Introduction to the Practical Elements of the Thesis

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This paper is intended to give you the background and context to the two practical elements of my thesis that you are about to see: a lighting control system and a performance.

My project proposes to give the theatre lighting artist a different, more performative role within the performance. The principal strategy for achieving this shift is to conflate the existing professional roles of the lighting *designer* and the lighting *operator* into what I have termed the lighting *artist*; this in turn makes possible the deferral of certain design decisions until the moment of performance. This strategic deferral of decisions opens up opportunities to change the relationship between the lighting artist and the performance event, including (through the control technology) the light on stage as a part of that performance, the audience, and the activity of the stage.

Such a strategy may be seen as one in which the role of the lighting artist is modeled in part on that of the performer – a strategy that has a seventy-five year old precedent. In the early nineteen-thirties, Frederick Bentham working for Strand Electric (the leading theatre lighting manufacturer of the time in the UK) created a new lighting control that was in three respects a radical departure from the systems then in use: the Light Console. The first departure was – to adopt a term Bentham used repeatedly – the Light Console's 'playability': for the first time all stage lighting was brought under the control of a single, comfortably seated operator, who could select any light or combination of lights for immediate control. The Light Console made it possible for a practiced operator working with a known lighting rig to improvise lighting *in the moment* in response to stage action.

The second respect in which the Light Console was a radical departure from previous control systems was that it separated the control interface from the dimmers themselves, allowing the control interface, and hence the operator, to be placed front-of-house where s/he could see the activity of the stage and (potentially) take a creative part in its making. The Light Console's third departure from previous controls was that the state of the interface controls did not reflect the state

of the dimmers (and so the light on stage), requiring the operator to have a mental model of the system state that was different to the one presented by the interface itself: with the Light Console, the lighting system acquired a virtual dimension.

The three innovations I have outlined – playability, the spatial position of the operator, and the partial virtualisation of the lighting system – came about, I would argue, because of Bentham's central proposal: that lighting should be performed or played in the way a musician plays music. Some seventy-five years later, my project makes that proposal again, and again proposes changes to the practices of the lighting artist and her/his role in the making of live theatre performance. To restate Bentham's proposal in my own terms, and in relation to present practices, we can say that to reposition the role of the present lighting designer to be more like that of the performer is to defer certain design decisions until the moment of performance; rehearsal leads not to a 'frozen' lighting plot to be reproduced with as much technical accuracy as possible, but rather prepares the lighting artist to create anew in the moment.

Each of Bentham's innovations has suggested *strategic interventions* that might be fruitful in seeking to promote such a repositioning of the lighting artist's role: intervention into the relationship between the lighting artist and the performer (by adopting a creative process more akin to that of the performer); intervention into the spatial relationships between lighting artist, the audience, and the stage; and intervention into the relationship between the lighting artist and (through the control technology) the light on stage. My thinking in each of these three areas is developed in a chapter of the written element of my thesis, which I have summarised below.

The Virtuosity of the Lighting Operator

Historically, lighting as a component of theatre performance has become aligned with the scenographic. The first chapter traces that history and identifies some of the factors that led to the alignment with the scenographic, and begins to develop a discourse of lighting as a performative element of the theatre event. I go on to argue for a lighting methodology that is more attuned to the immediacy of performance 'in the moment', and so – both in terms of process and aesthetic sensitivity – more like the methodology of the performer (actor, dancer, musician) in its openness to the variability of live performance: to the *accidental* as it is brought to bear on the institutional. In order to ensure that the contribution of the lighting to the performance is not reduced to one that is purely responsive and unplanned, I propose that the lighting artist should adopt the methodology of the performer and *rehearse*. The purpose of rehearsal here is different to that found in traditional lighting: instead of rehearsal as a process to arrive at a 'finished' lighting design for automated replay during performance, here rehearsal serves to develop a lighting 'script' or 'score' for the creation of the lighting in the moment of performance. From this chapter emerge

two *strategic interventions* into the role of the lighting artist: firstly, to defer certain design decisions until the moment of performance, and secondly to rehearse the lighting with the other performance elements in order to develop a lighting score for the performance event.

Ways of Looking

The second chapter argues that the relationship between the lighting professional and the performance space has been determined by specific historical, technological and cultural factors, and it considers some of the technological and attitudinal changes that might be required to reposition the lighting artist as performer rather than scenographer. The chapter theorises the relationship between the audience and the stage (with its performance activity) in terms of three *gazes*: the *commanding gaze*, the *interrogating gaze*, and the *transcendent gaze*. I locate each of these initially in a specific historical and cultural context, but go on to argue that all three can be in play at the same time, and that the gaze of any individual spectator is influenced by their spatial relationship with the stage and with other spectators: the spatial geometry of the theatre. I apply this analysis to both the lighting designer and the lighting operator, arguing that their gaze, and so their relationship with the performance event that they contribute to the making of, is in part determined by certain traditional professional practices that determine the designer's and operator's spatial location in the theatre. I then argue that theatre geometries that promote the interrogating gaze do so by establishing 'circuits of energy' that link not only performer to spectator, but also spectator to spectator, and that – in order to promote the lighting artist's sensitivity to the audience in the moment of performance – the lighting artist must be connected into this circuit. I propose, then, as this chapter's *strategic intervention*, to configure the spatial location of the lighting artist within the theatre so as to engage her/his interrogating gaze and connect her/him into the 'circuit of energy' between lighting artist, performance and spectators, so as to promote the lighting artist's role as a performer.

Playability, Immersion and the Virtual

In the third chapter I consider the relationship between technologies and conceptual models of the light on stage, and how redesigning the lighting control interface might create an alternate model that better suits the purposes of my project. I argue that the development of the increased technological complexity of lighting systems and controls means that the interface no longer has a simple, analogical relationship with light on stage (for example, a fader per channel), but presents a 'data space' that is highly abstracted from the light on stage. This data space, and its presentation by current control systems, can be seen as a (partially) immersive, virtual environment, with the lighting operator during rehearsal occupying and manipulating both spaces: 'virtual' and 'real'. In

current practice, the difficulty of being present in both spaces is avoided by dividing the task between an operator (focused more on the data space) and the designer (focused more on the real space). Since my project requires a conflation of the two roles throughout both rehearsal and performance, the difficulty must be avoided another way: by bringing the real and the virtual spaces together through a control interface for the lighting system that enables a shift from a virtual data space presented to the operator through a variety of symbolic representations on screens and control labels, and towards a system that allows and encourages the lighting artist to manipulate an instrument as a musician does, without conscious though about the process. A further strategy to promote the lighting artist's presence in the real is to give consideration to the physical, kinaesthetic experience of operating the control interface, so that controls used to create different lighting effects and affects might 'feel' different to operate, and might create new expressive potential arising from the lighting instrument.

I also argue that present lighting controls promote a particular conceptual model of theatre lighting, that I term the "state/cue" model. In this model, lighting designers define a series static lighting 'states' (often in considerable detail), which are then replayed in performance with transitions ('cues') created largely automatically by the lighting control system. This model privileges the static over the dynamic, and the pre-designed over the immediacy of the moment in performance. This chapter, then, proposes its *strategic intervention*: to redesign the lighting interface, firstly to promote a conceptual model of the control of light that promotes dynamic immediacy over static, pre-defined, and synoptic pictures, and secondly to promote the presence of the lighting artist in the 'real' of light on stage.

The Practical Elements of the Thesis

The performance that you are about to see is the result of my attempts to implement the strategic interventions described above. I have created a custom lighting control system that replaces the conventional 'state/cue' model with a 'thread/impulse' model in which 'threads' represent lighting elements (combinations of colour, direction and intensity) that have specific aesthetic or dramatic value and which exist for the duration of the performance. These threads are balanced against each other by modulating their intensity on the impulse of the lighting artist, responding to action elsewhere in the performance or to a sensed need to prompt a response amongst the audience and/or the performers. Such impulses are not completely spontaneous, but are the result of a rehearsal process that has set the overall parameters for the lighting impulses in much the same way that it sets the parameters for an actor's impulses. My lighting control system also offers the lighting artist a variety of ways to control the intensity of the threads, with a mixture of buttons,

faders (of different sizes and tactile qualities), piano-style keys and foot-pedals providing a range of kinaesthetic qualities and expressive potentials.

I have been present throughout the rehearsal period, operating the custom lighting control in the rehearsal room (which is also the performance space). The spatial relationships between audience, stage and lighting artist-operator have been configured so as to promote a 'circuit of energy' linking these three elements in performance, with particular attention paid to the sightlines from each element to the other two. The resulting performance 'script' or 'score' for the lighting artist has been arrived at through close collaboration between the lighting artist, the performers, the director, and other members of the production team, from the very start of the project.

The Performance Project: *Passages*

The performance you will see has been created in collaboration with students of the MA Theatre Practices programme, together with staff and other students, at Rose Bruford College. It takes as its starting point events during the later part of 1940, when the German critic and philosopher Walter Benjamin travelled from Paris towards Lisbon as a refugee, fleeing the Gestapo and carrying an entry visa for the USA but no exit visa from France. Arriving at the Spanish-French border town of Portbou in poor health, Benjamin was refused entry. The border guards allowed him to stay in a local hotel before returning to France, but by the next morning Benjamin was dead. Beyond these bare facts, the circumstances surrounding Benjamin's death are unclear. Did he commit suicide? Why were his travelling companions allowed to proceed to Lisbon and so to the USA? Was the manuscript Benjamin was carrying – now lost – a final version of his unfinished *Passagenwerk* (Arcades Project)? Taking as inspiration and starting point the death-story of Walter Benjamin, *Passages* follows Benjamin in seeking out the unseen connections between things – the links and passages between.

www.passages-project.org.uk

The Performance Schedule

Tuesday 4th August

2.00pm	invited audience arrives - hospitality
2.30pm	introduction to the performance and the research project
3.00pm	performance of *Passages*
3.30pm	Q&A and opportunity for a hands-on demonstration of the lighting control
4.30pm	finish.