



*Gail believes she is the only female graduate to-date of the ABTT sponsored City & Guilds Theatre Technician's certificate. She worked as a theatre electrician at Manchester Palace, ABC Blackpool and the Bristol Hippodrome discussed in her article.*

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THE end of an era occurred in Bristol in 1980. No fanfares accompanied this momentous occasion, no headlines were made, though maybe a tear or two were shed at the passing of a wonderful old lady — the Grand Master board from the Bristol Hippodrome.

To those who think it a contradiction in terms to describe a Grand Master as a lady, I can only say that she must have been female. As her only full-time woman operator, I should know, and I expect most of the men who've had the privilege of working on one of these grande-dames of the theatre would agree. Her scales were upside-down for one thing, so a lamp on full resolutely registered 0 on the scale, and a lamp at quarter-check meant a reading of 8 (half-a-point being altogether too finickiness to reproduce).

A masterpiece of engineering, the gearing between her banks was a joy to behold — and we honestly didn't find the fact that the autos and specials bank wouldn't go into reverse too much of a nuisance. The old lady would occasionally let a locked-off dimmer slip by her, but a fade to very-nearly-black was a small price to pay for the smoothest fade imaginable!

Positioned at the master wheel, awaiting one's cue (a buzzer loud enough to wake even the doziest electrician, but never a peep reached the audience's ears from our backstage perch) it was easy to imagine oneself as the captain of a ship, nursing the great heap of iron through slow cues and fast, towards "house up" and the successful completion of another voyage... I mean, show.

Today's generation of technicians, brought up with the luxury of thyristor boards, can have little idea of the sheer energy needed by us older folk. The climb to the perch up a twenty-foot vertical ladder was tiring enough, and the shows always involved a good deal of leaping about — no leaning back in a reclining chair with controls at one's



# FAREWELL OLD FRIEND

by Gail Hardman

fingertips for us! Still, the amount of room on the perch did have its compensations — during one particularly boring show I made two rugs!

A lack of understanding of the realities at the top of the ladder often caught out lighting designers who graced our portals — the less experienced ones, that is. During lighting sessions they would pause to admire the state they had called for, and the Grand Master operator would sink gratefully back into his/her chair. Several eternities later, the chap in the stalls would say, "Could you just take a couple of points off number 83 please?" Gathering my legs beneath me in a gallant attempt to rise and perform the requested alteration, I was frequently halted by the words, "Oh, great, fine, super, that's much better thanks. Plot it!" Which only goes to show that even a lighting designer's eye can be fooled into seeing what it wants to see.

A replacement for the Grand Master was suggested several times, but when it came to the point there was always some good reason why it didn't happen. Often, this amounted to the fact that, management having made up their minds (again!) to buy a new board, they dithered so long before accepting the proposed expenditure that the price had doubled by the time they were ready to go ahead, and then they couldn't afford it.

Derek Peel, the ex-chief of the Bristol Hippodrome enjoyed a love/

hate relationship with the board for many years, but he wasn't too surprised that she outlasted him.

"Those old boards will never wear out, either electrically or mechanically, provided they get reasonable maintenance," he told me. (It was actually the contactor room which blew up in the end, and sounded the board's death-knell.) "I think they were more reliable than the new electronic boards." — Ours certainly never went wrong, anyway!

"There's a lot to be said for the new computer-type boards, but I honestly don't think there's much they can do that a couple of good operators couldn't manage on the Grand Master. The new boards are cheaper to run, of course, since you only need one operator. Two was normal for us, though on exceptional shows like "Hair" and "Godspell" there were five of us falling over one another to do an average of a cue per minute. Variety bills couldn't have been simpler, with the banks being ready colour-coded according to their colour states.

"Computer boards are here to stay, but I doubt if they'll ever have the character that the Grand Masters had — of the hundred or so boards installed, I doubt if any two were exactly the same!"

Roy Hynam, the present chief, is more than pleased with the Duet which has proved to be the Grand Master's eventual successor, but he still has nostalgic feelings for the old board.

"The Duet's great, very flexible and easy to use, and much quicker for plotting and operating than the old board, but there was something about a cue done on the Grand Master, a... what's the word? ... a subtlety, I think, which seems to be missing now.

"I feel quite sad when I see the old board sitting there, useless and partly stripped down. And I must say I preferred being backstage — there might not have been such a good view of the show from the perch, but we could absorb the atmosphere, which is missing FOH."

Over the years the Grand Master, which performed its first show in December, 1948, has consumed an estimated three million kilowatt hours spread over her ninety-six ways of 1500W ± and 2kW ±. She has performed around a million cues (give or take a few thousand) and has graced the performances of some of the legendary figures of the stage — Van Johnson, Max Wall, Tito Gobbi and Rod Stewart to name but a few of the thousands of artistes she has illuminated.

Now, she is likely to find a new home in the Theatre Collection at Bristol University's Drama Department. A fitting end, perhaps, for this piece of theatre history. But I expect the old girl will miss her perch, and that intangible, yet unique, atmosphere of her old home.