



WITH THANKS TO SPORTS PERSONALITY OF THE YEAR, BBC

Designing with light

Gurdip Mahal is one of the world's leading talents in lighting design. He is constantly busy, lighting many major TV shows and events around the world. In recent years he has won a Royal Television Society award for multicamera lighting and a Knights of Illumination award. Zerb editor Matt Grant was lucky to catch up with Gurdip between shows for an interview.

How did you start out as a lighting director (LD)?

I never really knew what I wanted to do. I thought I was going to become a stills photographer. I had studied photography for five years before going to university and was then the first person to graduate from Southampton University with a first class honours degree in photography.

After university I fell into lighting really. I started at MTV, assisting other lighting designers and directors, and was lucky to learn from some amazing people there. Then I started to do my own shows. When I left MTV I got a chance to do T4 (the Channel 4 slot aimed at young people). When I started to light my own shows I began to properly realise this was something I could do, something I felt I was good at.

Why do we need LDs? Cameras are getting more sensitive – they can work with available light now.

Lighting is not just about illuminating and getting more level down the lens. It is about creating a mood, an atmosphere, and giving the image depth and feeling. It changes the way things feel, whether it be for a TV show, commercial or promo. I see lighting as an art rather than as being purely technical. It is a creative field in its own right.

What is the difference between a DoP and a LD? What scale of production warrants a LD?

A DoP generally lights for one camera while a LD works with multicamera and has to light for different angles at the same time. If you're doing single camera, all you're worried about is the angle your lens is pointing at any one time, but a LD views things more in the round and will be more involved with the set and so on.

There are some very challenging DoPs out there who will do an amazing job and I'm sure can light for multicamera as well, but generally you would book a LD if you're in a studio space, using studio lighting. A LD doesn't operate a camera; their vision is the monitors inside the gallery. I don't think you would usually put a DoP into a studio, but a LD could light an interview. It's a fine line; it's what you want to achieve at the end of the day.

How much is down to you and your vision, and how much is dictated by the customer?

It is really important that you listen to clients and give them what they want, but at the same time, they wouldn't book you if they were designers. So, as a designer, it is your job to show them what different things can be done, while at the same time listening to find out what their needs are. You have to treat each job differently and ask, "What does this job need? Does it need lots of moving lights? Is it a big Saturday night show? Should it be all singing, all dancing, or is it more classic? Perhaps it's in the Albert Hall and should be lit with tungsten lights to look more elegant?" No job is the same, even though you have your own style.

U2's Bono with rapper Jay-Z at the Brandenburg Gate for MTV



KEVIN MAZUR, WIREIMAGE



Lady GaGa, MTV Europe Music Awards 2011

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At the start of a job, I will go into a meeting with the executives and they tell me their ideas for the show. I generally then go away for a couple of days to think about what they've said and how to put my style into it. Then I do a pitch where I turn up with a mood board and show images of what I'd like to do with styles of lighting that relate to what they have described. I try to get into their thinking and give them back something they want and then work with them to modify those ideas to suit the programme.

By the time you do the show, the director knows the style you're going to use as you've already discussed it and they should respect you enough to let you do your job and trust you. They have enough other things to worry about.

You also need to consider the artists. When I was working with U2, for instance, Bono wanted his face lit in a certain way from a certain angle. So, before we started the concert, we sat down and had a little chat and then I took what he had said into consideration before starting the designs. The artists have a big say. I think you have to give them the respect they've earned – treat them as you would want to be treated.

Do you have a signature style – something that says "This is Gurdip Mahal"?

Yes, I think so. My work is quite young, quite edgy, but I also really concentrate on lighting for faces. I think the faces are the most important element within the picture, so I always try to make the faces as beautiful as possible.

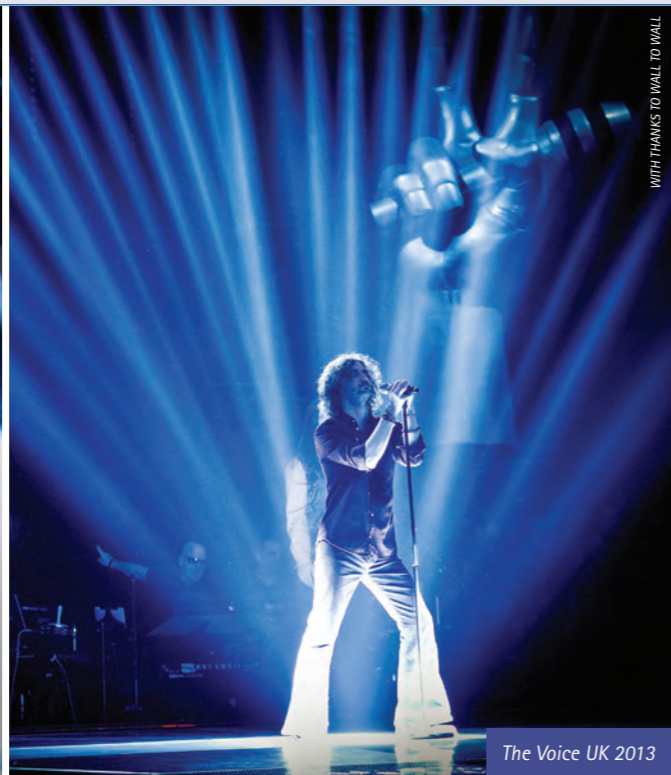
I don't mix many colours when I design. One of my rules is I never use more than two colours, so my work is very monochrome. If I do use colours, they are used very sparingly.

Over the years I have come up with my own style and ways of doing things. This has grown up as new technology has evolved. I am getting more resources and bigger budgets to do things now, which means I can be more experimental and try things out. The technology has really changed over the last few years. There are many more moving lights out there. I use a lot of lasers in my designs now. I get demo technology before it comes out to see what is going to work on camera. It's not like many years ago, when all you had were tungsten and HMI lights.

There's a lot more to it than just lighting: you're really involved in the entire look?

I think the difference in the way I work compared to some other LDs is that I get involved in the set design very early on, working with the set designers. At the planning stage, I will be involved with the choice of materials on set, the colours, the height of the set etc, so I can integrate the lighting and set design.

I try not to get too caught up in money conversations though, because I think this inhibits your style. I tell them what I would



WITH THANKS TO WALL TO WALL

The Voice UK 2013

I love doing designs and plans that are virtually impossible to achieve, either because of the technology or the time, resources and budget. I just hand it over and say: "This is what I want", step away and let my team of geniuses figure out how it is all going to work! I just look after the creative side. Sometimes you'll ask for something that is impossible, and you may only achieve just a quarter of it. But by managing even that quarter, you get something special and have pushed everybody. I don't think my not being particularly technical has ever held me back.

There is so much technology involved these days. Some shows have

five desks running at the same time with 1000 moving lights live for four hours. So, you have to make the system run and work, while still ensuring the keylights are in the right place for the faces and so on. There is plenty of physics involved, but at the same time, you shouldn't get too caught up in that. You should do what you feel looks good and works.

If you had to pick just one light for everything, what would it be? I think I would go quite old school, and probably choose a 5K Fresnel. Beautiful lamps, perfect for a keylight. You can run it low with less voltage and get the most incredible gold colour from it or run it



Miley Cyrus at the MTV Europe Music Awards 2010

GARETH GUTTERMOLE, GETTY IMAGES

like, and also the band may have ideas of what they want, then I let the production manager and the record label figure it out. It's hard not to get involved in this, but I try not to.

How about the camera supervisors – do you work closely with them? Working with the camera supervisor is really important because you obviously want the cameras to be at the right angle to achieve the lighting effects you have in mind. In a studio environment, I will bring along graders that rack the cameras to my style. I have memory cards and chips that I put into the cameras to achieve the particular scene files I want. So, crushing the blacks, more saturation, playing with the knee, skin detail etc – this is all stuff I will control, but I will talk to the camera supervisor to let him know the reasons why. If I'm playing with the depth of field, for instance, it's obviously important to tell the camera operators why we're working with the cameras wide open.

How much attention do you pay to the particular camera technology being used? As far as the cameras themselves are concerned, a lot of my work is on ALEXAs. We have to be very careful with the ALEXA, mixing technology. If I have tungsten lights and video walls and moving lights, for example, you've got different shutter speeds happening on the camera and on the other technology as well. As a LD, you have to know enough about the different technologies to know what you need to do to make it work, but I'm not very technical myself. I think if you get too caught up in the technical side, you lose some creativity, because you realise how difficult it is to do things.

Do you always work with the same team of lighting technicians? Yes, I am very lucky to have one of the best technical teams around me that do all my technical spec. I have a gaffer, James Tinsley, who is with me full time and looks after all the power and rigging. Then there's Ross Williams, my programmer. He does every show I do and looks after all the technology, the moving lights and lasers. Gerald Smith is my generic operator and looks after the tungsten lights and generics. I've been working with the same team for coming up to 15 years. When I turn up to a show, they know exactly what I'm thinking through second nature and I don't have to explain myself, they just know what needs to be done. It's wonderful, everybody is so professional, they just get on with it.

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high with more power and get the whitest, cleanest, most pure light. Tungsten – it's where lighting started but it's still one of my favourite lamps.

Do you work with LED lights at all? I do work with LEDs, yes. I think they have their place. They're amazing when you don't have much power and you need quantity, and with many of the LEDs you can go outside easily as they're weatherproof. I use LED to light sets and also LED video effects, but at the moment I don't use them to keylight faces. I don't feel the technology's come far enough to use LED for faces yet. I'm incredibly fussy about colour temperatures and may be a bit old school in liking the 100% control that tungsten gives, which, in my opinion, you just don't get with LEDs. There are some fantastic LED products around, and yes, they're bright and it's really coming on, but it doesn't feel right with me at the moment for most of the work I do.

Do you like to use natural light? I love natural light... but it changes so much! Most of my work is in the studio or on location but not outside, so I don't really have the opportunity very much. But I do like to use natural light and then maybe add a little to it. Natural light is beautiful, it's a present from God to us – you don't get any better.

What kind of shows do you do mainly and what are you most proud to have worked on? I do everything from the MTV Awards and BBC Sports Personality of the Year to Children in Need. At the moment I'm designing the sets and lighting design for the MOBOs. I also do The Voice and other Saturday night shows.

When you design the big shows, especially game shows, is the lighting design sold as part of the format? When I do the lighting designs for a show, they go into a book called 'The Bible', which is the technical spec for that show, which includes the creative and artistic sides of the lighting. It varies from production to production who owns the rights for that design.

Are there any other genres you'd like to do, say, drama or anything else? I'd love to light a full feature film one day, but at the moment I'm very happy with what I'm doing and I've got enough going on. When I'm older, I think it would be nice to do a feature.

Thank you for talking to Zerb, Gurdip.

Fact File

Gurdip has been the lighting designer for many large-scale events around the world including the MTV Awards in three continents and Laureus World Sport Awards in Europe, Russia and the Middle East. He has collaborated with many leading musicians including U2, Rihanna, Lady GaGa, Coldplay and Queen. In the UK, his work has included BBC Sports Personality of the Year, which he has designed for the past seven years, and the original design for Million Pound Drop, now produced in multiple countries.

See more about Gurdip Mahal's work at: www.gurdipmahal.com/gurdip.html



Laureus World Sports Awards, Abu Dhabi 2010

JOHN GICHIGI, GETTY IMAGES FOR LAUREUS

I do a lot of music but also game shows like Million Pound Drop, which has been running for a few years now and goes out in 50 countries. I vary my work and try not to specialise, but to retain my own style and bring this to whatever I work on.

The most prestigious job for me has probably been Sports Personality of the Year, just because it's been running for so long. It's one of those shows I used to watch when I was a child. I've been lighting it for seven years now and I've seen it grow from a studio with an audience of just 200 to 17,000 at the ExCel. It is a huge show these days. It must use over 700 moving lights, thousands of pieces of LED, video walls and pyros.

That's lot of power – I hope you end up planting a few trees to offset your carbon footprint! Yes I'm going to have to plant a whole forest. But again, if I start worrying about how much power I'm pulling it would probably inhibit my design, so I tend not to think about it too much.

Are there any jobs you've got involved in where you thought "I wish I hadn't taken this on, things have changed or become too complex"? As a professional, when you take a job on, you just have to go through with it whatever. Even if the job changes or things are not going quite right, you have to be professional enough to say: "I signed up for this, I'm going to carry on and see it through."

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