Thought to Stage: The Transition from Conceptual to Visual in Stage Lighting

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Introduction

My theatrical lighting design process is multifaceted. It involves taking imagery and ideas communicated through the written word, translating them into a collection of visual artistic choices, and putting them on display for an audience to see. This translation is the lifeblood of what I do as a lighting designer. I take information about light contained in the script and synthesize it with the director's vision to form the framework around which all future lighting discussion will be based.

This framework is often made up of guiding principles, a series of expectations and guidelines for how the lighting will function in the play. These are also known as the Lighting Concepts for the play. Expectations and guidelines are useful early on when discussing the play in theoretical terms, before major visual decisions are made, and the designer is working with the director to establish the central vision for the lighting design. However, theater is ultimately a performance medium, so at some point lighting concepts have to translate into concrete visual choices in order for the physical production process to begin.

Perhaps my primary responsibility as a lighting designer is to act as that bridge or medium between a conceptual and literary director and the nuts and bolts reality of producing the play. The ideal design process has that transition built into it, wherein the concept is guide for visual decisions ultimately made to make the show visually engaging and consistent. However, for some shows the process does not work that way, and lighting decisions are made based on rigid adherence to intellectual concepts. The visual impact is either ignored or is a secondary concern. These represent two extremes, but the ideal design process balances conceptual and visual thinking.

Process

My process for taking a show from script to stage in terms of lighting varies from show to show. However, it can generally be broken down into six broad stages:

1) Script Analysis

2) Research/Rendering

3) Discussion/Collaboration

4) Refinement

5) Finalization

6) Production

The Script Analysis phase consists of reading the script and identifying lighting elements within it, specifically stage directions detailing the environmental lighting, character references to light, and other aspects that might affect the lighting, time of day or weather for instance. Script analysis is also where I begin to craft the overall lighting vision based on the play as a whole. This is also where frequent and intense discussion with the director is necessary. Understanding their overall vision of the play and how they need lighting to function in that vision is key to moving forward. By removing excess ideas from the equation the overall design concept is sharpened. This part of the process is highly theoretical and conceptual. The director and I slim down what the play is trying to convey, and how the lighting fits into that. We also figure out how the lighting progresses through the show, and ask questions including “does it change?” What does the change convey? Is there any underlying meaning behind it? Images used to describe the lighting also come from this

phase. They can come from script notes, such as “A dark and stormy night,” or ideas from the director’s vision such as, “I would like a feeling of isolation and oppression.” These images form the basis of the lighting concept for the show.

The Script Analysis phase establishes the groundwork for the show’s lighting concept. The next phase begins what I call the Translation Process, where the intellectual concepts are brought into the visual world. This is generally through two methods: Research and Rendering. Research usually comes first. This is the process of collecting visual references that illustrate the ideas that came out of the Analysis stage. These references generally take the form of images, usually photographs or paintings. For lighting, taking the design team to a location lit in a particular way can also be an effective communicative tool. The goal of the research is to take the idea out of the designer’s head and format them in a way their collaborators can see and respond to. This phase can be imprecise as a designer is using preexisting media to illustrate an original set of thoughts. For my process, I collect tens to hundreds of images, hone them down to those that most accurately show my ideas, and present groups of images that combine together to get closest to the idea I am going for. These collages, or image boards, give the rest of the creative team a window into my ideas for the show and when combined together, hopefully, create a kind of first look at how the lighting will function within the overall design.

To communicate ideas more specifically, I move into the Rendering phase. I take research and work from the scenic sketches or renderings to create lighting storyboard renderings to more precisely showcase my ideas. Renderings of this type are very useful for illustrating the progression of light through a show, elaborate on compositional ideas, and

give the design team a rudimentary idea of how the lighting choices work with the other design elements.

Both research and rendering are the first steps in moving from concepts and ideas into the visual realm.

The Discussion and Refinement phases tend to overlap. With research and scenic models on the table, the team discusses individual elements and decides to reject or develop them. Sometimes, all of the early concepts that came out of Analysis get thrown out the window and a new set of concepts emerge out of discussion. This causes these stages to bounce back and forth between conceptual thinking and visual decision-making. This phase can last all the way up to dress rehearsals and beyond on some productions, though is generally complete before load-in.

The Finalization Phase is where everything begins to be finished. This phase is all about taking the ideas and visual decisions made during the Refinement process and making them ready for Production (where everything is built and hung). This process generally happens before load-in, but sometimes is not finished until dress rehearsals. This is where I make what I would call the Final Translation, where abstract research and ideas are turned into concrete choices for the show. This includes: determining what kind of lights and where they are located (light plot), what kind of color and patterns are being used, and how all of this will be put together to achieve the desired lighting aesthetic. This process can be quite fluid and dispersed over a period of days or weeks if the Refinement process continues past load-in.

Defining Conceptual and Visual

In an ideal process, the Research and Finalization stages are where intellectual concepts are translated into visual decisions. In this context, intellectual concepts and visual decisions refer to types of thinking that are necessary modes of any design process. Intellectual concepts often take the form of a set of rules, referred to as a rigid concept, or general guidelines, referred to as loose concept, set up by an artist to govern decisions. The goal is that each visual element in the show supports the concept. In a purely conceptual process, all artistic decisions are made to correspond with the concept and other concerns are secondary. Through an intellectual exercise wherein the concept says "X" so therefore the lighting should look like "X", visual decisions are taken. Though the visual appeal/effectiveness of a choice is certainly taken into account, it may be overruled by the need to adhere to concept.

Visual thinking refers to a process wherein aesthetic principles are used to govern visual decisions. The goal is to make everything look as visually engaging as possible through the manipulation of visual elements including composition, color palette, and visual focus. In a purely visual process, all artistic decisions are made because they look the best to the design team and other concerns are secondary. Though the show's overall concept is certainly taken into account, it may be overruled if it causes choices to be less visually appealing.

In reality, a design process contains about equal measure of both of these thought processes. Conceptual thinking gets the show from words on paper into a visual language that can be discussed. Visual thinking takes the results of those discussions and translates them into something visually appealing on stage. My ideal process by the end is guided

primarily by visual thinking with the concept serving as a source of inspiration and gentle guide, particularly in terms of lighting progression. However, if a process is skewed towards either, the process can become more difficult and endanger the final product.

Rimers of Eldritch: Accidental Beauty Through Adherence to Concept

The first show I lit here at the University of Virginia was Lanford Wilson's *The Rimers of Eldritch*. Produced in the thrust Caplin Theatre, the play tells the story of a decaying former coal town in the Bible belt. The play's story is told in a non-linear fashion, with individual scenes jumping to different times and places, with some moments taking place outside of time altogether. Before designing *Rimers,* most of my previous theatrical design processes were conceptually driven. My emphasis was on justifying every visual choice from the script or rigid production concept. My process on *Rimers* reflected this. My central focus of the early process was to find a central image to guide the rest of the design. The show was set in an old coal town. The image of coal dust in old mines became a visual metaphor for the decay of the town, as all the good things had departed long ago and the dregs were all that was left (Figure 1). I also gravitated towards the frequent references to frost and the woods (Figure 2). These became secondary symbols.

Figure 1: Research Image: Coal Dust

Figure 2: Research Image: Night Time Forest

While this was going on, the scenic designer was hard at work crafting a wood plank sculpture of a set. The multi-level unit featured a deck made in the style of outdoor decks: multiple two by fours put about 3/4" apart to create the top surface. The designer mentioned that she would be okay if I wanted to put lights underneath. I was torn. On the one hand, planks of wood with light streaming through had visual potential, but on the other it did not connect with my concepts of frost or coal dust. I decided to pursue it anyway, though with a great deal of unease, as it was outside my conceptual comfort zone.

The director engaged with both my imagery and underlighting (Figure 3) and made some additional requests. He wanted the lighting to indicate various places and give us an

idea of where we are, a forest, or Main Street or a diner for instance. Some of this was simple, as forests and frosty dirty streets were images I was already working with, but the interior locations, the café or courtroom, were something else entirely. I collected images to that effect and added them to my research, but I was not sure how I was going to integrate those elements into my process or translate them into lighting
choices.

Figure 3: Research Image: Light Through Slats of Wood

At the University of Virginia I had access to a new resource: a light lab. There, guided by my concept, I began to experiment with color and pattern by hanging a scaled down light plot and seeing how various colors and pattern worked on a set sample. In this place, some real visual decision-making was taking place. In my mind, I had done the hard work and my

service to the script and concept. Now I could experiment with color and texture. Though I had specific goals in mind (make the light look like we were in a forest, or on a main street), I was guided most by what was visually evocative. In one instance, I lit a set sample with a pale blue, medium blue and a lavender pattern. I discovered that this not only made the wood planks look iced over and cold, but also created a blue-lavender gradual effect across the entire piece. Through this process, I explored my conceptual ideas and how they might translate into specific visual choices about color, angle, and composition and had begun translating and synthesizing those into the light plot. However, I had developed color ideas for a cold night forest and a cool town street. Both of these were blue and lavender intensity, and did not serve the interior looks the director requested in previous meetings. To compensate, I threw in some amber in a top system and submitted my plot.

The light lab work was instrumental in preparing the *Rimers* plot. Since I had worked out my colors and angles in advance, it was a simple, if time consuming, matter to turn color and angle into systems. The plot reflected my lighting concept, with a large percentage of the lights dedicated to creating the cold forest and coal dust images that were at the center of my research. Nowhere was this proven more than in my actor lighting system which consisted of four different subsystems at 90 degree angles intended to blast the stage with the same pale cold blue with the intent of enveloping the actors in that light. This system alone accounted for about one hundred of the approximately two hundred instrument plot. By contrast, the only lights that were intended in any way to be used in interior scenes numbered about eighteen and were plotted last.

By the time we began tech rehearsals, I had finally found a place in my concept for the

underlighting. The director mentioned that he wanted certain scenes–specifically those taking place in a courtroom–to be out of time, almost in another place. The underlighting changed the composition of the set dramatically, enough to reinforce the idea that this was a different, and possibly heightened, time and place.

Through tech for Act I we jumped from the forest look (Figure 4), to the dirty street look (Figure 5), to the courtroom image. While the courtroom was certainly a contrasting image to the other two, the audience had very little break from the sea of cool blue that saturated the stage as the courtroom was only shown twice. This was by design, as every moment not in the courtroom was to be spent in this environment.

Figure 4: Production Image: Forest Scene

Figure 5: Production Image: Dirty Street Scene

This completely ignored the practical considerations. With so much blue, the audience's eyes would fatigue fast, as the continual stimulation of the red-blue cones causes them to tire quickly. While I am not sure he would have stated it in those terms, the director clearly understood this and asked if I could switch to something warmer (Figure 6). I agreed, though reluctantly, to turn on the amber top light because it would create the first really warm image of the whole show. We stayed there for maybe half an hour and shifted slowly

back to the cooler blue color palette as Act II progressed. Without the director's input, I would never have turned the amber lights on, as they were not conceptually supposed to be used at that point in the show.

Figure 6: Production Image: Amber Scene as Requested by Director

Rimers turned out to be a visually appealing production in part because my collaborators pushed me to consider visual elements outside my initial conceptually driven ideas. While I was very satisfied with the main visual choices I had made, elements such as the warmer interior looks and underlighting created contrast and were some of the most visually interesting moments of the show. Working in the light lab was instrumental for the lighting's success. Without being able to develop ideas in physical space, I do not believe the main visual images, forests and coal, would have been as successful and I would not have found a

place for the underlighting in my concept and in the show.

Bloody, Bloody Andrew Jackson: The Conceptualization of the Visual

The University of Virginia's drama department produced *Bloody, Bloody Andrew Jackson* in fall of 2015 in the proscenium Culbreth Theatre. The punk rock musical tells the story of Andrew Jackson, reimagined as a defiant punk rocker. The show attempted to fuse 19th century aesthetics with the look and sound of emo punk. I wanted to build on my visual successes from *Rimers* and avoid limiting my process to a rigid concept. My initial lighting ideas for *Bloody, Bloody* were centered around the show's structure. The two act play divided up nicely into three parts. The first part was Jackson's young life before he "broke out" and became the demagogue history knows. The director had a very specific vision: vaudeville. He wanted sepia tones and foot lighting to highlight the historical absurdity present in the first section. I came back to design meetings with sepia tones, foot lights, and Jackson's life in the woods as research images (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Research Collage: Part 1

The second part details Jackson's rise to the presidency during a time of unbridled optimism and punkish determination. The whole thing was about Jackson as the "rock star president" so the director wanted to bring in punk rock elements.

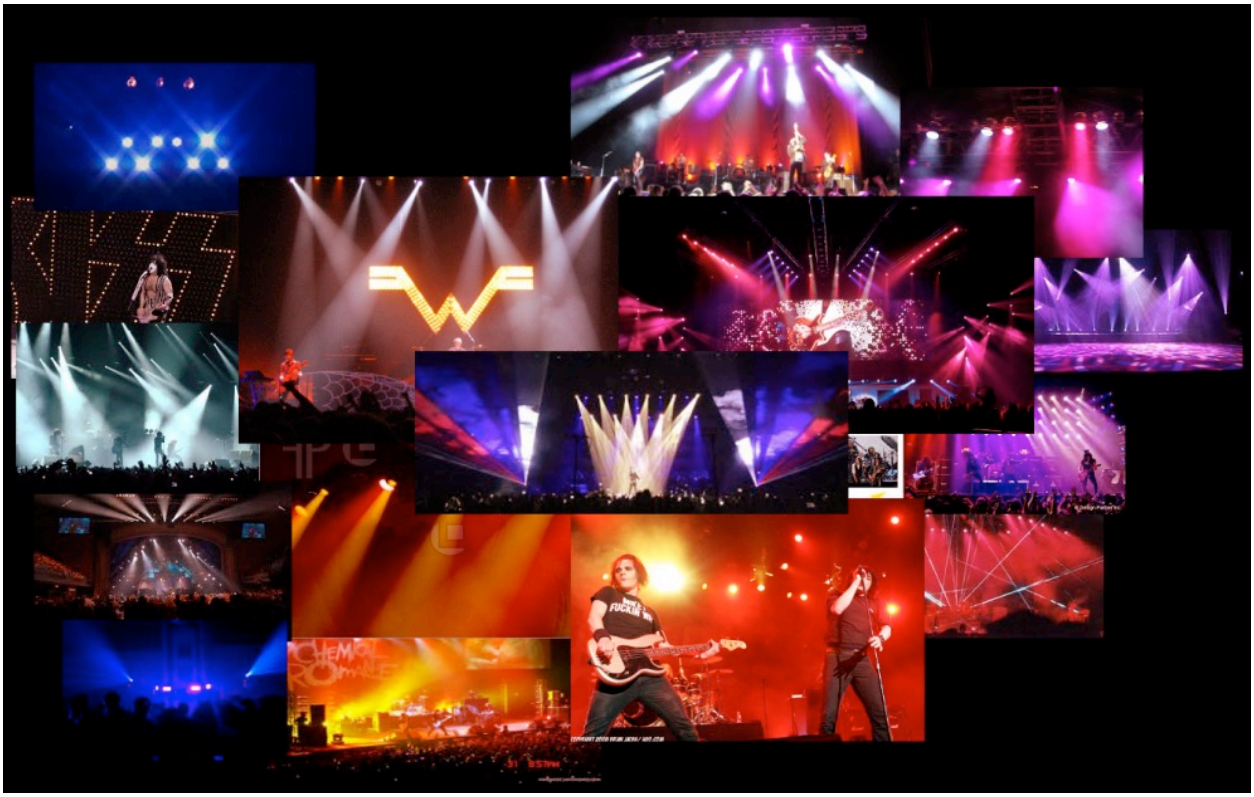

Figure 8: Research Collage: Part 2

I agreed, so I came back with a collage of research images from the internet (Figure 8). The third section details Jackson's fall from grace. As the realities of governance and democracy hit him, he is confronted by the fact that the party is over and that running the nation was harder than he thought. The director had no specific ideas, but I latched onto the idea of mirroring Jackson's loss of vitality by leeching the color and energy from the stage with cold and grey colors (Figure 9). The motivation behind my choices of images was based upon specific visual imagery from the script. My goal for this lighting process was to keep it a visual one and avoid any kind of overreaching concept. As the process progressed however, I became focused on making the stage pictures look like the images in my research as closely as possible and other visual concerns took a back seat. While I had avoided a rigid concept

like I had during *Rimers,* I was working from an equally restrictive position.

Figure 9: Research Collage: Part 3

These restrictions began to manifest in tech. In the first part of the show, my quest for a vaudevillian sepia tone atmosphere led me to light the actors mostly with footlighting (Figure 10). This caused actor visibility issues that I corrected using a low angle front light system with a chocolate color gel.

Figure 10: Production Image: Foot Lighting

The low angle front-light caused more issues. While it created the sepia tone feel we had been looking for, the shallow angle meant that the actors were flattened out considerably, since most of the light hitting the actors was hitting the scenery behind them. The actors and scenery sharing the same light quality unified the two elements, almost as if a sepia filter was being placed in front of the audience's eyes (Figure 11). It also made both elements have equal points of focus when the actors still needed to be highlighted the most in that moment. In addition, the lack of contrast made the scene fatiguing to watch and detracted from the energy and action on stage. I chose to leave it because it fit with the concept of the flat sepia toned photographs from my research and the director agreed.

Figure 11: Production Image: Flat Lighting

The second section of the show featured the more energetic rock and roll elements and I planned to use more lights than in the first section of the show. I planned for there to be riotous color and patterns on everything with heavy haze with moving light beams moving through it. Trying to realize my ideas and match the stage picture to my research required a lot of time and energy focused on a multitude of color and effect systems, all of which had nothing to do with lighting the actors (Figure 12). These were my top priorities as we teched the show. The actor lighting system was not and as a result it had many holes due to poorly focused or malfunctioning lights. While this was not an issue as far as I was concerned, to the director the lack of actor visibility was a serious issue. This created friction with the director

and caused a great deal of stress and anxiety among several of the production staff. Even after the technical director and scenic designer voiced the same concern and we repaired all broken lights and focused the system correctly, there were still issues. The research featured follow-spots that had a saturated cold color to them. I replicated this by using a medium transmission blue gel. The color made the actors look exactly like the research images, but it cut so much intensity that it was difficult to see their faces clearly. I ultimately abandoned that part of the concept. I changed the color to a warmer, higher transmission gel which did not achieve quite the look I wanted, but fixed the visibility issues (Figure 12).

Figure 12: Production Image: Well Lit Scene with Color and Effects Systems

We got lucky in the third section of the show. The grey cold scene was easy to make with the lights I had in place. It was also a short enough section that visual fatigue was not an

issue. It was generally successful.

In retrospect, my greatest challenge in lighting *Bloody, Bloody* was that I created three independent light plots to accommodate each research collage, and put them into a single plot. The sepia toned photograph for part I, the rock concert for part II, and the grey filtered scene from a depressing movie in part III shared very little with each other visually. While some lighting elements overlapped, a foliage pattern system for Parts 1 and 3, and a front light system for 2 and 3 for example, there was little else that was common amongst them. Essentially, each part had its own mini light plot within the overall light plot, with the majority of lights devoted to part 2. What resulted was a relatively large, but specific light plot. With certain angles occupied by systems specialized towards a single part of the show, there was little versatility, making it difficult for me to respond to what the director and I were seeing happening on stage in rehearsal. Additionally, the high side and back light systems, two crucial systems, were occupied by scrollers and patterns that were specific to part 2 and did not fit the aesthetics for parts 1 and 3. That made them unusable for more than half the show. What I wound up with was a highly conceptual, but less versatile plot. In a roundabout way, I had done exactly what I was determined not to do at the start of the process.

Mr. Burns: Finding the Balance

In my third year, I designed the lighting for *Mr. Burns: A Post Electric Play,* a straight play in the Caplin Theatre. The *Burns* script lent itself well to a visually driven design process, but also significant intellectual conceptualizing. The show takes place after an apocalyptic event has cut off all electrical power seemingly permanently. It asks how human culture and

entertainment will survive after the lights go out. The biggest paradox of the production is the use of electric theatrical stage lighting equipment to light a play which is set in an environment where there is no electric light. The fundamental question for me as a lighting designer was how to reconcile this conflict, especially in the Caplin Theatre, where the stage lighting fixtures can be seen easily (Figure 13).

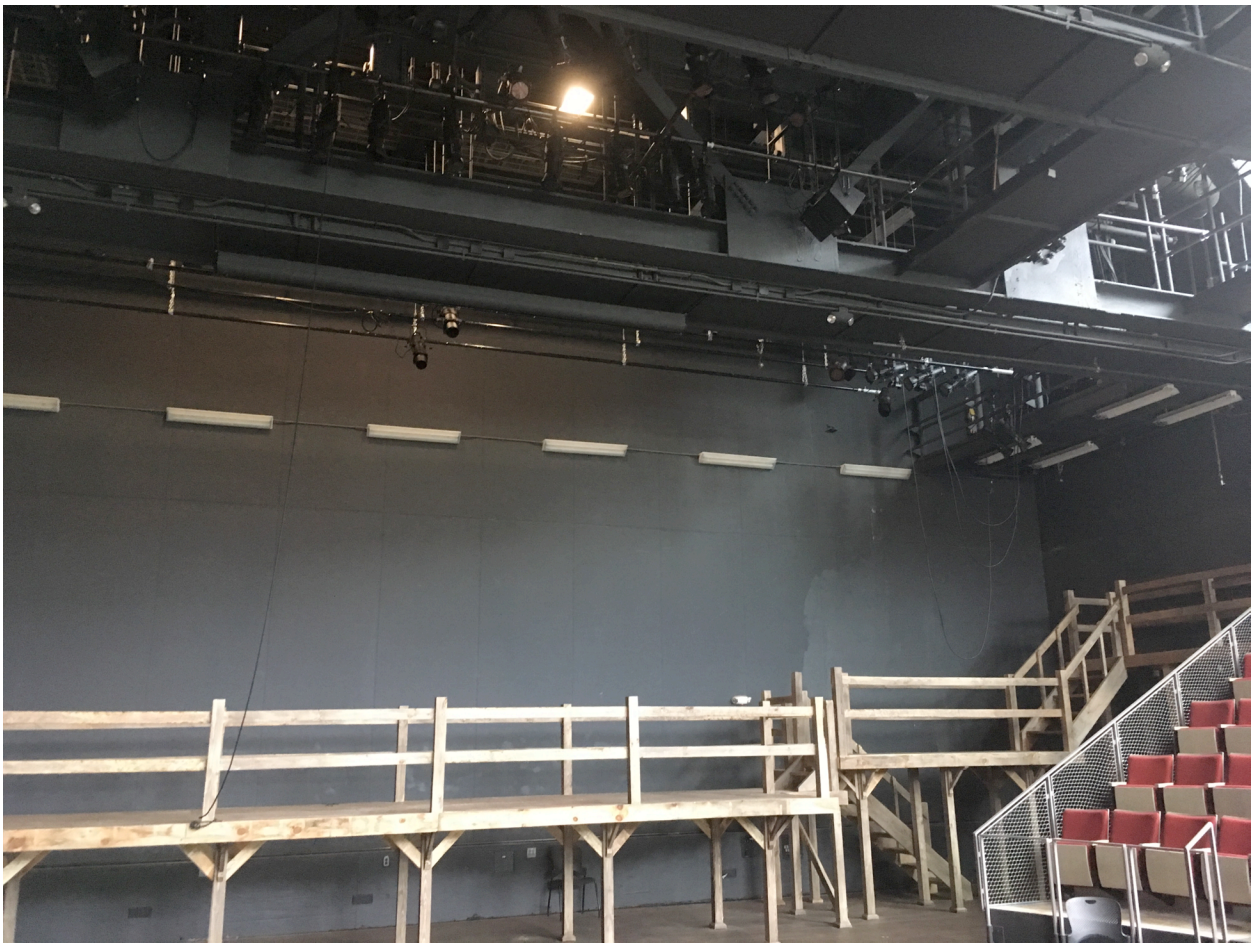

Figure 13: View of the Caplin Theatre House with Visible Lighting Fixtures

One initial thought was to try to light the show as much as possible with practical sources that simulated natural light like flame effect units (Figure 14). The stage directions

made specific mention of non-electric light sources that were to be on stage, including a campfire, candles, torches, and sunlight through windows. For a while the collaborative team and I worked on harnessing and possibly increasing the number of them to give sufficient light to act by. I ultimately found it impractical to light the show entirely this way given the configuration of the space. Since the show had audience on three sides, the actors needed to be lit well from all sides to be visible to the entire audience.

Figure 14: Research Image: Open Campfire

The director and I worked on this conundrum for a month, going back and forth on how to reconcile this non-electric concept with the need to see the actors in the space. I felt

like this was the key decision in this lighting process, and therefore nothing else got done while we mulled over it. The solution came out of a one-on-one meeting with the director in the lobby. She noted how theatrical the play was, as it was a play about people putting on live action versions *of The Simpson's* after the apocalypse. This inspired us to look at it from the opposite direction. Rather than trying to hide the lighting's electric nature, we decided to embrace it. Rather than using a subtly blended leaf pattern to give the illusion of real moonlight shining through real trees, I decided to use a very sharp and obviously artificial pattern that looks exactly like branches projected on the floor. I also noted that this made sense with the idea of real people acting out a cartoon, the clearly man-made images gave the play an illustrated feel, or at least an artificial one.

By embracing the paradox, I was able to move forward with the design process. I put together research based around three central images derived from the locations of the three acts: the woods, warehouse ceiling trussing, and a river. These would guide the choice of the three different pattern systems that I was planning, one for each act. It also freed us up to make certain decisions, such as using the stock fire effect pot and electric fireplace logs rather than spending a great deal of time and money on a practical lighting effect to light the actors completely while also looking like the effect of fire.

By this point in the process I had a good idea of what each act was supposed to look like and what kind of environment it was set in. I translated my ideas into research collages from which I was able to draw color inspiration (Figures 15, 16, and 17). This allowed me to narrow down the color palette I wanted to use. But when it came down to it, I was making choices based on what looked the best with the scenery and costumes, rather than any

preconceived intellectual concepts.

Figure 15: Research Collage: Act I

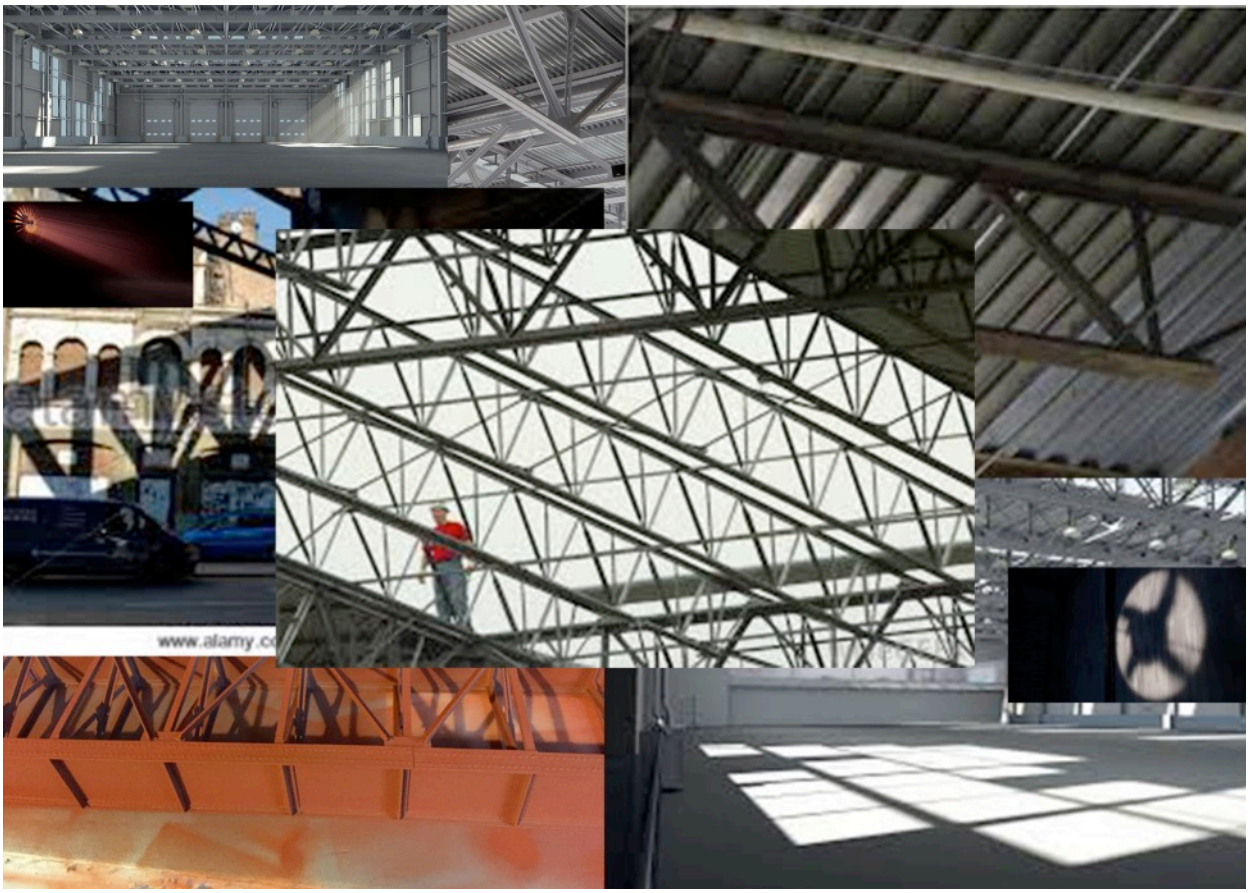

Figure 16: Research Collage: Act II

Figure 17: Research Collage: Act III

In the process of choosing color for lighting I referenced the scenery drawings frequently and steered my color choices to highlight or downplay various elements of the set. One element was the patinaed bronze floor treatment (Figure 18). While the actual color of the floor worked well in Acts II and III, which were set in more artificial locations, it did not work well for the Act I forest. By using a blue top light with very little green content and a redder lavender in the top light forest pattern, I was able to dull the floor down to the point where it appeared to be a neutral color tending towards brown (Figure 19). The combination of the blue top-light and lavender forest pattern also made for a nice moonlight through the trees effect and provided a pleasing warm-cool contrast.

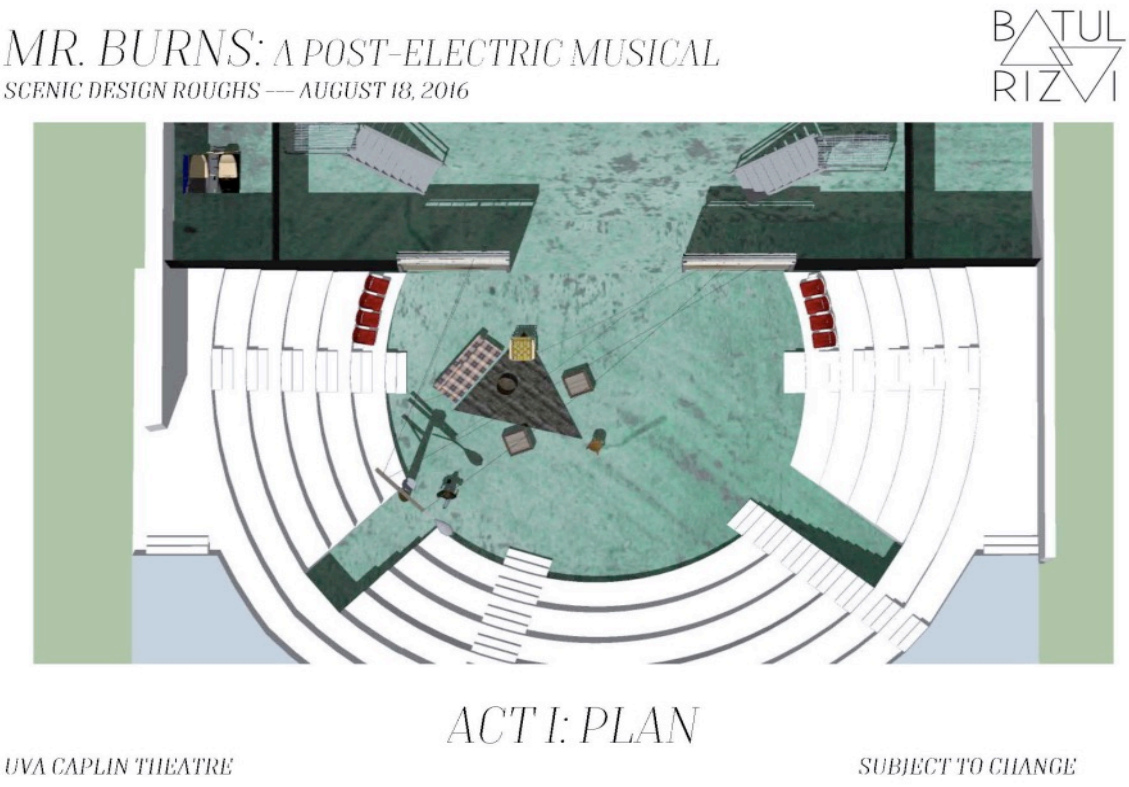

Figure 18: Floor Paint Color Rendering, Scenic Design by Batul Rizvi

Figure 19: Production Image: Act I

Another example was how I lit the graffiti that adorned the upstage walls (Figure 20). I wanted to visually down play it in Act II and to pop it in Act III. For Act II I washed it with a gray-blue which dulled down the red tone graffiti and visually emphasized grey metal (Figure 21).

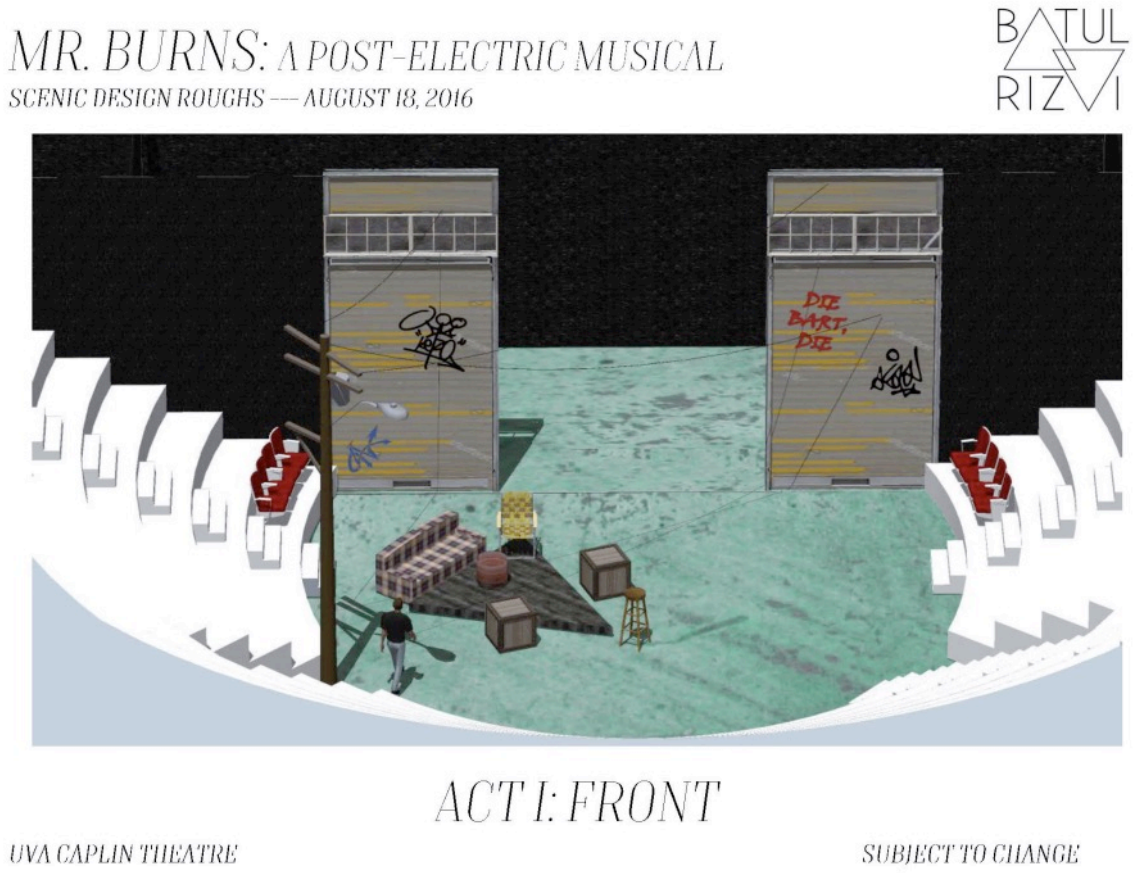

Figure 20: Upstage Wall Color Rendering, Scenic Design by Batul Rizvi

Figure 21: Production Image: Act II

For Act III I washed the wall with orange and red light, making them recede and the graffiti pop (Figure 22). My color choices also helped reinforce the sense of place. The pale grey-blue gave a more daytime in the city feel for Act II, while the red-oranges helped reinforce a flame lit environment for Act III. This also set up a nice temperature contrast between the two acts, making for a more dramatic shift. This was useful and the time difference between Acts II and III is more than sixty years.

Figure 22: Production Image: Act III

Not pursuing a realistic natural light concept ultimately made for more engaging stage pictures, particularly in Act III. Since it takes place on a houseboat, I chose a cartoony static water pattern in a vivid cyan to represent the river in Act II. The cyan pattern contrasted well with the flame-inspired red-orange actor lighting in the scene to create a dynamic composition as the actors moved through it (Figure 23).

Figure 23: Production Image: Act III Water Pattern

The shift from a realistic conception of the lighting to a more cartoon like concept made that lighting design work by freeing me up to make visual decisions. Had we continued down the former path, I would have spent a large amount of time trying to address visibility issues and coming up with yet more ways to simulate firelight rather than simply making beautiful theater. The concept we settled on led us to find useful imagery that could act as inspiration for lighting choices, rather than dictating what technology and color we could not use. It made for a nice balance between the conceptual and visual and allowed for a vibrant and creative process.

Conclusion

The design process for *Mr. Burns* represents most ideal balance between conceptual and visual thinking that I have achieved. While *Rimers* had some visual decision-making involved, I clung to a rigid concept too long into the process. It ultimately took a great deal of input from my collaborators to break me out of that conceptual mindset. As they were working on more of a visual level, responding to their inputs ultimately steered the process to be more visually based than I had originally intended. Thanks to their input, I added elements to the plot that made it flexible enough that I could respond to changes during tech, which resulted in a more visually successful production. *Bloody, Bloody* was also a rigidly conceptual process for me. While I went into it with the intention to work more visually, I ultimately built a rigid concept around making the show look as close to my research images as possible. To that end, I made specific lighting choices which lacked the versatility needed to address unforeseen complications. The result was a production that was not as visually unified as it might have been. *Mr. Burns* was the show where I really felt I had achieved an ideal balance. My collaborators and I worked closely on a lighting concept and arrived at one which allowed ample creative freedom. The light plot was comprised of some specific elements to suit and plenty of flexible systems to respond to changes as needed. In tech, that concept was sitting in the back of my mind providing inspiration for the show's visual choices.

In the design phase, an intellectual concept acts as a guide that directs my decision-making about lighting in a direction that will work well with the other elements of the show. Once a show is in production, my focus is on visual decision-making that will create the most dynamic and beautiful stage images.