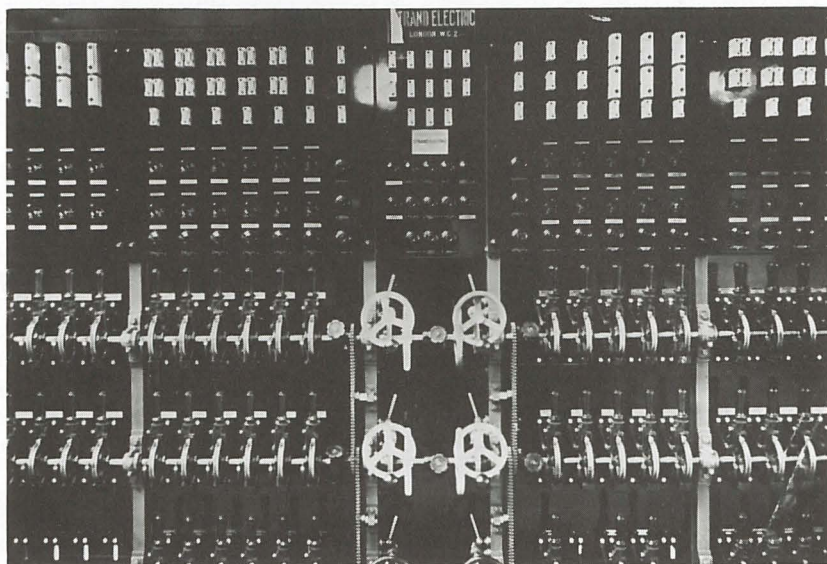


*Stage Lighting.* Bentham was referred to in a recent issue of CUE as 'being perhaps the father of British Theatre Lighting'. I think he would deprecate the suggested paternity, not from any lack of self appreciation I hasten to add, but from any consequent inference of impending senility. I am told that the latest revised edition of the book is now available. After this unsolicited plug I expect to receive an autographed free copy.

Forty years ago a reasonably well equipped proscenium stage would have had three or four compartment battens, a No. 1 twelve way Spot Bar, a compartment footlight and half a dozen F.O.H. Spots. Obviously this was before we were expected to think in tens of everything except eggs. There would have been a mechanically robust and bulky board embodying resistance dimmers in 48 or 60 circuits. Today if a similar type of theatre has been modernised the battens and footlights would be absent, except for lighting backcloths or a cyclorama. Over the acting area there could be anything from 50 to 100 spots of various types and there would certainly be a generous proliferation of F.O.H. Spots.

The most flexible of the old directly operated dimmer boards was impressively named a Grand Master. One of the last of that type was installed in the Blackpool Opera House in 1938. It had 90 dimmers and was 13ft. 6ins. wide and 7ft. 10ins. high, sited, as was customary, on a sturdy platform in the prompt corner. Even an operator wearing roller skates would have been over stretched when coping with the timing of complicated cues: two operators were usually necessary. Obviously there were physical limits to the number of dimmer channels that could be controlled in this fashion. As the numbers increased technical inventiveness had to be concentrated on systems of remote control: father Bentham's organ console was an early type, controlling large banks of motor driven dimmers remotely situated. It is in this field of condensed control that technical ingenuity has been most conspicuously demonstrated, aided and abetted by the arrival of thyristor dimmers and computers. In the March/April issue of CUE Adrian Dightam reviewed ten different but basically similar types of compact panels, some controlling anything up to a thousand memorised cues, others having more modest capacities. To those of us who are electronically illiterate the technical specifications of such controls are mumbo-jumbo of disconcerting obscurity. Fortunately one can learn to manipulate the most complicated of the magic boxes without having any knowledge of why the controls respond so miraculously to a modicum of finger-tip dexterity. We can, of course, learn to drive motor cars without having even elementary notions of the component technology and manage to operate with moderate expertise: there are not infrequent lethal casualties but these are mostly due to reckless ineptitude, not to faults of the mechanism.

In the professional theatre there has arisen an elite corps of lighting designers



*An early Grand Master lighting control – two operators were usually necessary. (photo Rank Strand)*

whose experience has fostered a desire to have maximum facilities for subtle variations of light and shade in their striving to achieve the Apian fluctuations of appearance in that phenomenal world of the stage. Their promptings have stimulated the inventive genius of the technical lads who now vie with each other in devising controls of impressive versatility. The danger is that one may become so fascinated by the versatility that the basic purpose is obscured.

What matters most, of course, is not the expansion of ways and means but the capacity for effective use of whatever may be the ways and means available. There are still a lot of lighting enthusiasts, both professional and amateur, who have neither the means nor the need to acquire extravagantly sophisticated equipment. Some of them are still compelled to rely on a limited range of light sources and comparatively simple control units. Although the resistance dimmer is now obsolescent there are still stages with light control restricted to the humble Junior 8 or, possibly, if the original owners had been a little more prosperous, they might have a 24-way bracket handle board. If so they should not be despondent or inhibited. Although their facilities may be lamentably restricted the basic principles of lighting remain unchanged. The first need is to provide appropriate visibility that can be varied to add significance to the pictures being created. There must be a clear idea of the visual effect being sought. There must be a sensitive appreciation of what can be achieved with whatever equipment is available. There must be a knowledge of what additional units can be hired or borrowed if there is an imperative need which cannot otherwise be met.

An appreciation of the principles of pictorial composition must be developed. Each of the constantly changing stage pictures must have visual quality, an artistry of line and form and of the essential focal points that must blend emphatically but not obtrusively. Whatever may be the scale of the production or the limitations of

facilities there is the need for artistry. Fortunately there is universal distribution of the divine spark. Each of us is a bit of an artist, an attempt at an artist, and however little the bit or unsuccessful the attempt there is an ability to develop appreciation of the detail of visual expression.

There are numerous books dealing with the problems of stage lighting. It is possible to select those most likely to assist the ambitious beginner. They cannot *teach* him (as always the masculine embraces the feminine) the subtleties of artistry. They can suggest what the palette for painting with light should consist of and how it should be used. They cannot offer any specific formula for creation of a masterpiece. They can help the serious student to learn by experience if he knows what he wishes to express and has the guts to have a go. He will often learn more from failure than from success if he can recognise which is which.

The tyro must realise that he should never use light just for the fun of demonstrating ingenuity of control. Light waves should be used as the actor should use sound waves, to interpret to an audience the creation of the dramatist: both must have light, shade and colour to achieve subtleties of emphasis.

The extent and sophistication of the apparatus cannot guarantee success: that must always depend on the quality of the individual involved. The would-be lighting artist must be willing to give a lot of thought and time to the job and, unlike the actor, must not expect the reward of applause from the audience. The best lighting usually results from the least obvious use of light. If he has the essential critical ability to judge his own work objectively, not being satisfied too readily with approval or too easily deterred by criticism he will learn much from disappointments and, just occasionally, he will have a glow of satisfaction when he knows that the job has been well done. Like all other mortals he can never command success but at least he should make every effort to deserve it.