



"CATS" Lighting: David Hersey. Photo by Benny Ball.



"I CLAUDIUS" Lighting: John Green.

THE occasion of the international symposium Showlight '81 at the new Barbican Centre, was a happy bringing together of international lighting practitioners from theatre, film, television and rock and roll. It was also a moment to weigh up the present position of lighting for entertainment and speculate on its future in the '80s.

Lighting is, in my view, 90% art and 10% technology. Equipment to the lighting designer is as palette and paint are to the visual artist — a means to an end. That end, creative lighting, is achieved with imagination, an awareness of the potential in light, a love and sympathy for the performance... and talent. Happily the conference, despite the usual preponderance of manufacturers, frequently endorsed this view and the view that, without trained talent, all the hardware in the world will not produce good lighting.

In the English theatre, the past decade has seen technical advances (mainly in memory control) but not much sign of an advance in overall design standards. The general status of the lighting designer's profession is still deplorable. At long last Equity, the designer's union, are making some progress toward a minimum contract. There is increasing concern over training which is virtually non-existent. A group of prominent designers, original founders of the Society of British Theatre Lighting Designers, which later broadened its base to include all theatre designers and led the way into Equity, have resolved to re-form a Society of Lighting Designers to specifically husband the non-union interests of lighting design. This was a move much welcomed by our colleagues in the Society of Television Designers.

Ironically, Showlight '81, bringing together the various branches of performance lighting, underlined an interesting fact. The question of status is not only a matter of the pride (or arrogance) of the practitioner, it is an intrinsic element in allowing lighting to make its full contribution. If there has been little or no recent artistic progress in stage lighting in the U.K., the same cannot be said in television or rock and roll or indeed in parts of the theatre in the U.S.A.

In British TV (particularly the BBC) the lighting designer is now the senior creative technician in the studio. He is in charge of everything seen and how it is seen. At best the results are superb,

combining the best qualities of lighting in protraiture, film and theatre. In rock and roll, the lighting designer, required to put on a hell of a show, has 'come out of the closet' and become a key figure in the presentation. While at times the results may be crude, often they are superb — using light with drama, flair and uninhibited vigour.

In the Broadway theatre, through a long tradition of union organisation and formal training, lighting design is regarded as an essential element. Status again results in best work being required and delivered, and new young designers pushing their elders in their enthusiasm for the design profession. All too often in the U.K. theatre, the lighting designer is still underappreciated by his employer and his director. He is underpaid, often involved in production too late and his full contribution is still not sought. Despite some vigour from young lighting enthusiasts, training is rare and progress through the profession very difficult. In short the lighting design profession is precarious and under-rewarded, resulting in ignorance among directors and others about lighting's potential contribution.

So the status of the lighting cameraman in films, the lighting director in TV and designer in rock and roll all present examples of how enhanced status would appear to have resulted in higher quality work.

It's also fascinating to find how in TV and the rock and roll business, some interesting technical developments have resulted, that in turn have or are having an important effect in the theatre.

The major contribution of TV has been in control system development. Most of the major developments of the fifties and sixties were prompted by the financial muscle of TV from which the theatre soon benefited. Rank Strand's traditional leadership was successfully challenged by Thorn who with the Q-File built a device in close consultation with TV users. Only the National Theatre's requirement for a new control system specified by Theatre Projects and built by Rank Strand combined the virtues of both approaches and made a real advance in memory system design — while at the same time restoring Rank Strand's technological leadership. Lightboard was the first memory system to be designed to truly allow the use of

memories to create and manipulate lighting in a quite new and much more fluid manner. Since the beginning of modern times, lighting has always been built up one circuit at a time to create a stage picture. In fact, of course, only a tiny minority of lighting cues in a show involve the movement of single circuits. Memory systems, once one has appreciated with wonder (and relief) the ability to recall exactly a lighting state, more importantly offer the designer the ability to rapidly move, balance and rebalance blocks of lighting to create a stage picture, and to move from picture to picture in a far more complex or subtle manner. These advances with Lightboard, despite numerous superficial imitations, have at long last been repeated in the new system, Galaxy. Pressure from Australia's theatre building boom, with encouragement from Germany (the only country who could and did afford Lightboard), has finally resulted in this microprocessor version offering much of Lightboard's new style of control at a reasonable price.

The technological contribution of rock and roll has been mainly in fast rigging and touring techniques. It is a world of one night stands; and trusses, lifts, multi-way sockets and cables, lightweight and simpler lanterns (often low voltage), portable dimmer racks and control systems have already had a major effect in theatre lighting methods both in the U.S. and U.K.

Theatre today needs to be just as cost effective as the more commercial (and successful) music business, and these techniques aiming for greater productivity are essential.

Control in rock and roll offers a fascinating challenge. In the U.S. memory systems increase in popularity, but in Britain three preset systems with pin matrixes to allow any circuit to be connected to a large number of submasters (some with programmable chase facilities) are most common. The emphasis is on spontaneous 'playability'. One suspects that an unexpected future might emerge out of a mix of Fred Bentham's Light Console, the type of manual board developed for rock and roll and Lightboard with an extended sub-master section. Add dimmers able to produce the voltage required and run from the latest micro...! Well, let's remember playability and ergonomics!

Which brings us back to people. The operation of lighting must be challenging, efficient and fun. Lightboard deliberately chose not to automate 'the plot' and to allow operator choice in the achievement of many effects. The TV and rock and roll lighting designers needs are very similar.

A greater interchange of ideas between these parallel skills will be of benefit; technically, of course, but as technology must be the servant of the artist, so the meeting of artists will be of benefit to all.



"BREAKING GLASS" Art Director: Evan Hercules. Lighting Cameraman: Stephen Goldblatt.