

Lighting & Sound

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I have a confession: my favourite theatre light isn't one of the all-singing, all-dancing moving lights. It's something far more magical: the Svoboda batten, manufactured by ADB.

The light is named for its creator, Czech designer Josef Svoboda. Trained as an architect, Svoboda became chief designer at the Czech National Theatre in 1948 and, through his work there and around the world, one of the most influential figures in theatre design through the twentieth century and on until his death in 2002 at the age of 81. Svoboda's role went far beyond the design of the scenery. He would constantly blur the distinction between performers, scenery and lighting, with projections performing alongside actors, and sheets of light through hazy atmosphere creating apparently solid architecture from nothing.

"Light is a material I love. You cannot light a stage space without light," he said, and he created the tools to give him the quality of light he needed - his batten being one example. A metre wide, the most common version features nine reflectors with 24 volt crown-silver lamps, series-wired and arranged in two offset rows. Each lamp in isolation would be beautiful - a near parallel shaft of light, textured slightly by its spill-rings, the same beam-quality as that other lens-free lighting instrument, the beamlight.

Mass nine of these lamps together, the staggering of the lamps ensuring that there is effectively no gap of light between each, and you get something altogether more dramatic. One batten gives you an intense sheet of backlight, the most epic highlight to a performer on stage, and completely different from the cone of light we now so often accept as normal. Rotate it 90 degrees, mount it on a stand, and you have an incredible, unique sidelight.



Or join the units together: the shape of the case is not a quirky design choice, but allows battens to be connected without interrupting the lamp spacing. The result, with the right atmospheric treatment of the air (something we take for granted, but which Svoboda had to invent from scratch) is a wall of light: lighting as architecture, conjuring solidity from emptiness. But ethereal,

a curtain of light - capable of allowing people, ghostlike, to pass through it, yet concealing them completely once they are behind it.

There are now other products that create similar effects - one is even called the (Digital) Light Curtain, and has the advantage of movement and colour change (there is a yoke available for the Svoboda, but no-one's tried adding a scroller!). But though the DLC is a fantastic product in itself, it's not quite the same, in the same way that a PAR can is a bit like a beamlight but the beamlight retains a unique character all its own.

Best used *en masse*, Svobodas are most commonly seen in the equipment stocks of European opera houses. Which isn't to say they don't suit other types of shows: right now, those near London can see the unique character of the Svoboda for themselves in the new production of the musical *Evita*.

ADB Svoboda Batten:

www.adblighting.com/default.asp?type=item&ID=59

Josef Svoboda:

www.laterna.cz/ensemble.php?lang=en&p=svoboda&info=1

www.guardian.co.uk/obituaries/story/0,3604,688224,00.html

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