

Several months ago I wrote an article about creating paperwork for your lighting designs (September 2008). In it, was a review of Vivien Leone’s detailed and elegant paperwork plus a mention of a program called Lightwright. Today I will continue with a review of the latest version of Lightwright and a little background of John McKernon, its creator.

The performing arts, principally theatre and dance, became a necessary part of my life at a very young age, so I was most fortunate to have been born in New York City. As a result, I have worked with some amazingly, talented people and many are still my friends today. John McKernon is one of these people whom I met along the way from obscurity to notoriety in the New York theatre world.

In brief, we met as electricians in Off-Broadway and then our careers went in slightly different directions. His, to devote himself to lighting design and later the creation of Lightwright (LW); and mine, to stage and production management with lighting design as an adjunct to my creating large productions and later to writing to you, my readers. But as John would have us believe, LW was created in his spare time between shows.

So I asked John to supply me with his current resume. It is 8 pages long! After looking it over, I started to wonder, “What spare time?” This man works ALL THE TIME! So I will compress his credentials or they will not fit in this article. First and foremost, he is the perennial assistant to Broadway lighting designer, Ken Billington for over 20 years. But that does not mean he is not a designer in his own right. John designs for musicals, theatre and dance in every scale of production from Broadway and touring, to Off-Broadway and regional theatres. He even found time to lecture at New York University. But back to his creation; Lightwright.

In the early 1980’s as the personal computer became available, lighting designers and electricians were still creating their paperwork by hand. Every production would need accurate lists of the lights and dimmers used in a show. And every small change in a design, like adding one light to a pipe, would require a change in all these lists. So back then, an assistant lighting designer’s job was to keep the paperwork updated. This sometimes meant hours and hours of checking and rechecking every page with the most current version of the light plot. All of this was done with note pads and pencils. Lots of note pads and dozens of pencils! It was boring but necessary work. There HAD to be a better way. Computers were the solution, in theory. But no program existed to create the paperwork and check then it for accuracy.

As I said, writing by hand took a tremendous amount of time. And if you are a busy working theatre professional your spare time was precious too. (We will not talk about all those times between shows when you have too much time and not enough money.) By the mid-Eighties “portable” computers began to appear. These machines were the size of suit case and had tiny monitor plus two floppy disk drives! And just enough computing power to start to create a practical program for lighting designers and their paperwork.

It was also at this time that John had written his first usable program called ALD (Assistant Lighting Designer). He sold the idea to Rosco who started selling it, and the pennies start

trickling into his bank account. Fortunately, John kept designing lights to pay his rent. By the end of the Eighties, a new and improved program was developed. And after many suggestions from his friends and collaborators, Lightwright (LW) was born.

The basic premise of LW is a spread sheet program. But it also keeps you from making errors by checking your work. It can, for example, make it impossible for you to overload your dimmers because you tell it the wattage of every light you use and the capacity of each dimmer. One of the new features of LW5 is its ability to automatically reassign dimmers within each dimmer rack to balance the loads across electrical phases.

The program grew with each new release of LW. What started as a program that held 8,000 lines of programming code (LW1), now has around 220,000 lines of code (LW5). While it tracks a lot more information and has a much better graphical display, it retains its spreadsheet-like features. Graphic 1 is the Channel View. You can also sort by lighting location (Graphic 2), color, dimmer and more. And you can print out these views as well. The most important aspect of using LW is that you only need to add the information into the system once for each light. After that, it is sorted for you by just a click of the mouse.

What does this mean for a lighting designer or electrician? No more spending hours with a pad and pencil creating paperwork. And less time spent correcting and updating the information. This means that today’s designer can create his complete design, the light plot and LW files, and email them to his producer, electrician or lighting rental house.

Each release of LW has included new features. As changes and innovations occur in the industry like the creation of moving lights, LW has added features to use them. But John has also improved the overall visual impact of LW5. For example, your color is now shown as a number AND as a visual color on the worksheet view. Every monitor is different as we all know, so the color shown is a representation NOT the actual color that will be seen on stage. But it gives the designer another tool to quickly see what he has created in his paperwork. The Gobos you use can also be seen as a number and a graphic (Graphic 3). No more remembering that Rosco 77119 is a leaf breakup pattern, it’s right there on your screen just the way it will look on stage.

Another advance is the ability to create a color scroller within LW5 (Graphic 4). You can create a scroll to match the scroller model you are using, pick colors from Apollo, GAM, Lee, and Rosco brands, and see these swatches of colors on your worksheet. Are you a designer who has the budget to use moving lights? LW5 can now help you create the paperwork for all your gobo patterns (Graphic 5).

In past releases of LW you would have to run a report to see the total number of lights, scrollers and effects used in your design. But LW5 shows you a running total of everything you are currently using.

In LW4 you had to choose between a number or a text custom column but not any more! You can create custom columns in your LW5 file and they can be labeled anyway you want.

A major technological improvement of LW5 is the ability to exchange data with VectorWorks Spotlight 2009. Change information on the light plot, switch to LW5, and the change is there. Make a change in LW5, click back on VectorWorks and with one keystroke the light plot has the change - including added or removed lights & accessories, colors, templates, channels, and symbols.

LW5 knows who made every change on a worksheet and when. For every data field on every light, a single mouse click lets you see what's been done - and a second mouse click can change it back to any value from the past. You can also take the entire file back to a specific point in time, or undo changes made by a specific person.

A lot of people work on LW show files during the course of a production and each of them make changes. In the past, the LW file was passed around like a football, so each person could make changes only while they had "the football". Worksheet Reconciliation (Graphic 6) takes advantage of LW5's knowledge of history and based on what was changed when. It shows you where two people's data disagrees and shows you when the changes were made. Once you agree (or disagree) with LW5's suggestions, a single button click updates both show files so that their worksheets agree.

John recently told me that LW5 will be available by the middle of 2009. I suggest that you go to his website (www.mckernon.com) and download a trial version of LW4. If you can learn to use it (and you CAN, I promise) you will have no trouble with LW5. One last thing, if you buy LW4 before LW5 is released, John will give you a free upgrade to LW5.

It takes some time to learn how to use LW5. But its advantages out-weigh the pain of learning. Once you are even a little familiar with what it does, you will want your assistants to use it. LW really simplifies and standardizes your paperwork. Making changes and updating your design becomes easier. And your designs can become more complex because creating your paperwork became simpler.

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