

What is a lighting director?

Simply put - a lighting director designs the lighting for multi-camera television productions. He or she instructs the crew of electricians in their work in addition to guiding the team of operators who usually sit with the LD in the lighting control room. All this while working closely with the director and the rest of the production team to deliver the best possible pictures.

However, there's rather more to it than that, and on this page on the website I explain where LDs work, what kinds of shows LDs work on and give some of the background to what we do.

It's important to point out right away that simple 'illumination' is actually a relatively unimportant part of our work. Current TV cameras are capable of operating in very low light levels so it would be quite possible to see what was going on in most studios simply by switching on the houselights. Fortunately, producers and directors realise that the result would look pretty awful.

Another thing is also worth making clear – a lighting director is not an electrician. He or she might have been once, but an LD is not another name for a crew chief or gaffer. Most television LDs do not have electrical qualifications, although some may have. In any case, this is not a requirement of the job. The electrical supervisor (gaffer) is in charge of realising the LD's design in the studio from the rigging and electrical point of view.

LDs arrive in the job via all sorts of routes. There are no rules or qualifications – you just have to be good enough for a producer to book you to light their show.

The information below is mostly aimed at those interested in the broadcast media who are hoping to find out something about the role of the lighting director in the making of television programmes. It may also be of some help to those who might be considering working in the industry, with a view to eventually becoming an LD.

Unfortunately, most shows on British TV are still lit by a man. However, a few women have moved up through the ranks and their names can be seen in the credits of an increasing amount of shows. Regrettably, at the time of writing (summer 2020) this is still a very small number.

Where do LDs work?

From the 1950s to the 1990s there were TV studios in cities all over the UK owned by the BBC and the various ITV companies. Then these were closed one by one until by 2000 pretty well all TV production came from studios in and around London. In the early 2000s the government, via Ofcom, instructed the BBC, ITV and Channel 4 to go back to making TV outside London. This process took several years but by 2020 over 50% of broadcast hours of entertainment, drama, documentaries and children's TV was being made outside the M25.

Of course, this didn't come about by reopening all the old regional studios, most of which no longer existed.

The BBC reacted to this pressure with enthusiasm, believing that it would be cheaper to make programmes outside the South East of England. They decided to sell off Television Centre and along with ITV did a deal with a property company called Peel. Peel built some studios at a new development in Salford called MediaCity UK. The company that runs the MediaCity studios is called 'dock 10'. ITV and the BBC signed up to renting studio space from them over 10 years from 2011. ITV left their old Granada studios in Manchester and booked one of the 4 main studios on a permanent basis, also using others when required.

BBC Children's and Sport departments moved to Salford in 2011. Both regularly book space in the smaller studios at MediaCity. Please note - despite what many people assume, these studios are not owned or run by the BBC. They simply rent studio space like everybody else.

For various reasons, fewer comedy and entertainment productions than anticipated were made at dock 10 during the first 7 or 8 years. Most productions of this kind shown on BBC, ITV or C4 are made by independent production companies and they preferred to continue to make their shows in the remaining studios in and around London. The number of shows made in the dock 10 studios has now risen, following increased pressure from Ofcom.

When Television Centre closed, the business that ran the studios – 'BBC Studioworks' – refurbished studio D at their Elstree Centre which is also where *EastEnders* and *Holby City* are made. *EastEnders* is lit by a lighting director (several are on the regular list) but *Holby* is lit by a DoP. Most of Television Centre was redeveloped but 3 studios were saved and reopened in 2017.

BBC Studioworks also converted stages 8 and 9 at Elstree Studios (a separate studio centre down the road from BBC Elstree) into TV studios in 2013. They additionally created a suite of control rooms that either stage 1 or 2 at Elstree could use. Stage 2 has become the regular home of *Strictly Come Dancing* and is used by several other large-scale entertainment shows too.

As part of their move away from the capital, The BBC created a new drama centre in Cardiff. (However, single-camera drama is lit by a director of photography, not a lighting director. More on this later.) They also built a new HQ for BBC Scotland in Glasgow, containing a large TV studio. This studio has often been used for gameshows and the occasional sitcom for BBC1. There is also a smaller studio which has been used for quiz shows as well as local programming.

The BBC's main TV studio at Llandaff, Cardiff closed in 2020. They have moved to a new building in the city centre but the studio there is much smaller and only intended for local programmes, lit by staff LDs. The BBC's Belfast studio is mostly used for local shows but has been the home of *Mastermind* since 2019.

A couple of regional ex-ITV studio centres have survived. Maidstone Studios have two useful studios – one is very large – and against all the odds, the old Granada Studios in Manchester have been saved from redevelopment. They are being refurbished and will be available again in 2021, having closed in 2013.

In Bristol a very large factory where they used to make Harvey's Bristol Cream sherry has been turned into a TV drama studio centre. As well as a number of 4-waller stages, The Bottle Yard

Studios have one multicamera TV studio, which has been booked by a few long-running gameshows since 2013. These have included *Deal or No Deal*, *Tipping Point* and *The Crystal Maze*.

So there has been an increase in multicamera TV studios outside London since 2011, where freelance LDs are booked to light shows. You could argue that an equivalent number of London's studios might no longer be required. However, the number of studios lost was far more than those that have opened outside the M25. Between 2013 and 2018, the industry was dealt blow after blow as many major studios shut down. We lost most of BBC Television Centre, Teddington, Capital, Fountain and ITV's studios on the South Bank. This was not because they were no longer needed but rather because their owners believed the land they occupied was worth more if sold for the construction of luxury flats.

Sadly, the small but useful studio in Soho's 'h Club' also closed in June 2020, due to the effects on the business of the Coronavirus pandemic.

The only fully equipped medium to large TV studios remaining around London are at TV Centre, Riverside (in Hammersmith), Elstree Studios, BBC Elstree, Pinewood, Sky and BT Sport. Of the original eight, only three studios now exist at TV Centre but in fact only one of those is available for hire – two are fully booked by ITV Daytime shows.

Pinewood is technically not in the capital as it lies just outside the M25. However, it is usually treated as a London studio by production companies, who normally do not pay travel or accommodation costs to freelancers working there. Pinewood has two very well-equipped large TV studios, sharing a suite of galleries. These studios are usually pretty busy with comedy and entertainment shows.

Riverside Studios closed in 2014 for rebuilding and reopened at the end of 2019. There are three studios – studio 1 is a medium size and suitable for many entertainment shows with audiences, studio 2 is a little smaller and studio 3 is only suitable for small-scale productions. There are two gallery suites, shared between the studios. These new studios are a very welcome addition to the few that are left in London. Only studio 1 is dedicated to TV production – the other two are shared with live theatre and music performances.

Since 2013, BT Sport have occupied an impressive studio centre at the Olympic Park in East London. Unlike Sky, their programmes are crewed by freelancers. They have one very large studio and two smaller ones. These were initially just used for sport programming on their own channels but since 2018 they have been marketing the studios more widely and they are now occasionally used by entertainment shows for other broadcasters.

Lighting directors are also booked to light comedy, music and entertainment shows made in theatres and concert halls for TV. Partly driven by the lack of proper studios, since about 2010 there have been a growing number of TV shows made in various locations using 'flyaway' or 'derig' kit. A few specialist companies now provide all the necessary equipment to make a TV show that can be delivered in a van and set up in a day or two. This includes cameras, lenses and dollies but also vision mixer, monitors and most importantly, a talkback system and comms facilities. This has enabled shows to be made at venues like LH2 – a very large facility in West

London originally intended for bands to rehearse tours. Shows made here have included *The X-Factor*, *The Voice* and *The Greatest Dancer*.

Also, in 2018 ITV erected a huge 'temporary' sound stage at Bovingdon airfield in Herts that is used for *Dancing on Ice* and *The Masked Singer*. These shows use an OB truck for facilities.

LDs are usually brought in when opera or theatre productions are televised and streamed to cinemas. The stage lighting will often require some adjustment to enable it to look its best on camera and a few LDs specialise in this work – which can require a great deal of diplomacy in dealing with the theatre's own management and crew - and occasionally the original lighting designer will be involved too.

Some concerts are recorded using multiple independently recorded digital cameras, rather than conventional TV cameras with an OB truck or flyaway kit. These usually have a DoP who is responsible for making sure the concert lighting works on camera. Digital cameras like the Arri Alexa have a huge contrast range much greater than a normal TV camera and the pictures are graded in post-production rather than being adjusted by a vision engineer at the time.

Most lighting directors are freelance but there are some staffers working for the BBC, ITV and Sky. At the BBC these look after the news studios at Broadcasting House (but not the *One Show* studio, which is lit by freelancers.) BBC Glasgow, BBC Cardiff and BBC Belfast also have staffers to light their local and news programming. All local news in the BBC and ITV regions is lit by members of staff.

ITV's daytime shows at Television Centre are lit by their own staff. ITN produces the main ITV news but also Channel 4 News, Channel 5 News and the *Jeremy Vine Show* for 5. ITN staff LDs light all of these. At Sky in Osterley there are a couple of LDs who look after all the various studios there which mostly produce news and sport. They do have a medium sized studio which is occasionally used for entertainment shows but these are usually lit by freelancers.

IMG is another company producing sport programmes. They are located not far from Heathrow Airport and have their own staff but occasionally their small studios are used for more general programmes. *Question Time* came from here during the Pandemic in 2020.

Most TV drama is shot using a single digital camera and lit by a Director of Photography (DoP). However, lighting directors work on several of the continuing dramas (soaps) that are made in their own dedicated multicamera studios around the UK. These include *EastEnders* (BBC Elstree), *Coronation Street* (Salford), *Emmerdale* (Leeds) and *River City* (Glasgow). Some of these are occasionally lit by DoPs but all have been lit by LDs too. *Casualty*, *Holby City*, *Hollyoaks* and *Doctors* are lit by DoPs as they are shot using single-camera techniques.

There are also a number of small TV studios around the country producing live material for the dozens of digital channels (e.g. business news, sport, shopping, quiz, gambling etc.). These usually have their own permanent or contracted staff, often working in a multi-role situation but may occasionally bring in a freelance LD to relight a studio.

What kind of TV show does an LD work on?

There are probably only about 20 LDs in the UK who light most of the comedy, music and entertainment shows made for the main broadcast TV channels. (Some are naturally much busier than others.) In addition, there are perhaps a dozen or so who have regular employment lighting soaps - and a similar number, mostly staffers, who are working in news and/or sport.

This relatively small group of LDs is responsible for lighting productions that range from continuing drama through comedy to gameshows, variety shows, panel shows, music shows, kids shows, magazine programmes, political debates, sport programmes and many other kinds of studio-based and outside broadcast programmes and one-off events.

Wherever more than one camera is used you need an LD.

So, what doesn't an LD do?

A vast amount of everyday television is shot using a single camera, mostly on location. This is lit - if any lighting is involved - by the cameraman. (NB - 'cameraman' is a generic term in the industry and applies to both men and women.) There are hundreds of people working in this field on interviews, make-over programmes, cookery series, documentaries and so on. If any lighting is necessary they do it themselves. This sort of work seldom involves more than a few small lights and often the camera operator will set those up him or herself, or perhaps have one electrician to help.

Many cameramen working in this field produce beautifully lit pictures, particularly with interviews - when faces need to be lit flatteringly and backgrounds can be treated in various creative ways. Occasionally a second camera might be involved in an interview but one of the cameramen will take the overall lighting responsibility.

As mentioned above, single-camera TV drama productions are lit by a Director of Photography (DoP) - sometimes called a 'lighting cameraman' or 'cinematographer'. The term 'DP' is also often used. Many of these people will have received training at film school or simply made their way up via someone they know working in the film industry.

The UK has many superb DoPs who have been responsible for lighting a great number of high-end drama series. Often they also work on commercials and pop promos and of course some move into the movie industry and become highly-regarded international cinematographers.

Programme types and who lights them

Multi-camera drama is a very popular form of TV in the UK and it often tops the ratings of both BBC1 and ITV. Of course, many people call it 'soap' but the lighting standard achieved on series like *EastEnders*, *Coronation Street* and *Emmerdale* is often very high indeed. The care and dedication shown by the LDs who light them is remarkable, particularly considering the constraints of time and budget.

Each show usually has a team of LDs - perhaps three or four regulars - who are often employed on a contractual basis to light a number of episodes. Some move from show to show. (I understand that the daily rate these people are paid is often less than the normal rate an LD receives but of course this is compensated for by the long periods of guaranteed work.) Some soaps, like *EastEnders*, are mostly shot in traditional multicamera studios and require the use of a console operator to balance the lighting. This is a possible route that an aspiring LD could take. Having said that, some of today's soap LDs were previously cameramen or gaffers (electrical chargehands).

Studio-based sitcoms with a live audience are in some ways a cross between television and theatre. This calls for particular skills, especially in coping with booms swinging over the set, potentially creating unwanted shadows. This style of comedy is relatively unfashionable at the moment but it refuses to die out completely and, thanks to the popularity of a few shows, will probably keep going for a number of years yet.

There is currently a very small number of LDs with sitcom lighting experience in the UK. Often, a sitcom will have the location scenes lit by a DoP (who will usually operate the camera) whilst the studio scenes are lit by an LD.

Gameshows and quiz shows are the bread and butter of both daytime and peaktime schedules. Every producer seems to want his or her show to look different and this often means that they hope that the lighting can provide that individuality. Video graphics on LED screens are usually integrated into the set design for gameshows and the LD has to work closely with the design team to achieve the look the production team require.

There are probably only half a dozen or so LDs who light most TV gameshows. Many also work on a range of other productions too including music and general entertainment.

LDs lighting entertainment, panel shows, quiz shows and gameshows come from various backgrounds. Some were staff LDs with one of the big companies in previous years although one or two have a background in event lighting. Some were originally cameramen or perhaps vision engineers or electricians. Almost all have had some experience of console operation.

Music shows range from outside broadcast events such as orchestral concerts or rock concerts to studio-based shows. Once again, the list of LDs regularly involved in this form of TV is relatively small. One or two have come into the industry via the concert touring route. Most also work on a range of other TV shows.

Moving light operators are particularly important to the success of any production involving a big automated rig. These people make a significant creative contribution to the final look of the show. Consequently, one or two operators have moved into lighting design themselves. They may have stood in for the regular LD on occasions or simply become known by the production team over a long period and one day given a chance to light a show in their own right. This may therefore be seen as a possible way into the industry for some people.

Outside Broadcasts (OBs) such as awards ceremonies and concerts are sometimes lit by the same group of LDs as those who light big studio-based music and entertainment shows. There are, however, a small number of LDs who specialise in OBs - lighting events, music and

entertainment productions in theatres, concert halls, arenas, churches and other locations. Some only do this kind of work and are seldom seen in a studio.

General entertainment productions cover pretty well everything else that many LDs are involved in. These range from chat shows and panel shows through magazine programmes, studio cookery shows, discussion programmes and of course all the different forms of children's TV.

In recent years we have also seen the rise of the reality show. These involve very close liaison with the set designer and careful planning by the LD. Clearly, nothing can be done to stop the flow of the live action once it begins so the LD has to take into account all possible angles from which the cameras might shoot the participants. This involves much more than simple illumination as many of these shows also have high production values and wish to create a distinct look for the series.

As mentioned above, there is a broad range of news, current affairs and sport programmes that tend to be lit mostly by staff lighting directors. For example, Sky TV at Osterley has a couple of staff LDs who work in the studios there relighting the various sets that come and go all the time - mostly for sport programmes but they are also responsible for the look of Sky News and Sky Sport News.

In some operations the lighting director is a console-operator who also takes on the LD responsibility. Each company has a different policy. Often, these people get no credit at the end of programmes but their work is no less important. Some are genuine LDs but as I understand it others are not called 'lighting director' by the company employing them but given some invented term that avoids paying them an LD's rate. Others may have multiple responsibilities such as operating the console, racking the cameras and perhaps even remotely operating them.

Summary

There is a huge range of television that fills the peaktime schedules that has been lit by an LD. Sometimes working with plenty of time and a large budget but more often than not, creating inventive and professional results with neither.

Many LDs work on a range of different kinds of work whilst others specialise. Circumstances often dictate what kind of work an LD will become known for. Luck and availability combine to influence how any LD will be booked to light a show and thus his or her career may well end up moving in a direction they might not have originally chosen!

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