Developing a Cuelist

By Clifton Taylor, May 2022

The unit breakdown document becomes the basis for developing a cue list. Cues in plays can happen for several reasons:

1. **Beginnings and ends of scenes.**

   It is perhaps obvious to say, but the beginning and ends of major scenes will require some kind of lighting change, in most cases. It is common in modern programming practice to BLOCK the cues that begin a scene, so that values from prior scenes will not track into the current scene.

   > *Note on lighting a show: Whenever I'm working on a show, I want to have a light programmed for the beginning of each scene. Even if I know that there are many cues planned for a scene, I still want to have at least one cue programmed for the beginning of each scene, so that technical rehearsal can proceed without*

2. **Openings and closings of the main curtain, if there is one.**

   It is standard practice, when a main curtain is present, to provide some sort of "preset" cue that has light behind the curtain. After the curtain is up, or ¾ up, a second cue is created to add the light that comes from "Front of House". The preset cue is sometimes a copy of the next cue without front light, and sometimes it is a more 'dramatic' version, a 'tableau' cue to set the scene. *I will often leave a partial block on these cues (where ALL front of house equipment is blocked to a 0% level in blind) to help that there is not a tracking mistake, especially during previews!*

   The reverse is true at the end of a play that uses a main curtain. It is common to create a final cue that is not a blackout but rather a "front of house" (FOH) lights out so that the curtain be brought in without being lit from the front.

   > *Note on lighting a show: I always create a group that holds ALL lights that are in front of a main curtain. That way it is easy to take all these lights out for these kinds of cues. In situations where there is a main curtain and the show is only having a short run of performances, I also create an "INHIBITIVE SUBMASTER" with all 'front of house' lights in it, so that the lighting console operator can manually fade out FOH lights as the curtain comes in.*

   > *Note on curtain warmers: It is typical in OPERAS and BALLETS to only operate curtain warmers manually via a submaster. In other words, curtain warmers are NOT put into cues.*

   > *In the spoken theater, it is more typical to put curtain warmers into recorded cues. Two different cultures, to be respected.*

3. **Cues that deal with a change in dramatic action**

   You might want a lighting cue to deal with changes in dramatic action units. When you imagine the action of the scene, which characters need to have focus, and how can lighting help to illuminate the power dynamics at play?

   Generally, within a scene of a play, when I need a block, I will use INTENSITY BLOCKS instead of FULL BLOCKS, so that any intelligent or color changing equipment can be adjusted later and allowed to track through a full scene.

4. Actor or action motivated cues.

Cues can be necessary when an actor moves from one place on the stage to another, or manipulates a practical lighting source, etc. Sometimes you can anticipate these kinds of cues before rehearsals begin, but I usually will wait to write these kinds of cues into my cuelist until I see a rehearsal.

In my own work, I will often prepare cues in my script and in a spreadsheet organically as I learn new information. I will usually wait to number the cues, though, until I can see a run-through in the studio with blocking. It is easier for a stage manager to call cues that are sequentially numbered than it is to call a show where there are a lot of point cues or cues skip numbers randomly. Of course, all sorts of things change in the process of lighting a show, so point cues and skipped numbers will become a part of any completed design. I would not change numbers of cues except under extraordinary circumstances. Especially in these days, where it is common to be triggering the cues from other departments or to be triggered by them via OSC (or MIDI SHOW CONTROL) connections, cuelist number changes can slow everyone's process.

The cuelist is an extended version of the dramatic action unit breakdown with both more columns and more rows. There should be columns for Cue Number, Timing Information, and the Lighting Action.

Because there probably will be more lighting cues than there are dramatic action units, there will be more rows in this enhanced document.