

Course: THEA 272 Scenography

Designing the Lights

Read the script I

Step 1: Get a complete copy of the script. Block off two hours, find a comfortable chair, pour a cup of coffee, lock the door, turn off the phone, and read. You should not pause to make notes; just read. Don't think about lighting or anything but following the playwright through the work, going where he leads you, enjoying the unfolding of the work. You will never have this experience again.

Read the script II

This is the first working reading. Some scripts require multiple readings to get a handle on the ideas, so this may be more than one actual reading. You should have a copied script rather than the acting edition so that you can have it on regular paper, printed one side only, allowing notes on the facing pages.

Research the show

It is time to learn something about prior productions of the play and the critical views of the work. Summaries, reviews of productions, academic analyses, and sometimes directors' notes are all available on the Internet for any known work. Often a brief summary will provide some insight into a theme you may have overlooked. You also may find out something about how it has been lit, but do not allow this to frame your approach uncritically.

Meet the Artistic Team: the first general design meeting

The first design meeting is very important. It is very likely that discussions between the director and the scenic and costume designers already have begun. It is difficult to be clear about what happens in the first meeting. In a typical pattern the director will outline some ideas about the show, about its themes, and about the style. There usually is discussion of key moments and the kind of imagery they should involve or evoke. If the other designers are involved, they also will make contributions. The discussion typically will progress through indirection, almost never in a linear way. It will leap around in the script and associate ideas and moments from various parts of the play. It will involve references to external ideas – paintings, music, dance – that convey or evoke the spirit of the play.

Research the lighting

You must begin the design with ideas about how the lighting appears to the audience. You cannot begin a design with considerations of equipment, lighting locations, colors, control technique, or anything else that is used to implement the lighting idea. You have to begin with the lighting ideas themselves. Developing them is a three step, reiterative process:

- Research
- Observation
- Imagination

Research

It is likely that you have never really looked at light in the way that is required of a lighting designer. We respond to the mood and evocative imagery of light, but the controllable properties of direction (or distribution), intensity, and color must be observed specifically and thoughtfully. Those are the choices you will make as a designer. You must build your repertory of lighting ideas for this project so that you can construct your design deliberately.

The first lighting design conference

Different directors work differently, but there are some consistent practices. Most directors don't want a lot of meetings – lives are busy and they spend a tremendous amount of time in rehearsals. They do like to talk through their thinking about how the show should flow and work.

Show up with your script, your notes, and your images. Revisit your list of *key moments* in the play – those confrontations, reversals, revelations, climactic moments, resolutions, slapstick bits and crisp bits of cleverness – and update it.

You should leave this meeting with clear ideas about the look of major scenes, and which scenes and moments the director feels strongly about. This is not a cue meeting, but a concept meeting.

Confer with the designers and technical directors

A critical step in gathering information is to confer with the Scenic and Costume Designers to ensure the coherence and feasibility of the project.

The Project takes shape

You now have a sense of the shape and dimension of the project. You know the script, you know what the director is looking for, and you know where the other members of the artistic team are going. You have concepts and ideas for the show. It is now time to begin the plan.

Put it on a schedule

Up to this point you may have been working with general ideas about the calendar. It is critical to lay out a specific schedule of work. You have tasks you have to complete that must coordinate with the work of others. You have to plan when you will need help from others and how you will use them.

Rehearsal research

Lighting the stage requires knowing where the acting is placed, what the feel or sense of the scene is as it is played, and how scenes transition from one to the next. The only place to understand this is in rehearsal. You can get a sense of things in early rehearsals, but decisions are in flux until they have been worked on for some time.

Cue the script

The next step is to cue the script. This involves two actual processes. One is **placing** the cues in the script, which can be done at any time, even before seeing rehearsals. These placements won't be final, but you make no marks in your script that are not in pencil. **EVERYTHING** can change. The second process is **describing** what actually happens in the cue. This must wait until you see what is going on in the show, because it involves knowing what has to be lit where, and what the look of the cue should be.

Cues you will need

There are at least four kinds of cues:

Transition cues occur at the beginnings and endings of scenes, acts, and the performance as a whole. Another type of transition cue occurs with "step-outs", when the action steps out of the scenic context, such as musical numbers.

Emphasis cues shift lighting emphasis and audience focus to one part of the stage for some dramatic purpose. They also temporarily brighten entrances, usually without drawing attention.

Bumps change to brighter or more colorful levels to punctuate dynamic changes in musical numbers.

Effects cues provide specific lighting features, such as headlights or explosions or the apparent light from practicals (light sources in the setting).

Defining the cues

The second part of cuing the script is defining each cue. After the major transition cues are placed in the script, the designer enters some of the most difficult work of the design process. Each cue is imagined, planned and described. The more thoroughly it is done at this stage, the less time is spent in cuing sessions and the fewer installation (hang, focus, patch, color) corrections will have to be made. Every decision made now will reduce time in the hall and the demand on labor resources while you make up your mind at the tech desk.

Write cue 1

Lay out your rehearsal maps, research images, color media swatch books, mini-flashlight (for looking at color media) and script. You also will need sheets of paper, a .7 or .9mm mechanical pencil, and a big eraser. Start by heading your first sheet of paper: PAGE [space] CUE [space] TIME [space] DESCRIPT. Draw a line across and write PRESET below. On a new line, the first page number of the script, 1 (for Cue #1), and def (for default time). Then describe the lighting or look as the audience enters, such as "House full, blue back, lav R side low". You have defined the first cue clearly enough that you can construct it easily and quickly during the cue writing session.

Plotting the design

Your lighting design now exists. You've researched the show, cued it, colored it, and determined lighting directions. Plotting the design is the first step in implementing that design idea.

Requirements list and magic sheet (lighting key)

The first thing you need to grasp is what exactly the task is. What is going to be demanded of the lighting equipment you put in the air? You have to begin with a requirements list.

To make a requirements list, methodically begin with the first cue definition, and list everything that cue has to be able to do. Also include the color and other additional information from the enhanced rehearsal maps. In the case of the example given above: "House full, blue back, lav R side low":

1. house lights -Q 1, 2
2. blue back R64 -Q 1
3. lavender right R54 -Q 1

Continue through the cue definitions. Then *consolidate the list* by looking at where requirements can be served by the same equipment. The result is a master list of what you need for your

lighting to be able to do. Prepare a new consolidated lighting key (magic sheet) that shows all the lighting vectors (directions) and colors that are included in the requirements list.

Dividing the stage

The first thing to do in constructing the first layer of lighting is to define the areas of the stage for focus. The idea is to divide the stage in such a way that all of the acting areas can be covered effectively and efficiently. There are two ways of doing this: *grid coverage*, and *acting area coverage*.

Grid coverage is most effective in covering open expanses of stage where the action might take place anywhere. This is typical over the whole stage for dance lighting, and in repertory situations and similar circumstances where definitions between acting areas are fluid and flexibility is required. The stage is divided into a grid and each cell is lit individually from multiple directions, allowing the greatest flexibility within the grid structure.

Acting area coverage is most effective where parts of the stage are consistently used in specific ways defined by the ground plan. Action tends to relate to features of the set and acting areas of various sizes make irregular divisions of the stage. These settings do not lend themselves to grid coverage because important acting areas will not coincide with grid cells. For instance, an area around a sofa in the middle of the set includes several sub-areas where action may need more or less emphasis, including on the sofa, in front of the sofa, behind it, and at each end of it. The area in front of the entrance door is an acting area that needs to flow out into the room, and the area at the foot of the stairs might be needed for some key interaction there. All of these acting areas are linked by transition areas until the entire set is fully covered.

Layer 1:

To light this first layer, you need to look at your master magic sheet. The discussion of using color above referred to several possibilities, and you must shape your ideas from the lighting key. The leanest idea would be one warm instrument and one cool instrument from the front (beam slot for full stage; 1st electric for on-stage productions) on each lighting area, one from right front and one from left front. Convention has it that these are high-key choices, with colors that pass over 50% of the light. One would be considered cool for a fill, and the other warm for a key. In devising the grid system in the 1940s at Yale, Stanley McCandless double-hung the warm side of the front light with a secondary cool, allowing the designer to control the color of the key. Another possibility is to move the secondary colder cool to a side front position on the same side as the warm and it becomes a fill for the front cool used as a key. The cool choice in the beam slot could appear warm in relation to a colder side color from the opposite side.

It is popular to place a key in a high side front position, usually not a strong color. This is the traditional “first box” position, and sometimes called jewel lighting. The fill is provided by front lighting. When done well it can have a crisp dramatic feel. It must be done carefully and requires delicate balancing of the sources and the colors.

You have to use your magic sheet to determine how you want to lay out your keys and fills. The first layer should provide you all of your major base lighting options through most of the show. A conventional complete first layer will include front key and fill, and back and side lights on each area, and ideally all would be individually controlled.

Layer 2

The second layer consists of toning washes. The purpose of a toning wash is to warm up or cool down a general setting. They may or may not be appropriate for a given plot or design.

Layer 3

The third layer is color washes. Typically, color washes are served from the side.

Layer 4

The fourth layer includes all the specials:

Specific specials on specific areas to bring up lighting for specific scenes.

Specific keylight for tightly spaced individual scenes.

Instruments placed for emphasis on doorways or other features of the setting or highlighting moments in the play.

Lighting on the cyclorama, both high and low, and washes on backgrounds.

Patterns and textured washes over any part of the stage.

Developing the equipment list I

When all of these layers are complete, you need to double check against your requirements list. Have you, indeed, placed the equipment that will do everything you need to have done? Next is the first phase of triage: conforming to inventory.

Developing the paperwork

The first priority is to clean the plot. Review the groupings and source locations.

Initially, it usually is simplest to do a hand schedule from your plot because it is easier to keep your place in your process and it works as a reviewing step. To create a quick hand schedule, label a sheet of paper with the following columns: No./ Focus / Color / Inst / LorR / Rem. On the first line below put Beam Slot. Then from SL to SR describe each instrument. The instrument number in the circle, the focus of the instrument, the color number, the instrument type, whether it is on the left or right side of the pipe (or top or bottom), and any remarks. Go through each hang position and list every instrument in the plot. Don't forget to include practicals.

Next, enter the data into the BSC schedule spreadsheet, which has macros for sorting. If you use Lightwrite or Softplot software you may have to do some manual calculations for channel wattage. The full schedule in the spreadsheet also will include the instrument frame size, the lamp size, the hang position, and remarks. Circuit, dimmer and channel will be filled in later

You can use the sorting functions of spreadsheet software to ensure consistency in instrument specification, and to highlight anomalies in the assignment of focus or choice of equipment.