

A Guide to Lighting Design



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Since Stephen graduated from WAAPA his design credits have included *Open House*, *Small Poppies*, *Svetlana in Slingbacks* all for Company B. Other work includes *Marinheiro* and *The Waiting Room* (Platform 27), *Michael Leunig / Neil Finn Parables Tour* (Australian Chamber Orchestra), *Connie and Kevin and the Secret Life of Groceries* (Siren Theatre Company & B Sharp), *Lobby Hero* (Ensemble Theatre Company), *Misanthrope* and *Sweet Phoebe* (Hair of the Dog), *Wicked Sisters* and *Rabbit* (Griffin Theatre Company), *360 Positions in a One Night Stand* (Kicking and Screaming & Sydney Festival) *Pussy Boy* (Kicking and Screaming & B Sharp) and many fringe companies around Sydney. Most recently *Two Up* (A Sydney Festival initiative) and *Arab's Mouth* (Smug productions). Stephen's future designs include *Brokenville* (ATYP) which is touring to London as a part of The National Theatre Youth festival and *Training* a dance piece by Paul Codero.

The following is an overview of the principles of lighting design and role and process of the lighting designer.

As lighting is a very visual art form it would be a good idea to have visual aids when researching the equipment and various lighting states.

The following overview is based on preparations for a theatre production, but these principles of lighting design can be applied to other disciplines as well such as dance, musical theatre or events.

1. FIRST READ

First and foremost is to read the play you are about to light all the way through. Don't consider the lighting side of things during the first read, just read the script to get a feel for the play, to understand the text and its meaning.

Once you have read the play, go back to the start and read it from a lighting designer's point of view.

Read the play with these questions in mind:

What is the overall feel of the play – drama ? comedy ? suspense ?

What are the defining moments in the script ?

- a death
- a resolution
- a discovery

For each scene, is it day or night?

Are any special effects required from the lighting ?

- sunset
- rain
- lightning

Where is the play set ?

- inside: fluorescent look, strong light from a window, incandescent light ie standard household light
- outside: broad back light, cool light
- country: soft light
- city: neon, man made light, harsher light

Once you have read through the script and think you have a good idea of the text and what it means and what you think it is going to look like on stage ... **TALK TO THE DIRECTOR**

2. TALK TO THE DIRECTOR (this is an ongoing dialogue throughout the design and production process)

The director is the person who has the overall vision for the piece. You must talk to them about their vision for the piece – how they see it looking on stage; how each scene will move into the next.

Talk to the director about:

- your lighting ideas and key points you have noticed in the script (you're seeing things from a lighting designers point of view and this may differ from the director's view of things)
- if the timeline is not clear, work through the script and define whether each scene is night or day
- discuss each scene – what's the overall feeling of each one?

These points are discussed so that the director and the lighting designer can progress in the same direction. It is important to keep talking to the director throughout the rehearsal process as things change once the actors and director work through the play and you need to keep up with these changes.

3. TALK TO THE CREATIVE TEAM (again, this is an ongoing dialogue throughout the design and production process)

The set designer and the director have usually come up with an idea of what the set/world of the play will look like, sometimes even before you have come on board as the lighting designer, so you'll have to work within this world.

Talk to the set designer about any special requirements that might affect your lighting design such as:

- set dressings i.e. light fittings
- cycloramas
- any set elements that could look more interesting with your help i.e. putting light inside of things which have holes or slits in them

Talk to the sound designer about the music in each scene and the music across the scene changes (this will affect the timing of lighting cues).

4. ATTEND REHEARSALS

It is important for the lighting designer to attend the first day of rehearsals. On the first day of rehearsals, the actors will read through the script for the first time and the play will become more than words on a page - it will start to have its own life.

Attend further rehearsals of the scenes in which the lighting designer will play a big part i.e. if there is a scene with torches as the only light source.

Once the company has started to run the play look at:

- the placement of actors in the space: where they are standing in particular moments and which parts of the stage they are working in at any given time
- where lighting cues are required: scene changes, defining moments
- get a feel for the production and a sense of whether your lighting will fit in with what the company is doing

Once this is down we move on the actual designing

PRINCIPLES OF LIGHTING DESIGN

What is the role of lighting in a production ?

It is primarily:

- to allow the audience to view the production ie. the visibility
- to provide selective focus: directing the audience's attention to a certain area be it total focus or highlighting a certain person or people out of a large group. Tied in with this is the use of selective visibility; the controlling of what can and can't be seen through the use of shadow and light.
- to create mood and to stimulate an emotional response to what the audience is watching.
- for modelling: this is to reveal the shape and form of an object. In the case of theatre it is to give the actor dimension and to separate them from the set and space around them.
- to establish a given circumstance ie. time of day, season, location etc.
- to contrast: the difference between light and shade.

This is done through the controllable factors of lighting:

LAMP SELECTION

There are many different types of luminaries available for use in the art of lighting design. The following is a list of the most commonly used fixtures.

Profile or spot light: A profile is a lamp with a lot of control about it. It can be made to have a hard or soft edge to the beam and has shutters to control the beam so you can cut the beam off set or somewhere you don't want the light to hit. It is used for localized area lighting as a special or single spot. They come in varying wattages or brightness from 650W to 12kW (dimmiest to brightest), including the new super bright technology low wattage for high output.

Fresnel or wash light: Unlike the profile the Fresnel has a soft edged beam. It is primarily used for wash lighting; by using a few of these together in a line you can cover a large area with an even coverage. They have barn doors on the front of them for control of the beam. They come in varying wattages or brightness from 650W to 2kW (dimmiest to brightest)

PC or Piano Convex: This lamp is a cross between a Fresnel and a profile. It is used for soft localized lighting or for wash light. It also has barn doors for control.

Par Lamps: These lamps are a broad soft lamp covering a large space with no control over the beam at all. They are an oval shaped beam and can be rotated horizontally or vertically. They come in four sizes very narrow, narrow, medium and wide floods.

There are different wattages and names but they are essentially the same style of light:

-Par 64: 1000w; the brightest of the par family in this country we use the 110 volt variety so we have to use them in pairs.

-Par 56: 150w or 300w; these are a dimmer version of the 64 and are 240 volts so can be used on their own.
-Par 38: 100w or 150w; these are the same light as you see in many backyards around the place. They come in narrow, medium and wide floods.
-Par 16: 50w and 75w; also known as Birdies (one under par ... hehehe ... sorry a little lighting joke). A small fitting used as foot lighting and to get light into small places i.e. in sets and doorways etc. where space is the issue. Beam angles from 10 degrees to 60 degrees i.e. very narrow to wide.

Flood lighting: Floods are used to cover a very large area with one light they are broad and soft and have no control. Used primarily for lighting cycloramas or back cloths. They come in 100w to 2000w

LAMP POSITION

Front lighting: This is the light from the front of the performer primarily to light their face so they can be seen. The lamp can either be positioned straight on to the performer or at a 45-degree angle to the performer. For the latter, you use two lamps to light the same area, one from the left and one from the right of the performer to assist with the modelling.

Back lighting: As the name suggests, it is the light coming from behind the performer to bring them out from the set or space behind them i.e. the modelling again. The lamp can be positioned either straight behind the performer or in a $\frac{3}{4}$ position; about 45 degrees behind where they are standing.

Side lighting: This is the lighting coming side on to the performer, either high or low. It is primarily used for dance as it sculpts the body very well but is not very good for lighting the face. It can be used in conjunction with front light to create very nice shadows and to aid in contrast.

Foot lighting: Once again as the name suggests it is light that comes from the floor or the feet. It can be used for that scary or sinister look or to create a different space for a character ie. a spy doing an aside to the audience.

Top lighting: Lighting from directly above the performer. This is used for isolation or to define the space that you are lighting. It also creates nice shadows on the performer's face and body if that is the look you're after.

COLOUR

Colour is created in two ways through the use of lighting gel or fitters and through intensity or colour temperature.

Some of the colours I use to create the mood or feeling of a scene are:

- Day: generally depicted in theatre as amber or similar
- Night: generally deep blues.
- Scary: red

Or in the case of a feeling:

- Playful: bright colours
- Sombre: deep colours

Colour temperature

Colour temperature is the colour that the particular light source gives out ie. incandescent. This can be changed through the intensity of the lamp.

For example, household lamps are an amber colour where as fluorescent lights give out a bluish cooler light. Most theatre lamps will generate an amber colour.

INTENSITY

Intensity or the level of light (ie. bright or dark) can create mood and contrast.

For example:

- Bright: happy
- Dark: mysterious

It can also focus the attention of the audience.

MOVEMENT

This refers to the timing of a lighting cue: how long lights take to fade up or to fade out. It also refers to the movement of light across the stage i.e. light moving from one part of the stage to another. For example, moving from a special to a broad lighting state.

NOW OVER TO YOU

The most important thing to remember is that lighting design is an interpretative art form - there is no right or wrong. There are rules to follow but there is no right or wrong.

In lighting design you have to play with things in order to get them right so don't be afraid to experiment.

Think of lighting design as painting with light. Light is the paint and the stage is your canvas.

Related links

Australasian Lighting Association Website www.alia.com.au