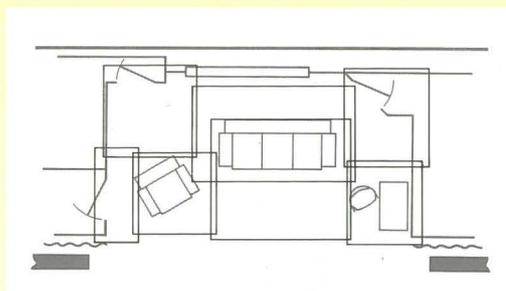# DIVIDING THE STAGE
DIVIDING BY AREA

Once decisions have been made about the kind of contribution that we expect lighting to make to the production that we are planning – and these contributions have been put into some sort of order of priority – we need to break down the stage area into the segments over which we require independent selective control. The required breakdown may be symmetrical, in which case the stage plan will be divided into something that resembles a series of areas of different sizes corresponding to the placing of the action. Of course it could well be that there is no need for division into what it is useful to call *production areas*: all the stage may be in use all the time. In this case a simple division into centre and sides will allow balancing for maximum 'enhancement' of the look of the scene.

Note: Adjoining areas overlap – both side to side and back to front. And remember to remember that these are areas where an actor's head is to be lit – they are unlikely to be the same as the light patterns on the floor.

AREA PLANNING FOR A PLAY

In this naturalistic play – possibly but not necessarily in a box set – the areas are determined to a considerable extent by the positions of furniture and doors. And the lighting is expected to make some logic in terms of practical light fittings (table lamps, wall brackets, etc) and the natural sunshine and moonshine coming through windows (including those in the audience's 'fourth wall'). In this particular example, we have a play where it is desirable to focus attention at various times on the sofa, the armchair, the table (with that essential tool of modern drama, a telephone) and the doors. These doors are tremendously important in any drama: some of the key appearances and speeches are made there. But for a long intimate scene on the sofa, it is useful to concentrate on that sofa and loose peripheral areas like the doors. Consider the seven areas shown here in terms of possible combinations: the *area palette* gives the director a wide range of selectivity of audience vision – whether a subconscious fluidity (slow cues that are not obvious) or an area selection obviously linked to the switching of the practical lamps.
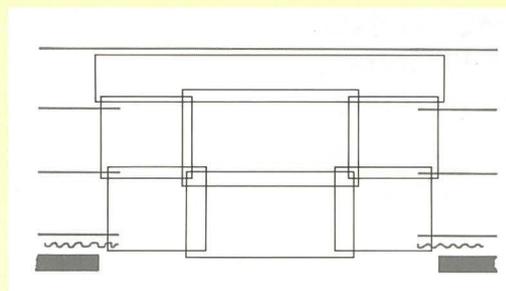
AREA PLANNING FOR A MUSICAL

Musicals tend to have many scenes and many selective and atmospheric light changes within these scenes. Therefore, unless there are many – very many – lights available, the breakdown into areas has to be symmetrical. In this example the breakdown is symmetrical because, as in so many musical productions, the settings consist of a symmetrical series of wings leading to a backcloth, possibly a skycloth. With the addition of cloths and scenic pieces, the method of staging gives a flexible masked acting area with the possibility of sufficient open space for dancing and lots of entrances for a large chorus to get on and off quickly. In most musicals the big moments are staged in the downstage areas: to help both musical balance and the 'putting across' of numbers to the audience. For the same reasons, much of the essential action takes place centre stage. The most common selective lighting cue is to 'concentrate centre', usually downstage centre, by 'losing the edges'. This suggests a minimum of three areas across the stage – certainly at the front of the stage, and probably also midstage. However, it is often quite practical to consider the whole width of the rear of the stage as one area. This provides a seven area combination that offers an *area palette* giving the director considerable selectivity with the possibility of progressive tightening from back to front and from sides to middle.
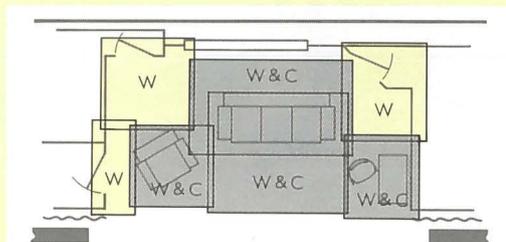
DIVIDING BY COLOUR

Does our chosen lighting style for the production include a fluid use of colour? After establishing a breakdown of the stage into areas, the next step is to consider whether any areas need to have controllable variations in colour. Or whether some of the adjoining areas could be grouped together for more general variations from a less selective colour wash.

Note: When working on plans it is useful to define the selected areas and indicate basic colour range by initials such as W, C, N for warm, cool and neutral: or possibly R, O, Y, G, B, A, for red, orange, yellow, green, blue amber in the case of a musical. (To help simplify our plans here, the neutral lights have been coded N. Actual colour filter selection is best postponed until after the position and type of light has been decided).

W = Warm   C = Cool

COLOUR PLANNING FOR A PLAY

In a naturalistic play, colour is often used to create a fluid atmosphere that can shift from warm cheerfulness to cool sadness. If an area is lit with some lights in warm tones and some in cools, the dimmers of the control board can be used to achieve a whole series of options from an extreme of the warm colour alone through the neutrality of both together, to the other extreme of cool colour alone. Which (if any) of the areas need to have this kind of 'double cover' of colour tones? In this example, discussion with the director has established that such a *colour palette* seems necessary around the central areas and the desk, whereas the upstage corners and downstage right can manage on a warm tint only – although perhaps one that is a little closer to a compromise neutral than the warms in the mixable areas. In such a naturalistic production the actual colour tints chosen are likely to be quite subtle.
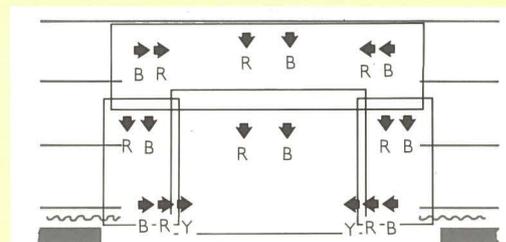
B = Blue   R = Red   Y = Yellow

COLOUR PLANNING FOR A MUSICAL

The dialogue scenes of a musical require the subtle colour tones that are appropriate for a naturalistic play. However, the musical numbers, particularly when solo singers can be given isolating visibility from tightly focused follow spots, usually call for strongly atmospheric colouring. And many dance sequences, where the body is relatively more expressive than the face, respond well to positive use of quite strong colour. This example shows a much used technique where the colour is applied in rather broader washes than the areas selected for scene location. The front half of the stage is divided into three areas, each lit from above in rather saturated colours: a hot and cold rather than a warm and cool. The rear half is treated as one area, also with a hot and cold from above. From the side comes further washes, probably in slightly less saturated hues. These may divide the stage into bands: in this case an upstage band and a downstage band, possibly splitting the stage into left and right but just as likely covering the full width. With relatively neutral colour from the front, saturated colours from above and intermediate colours from the side, we have a *colour palette* that offers considerable scope.

SPECIALS

The major proportion of a stage lighting rig is focused to form a palette of areas and colours whose various combinations will provide the desired fluidity of selectivity and atmosphere. However, there are certain lights whose function is so 'special' that they cannot make a significant contribution when mixing the basic palette.

FOR THE ACTOR

Specials usually consist of spotlights set so tightly that the spaces they light cannot be considered as areas. They are often for moments when an actor has to be picked out (perhaps only head and shoulders) on an otherwise blacked-out stage. They need to be listed in a priority order for close scrutiny and reduction to essentials.

FOR SPECIAL EFFECTS

There may be a request for equipment to produce clouds, flames, water, lightning, etc. When listing it is always prudent to remember that such effects can draw attention away from the actor rather than positively support a performance. And if the effect is essential, then the effect of light reflected from fire or water is often more telling than a pictorial representation of the actual fire or water.

FOR THE SCENERY

The proportion of the rig focused on the scenery will be very small. With the exception of skys and back or front cloths, scenery normally gets sufficient general wash from the reflected light bouncing off the stage floor from the lights that have been set for the actors. Indeed, as discussed in the following pages, many of the basic problems of lighting design arise from difficulties in stopping actor light hitting directly on the scenery. Successful lighting of scenery depends on augmenting the diffuse reflected general light by selective highlighting of chosen scenic elements, or parts of these elements. This can vary from bold gashes to soft emphasis. Again, to be listed and reduced to essentials after a debate based on priorities and available resources.