

Interviews with Contemporary  
Lighting Designers

THE  
RIGHT  
LIGHT

Nick Moran

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# A c k n o w l e d g e m e n t s   a n d T h a n k s

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# I Active Practice

What makes the light *right* on stage? Of all the almost numberless choices available, why does the lighting designer (LD) choose this one over all the others? That is the question at the heart of the 19 interviews with lighting designers on which this book is based. By *right light* I'm not arguing for an absolute – a single perfect solution to each production's lighting design. Rather I'm proposing *right* as a continuum, each solution requiring to be judged more or less right, from only just right and right enough for now (but requiring work if time permits) through right for this moment (but not that one) all the way to so right I can't imagine anything improving it. And throughout we will naturally be looking at light in the context of many other elements that make up the stage picture, including the set, costume, projection and sound design, direction and choreography, performers and audience.

Through the interviews, I'm hoping to reveal something of the working process of some of the top lighting designers in UK theatre today; their creative starting points, their priorities and the basis of their aesthetic choices, their triumphs and insecurities, and what they think of as good lighting design. I'll also be asking the question: is lighting design for live performance 'art'?

What singles out the LDs I wanted to interview is that it seems to me that their approach to lighting the stage is quite different to what has gone before, and to some extent what continues to happen in many theatres. This book suggests that these practitioners are all part of a new way of doing theatre lighting design, responding to changes in the way theatre – drama, opera and dance in particular – is both made and presented.

## How to use the book

Much has been written on the technical aspects of lighting the stage – the 'how to' of lighting design. Much less has been written concerning the 'why?' This book aims to correct that. It aims to provide a non-technical insight into the process for readers working in or interested in theatre and performance that is also useful for students of lighting design and aspiring lighting designers.

I have tried to avoid technical details whenever possible and to focus on the creative side of lighting design practice. However, interviews frequently became conversations between two 'experts' with similar experiences – so there are times when quotes from interviews have required some words to be inserted to provide context for the more general reader. These are in [square brackets]. There are also a number of specialist words and phrases and instances where words are used in different ways to common speech. I hope that most of these words can be found in the glossary at the end of the book. In the interviews, I've used a short dash (–) to indicate a pause and three dots (...) to indicate that text has been cut out. I've kept in a lot of colloquial use in the hope that the reader will get a closer connection to each lighting designer, but with the permission of the interviewees I have tidied up some grammar to make meanings clearer.

There are no pictures in this book. With a few exceptions I believe that the subtlety and strength of most theatre lighting design is poorly served by still photographic images in books. One or two still images out of context do not really tell us very much about the light of a production. However, good-quality images of almost all the productions referred to at length can be found on the internet, frequently with short video clips. To make it easier to find these is one reason why I have included so much production information in the notes. However, it must be said that cameras do not see the world in the same way that humans do, and the only way to really experience the lighting design for live performance is to see it live – something I hope that readers will do.

## **The beginnings of the role of lighting designer**

Theatre as an art form is at least 3000 years old. Theatre lighting design in the way it is practised in North America and much of Europe today is probably less than 100 years old. Theatre lighting design in the UK has a heritage, even if it is not a very long one. Some of today's top UK lighting designers began their practice watching the work of, or working for, the first generation of people who were called theatre lighting designers.

Once theatre went indoors – in Europe this was largely during the Renaissance – it became almost essential to provide some kind of artificial light to enable the audience to see the performers. Theatre has a long-standing love affair with technology, from the architecture and masks of classical Greece, through the fantastical stage machinery of Renaissance Italy to the digital projection technologies so prominent today. Although some theatre makers have at times sought to purify their art by removing technology from

their stages, its advance is at least a part of the story behind most advances in theatre-making practice.<sup>1</sup> Over the long history of theatre, lots of people have come up with ingenious ways of getting light onto the stage, and controlling it too. The introduction of gas lighting into theatre was seen as very much a mixed blessing: more light on stage for sure, and better control of it, but also more heat, and a noxious smell. For theatre, as for much of Western society, one of the most important emerging technologies at the end of the nineteenth century was electric light.

Although gas lighting had considerably extended the area of the stage on which the performers could be clearly seen, in most places it was the introduction of controllable electric lighting that finally enabled significant changes to be made in the ways drama is performed and theatre is presented indoors. Once controllable electric light became established in theatres, it became possible and more usual to dim the lights in the auditorium during the performance. The increased flexibility of electric light meant that more of the stage could be adequately illuminated, and performers could move more freely about the stage. Many other radical changes were taking place at this time, in theatres and in the wider societies they were part of, and these too had profound influences on the stage. However, it is hard for me to see how the move from the declamatory theatre style of nineteenth-century theatre towards more naturalistic styles of performance could have developed on a stage lit by gas footlights and limelight follow-spots.

As part of this wider revolution, the roles of director and stage designer as we know them today began to become the norm. Alongside these new *creative* roles, new *technical* roles appeared too. In the lighting world, the specialist knowledge required to master the technologies of the new electric theatre lighting required a chief electrician (master electrician in North America), usually heading a technically focused team. The job title on both sides of the Atlantic reflects the main responsibility of the role then (and in some places now) – that is, the electrical system that powers and controls the lighting instruments, rather than the qualities of the light on stage – what we now call the lighting design. These electricians were generally given instructions as to what to do with their lighting system by the producer/director or sometimes by the stage designer.

Quite early in the process of bringing controllable electric light onto the stage, directors and producers began to acknowledge the potential of this new medium. By 1925 C. Harold Rudge felt able to write in his book *Stage Lighting for 'Little' Theatres*:

A play may be good, and it may be well acted, but it will fail unless the audience can see it. Light therefore plays a most important part in

the theatre. The first duty of the electrician [sic] is to make the actor visible to the audience; his [sic] second is to aid the action and atmosphere of the play by doing this in a suitable manner. ... [G]ood acting can only be enhanced by suitable scenery and beautiful lighting (Rudge, 1925, p. 71).

In many ways, the fundamentals as expressed here have not changed. All the LDs interviewed regard the appropriate illumination of the performers to be the priority – most of the time. They also agree that the next priority – most of the time – is to aid the action and atmosphere, and that their work is there to enhance the performance. Rudge is, however, a little disingenuous when he implies that he will leave it to his electrician to decide how the light should look on stage. (Rudge does not use the word ‘design’ in relation to light or lighting.) Later on in the same book he writes:

In poetical plays, or any play that is not mounted realistically, the producer can proceed boldly and unhesitatingly with the lighting (Rudge, 1925, p. 76).

The general expectation is that the producer (adopting a role that would later be called director) will be the one doing the job we would now call ‘designing the lighting’, while the electrician does what he [sic] is told.

The job of lighting designer became established in the USA at least a generation earlier than in the UK. The US stage lighting pioneer Stanley McCandless – who is also credited with starting academic study and training in lighting for the stage – first published his influential work *A Method of Lighting for the Stage* in 1932. In his introduction to the revised edition (published in 1939), he writes that his purpose in writing the book is,

to give the young designer or technician the confidence with which to face the real problems of lighting. The art of illumination is not measured by ingenuity, although the complicated technical nature of the subject often leads people to applaud technical mastery ...

This plan prepares the palette, as it were, of the lighting designer, and suggests a practical method of using the tools that are available, but it does not pretend to guarantee the final results of balance and composition in dramatic pictures. The final result depends on the eye and taste of the designer (McCandless, 1932 Revised edition 1939, pp. 9, 10).

So here we see that the job of lighting the stage has begun to be associated with design *and* the job is no longer assumed to be the role of the producer/director. Today, McCandless is frequently accused of proposing a formulaic

craft-based approach to stage lighting (usually by people who have not actually read his work), but what is quite clear here is that he believes an artistic approach is required to light the stage well – to choose the *right light* for each moment of the performance.

By the late 1940s in the UK, perhaps as part of the post-war celebration of the democratic spirit, it had become usual to acknowledge set designer and costume designer in theatre programmes. By this time too, the role of theatre director was beginning to be understood as the person in charge of a *team* of theatre artists, rather than a solo authoritarian creator. However, in 1956 Geoffrey Ost in his handbook *Stage Lighting* (complete with a foreword by the great actor/manager Donald Wolfit) was still able to write:

Readers will soon realise that the electrical and technical side of the business as only a means to an end is not difficult to grasp, and that the more important part of the work is arranging and directing the light on stage.

Still no mention of design. Mr Ost goes on:

In the early stages of play production he (the producer, for whom this book is primarily intended) carries in his head a mental impression of the play as it will eventually appear. Therefore, it is highly desirable that he should plan his own lighting (Ost, 1956, second impression 1957, p. 11).

So this was the general expectation in the UK as the likes of Michael Northen, Robert Bryan and the legendary Richard Pilbrow were beginning their careers. Many directors and some set designers still expected to ‘light’ their own shows. Slowly at first and only in a few places, the role of the specialist lighting designer as an artistic collaborator became established.

By the time the LDs in this book began their practice, the theatre lighting designer had become a regular member of the team working together to make a *show*. For some there remained the expectation that the lighting designer was there mostly for their technical expertise rather than their creative input.<sup>2</sup> However, all the LDs interviewed for this book (and many others too) have largely escaped that way of working.

Today it is common practice in the UK and elsewhere to refer to the ‘creative team’, which will include designers (set, costume, sound, projection), other specialists (choreographer, musical director/conductor, etc.) and for new work, the writer(s) and/or composer(s). Almost always the acknowledged head of the team is the director. This is now the generally accepted structure for making work for the stage in North America and Britain, and increasingly elsewhere too.<sup>3</sup>

## The new kind of practice

The lighting designers interviewed here are among a group that span several generations, but who are all to a greater or lesser extent working in a way that is different to the first generation of UK-based lighting designers, and many still working in the UK today. Some of those interviewed trace their early influences back to the first people who were credited as lighting designers in the UK. One of the most influential of these remains Robert Bryan – universally known as Bob. He is acknowledged by Paul Pyant and Mark Jonathan as having had a major influence on their way of thinking about light, particularly in opera. Nick Richings worked closely with the late Michael Northen, who is often cited as the first person to be billed as lighting designer in the UK. The links back to these first practitioners continue through to the next generation. Ben Ormerod, who acknowledges his debt to Gerry Jenkinson, a near-contemporary of Bob Bryan, is in turn an inspiration to, among others, Bruno Poet, Neil Austin and Paule Constable, all of whom have worked as Ormerod's associates, while John Clark has in turn been associate to Paule Constable.

To be clear, what I'm writing about is the practice of some of the most creative lighting designers working in UK theatre at the moment. This is where I live, teach and research, and it is not my intention to generalise beyond UK theatre. Although most if not all the LDs interviewed in this book work internationally, they are all based in the UK, and most of the work mentioned was produced here too.

I'm going to call this newer approach to creating work 'active practice', correlating it with another relatively new concept of active aesthetic for which I am grateful to my colleague at Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, Dr Experience Bryon.<sup>4</sup> The active aesthetic concerns itself with the *way* of practice rather than the *what*. It sees practice as a dynamic, carrying within it, a sense of responsibility and ability to respond to the ways in which we engage in creative acts. My *active practice* is contrasted to the traditional practice that has been more or less the norm for much of the second half of the twentieth century. By aligning it with *active aesthetic*, active practice can open up a way of doing things that involves being inside a process as opposed to essentially responding to the creative acts of others.

For many theatre makers working in all kinds of genre today, it is no longer enough for light to be just the final layer added to an almost completed piece. Instead they aim for light to be an integral part of the development of the work, its role within the piece considered from as early in the production process as possible, and this requires the LD to be an active practitioner. I think that for many of the LDs here, when I refer to them

as active practitioners they are inside the creative process, and that fundamentally affects the way in which they are *doing* lighting design. What informs the ways in which they are making choices is the *active aesthetic*, and this in turn informs what they mean by the *right* light.

Following Bryon, then, this concern with the active aesthetic is a marker of the integrative lighting designer.

It feels to me as if in this second decade of the twenty-first century, theatre lighting design, in the UK at least, has come of age. Few in UK theatre now question the need to have a competent lighting designer involved in almost any theatre production. The expectation is generally that this person will be an active creative partner in the production team. This is in contrast to the general expectation of previous generations of theatre makers who, if they had an LD at all, saw him [sic] as primarily the leader of a team of technicians who turn the lights on and off as and when the director tells them. This is not to say that every lighting designer of previous generations simply did what the director told them. It is only because many of them developed an individual creative practice, which showed directors and others what was possible, that the present generations have the opportunities to take this further.

In the context of this discussion, a theatre production might be a play, an opera or musical, a ballet or another form of dance piece, or something that is not quite any of these. Today in the UK there is an expectation not only that designed light will play a part in helping the piece live, but also that a lighting designer will be responsible for designing that light. It is important to remember that this has only recently become the norm, and is by no means universally true outside the UK and North America.

Lighting design is frequently mentioned in newspaper and online theatre reviews and even in comment pieces in some more serious newspapers. Most of the major theatre awards ceremonies honour lighting designers. Describing theatre lighting design as an *art* and theatre lighting designers as *artists* no longer causes raised eyebrows among the 'great and the good' of UK theatre. Today the practice is mature, and what both audiences and theatre professionals expect of light on stage is far more than the visibility and atmosphere of traditional practice. Increasingly there is an expectation that the lighting on stage will play a significant role in telling the story, and that lighting designers will be concerned with much more than the technical realisation of a decorative aesthetic.

How then might critics, theatre academics and other audience members recognise this different approach to theatre lighting design? A lot of the time the most visible aspect of this approach can be characterised as 'less is more.' On stage, there is now a much greater willingness – some would say

demand – for light to be used *dramatically* – as a spatial design tool and a signifier, for example. The notion of doing this goes back at least as far as the early-twentieth-century writings of Adolphe Appia and Edward Gordon Craig. Both men wrote about the power of light on stage to shape space and to be a symbol.<sup>5</sup> The bold and conscious use of light in this way has for a long time now been integral to the performance of some kinds of contemporary dance, and was often a feature in opera houses, but was not really seen on the drama stage in the UK until relatively recently. (There is some irony in reporting that for much of my early working life I was frequently cautioned to avoid what was generally called ‘dramatic lighting’ on the drama stage, as it was thought that light should not ‘draw attention to itself’)

On the drama stage, the main objective of the lighting design has been, and remains, the visibility of the performers. Richard Pilbrow’s influential 1997 book *Stage Lighting Design* includes the lines:

The cardinal rule is: Each member of the audience must be able to see clearly and correctly those things that he is intended to see. ...

Ninety-nine percent of the time it is the designer’s duty to light the actors clearly so that everyone can see them. (Pilbrow, 1997, p. 7)

For all the lighting designers I interviewed, visibility of performers on stage remains key, and getting light into eyes is especially important. Here is Ben Ormerod, whose influence on several of the other LDs interviewed here has already been noted, talking passionately about the importance of getting light into the actors’ eyes:

**Ben Ormerod:** [Visibility of the actors] is absolutely key. It is the most important part of the job. If you rig a light that doesn’t get into someone’s eyes, you’ve got to justify its existence on stage. Even backlights can be designed to get into people’s eyes. Every light has to earn its keep. If you’re a young lighting designer, starting out, and you’re lighting a show with 20 lights; if one of those lights doesn’t light someone’s eyes, what is it doing there? It’s as simple as that.

I’m confident that when talking about drama or opera, no one interviewed here would disagree with Ben on this. And yet, by ‘visibility’ these LDs don’t necessarily mean the same as Pilbrow did when he wrote the quote cited earlier. In the interviews they argue, in different ways, that while there will be many moments when ‘lighting the actors clearly so that everyone can see them’ is key, there are approaches to achieving this that are far more interesting and useful (right?) than the carefully planned and focused 45-degree



washes of McCandless and his followers that dominated traditional stage lighting practice for at least two generations.

Mark Henderson, who has more awards for theatre lighting than any other UK lighting designer and perhaps grew up in that tradition, had this to say on the subject:

**Moran:** Getting back to angles – through doing this project, I’ve realised that my process has changed markedly, in that I used to start by putting in a 45/45-degree front wash and a backlight bar – and I just don’t now.

**Mark Henderson:** Oh yes – that’s what I used to do, and absolutely don’t now.

**Moran:** What do you think caused that change, because that approach has almost disappeared in this country?

**Mark Henderson:** Yes – I think it leads to more dramatic looks – you don’t get a dramatic look with a 45/45 [degree front cover] and straight backlight. You need dramatic angles to create dramatic pictures, and I think that’s where it’s come from.

*Active practice* involves a different kind of planning – and frequently a much closer collaboration between LD, director and performer. Alongside this though runs a broader definition of ‘light them clearly so everyone can see them.’ The traditional practice – perhaps best explained by McCandless, was to ensure the actor’s body, and particularly the head, was ‘well lit’ from at least three directions. Rick Fisher, whose approach is most often to start building a lighting state from the light that will shine on the actors’ faces, makes a clear distinction between lighting faces and lighting the whole head:

**Rick Fisher:** But what it comes back to is we are lighting people’s faces. I think, not that I think about this too much, but I think sometimes we make the mistake of thinking that people’s faces go 360 degrees around their head. So that means we [try to] light the whole head evenly, but actually the face is only one quarter of the head. I don’t need to light the back of their head so much, and I don’t necessarily need to light the side of their head so much – I want to light their face.

Rick later talks about paring away surplus light, as do many others interviewed here. The desire is often to do as much as possible with as little light as is practicable – less is more – just the light that is needed and nothing more.

## The roots of the active aesthetic

The change in the practice of lighting design that I'm writing about here has, at least in part, been made possible by technical advances. Alongside these though came changes in ideas about what acceptable lighting looked like on stage, influenced by (amongst other things) what was happening on our television screens. Nick Richings and David Howe both argue that the dynamic and bold use of light on television (according to Richings beginning with the American crime lab franchise *CSI*) has helped make the increased use of bold lighting on the drama stage acceptable:

**Nick Richings:** It would be a very dull play if you just had grey daylight streaming in all the time, because it's not dramatic.

**Moran:** It would look like telly.

**Nick Richings:** It would look like telly before *CSI* came along, or digital cameras. The thing that's changed TV is digital cameras, and then people's realisation that you can make it look like you want it to with light – so you can have big bold highlights, and backlight and key light and all that stuff we only ever used to see in film. I think shows like *CSI* have changed the way we look at everything, including the stage.

That has helped develop a language that most audiences can relate to. You can have someone who is just side-lit [on stage] now. And directors and producers buy into that too, which is the other battle won. You know, I'm quite happy having someone lit in just a shaft of light coming through an open doorway ...

The *CSI* effect has changed people's perception of what's acceptable – and you can do more dramatic things [with light].

David Howe is quite clear about what he and others mean by a 'dramatic' look:

**David Howe:** What we're looking for [as theatre makers and audiences] is the more sculpted look. We know they have got faces. We know they have got eyes and teeth. We sometimes want to see them, but not all the time. We know they're a big star from the TV. But also we're used to seeing them in the half-light on the TV.

**Moran:** Nick Richings was saying that as well, that he thinks that programmes like *CSI*, and the visual style of that, has influenced what is acceptable, and possible.

**David Howe:** Yes, absolutely. ... Back in the time of the [1970s TV series] *Upstairs Downstairs*,<sup>6</sup> back then everything was very visible the whole time. If we were doing *Upstairs Downstairs* today [on television] it would be a shadowy basement, with the light coming through a grill [in the wall] over there, and they would be illuminated by the gas jets, or the flames of the fire, or whatever.

Peter Mumford, who is also a film maker in his own right, has this to say on the subject:

**Moran:** Relatively recently television has become ... unafraid to use light in the same way that the best film makers have done.

**Peter Mumford:** I think that's absolutely true. I think people [now] have a language too, that they don't even know they've got. Through generations of watching film and television, they understand editing without knowing it – for the most part. Obviously there are those who do know it too. But general audiences read a language of editing [on stage that they have learned from the screen]. They read a language of parallel action. They understand flashback and a whole load of things that I imagine an audience of say 60 years ago wouldn't have understood, and wouldn't know how to read. So all of that interacts.

I think now there's a lot to learn from television. In my early days we were all trying to copy film quite a lot – you know HMIs [short-hand for large, powerful film lights] and single shadows to make it look like film. And then discovering that it's a line somewhere between the two, between film lighting and traditional theatre lighting. That is what you actually want. On stage, you can't be as purist as you would be on a film set.

Here Mumford is acknowledging both the debt that contemporary theatre practice of many kinds owes to cinema and television, and the fact that live theatre is different: 'You can't be as purist [with light on stage] as you would be on a film set'.

Something else audiences might have noticed, especially if they sit up at the top of the theatres, is a change in where the light is coming from. I grew up going to see and then working on shows lit largely by ranks of profile spotlights high up on either side of the auditorium. Although still present in many theatres for many of their productions, as Mark Henderson confirmed, this front of house position is no longer the starting point and main tool of the LDs interviewed for this book. (The equivalent positions in the largest two auditoria of London's National Theatre are sometimes

referred to by the lighting staff as ‘the most expensive call lights in the country’ as they are rarely used for anything except the curtain call – the only time when the cast face directly out into the audience.) The LDs interviewed here offered several different reasons for the move away from lighting design built around large front of house rigs. These range from changes in acting and presentational style through to the willingness of technical crews to find alternative hanging positions for them, suggested to me some years ago by Ben Ormerod, and here by one of his prodigies, Neil Austin:

**Moran:** We were talking earlier about the move from three-quarter front of house lighting to side light ...

**Neil Austin:** [T]hat’s been done in dance since the 1950s, earlier even. And it should have made the leap [to the drama stage] much earlier than it did.

I think it comes from two areas: A) electricians who are more interested in rigging in unusual places – so once you can persuade an electrician to rig a whole load of stuff on a boom (which is a real pain in the arse for them), then you can start using it. B) It’s the lowest-cost way of colouring a stage with the least amount of lanterns, so it’s certainly come from our fringe careers as well – from when we didn’t have very many lights. How do you use three lights and cover the entire stage? If you put them above, it will be no use at all but if you put them on one side you could. ...

On top of that what it gives is that super high-lit person within a [darker] environment, and that’s what everyone wants and why it gets used a lot.

**Moran:** High contrast between foreground and background?

**Neil Austin:** Yes. It only works if you don’t have side walls, but often you persuade the scenic designer to [have the scenic artists] paint the sides down, at least up until head height. Let’s have a nice piece of wooden wainscoting please around the set and then you can have whatever colour [light] you want around that.

Actors have become more used to playing in it too.

**Moran:** It does to some extent reflect acting style as well in that less is played straight out, more is played across – a more interior kind of presentation?

**Neil Austin:** Yes. But even in a straight out version you would use the ‘Hendie’ lighting position. [A lighting position ideally around 2 metres

above stage height towards the sides of the auditorium, that provides a place to hang lanterns that will light straight into the eyes of actors – named for Mark Henderson, because many of these positions were originally installed to facilitate his lighting designs.] They're called Hendie rails all around this country, and abroad now. I went to LA and put some in the Ahmanson Theatre and told the electrician what I called them and he misheard and called them Handy rails because they're quite handy.

What motivates these LDs to make use of other positions is the strong desire to give three-dimensional shape to the performers in the space. Paule Constable is clear why she avoids using the more traditional 45-degree front of house lighting angle:

**Paule Constable:** My big obsession is that if you've already made something you are really excited by, and then you use a 45-degree angle from front of house, you turn the light on from out there – and it all just goes... because you're pushing the actors on stage into the floor – and what it is doing so often is NOT making people more vivid, not bringing the people on stage into our lives, but actually it's taking them away from us, and pushing them into the background. ...

90 percent of the time you're carving something, and when you just add something from front of house – that just completely works against how you're trying to deliver an image, how you're trying to paint – and you kill it!

So in a way, it's by taking everything back to its simplest – this is about light through a window, or this is about this or that light – then when you add, you become very aware of what the repercussions of adding are. So it's trying to find ways to support the text when it is needed but still maintaining a live space that is beautiful, really.

I think the notion that it is part of the LD's role to help to create a connection between the stage and the auditorium is relatively recent too, though the first generation of lighting designers were largely responsible for getting rid of footlights, the biggest barrier between performer and audience. The idea that the LD needs to strive to maintain a 'live space' that 'supports the text' is something that all the LDs interviewed talk about in one way or another.

For Constable and others, the way to achieve this is to work at revealing the three-dimensionality of the performers on the three-dimensional stage. Although she, like many of those interviewed, frequently uses the analogy of painting, here Constable is moving beyond that towards a sculptural aesthetic. This, and the notions of liveness and connectedness of the audience with the lit space, and the focus on revealing the three-dimensionality of