

# How to hang lighting fixtures

**John Black** looks at where to hang lighting fixtures that support both weekly services and special drama performances

## WE'VE ALL BEEN IN SITUATIONS

where an actor, director or service planner comes to us half an hour before an event asking for a particular area of the stage to have a spotlight or a particular colour wash. Depending on the equipment you have installed in your facility, where it is installed (and accessed) and the experience of the technical team, last-minute requests may be something you can easily provide for, or it may be impossible in the time you have before the service starts.

One of the surest ways to meet the lighting needs of special performances – regardless of whether they are last-minute or well-advanced requests – is to plan lighting fixtures into your rig specifically for the purpose of these special events.



**Redemption to the Nations Church cues its Elation lighting rig to create a wide range of effects** *Image courtesy of intyde*



## Repositioning lights before a performance

These are fixtures in addition to your standard service rig and are placed specifically to achieve certain looks that can be easily and quickly adjusted when needed.

In all of my venues, I have a 'house plot' hung, circuited and patched that consists of fixtures that can front light, top/back light and colour every stage zone individually (see *Setting Up a Basic Lighting Grid* in the March–April 2019 issue). In addition to these fixtures, I include a number of 'specials', tight spotlights focused on areas of the stage that I want to light more specifically. These specials are frequently used and are therefore a part of the house plot. Finally, I have

a number of fixtures hung throughout the rig for the sole purpose of quick and easy focusing for special lighting needs of events that come and go. The fixtures stay in place, circuited and patched, but will be adjusted as needed (whereas the rest of the house plot never changes).

Before looking at the specific positions where lighting fixtures can be hung to support special drama performances, let's first quickly review some basics about stage lighting as that will help guide us in fixture placement. Remember that none of these basics are unique to lighting drama performances and are considerations for any lighting design.

## Functions and qualities of light

Often when a special drama is performed in a worship service, large elaborate scenic elements may not be possible to help set the scene and so lighting can play a dominant role in supporting and reinforcing the message of the drama.

The first function is visibility or selective visibility, which refers to the ability to see – or not see – certain objects. To the designer, it is a balance between what is illuminated and what is not. Most importantly, seeing the actors helps the audience understand them.

The second function is focus, which refers to directing the audience's attention towards what is most important. When it is important for an audience to focus on a single character or object onstage, it helps if the entire stage area is not lit, bringing focus only to where the scene action is taking place. If the focus of what is being said is a particular object, perhaps it may be powerful to focus lighting only on that object for the audience to consider.

The third function is form, which refers to the three-dimensional modelling of the actors or elements onstage. Lighting can make an actor or scenic element look flat and

two-dimensional, or sculpted and three-dimensional. Form is created predominately through the physical positioning and angles from which light is hitting an object.

The fourth function is composition. Just as a photographer considers all of the objects or elements in the frame, or a scenic designer considers balance, elements of symmetry and line in a set design, the lighting is also an important part of composing the 'stage picture' that the audience sees.

The fifth function is mood, which refers to the use of lighting to portray and reinforce the feelings of the characters and circumstances. Lighting can be used to reinforce certain emotions through the use of colour and angle from which it hits an object.

Finally, the sixth function is given circumstances, which refers to the use of lighting to let an audience know when and where the action is taking place. The use of colour and patterns for suggesting weather, time of day or location, for example, provide detail to the audience about where and when the action is happening.

All of these functions are realised through manipulating the controllable qualities of light, which include intensity, colour, direction, shape and movement. These functions and



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qualities are not unique to lighting for drama and should be considered when creating the house lighting plot used in your facility for your weekly services.

## Where to hang special lighting fixtures

In facilities that are equipped with LED wash fixtures and/or moving light fixtures, it may be that you can meet the needs of special drama performances using your house plot through making programming changes on the lighting console. However, if your facility is not equipped with these fixtures, then I would recommend adding some fixtures to your house plot for the purpose of special drama performances or other special lighting needs that may come up from time to time.



**New Destiny Christian Church has a lighting rig above the congregation**



**Adjusting lighting fixtures**

## Front light first – visibility and focus

First and foremost, the function of visibility is key. I would first add fixtures to your front lighting positions so that when a special lighting need comes up, you are able to make the actors or playing area visible. In one of my venues, I have 12 ellipsoidal fixtures hung and ready in front lighting positions that get refocused on a weekly – if not daily – basis. These fixtures are equipped with irises to adjust the beam size as well. What really makes this work in my case, however, is the accessibility of the fixtures. In this venue, the front lighting positions are accessed by a catwalk system, so getting to the fixtures and refocusing is fast, simple and safe.

In another one of my venues, the front lighting positions are electrically on motorised winch systems directly over the audience seating area.

When working on these fixtures, the electrics are lowered to a workable height and then flown out again. As it spans the full width of the auditorium and for safety reasons, I can't make adjustments to fixtures without removing the audience from the front half of the auditorium. In this case, making last-minute changes for special lighting needs using conventional fixtures would not be possible. Therefore, I have placed a number of moving light fixtures in these positions so that when special lighting needs arise, I am able to support these requests without having to directly access the fixture.

When lighting special drama performances, often there is a need to provide a specific focus and visibility for the actors that are performing, so that is why I would prioritise building flexibility into your front lighting. If you've set up your house plot to light your stage in a

number of small zones, it may be that what you've set up will work for the majority of your special lighting requests. However, having a few extra fixtures available never hurts and allows you to provide some special lighting if and when needed (such as lighting a specific scenic element or an auditorium aisle for an entrance).

When it comes to hanging these fixtures, try to place the fixture in a position that is accessible. This may also determine the type of fixture you choose. If you have a balcony rail accessible without a ladder or positions accessible via catwalks, throwing a few extra conventional fixtures into your rig will meet the majority of your needs.

## Top/back light second – mood and circumstance

The second most common request I receive is colour. Performing groups often want particular colours to support or help portray certain moods and/or circumstances.

This is easy to achieve if the rig consists of top/back lights set up in zones and equipped either with colour scrollers or LED fixtures. If you only have one set of top/back lights used throughout a regular service for providing form, then you may need to look at placing some additional fixtures in these positions to provide colour for special drama performances.

The benefit of an LED wash fixture or a unit equipped with scrollers is that the colour of a particular stage zone can be

changed programmatically on the lighting console. However, if neither exist, you won't be inserting gels mid-service for a special drama performance. In that situation, add a few extra fixtures that you know are available to place a gel in from week to week depending on the needs of the service. Again, accessibility is important.

About eight years ago, I changed one of my venue's top/back wash rigs completely over to LED. The response and flexibility for planners and performances was amazing. A year later, I did the same thing in my other venue, although I put in moving head LED wash fixtures. The flexibility to change a colour wash anywhere on the stage has not only provided a level of flexibility and support that I wasn't previously able to provide, but the amount of time it took me to prepare for and meet those needs was significantly reduced as I no longer had to access the fixture for refocusing.

## Conclusion

As you can see, lighting for weekly services doesn't necessarily differ from lighting for special drama performances, but building flexibility into your rig will allow you to be able to meet special lighting requests easier and more efficiently. All facilities are built differently, so be sure to look at how accessible areas of your rig are. These are the two hanging positions I would start with. There will always be special lighting requests. If you plan for that happening, then meeting those needs will be much easier.



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