

A German View on Lighting the Stage today

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As a lot of us in U.K. or North America have appreciated for a considerable time now, lighting plays is no mere supporting role to back-up decor, costumes, colours, actors and singers; it is in its own right part of the very substance of any production. The lecture below given by a distinguished German director during a "Light" symposium in Salzburg will come as something of a surprise as it was aimed at professionals. After all, we must remember that sixty years ago it was Germany who had so much to show the rest of the world in the art of stage lighting, particularly for large-scale naturalistic effects based on the use of a cyclorama. For example, the new 1934 stage lighting installation for the Royal Opera House Covent Garden, although the equipment was designed & made in England, was quite literally based on German practice. What follows is a translation of the reprint of the lecture as it appeared in *Bühnentechnische Rundschau* (Heft-1 February 1987) edited and adapted for the "Anglo-Saxon" reader.

Since October 1985 twelve students have had the chance to learn lighting from the bottom up. Which spotlight throws what sort of light, how many different qualities a different quantity of light has, how lighting can change the reality (of any picture), how light can follow a person, how a *memory* control is worked and the resulting lighting change can be used. We all have learned by doing; but this is not enough. We have watched our 'teachers' and cribbed from our colleagues. We have often trusted the lighting engineers and stage designers, and have unnecessarily lengthened the lighting rehearsals; because we only developed a lighting plan there and then as we went along. Lighting was not thought of as part of the original concept, it was not an essential part of the production. This state of affairs has fundamentally changed in recent years — partly through the influence of new Media. Many Regisseurs do television and films as well, where lighting is crucial to provide *any* picture.

Lighting Designers came from the Anglo-Saxon countries; if the Beleuchtungschefs allowed it. They *had* studied light and its uses and nowadays in New York, for example, the light-creator sits beside me at every rehearsal, knows why a given position is decided on, senses the atmosphere appropriate to all 'pictures', and lights the piece during the weeks of rehearsal and plans the positions of the sources of light and knows beforehand what is impossible. It is nonsense to start with this plan only when the sets are ready or at lighting rehearsal. Thus this lighting designer, who is trained both in the field of the technical and the drama, gets the Regisseur to explain the motivation behind the lighting he has requested. However,

lighting designers exist only because many lighting engineers have never got beyond the electrician grade and many Regisseurs only organise and don't create. Even great Regisseurs didn't know how to use the lighting control — some *did* play with it and achieved amazing results; some improvised with the toy, some preferred to resort to lighting without change and call it their style. The great Fritz Kortner worked in enormous detail in this way: for each position he called for another spot and as there were an infinite number of positions he soon ran out of lights. When Kortner was forced to admit that this state of affairs could not be ascribed to the ill-will of the Beleuchtungsmeister; either some actors sat in deep darkness, which inspired critics to deep interpretation, or he employed follow-spots in the middle of the show!

I have also experienced situations where the Regisseur and dramatist had completely opposite opinions about the lighting. Hans Schweikert did "The Good Woman of Sezuán" and called for hard cold Boxing Ring Lighting. Brecht came and said "This is Brecht completely misunderstood; it must be soft, coloured light — the cigarette smoke must curl in its rays". I thought I could hear the architect Holzmeister when he spoke of incense in churches. The Regisseur should already during the making of the Regie book not just set down the moves, the props etc; but visualise all these happenings in the right light and that doesn't mean just light and dark, nor light on or off, it means to find out what is the appropriate, adequate light for a piece, a figure, a setting, for a theatre and that town. An important happening every night right at the beginning is the moment when the auditorium light slowly goes out; how smoothly or jerky is it,

or suppose it did not happen to go out at all! And then the curtain opens — how quickly? And if it is light on stage, how light? or if dark, how dark? Or to quote Fry: The dark is light enough. In these first seconds the whole evening is decided. In an opera, how do you get over the unpleasantly grey impression caused by the spill of the orchestra lights onto the flats, especially if it cannot be swamped by the stage lighting at that time.

I think it is bad practice which is increasing, that my Regie colleagues turn the overture into a Pre-Scene. They want to show that they have completely understood the opera and its story, or better that they have conceived it now in a new way and show that Senta or Elsa or the Steersman have only dreamt the opera; because otherwise the reality of what is happening would rationally be impossible. With these Pre-Scenes the most mystical moments of theatre are destroyed — that last free space in the mind of each member of the audience, before the sights & sounds of the combined 'doers' pelt down, is prematurely taken away. This free space, where the imagination of each and every one is challenged to build for himself a scene and to conjure up the actors, to immerse them in the right light. This moment of creation should be left to the visitor before, with the rise of the curtain, he abandons himself to the imagination of the Regisseur, which may turn out to be disappointingly poorer than the product of his own — or else can turn out to be more stimulating, exciting and explanatory than he ever thought possible.

It can be no different for us Regisseurs. After countless preliminary discussions we see a model or a plan in which the lights are shown well — a state of affairs mostly impossible to achieve. Often our imagination is insufficient to project the *model* to the *real* stage. The disappointment at our first sight of the set shows itself in utterances such as: If only we had our rehearsal mark-out, it was so much more appropriate. But then the lighting rehearsals start and lift the whole procedure into a new reality. The sun rises, the grey board appears as figured wood, a bit of material becomes royal brocade, sheeting turns into foaming waves, tin into pure gold and a weedy tenor becomes a conquering hero sculpted in dramatic backlight. Light = lux = leukos = white, brilliant.

The physical explanation of this light beam that it increases in size and lessens in intensity with distance from its source is not at all sufficient. Light is not just light. The quality of light is an aesthetic category i.e. it is not at all relevant physically; the quality of the light, i.e. its beauty, is essentially and purely a matter of concept, a creative act