lux. The colour rendering properties are, however, preserved. The eye, which cannot perceive colour at this level can only interpret the colour of the moon as 'silvery'.

The problem is that on stage the light levels can never be as low as that: and even if they could, the eyes of our audience do not have the requisite half hour or so to adapt. Therefore they will be as sensitive as ever to the slightest hint of colour. All we can do is attempt to simulate the effect of silvery light. Unfortunately, no filter known to man can translate the spectrum into shades of grey, and so we must make a choice as to which colour represents moonlight, or whether to go for open white, and also to make a choice of our primary light source. The two are of course, interdependent. As light levels get low, filaments are producing a great deal of red light compared to the blue, and this creates, inevitably, a warmth in the light which tends to accentuate any reds on the stage, including actors' skin tones. (It is interesting to note that an old number of 'TABS' recommends the use of cinemoid no 61 for moonlight on the grounds that it doesn't kill reds too much!\*) It would