

Stalling or Immobility

It has suddenly become *de rigueur* to have a lighting control in the stalls for rehearsal purposes, and a number of first-class installations either have it or are about to have it. As in so many things to do with stage lighting we have but to turn up earlier writings to find ourselves fervently advocating such a technique. Furthermore, we are glad to say that, being us, it was not all talk—there were the technical means to do so. Indeed the 216-way Light Console in Drury Lane Theatre has, coiled up beneath, sufficient flexible cable to allow it to be moved out into the stalls for rehearsal. Installed twenty years or so ago, the console has in fact never been moved out there—not even for the month-long lighting rehearsals for the much-heralded *My Fair Lady*.

There were other such installations. For example, a certain work¹ declared of the Light Console in the Theatre Royal, Bristol, that it “can be moved and plugged up in the stalls for rehearsals”. The same book shows a photograph of a portable 64-way light-control desk used in the South Shore Blackpool Icedrome at about the same time. Here, “detachable plugs allow the desk to be used in four positions, one of which is 300 feet from the dimmer bank”. This was again for rehearsal purposes so that the operator could see what he was doing. From then on the battle was waged, and often won, to obtain a good front-of-house position, and now such a requirement would not be questioned.

Yet at this very time when excellent F.O.H. positions have become available, many of them quite perfect, the call goes up for a temporary position in the stalls. Whence springs this demand? We suspect that the blame lies with Francis Reid. He started a fashion at Glyndebourne which was perfectly logical there but which will not bear examination everywhere, and before *everyone* jumps on this band wagon we shall set out to tell you why.

Francis Reid had planned that control for limited festival seasons, during which he

not only lit the shows but was also the principal operator during performances. What could have been more logical than to have, as he did in effect, a complete preset down in the stalls and a duplicate set of operational masters². Some or all channels could be transferred. Thus he could compose the picture from down below next to the Director or take over bits and modify while his assistant operator remained on the main board. A couple of years later a rather similar installation went into the National Theatre where the resident operators remained on the main control, while in the stalls Richard Pilbrow and other visiting lighting designers could tweak and modify their lighting directly themselves in order to get exactly what they wanted. These two were “enstalled” in 1964 and 1966 before the days of instant dimmer memory (i.e. magnetic plotting).

Everything had to be written down. The plot, whether it was being written down or read back for execution, was the big bugbear. It was that more than anything else which made intervention by the director or the lighting designer at a critical moment such a something nuisance. When about to put into action an unfamiliar, scribbled lighting change—the means for achieving which he had scarcely worked out—there was a temptation for the operator to be rather sharp with the most modest request.

Nevertheless there were and are a number of operators who seemed to thrive on such a diet at rehearsals and who take everything in their stride. The more preposterous the demands and the more limited the switchboard, the greater the virtuosity and the better the service.

We now seem about to throw all this away. We collect together every facility man can devise to make the operator's lot easy, we place him in a good position to see the

¹“*Stage Lighting*”, by Frederick Bentham. Pitman. 1950.

²TABS. Vol. 22, No. 2. June 1964.