

Despite the impression created by television news, Ireland (the Republic and Northern Ireland combined) is one of the most civilised lands on earth. The performing arts reign supreme. In this special report, *Lights!* goes both sides of the border to find that...

THE SHOW GOES ON IN IRELAND

by Richard Humphries

For some reason sociologists have yet to fathom, Ireland nurtures the extremes of human behaviour – the creative and the destructive.

Caught quite literally in the cultural and political crossfire are its theatres, thought by many to be the most spiritually fertile in all God's creation. Not for nothing was Dublin designated European City of Culture in 1991.

North of the border, and still woefully beset by 'the Troubles', Belfast, as the cultural capital of Ulster, refuses to lie down and accept defeat. All that the sectarian bombings and shootings have achieved is to strengthen Belfast's resolve that 'the show must go on.' In one theatre project, Strand Lighting is closely involved in a pioneering scheme which is bringing the traditionally warring factions together.

Strand Lighting's distributors on both sides of the border have just had an outstanding trading year. Their customers are quite clear why. In an uncertain world, the support they receive from their local Strand representatives has been constantly reliable.

In Dublin, the emphasis of the work carried out by the Stage Lighting Centre is very much theatre and studio. The company is run by two long-standing Strand men, Paddy Farrell and Pat Walsh. To complement the lighting service, for which Paddy is the learned engineer, Pat and his wife also run the company's stage curtains 'division'.

Culture figures large in the workload. One gem of a lighting installation completed last year was a 120-way M24 at the Siamsr Tire cultural centre at Tralee, in Kerry. Further round the coast is the Bru Boru heritage centre at the

Rock of Cashel in Tipperary, where a 36-way Tempus controls a range of Strand luminaires and Permus dimmers.

As Paddy Farrell says, 'It is very much a personal service type of business. You can't put a cost on most of the work that we do. We do it for love.'

In Dublin itself, recent installations have included St Patrick's College and church, and a Galaxy 3 and five Geminis at the TV studios of RTE. Lighting installations in theatres include The Abbey Theatre, which along with its sister Peacock Theatre, is the National Theatre of Ireland.

A short distance from The Abbey is one of the world's most delightful theatres, The Gaiety, built at the turn of the century.

Stage manager George McFall, who has been there



Pat Walsh and Paddy Farrell.

for almost 45 years ('It's not a job - it's a way of life, and I think I might get to like it!'), recently saw the arrival of a Gemini 2 control desk.

He has also witnessed some of theatres triumphs (Peter O'Toole in *Juno and the Paycock*) and tragedies – such as the time Richard Harris was boo-ed off stage in October 1959 from his role in the risqué *The Ginger Man* to cries from the unenlightened



Irish tradition under the spotlight at Bru Boru, Tipperary.

audience of 'Get that filth off!'

Until the 1970's, lighting control was by way of a Strand-installed Grand Master board – now very much a museum piece. Then the theatre switched to a Duet.

George explained, 'The problem was that we didn't know how to use the Duet. Until then, the lighting operator had been using bits of stick to reach the controls on the Grand Master to bring up the lights. When the Duet came in the whole world changed overnight. We were faced with a board with sliders and numbers on it. It was like having to use a calculator after using your fingers for counting. We panicked – until we were shown how to operate it.'

A short step from the Gaiety is the Andrews Lane theatre, a studio-style commercial theatre converted from warehouse buildings.

With 220 retractable seats telescoping back to reveal a floor area of 50' x 40', it has a dual role as a theatre and a popular venue for corporate entertaining. Its recent run of Ibsen's *A Dolls House* is typical of its programme of respectable theatre.

Strand Lighting Preludes, Quartets, Punchlites and old Pattern 223's, governed by a 36-way manual control desk, light a stage which at 32 feet across the tabs is virtually the same dimensions as more conventional theatres. With luminaires hung studio-style from a series of lighting bars, the theatre was designed with TV productions in mind.

Upstairs, a smaller studio theatre is used for less

demanding productions.

But as joint general manager Terry O'Dea ex-



Dimmers set the mood – at Belfast's Europa Hotel.

plains, 'We see this as very much the way that smaller theatres will have to go. The business is approached very commercially to make the most of the space.'

The theatre also runs a part-time course at weekends for budding actors and actresses. Such is the feeling for the arts in Dublin that it is always well supported.

The Abbey was the first theatre in the world to instal, in 1982, a complete electronic lighting control system – having selected a Galaxy control board when it was still in the design stages.

Two years ago the Galaxy



The Gaiety's old Grand Master controls.