

LIGHTING SOUND

International

APRIL 1989

Designer Lighting for the Concept Musical

Just opened at London's Piccadilly Theatre, 'Metropolis' has already picked up rave reviews for its design and technical excitements. Julian Williams talked to lighting designer David Hersey during rehearsals.

If you were asked to put the name to a lighting man who exclusively designs stage lighting for a living, works on several productions at once, has his work in performance in many theatres at the same time all around the globe, and who made the gobo into a successful and refined product in the UK, you would most likely know who he is.

When you walk into David Hersey's new Vauxhall-based offices in London, you are immediately aware of considerable activity, with figures weaving in and out of a micro-network of office booths within a plush new blue/grey decor. Running above, from one end to the other, a central catwalk connects his personal office to the fray, adjoined to which are the demonstration and meeting areas.

David Hersey's current LD achievement is similarly set amongst machinery, with catwalks above, walkways in and out of gleaming pipes with puffing steam and drive shaft cogs. Taking up all the available space on a minimal stage, it inevitably requires careful illumination from the now usual non-

conventional lighting positions. Hersey's much credited lighting for 'Metropolis', which opened at the Piccadilly Theatre in London, in February, brings him back to the West End again, with a commercial production to add to the long-running *Cats*, *Les Miserables* and *Starlight Express*.

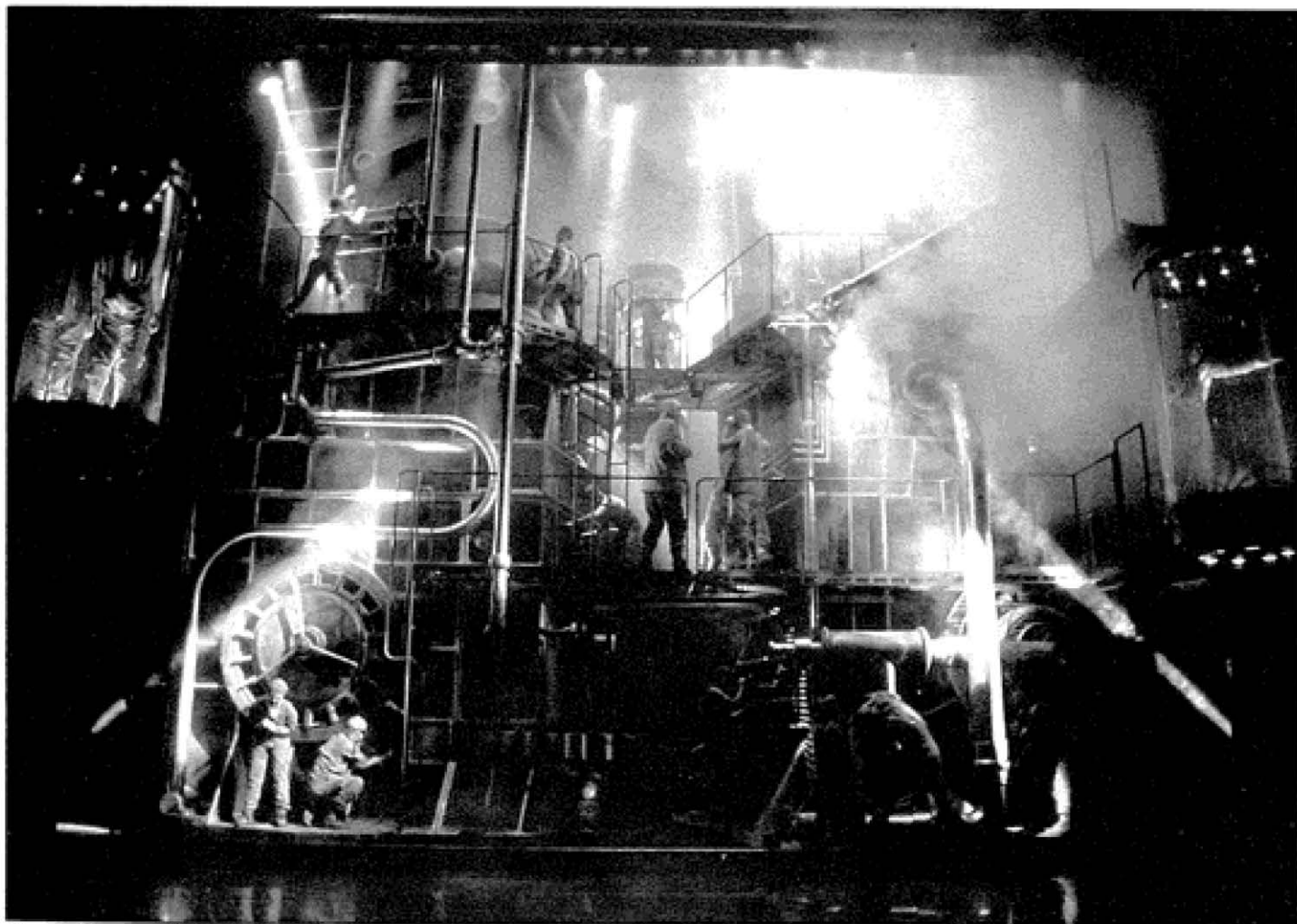
Keeping organised is the lighting designer's biggest problem, so when David Hersey lights a show these days, he takes his desk with him into the dress circle, complete with two Mac micros. Organisation is essential with the documentation required, and when shows are transferring and repeating in various parts of the world. As he told me: "If you don't do your homework and plot it immediately the show opens, it's too late. You never know when a show will pop up again."

During the long hours of the weeks he spends at the production desk of a show, he may have to work on several projects at the same time. During one of my visits to discuss his work on *Metropolis*, I had to wait my turn to interrupt his concentration, a situation which, to those who have worked with him,

will be very familiar.

During a pause in the technical procedures, he would be viewing his Mac screen, mousing some adjustments to the design of his multi rig for *Carmen* due in the summer, coupled with the interruption of a telephone call from an LD who is realising his design for the imminent opening of a production of *Cats* in Paris. When told by the director that no more lights are necessary for this particular *Metropolis* rehearsal for an hour, he works with his assistant to update the schedules of equipment for yet another show. There is a repeat production of *Happgood* in the US to deal with, and in between times, people from his office consult him on administrative questions.

Though *Metropolis* opened to mixed reviews, unusually, at a time when it is being said that the era of 'the high-tech' set is over, the critics raved about the 'astounding' and 'breathtaking' sets of Ralph Koltai, which themselves contain the drama. Albeit, this spectacular 'state-of-the-art' type presentation is in stark contrast to the original black



The machine room in the depths of *Metropolis*.



The Master of Metropolis' protégé-robot, Futura, personifying Maria, with a child from the workforce.



Stephen, John Freeman's son, surveying Metropolis for the real Maria.



A dance routine opens the second act, in Club of my Sons, where a giant mirror disc reflects the illuminated changing floor patterns.



The obliteration of Futura lying in the embers of the Furnace.



David Hersey takes his office with him into rehearsals for Metropolis.

and white Fritz Lang film of 1927.

With this in mind, I asked David Hersey to comment on how 'Metropolis' had turned out for him. He replied modestly: "It's actually turned out quite well and there's not that much there! Although it's a pretty interesting piece of work."

I asked him how he approaches the design for a show. "No matter what I do, my work is in response to what is going on, on stage. When it works really well is when it works on stage. I have a really hard time lighting something that's not good. When the director and actors are working well together, the work speaks for itself practically. You watch rehearsals and they know what they are doing. You respond to it and it becomes very clear what you have to do." I asked if he spent much time at the rehearsal stage. "I like to be there the minute they get to run anything," he said.

As much of David Hersey's work is repeated in many parts of the world, I asked how he managed to work on several shows at the same time. "Once a show goes to, say, America, it gets documented in a 'very grown up' kind of way, which is what we're trying to do now," he explained. "If the show is to move, you have to have a couple of people working on it whose job it is to document it." As in America, there will always be two or three assistants who are capable of moving it around.

David Hersey's DHA operation was conceived from ideas as a by-product of his lighting work. It started by marketing some of his special lighting equipment and effects from the shows he had lit. "Gradually it has grown up over the years into a manageable sized company," he explained. "I didn't even believe I could earn a living in lighting designing and needed something to fall back

on. There's a huge element of luck, I have been exceptionally fortunate in the number of commercially successful shows I've been able to do."

David Hersey is one of the UK's busiest lighting designers, regularly covering both legit and operatic productions along with 'big time' musicals, whilst maintaining his own company. He has clocked up more than 200 productions for many major theatre, opera and ballet companies, and I asked how he kept it all together.

"I am very blessed with the wonderful back-up staff I have. I've got real support here which is invaluable. I couldn't move around without it," he responded.

Getting back to Metropolis, David Hersey explained that using the Starlite moving light HTI source proved to be very interesting. "It was partly just to get some variety to be able to use these units, not as rock and roll 'wizz-



The laboratory where Futura is created, with Warren, the scientist, the Master and his assistant.

bang' units, but just for sheer quality of light-intense pockets of light. The colour of the HTI I found very interesting. It's a weapon I would like to see as part of the kit and you could always have a dozen on a show without it being impossible, as it's very expensive. It gives dynamism when you want it, which is very specific. They still have a way to go in terms of being 'smooth and subtle' and require a sympathetic operator in a theatrical situation," he explained.

His use of the Starlite units came into its own in the Destruction scene, when immense power and effect was required.

For this show, as is so often the case, Hersey was given the choice of a moving light rig or a conventional one. Eventually he was fortunate in having some good deals which allowed him, in the end, to have both!

Being one of the first in this country to utilise the moving light source on a commercial production in the original Starlight Express, David Hersey took a big chance in the use of the moving light, before such systems as the Vari*Lite and Starlite were evaluated and took off. He admitted to early problems in the control of the drives and the plottings of these instruments, though they did achieve good colour control and movement.

Back to Metropolis again, he explained that positioning the rig was a problem. He had to use 'non-conventional' positions because of the tight fit in a small stage area. With the huge size of the 'Machines', which each weigh at least six tons, and The Module, which is lowered over the centre of the stage, there is no room for spot bars! There are illuminated transparent tubular elevator lifts, traversing up and down the prosc. and mounted on each side of the stage, thus restricting the use of the prosc. boom positions. This was overcome by a truss which was built onto the audience side of the prosc. with 'box towers' on both sides.

Nearly 350 dimmer channels are in use, controlled from a Strand Galaxy board in a circle box. Many of these are used to control the hardware associated with a luminaire, such as the light curtains' motors, and the 15 Pançans in use over the Machines. These require four channels a unit to cover the pan, tilt and colour, as well as the light output. Also, almost 50 dimmers are used to control the architectural strip lighting and red neon in the transparent patterned floor which comes into its own in a dance routine where a flown mirror disc reflects the floor image vertically into the audiences eye lines.

In addition to his 'trade-marked' lighting, with much traditional use of the gobo, light curtain, dark corners and 'brilliant white light', David Hersey was also called upon, in the latter period of the production, to additionally simulate the special effects, such as in the Laboratory scene. A laser was used as a symbolic effect when a robot named Futura is transformed into Maria, along with (3000 joule) strobe beacons, a mirrorball, fibre optics, neon and Arcline.

DHA animated disc effects are used when Maria is brought back to life by the scientist in the Laboratory scene. Careful simulation of progressive movement is created by variable speed rotators, revolving two gobos in opposite directions from above.

Also, the convincing process of the robot Futura burning in the oven took some planning to get right - in order to create several phases of heat, with a fire burning inside a furnace, including extract fan control. It is all controlled from the board for precision and continuity.

Currently, David Hersey's busy schedule in-



The Module.

all show photography Clive Barde.

cludes a varied selection of theatre work. He is preparing 'Happgood' in LA, 'Albert Herring' at the Opera House and 'Ghetto' at the National. A mega production of 'Carmen' at Earl's Court is being planned along with 'Miss Saigon' at the Lane. In between times, he will be working on a major project in Las Vegas.

David Hersey, who is a serious user of the 'toys' of stage lighting, has won various awards including two Tonys. He said simply that Metropolis was fun to do, just playing with the lights! What he predicts will be a 'show' is due to appear later in the year.

And that one will have a helicopter! . . .

Metropolis

First performance at the Piccadilly Theatre, London on March 8th 1989.

Produced by Michael White and Metropolis Theatrical Productions Ltd.

Production designed by Ralph Koltai
Lighting designed by David Hersey

Sound designed by Bobby Aitken for Autograph
Directed by Jerome Savary
Production electrician Bill Ward-Roper
Lighting designer's assistant Alan Burrett

Equipment:

Lighting equipment hire: Luff Light & Sound
Gobos, animation discs, special effects, etc.: DHA
Laser: Laser Creations
Starlite units and control system: Tasco Communications Ltd.

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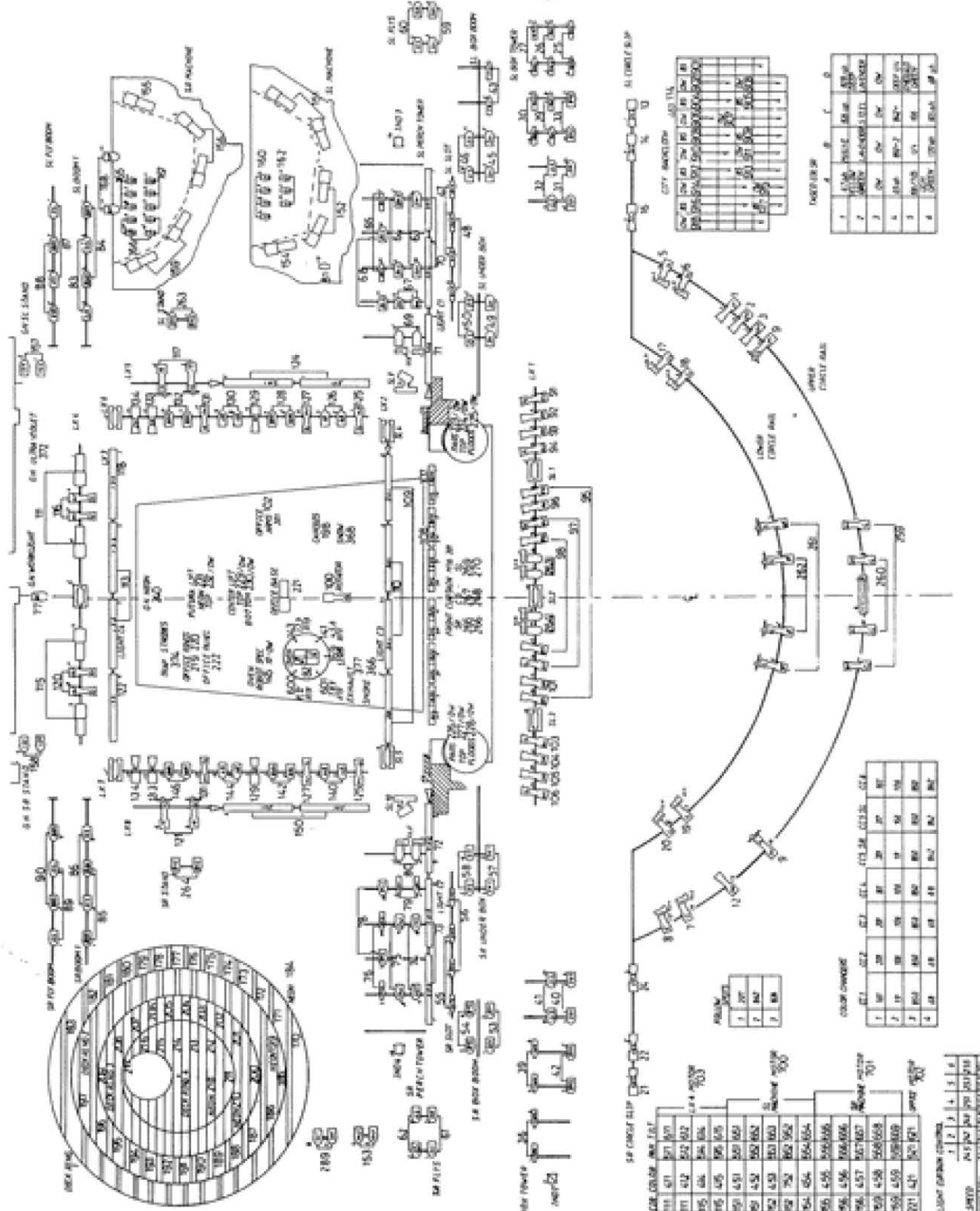
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The real Maria returns to the workforce after her ordeal in the Laboratory.



Maria 'comes back to life' after being captured for the robot life-like copy by Futura. Note revolving gobo effects.



In the module with the Master, scientist, and Futura.