

Vocational Trading

By now it will be generally known that "B" Bear died suddenly at his flat last January but the present editor of TABS, like his predecessor, believes that it is inconceivable that the event should go unrecorded in the pages of this journal.

So what to write at this distance of time? Among the many, many letters of sympathy that I received was one which said "I know it sounds silly but it is something like 'B' being the embodiment of the Spirit of the Old Strand. Its got no existence without him but he hasn't one without it". Every one of "B's" vast crowd of friends will know what she means and the fact that so many sent their letters of condolence to me endorses her feeling. I was the nearest that they could get to sending them to "Strand Electric".

Though I worked with "B" off and on for 43 years, and at times very closely, I never really got to know him—never got through his guard and I don't know anyone who did. Although "Uncle B" got on very well indeed with small children and on many occasions "sat-in" for ours when my wife and I were abroad for conferences, he chose to be a man without family. He was a complete "loner" and unlike the rest of us at Strand, "B" had no other life to relax into. All the fun of living was to be had in and around and arising from his work. Since this was "theatre" in theatreland, his interests—like those of Sherlock Holmes—although narrow were wide.

Just as Holmes had his violin but never really did anything much with it, so "B" cherished a deep feeling for boats. Whether this was because he saw them as tossed on a stormy sea of Strand Electric waves or as floating down a running river of Strand Electric water ripples I'll never know. Certainly on our first visit to New York in 1956 we had to rush down—in a taxi of course, "B" was a great taxi man—to see the *Queen Mary* tie up by the roadside in the intimate manner peculiar to that city. He also had a detailed knowledge of the pubs in the upper reaches of the Thames acquired, one gathered, in his punting days of remote Strand pre-history. It was warming to see him in my boat *Peter Sam* help fend-off with his rubber-tipped stick when making the transit of a flight of canal locks.

This stick, which was cremated with him, was a symbol of his determination to get back to work at Strand after a serious and prolonged illness in 1970 had left him with a weak heart and a perpetual giddiness.

"B" joined Strand Electric, my department, in 1935 having been drawn there by both a love of stage lighting, which he had practised as an amateur, and an insight of the possibilities of the then brand-new Light Console. He it was who started the Light Console Society with the idea that we should have a knowledgeable audience of enthusiasts who would attend a series of recitals of Colour Music in which new pieces

would be introduced and favourites repeated. This was a success and my archive shows that ten different recitals were given in 1936 and 1937 until the expiry of the lease of the Floral Street theatre and the impending war put a stop to it all.

It is curious that 43 years later our King Street theatre closed for good in the evening of the very day of "B's" funeral and the wonderful wake which followed it. Just what he would have liked, lots of his friends and lots of drinks on his estate! It was the ABTT's tenancy of these premises after Rank Strand had vacated them in favour of Brentford that gave "B" three more years of "Strand Electric" life. In the regions below no. 29 King Street—the lower showroom, the Blue Room, and the theatre—he could continue to act as mine host and with less than the minimum equipment and a deceptively casual manner, continue to prepare and serve the fabulous meals for which he was renowned.

It was at his suggestion, in the early days of the ABTT, that they began to meet regularly on the last Friday of the month. Much earlier he had started Strand's regular bi-annual television meeting which was to lead many years later to the founding of the Society of Television Designers. In a sense this arose from an interest in doing or talking about lighting rather than selling or hiring the stuff to do it. This is not the place to go into our soft-sell methods. They were unconscious, a result of a way of life rather than the crafty product of deliberate policy. The same attitude shows in TABS of those times. The TV meeting was held around various lighting subjects and speakers, and only sometimes about the bit—the controls—we actually supplied.

Those were the days before transistors and all the rest of the new solid-state technology put the Strand Electric in jeopardy. Even then out of disaster came an extension to our way of life and I don't mean the Rank takeover! Thanks to the uncertainty principle embodied in Strand's dimmer memory prototype—System IDM—"B" and I often found ourselves faced with keeping invited customers occupied for wayward periods before the machine in the theatre could be coaxed into performing without noticeable failure. Drinks were an obvious solution. Not only did they pass the time pleasantly but with time they dimmed the discerning eye. "B" took to preparing snacks to punctuate these unbottling periods. The creation of the Blue Room annexe with "B's" hot meals was a natural step. "Lunch on the table" was a sure announcement to clear the theatre if IDM began to show that it thought that it had done enough work for one day. Soon being asked to lunch became the main target and the IDM reduced to a hasty glance between the aperitif session and the lunch session!

After his early beginning with me "B" became an outside rep. with a penchant for obtaining jobs which needed inventive solutions—like the GPO pavilion full of ultra-violet clouds at Glasgow in 1938. In the war he served in the R.A.F. Regiment on Malta during the period it won the George Cross. More adventurously perhaps, immediately after, he sold a Light Console and a full set of stage lighting to the Opera House Ankara and went out there with it. It was Strand's first big post-war export. In the period that followed he is better known as No. 2 to Jack Madre in the Hire department. I think basically he was happier that way. He used to say his role, whenever he was associated with me, was as catalyst. In early 1959 he became manager of the I.E. department. He disliked the title since neither he nor his department did what you could call illuminating engineering. Theatrical Lighting would have been more appropriate. Anyway it never did matter much what you or your job was described as, in the old Strand. People gravitated to what they were good at—and did it very well.

"B" made a good manager but his methods were strange indeed. He was very good at figures however, both when estimating and keeping an eye on costs. His desk work defied analysis and when he gave up his beloved Players for brown packets of mini-cigars for health reasons, he deprived himself of his favourite memorandum pad. His only alternative was a large scrawl across a sheet of foolscap.

Although he was a poor writer he was a superb proof reader. Something the readers of my old TABS and subsequently of the ABTT's journal *Sightline* have good reason to be thankful for. We used to compete on spotting "literals" in galley or page but I never got anywhere near his score and it was a real triumph when I managed to spot one that he had missed. He was really patient, reading other peoples stuff carefully line by line whereas he tossed his own off by the page. The result was a kind of jumpy shorthand of ideas. There is only one literary work of his very own extant and that is the original 24-page booklet *Some Advice on Stage Lighting* published by Strand "anon" in 1947. He really did know his lighting and written for amateurs with but little equipment he was able to keep it as he liked—simple. For lighting effects on a much larger scale he will be remembered at the Daily Mail Ideal Home Exhibition and the now defunct Empress Hall. His effects combining optical projection and ultra-violet light over the entire ice rink were both imaginative and meticulously carried out. In one instance there were boats sailing over the optical water and in another dancers upon an optical carpet.

As the man with the fertile pen my own debt to "B" in that direction alone, and there were so many others, cannot be better summed up than by repeating what I said in the latest edition of my *Art of Stage Lighting*: "The services of "B" Bear have been as always—unique; they cover almost everything in the book from first draft to final indexing."

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