

SHALL I SEE IT FROM THE BOX OFFICE?



by Francis Reid

Francis Reid, sometime editor of this magazine, has enjoyed a love-hate relationship with stage lighting for nearly 30 years. From time to time he retreats to recover his sanity. After a decade at Glyndebourne and a clutch of west-end hits including Sleuth and Man of la Mancha he disappeared for three happy years to varnish boats on the Norfolk Broads before re-emerging to light a cluster of shows including Bubbling Brown Sugar. For the past couple of years he has turned his back on lighting design (apart from Anyone for Denis?) for a sabbatical as Administrator of the National Trust's 1819 Theatre Royal in Bury St Edmunds. TABS asked him what happens when a lighting man gets his hands on a theatre's budget.

WHEN I arrived in Bury, I looked over the lighting equipment. It was rather tired, both optically and mechanically. Cable tails were frayed and earthing notional. There seemed to be only two possible alternatives: to replace the lot or to kit out crew and cast in wellington boots. I looked in the cheque book: it might have stood replacement at 1950 prices. I looked in the programme: *Merry Widow* in wellies? Perhaps. But not in Bury St Edmunds.

So I consulted a congenial gentleman named, rather oddly but aptly, A. Lights Esq. Ancient, for that was his christian name, looked briefly up at the hanging rig and instantly quoted a flat price per lantern for going through the lot, replacing anything that was substandard: tails, holders, reflectors, lenses, etc. I did an equally hasty calculation (using the seat of my pants rather than more conventional accountancy) and accepted by uttering that well known theatrical business expression — done! A pair of ancient lightermen, equipped with a trolley loaded with bins of every conceivable Strand spare and screw, whipped through the lot in a day.

You may wonder why we did not do the job ourselves ("in house" as the jargon has it). Well, reference to Sod's Encyclopaedia of Lighting Law will confirm that diagnosis cannot precede dismantling. We did not wish to invest in a comprehensive stock of spares, and our friendly local stockist

was hardly just around the corner. So I applied one of the basic principles of budgeting and scheduling that is part of any lighting designer's knowledge of management: reduce the unknowns — subcontract the risk and the hassle.

With safety restored, I hoped that I could forget all about the lighting. The last thing that I wanted to do with my theatre's slender cash resources was to spend on peripherals like marginally improved illuminations! Survival for 350 seat theatres in isolated market towns of 27,000 souls can only be based on *buy shows cheap, sell them dear, bang the drum and squeeze the overheads*. The best available shows, well publicised, are the only hope of attracting an audience. New lighting equipment? Would I see it from the box office?

However, there were disturbing bulletins from the control room. Elsie was reported to be sick. Indeed, terminally ill. So I went up to the gallery and gave her a good kick. My roots are in an earlier technology and so are Elsie's, so she perked up considerably and went about her daily cues in a more or less orderly fashion.

To those unversed in the christening procedures for older Strand boards, I should perhaps explain that Elsie was an LC ("Elsie"/"LC" ... get it?). For years I assumed that the letters L and C stood for inductance and capacitance. It was only years later, in the ante room of the research and development department (the Lamb & Flag) that I discovered that LC had been named after her midwife — an abbreviation for *Leggett's Choke*.

Elsie's stage debut was the opening of Chichester Festival Theatre where she was immediately embraced by those of us who found the popular organ desks to be but grandmasters robbed of their traditional multi-operator flexibility. In fact LC (2 preset, 3 group) was the grandmother of all today's controls whether they be multi-preset or infinite-preset (and I am definitely *not* referring to choke dimmer's unfortunate habit of remembering a fading vision of the previous cue!).

But logic was niggling away in my mind. Elsewhere in the theatre's operation, I was fighting a recession with a policy of *you have to spend to make*. I knew that capital expenditure on a new control would effect savings

The Theatre Royal, Bury St. Edmunds.



in running costs, but I think it was probably the fact that I was a lighting designer turned theatre administrator that was stopping me from spending money on lighting.

As usually happens, the decision was made for me. One opening night, I was gently enjoying the Victorian charms of "Lady Audley's Secret" complete with an admirable simulation of gaslight. The interval revealed that the random rippling of the light was not part of the lighting design, but was Elsie's involuntary contribution to the plot. Elsie received another therapeutic kick and normal working was resumed. But we had to accept that her end was nigh. We tried a variac transplant but the donor turned out to be of a different mark. I appeared, with Elsie's support, in a one man show entitled "Lighting the Stage", all seats 50p, all receipts towards a new lighting control. The publicity primed the local authority pump to the extent of a £10,000 interest free loan. "Housing the Arts" coughed up another £1,000 and box-office surpluses provided the balance.

We went to tender and were relieved when DUET 2, which seemed to offer the right facilities, turned out not only to be the cheapest quote but within our budget — provided that we used some of our summer slack for do-it-ourselves installation.

The basic package was a Duet with VDU and Pin Patch. The choice of pin patch rather than twin preset was not made for back-up reasons. We hoped and believed that no multinational was going to market a packaged control that was susceptible to failure. Our faith was justified: 18 months continuous service so far without a single problem since installation. No, our choice of pin patch was because of a belief that this is the best facility for instant lighting of the one nighters who frequently fail to provide a running order, let alone a lighting plot.

Furthermore on some of these shows there is better contact if the lighting operator is on the side of the stage rather than in a remote control room. Also, any stage inevitably has some very simple evenings when an operator is unnecessary; apart from economics, it is not exactly humane to send anyone into a lighting box for two hours or more just to check the houselights and raise a reset when the pianist enters. So the pin patch

masters were duplicated in the prompt corner.

The other act of *economic humanity* was to install a rigger's control. This just has to be regarded as essential in any small theatre. Especially in one like Bury where the total technical staff (stage, flies, electrics, props, maintenance) is two people. (And in March 1981 we opened for 28 days, giving 31 performances of 16 different attractions). It is difficult to function effectively if half the staff is continually climbing the gallery stairs to flash a channel for focusing!

These two extras duplicate remote pin patch masters, and a rigger's control — turned out to be incredibly cost effective. And the Duet performed that standard feat of all memory boards: reduced plotting time and therefore overtime. As well as that all important reduction of hassle.

So, Bury reinforced my conviction that in lighting, like most things, you have to *spend to make*. Or if you prefer to put it more profoundly — *capital investment produces economies in running costs*.



Duet 2. "18 months" continuous service so far without a single problem".

Just before I left Bury, I started to put into operation a plan to effect savings in lamp running costs by concentrating on stocking only a small range of cheaper long life lamps. Calculations suggested that lamp savings would justify part exchanges of new equipment (using T/11 or T/19) for old (using T/4, T/15 or T/16) within the same financial year. First indications seem to confirm that this course of action is correct.

Very few of the great developments in lighting came about for purely artistic reasons. Staff reductions and contributions from electricity supply boards on the changeover from DC to AC provided the first real stimulus for remote control development. And it was the commercial theatre that first adopted the lighting designer; essentially as a money saving device to be later adopted by the subsidised theatre for artistic reasons.

So the moral is ... if lighting designers (like me) want to get new equipment from administrators (like me) they should go easy on the quality but stress the width: don't bother to try to explain the visual improvements that will increase the box-office (they will), but concentrate on the much easier proof that the sun will shine on the overheads.