

Denis Irving – well known Australian 'Man of the Theatre' was for many years in charge of Strand in Australia.

Five years or so ago, tiring of the commercial world, he set out on his own for wider horizons and has become his country's leading Theatre Consultant. He is a member of the British Society of Theatre Consultants and when possible visits Europe & North America for conferences, seminar and all those other gatherings of Theatre Consultants that seem to happen so frequently nowadays, and to result in so many strongly expressed views and so much standing up eating & drinking.



by Denis Irving



The early days of

UP to 1951 or thereabouts, 'The Strand Electric' although practically universal in British live theatres, and a password through pretty well any West End Stage door, was virtually unknown in Australia excepting for some items sold by its then agents (British General Electric) and the occasional colour change or portable board imported or bought second hand from touring companies by various entrepreneurs.

This was to change over a period of years, to peak in the mid to late seventies, when the Australian Strand team was often accused of being 'a bloody monopoly'.

But, back to the beginning, Antipodean legitimate theatre was dominated for many years by the J. C. Williamson's organisation, which owned, or operated in, theatres in most capital cities (except Canberra) and several theatres in New Zealand as well. Realising that stage lighting was becoming more complex than battens and floats plus a bit of foh with colour change, JCW invited one Alec Brown to join them. Alec was the son of 'Papa' Brown, one of the original London Strand staff, and had for some time been the head electrician of the London Coliseum. He was keen to come to Australia, and arrived in 1950 to start educating the natives. No one had up to this point reckoned with the then JCW resident electrics chief, Reg Jones, who did not take kindly to the newcomer, and who eventually succeeded in having Alec sent on tour with 'Oklahoma!' until his initial contract expired. This was not renewed so Alec was jobless. The tour had however taught him how little knowledge or equipment there was at the time, and some correspondence with Jack Sheridan (Chairman & Joint Managing Director of Strand Electric, London) led to the setting up of the Melbourne branch at 481 Malvern Road South Yarra, in 1952. Alec was of course the Boss, with a small group of ex Oklahoma cast or crew to help. Notable amongst these were Reg and Judy Bartram, both fine dancers, while the



former was also a qualified electrician. They later moved to Sydney, of which more anon.

Stock and money were both rather scarce, so Malvern Road had to do all sorts of work to survive its first year or so. Fortunately, the Old Vic (or was it Stratford?) Company had scheduled an Australian tour, with a tight timetable necessitating two complete sets of lighting rigs, mainly Patt 43 1000w single lens spotlights, with battens and portable six way resistance dimmer boards. A deal was struck whereby this touring stock eventually remained in Melbourne to become the new hire stock, so the touring rigs were modified to cover a greater range. A limited amount of

contracting work was undertaken, and jobs such as festoon lighting for Melbourne Christmas street decorations, and fit-ups for the Carols by Candlelight performances helped to establish the business. The early antipathy to 'flaming Poms and expensive gear' persisted for some time in the ranks of the older stage electrics staff, so most effort was devoted to the schools and amateur markets, and to badgering any luckless architects who might be designing anything even remotely resembling a theatre. This effort included a great deal of lecture and demonstration work all round the country, mainly by Alec Brown, who had a wide Cockney flair for such

things and was not above relaxing the laws of physics now and again in the interests of a good prospective sale. It was at a Summer Residential School in Albury NSW that Alec and I first met, where he was lecturing, and lighting some guest performances by Dame Sybil Thorndike and Sir Lewis Casson. I became his instant chief assistant (by default) and a friendship developed. Having just escaped from a long spell in hospital, and with nothing better to do, D. Irving then accepted an invitation to join the Malvern Road staff part time. This rapidly became full time, and eventually a permanent appointment following Jack Sheridan's first visit to Australia in 1953.

