

Memorabilia

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"In the mid 1960s it was evident that *traditional* lighting control methods would not be able to cope with the rapidly approaching era of colour television". The author might have added but didn't "and the ever increasing size of stage installations". He did however go on "... we had the peculiar advantage of knowing very little about *conventional* lighting control philosophy: In consequence, we were not biased by *traditions*, and were able to make a first principles assessment of the operational requirements".

The italics are mine and the paper for the IBA 78 conference at Wembley was, as its title implies,* dealing with the products of one firm and that firm a late entry in the field. I found myself questioning whether it is possible to take such a naive view of technical development. No firm is an island, entire of itself. All work however original is a matter of building on what went on before. It was because the lighting controls by Strand Electric in use in

lump of machinery backstage out of sight of the lighting for which its operator was responsible. If Tom couldn't do it on his own then you called up Dick and Harry to come and help. Likewise if there were not enough dimmers for the new show, you hired the appropriate number of twelve or six-way portables and shoved them and the men to work them where you could – not infrequently this was *under* the stage.

Quite literally Britain's first important remote control installation went into the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden in 1934 simply because there was nowhere to put the enormous manual board to cover the 120 dimmers they needed. In fact the facilities the Strand remote panel actually provided were much worse than those of the orthodox Grand Master. Even the fact that the panel was small and compact tended to be a drawback because to use more than two operators was out of the question. However they got used to it, came to love it and some

levels at which the individual levers were to trip could be set before turning the master wheel. Never in my wildest dreams did I imagine then, that Strand would one day be supplying stage lighting controls to Germany. A contract like Rank Strand's recent one for a Lightboard to go into the Deutsche Oper in West Berlin and replace a Siemens control is fantastic!

Back in London it can be seen that to launch a control like my Light Console and talk about "playing" the lighting was optimistic in extreme. I can only at this distance of time marvel at my youthful powers of persuasion and the foresight of the three directors of the private company, as Strand then was, in spending so much of their money on the demonstration theatre installation of 1936. At the time the only market at all likely was the cinema presentation house (super cinema) and over in United States there were a few examples of outstanding controls in these – notably Radio City Music Hall. It was the

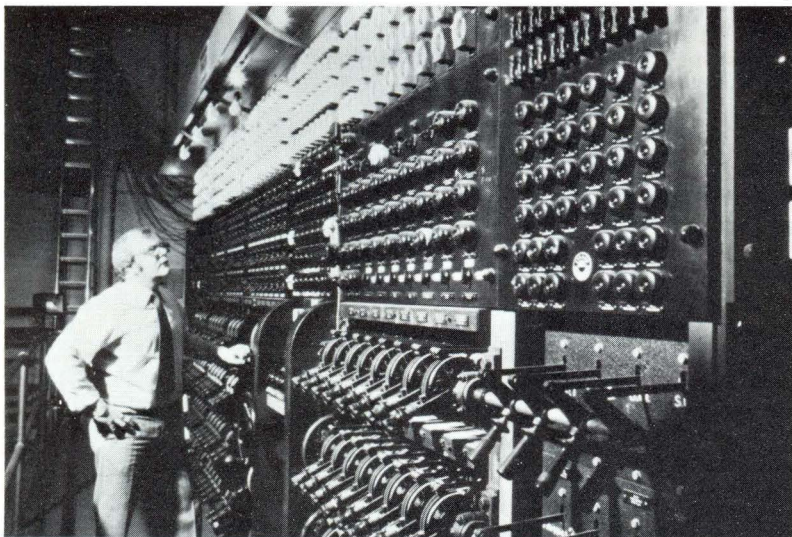


Fig. 1. If Tom couldn't do it on his own.

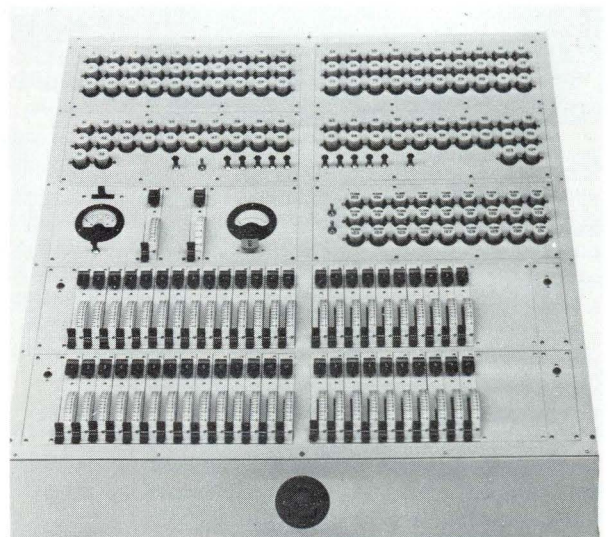


Fig. 2. Twelve important, little black buttons.

television studios and theatres in the early sixties were so good and allowed the operator to do so much, that it became necessary to think of another leap forward. If the controls really had been *traditional* and the lighting philosophy *conventional* there would not have been the urgent need to move on, because the journey would not have started!

My trouble when I joined Strand in the early 1930s was quite different. The customers, the users of our lighting, were perfectly content with the existing Grand Masters and other direct operated manual dimmer boards. They did not question the use of this great

were sad to see it go in 1964.

The situation in United States was no better. Virtually nothing was expected of the house board and the use of numbers of portable 'piano' boards was notorious and long-lived indeed. There was nothing *piano* about these in the sense of playability; it is said that the name came from the shape of the packing case. To see dimmer controls in the twenties and thirties which allowed any finesse it was necessary to visit German theatres and opera houses. The compact regulators with levers at 2 $\frac{3}{8}$ in. centres operated Schwabe resistances or Bordoni multi-slider transformers via long runs of tracker wire and incorporated mechanical delights like up and down locking on the same master shaft and some degree of presetting, i.e. the

use of extensive colour changes from a fixed installation both in the auditorium and on the stage as a feature in itself, like the cinema organ*, which made this a proposition.

The use of coloured light on sets of drapes reduced the need for scenery for the variety acts and band shows. This technique was adopted for the spectacular revue cum variety shows which flourished in London after the outbreak of the war. The drapes actually came from the super cinemas which on

*R.E. Jones. From Q-File to Thornlite – Twelve Years of Electronic Lighting Control. IBA 78 at Wembley Conference Centre.

*The organ originally went into cinemas to accompany silent second features instead of just a pianist while the resident orchestra took a rest. By the thirties, this purpose had vanished and organs were put in purely as an entertainment interlude between features.