

# HIRE TODAY, GONE TOMORROW

by Philip L. Edwards

In the beginning was the Strand Electric and Engineering Company whose hire department enjoyed a virtual monopoly. Then came Theatre Projects and then came all the rest until today there are, perhaps, half a dozen big hire firms and a whole host of small businesses such as that which goes under the name of Philip L. Edwards (Theatre Lighting) and is run by my wife and I attended by our three year old son and assisted by a couple of friends part time. There is no such thing as a typical hire company but I don't think we're untypical of the smaller ones.

This, perhaps unlikely, organisation grew from the half dozen lanterns I owned when I moved to the North West eight years ago and now has stocks of several hundred lanterns, control gear and sundries such as rigging equipment and orchestra stands. A sales side inevitably developed, first a few sheets of Cinemoid to help hire customers who wanted to get all their requirements in one place, then a few lamps and so on. Now we stock large quantities of several ranges of colour, substantial numbers of lamps and recently we have started holding a range of pyrotechnics.

In the early days I was lucky to be able to store lanterns at my other workplace. This became impractical when my stock of lanterns started to become comparable with those that rightly belonged there. We were lucky to be able to move into a building on a trading estate near the house, of which more later.

Our storage of colour in the early days is worthy of comment. I was reluctant to store colour at work due to the risk of confusion between the two stocks. Looking round we realised that the floor area under the beds was hard-

ly fully occupied, thus Cinemoid went under our bed, Chromoid under the spare bed! It may have been unusual but it ensured that the colour was kept flat and enabled us to clean under the beds by sliding out both colours and dust!

As I said we have a store near the house — a building which seemed large when we moved in but is now hopelessly small. We are hoping to be able to move into a larger purpose-built building on the same estate within a year or so. Until then I shall continue to suffer from a recurring nightmare about the day when all our equipment is in — and probably around — our store at the same time.

The big advantage of being small is the ability to get to know our customers, several of whom we now class as friends as well. We have never kept normal, formal office hours. An awful lot of people, especially in the amateur world don't find it easy to collect and return equipment between 9 and 5 Monday to Friday so as far as possible we try to meet them when it's convenient for them. This has led to a regular date after morning church on a Sunday when equipment comes back, is checked and if we are lucky goes out again straight away.

This business of doing our best to fit in with customers does have its problems like the man who nonchalantly suggested 'Thursday' great, except that this Thursday happened to be Christmas Day! On that occasion we were shut!

Customers come in all shapes and sizes. No doubt other hire firms find the same thing. I suppose the perfect customer is the man who telephones his order well in advance, confirms in writing, collects when he says he will in

*Philip Edwards is a lighting designer and technician who runs a lighting hire and sales business in North West England. He is also the resident Lighting Director at the Royal Northern College of Music Opera Theatre in Manchester.*



*In the stores — our author in pensive mood.*

a vehicle large enough to carry the gear safely and then returns the equipment punctually in immaculate condition at the end of the run. The other end of the scale is the person who telephones one order, confirms another; if he confirms at all, tries to collect twelve foot stands in a Mini and eventually returns the gear with the cables tangled, lanterns with the shutters pulled out, bolts and half the colour frames missing and plugs only half connected to some of the cables. In between come the rest and really they are all marvellous — they must be — they keep us in business.

The question of looking after hired equipment is a vexed one. Whichever hat I am wearing, chief electrician or hire operator it seems natural to me to look after the gear properly. Obviously any damage has to be put right and the putting right costs money. Equally obviously the person who ultimately pays is the customer. As has been said before, 'If you keep our costs down it will keep yours down'. Hire operators all attempt to offer a good service and supply well maintained equipment and it is in the customers own interest to look after it.

I mentioned cables earlier. In common with, I think, all hire firms we supply cable coiled and taped. It is no hardship, surely, to return the cable in this state, even if there is no tape available you can always use string. Whatever you do don't just tie the end round the coil, firstly it comes undone and secondly it doesn't do the cable any good. In any case secure the coils. Imagine being faced with a heap of tangled cable which you know is really twenty leads. Sorting it out takes time and costs money — your money. As an extension of this, if you must change plugs put them back properly so that we don't find out! We don't put plugs on with the cable grip done up on the individual wires and the earth disconnected and neither should you.

Now all this sounds as if we do battle with a procession of people who smash our equipment. We don't really but inevitably the bad ones are the ones who get noticed. In fairness to the vast majority of our customers and I'm sure to everyone else's too, they do look after the equipment and when they haven't been sure how to handle it they've asked.

This perhaps is another advantage of small is beautiful. We actually handle the stuff so we've got a pretty good

idea of the quality of the equipment. In my case I light shows and I handle other people's lighting so I keep up fairly well with what's available and how good it is. Most of our range is, naturally, Strand equipment, for two reasons. Firstly it is by far the most comprehensive range from one manufacturer and secondly most of our customers ask for it. This doesn't mean that I've no criticism of the range. The editor of this magazine came in for some of it in his previous post and the Northern branch get it regularly. I am pleased to say that it has all been taken in good part and indeed alterations have been made as a result of criticisms from me and people like me.

This, of course, is true not just of Strand but of any firm. We enjoy a lot of conversations with our customers and we try to find out the sort of things that they want to hire and buy, we have to, to keep in business. Also, though, we try to keep our range up to date by adding to it whenever something new and worthwhile comes on the market.

Like any supplier we are always pleased to advise or demonstrate equipment — as I said I use it regularly so I have a pretty good idea, for example, of how difficult it is to get an 808 into a ceiling slot — bloody difficult. Why can't somebody make a small 2Kw profile spot, and before anyone answers that I know why, but it doesn't make it any easier!

I mentioned three year old Glyn at the beginning of this article. He has a splendid vocabulary including 'barn-doors', 'switchboard', 'Cinemoid' and so on. We have to be very careful though. He has adopted our stock of 6-way Mini-2 desks as 'Glyn's switchboards' and we now have to ask him before he sees us give one to somebody! He also has an endearing habit of picking things up and 'putting them away' so next time you are handed a colour frame from the bin which is otherwise full of spigots it's not illogical, just Glyn!

So that's Philip L. Edwards (Theatre Lighting), like this article loosely knit and rambling but I think performing a useful service to our customers. Just as we try to look after our customers we are very well looked after by all our suppliers especially Herbert\* and Co. at Lowton to whom my many thanks.

\*Herbert Hughes is the Strand Northern Regional Manager—Ed.



*The next generation. Young Glyn helps dad load up!*