

THE ART OF THE GAUZE

by Alec Shanks.

It is hard to say exactly which English production was the first to use cotton gauze, as opposed to the silk transparencies which had been used for magical effects ever since the introduction of painted scenery in the seventeenth century. But it is on record that in "Telemachus" at the Olympic, London, in 1834, a scene entitled "Calypso's Vision" began with the lowering of a gauze giving the impression of mist and clouds.

There would seem to be a natural connection between the introduction of the "lime-light" as a means of side-lighting from off-stage perches and the use which Charles Kean (in his day the greatest innovator among actor-producers) made of gauzes at the Princess's Theatre in the 1850's. One sensational effect was the apparition of a flight of angels to the dying Queen in "Henry VIII," apparently suspended in a diagonal shaft of white light from a "lime" in the flies, and seen through what had appeared to be a solid backing of tapestry. Gauzes were used frequently after this, in Romantic Ballets, and in some of Henry Irving's productions, but never where comedians were involved, as they then (as always) refused to play with the front of the stage darkened.

With the general development of electric lighting and dimmers from the 'eighties onwards, we see an increased realization of the possibilities of gauzes, and during the last few years, producers of "straight" plays have made frequent use of them to show simultaneous action beyond or outside the actual scene, or events taking place at some other period in time (as in the cinematographic "flash-back"), as well as phenomena of the "vision" type.

A few words about the types of gauze and methods of making-up may be of interest, before considering their various uses and possibilities.

The English gauze as manufactured over the last hundred years is a cotton net, the mesh about $\frac{1}{8}$ in., woven in lengths of 55-65 yds. by 24 ft. wide, so that a single piece can make a seamless "cloth" or running tabs, to the dimensions of any stage.

Continental gauzes are rather heavier in weave, the advantage to the scene-painter being that the painted subject shows up much more clearly when front-lit, the drawback being that the material is much narrower, and care has to be taken in the positioning of seams.

American designers use a thicker, stronger gauze of the "filet" type with a larger, elongated mesh woven with a double thread. This is called Hanson gauze, after its inventor, and is now manufactured in England, in lengths of 65 to 70 yds. by 24 ft. wide. With this type, an opaque effect can be achieved by painting thickly over parts of the gauze, the paint filling up the holes. Hanson gauze can often be used without a backing, and is almost indistinguishable from painted canvas until lit from behind, when one is still aware of the presence of the gauze. In certain circumstances this is exactly what the director wants. Gauze is sold in white, black and grey, and Hanson gauze in "natural" colour.

As all gauzes are comparatively fragile, they should be sewn to a heading of canvas or webbing, which takes the tape "tyers" that attach them to the top batten or bar. The bottom edge should be weighted by a chain run through a canvas pocket, to avoid "floating" caused by draughts, and to prevent fouling other hangings as it is dropped in.

This applies also to any backing which hangs immediately behind it, as the suction of air can cause the backing to stick to the gauze, and drag it up as the backing flies out. Always see that the gauze is made a few feet wider than the opening it is intended to fill because the sides tend to "drop in" with the weight of the chain.

Although in this article we are considering the gauze as a means of creating some kind of illusion, it can be of great value used as material in other ways. For instance, a plain gauze tightly stretched immediately in front of a sky cloth gives a very atmospheric effect, and conceals all those creases and seams which overhead lighting tends to accentuate.

Pieces of gauze let into the painting of cloud strata, mountains or water, help to achieve special light effects, and several layers added to the bottom of borders soften hard edges.

The general principle of "working" a gauze is this: whether the gauze is painted, or is plain-coloured with a subject projected on it from the front, it is backed by a dark (usually black) backing of the same dimensions, which hangs on a separate bar, and can fly independently of the gauze, or open on a Tab-track. The gauze has now all the appearance of a cloth, and is lit with normal front lighting.

When it is desired to fade-through to a scene already set behind the backing, all light up-stage of the backing (including those treacherous pilots!) must be blacked out. The first flys-cue is to

Photo-sequence of 12-second Transformation taken during performance
at the Victoria Palace.

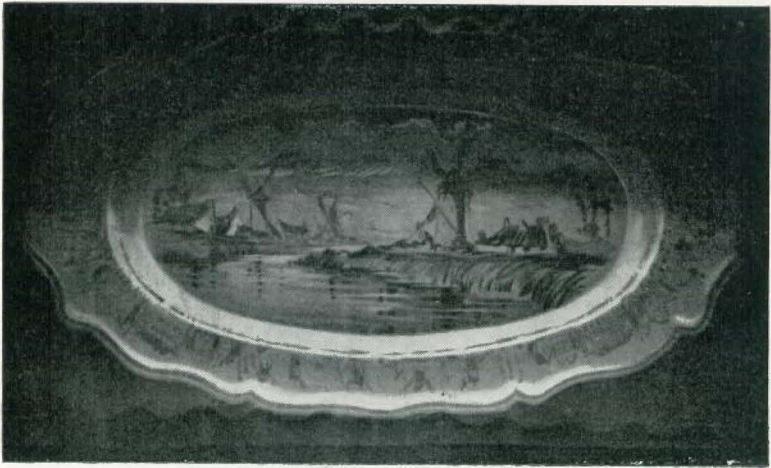


FIG. 1. *Three seconds. Gauze with backing in place. Footlights half.*



FIG. 2. *Six seconds. Gauze with backing almost away, footlights almost OUT, upstage spots fading IN. Now both the gauze-picture and the "still picture" on stage are visible.*



FIG. 3. *Nine seconds. Gauze starts to rise. Back-lighting is FULL. NOW only the chained edge of the gauze is visible. During the remaining three seconds the gauze will be away, footlights FULL and F. O. H. added.*

take away the BACKING, but as it is obvious that the less front lighting that hits directly on to the gauze, the less risk there is of the back scene being seen prematurely, an opportunity must be found to kill footlights and balcony-rail spots before giving the fly-cue. Overhead and side spots can remain on if required.

When the backing is, say, two-thirds up, you can begin to fade in the lights behind the gauze (spots having been focused on to special parts you wish to high-light, and care being taken that no light strikes across the gauze itself). If no backing is used, then the operation becomes a CROSS-FADE, the back light coming UP as the front goes down, and can be timed to the exact number of seconds required. As soon as there is a stronger light behind the gauze than in front of it, the gauze picture vanishes. The synchronization of the CROSS-FADE is all-important, and with a manually operated board, the electrician will require a little time and practice to complete the operation in the given time.

You can now fly the GAUZE itself, and proceed with the scene, adding whatever front-lighting you require once the GAUZE is away, or the whole scene can be played with the GAUZE IN, and the down-stage lighting still DOWN. If you are using F. O. H. projections on the gauze during a scene-change, both BACKING and GAUZE go away before the back lighting comes UP, which kills the effect of the projection, which is then switched off.

To go back to the original picture at the end of the scene, the operation is reversed.

In Covent Garden's recent production of *The Ring*, one whole act was played behind a vast dark grey gauze stretching the width of the proscenium, with projections of stylized painted effects from the auditorium, alternatively and sometimes simultaneously with stage-lighting illuminating the action, behind the gauze.

A similar principle is used for a short scene in *Under Milk Wood* at the New Theatre, with a ripple effect from an effects lantern in the footlights, while symbolic figures are dimly seen through the gauze.

A point to remember, when playing a musical scene behind a gauze, is that the performers cannot see the conductor's baton, which in this case must carry a small light.



FIG. 4. *Gauze for the Adelphi Theatre, London, designed by the author.*

At the Criterion in Peter Hall's production of *Waltz of the Toreadors*, one half of the back wall of the set, although apparently solid, contains a large gauze panel behind which is a complete bedroom, revealed or blacked-out as required, which communicates by a door with the main set.

In serious plays there could be a danger of gauze effects becoming a producer's "gimmick," but in musical plays and spectacular

revues, the fading through from one scene to another not only helps the continuity of the action by obviating blackouts, but with subtle light changes can greatly enhance the mood and atmosphere created by the music.

In revues and pantomimes a popular, if unsophisticated effect, is the fade-through illustrated here from *These Foolish Kings*, the current "Crazy Gang" Show. Unfortunately, it is by its nature a difficult effect to photograph.

The gauze is painted with the representation of some real object (it could be a tapestry or a well-known painting). In this case (Fig. 1) it is a blue and white Delft platter, which is shown for a few seconds with front-lighting, and then gradually, as the light comes up behind it, and fades in front (Fig. 2), the actual gauze entirely vanishes, and we see a Dutch scene (Fig. 3), painted in the same style and colour, but peopled with live characters in porcelain-like costumes, in completely still positions until the fade-through is complete, when they become animated. If, instead of a chain being used to weight the hem of the gauze, the bottom of the gauze had been cut into "scallops" with small lead weights at intervals, the gauze would have risen quite unnoticed.

A more elaborate variation on the same idea was staged by the writer (Adelphi Theatre, 1954). The subject was a painting of an Old English coach, complete with outside passengers and postilions, set in a realistic picture-frame. Behind this a practical replica of the coach and background was constructed, and the actors placed at exactly the same height as those on the gauze. Here the problem was to condense the depth of the set so as to leave as little space as possible between the furthest-away actors and their painted counterparts, in order to reduce the "double image" effect likely to occur during the cross-fade. Once the gauze was away, all kinds of lighting effects were possible with the transparent linen back-cloth, and at the end of the tableau, the gauze came in again, and the scene finished with the painted picture, as it had begun.

If these notes have been enough to give the reader an idea of some of the ways to use gauzes, it must be equally clear from them that the closest co-operation is required between director and designer on the one hand, and stage-manager and electrician on the other.

The effective use of gauzes is inseparable from good lighting, and a great deal of irritation and loss of time can be caused if the working-out of gauze effects is left till the last rehearsals. All this can be avoided if the technicians are given in advance a clear knowledge of the director's aims, and if director and designer understand the technical problems involved, and all collaborate in "The Art of the Gauze."