

STAGE LIGHTING

A GUIDE TO LIGHTING THE SMALLER SCALE PRODUCTION

Whatever the scale of a production – amateur or professional – lighting like other design processes is based on a sequence of logical decisions plus a good measure of creative inspiration. This brief guide offers a sequence of step-by-step decisions to form the basis of a lighting process for the smaller scale production. It has been prepared by a lighting designer with experience of working on productions of all types and sizes. Strand hope that it will be especially helpful to amateur groups, small touring companies and educational theatre.

PLANNING

Read Script at least twice (first for overall 'feel' and then for detail) concentrating on text rather than the stage directions which the director may well ignore – especially those in an 'acting edition'. If a musical, listen to the music until absorbed.

Discuss with the director, choreographer, set and costume designers, how the script will be staged and the contribution to be made by the lighting. Will light select acting areas? And/or will it establish shifts in atmosphere? Are there any particularly special effects?

Decide Style of the 'lighting look'. Will it be softly diffuse or have stabbing beams? How directional? How selective? How atmospheric? Will the colours be subtle tints? Or more strongly romantic hues? Or more saturated contrasty statements? Or a penetrating white? How naturalistic?

Establish Priorities for the allocation of resources. There is rarely enough equipment or time to meet all the requirements of our ideals. How vital is that two minute special effect? Enough to justify removal of two lights from two hours of general use?

Divide Stage by Areas for independent selection determined by the production's requirements (at actor eye level which does not correspond to the area of lit floor). Musicals may have symmetrical areas of uniform size but drama areas are rarely symmetrical in size, shape or distribution.

Divide Stage by Colours if colour is to be a variable. Which areas in a drama need both warm and cool toning? Can some be neutral? In a musical where do we need more saturated 'reds' and 'blues' (and 'ambers?') in addition to face 'neutrals'.

Determine Essential Specials where the light beam's size or shape is so critical that one of the generally set area lights will not suffice. Also determine essential special effects. Double check priorities.

Choose Lighting Positions to give the best available angles for lighting the chosen areas in the chosen colour ranges. And position the specials and the effects.

Allocate Lighting Instruments starting with the ideal type for each position, then reallocating to make the best use of equipment actually available.

Select Colours by converting general 'warm', 'cool', 'reddish', 'bluish', 'amber', 'hot', 'fruity' etc into specific colour filter numbers.

Complete Paperwork including lighting layout plan; equipment, colour and cable lists; cue synopsis.

Communicate Intentions to electricians crew, stage manager, scene designer and director by giving them photocopies of lighting plan and cue synopsis. Point out to them anything vital that they might otherwise overlook.

Check Intentions by comparing the observed action at rehearsal during each cue state with the planned areas, colours, specials as noted in the cue synopsis.

Prepare Equipment by checking all adjustments for free movement and positive locking. Clean and flash-out all spotlights. Don't forget accessories. Visual check of all cables for insulation breaks and loose clamping at plugs and sockets.

IN THE THEATRE

Rig as plan, paying particular attention to mechanical safety. Fit barndoors, masks, gobos, colours etc. Flash-out, checking plan numbers correspond to dimmerboard numbers.

Focus each light to predetermined position on stage, checking actor lights by moving around all positions which are intended to be lit by a particular spotlight. Check for required beam edge quality – normally soft and, as far as possible, 'lost' on set.

Plot each cue state by selecting appropriate lights and balancing their intensities on the dimmers to give the required lighting pictures. Use a 'body' to walk the actor positions and do not hurry the writing down of the levels.

Rehearse any difficult cues before the dress rehearsals. After these rehearsals, some rebalancing and refocusing is almost inevitable.

Perform with maximum concentration. If anything goes wrong, correct very very slowly and smoothly. If nervous actors head for black spots, try to help them – but slowly and smoothly.

Get-out carefully after the final performance. Put away all equipment as you would hope to find it next time.

Conduct Post Mortem with the rest of the production team to compare hopes with reality, so that next time...