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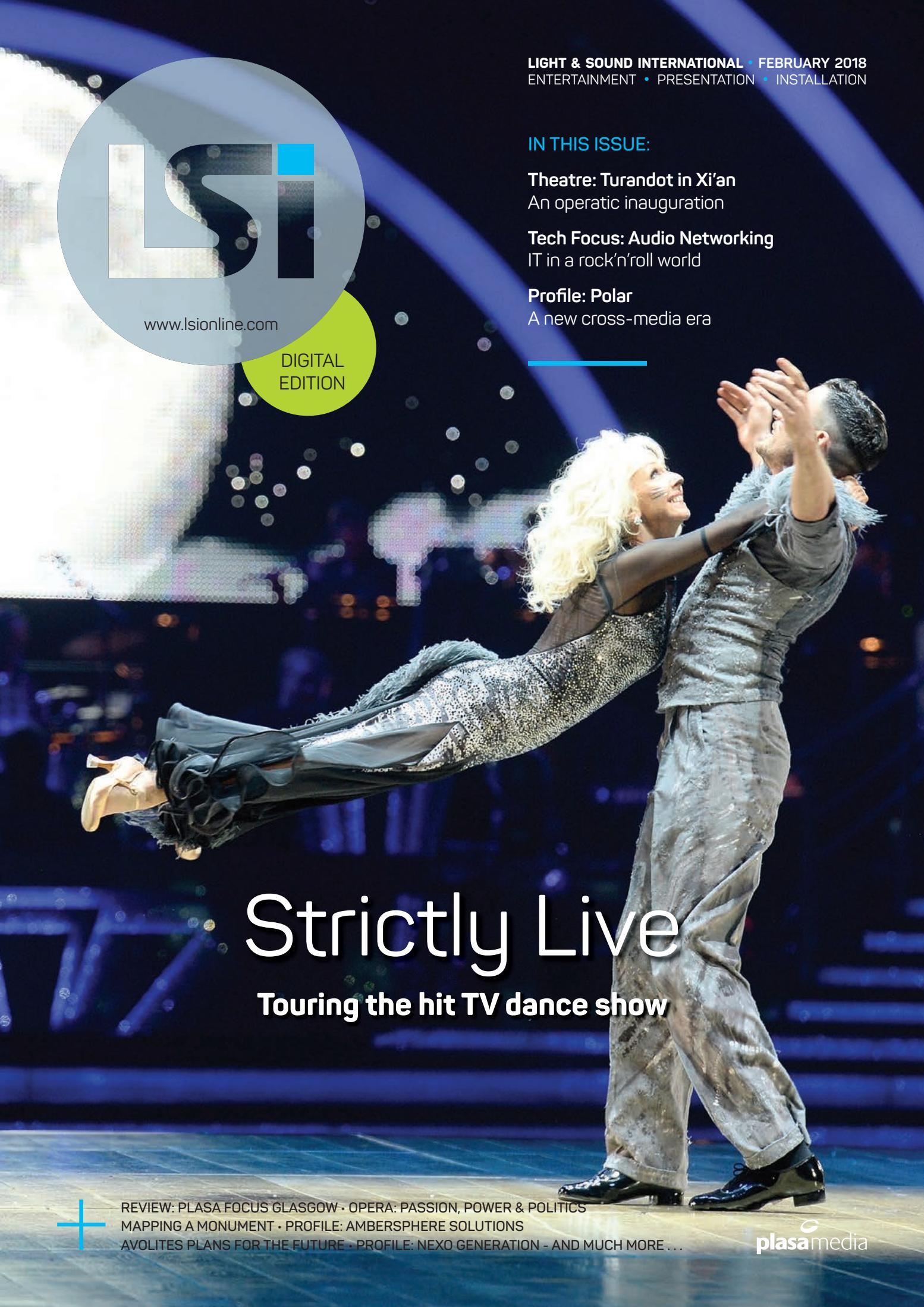
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Grelco | by Rob Halliday ...

"If you work in theatre lighting in the UK, you probably say this a dozen times a day without thinking about it. What you're actually after is a two-way splitter."

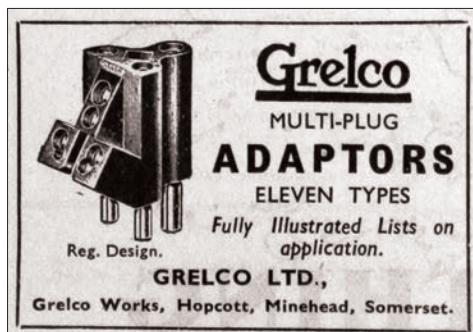
→ Sometimes the thing you think you know isn't actually quite the thing you *really* know; the name you say isn't actually quite the right name at all. It's the Hoover syndrome: we all own a hoover, but very few of us actually now own a Hoover. Whether the original company chooses to be flattered by that or to refer it to their trademark attorneys is, of course, up to them ...

So: Grelco. If you work in theatre lighting in the UK, you probably say this a dozen times a day without even thinking about it. What you're actually after is a two-way splitter, a device to let you plug two lights into one dimmer. A 'twofer', the Americans would call it, but that's usually two sockets on two bits of cable wired back into one plug. What you probably expect is a neat, small, rectangular, plastic device that has the three round 15A pins protruding on one side and two 15A outlets on the other. A grelco.

Except it's not: it's a Snapper or a Lumex or a similar product, most now originating in South Africa where domestic wiring still uses 15A plugs and sockets and so the device is like a British four-way adapter.

A real grelco - a Grelco - was a much earlier version. It's recognisably the same idea - one moulded shape featuring one plug and multiple sockets - but of a different material, Bakelite, and a different design. The manufacturer was the Grafton Electric Company (originally of Grafton Street in London W1). Take the first two letters of each word in the company name, put them together and you get that familiar name: GRELCO.

The company billed its product, the Grelco Multi-Plug Adaptor, as "revolutionary



and outstanding in design". It was available from the late 1940s or early 1950s in the various outlet types available at the time, 5A and 15A, to give two outlets wherever one was available, to adapt between the different types, or to do both - a 15/5 Grelco ideal for pairing effect projector lamps, which Strand's rental division of the day supplied with 15A plugs, and the effect motor, supplied as 5A.

Other companies, Clang and Volex, came along with similar products, but the Grelco design didn't foul switches

on socket outlets, and could be stacked if more outlets were needed. That 'flexibility' perhaps played a part in the ultimate demise of the 'real' Grelco: though it had a minor redesign in 1974 to add a shroud around the ends of the pins to protect you against shock when unplugging, they could also be plugged in upside down leaving the extra pin exposed, and had no protective shrouding to the sockets. By the late 1970s this was no longer allowed; the familiar plastic Snapper products arrived from South Africa soon afterwards to fill the gap, carefully designed to avoid just those issues (for example, you can stack them neatly for storage, but doing so covers the second outlet).

They're all still 'grelcos', though, a shorthand we all share (we've also derived a related word, 'trelico', for the three-way version). Sometimes down in the depths of an older generation of theatres, you'll even still find a real Grelco or two. Though it feels like for those brought up with 16A cable there's a new, more exciting-sounding name for the same tool: the 'ray gun'! ✕

The Grafton Electric Company:
www.gracesguide.co.uk/Grafton_Electric_Co

Rob has been working in and writing about lighting for more than 25 years, on shows around the world. He wonders if this makes him a classic... or just old!



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