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# Classic Gear: The Mini Maglite

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

There was a time - probably around the late eighties - when it felt like this was the badge of honour for anyone calling themselves a theatre technician. Concealed in a belt-mounted pouch with a fold over, velcro-sealed cover, a compact, rugged aluminium tube: not just a torch, but a 'work of art - that works', as the manufacturer would have it.

This torch, the Mini Maglite, is another example of a product succeeding by just being better. Until its arrival, torches had always felt like disposable items, cheaply made, fragile and prone to failure at the most inconvenient times. It was as if the manufacturers were thinking 'well, it's just a torch, let's not worry too much about it . . .'

In America, one Anthony Maglica thought somewhat differently. New York-born but raised in Croatia, Maglica returned to the US in 1950, learning a few words of English every day and scraping together \$125 as a down-payment on a lathe. This one-man machine shop manufactured precision parts for the aerospace and military industries, eventually incorporating as Mag Industries in 1974.

In 1979, Maglica created the first of the products that would make his company

famous worldwide: the Maglite. People who relied on torches - the police, firefighters - discovered it, spread the word, insisted on it; the Maglite rapidly became a hit.

Five years later came the version the theatre-crowd loved: the Mini-Maglite. Made of rugged anodised, knurled aircraft-aluminium housing, 146mm long, 18mm wide and weighing just over 100g with its twin AA batteries, the torch was compact enough to have with you all the time, big and comfortable enough to be easy to handle (as long as you'd bought the hexagonal lens-holder, which would stop the torch rolling off down a raked stage when you set it down!) Its bright bulb gave enough light to work with, the twisting lens head doubling as an on-off switch and focus control from spot to flood - or you could remove it altogether to form a mag-candle. And when the bulb broke, there was a spare one in the torch's base (provided you'd read enough of the instructions to know that!). Joints were sealed with rubber o-rings to keep out dust and moisture - a statement of intent that this was a product meant to last.

Generally, they did, usually being lost or left behind before they failed. For a few years, though, lost Maglites weren't replaced with



Photo: Jonas Bergsten

Maglites; the company fell behind the competition, who offered brighter Xenon lamps or, more usefully, bright but low-energy LED variants. It took Mag until late 2006 to launch their LED version . . .

Now the company is fighting back, both through its range of lightsources, but also with legal battles against the cloners, and a hearts-and-minds sell, particularly to the American public, of the advantages of keeping all of their manufacturing US-based rather than outsourcing abroad.

The result? A Mag-Lite may not be the first choice of that aspiring theatre technician any more, but that one-man shop is now an 850 employee company, still led hands-on by its original founder, and still taking the humble torch very seriously indeed.

The official Maglite website:  
[>>> www.maglite.com](http://www.maglite.com)

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