

THROWING LIGHT ON ANIMAL FARM

MIKE ROBERTSON EXPLAINS THE THINKING BEHIND MERCHISTON SCHOOLS' PRODUCTION OF THE ORWELL CLASSIC

Animal Farm was one of the productions to be put on in our recently built theatre. The show itself is a strange mixture of light hearted songs and comic moments combined with overtones, such as Communism. So the approach to the production was that it was a musical with serious overtones.

It was staged on essentially five different areas. The stage was supposed to be the barn, half of the apron was a yard, the other half was a house and there were two main yard areas in front of and to the side of the apron.

There was very little scenery to compete with. The barn and the yards were littered with bales of hay and except the odd window frame that was the scenery. So my first thought as to lighting was: should I make the lighting abstract or realistic? I ended up somewhere between the two.

I gave the barn coverage from four 1kW Fresnels on the inside proscenium bar to light upstage, and used four wide angle profiles just in front of the proscenium to light downstage.

One of the specials which was common to both apron and stage was a wash in middle blue to give the action a freezing effect. For this, we used four 500W floodlights again on the inside proscenium bar to do the stage. To achieve this effect on the apron we used two medium angle 1kW profiles at a low angle, on the FOH booms.

Another special onstage was an area lit in blood red for a conspiracy scene. Here we simply used two 500W lanterns on the FOH booms lighting a little spot on stage on the prompt side. This was also toplit by a good old Pattern 23. All of these lanterns were coloured in Chromoid 164 (medium red).

I had decided eight weeks before the production, in our first production meeting that I would hire a couple of Parcans to give two strong shafts of light onto the stage from the OP wings. This was to give a sort of sunlight through windows effect. One of the lanterns we set to skim the back wall,

which looked good. They were coloured in Chromoid 150 (pale yellow). These Parcans had medium angle lamps in them but on reflection I think narrow angle would have been better.

My first reaction to the hay bales appearing on stage was — 'What a damn nuisance, for access to the grid'. But after that, I was quite inspired by them, as they picked up my wide use of straws, apricots and ambers nicely.

Then I thought I would light them in break-up gobos with broken colour. I used small break-ups with straw/yellow/green/light blue/and light red gels. The effect of this on the hay was quite breathtaking.

I used it first as a 'nice pattern' but soon extended its use to form the basis of a tranquil, abstract concept during one of the songs. I liked it so much that

I hung two Minim 23's on the FOH bar to light down into the audience but this time with just pea green and straw gels. This was to extend the onstage concept as well as give me a 'mood setting' intermediate house lighting state.

To light the yard half of the apron we used four 1kW PC's on the FOH bar. Our FOH bar is very depressing to work with, as it is hung at quite a low angle, so light from it onto the apron or stage is at a near horizontal, making lighting on the apron look bland.

To compensate for this problem, I tend in most productions to use different colours on either side, to try and sculpt the actors more.

The largest of the yard areas was yard A. We lit this with two 1kW PC's again on the FOH bar, and a 500W floodlight at the bottom of the OP boom lighting in.

The other yards were in front of the apron, and were all lit together using three 500W Fresnels with light yellow gels. Finally, to light the house, I just used 1 500W Fresnel with no gel, as it was not a valuable acting area and did not merit a 1kW.

The production was great to light with little resources and the results were pleasing. It was very different to the kind of lighting I usually design for Merchiston musicals. There wasn't even a trace of surprise pink!



Photo: Merchiston Castle School, Edinburgh