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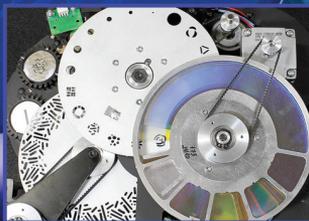
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Classic Gear: The Beamlight

Rob Halliday takes a nostalgic but instructive look back at the tools that have shaped the industry . . .

It's a curious contradiction that much of the light we (at least, those who don't spend most of their lives in darkened theatres!) live by is the parallel rays from the sun, yet most of the light we light with isn't, beams diverging rapidly as they issue from the lens of a fixture.

Perhaps it's because we spend so much time with this quality of light that we just come to accept this, our light made of overlapping cones. But just occasionally a searing parallel shaft of light appears on stage, reminding us that it is possible to do things differently. Sometimes that shaft is actually daylight, piercing a tiny hole somewhere high in the theatre's roof. But sometimes, it's because there's a beamlight in the rig . . .

For such a dramatic light, a beamlight is optically very simple: no lens, just a parabolic mirror with a lightbulb, usually crown-silvered, at its centre. The crown ensures no light goes straight forward from the bulb; with the filament sitting at the focal point of the reflector the light is gathered then projected forward as a near-parallel beam. You have little control, usually just a knob to move the lamp back and forwards to get the filament in the right place. It will make the beam a little bigger or smaller (usually with a black hole appearing in its centre as it grows), but it's really a 'rightness' control - there will be one point where the beam just feels right,

snapping into a strong, parallel shaft. Reflector material varies by model, aluminium or silvered or even dichroic glass; the reflector needs to be in good condition for the light to really sing. The lamps are often low voltage, giving high output but requiring a transformer built in to or sitting next to the fixture.

Beamlights have long been a standard lighting tool in continental Europe, less common in the UK. The effect is remarkable, but they were expensive, so for special occasions. Then the PAR Can came from rock-and-roll, a parabolic reflector sealed into a rugged, fuss-free lamp, claiming similar effects at lower cost - though never quite the same, never quite as good, never quite parallel. A real beamlight's photometrics defy easy description: they have a sharp cut-off (particularly when the fixture is fitted with concentric spill rings to control any stray scatter light) yet with a hard-to-discern, beautiful soft edge.

In Europe, this edge also meant they were adopted for followspotting, a highlight that travelled with the performer, usually from a side-box or side-stage position, rather than Broadway's 'look at me' hard circle of light. It is a technique that, once sampled and on the right show, becomes compelling, performers just magically lifted above the rest of the state or, with a little haze in the air, a finger of light saying



A modern Beamlight by Lighting Innovation.

'look here' - invaluable for human-sized performers on big stages in enormous theatres.

Francis Reid, I believe, brought the technique to Glyndebourne. David Hersey made it a core element of his designs across many shows; six beamlights (run by four operators, two moving between up-stage and down-stage spots) still light *Les Mis* in London nightly. Those lights are 1k Panis, but I've always had a soft-spot for the smaller 500W Reiche & Vogel 'niedervolt-parabolspiegelscheinwerfer'; that'd be my choice for a classic representative of this classic fixture type.

Of course, everything old is new again - for really, what is the hugely popular Sharpy but a dramatic new take on lighting with parallel beams?

Beamlight by R&V: > [//plasa.me/c928j](http://plasa.me/c928j)
Beamlights by Pani: > [//plasa.me/m1n5v](http://plasa.me/m1n5v)
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