



# LIGHTING+SOUND

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# ANYTHING GOES?

Julian Williams



One of the set pieces from Anything Goes.

Photo: Anthony Crickmay.

At a time when the standing of theatre technicians is being brought into question (see *Fantasy Island*, L+SI August), Julian Williams talks to two leading exponents about their role, and how they have made it work for them - and for theatre.

In this article he meets Mike Odam behind the scenes at the Prince Edward Theatre.

These guys say if it has a plug on it, then the Production Electrician has to install it. Their challenging life can see them rigging lamps one week and out chiefing on a show the next.

Leading production electrician Mike Odam (known to most as 'Dobbin' in the trade) has 17 years behind him, and is now one of those few top grade PE's who has more than enough work on his plate, being booked-up months in advance. In fact he often has to get others to help him out with his work schedule.

As far as we know, though he takes the occasional trade show if it sounds good, Odam is the only PE whose principal work comes

from the theatre. "In this capacity it is my job to take ideas from the lighting designer and turn them into reality - ensuring all the hardware and personnel are in the right place at the right time . . . and working! This allows the lighting designer to create his images without the worry over technical problems."

And when the show is up and running and the LD moves on, he sees it as his function to organise the re-lights at the subsequent venues the production may go to, thereby dealing with all the inherent problems such a move contains.

With partners Paddy and Ian (Patsey) Pater-son, Mike Odam runs Limelight Services from its Guildford base - surrounded by the tranquility of the Surrey hills. Their services span the whole industry from the professional market to the local amateur societies, covering theatre, conferences and trade shows. And they haven't looked back. In the early part of last year there were no less than nine shows running in London's West End alone for which their services were provided. These included, among others, 42nd Street, Les Miserables, Follies, Kiss Me Kate, and Phantom of the Opera. Added to this

there were three major UK tours which included *My Fair Lady*.

No matter how small a client's order may be he gets the same attention and service as is given to the vast touring lighting rigs' goes the company motto.

This time, the show is 'Anything Goes'. Life as a production electrician, says the unflappable Odam, in this latest musical blockbuster American-styled show, is for once very straight-forward; but still it has had its difficulties. The lanterns are a simple mixture of Lekos and Par cans, with 8 Spot Bars, 2 booms a side, a big ground row and a lot of backlight on the cyc. There are about 50 practicals. Said Odam: "There is nothing new, and there should be nothing difficult about it. There are light boxes and pea-bulbed handrails around the set, and a big Fibre Optic Cloth - all traditional, tried and tested theatrical lighting.

"With this show though it was just the sheer volume of it," he continued. With all the practicals being wired to American lower voltage there were many problems converting the wiring to the British standard."

The problems they had came from a com-



bination of the fact that the set travelled badly, although it was constructed as the American touring set, and the different standard of the wiring.

Mike Odam got involved with 'Anything Goes' in January when he and production manager Simon Robinson of Martyn Hayes Associates, Peter Kemp, and scenery builder Richard Mara went over to the States to see the touring production before it finished its run. They then went on to New York to compare it with the production now in its third year, and still running.

He came back and worked out a price to wire up a new set built from scratch - although it was eventually decided to bring over the touring set. As those in the industry know, it is difficult to quote a price up-front and the need to do so ahead of time, led Odam to experience difficulties, as there were many unknown factors involved in using the existing set. "One of the usual problems," he explained "is that it is impractical to work on a set when it is in a scenery store and you can't get to it to fix something. It has to be put somewhere where it can be totally rebuilt."

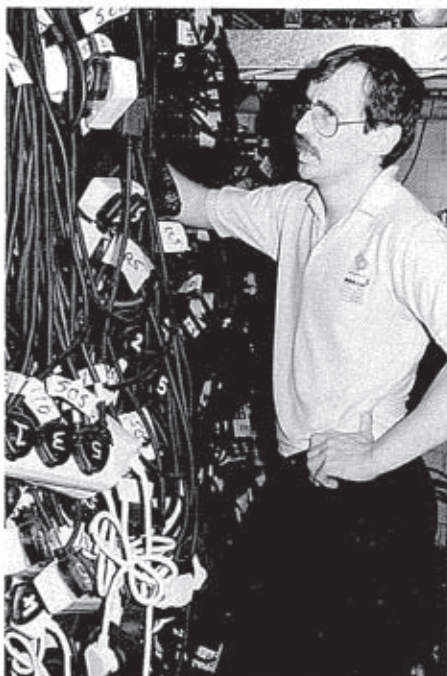
He had to make a decision to either start from scratch in completely rewiring it or just to mend what was necessary and change it in line with Westminster Council's regulations. They opted to keep all the practicals with the American wiring, and transform the racks down to 110 volts to keep the power exactly as it was, and therefore send 110 volts into everything. But they couldn't get hold of a big enough transformer in time.

In the end they encountered so many problems that they had to re-wire almost everything. They came across some of this when the set was in the store but it wasn't until they got into the theatre, about an hour before the final dress rehearsal, that they discovered that the multicore cables feeding the practicals on the truck/revolve were badly damaged - a fault that only became apparent once the revolve was in use.

So for the first week of previews they didn't have any practicals while they re-wired the set. This meant taking the set to pieces on the Saturday night to get into the bottom of the revolve mechanism. There are 24 circuits involved, so they had to put new multicores up through the centre pillar where there is little space, and they will have to be replaced again in six months time as a matter of course.



Mike Odam and the electricians get together to deal with a wiring fault.



Mike Odam in the dimmer rack cage beneath the stage of The Prince Edward Theatre.

As he starts so far in advance on a show, I asked Mike Odam if he could handle more than one show at a time. "You certainly can't handle more than one of the big shows like Aspects at the same time, as it's physically impossible," he told me. However, although the production period can run for three months, as they start to run down on one project, he can often get away to commence work on the next.

Talking to him in the dimmer rack cage beneath London's Prince Edward's stage he commented: "What is going to turn into a big problem is that Westminster Council now say that if a show has run for three months it has to be permanently installed - which will mean replacing all the portable dimmers, plugs and cabling."

With this in mind they have attempted to make the neatest 'temporary' installation, taking a lot longer, and making up all the spiders and cabling to the exact lengths, so it doesn't look worse than it might, to blend it into the system. For additional dimmers they are using Strand's Act series. There are 75 5kW dimmers and 36 2kW dimmers in the 'temporary' installation on top of the theatre installation.

One problem with these large shows is that they can't afford the expense of a permanent installation. The Council are insisting that it's a permanent installation in trunking or in armoured multicores after three months. The shows don't know as a rule if they are going to be running that long or longer, perhaps even for three years or so. So it's done temporarily in the traditional way with TRS along spot bars looping across the grid and down into the dip traps, and so on, like jumping dimmers from upstage left to feed something on the circle front because you have run out of dimmers.

As Odam explained, this has now all got to change because of the Council's three months rule on a fixed installation - whatever the cost. This goes right through the whole rig back to the switchgear and the mains installation, with hard wired dimmer racks.

"Another of the difficulties with this show is the amount of power they are pulling out of the building, possibly over-loading one of the incoming mains as on one phase there is so much power being drawn they are having to rewire the air conditioning onto a dif-

ferent supply to balance up the phases. The worst situation is the full-up during the curtain calls, demanding in this case a power in excess of 1600 amps - far more current drawn than either Evita or Chess were using on the same stage!"

The cyc and ground row draw most of the power with 75 x 5kW dimmers - and this area alone uses more power than was used on Chess. There are 86, 4 cell cyc units. There is a conventional Flood Bar in front of the cyc and from behind, there is a 'light wall' of seven stacked bars, backlighting the RP screen. As this is on 'non-stop' for the duration of the two hour show, and only five feet or so from the cyc, there is a problem with the light leaking from air vents and the colour and frost burning out. Especially the blues!

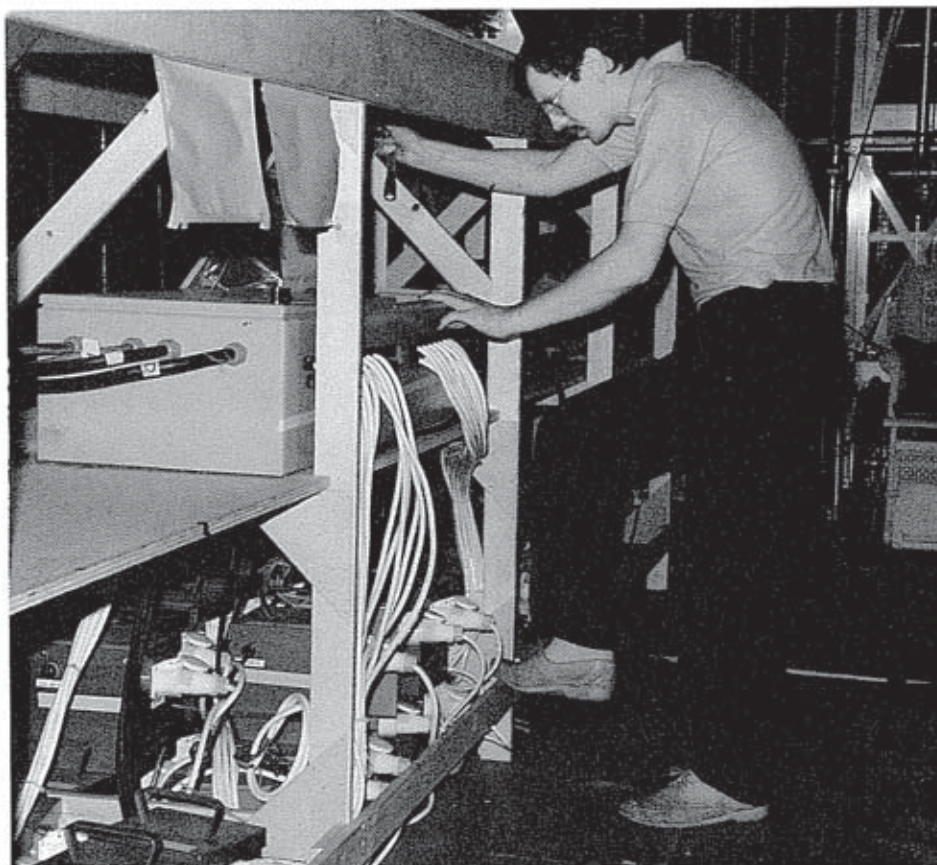
Odam continued: "Luff's, being the main hire supplier, are asking James Thomas Engineering to develop a triple colour frame so we can get a piece of heat-shield filter before the actual colour - and then a bit of frost. This will provide an air flow between the three filters avoiding them welding together. At the moment it's a vicious circle spending the entire show taping up the leaking colours, generating even more heat and more leaking colours. It's a four hour call every day to go along replacing colours alone!"

There are 36 M&M Rainbow Scrollers which, according to Odam, run very quietly.



Pictured with the 'Howie Batten' ground rows, Mike Odam gets to work. Note the distance from the RP screen above him and the back wall.





Mike Odam with the many transformers on stage for *Anything Goes*.

Their particular problem is that they draw so much current from the MUX on the Light Palette house board that there isn't enough current up there to drive them. So it was decided to run them from a separate Strand M24 control. "This is not a problem with the unit," Odam explained, "but others should be aware of the amount of power it takes off the MUX demultiplexing system."

Part of Odam's job is often to complement the house crew of a theatre. To set up the LX crews to put on the productions he often has to organise a specific crew at a moment's notice to do an all-nighter on a production. On the very big technical shows such as *Time*, a separate crew was negotiated specifically to run the show, where they are not involved in the running of the building, though this was exceptional. It is still normal practice these days that once the show is running the house crew take over.

Odam is now off to work on two 'Phantom' productions - back to back - and will be spending a month on each production, in Toronto and in Stockholm. This will be followed by a trade show in Tokyo. He says he gets booked up a long way ahead and cannot always be available to do the occasional trade work when it comes up.

He sometimes works jointly with another production electrician such as Howard Eaton where, on high tech shows such as *Time*, *Phantom* and *Aspects*, the work is split down the middle so that one can look after the conventional nuts and bolts and the crewing, while the other looks after the new special effects and the development of new ideas.

I asked Mike Odam how he sees the development of the production electrician's role with the approach of the '90's and if he sees it as a major role in the staffing of a production. He said: "If productions continue to be as big and as complicated as they are now we will end up with the production electrician being on a par with the production manager, which would become more of an administrative type of job as it covers so many parts of a show. There would then be

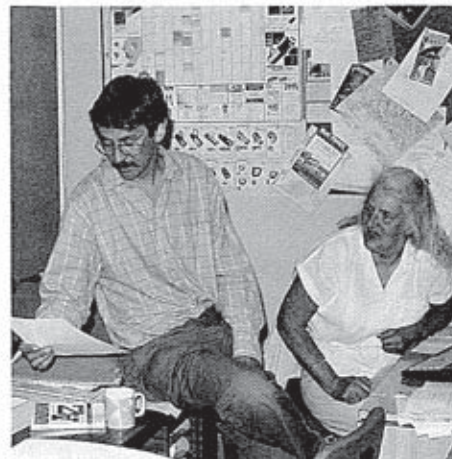
three or four assistants or foremen 'types' to delegate to the electricians.

I then questioned if his company had come forward with its production electrician service when he had seen a change in this area, or whether he had established the service in response to an era of high tech shows. In his view it was a case of being in the right place at the right time. When they were working on *Time* they thought it was inefficient that everything was being built in the theatre during the fit up, and when something needed buying it was necessary to track down the company manager for the money.

"One person should be totally responsible for the lighting installation," said Odam. "Whereas the production electrician would sit down and work out all the pieces to do the job and then go round to the management and say he needs a cheque for this and cash for that, we wanted to see the role have a more defined administrative responsibility. So we set up our own company with our own accounts and suppliers, having more clout and more back-up facilities. The supplying companies don't have relationships with all the producers as a dedicated company such as ours can have."

On the other hand they aid the lighting designer, and I asked Odam if it was the lighting designer who created the need for the role. "It was partly the designers who need their assistance," he said. "But rather than being a design assistant the job developed as a technical department on its own. Though the big designers have their assistants to keep track of the paperwork and look after the follow spots and so on, they have now got the production electrician who takes away all the technical worry."

Looking from here into the future I asked if we were following the trends of the Americans. He feels we are going along parallel courses and feels they are very good in keeping the paperwork up to date. However, in his view there is so much generated that you can get swamped by it. The danger is that as it's there you actually



In the offices of the company are Mike Odam and Paddy Paterson who, together with Ian Paterson, run *Limelight Services* in Guildford.

believe it because it says so - but in reality some things are questionable.

For example, as Odam explained: "A mistake I made with the computer software on this show when the programme printed out the colour call, was that after I had ordered all the gel I found that it hadn't printed out the colour needed for the scrollers." He just saw the paperwork which said 'gel order'. "It makes you relax," he said, "and I relied on it without doing all the homework. It was there on the paperwork, so it must be right!"

Despite that, in the future he still sees the paperwork being generated from the production electrician's side, where they may have more technical knowledge and experience than the designer's assistant.

The difference between the American and the British way of doing things is, according to Odam, as follows: "We get the minimum paperwork and the plan, and then sit down and tot it all up and come up with a list that goes to the hire shop with all the other information that they need to rig the show. In America, it seems, you get all the information given to you by the designer, including the colour call, which is in fact the responsibility of the production electrician.

"Even though we are technicians", he continued, "We have more creative input over here because in the States if it's not right it's down to the paperwork... the show is built around the paperwork. Whereas here we say we will go away and solve the problem and work out the rigging. The designer gives the production electrician the problem to solve. It's not the job of the designer to work out the rigging for these lamps. "We just need to know the position where they want them and we will get them there."

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