

# LIGHT AS SCENERY

The possibilities are endless, says **Peter Mumford**

The use of lighting in the theatre as “scenery” is an important development. Theatrical lighting was originally used functionally to illuminate the surfaces and structures before which the piece was acted or danced, and of course the performers themselves.

This illumination of landscape backdrops and interiors demands considerable skill, as also does the clear lighting of actors and dancers. However, when the medium of light itself is used to express landscapes and rooms, cloudy skies and prison cells or more emotional and intellectual concepts such as isolation, hope, coolness, heat and time passing, then it is clear that a new visual language is in use, and that the lighting designer’s role has become in some ways a more directly creative one.

In several respects, lighting for contemporary dance has led the way in the development of the medium of light as a visual language, and the progress made in this area is now reflected in drama, opera, musical theatre and television.

One of the main reasons for this is the spatial demands that dance makes on its performing area. In the majority of dance works, the entire floor space is required, and this leads to special design limitations, forcing the set designer to work with the edges of the stage area or maybe floating

above the performance space. In such a space, in which solid scenery cannot always exist, a shaft of light can assume the function of a three-dimensional object.

Lighting can therefore be used to build walls and linear structures, to change background and floor colours, to redefine areas, to contract and expand the stage space, and even to clothe the performers. Dance, in making all these visual requirements (and taking up all or most of the stage for its performance), has become the natural culture for the growth of “scenic” lighting. Lighting can express time, space and mood, and can be orchestrated rhythmically in relation to, or in juxtaposition with, the musical score; it is like painting the air, and its effect is much more than the mere “wallpapering” of a production. Indeed, lighting for dance is central to the process of its visual communication, the link between movement and its perception, and the balance between the body and surface design. At the same time, the lighting is there to support, amplify and reinforce the objectives and ideas of the



*In Pictures from an Exhibition, I created frames of light, using only the smallest possible strips of light, which gave an architectural feel to the space.*

dance work, and not to overpower it or distract from it.

Although I think that it can be strongly argued that the recent world of contemporary dance has seen the most obvious changes in the role of lighting design, it’s also true to note that, certainly in the latter half of the twentieth century, playwrights have been very influenced by the compositional structure and language of movies, and this has had a big influence on the way that we stage and visualise those plays. The ability of a film to cut instantly from



location to location and even through time, as in flashbacks, has changed the way writers write plays for the theatre in many instances.

Without a thought as to whether the “French windows are opening on to the garden beyond”, many writers present us with text for the theatre that also cuts from scene to scene without regard as to how that will be achieved technically. Some of those writers actually do envisage this being achieved simply through a change of light.

For example, Tennessee Williams in *Glass Menagerie* (1944) gives considerable instruction as to how light should play a major scenic role

in the work, indicating transparent walls that might appear and disappear through the use of light, revealing and disguising rooms that may then float in and out of existence for the viewer. This is all very well, but one cannot actually build solid physical walls purely out of light, so clearly a language of metaphors must be developed, and here the imagination and the logic of the lighting designer is required to create visual symbols that can be communicated.

In a darkened space a square of light might seem quite sufficient to contain and even restrict a performer, because, after all, even though

they could physically leave that defined space, by doing so they would cease to exist for the audience and therefore the light becomes either a literal room or just a restricted interior in a more abstract sense. A strip of light becomes a pathway and a line of bright narrow beams, often described as a “light curtain”, can become a wall. By defining a space with light, by isolating that space, the light achieves an architectural function.

Therefore, it is no longer inconceivable that a performance of an opera, play or dance piece can be performed solely using light as its scenery and with no other physical structure at all. Indeed, this has been done on many occasions.

Projection, of course, is another way that light can take on a scenic role. Light projected imagery carries with it far more direct narrative content than a plain beam of light can generally communicate. Once projection is introduced into the scenario an almost infinite library of images becomes available.

There has been much discussion about the notion that projected scenery might be a replacement or substitute for conventional scenery. This concept must be treated with care, since, although it’s certainly true that projected images have a scenic role to play, it’s dangerous to assume that, for example, a projected image



*A curtain may become, or at least represent, a building or some piece of architecture for the required moment.*

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of a forest is the same as a painted image of a forest. Even though the source imagery may be the same, the projected image will quite frequently have a different quality and send a different visual message to the viewer.

It's therefore important when using projected imagery – either still or moving – to make that a part of the “language” of the piece from the outset. Projection automatically leads one into the realm of photography and film and it's therefore essential to recognise this and use these qualities accordingly.

Obviously the ability to mix from one image to another rather than introduce a new piece of physical scenery can be both useful and exciting, but it is different and causes the viewer to start reading the visual information using a

more cinematic language and expectancy. We have all been subliminally educated in this cinematic language of editing and framing from years of watching television and movies. It's not something that most people are consciously aware of, but we all understand the significance of a sharp cut from one image to another as opposed to a slow cross-fade between images. So, if one is to use this kind of imagery on the live stage, we need to be aware of the consequences and of how to manipulate this new media for the purpose of the production.

So, there are a number of reasons for using



light-projected imagery. One would be to reproduce visuals that could not be rendered in any other way, e.g. moving imagery or documentary or specifically photographic information. Again, one would need the right context for using this information.

Both Brecht and Pinter have often suggested the use of projected titles to introduce new scenes, and Nicholas Wright's play *The Reporter*, set as it is in the world of television, immediately lends itself to the use of that media within a theatrical context.

Another reason for using projected imagery might be to enhance or alter existing surfaces, by adding either texture or more specific visuals to transform, say, a brick wall into a surface that is suddenly able to provide a whole range of new visual information that could relate to

*Some time ago, when working on New Galileo with Siobhan Davies for London Contemporary Dance Theatre, she asked for a space that would divide the dancers, a kind of wall between them, a barrier. She did not, however, want to impede the overall space in a way that would limit the choreography. My solution to this was to create two “light curtains” comprised of many (nearly) parallel light sources, running from front to back of the space, dividing the space into two. These light curtains were suspended from tracks which ran left to right of the space. The piece was about half an hour long and so the lights began by dividing the space into two and then traveled to the edges of the space incredibly slowly, imperceptibly. So the space was at first divided by the “walls” into two equal parts left and right, which then became three spaces and finally, as the “walls” reached the edges of the space, it became one complete area. A little haze in the air gave these “walls of light” a visible three-dimensionality, and at the same time allowed the dancers to pass through freely, when it was appropriate.*

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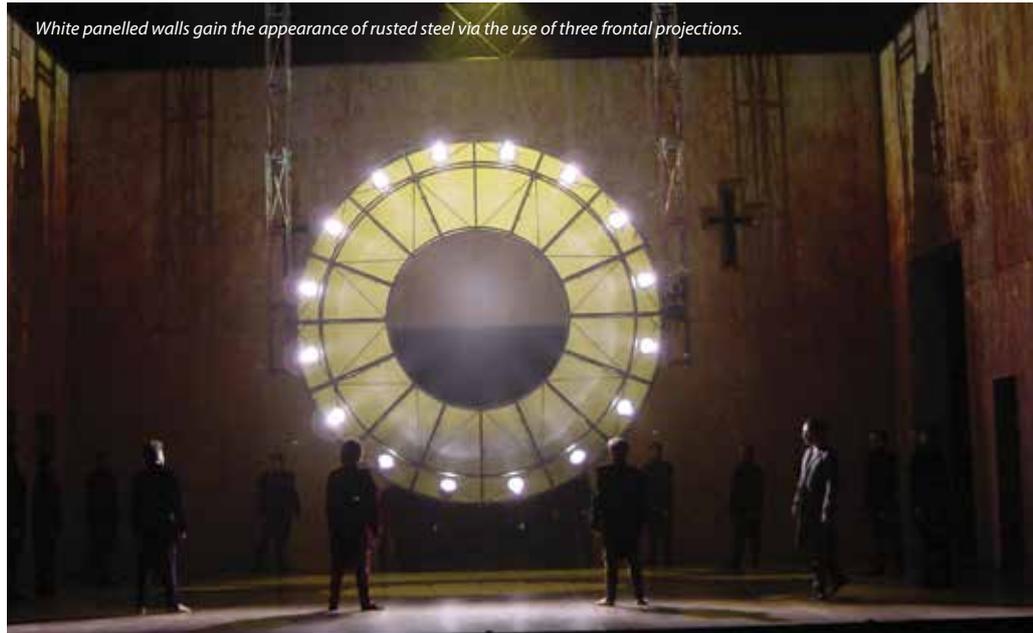
time or place, turning a surface that is real and physical into something quite different in the mere moment of a change of light.

For example, when designing *Portrait of a Lady* I used statically framed moving images seen through a series of arches. These images appeared at first to be still until one gradually noticed that the leaves of trees were moving slightly in the wind or a bird might fly across. In this particular piece, it was also necessary to make many transitions to different locations, and so the “view” through these relatively neutral archways could change cinematically to transport the audience in a believable way from, for instance, an exterior overlooking Florence to a garden in England and then an interior in Rome. By adopting a “cinematic” approach to this aspect from the very beginning of the production, it was quite possible to create a believable and communicable visual narrative. Because the images were viewed beyond the architecture of the set, they achieved a believability that would have been less possible with conventional scenery, even if there had been sufficient space to use the number of painted cloths that would have been required, which there wasn't, or the technical facility to change them around, which would have been cumbersome.

In one sense, all light is “projected”, it's just a question of what content a particular light is emitting. It could be anything from just a colour filter through to a full scale movie image.

The advancement in video and digital technology has produced a fervour of new possibilities, so that now we have at our fingertips everything from a simple matt stencil or “gobo”, right through to walls of image-

generating LEDs that can be programmed to receive video imagery as well as computer controlled colour programming. Projection is no longer a simple “slide in a slot” but, as with every other aspect of using light, it should still just be the vocabulary expanding with technology. The aesthetic principles have not changed since using much cruder equipment back in the Sixties, and the principles of image-



*White panelled walls gain the appearance of rusted steel via the use of three frontal projections.*

*In the late Sixties I worked with the mixed media theatre group Moving Being. One of the first pieces we did was for three performers and called Trio. The entire "set" was six columns of blue light arranged in a three, two, one triangular formation on the stage, each column of light separated by darkness. The performers inhabited these columns either individually or collectively using a mixture of movement and words to express the piece (based on Proustian writings). Geoff Moore, the director and "author" of these early works was concerned with a kind of assemblage or collage method of creating theatre, which involved all available media forms, dancers and actors, film and still image as well as physical environment. So here, projected images became a part of the language and also an extension of the scenic elements. Working as designer with the company, I became involved with lighting as a direct consequence of having to solve how to make projected images work and mix with both the surrounding lighting and the structural design. It was really in these years that my involvement with light grew, alongside a developing interest and knowledge of film and still projection, and the use of these media in theatre.*

making remain the same. What we should all be aware of is that all of these new technological advancements are just more layers and they rarely replace any basic principles of creativity. Implementing new ways of image-making is exciting and challenging but needs to be in context; the use of projected images in particular needs to have the reasoning of the overall production behind the decision to use this media.

The use of lighting as scenery is a very interesting and exciting area to me, and whenever the opportunity to work with light as the leading visual element on a stage arises, I would always seize the opportunity if it's right for the aesthetic of the piece – but that is a considerable "if" and not to be underestimated. Theatre is a collaborative art form, and not without reason, because it is complex in its form, so the right decisions must be made in each instance.

When you use light as scenery, when you introduce the use of projection into the scenario, you must understand that you are introducing a different and possibly new language and not just an array of amazing equipment. It is essential to speak that language, by which I mean understanding the principles of "editing and framing" the event with the use of the media at your disposal in order to communicate ideas as clearly as possible.

So, light as scenery can take many forms if we are to include its broadest applications: pillars of light, spaces defined by light, light from a window that's not really there, shadows from a tree, moving backgrounds, clouds, pure sheets of colour, performers projected big and small, laser beams constructing shapes in the air. The possibilities are endless but the rules and the aesthetic remain the same. 🌸

Image credits:

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*Pictures from an Exhibition*  
Directed by Daniel Kramer  
Design by Richard Hudson  
Lighting by Peter Mumford

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$e=mc^2$   
Choreography by David Bintley  
Costume design by Kate Ford  
Design and lighting by Peter Mumford

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*The Reporter*  
Directed by Richard Eyre  
Design by Rob Howell  
Projection design by Jon Driscoll  
Lighting by Peter Mumford

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*Portrait of a Lady*  
Directed by Peter Hall  
Costume design by Christopher Woods  
Design, lighting and projection by Peter Mumford

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*Arthur*  
Choreography by David Bintley  
Set and projection design by Peter J Davison  
Costume design by Jasper Conran  
Lighting by Peter Mumford