

Developments in theatre lighting from the renaissance to the present day

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Task Developments in theatre lighting from the Renaissance to the present day Theater lighting started as early as the times of Valerius Maximus where he explains his first attempts in the enhancement of drama by use of decorative lighting. This need for artificial lighting of the stage came during the period of 1200 to 1400 A. D. It is a fact that lighting has an additional value to theatre production more than just mere brightness. This is because it helps the audience see the actions more clearly apart from setting the scene, casting visual emotion, and moving the action. The history of theatre lighting hence dates back to the history of theater itself. It has had developments through the classical Athenian dramas and comedies, developed through the first lighting based on flames until the today's complex electrical lighting systems (Comiskey pg. 45-8). From the classical Athens and Rome period, the period from 472 BCE to about 450 CE that is; the fall of Rome, plays used to be performed outdoors under the natural sun light. This could not allow plays to be performed into the night making such plays end at sunset. Such plays and dramas were held in open-air theaters such as the Theater of Dionysus in Athens, which held quite a number of people. The natural sunlight illuminated the view making visibility probable. In Rome, comedies and tragedies came to be replaced by the gladiator events in the open natural light settings. This need for artificial lighting saw stage lit by a formation of cressets in form of crudely woven baskets of iron, mounted on poles, and then filled by blazing pine knots and pitch (Smith pg. 207). Then came the Italian Renaissance between 1430-1680 and this development in history was propagated by the fact that visual spectacle in theaters became increasingly important. An Italian theater worker

Sebastiano Serlio propagated the onset of color stage lighting where he perfected the plan of placing candles behind bottles filed with colored fluids. The great halls housing productions was composed of elaborate sets, curtains and special effects (Comiskey pg. 73). Mechanicals pulleys were used together with stagehands for the purpose of impressing and inspiring the audience. Inside the great halls, lights from candles and oil lamps could be focused for effect onto the stage in plays; such plays were mainly attended by; the upper-class citizens who could afford. The middle and the lower class still attended the open-air theaters lit by the sun at daytime on the streets. Their comedies were performed by travelling players and they were most of the time based on a number of stock characters and plots (Haff pg. 36). Then came the developments in the Elizabethan theater of England, which based its applications from the Italian context. This was the time when Shakespeare and the Globe Theater presented plays to a wide audience. There was a wider discrimination in that the groundlings and the poor people were named depending on their sitting locations in the open-air theater characterized by poor views. The elite in the society took prestigious sits in the theater to see plays during daylight hours (Wischmeyer pg. 57). Given the minimal nature of the artificial lighting, jokingly some plays were seen under the moon and the lantern. In the 19th century theater gained popularity in both the US and Europe and the emerging middle class were drawn into the stage due to the emergence of the more realistic and easily understandable acting style. This saw New York establish itself as the American capital of performances. Candles and gas lamps lighted the theaters during the evening performances (Haff pg. 113). Musical theater as

well as burlesque brought on board all the immigrants not fluent in English out for the sole purpose of entertainment. In addition, industrial revolution enhanced the capability of the technicians to produce special effects such as mirrors, ropes, lenses and many other tools, which aided the focusing of light hence the special effect (Smith pg. 76). The modern theater lighting systems have since resulted after the invention of incandescent lighting in 1879 leading to a revolution in theater lighting and performance. This led to the installation of the first electric lighting systems in the London's; Savoy Theater in 1881. The development ensured that most theaters used electric lighting by the year 1890's. In the modern day era, electric theater lamps are used by lighting designers; these lighting systems are accompanied by movable lenses as well as other accessories realizing the achievement of nearly any look on stage (Wischmeyer pg. 21-3). Such are meant to either complement or change scene and as a result producing a dramatic visual effect most cherished by the audience. Works Cited Comiskey, Andrea. " Mexican Movies In The United States: A History Of The Films, Theaters, And Audiences, 1920-1960 (review)." *The Velvet Light Trap* 60. 1 (2007): 91-93. Print. Haff, S.. " BOOK REVIEW: Spaces, Gestures, Objects, Light And Words: The Plays Of Bernard-Marie Koltes." *Theater* 22. 3 (1991): 91-91. Print. Smith, A. D. " A System of Lights." *Theater* 26. 1 and 2 (1995): 50-52. Print. Wischmeyer, Carl R. " A Thyatron Circuit For Theater Lighting." *Transactions of the American Institute of Electrical Engineers* 60. 12 (1941): 1067-1072. Print.