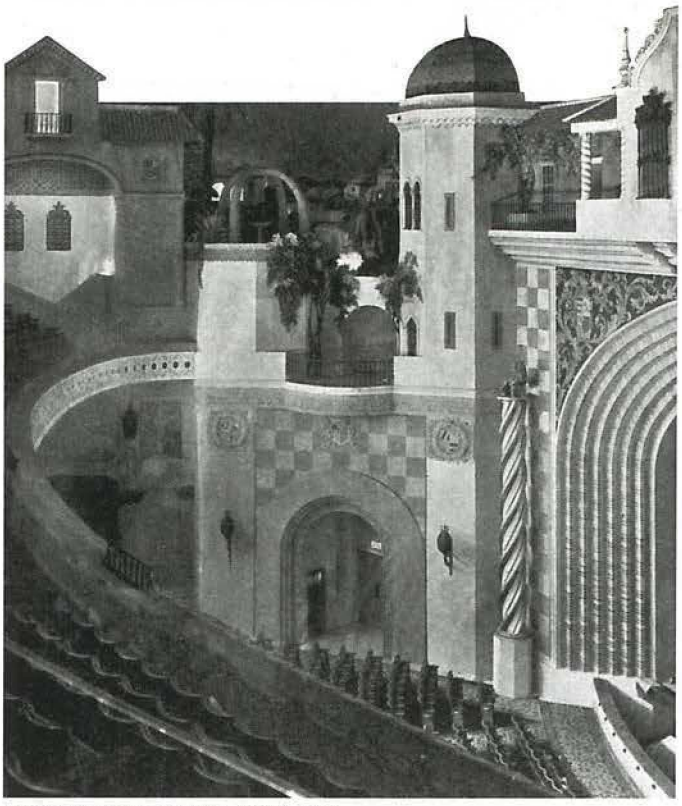
Fred Bentham's article in our last issue was illustrated with a picture of London's New Victoria Theatre. This prompted Fred to muse on the emergence of the 1930's super-cinema and today's multiplex solution for screening motion pictures.

NO MERMAIDS IN FINSBURY PARK OR CLYDEBANK



The Astoria Finsbury Park - 1930's style.

Both the New Victoria cinema and Finsbury Park Astoria opened in 1930. The Astoria was what was known as an atmospheric, or more appropriately dubbed by architect Julian Leathart, an 'outside-in' cinema. Over the auditorium there was a cyclorama ceiling representing the sky.

To me the colour changes and optical clouds lacked conviction up there. Only one atmospheric got my approval – the Richmond cinema by Leathart and Granger. In reality the New Vic in its original thirties prime did not look like the colour photo shown. That belongs to the 1973 refurbishment when warm colours were used, possibly to stimulate the sale of ice creams.

The architect Wamsley Lewisonly did one cinema, that undersea Mermaid's palace – an art deco masterpiece. As became the marine motif, cool green and blue colours were used and a fabulous feature was the seaweed effect of the stalactite fittings drooping 12 feet below the dome. The planning and construction to get 2786 seats onto such a tight site was equally ingenious.

The New Vic auditorium, under the guise of Apollo-Victoria, is at present, and has been for eight years, full of special mechanical scenic effects for Starlight Express. It has become a theatre, which poses the question: what are the new cinemas like, built to day?

Well, I don't think any mermaid would feel at home in them. Multiplex is the key word. Clydebank near Glasgow would seem to provide a good 1990's example. It forms part of a very large shopping centre and the complex conists of ten auditoria, ranging from 230 to 400 seats.

Complex is also a good word to cover the large amount of 'building services' type engineering involved. Coming down to basics, we are told that the plumbing alone cost £80,000. And the auditoria lighting comprises GLS lamps with Edison screws to facilitate lamp changing from floor level using a 'cherry picker'. Sounds practical but not very romantic. Oh! for those distant days of my youth in that Mermaid's palace. ■

Editor's note: *The photograph of the New Victoria cinema in Vol.3 Issue 1 was incorrectly captioned as the Finsbury Park Theatre.*

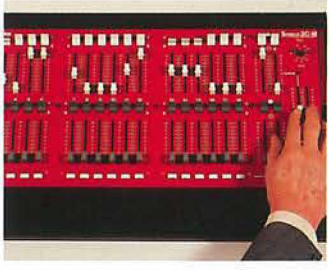
The Not-So-Grand Master

by Andy Collier

I could never be disrespectful to the late lamented monument to the mechanical age of lighting control but I would offer a warning about the over-use of that little fader which shares its name.

I don't know whether it is due to the lack of spotlights or the lack of time available for lighting the typical non-professional show but there seems to be a common theme running through the lighting designs of many small drama groups and schools: if it's daylight, full up; if it's evening, same lighting, half check.

Let's just investigate what happens when you dim a light. Firstly, the intensity reduces but more importantly, the colour of the source changes from white towards red. This is often referred to as a reduction in colour temperature, which gives the feeling that the light is becoming 'warmer'. Now the colour you chose for the filter may look



great when the lamp is full on but look at it as the light dims. Remembering that a colour filter absorbs all wavelengths (and thus colours) of the light other than the colour it transmits, it follows that if the colour of the source changes as the intensity changes, so does the projected colour.

A well-known physical law in the theatre which says that if it can go wrong it will, means that inevitably the colour that you have chosen has very little red in it (it therefore absorbs red wavelengths). So when the lamp dims and goes red, the filter absorbs an even higher percentage of the available light than before. The result is what we commonly call 'mud' – a subtle browny-grey directionless colour. Try an experiment with a lavender filter to see the effect. The old Cinemoid 36 (Strand Filter 436) beloved of so many on the small stage and often called 'Surprise Pink' for its ability to be either a warm or cool colour depending on the dominant light in the scene is also marvellous for changing colour as the light dims.

Another factor to bear in mind is the method by which modern control desks perform a 'fade'. In the days when operators were called electricians, referred to their machines as Grand Masters and complained of muscle fatigue rather than typists' finger, the relative position between one-circuit and another remained the same during a fade. This so-called 'shaft-master' relationship meant that circuits at a low level in a scene would fade out earlier (as the handle reached the bottom of the scale) than those at a higher level, minimising the 'mud' effect. Modern systems provide proportional fading where all channels fading to zero start and finish at the same time. This means that a well-balanced lighting state can be reduced to a grim grey glow very easily if the whole scene is 'dimmed a bit' to give an evening effect.

So how do we get over the problem? Concentrate on seeing the actors faces by using a few bright lights rather than dimly lighting the entire acting area; use cool colours on outside scenes, warm on inside scenes; create shadows to contrast areas of bright light; reduce the lighting on the scenery; emphasise the dominant direction of the light; use gobos to give a feel to the lighting; add practicals. But please, don't just 'dim it all down a bit.' ■