

was supplemented by a Gemini control board, and this was followed by an up-dating of the original Galaxy to allow for a colour monitor.

If anywhere can be said to have launched and furthered the careers of Irish writers, it is the Abbey. Irish playwrights whose work has been shown here include George Bernard Shaw, James Joyce, Eugene O'Neil and Brendan Behan. One show originating at the Abbey, Brian Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa*, is currently playing Broadway and London.

With a stage depth of 80 feet accommodating 42 flying bars, the facilities are nothing less than grand. Assistant Chief Electrician Mick Doyle is proud of the Abbey's complement of more than 300 Strand luminaires – including many Pattern 264's, 223's, 23's, 123's and 243's which



have functioned well since the present building opened in 1966.

The Abbey's current five-year replacement programme has just seen the installation of new front of house lights, including a bar of Cantata PC's. Old 264's will soon be phased out by Preludes.

The other theatre within the Abbey complex, The Peacock, is three storeys below ground level. A second Gemini here doubles up as touring board.

Mick Doyle is quite clear on the reasons for the theatre's loyalty to Strand. 'In my job, if I make a mistake, then I answer for it. But I know that when I operate a Strand lighting control board, it is the best there is.'

North of the border, the entire theatrical world was stunned almost speechless (a rare occurrence in Ireland) by the IRA's pre-Christmas bombing campaign.

A 1000-pound bomb in a Ford Transit truck was deto-

nated against the stage doors of the Grand Opera House in Belfast. One entire side of the theatre will have to be demolished and rebuilt; the explosion was so severe that it lifted the roof off the building, destroyed the entire back-stage area and ripped through the control room.

The only items completely unscathed were the Strand EC90 digital dimming units and the Gemini control board, despite the fact that they were in areas which took the full force of the blast.

Strand's distributor in Northern Ireland, GEP Limited, has represented the company for more than 25 years. GEP's Eric Allen explained, 'More than anything else this attack on the Opera House knocked the heart out of us all.'

'You learn to live with the threat of terrorism. But when it affects something you are personally involved in, it can be devastating.'

Technical manager of the 1000-seat Opera House, John Jordan, said, 'On the day the bomb went off I had been at the Strand factory in Scotland with Philip Marks and Eric Allen from GEP, various theatre technicians and Brendan Carson from the Arts Council. The very next morning I came round the corner on my way into work and saw the damage. That was the first I knew. I could have wept.'

So severe was the blast that the roof had lifted off, massive structural timbers in the roof void had split and the doors to the control room were blown from their hinges. They crashed in pieces around the Gemini control desk – without damaging it. The recently-installed EC90 – one of the first installations of the dimming system in Europe – was completely unscathed, despite being located in the roof void and protected by only a stud partition enclosure. The auditorium was saved from destruction only by the safety curtain, which held back flying debris.

The Ford Transit truck in which the bomb had been placed was obliterated – although one section pierced the Stage Door sign – and the windows of the Europa Hotel across the street were blown out. The pantomime *Babes In The Wood*, due to open a few days later, had to be cancelled in view of the structural damage, although John Jordan

was in favour of staging 'something...anything...even a man playing a banjo, just out of defiance.' Even he had to accept temporary defeat. But the theatre should open again in April.



John Jordan with the bomb-proof EC90.

Despite the set-back, John Jordan retains a typical Irish sense of humour. He said, 'Our EC90 is 'state of the art'. It diagnoses itself. When I came in on that Thursday morning and saw the damage, I looked at the EC90's display panel and half expected it to read 'Ouch!'.'

The Opera House lighting installation includes the 120-way 10A, 24-way 25A EC90, the Gemini 2+, with designer's control, 16 Cadenza 9/15's for FOH and four Cantata 11/26's.

Across the street at The Europa Hotel, the standing joke is 'If you want a room with a window you have a choice of glass, plywood or nothing at all'. It is 'the most bombed hotel in the world'.

The hotel is a popular venue for official functions such as dinner-dances. In the hotel's Emerald Suite, two special Strand Permus dimmer installations, one with 24 20A dimmers and the other with six 20A dimmers, provide mood lighting by way of 36 outstation controls.

North of the city centre in the strife-torn area often likened to Beirut, Catholic and Protestant zones are divided by a 'peace wall' containing steel gates which are closed at night to deter terrorist gangs from making assassination forays. Unemployment and bigotry fuel an atmosphere so heavy it could be severed – and often is – by a bullet. Which is why all eyes are currently on an experimental community theatre project aimed at bringing the two sides together.

The Golden Thread Theatre in the refurbished Brookfield Mill business centre was completed only last

summer. Its aim is to be 'cross-community', providing facilities for visiting and local theatre companies, music societies and groups. Volunteers run arts activities to encourage residents of the Ardoyne, Crumlin, Shankill and Falls Roads areas to rediscover their self-respect.

Arts director of the theatre, Ciara O'Hagan, does not doubt it is working. 'I have a lot of faith in the project. There is no finer way of getting people together.'

Strand's installation comprises an MX24 control desk, three Act 6 dimmer racks, and a mix of Quartet profile spots, fresnels and PC's, plus a battery of 500W Coda floods.

Out of Belfast itself, the road to Portadown passes The Maze prison. But thoughts of leaving 'The Troubles' behind in the city are short-lived. Portadown is within the District Council area of Craigavon, where the night before the *Lights!* visit, the police station was obliterated by a terrorist bomb, and 70 civilians were injured.

This does not, thankfully, alter attitudes towards the arts. Portadown Town Hall, now that local government has moved to Craigavon, has been converted to a theatre and entertainment venue.

Built in 1890, the Town Hall, as part of its refurbishment, has seen the installation recently of an M24 lighting desk, with effects panel, 60-way Permus dimmer racks



Ciara O'Hagan – high hopes with MX24.

and new front-of-house lights including 18/32 Cantatas and Punchlites, slung in a concealed gallery in the roof void.

Theatre technician John Riddel explained, 'Only a minute percentage of people are responsible for the violence in this country. For the rest of us life continues pretty much as normal, particularly in the entertainment world. 'The show must always go on.'