

Only 16 miles from the high political drama of Washington DC, another type of drama (and opera, music and dance) is to be found in the rolling green hills of Virginia.

Nestling in a small valley, surrounded by lawns and wooded hillsides, the weathered wooden fly tower of Wolf Trap Farm Park for the Performing Arts rises into the night air.

Politicians and tourists, jeans-clad suburbanites and city sophisticates mingle before a performance. Picnic blankets are spread on the lawn while black ties and gowns take their seats in the comfortable open-air auditorium. Wolf Trap's popularity owes much to this blend of formal and informal, and to the enormous variety of its summer season.

The present theatre is the third to be built over the past 20 years, which is a tribute to the US Government, fundraisers and to Wolf Trap's founder, Mrs Catherine Filene Shouse.

Originally from Boston, from the family who founded Filene's department store, Mrs Shouse moved to Virginia in 1930 and bought a 300-year old farmhouse with 52 acres of land. She built up a thriving farm and dogbreeding kennels but in 1966 she donated 100 acres to the Government, plus funds for the building of a theatre.

Using her own observations made during a tour of European theatres, she briefed the architects on her concept for a multi-use performance building.

She explained, 'Programmes of all types were considered in the basic planning - jazz, dance, opera, concerts, operetta and popular performances - to provide for the interest of both younger and older audiences.'

'Also included in the concept was the pleasure of picnicking before a performance, which I had enjoyed at Glyn-debourne in England and which I knew would appeal to our Wolf Trap audiences.'

In an historic decision, Congress awarded the new theatre 'National Park' status. Unlike other National Parks, however, Wolf Trap was designed to reach audiences far away from North Virginia. Television was seen as the ideal way to make Wolf Trap a

*One of the most remarkable theatres in the world has recently installed a Light Palette 90 lighting control system. SUSAN DANDRIDGE tells the story behind the story...*

# DRAMA

**-AND EVERYTHING ELSE BESIDES-**

# AT WOLF TRAP



national rather than a local theatre. As a result, care was taken in the design to ensure that the theatre would lend itself to live broadcasts.

But with the opening night only five weeks away, fire broke out on March 13, 1971, destroying 60% of the almost-completed theatre. Despite this setback, building started again and finally, the first performance was held on July 1 that year.

## TRAGEDY

Tragedy struck again on April 4, 1982, when after 947 performances, the theatre was once more burned down.

The speed with which funds were raised and re-building was carried out were attributed to the reputation Wolf Trap had developed through its television broadcasts. More than 18,000 contributions and pledges came in from all 50 states, seven other countries, and two US territories. The project was re-designed and built in just over two years, opening on July 30, 1984.

Despite its history, the new theatre is again built of wood, but this time it is protected by a \$1.7 million fire detection and protection system.

Last summer's season, stretching from May to Sep-

tember, included performances by the National Symphony Orchestra, Mikhail Baryshnikov's experimental White Oak Dance Project, the Wolf Trap Jazz and Blues Festival, Bonnie Raitt, Ray Charles, Bob Dylan and The Temptations.

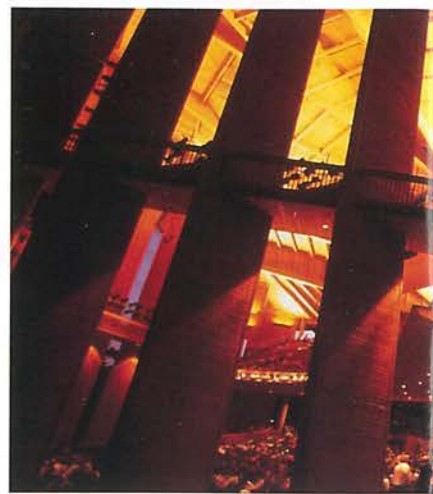
Wolf Trap is also home to the Wolf Trap Opera Company, Wolf Trap Institute for Early Learning through the Arts, and an annual International Childrens Festival.

Strand Lighting's involvement with Wolf Trap began during the rebuilding during 1984. By then, Light Palette and CD80 had become the national professional standard for lighting control systems, with the majority of Broadway shows designed on Palettes. The decision to install a Light Palette at Wolf Trap was based on the knowledge that visiting designers would be familiar with the system.

Another factor was that at the time, Light Palette was the only system on the US market capable of providing a channel for each of Wolf Trap's 714 circuits, which would give complete flexibility.

However, over the next few years complaints arose from some of the visitors. Light Palette, designed for theatrical production, was at its best when recording complex moves for playing back cues night after night. It was less agile in situations calling for 'seat of the pants' lighting common to musical performances and TV production. The answer came initially with Light Palette 3, which blended TV and theatrical needs, and then with the latest system, Light Palette 90, which was installed in 1991.

According to Henry Parks, Head Electrician at Wolf Trap since 1984, the theatre's aim



'is to be adaptable to anything that rolls in the door, as quickly as possible.' Few productions are designed specifically for the stage at Wolf Trap. Bus and truck productions of Broadway shows, touring dance companies and popular music concerts all must have their original designs modified and adapted to the facilities. A standard rep. hang provides the basis from which incoming designers work. Plots showing final placement circuiting and specials are received as much as a week ahead of time - or occasionally, not until the day of load-in.

## DEMAND

Although the majority of shows use the existing inventory and the house dimming and control systems, Mr Parks estimates that 35 per cent of incoming shows either bring additional equipment or full lighting rigs. The need to integrate additional control and lighting rapidly places great demand on the existing system.

Light Palette 90, combined with an upgrading of their CD80 dimmers to Advanced Electronics has many advantages. Digital electronics mean faster response times. More importantly, the dimmers now accept the input of multiple protocols. Both Light Palette and a touring desk can address the dimmers simultaneously, making the integration of house and touring systems much simpler. Additionally, individual house-lighting circuits can be selected on a show-by-show basis, to be run from the new Strand Premiere house-lighting control system, or through the Light Palette.

The installation here is the largest and most complete