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April 2016

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Classic Gear: DHA's Light Curtain 560

Rob Halliday takes a nostalgic but instructive look back at the tools that have shaped the industry . . .

Lighting, I increasingly think, has fads of fashion, looks from the past re-born, driven by new tech. Witness, currently, the GLP X4, Ayrton Magicblade and other products that create intense, solid, linear walls of moving light - a look that for years the DHA Digital Light Curtain made entirely its own.

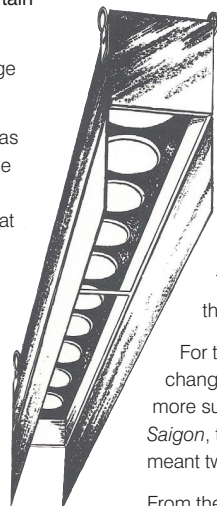
But just as the DLC preceded the LED, so too there was an age before the Light Curtain went digital . . .

Lighting designer David Hersey freely admits his inspiration was the lighting of Czech scenographer Joseph Svoboda, which he had seen, admired, and actually ended up re-creating for the tour of a Svoboda-designed, Richard Pilbrow-lit *Three Sisters* at the National Theatre. A key element of Svoboda's work were the banks of light we now call Svoboda battens, made by ADB.

A few years later, Hersey was asked to light a piece called *Reflections* for Ballet Rambert, which called for characters to appear through walls in a room. With the set just a floating cornice with a window and a door frame, he decided to try to make the walls with light, taking the 12V 240W PAR 56 VN5P lamp originally used as a Boeing 747 landing light and persuading the carpenters to build them into the cornice. Later came an opera designed by Stefanos Lazaridis; with no budget for the Svoboda battens, Hersey's company DHA built a 2.5m-long steel frame holding ten of the PAR lamps wired in series, with two of these 'Light Curtain 560' units, as the brochure identified them, wired in series to get back up to 240V.

By the time of the original *Evita* in 1978, this had evolved to nine lamps in series (so brighter), built in aluminium (so lighter). Some of the *Evita* units

were mounted to a tracking, flown screen; as it moved, the curtain of light moved. Inspired by this, Hersey's design for the RSC's *Nicholas Nickleby* in 1980 made the movement deliberate, though low-tech, by rigging the Light Curtains from two sets of fly lines, allowing them to tip.



Motorising the movement was an obvious next step: an electrician working on the Australian debut of *Evita* suggested antenna rotators, motors designed to pan radio or television aerials but with the ability to bring them back to precise, repeatable positions. Sure enough, mounting one to the end of a line of light curtains, all bolted together, meant they could move *en masse* (adding multiple motors would disrupt the spacing of the lamps, crucial to achieving a solid wall of light). For the first 10 years of *Les Misérables*' run at the Palace Theatre, the lighting operator rotated a circular dial labeled with the points of the compass to move the lights to their cued positions.

For that same period, the curtains of light were monochrome; colour change got tackled unsuccessfully for an epic *Carmen* at Earl's Court, more successfully in partnership with Rainbow for the original *Miss Saigon*, though the long runs of light curtains and weight of the scrollers meant two rotators per light curtain were needed, one at each end.

From then, the next obvious step was to be able to move each section of Light Curtain independently, if required, and all controlled digitally - the story of a whole other classic. But even before then, be reminded that if you have a vision, why not create the tool to achieve that, rather than just settling for what's already available?

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