

A Transatlantic Butterfly

BY DAVID TAYLOR

It is a tribute to his totally unassuming nature that Andy Phillips states categorically that his work is usually unseen. For a lighting designer who is constantly held up as an example of lighting style, such invisibility belies the tremendous work and depth of self-criticism that has led to a career for Phillips that includes many of the great smaller pieces of British theatre over the last twenty years. Today, *M. Butterfly*, originally lit by Phillips on Broadway, is running in London's West End to enormous public and critical acclaim.

M. Butterfly at the Shaftesbury Theatre marks the culmination of a varied, but quiet, development from the day Andy Phillips began work in the flies for matinees at the Royal Court Theatre in London. At this time, the early 1960s, he was a prop-maker who had originally trained as an actor at the Florence Moore Theatre Academy on England's south coast.

"It was the time of Paul Scofield's *Lear*," says Phillips. "It was going out to Europe on tour and I was asked if I wanted to become a touring electrician." By 1965, Phillips was the Royal Court Theatre's touring man, but it was his criticism of the rather unadventurous lighting style for the in-house shows that caused him in 1965 to be put on the spot with his first lighting design. He recalls that his lighting around Jocelyn Herbert's austere tree in *The Lion and the Jewel* needed to be re-rigged three times before he was happy.

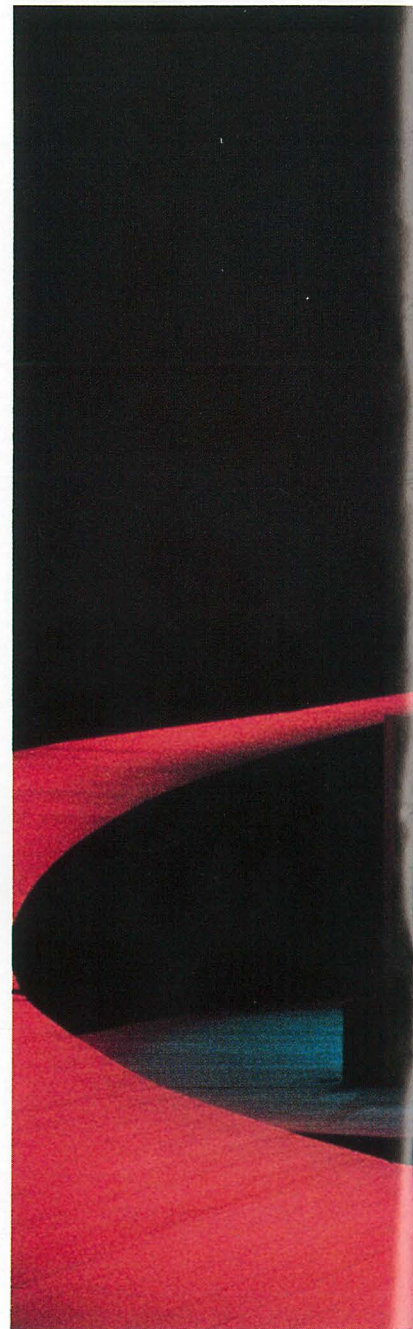
This development-by-experiment has held true throughout Phillips' work to date, and he is happiest when he can get into a theatre to try out his ideas as early as possible. Of course, this requires the benevolence of a trusting director. From his early days, Phillips' collaboration with the director John Dexter has grown stronger with every production. Dexter, who joined the English Stage Company at the Royal Court as an actor in 1957, quickly established his reputation as one of Britain's and America's most innovative directors.

Dexter's acclaimed *Equus* was lit by Andy Phillips on both sides of the Atlantic, yet Phillips describes their relationship as a "love-hate thing." The relationship is the most important element in the production, Phillips believes, and it is obvious that he is John Dexter's favourite visual collaborator. "Dexter has very strong views," says Phillips, "but he does allow a good rein for the lighting designer.

"The process is one of osmosis. We hardly talk, except when he says he doesn't like something, which isn't often. I just do what I think he wants." Such a production relationship is rare in British theatre today, based as it is upon absolute trust between director and lighting designer. *M. Butterfly*, however, is a production which had to develop through trust and experiment.

Despite his belief in the ethos of "the better the text, the simpler the lighting," Philip's guessed early on that David Henry Hwang's play, based on the unlikely, but true, story of a French diplomat's involvement with a young singer in the Peking Opera, who turns out to be a spy for the Communists, would require a very particular style of lighting. Eiko Ishioka's setting, developed in close association with John Dexter, was a triumph of Japanese simplicity — a huge spiralling ramp around a central focal point, wrapped about a vast diorama which was so smooth as to defy one's focussing on it.

It was a highly stylized, yet dynamic setting, and Phillips knew that the need for



NOBBY CLARK