

# Rented Light

Once upon a time – and that time was little more than twenty years ago – there was only one British lighting hire firm of any consequence. Hire was part of a package through which that one firm dominated the stage lighting hardware market by manufacturing, selling and hiring the entire product range. Through one of the softest sell house magazines in the history of controlled circulation journalism, and one of the most readably literate engineers in the history of technical books and catalogues and lectures, this firm ensured that there was little conflict between the needs of the user and the equipment available.

In the late fifties another firm broke in and grabbed a substantial slice of the major west-end long-run hire market in no time at all. The equipment offered by these new boys was basically that manufactured by the established chaps. It was going to be very late in the sixties before any other manufacturers would make a significant dent in the market, other than some discounted follow-my-leader designs for the educational stages.

Throughout the later sixties and earlier seventies, the growth of entertainment lighting accelerated. With mechanical engineers giving way to electronic whizzers and computer programmers, a foothold in the market place became easier. The industry became internationalised and the customers became more articulate than the manufacturers. (There is a possible future thesis for someone in an analysis of the changes in lighting – both hardware and software – brought about by the shift in

control of the literature from the manufacturers to the users.)

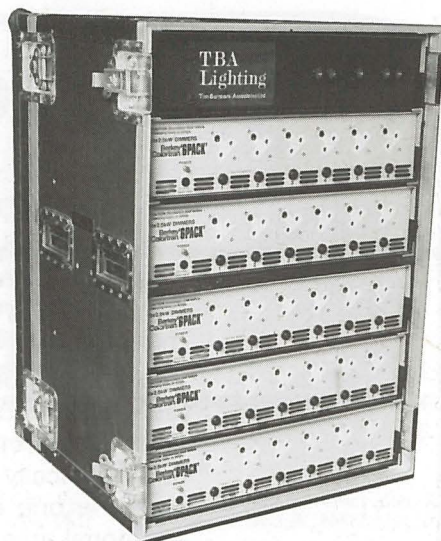
Stage lighting has now become a more conventional wholesale/retail operation. There is still considerable direct selling at the top end of the market but it is increasingly to the small retailer that we must turn – and are happy to turn – for our bread and butter lighting requirements, whether on sale or on hire.

Sale or hire – buy or rent – is a basic decision of lighting management.

For a theatre with a resident company producing its own shows, a semi-permanent flexible rig of bought equipment is almost certainly the correct cost-effective decision. But for nearly every other form of entertainment lighting where there is a landlord and tenant situation between the building and the producing company, there is a strong case for considering hiring the lighting equipment. This has long been the practice in London's west end and has been adopted for the big-budgeted touring that promotes the stars created by the recording industry.

## Financial Advantages

The costs are clearly known and are fixed. This simplifies budgeting and removes one of the great imponderables – lamp maintenance (normally included unless negotiated otherwise) – from the area of risk, and consequently reduces the amount of contingency provision necessary. With so much theatre accountancy based on a weekly balance, the inclusive weekly charge of a rental system simplifies accounting



*Flight case packaging by TBA Lighting.*

procedures. When a show is financed by investors, the accountancy charges and complications of amortising purchase and maintenance costs are a deterrent to equipment ownership – particularly when so many producing managements consist of a skeleton staff with small offices and minimal storage. Quite simply, it can be cheaper to let a rental company carry the maintenance problems and the financial risk.

## Technical Advantages

The equipment is clean, electrically safe, and mechanically sound. The cable runs are prepared with the specified parings all combined into labelled cable harnesses. On a west-end changeover with the customary fast turn round, there is just not sufficient time to clean, service, and re-organise the equipment from a long run: the only practical schedule is to get the complete old rig out and bring an entirely new one in. Similarly, for a tour the rig has to come from workshops ready to erect at the first venue in a time which in most other industries would be considered unrealistic. Good rental shops are geared to this type of operation. And it is easier to tour with a known rig than to cope with strange equipment on a weekly or daily basis.

## Artistic Advantages

When using existing equipment, it is often necessary to utilise a less than ideal item of equipment just because it is there. When hiring, it is possible to specify exactly the right instrument for the job.

## But, and it is a large BUT

If the equipment is *not* clean, electrically safe, and mechanically sound, the rental company is cutting corners to cut costs. Having to change two or three profiles during focussing because of jammed shutters or slipping locks can be an expensive exercise in terms of time. Hire companies are like every other commercial exercise: you get what you pay for.



*Part of the large Hire Department at Donmar Sales & Hire.*