

WITH COUNTLESS LIGHTING AWARDS TO HIS CREDIT, 'DISPLACED NEW YORKER', DAVID HERSEY, WHO HAS BEEN BASED IN ENGLAND SINCE THE LATE 1960'S, IS CURRENTLY THE TOAST OF THE LIGHTING WORLD WITH THE HIT WEST END MUSICAL *MISS SAIGON*. HERE HE EXPLAINS HOW, FOR HIM, LIGHTING A SHOW IS...



Photos: Rex Features

...A VOYAGE OF DISCOVERY

With a string of hit shows behind him, such as *Evita*, *Cats*, *Les Miserables*, *Starlight Express*, *Chess*, *Carmen* and a clutch of Tony awards for his lighting designs, it comes as a surprise to learn that David Hersey's greatest personal triumph, in his estimation, was not one of the top money-spinners.

'The show which gave me the most pleasure was only a semi-commercial success,' he admits, and that was *Nicholas Nickleby*.

'That was one of the most exciting pieces I have ever had the pleasure of working on. It was the most organic and most fluid design I have ever managed to achieve. It was the kind of thing where lighting is sometimes at its best where you are at your most invisible.'

'I only got a nomination for that but I know in my heart of hearts that it was by far the best thing I have ever done.'

The Hersey production currently drawing most attention is *Miss Saigon*

at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, where a mix of lanterns and effects is controlled from a Galaxy 2. Not the least of the talking points is the first use in this country of light curtains.

The musical is a love story set in Saigon in 1975 as the last US troops are preparing to leave. How did he go about designing the lighting?

He explained, 'The process was fairly typical. We had been through several versions and John Napier, the designer, had not quite developed his set ideas. We worked together and negotiated some lighting positions which ultimately became part of the structure.'

'It became clear that in a number of scenes the set would move and flow and would require a rig that was not a conventional kind of fitter rig, which led to using moving lights and motorised light curtains. That is not a show where the lighting is particularly up-front but it developed successfully and I am quite pleased with it.'

How did David go about planning

the lighting for a major production? He explained, 'Well, first of all, you get used to certain kinds of equipment and the hire companies tend to have certain kinds of equipment available. In the end, it's a business and you have to work to a figure and of course each show has its own problems.'

'You make sure you use a fair amount of conventional equipment so you have more money left over for the "toys" if they're required. For example, we had to alter the original design of *Miss Saigon* quite drastically in order to be able to afford the moving lights.'

'In some ways, designing for a major production is a voyage of discovery. There are so many things which have to interact. Ideas can come to you at any point but you have to start by gaining some control over the space so it becomes a kind of physical exercise, achieved in relation to the script — and even that can change dramatically as you go along.'

'I always work to a budget but then