

Topic 026

An introduction to stage lighting

The evolution of lighting in theatre began during the times of Ancient Greece. The performances were outside in an open-air space, which the use of natural light was the primary source of illumination. (As you can see in the ruins of the Greek 'theatre in a circular setting' allows for only natural light). The production would take place during the day time so that the sun light can be used. Productions used the main theatre layout of 'theatre in the round' and plays were done at high noon when most everything was illuminated. Plays were done at certain times of the day, so the height and angle of the sun's natural light could enhance the scene. The Greeks also used large mirrors with the sun's light to alter the lighting for their plays. If they wanted to establish any type of moods then there would be an intermission until the 'time of day' and sun's angle would suit the need for the production.

It was when the Roman theatre developed with much insights from the Greeks, that they began to use torches and candles. This gave the Roman theatre players an opportunity to perform in the evenings as the use of torches illuminated their scenes. The 15th century introduced 'oil lamps' and created illumination for lighting the stages indoors. It was Sebastiano Serlio who then added 'colored liquid' to the oil lamps in 1545, introducing color and more variety to stage lighting. This is when the lighting became important to the genre of theatre. It is here where qualities of light, with distribution, intensity and color was being added to a live production.

FIRST type of DIMMING:

The 16th and 17th centuries introduced dimming of candles by using metal cylinders lowered onto the candles, invented by Nicola Sabbatini. This process was a manual process and took a lot of stagehands to make this possible. In these time periods stage hands were how all of the production's lighting -dimming, plus scenery and more transformed the production and created the drama or illusions of effects.

Chandeliers with candles were used in several places on the stage for illumination, this distribution or placement of the candle light chandeliers allowed for more dramatic lighting and flexibility. Keep in mind this form of natural light (fire) was used as a main source of light. This also explains the cause of a lot of old theatre's that caught fire and burned down to the ground.

Stage lighting in the 17th and 18th Century:

Lighting became more important as it was given birth from natural sunlight in Greek theatre. In Roman theatre torches to oil lamps were used. This movement of torches and oil lamps transferred into the Middle Ages, the Renaissance age straight into the 17th & 18th century. It was in the middle of the 18th century when the kerosene lamp with a wick was the biggest

improvement to the oil lamp. Coal gas was also beginning to be used for illumination to the stage.

19th century

The 19th century had the most development to stage lighting and the gas lights made more of an impact! The electric arc was also invented by Sir Humprey Davy a chemist in 1810. It was not until 1880 when a true electrical system was introduced by Edison. Although this took some time for stage lighting to use the electric light, this invention created a great development for the possibilities of stage lighting, dimming and controls units which came shortly in the 1900's.