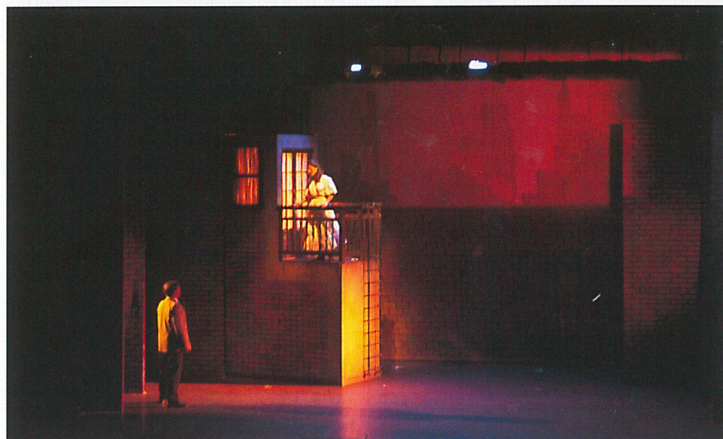


WELSH LIGHT GLORY

Mike Robertson describes his lighting design for Leonard Bernstein's "West Side Story" at the Lyric Theatre, Carmarthen, Wales.



Tony and Maria convey their love for each other.



The dance scene at the gym is brightly-lit to convey the energy of the performers.

West Side Story is my idea of a dream ticket, its plenitude of locations, timescales and themes, coupled with beautiful songs, demand that its lighting is not approached lightly (no pun intended!).

As a piece of theatre it plays hopefulness and joy against painful and inevitable tragedy; also there is a good mix of exterior/interior, night and day scenes all making for a diverse range of aesthetic images.

I could have approached this show in one of two ways. Firstly I could have designed a saturation rig with a series of 'special' lanterns doing reasonably accurate predetermined jobs. Or I could visualise spatially. A series of pictures that represent different scenes, or even lines in a song and design rigs within rigs to light those moments in the show. If I had designed it in a "General Cover and Special" way I would be leaving a bulk of the design to the plotting session, where I would then begin to assemble my series of pictures. But by my "Multi-Scene" approach I commit myself to a number of lighting states that I consider follow the ideas and themes of the production at a much earlier stage. The problem that I feel about the "G C & S" way of designing lighting, is that it can easily become an obsessive exercise in symmetry and pretty pieces of paper. It is an easy 'get out' for not truly examining how the design process could work best for the piece.

It is all very well to wax lyrical about the "Multi-Scene" approach, but inevitably someone will say "What happens if you've conceived the look of a scene and when it comes to it, it doesn't work". The answer is to design enough safeguards within the plan to cover your back for any eventuality; this is all that I did for *West Side Story*.

Take, for example, the famous balcony scene where Tony and Maria



Gobo pattern projection is used to express the virtues of America.

sing "Tonight". Within the structure of a grubby neighbourhood we want to have a few clear moments of beauty where they convey their love for each other. But we must not lose sight of the obvious sadness that is to occur, so the visual beauty is heightened to look supernatural. The balcony at the tail end of this scene [top left] is lit from within the truck in a loving amber, from a low wing position in an orange - to suggest a setting sun - and the sky cloth is lit in a heavy pink, to suggest that for our two characters their love is spreading across the city. The scene is backlit in a heavy warm blue which suggests a sweep of serenity and by mixing with the ambers it further adds a pink tinge to the downstage where Tony stands. The song ends and the light from the truck reverts to a cool blue, the sky turns to a mix of chocolate and slate blue and a mercury discharge lamp with a high colour temperature comes on. Immediately the beauty is

gone and we are left with the harsh moonlight (the bluey white of the mercury) and the gloomy sky.

At the end of the "America" song [centre] one character starts by singing about the wonderment of living in Puerto Rico, although the rest of the assembled immigrants don't share her enthusiasm, but the key point is that she believes it! So the first lighting image was a complicated series of shutter cuts to provide this one character with her own serene light as she selfishly indulges in peaceful thought, whilst the rest of the company are uplit in a foul pale green to wash them in disgust. The soloist's light is complicated, for it had never to touch any of the others, else it would spoil her isolation. This was achieved by careful blocking and a few Strand Cantata profiles shooting off bars and trucks at bizarre angles. Then the company sing about the virtues of America. Unfortunately they only see the commercial icons

and therefore by the end, it is fitting that they should be engulfed in dollars (using gobo pattern projection) to the point of looking farcical, thus illustrating the superficiality of what they sing and what the audience believe.

Finally the dance at the gym is a fun scene because it is a change to be bright (there aren't that many in this show). Because it is a dance packed full of energy and conflict, it starts with the company backlit very strongly in a raunchy red (2k Fresnels) whilst the music builds. Then the lighting builds [top right]. It is simply two rows of Parcans at about 6 and a half foot high running up and down stage, providing the intensity needed in the scene, whilst an imbalance in colour on either side aids the idea of conflict.

In all, I conceived about 70 pictures in the rehearsals which were adapted to fit the fluidity of the choreography, blocking and physical nature of the set. By the time the show was on we had about 100 cues and a 140 luminaire rig built up "rig within rig" style and then cutting luminaires that were to be common to several pictures. There was a fair mix of conventional tungsten halogen luminaires with mercury and sodium discharge lamps to provide "real" moonlight and streetlight.

In the second week of the show's run, I phoned a chief electrician friend of mine to cheekily enthuse about the lighting of the show, the conversation was cheeky enough for me to say playfully "Well at least I'm young enough to come up with new ideas", to which she replied, "Yes my darling, but I'm old enough to tell you they've been done before"...

Photographs by
Mike Robertson.

