

The ALPD Professional Process for Lighting Designers

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Role of the Lighting Designer

The Lighting Designer leads the creative vision for lighting and works with the wider team to realise it fully in performance.

They collaborate closely with the creative, technical, sound, video, and automation departments, and should remain mindful that the production may also be captured or recorded for future use

Engagement

Contract

A contract matters. It sets out the level of work, the fees, payment dates, working conditions, and the practical expectations around the production. It should also address attendance requirements, future productions, Visa's / Work Permits, welfare expectations, and terms around capture, broadcast.

The Lighting Designer may have an agent working on their behalf to negotiate and arrange invoicing and payments.

Pre-production

Background research

The lighting designer's work begins upon receipt of the script, score or concept outline. Research will be necessary to gather knowledge about the production style or design themes and will involve meetings with the other creatives. Early involvement ensures the most integrated and effective designs possible.

Budgetary and Schedule Negotiations

Once the contract is in place,

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It is worth sitting down early with the Production Manager and producers to agree the real budget and schedule you are working within. This includes consideration of venue specifications, equipment, staffing, scheduling constraints and the time required for focus and cue plotting. Site visits and technical meetings should be included within the agreed engagement.

Assembling the lighting team

As the lighting designer will be working closely with a wider lighting team, it is important to discuss with the Production Manager and General Manager what staffing you feel is necessary for the production, and how that sits within their overall view of the budget and resources.

Availability checks matter months ahead, and touring or commercial work may need extra support — associates, production electricians, and programmers — to make the process sustainable.

Be prepared to advocate early for the key people you need in order to properly deliver the show you are designing.

Creative Design Process

The creative design process involves meetings, research and development with the director, designer and other creatives, as well as discussions with producers and production management. The lighting designer will develop lighting concepts, attend white card and model presentations, and collaborate to ensure the lighting integrates effectively with the set design and venue. More complex productions may require extended rehearsal involvement, which should be discussed at contract stage.

Technical Design Process

The technical design process involves close liaison with the production electrician and production manager regarding rig construction, built-in electrics and desired effects. It includes drafting lighting plans, agreeing the flying plot, preparing equipment hire lists, negotiating availability with suppliers, and sharing final plans for costing and discussion. This may also include network distribution planning, show control integration, and sustainability considerations.

Scheduling

To protect enough time for the rig, focus, moving light work and cue plotting, the Lighting Designer and Production Electrician need to be involved in scheduling from

the start. Schedules should also allow for pre-programming and visualisation where required, and support sustainable working hours.

Production Rehearsal

Rehearsal Period

The lighting designer will be invited to the first day of rehearsals, model showings and production meetings, and will attend rehearsals and run-throughs as necessary to develop the lighting plan. Reference recordings may be made with permission for creative use only. Once fit-up commences, the lighting designer will divide time between the rehearsal room and venue.

Pre-Programming and Console Preparation

The programmer and lighting designer will need time to set up the lighting console before the first focus session. Pre-visualisation sessions may be required and should be included in schedules and budgets in advance. Meetings with the DSM or show caller may be called to establish cue structure.

Fit-up, Focus and Lighting

Prior to the start of focus, the Lighting Designer should be present to confirm the final trim heights of lighting bars and borders, as agreed with the Set Designer and Production Manager, and where appropriate the touring carpenter or Stage Manager.

Technical Rehearsals

Sometimes a dry tech is the only way to prepare complex technical cues safely before the cast arrives. The lighting designer will be in attendance during all technical rehearsals, working closely with the programmer to create cues at speed. Adequate lighting time must be protected between stage calls.

Previews

Preview work can take many forms. It is often work outside of the performances, and may involve changes being made to the script, staging, set, and consequently the lighting.

Cast are often called for part of the day, but it can be extremely valuable to have some stage time without them, allowing the Lighting Designer to look at cues and make adjustments properly.

Be realistic about what time you need, ask in good time for that time, and be clear about what other resources are required around it. Remember that everyone will be wanting to do work too.

Photo Calls and Recorded Media

The lighting designer may be asked to attend photo calls, EPK sessions, or B-roll filming, which may take place during previews or after opening.

It is always worth checking with the General Manager what is actually needed from you, and whether this sits within what was agreed in the schedule and contract.

Pre-opening, during previews, this may well be part of the process. Post-opening, it probably is not.

After opening, you should be clear about your own availability, and whether an associate or deputy could attend on your behalf if a lighting presence is needed.

Capture, Broadcast and Cinema Relay

If a production is captured for broadcast, streaming, or cinema relay, lighting adjustments will often be needed, and this must be discussed and remunerated in advance.

Designers must be properly credited wherever recorded content is used, and any further use should be agreed clearly at contract stage.

Post-Production after Press Night

Documentation

Once the production has been locked, time must be scheduled for staff to create documentation required for touring, revival and maintenance. Adequate records of focus, presets and cueing allow crews to maintain the integrity of the lighting design.

Lighting Designers should receive performance show reports, and should make sure they read them on a regular basis, so they remain informed of any lighting-related issues arising after each performance and can advise on appropriate action where needed.

It is helpful to establish the reporting chain early: who will monitor lighting notes, who should be contacted about problems, and who has authority to action work. Issues might include a knocked lamp, burnt-out colour, focus drift, equipment faults, or moving light problems.

Touring and Show Checks

Every tour works differently, so talk early with Production Management about how the show will move from venue to venue.

Is the tour supported by a lighting team permanently travelling with the production, who will re-light the show as it moves? Or will freelance or local Production Electricians be brought in at each venue to move and recreate the show?

It is vital to keep in touch with the resident director and touring team to ensure that the design is being replicated as consistently as possible each week.

Once the local or touring team has properly learned the show, it should not require ongoing extra work from the Lighting Designer week after week.

Wellbeing, Welfare and Professional Conduct

Lighting work is intense, physical, and often done under pressure — particularly during fit-up, technical rehearsals, previews, and touring.

Productions should take wellbeing seriously: reasonable hours, proper breaks, safe working conditions, and a culture of mutual respect and care across the team.

It is also worth being aware of the pressure that builds during the technical process — not only for yourself, but for your close team as well. Time is short, budgets are tight, and expectations can feel very high. But the best work is achieved when people feel supported, listened to, and able to focus without unnecessary strain.

Most teams do this well, but when fatigue builds, or conditions become unsafe or unpleasant, it is important that concerns can be raised early and addressed quickly — without anyone feeling that this is simply “part of the job”.

Touring and overseas work can add extra strain, so welfare, rest, and care for the team should be considered in advance, not as an afterthought.

If concerns arise — whether about fatigue, working conditions, or how people are being treated — it should be possible to raise them early with Production Management, the Company Manager or General Manager, and for them to be addressed sensibly and without stigma.