

*Stefano Mariotti and
Riccardo Bertocci review*

THE LAST DAYS OF MANKIND

During the 1930's, Karl Kraus wrote, in Germany, a monumental play, *The Last Days of Mankind*, dealing with the First World War as described by war correspondents.

In 1990, Luca Ronconi wanted to revive this classic expressionist work, but keeping the industrial atmosphere of period set-pieces.

With a budget of five billion Italian lire it was possible to be very ambitious and to look for the perfect setting for the play. A regular theatre could not offer the kind of space needed for monumental work, so the choice fell upon 'Il Lingotto' (The Ingot), a disused FIAT industrial plant in Turin.

An area of 20,000 sq ft gave the opportunity of making the most of the atmospheric 'feel' of the old plant. Three huge platforms were built around a central area, where the audience could be seated. On these platforms, real railway engines, carriages and a construction crane could move during the play, continuously changing the look of each scene.

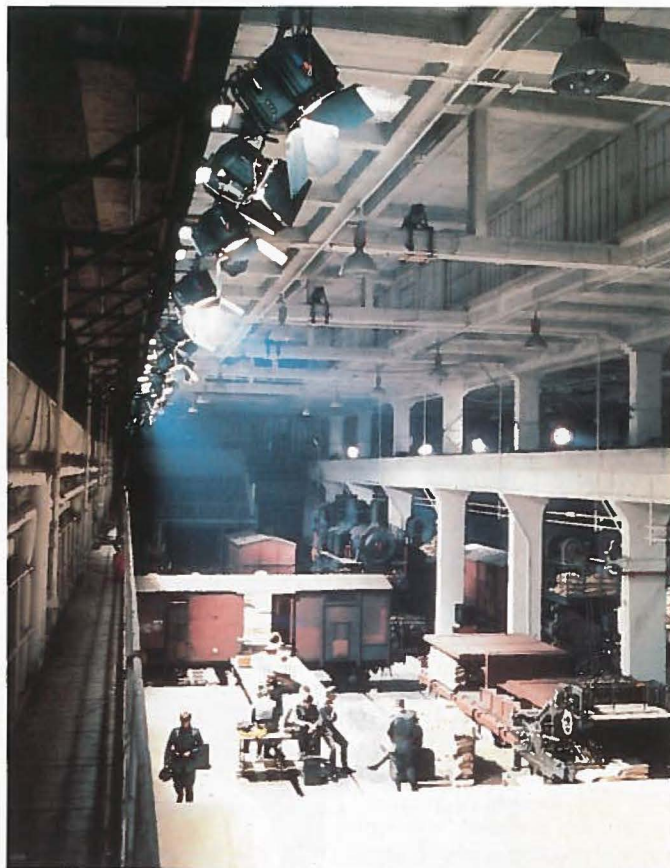
Furthermore, there was not just one single scene enacted at a time but up to eight individual scenes presented contemporaneously on different areas of the stage. In some cases the action was brought into the middle of the audience itself.

To avoid confusion, no particular scene was given prominence over others, nor one given greater emphasis by the choice of actors or lighting. There was no leading role and no area was lit while leaving others in darkness. Only in some cases did a certain area receive a little more light than others.

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The choice of the kind of lighting was also quite unusual for theatrical work. The director wanted to retain the plant's lighting system, which consisted of 60 400W metal halide lamps, giving a colour temperature of about 5600°K. This was supplemented by HMI luminaires to match existing lighting. Strand dealers TTT of Milan supplied 56 4kW and ten 2kW Sirio QuartzColor HMI spotlights, 55 1200W Quasar Quartzcolor luminaires, all manufactured by Strand Lighting, together with 22 2kW floodlights, six follow-spots and 70 more 400W metal halide luminaires.

Using HMI light was no easy task. This kind of light is exceptionally intense and cannot



be controlled with conventional theatrical dimmers. When the luminaires were focused against the railway wagons and locomotives the light was reflected in a random way. The only satisfactory solution was to light the scenery with 2kW floodlights directed against a reflecting screen.

The director did not want to use any coloured filters. They would interfere with his ideas of a white wash that would cover all acting areas uniformly. That left only one possible variation — turning the luminaires on or off manually. And because there were so many of them, an army of technicians was necessary to control the HMI light switches. An even higher number of stage hands was necessary to move all the various pieces of scenery throughout the play. The high number of movements involved (more than 400 in just the first 45 minutes), created a series of problems.

The greatest one was to find a practical way of planning and organising the various movements. The solution was found in a computer expert who devised a way of putting down in graphic form all the pieces of scenery and then moving them around the stage in a logical way. A scheme of movements was finally printed out and each stage hand was given a personal schedule, telling him what to move and

when. Even the six follow spot operators knew where to direct their beam at the right time, just by reading their individual computer printouts.

Marco Andriolo, the technical second director, explained, 'We tried every possible way to synchronise movements. It was just too big for us to handle and too time-consuming.'

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The Strand Quartzcolor HMI lights that were added to the existing industrial lighting of the plant gave an eerie feeling of dreamlike suspension between daylight and artificial light. This created the perfect atmosphere for an expressionist play.

Stefano Mariotti is a well-known journalist for many Italian and English-language lighting journals. Riccardo Bertocci is a technical author.

Footnote: Developments in discharge lighting technology and intensity control will be covered in a future issue of 'Lights!'.