

Topic 046

Direction:

The direction of light is one of the most important attributes in stage lighting design. All light has direction. A bare candle radiates light in all directions. A spotlight radiates light in a very specific direction. In nature most light comes from the sky, from above. In theatre lighting this is also generally true as most lighting positions are above the stage or audience.

Low front lighting is often considered to be 'flat'. Very high lighting angles may cause shadows on the actor's faces. Lighting from more than one direction can add 'plasticity' and dimension to an actor. Lighting from the 'balcony rail' can fill in shadows on the actor's face however this position can also cause shadows on upstage backdrops or scenery. Very low lighting angles have always been associated with rather unnatural lighting and are usually used for effect lighting only. Footlights, once common in many theatres are seldom used today. Clearly the lighting designer must choose the direction of light very carefully.

In theatre, like in nature the 'floor' reflects some light from below, usually filling in shadows. The color and reflective qualities of a stage floor are very important and for this reason should always be selected with assistance from the lighting designer.

Interestingly enough, the property of DIRECTION was not really considered by McCandless as one of the 'qualities of light' in his 'Syllabus of Stage Lighting, 1964' He did however discuss (briefly) the importance of direction in respect to plasticity of objects and the actual 'position' of the light source.

Example:

Along with the quality of light that you choose or create, the direction from which the light hits the subject is another fundamental factor. From gross variations to more subtle you can move either the light or the subject to bring out the quality you want. With a craggy old man you may wish to bring out the wrinkles, so sidelight will work best. For a woman for whom you want to hide any wrinkles, the light wants to be from the front, where the wrinkles are least obvious.

Direction of Light

Light not only has the characteristics of being harder or softer, diffuse or sharp, but it also has a directional quality that you can use to enhance or your subject and, therefore, your images. There are typically three directions that we look at when discussing the direction of light.

Front Lighting

Front lighting typically comes from a source that is behind the photographer and shining directly onto the subject. One of the characteristics of this type of lighting is that it tends to flatten out your subject. It's kind of like putting your subject on a copy machine where everything is evenly illuminated. It does, however, offer a very well lit and defined subject (**Figure 4.11**).



Figure 4.11 When the light is coming from directly in front of the subject, there is less shadow and a flattening of details.

Side Lighting

If you really want to define the three-dimensional characteristics of your subject, the best possible light to use as a main light is side lighting. Side lighting will enhance any contour detail by creating shadows and highlights, giving a three-dimensional quality to the scene. This is why a lot of portrait lighting or landscape lighting is done with the light coming from a side direction (**Figure 4.12**).



Figure 4.12 The late afternoon sun was crossing in from the left of the frame, creating shadows and highlights that define the contours of the landscape and the cactus.

Back Lighting

The best light to use for separating your subject from a background is, of course, back light. Unfortunately, back lighting provides little illumination on the front of your subject—which is what your camera is pointing at—but it does an excellent job of separating the subject from the background and giving a three-dimensional feeling to the shot.

Usually, a back lighting technique is used to enhance a silhouette or to provide a little separation in combination with other light sources. Typically, I'll use this kind of light if I'm shooting a person in bright daylight. I might actually put the sun behind them, then use a flash to fill in the shadows on the subject's face. That way, I have my separation using the back light from the sun, and I have an excellent light coming from my camera angle to define the face. Best of all, I don't have bright sunlight shining into my subject's eyes and making him squint. I get the best of all the characteristics of direction and quality of light (Figure 4.13).



Figure 4.13 By positioning myself so that the bright sun is behind my subjects, I can get a good rim of light to separate them from the background while using a flash to add a little light back into their faces.(photographer)