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# Classic Gear: The Lobsterscope

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

For a real education in the down-and-dirty aspects of showbiz, perhaps ignore the conventional textbooks and turn instead to a practical tome like, say, *Gypsy: Memoirs of America's Most Celebrated Stripper*. It even includes some tips on lighting - describing the boy dancer who performed 'Me and My Shadow', but added to the act by bringing his own lobster-scope, "making it look as though he was dancing in slow motion." This lighting classic was a vital part of the act: presenting it to the spotlight man in each new town he would warn them, "be careful of it. Anything happens to that lobster-scope and the whole act's a flop."

The object of his concern was nothing very high-tech. The same book gives a good description: a lobster-scope is a "metal disk that fitted over a spotlight". But the key to the effect - and its name - is the two narrow, curved slots cut into the disk 180 degrees apart. Spin the disk, via an electric motor or even by hand, and the effect was flickering light, redolent of a film, a television, a passing train, or the slow motion demanded by our boy dancer. A strobe, of sorts, but a soft, organic strobe rather than the sharp, electronic effect that the term now conjures in the mind.

It's the curve of the slots that gives the lobsterscope its fun name - usually one is s-shaped, the other eye-shaped oval, both resembling somewhat the claws of a lobster. Quite why they are different shapes is one of those classic details, the origins of which are now lost in the mists of time. Some suggest it is to make the alternate flashes different durations while being of the same brightness. Others that it was designed so that each flash gave a different wipe across the beam to disturb the viewer's eye more.

Very probably the first Lobsterscopes were hand-made like the boy dancer's, created by users looking for a new lighting effect that could be set-up quickly and easily on the road - just slap it onto the front of a followspot. By the mid-'60s, it had very definitely become a product for

sale, with both hand-driven (list price \$35) and motor driven (\$40) lobsterscopes - it had lost the hyphen somewhere along the way - appearing in the 1964 catalogue of Times Square Stage Lighting of New York and later in the catalogues of Altman Stage Lighting and others.

The lobsterscope is largely gone now, replaced by the electronic strobes that became commonplace from the mid 1970s - though the animation discs still made to fit to the front of spotlights (and included in some moving lights) are perhaps its spiritual descendents.

But if your show calls for some kind of flicker effect and your first thought is to turn to a strobe, spare a thought for the lobsterscope - particularly if the show is a period show like, say, the musical *Gypsy*, adapted from that same memoir. The lobsterscope is history's strobe, strobing from the age of vaudeville, of variety, from a gentler age. Plus it's an effect that hasn't been seen for a while, and in lighting those are usually the effects that stand out from the crowd . . .

Still available today:  
> [//plasa.me/lobster](http://plasa.me/lobster)



Top: rear view and above, the front of the Lobster-scope



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