

## A CHALLENGE TO LIGHTING'S FUTURE

# Rembrandt versus Batman

BY HANS WOLFF

**W**ithout light we can not see." This obvious and simple statement forms the background of our profession. Our job as manipulators of light gives us a great responsibility and, without being overly dramatic about it, I wonder if we realize this responsibility. In these days which are filled with so many thrilling new technologies, it has become difficult to maintain an incorruptible attitude towards our profession.

### LIGHTING — THE INVISIBLE ART

In a time when the designer needs to create a high profile in order to get work, it is difficult to play a serving role. In the theatre, we have to support the content of the play and the work of the actors, all with the intention of calling as little attention as we can to ourselves. Lighting becomes not an art on its own, but a serving participant in the production.

To light a simple comedy with one set often requires a great deal of craftsmanship and easily ends up with 30 to 40 cues. "Invisible" perhaps for the audience, but essential for the production. Sadly, these are not the productions with which you get famous.

### NEW AND NEWEST

New, and especially newest, is what counts in our profession. We have drifted into a rat race where the only thing that counts is to be the first, the newest, and the most original. The industry helps us with an endless stream of new, almost new, or almost newly copied products.

Jumping and bumping, turning and waving. It seems contemporary theatre can't survive without moving lights — no matter if it is a Mozart opera, a hard rock concert, or a television quiz show.

Formerly, we had the nervous flicker of the stroboscope and the boring patterns of the laser. Nowadays, no production seems complete without at least ten moving lights. You know the picture, bundles of light slowly brush past the set. Then during the refrain they move faster, rapidly changing colour, and projecting the well-known gobo with the dots. In the final chord, they come all together to form a dramatic backlight on the singer. Boring!

Honestly speaking, the first time I saw moving lights used I was deeply impressed, but now, I believe, they have become such a cliché.

Basically, I think that's the main problem. We are confronted with an overkill of technology and we don't realize that technology alone doesn't make good theater or television. What we need are good and strong ideas.

### EDUCATING DESIGNERS

Every magazine in our field prints articles on the subject, seminars in trade shows are dedicated to it, and nowadays everybody is convinced of the need for formal education for people planning on being lighting designers.

But sorry, I am not. I believe that our profession has to be learned in the old-fashioned way — in practice.

University doesn't teach you how to deal with hysterical actresses, or directors who haven't the slightest idea about light, or about set designers who think their set is the most interesting part of the picture, or about tired technicians.

Of course, lighting design has to do with technology, but the main part of this profession is dealing with people. You can be an expert in analyzing scripts, technical drafting and colour theories, but if you can't communicate, you will fail in this profession. The technical knowledge you need in this profession can be obtained in

three or four weeks. To become a designer takes years.

I do believe a good designer needs a good education, but not a technical one. Perhaps architecture, history, or a more human-oriented study like philosophy.

But the best education is to work side-by-side with a designer. And the best designers have a busy practice and don't want to spend their lives in classrooms and university theatres. I realize that it is not always easy to have students around when you are at work — they ask the wrong questions at the wrong time, they spoil your drafting, and they aren't around when you need them.

Still, I think it is our responsibility to take care of the training of our successors. Because only in theatres and studios can they learn what lighting design is really about. Plus, students can challenge you to rethink your own opinions, they bring in fresh ideas necessary to brush up your routine, and, when they are without any talent, they can make your tea.

### REMBRANDT VERSUS BATMAN

In conclusion, may I say that shadow making is our profession, in a sensitive and caring way — not blinded by the newest technology, but serving the production — not with the cheap tricks of *Batman*, but with the integrity and craftsmanship of Rembrandt.

Editor's Note: This piece is taken from a paper presented at Showlight 89, the international television, theatre, and film lighting colloquium, 15 - 17 May 1989 at the NOB TV Studio in the Netherlands. Hans Wolff is a leading Dutch lighting designer and theatre consultant based in Amsterdam.