

Darkness is more important now than ever

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To quote the famous theatre designer Richard Pilbrow: "It's not where you put the light, but where you don't put the light".

As a designer who has worked in both theatre and architectural lighting, I know that darkness is as important as light. Like the actor who needs silence before the beginning of his play, lighting needs darkness before it can show its splendour. In the theatre we do not have to adhere to codes or obey rules about lux levels and uniformity, or stick to conventions about best practice. All we have to do is convey an atmosphere, something that helps the narrative of the story. We do not mind if the actor is blinded by spotlights, or if the audience is led to believe something that is not true, or if half the set is not visible in a particular scene, or what we spend on wattage per square metre. All we care about is the best way to go get the message across. Theatre lighting designers are in a privileged position, and are frequently envied by colleagues who design architectural

lighting and are compelled to adhere to strict regulations, sometimes impossible objectives, and contradictory rules. But the outcome is the same. No light without darkness, no intensity without shadow, no texture without surface.

Darkness is more important now than ever before. I believe it was the late Jonathan Speirs I first heard talk about a darkness masterplan rather than a lighting masterplan about four years ago. That struck me, and stayed with me. Contrast has sometimes bad connotations in architecture, but in the theatre it is the ultimate goal. Just as a designer needs a blank piece of paper to start to create a beautiful object, so a lighting designer needs darkness to create his vision.

Nothing is more beautiful than to start in complete darkness and then raise the fader from zero and see the soft glow of our beloved incandescent bulb come alive in its surroundings. That first five per cent is where the real magic occurs...

To apply this theory in practice, I would like to present two examples.

While programming and following the rehearsals for the Youth Olympic Games in Singapore, I got into a lengthy discussion with the stage director, Ivan Heng, on the right mood and atmosphere for the last run with the Olympic Flame towards the Cauldron. Ivan wanted to put a lot of people, and drummers and musicians along the path to mark a big celebration. I had the opposite thought: I felt the boy should run alone, almost in silence, through the

water towards the Cauldron. For me it fitted perfectly with the theme of our story, which was based on the lonely and often very hard road an Olympic athlete needs to endure before reaching his goal, which is participating in an Olympic tournament, and the battle he needs to fight against his own monsters to conquer all the obstacles on his way. I saw this boy, running alone, towards his goal, in almost total silence with only the splashing of his feet in the water and maybe two lights on him with the rest of the stage in total darkness. For me, that was the ultimate vision.

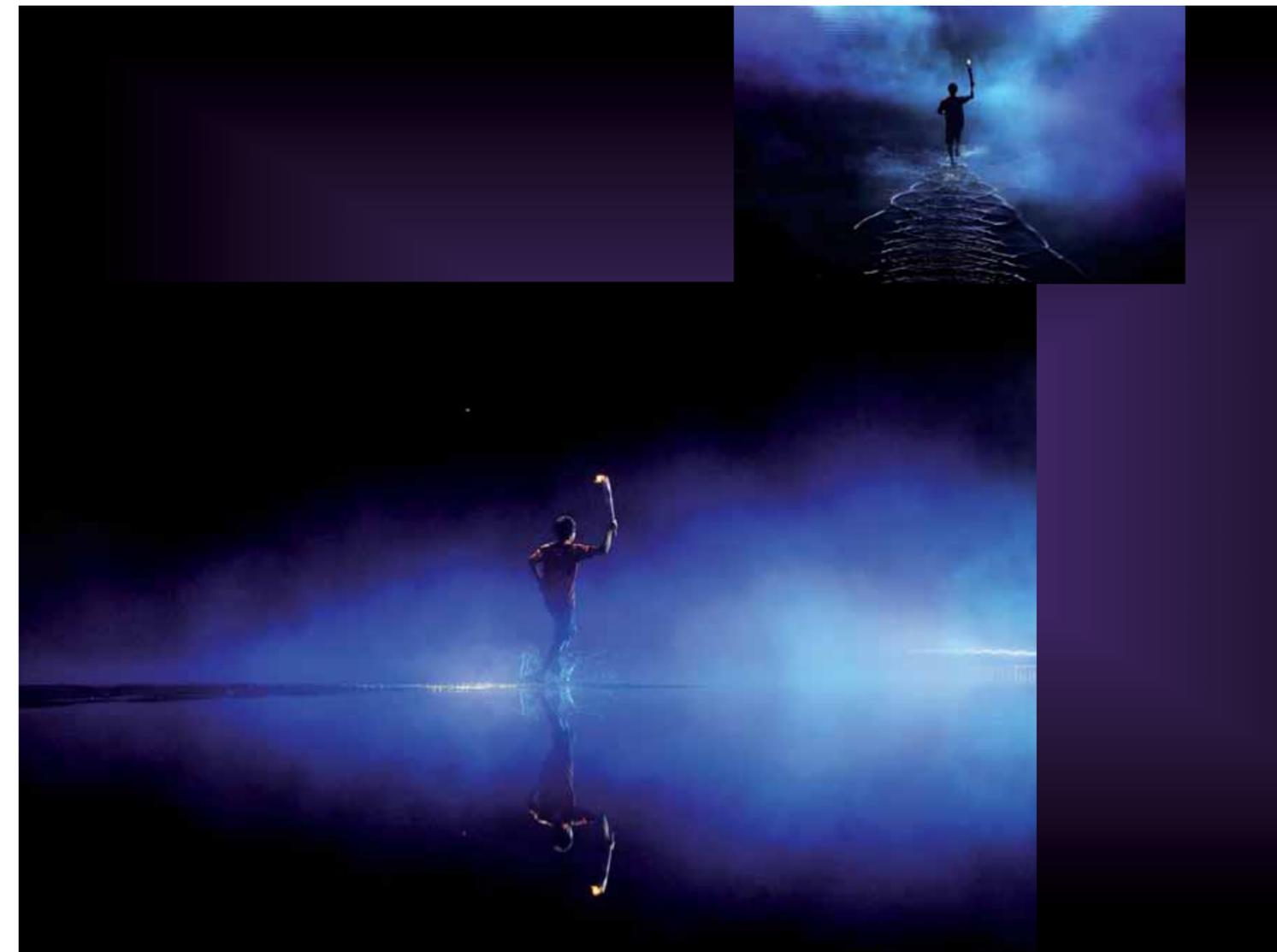
After mocking it up onstage and showing Ivan the end result on camera of this shot, he was convinced. He took all the musicians, drummers and cheering people away and the boy ran alone, with the stage in complete darkness, towards one bright light, which was my symbol for his victory.

A second example was during a show we just recently finished for Puy Du Fou Park near Nantes and Angers in South-East France. They have been producing a spectacle entitled CinéScénie for the last 35 years. It involves 1200 actors, 300 animals and 60 horses, a mediaeval castle, rural surroundings, a 300-metre wide and 100-metre long lake, and a front stage that measures 220 metres wide and 30 metres deep – a real Son & Lumière in the traditional French sense.

ACTLD was commissioned to re-light the whole show and we spent almost five weeks on site reprogramming this feast for the eyes.

The first thing that happens in the show is a short introduction and then a piece that is called the Interludium, where a man in plain clothes walks the whole length of the stage, the full 200 metres from right to left. I remember the first time I saw the show four years ago. This scene was so powerful: a single man crossing the stage, so intimate, so small a gesture in front of 14,000 people watching in anticipation for the show to start. And walking that distance takes about four minutes. Four minutes in which nothing happens, only this guy walking in slow but decisive steps, and the whole audience focussed on what is going to happen next.

So when it was my turn to adapt the lighting of this piece, I stripped it completely from all its embellishments, took away the follow-spot, took away some of the scenery lighting and just placed a single lantern in his hand with a small flickering light like a candle and then a small upright to put some light on his body and face, which was hidden by a large hat. Taking away all the extra lighting around him and really letting him traverse the empty dark stage alone reinforced the effect of anticipation on the part of the audience. When he finally arrived at the spot where he addresses the audience for the first time, we already got a round of applause – the audience was glad after four long minutes of holding their breath, enrapt as they were by the powerful art of darkness..



Photos: International Olympic Committee.