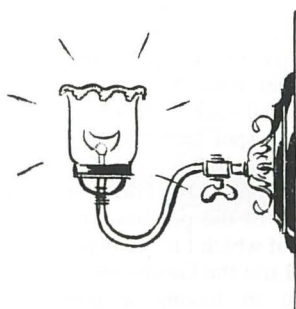


Gordon Craig tells us that the gaslit stage of Henry Irving and Ellen Terry was flecked with little motes, but nevertheless gaslight had a glamorous softness and quality unachieved by electricity. This may be; I have no experience of it except on one occasion when, playing in South Africa behind a row of gaslit floats, I realised why there are two rows of jets in a gas oven; so that the other side of the chicken will also be roasted brown.



It is difficult to know what to say about Stage Lighting. To a beginner, yes, one can instruct in its fundamentals; but what can I, a producer who for twenty years has lit his own plays, say that can possibly be of interest to others who have done the same and have their own ideas; and what can I say to the electrical technician who, doubtless, knows more about it than I do before we start. All I can do is to summarise my findings over these twenty years, and pray that the result may be of interest to somebody.

I have long ago discovered that when a set is perfectly lit from the pictorial point of view, it is certain there will not be enough light for the action of the play. One can be equally sure that when enough light has been added for the action the pictorial quality of the set has been in a great measure disturbed. So there is created a perpetual battle between the desire for the perfect stage picture and the desire for the perfect performance, and by performance I do not only mean that of the actors, but of the play as a whole.

I have been working here in Ireland so long in our own little Gate Theatre and at the Gaiety that I have lost touch with the outside theatre world, and I do not even remember very well how these things were done when I was a youngster at the Old Vic. I only know that very fine results were achieved by Robert Atkins with the aid of Egan, the Vic's electrician, and these effects were obtained with the simplicity of greatness.

Having lit well over four hundred shows and approached the subject as scientifically as I can with my limited knowledge of electricity and optics, and relying chiefly upon my requirements as a producer and the aesthetic sense that I have endeavoured always to cultivate, I approach each new play with a feeling of confidence, saying to

This abridged, instructive and amusing article by Hilton Edwards, Actor, Director and Producer appeared in the first post-war issue of *Tabs*, September 1946.

Forty years on have seen many changes in technique, but readers will recognise much that is unchanged in the basic philosophy expressed.

myself: "Now, after all the shows you've lit, this ought to be easy"; and always I find that any experience that I am conscious of is of little use to me and that each show, each set, has its own problems of colour and form and dramatic requirements, that make it yet another individual task of lighting, to be built up *sans* theory from black-out to full-up, or where you will between; and always I return from each lighting rehearsal murmuring that this was the most difficult lighting job to date.

This may be a result, I often suspect, of a natural stupidity on my part, and there is no doubt that there is a certain lack in me due to uneven memory, which does incline me to go over the same ground twice. But there is also a desire to guard against working on cliché which is so inevitably a result of experience and is such a dangerous master whether it be in writing, in acting or in stage lighting — "This is a good way of doing it, it worked well before" — hence the new angle is not discovered, time is saved but another opportunity dies.

I suppose in some theatres, lighting is a matter for the designer of the set; one would think at first glance that he was the proper man to put in charge of it until one remembers that the perfectly lit set from the artist's point of view is often dramatically inadequate. Authors so often inform you, at the end of a rattling comedy scene, during which every mobile flicker of the face is of value, that the lamps must be brought in as it is now too dark to see. Or again — in a scene in which the accent of the light is concentrated on a limited area and achieves the most exquisitely modulated chiaroscuro, that the producer has distributed the action all over the stage, or at least one important piece of action takes place in a now dark corner where even with due allowance for theatrical convention, no light could possibly fall at that time from those windows. Therefore, although he may not be as intense in his knowledge as the expert in all departments, I think it is an advantage for the producer to light his sets, provided, of course, he is in sufficient sympathy with his artist.



But then I am working on the assumption that if the producer is not in sympathy with the design, has not indeed passed it, he will not be working on it. This again probably explains why I prefer to work in my own theatres, for unity of design can only be obtained when it has been forged on a common anvil.



My limitations include the fact that I am no electrician, though I cannot let this statement pass without adding that I have once been known to mend a fuse, and, I would have it known — the result was successful! I have a vague suspicion of what goes on electrically — hardly more concrete than my knowledge of what goes on under the bonnet of my car. But, once the juice enters the dimmer and therefore under my control, and gives a certain promise of entering the lamp, I know where I am. This limited knowledge puts me at no disadvantage with the theatre electrician because from the moment I have decided in what way the play is to be done, I have borne in mind what effects of light I have desired to achieve, although not necessarily how to achieve them.

These first steps towards an ultimate goal, and indeed, the ultimate goal itself, have been in my mind in choosing the sets, or in selecting the suggestions of the designer. The same target is kept in view with the costumes and the music, and the choice of these have been guided by the demands of the action, that, to the best of one's ability one believes will best serve audience and author. As these various aspects of the theatrical pattern form themselves and coalesce, additions and omissions from the original object manifest themselves, decisions are made, and upon successful selection depends the result. But there usually emerges by now a harder and more defined outline of the result devoutly to be desired. Now, all is assembled, and in the assembly, particularly in the building and colour of the set, it is to be hoped that opportunities for the achievement of lighting results have been catered for — correct angles of windows, pillars upon which the accent of light shall fall, angles that shall keep an alcove in the requisite shadow, etc., etc., and it is now a matter of practicality.

I do not know what is the usual practice — I am told that Beerbohm Tree, great master of lighting in his day, would content himself