

Fraser trained as an engineer and later in data processing. He was instrumental in getting the unsuccessful SRS (Seat Reservation Systems) off the ground in the early seventies, but left, disappointed at the way the operation was being run. His deputy, John Taylor, has a computer background and is responsible for development and installation of BOCS, Space-Time Systems' first application of computer technology to audience requirements, but not, they hope, the last. Other fields like sport will follow when the first is safely launched.

It is heartening at a time of deep recession to learn that Fraser obtained the venture capital for his project within a month of outlining the idea. And in the sleepy holiday month of August, to boot! That was in 1979. The city's Foreign and Colonial group, with investment potential of over £300 million and mid-Victorian ancestry, had been impressed with Fraser from earlier dealings and were quick to respond to an attractive project. F & C has the majority shareholding; Fraser holds a minority interest as does Theatre Projects Ltd, represented by Richard Pilbrow on the board. A third minority shareholder is Venture Link Ltd, the venture capital company that put forward Fraser's idea to F & C.

Detailed explanations of the BOCS operation are most clearly grasped after taking a 'test drive'. But in essence, the seats are booked through the keyboard and the booking comes up on the screen. For example, 'what are the best available seats at £3.50, next Tuesday evening (which happens to be a piano recital)?' The answer will rely on the box office manager's pre-programmed definition of 'best seats', in this case, nearest to the piano. In a multi-purpose venue this can vary from day to day. However, manual override can operate at any time. A seating plan, like existing paper ones, plots the gradual sale of seats, and each performance has a separately filed seating plan. In contrast to present manual systems using paper seating plans, BOCS's on-line programme enables any number of sales staff to handle bookings simultaneously.

Fraser calculates that some 200 of Britain's 600 box office operations could be using computerised systems before long, with America providing a sizeable export market of about the same numbers.

One reservation raised within the trade so far, is the expense of even a small BOCS, about £30,000. For the majority of theatres, 1,000 seaters and under, a mini version has been suggested with more modest performance or capacity.

A central computer can store information, however, for any number of terminals in different theatres. Ian Albery is thinking of running lines between his Wyndham's and Albery theatres in London and using Post Office lines to connect up his Piccadilly and Criterion theatres half a mile away, says Fraser.

There are other bonuses. Information vital to running the box office can be stored (on magnetic floppy discs) and several copies kept in case of damage or loss. So goodbye to the old 'master plan'.

Also, explains Fraser, 'one is now used to standby schemes, but there are further possibilities. With instant pricing facility, you can introduce Dynamic Pricing, as I call it. Special prices at short notice, for promotional competitions and one-off discounts'.

In time, as the Palace mentioned, BOCS and its competitors will link up with Prestel, Ceefax and Oracle as well as agencies with terminals all over the country. Availability of tickets could thus be checked and instant bookings made from private homes or agents in far away Edinburgh or Lower Slaughter.

At present the difficulty with Prestel, which runs ten computers round the country, is that information is only updated every 24 hours, so that any theatres using a display card to publicise shows, like the RSC, have to withdraw it with 200 seats unsold, to avoid double booking. This creates PR difficulties.

But Prestel is making strides and it should soon be possible to update information every hour. Orders, incidentally, sit in the Prestel computers and have to be regularly checked by box office staff. As Ken Fraser puts it: 'When they have better technologies, less Space Invader-like, they will become very valuable.'

Advantages to producers of the BOCS are, as Fraser sees it, an efficient means of analysing accounts as it goes along and providing a no-wastage marketing tool by storing customer information. This could make it safer to mount more varied and complicated repertoires at the last minute, since a lot of organisation goes into the detailed types of event.

Advertising patterns would probably change too, he thinks, as the leading means of publicising something. Prestel, direct mail, agency promotions would all assume greater importance.

Cautious enthusiasm

I sounded out a number of managements on their reaction to computers, and BOCS in particular.

Paul Findlay at the Royal Opera House was 'very impressed' by what he saw. 'Computerisation must come in time, probably not that far in the future' he felt. 'What worries me, given the complexity of our bookings, is whether the system is foolproof? Is it also quicker than our manual system, because that's pretty quick. We must see it in action for a while rather than in a demonstration. SRS, you see, did not work as fast as our manual. Pre-printed piles of tickets were more efficient every time'.

The Barbican arts centre will be the biggest complex in Britain when it opens. How does it see the computer revolution? Richard York, the Deputy Administrator: 'We are well aware that computers are the right answer for us and they open up the way for outside sales terminals. Our 52-week programme must develop a consciously efficient image. There will be a cen-

tralised booking point for all events, with individual redemption desks by each cinema, concert hall or theatre—as at the National.

'BOCS's attitude in exploring our requirements was a refreshing change. Rather than taking the available hardware and patching it to our needs, they worked the other way round. I have enjoyed that process and thought it was constructive.'

Although ICL is not yet active in this field', he added, 'they are not to be underestimated in their capacity to produce the goods. Perhaps they will not be around for another 12 months or more, but who knows? We may find two or more compatible systems on the market, each suiting particular needs. I admit though, that BOCS have made great progress.'

'I expect the next six to nine months will see something shaking out of the current discussions, especially with the Theatres' National Council (representing all major British theatres). Thereafter the purchase pattern will be interesting to watch'.

York did not believe savings would come from staff salaries or cutting down in the box office. 'The operation is run on a very slim staff normally, so I can't see savings there really. But it may release them from the interminable drudgery of stub counting and stub reconciliation'.

The Barbican is owned by the City of London. Does York feel that local authorities will be the first to change to computers? 'Quite possibly. They are very heavy users of computers and don't have the fear of them that smaller users do. For the last 20 years they have invested in computers in most departments'. As an afterthought he added: 'One of the things about computers is that things change very fast. Of that much you can be certain'.

The official line from the Society of West End Theatre is let's-wait-and-see. Development officer Vincent Burke appeared quite chary, perhaps not having seen the demonstrations. 'We are looking at it with cautious enthusiasm. It is no doubt inevitable for the future, but the main misgivings are currently, (1) that it must be proved reliable; and (2) it must be compatible with any other system, such as ICL (when it comes along).'

BOCS's John Taylor commented: 'ICL are talking about developing a system over the next six months or so. But it is not physically possible to do it that soon. 12 months is more realistic. The question as we see it, is: will ICL make their systems compatible with BOCS? For ours will certainly have that facility.'

In general, Ken Fraser detects a new climate of opinion. 'I found an enormous difference in reaction to computer systems now from that in 1970. Now it is assumed computers will do what we want. People used to think they just printed lots of zeroes like your gas bill. The pocket calculator changed a lot of views, ditto space programmes. Perhaps we now believe too readily that computers will do whatever we need'.

Undoubtedly BOCS is the shape of things to come. And being first in the fields always helps.