

IN THIS ISSUE:

**Theatre: Network**  
Combining stage and screen

**Tech Focus: Robin MegaPointe**  
Robe's all-purpose moving head

**Review: JTSE, Paris**  
Showfloor highlights

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## in profile

LSi talks to entertainment lighting consultant **Alan Luxford**, who celebrates 50 years at Philips Strand Lighting . . .

*"My only real claim to fame was that I lit the very last Bing Crosby concert. I lit him on Monday and he died on Friday. I don't think it was my lighting that killed him . . ."*

→ Strand Lighting has been at the heart of the entertainment lighting business for one century and for almost half of that time - 50 years and counting - Alan Luxford has been an integral part of the company.

Although today you may find him demonstrating the latest Philips Strand Lighting Fresnels with their water cooled, high-output LED light engines, Alan's career stretches back even to a time before tungsten-halogen stage lighting . . .

He got the lighting bug at school, and met some lighting technicians on a visiting production from a new outfit called the National Theatre. "I said to them, 'I fancy stage lighting as a career, which company should I apply to?' They said there was only one - Strand Electric."

Alan wrote to the managing director, Jack Sheridan, son of Strand's co-founder Philip Sheridan. Invited to an interview at Strand's head office in Covent Garden, Alan turned up in school uniform to be interviewed by the great Fred Bentham. After a second interview, he was offered a job. It was 1967.

Strand's King Street office had a showroom, where Alan began his lighting education, and behind that a demonstration theatre. Here, regular lectures on lights and lighting would be presented by Fred Bentham and others, including guest speakers such as lighting designer Francis Reid. Naturally, the lectures and demonstrations provided a testing ground for Strand's latest control systems. "The IDM [Instant Dimmer Memory], the first production memory control system, was first demonstrated in that theatre," says Alan.

In 1969, Strand was bought by the Rank Organisation. "It was the best thing that could have happened," admits Alan. "Strand were in great difficulties at the time with IDM. It was a failure. The prototype worked, but when they sold it to various theatres, both in the UK and overseas, they had to do a lot of work . . . The one in Budapest, one of the engineers was there for a year."

The solution for IDM was a replacement system called MSR (Memory

System Rank) developed by a new generation of engineers including Dave Bertenshaw, Tony Brown and others. "The R&D guys were brilliant, way ahead of their time," says Alan. "Look at the Lightboard for the National Theatre in 1976 - it was 1000 channels, you could record any channel at any speed, it controlled lights, carousel projectors and colour changers. It used a DEC PDP11/15 computer, but that was too slow, so Bertenshaw made a hardware computer to do processing before it went into the desk - brilliant. When Rob Halliday gave a lecture at the Computer Museum at Bletchley Park recently, he talked about the Lightboard and these computer buffs were saying 'Strand did what in 1976? Amazing!'"

Alan worked on luminaires in R&D, and his involvement with the groundbreaking 700 Series of tungsten-halogen fixtures, launched in 1973, led to a close relationship with the BBC. "I used to go every week to Television Theatre and Television Centre and work on programmes like *Top of the Pops* and *Morecambe & Wise*. I just watched and learned from these fantastic lighting directors." Among them he recalls names such as Bert Postlethwaite, Clive Thomas, Ken McGregor, Eric Wallis and Bill Millar.

Later, he moved into sales as South of England rep. In 1976 he switched the old 1930s 'Light Console' at the theatre Royal Drury Lane to a new MMS when *A Chorus Line* arrived from Broadway, and he supplied the 200th MMS control system to Glyndebourne in 1977. "MMS revolutionised lighting control," he says. "It was the first really affordable, customised control system [and] it was the first console anywhere to have an encoder wheel; it was patented, but we didn't enforce it. If we'd enforced all the patents Strand had, nobody else would have been able to make anything!"

As a supplier to his local Brighton venues, Alan was at The Dome when ABBA won Eurovision in '74 and he would often personally light concerts at The Brighton Centre. "My only real claim to fame was that I lit the very last Bing

Crosby concert," he says. "I lit him on the Monday and he died on the Friday. I don't think it was my lighting that killed him . . ."

In 1978 he moved to export, beginning close relationships in Russia, Eastern Europe and Australia. At the height of his time in export he was away for 256 days of the year. He recalls: "It was hard because my kids were quite young, but it was the job I had to do."

Any career spanning half a century will have its ups and downs, and Alan's most uncertain times with Strand have followed corporate-level changes. In 1996 Rank sold Strand to Schroder Ventures. Their five-year plan was to 'streamline' and sell the company, but they struggled to find a buyer. "And they didn't have another five-year plan," says Alan.

Eventually, in 2006, Genlyte Group made an offer for the US and Asia offices, plus "certain assets" of the European operation. The UK office was immediately closed. For a time, Alan, along with Ken Berreen and Igor Cernitori, serviced Europe via dealer Barndoor in Holland. Then, in June 2007, a new Strand Europe office opened - with Alan as general manager.

Philips acquired Genlyte in 2008, and in 2009 it acquired Selecon. But Selecon had its own management team, and again, Alan found himself temporarily out of work. However, he was soon asked to return to look after his established customer base in Russia and Eastern Europe, a role which he continues to fill today.

Of the company in 2017, he says: "We have such a great bunch of people. We look after each other and we're a great team. In the old Strand days, there would be fisticuffs, literally, in the office - and then they'd go to the pub! I've seen that happen." At 66, Alan has plenty to look back on. He concludes: "Ultimately, being general manager was a highlight. It took me 40-odd years to get there, but even for that short period of time, I'm proud that I did that."

Indeed, the young boy who went for his job interview in school uniform turned out rather well for Strand. ✕