A PRODUCTION PROCESS FOR LIGHTING DESIGN

for you, from

THE LIGHT LADY

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Before you start to apply your practical knowledge of hanging and focusing lighting instruments, operating a light board, and the theory about lighting design and the creation of a Rep Plot, it's important to understand the process that a Lighting Designer goes through to design a play, musical or other full length production. Understanding this process will give you a grounding on how to apply all of your practical and theoretical knowledge.

Following is roughly the process you would go through as a Lighting Designer. It's not always in this order, and it may include other steps, or it may not include all of these steps, but the overall process is fairly universal whether you're working in educational theatre, a community theatre or a professional theatre.

SCRIPT ANALYSIS

Your first job is to obtain a copy of the script. If possible, three-hold punch the pages and keep it in a binder along with the other paperwork that you will be creating and collecting for the production.

Read the script. Note any possible cues, blackouts, etc. that dialogue and stage directions in the script call for. The script "tells" you how and what to design. Stage directions and characters' lines can indicate that a character turns a light on or off, where the scene is set (a living room, a forest, an office interior, etc), when the scene is set (day time, night time, sunrise, etc), and the mood of the scene (dark and scary, joyous and bright, sad and gloomy, etc).

PRODUCTION MEETINGS

These meetings are where the director, stage manager, the rest of the design team, and others involved in the production, meet for a variety of reasons:
- ✓ First and foremost is in order to discuss the director's concepts and visions for the production.
- ✓ Where designers can present ideas.
- ✓ For the lighting designer to meet with the rest of the design team to find out what the set and costumes will look like, and what will the color palette be. The set will "tell" you what to design, and the set and costume colors will "tell" you what color palette to use.
- ✓ Where scheduling and logistics are discussed.

The number of meetings depend upon the complexity of the production.

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STUMBLE THROUGH

After the rehearsal process has reached the point where the cast is ready to run through the complete play in a reasonable time frame, and the set is mostly constructed, the lighting designer should go to watch a full run through of the production by the actors in order to determine what cuing will be needed and what instruments will be needed to achieve the looks (cues). Typically the sound designer may also attend in order to determine their cues. This rehearsal is fondly called a "stumble through" because often times the actors are running the full show for the first time, and are 'stumbling' through it. It not necessary for the performance to be polished or the set to be complete in order for the lighting designer to do their job.

During the stumble through make notes in the script (in pencil!) of possible cues and blackouts. Make your notes in the inner margins of the script. Be sure to leave the outer margins blank for later, when you are writing in your cue numbers.

 While you are watching the run through, think about:
- ✓ Location: inside, outside, in a living room, in a circus tent, in the forest, on the street?
- ✓ Time of day (what color is the light, from what angle does it come)?
- ✓ Do you need specials: where do the actors move, does one or more actors or a part of the set need to be isolated, is there a dream sequence or other motivation for non-realistic lighting? The blocking "tells" you how to design the show and if you might need any specials.
- ✓ When do the cues happen, how fast should they happen; a slow fade or a bump?
- ✓ What is the motivation for each cue? Cues should happen for a reason and the lighting should support the show (leave flashy lights for rock concerts - *unless* a scene specifically calls for them, and they enhance, not distract from, the scene).
- ✓ How bright should each individual area, special and/or cue be?
- ✓ Where (from what angle) should the light come from; what is the motivating factor? Is there a floor lamp in the room, or is there moonlight in the evening?
- ✓ What color should the light be and why: what color is the light in a forest, in a living room, in an office? (Start to notice these things in your daily life.)

To learn about what the colors of light "do", check out www.PRESETT.org/LITT.

PAPER TECH

Not all directors do this, and it can be a long process. It can also be redundant, because usually this information can be found by reading the script, watching a stumble through with the director by your side letting you know where they'd like the cues to be and what they expect. But, if your director does schedule a paper tech, this is where the director, stage manager, sound designer, lighting designer (and other members of the production team as needed) sit down around a table with the script and the director lets the team know where they would like to cues to go in the script and what happens in each cue. It's called a "paper" tech because everyone is only going over the cues 'on paper', not in practice.

DESIGN TIME

After having read the script, met with the director and design team, and seen a stumble through, this is when the lighting designer determines what instruments will be needed for what situation and where they will need to be placed. The lighting designer drafts up a lighting plot to that effect, and creates other documentation noting circuiting, gelling, patching and channel assignments. This information informs the tech crew who are helping with the hang and focus what needs to be done.

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REP PLOT
Hopefully the theatre you are working in has a functional Rep Plot and you need only to make adjustments and add specials, rather than starting the whole plot from scratch.

A Rep Plot is a standardized lighting system, which is versatile for almost all performances and can be quickly and easily adapted to provide lighting for any event from class meetings, speakers, videos, variety shows, band and choir concerts to plays, musicals and dance recitals, while allowing for show-specific flexibility within a reasonable time frame. Having a Rep Plot alleviates the time consuming and sometimes costly process of starting each lighting design "from scratch" for each show or event. For a book on how to install a rep plot, visit www.PRESETT.org/helpful-books. To have a rep plot designed for you visit www.PRESETT.org/repplot.

DRAFTING THE LIGHT PLOT

- ✓ Make several copies of your light plot (always keep an original).
- ✓ Think about all the instruments you will need to achieve the above objectives.
- ✓ Make adjustments and compensations for dimmer and circuit capacity and instrument inventory.
- ✓ Make at least two copies of your plot for hang and focus. If you are hand drafting keep your original elsewhere, as the plot you bring to hang and focus will be used for scribbling notes and recording adjustments.

WRITING UP THE PATCH SCHEDULE AND DIMMER SCHEDULE

Transfer the following information on your light plot to your patch schedule and dimmer schedule:
- ✓ channel number (and name/purpose, if you want)
- ✓ circuit/dimmer/address number,
- ✓ gel color, and other information

Some drafting programs will automatically do this for your, but if yours doesn't, or if you are drafting by hand, then you will need to create this paperwork.

Make at least two copies of your schedules for hang and focus and for your script binder, keep your original in a safe place (especially if drafting and documenting by hand).

LOAD IN

Loading in the set and props, etc. should be a separate call from the hang and focus, and does not typically involve the lighting designer.

HANG AND FOCUS

This is when the lighting designer and the light crew hang, gel, circuit, patch and focus the lighting instruments as per the plot provided by the lighting designer. The crew should be able to hang, circuit, and patch the lights relying on the documents provided by the Lighting Designer, but usually the lighting designer calls the focus. How long this will take depends of factors such as: is there already a rep plot in place, how many lighting instruments are needed.

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Usually the timing of the hang and focus can't be determined until the time that the lighting designer has seen a run through. But, in order to figure out roughly how much time you may need for hang and focus, as a very general rule, with a crew of 3 techs and the 1 Lighting Designer, allow 12 minutes per instrument for hang, circuiting and patching, and 8 minutes per instrument for focusing. This may be quicker with an experienced crew.

Allow extra time on either end for setting up and cleaning up, and also allow extra time for the inevitable trouble shooting. And don't forget to schedule in break and meal times for your crew.

SPLIT HANG AND FOCUS
In an ideal world…it's best for the lighting designer and light crew to hang the lights first, then the set is loaded in, then the lights are focused on the set during a separate call.

DRY TECH

This is typically solely for the purposes of setting light cues. The sound techs don't need to be there, nor do the actors. The only people who need to be there are:
- ✓ the lighting designer,
- ✓ the stage manager (to record where the cues happen in their script),
- ✓ the light board operator (to record the cues on the light board), visit here for light board lessons: www.PRESETT.org/LITT.
- ✓ and sometimes the running crew if there are major set pieces that need to be moved into place in order to design cues.

Sometimes the director also attends, sometimes not; it's up to the individual director. Some directors like to have a say in how each cue is set, some prefer to see what the lighting designer comes up with.

A good rule of thumb is to allow twice the length of the production for the Dry Tech.

Write your cue numbers in the outer margins of your script. That way you can quickly scan the script to find your cues and they aren't mixed in with any previous notes you have been making. If you are working with a new SM, encourage them to do the same, as it is important for the SM not to miss calling a cue because they couldn't see it mixed in with other notes in their script.

CUE-TO-CUE

The actors perform while cues are being set (if there has been no Dry Tech), and/or tweaked (if there has been a Dry Tech), and rehearsed by the tech crew until the time that the lights, sound and set designers and crew are satisfied with that cue, and then they move onto the next cue in the script. The actors are asked to stop and jump ahead to the next part of the script where the next cue happens.

This form of tech rehearsal is not always scheduled, and it depends on the individual director. Some directors prefer to go straight into tech rehearsals. The Cue-to-Cue includes the actors, but it is for the purpose of the technical crew.

TECH REHEARSALS

Typically a show can have two to four tech rehearsals, the last one being the "Final Dress" (which is done in 'show conditions' with no stopping). Tech Rehearsals are where the cast (and orchestra, if a musical) run the show, stopping where necessary for light cues, sound cues, and set moving cue adjustments.

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The first Tech Rehearsal will take the longest, with the running time tapering down as the days go on. For a two-hour play or musical the first Tech Rehearsal can take up to six hours, depending on the complexities of the cues. Sometimes the cast and crew don't finish teching the whole show during the first tech rehearsal and pick up where they left off the following day. Regardless of the Tech Rehearsal process, the curtain somehow always goes up on time on Opening Night!

FIRST TECH REHEARSAL

Tech rehearsals are for the technician, not for the actors, so feel free to stop them at any time in order to get a cue designed and recorded. Allow about two or three times the expected length of the play for this first tech rehearsal (sometimes more!). It may seem like the first tech is a long process, but if you take the time to work on the cues during the first tech rehearsal, it will speed up subsequent techs.

Often times during a first tech rehearsal if there are followspots, the followspot operators will not be included when setting cues for the first time. It is a good idea however if they can sit near the Lighting Designer with their scripts, making notes as to when their cues will happen.

The process for the first tech rehearsal is typically as follows (with adjustments for your specific situation and the unique needs of each production):
- ✓ The Lighting Designer designs each cue as the actors run through the play. (If there has been a dry tech, then the cues that were preliminarily set are now refined. If there has been no dry tech, the cues are set for the first time at this tech.)
- ✓ The Board Operator records what each cue is on his/her cue sheets or on the computer, and the Stage Manager records when each cue happens in their script.
- ✓ Each cue should be numbered in sequence in whole numbers: 1, 2, 3, 4… and so on. Should you later discover you need a cue between, say, cues 6 and 7, you can use 6.1 through 6.9. If you only find you need to add one cue between 6 and 7, it's customary to use 6.5.

The cues for the beginning of the show (and the beginning of the second act after intermission) should run roughly as follows:
- ✓ Cue 1 - first set a blackout cue that you can easily return to and copy later on.
- ✓ Cue 2 - set a pre-show cue to be up while the audience is entering, and that can also be used as an intermission cue. If the main/grand curtain is closed when the audience enters this typically includes a "curtain warmer" (a wash light on the main curtain) and some lights up back stage at a low level so that the crew does not need to use the worklights. If the main curtain is open while the audience is entering, then the pre-show cue lights the set typically in a low light, the design of which is tied into the show design.
- ✓ Cue 3 - house to half. (This warns the audience that it's time to be seated. If you are designing a musical, it's nice to leave the house lights at half during the overture so that the audience is not left sitting in the dark.)
- ✓ Cue 4 - house out and blackout the stage. (Some Lighting Designers like these to happen in two separate cues.)
- ✓ Cue 5 - stage lights up for the opening scene.

RE-DRAFT AND RE-HANG

After having seen one or two tech rehearsals, sometimes you will find it is necessary to move, add, or delete some instruments. If so, allow time to re-draft your plot, re-write your schedules, and re-hang, move, and/or re-focus instruments.

FURTHER TECHS AND DRESS REHEARSALS

When you watch the show for the second, third or forth time, each time you will see places where you need to make adjustments to your cues (the look and the timing) as well as add more cues and/or deleting any unneeded cues. The director will also continue to make cuing requests.

Once the cues are mostly set, it's at this point that the Stage Manager should take the time to add Standby's in their script. These should be called roughly half a page before the cue is to be called.

Also, if the show is a musical and will use followspots, it's at this time that the Lighting Designer to instruct the followspot ops on when and how to take their cues.

Be sure to create Pre- and Post-Show checklists for the Stage Manager and crew to follow for all techs and performances. These are for the purpose of preserving the integrity of your design once you are no longer there.

ATTEND OPENING NIGHT

It's always a good idea for the Lighting Designer to attend the opening night as an audience member, for a few reasons:
- ✓ First, just to make sure everything is running smoothly without you (and if it's not, address the issues).
- ✓ Next it's good form to show the director, cast and crew that you care about the show and you're not just running out the moment your job is done.
- ✓ And lastly, it's just fun to be able to watch the show as an audience member. As a Lighting Designer you have been so intent on designing the lights, that there will be things about the show that you have just missed, such as a funny line, or a cleaver costume piece, that will surprise you when you are able to sit back and see the show through the eyes and ears of the audience.
- ✓ You will undoubtedly also find at least one cue you *should* have added. Don't worry about it – if you've followed all these steps, your show looks great!

STRIKE and RESTORE REP PLOT

Even if your 'job is done' on opening night it is a good idea to return to the theatre a few days after closing night to restore the theatre's lighting system; strike any specials that you hung, restore any gels you changed, refocus any instruments, etc. This is especially important if the theatre has a rep plot. Sometimes you will be required to restore their plot back to rep. But even if you are not required to, it's always best practice to 'leave the theatre better than you found it'.

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