

Automation for Beginners; Lighting for Professionals

Automation in the Entertainment Industry, by Mark Ager and John Hastie

Entertainment Technology Press. 380 pages. Paperback. ISBN-10: 1904031587. ISBN-13: 978-1904031581

Reviewed by John McCullough

Automation in the Entertainment Industry, by Mark Ager and John Hastie, “is intended to provide insights and practical advice from those who use automation, to help the first-time user understand the issues and avoid the pitfalls in its implementation.” They’ve succeeded admirably in presenting a comprehensive introduction to the field of automation. Engineers may find it light on technical data, but directors, producers, stage managers, and designers will get a strong foundation on which to work. It covers automation topics on both a production and venue level, including an examination of modern mega-shows and cruise ship theatres.

The book is organized into two main parts: Part 1 is a general overview of concepts, terms, and procedures used in stage automation. Part 2 is a technical guide that goes into more detail about automation system components. Appendices are included, presenting a sample risk assessment, a discussion of standards, units of measure, and brief biographies of the many contributors to the book.

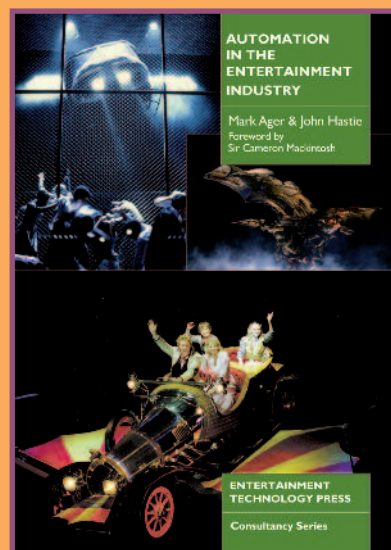
Part 1: An Automation Overview is the stronger of the two. The authors have written a clear and concise overview of automation concepts that

should be required reading for any director, producer, or designer looking to add automation to their shows.

Part 1 starts by defining what automation is, and the different types of automated pieces (sliders, trucks, wagons, lifts, revolves). None of the topics are presented in a vacuum; the book focuses on how these systems fit into the larger picture of the show. The planning, implementation, and maintenance of automation systems are explained in layman’s terms, with an emphasis on safety and communication.

The authors then discuss the “whys and hows” of planning automation for a production or venue. The writing is informative and insightful, and dispels many common myths about automation—namely that it is expensive, complicated, and unreliable. By focusing on the why, and not just the how, of automation, the book gives readers a solid foundation for making decisions about automation systems.

To support the descriptions of systems, examples of how they are used and maintained are presented frequently. This is accomplished in the main body of the text and in various case studies and sidebars. The side-by-side comparisons of theory and practice are very effective.



A repeated theme is the importance of human participation in the automation system. Each system is described in terms of what it helps the show accomplish, and how it can augment a human crew. While automation systems are capable of replacing human muscles and can rapidly perform tedious calculations, they are not designed to replace the decision-making function of a competent automation crew. The importance of highly skilled and knowledgeable automation operators is stressed throughout the book.

Part 2: A Technical Guide makes it clear that it “is not a design manual for an automation system; it is a guide to help the user appreciate the system they are working with and to become aware of the possibilities and constraints of automation.” This section provides definitions, diagrams, and photographs of many automation system components, from control desks and network switches to encoders and turntable drives.

Some of the explanations are clear, and will help a user gain a better understanding of the automation system. In particular, the descriptions of control desks and pre-programming and visualization software do a good job of explaining the capabilities of those systems in layman’s terms.

At other times, this section falls short of the mark, with information that may confuse the novice reader while leaving the knowledgeable reader wanting more. This is true particularly in the descriptions of mechanical components, where some entries assume a greater familiarity with mechanical systems than should be expected of the target audience.

I especially liked Appendix A—Risk Assessment. It is an excerpt from the performance and risk assessment for the West End production of *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*, and it makes the assessment process look easy. The straightforward manner in which the risks are evaluated, and the plainly presented solutions, controls, and emergency procedures, take the edge off of the daunting task of evaluating the risks of a large production. This real-life example of the planning, safety, and communication procedures outlined earlier in the book further reinforces those lessons.

This book presents an excellent “big-picture” look at automation systems and their place in the entertainment industry. It will help a first-time user gain a clear understanding of the planning and implementation of automation for a production or a venue, and will give a layman a frame of reference for comparing automation systems. For the engineer (or aspiring engineer), the book is light on technical details, but may still be worth reading for the case studies and perspective.

John McCullough is technical director at New York City College of Technology, where he teaches scenery construction and stage machinery.

A Practical Guide to Stage Lighting, Second Edition, by Steven Louis Shelley

Focal Press. 488 pages. Paperback. ISBN-10: 0240811410. ISBN-13: 978-0240811413.

Reviewed by Ellen E. Jones

A Practical Guide to Stage Lighting should not be confused with either introductory stagecraft textbooks or inspirational volumes that show fabulous color pictures of major designers’ work or introductory stagecraft textbooks. Instead, it offers specific information for lighting designers operating outside academic or resident theatre. Steve Shelley’s 30-plus years in the professional arena are the foundation for the design processes he has developed. The book also reflects his unique voice and personal style. If you don’t know Steve Shelley, spend a little time after a grueling day scanning the glossary to understand exactly what that means. He will not disappoint.

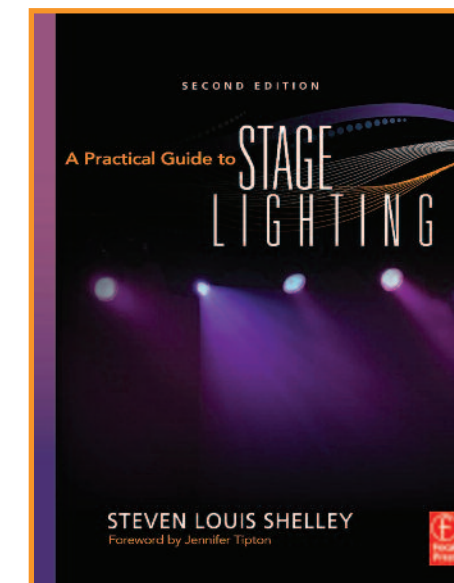
In the introduction, Shelley states, “This book is not written for the person only beginning to study theatrical lighting design.” He may be too modest about his ability to cover introductory information in a concise fashion; *APGTSL* offers a thorough background on bedrock topics. The breakdown of the show staff by title and function is particularly good. The book offers a complete enough overview of basic information to support someone who is self-taught or has found him- or herself in charge of stage lighting by virtue of a job description rather than training or education.

A Practical Guide to Stage Lighting is an ideal tool for the designer entering the job market. Shelley offers a detailed process to complete each segment of the design. However,

he reminds the reader that reality interferes with the best laid plans. Responses to changes and distractions must be quick and thoughtful, or no amount of artistry will save the show. He also includes tips on how to deal with changes in budget, labor, incorrectly filled shop orders, and late deliveries of documents and perishables—all based on his actual field experience.

This is the second edition, and it has significant updates from the original version, including over 100 new or updated illustrations. The organization of material reflects Shelley’s experience, and offers an interesting visual quality to the overall book. In many ways, it is reminiscent of a well-drafted light plot or other graphic documentation tool.

Each chapter features written narrative and a final summary. The bulleted checklists and information scattered throughout are gems. Visual



What keeps these

187 moving lights,
240 conventional lights &
28 moving LED panels

Safe?



This ETCP Certified Electrician.

Equipment for the Nu Skin 25th Anniversary show, held at Nokia Theatre in Los Angeles, included dramatic lighting displays. The show's electrical work was supervised by its lighting designer, Rob Holland, an ETCP Certified Entertainment Electrician.

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BOOKS OF THE MONTH

icons are used to alert the reader of:

- Checklists: lists to review before approaching tasks;
- Shelley's notes: tips based on personal experience;
- Sneaky Tips: quick tricks of the trade learned from someone else;
- Shelley's Soapbox: strong personal opinions;
- Shelley's Golden Rule: a fact, situation, or method that thus far has been an axiom;
- Tales from the Road: Shelley's examples from the painful practical experience of learning things the hard way.

After the initial review of lighting basics, the text is divided into three topic areas. Shelley uses the design and execution process. (Only Steve Shelley would create a fictional show described as "a pseudo-children's rock musical that is one part *Rocky Horror Show*, one part *Teletubbies*, and one part *Noises Off*.")

The major book divisions are:
Stage 1: Research and Analysis;
Stage 2: Preliminary Documents;
Stage 3: Preparation—The Creation of the Final Paperwork and Documents Prior to Load-In;
Stage 3: Application—Using and Updating the Documents Once the Show Loads In

There is nothing surprising in the first segment except, perhaps, the reminder that designers need to engage in research and analysis, even after leaving academic theatre. The suggestions of specific questions for the director are terrific additions. Many entry-level designers have attended only a few design or production meetings outside of the somewhat scripted setting of an educational program.

The next three segments contain the most valuable information on design and execution.

Creation and use of complete paperwork for preliminary planning and execution of the design are among Shelley's fortes. His examination of preliminary paperwork and analysis of resources are precise and complete. Illustrative samples of every document or type of graphic cited are included. Most of the additional pages in this edition are examples of paperwork and graphic tools used either to reach the plotting process or as part of developing the actual light plot. The emphasis is on complete preparation and organization at every stage of the design process. Using the *Hokey* case study, he takes us from the preliminary script analysis and cue master through the final documentation of how to accurately plot and organize the show. The expanded treatment of these subjects is the strength of the new edition.

This analysis is particularly valuable for those who have not yet worked outside the resident theatre setting. Placing a shop order and designing for an out-of-town or touring production are fully addressed. So is designing a show that may be a remount or is planned to be a

remount in the future.

Two other particularly important sections include suggestions on crafting a contract agreement and a discussion of personal protection for the designer in case of medical emergency or liability. The contract information draws heavily on the United Scenic Artists Local #829 provisions of the Model Agreements. Liability issues for designers have changed in recent years. The consensus has long been that a simple declaration on all drawings that the design was for artistic consideration only would release the designer from any liability. That is no longer the case, and an "insurance clause" should be included in the contract to protect the designer from being personally sued.

Shelley details the parameters that must be considered as part of the design process, and how to deal with later changes in those parameters once the design is completed. Professional productions may undergo dramatic changes in personnel and/or budget, which in turn impact equipment and labor budgets as well as time management and reevaluation of design choices.

Process descriptions outline techniques to advance a space before load-in, to construct lighting systems as well as plotting techniques to appropriately select and place fixtures for the best lighting coverage. Specific responses to unforeseen incidents, such as the delivery of damaged equipment or the wrong soft goods, are addressed. The included checklists and tips on how to deal with everything from the mildly annoying to the catastrophic are priceless.

Effective use of focus time and graphic aids for lighting focus are two areas where Shelley is an acknowledged expert. He had given frequent presentations on those topics at national and regional theatre conferences. The illustrations and explanations in this segment include

specifics on light overlap for different hanging positions and tips on how to create useable spike marks to allow focus of a show in situations where the scenery has not loaded in yet or focus time has been severely truncated.

The second edition of *A Practical Guide to Stage Lighting* has been in development for some time. The volume has expanded by almost 200 pages. The added illustrations and expanded topics make it well worth

picking up the new version. Even the most seasoned professional is sure to gain some new insights and add tricks to his or her repertoire.

Ellen E. Jones is a member of USA Local #829, with credentials as a lighting designer, scene designer, and scenic artist. She is a former USITT Lighting Commissioner. She recently returned to academia and is a faculty member at Bemidji State University in the wilds of northern Minnesota.

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