# Limelight Encyclopedia Article

## Limelight

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# Limelight

The invention of limelight may not have been welcomed by all theater directors in the 1800s. Suddenly, their actors began competing for the most desirable area of the stage--the front and center, which could be brightly illuminated for the first time with Thomas Drummond's (1797-1840) new theatrical spotlight. The light was produced by pointing a hot torch at a solid block of lime (calcium oxide). When heated, the lime gave off a bright, soft white light that was easy to focus on a small area by using a mirror as a reflector. Drummond, born in Scotland in 1797, invented limelight in 1816 and first used it during a survey of Ireland in 1825. Drummond's early limelight was based on a torch that burned hydrogen and oxygen, which had been developed by Robert Hare (1781-1858), an American chemist. Although limelight was considered for lighthouse applications, the cost of production was too high. In 1837 limelight found its niche in the theater, where it was used not only to spotlight actors but also to create realistic special effects such as moonlight on a river or clouds moving through the sky. However, limelight had a major disadvantage; it required constant attention by a stagehand to keep turning the block of lime and tending the gas torch. In the late 1800s, limelight began to be replaced by electric arc spotlights. But its name has lived on; we still speak today of "basking in the limelight" of popularity or attention.