

# All at Sea

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Company manager of a five month season of the Black and White Minstrel Show, on board a Greek cruise ship, off the coast of South America – sounds unlikely? Well it was far more unlikely than it sounds! I write this as a guide – or warning – for anyone thinking of becoming involved in this rather specialised branch of show-business.

The ship in question was the T.S.C.S. (Twin Screw Cruise Ship) Navarino. Originally built for a Swedish company, it was refitted by a Greek line in 1975. In the summer months it cruises round the Mediterranean, and each winter it sets sail for somewhere more exotic. Last time it was Argentina, Uruguay and Brazil – stopping off in South Africa en route.

The entertainment set up on the Navarino was different from most ships, very much to the artist's advantage. The Robert Luff Organisation provided a package consisting of thirteen minstrels (singer/dancers), two acts (a musician and a magician), costumes, lighting and sound installations, operated and maintained by a wardrobe mistress, a sound/lighting technician, and myself. At Robert Luff's insistence everyone was on an equity contract, required only to perform in Black and White shows and cabarets. On many other ships, entertainers – except 'acts' have to be part of the cruise staff, and are involved in deck sports and bingo in addition to the shows, and there are no theatre technicians. Our cruises averaged fourteen days, as we performed only on nights at sea. Except for the three days of Carnival in port in Salvador, when even the Brazilians were afraid to go ashore after dark! There were four different Black and White programmes, each lasting about an hour, and consisting of three sequences interspersed with the acts. Performances were twice nightly, with only the final show using the traditional black faced make up. On other evenings members of the company performed in cabaret, either solo, in double acts, or a mini floor show. Once the various shows were rehearsed and in our repertoire, we had a clean up rehearsal/band call in the afternoon of whatever we were doing in the evening. This in the real meaning of repertoire, when you only perform each show fortnightly, or even once a month. You really do have to stop and think what you did last time.

The performance area was the ship's Main Lounge. At one end was a small stage

occupied by the four piece band. In front of them was the dance floor, approximately 30 feet square. The audience sat at tables, and there was a bar at the opposite end to the band. We therefore had to suffer the usual indignities of working in a cabaret environment – the catering comes first, the 'turns' are incidental. Guards had to be posted to stop people blocking entrances, or taking a short cut across the stage. We also had the inevitable waiters on the follow spots, but here of course with the added complication that they did not speak English!

The technical installation, while necessarily basic was very effective, and far superior to most ships. The lighting consisted of a bar with 6 Parblazers in 3 colours at the front of the arena, and on either side, two booms each holding 4 Pat 123's in 4 colours. There were 11 circuits in all, up to

was made of follow spots, as they were operated by members of the company rather than waiters. Even this modest level of equipment however, when first installed moved the Commodore (the Navarino is too high class to make do with just a Captain!) to decree that it must be removed after each show. 'You make my ship look like a christmas tree'. Good sense prevailed though and it stayed.'

The concept remained with regard to the sound system, where rather than a permanent installation, the speakers were on stands. In order to minimise the wear and tear of equipment they were not struck every night, but they had to be demounted in rough weather. It was not unknown for this to occur at 4 am, resulting in a dash up to the Main Lounge, hotly persued by the band to attend to their own gear. The



the limits of the power available. These were controlled by an 18 way Mini 2 board. This gave us 1 spare dimmer rack, and 1 spare circuit should there be trouble. By the end of the season the equipment had been on the ship for three years, and I am told that no lamps had ever blown – we were of course running on 220v supply. In addition to this there were 2 Silhouette 1k CSI follow spots. Obviously more equipment would have enabled greater sophistication in the lighting, but with the lamps available quite a degree of variation was possible. It was more effective in cabaret, when greater use

system comprised 2 Revox tape decks, a Soundcraft 16 into 2 desk, with Bose amps and speakers. This proved quite satisfactory, except when the room was over full of exuberant South Americans. Then extra speakers would have been useful, to ensure that those at the very back heard clearly, without deafening those at the front. The other difficulty with a very noisy house was that while the Black and White shows were on tape, and could always be pushed sufficiently high, in cabarets using mikes there was a tendency to start picking up the band, since they were right behind the singer. The