

# I was There!

mutton. It was my first encounter with the raw deal French cuisine bestows on roast mutton. On the return journey we three saw the Casino de Paris show with Josephine Baker and Maurice Chevalier. We had seats in the front row stalls and I was much impressed with the torrent of saliva from the famous bottom lip. It could clearly be seen in the limes from where we sat.

The interior of the S'Carlos opera house turned out to be as beautiful architecturally as Lisbon itself. This particular building opened in June 1793 having been built to replace the one by Bibiena which had been totally wrecked by the great earthquake of 1755. After 132 years of service it was closed in 1925 as being in serious need of maintenance: and that is how we saw it fourteen years later. Although a great deal of restoration and redecoration had yet to take place before it could re-open on December 1st it was impossible not to be impressed. This date in 1941 celebrated the 300th and 800th anniversaries of important events in the history of Portugal.

On our return to England we had to set about making the equipment. Our large Talbot Road factory was full of work for the Admiralty (those patriotic pillars and landing lights and the like!) but Export still had a high priority. It was "the piano" which might have stymied us because Comptons had gone completely over to the wood fuselages for Hurricanes. However J.I. Taylor, that superb improviser upon the organ and Comptons technical director, said that now we had an order for a Light Console they *must* make it somehow. So there it was a loner among an entire factory swept by Hurricanes.

The Battle of Britain was by now in full swing but I had a private one which included dubious health prospects and a conviction that this was the last chance ever for me and my Light Console. When it and the dimmer bank came together at Talbot Road I had to have someone at the other end while we made the main cable – our first ever! Comptons could not spare anyone and Paul Weston was the only other one in Strand who had seen the technique, so there he had to be – and was! Every now and then we would have to drop the job and adjourn to the air raid shelter, there to watch with a great deal of non-comprehension interminable games of Solo. It seemed improbable that this job of mine would ever be completed, let alone installed.

This changed to certainty when having at last tested and packed-up the dimmer banks and all the rest and dispatched them to the London docks, Hitler opted to concentrate bombing on that area. For three successive nights I could look across London from the house at Harrow and see the great red glare in

the sky which signalled the end to all my ambitions. But in fact it didn't! The Lisbon equipment was in the basement of its blitzed warehouse and survived to be shifted up to Liverpool, thence to be embarked on a two-month voyage. Lord knows where and by what routes the boat went but it certainly crossed the Atlantic to get to Lisbon!

Eventually we were warned to be ready to receive and install the stuff. France having fallen it was air travel or nothing. And the Air Ministry decided that it was to be nothing. This was hardly surprising since there was but one Civil flight a week – a survival of the Empire flying boat era. There were only six places and this was the link with the entire Empire and the Pan-Am clipper to USA via Bermuda. Just Bill Pepworth, who always installed Applebee's jobs, and I were now to go. We lobbied A.P. Herbert who was the one MP who would know how

packing case was manhandled over the tail end. Unfortunately owing to the layout of the room Teclado 3 (Manual 3), the largest section, had to be got in first. When this finally reached the ground and amid loud hammerings the case was removed we could see that it was not going through the doorway. However, once the Portuguese do move, they do and no mistake. The masons arrived and in about twenty minutes the concrete and stone steps were removed using pickaxes only. Then began a terrifying spectacle, with groans, crashes and mighty swayings the section arrived approximately in position. The other two followed, the job being complete just about 9pm.

While this was going on, the Customs broker would persist in carrying on a rapid conversation in French about 'cette jolie piece' etc. and as my heart was in my mouth most of the time it would have been

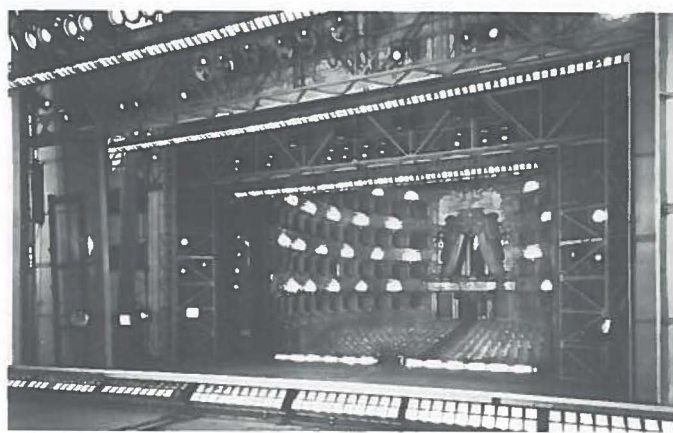
bilities who give voluble explanations with assurance. I feel certain from experience in England that they have got it all wrong. They are, of course, quite safe from my protests since neither they nor I understand one another. . . . You can have no idea what it is like trying to get things done here. The language difficulty does not help, and it is very hard to see that 'our' men do only *our* jobs. There was a time when everytime Pep's back was turned the men would vanish from the stage and start once again polishing the dimmer bank. Above all we are hampered by 'tomorrow' everything can be answered by 'tomorrow'.

All this was in spite of the fact that it was a matter of days before the date of the Gala performance which *had* to re-open S'Carlos. There was a battle to be fought over the location of the Light Console. On our previous visit this had been settled, as I wanted, in the orchestra pit. On our return it indicated that there had been a change of mind and it was going on the stage. Apparently everyone was for it in the pit except the Maestro. I put my foot down many times and the Minister decided after visiting the theatre at nearly midnight that it must go in the orchestra. Meantime the Maestro, who is also the composer of the Gala opera and speaks a little English, congratulates me on the console and says he doesn't mind it in the orchestra at all. It is moved there and I put the cable on.

These battles will be familiar to most of those who have done export installations or indeed any complicated technical job in a theatre. Lisbon was more special than most, so to speak. It was the great chance to show off my own cherished invention. It could well be the last chance, being a race against the hazards of war and illness.

Far more serious, indeed in retrospect a hurdle impossible to surmount, though I did give the matter some thought the night before setting off to the docks to enquire, was the missing console relay. I remember going up to the tired and haggard captain of the battered old merchantman; feeling an absolute heel to bother him about the relay which was to do something so unimportant as to make stage lighting work. I found him leaning against the bulwarks supervising some job on what seemed a singularly empty and weather-beaten small ship. He immediately suggested we take a look and led me into a hold in which the same emptiness ruled overall. However before despair could take over; there it was, looking very small partially hidden behind a bulkhead, the missing Compton relay. It was this which enabled the relatively few wires of the main cable to multiply and activate all the contactor and clutch coils and the rest. Without it there was no alternative to manual operation by a gang of slaves at the end of a telephone line in the dimmer room. The "piano" would have been a fraud.

We did not get any current to run or test the job until November 22nd though we were ready four days earlier. However, we did open on December 1st – the appointed day.



S'Carlos Opera House

important first nights and opening dates were! The best he could suggest was that we should get our agent, Arriaga de Tavares, to tackle his government. After all it was they who were going to celebrate "oito seculos" of this and "trois seculos" of that with a State re-opening of their opera house. The idea worked. Armed with Portuguese visas with "At the extraordinary request of His Excellency the Ambassador" scrawled in red ink across them we were allocated our two places.

One way and another it took eighteen storm-tossed hours of flying spread over three days to get to Lisbon in the flying-boat Claire. I used to send detailed accounts of our adventures back to head office which were typed out and circulated. This contemporary document describes the arrival of the Strand equipment:—

The apparatus was unloaded very smartly into the scene dock including 'the piano'. This took them from about 1.30 to 4pm, there seemed to be a hell of a lot of packing cases. Then about 5pm there arrived (up the hill) three small lorries with three large packing cases. These were to go straight into the dimmer room. It was obvious that the packing cases would not go through the door, so they were unpacked in the street. Lamps were rigged and the traffic stopped; by this time we had quite an audience. I will not describe the nervous strain of what followed, both Pep and I thought the lorry would tip up as the

difficult to talk in English let alone in French. The men worked from lunch until after nine without a break for anything, drink or food and they worked with a real will and never a grumble. Pep and I took turn to return to the hotel to eat our dinner. They deserved the drinks we stood them afterwards. In all this it must be remembered that Pep and I were entirely cut off and dependent on our own resources, there was no question of any spares and replacements from England. Many years my senior Pep and I formed an ideal pair – he had all the traditional skills of an experienced foreman mechanic and wireman and I the new ones.

My account also covers the events of the next few days and includes a "tribute to the Strand 'system' which gave the Customs a complete list of case contents and ourselves nothing useful at all." It continues: "There was a touching picture at one time of Engineer Martins (in charge for the Minister) and Arriaga (Strand's agent) peeping through the the partly opened lid of the 'piano' packing case to satisfy their curiosity. The general opening of the parcels, cases etc., reminded me of opening Christmas presents, all excitement. The rain effect (rain-box), for instance, everybody played with it. While the console case was opened all work seemed to stop. . . . From that time on neither the console or the dimmer bank has been free of visitors. Parties are conducted round by various nota-