



Playing THE angles

A user's guide to lighting positions

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY DANIEL KNIGHT

I TELL MY STUDENTS that the first job of lighting is visibility. If you can't see the actors, everything else you do won't matter. Visibility isn't just pointing a light and turning it on. Lighting a stage and actors demands careful consideration of where we hang a light, and its intensity, angle, and color.

Just as reflected or refracted sunlight on a surface allows us to see the true shape of an object, the right mix of theatre lighting creates a greater sense of actor and stage dimensionality. It isn't enough to shine a single light on an area (unless that's what you're going for); it requires multiple lights and an understanding of how they will interact. Like any visual artist, a lighting designer should be attuned to light, shadow, and color and how the composition of these things can help the work of the actor, director, and scenic designer come to life.

This article will focus on the basic characteristics of lighting angles and how to employ them in your own designs. Lighting angles include up, down, side, front, and back, with variations of low, mid, and high. What follows is an explanation of these positions, accompanied by a series of photographs that illustrate each.



High side light

A high side light, typically used at a 30- to 60-degree angle, helps to highlight the actor's head, shoulders, neck, and center of the torso. Although it can be used for any design, it is most strongly associated with dance lighting. The use of high sides may be a challenge if you lack adequate dimmers or fixtures. High sides (also referred to as pipe ends) can heighten visibility and sculpting of the actors' bodies. This is especially true if you can hang multiple fixtures covering the width of the stage.



Side light

Focused perpendicular to the actor (90 degrees), a side light is typically composed of three lights arranged high, mid, and low. This light sculpts the actor's or dancer's full body. Side lighting will often be hung from vertical positions in the wings on booms or lighting ladders. I always include it in my designs. Besides the benefits to the look of the actor, the 90-degree angle of a side light allows the designer to isolate actors who are in a scene but not directly part of it. Side lights can also draw greater attention to a scene's featured character by brightening the light's intensity on the actor. Lastly, when used in musical production numbers, it creates additional visibility and intensity that can help make the number come to life.



Down light

A down light is used to highlight the actor's head and shoulders and to wash the entire stage in color. As you can see in the photo, using a down light by itself renders an actor's face invisible. But employed in tandem with front lighting, it helps to define the actor's features and creates an additional visual layer and texture onstage. There might be an occasion to use the down light by itself; in this case, focusing it at a slightly oblique angle (a few degrees upstage) will cast a bit more light on the actor's face.



Up light

Lighting from below is the most unnatural of all angles but can be quite interesting. More a part of theatre lighting of a century ago (in the form of footlights), up lights are rarely included in contemporary designs. They're most likely to be used at very special "must have" moments in your overall lighting design.



Front light

There are two different variations to front lights. The first (left photo above) projects light from the front at roughly 45 degrees above and straight on at the actors. This approach usually results in making the actor look flat and one-dimensional. Adding side, back, and down light alleviates this flattened look and also provides an opportunity to add additional color from the other angles.

In this first front light variation, I often use the "slinky method," named by designer, entrepreneur, and author Steve Shelley. In this approach, the designer overlaps pools of light to fill the stage with an even distribution of 50 percent of each light's intensity. The slinky method can be very helpful if you have a lack of front-of-house fixtures. Another front light approach, using the same lights but at a lower angle, is known as the "jewel method" because it appears to make the actors eyes glisten like jewels. It is generally accomplished by hanging lights on the balcony rail. Box booms, with lights mounted on the walls in the audience area, can also be used for front lighting. Box boom positions are especially helpful when



trying to minimize any dark spots on the front of the stage.

The second variation of front lighting was introduced by Stanley McCandless and is described in his book *A Method of Lighting the Stage* (1932). In the McCandless method (right photo above), the actor is lit from the front but with two lights positioned at 90 degrees to each other and 45 degrees to the actor's left and right and 45 degrees above. What distinguishes this approach from the slinky and jewel methods is the 45-degree orientation of the lights to the actor and the use of warm and cool colors in tandem (amber as the brighter key light and blue as the dimmer fill light). Depending on colors chosen, they will mix toward white on the actor while maintaining a greater sense of dimension. This method of lighting design has influenced the building of many theatrical lighting systems and is most common in theatres where lighting circuits on the electrical battens are repeated on stage left and right.

While the McCandless method provides a great sense of dimensionality, it also demands at least two lights for every actor—a challenge if you have a limited inventory.



Back light

Lighting from behind helps to pull the actors out of the background and will add a greater sense of three dimensions. Back light also allows the designer to use stronger colors that can wash the stage floor without interfering with costume color. If your dimmer/circuit and fixture inventory won't allow you to back light the entire stage, try to at least include it with your specials.



All together now

Although any of these angles used alone can be compelling, it is the combination of lights that creates a greater sense of visibility, dimension, and form. As lighting designers, we are tasked with developing a scheme that will meet the needs of the show, the vision of the director, and our own sensibilities. You will need to balance these elements with the limitations of your lighting inventory, available board channels, and budget.

As you do your script analysis, keep an eye out for very specific ideas suggested or demanded by the script that might be well served with particular lighting choices. If there is a “must have” moment in the show, likely you will need to design around it, making production choices based on that need. Any choice of angle, color, intensity, etc. will always be based on a multitude of factors. As a rule of thumb, try to include at least three different angles in every design that you do. This sort of visual variety will raise the likelihood of meeting the dramatic needs of any show, ensure that your actors will be seen, and help you realize your vision of the lighting design. ▼