

Light and the Performer

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Most importantly, we are, first and foremost, lighting the performer. Whatever their genre, this is something which we should consider above everything else.

How do we define this “performer”? As the onlooker, how do we perceive them? Dancers perform and are telling their story as three dimensional moving shapes. Actors tell their story not only in three dimensions but verbally too. As a Practitioner of Light one must accept the fact that the performer is the focal point and therefore must be continually treated as such throughout their performance. They have to “live” and be a part of the entire picture but one must not distract from them unless... it is an integral part of the performance that they be “masked” and removed from the space for very good reasons.

POSITIONING OF LIGHT

The angle at which light falls on the performer is a vital component of the revelation of the shape, form and our perception of the performer. Low positioned side lighting, universal in performance dance, assists in conveying to the onlooker, the human form and structure. The angle of light determines the angle of shadow; therefore we also have to consider shadow in order to reveal the performer successfully.

The performer has to exist within some sort of environment. They need to exist in a physical locality, but also in a psychological environment. Therefore the immediate surroundings may need to be illuminated to confirm their placement within their environment and also their total affiliation to that multifaceted framework.

Low level side lighting, so frequently employed in dance, enhances the sculptural characteristics of the human form. It extracts the form from its background and because of the nature of the angles of the light, develops shadows as well as highlights, therefore the body becomes a three dimensional shape in a three dimensional space. It can be used as the sole illumination of the dancer, using different strengths of light and colour and mixtures of both... or one can add further lighting positions to soften the hard shadows, illuminate some or all of the surroundings or add dramatic shadow play.

REVELATION OF HUMAN FORM

The revelation of the human form, the performer, is controlled by the light (and the subsequent creation of the shadow) that falls on the performer. Contrast involving the light and shadow falling on the performer determines the perception of form by the audience and determines how we construe their words, expressions and actions. What do we see... are we seeing comedy or do we see tragedy? Are we able to see their faces, their eyes? Can we look deep inside them? Even from 30ft away, sat in the

audience, their eyes of the performer are of vital importance. Is it alright that we are bemused with what they are doing / saying? What are they portraying?

Changing the position of the light to a location beneath the player will modify their form spectacularly, whilst moving the light to the side has a less significant effect on the perception of the human form.

The focus on the performer must always be “sharp”. Sometimes we find that this is not always possible but one should really make this goal paramount.

It is perfectly possible for light to make the actions of the performer give the impression of normality or totally the opposite. It can give grounds for our conscious impression to be one of belief, skepticism, uncertainty or perspicuity. The way in which we create the many foci for the performer, will in more ways than one, determine the absolute focus of the performance as a whole. One can't conceal an awful performance using light (or the lack of it) unless of course one removes every trace of the light! But it is possible to enhance a performance to such a degree, that it improves it.

Good stage lighting will work wonders for even the most mediocre of shows. Conversely, bad stage lighting can devastate even the most excellent ones. It is all down to the acuity of the Director and Lighting Designer and other members of the creative team, skillfully executed cueing, a well realised lighting rig and the precise choice of instruments.

COLOUR

One of the principal characters of light which help us work our craft, as Lighting Designers, is colour. We are able to utilise this incredible medium to create a plausible environment for the performer in which to work. Let's not forget the use of white light. It is, as we know, the cohesion of every visible spectral wavelength. Therefore this has extremely powerful properties.

Our perception of the performer can be controlled to an enormous degree with the use of colour, not only with heavy saturates but with the subtlest of cosmetic tints.

Colour, used in performance lighting, is extremely important. It not only assists us with our quest in creating the realistic and believable environment but it also assists us in revealing the performer in appropriate and flattering ways. We possess the ability to subtly change colours throughout a scene, therefore allowing us to warm the scene or cool it down to follow the mood perhaps.

We can use colour in a more blatant fashion to enhance the piece and excite or depress the onlooker. We can use strong colours to create extremely redolent moods! Using what we call “artistic license” we can use quite powerful colours to depict the time of day, like a sunset or moonlight. They may not be utterly naturalistic but they can tell an audience precisely what we wish them to perceive.

Coloured light may be described as the existence of particular wavelengths of the spectrum and the nonexistence of other wavelengths. Using “Colour Filters” we simply remove or “filter” out the unwanted colours from the spectral wavelength from the white light source. For example, a strong (primary) red filter removes or absorbs all but the red wavelength, giving us red light. So by using a

subtle tint, we are simply removing a small parts of the spectral wavelength in order to leave us with the desired colour. Etcetera.

Lighting designers often merge or combine colours by using a subtractive or an additive method. As an example of this, mixing together several different coloured lights on a given surface is known as an “additive” method. Creating coloured light by filtering the original white light is known as a “subtractive” method. If you were to place the three primary colours physically together in the same white light, they would effectively filter out the entire spectrum, thus blacking out the light altogether!

DANCE

Dance, is using the human form as a style of kinetic sculpture. Because of this simple, yet complex factor, experienced Dancers and Choreographers recognise the importance of this and appreciate light as an ingredient of their occupation, to a far greater extent than actors and other theatre disciplines. Dancers who are able to play an active role during the lighting process, either with the design or the mechanical process will, in fact, develop a far greater understanding of the overall visual characteristics of their performance.

A Choreographer, on occasions, takes control of the design to a certain degree, particularly if they have a concept in mind when creating the dance piece itself. They may well assume the function of Lighting Designer to contain and further administer the manner in which the performance takes shape overall. As the Choreographer is also an artist, developing and creating their work of art, through the cooperation and support of the dancers, they in fact will have a preconceived thought process with every move logged and scripted either on paper or in their mind. They may not in many cases, be able to translate these thoughts into the actual realisation of a completed and successful lighting design but in collaboration with the Lighting Designer they will find the ability to turn thought into light.

Modern dance has established that the relation connecting performer and light can be adequately engaging to embrace the captivation of an audience and of their imagination.

LIGHTING DESIGN

The development of lighting design is something that is premeditated and cued, to a large extent, in same way as the dance process itself. Lighting creates the mood and atmosphere of the production, thus it develops the emotions and feelings and consequently leads the onlooker through the story telling process. Lighting Design is the development of creativeness, utilising the behaviour and functionality of light to affect the mind, objects and the surrounding spacial environment.

Lighting is an ever evolving art form and therefore there ought not to be a right or a wrong but simply another way. Unfortunately there are many ways that one can in fact go wrong in the case of a performance. There are particular guidelines set out by practitioners in the field who have experimented enough times to find ways which definitely work and ways that do not. There are Designers who have

set standards with the ways in which basic lighting design principles are carried out. These sorts of things work well but should only be used as guidelines, to assist in the development of one's design.

Design for performance requires a scrupulous perception of the psychological and also the material aspects of lighting.

THE PERFORMER

The concept, the surrounding space, the time and the story must all be taken into account but what of the performers themselves? It is the Performer that audiences have taken the trouble to see... it is not the lighting! However, without the lighting, they would not see the Performers! So it is vitally important that we give the Performer as much of our time as possible. One could simply turn on the "working lights" and you would make the Performer visible but the result would be uninteresting and unflattering. Without good stage lighting, the performance would be less evocative and structured, if at all.

From the time when theatre began, people have understood the benefits which spectacle brought to the performance space... astounding their audiences and using visual effects to influence the audience's frame of mind and their complete awareness. However, this is not everything. We need to see the performer, whatever the case may be, unless we are deliberately attempting to hide the performer for some particular reason.

IN CONCLUSION

Let's revisit an earlier paragraph where we look at the revelation of the human form. It is not difficult to make the performer visible but should they be a three dimensional shape or simply flat and "cut out"? With a carefully constructed and well thought out design, one is able to transform the Performer into a 3D living form within a 3D performance space.

Light and the Performer make quite a team!