

FAMOUS STRAND JOBS OF THE PAST OR I WAS THERE

by Frederick Bentham

THERE can be no better cue for a second article on the thirties, the golden age of the Grand Master Switchboard, than Gail Hardman's affectionate account (in the last issue of TABS) of working the one in the Bristol Hippodrome but recently replaced by a Duet. To be pedantic there were no "golden" grand masters of any age but there were two chromium-plated ones. The first was of 56-ways and controlled the installation in the new Shakespeare Memorial Theatre at Stratford-upon-Avon in 1932. The second one had 30-ways and dominated the small auditorium of the Seecol Theatre in Covent Garden's Floral Street. I had to demonstrate this shining-shafted switchboard but my aim was to get it replaced as soon as possible by my own Light Console. Another thing I wanted to get rid of was the trade mark "Seecol". It stood for Strand Electric & Engineering Co. Ltd. There was a much advertised ointment called Zambuk which claimed to soothe bunions and piles — whatever they were! The name Seecol suggested an obvious competitor.

There seemed to be but one other who held the Grand Master in low esteem — John Christie of Glyndebourne. His opera house was under construction at the time and he had a way of dropping into 'my' demonstration theatre of an afternoon. I never knew why; because he never brought anything we made if he could help it. He would gravitate each time to the Grand Master and tell me how stupid it was and how much better the German tracker-wire remote controls were. He was quite right too, for they were much more compact and had all sorts of practical interlocking gadgetry. As soon as my own Light Console replaced our Grand Master he ceased to appear. Perhaps he didn't like it because it used a Compton console and relay, not a Christie.*

Even when new in 1948 Gail's board at the Bristol Hippodrome was rather an anachronism. After all, the Theatre Royal had a small Light Console of 60-ways put in two years earlier. With 96-ways it was certainly time for remote control but a number of these very large Grand Master boards were made post war. It was not until the late fifties that I was able to get the Strand directors to declare that no more would be quoted for. Aside from the extra cost I do not think that my insistence on organ console rather than

miniature switchboard put many theatres off.

Bristol was the scene of a notable close encounter between myself and a Grand Master. The year was 1934 and the theatre was the Prince's (destroyed during the war). My job was to go down to Bristol and 'play' a colour music solo on the new board just installed, as a curtain raiser to the play *Ten Minute Alibi*. Originally intended for the first two nights only, it was extended (by public demand!) to cover all performances from August 6th to 11th. The item was announced in the programme as "an elaborate demonstration of the beautiful new Stage Lighting Effect. This demonstration has been devised and carried out by Messrs L. G. Applebee and F. P. Bentham". It was, however, no duet. Applebee's role was his usual one of selling the theatre the Grand Master, floats, batens and the rest.

According to the *Bristol Evening World* "It was effective enough to fascinate a large audience by its constantly changing colours for at least ten minutes ... And there was unrestrained applause at the beauty of the colourings which was altered by the operation of dimmers". And so on for 6½ col. inches no less! Mind you there was not much to create all this "beauty" on and with. A pair of decidedly second-hand greys were dropped-in between the standing box set for the play and the house tabs. This limited things to the colours in the No.1 batten and the float plus some modest side lighting to pick out the folds. The board was on the prompt side perch giving me as operator an acute side view. What I did see very well was the small band in the pit. About half a dozen musicians played the *Four Indian Love Lyrics* by Amy Woodford Finden with some of the necessary fervour for "Less than the Dust" and passion in "Kashmiri Song". It has been a matter of checking with the leader to see what they had at all suitable in their repertoire.

My curtain raiser stint done, I recall stealing across the coconut matting upstage past a young girl ASM who sat on top of a pair of steps; perhaps, it was because the stage door was on the O.P. side or maybe to get another look at her. Anyway, she had a very important part in that thriller — the many resets of the hands of the clock upstage centre. There is no record left of this Prince's Bristol installation: the board was probably like that of the Regal Edmonton detailed in my last article.† It would certainly not have been larger. There was only one real whopper of a Grand Master before the war and that was the 100-way for the Opera House Blackpool in 1938. The biggest of all Strand's thirties installations, the Royal Opera House Covent Garden, was so big that, even in 1934 with but seven weeks to do the job, the most staunch direct-operation Grand Master man had to think about the idea of a remote control system.

The stage connected load was to be 700-kW A.C. and another 150-kW at 100-v. D.C. for arcs etc. There were to

be 175 dimmers controlled as 130-ways on the remote panel up on the P. side bottom perch. The previous control had been under the stage without a view of anything so it was just possible that there might have been several Grand Masters down under. We must remember that these were the days of the Beecham international season of opera in May and June only. Even with rehearsals and the De Basil Ballets Russe de Monte Carlo which always followed, the stage lighting was used for less than one third of the year. Until 1934 Covent Garden opera productions had used traditional painted scenery and someone, and I can only think it was Beecham, decided that they must go modern with a great encompassing cyclorama and all that entailed. The Germans were well used to such techniques but over here any cycs used in theatre had been tiny and usually confined to the upstage area. For the new Covent Garden stage lighting the cyclorama would not just form part of the installation but a major part — 184-kW no less. This was half as much again as the total stage lighting load at the Stratford Memorial theatre; Britain's, and Strand's, largest permanent stage lighting installation in a theatre till then.

It must be realised that neither Strand or anyone else in this country had a suitable system, it had to be designed there and then. I should at this point make it clear that I played no part, nor was asked to, in this design. My "I was there" had to do with working with the board; which I found myself doing at the rehearsals as the great expert on mixing on the three primary colours, red, blue and green. The whole of the great Hasait cloth cyc was lit on this principle with double wattage blue. The new Ring had sets by Gabriel Volkoff and was directed by Dr. Earhardt who brought Max Hasait (with charming daughter as interpreter) along as technical adviser. All had been brought up on the Schwabe 7-colour system — dark, mid, light and steel blues, green, yellow and red. The cyc controls were at the on-stage end of perch panel and one sat on a tall stool hovering right inside it. (This view was mucked-up post war by hanging red traverses for curtain calls.) There would be a call from the stalls for yellow cyc (no mikes then) and to a murmur of satisfaction I would bring up the reds and the greens gently to the required level.

Suddenly there would be a German curse from below and a cry "Kein Grün". Hasait had wandered on the stage and chanced to look up aloft. With fury at my non reaction he consulted his daughter and shrieked "Not Green". There was nothing for it, out the greens had to go. Whereupon Earhardt out front would make a bigger noise — he was a big man — "Kein Rot". Frenzy would take over until they returned to the stalls to find themselves beholding soothing yellow once more. We never did get this sorted out but the three colours stayed and tales of subsequent battles fought on the perch during public perfor-

mances lost nothing in their retelling to me, once I returned to the safety of the Seecol theatre at the other end of Floral Street.

Fortunately Charlie Storer the chief operator was one of those who simply got on with it no matter how the storm might rage, a wonderful man who had been there for years on the old board. I was overawed also by the way that Jack Croxford, Syd Cheney and most of the large temporary staff knew the operas. In spite of the brand new set of three-dimensional rocks no one had to tell them where Wotan might need a spot, Brunnhilde a patch to snooze in or Flosshilde a drop of Strand ripple. This last reminder of happier days, when the Rhine's only pollution came from gold and maidens.

It was for this 1934 season that the great bridge and triple perch structure, which is such a feature of the Covent Garden pros. as seen backstage, was built. This, the new counterweight system, cyc track and winding gear was by The Lift & Engineering Company while Strand Electric did the electrical installation. Just upstage hung the main cyc bank — five rows of 1-kW 17-inch floods with silvered glass reflectors. A second smaller bank of these hung further upstage. Even the groundrow trucks were made up of 500W 12-inch floods, seventy-two in all. There were five compartment batens, all with silvered glass Sunray reflectors and between the 6ft lengths of each there were five feeble pre-patt. 56 acting-areas. All these had to be made on top of other work in the days when lanterns were manufactured in batches of a couple of dozen at a time. There would be nowhere to store anything at our new but small works at Gunnersbury. Vans did not take much of a load either, so transport from there would be quite a feat in itself.

What we should find that installation short of was spots and what there were did not, with one exception, give much light. This was the age of the plano-convex lens focus lamp. Back-up from arcs was essential at times and all the many optical effects in *The Ring* always used arcs. The exception was the Steimar spot. There were six of 1-kW, one to each perch and three out-front in the dome with 30 volt 30 amp lamps and remote colour change. Somehow or other, Steimar has got associated with the later Brockliss arc follow spots of 1935 but Strand were making these 1000-Watt projector lamp models at the end of the twenties. With a patent date of 10/9/25 these were literally the first ellipsoidal profile spots in the world. They were 3ft long however, and on the perches here they were manned. They were dimmed from the board and then redirected

Continued overleaf.

FOOTNOTES:

* John Christie was chairman of the organ builders Hill & Norman Beard in the twenties and was responsible for their version of the cinema organ bearing his name.

† TABS Vol.38 No.1 June 81