

Talking to Followspots

By Rosemary F. Heath

"On my first 'go,' all followspots will snap to color #1. On my second 'go,' all spots will snap to color #4."

"Go."

"Go."

"Go." ???!!!!???

Every spot operator has his or her own set of horror stories about lighting cue callers who didn't seem able to place an operator-assisted phone call, much less handle a two-followspot show. But spot operators will also admit (as a letter in the January 1979 issue of *Lighting Dimensions* pointed out) calling followspot cues isn't covered in the textbooks.

Clarity is Next to Godliness

The closest analogy to describe cue calling is creative backseat driving. You, the lighting designer, know the show — the operators don't. It is the operator's job to keep the lamp on his subject; it's up to the cue caller to talk him through the cues that the design needs.

As with any backseat driver, the difference between a good cue caller and a lousy one lies in his ability to be clear, considerate, concise, consistent and calm. If he can get high marks in these areas, he bypasses most of the backseat driver's pitfalls and becomes a navigator, guiding rather than dictating.

Being *clear* is the most significant factor. "Make it funky" is not on the list of approved cues, although it's been used more times than most spot operators would care to remember. After all, you are being paid to design the show. Don't ask the spot operators to do your job!

A spot operator wants to know what you want to see happen in fairly specific terms. Like "spot one, standby to snap to color #5." Not "make the drummer blue." To facilitate smooth communication, the LD assigns a number to each spot before the show starts. Color frames are then referred to by boomerang position, not color contained. (Of course, the operator sees the color at the same time that you and the audience do!) If you want blue, you should know what

position you requested it to be in. Of course, if you're truly professional, you have handed out your own set of spot frames with your colors in place and each frame numbered by position.

A stage is a large place. A spot operator needs to know where he should direct the lamp. "Pickup Harry" doesn't help Herb the spot man — he doesn't know which speck is Harry. "Pickup guitar player stage left in the red shirt" is likely to get you the cue you want without a faraway voice asking "Who's Harry?" while the chance for a lovely cue slips by.

Remember that most people can't tell a bass from a guitar at 200 feet, and a 50-year-old stage hand may have trouble with the fine distinction between *the guy at the Rhodes* and *the guy at the Mellotron* without some extra hints like hair or shirt color, or something equally obvious.

Spot operators need to know when. "Snap to color #5 on the chorus" is not what an operator wants to hear. He wants to hear "go" — you get paid to tell him at the beginning of the chorus.

When several spots are supposed to execute the same cue, the best way to have it happen in sync is to give a crisp, clear "go."

When a cue isn't instantaneous, like a bump or a blackout, the operator needs to be told how long it should take to execute. While you may find "give me a slow fade" perfectly acceptable, you can ensure that everyone has the same concept of *slow* by asking for "fade to black in three counts." Three counts (or however many) is the length of time it takes to say "One thousand one, one thousand two, one thousand three." If you provide the "go" and count out the cue, then everyone has the closest possible idea of your intentions.

Once you add up the cues and their associated standbys and readys for 2 to 12 lamps, there's a lot to be said in calling a show.

Although *you* may no longer have to concentrate carefully on calling the cues (because you've done this show so many times you could do it in your sleep), your operators don't know the show and must concentrate carefully on listening.

In a fast-paced show, they must also think about what their hands will do next. This, naturally, is in addition to running the lamp and maintaining the arc.

Conducting a talk show to fill up the silence between cues may entertain you, but your captive audience may not give you rave reviews. While the best cue callers establish a relationship with their operators with a little chatter, or a story or joke, once the show starts they get down to business.

Being clear and concise work together. Try to refine your calling to put the maximum information into the fewest words.

One Word is Worth A Thousand Pictures

Nobody likes the backseat driver who says "Take this exit" as you pass it two lanes out, or the cue caller who waits until he wants the cue happening before letting the spot men in on the secret. Running a followspot, like driving a car, calls for physical and mental preparation before many actions. A large part of being considerate consists of allowing them am-

ple warning time.

Ideally, a "standby" should precede a cue by 30 to 45 seconds, and include a complete description of the cue. About five seconds before the "go," give your men a "ready" including the numbers of the spots affected and maybe a quick reminder of what will happen. This "ready" warns operators to get their hands in position. A typical sequence could be:

"Standby spot one to blackout; spot two to snap to color #4 on the same cue."

"Ready both spots."

"One and two . . . go."

When cues are coming up hot and heavy, you may have to skip the "standbys" and rely on very clear "readys."

If two or more spots will perform different cues on the same "go," tell them they are sharing the same "go." When the spots are going on separate "gos" very close together, indicate this to the operators and include each spot's number in the "go," e.g. "Lamp one — go."

Since cue-calling isn't a textbook subject, you'll find you develop your own style as you gain experience. Remember

Terminology

Standby — The first description of a cue is usually phrased as "Standby to . . ." do whatever the LD wants done. It includes the number of the spot(s) which will be working, and details what, when, whom.

Ready — Reminder of cue just prior to its execution. Should include the spot(s) number and a brief description of the cue if 2 or more cues are to occur close together.

Go — Do it, now.

Blackout — Instantaneous shutting out of the beam, accomplished with dowser (if the lamp is equipped with one) or with iris and shutter.

Bump/Snap — A quick cue. "Bump in" means turn the beam on instantaneously. Snap usually is used in reference to color changes, signifying a fast change.

Fade — A slower cue. Usually the LD states the "count" or time the fade should take. One can "fade in" — bring the light on; or "fade out" — turn the light off.

Dowse — To use the "dowser" or built-in "dimmer" of the followspot. The term means fade if applied to a lamp lacking a dowser.

Roll — Describes a slow color change. "Roll to color #2" means to go into color #2 while removing the previous color equally slowly.

Color Numbers refer to the position of each color in its frame within the color boomerang. Counting towards the operator and away from the operator are equally accepted procedure, so establish which order will be used at each show.

Spotlight Numbers are usually designated by the LD at each hall. Use whatever makes sense to you in deciding which spot will be what number. If the spot operators insist you use their numbering scheme, give in gracefully. It is easier for you to look at a crib sheet one night than to spend that whole show reminding the operators what numbers they are tonight.

Followspots...

that often it's not really *what* you say but the manner in which you say it that's important. Strive for consistency in calling.

It usually takes the first 10 minutes of a show for cue callers and spot operators to get adjusted to each other. They will adjust best and fastest if your calls are consistent; they can deal with your "readys" being 45 seconds too early if they are *always* 45 seconds early. If you use a particular way of describing a cue early in the show, try to continue the practice throughout. It isn't possible to be totally consistent — especially with an unpredictable performer — but you should try.

You know those shows that make you want to retire — the ones in which they add a new song you've never heard, and somewhere the lighting system loses a phase so all the stage lights aren't there, and then one of the spot operators loses his arc and can't restrike and hold while the other lamp is out changing carbons. "If you can keep your head while all about you are losing theirs..." you'll be a good cue caller.

When you're using a good intercom system, you're whispering in somebody's ear.

Think about that before you shout, curse or ridicule.

Courtesy Counts

Incompetent and uncaring spot operators do exist. They are rare. Most problems in followspot performance are attributable to the caller failing to be clear, consistent, concise and courteous. Don't compound the problem by losing your cool. A caller who opens with "Pick up Harry" and works up to "PICKUP HARRY, YOU STUPID S.O.B.!" while the operator is vainly asking "Which one is Harry?" is begging for rotten spot work. He will usually get it. Speaking from both sides of the fence, many operators deserve more credit for interpretive ability than callers merit for ability to communicate.

Spot operators are human. They appreciate a compliment when they do something well. Remember that if you must chew out an operator during a show, it is done in the hearing of everyone else who is on the headset. Be as tactful as possible. And if you really must scream, take the headset off first!

In general, realize that spot operators vary widely in expertise. A good designer may carry in his head a "beginner," an

"intermediate," and an "advanced" version of the spot cues he wants, and after a couple of minutes will adjust the complexity of the cues to the abilities of the operators. Sometimes the physical condition of the spotlights must be taken into consideration. The best spot operators will have problems running lamps more suited to the junk pile than the theater.

To gain a real first-hand feel for what information a spot operator needs to hear, run a lamp yourself when someone else is calling cues. Once you know how it feels from the doing end, you'll have a much better idea of how to approach the talking end. Then see how smoothly it can happen and how good it can look! □

About the Author
Rosemary Heath is co-founder and senior partner of Consolidated Edification Inc., New York City. She has designed lighting for the Central Park Music Festival for the past seven years. Previously, Rosemary did the lighting design and production for the 1976 Labelle tour, then worked with Sara Dash and Nona Hendryx, two members of the band. She is a technical consultant and lighting designer.

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