



# Lighting for special events and drama

**John Black** takes a look at how to adapt your house of worship's existing lighting setup to provide something extra for special events

## **MOST HOUSES OF WORSHIP HOST A VARIETY OF**

special events throughout the year in addition to the normal worship service schedule. Whether the event be a Christmas pageant, an Easter service, a night of praise, a drama presentation, or the hosting of a local or touring band, chances are there will be times when the lighting director/volunteer tech staff will be asked to provide special lighting beyond the regular lighting used for services.

The good news is that customising the lighting for these types of events does not always mean it will become more complicated or expensive. Whether you work in a well-resourced facility or a small venue with a simple system, there are some tricks you can do to create special lighting specifically for what is being presented that will look different from your regular setup. When considering special lighting requests for these events, it is important to keep in mind that the goal should be to support the message of what is being presented.

## **Functions of stage lighting**

Before looking at some specific things you can do to achieve special lighting looks, a quick review of the basic functions of stage lighting will help guide you as you plan for these special events. There are several criteria you should consider when approaching lighting for a special event. These criteria will help you to determine what specific lighting is necessary and will be most effective for the event.

**Visibility.** Though perhaps the most obvious, visibility is an important function of lighting as it encompasses more than simply illuminating an area or object. You need to consider exactly what you want the audience to see – as well as what you don't want them to see. This can also be referred to as

'selective focus' – directing your audience's eye to exactly where you want them to look, whether that be a presenter or an object. For example, it may be that during a reading you want the audience to focus on the object the reading is about. In this instance, you may choose to light the object and not the speaker to draw the audience's attention to the object.

**Form.** Form, also referred to as 'modelling', has to do with how shadows and highlights are used to reveal an object in its surrounding. Form affects the audience's visual understanding of the object being lit. For instance, an audience's understanding of a person lit from overhead as opposed to from underneath will change as the person's natural highlights and shadows from facial features will be reversed. If the special event involves live video projection or IMAG, form is important to consider in order to pull the object or performer out from the backdrop and creating a sense of depth for the camera.

**Mood.** Mood is an important function of lighting and is also relatively easy to affect. Mood is most often associated with colour choices and an audience's understanding of feelings associated with certain colours. Mood can either be literal or metaphoric. For instance, washing your stage in blues may indicate to the audience that the scene is set at night, while washing the stage in red may communicate to the audience a sense of fear or danger.

**Composition.** Composition combines the above criteria into understanding the overall lighting look you are trying to achieve. Often in houses of worship, the ability to construct large, realistic sets is not possible. Lighting can instead be used to 'set the scene' with each lighting look creating a visual picture for the audience. For instance, different colour washes can reveal the time of day, or whether the location

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**Selective focus deployed on actors**

is interior or exterior. The use of gobos can suggest whether the scene takes place under the shade of trees, in a city or underwater.

When approaching lighting for any special event or drama, be sure not to forget that the overarching function and purpose of stage lighting is to support and reinforce the story being told. Again, creating lighting for special events doesn't have to be expensive. Even if you're a small facility with a small number of lighting fixtures, there are some tools that you can use to help achieve some of your desired lighting looks.

**Using colour**

Coloured lighting can be achieved in a couple of different ways. If your



**Abstract gobos on a stage floor**

facility is equipped with LED-wash fixtures or automated fixtures with colour wheels or CMY-colour mixing, then you already have some tools to easily add colour to your event. If you only have conventional lighting fixtures installed, colour can be achieved by purchasing colour filters, called gels. Gels are transparent pieces of coloured plastic that are added in front of the lights, forcing the light beam to pass through. Gels are inexpensive and can be purchased in almost any colour you can imagine.

Colour can be used very effectively to assist and influence the audience's understanding of and reaction to what is being presented. It can be used to indicate literal times of day or whether a scene is inside or outside. It can also be used metaphorically to reinforce or



**Gobos can be used to add patterns**

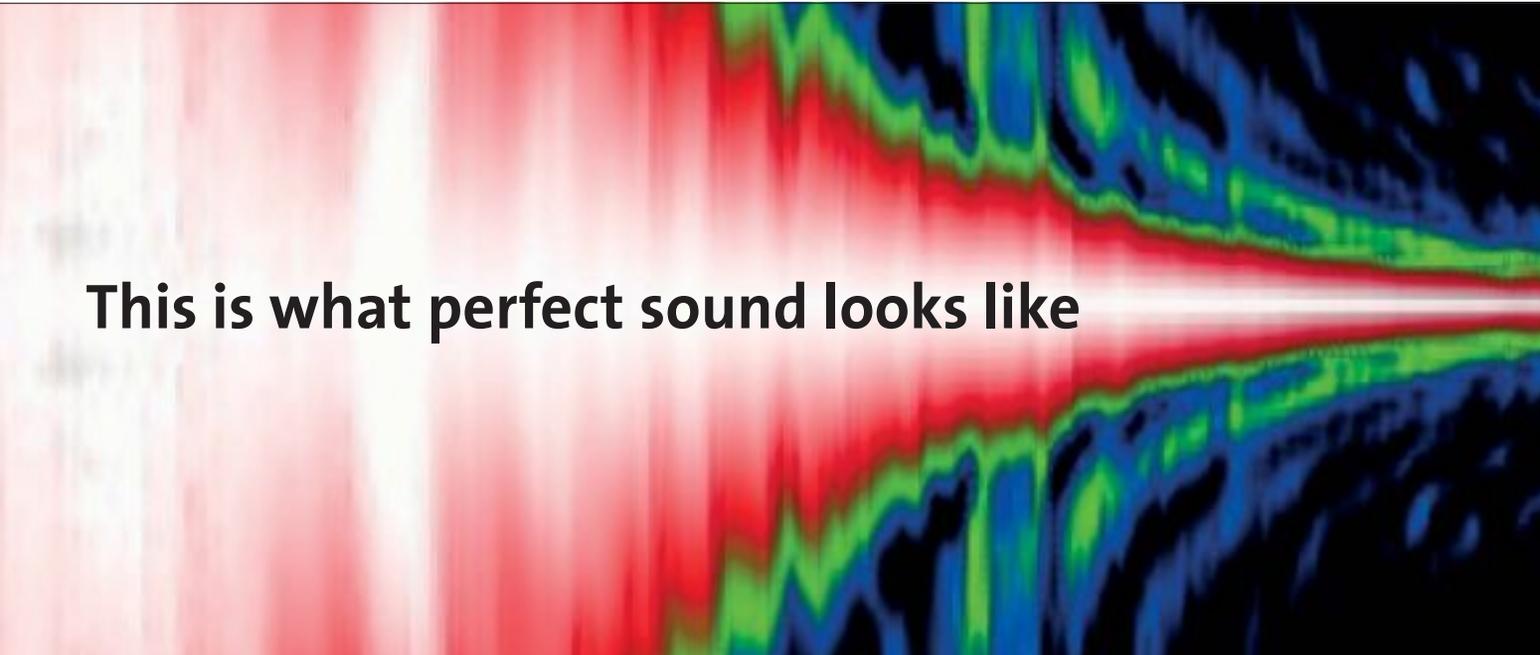
suggest moods that the actors are feeling, or to evoke particular feelings of the audience members. When using colour, you need to be mindful of the colour(s) used on the set or wardrobes of actors as well. For instance, shining red light on a red jacket will reinforce the red pigment of the jacket, while shining red light on a blue jacket will cause the jacket to appear darker or 'blackier.' If you have the opportunity, I would suggest reading up on basic colour theory for lighting applications or test it out before the event happens.

In most cases, coloured lighting will come from over the stage as down-lighting or back-lighting, depending on the layout of your facility's lighting grid. If you have access to LED or automated fixtures, you will be able to wash your stage in multiple colours from a small

quantity of fixtures. If you don't, you will need to plan on a set of fixtures (however many it takes to wash your stage) for each colour you are wanting to use as you will be unable to swap out gels during the event. Colour can also be used from the front and side lighting, though in most cases this is subtler than down- or back-lighting. For instance, a subtle cool and warm set of colours can be used in front lights to help reinforce different times of the day or locations where light can be described as being 'cooler' or 'warmer.'

**Using patterns**

Often more understated, but just as effective as colour, is the addition of texture in the lighting plan. Texture is created through projecting images



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**Man-made Sound**

by using patterns, or gobos. Gobos come in steel or glass, and can be simple two-dimensional images or high-resolution printed images. If your facility is equipped with automated fixtures, you will already have several gobo options installed in the fixtures. For conventional lighting fixtures, you can add a gobo to ellipsoidal fixtures, which have the ability to focus the image. If your facility is equipped with LED-powered ellipsoidal fixtures, you can even create your own patterns using materials such as transparency film (as LED fixtures generate very little heat, film can be used without melting).

Gobos can be used to create texture on objects through abstract patterns of

highlights and shadows. For example, if you want to suggest that actors are in a forest, you may use patterns of leaves from overhead to create the look of sunlight breaking through the leaves of the trees. Light and shadow would hit the actors underneath, creating that texture on their bodies. Gobos can also be used to create texture in the air. When used in combination with a hazer, the light beams emitted from the fixture will be visible through the air, which can be used to compose some cool looks. Going back to the forest idea, think about how the sun can create rays of light as it breaks through the trees, or light rays breaking through a cloudy sky. That effect can



A hazer can add to gobo effects in the air



Selective focus lighting during a drama

be recreated using gobos and haze.

Alternatively, gobos can be designed to look realistic. For example, a gobo of skyscrapers could be projected to suggest the action takes place in a city. A gobo of a jail cell could also be projected to suggest the action takes place in a jail cell without having to build a physical wall as a part of the set. If your event has a special logo, you can have a custom gobo designed and created with the event name and project it onto a wall.

These are just a few of the things to consider and techniques you can use when approaching a lighting design for a special event or drama. I encourage you to test and experiment with the

equipment you have in your rig and learn about some of the looks you can recreate. Learn what lighting angles work well for silhouetting or creating shadows. Learn what positions you have available for side-lighting dancers if a dance event comes up. Experiment with different gobos and the looks that they create when being projected on an object from the back versus the front. The more you understand how to create particular looks, the easier it will be to recreate those when planning for a special event or drama that comes up. And though every facility's lighting rig is different, the goal is the same - supporting and reinforcing the story being told.



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