

**Mike Clark, *Avant-garde artistry. Lighting Takes Center Stage in the Works of Fabrizio Crisafulli*, «Lighting Dimensions», vol. XXI, n. 3, New York, April 1997**

One of Italy's leading experts in artistic lighting is the multifaceted Fabrizio Crisafulli, who is also a noted producer, set designer, and university lecturer. Commentators have described events staged at his students' workshops and by the theatrical group he founded as the "new 20th-century avant-garde." *Lighting Dimensions* caught up with Crisafulli at one of his Italian "installations"--*Polvere* (Dust), staged in an overgrown, rubble-filled garden and an abandoned sculptor's workshop, but filled by a constant flow of visitors.

Born in Catania, Sicily, in 1948, Crisafulli received a degree in architecture from Rome University in 1975, with a thesis on town planning entitled "The City and Spectacle." Upon graduation he was part of the university's architecture faculty for several years. He switched to the Catania Fine Arts Academy from 1982 to 1992, where he taught stagecraft and set design. In 1992, he was appointed a lecturer in stagecraft and set design at Urbino Fine Arts Academy. Crisafulli has also taken his talents abroad, designing sets and lighting for theatre and cinema. Since 1995, he has been holding lighting seminars and workshops at the School of Architecture and Landscape at the University of Greenwich in London.

"My interest in lighting began almost instinctively as a boy," Crisafulli explains. "I used to criticize how streets and the interiors of homes were lit. But my passion for theatrical lighting began in the 70s when I met up with members of Rome's avant-garde theatre." By the early 1980s, he recalls, this underground or "image" theatre was experimenting heavily with light.

"Nowadays, lighting plays a very constructive role in my shows: not just as far as vision and space are concerned, but also for the actual dramaturgy, rhythm, and movement. Lighting virtually redefines the script onstage," Crisafulli says. "When I design and prepare an event, the lighting often comes first, followed by all the rest." Crisafulli's audio-visual performances are far from the "effects for effect's sake" policy of some *son et lumiere* projects, and closer to Vasili Kandinskij's "scenic compositions": When people appear onstage, in some cases it's only to move the material used for the event, or to act as screens onto which light or images are projected.

Crisafulli's Urbino Academy Theater Workshop, one of Italy's most interesting experimental theatrical groups, gives him and his students the opportunity to take their ideas on the road. In 1993, they were invited to stage their *Scena in scena* at the Experimental Audio-Visual Festival in Arnhem, Holland. The show was divided into two parts: The first (*Pictures at an Exhibition*) was a tribute to Kandinskij, the second an entertaining piece in which the material used for the set was gradually dismantled onstage.

Under Crisafulli's direction, the lighting's relationship to the set's surfaces and materials is dissected and studied; indeed, the lighting is sometimes the only "performer" in a staged work. In 1990's *Fog-Malevic*, the lighting's interaction with the stage components achieved an almost magical condensation of shapes and colors, creating abstract geometric forms that reflected Russian artist Casimir Malevic's Suprematist theory.

Besides organizing his students' workshops, Crisafulli also directs an experimental theatrical group called *Il Pudore Bene in Vista*, which he founded in 1991: This was also the title of a performance staged for the first time that same year, a highly entertaining combination of theatre, sound, images, and dance. Its fusion of live action, projections, and other

lighting effects produced some wonderful visual tricks, such as making various body parts of its three actresses seem to disappear or multiply.

"I always tend to consider two types of light, and combine them," Crisafulli says. "One is normal, 'functional' light, involving the set and the actors; the other is what I'd call 'positive' lighting. The former enables things to be seen, while the latter is designed to be seen: strips of light, projected images, and laser beams are all positive light. My use of light as an active component in a performance very frequently involves profile spots and gobos used to shape the beams precisely."

Crisafulli is particularly interested in the relationship between theatre, architecture, and visual arts, a topic on which he has written a great deal and is considered an expert. He collaborates with professional lighting manufacturer Fly srl, for whom he is technical consultant for experimental lighting fixture production, and with domestic lighting manufacturer I Guzzini.

La Memoria che si vede, a show staged by Crisafulli during the Habitat & Identity show/workshop, "starred" no less than 17 products from the Guzzini range of fixtures. The various scenes were futuristic geometric compositions in which Guzzini products were not only used as light sources, but also became the protagonists of the show. Thanks to their reflecting and translucent material, the products were brought to life with spectacularly dramatic visual impact.

"For me, darkness has the same importance as light, and should therefore be calculated and designed in the same way. When a scene is being lit, what is illuminated and what is not must be taken into consideration with the same precision," Crisafulli says. "I work a great deal with what I would describe as graphic, architectural, 'figurative' light, all one with the form and dimension of the area in which the show is staged. Although I've used over-lighting to make objects seem to disappear onstage, having a great quantity of fixtures at one's disposal doesn't necessarily ensure better, more effective lighting. I've seen really well-lit shows using a lot of equipment, but also some great stuff in which there was just one spot onstage, and the movement of the actors changed the effect the light had on them."

As far as external influence on his work is concerned, "I've learned from Fredegiso of Tours that darkness and light are degrees of the same phenomenon, and from John Cage that silence can be heard, therefore darkness can be seen. From the 19th-century Swiss set designer and theorist Adolphe Appia I've learned that shadows are the substance of vision, and from author Italo Calvino that the most effective images are those that let people create their own mental view of what they're looking at."

Reactions to Crisafulli's work vary. "People who follow experimental theatre have quite similar responses in most of the countries I've visited. But there have been some exceptions, particularly where the culture is very different from Western Europe's--there was great curiosity in Uzbekistan, where a heated two-hour debate took place after the show. In Egypt, the public's enthusiastic reaction was quite different from Europe; warmer and more direct. I was struck by the fact that several people said they'd related the changing light in my work with the endless nuances in Africa's natural light, not so much for the quality of the light, but for the delicacy of the variations."

Crisafulli frequently uses non-theatrical lighting fixtures in his productions and lighting setups, from simple lamps to overhead projectors used along with custom handmade glass gobos. "I even used electric element heaters to create a 'closed-in,' warm atmosphere in a performance inspired by a story by Nobel Prize-winning Japanese writer Yasunari

Kawabata, *The House of the Sleeping Beauties*. [*Le Addormentate* and *Sonni*, by Crisafulli and actress Daria De Florian, are both based on this story.] Although I don't deliberately avoid modern technology, non-theatrical sources of light offer a real mine of possible theatrical applications that haven't yet been fully exploited. I find traditional technology (such as film projection) very useful when a strong link with the past or a touch of irony are required--this isn't so easy with more impersonal new hardware."

In *In Cerca di Frasi Vere*, staged for the first time at Edinburgh's International Fringe Festival in 1993, Crisafulli projected a variety of different clothes onto De Florian, in the role of Austrian poetess Ingeborg Bachmann. A startling contrast was generated between her tension-wracked poetry and her delicate "garments," representing the more mundane, feminine aspect of her character. "The area in which images are normally projected (a screen) is not a theatrical element, so I prefer to use something else (Daria's body, in that instance), or find a coherent way of including the geometric shape of a screen in the set."

Crisafulli has also recently directed and designed a series of site-specific performances, with his work becoming part of the surroundings and architecture, not just using them as a set. Versions of his *Citta Invisibili* (*Invisible Cities*) have been staged in Italy, Klagenfurt, Malta, Rio de Janeiro, Unterach, and Liverpool in collaboration with the Center of Applied Theatrical Science and *Teatro Potlach*. "In this kind of event, the sites' features interact with the text, action, and dramatic presentation, and I use lighting to reveal details which might normally go unnoticed, or forgotten aspects of the venue. One of the main problems in these cases is creating darkness (for example, switching off street lighting) to 're-invent' the area using my own lighting, which has included lasers, underwater and UV fixtures, strobes, slide and film projectors, TV monitors, luminarie, and fireworks."

The LD is designing permanent lighting for two of Formia's most famous Roman monuments, St. Remigius' fountain and Cicero's tomb. "Many Italian cities and monuments are lit disgracefully," he says. "The trend is to use discharge lamps, such as low-pressure sodium, for financial reasons. These are the same lamps used to illuminate freeway intersections and industrial areas, and thanks to their very low color rendering, they turn everything yellow. This means that after having spent large sums restoring buildings to their original colors, after sunset the work is thwarted thanks to the flattening effect of the sodium lighting. The excuse of having to save money is unacceptable; I think in the long run these places lose their attraction, which leads to financial loss."

Other unique venues have included a Maltese castle, a soccer field, antique wine cellars, a classroom (where the extremely effective *Aula* was staged, again with the students of his set design course), and the sumptuous, frescoed Hall of Mirrors at Rieti's Flavio Vespasiano Theater. This was the venue for *Acuta di coscenza, amara di nostalgia*, in which Crisafulli dimmed the hall's chandeliers and wall lights, achieving a poetic starry sky effect. Rome's old Felice aqueduct was the setting for *Bandoni*, with scenes installed under its arches and in nearby streets, along which the audience walked for over an hour among the ruins of Pier Paolo Pasolini's Rome.

Crisafulli's recent collaboration with dancer/choreographer Giovanna Summo has resulted in two shows to date, *Canto Sospeso* and *Centro e Ali*. In the latter, the audience at Rome's Galleria Sala 1, a converted church, was divided into three sections. Each section had an arch of one of the venue's walls in front of it; Summo and two other dancers interacted with the lighting, creating an elegantly simple but breathtakingly symmetric and asymmetric show, according to the viewer's position.

Crisafulli often uses lighting to make a set, or the objects on it, appear weightless. This ethereal and mysterious effect has been seen in pieces like *Citta delle Ombre*. During this spectacular event, an endless number of chairs evidently defied the law of gravity, and even managed to reach the tops of trees, in an enchanted garden through which an actress floated, aided by a hidden cord.

The LD has collaborated with Isabel Rocamora and Sophy Griffiths, the UK "aerial dance" group Momentary Fusion, on unique multimedia projects. Precise lighting cues, illuminating only the area below a trapeze when it is used by the dancers, have resulted in striking effects during their performances. Crisafulli and Momentary Fusion have so far collaborated on two shows, *Shifts* and *High Vaultage*. The latter, a project by Crisafulli, Momentary Fusion, and Gareth Williams, won the English National Opera's Stephen Arlen Award in 1995 as "Most Imaginative Project" and the Live! Show's 1996 Silver Award as "Best New Event." The show, involving five dancers and three musicians, was held in the vaulted Victorian Turnhall Building where, besides a series of profile spots for lighting the trapeze work, Crisafulli also used two conference-style overhead projectors fitted with gobos to project images onto the set. While Rocamora and Griffiths danced on the walls, even the flown speaker boxes swung around, adding to the performance's gravity-defying atmosphere.

Crisafulli has recently worked with Kit-Yin Snyder, a Sino-American artist living in New York City who creates wire-mesh sculptures. Last year they collaborated on *It is so (if you think so)*, a Luigi Pirandello work adapted by Snyder. The sculptures were translucent reticular structures, so when the lamp the LD placed moved, it projected constantly changing "perspectives" of the wire modules on the walls. The transformation of the sculptures from solid, ice-like structures to airy, ghostly forms was related to Pirandello's search for the absolute truth, stimulating viewers to form their own interpretation of what they saw. The LD continues to find new ways to challenge audiences.