**A History of Stage Lighting**

# *Ancient Greek*

Greek plays were performed in daylight, and the dramas were frequently designed to take advantage of the position of the sun. Also, theater sites were well placed to gain the best effects of the natural light.

# *Ancient Roman*

The Romans were probably the first to use torches and lamps at evening performances.

**The Middle Ages**

Information about medieval lighting is uncertain although it seems likely that torches, both moving and stationary, were utilized.

**The Renaissance to the Seventeenth Century**

Nicolo Sabbattini and Leone de’ Sommi wrote on the use of lighting in the 16th century; in addition, they developed footlights and techniques for colored lights and for the dimming of lights. From the Renaissance period until the triumph of gas lighting in the mid-19th cent., great use was made of lamps, candles, and torches. Although they caused much work, odor, and smoke, ingenious effects were produced.

**The Eighteenth Century**

Lighting became a problem only when the theaters were entirely enclosed. At that time lights (torches, candles, oil lamps) and reflectors surrounded the stage, and footlights came into use. Later chandeliers and candelabras became fashionable. Much use was made of colored lights made with mirrors reflecting colored water; shadows were painted on the flats. The auditorium itself was not darkened for the performance.

**The Nineteenth Century**

The 19th century brought extensive changes in lighting and scene design. Gaslight was first introduced (1817) in England. Although it was responsible for many theater fires, gaslight had, by 1849, the advantage of being centrally controlled. Sir Henry Irving, at the end of the century, was first to darken the auditorium completely. He also was first to experiment with the color and intensity of gaslight. The first spotlight was the limelight (1816); it was followed by the arc light (1846). With the invention (1879) of the incandescent bulb, light became the primary scene painter. Through the efforts of Adolphe Appia, modern stage lighting was born.

The concept of the invisible “fourth wall” forced the acting area to be located behind the proscenium arch, thus eliminating the need for a wide apron and glaring footlights.

**The Twentieth Century**

After 1912 lights were placed in the auditorium to allow for more natural angles of illumination for both the actor and the set. The projector lamp, a spotlight that could be dimmed, was invented in 1914; after 1919 colored “gels,” or gelatine, were placed over the lights. By 1922 stage lighting had become a scientific study.