

I KNEW I should never have walked into the Strand lighting demo at the National Drama in Education Conference down in that Athens of the South otherwise known as Melbourne. Trouble is, with a father who was an old hand at stage lighting (everything from Oklahomal for J. C. Williamsons to the Sydney Opera House, and the best follow spot operator I have ever seen) and a healthy interest in the business myself, I can't seem to stay away from anyone who even remotely looks like they might be about to demonstrate a dimmer. When I was doing an M.A. in drama and theatre arts at Leeds University I was dubbed a 'technological romantic' after coming back from a lighting demo at T'Bradford Alhambra where the redoubtable Trevor Falkner and myself had just seen limelight demonstrated. Seventh heaven!

But technological romanticism does not go amiss when you are dealing, as I often have to, with totally inexperienced students, teachers and would-be lighting crew for the amateur stage. And when I walked into that demo in Melbourne, there it was again, the fear that some people have of dealing with an area so crucial at times to the artistic success or failure of a piece of theatre. Sure, there are both long and short courses around in Australia and many of the people who sell and service the equipment go out of their way to help those who wouldn't know a Patt 23 if it got up and bit them.

But there's still a distressing sense that stage lighting is an unknowable mystery, particularly to the director (not always amateur) or the teacher-director with no scientific or technical background. It is (as we all know) very hard not to groan more than inwardly when someone says to you when asked about the lighting; 'Oh I just want some ambers and straw...' or 'I just want a few lights. I don't want you to go to any trouble...' You rain mental curses down upon the writer of that 'how to put on a show' book* from which the first speaker got those lovely technical terms to throw about. You control your temper with the second who has clearly never spent three hours lighting (with three lamps) a piano to the satisfaction of a performer visiting the local community theatre for a concert. And you think seriously about resigning when your college principal, faced with an exhausted head of Performing Arts after a weekend spent rigging a show, says 'But was all that time strictly necessary? Surely all you were doing was putting up a few lights...'

Then there's the schools where lighting and sound are firmly in the grip of someone from the Science department and have been for a decade, usually thus ensuring that anyone (a) non-scientific (b) female

(c) junior is never even going to get the chance to try. (They ought to see Peter Howe in action. He's a Canberra primary school teacher who actually trains the under-elevens, both male and female, to design and operate the school shows' lighting and sound.) I was horrified when a few years ago I walked into a local secondary school (which had better remain nameless) to help a director who had come in from the outside to do a musical with the students. She needed the lights in a week. The Junior 8 in the wings looked like a bomb had hit it. A few moments later, when a student damned near electrocuted himself after having been told not to touch, the smell of roasting fourteen year old sharpened the simile. Then I discovered the flood battens coloured up with many layers of cellophane... And all the while, a Science teacher stood by and muttered.

Okay, so for me it's been easy. A father in the business, an opportunity to teach performing arts in some new and well equipped secondary colleges... You must be kidding! I used to have conversations with my father that went like this:

'Dad, teach me something about lighting...'
'Fer Gawd's sake go away and call a show!'

So eventually, after looking bemused at lighting rehearsals for a bit I went away and called a show. And learnt that follow-spotting is not an inherited skill. And was a 'gofer' for people who knew the difference between a dimmer and a circuit and who were never fazed when a Patt 23 got up and bit them.

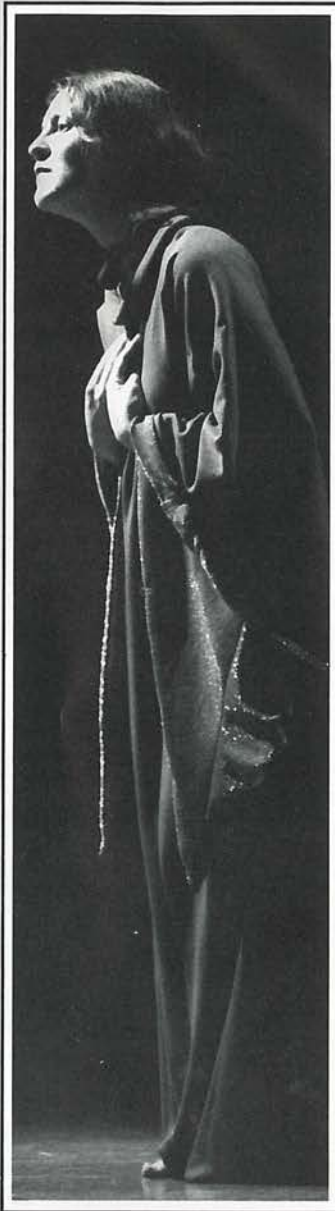
And then when I was faced at Phillip College with a lighting system that didn't get finished until six weeks before our first production (nothing very ambitious - just PEER GYNT) and no handbooks (the contractors had thrown them out... they also managed to 'assemble' the Patt 123's by jamming the lenses into the runners that take the gel carrier, but that is another story). I developed (in panic) a teach-yourself-lighting method that went something like this. I locked myself in the bio-box to keep out all those well-meaning people, both staff and students, who were, with the best will in the world, getting in the way of *me* learning to become independent of the Science department. When the handbooks came in from Strand, I was delighted to find I'd guessed right about a few things...

Of course, along the way I also made sure I found out enough about loads, electrical safety and the wiring up of extension leads to survive. (I may be a technological romantic, but I'm not a technological idiot!) I'm reliably informed that my first 'lamp-up', which seemed to take hours, was so horrible to watch that the man who incautiously offered to help went away feeling ill. But I got the lamp into the lantern eventually... .

"Dad... teach me something about lighting!"

by Alanna Maclean.

Alanna is currently the Senior Teacher, Performing Arts at Erindale College, which is a secondary college in Canberra attached to a community centre with a theatre of slightly unusual design that deserves an article in itself! But that is another story.



Margaret Traill as Paulina in THE WINTER'S TALE PHILLIP COLLEGE 1981.

My father by this time had graduated to growling; 'Do you get TABS?' and waving greasy copies of a funny looking little magazine at me. He also got around to seeing some of my lighting designs in action. But there's no pleasing some people. He was raised in an era when lighting was meant to make performers visible. He could even remember

footlights. So when faced with some of my murkier efforts in Trojan women or Hair (he'd worked on the original Sydney production) his comment was invariably: 'Yer underlit!' An argument would generally ensue about the virtues and vices of artistic murk, although basically I reckon he just wanted a closer look at the nude scene in Hair. My side of the battle would usually be fought with pictures such as the accompanying one from a production of mine of The Winter's Tale. (Murky, yes, but you can still see what's necessary.)

So no matter what your contacts, learning about lighting and putting it into practice in the amateur/school situation in Australia is no easier than it is anywhere else. But I've seen a lot of people start from scratch and come to understand that lighting is not a mystery to be guarded jealously only by those who know what's Watt. To know nothing about it is to place both director and teacher in the untenable position of the person I spoke to at the Melbourne demo who only got to see her lighting at the dress rehearsal. You see, this other teacher had been looking after the lights for years and nobody else except him and a few of his students were allowed near the stuff... thus cutting off whole areas of opportunity, not only for allowing the director full artistic control (she was not happy with his work but what could she do? It was dress rehearsal night, she was new to the school). but also for opening up this area of creativity to students. (I recommended a variation on the 'lock yourself in a room with the equipment and throw everyone else out' method for next time.)

Sure, we all know that there are tremendous problems with the nature and state of equipment in amateur/school situations. Antique Junior 8's, Patt 23's hard wired into position, lighting bars located somewhere in the stratosphere high on the roof of school halls with no access; and then there was the primary school where the lighting kept blowing lamps. 'The bulbs keep blowing' they said. 'No wonder' I replied, looking at some Patt 23's bolted onto the walls sideways. 'But they were put up by an electrician!' came the wail.

But it's worth it when a student meets your (mild) suggestion that you work the board tonight because it's your design with the rejoinder that you know what you can do with your ego but that you can stay and watch if you want to. It's worth it when a drama piece by a student turns out to be superbly lit with two Patt 123's and a lot of juggling with levels. And it's worth it when a colleague announces that she's ordered a piece of equipment and you know it's the right one because she's learnt to choose.

My only present regret is walking into that damned lighting demo in Melbourne. If I hadn't, I wouldn't have had to write this article. ■

*Not Francis Reid