

First in Lighting Design

Julian Williams interviewed MICHAEL NORTHERN at Plymouth Theatre Royal during rehearsals for 'Dick Whittington'.

In this present era of musical revivals the West End has seen many of the old favourites again, some 20 or more years after their origination. This month we have come full circle as one of the remaining best shows - the one that "socks it all" with famous musical hits one after another - comes into town. 'South Pacific' is now given the modern treatment - all effects, real waterfalls and the best in lighting. At the same time, one of the great masters of theatre lighting, Michael Northern, has made a comeback. After a seven year break at the age of 67, he has achieved design credits for a major series of current shows around the country which include 'Dick Whittington' at Plymouth Theatre Royal, 'The Wizard of Oz' in Birmingham, and both the new productions of 'Peter Pan' and 'South Pacific' in London.

Michael Northern, who lives in a peaceful retreat - on a 17-acre donkey stud in the Cotswolds - claims that during his "best years" back in the '50s, '60s and '70s, an era when there were relatively few lighting designers, it was possible to detect the presence of a lighting designer by a distinct visual style in the lighting for a particular show. He considers this the top period of theatre set design, where there were many more designers who were great artists in their own right, and when design was more pictorial. Artists that he was fortunate to work with during that time included Tanya Moiseiwitsch, Lesley Hurry and Salvador Dali - with whom he worked on 'Salome' at The Royal Opera House. He lit most of John Piper's work at the Opera House including 'Billy Budd', and more recently lit his 85th painting exhibition at The Tate, just two years ago.

He questions what is currently being said about the lack of good training for production technical personnel, as he finds there are many good young production personnel and electricians around the country who are very conscientious and obliging in meeting the heavy demands of the lighting designer. He finds it beneficial to the artistic work of the designer to have this back-up from competent, technically orientated technicians who are using the equipment to its fullest advantage and as an aid for the designer. "If there is an experienced, perhaps even older member of the team to motivate these crews then so much the better," he said.

Michael Northern is, as others are, concerned about the extent of technology now available. Whilst in some ways envying young designers and technicians having so much equipment to use, he feels that if he were starting out on a career today, he would fulfil a dream, but he is also concerned that the creative element of lighting could gradually disappear as a quality of a forgotten age. He is continually surprised at the amount of equipment being used in today's lighting rigs, apparently with such little forethought in the planning or positioning; particularly where the same lanterns could perform various tasks.

Very aware of being one of the 'old

school', and therefore old fashioned in his ways, he prefers the days of lighting rehearsals where there was time to concentrate properly on each lighting cue, instead of being left out of modern schedules where the lighting designer is expected to cope with cue changes over rehearsal time and with other distractions. He well remembers his early days back in the late '30s when theatre lighting was so excessively simple, and when Strand had just four lanterns. The lighting consisted of the floats or footlights, a couple of lamps front of house and a couple of simple follow spots.

Although feeling very modern using the par can - "in relatively small amounts on my favourite booms position, compared with the millions you see used on the screen" - he



Michael Northern

began his theatrical career in 1939 as an ASM, and after war service in the RAF he returned to the theatre, working at Stratford and Covent Garden as well as in numerous London theatres.

The first lighting designer in the country to be billed as such, his initial major credit was Gielgud's 'King Lear' at Stratford in 1950, and he went on to light countless other productions at Stratford for the RSC and numerous plays, ballets and operas at the Old Vic, Glyndebourne, Aldeburgh, Covent Garden and overseas.

Among his more recent credits are 'Lend Me A Tenor' at the Globe, 'Cabaret' at the Strand, 'Seven Brides For Seven Brothers' at the Prince of Wales, 'Ross' at the Old Vic and 'Two Into One' at the Shaftesbury. In fact he has lit shows in every West End theatre - among earlier ones being Noel Coward's 'Sail Away', 'The Mousetrap', 'The Music Man', 'Wait Until Dark', 'The Canterbury Tales', 'Alfie', 'Charlie Girl', and 'Relatively Speaking'.

His regional work has also been extensive, and includes tours of Compass Theatre's 'King Lear' and 'The Tempest' with Anthony Quayle, and numerous productions at the Theatre Royal Plymouth and other major producing venues.

Michael Northern's latest work is discussed in this article.

finds that now he has learned to live with them they are almost as suitable as his favourite specially-designed pageants, which also in their day had to be carefully adjusted to achieve a good result.

He spends much time in keeping up with the technical advances of equipment, although he considers there must be a need for some good old fashioned lighting these days, such as light battens and footlights, as otherwise he wouldn't have been asked to light a show in the first place! In future, he plans to stagger his production schedule as he feels it's now important to recognise that lighting designers can easily be 'dried up' if they take on too much work at one time, which may result in producing lighting for the sake of lighting with little creative thought as to its purpose.

Michael Northern started out in the theatre at the age of 17 and trained as a stage manager. He went on to stage manage big revues with such artistes as Hermione Gingold and Hermione Baddeley and followed by Jupiter Laughs with James Mason. During the war years he toured the world working with the Gang Shows and doing everything - stage managing, lighting and some acting. After the war he set up a studio as a model-maker, with his own miniature theatre at his home in London, and assisted set designers with practical work and technical drawings. He also worked with Peter Brook at Stratford-on-Avon as a co-designer on sets.

He then joined Covent Garden as production assistant where he was able to work with the big designers of the time, and while stage managing there for the Royal Ballet, came what he considers to be his big break into lighting. John Gielgud invited him to light 'King Lear' at Stratford and even now he says his lighting was "absolutely fab" and that it was "a bloody difficult play to light".

At a time when Joe Davis was about the only credited lighting designer, Michael considers that it was a combination of John Gielgud and the designer Lesley Hurry who encouraged him to have a bash at the lighting. In 1953 he left the Royal Opera House and undertook a series of seasons lighting productions at Stratford, after which he went into opera and worked at Glyndebourne with designers such as Oliver Messel on 'Idomeneo' and John Piper on 'Don Giovanni'. A couple of seasons later he joined the English Opera Group as a director, and worked at Aldeburgh in the early '60s when he went to Venice with their production of Britten's 'The Turn of the Screw'. At this point he was persuaded to go into the commercial theatre and lit plays and West End musicals including all of Harold Fielding's productions of the time which included the elaborately designed Cinderella at the London Coliseum. He has had as many as eight West End shows running at one time, including specials such as the Debbie Reynolds' Show at the London Palladium.

When I asked Michael what had persuaded him four years ago to come back into the business after a seven year break he told me

that Anthony Quayle's launching of Compass Productions was utilising much of the earlier expertise of the profession, and he agreed to light 'Clandestine Marriage' on a friendly basis. The production eventually came into the Albery Theatre where his name suddenly appearing on the billboards in the middle of St. Martins Lane surprised many.

At the same time his contemporary and good friend, the eminent Joe Davis died. Together they had been the first lighting designers to receive billing and recognition for their profession, and he decided to support their cause once more and take on more lighting himself, particularly as the offers came thick and fast! The fact that the 'Joe Davis era' might know something about the theatre also stimulated him.

He was surprised that people bent over backwards to help him when he started lighting again, and he came out of the cobwebs into a wide new world of computerisation, pressing buttons and looking at video screens. He found that there was no resentment towards "an oldie". In fact he found that the efficiency of today's lighting technicians with this new equipment made it so much easier to work creatively again. As other designers have also said, he feels that "it is the biggest drawback to know anything about the workings of a computer board" - and he doesn't even like being presented with a machine in the stalls as he feels that this is the domain of the technician.

Michael Northern is concerned that the link between the younger and older generations is in danger of being lost by allowing the machine to take over completely and thus lose the individual style of the serious designer. There are many lighting technicians who have become lighting designers but are, at the core electricians, and more interested in that sort of thing and not so happy about the artistic side of theatre lighting, though very interested in interpreting it.



A scene from 'Dick Whittington', the current production at Plymouth Theatre Royal.

"They burst their buttons to get it right for you," commented Michael.

He feels that the integrity of the young technician today is very high and told me he has not been to a single theatre in the country where he has found the chief LX and board operator not well versed and keen to help you, and more interested in the practical side rather than becoming creative lighting designers. "It is important that the modern technician appreciates this link, and is prepared to go beyond the limits of the machine to interpret an artistic impression

with individual feeling," he said.

"With theatre lighting in a different style in this modern age, with nine million par cans all going upsy-downsy and twiddling round, and extraordinary space-age-looking moving machines, we could lose the original techniques of stage lighting if we are not careful," he believes.

It is reassuring to know that Michael Northern can still contribute so much to theatre lighting, and that his techniques can be interpreted in the modern idiom of today's high tech world.



The dramatic new production of 'South Pacific' - "all effects, real waterfalls, and the best in lighting."



The 1987 Compass Theatre production of 'King Lear'.



A scene from 'Peter Pan' at the Cambridge Theatre, London.



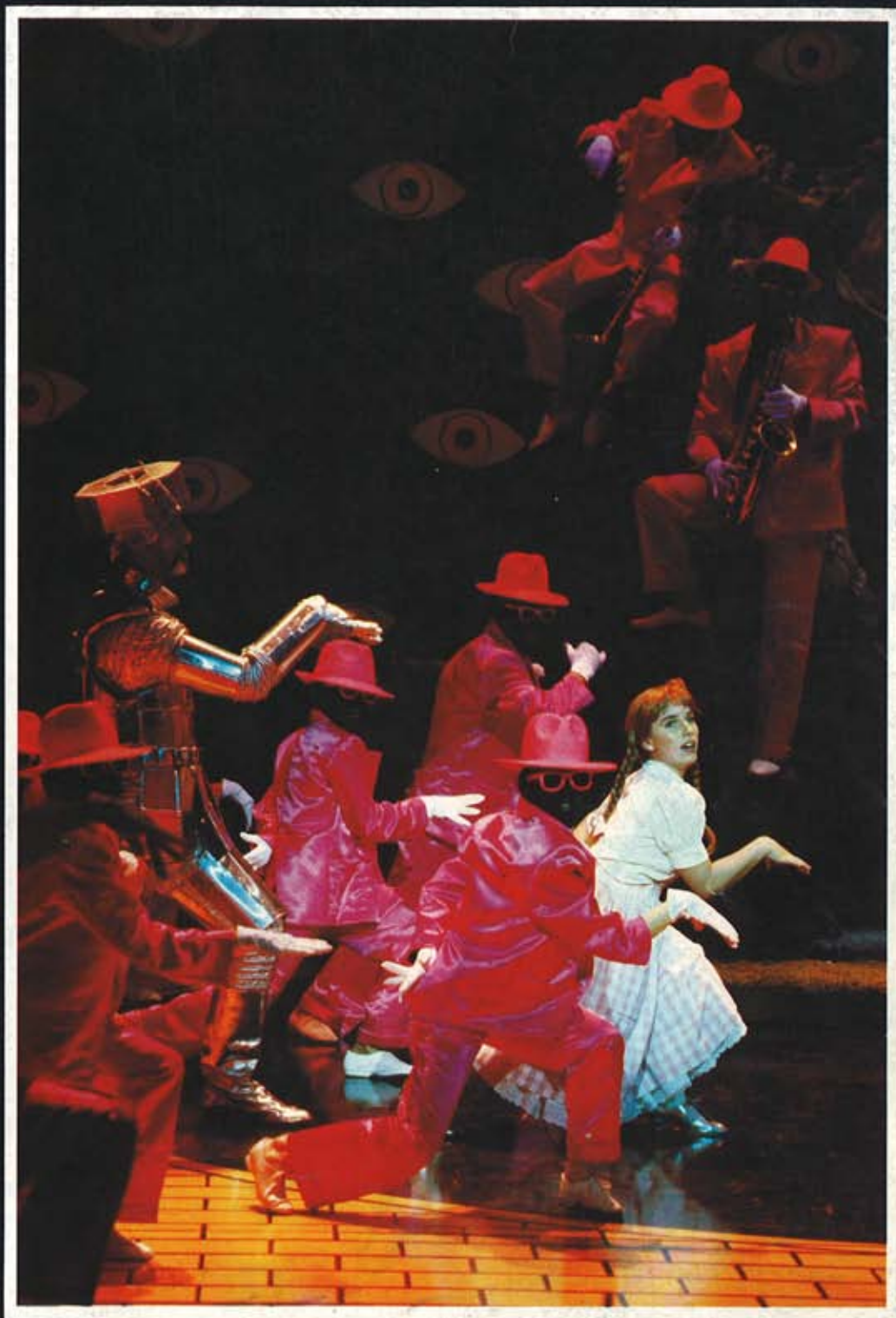
'The Wizard Of Oz' at Birmingham Repertory Theatre - see also cover picture.



'Curse Of The Baskervilles' - a Theatre Royal Plymouth production.

photo: Eric Thompson

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A scene from 'The Wizard Of Oz' at Birmingham Repertory Theatre - lighting design by Michael Northern. A profile of the designer is included in this issue.

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