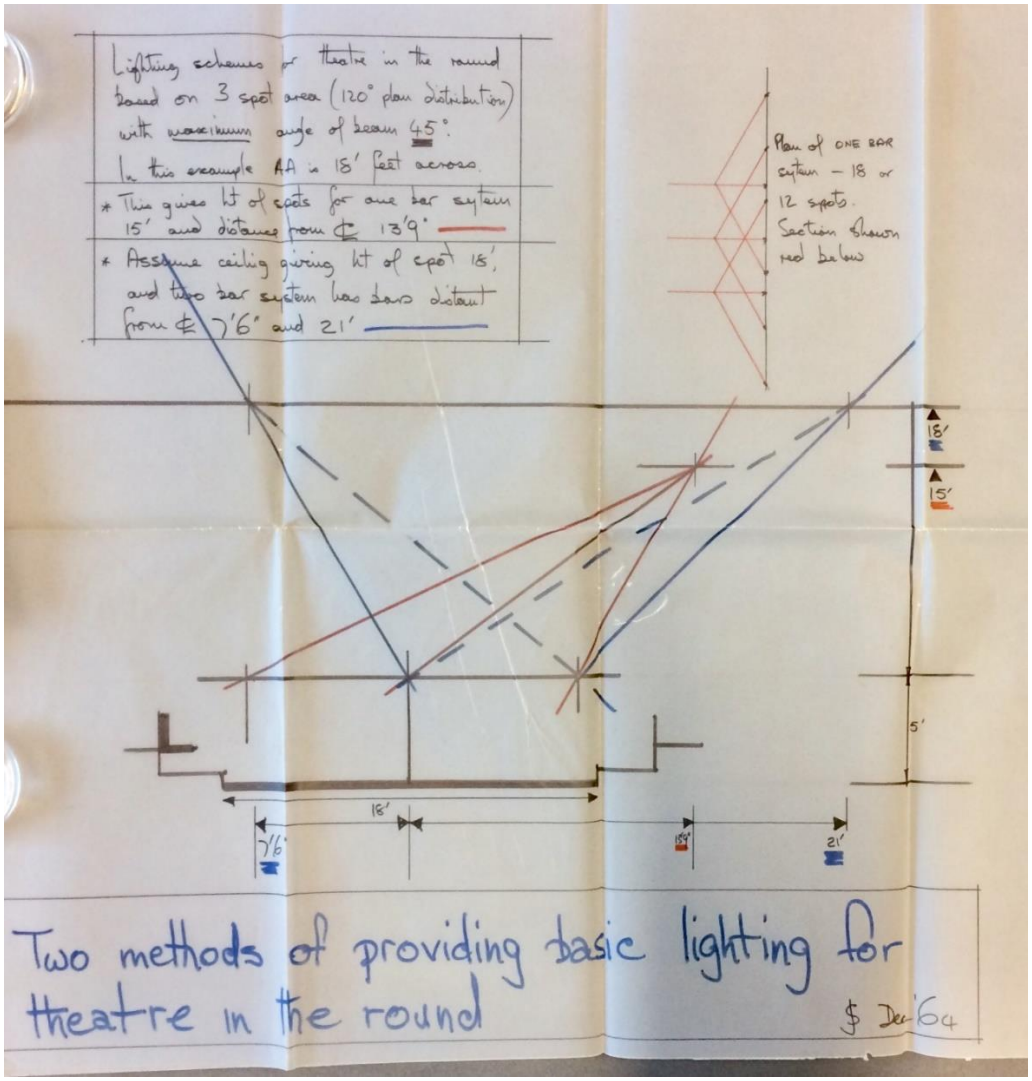
Stephen Joseph's approach to theatre lighting – Bob Millington

Stephen taught me the basics of lighting theatre in the round in one short tutorial. The working principles have been with me ever since, and through my role as Drama Lecturer handed on to future generations of students. My story is indicative of the way Stephen's innovative approaches to the open stage were spread around the country. Early in 1965 I was in my second year as a Drama and English student at Manchester University, and I needed advice on how to light an evening of three short plays in the recently-converted Studio in the German Church on campus. This was the prototype for so many black box studios that were to spring up in universities, colleges and schools in the following years.

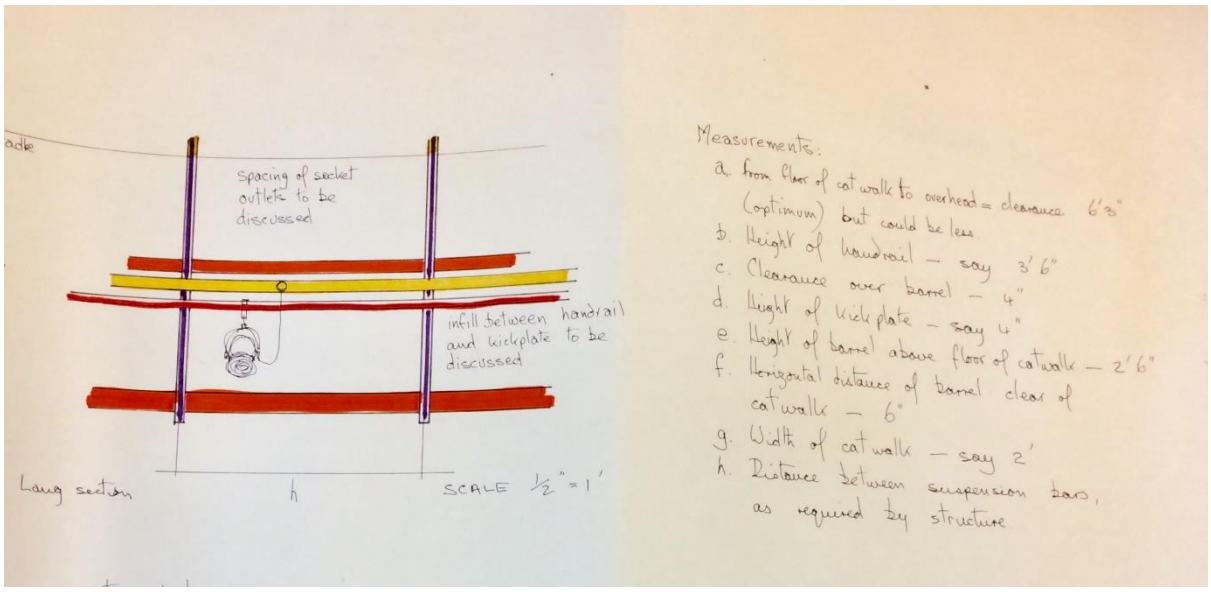
I found Stephen in his rather gloomy office on the ground floor of the building. I don't remember whether his sleeves were rolled up at the time, but they often were. Anyway, he quickly got down to business with me. The secret of successful lighting design for the round was he said, "to keep it simple". This meant using 3-point lighting for every area, to ensure that actors were evenly lit from all sides, with the 3 lanterns set at about 120° to each other. To avoid heavy shadow obscuring expression the vertical angle of these was best not to be raised much above about 45° to the horizontal, as it fell on the actor's face. Reducing the angle to less than 30° degrees was still more problematic, as you would find yourself lighting sections of the audience as much as the actor, and dazzling them in the process. It was all a bit of a juggling act that needed advanced planning on paper, to work out the optimum hanging points and avoid the problems.



Courtesy of The John Rylands University Library Manchester/ Stephen Joseph Estate

From 1962 to 1967 (in parallel to his work as Drama Fellow and Lecturer at Manchester) Stephen also worked as a theatre consultant, sharing his knowledge of up-to-date practice with architects designing new theatres that were springing up around the country. Some of his technical planning documents from this time have survived in the extensive archive of Stephen Joseph papers at the John Rylands Library in Manchester. Two of them, relating to lighting provide good examples of his input as a consultant.

The first of these dates from almost the same moment as my tutorial, and is dealing with similar issues regarding lighting theatre in the round. Though the specific theatre is unnamed, the drawing's date and features suggest it relates to the new Manchester University Theatre building (now the main house of the Contact Theatre) where Stephen was working in collaboration with its architect. Since his arrival at the University in 1962, Stephen had been working hard to get the specifications and plans for this building changed from the provision of a traditional proscenium theatre to a more flexible space, better-suited for contemporary Drama. By 1964 significant changes had been made to the plans and the drawing cross-section demonstrates the lighting arrangement options when the building was set up for theatre in the round. When looked at closely, it will be noticed that one of the 'two methods for providing basic lighting for theatre in the round' is by no means ideal. It would, indeed, produce a very uneven perspective as it was utilizing lanterns hung from only one border batten over the permanent stage. Stephen generally disliked appearing dogmatic and, as a consultant, recognised the importance of offering his clients a choice, even when one of them, as here, was not really an acceptable one. It possibly was intended simply as a mechanism to help the architect start thinking "outside the box" and to provide better lighting bar positions in the auditorium.



Courtesy of the John Rylands University of Manchester Library/Stephen Joseph Estate

The second drawing relates to the provision of lighting cat walks in the University of Lancaster Arts Centre (eventually to be the Nuffield Theatre) when Stephen was working in collaboration with the architects Shepheard and Epstein on the development of this new purpose-build facility on the brand-new campus, and is dated February, 1966. The drawing shown above, forms part of a larger plan and reveals Stephen's attention to detail in ensuring that the cradle structure, hanging bar, trunking and kick-board were all disposed in a way to support easy and safe access to the equipment.

Long and laborious fit-ups used to be the order of the day. Typically, this would require work from ground-level on ladders or towers to rig and hang, and necessitate the movement of rostra and seating. It was only with the Nuffield theatre project, that Stephen managed to achieve a viable alternative – a catwalk scheme that fully separated lighting installation from workings on the stage below. Sadly, he died before the Theatre opened in 1968, and was never able to see for himself what he had achieved, in one of the largest black box theatres in the UK. However, in 1983, I was able to make use of the cat walks myself when I took a touring production into the Nuffield Theatre. They made the whole process of setting up and re-angling the lighting so much easier and saved everyone at least a couple of hours in the process. I had no idea when I was in the building that Stephen had been involved in its development. If I had known, I would certainly have taken the opportunity to admire his handywork more closely! So, thank you, Stephen Joseph! You tried to make everyone's work in technical theatre easier and more efficient. You may not have been an absolute innovator in relation to lighting practice, but in the best traditions of the ABTT, the association you helped to set up, you played a significant role in advancing new ideas and sharing good practice.

(SJC Member, formerly Senior Lecturer Drama and Media, Liverpool John Moores University)