

# London's Friendly Hangman

Graham Waile talks to Alan Jacobi of the Unusual Rigging Company.

It is my view that the best designers of lighting or sound are those who think in creative and abstract terms before they consider the necessary hardware. Pictures should come first, and hardware should come second. Rigging usually comes third, and is often taken for granted. The Unusual Rigging Company might change all that.

The Company is one of that interesting and select band which was born out of the changes that affected Theatre Projects some years back and has just celebrated its third year on its own. And it will soon be moving to new premises.

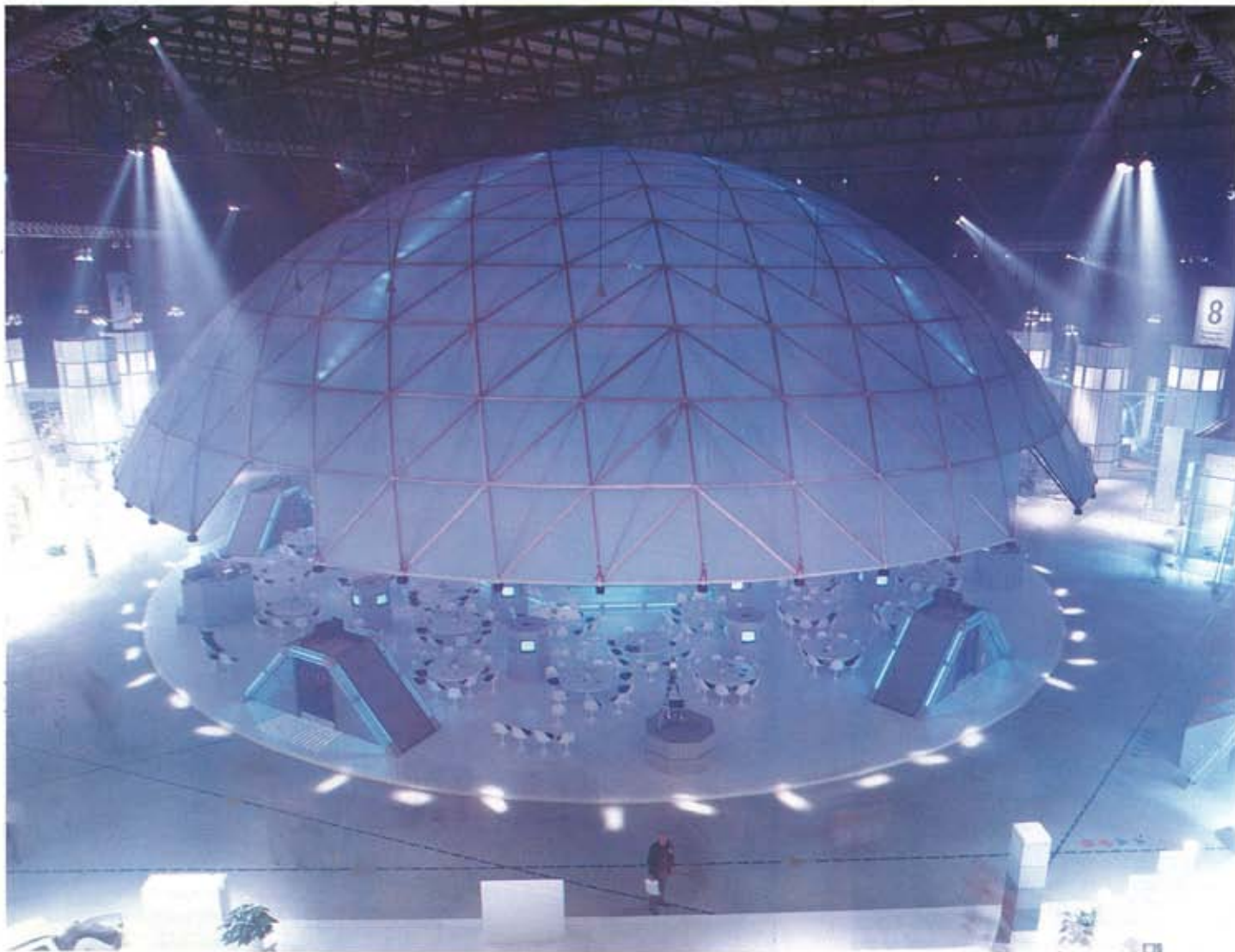
I asked Alan how the name came about. "We wanted to call ourselves 'The Rigging Company', but a business with that name already exists - they work on oil rigs in Scotland," he explained. "People refer to us as 'unusual' and the name has stuck. And it's true we do specialise in unusual things!

"There are now three specialised rigging companies: the other two concentrate on tours and video, and we cater for the trade show and conference market although we are also working in the more traditional theatre area. Theatre work is more intricate, but generally without the budget!

"Basically we do anything if it involves



First man in Unusual Rigging - Alan Jacobi.



Unusual Rigging's 'pièce-de-résistance' to date - 25 tons of British Telecom's dome flies out.

hanging something up, supporting it, pushing it, or pulling it. In fact any kind of mechanical handling, and it doesn't matter what 'it' is . . . lighting, sound, scenery or computers. We have also found that it makes sense if we specialise in providing full site services because we are the first people to arrive and the last to leave. So we can also arrange loos, catering, transport, lighting and generators, for example."

Unusual work all over the world and in many different kinds of buildings. I asked Alan how they cope with varying local safety requirements. "Well they do tend to change from place to place, and it isn't easy to conform - but we have our own safety procedures and we adhere to all the current regulations including those that involve craneage or lifts, for example. We work on many structural calculations ourselves and liaise with the house engineers to get on-site clearance. Everything we own follows the letter of the law and is tested annually. When we move it will be much easier because we will be setting up our own service bay."

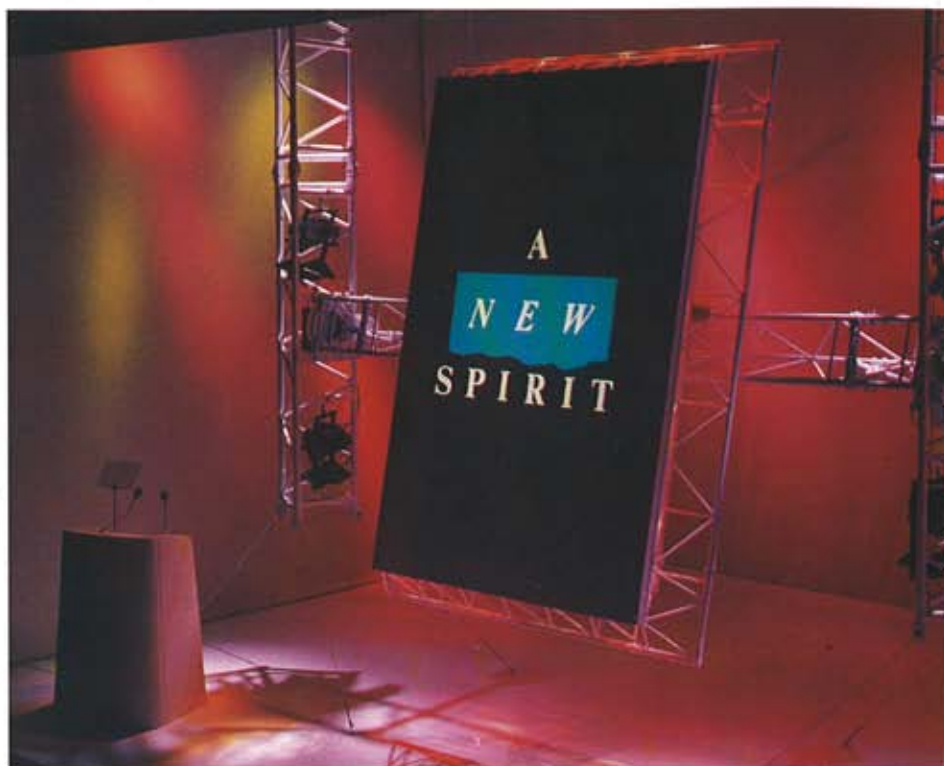
I spent a good hour looking at photographs of typical 'Unusual' projects - some from the early days like the 'Starlight Express' and 'Electric Ice' rigs - to schemes in the NEC and the P&O project which was featured in L&SI back in September.

We selected four typical projects . . .

"This really is a favourite . . . Imagination produced the launch of the Ford Orion at Castle Ashby and built an enormous room on to the back of the building, mocking it up to look like a banquet hall. We suspended the 80' long end wall on a truss, and for the reveal the whole wall flew out including the windows, curtains and plants. It was literally fantastic!



"The longest truss in the world" - for the 1987 Royal Tournament at Earls Court. The event is an annual four-in-hand between producer Major Michael Parker, lighting designer Robert Orno, Theatre Projects and The Unusual Rigging Company Limited.



A goal post truss with mounted revolve motors for the Daily Telegraph launch at the Mayfair Theatre.



Ford Orion launch: the back wall flown out from an improvised banquet hall - a stunning effect when seen from the inside!



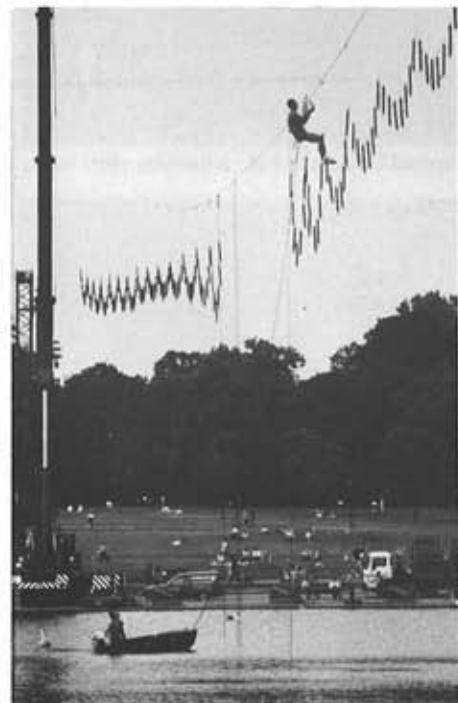
The spaceship flies in at the Royal Tournament.

"Another good one is the Royal Tournament which we undertake for the producer, Major Michael Parker. We provide what we think is the largest truss in the world, 300' long. This year was the RAF's year, and as a space theme we built a circular truss for lighting designer Robert Ornbo, which flew in during a blackout and then started pulsating to the music before flying out like a spaceship. The key thing about this was its flying speed, nearly one metre per second, phenomenal for a weight of 2 tons. And it worked every time. I also achieved an ambition because we were asked to suspend some old aircraft, and I'd always wanted to fly a Spitfire!

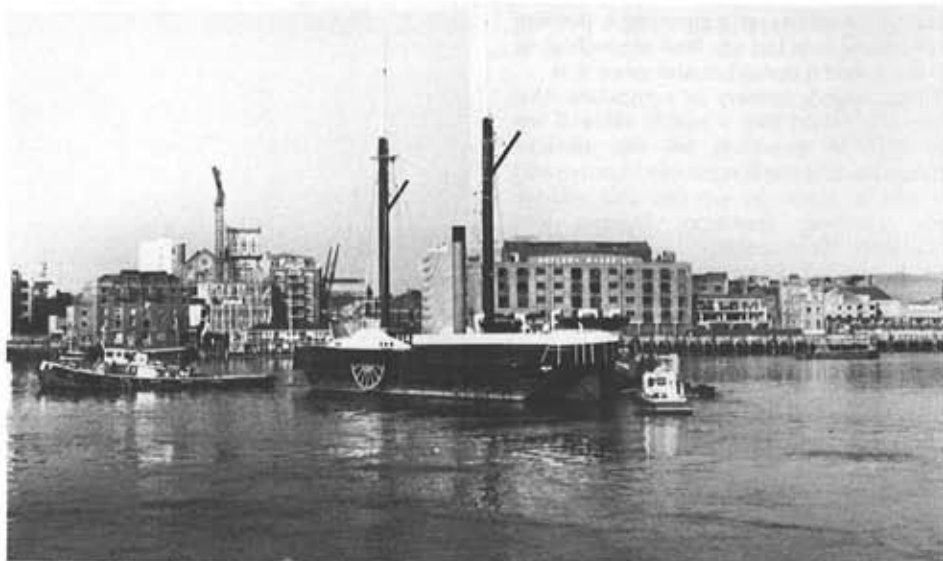
"On a smaller scale we did a launch for ICM on the new format of the Telegraph newspaper in London at the Mayfair Theatre, which is quite compact. We suspended a 'goal post' truss from the theatre grid and mounted a bridge piece which had a motor built into it and an actuator which turned the screen around. A lot of our projects are done in hotel ballrooms and the like, so we don't always work on vast scales. Of course, a lot of work is outdoors - like the P&O project you've mentioned and also the launch of the British Airways shares, which was similar to P&O in the sense that it took place on a barge moored in the Thames.

"Another outdoor project was for the Handel Tercentenary in Hyde Park for Fisher Park Limited. Our job was to suspend a firework curtain 300' across the Serpentine. To do this we placed cranes at either side of the Serpentine and stretched a catenary cable across with a rope above it. By using a cherry picker we threaded a lighter gauge cable across which carried the droppers on which the fireworks were suspended. Steve Colley 'absailed' across to join the two halves together and then into the boat below before the whole thing was tensioned. When it went off the reflections in the water were fantastic.

"Our pièce-de-résistance to date was another Imagination production for British Telecom. Impact Structures supplied a huge dome, 30 metres across and weighing 25 tons. Visitors came into the dome down a tunnel, and after a presentation the whole thing flew out revealing a vast exhibition.



Steve Colley absails across the Serpentine to prepare for the 300 foot firework curtain.



A replica of the William Fawcett, P&O's first steam packet, was built at Wapping by Unusual Rigging using a barge as a base. It was then towed down the Thames to Greenwich for the company's 150th anniversary celebrations last summer.

After they had walked round, it then flew in again and they went back in through the doors for lunch. I think it's the best thing we've done . . . so far!"

As a theatre man listening to Alan (another theatre man), I couldn't help thinking of the word 'magic' as he described the various 'reveals' and transformations. I asked him

what he thought about the way theatre used rigging.

"I don't think the traditional ways of doing things have been surpassed. Quick changes can't be done any better by hydraulics, for example. We can lift heavier things, but the theatre has more to teach us than we have to teach it," he said.

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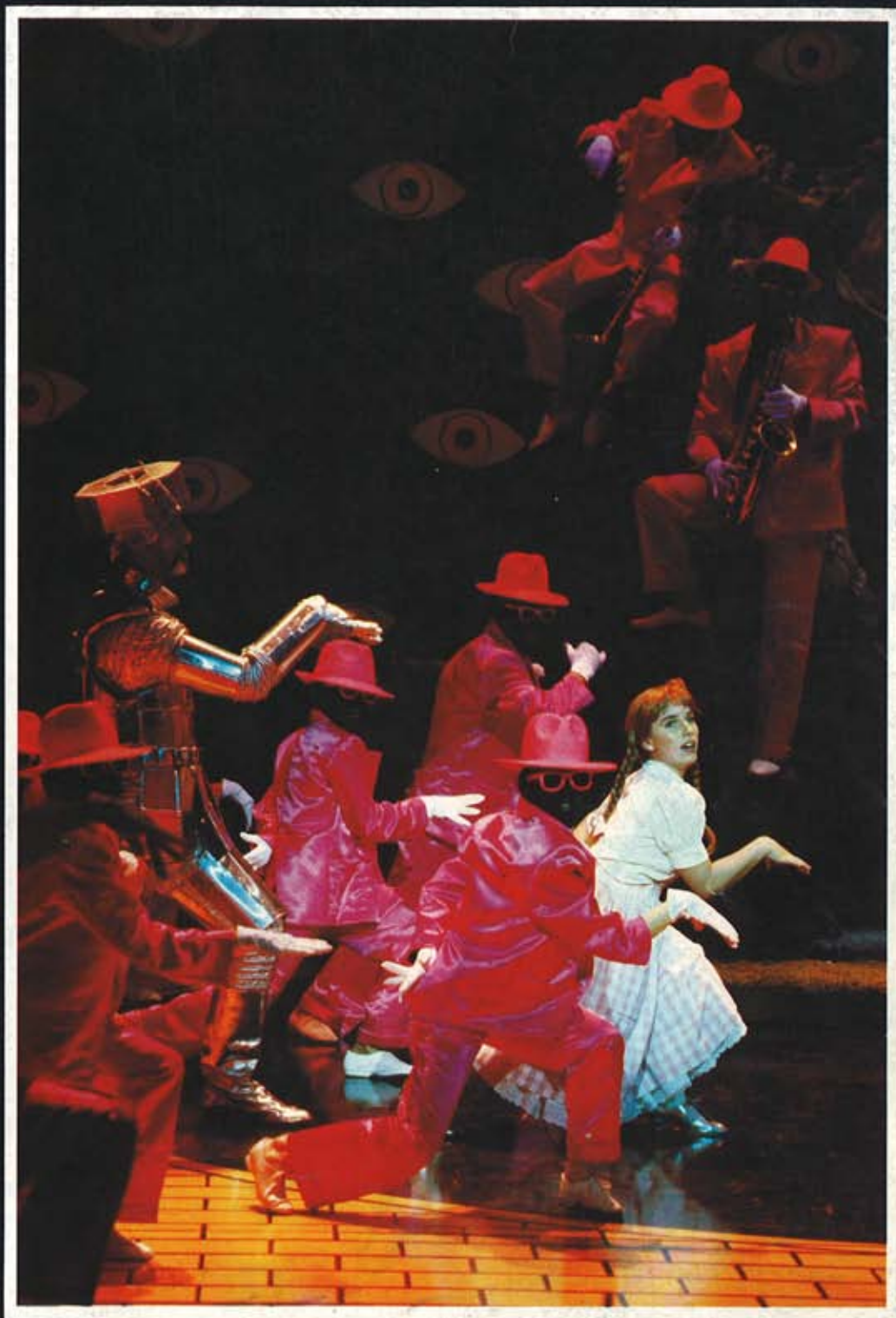
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A scene from 'The Wizard Of Oz' at Birmingham Repertory Theatre - lighting design by Michael Northern. A profile of the designer is included in this issue.

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