

VENTURE THEATRE ASHBY DRAMATIC SOCIETY

Sound and Lighting

Chris Bingley has worked in all areas of the theatre but his special area of interest and expertise is sound and lighting. Chris first became involved with amateur theatre as a teenager. In his first production he was presented with the sound equipment and told to get on with it! He told us he probably managed to get it right by about the fourth performance. "Well they threw me in the deep end so what did they expect?" he added.

About a year later he became involved with the lighting and found that that was where his real interest lay. Whilst still a university student he attended several courses in London led by some of the top lighting designers of the day and so learnt his trade from the professionals. "It gave me a good background and plenty of ideas but then you have to come back down to earth and do what you can with the equipment and resources you have."

Not that the Venture Theatre is poorly equipped. "We're a lot better off here than most amateur societies," Chris said. "I think if you've got your own theatre you tend to buy your own equipment and fit it out well. My previous society put on performances in a local community hall and the lighting equipment was fairly basic. In fact, we used to operate it all from a table at the back of the hall and talk to the audience during the interval which was quite fun but not really part of the job."

Since Chris joined Ashby Dramatic Society 12 years ago, the sound mixer has been replaced which means there are more opportunities to do extra things and it's more reliable. Also, the sound nowadays is run off a computer which gives a bit more scope than the old system. No more swapping disks all the time so there's less likelihood of mistakes. The lighting desk has also changed since Chris joined. This one is programmable which means it has "memories" so that you can specify for a particular cue all the lights there should be, what levels they should be, how quickly they should change etc. "It means that once it's set, the actual running of the production is a matter of paying attention rather than remembering the technical things," Chris explained, "so that you run the cues at exactly the right time."

Chris was keen to emphasize that there are different styles of lighting design and that he has his own, just as other designers have theirs. The job of the lighting designer is divided into two parts, firstly the setup which is done before the performance and then the running of the production.

The setup involves a lot of design, planning, understanding where you need to point things and what the effect of different angles will be. There are three areas to think about at this stage: lighting the actors, lighting the set and any special

effects. Chris reckons for an average play where the lighting is fairly straightforward he might spend three or four hours setting lights up, but not all in one session. This involves a lot of climbing up and down ladders and moving things around as well as setting up the clever technical parts. "It's surprising how long it can take," he said. "Even when things look more or less right you may find that one light is casting a shadow in the wrong place and you have to move it or an actor is walking through a dark area. There is quite a lot to do." The sign of good lighting design is when the audience doesn't notice it because everything just looks right. This doesn't apply to special effects of course which are meant to be noticed. Chris told us that he hadn't had to work on any extreme special effects in recent times but he did give one example of a lighting effect which in a way is special. "When you have a scene which is during a sunset. You need an effect which will cause the lighting outside the window to change colour very slowly. This isn't immediately noticed by the audience but a bit later they become aware of it and think "oh, that's changed and I didn't notice."

Once the performance begins, the important thing is to keep your attention on the stage and remember the cues. Again, if you get them right, the audience shouldn't notice. An obvious example of something going noticeably wrong is when an actor turns on a light switch and nothing happens or there is a slight delay!

Chris says that he is very happy to train newcomers in the skills of sound and lighting as long as they have a genuine interest in the area. Once again, he stressed that what he would be training them in was his own style of lighting. "My son reckons when he comes to a production he can recognize if I've lit the production. I don't know how he does it!" Chris added. "I do advise people to work with other lighting designers as well so that they see a different style of working and then they can develop their own which I think is important. It's what makes it more interesting for people and they are more likely to keep it up. That's important for the Society."

Chris usually takes newcomers through all the basics of how you plan the design through to setting the lights, climbing ladders and programming the board. He then gets them to assist him for a real production. He'll then tell them to find a director who is willing to let them have a go and Chris will assist them so that they are not left on their own. Chris has trained quite a lot of people in the past, both for the Venture Theatre and for previous societies to which he has belonged. One even went on to work for the Royal Shakespeare Company!

"But," he added, "you don't have to do just this. I started in back stage work, set building, sound, lighting, stage management; then I got persuaded to do a walk on non-speaking role, then do one or two lines and finally doing somewhat bigger parts and even trying my hand at directing. So I quite enjoy doing a bit of everything and I find that more interesting. Not everyone does but I think if you do more, then you can be more involved and feel part of the theatre more."