

Have you ever looked back on a favourite show and wished you'd captured it on film? Freelance author and production electrician Robert Halliday offers some advice on ...

RECORDING THE LIGHT



"A Place with the Pigs" by Athol Fugard. An example of the extremes of contrast that often appear in theatre - a bright face against a completely dark background. The exposure was set by zooming in to the face (since that is the important part of the shot), metering, then re-composing the picture.

Photography is used in theatre for a wide variety of purposes - from the glossy black-and-white shots actors use to get parts, to the pictures sent to the newspapers to pull the audience in. But what the word photography actually means is "recording light", and this can be one of its most valuable uses - as a record of the lighting, set, and costume designs of a show.

Sadly, many small-scale productions are never recorded in this way. Lack of time means that a bright state is put up and a few posed shots taken for the press. Once the final curtain falls, the production is lost forever. And that's a shame, because although taking in-performance shots under real lighting conditions is a little harder, it needn't take up any more time.

As a basic setup, all that's needed is an SLR camera (either autofocus or manual, although



"Cabaret" An element of luck again! The shot shows another different theatrical lighting condition - strong backlight. Here exposing for the central character's lit face has thrown the rest of the company into silhouette. This was the plan behind the lighting for the scene, so the picture has captured it well.

manual control of exposure is essential), a lens and some colour film. The most useful lens is probably a 35-80mm or 35-135mm zoom since these allow for a wide variety of shots without having to fumble around changing lenses. Most reasonably priced zooms aren't very "fast" (meaning that they don't allow very much light through), and so quite a fast film will be required - at least 400 ASA, and possibly up to 1000 ASA. This means that the pictures will be a bit grainy - they'll be fine as a record of the show, but some black-and-white posed shots will still be needed for publicity purposes.

The best time for taking production photos is normally the last dress rehearsal, since by then all of the elements of the show should be finalised. And, basically, it's then a matter of knowing the best moments and being in the right place to capture them. The problem is, the light-meters on most cameras are designed for taking pictures outdoors, where the entire scene is at about the same brightness. On the stage, there is a huge range of contrast - at an extreme, a brightly lit singer in a followspot may be surrounded by black drapes. The meter will try to average out all of the dark areas, come up with an impossible exposure and suggest using a flash! Ignore it! Instead, zoom in to fill the entire frame with something brightly lit - like the singer's face. Then set the aperture and shutter speed that the meter suggests manually, and re-compose the shot as required. Print film will cope better than slides with the slight exposure errors which always result when working like this.

Some scenes might really be dim, requiring shutter speeds of 1/30th of a second or longer.



"Amadeus" by Peter Shaffer

This can lead to the picture being blurred either because the camera, or the person in the shot, moved.

A tripod will reduce camera shake although it makes it hard to move quickly to get the next shot - instead, try bracing the camera against a seat. Choosing a moment when the character is still overcomes the other problem.

Above all, don't be afraid to take as many shots as possible - wide-angles of the set, close-ups of the action, and some of the rig. You're not going to get a second chance. And get them developed carefully; minilabs don't cope very well with theatrical shots, and if you're not happy with the results you should demand that they reprint them. Then, with careful mounting in a good album, you'll have something to remember a well-lit show by, for years to come. *

All productions at the Gulbenkian Theatre, Canterbury. Article and photographs © Robert Halliday 1992



Scene from "Accidental Death of an Anarchist" by Dario Fo.