

Getting to Grips with the New Technologies

PAUL NEED

We face ever more rapid advances in technology, with the lifespan of product cycles becoming correspondingly shorter. One way to stay on top of new developments could be to attend a new 'hands on' style course, aimed at benefitting practitioners and manufacturers alike. An impartial observer went to find out.

Technical training for the theatre has always been a talking point within the profession. The subject of retraining verges on controversy. So when Stagehands, the technical agency based in Cardiff, announced the 'Latest Technology Familiarisation Course', held last August, there must have been cries of disapproval from many quarters, including those who believe that the people being retrained should not need to pay for the privilege. The course fee was £250 including lunch and accommodation was extra.

The course was aimed at professional technicians from the entertainment industry and it succeeded in attracting a wide variety of people – from the time-served chief electrician to the "roadie", the sound engineer to the student and the technical manager, even a shop fitter. 25% were on Stagehands' books and 90% had their course fees paid for them by an employer or sponsor. Theatre management obviously have the money to spend on training.

Choosing Birmingham University as the location was a conscious effort by the organisers to stay clear of London, to keep costs down, and still provide easy access and good facilities for participants from all

over the country. Where else could you find bed and breakfast, and evening meal for £150.00 per week and only a ten minute walk from the conference hall? Certainly not in London.

The aim of the course was to provide professional technicians with hands-on experience of the latest equipment in lighting, sound, A.V. and special effects, which was on the whole reasonably successful. However, a couple of companies displaying their wares rather disappointingly failed to bring their most recently released items.

Strand talked at great length about the importance of control equipment and brought the M24, Tempus and the new Action lighting boards along. The new Lightboard M, together with the MLP2, Gemini, and the Galaxy 1, 2 or 3 were frustratingly absent, as were the Parscan, Litescan, Parscroller, Iris scroller or any colour change unit. The session began with an account of the historical development of luminaires and dimmers followed by a lengthy description of their new lantern range. This left barely an hour to actually get to grips with the all-too-few new items that they brought with them.

CCT, gave a somewhat unprepared talk about their range of equipment and also failed to bring along anything really exciting. It seemed as though both CCT and Strand had misinterpreted the brief from Stagehands as to what exactly should have been covered and demonstrated. Either that or they ignored it. Using salesmen to talk about an equipment range can be a mistake in any form of teaching/training situation since at the end of the day they must be aiming for a sale. In this respect the course sometimes resembled a mini ABTT trade or PLASA Light and Sound show.

Other demonstrations included a very informative lecture-type presentation given by Keith Flounder of Laserhire. He covered the principles of how lasers actually work, and how to use them effectively and safely. This was probably one of the best sessions in the first half of the week. A superb balance of magnificent displays, theory and hands-on experience. Many people on the course, some of whom have never even seen a laser, believed this session to be truly exhilarating.

It succeeded in attracting a wide variety of people – from chief electrician to sound engineer and technical manager.

Tony Harcourt of Kodak also gave a very detailed and enjoyable talk on projection equipment. The theatre space overflowed with Kodak products enabling everyone to experiment with Carousels, dissolve units and the new Display maker, plus a computer-aided graphics design device used mainly for conferences and teaching purposes. Everyone had fun creating pretty, and sometimes rather rude pictures.



Eltec – Budget control systems.



CCT Lecture demonstration.