

## LIGHTING DESIGN IN THE CRITICAL REVIEW

A critical review, whether for a dramatic production or another form such as musical comedy, should be based on standards cited by the reviewer and shown to be relevant to the production at hand. Normally, if the subject is a dramatic production, the basis for relevance of the standards is found in the script. In other theatrical forms the basis for the standards may be found in style, in comparison with other similar productions or even in tradition.

Most reviewers choose to include the visual production in their reviews, although this is not always necessary. When they do, they may find themselves in a realm where they have little competence. Retreating into such glib comments as, "The lighting added brilliance to the production," does nothing to enhance the review and may even reduce its credibility. Therefore the following general criteria for dramatic and spectacle lighting are offered to give the would-be critical reviewer some basis for developing specific standards.

A good choice of standards for evaluating the lighting will be rooted in the reviewer's analysis of the production as a whole and therefore should interrelate with the reviewer's evaluation of such things as the interpretation of the script, the clarity of the artistic import, or the consistency of its style.

Although the following criteria are listed in their most likely order of importance, another order may sometimes be appropriate. However, ignoring any of them should only be done after very careful consideration.

### Criteria for Lighting Dramatic Productions

- *Plasticity.* Actors' faces should be lit in a way that makes it easy for the audience to read their expressions and thus perceive the characterization they are developing. Acting, directing, and lighting form a trilogy that develops plot and

characters and communicates them to the audience.

Plasticity can be a powerful interpretive element; a designer can manipulate key/fill ratios, angles of key light, ratio of facial lighting to the background, and color to make a major contribution to the development of character and/or to build a scene. Clearly, this must be done in harmony with the work of the actor(s) and the director.

- *Focus.* The lighting should assist in guiding the audience' attention toward the focal point of the action. The audience' focus on a scene is a function of the blocking, usually controlled by the director; the arrangement of the setting; the costumes, particularly their color; and in a major way by the lighting, without which none of the other factors can function. Control of focus by lighting involves subtly changing the focal point (the brightest area) in coordination with the director's changes in the blocking. Multiple focal points created by the director call for multiple foci in the lighting. Another approach involves the lighting designer, in cooperation with the director, creating a variety of focal points on the stage into which the director moves the actors as needed. These may be subtly increased in brightness when they are in use and dimmed back into the overall lighting when empty. The degree of importance of the various focal points should be clearly established through brightness and contrast and carefully altered as the dramatic action shifts.

Control of focus is most effective when timing of cues is so synchronized with the movements of the actors that the light seems "attached" to them making the cues imperceptible to the audience unless there is good dramatic reason for them to be obvious.



Figure 18.1. *Equus*. Final scene after reenactment of blinding the horses with the spike. This is an example of good modeling lighting applied to a scene that depends heavily on audience perception of facial expression. Produced at Constans Theatre, University of Florida, Gainesville. Director, Dr. Judith Williams; scene design, William Jacobsen; costumes, Pamela Crevcoure; lighting, Ellen Jones. Photo courtesy Ellen Jones.

- *Rhythm.* A well-written, well-staged production will have a very definite rhythmical pattern, primarily controlled by the writing and the directing. Good dramatic lighting should supplement that rhythm. Therefore the pacing of cues should parallel the pacing of the action. Rhythm and degree of change in the lighting should normally harmonize with the dramatic action, making a powerful contribution to the rhythm of the production.
- *Atmosphere.* Good dramatic lighting adds to the development of an environment for the action that has unity and relevance to the dramatic import of the production. Atmosphere is the result of careful manipulation of light and shade, color, and intensity in such a way that these harmonize with the other elements of visual production such as setting, costume and makeup design. Moreover, the total atmosphere should appear to emanate from the style and import of the script as interpreted by the director.

### Criteria for Spectacles

Spectacles range in type from plotless pageants, light shows, revues, and concerts to musical productions. Instead of emphasizing plot or dramatic import, spectacles seek to dazzle and impress by presenting a rich assortment of stimuli designed to please the eye and the ear.

Unity in spectacles derives, not from a central core of dramatic import, but from style. This is often imposed on the material by the producer, the director and/or designers and may be subject to major changes as the production is developed. Indeed, such forms as revues, often have interchangeable parts (“numbers”) which can be rearranged, added or deleted, altering but not destroying the unity of the whole.

The following criteria are suggested for reviewing lighting of spectacles, unlike those for dramatic productions, these criteria have no particular order. Any combination of them may be relevant to the production at hand:

- *Focus.* The stage picture in a spectacle should never be more than momentarily without a focal point. Creation of focus is a function of the blocking or choreography, the costumes, particularly their color, the setting, and, most powerfully, the lighting.

In some cases the focal point may be quite arbitrary, in others it naturally evolves from the presence of a soloist or lead dancer, or from the “plot” of the number being performed. Whatever its motivation, a focus must be established by the various means available and particularly the lighting. Almost always, this focus will be the brightest lighted area on the stage.

The simplest, and often the most effective way of creating focus with lighting is the high powered follow spotlight or “light cannon.” This overriding source not only creates a focal point by providing a brilliant pool of light wherever it



Figure 18.2. *Nicholas Nickleby*. See also Figure 1.1. This drama depends heavily interaction between sets of characters. Note how the lighting is arranged to make varying degrees of emphasis on the people surrounding the central figure easy to adjust. Scene lit by Cindy Limauro.

Carnegie Mellon Kresge Theatre; directors, Gregory Lehane and Jed Allen Harris; set design, Tony Mileto; costume design, Cletus Anderson; lighting design, Lauren Crasco (Part I) and Cindy Limauro (Part II). Photo by Harold Corsini, courtesy Cindy Limauro.



Figure 18.3. *Hamlet* (Gertrude's chamber just after stabbing of Polonius). Staged at Stephen Foster Memorial Theatre, Pittsburgh. Director, Stephan Coleman; lighting, Ellen Jones. Photo courtesy Ellen Jones.

is directed but also may create a visible beam of light extending from the luminaire to the stage to serve as a "pointer" directing the audience's attention. Obviously, it lacks subtlety but subtlety is not the name of the game in spectacles.

- *Plasticity*. Although the faces of the individual actors may not be at the center of the theatrical significance of the scene, flat, poorly delineated faces and figures are uninteresting. Key/fill ratios must be great enough to emphasize the shapes of the actors (and also the scenery when it is also three dimensional).

- *Color rendering.* Color of set and costumes is often one of the major attractions of a spectacle. Lighting colors should be carefully chosen to heighten these colors and add to the total color scheme. Additionally, it is quite possible that the lighting will itself provide bright patches of color or even sweeping changes in color (see below.)
- *Lighting as spectacle.* Unlike the dramatic style where lighting is a dependent art beholden to the acting and directing, "spectacle" may include "light shows" wherein lighting itself is the center of attention. A complete technology has developed around this concept in the pop concert and *son et lumiere* world. Moving luminaires casting beams through haze-filled air have become a standard technique which is often supplemented by such attention-grabbing elements as vivid scenic projection, strobe lights, laser effects and even fireworks.

When the style is "light show," all pretence of subtlety vanishes and the designer moves into a world of fantasy, masses of color, banks of moving lights, stages filled with haze or smoke to accent light beams and cues that follow one another to the beat of the drum. If the performers or musicians are intended to be at the focus of the scene, powerful follow spotlights, often in multiples, may be needed to center attention on them.

Obviously, the theatrical intent of the production as determined by the reviewer forms the starting point of a critical review. From that, the reviewer moves toward consideration of the production's dramatic intent, if it is a dramatic production, or towards its style if it is a spectacle. This often requires some development of plot and characterization and may include comparison with other productions of the same work or with similar works. Through this process the reviewer develops his or her standards for reviewing the production, supporting their appropriateness by reference to the dramatic import of the drama or by citing the style evident in the spectacle. Application of these standards, usually supported by examples, rounds out the review. Lighting may well be one of the production elements evaluated in such a review.

The author of a critical review of a production which includes an evaluation of the lighting may take satisfaction in the probability that the lighting designer is as apt to read the review as are the actors or the director. Recognition of the art of lighting, even if qualified, can have a significant effect on the future work of the designer who usually suffers more from lack of recognition than lack of praise. In particular, a knowledgeable critique of the lighting can make a contribution to the artistic growth of a lighting designer, not only through recognition but may also encourage that person to develop his or her creative abilities, to dare to reach for the freedom to dream, to entertain the artistically impossible.



Figure 18.4. Dance. Group Motion Dance Company, Philadelphia. Note the use of highly directional light to emphasize the dancers figures. Lighting by Richard Devin. Photo Richard Devin.



Figure 18.5. *Richard II* (Shakespeare). Staged at the Colorado Shakespeare Festival. Director, James Symons; scenery, David Barber; costumes, Jannice Benning; lighting Richard Devin. Photo Richard Devin.



Figure 18.6. *Orestes* (entrance of Menelaus after the sacking of Troy). Staged at the Constans Theatre, University of Florida, Gainesville. Director, Mickel Pinckney; scene design, William Jacobsen; costume, Tim Dial; lighting, Ellen Jones. Photo courtesy Ellen Jones.