

JOE DAVIS – THE PIONEER

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With the death of Joe Davis, early this July, just after conducting a lighting rehearsal of *42nd Street* at Drury Lane, the theatre has lost a real pioneer and those who knew him, a friend who was great company. For many years Joe had suffered a heart condition which used to shoot him off to the local emergency ward from time to time. There to recover as quickly as he could and it was back to lighting a show – another to make up his total of nearly six hundred.

Joe Davis was the first in this country to have his name regularly on the programme as 'doing' the lighting – in other words, as the lighting designer. It is commonplace today to sum up progress in stage lighting in terms of the changes in technology; particularly, the ones concerning dimmers and their control. In an ambience of chips and computers the man who decides in what manner all this equipment should be deployed, who lights the show or paints the stage with light – put it how you like – could be submerged. That this is not so is in large part due to Joe Davis, founder in 1961 and first chairman of the Society of British Theatre Lighting Designers; later its Life President, a role he continued when it was enlarged as the Association of Lighting Designers a couple of years ago.

Joe had a marvellous memory and was a born raconteur and his own words, in an article he wrote for *Tabs* of December 1963 provide a witty but authentic evocation of his first job at the time of his thirteenth birthday:

"In December, 1925, accompanied by my mother, I presented myself at the premises of the Strand Electric, 24 Floral Street, to be interviewed for a 'position'. A position seemed a little more attractive than a job! My mother having convinced the foreman of the sheet metal shop that he would never regret having the foresight to employ such a potential gift to industry (subsequent events have proven this was not strictly true), I was engaged at the princely sum of 3½d. per hour.

"I was introduced to a world of cowed gas rings, gas fumes and the pungent smell of spirits of salts as the hot soldering irons were plunged into the pot, the hammering of rivets, sheet metal of every size and shape and tea in large tin mugs, cheese cake and bread and dripping – the staple diet for the tea breaks. The tin mug was made by each tinsmith to his own capacity and design. The shop produced every type of lantern used in those days and the craftsmanship was of a very high standard. From very scanty drawings they could produce a flambeau, candelabra, trick boxes, intricate signs and chandeliers that looked real, and, of course, tin mugs."

After 18 months Joe left this to work in Strand's outside fit-up department; which meant that by 1928 he was "going out on tour with productions of various managements, such as C.B. Cochran, Julian Wylie,

Clayton & Waller and others as fit-up electrician rigging and setting all the equipment." Today the job would be called production electrician and the backstage photograph of the Palace, Manchester, in 1933 shows him (on the left) during the fit-up for *Gay Hussar*. For it's time this was a very big musical and in an interview for *Sightline* in 1976 he described it and the techniques of those times in some detail:

"We managed to get sixteen Patt 43's, the old focus spotlight, on the No 1 Bar which was pretty good going. On the perches we had 43's on stands to crosslight the down-stage area but there were no booms. You must remember that what you were dealing with in those days was a very different style of production. The scene painting was of such a quality that you could use an even wash from a batten and the shadows and details were there – sunlight, depth and perspective. There was no question, as today, of using the lamps to make real shadows of realistic scenery. The sets were mainly of canvas and timber and painted with such artistry that you could create practically any effect with the battens, coloured to enhance the skill of the painter.

"You had no problem of staffing. There could be as many as twelve electricians and up to four operators on the main switchboard. An operator had to be an acrobat or an octopus to execute cross fades and black-outs with a fast return. It was not unusual for the production staff to work two or three all-nights and rates of pay were low even by the standards of the day. Heads of Departments, as we were called, were paid a basic salary irrespective of the hours we worked. In a musical there were usually two men on the arcs – the old 40 amp type – in the bio-box or at the corners of the Upper Circle. Arcs on the perches had ceased of course but there would be men there to change the colours or the setting of the Patt 43's. It was the same on the stage. You could have as many stage floods or mobile spots as you wanted for backings or backcloths. I favoured the use of Towers as did Hassard Short and these were moved and re-positioned by men detailed to them.

Hassard Short was an American producer (as we called directors then) who did *Waltzes from Vienna* in August 1931 at the old Alhambra theatre, Leicester Square. It took the town by storm, as they say, but to us technicians it was his use of massed spots on the circle front that caught our eye. This was a real first. Short's lighting was outstanding and *Stop Press* at The Adelphi in February 1935 was the peak of what could be done with lanterns of the type common before the new range of Pageants, Acting Areas and Mirror spots was introduced in my 1936 catalogue. It was sometime in 1932 that I first met Joe Davis, when he dropped in to see what the new Seecol demonstration theatre in Floral Street was like. Thereafter we never quite lost contact and although it

was not always a matter of 'honeyed' words (how could it be in theatre!) between us, advancing years brought a genuine friendship. When together we often used to wonder what the lighting of shows in the days of such limited technical resources really had been like. Here is Joe on the subject:

"I suppose that memory can play tricks but when I look back on the shows I saw and worked on in those days they were very well lit and had marvellous visual effects. I remember the last scene of Wylie's *Good Companions* when Jess Oakroyd is going off to Canada. There was a cloth painted black for the side of the liner. There were holes cut in it for portholes with two Patt 49's in Amber to light them up. There was a canvas gang plank – you could't walk up it of course. There was a bit of smoke, the sound of a ship's siren blown by an air cylinder and a few bits of rope and 19 Blue in the batten. Jess was discovered downstage with his back to the audience, looking up at the great liner. A follow spot in No. 17 steel blue picked him up and as he walked slowly upstage towards the gang-plank the curtain came slowly down. So with great economy and simplicity you had all the atmosphere of a great liner leaving her berth.

"My interest in and appreciation of what can be done with lighting was really roused when working with Komisarjevsky. He was a stimulating producer, a designer in his own right and a creative and exciting lighting man. Then there was *Blackbirds* in 1936 where I clocked up two firsts. It was the first time I started to do drawings or layouts of what I was going to use before I went into a theatre and it was the first time my name actually went on the bill outside the theatre as responsible for the lighting."

This meticulous planning on paper in advance was for a long time peculiar to Joe's way of working, it is commonplace now. With few exceptions the pre-war shows – even those in London – can be thought of as tours because the house facilities were so limited. Indeed some of the variety houses, provincial dates and super cinemas were much better equipped than a West End theatre: they had to be, in order to cope with the regular Monday change-over. A number of portable interlocking boards had almost always to be used wherever you went. These were 6-way and 12-way weighing 2 cwts and 3-cwts respectively; so although they were called 'portable interlockers' the word 'movable' was more appropriate. The big problem as Joe saw it –

"... was that if you took a show out of London on tour, or even across London to another theatre, you would be faced with different types of current, different voltages and different plugs and sockets. Varying voltages meant lamp changes to suit and the nature of the current affected the use of effects motors. All this and the continual