



Microprocessing a Georgian Theatre

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'Let there be light,' said the Mayor and, with audience joining in, continued 'and there was LIGHT!'. On the word *light* he pushed the raise button on his Rigger's Control and was immediately bathed in a tight white downlight from six PAR Cans. Simultaneously, as the remainder of the stage and auditorium blacked out, Monteverdi trumpets thundered out from speakers at the back of the gallery. Pause of five seconds then auditorium and cyclorama went into a 45 second sequence of crossfades that embraced a fairly comprehensive palette of colours and textures.

A theatre which has known the switch-on of candles, oil, gas and common electricity (presumably first the direct and then the alternating) had become equipped with the all-singing, all-dancing, micro-processed digital stuff. A significant moment in the life of a Theatre which has no legal right to call itself Royal, but has surely earned regal status by continuing to remain on parade for 161 years. Yes, Wilkin's 1819 Georgian Theatre Royal in Bury St Edmunds, the only working theatre in the care of the National Trust, has entered the age of the silicon chip. A moment surely for Mayors

and Trumpets.

The final moments of the old switch-board – a Strand LC – had passed with perhaps a more muted but nevertheless emotionally tinged ceremony. After LC's last cue, the theatre staff processed to the 'gods' with a salver bearing a bottle of champagne. The cork behaved impeccably and landed where the OP stage box would have been when the theatre first arose in the Georgian mode. Glasses were raised and LC solemnly thanked for services rendered.

The audience entering for the new switch-on found LC standing proudly in the foyer, bearing the simple words

1965 – 1980

R.I.P.

She has been put out to graze in the Arcadia Skegness and we wish her a happy retirement: one of the amplifier cards, framed and inscribed, will hang in the theatre to remind future lighting generations of the dawning of the age of the transistor.

The new Control System was funded from the Theatre's Repairs and Renewals Fund (swollen by last year's operating surplus) temporarily augmented by an

interest free loan of £10,000 from St. Edmundsbury Borough Council.

The chosen system is a Rank Strand DUET 2 with 60 STM dimmers. Why DUET?

Well, most controls now have certain essentials:

- . Digital Channel Access
- . Two playbacks
- . Cue linkage
- . Video display

But DUET also offers two essentials which are not universal:

- . Wheel for channel adjustment
 - . Digital window in addition to VDU
- and, very important, it is not *over-miniaturised*.

Bury surveyed the market, went to tender with four likely manufacturers and discovered DUET to be the most cost-effective response to outline specification. Two hundred Duets sold seemed impressive – and a few discreet enquiries established that the machine had acceptable reliability in lands more remote than Suffolk.

So it's a DUET.

The package is fairly straightforward. The back-up is a pin-patch and there are a couple of stock extras to make life easier in a theatre where the resident technical staff is also but a duet (Stage Manager and Assistant). The control room is in the gallery so a rigger's control makes sense – it will save time (and therefore to some extent save money, although time in a theatre is frequently something that money cannot buy). But the Rigger's Control is also a very humane device – even in a small theatre, the journey from stage to control room can be quite a route march.

The other optional labour/time/money saving device is the duplication of the pin-patch masters in the prompt corner so that the control room need not be manned during simple concerts requiring simple standing light or basic colour washes. Indeed there are many unrehearsed concert situations in a small regional theatre when it can be more convenient – and often produce better lighting – when the operator has the *contact* of being on the side of the stage rather than in front.



Councillor John Knight, O.B.E., Mayor of St. Edmundsbury, switches on under the supervision of stage manager Nick Beadle. (Photograph Nick Adkin)