

We thought it would be interesting to get two non-staff people to visit two M24 installations to get the feeling of the users after some actual lighting on the board. Gail Hardman went to the Mitchell Theatre in the Potteries, used almost entirely by amateur companies, while Graham Walne visited the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art representing the other end of the spectrum as the very forcing house of professional theatre and TV talent.

"EVERY DAY EXCEPT CHRISTMAS"

staff are two electricians, who take it in turns to work each show. Since it was Clive Hargreaves' week on the board, I had a brief chat with him before the interval.

"The groups who use the theatre are almost exclusively amateurs," he told me, "and we provide quite a lot of help with their lighting, so one of M24's most useful facilities is being able to use it from the stalls during plotting – both to see what we're doing, and to offer advice to the producer or director of the show." The electrician on duty is also designated official fireman, so during performances the board has to be sited in the wings to allow him to keep an eye on things backstage.

Clive, a self-employed electrician in his "day-job", found that it took him quite a while to become familiar with the new system, and it still takes him longer to programme the M24 than to plot the old board, but increasing experience on the Mitchell's wide variety of shows is bound to help. "Malcolm's had all the tricky plots so far – the luck of the draw," Clive grinned. "Although I still find that the programming takes quite a time, the M24's certainly far more flexible than the old system – we can do things that we wouldn't even have considered before, and I don't think we're really using its full potential yet."

Once the show was safely under way, Clive's colleague, Malcolm Wood, took up this point. "In a way it's been difficult for us, moving straight from the dark ages onto the most up-to-date system possible." (Their old board was "half a Grand Master", now happily resited and continuing its long career in a

nearby village hall.) "When the local authority decided that a new board had become essential, we were looking at a standard manual three-preset type. But just as the order was about to be confirmed, along came the M24. At about the same price with so many more facilities there was no contest, and it was installed during our August break last year."

A few initial teething troubles were sorted out between Rank Strand and Midland Theatre Services, who, Malcolm told me, really put themselves out to remove the system's bugs. Part of their operational difficulty at first, being totally unfamiliar with such a board, was that if a problem arose they were unsure whether it was a system fault or merely themselves misusing it in some way. Malcolm, who feels that his ordinary job with a computer peripherals manufacturer has helped him to become accustomed to the M24 a little easier than Clive, has developed his own system of arranging a few useful states on the FX24 accessory panel, so that he knows he has manual back-up in case of emergencies. "The FX24 is a very useful addition to the board's capabilities, since we can often use some of the flashy effects, and the eight manual states are invaluable for times of panic – like when you're only half-way through the plot by curtain up!"

With a new show every week, all produced by amateurs, and only the two professional staff to cope, the schedule is frequently hair-raising, and Malcolm feels that the new facility demands some extra effort in pre-planning. "What I would like to do in the near future is to organise an

exhibition to show the societies what the board can offer them. The old Grand Master was so limited, and now we've such an exciting range of possibilities, but it's no good if the producers don't know what we can give them. The most important thing now is forward planning, and I want to educate the groups and make them understand how vital this is if they're to get the best out of their lighting."

"In future, Clive or I will visit the society 4-6 weeks before they open, to arrange the lighting plot with the producer. Then we'll set up the cues blind and transfer the whole plot onto audio cassette, ready for the dress rehearsal. Then hopefully all that will be needed will be minor adjustments, saving us a terrific amount of time. This blind plotting feature of the M24 is going to be a great help to us. Adjustment of the memory content is no problem – you can add or subtract (only don't ask the computer to subtract, you have to say 'add zero!') cues and lamp states at will – but having the basis already programmed is really necessary for our very tight schedule."

Malcolm used this technique on the theatre's most ambitious production so far – award-winning Studio One's version of Grease. "It took me about two hours to blind-plot 120 cues the week before Grease opened, so during the Sunday fit-up we only had to colour and focus, and then fine-tune the plot during the dress. One dance number used 30 move fades, sequenced and timed automatically by the board. It was fantastic – every night it finished exactly on the beat of

the music, and it was really exciting for us to be able to match choreography, sound and light with such precision!

"Operational flexibility is the M24's key feature – you can alter what's happening to the lights before, during or after a cue – for instance, if the next act's broken its leg you can skip a few cues, or if something goes wrong on stage you can take control and fade to black or whatever."

"One of my favourite cues was a ten-minute change from moon-set to sun-rise, using three of the six move fades available. On Grease we made extensive use of the FX24, for chases, flashes and sequences that were programmed onto the manual faders as the show went along – it was great fun!"

"We're really only at the beginning of what this board can do for us – it opens up so many new horizons in our lighting. When Midlands Theatre Services came to give us our first lesson on it, we asked them to come again in a few months, when we've got past the stumbling to the walking stage, and show us how to really run with it – the points of operational finesse that you really can't get from reading the manual."

The M24 has certainly opened the way for the smaller organisation to be able to afford to move their lighting control system into the computer age. As Malcolm put it, "This board represents such phenomenal value. OK, there are some things a Duet can do that ours won't, but then there are some things we can do that the Duet can't, and for about one-third of the price. . . ." Phenomenal, indeed! ■