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Bringing Light From The Shadows: The Job Of A Lighting Designer

“Upon the electrician fall all the duties of Jove in the delicate matter of making the sun to shine or the moon to cast its pale rays over a lover’s scene. Operated by the man in the haven of the gallery gods out front, all are under the direction of the electrician who sits up in his little gallery and makes the moonlight suddenly give place to blazing sunlight on a cue.”

For the theater community, there are a million “I can’t I have rehearsal” tee shirts, stage manager jokes, standing ovations, and so on and so on, but the lighting designer doesn’t often make it into the limelight themselves.

Good lighting design is another tool of immersion, helping the audience to lose their footing in reality and escape into the world created behind the proscenium arch.

Good lighting design, therefore, should never be acknowledged by the audience. Most people just accept light as a given and fail to notice the work and detail that goes into lighting a scene for the stage. Take a moment right now and look around the room and imagine how you would mimic onstage the light coming through your window. Chandeliers shining, street lamps coming on right at dusk, or the almost strobe effect of a subway whipping around underground.

Now consider how differently the chandeliers would look today versus the 17th century, or how differently the sun pours in at 11 AM versus 2 PM. The next time you see a show, or concert or even a movie, consider the detail of the lighting and the research and thought and creativity that went into it. Lighting is more than how it looks, it can change how the scene feels to the person onstage.

And for the lighting designers among us the relationship with the actors and how integral to your design is to the show are the most important. You analyze the text with the director to determine what, how, and why you are telling a story and create an environment from those conversations. But lighting is more than how it looks, it can change how the scene feels to the person onstage; the person in the light. When these two ideas work together, the performance can be shaped in a subtle way that creates a magically harmonious blend.

For more inspiration and understanding, follow local contemporary art shows. Light is becoming an increasingly prominent theme. You may even ask a lighting designer to talk you through their process during your next production. This could add new layers to your design or performance, and it would certainly warm their heart to be noticed. If nothing else, I hope you start to see the world, on the stage and off, in a new light.