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Classic Gear: Theatre Projects' Lighting Stencils

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If there was a defining moment when lighting in the UK really started taking itself seriously, becoming art rather than illumination, I'd suggest that it was the moment when Theatre Projects created its first lighting stencils.

Richard Pilbrow's inspiration was seeing American light plots in Joel Rubin and Lee Watson's book *Theatrical Lighting Practice*. His motivation was persuasion: drawing the lanterns to scale meant he could convince theatre electricians that they really could hang more than 12 lights on a bar, then the norm. And practicality: with the plan drawn accurately and to scale, the bars could be pre-rigged and the cable runs prepared in TP's workshop, speeding up the load-in time in the theatre.

His first versions were hand-cut from his business cards; even then the stencils differed from American practice in showing actual lantern models to scale rather than just generic fixture types. Hand-drawn sketches were refined by Bob Bryan and rendered in plastic by Uno. The first generation of these stencils had raised edges for use with a pen, symbols included both for lanterns then common in the UK - Strand's Patt-range - and for the more exotic fare being imported by TP, such as the R&V beamlight. The symbols beautifully captured the distinctive shapes and distinguishing features of each lantern, making them easy to recognise on paper.

The second and most familiar TP stencils were designed by Molly Pilbrow and Andy Bridge in the mid-1970s. Larger, this set were flat, allowing use with pen or pencil. They also reflected the expanding

Above: TP stencil, 1960s.
Right: Richard Pilbrow's first versions were hand-cut from his business cards.
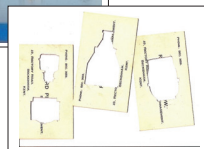
range of equipment available to British practitioners - one pair (plan and section) covering everything from the familiar Patt 23 and 264 to the newer Silhouettes, PAR cans and the Kodak Carousel, a second, more 'glamorous', pair having a west-Atlantic flavour, American Lekos and the like. The stencils were metric, at 1:25 or 1:50 scale, and also hinted at how hard the stencil maker's art would become as lanterns all became dull, rectangular boxes!

While it was perfectly possible for those starting out in lighting to sketch a rig without the stencils, they became aspirational: something young lighting designers craved both to make the task easier, and as a badge of their chosen profession. Even now, when there is a generation of designers working who've never owned a set of stencils, their entire career managed in CAD, the distinctive smell of the TP stencil's plastic is hugely evocative, immediately taking those of the 'older' generations back to long nights hunched over drawing boards. Of course, some still work like that. The best of these plans are beautifully clear and legible - a reminder to all those manufacturers helpfully uploading the CAD files of their lights to the web that what we often need is a high-tech stencil: a carefully-crafted, clear, accurate representation of the light, rather than a full-on construction drawing!

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