

To Look Forward First Look Back

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There can be few who have written more about theatre technology than Fred Bentham. From the day he joined the little theatreland firm of Strand Electric in the early '30s he seems to have been bursting with things to say and within a few years, having finished inventing his Light Console and reshaping the main showroom to suit his recitals of Colour Music, he became a founding contributor to TABS. As we now know, Strand Electric grew fat on the inventions of F.P.B. and in the post-war television boom Strand sold the natural descendants of the Light Console to studios throughout the world. Surprisingly, F.P.B. did not become editor until 1957, but it can be no coincidence that under his care TABS continued to grow into a respected international magazine. I suspect F.P.B. will agree that the commercial success of Strand must have been at least as much due to the existence and strength of the give-away TABS as to the merit of their rather more expensive products. For, of course, the lively, provocative, intelligent discussion of the wider problems of theatre lighting attracted lively and gifted minds while still at school or university and retained their interest when the need to earn a living arose. Many such people went into the profitable worlds of TV and theatre management and, when the time came to spend money on new equipment, they naturally turned to the names they knew and insisted on getting solutions to their problems in the way contributors to TABS had said should be possible. And again, when a new generation of experts were needed to harness the computer for lighting control, the rival companies had a choice of talent who understood the technology and also, from the pages of TABS, the nature of the problem.

But all good things must come to an end and, as he points out at the beginning of the book, Frederick Bentham is no longer with Strand. Indeed, Strand Electric is now only Rank Strand in the eyes of those with golden memories of times past. Nevertheless, on the credit side, new inventors have produced even more marvellous lighting controls; TABS has become Tabs Stage Lighting International and has a new and equally respected editor, and is printed in full colour (though its loyal readers now have to pay!); and F.P.B. himself now has time to edit and write the major part of the ABTT Journal, *Sightline*, and to revise the 1968 edition of his book.

As everyone will know who is not totally new to the author, the subject of the book is really the lighting equipment. Lighting design, although dealt with at some length, remains a beginner's guide to theory rather than a practical account. The Art that F.P.B. understands best is the art of getting things done, so, being employed by Strand Electric to solve the multitude of engineering problems brought to them by theatre people, any early wish to go out and light for himself was soon stifled by the experiment, research

and invention needed to give other artists the improved and sometimes revolutionary new equipment they learned to expect. Thus, although the book contains many references to how "we" (F.P.B. himself, and usually "B" Bear and Paul Weston) lit this exhibition and that west-end success, these are references to the 1930s, and practical techniques for lighting in the post-war Pilbrow era are reported at second hand. However, the author's long experience of lecturing about stage lighting to amateurs (another of the traditional and self-imposed services that Strand gave to the industry) does result in two chapters dealing with Illumination of the Stage, and Painting with Light, that should well and truly launch a beginner. (Certainly they have a lot more useful advice than I remembered when reviewing Francis Reid's book in the last TABS which led me, on the irrelevant evidence of my copy of his earlier 1950 work, to accuse F.P.B. of virtually avoiding the problem.)

An interesting point in these chapters is the use of virtually free-hand margin sketches using CIE lighting symbols that the author helped to devise, for their proper use for making points of principle without irrelevant practical detail. But both chapters are exact reprints of the earlier edition even to repetition of a reference to the long defunct Strand fittings hire service.

Lighting Procedure is the title of the other chapter concerned with actually lighting the stage. Again, it hardly differs from the 1968 version even though custom and practice have moved onward since it was first written. In 1968 the idea that a text-book on stage lighting should include a discussion of the designer's responsibility for efficient pre-planning and use of rehearsal time was something of an innovation. Nowadays this is a well recognised factor in the success of the new breed of freelance and staff lighting designer and the author's thoughts on the subject seem rather elementary beside those expressed by, for example, Pilbrow and Francis Reid.

The author is at his most interesting when writing about subjects where his knowledge of detail or independent viewpoint are allowed free rein. Two chapters, The Development of Stage Lighting, and Auditorium and Stage show these two facets. In the former his incomparable experience makes for a highly instructive review of the technical milestones from lime-light to HMI and from gas plate to thyristor. Minor additions have been made to link with the up-to-date chapters describing the present state of the art. In Auditorium and Stage the author describes, often with passion, the recent history of theatre design and comments in new paragraphs on the wave of new buildings and conversions that

have been completed in recent years. It must surely be well known that F.P.B. has a strong dislike of adaptable theatres and a lasting suspicion of theatre-in-the-round and thrust stage. However, such opinions are widely held and the reasons are well argued here. The other point in this chapter, that bigger is not necessarily better, will be received by most with increased gratitude as the national purse strings tighten even further.

On the subject of lighting equipment itself, the book is deliberately not very thorough. Luminaires, lanterns, instruments or what you will, are illustrated on various pages but only dealt with methodically in the chapters Equipment in Common Use, and Optical Projection. The latter gives a good survey of possibilities and achievements, including new paragraphs dealing with modern extra-powerful projectors and with multi-screen technique. Equipment in Common Use should, however, be re-titled These You Have Loved, for most of the text and 12 out of the 13 illustrations deal with items now seen most frequently in museums or on a scrap heap.

Colour Music, alas, has been relegated to an Appendix.

To complete the list of the 11 out of 14 chapters that remain substantially unchanged, there are excellent technical explanations of the fundamentals of light, lamps, colour and electricity. These should be intelligible to any school leaver and bridge the gap between the theory of O-level science and the practice of stage lighting. Since the basic science has not changed, there is no need for revision here except, perhaps, that lamp technology has achieved a lot lately. Although the author has now clearly forgiven his old enemies for denying him the lamps he insisted were possible and necessary in the '30s, '40s and '50s, the revision he has incorporated still implies that, with a bit more effort, things could be better still. Understandably, the chapter on electricity avoids any attempt to explain how computer logic control systems work.

The parts of the book already outlined are together worth the cost of buying this book for the first time, but not, perhaps, if you already own the first edition. For two groups of connoisseurs however, there are two new chapters that might themselves justify adding this edition to the earlier on your bookshelf: the new chapter 1—Setting the Scene, and the new chapter 8—Lighting Control.

I myself especially welcome chapter 8 because, for many years, I have enjoyed being a part of the dialogue that revealed new problems for F.P.B. and his colleagues and competitors to solve. Lighting control for theatre and television has been studied in Britain with great thoroughness since 1950. The results are now spread around the world embodied in one-off and short run production items that have done a lot to help our balance of payments. But, unlike university research and many other

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