

GCSE DRAMA

Lighting design

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Teaching guide: lighting design

Contents

Lighting design

Activities 3 — 4

Professional example 4

Lighting design

Introduction

Making sure that the actors and set can be seen is only one part of the lighting designer's role. Light can be used to create atmosphere, highlights and depth in the space. A character's personality can appear to change depending on how their face is lit. Lighting designers use light, shadow, darkness and colour to shape and create performance spaces.

Activity 1: Researching what light will do

A good starting point for lighting design is to explore what light can do in a performance space. Collect some examples of lighting design in action and try to identify the different decisions the lighting designers have made. What are the effects of these

decisions? Consider how light is used to direct the audience's attention, to alter the performance space or to create a specific stage effect. How might these sorts of decisions apply to the play you are currently working on or to your devised piece?

Way in

Choose a scene you have been working on, and perform it twice. The first time, you should use natural light. The second time, try to add a deliberate lighting effect. This could be as simple as making the room dark and each actor holding a torch as they perform. Think about how changing the light alters your experience of the scene. You could also consider the purpose of the light: is it more important to create an atmosphere or to make sure the audience can see the actors' faces? Are there ways you can do both?

Activity 2: Thinking about lighting sources

'Light' in theatre does not have to mean expensive professional stage lights. If you want to explore how professional theatre lights – usually called **lanterns** – work, Theatrecrafts.com have a reference sheet on their website: [here](#).

Lighting in performances can also mean a range of other light sources that might be easier to access. Consider how you could use domestic lamps, battery-operated candles or torches (possibly in conjunction with reflective surfaces like mirrors or old CDs) to create specific effects in the play you are studying or your devised work.

'Lighting design is to some extent an art that anyone can try. Change the mood of your living room by swapping to a different coloured lightbulb and you are, effectively, a lighting designer. Lighting design for the stage is just an extension of that. As the lighting designer you are the person ultimately in charge not just of who sees what, not just how they see it, but also how they feel while they're seeing it – the visibility, the mood and the atmosphere of the whole show.'

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Discussion ideas

- What do you think the relationship is between lighting and set design? What about lighting and costume design?
- Would it be possible to use just light to create the performance space for the play or devised piece you are working on? How would you do this and how effective could it be?
- ‘The most important part of the lighting designer’s job is to make sure that the audience can always see the actors.’ Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Why?

Activity 3: Exploring what light can do

Take a single light source (a torch works well) in a dark room and experiment with the effects you can create. You can change the colour of the beam of light by adding a piece of coloured plastic (called a gel). What mood or atmosphere do different colours communicate to the audience? You can also make a shape with the light by using a gobo. A gobo is a cut out shape that is placed in front of a light source. With theatre lights you should always use professional metal gobos. With your torch, you can experiment with shapes cut from cardboard held or taped to the front of the torch. Again, think about the mood or atmosphere that different gobos can create. Can you combine gobos with gels for extra effect?

Design tips

Projections can be used to great effect on stage. You can experiment with projections by using a regular digital projector and a programme like PowerPoint. Create two different PowerPoint slides which represent very different moods or atmospheres and add a slow transition between them. Perform a short scene in front of the slides: how does the projection change the audience’s experience of the scene? Could you use this in the play or devised piece you are working on? A word of warning: if you want to use projections in performance they should be carefully thought out and well-rehearsed to make sure they are of a suitably high standard!

Activity 4: Lighting and the play text

Consider the play you are currently studying or piece you are devising. What opportunities do they present for a lighting designer?

Make a list of the different purposes of lighting in the play. Consider what lighting is called for by the text and what lighting effects might you, as a lighting designer, want to add?

Choose one scene to focus on and visualise how the lights will be used and what the scene will look like at each moment. Make a list of each time the lights will change (called **lighting cues**), and what the lights will look like at each moment (called **lighting states**).

Professional example: *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2012)

The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time (National Theatre, 2012) uses a range of different light sources and projection to create effects during the performance. The production showcases developments in lighting and projection technology to bring the main character’s world to life on stage. Lighting designer Paule Constable can be seen discussing the production in this BBC video: [here](#).