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Gel Services Inc. ShadowMagic

By: Richard Pillbrow

Keny Whitright has always been something of an entrepreneur and an innovator. From being the inventor of the colors scroller and creator of Wybron, he's had an important impact on our world of stage lighting.

Now he offers a new "treat," a software tool that allows the owner of an iPad or iPhone to experiment to his or her heart's desire with their favorite subject: stage lighting in your pocket.

The app presents a virtual light lab with a 40' by 30' stage backed by a cyclorama, with six lighting fixtures and a choice of two performers. Future iterations will add more actor choices and the ability to change costumes and scenic background. The fixtures are ETC Source Fours, with a choice of five beam angles, or a zoomable 7" Fresnel. Lamps are 750W HPL, and if my eyes don't deceive me, they behave in a very familiar manner to the real thing, shifting color temperature as the lamp is dimmed.

I should add here that all my comments are personal visual judgments, not the result of any sort of scientific evaluation. The software includes 1,600 colors from the four major manufacturers. By eye, they appear to be pretty accurate renditions. Any number of colors may be chosen as a gel string and placed into any fixture.

Each light may be positioned anywhere around the theatre, thus simulating overhead, front, and backlight; side booms; shinbusters; or balcony rail. Lights automatically focus on the actor, whereas lights on the cyc may be focused manually by touching its surface.

Scenes can be recorded and grouped into projects, then shared as PDFs with colleagues or friends.

The viewer can zoom in to the performer, track across the stage, or rotate the view in any direction. Reflections from the matte gray stage, as well as the coloring of shadows, are subtly achieved.

I've enjoyed other modestly priced lighting simulators in the past. Eric Cornwall's West Side Systems Virtual Lightlab

has long been a favorite of mine. It offers a frontal view of a fixed stage space. Multiple lights may be arranged on a grid surrounding the performer. This greater choice of positions allows examination of multiple color choices from similar or differing angles. I've found this a useful tool for exploring color options for some large-scale shows, including my recent foray into the recreation of lighting *My Fair Lady*, directed by Julie Andrews, at Sydney Opera House.

High-end visualization of lighting has been a reality for many years. Products such as WYSIWYG have been a mainstay of many major productions. Lighting control systems such as Jands Vista, ETC Ion, and others by ChamSys, MA Lighting, and Avolites provide visualization capability. Other stand-alone products such as Capture, Realizzer 3D, Martin ShowDesigner, LightConverse 3D, and ESP Vision offer various design packages that might include features such as drafting capability, paperwork preparation, and visualization. High-end visualization packages simulate moving lights, lasers, video walls, multi-screen projection, water, atmospherics, and so on. The increased capability of virtual reality holds enormous promise to the lighting designer.

ShadowMagic is purposefully very basic; "back to essentials" perhaps might describe it well. But it is no less valuable for that. What it focuses on is how light reveals the human body and how subtly changes of angle and color

can variously reveal and conceal. I've seen a lot of lighting in recent months on Broadway and London's West End, and I sometimes wonder about those essential basics being occasionally forgotten. Stanley McCandless wrote the classic text *A Method of Lighting the Stage* many decades ago. He always regarded it as "a method" rather than "the method," yet today I still see too much light onstage that seems to forget basic tenets of lighting the actor. Today, the tendency is to regard McCandless as outdated, but, to me, his fundamental principles still appear timeless. Light in nature tends to come from above, from sun and sky, and



the best of stage lighting can still seek to model the actor in three dimensions. The late, great, lighting designer Jean Rosenthal described the light she loved on stage as “jewel-like” light. Our friends in the movie industry still set standards of form-revealing three-dimensional light that I often think we’d do well to emulate. On a real stage, our actors must be seen from both the front row and the last, sometimes from far away. Jewel-like, form-revealing light can assist in extending the eye’s ability to see from both near and afar. Keny’s new software encourages reexamination of a return to basics: of how to reveal the actor in a meaningful way in three dimensions.

There is more work to be done on this promising software. Selection of fixtures and their manipulation is somewhat clunky; a cleaner interface would allow multiple attributes to be more easily addressed. When evaluating color, it’s important that the performer’s face color, costume, and background be easily changed. All these are planned as developments as part of this work in progress. I think that the ability to have two performers onstage would also be an advantage, as so much in lighting depends upon the interaction between two coherently well-lit characters.

ShadowMagic is a fascinating and useful tool for the aspiring and, indeed, the experienced, lighting designer. It is a back-to-basics model box that encourages experiment and research into the fundamentals of light and actor. An aspiring artist in light can spend many happy hours with this software, exploring how light and color can best, and most tellingly, reveal the actor. 