

## Stage Lighting In Puppetry, A Friend Or An Enemy ?

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**Abstract:** When dealing with such topics as lighting setup, particularly in a puppet production, and its impact on the actor, namely *the puppeteer*, the main goal is to emphasize the importance of a stage element that is often ignored by the director and the lighting technicians as well as by other members of the production crew including the actor, the scenographer or the coreographer. My interest in this issue is not of recent date and the present article is the result of both collecting information on lighting techniques and concepts (lighting points, positions, dimensions, technical equipment, aso) and interviewing lighting technicians in this *art*, as one may call it, on their correlation to every phase in the evolution of a production. I do not claim to have supplied clear solutions to the above matter, but I have opened a path for debate for those that are interested in such aspects, mostly for those that can actually address this issue in an appropriate manner when working on the lighting setup of a puppet production or other stage production.

**Keywords:** Creative/practical skills, influence (impact), puppet theatre, puppeteer, stage lighting, setting, lighting techniques

The present article supplies a rather personal perspective on stage lighting and therefore a partial approach to this very rich topic, being nonetheless the result of both professional and lay opinions I have collected as an actor. Its main focus lies on the specific issues of lighting in puppet performances, relying on professional evidence and information as well as on my practical experience and observations in this field. Even though it was initially entitled *Stage Lighting – a Character* as I intended to point out not only the major role of this powerful artistic means but also its occasional excessive use in a series of performances, I eventually decided on the above title as I thought it to offer better ground for developing this topic both from an actor's viewpoint and from an occasional spectator's, too.

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The first part of the article will provide an insight into the evolution of stage lighting and list its key moments, starting with 5th century Ancient Greece when the building of the first theatre was recorded, its seats facing east so as to benefit from appropriate light in the afternoons when performances were taking place and the actors would play in the natural sunlight while the orchestra remained hidden into the dimming sunset light. This `technique` has been clearly used until present days in street performances that director Mihai Mălaimare, for instance, the manager of `Masca` Theatre, Bucarest, and a performer himself, considers to be a form of purification (*katharsis*) that creates `that fabulous connection between the actor and the audience` because `on stage the light shadows prevent you from seeing the audience while here you look straight into their eyes and become aware of your power to manipulate them and guide them like a parent into discovering the potential meaning of your performance`.<sup>1</sup>

In Elizabethan times new lighting means were developed, from tallow candles and lamps to chandeliers placed in the centre of the theatre buildings that were becoming increasingly popular throughout Europe. In the 18th century gas lighting was introduced, replaced by 19th century electric lighting. Its astonishing evolution resulted in the many 20th century variants such as special effects, lasers, video projections, 2 D and 3 D animation, and the more recent video mapping and interactive videos.

Nicola Sabbatini (1574-1654), an 18th century Italian architect, described the principles of lighting setup in his work *A Manual for Constructing Theatrical Scenes and Machines* as follows: `When planning how to light a scene, one will have to consider where to set the lights and the shadows; the place of the lights comes after. Things are not clear in this matter. Some advocate that the lights come from the front of the stage; some from the opposite side, from the back of the stage. (...) if we use it from this side the stage will have too much light on it that will turn it almost to white so that the people who want to see the actors will not be happy nor will they see the elements on stage. If light comes from the opposite direction (...) the stage will

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<sup>1</sup> <https://capitalcultural.ro/in-spectacolul-stradal-exista-cele-mai-mari-sanse-sa-se-petreaca-katharsis-ul-adica-acer-arc-voltaic-fabulos-intre-actor-si-spectator/>

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turn so dark that candles will be useless and the spectators will hardly see anything or be happy. But if light comes from one side of the stage (left or right), the houses, the middle and the ground, in one word, all scenery, will be better lit than in any of the above situations and it will make the audience very happy because lights and shadows will come from the exact places where they should come from for a better view.<sup>2</sup>

Almost four centuries later, the principles remain basically the same, only adjusted to contemporary formulas. Present day stage lighting observes the same elements as old setups: stage dimensions, relationship between director and artistic team: lighting technicians, scenographer, actors, and audience. At this point, I must admit that I was surprised to discover that the relationship between the director and the lighting crew, that I knew from my own experience to rely largely on the director's perspective on the performance and the lighting technicians putting it into practice, may be approached differently. For instance, Andrei Cozlac, a remarkable young Romanian video artist, described his relationship with director Radu Afrim as a process of constant interchange of ideas in creating the theatrical performance. As he stated in Ramona Iacobuțe's interview for *Adevărul* magazine: 'Radu is one of the few directors who tells you where you should get, but he would not clearly indicate how to get there. He shares his ideas with you, but there is a lot of change taking place in the rehearsals, we get inspired by each other.'<sup>3</sup>

After collecting information from a series of both local and foreign specialised articles, I realised that stage lighting is not only about spotlights, colours, light beams or light density. Lighting can turn into a means of creating feelings and moods, it unveils or hides various points of viewing with the unfolding of the dramatic text, it creates dimensions according to the stage director's and the lighting crew's perspectives. I discovered that lighting devices are divided into the following categories: ellipsoidal reflector spotlight

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<sup>2</sup> Michaela Tonitza-Iordache, George Banu, *The Art of Drama*, Bucharest, Nemira Publishing House, 2004, pp. 113-114

<sup>3</sup> <https://adevarul.ro/stiri-locale/iasi/interviu-andrei-cozlac-artist-video-eu-nu-2050705.html>

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with a relatively narrow beam that is used to light faces and props, parabolic reflector with a wide wash of light, reaching angles that are else difficult to light, fresnel reflector with a zoom function and adjustable focus, and moving head with a complex beam focus, that supplies a variety of colours. Light setup, in its turn, observes a series of stage characteristics such as form, ceiling height, lighting device weight and distance, and involves: one point lighting, flat and bidimensional that is close to natural light, two point lighting that provides a three dimensional perspective, usually placed in front and behind the point of viewing, the three point lighting that uses two front lights and one back light and helps eliminate all unwanted shadows for the audience; four point lighting utilized mostly for video lighting. I used the little information I could get from local lighting technicians who proved not very generous in sharing the secrets of their work they thought it was not worth wasting on amateurs such as myself to validate the assumptions I had made on the lighting issues over the almost 20 years of puppeteering. I was told in few yet considerate words that stage lighting setup is an intricate process in which the participants, the lighting technician or the lighting designer (that are not one and the same) have specific assignments, the latter's position requiring different skills and methods. I was also told that the initial lighting plan cannot be altered subsequently nor the director could adjust it once the performance is premiered, and that all stage elements have to be ready when lights are set, from necessary technical devices to text, props, costumes, make-up and choreography.

However, my long experience as a puppeteer has proved that the above rules are not always observed and that many times the initial lighting plan will differ from one performance to another. In puppet performances, the characters, *the puppet* or *the marionette*, are small and usually manipulated on small stages, so, if not properly lit, the audience will hardly see them. In addition, there is one aspect lighting setup has to take into consideration in this case, namely the manipulator's face that should be hidden from view. Therefore, the lighting technician's abilities are highly important in this process, along with stage directions and sometimes even with the puppeteer's suggestions on how to avoid getting the light on his face. My personal experience as a puppeteer and occasionally that beyond the stage as a spectator have lead me to think that light setting in puppet performances requires not only specific technical skills but also observing the relationship between

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puppeteer and puppet. I witnessed, mostly when touring *The Goat and Her Three Kids* show in Europe, the amount of creativity that both light setting involves in such circumstances and the adaptation of unconventional spaces such as museum or training halls into small stages where to perform in similar conditions to professional stages. But my almost 20 years in this field have also proved that the initial light plan alters with the the passage of time, the above *The Goat and Her Three Kids* being one such example. Usually short and manipulated on small 1-1.5 m tables, if not properly lit, the small characters fade in the dark and the audience is impacted mostly by the voices of the puppeteers. As our shows are meant primarily for the little ones, we often feel they start to lose interest in our stories, they are loud and lack emotional involvement. For instance, *Thumbelina*, one of our most recent shows counts among such examples when the puppets are very small and the lights are not appropriately adapted to their sizes. I have experienced a series of other similar situations as a puppeteer or as a spectator when the lightset would be inappropriate due to changes to the initial lighting plan, misplacing, wrong colours or intensity that more often than not are the result of an unsatisfactory relationship between the director and the lighting crew. On the other hand, an example of excellent balance between light and puppet size is *Don't Mess With the Bear*, a 2023 private theatre puppet performance from Israel hosted by the Luceafărul Theatre International Youth Festival.

The above examples of inappropriate lighting are definitely not singular; many puppet theatres are confronted with such instances. As a spectator, I have often witnessed small size puppets left in the dark in local and foreign puppet performances, manipulated on stages placed too far from the audience and poorly lit. While on a one month experimental exchange in a small puppet theatre in London, where the seating was not far from the stage, I had to move to the front to see the small faces and the movements of the tiny puppets that, in spite of good manipulation, were again poorly lit.

As shadow puppet performances are part of the puppet theatre tradition in spite of being less practiced at present, I will make a brief presentation of its lighting evolution, too. At first, lighting was supplied by a rudimentary means such as the fire light placed behind the screen made of buffalo hide or tissue; later it developed into more complex techniques. Now it relies to a large extent on the puppeteers' creativity to find new lighting methods such as

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bulbs, lamps, lanterns or small spotlights. The desired images on screen are obtained by using the lights that can bring out the fragile and almost immaterial characters of this particular type of performance. The manipulator himself can turn into a character in the light and shadow story. *Norbert Götz, the German founder of the Theater der Schatten* of Bamberg, Bavaria, offers a brief yet convincing insight into the shadow theatre light design in the following video.<sup>4</sup> *As with puppet theatre, inappropriate lighting in shadow theatre results in a diminished visual and emotional impact on the audience.*

From this perspective, a relevant example is provided by a dramatic production of the National Athenaeum of Iași, *Zorba the Greek*, in which the powerful and excessively colourful lights played the main role in the performance and diminished the impact of the acting, the text lines and the setting on the audience. The above example of Andrei Cozlac's interview reiterates his perspective on the massive use of video projections on stage unless they become a character themselves: It may sound incredible that I advise against the massive use of video light on stage unless it becomes a character. You may very easily captivate by astounding images. I get tired by those performances that rely on too much video projections or on a mixture of random images because of the lack of focus they create. The video projections have to follow the rest of the elements: stage directions, movement, setting and light.<sup>5</sup>

At this point, I would like to mention a remarkable theatre performance that is, in my view, a very appropriate example of successful collaboration among the director, the lighting crew and the stage elements, namely Zoltán Balázs's *Gardenia*, hosted by the 2022 Luceafărul Theatre International Youth Festival, which proves that at times stage directions can perfectly match the cast, the setting and the lights. Each appearance of the four female characters in the performance, that represented four family generations, was signalled by a light being turned on and every exist by a light being turned off. Zoltán

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b-e&q=lighthong+in+shadow+thetre#fpstate=ive&vld=cid:3aea84c9,vid:M-kgjNlk9Hc,st:15>

<sup>5</sup> <https://adevarul.ro/stiri-locale/iasi/interviu-andrei-cozlac-artist-video-eu-nu-2050705.html>

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Balázs, who was born in Cluj and graduated the Budapest School of Drama and Theatre Directing, was also the American director Robert Wilson's student in Paris. Wilson is an impressive and complex director whose interest in light, as he once explained, is so powerful that most often he would first design the lighting plan and then he would start working with the actors. 'To me, the most important element is *light*. Without light there is no space. Light is what helps us hear and see. (...) I am not interested in light only before the first performance, but right from the very beginning.'<sup>6</sup>

The few online fragments of Ionesco's *The Rhinoceros* directed by Wilson in 2014 in Craiova illustrate the above statements in the best possible way.<sup>7</sup> I will not comment on his complex yet contradictory acting concepts, yet I will try to emphasize the undeniable impact his approach has on the audience: the slow movements he requires from the actors, the strong make-up and innovative setting. Crista Bilciu, a director herself who had the opportunity of attending the rehearsals for *The Rhinoceros*, read as follows in her stage diary entitled *A Collection of 57 Scattered Ideas on Bob Wilson's Stage Directions for The Rhinoceros* : „•The first thing Bob Wilson did when he started the rehearsals was to design the lighting plan and then ask for a casting call, now that the lights had been all set. • Bob actually paints the actors and the setting with light. He notices and rearranges light details that 90% of all the others are not even aware of. • The actors always wear white make-up and white gloves that catch the light better. No rehearsal starts without these two elements. • Before the final costumes are ready, the actors must attach to their rehearsal costumes a piece of the original material so that Bob could see how it reflects the light. • The entire setting, costumes and make-up are white, black or grey, with stripes or dots. Only the actors' hair is coloured to become more visible. And above all, there is the light. Yet Wilson explains to me that many of his performances are more colourful. • All of Bob Wilson's stagings include a cyclorama which does not only provide static

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<sup>6</sup> Op. cit., p. 476

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-1-cE5ODgEE>

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images and video projections , but a source of light and colour, too.”<sup>8</sup> The light setup of the performance was provided by two remarkable American light designers, John Torres and A.J.Weissbard. The latter’s perspective on the connection between light and space confirms the above statements: ‘Light and space are inextricably linked: light renders space; space reflects light. Light is the most elusive of materials, a medium that is realized in the space in which it inhabits and by the objects on which it lands.(...) Working with light, I begin by thinking how I want to see the space. Working with space, I start by thinking how it will be lit. My art has always comprised the powerful dialogue between the source and the surface, between energy and form, the very volume of the visual atmosphere.’<sup>9</sup>

In my view, the main objective of every performance is to present a well-balanced structure that utilizes all its constitutive elements for a best visual and emotional impact on the audience.

The final issue I would like to point out in the present brief article, concerning the impact of lighting on the puppeteer and typically on actors, is whether the director, the lighting technician/the lighting designer or the actor himself could alter the initial lighting plan to fix the technical inadequacies that may appear after the first performance despite the rule that forbids such procedures.

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<sup>8</sup> <https://yorick.ro/57-de-idei-razlete-despre-teatrul-lui-bob-wilson-adunate-pe-marginea-repetitiilor-la-rinocerii/>

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