

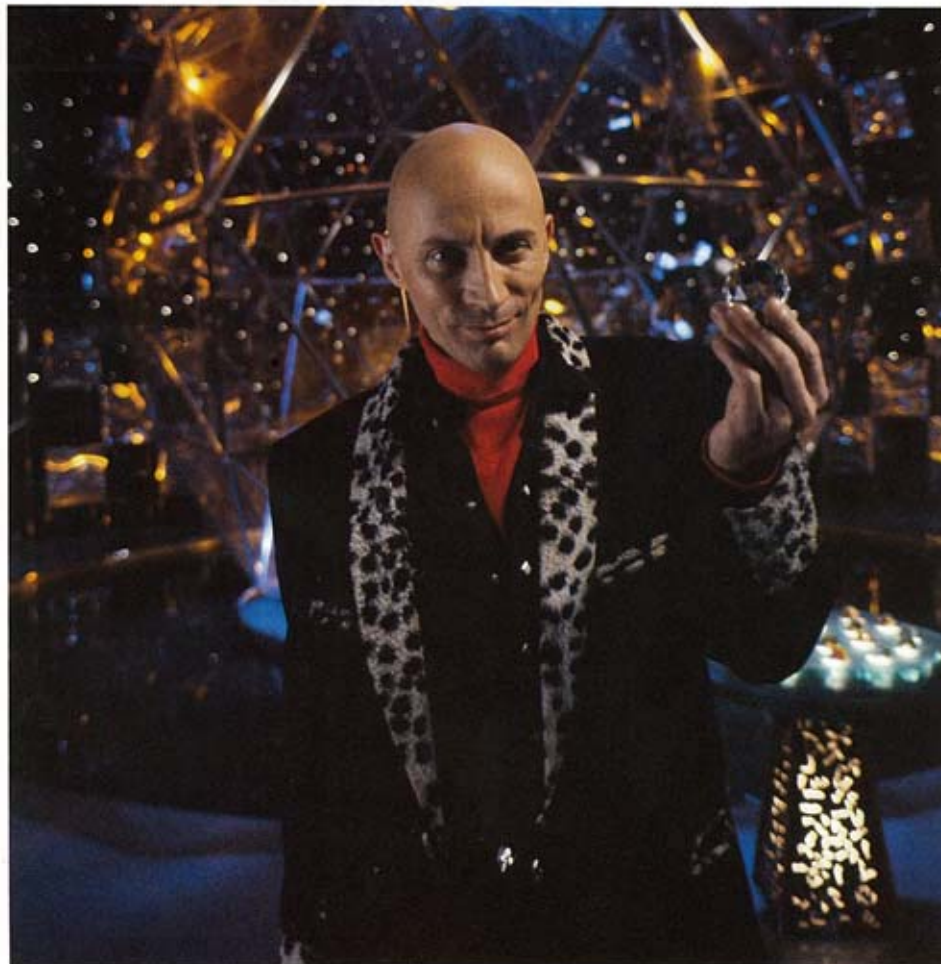
CRYSTAL STRUCTURES

Crystallizing the lighting of the Maze

One of the most curious off-the-wall programmes on British television in recent years is *The Crystal Maze*, featuring the animated eccentric, and *Rocky Horror Show* originator, Richard O'Brien in latter day *Pied Piper* host mode. Much of the lighting is as idiosyncratic to match the mood. Tony Gottelier talked to lighting director Mike Sutcliffe and assistant Derek Watson of Entec.



In the best light: The Pied Piper of *The Crystal Maze*, Richard O'Brien poses in Mike Sutcliffe's well-lit scenes.



I should have realised that it was going to be a Boys Own expedition when the PR lady told me that I could meet the elusive Mike Sutcliffe on a particular afternoon in November, if I cared to transport myself to the hitherto inconspicuous North Weald airfield, and subsequently to an aircraft hanger called Aces High. A loan of Mark Fisher's famous WW2 flying jacket would certainly have been appropriate.

I deliberately haven't described North Weald as an aerodrome, because this conjures up an image of serious flying business whereas this is a landing strip in the *Biggles* tradition: 'Chocks away Ginger!' and all that. On arrival, if you are a new visitor, you are escorted, strictly at 20mph, by Range Rover, around the perimeter, past signs warning you to stop if an approaching aircraft is spotted. Or duck! No, this is clearly a place where oil-splashed overalls get to grips with the mechanics of flying for fun, in the tradition of *Those Magnificent Men* and where flying is still done 'by the seat of your pants'.

This same boyish enthusiasm and pranking pervades the atmosphere at Aces High where Mike Sutcliffe and his team of Entec technicians are lighting the new series of the *Crystal Maze*. Presiding in his flight deck eyrie at the top of this vast hangar-come-studio with the RT cracking out off-air instructions and the director's wisecracks with the constant banter and repartee of the recording engineers and lighting technicians in the background, casts Mike firmly in the *Biggles* role. (If the contestants knew what was being said off-air they would die. Because, for them, this is very serious stuff indeed and they are petrified to their nerve-ends - to say nothing of the fact that none of my taped conversation is distinguishable as a result).

But lighting by the seat of his pants? In this case I think not, although I am sure he has done much of that in the past. Yes, of course with any TV or video shoot there is a considerable element of busking, as ideas evolve in the creative flow, but surprisingly the lighting for this particularly bizarre adventure challenge, with its ad hoc feel, not a conventional game show by any stretch, is surprisingly fixed and pre-planned. So how is that cranky atmosphere successfully created?

To find the answer I suspect we need to find out a little more about Mike Sutcliffe, the lighting designer. His name is synonymous with TV Pop and Rock shows, and I was curious to know how that came about. Indeed what started him on this road that few others care, or perhaps dare, to tread?

"For reasons that are a mystery even to me, I always seem to have been fascinated by light," Mike told me. "My mother used to take me to see musicals when I was quite small and I remember spending the whole time watching the lights and not the performers. I certainly couldn't have answered questions about the plot; it rather irritated her at the time!"

Subsequently he joined ATV where he became a cameraman. But his light-struck behaviour continued whilst at ATV. "I educated myself on the subject by spending every possible moment tracking the modus operandi of senior lighting directors such as John Rook, and asking why they solved various lighting problems in a particular way. This was like an apprenticeship to me."

In June 1979 at the tender age of 26, when he felt that he had acquired sufficient knowledge to dedicate his life to the skill, he left ATV to become a freelance LD, becoming one of a then

elite band of only three freelance apparatchiks of the luminescent art which included John Henshall and John Rook.

"It was good timing," explained Mike, "because the pop video thing was just beginning to happen and I had the opportunity to cut my teeth with some brilliant directors, to say nothing of the artists. The list reads like a Who's Who of the rock-n-roll hall of fame: Bowie, Stones, Queen, Sting, Gabriel, Kate Bush, Simple Minds, Diana Ross among many others." He also lit live concerts, including such famed productions as The Police, 'Synchronicity' and Donna Summer, 'Hot Summer Nights' plus tours with Neil Diamond and Cliff Richard.

I asked how he thought this qualified him for Crystal Maze in particular. "I suppose producer David Croft felt that my experience was relevant in that an unusual feel, with lots of weird atmosphere, was called for and the rock videos, for example, are a good grounding for all of that."

So, to the production itself. Aces High is a vast aircraft hangar - in fact one of the few spaces in the UK large enough to hold the giant set necessary for this show - for the labyrinth actually exists in a very real sense, albeit in Bloomingdales room-setting fashion. Every year for nine weeks the maze is re-created at Aces High and light and sound rental company Entec bring in an array of trussing, lanterns, dimmers and lighting boards and a crew headed by Derek Watson to satisfy Sutcliffe's requirements.

Up to now, not much different from a concert situation. The difference arises in the complexities within the set and the number of different feels this demands. Entec's Derek Watson explained: "There are four thematic areas within the maze, which is set out around the central crystal dome of O'Brien's throne room, and in each of these 'worlds' there are six different rooms each with a distinctly different look linked by a series of hazardous bridges and elevated walkways which also have to look as mysterious as possible. This makes a total of 37 different areas to light, not including doorway shots! And it's a multi-camera shoot, six cameras, one of them on a crane."

The four thematic worlds are described as Futuristic, Industrial, Medieval and Aztec - the latter being reminiscent of Indiana Jones' Temple of Doom. Indeed, it could be said that the whole show is a bit like participating live in an episode from that movie.

This sprawling multi-level studio set, probably the largest in this country, is overhung with an



Blue gelled fluoro cold washes the Industrial Zone.



Architecturals provide the focus, to a planetary backdrop - scenery this, not a projection, in a Future world.



A red bulkhead and a coolie shade with 40W incandescent give that authentic industrial feel.



interconnected gantry formed from 37 lengths of Thomas 'A' truss from which 74 skirted 5k gel-softened Spacelights and 336 Thomas Parcans provide the general level. 328 channels of Avolites dimming are also involved, supplied from two massive 500kW generators and involving two TPNE distribution systems, 136 of 30m Socapex cables, 218 runs of TRS and numerous sub distribution systems.

In turn, this is all supported by a wide range of studio lanterns from 12k through 2.5 and 1.2k down to 575W fresnels, 2k Blondes, CCT Silhouettes and profiles, Altman Lekos, Photofloods, 8-light Molefays, groundrows and MR16 battens. But it is the 'practicals' which really interest Sutcliffe in his effort to create the required faded atmosphere. "It is the new chip-TV cameras which have really made this possible," Mike told me. "They are happy at so much lower light levels than the old limiting tube cameras which required considerable saturation." So in some cases Mike is able to achieve a visible effect with something as small as a 40W domestic in a coolie shade!

Other such practicals used successfully in this way (see pictures) are Red bulkheads, Fuzzlights, fluoros, and assorted architectural. Smoke is provided by a portable Concept Colt, with a cracked oil when necessary, and a Par Opti fibre optic starcloth backs the crystal dome.

Control is provided by two Celco Series II, 90 and 30 channel desks jammed into the corner of the high-level control room inside Aces High, and this is where Mike and Derek sit, practically in each others laps, and hold court during shooting the occasional foray onto the floor to make adjustments, or to correct failures if there is no tech available at the time. Derek operates the board. Unlike most TV, where there is the opportunity for busking changes, this lighting system is so intricate it takes three weeks to rig -

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so only minimal changes can be made by Sutcliffe in situ. He has to be absolutely sure it's right at the design stage.

The configuration of large footprint desks, 120 channels hard-patched to over 300 dimming channels, raised my, metaphorical, eyebrows in these days of compact memory desks, demultiplexers and DMX512. Sutcliffe and Watson agreed that something like an Arri

Imagine board would probably make their lives a great deal simpler. "It's a matter of persuading Entec to invest in such advanced technology!" joked Mike, warning to my pet subject, "but I would certainly expect something of the sort to be in use on a new series, if there is one." Derek Watson concurred, bemoaning the fact that, with so few control channels, they were constantly having to change the patch. Even the

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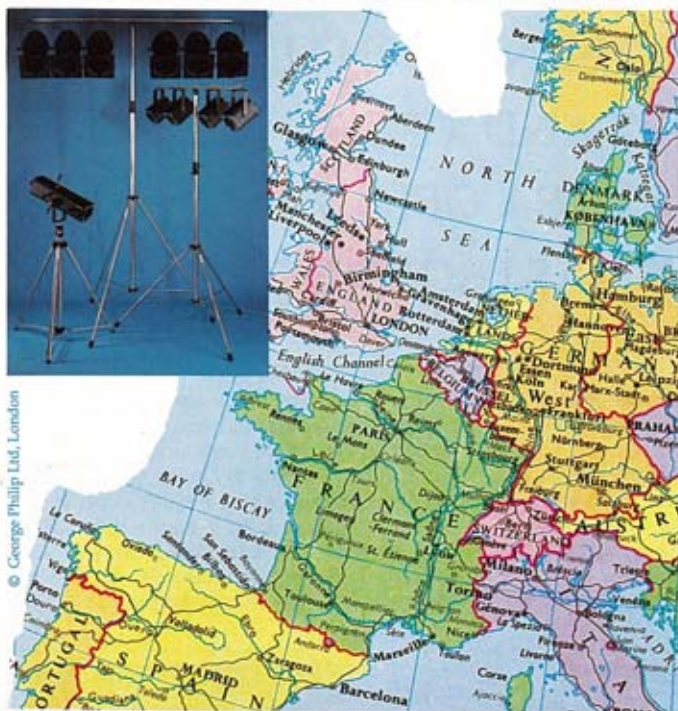
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30 channel industrial was a last minute addition.

By now the combined cacophony of noise in the control room and the never to be openly admitted, adrenalin of being a secret observer of an abject misery of some poor incompetent contestant's failure to perform even the simplest task, under the combined stress of clock and TV performance (most of which will be edited from the broadcast), persuaded me that it was time to leave the fantasy world of flying aces, Biggles Sutcliffe and Ginger Watson and head for terra firma. I left with a whole new and evocative lighting vocabulary ringing in my ears: those of you not familiar with studio lighting catch this lot: Turtle, Skate, Charlie Bar, Dot and Finger, Samson, Hercules, Blonde and Redhead. Don't call me for translation, call Entec!

In the car I got to thinking about what sort of masochistic mind had thought up this little game, where contestants are punished in full view, though not in real time - surely in the tradition of Japanese TV?

Wrong. It was a French series in its original guise. I should have guessed. After all, it is a kind of cerebral *Jeux Sans Frontiers* seen through a haze of herbal cigarette smoke.



HMI sunlight through a cell door in a Medieval castle.



No serving wenches, but a real gas.



An overhead view of the set with forest of skirted space lights.

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