

Theatre People: Lighting Designer

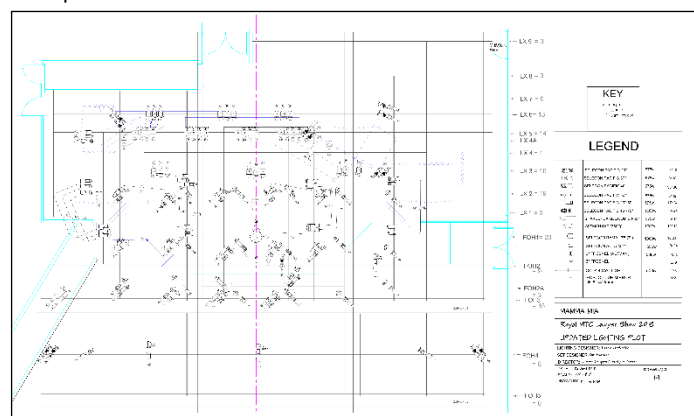
The lighting designer chooses the lighting instruments and their position in the theatre space, and then makes choices about their colour, intensity, and movement to help tell the story and convey the atmosphere of a theatre piece. The lighting designer works with the director to develop a concept that encompasses moods, themes, and the world of the play. Once they have collaboratively decided what is important, the lighting designer considers the physical space and other design elements to determine what instruments to hang, where to put them, and how to use them.

Designers are creative problem-solvers. The lighting designer blends the technical and artistic. They make sure that their choices support the story and the statements that the director wants to make about it, but also take into account opportunities and challenges of the space, ensure that the scope of the design is appropriate for the theatre's inventory, budget and the amount of time in the schedule, and adapt to change. Most lighting designers are self-employed or independent contractors, who are hired by a theatre for a particular show on a short-term contract.

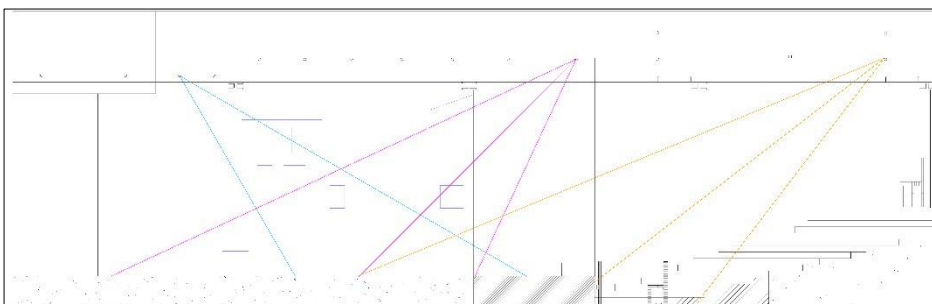
Tasks and activities in a typical day

The lighting designer's day varies depending on whether they are creating the concept for a show and working towards drawing deadlines, or whether the show is in rehearsals, and they are in residence at the theatre. (You could be working on multiple shows in different stages at the same time!) Some activities a lighting designer does regularly are:

- Read the script and respond to it.
- Brainstorm and collect visual references to discuss with director.
- Research – historical periods, different locations, art movements, and more.
- Attend meetings to clarify information and make choices.
- Become familiar with what different instruments are capable of so you can decide what's best for the show.
- Attend rehearsals and take notes to understand the action.
- Use drawings of the space and specifications of lights, combined with some math, to choose where and at what angles they should be hung.
- Create a lighting plot – a drawing that shows where each light goes and what colour filter is in it
- Decide what each cue will look like, including what is illuminated, when changes happen, and how long they take.
- Attend lighting focus sessions to direct crew where to focus each instrument.
- Work with the lighting board programmer to build cues, and the stage manager to set timing.
- Attend technical rehearsals onstage to incorporate lighting with staging and make any adjustments.



Lighting plot for fundraising performance of *Mamma Mia* at the Tom Hendry Warehouse, showing many types of instruments in relation to the set and theatre grid. (Designer: Ksenia Broda-Milian)



Lighting instruments can have a variety of beam sizes (how wide the beam of light they emit is, measured in degrees).

A lighting designer finds out the specifications for a light and uses a section view of the theatre and set to determine what kind is needed for the stage coverage they want, and where it should be hung. Here each colour is a different size of beam.

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10 skills that a lighting designer uses:

- Time management
- Organization
- Collaboration
- Creativity
- Inventory management
- Technical drawing/drafting
- Visual, verbal, and written communication
- Decision-making
- Analysis (of story, theme, character, and action)
- Attention to detail



In *Alice Through the Looking Glass*, colour in Kimberly Purtell's lighting design showcased the fun mood of the show, focused attention and set the locations. (Set & costumes: Bretta Gerecke. Photos Robert Tinker)

In *Sherlock Holmes and the Case of The Jersey Lily*, Scott Henderson balanced the need to see expression and highlight the set with the dark mysterious mood. (Set & costumes: Brian Perchaluk)



Building Abilities

There are probably lots of things you are already doing, and things you can start to do, that will serve you in a career as a lighting designer. Some of these are:

- Observe the environment around you. What directions and angles does light come from? What colour is it? What shadows or textures are created? What kinds of feelings do these give you?
- Find an organizational system that works for you to track different tasks and projects.
- Get comfortable with presenting in a group. Practice helps a lot!
- Understand colours and how they work together - important for lighting choices, and how those interact with other design elements like costumes and set.
- See and participate in theatre whenever you can, and watch movies and TV! Think critically about what choices you see being made, how they make you feel, and what the intention might have been.
- Learn about other theatre jobs. The lighting designer has to speak the languages of paint, construction, technology, timing, movement, and more to have effective conversations with different departments and the director.
- Creative practice of any kind, to discover your own process and aesthetics!