

# SHOWLIGHT 89, AMSTERDAM

Francis Reid, Julian Williams and Tony Gottelier report back from the Hilversum colloquium.

If the entertainment industry's technology conferences, symposia and exhibitions were laid end to end, there would be no time left to go on holiday. Fortunately, these events are not cloned but take many forms, with the theatre technology associations of USA and UK representing the extremes. USITT confer with intensive zeal in many simultaneous sessions from before breakfast until after supper, with an exhibition on the side. ABTT concentrate on their trade show, leaving philosophical discourse to the informalities of the bar. Balancing these extremes, the international trend is to add discussion sessions to trade fairs: mainly due to the clear need for a more formal dialogue between maker and user, but also because the word conference can make it easier for visitors from sectors subject to public accountability to claim attendance expenses.

Showlight however is different, even unique. It is not exhibition-based, although the refreshment area has small commercial stands which are more in the nature of meeting points than product launchers. It is held every four years, having started in London in 1981 and reached Amsterdam via New York. Showlight is not just confined to lighting but to the lighting of shows viewed directly by the human eye or via film and video. It uses the label 'colloquium' to emphasise the opportunity for talking together.

However, it has to be said that in Amsterdam the nature of this colloquium was no different from that of virtually every other event - it happened outside the formal sessions. The word discussion appeared seven times in the printed programme but occurred only once and then briefly. This was as it should be: in a two day event it is possible to have papers on a broad spectrum of topics or to have discussion, but not both. And the strength of Showlight 89 was in the breadth covered.

Another major strength was the brevity of the papers. With only one conference room in session and most papers under 15 minutes there was an incentive to get involved beyond one's own special area. Here in Amsterdam the dialogue between various light users - that interaction to which we all pay lip service - actually took place.



The exhibition area at the Hilversum studios of NOB. 300 delegates attended the Showlight colloquium.

If there was a common theme, it was a plea for simplicity. Some calls were for a non-technological simplicity while others (usually from those, it has to be said, with a vested interest in developing and selling hi-tech) were for harnessing complexity to achieve simplicity. Top performers included:

- **Hans Wolff** who offered an entertaining polemic against formal lighting education and a splendid spoof launch of a new control system based on the 'armature control visor'. He warned against the race to be first to use the newest, and generally reminded us that we were a people industry.
- **Philip Edwards** took up this people theme in relation to control desk operation, making a totally convincing case for an involved operator using live rather than recorded time.
- **Tim Burnham**, a board operator from pre-memory days, knows that while new technology has provided lots of ladders, control systems have also provided a growth area for snakes, particularly in channel access time. With digitisers, the plot can become the control surface. This could be a way forward, although it raises as many questions as it solves: conference organisers in search of a theme should put this one down for an afternoon's discussion.

● **Max Keller** and **John Henschel** are possibly the most brilliant anarchists working in lighting today. Using non-conventional light sources they are a window on much of our future. Henschel with his 'wrecktech' involving such alternative luminaires as the dustbin, cyclops and sunbed represents the de-formalising of television, while Keller shows us the theatrical value of broad directional statements from single discharge sources. Their Showlight submissions received sympathetic hearing in the prevailing climate of technology as slave rather than master.

● **Lee Watson** was timely pragmatic about lighting education. While acknowledging the importance of on-the-job discovery, he emphasised the need for lighting newcomers to be made aware of knowledge which already existed and so avoid re-inventions of the wheel. And he triggered some of that informal glass-in-hand lunchtime debate: is the lighting designer a light person who works on shows, or a show person who works with light?

But my golden tulip for Showlight speaker of 89 goes to **Robert Menzies** who demonstrated gobos in general and his own DHA ones in particular. He did so in such a clear informative and interesting way that I shall henceforward regard him as the industry standard for the articulacy to which all sales engineers should aspire. (Not for Menzies such meaningless phrases as 'state of the art', for



Delegates await the official opening of Showlight 89.



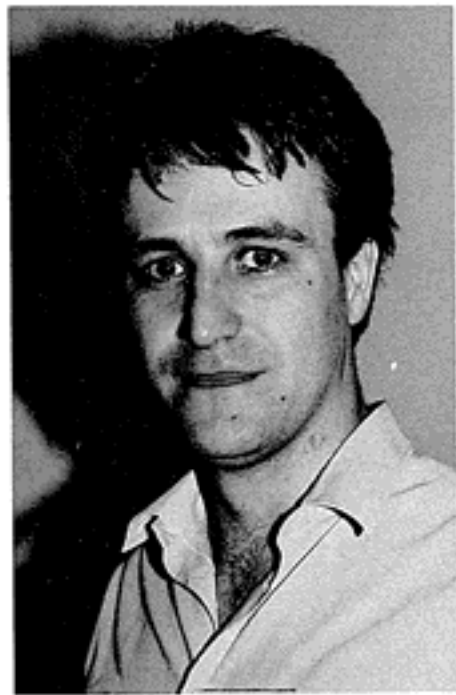
First-day trio (left to right): guest speaker Bill Klages, Ken Ackerman (chairman of the Showlight 89 programme committee), and Dr. A. Smit (general manager, television division, NOB).



Hans Woolff.



Béla Götz.



Robert Menzies.

me the ultimate turn-off in any sales pitch.)

These were just a few highlights as noted by one member of the audience at an event which rated a generally high standard of excellence in all areas. Apart from the diversity and depth of the formal programme, mention must be made of the high quality of presentation. It was certainly interesting to discuss the future in a studio setting of archaeological fragments and, thanks to NOB (Netherlands Broadcasting Services Corporation), this is the first conference where I can recall speakers being properly lit and the sound not only working but doing so with quality.

And full marks too for the boat trips. The first, along the canals from the Theatre Museum with stops at the Schaffy, Carre and Muziek Theatres offered an opportunity for us to meet, gel and become more than the sum of our parts. The second provided the real colloquy of Showlight 89: a rijsttafel buffet aboard a cruising restored paddle steamer was the ideal venue for informal discussion of the topics aired by the formal papers. The wine and conversation flowed. We landed aglow with our confidence in the future of light for shows. But the organisers presented us all with torches. Just in case.

Francis Reid

"Through the language of light, we have been connected together," said John

Henshall in his paper 'Wrektech Lighting: The Alternative Approach', as he illustrated with film sequences his lighting of the outrageous cult art network 7, which did not use any conventional TV or film lighting. His talk gave us a unique insight into other possible uses of lighting equipment and handling of sources, in adaptations ranging from dustbins to motorbikes.

Having spent two days at the NOB in Hilversum, near Amsterdam, I feel this is what Showlight is all about. Speakers combined their talents over a programme that covered television, theatre and film lighting, and this third international colloquium was presented to around 300 delegates from 25 countries.

The uniqueness of the event can be summed up in the words of chairman Ken Ackerman: "We do not expect any momentous decisions, but we do expect much individual benefit from the discussions between expert practitioners, equipment suppliers, and consultants, covering the whole field of entertainment lighting."

From a broad range of activities within the entertainment lighting business from users, designers, manufacturers and engineers, the subjects covered standards, light sources, luminaire design, safety practices and so on.

"The colloquium is aimed at technically aware and experienced delegates," said Phil Rose of CCT, a member of the organising

committee. Despite the specific aim of the colloquium to discuss equipment and not to delve too deeply into the artistic lighting philosophy, there were some intense papers covering diverse subjects.

But, for me, the purpose of such a unique event, where so many countries are in attendance, is to draw on global diversification and to learn from each other's knowledge - to hear speakers who are leaders in their field, and who have innovative theories which need to be aired and then discussed.

Although it is necessary for papers to be presented from the manufacturing sector, they need not spend so much of their time selling their product - a seminar at one of the numerous trade shows or fairs can be used for that purpose - Showlight is the place where they should be in discussion with experienced practitioners in the profession.

This Showlight programme consisted of seven sessions, respectively on 'Performances', 'Special Rigs', 'Controlling Light', 'Light, Art and Science', 'Light Sources', 'Automated Lighting' and 'Effects'. Each hourly session had about four papers. There was also a guest speaker to start each morning and afternoon session.

Some representatives from commercial companies limited themselves to their own products, while some speakers took their time in going over material, with which many of us are already familiar, to make



BBC Television's John Farr (left) with Lee Watson and Bill Klages.



CCT Theatre Lighting's Phil Rose (a Showlight committee member) with organiser Maureen van Woudenberg of NOB.



Joe Thornley and Peter Boott of Lee Colortran (left) with David Bertenshaw of Strand Lighting and Francis Reid.



Le Maitre's Rodney Clark (left) and Will Scott (right) with Ben Weijters of Jac Van Ham, their Dutch distributors.



Mario (left) and Fabio De Sisti (right) with Flashlight's Gerard Jongerius.



In between sessions at NOB, Hilversum.



Strand Lighting's Alan Luxford with Clive Perry, head of lighting for BBC outside broadcasts.



Brian Fitt of Lee Colortran (left) with Derek Gilbert of Glantre Engineering.



Outside the Carré Theatre: Neil Rice of Optikinetics with Lee Watson and Francis Reid.



Coffee, sandwiches and business on the Optikinetics stand with John Jeffcoat and Neil Rice (left), David Thomas (right), and Hans Noijens of Jac Van Ham.

their point. So there was inevitably little room for the 'informal discussion' - the essential 'other' ingredient.

Guest speaker Bill Klages from the USA, opened the first of the sessions over a background film of Michael Crawford's 'Music of the Night' from 'Phantom', performed live to an audience of 16,000 to celebrate the inauguration of George Bush. He used the example of the enormous installation for this networked television distribution to make the point that, even with the benefit of today's technology and experience, over a 20 year period the light level had not changed much from around a hundred foot candles.

In a jovial, yet stimulating opening address entitled 'Television Lighting Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow' he proposed that in order for us to obtain the result which we envisage, we should pay as much

attention to our intuition as to the rigid rules of the experts. He questioned the engineers who designed the switchboards of today with all the 'bells' and 'whistles' but who never visit the production environment and, giving us some detail about the reliability of the dimmer systems 15 years ago, suggested that they should meet some of the criteria built into some of the antique control systems.

Despite these reservations, he ended on a brighter note saying that he felt we had come a long way with our technology and can look forward to further advances. His view was that we have accumulated a catalogue of methods and skills due to accomplishments of our associates, and through their efforts have gained an acceptance that we could never have envisaged in the infancy of our profession. "Let us appreciate the fact that we have Showlight 89

and remember that there really is big fun to be had from what we do in the industry." Emphatically he concluded: "Let's not change a thing."

To come to this event in Holland was, for me, a chance to see how other practitioners work, and an enlightening paper came from Hungarian designer Bela Gotz. It was unfortunate that the video conversion from the Russian format was incompatible and resulted in its quality being impaired. This made it difficult for Gotz, with a limited English translation of his paper, to adequately illustrate his work. Despite this, the tape made apparent the theatrical quality of his work, both lighting and set design, with stunning examples giving a magical appearance in scenes from 'Passion of Czikomlyo', 'John the Hero' and 'Stephen the King', the rock opera lighting being supplemented with flame projectors, lasers



Nick Hunt of the Swan Theatre Worcester (left) - winner of a free trip to Showlight courtesy Roscolab and Mike Hall (centre). L+S's Julian Williams gets the story.



Masterlite from Rolite Holland: a Par 64 add-on that caused a great deal of interest.



Showlight banquet on board the paddle steamer M.S. Jan Nieveer: Joe Thornley (Lee) and Brian Fitt (Lee Colortran), Mike Wood (WB Lighting) and Martin Christidis of Philips Lighting are amongst the group.



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Flashlight of Utrecht's Gerard Jongerius (centre) with Joe (right) and Andrea Tawil of Great American Market and Gordon Pearlman.

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and military searchlights. He showed how the elements of lighting can change the appearance of different textures of scenery surface materials.

In the foreword to his brochure, Pal Mihaltz says: "Gotz had developed from a self-taught man into an expert of remarkable accomplishments . . . His stage scenes assist the communication of abstract ideas as well as the simultaneous manifestations of external and internal realities." The response to his work at the end of his paper could be judged by the number of people trying to obtain this illustrated brochure of his work, which was in limited supply.

There were some interesting papers in these sessions, from assorted, yet contrasting areas of the industry. For example, in the session about Performances, Anthony Bowne spoke of the different opportunities that lighting for dance presents to the other forms of theatre lighting. And Keith Reed showed some clips from the 'Bretts', the 1930's theatrical drama series and explained how Jim Laws' knowledge and his "painstakingly collected, theatrical Aladdin's Cave of archival stage lighting equipment" had helped him in realising the period lighting for the television production.

In the session on Special Rigging, although the scheduled paper on a rock 'n' roll feature could not be delivered and was much missed, Steve Kemp's paper came to be the nearest to the subject when he talked about his prominent Lee Towers Gala rig, featured last year in L+SI. Then there was Henk van der Geest's most informative paper on the difficulties of touring. He has come up with some ideas and explained his expectations of the equipment (though much said before in the past), on control compatibility, but where boards and dim-

mers should 'talk' to each other, to link computers together, and provide electronic cue loading.

Other sessions included Controlling Light, Light Sources, Automated Lighting and Special Effects, and a session on Light Art and Science in which Lee Watson talked of the trends and changes we are about to see in lighting education in the US and possibly elsewhere.

Though the standard of these papers was high, an invigorating and entertaining paper about Dutch lighting consultant Hans Wolff's ideas, was possibly about where we are at rather than where we are going . . .

He raised some objections to current issues. He spoke of the choice of a new light board on a consultancy project being always a big topic, and said that light boards today don't satisfy him at all as they need too much handling. Meanwhile dreaming of the mind control light board, he made the point of the slowness, while liaising through an assistant and a board operator, to carry out the simplest of tasks.

He talked amusingly about his own 'dreams of the mind' control light board and handed us over to his 'friend' playing the part in a spoof of a 'Delaware' products salesman introducing us to the latest product for the 'fast pacing lighting designer'. And further to a 'new, essential tool of the trade' to replace the electronic overkill that slowly turns the contemporary lighting designer into a 'monitor orientated desk pinned operator', instead of a highly manoeuvrable stage orientated craftsman! The 'salesman' then demonstrated the 'Armature control visor' an adaptation of an 'F16 pilot, fully equipped headset' with a so-called reading visor having all the instruments projected from the 'dog fight

panel.

But Hans came to the point when he said that every magazine in our field brings articles on these subjects. Seminars are dedicated to it. Nowadays everybody is convinced of the need for educating the lighting designer. Once again, apologetically, he questioned this, and said he had his doubts.

He questioned whether the current form of training for our prospective colleagues is in fact the best available, emphasising that our profession has to be learned in the old fashioned way, which is in practice. "You don't learn at school how to deal with hysterical actresses, directors who don't have the slightest idea of light, set designers who also think that their set is the most interesting part of the production, and who think that actors only disturb the picture!" Although he accepts that the lighting designer has to deal with technology, the main point of this profession, he contended, is dealing with all kinds of people. "You can be an expert in analysing scripts, technical drafts or colour theories," but he went on to say, "you don't learn lighting design from a book, but only in daily practice."

He recommended a good non-technical education as a base - such as art school. Being an educationalist, he specialised in the handling of difficult children and emphasised that this was invaluable training in association with his work now . . . To become a lighting designer takes years, and he claims that it's our responsibility to care for the training of our successors in theatres and studios as it is there that they learn what lighting design is about, and not from the theatrical dreams of a university.

He concluded that: "Shadow making is



Daryl Vaughan of Vari-Lite Europe (left) with Brian Fitt of Lee Colortran.



Qahtan Hardy and Mike Bacon looked after Telestage business.



Lighting 'anarchist' John Henshall.



A Showlight 89 session in progress.

# LIGHT

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**LIGHT** *adj.* not heavy; weighing relatively little.

**LIGHT** *n.* the medium of illumination that makes sight possible.

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Lucien Van Nieuwenhuysen (left) and Bob Rutten of ADB.

our profession in a sensitive and caring way - not blinded by the newest technology, but by servicing the production, not with the cheap tricks of Batman, but with the integrity and craftsmanship of Rembrandt."

Another commendation should go to Philip Edwards who bravely got up, as a technician of the trade, and questioned the place of the lighting operator today. "There is little talk about the training of an operator, particularly in the theatre, and modern controls are tending to make us lose sight of the fact that theatre is about live performances," he said. As a practitioner in another area of the industry, Edwards said he felt strongly that "technology for the sake of technology is boring... live skill is fun."

Will we still be at the same crossroads of technology versus craftsman and education versus practice when everybody meets again in four years time in Rome? And at that time, it will be a year after 1992.

Julian Williams

This learned gathering of lighting luminaires was, indeed, a melting pot for ideas and cross-border thinking between all the different lighting disciplines.

Apart from the theatre, film and TV people, there was an interesting interchange with architectural lighting, both in a product sense, and as far as individuals were concerned. This was particularly apparent in the

presentation given by Dutch stage lighting designer Hans Wolff, who provided an object lesson in how to use theatrical stunts and props to keep a serious audience amused, without obscuring his message. I was not, therefore, surprised to discover that he is successfully applying theatrical lighting techniques to commercial interiors from his recently formed architectural lighting practice. If he gives his clients similar presentations, he will never be short of work!

Similarly, Dr Harald Hofmann from Erco gave a convincing talk on theatrical influences on their range of lighting products, using the famous glass pyramid at the Louvre as his focal point. Less easy to grasp was a lecture by a Polish gentleman on the potential use of lasers on stage which, I am afraid, left me, and I suspect most of the audience, more convinced than ever that their natural home is elsewhere.

Nevertheless, the very fact that the subject was given an airing at all, is indicative of Showlight's vision in creating a forum where the future is up for grabs. That is not to say that there wasn't plenty of retrospection also, in fact rather too much of it for my liking. What has happened in the past is not always helpful in explaining what may occur sometime hence; although it certainly helps to fill up the allotted ten minutes.

Although I was sceptical about the hijacking of the symposia by commercial interests, I now realise that they provided an essential



Showing the Starlite system: Ray French (left) and Roger Pearce-Harvey of Tasco Communications.

element and, of course, are more willing to talk as they have a vested interest. One who resisted the temptation to promote existing equipment, and looked only to future product possibilities was Tim Burnham. Always a visionary, Tim's thoughts are now engaged in the possibilities for applying CAD and computer graphics to lighting design, several steps beyond simple drafting of the lighting plot.

Those who didn't resist the temptation to promote, but who succeeded in engaging their audience's attention, were Strand Lighting who demonstrated the latest PALS driven lighting system; Vari-Lite who unveiled their improved model the VL2B; DHA Lighting who gave us a clear view of their gobos and other effects wheels; and Wilf Scott of Le Maitre who, as you might expect, attempted to blow us all up.

Missing from this list, simply because he demonstrated something which was new, at least to me, is Dedo Wiegert's eponymous Dedolight. Through what is claimed to be a unique optical arrangement, which moves in entirety in relation to the fixed front condenser, it succeeds in out performing the best fresnels by achieving a focusing range of 1:25. With a conventional instrument you would do well to achieve 1:6. In addition, considerably boosted light output and evenness of distribution has been managed, by using this set-up with a clear condenser and 12 volt halogen lamp. All this is housed in a light aluminum diecast casing which will fit in your hand.

There is an additional projection lens attachment available for this fitting which enables framing shutter, iris and gobos to be applied with no apparent colour fringing. This particular function was most successfully demonstrated, and makes it very useful for applications outside its intended market, for example in display and interior lighting designs.

It was, perhaps, to be expected that little interest would be shown in this so called, lighting colloquium by the rock and discotheque lighting designers and manufacturers. The one speaker on touring rigs failed to turn up and I only found Mike Woods of WB and a team from Optikinetics from the disco side of the fence.

I suppose this is still the feeling of rebellious young turks, having turned established norms on their head, yet intimidated by all the learned chat, or simply too impatient to take the time. It's a pity because there is considerable innovation on offer from this sector and the crossover is potentially great and mutually beneficial.

Tony Gottelier

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