

The Flash! Bang! Effect
My concept for Our ACT Production of *Chicago*
By John Elliott (2008 June 28)

CONCEPT/CONCEIT

During *Chicago*, there no fewer than a dozen flash powder camera outfits set off. These are usually indicated by “Flash! Bang!” in the script. The flash powder used in those days was loud and the flash was very bright.

I have chosen to expand on the nature of this “Flash! Bang!” (camera) effect as a unifying concept for the entire production of the play.

Maurine Watkins pinpoints certain details in the script that, in a normal production, would sadly go unnoticed. But they are important moments or images and I don’t want to lose all of them. Take, for instance, this from the set description that opens the play, which so completely defines Roxie and her husband:

Another door [left] opens into a small closet, filled ninety-eight per cent with feminine garments; two pairs of trousers and a coat are accorded one hook in the corner.

Sadly, we’ll never be able to reproduce *that* particular image from the stage, but I use it to give the idea of what I am after: to focus the audience’s attention momentarily on an important moment or image that the author has given us to delight in.

This focusing of the audience’s attention on those items of momentary importance will be done with lights (strobe & spotlights), the explosion sound of the flash powder igniting, all combined with the actors’ momentarily freezing in place . . . before the action continues: a photograph. Sometimes this “photo” will be of an item on the set (such as the Victrola or the empty Marshall Field’s box).

All the cameras used in the play are those of newspaper photographers; the end result of which is a grainy image that the public is greeted by from the pages of their morning or evening newspapers. The graininess is, of course, caused by the screening of the image required to print the halftones from black to white, of grays would not be possible. It is this screening that I will be using to paint (texture/shade) the set.

THE SET

There are four different settings in *Chicago*. But we are going to do all of them within the confines of a single 3-wall, 3-door, 2-window background. The wall will be base coated with a color imitating that of newspaper. Then, the details will be painted on to resemble a screened photo.

The lower portion of the wall will be a wooden wainscoting topped with a chair rail. The upper portion of the wall will be “white” (newspaper-colored) with a low rail (lower than a picture rail) from which mirrors, pictures, and hat/coat racks can be hung when necessary.

All rooms will appear at first “identical,” but can be colored by light to alter their upper-wall appearance. For instance, Roxie’s bedroom should red, the jail walls can be either white or greenish, and the courtroom should be in the blue or brown tones.

The set pieces will *not* be painted like the walls. They will be painted realistically.

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All further differentiation from setting to setting will be done thru the various *arrangements* of set pieces, and by the display of a masthead (or nameplate) over each set that tells the audience what the time, day, and location is. This masthead is approximately 16' long and 2' wide and will somehow be lowered in at the beginning of each act or scene, then taken away so as not to interfere with the lights. It, too, will be newspaper colored – as it is being made to resemble the top of a newspaper's front page:

The Chicago Billiken
6:58 p.m. Friday April 3rd 1924 The Bedroom of Amos Hart and others

The last detail to set this concept is to try and include life-sized cardboard cutouts of characters in costume photographed and “screened” then printed out on large format printers and glued to the cardboard. This will be used in two instances:

- Once a speaking character has concluded all his/her speaking lines, if s/he appears again (this is mainly for the courtroom scenes) but does not move or speak, their photo look-alike will be used in their place.
- For characters who never speak or interact with others but should be present (again, the courtroom scene is the main place for this), the cutouts will be used.

THE LIGHTS & THE “MOMENTS”

Most of the flash photo moments will be during the course of a scene; some will be surrounded by moments of blackness.

The moment when each “photo” is taken is, of course, indicated by a strobe and the sound of the flash powder exploding.

- For the photos “taken” **in blackouts**, a spotlight illuminating the thing of interest should come up at the same time as the strobe and then fade slowly to black.
- For photos “taken” **during scenes**, the area of interest should be suddenly more brightly lit than the surrounding area (which should dim), then the “scene” light comes back to normal while the spotlit area dims to match the level of the scene lighting.

Outside of these moments, I want the **overall lighting** to make strong and liberal use of light *and* shadow, incorporating gobos and extreme angles (there should be no straight-on flat front light in the scene lighting). This will make the blatantly front-lit “photo” moments really stand out.

The following pages illustrate this concept using the opening scene of the play. Note: the entire opening scene will last less than one minute.

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THE OPENING SCENE – AS WRITTEN

PROLOGUE

Six fifty-eight P. M., April the third.

SCENE: Bedroom of Amos Hart and others. A corner room, first floor, in one of those cheap modern flats on Chicago's South Side. There's an entrance with fountain and flowers, but pine and beaver-board within. Mission finish to the heavily pretentious woodwork -- solid doors, beams, and molding. Furniture red and glistening like a courtesan's polished nails. Flowered paper, gaudy rugs on the wide-board floor. Everything new and tawdry, everything cheap and shiny.

Two windows [center rear] look out on the court, a door [left] opens into an adjoining room, and another [door right] into a narrow hall, with living-room straight ahead and outside door [unseen]. Another door [left] opens into a small closet, filled ninety-eight per cent with feminine garments; two pairs of trousers and a coat are accorded one hook in the corner.

Between the two windows, with foot-board to the front, is a large brass bed, with covers thrown back in confusion and pillows tossed together. At its head is a night-table, with telephone, a stoutish bottle and a couple of glasses -- empty but not unsoiled -- an ashtray, and a box of cigarettes.

At the right is a large vanity-dresser, equipped with all the known weapons of offense and instruments of preservation: bottles and atomizers, jars of cream, powder, rouge, perfumes-especially perfumes, that fill the air with their heavy cloying odors! -- silver embossed brushes and comb filled with hair; manicure set of imitation ivory; eyebrow pencils, and lipstick. And over it all a heavy film of pinkish powder. Half-closed drawers reveal shoes, intimate garments -- peach and pink crepe de chine with deep Val lace -- soiled hose, hats, and gloves, in endless confusion.

To the left of the center window -- between it and the door to the hall -- is a Victrola. There are records on the floor, sorted to the player's choice. It is playing now: heavy, rhythmic jazz, with the sinful insistence of the tom-tom and the saxophone's wailing plea.

The man [CASELY], a man perhaps of thirty, stands in the doorway, pulling on his coat and turned to go. The woman [ROXIE], a girl of twenty-three or so, stands by the foot of the bed watching him, and she steadies herself with one hand on the rail. Steadies herself from emotion perhaps, perhaps from the drink that left empty bottle.

She is slender, beautifully slender; as you can see, through the diaphanous, flashy négligée of blue georgette with its flounce of imitation lace and accordion-plaited ruffles. And the face is beautiful, too, with short upper lip, pouting mouth, tiptilted nose, wide dark eyes, skin of the finest texture, and hair the color of flame. Turned now in profile there's a hint of a Raphael angel -- with a touch of Medusa.

ROXIE (a shrill, hysterical voice that is vile in anger): You damned tightwad! (her voice is lowered with hatred) Like hell you're through! (One white arm flings around to the dresser, one white hand searches the drawer and brings forth the latest necessity of milady's boudoir: a pearl-handled .32 revolver. Her voice stabs with virulent rage.) You God-damned louse -- !

(She pulls the trigger, then stands fixed: he sways, crumples, falls-a soft, thuddy fall. Outside the window children are singing and playing under the swaying arc-light; but within there is a silence. Except for the tom-tom's sensuous beat and the saxophone's last sad wail.

From the next room comes the cheerful, idiotic call of the cuckoo: "Cuckoo . . . cuckoo . . . cuckoo . . . It's seven o'clock.

CURTAIN.

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THE OPENING SCENE – AS WE’LL PRESENT IT (subject to change)

Curtain warmer lighting fades out as the curtain begins to opens. The scene behind is dimly lit (or in blackout).

*Once the curtain is about half way open, there if a strobe flash & a bang & the **bed** is momentarily spot lit. (The spot fades to black.)*

*When the curtain is fully open, the same flash-bang process illuminates the **dresser** momentarily.*

*Then, downstage of the dresser, the **Victrola** is illuminated in the same way as above.*

*Next, the **man** [CASELY] is lit: we see him picking up a \$50 bill from the dresser. The light fades out, and CASELY then moves to the other side of the room.*

*Now **ROXIE** is flash-lit, but the light holds longer – is it going to fade? ROXIE drops the empty liquor bottle she was holding and the scene immediately illuminates fully.*

ROXIE: You damned tightwad! Like hell you're through! You God-damned louse -- !

ROXIE reaches to the dresser, knocking things off the top as she finally finds and brings into view a revolver. She steps to center, aims and shoots one shot: the same Flash! Bang! lighting and sound effect as before except that the flash powder explosion is now replaced by a loud gunshot sound.

As the scene lighting returns to normal, we see CASELY slumping against the wall. When he hits the ground, he, now, is spot lit with another Flash! Bang! effect.

Then the windows are flash-lit (the lights dimming slowly as we hear the sound of children playing outside.

And lastly, ROXIE is spot lit – the light holding on her; as the curtains closes, we hear the sound of a clock somewhere cuckooing seven times. The curtains are fully shut on the seventh cuckoo.