

If you are neither actor nor writer it is sometimes all too easy to feel isolated from the mainstream of the theatre world. Continuing our series on the professional bodies who speak for the lighting world, we take a peek behind the curtain at the Association of British Theatre Technicians.

THEATRE-LAND'S VOICE OFF-STAGE

Considering that live theatre in Britain has a pedigree stretching back to before the time of Shakespeare it is nothing short of remarkable that the 'backroom boys', and girls, did not have their own professional 'voice' until the early 1960's.

But what the Association of British Theatre Technicians lacks in history it has more than made up for with effort. In general terms it is the professional body representing everyone in the UK who is involved in theatre, with the exception of actors and writers. That is to say... everyone from theatre managers, lighting and sound technicians through to make-up artists and scenery carpenters.

Most significant of all is ABTT's advisory role, particularly the influence it has had in the design of new British theatres in recent years. However, the Association has been more concerned in recent years with its own fight for survival, following cutbacks in its funding.

ABTT is governed by elected officers - all of them working theatre personnel - although day-to-day running of the organisation from its offices in Soho, just a curtain call from London's West End theatreland, falls on two people. Ken Smalley is ABTT's Publications Officer, and as such edits and publishes the Association's newsletter, information sheets and other publications. Ethel Langstreth is Executive Secretary but also acts as co-ordinator and secretary for other theatre organisations sharing the building.

In Ken's words, 'The ABTT is there to help those who help the actor. This is obviously a very wide brief but until the early 1960's there had been no one filling this role.

'Our Theatre Planning Committee has been one of our most influential activities. Since this started, we have commented on more than 300 new theatre schemes. Along the line the Arts Council of Great Britain made it a requirement that all Housing the Arts applications should be vetted by this com-

mittee and that gave us a lot of clout.'

In addition, ABTT's other committees on lighting, sound, materials and safety, have brought pressure to bear on manufacturers over the years. This has ensured that the theatre world has had a 'voice' with the various industries. As a result, this may have prevented unacceptable products from being foisted onto technical crews - and has no doubt saved a lot of potential heartache in live performances.

One of the greatest early milestones for ABTT was when the influential Architectural Press published a series of planning guides on theatres in *Architects Journal*. These were compiled into a single publication by ABTT and entitled 'Theatres'. This has since become the 'bible' for theatre architects, consultants and staff, having been reprinted many times over.

With more than 1100 members throughout the UK, the ABTT sees its primary function as being one of influencing and informing about new developments and existing legislation.

Ethel joined ABTT in the mid-1960's, and Ken in 1970 as technical officer. The burgeoning of technical literature has seen two important ABTT publications being founded, again with the primary intention of passing-on information to members who may have little direct contact with their colleagues in other parts of Britain.

ABTT News is a regular monthly update on anything of relevance happening within the industry. A glossy international magazine, *Sightline*, is published quarterly and gives a more in-depth look at specific technical aspects of theatre, and recent productions of note. The editor in this case is Ian Herbert.



As an indication of the close family links within the lighting industry, *Sightline* was founded to continue the basic groundwork set for the lighting world by a previous Strand Lighting publication, *TABS*. When *TABS* ceased publication, Fred Bentham left Strand and was instrumental in founding *Sightline*.

The Association also publishes its own information and data sheets plus relevant Codes of Practice relating to the industry, study guides and also stocks any other publisher's publications which may be of interest.

Before joining ABTT, Ken was general manager of London's Mermaid Theatre, the brainchild of Bernard (later Lord) Miles, head of the famous theatrical family.

Links with the Mermaid were renewed this year when ABTT's annual Trade Show was held there. Over the years this has become an important showcase for the industry and it provides a rare opportunity for association members to get together with manufacturers and to study the industry's latest developments. The range of interests covered goes from lighting and sound to scenery and costume.

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On the international scene, ABTT comes under the all-embracing 'umbrella' of OISTAT which, translated from the French, is the International Organisation of Scenographers, Theatre Architects and Technicians. This organisation has a system of 'hosting' meetings in various parts of the world, so keeping all theatre technical staff in contact with their overseas counterparts. The secretariat of this organisation is based in Prague.

There are also close links with ABTT's sister organisation in the United States, USITT.

One thing that ABTT is not, however, is a trade union. It is barred by its Articles of Incorporation from being so.

'What we are here for is to keep members abreast of what is going on,' says Ken.

'Regulations are being piled on in every country and one of our prime functions is to keep the members informed.'

David Adams, Honorary Secretary of the Association and Chairman of the Safety Committee, himself a production manager of many years' standing, added that the Association saw its future role very much in the area of informing regulators as well as the industry, and of ensuring that new legislation and regulations took full account of the special needs of the theatre. He said 'We have recently been closely involved with the Home Office in the revision of the *Guide to Fire Precautions in Places of Entertainment* and with the City of Westminster and other London Boroughs in the revision of the *Rules of Management*. Our members have assisted the British Standards Institution in the formulation of *Guidance on the Design and Use of Places of Assembly*. We recently co-hosted a two-day conference, SAFE-T '91, on theatre safety, which attracted a wide range of legislators, managers and technicians.'

Membership of ABTT costs £30 a year, and is open to anyone, regardless of nationality or professional qualifications. 'The theatre doesn't put a lot of importance on paper qualifications,' said Ken. 'Experience and ability are far more important.'

If you would like to learn more about ABTT or apply for membership, contact: Ethel Langstreth, ABTT, 4 Great Pulteney Street, London W1R 3DF, England. tel: 071 434 3901.