

COMFORT AND CONFIDENCE

Concluding this CUE series, FRANCIS REID adds a reminder that the actor is a human individual in an increasingly technological environment.

Spotlights in ideal positions. Pointed precisely. Angles just right. Beams softly tuned. Colours delicately toned. Areas clearly selected. Atmosphere appropriate.

Enough? Not quite. There is another vital ingredient. The actor must have comfort and confidence.

Lighting that is 'comfortable' to an actor is in fact rather in the nature of a controlled discomfort. Or perhaps 'professional discomfort' would be a more appropriate phrase. An actor needs to feel a touch of glare in the eyes to believe that character can be projected. A sensitive actor feels the light. Feels it enough to be aware of the degree of personal visibility. But not whether the balance between the characters is correct. A sensitive actor who has studied lighting will develop an awareness of the sculptural quality of the light in the acting environment. (*aside*: it is my sad personal observation that the acting schools teach less about the nature of design than the design schools teach about the nature of acting.)

Apart from sensing the eye light, the actor may need some help in feeling comfortable. For example, in some auditoria the foh lighting angles from ceiling bridges and side wall booms can be excellent in lighting design terms but have a disconcerting black hole just where the audience is. Especially in comedy, there is little comfort in standing at the point of command to embrace an audience void surrounded by a series of light arches (rather like goalposts) getting larger as they recede from the actor – a most disturbing inversion of the laws of perspective.

There is a possible solution that I have used with some success – although I have had to measure that success by the cheerful uncomplaining disposition of my actors since any discussion with them might destroy the cheat, but honest cheat, upon which the method is based. As observed earlier in this series, horizontal light from the front of a low balcony is unsuitable as a component of normal actor lighting whether for visibility, sculpting or atmosphere. Well, at least from the audience viewpoint. But a little glow can be comforting to the actors. Fresnels on a flooded beam angle but with top and bottom barn-doors squashed to a slot and hitting straight in, no crossing, at eye level. A very small proportion of the total light. With 50 or 60 foh from top and sides bashing in with palest tints at about point 8, I have used half a dozen fresnels with middle saturation filters at about point 2½. (I refer, naturally, to points on the only civilised dimmer curve, i.e. the one that gives me personal operational satisfaction – the old Strand 'S' curve.)

A low-intensity of light from this angle

does practically nothing for the actor except induce a cosy comfort. With filtering, the technique can be used to encourage the actor to feel chilly misery but is rarely required since sadness tends to be a more introverted emotion than joy. On the other hand, happiness and comedy are somewhat dependent on the actor receiving positive response of the kind that does not come from a void: eye-level lights help to provide an audience focus. (This is surely a statement to provoke a cry of rubbish in a reader or twain.)

This actor comfort was one of the important functions of footlights. They often gave more positive help to the actor in this way than their negative influence as a barrier to the actor/audience relationship. (Do I hear further cries of rubbish?).

In passing it should perhaps be noted that the lighting for drama exercises in schools is frequently used to create a working ambience for the actors (there is no audience). I am surprised that lighting is not used more often to create a working ambience for the actors in the workshop sessions that are now a regular part of the creative process in the rehearsal room. There seems to be some case for a simple emotional lighting from time to time to stimulate the search for character. Once discovered, the character has to be projected by the actor's technical ways and means. At this point, lighting would become an aid for the audience rather than the actor. But I fantasise.

What is not fantasy is that the transfer from the rehearsal room to the stage is something of a traumatic experience for any actor. It is not easy to come to grips quickly with the projection demands of an audience room while acclimatizing to a technological environment where various elements have to be integrated with each other and with the actors in what is often a ludicrously short time. This is where confidence is vital. The actor must have confidence in the lighting designer. Indeed the actor must have confidence in the whole production team. Perhaps in theory it might be thought enough for the actor to have confidence in the director who controls the whole production team. But increasingly complex technology and ever tighter schedules mean that the director just has to delegate large areas of responsibility in order to concentrate on the totality.

Lighting is a particularly important element in the confidence area: most other contributions produce designs in a graphic form which is understandable to the non-specialist. The performances can be seen growing in the rehearsal room and the designs taking shape in the workshops. But the lighting cannot be realised until a very late point in the production process. As one director once put it, somewhat brutally but

truthfully, "plotting lighting cues becomes easier after the first half hour or so: one then begins to know what one has not got."

Intensive planning is the main requirement to overcome this, but actor confidence is a vital adjunct. The actor must be able to accept from the lighting designer "yes we have a problem here, but we are working on it and the idea *will* work." The main way to get confidence is naturally to ensure that at the next rehearsal all is right. But the actor's confidence must be sufficient to survive several interventions of Murphy's Rehearsal Law which states that unrelated disasters tend to occur to the same actor at the same cue daily.

Actor/lighting designer confidence can come in various ways. A little, inevitably, from reputation (but this has been known to work inversely!). Mutual confidence is easier in a company with regular actors and staff. Otherwise it is a matter of the lighting designer showing concern by regular attendance at rehearsals (often difficult due to the low fees which have always been a feature of freelance lighting design in Britain). And talking to the actors informally from time to time – showing interest, knowledge and concern for the actor's problems. The actor is rightly worried by the mass of anonymous faces that can surround a production desk in an otherwise deserted auditorium – wearing 'cans' and chanting numbers. But if the faces are familiar and have regularly shared a beer, a joke and a moan, the threat is diminished.

It may be a much frayed cliché but we need to repeat it daily: *theatre is a people industry*.

...And as this is
Christmas CUE...

A FEW THOUGHTS ON LIGHTING PANTOMIME



If anyone has anything important to say, they will come down front! If the lines are particularly important, they will be delivered into a microphone, probably centre. With twice daily full houses of responsive lungs lubricated with ice-cream, this is the only road to actor survival. So follow spots and a bit of frontal bash will look after faces, leaving the rest of the rig to wash in