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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 the 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

performers in that space, are all key components of the aesthetic concerns of the active practice of stage lighting design.

Constable's concern with simplicity too is key to her active aesthetic. As Bryon writes, 'the best choices are not complicated' (ibid):

**Paule Constable:** I love the simplicity of a single source shadow. That's one of the reasons I love one light doing a great job – it can speak so much. I also love a sense of directional shadow, and I love when the key light is so strong you don't see the shadows of other lights, and all that kind of thing. I love it in its purest form, when the shape that the shadow makes is as interesting as the thing itself. But I think all of those things I love are about that purist sense of it. Because I think I am a bit Amish about all this (laughs)

But I couldn't take an element like shadow and take it out of what I do, but I think it's hugely important for when it says the simple thing that I love to say...

### **The influence of theatre in the round**

Paule Constable and Johanna Town cite the influence of theatre in the round. For Town in particular it is the Royal Exchange theatre in Manchester, which has been an influential producing theatre since its beginnings in 1976, and has always had a concern with light. Town, who trained as a theatre electrician there, was inspired by the productions she worked on and saw at the Royal Exchange, which showed her what was possible. Later, while working with the traditional lighting set-up of a proscenium theatre (with its 45-degree front of house rig and all the other elements of traditional lighting practice) everything looked dull and artificial:

**Johanna Town:** I just couldn't believe that nobody was making these lovely spaces that were real places that the audience could sort of touch, which is what I'd been brought up with for three years at the Royal Exchange.

[F]or theatre in the round, you need to light on three sides, so you shouldn't have somebody under-lit [but that's not the same as making the light look the same from every side]. What you should be doing is saying the light's coming from over there – a key ... say the action is in a living room and the sun's coming through the window on the right side, the person will need a fill tone on the side away from the window and have

daylight the side facing the window. That way you have lit someone from both sides but in a more natural way – you have *got to shape them*.

I think I've always taken what I've seen happen in the round and then tried to make it work with a proscenium.

In the 1970s and 80s, many of the theatre spaces producing the most interesting new work were not traditional proscenium theatres. Among these were the Bolton Octagon, Scarborough's Stephen Joseph Theatre and Glasgow's Citizens Theatre – all theatres in the round, and all mentioned by at least one of the LDs interviewed as important starting points for their careers. As if to reinforce the point, the new National Theatre building opened in London in the mid-1970s, and only one of its three theatres had a proscenium. It seems reasonable to me to propose that this preponderance of non-traditional theatre spaces is at least partly responsible for producing, enabling or requiring a radical change in practice – from more than just lighting designers. Significantly though, several LDs can't really be said to have come from this background. Paul Pyant and Mark Jonathan both grew up (from a lighting point of view) on the lighting crew of the Glyndebourne Festival Opera house, a traditional proscenium theatre, and the early work of both David Howe and Nick Richings was predominantly in proscenium theatre.

Ben Ormerod, who was one of the last LDs I interviewed, was keen to point out that many of those interviewed had worked in a range of genres. Almost everyone has a strong background in at least three of: opera, musical theatre, drama and/or dance, and many have also worked on site-specific projects. The successful mixing of scale and genre is perhaps one of the markers of a mature lighting design practice.<sup>7</sup> However, this is not particularly different from past generations of lighting designers.

What is perhaps a marker of the step-change in lighting design practice, however, is that these lighting designers, like Johanna Town, take what they have learnt and developed in smaller spaces with the audience on more than one side, onto large stages for full-scale operas, musicals and dance works, and vice-versa. These lighting designers demonstrate the ability to light intimately in a large space, or grandly in a small space, bringing sensibilities developed lighting dance onto a drama stage, or from drama into a musical theatre production. To quote Jon Clark, relating the advice Paule Constable gave him in preparation for his first design on the immense open Olivier stage of the National Theatre: 'treat it like a Studio theatre and be bold with it. ... If you start piling light into everywhere then you lose any sense of the picture.'

*A nice even wash*

When I was growing up in theatre, in the 1970s and 80s, on most commercial stages and elsewhere, one of the markers of a good lighting design was that performers looked the same wherever they were on the stage, particularly in the third of the stage closest to the audience. In an interior setting, the presence of a window at one side of stage would be reason enough for light from that side to be warmer or cooler than light from the other side of stage, but generally it would not be sufficient justification for making that side of the stage brighter. For an exterior scene, the high-contrast light of nature would be sacrificed for the achievement of similar levels and qualities of illumination over the whole acting area. (The single shadow, such as one might see in nature, would be more or less impossible to achieve for technical reasons too.)

The aspiration to create even illumination over the whole acting area dates back at least as far as McCandless, and is perhaps a reaction to candle- and gas-lit stages where this was certainly not the case. Achieving the uniform washes of light that this requires is no mean technical accomplishment, but it is something the first UK lighting designers did very well. However, it often worked against the architecture of the set, and very often it was not dramatic, in the sense that Nick Richings and Mark Henderson mean the word.

These were the even washes that Town talks about being shocked by when she left the Royal Exchange theatre, and theatre in the round contributed to the decline of this style of lighting at least as much as Richings' *CSI* effect did. But so did an aspiration to do more with light on stage, and the gradual rise in the status of the theatre lighting designer.

**The integrative lighting designer**

The lighting designers here, and many others too, respond much more directly to the architecture of the set, the dynamics of the space, and the performers. They also want to create dramatic lighting that makes beautiful stage pictures.

Integrative lighting designers are more likely to make a researched and thoughtful response to each new production than to impose a style or template on it from outside. They are less inclined to work to a formula expected of this space or that genre. Though they are much more inclined to take what they have learned works in one kind of space, in one genre of performance, and try it out in the new production, that only happens if their research finds that this might be a suitable approach. They walk into each project much less inclined to follow the rules, either their own or someone

else's, though they may well develop a set of rules for how light works in each production – a language for the lighting design that works with the other languages of the piece. These rules come from within the text and the production and are not imposed from outside it.

### *Other changes in the production process*

How has all this become possible? Within the production process, away from the general audience and most other critics and observers, other aspects of the shift are evident. The traditional model of practice is for the LD to be brought in only once the director and set designer have developed the underlying concepts that will inform the production, and the space has been fully designed. Many of the lighting designers interviewed here are more regularly part of the discussions about the production from the beginning; that is from the same moment that the set (and costume) designers come on board – occasionally before even that point. Again in the older model, the LD was at the first read-through on day one of rehearsals and then at final run-through in the rehearsal room – which usually happens the day before the beginning of the technical rehearsals in the theatre. Almost all the LDs interviewed aim to spend more time in the rehearsal room earlier in the production process. There is more to be said on this in chapter 2: Instinct as Inspiration.

In the older, traditional model of theatre making, the director is at the top of a hierarchy and suggestions (more often instructions) only flow down. In productions with a flatter structure – where the director is open to extensive two-way collaboration – lighting designers get involved with many aspects of making the piece, and others make suggestions about light too. Several of the lighting designers interviewed recount their involvement in discussions about blocking, character motivation, and even in one case (Neil Austin) a small re-write of the libretto.

Lighting designers need to collaborate with others, too. UK theatre works largely with a deputy stage manager in the role of show caller following the script or score and giving cues to follow-spot operators and someone who is operating a lighting controller (amongst others). When working with larger and more technically complex lighting rigs the LD generally requires a dedicated lighting programmer. When the work is in repertory or on tour, the lighting design will need to be reproduced – generally by a staff member of the repertory theatre or an associate of the original lighting designer. Increased technical complexity has meant that the scope and integrity of lighting design is often dependent on, and at times constrained by, these collaborations.

For the most part the changes in practice here are largely incremental as distinct from the step-change in other areas of lighting design. The exception may be the collaboration with the lighting programmer on the larger productions. These collaborations are part of the focus of chapter 4.

## Key issues in conceptualising lighting design

### *Why is light an important component of stage performance?*

Professor Erika Fischer-Lichte, a distinguished international theatre scholar, succinctly explains in her 1992 book *The Semiotics of Theatre*<sup>8</sup>:

Both natural and artificially produced light – like naturally and artificially produced spaces – can be interpreted in terms of their practical and symbolic function. Making a space visible is, generally speaking, a practical function of light. Illumination of space is what first allows the latter to become evident ...

In addition to this basic practical function – and usually as a consequence of it – light can assume a wide variety of symbolic functions ... Nearly every culture not only has learned to interpret light as a sign in relation to the time of day and season of the year, but has also developed a rich store of light symbolism ... (cited in Palmer, 2013, p. 70).

Fischer-Lichte here is following any number of writers on theatre who remind us that anything that is put on stage, in addition to its practical function, is available to the audience to be interpreted. It seems natural for us to look for layers of meaning in most forms of story-telling, and theatre is no exception. A chair on stage is not only something convenient to sit or stand on, it is also able to tell us as audience things about the ‘room’ in which we see it, the time and place that the performance asks us to imagine, and things about the people who own it, and quite possibly a lot more. Similarly, a dress is not merely a covering for a body – it can also tell us about the status and habits of the character represented by the actor wearing it. These objects are open to being read by an audience – in the same way that every object on stage is. What Fischer-Lichte reminds us of here is that light too has potential for being read by an audience, for creating symbolic meaning; sometimes in ways that are deeply rooted in our cultural history.

The potential to carry symbolic meaning has increased steadily as developing technology from the late nineteenth century onwards has enabled more control of the qualities of light on stage at any particular moment. Once it became more possible to control it, many theatre directors and designers

were quick to see the potential of light on stage. There is plenty of evidence that light has been an important and well-considered part of staged performance since long before the invention of the electric lightbulb.<sup>9</sup> However, to quote Fischer-Lichte again: ‘it was not until ... the transition to more differentiated lighting had been accomplished ... that it became possible to assess and interpret the light on stage as a theatrical sign.’ (ibid)

Many contemporary playwrights, directors and others want light to do more than simply illuminate the players and the scene:

**Peter Mumford:** I think directors expect lighting designers to be artists now, and are disappointed when they’re not. For the most part, the newer wave of directors certainly want that. I’ve had directors complain that all [their last] lighting designer did was ask, ‘what do you want?’

Theatre is a chemistry process in some sense. It’s about bouncing ideas off each other. [As a lighting designer] you should be going, ‘this is how I see it’ and then you [and the director, and other designers] can disagree about it, and that’s fine – you can have a conversation.

Unless it [lighting design for theatre] is actually a creative art form you can’t have that conversation – you’re just engineering.

I’ll be expanding on the case for theatre lighting design to be considered an art form later in the book. Clearly that case has to say more than simply ‘because light on stage can have a symbolic function, it must be art’. Just because light is able to carry significance, designing that light is not necessarily an art. Semiotics teaches that we interpret the whole world in terms of signs and symbols, and the fictional detective Sherlock Holmes told us that almost anything can carry significance – in the right circumstances. So we are going to have to go quite a lot further if that case is to be convincingly made.

The stage is a place where we, theatre makers and audience, are engaged in a game of let’s pretend. The games we play range from the child-like diversion of pure spectacle through to productions loaded with deep psychological and metaphysical significance, and much in between. For the most part, audiences buy into this willing suspension of disbelief which allows a few sticks to stand for a house, a costume to transform a well-known actor from television into a long-dead king, or a square of light on stage into a room with walls. Whatever the game on stage, as Austrian novelist and playwright Peter Handke has it, ‘in the theatre, light is brightness pretending to be other brightness, a chair is a chair pretending to be another chair’ (cited in *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms* (States, 1985) and frequently quoted elsewhere).

I think we need to take this idea a little bit further, however. Even in production situations when ‘the brightness on stage is pretending to be’ the natural light of the everyday world, as we heard from Nick Richings earlier in this chapter, ‘It would be a very dull play if you just had grey daylight streaming in all the time, because it’s not dramatic.’ In just the same way, in most circumstances the stumbling, half-structured sentences of everyday speech would not be good enough for the stage. As the British film actor and theatre maker Steven Berkoff said in a 1998 radio interview, ‘real life is theatre watered down. Life is second class theatre’<sup>10</sup> and by implication theatre must have more power, more intensity and more poetry than real life – and so must its light. Following playwrights, what lighting designers seek is a dramatic version of naturalism. The light is pretending to be other light, but it is also capable of doing a lot more. Using the analogy of film-making, Neil Austin give a clear account of what a lighting designer might be able to achieve, or might be expected to achieve, beyond making light that pretends to be other light:

**Neil Austin:** If we were to translate this into the film world, the LD [fulfils the function of] many different people. Most obviously the DoP<sup>11</sup> or the lighting cameraman. That is the person who is choosing where the lights go and what they are pointing at. But the LD in theatre is also the DoP from the point of view of choosing the shot – is this a wide shot, a mid-shot, a close-up? Is this a super super close-up?

You are also the colourist – [making choices about] the hue of an image – that has a massive massive effect. You see it constantly in television programmes now – they are making use of colourists. And you’re the focus puller – in the way you can take the attention of the audience from here to there.

And on top of all that you’re the editor too. Because the lighting designer chooses how you get from here to there – where you’re looking now and where you’re looking next, and also how you get from this moment to that moment.

Neil Austin is not the only LD to have used this analogy with the film world. Peter Mumford also used the analogy, but is keen to point out its limitations:

**Peter Mumford:** It is different to the way you do it on stage because that’s always a wide shot. You’re pulling people’s eyes on stage by what you do with light. It’s not actually changing the frame as it is with a tracking shot or a zoom or an edit in film.

All of this it is possible to do through the thoughtful and planned use of light on stage, and yet this is rarely acknowledged in writing analysing performance.

Making another good point about the importance of the role of LD as well as the role of light on stage, Austin went on to talk about the way in which he, as lighting designer, frequently coordinates all the visual and sonic elements through a scene change:

**Neil Austin:** I find as lighting designer that quite often you are heavily involved in [what happens when in a scene change]. I never want to say directing because that sounds like you are taking responsibility away from someone else, but let's for the moment use the word. You direct scene changes, you often choose exactly how it happens – when the music comes in. Music and lights often go together. They need to motivate the changes together. One without the other sounds very strange – but also when the fly cue should happen, when this piece of scenery should move ... And also what is the focus during all of this? What are the audience supposed to be looking at during this scene change?

You know, you can say to the director, 'if we just leave that person on stage a little bit longer, we can get most of the scene change done, and now we fade out [and now we're] into the next thing'. As an audience member, what you have been watching is the previous scene closing down onto this one person, then all of a sudden you're straight into the next scene.

[As the LD] you've made most of those decisions, so actually you are the most central person in the production team [at these points]. And because you are on cans you are the most central because you are the one who understands what the other departments are doing, and how to solve those problems. With lots of directors I work with this is a lovely moment of collaboration – when they hand that responsibility across.

Many LDs would recognise the enhanced role Austin is talking about here, and have experience of similar situations themselves. Few other LDs would put it in quite such unrestrained terms perhaps, but then one of the issues that comes out of the transcripts of these interviews is the tendency to diffidence exhibited by most of the interviewees most of the time. For example, almost all of them talk about their own practice in the second person, frequently substituting 'you' for 'I'.

## **If light on stage is so important, how come it is so rarely written about?**

This is a question I have asked myself, often. Here are four interlinked reasons I've come up with.

1. Writers are intimidated by the apparent technical complexity of the *machine* that is needed to get the light onto stage.
2. It is often not clear to writers what affects are due to lighting in the multi-channel environment of a live performance.
3. The limitations of language – ‘whereof one cannot speak, whereof one must be silent’, to borrow what is probably one of the most commonly used quotations from the philosopher Wittgenstein.
4. We can't see light – only its effect on the bodies and objects that it hits.

### *Reason one: Writers are intimidated by the technical complexity ...*

This is hinted at in the earlier 1939 quote from McCandless. Theatre critics and academics seem to find ‘the specialist knowledge’ required to create lighting design (on all but the smallest scale) intimidating. Stage lighting often seems to the outsider to be something close to a technological dark art. The technical language used by theatre lighting specialists can seem impenetrable, and what most people see of how a lighting design is realised does little to provide an understanding of what anyone involved is actually doing. Of course this hiding of the way it works is part of what many refer to as ‘the magic of theatre’, and it applies to other areas of theatre practice, including acting – ‘how does he or she sustain that performance every night?’ for example. But with lighting there is the additional mystery of the technology as well. To paraphrase the sci-fi writer Arthur C. Clark, writing in the 1940s: Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic, and the technological complexity of the systems supporting the lighting designs on some of the productions talked about later in this book is advanced. It is a big jump from most people's everyday experience of playing with light in their home or at work to contemplating how to play with the many dozens of moving lights and other fixtures that might be used to light an opera, ballet, musical or drama on a large stage today.

Compare this to fine art painting – a subject that many who can't do it are happy to write about. Most of us play with paints and crayons as children. Whether or not we then go on to study painting, drawing or any other fine art, the personal experience of ‘playing’ at painting gives us some understanding of how ‘proper paintings’ are made. The skill of many fine art painters, displayed in their rendering of aspects of the world on a canvas,

or in the evocation of emotion with more abstract work, can be understood in terms of a development from the playful mark-making of childhood. In other words, even if the extent of development required to go from my childhood daubs to something like a Rembrandt self-portrait is massive, having done the childhood daubs helps me understand something of how the Rembrandt was made, and helps to give me the confidence to comment on it.

Many children play with light, showing a fascination with shadows or mirrors or the way tinted sunglasses or transparent sweet wrappers change the colour of light. However, this light play is rarely honoured by the adult world in the ways that children's painting is. It is rarely brought into the classroom, for example, and can't be stuck on the wall alongside the latest drawing. Even when a child's fascination with light is encouraged by the adult world, it is rarely given the context that would allow the child (or subsequently the grown-up) to use the experience to help them understand how stage lighting works. Too often the implicit or explicit message given is that while playing with light as a child was simple – a desk-lamp, torch or raw sunlight for example – a theatre (or concert) lighting system is complex, intimidating and dangerous, and an outsider cannot understand it.

Although almost all sighted people have an early fascination with light, something performance lighting design depends on, this fascination rarely translates into an understanding of how it can be controlled. This contributes to a lack of common understanding of the subject, which in turn inhibits talking or writing about light on stage. This in turn has contributed to a sense of intimidation among general critics and other theatre academics when it comes to writing about lighting. For those of us who do understand the 'dark art' as technology rather than magic, the way through this impasse has appeared to many to be to 'go technical', and write for a specialist rather than a general audience. Often, too, we have written about the lighting system – the instruments and technology – rather than the light itself on stage.

At this point I should make a confession: Fischer-Lichte, like Patrice Pavis in *Analyzing Performance*,<sup>12</sup> demonstrates to me (an experienced specialist practitioner) an incomplete understanding of the practice and the technology of stage lighting design. Even after I had made efforts to become an academic, on my first reading of both these authors I discounted their useful insight because of their incomplete understanding of my specialist field of practice. This is probably a common reaction amongst specialists – especially those who like me are largely self-taught. However, it is something practitioners who wish to engage in academic discourse have to overcome. For practitioners who want to understand more about how their

work affects audiences (and performers for that matter) it is also useful to engage with the thoughts of distinguished thinkers and writers in their general field – even if their understanding of our practice is imperfect.

*Reason two: It's not clear to writers what affects in the audience are due to lighting ...*

This relates to the difficulty of analysing the ways in which theatre lighting affects an audience, when that audience is absorbed in the multi-layered performance environment. How can one be expected to study affect attributed to the lighting alone when the combined effort of the whole production team is to make the way light is working on us as audience a seamless part of a greater whole? The attempt is a bit like trying to pick out the exact voicing of the bass line in the grand finale of a major classical symphony you are hearing for the first time, without a score, and without being able to see the orchestra. Even if you have learnt to pay attention to particular details, it is hard to do that and still allow one's self to be fully affected by the whole piece.

Much of the time theatre lighting design exists as one of many layers of potential symbolic meaning, without consciously drawing attention to itself. The planning and effort that has gone into a long lighting transition; say from clear, bright, optimistic daytime to clouded, fatalistic dusk, can be done without the audience consciously noticing any of the literally hundreds of small changes to the quality of light on stage required to make the transition. The audience may even feel colder at the end than at the beginning, and they know that a change has happened on stage, though many will be unable to describe exactly what that change is, and very few will be able to say how much that change in atmosphere was accomplished by lighting design. It is important to note that no one channel on stage works entirely in isolation. In this case, no doubt the script and the performers would help to achieve the change in atmosphere, and the transition might well be made complete by the sound designer. That said, there are times when even experienced theatre critics have been known to ascribe well-handled changes in atmosphere, achieved almost entirely through light, to the playwright, set designer or director rather than the lighting designer.

As an audience watching the drama on stage – only subconsciously aware of the slowly changing quality of light that enables us not only to see but also to better understand the story – we are generally not consciously aware of the lighting designer's work. Keeping the dynamic changes in the quality of light on stage unnoticed by the audience is not the only way of working. However, it can be, and for many lighting professionals often is, one of the most impressive and least written about of their achievements.

*Reason three: The limitations of language ...*

This is of course linked in many ways to reason one. Much has been made of the inadequacy of language to describe our transitory experiences in the theatre, and in our everyday lives for that matter, but a particular difficulty arises when we try to describe the ways in which light affects our experience, particularly because our brains work to normalise each new lighting environment.<sup>13</sup>

Even when a writer gains an understanding of how light works on stage, it can be very difficult to find words that adequately describe stage lighting and the way it affects an audience. In 2014, Kelli Zezulka, the editor of *Focus*,<sup>14</sup> produced a Wordle™ assembled from articles on lighting design published in the magazine and written by professional drama, dance and opera critics.<sup>15</sup> After *light*, *colour* and *lighting* (the most frequently used words) the next eight most frequently used words are: *vivid*, *punctuation*, *transition*, *drenching*, *dramatic effect*, *defining*, *sound* and *perfect*.

‘Vivid’, ‘drenching’ and ‘defining’ might reasonably be expected to appear in writing about light in fine art painting. ‘Punctuation’ and ‘transition’ infer the importance of dynamic change. The prominence of the word ‘sound’ in articles about light on stage is interesting. We will hear from several of the LDs interviewed later in the book about how they frequently work very closely with sound designers and composers. There is also a generally accepted understanding that in many instances the creation of a particular atmosphere on stage is best done when sound and light work closely together. ‘Dramatic effect’ probably speaks to an extension of this principle beyond lighting (and sound) design – multiple elements working together to create something that is greater than the sum of its parts perhaps?

The word ‘perfect’ frequently implies definitive, in much the same way that the word ‘right’ in ‘the right light’ does, and we need to question this. What place, then, does the word ‘perfect’ have in any writing about theatre? And it is not just theatre critics that succumb to the temptation to refer to a particularly fine production or moment of performance as perfect – practitioners do it too. In this usage, perfection usually describes a ‘production’ or a moment when all the many elements of on stage come together to make something that is perhaps greater than the sum of its parts. Following Patrice Pavis and Bert O. States, using aspects of semiotics and phenomenology, we might say that every channel of meaning-making is working together to produce a somehow greater meaning.

Perhaps we can’t envisage or imagine a better way of presenting this theatre moment. How else is a writer to describe that a kind of transcendental absorption in a particular moment of theatre that can remain vivid and defining for an audience long after the piece has ended (especially when newspaper critics are limited to so few words)? ‘Perfect’ is shorthand.

Whilst it is extremely unlikely that such ‘perfect’ moments can be created by lighting design alone, in my experience (and I’ll admit here that I am biased) such moments are rarely possible without light that has a high degree of *rightness*. In this context, and with the understanding that what has been achieved is only one of many possible perfections, it seems ‘perfect’ will suffice for critics, just as ‘right’ will for lighting designers.

*Reason four: We can’t see light*

This is to do with the nature of light itself and the difficulties encountered in recording it, for archiving and even for public exhibition.

The dramatic text usually remains available for analysis for future generations while the performance itself remains only as fragments in the memories of those who witnessed it. Sets, costumes and props remain for at least as long as the production is running – sometimes longer – and the artefacts are frequently archived and sometimes exhibited. Lighting, however, remains only as a trace in photographs and its archaic notation, with its potential for re-creation largely defined by the exact nature of a theatre space and its technical lighting system.

Because of the largely context-dependent nature of our perceptions of light, analysing stage lighting out of context is of limited value. Because cameras – even the best of them – don’t work in the same way as human vision, camera-based recordings of performance lighting are of limited use for analysis. The detailed post-performance analysis that can be made of the text and the sets and costumes is rarely possible for light.

Just as the qualities of the performance of individual actors and dancers can be captured on camera only in part, so too with the qualities of light. However, in most attempts to capture live performance – on film or video – the focus is (quite understandably) on getting as close as possible to the experience of seeing the performer live, rather than capturing the authenticity of the lighting design. Trying to analyse a performance lighting design by watching a film or video of the live performance is – I know from experience – frustrating and ultimately of limited value.

So one of the main reasons that light on stage has had little consideration from writers and critics is that it is just too hard to see it.

**A short conclusion**

While those who cannot paint are happy to study painting and then to write about it, those who have no technical background in stage lighting find it hard to study it for the purpose of analysis, and harder still to write

about. Those of us who do have a technical understanding have tended to write mostly for aspiring or established practitioners rather than for a general audience, and to focus on what might be called the ‘craft’ of lighting design, rather than the ‘art’ (even when the books have had *art* in the title). What follows in this book is one of several more recent attempts to make the study of light in performance, and the practice of theatre lighting design, more accessible, and to overcome these four potential barriers.

In chapter 2 my focus is on starting points for a lighting design. What do lighting designers do in the earliest stage of a production? When and how do they become involved? What are the first steps in deciding what qualities of light are likely to be right for each production? What do lighting designers learn from early set models and drawings, and from watching rehearsals?

In chapter 3 I focus on what happens in the technical rehearsal – a period of often intense activity where all the elements of a production come together to make a show. This is the time in the production process when the lighting designer is often feeling at their most exposed – ‘like standing naked on a table and asking “what do you think?”’, as Mark Jonathan puts it.

Chapter 4 looks in more detail at collaborations (creative and technical) creativity and art. The extracts from interviews here illustrate a range of takes on all three subjects.

Chapter 5 looks at the part that story-telling plays in the contemporary practice of lighting design for narrative theatre, and the possibilities or perhaps even expectation that the lighting designer will perform a dramaturgical role – as the guardian of the story-telling. It includes thoughts from lighting designers on their work as poetry, and on their obligation to help to entertain the audience too.

The focus of chapter 6 is lighting for dance, primarily non-narrative dance. The esteemed American lighting designer and educator Jean Rosenthal wrote that ‘dancers live in light as fish live in water’ (Wertenbaker, 1972), and certainly the key practitioners in this chapter, Michael Hulls, Lucy Carter and Peter Mumford, believe light is more free to be the thing itself on the dance stage than elsewhere.

The final chapter looks at time – time to make the work, and time to become able to make the work – and attempts to draw some general conclusions on ‘rightness’.

This makes the book sound far more structured than it actually is. Truth is that the lighting designers don’t compartmentalise these things. Their practice requires them to use a lot of different skills, knowledge and *instinct* at the same time, and this is reflected in the interviews. As a taster of how

we are going to get to that final chapter, here is Paule Constable on poetry, and a lot more:

**Paule Constable:** I think it's interesting the whole thing about poetry. With the best poetry there's a brilliant lack of fear about what is not being said. This is slightly a tangent, but I think lighting without poetry can be very pedestrian. I think that lighting is like everything in a space with an audience, everything is potentially alive in that conversation. And in poetry more than prose, every word is alive with possibility. That's where I draw an interesting analogy between the two.

The brilliant thing about Cormac McCarthy as a writer is that he writes prose which is as densely beautiful as the best poetry. *The Road* is [250 pages] long – and it says so much. I think the problem with prose, and why there are so many bad books out there, is that words are cheap. And light can be cheap, but it never ever should be. It never ever should be. (laugh) It's always valuable, it's always important. So the kind of foregrounding thing about it is the way that we've all taken responsibility for telling that story. And every decision you make is important. It is the poetry. There's something that I know here instinctively. There is a very, very clear link there, about how I feel about poetry and about light.

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