

50



**The People in
Performance
Lighting**

The Association for Lighting
Production and Design
www.thealpd.org.uk
Autumn 2026
£5.00 / FREE to Members

NATIONAL THEATRE AT 50

LDs James Farncombe
and Paul Pyant share
notes and family chat

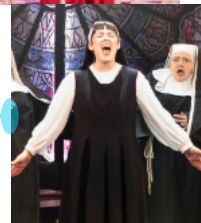
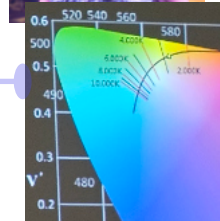
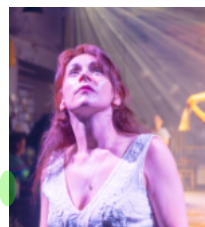
EDINBURGH LIGHTS

Lighting at the Edinburgh
Festival and Fringe
surveyed by Mark Fisher

AMATEUR THEATRE

Round Table explores the
potential and pitfalls of
lighting for enthusiasts

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Welcome to the autumn edition of Focus. I hope you've all managed to enjoy some of the sunshine and hot weather we've experienced this year.

I have to admit, I've never enjoyed theatre air conditioning quite so much! Although taking off my two jumpers and jeans to put on shorts and a vest before heading home at 10:30 at night was certainly a first for me.

This issue is absolutely rammed with summer reading. We start with Mark Fisher's annual reviews from the Edinburgh Festival. I hope everyone enjoyed the ALPD social in Edinburgh, I was sorry not to have been able to make it, as it looked like a great event. A big thank you to White Light, Chamsys, Martin and SLX, for making it a great evening for everyone.

To mark the National Theatre's 50th anniversary celebrations, Matt Drury managed to find time to talk to James Farncombe and Paul Pyant while they were both lighting shows at the NT at the same time. They kindly talked about their careers, their work and, in true theatrical fashion, the family connection between them.

We also have a great piece looking at amateur lighting design by John Leventhall, *My First Job* with Christopher Nairne, and Ben Pickersgill talks about his designs at Buxton Opera House. Nick Moran shares his experiences of visiting ScandLight. So, there's plenty here to dip into, whether you're looking for inspiration, a bit of

industry insight or simply something interesting to read between jobs.

You'll also notice something a little different running through this issue. We've introduced some shorter, more fact-based pieces about the work of the Executive Committee. I want Focus to be a place where members can see not just what the ALPD is doing, but who we are talking to, what we are working on and what we are trying to change.

There is a huge amount of work happening behind the scenes, much of which doesn't necessarily make it into your day-to-day experience of being an ALPD member. So, throughout this issue, you'll find updates and snapshots of our collaborations, conversations and projects over the past few months.

One very important development is the work Exec members, alongside other associations, have been doing to demand change in SOLT and UK theatres' attitude towards designers and directors. Please see the statement from Equity and sign their petition in support of their actions on page 9.

We were also asked to help Katy Morison make connections with lighting designers to support her vocational training through Theatre Clwyd. See her article on page 24.

We are continuing to develop and support the Lumière scheme, including the introduction of a new administrator role to help grow the scheme

**From the Chair of
the Association
for Lighting
Production and
Design,
Johanna Town**





further. You may have seen the adverts on social media, but if you're interested in this part-time role, please contact the office.

And lastly, please read the information about the rebirth of the Lighting Lunch — something I know many of you have been asking about!

There is a lot going on, and I hope these new updates dotted around the magazine will give you a better sense of the work that happens behind the scenes on your behalf.

So, grab a coffee, find somewhere with slightly less air conditioning than a rehearsal room, and enjoy this autumn edition of Focus.

Happy reading! 🍷

Jo

PS: I thought I would have a quick look to see who might be in town as well whilst at the Playhouse and to introduce Harriet White, this years Lumière, to another designer. Then I realised it was me! So a couple of shots of us on the first day of tech Till the Stars Come Down at Nottingham Playhouse, and the same week a quick visit across the road to The Theatre Royal visiting the team fitting up The Last Laugh Tour. Nottingham photo (top left) Francois Langton, Ryan Moore & Penny Coke-Wood - Lighting team Nottingham Playhouse. Photo right Jasmin Alayoubi (centre) - Last Laugh re-lighter & technician. Or as one of the actors said about life on the road: "Jo Town with two shows in town."

A WARM WELCOME TO OUR NEW ALPD MEMBERS

Non-Profit

Millgate Arts Centre, Oldham

Professional

Alexander D Wintle, Crawley

Caitlin Clarke, Hull

Rod Clay, Leadenham

Ben Nichols, London

Rory Kay, Inverness

Affiliate

Christopher M Pratt, Southampton

Daniel A Brown, Bracknell

Lucas Milton, Edinburgh

Christopher Myddleton, Edinburgh

Student

Mimi V Browne, Filey

Ryan E Morris, Cardiff

Florence James, Maidstone

Thaddeus Leong, Cardiff

Yiling Liu, Cardiff

Abdullah M. Al-Ghannam, Leicester

Jacob S W Henney, London

Jacob Barnes, Cockermouth

Danai Muyambo, Surrey

Ashleen Kayembe, Manchester

OFFICE NOTES

I hope you have by now had a chance to look at the new website. We welcome any comments and thoughts for future enhancements. If any of you have queries about how it all works, do contact the office.

LUMIÈRE

Following discussions with the Lumière Working Group, the Executive has approved the appointment of a Lumière administrator to drive fund-raising and administration. Full details can be found on our website at: www.thealpd.org.uk/sites/default/files/resources/ALPD_Lumiere_Scheme_Coordinator_Advert_Final.pdf



EQUITY

The Executive, and in particular, Zoe Spurr as our representative, have for a long time been in discussion with Equity and fees and conditions for designers. There is further discussion on p. 9.

ALPD EVENTS LTD

You will see on p?? information about the new Lighting Lunch planned for 14

December. ALPD Events Ltd has been formally incorporated as a separate trading company to manage events like this. We are presently seeking sponsorship to enable us to go ahead with this event with tickets at an affordable price. And our thanks to those companies who have already committed to supporting it.

LIGHTING DESIGN DEGREES

There are no undergraduate lighting design degrees currently offered in the UK; the Executive discussed ways to address the pipeline problem through education, apprenticeships, and outreach. This is a continuing discussion.

DRAUGHTING SOFTWARE

Vectorworks has withdrawn from corporate ALPD membership; members are exploring a September meeting with Vectorworks to negotiate a cheaper, stripped-back package for lighting designers. This is a work in progress through some set designers. If you have an interest in participating in a meeting or you have an opinion to share, do contact the office. Have you spoken with Vectorworks about the pricing? Any suggestions for other drawing packages? Do let us know. 🍷

News and information from the ALPD office by Amanda Laidler

DATES 2026

- 7 October White Light Tech Showcase Manchester
- 14 December Lighting Lunch Glyndebourne

DATES 2027

- 2 - 5 Feb ISE Barcelona
- 15 Feb - 7 March design | stage Exhibition Coventry
- 11 - 12 May PLASA Focus Leeds
- 9 - 10 June ABTT
- 8 - 17 June Prague Quadrennial

Contact Amanda directly at office@thealpd.org.uk



UPDATE

PEOPLE & EVENTS

Members news, meetings, awards and obituaries

THE EXCITING NEW ALPD CHRISTMAS LIGHTING LUNCH

We are delighted to announce we are planning a NEW re-imagined Lighting Lunch at the Glyndebourne Opera House (pictured below) in East Sussex on Monday 14th December 2026.



The plan for the lunch includes a 4-course lunch with table service. Lunch will be preceded by morning coffee, tea and biscuits at 11.30 am followed by a tour of the splendid opera. Coaches will be arranged from Lewes station.

To make this event affordable to all we are looking to raise around £10,000 of sponsorship with the hope of reducing the per-head cost to £50 including the coach from Lewes.

Tickets will go on sale in the early autumn, once we have sponsorship.

WHITE LIGHT TECH SHOWCASE MANCHESTER

Discover a diverse range of lighting technologies, connect with industry experts, and compare solutions all in one place. Hosted by White Light and supported by ALPD, ABTT, and RNCM, this new Manchester event brings together lighting designers, technicians, and live entertainment professionals for an afternoon of innovation, insight, and networking. Explore products from leading manufacturers, gain practical knowledge, and discuss future projects with specialists and peers. Designed for professionals across the performing arts, the showcase offers a unique opportunity to exchange ideas and discover new solutions. Stay on for our social drinks afterwards.

Doors: 14:00 | Showcase: 14:30. (point at QR for details)



DESIGN | STAGE EXHIBITION COVENTRY 2027

An ambitious exhibition and catalogue showcasing outstanding work from SBTD, ASDP, and ALPD members. Featuring professional productions from 2023–2027, design | stage brings together the breadth, creativity, and future of UK performance design. Exhibiting dates: Monday 15th February, 2027 to Sunday 7th March. Venue: Delia Derbyshire Building, Coventry

An ambitious exhibition and catalogue showcasing outstanding work from SBTD, ASDP, and ALPD members. Featuring professional productions from 2023–2027, design | stage brings together the breadth, creativity, and future of UK performance design.

www.theatredesign.org.uk/designstage

ALPD SOCIAL EDINBURGH FESTIVAL

ALPD Companies Rep Stuart Porter writes: "The ALPD drinks in Edinburgh have been on the calendar for several years, from a small gathering sponsored by White Light to what it has become today. It was a pleasure to host this social again this year. The organising team has grown, as has the event, with Ruari Cormack organising and coordinating with the

Assembly Gardens to secure an exclusive space, and Jonathan Haynes and I ensuring we have the sponsors; a big thank you to White Light, SLX, Chauvet and Martin for their continued sponsorship.

However, what makes this event so good is the ALPD members and their teams who attend; it's great to have a relaxed few hours at the fast-paced start of the Edinburgh Fringe. It is a drop-in evening, with people coming for a quick hello, a chance to catch up with manufacturers and lighting suppliers, and for lighting designers to talk through how many shows they need to design to make the Fringe work for them.

It was so good to see so many familiar faces, alongside first-timers, emerging practitioners and venue techs doing their first Fringe. I look forward to seeing you all next year."

PRAGUE QUADRENNIAL 2027

The 16th edition of the Prague Quadrennial will take place from June 8 to 17, 2027. Its main venue will be the newly renovated Prague Exhibition Grounds, where the event returns after eight years.

Prague Quadrennial will explore the theme of Absences and Silences - not as



Edinburgh Festival ALPD Social. Sponsord by White Light, Chauvet (under the Chamsys banner), Martin and SLX

Photos: Helen Garcia - Alton

voids, but as spaces of potential: As forms of historical and artistic reflection, or aesthetic and dramaturgical tool, and as testing grounds for thinking about new scenographic possibilities. Special focus will be placed on what has not been seen or heard - perhaps because it usually happens outside the spotlight, offstage, or beyond traditional canons, centers, and textbooks. The theme highlights scenographic moments, methods, and projects, directing attention, shaping rhythm and spatial dynamics and deepening meaning.

“Crucially, absences and silences can create opportunities to imagine what is still emerging or yet to come, carving out space for the futures we have yet to shape,” points out Barbora Přihodová, Artistic Director of Prague Quadrennial. pq.cz/pq2027 🍷

SHOWLIGHT 2029

Save the date and pack your sunglasses – Showlight is excited to announce that its next edition, Showlight 2029, will be held in Granada, Spain, on 23-26 April 2029. Headline sponsors for the event will be lighting manufacturers Ayrton and SGM, which will host the 12th edition of this popular lighting quadrennial.

Showlight’s organisers say: “Showlight changes its location with every edition and Granada has been chosen after considerable research into suitable locations. We feel it is a prime setting to continue Showlight’s journey after the immensely successful return of Showlight 2025 in Dijon, France. Taking place once every four years, Showlight offers an eclectic programme of presentations from



lighting professionals across many disciplines and delivers much more besides. Student Sponsorship and Emerging Professional bursaries are available. See the website for more details and sign up to the newsletter.

www.showlight.org 🍷

BACKUP TECH
The technical entertainment charity's Village Fête was another great success at new venue, Wilton Mill Karting Circuit, Daventry. From the organisers: "We're delighted to confirm that this year's Backup Tech Village Fete raised £50,000 to help support people across the technical entertainment industry when they need it most.

This simply wouldn't have been possible without the incredible generosity of our industry. Every pound raised will help us continue providing practical financial aid and health and welfare support to the freelance and employed technical professionals who keep our industry running."

24/7 Wellbeing Helpline 0800 464 7068

FREELANCERS MAKE THEATRE WORK

Following a three-month consultation with freelancers and sector organisations, FMTW has now secured a three-year funding package to support their next phase. "This funding gives us firmer ground under our feet. It means we can retain paid staff capacity, build our digital offer, strengthen support and signposting for freelancers, and begin developing more training and seminar activity." 🍷

EQUITY FEES - OPEN LETTER
Equity has served notice to SOLT (Society of London Theatre) and UK Theatre that the union will begin work on issuing guidance on fees for theatre designers from October, after prolonged negotiations and proposals failed to address key issues of rate increases, intellectual property, credits and royalties.

The union is asking designers to sign an **open letter** (QR left, link at end) in a final attempt to make progress and avoid what the union is calling the “extraordinary and extreme step” of abandoning the collective agreement.

At the end of 2025, Equity received an offer on the SOLT/Equity Agreement for Designers that was rejected unanimously by our Directors and Designers Committee. Equity consulted with Designers who had worked on the Agreement, as well as with members of the ALPD (Association for Lighting, Production and Design), SBTd (Society of British Theatre Directors) and Scene/Change, and received further confirmation that the offer from SOLT could not be accepted.

The proposals did not meet Equity’s ambitions for the substantial improvements to minimum fees that Designers deserve, and insufficient progress was offered on other important issues to Designers of all disciplines, including proper crediting, copyright, quantifying working time and royalties.

In response, we wrote to SOLT setting out a demand for an immediate significant uplift to the minimum rates and requesting substantive negotiations in order for us to progress the non-financial elements of our claim and modernise the wider terms and conditions set out in the agreement. Three months have passed: the uplift to minimum rates has not been agreed, and substantive negotiations have not been offered.

Equity’s General Secretary, Paul Fleming, has written to SOLT and UK Theatre to provide formal notice that the union no longer considers the rates under the agreement to have any effect, and that Equity will begin the necessary work to issue our own guidance on what minimum fees for Designers should be – alongside a new structure for fees that better reflects the value of a Designer’s labour, intellectual property, and professional skill.

This will include the introduction of day rates on top of minimum fees and im-

proved royalty provisions across both the SOLT and UK Theatre Agreements.
An Equity spokesperson said: “Terminating part of our collective agreements, and unilaterally issuing fees as a union, is an extraordinary and extreme step. However, we believe that SOLT’s inaction with respect to our Designer members and the wider Designer workforce leaves us with no choice. We are not prepared to await a further derisory percentage offer which does not resolve the underlying structural issues with the agreement, and we are committed to securing meaningful action to progress the issues we have been seeking to resolve in a standard industrial relations process since 2023.

“SOLT and UK Theatre have been given one month from the date of our letter to respond to us. Once that month has expired, in mid-September, we will begin the necessary work to ensure that the position outlined above is operable from October, ie we will begin issuing our own rates for theatre design work.

“We ask all Designers to stand with us. Add your name to this open letter to demonstrate your support for your union’s position.” 🍷

Open letter <https://tinyurl.com/5evct9vp>
www.equity.org.uk

OBITUARY

Clare O'Donoghue
1963 - 2026



Mark Jonathan writes: It's with great sadness that The ALPD records the death of our much loved member and lighting designer, Clare O'Donoghue.

Clare was born in Liverpool; she graduated from Goldsmiths and went

on to work in theatre lighting. In 1992 I met Clare at Sadler's Wells when Glyndebourne toured there. She went on to work at Glyndebourne in 1994.

Jon Driscoll remembers as a nervous student on work experience, Glyndebourne arriving in Norwich and Clare scooping him up, saying 'I'll look after you'. Clare went onto work in the lighting department at the NT. In 1998 the Department of Trade and Industry wanted to encourage girls at school to look at occupations in science, engineering and technology that were under-represented by women. Clare was one of 4 women chosen to do this. The resulting poster "Lighting up the stars" was sent to schools UK wide. Clare returned to Glyndebourne as Deputy Lighting Manager and latterly as a

supervisor. She met her husband Danny O'Neil at the NT and they had a daughter Caitlin. Clare progressed to doing re-lights around the world for Paule Constable and Jennifer Tipton as well as developing a broad portfolio of her own designs in plays, operas,

musicals and dance along with work for Howard Eaton.

Clare lost her brave fight against leukaemia on 20th June 2026.

Clare's sister Annie: "You could take Clare out of Liverpool, but you could never take Liverpool out of Clare. She had Sass, was quick witted, comical and a yarn spinner. Her enthusiasm had no bounds. She was a direct, straight talking northern woman.

Lighting designer Paule Constable: "When I started working in lighting there were so few women around - so I noticed Clare from the very beginning of my time at the National Theatre. Brilliant, capable - with a keen eye for bullshit and a can do attitude that I tried so hard to emulate. She showed me a way to do the job and not compromise who I was and I'll always be grateful for that. She's always been there through my whole career - a touchstone. I never thanked her enough for being so inspiring. Thank you Clare. For all the care. For all your incredible hard work. For being you. You blazed a trail. The young women in those roles now - which is no longer unusual - they all have you to thank. We all do." 🍷

The challenge for most lighting designers working in Edinburgh in August is how to cope with tiny spaces and minimal rigs.

With its 3649 shows in nearly 300 venues, the Edinburgh Festival Fringe takes place in hurriedly converted classrooms, lecture halls and basements, with a fast turn-over of shows and minimal get-in times. If the lights come on at the start and go off at the end, you are doing well.

Quite a different challenge faced ALPD member **Chris Davey** and his team. At the same time as the world's biggest arts festival is taking place (as well as the Fringe, there is the Edinburgh International Festival, the Edinburgh Book Festival and the Edinburgh Art Festival), an event of gargantuan scale happens every night on the esplanade of Edinburgh Castle. For many of the 9000 people who arrive by the coachload, come rain or shine, the *Royal Edinburgh Military Tattoo* is the only show in town.

And although it trades on the sound of the massed pipes and drums, coupled with the sight of hundreds of tightly choreographed dancers and troops, it would be nothing without light. Sitting on three sides, the stadium audience looks across the vast performing area towards the castle ramparts which are variously illumin-



Royal Edinburgh Military Tattoo
Photo Mark Fisher

EDINBURGH FESTIVAL LIGHTING

Edinburgh Festival Lighting

By Mark Fisher

EDINBURGH



Royal Edinburgh Military Tattoo
Photo Mark Fisher

ated by fire, lasers and large-scale projections.

This year's show was called *A Call to Gather*. Dusk was falling as the 9.30pm performance began, as if the fading natural light was the cue. Flaming torches burned at the top of the fortifications. Beneath them, powerful lights glowed from each aperture in the wall. And at ground level, a dozen or more spotlights sent beams fanning into the sky.

Before anyone had been seen, an intense light arose from within the gatehouse, caught in a haze of billowing smoke. It added to the fearsome impact of the emerging bagpipes in all their droning power.

Unsurprisingly, Davey's team was big. It included lighting associate Andrew Blumsum, programmer Alex Silvester, pyrotechnic designer Owain White, laser designer Seth Griffiths, as well as lighting gaffer Tim Saunders and follow-spot caller Erin Johnstone. That was in addition to projection designer Kate Dawkins and senior producer (projection) Sharmin Jackson.

In a show that was all about spectacle, whether it was the figure-of-eight patterns of the marching bands or the fireworks blasting overhead, the Tattoo played continuously with light. With digital screens

running along the length of the stadium, reflecting the colours of the large-scale projections on the castle walls, the esplanade continually changed in colour and focus: swirling white-on-red circles, geometric lines, yellow speckles...

Famously, no Tattoo is complete without the lone piper, making an impression not just because of the sound of solitary bagpipes coming from the top of the ramparts, but because of the way the musician is picked out by a spotlight against the dark night sky. Again, it would be nothing without light.

From the city's biggest show to one of the smallest – and one of the most beguiling. *Float* by Edinburgh's Starchasers, a company dedicated to very young audiences, was pitched at babies from birth to 12 months and, crucially, their parents. To accommodate the unpredictable needs of its audience, Kerry Cleland's



show ran for three hours each afternoon, allowing people to come and go as it suited. In practice, it suited them to stay for a long time.

Lighting designer **Emma Jones** created a dark, cocoon-like environment for Alison Brown's set, which was centred on a transparent container full of water beneath a canvas ceiling, with the audience gathered around in a circle of beanbags. The four performers supplemented the ebb and flow of Kim Moore's music with ethereal vocal improvisations, their silvery costumes reflecting the low-level light. Jones picked out the swirling water in the central barrel in blues and greens and gave the cast handheld torches to highlight the glasses of water they carried.

For adults and babies alike, it was hypnotic and dreamlike – so much so that warm blankets were spread around for anyone who fancied a nap.

Jones was also responsible for the lights in *The Singer*, a gig-theatre show written by director Cora Bissett. It was about Joe (Jamie Rea), a young man whose deafness is no obstacle to his love of music. With folk-rock songs by KT Tunstall, the Dundee Rep/Solar Bear production at the Traverse Theatre alternated between bedsit intimacy and rock'n'roll energy. Jones responded with appropriate exuberance as well



Centre: *The Singer*
Photo Tommy Ga
Ken Wan. Right
Float Photos Ben
Winger



Mayflies Photo Mihaela Bodlovic

as neatly expressing Joe's physical appreciation of music by embedding circular lights into the many speaker cabinets on Jenny Booth's set. They glowed in reds and blues with the pulse of the music.

Where Jones had to create a brash party mood for *The Singer* and an inviting environment for *Float* in the otherwise formal Edinburgh International Conference Centre, ALPD member **Simon Wilkinson** had to do both things in the old warehouse of Brown's of Leith. Edinburgh site-specific company Grid Iron chose the echoey space as the setting for an adaptation of Andrew O'Hagan's *Mayflies*. With the audience sitting around the perimeter, it was a rough match for the novel's post-industrial club setting in 1980s Manchester. With Lewis den Hertog's impressive projections capturing the era's gritty glamour on the high walls at either end of the room, Wilkinson used the large playing area to suggest festival-going hedonism one minute and the intimacy of end-of-life care the next.

It would be interesting to know how often an idea for a play comes not from a dramatic situation but a striking image. That was the case with *Hang Time* at the Royal Lyceum Theatre in the Edinburgh International Festival. Before she had written a word, writer and director Zora Howard

began drawing. She had a vision of three men suspended in the air, as if midway between life and death. The image persisted as the dialogue appeared. And it remained a fixed point throughout her intense and disturbing production for New York's Flea Theatre.

For its hour-long duration it looked like a snapshot of a lynching. Seemingly unaware of their fate, the three men – played by Kamal Bolden, Bryce Foley and Julian Rozzell – shared breezy bar-room conversation while holding their positions on Neal Wilkinson's set. **Reza Behjat's** lighting added to the impression of them hanging in mid-air. In a single image, the play showed us the rich lives of the men with all their foibles as well as their inhumane treatment by white racists.

At intervals, the conversation stopped and the men writhed as if a noose were being tightened around their necks. As they did so, Behjat intensified the light while focusing it even more tightly on the men's faces. It gave extra punch to Howard's dark, painterly vision.

Finally, three quick examples of light being used in a simple and imaginative way on the Fringe:

Back for a second year, *The Horse of Jenin* told a true story of life under Israeli



Prophets Photo Giulia Ferrando

occupation in the West Bank city of Jenin. At a certain point, actor Alaa Shehada described a power cut and was plunged into darkness. He continued with the help of the audience who illuminated him with the torches on their mobile phones.

Prophets by Jack MacGregor was about a Scottish researcher stationed on an island in the South Pacific. To create the illusion of an online conversation between the researcher and her boyfriend back home, actors Rebecca Wilkie and Xander Cowan shone torches into their faces as if looking

into laptops. Instant and effective.

Co-produced by Fern Culture, a new company dedicated to plays about the climate emergency, Paul Ready's *Little Animals* extended its environmental message to the production itself. Performed in the round on an empty stage in the Royal Lyceum's rehearsal studio, the one-man show relied entirely on natural light and the regular room lights. Ready's point was subtly made, even if it meant one less job for a lighting designer. 🍷

New initiatives to engage the visitors and welcomed returns of exhibitions marked this year's PLASA again as the place to be for all things bright and shiny (and loud, if that's your interest).

Blink and you miss it - said nobody, as the main manufacturers keep competing with ever brighter, bigger and more power-hungry flagship products. The success of recently sold out stadium tours clearly encourages the development of matching instruments, not just for impressive designs - they also "have to compete with ever brighter video backdrops and stage elements", as one distributor put it. Video has clearly taken up more floor space as before, with projector demo studios and wall size displays in all shapes attracting attention.

While the big instruments impress with size and powerful outputs, there is also a visible trend to minimise: Smaller washes and profiles have been further physically scaled down, while also becoming brighter and more feature rich. The dual purpose means that we will see

them more used en masse in clusters, but they have also become more feasible for smaller stages and venues.

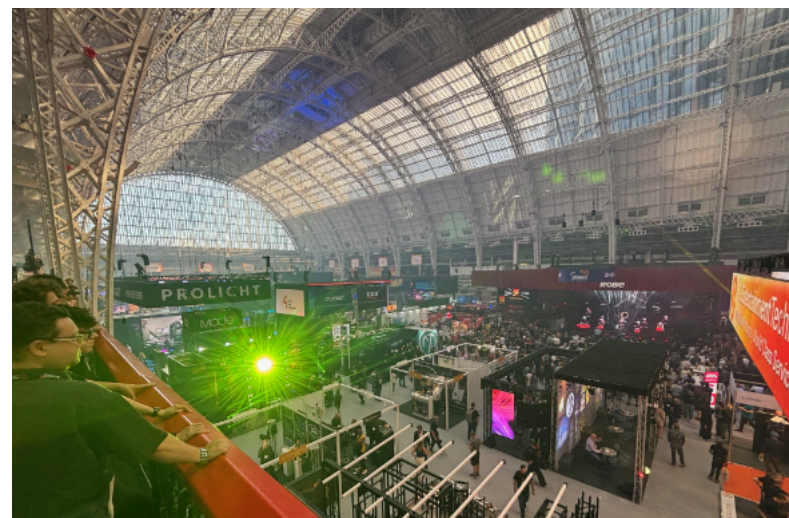
Where would we be without the (mostly) friendly competition of the makers and suppliers of our tools, driving standards, fea-

PLASA LONDON

New tools and ideas for lighting creatives and technicians at the annual Olympia trade fair

By Arnim Friess

ics of an oven tube with a cut-off glass-jar and sharp sliders. Though some people liked that, and the immense popularity of Rob Halliday's *Classic Gear Live* might hint



tures and creative options ever forward? Well we might still be in a small room with 24 channels and two presets, after burning our fingers on the crude mechan-

at a treat for nostalgia.

CLASSIC GEAR LIVE

In a warmly welcomed return, Rob Halliday brought back for the fifth time the live version of his LSi articles: the closest the entertainment tech industry has to an actual museum. Alongside Chris Hewitt's vintage audio display, it proofed again how immensely popular the collection of 'ancient' lamps, desks, amplifiers and speakers is. You could equally find wisened, greyhaired techies reminisce about long

forgotten productions, and wide-eyed students staring in disbelief at the rusty knobs, scratched hand-made housings and dusty lenses, wondering how these artefacts could have ever produced audible sound and bright stages. Some of it is the stuff of legends, and thankfully there are people able to tell the tales of the first Genesis gig or the first season of plays run from a computer (RSC *Roman Plays*, 1972). The National Theatre's 50 year anniversary echoed through many displays and conversations. Mirrored by Vari-Lite's own 45th birthday of the first ever concert use of a VL1 (Genesis, 25 September 1981, Barcelona), a very rare VL3 formed one of the highlights, and the companies lead-creators were on hand to answer questions. Rob Halliday writes (photo right): "On the left: Brooks Taylor. In charge of software, for both lights and the console. Went on to be in charge of Vari-Lite's patents. From that re-trained as a patent attorney, looking after Robe's patents in North America amongst others. In the centre: Jim Bornhorst. Effectively the creator of the Vari-Lite, though he's too modest to say that and will always defer credit to the team. Worked in sound and then making sound products for Showco, the rental company Vari-Lite grew out of. As a keen amateur photographer, he knew

about dichroic filters and had the idea of using them to mix colour. Led the team at VL until the company was sold to PRG. Subsequently led the teams on the Best Boy/Bad Boy fixtures for PRG. On the right: Tom Littrell. Vari-Lite programmer #0001, probably actually invented everything about this job but again would be too modest to say so. But all the original Genesis shows and many others were

Left: gallery view of the packed PLASA at Olympia. Below: Vari-Lite men of the first hour: from left Brooks Taylor, Jim Bornhorst and Tom Littrell.



under his control. Has a fascinating analogy about why pianos for humans are built horizontally rather than vertically to explain why the Artisan console had its encoders on the left whereas current consoles have them (wrongly in his view) on the right. Left VL to go to ETC where he spent a decade introducing us to LED additive futures. Now lights local theatre shows in his retirement. I bet the people he lights for have no idea of his history.

Behind them in view VL5,6,6b, 7 and the Artisan console. VL3 and 4 just in view at lower level. We had all of VL1-7, so all of the rental-only Vari-Lites on show!"

THE PLASA LAB



The "Plasa Lab" was a new initiative spearheaded by James Simpson and Chris West for Plasa which saw lighting fixtures pitched head to (moving) head in a blind test – comparing performance across many attributes such as output, colour, beam and zoom - all live. There were five categories of lights small and large spots of up to 30,000 lumens and over 30,000 lumens respectively, washes both large and small and finally the beam categories which looked at the in-air performance of seven fixtures. The blacked out, haze filled arena had a white carpeted area cordoned off with hazard tape and two white canvasses onto which the spots were focussed, whilst truss mounted washes were displayed on the floor. Credit is due to the students in lab-coats who were responsible for rigging, focussing and operating the 39 fixtures provided for the event by Chauvet, Elation, Varilite, Ayton and Beamz among others (by Sammy Kissin).

SIG-NET AND THE EU CRA

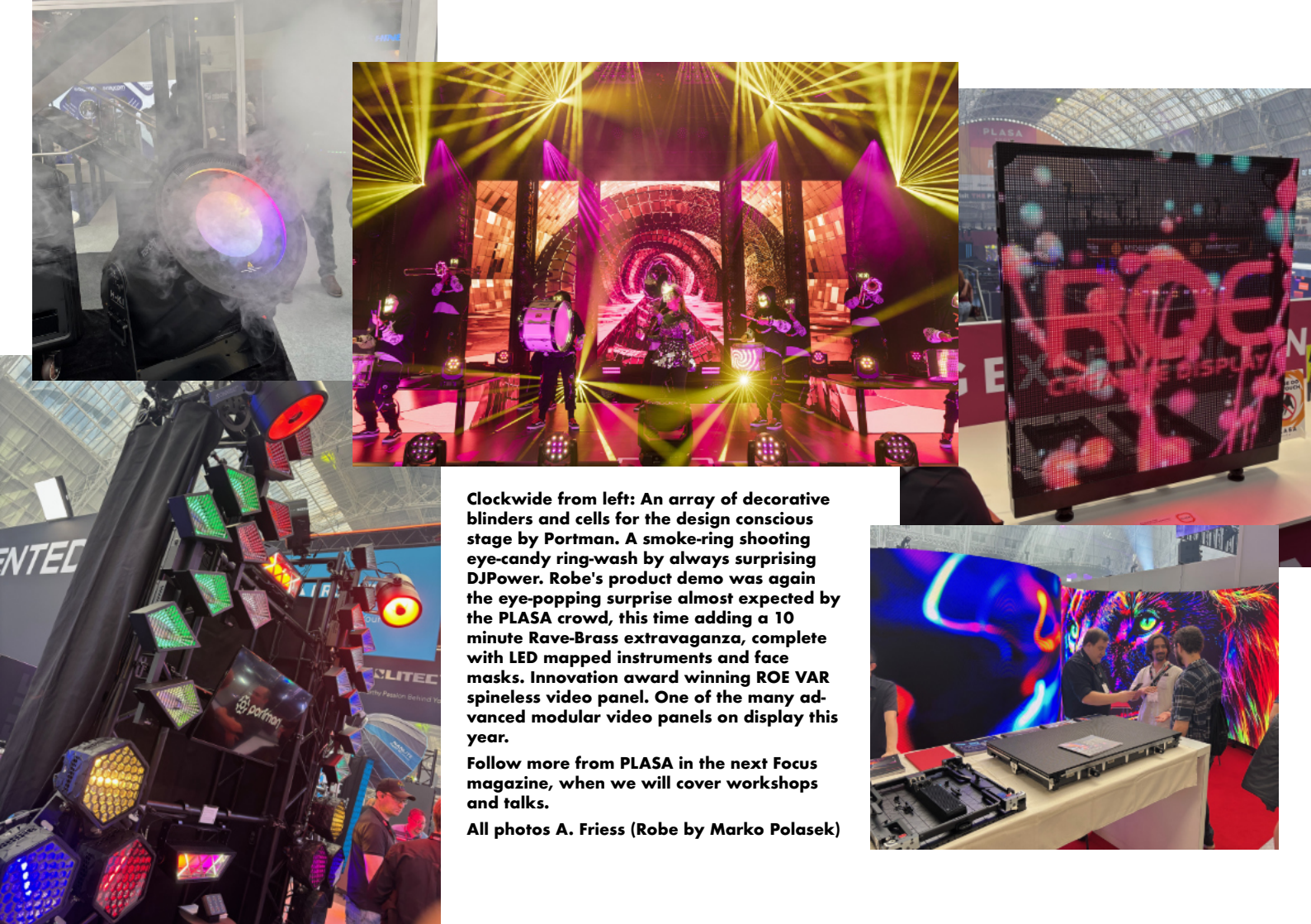
While a topic for the past years, PLASA 2026 was probably the first time many outside the manufacturers circles became aware that new international Cybersecurity legislation - most notably the EU Cyber Resilience Act (CRA) - will imminently impact the entertainment technology in-

dustry in the UK as well. Manufacturers are facing strict deadlines to secure their network interfaces. One response is the development of Sig-Net, which promptly won the PLASA Award for Innovation, as a "cornerstone of cyber security" and a "vital platform for industry" in the words of James Eade, chair of the judging panel. A pavillion informed visitors about the details, and in a parallel event at LAMDA Carne Studio, CyberFest looked at the practical implementation of the Sig-Net, SNOW and File-Transfer protocols. Focus will look at the implication in a future issue.

<https://sig-net.net>

VIDEO, VIDEO EVERYWHERE

In a trend foreshadowed by large live music and EDM events, LED display walls now routinely back even smaller West End, touring and panto productions, having replaced traditional scenery and shifting the job of the set designer to the video designer. This has neither been reflected yet with awards recognition, nor in education, but the importance was marked at PLASA with an Innovation Award for ROE Visual's VAR - this stands for Vanish Air Rental: "Placing the drive electronics in the perimeter of the panel makes this the first product to be a tourable, transparent screen without a central spine



Clockwise from left: An array of decorative blinders and cells for the design conscious stage by Portman. A smoke-ring shooting eye-candy ring-wash by always surprising DJPower. Robe's product demo was again the eye-popping surprise almost expected by the PLASA crowd, this time adding a 10 minute Rave-Brass extravaganza, complete with LED mapped instruments and face masks. Innovation award winning ROE VAR spineless video panel. One of the many advanced modular video panels on display this year.

Follow more from PLASA in the next Focus magazine, when we will cover workshops and talks.

All photos A. Friess (Robe by Marko Polasek)

Origins and purpose: Scandlight is one of many cross cultural meetings of theatre makers and researchers that owe their origins to OISTAT, and to dedicated, enthusiastic academics – in this case Lars Garpenfeld and Ingrid Elam from the University of Malmö.

They held the first conference over two days in June 2006. By 2009, Scandlight had become

inextricably linked to the late Anders Larsson of the University of Stockholm. The success of the 2026 conference is in many ways, a beautiful memorial to the late Anders, and a tribute to his ability to establish something

important that will survive his passing.

Scandlight is more intimate than Showlight, maybe 50 delegates plus students from the host universities. Anders and the team established a format over the three days with talks in the mornings, lunch in the university refectory, workshops in the afternoon, and social events in the evenings. Practically everyone stays for all

three sessions of all three days, and the whole event sometimes feels more like a three-day family party than a conference! We all know why we are there, our collective enthusiasm to know more about light. And despite well over 30 years as practitioner, teacher, and researcher, I learnt lots and discussed even more. The fact is that my responses to lots of the

presentations and workshops are still developing, many weeks later.

To do justice to all of the great content of Scandlight 2026 would take up a lot more space than I have here, so I'm going to focus on two themes that ran through presentations and

discussions, and will return with more from the conference later in the year.

Discussing Colour

Defining the colour quality of light sources has been a discussion point for longer than any of us have been alive. Back when electric light first started to replace gaslight and candles people complained that it was too harsh! And

some readers may remember the interesting transition from 2700k T-Class lamps to the 3200k tungsten-halogen lamps? Well of course all that is as nothing to the debates that rage around about which LED light engine can do a better Lee this or Rosco that. And that's before we talk about what we mean by "white" light, on stage, in galleries and museums, in public spaces and in our homes.

Mattias Fransson had the thankless task of presenting an update from the CIE (the people who gave us the diagram on many "ColorPickers" alleging to represent every colour visible to human perception). He explained how the CRI standard – developed in an age when fluorescent tubes and discharge sources were the only alternative to tungsten and daylight – is not going away! Despite a push for more useful (and perhaps less "gameable") standards, the CIE is not going to withdraw CRI any time soon. Later on we duly noted that even the more sophisticated evaluation methods such as TM-30 only look at colour on flat matte surfaces – which is not generally useful when we are talking about the sets, costumes, bodies, and faces that we light. So what do we do?

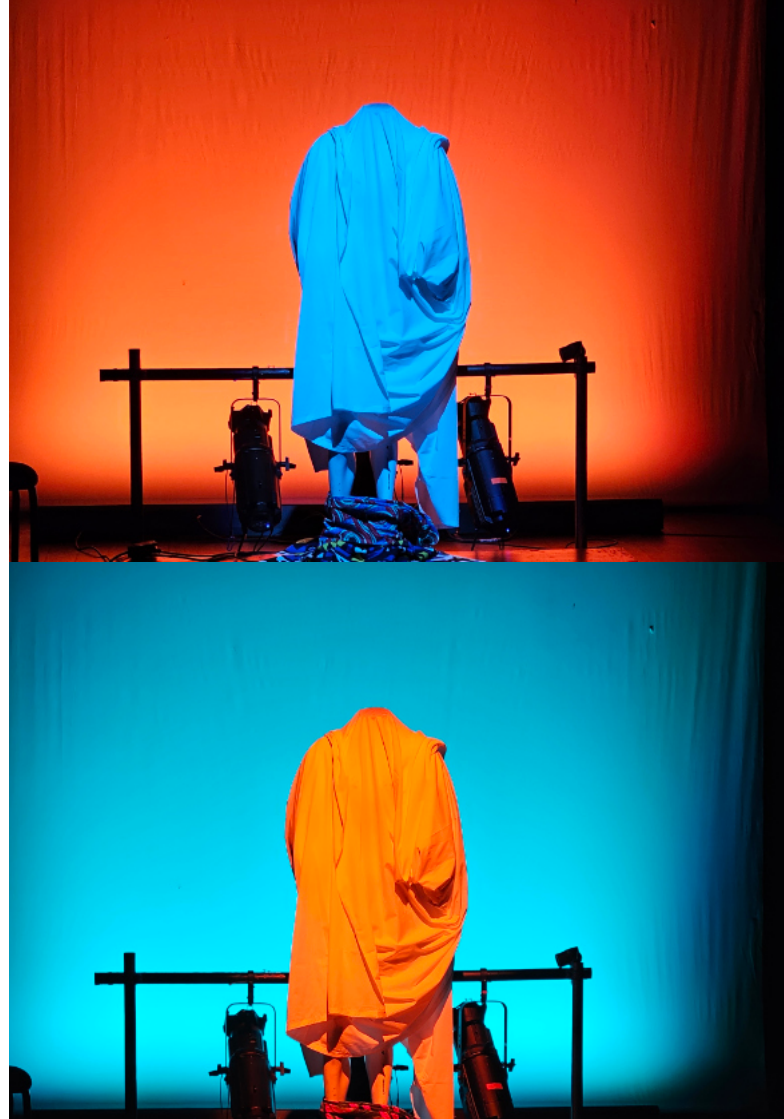
Clifton Taylor and Declan Randall both ran practical workshops with tips and

SCANDLIGHT STOCKHOLM 2026

A Meeting Place for People Who Care About the Art of Light

By Nick Moran (Part 1)





tricks, and some deeper insights too. Clifton stages a beautiful demonetisation on how our perception of what is “white” light is a construct – and something an LD can and should take responsibility for. He also introduced the concept of dominant and recessive colours – citing the work of Josef Albers at the Bauhaus Institute in the early 1930s and later in the USA at Black Mountain College. If you have not encountered Albers colour theory it is fascinating and really useful. Albers was involved in the artistic education of many of the key figures in US art in the mid twentieth century, including Cy Twombly, Kenneth Noland and Elaine de Kooning.

The Quality of Light

Back in the world of analysing spectra, Ludwig Lepage (of Robert Julliat) and Véronique Purrucon talked about the more than 100 “physics” ways to describe the distance between two spectra, and that none of them is really meaningful to humans! This failure to link the physical domain to the perceptual domain when we talk about the quality of light is at the heart of the sceALED research project. “The project combines artists, engineers and researchers to connect subjective experience with measurement, modelling and practical tools for performing arts

professionals.” If you were at Showlight 2025 you may have taken part in one of the project’s experiments. For us lighting people, a successful outcome from this project should make it easier to replicate lighting designs in the real world. Would you use a metric that can capture the quality of the light from each scene in a production so that it is possible to faithfully reproduce the lighting design with different fixtures, perhaps many years later?

The project has used Caroline Guiela Nguyen’s production Lacrima as one of many experiences to examine audience perception of light. (The production toured into The Barbican in London in September last year)

The production’s design concept included the idea that each of the three locations would only be signified by the quality of the light. Below you can see some of the words audience members used to describe the three distinct worlds of the piece.



I hope this gives you a taste of why I so enjoy Scandlight, and why I’m still thinking about much of what I heard there.

Next time I hope to tell you more about Scandinavian perspectives on lighting music for TV, being an in house LD, the ups and downs of making work as part of Hotel ProForma, light festivals, and what happens when you are truly in the dark! 🍷

MUMBAI

- Warm tones
- Pinks
- (Shades very close to spices)
- Work on colour saturation
- Orientalism

PARIS

- Raw, clinical white, even if it is rich in the spectrum
- Cold
- Brilliant
- Glossy
- Slightly purplish
- Huis clos
- Suffocation

ALENÇON

- Soft white
- Powder
- Bright winter morning

Left page top: recessive dominant.
Bottom: Dominant recessive
This page: Lacrima.
Photos: Nick Moran.

At the beginning of 2026, Theatr Clwyd announced the launch of Stiwdio Clwyd - "a national development studio that supports theatre-makers across Wales at every stage of their careers."

Their first year has two flagship projects: 'Tearing the Roof Off', supporting artists to move into large-scale theatre-making, and 'Sparks Open', a programme of support, mentorship and bursary funding for a wider range of theatre-makers to explore their creativity and professional development.

I was really impressed by the goals of the Sparks Open programme - for once it felt like a producing theatre had listened to the freelancers it works with and understood what it can do to foster development and artistic exploration.

"Sparks is a purposeful intervention based on what hundreds of freelancers have told us they need - an opportunity to take a step back from production and concentrate on exploration and growth. It is a small start enabling us to shape each iteration of the scheme around the individual artist, providing a bespoke and nurturing environment that encourages imagination, artistic rigour, and sustainability."

I believe the seeds of this idea go back to 2020, when I found myself on a Zoom forum headed up by Theatr Clwyd to keep in touch with freelancers during lockdown. We talked about how relentless freelance

happened.

So I was thrilled to see the concept re-emerge in a fuller, more exciting way - a whole department dedicated to nurturing freelancers across Wales.

SPARKS OPEN BURSARY

Theatr Clwyd's new mentorship programmes takes flight

By Katy Morison



life is, and how we rarely get time or money to train, learn new skills or just play and be creative. Theatr Clwyd listened, and after the first lockdown opened up applications for small bursaries with time in the theatre and staff support. I was successful, planning to explore controlling a large moving light rig in a Live Music setup, rather than the cue-based approach my theatre work had taught me. Sadly, before I could get up there we were thrown into another lockdown and the project was postponed, and ultimately never

I had considered applying to Tearing the Roof Off, as being mentored while exploring how to scale up my work was appealing. However, this first year wasn't open to Lighting Designers, though I hope they consider this in future. Sparks was open to any discipline of 'theatre-maker' - including LDs, technicians and stage management - purposefully 'Open' so each person can shape their own pathway.

My application centred on developing my skills with pre-vis software: how to integrate it into my design workflow, and

whether I need it at all. I'm largely self-taught on Vectorworks, from that generation who trained with pencil and stencil rather than CAD, and have built my skills alongside the needs of my work - from re-drawing touring plans, through 2D design work, to working in 3D to understand angles, coverage and tricky set pieces. I've never worked on a show demanding full pre-vis, but wondered if I was missing something: could pre-vis speed up a tight tech week, help me pre-plot Panto effects, or let me test ideas with directors before we reach plotting?

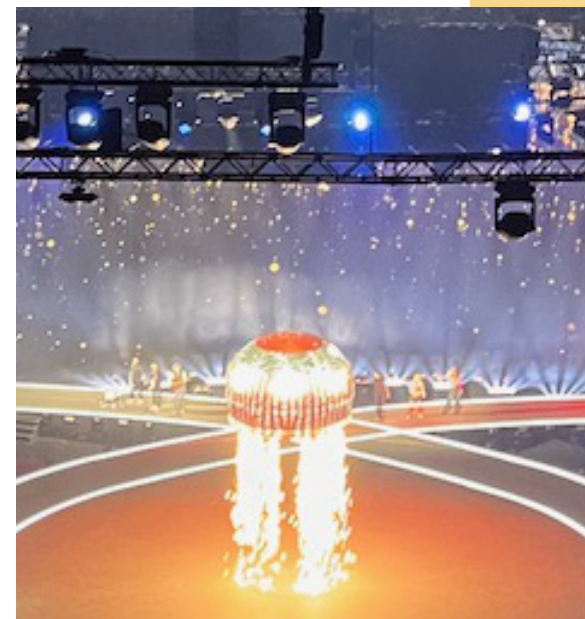
My application set out this thinking and how I'd use residency days at Theatr Clwyd alongside mentor input. I was very happy to be accepted.

Stiwdio Clwyd is headed by Suzanne Bell, who I spoke to about possible mentors. With help from the ALPD office, I was offered the chance to shadow Bruno Poet at the final tech days of the *Opening Ceremony of the Glasgow 2026 Commonwealth Games* in July.

Bruno and I discussed how essential a week of pre-vis is for a show of this scale, with such limited time in the venue - clear once I saw the number of fixtures, the pace and the effect-density involved. It was inspiring to see such a huge production come together, with the lighting team

working incredibly hard, often overnight, to be show-ready. I'm grateful to Bruno and his team - Johanne Jensen (Associate LD), and programmers Tom Young and Tom Lee - for answering all my questions. Seeing a show of this scale programmed, across four grandMA3 Full-size consoles, was fascinating. Johanne showed me some of the pre-vis prep for the Closing Ceremony, using Depence as their visualiser, and we discussed whether pre-vis is worth it at smaller scales, and whether software like Depence is justifiable for anything smaller than a concert or ceremony.

I was also given plenty to think about by Neil Austin, who kindly offered a chat despite feeling he might not be the ideal mentor, being himself wary of pre-vis. He described experiences with visualisation software that



The flying teacake and operating position at the Commonwealth Games
Photos: Katy Morison

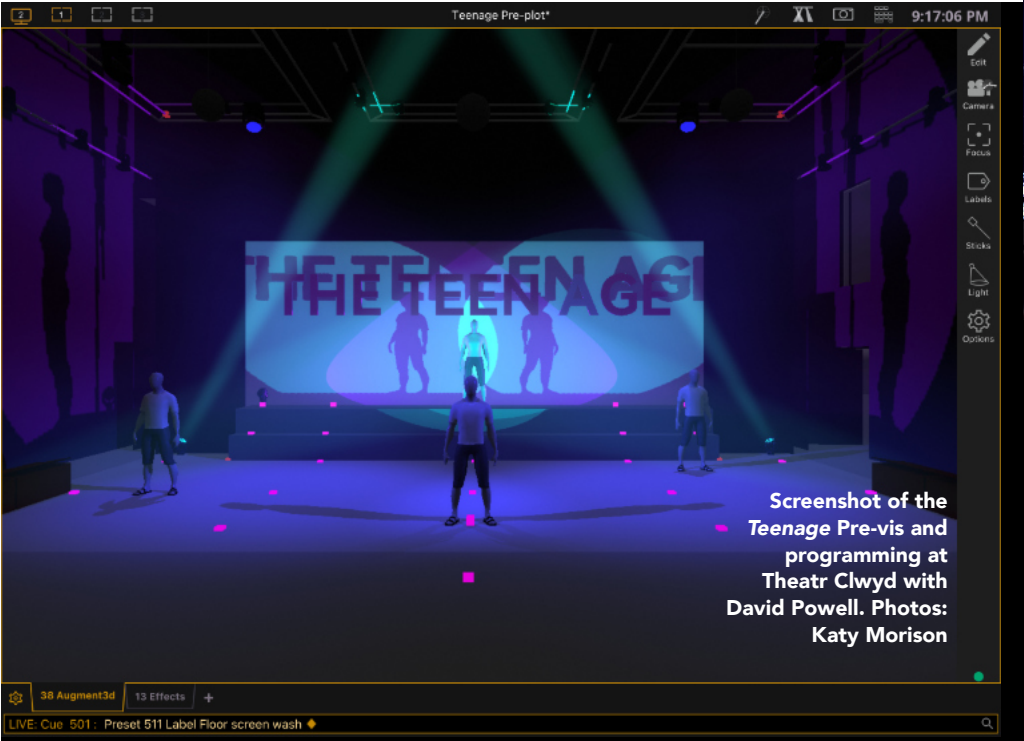
hadn't paid off, meaning much of his pre-vis work had to be redone - and explained why, despite his experience, he trusts accurate 2D drafting over advancing technology. He warned me against relying on the technology for confidence, rather than trusting my design - great advice that will stay with me.

The latest stage of my Sparks journey was two days in residency at Theatr Clwyd in August. I have two Lighting Designs coming up there this year: their Rock 'n' Roll Panto of *Pinocchio*, following in the footsteps of Jo Town, and the Young Company show *Teenage* in September. I'd hoped to use the Panto as my pre-vis test case, but the autumn schedule didn't allow residency days, so *Teenage* became my test case instead - on a rushed timeframe.

Having considered options such as Depence and Capture, I decided on ETC's Augment3d, largely because it needs no extra cost to run with an ETC console, and because my familiarity with ETC software made for an achievable learning curve. I learned the software over two days at home using etcconnect.com's online tools and YouTube tutorials, and found it intuitive - simpler to control than the equivalent features in Vectorworks, with useful tools for adding fixtures, scenic elements and figures. Importing my Vectorworks file as

an .mvr worked well. Focusing and plotting from home was enjoyable, though setup took a good few hours, needs two screens, and using the Nomad system meant working with ML controls rather than encoders - though the 'Click to focus' feature was very

pleasing. With cues, effects and colour palettes prepared, I arrived at Theatr Clwyd for my two days in Stiwdio Weston, where part of the value of these programmes is being able to draw on the building's teams and



resources. Clwyd's LX team are excellent, as proven by Chris Skinner (Lighting Manager) and David Powell (Deputy Lighting Manager) winning awards at this year's ALPD Awards. I've worked with them before, most recently on *Tick, Tick... Boom!* in May 2025, and David's previous Augment3d experience was useful as we shared tips.

The two days were rewarding: exploring pre-vis in a real rig without the pressure of tech or an audience for results was liberat-

ing, and something I'm sure many ALPD members will recognise as rare. There were challenges - focus positions didn't quite match the visualiser, likely down to slightly inaccurate room measurements - but features like Staging Mode (like Blind mode with the visualiser, letting you preview changes before committing) proved genuinely useful for both designer and programmer. We also explored running effects in a busking setup versus the cue-based approach I'm used to, which fed into how I might create Panto effects

quickly. There's still more to come in my Sparks journey - sessions with another mentor, a programmer who works with pre-vis regularly, to understand their workflow and what they need from a designer.

I'm extremely grateful for the support Sparks Open has given me, and I salute Theatr Clwyd for investing in Welsh freelancers - I hope it encourages similar projects elsewhere in the UK.

As for whether I'll bring pre-vis into my workflow: the notes of caution from Neil and Bruno ring true. Unless I'm on a large-scale production with budget for my time, the programmer's time and pre-vis setup, no one is paying for the extra work - and most fees barely cover the hours I already put in. Still, I think it could be a useful tool for developing ideas, auditioning looks and effects, and producing visuals to share with a director; many of the students I teach at RWCMD already use Capture or Augment3d effectively for exactly this.

Does pre-vis only belong in large-scale music tours, West End shows and events like Eurovision and the Olympics? Are there designers who use it solo, and how do they justify the time? I'd love to see some discussion on this among the membership. 🍷

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2026 marks the 50th anniversary of the National Theatre's home on the South Bank. The NT welcomed Lighting Designers Paul Pyant and James Farncombe to light concurrent productions, *Summerfolk* in the Olivier Theatre and *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* in the Lyttelton.

While both are longstanding and familiar collaborators at the NT, this marked the first time they had worked concurrently. The moment was made all the more significant by their family connection: Paul is James' uncle, and an early influence on James' decision to pursue lighting design...

Q: Paul - how were you first drawn into this world of creativity?

Paul: From an early age. Encouraged by my father, a talented Bass-Baritone involved in a great deal of amateur and school productions, theatre always has been a passion. I managed to get a place at RADA in the early 1970s on the stage management course (I was an enthusiastic but sadly untalented performer!) graduating in 1973. The rest is total happenstance as a series of very happy accidents led to my first job on graduating as a Production Electrician for Glyndebourne Festival Opera. My interest grew in Lighting and long story short became a full-time Lighting De-

signer from 1987.

James: I obviously benefitted from the same family's enthusiasm for performing arts. Theatre and art of all kinds were encouraged, and of course we were taken to see shows of Paul's. As a boy, I saw productions of his at Glyndebourne, and the National. Paul gave us a backstage tour of Glyndebourne one year, and I was completely ensnared by the atmosphere. Now it seems inevitable that I went on to get involved in school and university productions. From there I worked at Notting-ham Playhouse on a casual basis before landing a couple of lengthy tours as re-lighter.

Q: Paul - what was the first production you lit at the NT and James - do you recall an NT production that Paul had designed, that fed your aspirations to pursue a career in Lighting design?

Paul: 1988, *A Place with the Pigs*, written and directed by Athol Fugard and De-signed by Douglas Heap. A two-hander in

the Cottesloe Theatre (now the Dorfman) with Linda Bassett and Jim Broadbent. Whilst at RADA I had been lucky to have a great working relationship with Douglas Heap who was the Head of Design there and he very much helped me develop my early attempts of Lighting Design.

James: I saw *A Place with the Pigs*. I didn't realise it was Paul's first produc-tion there! It was a seminal moment for me. Lighting and sound conjured time of day and the passing of seasons in a way that I found completely fascinat-

ing. Great play, too, and those two actors remain favourites of mine. I've just worked with Linda on *Care* at the Young Vic, fun-nily enough, 28 years later. She is one of the best.

Q: James - what was your inaugural pro-duction at the NT?

James: 2011. It was *Men Should Weep* by Ena Lamont Stewart, directed by Josie Rourke and designed by Bunny Christie in the Lyttelton. I'd aspired to design there for over a decade and started to think it would never happen. The experience

lived up to expectations, and now, if I was a football team, I'd call it my home ground.

Q: You are both highly regarded for your lighting and also known as collaborators who are a pleasure to work with, despite having quite distinct styles. How have you each navigated the changes in lighting over the years, particularly in relation to Technology - desks, fixtures (Tungsten – LED), colour, VOR, pre-vis...?

Paul: Advances since the 1980s have been unbelievable. The Technology has changed beyond all recognition. The days of turning up with just a screwdriver and spanner are long gone. Teams require a great deal of specialist knowledge to handle the equipment we now use. Whilst the same design principals prevail, the process has totally changed. The lighting designer now has the challenge of meet-ing the Director and Designers expecta-tions and balance the available elements of Budget, Time and expertise as best one can. Which can be very challenging in-deed.

The development of areas of expertise, like lighting control, means that relation-ship with your programmer becomes a vi-tal part of the process. I no longer have the skill or understanding of modern con-trol systems, it is now such a specialist

NATIONAL THEATRE AT 50

Lighting Designers James Farncombe & Paul Pyant share their personal memories

By Matt Drury, NT Head of Lighting



A Place with the Pigs
Photo Douglas Jeffery



Men should Weep
Photo Manuel Harlan

area. It is very much a collaboration and I admire and value the skill and knowledge they can bring to a project. I think I personally still very much prefer the art side of lighting design rather than the technology, although I understand the two things must work together - hopefully in harmony.

James: I have tried to embrace the changes as they've come in. I took to the EOS quite happily, for example, I found it very intuitive. It took me a while to realise that the paper plan I was still taking to the production desk had become just an elaborate doodle pad, and I now use the magic sheet almost exclusively. Like Paul, I place a great value on the relationship with the programmer. Their contribution is a crucial mix of the technical and creative.

My approach to design has altered too. I used to fret for hours over choosing gel. The advent of the LED has changed that, but it's not so much that I can postpone those choices – it's more that I feel we can actively paint with light now, and respond so quickly to changes in atmosphere, costume, and skin tone, on a granular, state-by-state basis. Tungsten will always have a place in my rigs, and I cherish it, but I love the flexibility afforded to us by LED.

VOR is also a game changer for rehearsals and previews, especially for complicated sequences. Having that playback

showing the stage picture and exactly where it is in the cue stack has become invaluable. Pre viz is useful for me, but only to a point. I don't tend to design in a way that warrants actual cue composition in pre viz, but it is great for checking rigging positions and sight-lines.

Q: What about process/workflow - rep, schedules, rehearsals, focus, plotting, tech?

Paul: As a freelance lighting designer each project that comes along must be approached in a methodical way. As I mentioned earlier the process from proposal to finished project requires the balancing of the available budgets, time and expertise. On each I try to bring together people I know and trust. There exists a shorthand born of working together regularly. Other projects - when you are coming to a theatre that

you don't know either the space or the team, or maybe the language or working practices - is always daunting. Communication is the most important thing. Trying to balance all the elements and getting the



best result you can. It can be frustrating and exhausting.

Balancing all this into a good work/life balance is also challenging for a freelance designer. The work requires you to be developing several projects at the same time.

James: I encountered working in rep for the first time in the Lyttelton. In those days all three NT venue were in rep. I found it tricky at first. Drawing a plan from scratch had become part of my process and here I was presented with a huge pre-existing rig to work with. I had to hide the layer on the plan showing the rep rig to get started, but slowly it dawned on me that every time I drew a lamp, there was already one there.

I'm constantly trying to balance fre. A lot of the time I don't feel I need to be there. But popping in regularly is very helpful for keeping abreast of developments. Maintaining a regular presence, even if it's only for short spells, helps to keep the lines of communication open with everyone involved, which as Paul says, is really what it's all about. It also helps to develop a collaborative relationship with the cast, as it is all too easy to remain anonymous in the dark beyond the footlights once tech starts. Being in the rehearsal room means you can check in with them over a tea and biscuit.

Focus sessions seem to be a thing of the past, at least in the conventional sense. The time that is allocated is frequently nibbled away at by fit up. All the more reason to have a good, speedy programmer to focus all those moving lights over stage rehearsals.

Similarly, a dedicated plotting session is

a precious, rare thing. When I do get one, my approach is to move as quickly as possible, to rough in as much as I can, a little like the first washes of paint on a canvas. It's about learning what works, what doesn't and the unexpected things (both good and bad) and responding accordingly. As Bruno Poet says, you can usually always rig, focus or plot your way out of trouble, and the plotting session is the first opportunity to test some of your ideas and rough in basic states. There is rarely time for much else and it is important to avoid getting bogged down in detail.

Tech is the best bit, when everyone is working together. For me, the best lighting is a collaboration between lighting, set and actor, and the tech is the one moment to bring all those together before everyone's focus refracts again. It can be stressful, but it's the bit I like most.

Q: Can we talk about people - chiefs, programmers, crew and production colleagues?

Paul: I have been working now for well over 50 years and been very lucky to collaborate with so many talented people both on and offstage, usually meeting in a very casual happenstance way. Working at Glyndebournne meant early on I met very established directors, designers, practitioners in all the backstage departments

and an amazing team of electricians that worked the seasons there from Andrew Bridge, Keith Benson, Mark Jonathan, Gerry Amies, Hugh Chinnick, Howard Eaton et al. The head of lighting there in those days was Robert Bryan who was a great influence on me. Early breaks include meeting a very young director called Nicholas Hytner for who I eventually lit many productions like *Wind in the Willows* and *Carousel* at the NT. The NT also introduced me to both Trevor Nunn (*Arcadia*) and Sam Mendes (*The Sea*).

If I had to nominate projects I was most proud of at the NT, I would include *Candide* in The Olivier (1999 Caird/Nunn/Napier), *Arcadia* (1993 Nunn/Thompson) and *Carousel* (Hytner/Crowley 1990).

James: I suppose I could say I've had a number of theatre 'families'; people whose careers have been for a while bound up with my own, where a shorthand and common history has developed. Having a team that understands your taste and approach is invaluable. There is also something about working in a medium that is constantly examining the human experience, that means you can get to know people very quickly, and when you 'click' with someone, be it in a creative or technical collaboration, it can be fantastic. Like any relationship, it can take work to keep it

happy and healthy.

Q: Both of your careers cover theatre & opera, do you have a preference and is there an area of interest that you would still like to explore, installations or architecture for example?

Paul: I think my first love is Opera. I have huge admiration for the singers, dancers and actors that I have worked with and I am always in awe of their talent. I am not sure I would get the same buzz from anything else.

James: I have always loved the sense of occasion and the spectacle of opera. I love it when the orchestra arrives. Music, in its many forms, is my first love, and I'm lucky that I've been able to work in some of the biggest opera houses in the world, but sometimes, there is really nothing better than a good, fizzy script and a couple of actors at the top of their game.

I've noticed there is a shift in the aesthetics of live music to something with more of an awareness of visual narrative, and I loved working in theatre with artists like Yannis of the band Foals, so one day I hope to have the opportunity to experiment in the live music arena.

Q: As your careers have matured, how have you learned when to step back creatively - assuming there is always one more

mod that could be done...?

Paul: Always a difficult question. You usually know when you reach that point in creating a production. Some directors/designers/performers like to keep going - but sometimes the chemistry is such that you instinctively know when to step back.

James: Yes, not always easy to do. I think the decision to do nothing, when doing nothing is the right thing to do, is one of the most advanced and mature an artist can make. There can be an almost overwhelming temptation to constantly justify one's presence. I think it's a trap all designers fall into once in a while.

Q: What advice has stood you in the best stead throughout your careers, and does it still hold true for aspiring lighting designers today?

Paul: Respect. Know what your personal limitations are. Do not be afraid to admit you need the help and assistance. Try and be as collaborative as possible.

James: The maverick German auteur Johannes Schütz once advised me to "sit and look". Until I took this on board, I was almost frantic in my efforts to populate a show with cues. Too many changes, too many ideas. Now I take my time, get out from behind the monitors and move about, and actively 'sit and look', to try and

be objective about what I've made.

Also, learn to say no. It's perhaps counter intuitive for a freelancer, but I always think taking on too much work and doing a rushed, half finished job is always a mistake.

Q: What projects are coming up next for you, and what are you most looking forward to in the near future?

Paul: At the moment I am just about to go into fit-up for a production of *EQUUS* at the Menier Chocolate factory in London. That's followed by two Operas at Garsington in the summer, and later in the year a revival of *The Rise and Fall of Little Voice* at the NT Dorfman.

At my great age I only pick projects I want to do, so am looking forward in equal measure to all these. But I have a bit of time off scheduled in the autumn which I will really enjoy!

James: I have *Golden Boy* next, at the Almeida, with Josh O'Connor, then into the West End for *Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolf* with Gillian Anderson and Billy Crudup.

Q: Are there any other family members following in your footsteps that we can look forward to working with?!

Paul: Only James, of whom I am im-

mensely proud - but claim no direct influence over!

James: No, not yet. My daughter Olive has so far resisted the charms of the stage, although she is a comedian. She wants to be a pro footballer.

Q: Any final thoughts either on your recent experiences at the NT or generally for the reader?

Paul: *Summerfolk* recently at the National was a good experience. I last worked at the NT Olivier back in 2014 (*King Lear*. Sam Mendes), so it was quite a long break for me, and the team and equipment have changed beyond recognition since then. It is everything you would expect from a National Theatre, a well oiled and managed system which I felt secure and supported and greatly enjoyed being back!

James: It remains my favourite place to work. All three venues now have excellent lighting teams. Naturally, I won't pick one out. They are all exemplary. I've had a little run there over the last eighteen months. Bruno Poet and I revived *London Road* in the Olivier, I lit *Land of the Living* in the Dorfman and *Playboy of the Western World* and *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* in the Lyttelton. Nothing on the horizon at the moment, but we live in hope. 



Les Liaisons Dangereux
Photo Sarah Lee

Summerfolk
Photo Johan Persson

This time, Focus is calling all the way up north, to the shores of Loch Ness, to hear from Rory Kay about working in the Scottish lighting scene.

Focus: Hello Rory, tell us a bit about yourself and what you are working on at the moment?

Rory: I'm predominantly a lighting technician - board operator, production LX, Lighting design but I've ended up doing lots of other jobs in my career - event management, stage manager, sound operator & video wall technician. I am from, and live in Inverness in the Highlands, so nowhere near the big production areas. That's partially been down to life circumstances, but I also feel very lucky, working for sixteen years at Eden Court Theatre Inverness, along with working for producing theatre companies and on events before becoming fully freelance in 2024

Focus: What was your early path to get there?

Rory: I got into lighting at an acting course in Inverness, and there was no stage manager or technician there, so myself and a friend just took over as a necessity. I started really enjoying it from there, and began branching out into amateur

productions. I got into the Royal Welsh College and moved on from there. I had a great time learning my craft and working with a number of really good lighting designers, some of whom took me under

INTRODUCING...

... new ALPD member
**Rory Kay, from
Inverness Scotland, in
our new Focus series**



their wing, like Katharine Williams, who took me on as an associate lighting designer for a number of her shows.

Focus: And have you ever gone back to your original wish of acting?

Rory: (Laughs) Noooo - I discovered very quickly that I absolutely loved lighting design, and lighting in general, because it combined my love of theatre, technology, and being creative. It just felt like a perfect match for me.

Focus: Could you picture for members who live and work in a metropole, what it's

like to work in the far North?

Rory: I travel - a lot. Within the Highlands there's a very small network of people you need to know and spend time working with. I'm very used to taking trains for hours to get down to Dundee, Edinburgh, or Glasgow. I'm actually in Edinburgh this week to take out a show for Dundee Rep that I'm going on tour with. It is a bit of a challenge, and having a family and a life up here definitely doesn't make it easy - I can't commit to months of touring away. But it does mean I get to live in gorgeous surroundings, and it's a very relaxed and comfortable way of life up here.

Focus: ... and there's the Edinburgh Festival?

Rory: I was down setting up Dundee Rep's show, *The Singer*, at the Traverse Theatre, then I'm going on tour with it as production LX and relighter.

Focus: There is more in our article about Edinburgh lighting, page 11 ...

Rory: ... and it's lighting designed by Emma Jones. It's got many pieces of set with integrated LED tape, practical lights and speakers. I'm looking forward to getting it out around Scotland in September.

At the same time, I'm working on the first-ever Inverness Fringe, which is quite

exciting. There's a lot going into it at the moment, and because it's the first one, there's a lot of figuring out venues and how it's all going to come together - as, of course, all fringes do at the start.

Focus: How does it work on the hardware and hire side?

Rory: Up here you very much have to be a jack of all trades. You have to be able to fix kit on the run. Regularly you're on the phone to suppliers saying, "This is broken, are you happy if I pull it apart and fix it?" With hire, your choice here is often limited, and starts often with "what have you got on the shelf?", rather than having a specific instrument in mind. There's a local hire company here with gig lights and gig moving heads, and we use them because there's no other option - it's that or nothing. Transporting anything up here quickly involves high costs. So it can be a bit of a challenge.

Focus: And on the jobsite, what are your options?

Rory: It's a mix of working in the arts, but supplementing yourself with corporate projects. I enjoy this as well, you can't be picky up here, but often it's an opportunity to expand my skills base. I do look at the ALPD suggested fees - up here it's often day rates though, and those rates just



can't exist around our area.

As a new member, I hope for connections to other ALPD members within the UK. It's great having Focus magazine, to see what's actually happening in the world of lighting, so it feels less insular and disconnected up here.

Focus We wish you the best of luck for your future career!

If you are a new to the ALPD or have recently joined, we would love to tell all the other members about you and your work. Email editor@thealpd.org.uk



Saltire for National Rail at the Glenfinnan Viaduct (Photo Rory Kay, "while being eaten alive by midges.") and harsh working conditions at rehearsals for Call-Out by Arron Sparks. Photo Matthias Kremer (also portrait)

"I really enjoyed reading, in the last two issues of Focus, Joe and Andy's reminiscences about their first forays into the world of lighting - but I was struck by the relatively large scale of both their rig plans!

I definitely don't remember starting out straight into a prosc. arch venue with fly bars and bridges. So I went for a little dive in my archive to see how my scrappy notes from 2004 compared...

When I arrived at university in 2002, backstage theatre quickly became my primary hobby. I'd never really got involved with it at school (unlike most of my student peers), but it had always interested me from a distance, and I soon found that there was plenty of demand for people who were organized and enthusiastic, regardless of experience. Within a few weeks of arriving, I was ASM on a production of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* at the Oxford Playhouse (my only memory of which is handling the dry ice for the "pea souper" in the DSL assembly), and I spent most of the rest of my first year Stage Managing and DSM-ing a series of other student shows. By the start of my

second year, I had managed to supplement my ability to source props with some rudimentary rigging and focussing skills, and I was starting to suspect that I might enjoy being creative as well as technical. My first opportunity to find out was with Anthony Shaffer's *Sleuth* at the Playhouse's little Burton Taylor



MY FIRST JOB

ALPD member Christopher Nairne remembers student drama, his first swatch book, and having a (future) famous face to light ...

Studio (50 seats; 24 dimmers; 2 shows a night in rep).

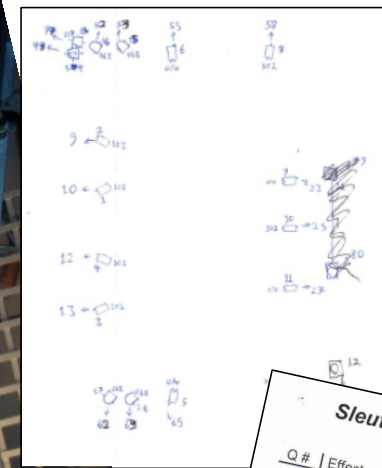
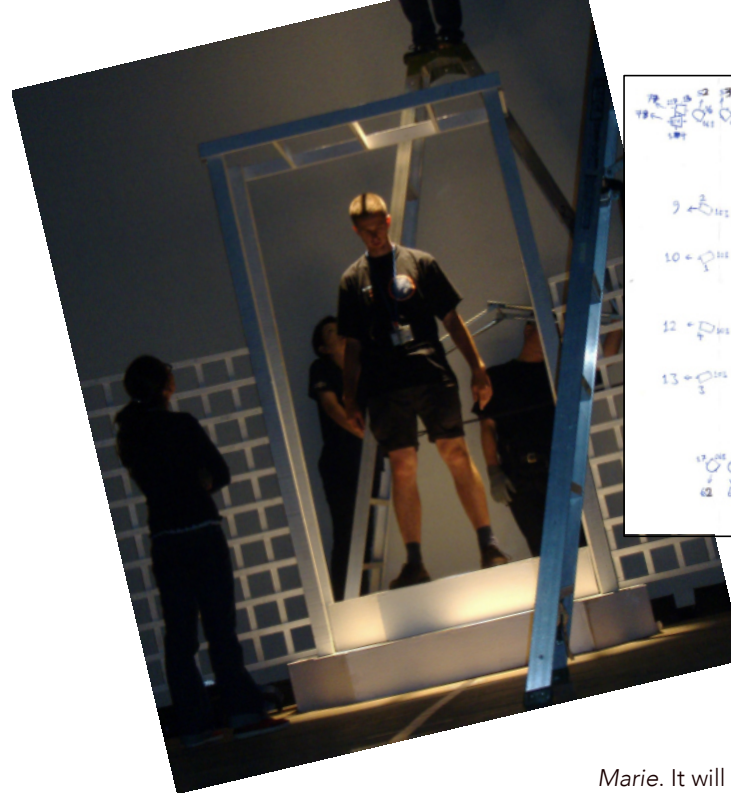
Like all sensible beginners, I had a rough idea of just how much I didn't know, and so I asked around widely for help! My friend Mark talked me through where I might generally place my limited stock to make useful front / side / back positions; Alex leant me a Lee Filters swatch book

and explained what "201" was; a different Mark (most of the technicians were called Mark) taught me how to program a cue stack on the ETC Express 24/48 console; and then – when I got stuck – Dave swooped in to help me create a simple blue-light police chase via a "macro" (a word that I didn't actually understand until years later).

It would be at least another six months before I invested in a set of stencils (and another five years before I'd even heard of Vectorworks), so my plan – as you can see – really was just a rough sketch. It doesn't even have the walls, seats or grid indicated... and I've seemingly orientated it facing Stage Right. The thing that really stands out to me, however, is that I failed to find a use for 6 of the 24 dimmers – that's certainly not been a regular characteristic of my subsequent work!

I recall that the director was keen to emphasize "games and gamesmanship" in the script, and I was therefore inspired to try colouring my side and back light in alternating strips of amber / open white, in the hope of creating a "chequerboard" effect as the actors moved around the space. I can only imagine that this would have looked deeply odd (if not downright awful), and I'm thankful that there are no photographs of the results. Having said

that, I stand by the premise that often the most interesting lighting ideas are borne out of a willingness to experiment. Hopefully each show that I've worked on has been a notch better lit than the one before; and I'll soon be opening my 350th design at the Charing Cross Theatre: a new musical called *Franz &*



The earliest photo that could be found of CPN doing any work: a focus session for a student tour of Love's *Labour's Lost* (Tokyo, 2006). And evidence of his first attempts at lighting paperwork.

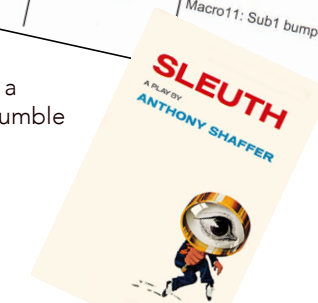
If you would like to share your first job as designer, programmer or production electrician please get in touch editor@thealpd.org.uk

Sleuth (BT, 0th week, HT04) - LX cue list

Q #	Effect	Cue	Link/Follow
1	Preset		
2	Fade HLX		
3	Full State		
4	Lower state; flood #1	Clearance 1st doorbell	
5	B/O	"5-4-3-2-1 Contact"	
6	Interval state		Q #4.1: Flood #2
7	B/O	Mid-dragging off SL	Q #4.2: Full state
8	Full state		
9	Add 2-blues	Clearance	
10	Fade state	"Never play the same game three times running"	
11	B/O	Colin freezes	Macro9: Sub1 bump-on
12	C/C state	Q#10 complete	
13	B/O		
14	Post-show		Macro11: Sub1 bump-off

Marie. It will have more than 14 cues.

It's been a pleasure looking back through these little scraps, and a lovely surprise to discover that our humble little amateur cast of five included... future multi-award-winning playwright Mike Bartlett! 🍷



Buxton Opera House is a beautiful Frank Matcham theatre, built in post Victorian times to provide quality entertainment for clientel escaping the summerheat to a fresher climate of a classic Peak District spa town - a much welcomed aspect in 2026.

Every year Buxton International Festival stages a full repertoire of three operas, aiming for high production and musical quality, while stressing their easygoing accessibility. This summer, the repertoire included Verdi's *La Traviata*, Lehár's *The Merry Widow*, and Handel's *Amadigi di Gaula*. Focus joined the festival to see how the challenges are met by an inventive creative team, and caught up with lighting designer and ALPD member Ben Pickersgill.

Focus: Ben, this is not your first time at Buxton Opera House ...

Ben: I did the 2021 season, just after Covid – one of the first live performances back in a theatre, so it felt quite daring. We did a full production of *A Little Night*

Music, which had actually been booked for 2020 and cancelled, so we did that production a year late. This year I came back because *The Merry Widow* was a production I'd originally lit in Glasgow for Scottish Opera, so it made sense to relight it here. And James, the director of *La Traviata*, and I have worked together a lot, so I was his

LIGHTING ABOVE ITS WEIGHT

Ben Pickersgill lights opera at Buxton International Festival

by Arnim Friess



first choice for that too.

Focus: It's a treat to see opera in a Frank Matcham building, famed for its great acoustics and sightlines, but more intimate than the London Coliseum. Buxton treasures its opera house, it is clearly well looked after. But it's architecture was built in the time of gas lighting. The first thing I noticed - there's no dress circle bar.

Ben: There isn't, no. For me the lack of a front-of-house dress circle position wasn't too much of an issue though, particularly for *Traviata*, because it wasn't a show where I wanted to throw a lot of front light at it. Front of house, the key sources come from positions in the unsold boxes, and the prosc arch trusses. We also had two follow spots.

Focus: *La Traviata*'s set is a giant jewellery box, designed after an item attributed to the real coutisan the opera is based on. It opens up in different ways to reveal the rooms - Verdi's only opera to be set entirely indoors. The set almost floats inside simply black backs and floor.

Ben: The design for *Traviata* was a great opportunity to light the show out of darkness, which really works here as the whole stage is essentially a memory space. Buxton doesn't really support flying scenery – there's a fly tower, but it's all manual, no counterweights – so a big flying show isn't really an option. When I first saw Elliot's model box I thought it was brilliant, because it gave us an object we could light and bring to life with the characters and costumes, rather than relying on scenic movement.

Focus: The black read as a strong metaphor to me – the jewel box isolated in a void, its little refuge in a big dark world.

Slightly marred though by the visible tape on a dance floor ...

Ben: The plain black floor of the Opera House might have sat better in *Traviata*'s jewel-box world than the dance floor we ended up with. Budget is part of the wider challenge Buxton faces. They ambitiously run a full three-opera repertoire in a theatre with very little storage space. The *La Traviata* set gets flat-packed and taken apart every time it comes out, and *The Merry Widow* travels in three trucks, built originally for Theatre Royal Glasgow and Holland Park on a structure never designed to fit Buxton. When it came here they essentially had to rebuild most of it, and the net result was far more scenery than the venue could absorb, with no time or budget left for a bespoke show floor.

Focus: How much wing space is there?

Ben: Very little. Downstage right there's a staircase coming up from the orchestra pit with a wall around it, so the masking flat goes off and you're straight round a corner – there's almost no depth to work with, and the scenery lift itself becomes a key part of the storage puzzle!

Focus: One moment that struck me were the shadows of the dancing chorus appearing upstage, distorted and in forced perspective, invading the space -



Preset of *La Traviata* at the Buxton Opera House. Photo: A. Friess

La Traviata
Photo Genevieve Girling



Ben: - again challenged by the tiny wing space. It's a nice idea: James was keen that it shouldn't just read as generic off-stage noise – that the movement should sit against the story unfolding between Alfredo and Violetta. That mattered a lot to him.

Focus: I noticed a really interesting palette of pale shades. There is an almost gaslight green in the 'bucolic' scene outside Paris. Did the history of Traviata's first gaslit production at La Venice play on your mind?

Ben: The main motivation was to not be too naturalistic, while still leaning in to a perceived sense of lightness that comes with the narrative shift to the countryside. We use subtle green and yellow tones which slowly drain away. The set has panels at the back and sides that can open like windows. At one point Elliot, the designer, wanted them all open, but I felt that would read as a conservatory, so we settled on two at the back and two at the side. I also wanted to preserve a sense of claustrophobia under the apparent happiness of that scene – it's meant to feel idyllic, but it isn't. That set is tricky too, because of its reflective surfaces – you can't just side-light it without getting reflections everywhere. We had no dedicated lighting session at all; the whole show was lit over the

stage-and-piano rehearsal, because there simply wasn't time for one. Within that scene there's also a slow shift in colour temperature toward a cooler palette as it progresses, on cues with four-minute fades, particularly around Germont's entrance as he starts to dismantle Violetta's happiness.

Focus: Can we talk technical for a moment – can you describe your rig?

Ben: My starting point was the existing Merry Widow rig from Scottish Opera, adapted to serve all three shows. We were also very last-minute, because the technical details of the designs were finalised late., so hire availability wasn't great. In the end we moved from an all-Encore-Cold rig to some Encore Warms front of house, which actually suited the show. That's been a bit of a learning curve for me – at Garsington, an outdoor venue,

I've always favoured Encore Colds against daylight, because a warm reads very yellow, whereas a cold source warms up better than a warm cools down. But for lighting faces and bodies in certain contexts, the warms are a better choice.



Focus: And the Traviata set itself?

Ben: That set meant lighting positions had to be worked out against a literal overlay of all three shows' footprints, ruling out anything too far upstage. We ended

up with more of a mix of fixture types than I'd ideally choose – Encore Warms, Encore Colds, GLP X5s, some lustres, and Robe lent us some T1 Profiles, plus some LED additive-mixing fixtures. So four different colour-mixing systems in one rig, which is not an ideal starting point. It's a nightmare scenario for colour matching. Claire Gerrens, who programmed the show, was pivotal to making the whole project possible. She would balance the colours and took what could have been a nightmare scenario and made it seamless. When Traviata transferred after Buxton to Theatre Royal Norwich as a co-production, we didn't have the T1s, so we used some Ayrton Diablos the venue had instead.

Focus: So the entire rig for Buxton was a hire?

Ben: The venue has some in-house kit, but that goes to the Pavilion Arts Centre next door, which has less budget to hire. Everything for the Opera House itself comes in from outside. Paul Anderson at Sparks put together an excellent deal, and we got a genuinely solid rig within budget – which matters, because I don't think the lighting budget has changed in about five years -

Focus: - which is not made easier by one production being taken into a completely different world?

Ben: Yes, Handel's *Amadigi di Gaula*! With a cast of just four and no chorus, unlike the other two, Olivia took the concept into the present setting of a *Love Island* style TV show. There are authentic baroque instruments in the orchestra, but the stage is full of inflatable flamingos, pink glitter hearts and TV cameras. What's great is that if you saw all three shows in a week-end, they'd all have their own identity – you wouldn't necessarily know they were part of the same festival. That's the ambition of Buxton, letting each designer build a self-contained world, though the practicalities around it are very challenging, and delays caused by needing to turnaround the sets are frequent.



Focus: Did you get any chance to change the lighting rig between shows – like move booms, add floor units?

Ben: Yes, absolutely. The overhead rig is entirely moving lights, fully remote-controlled, alongside a kit of booms and floor-standing units on wind-up stands de-

played per show. A footlight trough stayed rigged throughout. We had a second set of Color Force fixtures for *Amadigi*'s white cyclorama, which came out for the other shows. The booms just get reset and refocused between productions – anything we can physically reach stays on a stand, anything overhead is a moving light, so we don't have to worry about it.

Focus: The footlights were the only instruments I saw reflected in the windows of the Traviata set – were these Robe fixtures?

Ben: No, they're Color Force battens. Not really designed for the job – they're meant more for washing a cyclorama – but they're what we could get hold of, and they're very bright. That set is unforgiving: wherever you're sitting, you'll probably catch something reflected in it at some point. There's a trough for them – the Buxton stage is raked slightly, and there's a channel that historically caught anything rolling down the stage before it reached the orchestra pit. Turns out to be a very handy place to hide footlights! 🍷



Left: Handel's *Amadigi di Gaula*, below Lehar's *The Merry Widow*. Photos Genevieve Girling

CREDITS

Buxton International Festival
Verdi *La Traviata*
A Buxton International Festival and Norwich Theatre production
Director: James Hurley
Set Designer: Elliott Squire
Costume Designer: Zahra Mansouri

Lehar *The Merry Widow*
Coproduction with Opera Holland Park, Scottish Opera and D'Oyly Carte Opera
Director: John Savournin
Set and Costume Designer: takis

Handel *Amadigi Di Gaula*
Director: Olivia Fuchs
Designer: Eleanor Bull

Lighting Designer: Ben Pickersgill
Lighting Programmer: Claire Gerrens
Production Electricians: Alfie Sissons and Simon Moss
Production Manager: James Anderton
Lighting Hire: Sparks
With thanks to Robe for a loan on demo of T1 Profiles

Amateur theatre lighting is often regarded with a kind of gentle indulgence, as a scaled down imitation of the professional world. But listen to a group of amateur lighting designers talk about their work, and that assumption tends to dissolve.

Your roving reporter ALPD Exec member John K. Leventhall, also well steeped in amateur theatre, nowadays at The Robin Hood Theatre near Newark, got amateur LDs together on zoom and at the ABTT show this year to exchange views. Pretty soon the conversation made it clear that the slightly patronising pro's view of amateur practice needs an update! What emerges is a portrait of people who think, plan, collaborate and problem-solve with the same instincts and pressures as their professional counterparts - only with fewer resources, tighter schedules, and the added complication of day jobs. There are around 150-200 wholly amateur theatres in the UK - that's about a 10th of all theatres, and something like a couple of million participants in amateur productions. Clearly, amateur theatre is no small thing!

Sharing their experiences were amateur LDs Guy Lee (Brentwood Theatre Essex),

Nic Walsh (Bear Pit, Stratford-on-Avon), Adrian Matthews (The Loft, Leamington Spa), Nick Gale (Lacemarket, Nottingham), Ben Sassoon (several South London venues), Graham House (Swan, Yeovil, Jonathan Laverock and Brian List (Courtyard, Chipstead, Surrey). Most of them ALPD Associate members, some experienced in other venues, some professionally.

SPECTACLE ON A SHOESTRING

Lighting for Amateur Enthusiasts

by John K. Leventhall

Certain themes recur: Time is always short. Venues are often shared, schedules compressed, space contested. Lighting teams sometimes work around set builders, painters, sound crew, and rehearsals. Power is often limited, especially in older buildings or schools. Working around crew availability is universal. Crew maybe only available in the

evenings or for short sessions. Equipment varies wildly: museum grade conventionals - Strand Patt 23s and 743s or older, 'hand-me down' pro-moving-heads, far east import wash movers or LED pars and at the low end "discograde" fixtures that, as Nick Walsh notes, "Do they move quietly? No. Do they move when you want them? No."

And yet, despite these constraints, the designers consistently produce work that impresses audiences and, occasionally, seasoned professionals...

The stimulus for this article came from David Howe, ALPD

Professional Representative,

when he happened upon Ben Sassoon's lighting for *We Will Rock You* - Cygnets Players in the London Oratory School's improbably well equipped theatre. Ben says, "They would never be allowed to build that in a school these days". Ben's team, however, decided to push it to its limits. The director's brief was simple: make it a spectacle. The show's technofuturist setting gave Ben stimulus for a rig that would not look out of place on a touring musical. With towering



Dreamgirls (Bridewell Theatre Nov 2025) LD Ben Sassoon, Photo Justine Matthews. All other photos by the lighting designers

videowall legs, pixel bars across the decking, a FOH truss arch, and 60-70 moving lights, hired from PRG. All were installed by amateurs on a budget of £10,000 which is a hell of a lot for amateur productions! Most of the others have production budgets of zero, or perhaps £50 for gels up to a few hundred pounds for a complex show.

Ben's constraints were punishing. In a school, they couldn't work until Saturday. They rigged, ran a tech on Sunday evening, plotted on Monday, DR Monday night, and opened on Tuesday. The entire show was timecoded. Ben was LD, programmer, operator, and called followspots. That's a key difference from the pro world – multifunctionalism and multitasking! However, several of the other LDs do have programmers and chief LX. The show, all LED, ran from two 32amp three-phase supplies. Ben says. "It was unbelievably stressful." No wonder David Howe said: "I was taken aback by the sheer impressiveness of what the team achieved in such limited time". Ben, faintly bewildered by the pro's impression of his achievement, remarked, "David seemed to really enjoy it for some reason."

But such high-octane, build-from-scratch amateur lighting, is rarer - the other designers in the conversation offer a

contrasting picture: the steady rhythm of resident theatres, the compromises of shared spaces, and the quiet, persistent work of keeping a venue running show after show.

Adrian Matthews works in a 200 seat Little Theatre Guild (LTG) venue owned and operated by its members mounting nine productions of 10 -12 performances a year, leaving roughly three weeks to prepare the next. "I would dispute that it's plenty of time," Adrian says. The challenge in a resident theatre is not the speed of the turnaround, but the constant negotiation for space. Because the cast rehearse on the stage, the lighting team often have to work around them, fitting in rigging and focusing whenever the stage is free. Crew availability is variable. "You can never guarantee who will turn up. You can't force people in the same way as if they were being paid."



Clockwise from top left:
Ghost John K Leventhall,
On the Rocks John K
Leventhall, *Blithe Spirit*
Guy Lee.

Nic Walsh has an incredibly short schedule: Monday morning, prepared, he focuses and plots to a tech that evening, refines and dress rehearses Tuesday, and panics with remaining mods on Wednesday for first night 'perfection'.

Graham House, in another LTG venue - 135 seats and a busy calendar of inhouse productions, hires, and films has bars on winches, which allows him to "sneak in" early and rig before the set gets in the way. Focusing happens two weeks before opening, once the set is built - though, he notes with veteran's resignation, "it's never actually finished until the tech." Graham is retired, so has the flexibility to work during the day, but the theatre is busy with rehearsals and events, so working time is at still a premium.

Guy Lee has spent three decades at Brentwood in a very different environment.

Brentwood is a charitable community trust operated on a commercial basis. A studio space with 114 seats and a fixed rig hung from a rigid grid so any change to the rig requires hours on a scaffold tower. Visiting companies often want to reconfigure the lighting, but the theatre volunteers must restore the standard rig at the end of each week because a different show may be loading-in the next morning. Guy recalls one week when a drama school "tore the rig to pieces," and the staff were there until three in the morning putting it back. The most moving lights he has ever managed to squeeze in is ten, and even that required careful weighing and load calculations.

In Nottingham, Nick Gale at the 124-seat Lace Market Theatre, with a low grid and fixed bars but recently refitted with all ETC ColorSource LEDs avers that: "LED has transformed the workload: less power, less heat, less rigging, and far more flexibility" says Nick. Fourteen shows a year, including youth theatre and studio work, demand that Nick rigs the weekend before production week, focuses, and then plots during the technical rehearsals. Like many designers, he arrives with the cue structure and timing already recorded into the desk, even if the levels are not yet set. His first LED-lit show, *Gaslight*, barely used more



than 18% intensity on any fixture, a reminder that technology is only a tool — the artistic intention still governs the design.

John, Brian and Jonathan work in LTG theatres where the resident company is mostly the only user, so there is a 4 - 6week production period and they therefore get the luxury of exclusive rigging and focus time with plotting/programming done before tech rehearsals - much like bygone days where exclusive rig/focus time onstage and the 'lighting rehearsal' (plotting) were the norm in the professional world. Nevertheless, colleague availability and equipment constraints are much the same for all of our colleagues, and tech rehearsals equally stressful as for pros (although tech may only be one or two evenings!) and usually

just a couple of dress rehearsals, but no previews, to tweak.

What unites all these experiences is the joy of the work. Our designers spoke of the moment when the artistic picture appears on stage, when the audience reacts, when a cue lands perfectly, or when a "happy accident" reveals a new possibility. Ben describes the thrill of seeing all the elements come together: "You don't even notice the individual element... you just feel it with the audience." Others talk about the pleasure of focusing on a dark stage, the satisfaction of solving a

problem under pressure, the creativity in plotting, or the pride of watching a young technician grow in confidence.



One insight is Ben's reflection on observing a professional production. He expected a completely different world but instead found that "it was much more similar to the amateur life... it's really all just the same thing, just a bigger stage." Processes are identical: script, rehearsal, design, rig, focus, plot, refine, perform. The difference is scale, not craft. John, whose has also had observation opportunities remarks similarly: "We do everything the pros do but in less flexible venues, with MUCH tighter resources and equipment and crew that sometimes limits our ability to emulate everything possible in a large venue...but not always!" But our discussion participants all welcomed the idea of a professional observer of their work!

Amateur theatre, as participants note, plays a crucial role in the wider ecosystem of the lighting profession. It is a training ground for young people, a creative outlet for adults with technical skills, a significant feeder for the profession and a place where artistry thrives despite the constraints. It is a community where people give their time willingly, may often work late at night, but create moments of beauty for audiences who may never know how much effort went into them. How does that compare with your world? 🍷

Centre Stage London's production of Sister Act at the John McIntosh Arts Centre is the latest in a 60-year history of large-scale musicals produced to a high professional standard by this non-professional theatre group.

Lighting designer, Ben Sassoon, has lit many of them, but this is his first time using Ayrton Diablo fixtures. "As a non-profit

organisation we don't operate the same way as other productions but Sparks Hire were so helpful – they literally made miracles happen!"

Sister Act is set in the 1970s, and focuses on Dolores, a club singer who goes into police hiding in a failing nunnery, which she saves by the power of soul disco music. This gives the lighting designer plenty of scope to play with the juxtaposition between the dingy, penniless nunnery and the colourful fantasy world of disco.

"I needed a fixture that was versatile enough to do all these things, but I didn't have a lot of space or weight available to me," says Sassoon. "The show has a lot of flying pieces, and the weight allowance on

the bars was really quite tight, so I needed something that was small, lightweight, but still punchy. The theatre's trim height is relatively low at 6.5m, so the fixture needed to have a really big zoom too." Sassoon rigged seven Diablo over stage for back and high side light, keeping them close together to counter the lack of space, and two front of house for specials and general

washes, and for 'pulling out bits of scenery'.

"The show needed to move between many locations – the street, a club, the church – and moods, so I wanted to have the

ability to go from really dingy moments when we first see the impoverished church, to really bright, poppy looks full of saturated colour for the disco fantasy moments," he says. "To be able to show that big disparity was definitely key to the look I was trying to achieve.

"For the church, we kept to cools and gentle warms, and used the framing shutters on the over-stage Diablos to set the scene. We wanted to make it feel like you were in different locations without it looking repetitive, so being able to use the

framing shutters to close in on different areas, make interior rooms and corridors, and really hone into specific areas was quite crucial.

"We also had a custom gobo of a gorgeous rose window made, through Sparks, to enhance the big stained glass rose window located at the back of the set. We put this in the upstage Diablo, which was rigged in a very tight space between two pieces of set, in a super wide focus and it filled the whole stage to give a nice shadowy, atmospheric effect. It was the only fixture that would fit in that space."

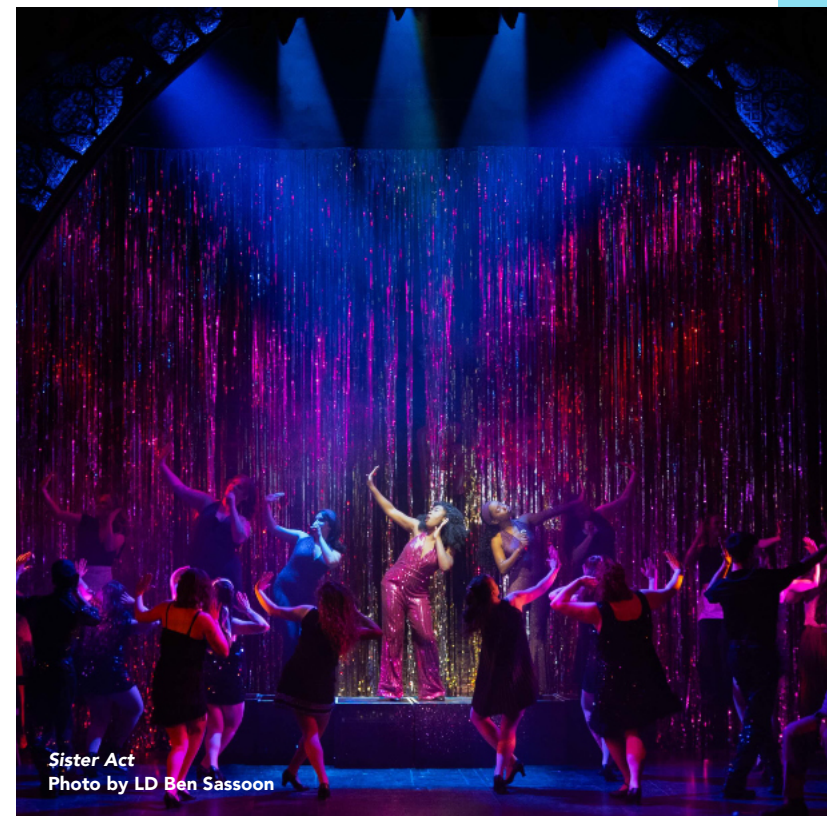
For the disco fantasy moments Sassoon moved into 'supersaturated mode' to transform the vibe into true '70s vividness in the most dramatic way. "Diablo's colours are great and still really bright, even when they're saturated, which was extremely helpful," says Sassoon. "We also used the front-of-house Diablos to project saturated colours onto a mirror ball, enhancing the effect on stage by using the prisms and dot gobos in the on-stage Diablo fixtures. The result was a massive area of light with all those little dots and cool beams across the set and auditorium, taking the mirrorball effect right out into the audience."

Diablo's speed was also essential part of Sassoon's design: "With such a limited rig, the fixtures had to be able to jump

between locations at great speed," he explains. "For one song, Raise Your Voice, the action jumps between a series of quick-change locations in a montage as the nuns learn to sing – the hallway, the choir room, even in the shower – so it was crucial to be able to jump around all those places really quickly. With only nine fixtures, I didn't have the luxury of a separate light for each location – just the same lights multi-tasking – so Diablo's ability to make super-fast movements during the dark moments and come up in the right place was paramount."

Diablo's quiet operation, despite this being a musical, proved equally important. "There's a moment near the end of Act II where, in one of the fantasy dream sequences, the band suddenly stops and the whole stage goes silent, with Dolores in a solo, hard-edge spot from the Diablos. The audience is in close proximity to the fixtures, but you just can't hear the Diablos at all: no loud fans, just silence, which is exactly what you want in those scenarios.

"The Diablos were my workhorse, and I was very impressed with them. Many of the theatres I work in don't have the best weight limits or space availability, so being able to pack loads on a bar is very helpful and not something you can do with many other fixtures. Diablo is definitely going to



be the fixture I ask for in future."

Ben Sassoon was aided by associate lighting designer, Paul Evans, and production electrician, Robbie Bradshaw. 



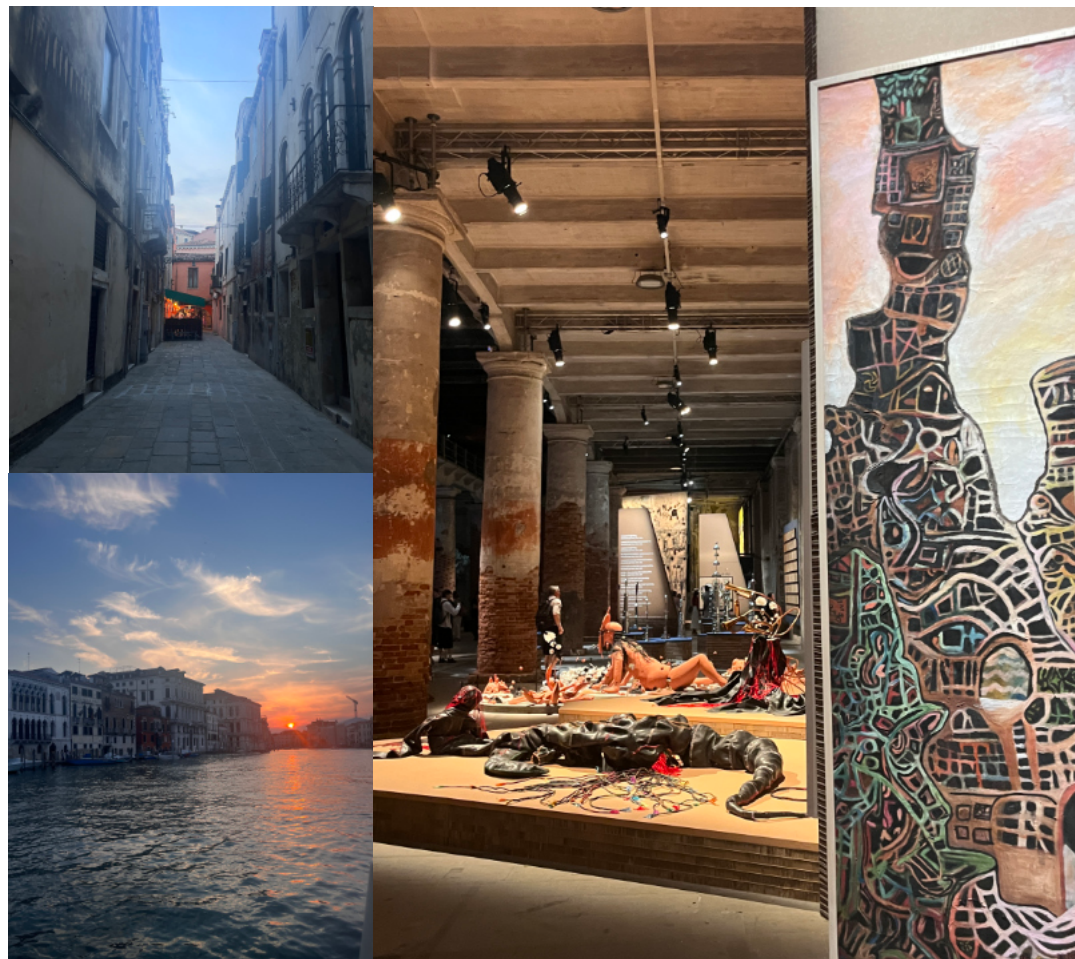
This advertorial was provided by ALPD corporate member Ayrton

Offstage: This is the page where we are looking at ideas away from the performance space - exploration of colour, texture, luminance - whatever makes lighting people tick. Or just plainly odd stuff. We'd love to show your inspirational photos. Please email to editor@thealpd.org.uk

Helen reports: "I was awarded a bursary through the Envelope Room and headed to Venice for La Biennale during the theatre festival. Mario Banushi's trilogy, Romance Familiare -an incredible triptych of movement based theatre without words- featured primarily diegetic lighting and progressed into a more abstract world in each chapter. I remain very impressed by the design of the production, and it's usage of limited lighting changes, a good reminder that less can indeed be more. Venice itself is a living perfect postcard with little marvels that are there if you are willing to look further, such as tiny crabs skittering across the cobblestones when the tide comes in."

ILLUMINATED IN ITALY

**Helen Garcia-Alton
sees the light
at the Venice Biennale**



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