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Classic Gear: The CCT Silhouette 30

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

Google 'CCT Sil 30' and you won't find much in the way of product information or sales pitches. That's perhaps unsurprising for a discontinued product whose history largely predates the web. What you will find is a long list of theatres that still have Sil 30s active in their lighting stock. That is a testament to basic good design, ruggedness and reliability.



from above and someone hadn't thought to 'truss mount' the lenstube knobs-up.

The Sil was perfectly timed: the soon-to-be-opened National Theatre would run daily show changeovers lit with a partially re-focused permanent 'saturation' rig, almost demanding the flexibility of zoom units. CCT made a special rep Sil for Theatre Projects Consultants: shutters in a removable cartridge, shutter handles protruding from top and bottom only. Focus the light, lock the shutters off, on each changeover just drop in the right cartridge rather than recreating fiddly shutter cuts.

Marking CCT's transition from small hire outfit to lantern manufacturer, the Silhouette profile spotlights broke Strand Lighting's near-stranglehold on theatre lanterns in the UK. The Sil took advantage of the then-new tungsten-halogen lamps, and led the way to zoom optics - varying the size of the beam as well as its edge. The Sil range was a family: 1kW or 2kW lamphouses - rectangular with the trademark finned sides - paired with interchangeable round lenstubes. It's size and 22-40 degree beam made the 1kW Sil 30 the most popular combination.

With its standard shutter assembly, the Sil 30 was the workhorse of British theatre lighting from the late 70s into the early 90s, through a number of revisions that finally saw it with hexagonal lenstubes, angled shutter handles and the 'Turbo Sil' badge. In that period there was rarely a Sil-free West End play or musical.

Lighting designers liked the Sil because they didn't have to work out beam angles to the nearest degree and for the added flexibility of scaling gobos. Electricians mastered the art of focussing the light, lenses front and back then front lens back a little for a small, soft-edged beam. The twin black lens knobs were solid and chunkily comfortable; the skilled could juggle both one-handed (perhaps leaning the knob a little to free a binding lens), and all could use their position to match focus from one unit to the next. You only really cursed if you were accessing the lamp

You can still buy Silhouettes today - but then came ETC's Source Four - another light taking advantage of improvements in bulb technology - and the rules changed again. OK, so we're back to figuring out beam angles, but a Source Four is brighter, and much easier to carry up all those front-of-house stairs. Still, old Sils rarely die. Well maintained, they continue to serve a useful life - if perhaps as the second string player rather than the star of the rig.

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