

Lumière scheme

Reflections from Lumière Ed Saunders

As I sit down to reflect on the Lumière scheme, taking shelter from the mid-July heat, it is the weekend before a likely record-breaking – havoc-wreaking – scorcher of a heatwave. I'm in London and thankful to be escaping to the countryside first thing in the morning, just before a Red Alert for extreme temperature kicks in and the train tracks begin to melt: I'll be in Sussex, forecast a comparatively comfortable 33 degrees, on an estate overlooking the South Downs that for best part of ninety years has played host to a uniquely distinguished summer festival of world-class opera. That this place, with its lake and croquet lawns, pheasants and A-list lighting designers, has so quickly grown to be something at once familiar and awe-inspiring is easily one of the most remarkable things that the Lumière scheme promises to offer.

I'm three months in to my first placement at Glyndebourne, and about to get stuck into three weeks of production for the piece that will see me through to the end of my time here. Time flies, and there's more to come: the Lumière scheme is a six-month development opportunity for early-career lighting practitioners, created and overseen by industry titan Peter Mumford. Now in its sixth year, there is both a Design Lumière and a Production Lumière, which set out to forge routes forwards in an industry where career paths are notoriously difficult to see without the benefit of hindsight. It's a two-pronged approach: equip aspiring young professionals with the tangible skills to assist on work that they admire, and introduce them to the workplaces and people that produce it. It's a training opportunity, but more than that, it's a demystification of what it takes to level up and what it's like when you get there.

Since starting in May, I've been posted as an assistant lighting designer across six markedly different productions. Glyndebourne is a repertory opera house, producing work in-house that can then go into its rep, out on tour, or sometimes packaged up for transfer to other companies, and so this season has been a combination of new and revived work each with a different process to get it on its feet. This is a way of working, as well as a scale and ambition, that is pretty much unique to opera and that, for me, has been a real initiation: aside from some casual shifts at the Royal Opera House and some small-scale cross-artsy design credits, I was a relative opera novice before starting here. It was not something that I grew up with nor something that my work had really led me to, and so my induction was a process of wrapping my head around the particularities of the art form and

Lumière scheme

Ed Saunders

the craft, and of the mechanics of producing this kind of work.

Crucially, it has also meant working with a staggering number of lighting designers in a pretty short period. My first week here was a revival of *The Marriage of Figaro*, lit by Paule Constable but resurrected in her absence by associate Ben Jacobs. It was, needless to say, gorgeous, with a design by Christopher Oram that set the 18th-century comedy in an exquisitely sun-soaked, 1970s baroque – flares and all – and serving up probably the grandest and most opera-y of initiations I could have hoped for. Watching Ben at work also made for a great introduction: as an associate and LD in his own right, he was further along a trajectory that I have my own sights set on, and which I'm hoping the Lumière scheme might be the springboard for. He talked me

through the specifics of his role as an associate on *Figaro*, all underpinned by the balancing act of handling the authority of the show archive with an intuitive sensitivity to the designer's eye.

Opera-making is an enterprise that fires on all cylinders, and my first week at Glyndebourne was not just production time for *Figaro* but also for Ethel Smythe's *The Wreckers*, lit by Malcolm Rippeth. Every day, the turnaround would clear the stage of the gilded Sevillian villa to make way for the skeletal coastal landscape of Smythe's Cornish tempest. It's a 20th-century piece, hotly anticipated not only for its rarity – most of its performances have been heavily abridged or in alternative translations – but for its urgent relevance: it's a tale of defiance, freedom, and mob rule. The threat of storm and of the destruction it brings is central to the work, and Malcolm's lighting painted

a brooding and thunderous landscape that took us from rain-slashed harbour town to misty causeway to abandoned sea cave. The production was already on its feet when I joined, so I had the pleasure of watching Malcolm in the throes of bringing this to life with Glyndebourne programmer Amy Clarke, which was a real masterclass in designer-programmer flow states. The two have worked together before, and it shows: there is an implicit understanding of each other's workflow in the way that ideas are articulated and plotted in, with a diligent organisation and streamlining of the building blocks of groups and presets, which mean that, along with systems of notating cue points and score-marking, they keep their plotting sessions entirely self-sufficient and can set their own pace.

In fact, a word must go out to the whole of the lighting team at Glyndebourne who are, individually

and collectively, exceptional at what they do. It goes without saying that a space of this reputation and ambition demands technical excellence, but it is the deep care for the work being made that has really made an impression on me during my time here. Whether it's set electrics, followspotting, show running, opping, or anything in between, there is a strong spirit of agility and camaraderie that is nurtured by the supervisors and is carried across the whole team, and it makes for an environment that feels supportive as well as high functioning. It's a welcoming place to walk into, so much so that the lighting department is a bit of a revolving door of the great and the good: they're calling in mostly



to catch up with head of lighting and legend Vic Pyne, who I have to thank for countless introductions and for initiating so many fascinating conversations. It is a remarkable thing that the Lumière scheme makes this not only possible, but

comfortable; the badge helps to ease that imposter feeling and gives the permission you sometimes need to throw yourself in.

La Bohème was the next production to come in and the first that I would see through from first

Lumière scheme

Ed Saunders

lighting session to opening night. I was working alongside LD Alex Brok, who painted a delicately steely, film noir version of Puccini's Parisian tragedy. Stationed between Alex and Glyndebourne programmer Tom Warren, I saw the two find a workflow – another masterclass – as they sketched in the main images for each act: Alex's approach, he had said from the outset, was first to make the pictures, as bold as possible and as rough as necessary, before going in and fleshing out the detail. Opera rehearsals are structured differently to theatre or dance, where instead of a generic format of tech/rehearsals/dress, there are dedicated lighting sessions scheduled around piano dress rehearsals and stage orchestra rehearsals; they bring together different combinations of the performers, orchestra, and costume and give priority to different parts,

whether stage direction, musical direction, or technical production. On *La Bohème*, and later with other productions too, the strategy was to use early lighting sessions to build a skeleton show file that could then be expanded during the other rehearsals. This is where the assistant role comes into its own: these rehearsals can sometimes be stop-and-start, and at other times incredible pacey – it inevitably seems to be that the moments that are dense for lighting are raced past in stage and orchestra rehearsals – so keeping track of ideas, things that worked, things that didn't, and notes half-completed, is essential to making good use of later lighting sessions.

Paying this kind of close attention to Alex's process meant that I was able to get a good idea of his intentions for the design and of his priorities when it came to working with the rest of his

team. There was one session where I deputised for Alex in his absence; this meant fielding the notes from the director as we rattled through a rehearsal, which made for a test of both nerve and intuition, gauging in real time which notes to act on in the moment and which to defer to Alex later on.

Similarly, I was there to help adapt the lighting for the filming of the production, which happens across two performances once the show is up and running and when the LD is often no longer there. Although not for live broadcast, the film is intended to bring the production to a wider spectatorship online with all of the same spirit of a live Glyndebourne show; the filming is done with a live audience, and so the trick is in the balance between keeping the work looking as good for those in the room as it does on

screen. I had the pleasure of meeting Bernie Davis, who by all accounts is the industry go-to for precisely this kind of challenge. He is a TV lighting director who works on translating large-scale live events for the screen – think the Proms, royal weddings, early Robot Wars – and he is extremely generous with his knowledge, taking the time to explain to me how the live capture process works, the margins for what can and can't be picked up by his cameras, how he selects and frames his shots, and crucially, how he approaches potential difficulties. A combination of adjusting levels in the desk, choosing shots carefully, and prepping his camera operators for in-camera tweaks, is what gives Bernie the flexibility to capture the production with authenticity to designers' intentions and with minimal visible changes.

Needless to say, adapting and reworking lighting design in this way is a real art. It has been fascinating not only to see how this delicate feat is pulled off to such a high standard for the film relights, but also, in an assistant role, to reflect on everything that I had absorbed along the design process and to make judgement calls informed by this. The lighting team have asked me to join them for the tour relight in September, when the production will be scaled for a number of regional venues, so I'll have the chance to put my knowledge of the show and the design to the test and to get stuck into the mechanisms of a relight at this scale.

With just a few weeks left at Glyndebourne, and just one more production to see through, the Lumière scheme is racing on towards its second half. The next three

months will be a varied programme of different placements and designers: I'll be finding out what I'll be up to soon, and feeling a mix of trepidation and excitement for the whirlwind it's likely to be. There's a sense of growing into the role, learning how to find your place within each project and how to develop a language with each designer, a balance of knowing what you can bring to a team and taking their lead. This is where I am feeling the full propulsive force of the Lumière scheme, putting me further out of my comfort zone than any job I could land at this stage but doing so with the full support and backing to run up that learning curve. 🚧