

Cover.

Act II of the new Verdi *Otello* at the Royal Opera House. Timothy O'Brien's spacious Venetian settings worked equally well for public crowd and intimate scenes. Requiring only one central interval the dramatic and musical momentum was thrillingly sustained throughout this great opera (Photo: Catherine Ashmore).

CUE

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ONE STOP SHOPPING?

Preoccupation with agonising over subsidy shortfalls tends to disguise the enormous growth in staged entertainment that has taken place in recent years. Performances have increased in number and diversity using, almost without exception, more technology. The flattening of the subsidy growth curve does not appear to have reduced the size of lighting rigs. The budgets for rock tours and trade shows are sufficiently generous to ensure that the success of an effect is rarely prejudiced for the sake of candle-end economies. The growth of alternative theatres and arts centres has ensured that stage space is more often defined by lighting than by a proscenium—for many performance situations, technology has replaced architecture and offers considerably more flexibility. Drama in schools has developed from an end-of-term incidental to an integral part of the curriculum requiring classrooms dedicated and equipped as studios.

So there is a healthy market for the hardware of stage technology.

Demand has stimulated manufacture, with an ever widening product range available to the customer. Recent years have seen a swing away from the traditional direct selling by manufacturers towards distribution through dealer networks which ensure that appropriate stocks, spares, and specialist service expertise are positioned for quick access by users. Dealers, however, are expected to demonstrate brand loyalty and their contracts seldom allow them to offer competitive products.

This is not particularly convenient for customers who increasingly expect to combine the most suitable bits from several manufacturer's ranges. Some manufacturers, particularly in lighting, seem determined to try to hang on to the concept of being able to supply a complete package. Could such a marketing strategy be an out-moded concept, perhaps more concerned with boosting corporate ego than serving the best interests of customers and therefore shareholders?

Consumer power has become a growing influence in the theatre technology industry: witness the acceleration of arrivals and departures, of growths and declines, and of mergers and takeovers. The time seems ripe for another step in the development of our industry. Should we now perhaps move from direct selling and dealerships into more conventional retailing, with a full range on offer from specialist shops—supermarkets, minimarkets and mail order, according to geographical demand? Or, in the brewery language that lies so close to the hearts of all we entertainers, shall we see a swing from tied house to free house?

Ian Albery believes in the concept of the one-stop store and his Donmar operation, in the heart of Covent Garden, has been reborn as the shop that will sell you anything made by anybody in theatre technology. With advertising slogans like 'we can match or better any quote', he looks determined to become the technical theatre's equivalent of the John (never knowingly undersold) Lewis Partnership.

Donmar has always carried a wide range of non-lighting products and for many years they have displayed scenic ironmongery for self-selection by those of us who know the sort of thing we want but are not sure what it is called. Like all supermarket shopping, such an approach widens the buyer's horizons and boosts the seller's turnover.

Is this type of retailing the future? Cue suggests that the growing diversity of manufactured product makes it inevitable. Will manufacturers gradually find that a more effective use of their sales and marketing budgets is to concentrate on detailed technical literature and advertising, with field sales forces used mainly to liaise with retailers, meeting customers directly only at trade fairs and conferences?

The Donmar one-stop-shop may be the prototype for a change in our theatre technology buying habits.