

Spotlight on Silhouettes

CCT Theatre Lighting are now in their 21st year of operation. John Offord went to their Mitcham base and talked to managing director Don Hindle and production director Phil Rose about the company's achievements and operating philosophy.

"I may be sticking my neck out, but internationally CCT are almost certainly the second most well-known lighting equipment manufacturer, with Strand obviously first," said Phil Rose.

It has taken the company 21 years to reach that position and grow from a three-man hire company to a 60-personnel operation with major computer controlled manufacturing facilities.

Luminaires are CCT's business, and its foundations as a major business were built on the now famous Silhouette spotlight. But CCT

didn't feel it was viable. Colin wanted it to continue, not least because a lot of the money the company owed was owed to clients of his advertising agency.

"I took a look at it and thought that it could be turned round, and the first eighteen months was spent doing sensible things like getting the pricing right - I don't think they'd had a price review in three years. They had even got to a situation where they were paying more to sub-hire equipment than they were actually getting for it. We had assets of about £3000 and liabilities of about £6000, but we

turned it round within eighteen months and at that stage I went to the shareholders and suggested that if they wanted me to stay that now was the time to start looking at manufacturing.

"We recruited a team of three people as a design team in late 1969 - Bob Deichen, Mike Downie and Terry Bailey - and went quite intentionally after the specifications which had been issued by the BBC for colour television studios. They had three requirements: a profile spotlight, an optical projector, and a follow spot. The very first



Don Hindle - CCT's managing director.

didn't begin life that way, as Don Hindle explained.

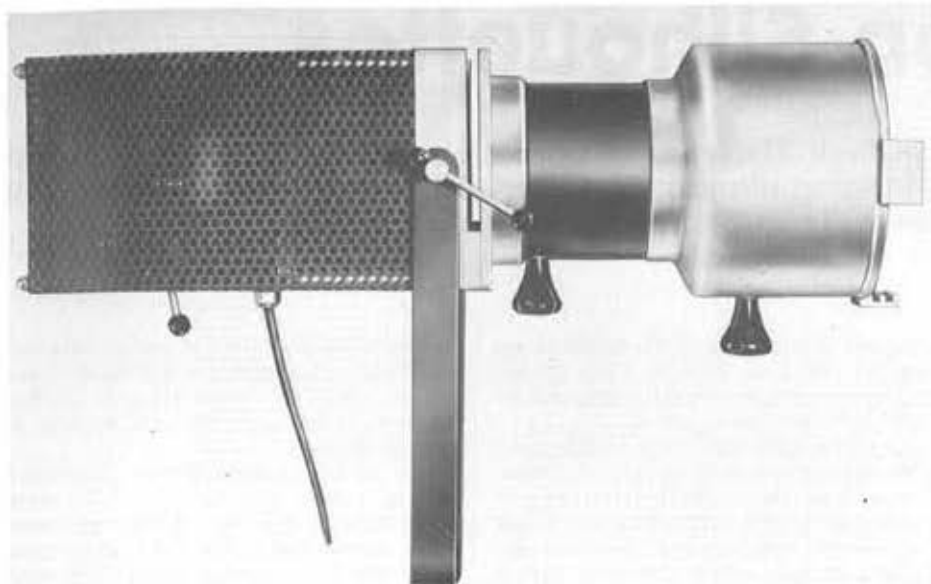
"In 1964 three people got their heads together and decided to form a hire company. They had seen an opportunity to make some money because the new Fairfield Halls complex had been built in Croydon and if anything it was rather under-equipped. Colin Phillips, Colin Turner and Terry Fitzgerald formed a company called CCT - which actually became CCT Theatre Lighting Limited in September 1965.

"Colin Phillips ran an advertising agency and was also very active in amateur theatricals and lighting for amateurs; Colin Turner was interested in theatre lighting but was a GPO engineer and also interested in boats, and after a while he went off in that direction and was one of the crew of Edward Heath's yacht at one point before taking over a ship chandling business in Hampshire; Terry Fitzgerald is and was a character - an actor manager - and the third of the triumvirate.

"I don't quite know how, but when I came to CCT in 1968 one of the most difficult things was to sort out which was CCT equipment and which belonged to Fairfield Halls! The arguments were long and furious. The reason I was asked by Colin Phillips to look at the company was because at the time Terry Fitzgerald wanted to close it down, and Keith Kennedy who was running things



CCT Silhouettes lighting 'Barnum'.



The first Mk.1 Silhouette.

thing that CCT produced was a 400 watt CSI optical projector which the BBC said wasn't powerful enough. So we produced a 1000 watt CSI projector called the Halostar which they still said wasn't powerful enough. Finally we went on to the profile spot.

"That optical design was the basis of the existing Silhouette range, although since that time it's obviously gone through a tremendous amount of change. Effectively it was first sold in the latter part of 1970 to television companies only, in its old 'blue box' format. It then developed on to the black format which was launched in 1972.

"This had come about by a visit from Jean de Baker of ADB Brussels who looked at our optics and said that what we were producing was a lot better than that which his research and development people were making, and would we make it in an extrusion that would match the rest of their range?

"This eventually led to a two-way agreement whereby we were responsible for developing and manufacturing profile spots, follow spots and optical projectors for ADB, while they provided us with fresnels, floods, and control systems. It all led to the first full installation that CCT undertook which was the Redgrave Theatre at Farnham in Surrey in 1972. And this was the very first full package where all the luminaires were CCT or ADB.

"This co-operation ran until 1978, a total of six years, by which time ADB had established a factory in France and decided they wanted to make their own equipment, and we had a 'semi-amicable' parting of the ways."

I asked Phil Rose, who joined the company in 1979, how he'd viewed CCT as a Rank Strand man looking in from the 'outside'.

"I first became aware of CCT when I came back from the States in 1974. I went down to see the equipment they'd put into Farnham, because there were comments coming through the trade about the company. I was quite impressed, particularly with the CCT equipment; but not quite so much with the ADB. One then became increasingly aware of CCT because of the attraction of the Silhouette range more than anything else.

"They'd identified a gap in the market and were successfully filling it. The approach they were making to the development of the profile spotlight was one that I'd been trying to persuade Century and subsequently Strand to go for, which was the interchangeable lamp house and lens tubes which was a very sensible way to go - and



Phil Rose - production director.

also some use of zoom lenses.

"I was therefore quite taken by what CCT had done because it reflected a lot of my own thinking at the time.

"One also became more aware of the impact they were making because of their cleverness in concentrating effort on a very narrow product range which had a lot of appeal and where the competition was quite restricted. In the process they developed a reputation. The profession was saying that at last here was a small company that seemed to be able to respond very quickly, that seemed to know what they were doing, and who were taking the trouble to talk to people about what they wanted and why they wanted it, and were going back and doing something about it.

"Subsequently I got closer and closer to CCT because they were beginning to compete seriously. One became much more conscious of them in a market-place sense rather than just in a technological sense, or a product design sense. Increasingly we were beginning to be asked 'why can't you do what CCT are doing?'

"This became very apparent on the Barbican project when many of the lights at that time were being specified around CCT product, and Rank Strand were very anxious to make sure CCT didn't get the order."

By 1977/78 turnover had topped the half-million - nearly all attributable to Silhouette or Silhouette derivatives. Looking to broaden their base, CCT started to make determined

efforts to expand into further product ranges.

"In 1977 we had decided that we wanted to produce a small 500 watt unit and we had identified a 500 watt long life lamp manufactured by Thorn - the M40 - as the size we wanted to use," explained Don Hindle. "We actually built a prototype and tested it with the M40 lamp, but Thorn did not want to produce a theatre version of it. Eventually we managed to convince them that we were very serious about it and we delayed the launch of the Minuette fresnel, the first in the Minuette series, until 1978 while Thorn developed the bulb. This became the T18 bulb and led to a whole range of offshoots of the original bulb we pushed for - the T range.

"This was the first real break-away from the Silhouette, and the demand to do it was generated by the break-up of our agreement with ADB. They had offered us the project of assembly of ADB products in the UK, and upon evaluating it we found we would have to reduce our operation by about 50 per cent. So it gave us the necessity of broadening the base as far as product was concerned, because we had no fresnels, no floods, etc. And this is where the new product ranges enter the scene. It simply grew from there.

"In addition, the semaphore colour changer was launched about the same time. It was originally conceived for a refit of the 'Talk of the Town', and developed by Bob Deichen prior to manufacture all within the period between the end of November and the following mid-January when the venue reopened. It was a very important product which we also make for Rank, and we still make colour changers for the Rank Organisation today. It's a good thing when two companies can get together and benefit from one product made by one operation.

"The Rockette was the first project John Schwiller developed after he joined us in R and D, and he then went on to produce the Starlette range of fresnels."

The general broadening of product has been regularly spiced up with the introduction of 'specials'. Phil Rose explained how some of them came about.

"We have certainly introduced new products that one could look at as being 'relatively original'. The colour wheel system was a significant breakthrough in that it was an attempt to bring together emerging technology in electronics, with multiplex control. One of the real problems with colour change in any kind of theatre has always



The original CCT Halostar with polaroid spinner - used for moving effects.

been the number of conductors that you have to wire around, and this has been one of the main factors that has inhibited the use of colour change. One breakthrough was an attempt to come up with an inexpensive colour change based on multiplex control with intelligent wheels, and I think our MX system was a major step forward in that direction.

"The most significant things we've introduced in more recent years has been the extension of the Minuette range. And there was a certain amount of logic in the way we did it. We wanted to have a balanced range of product that incorporated all the different types of optics that one has in theatre lighting, but put them into a scale that would suit both an educational environment or small theatre."

To aid manufacture of their growing brigade of luminaires, and having adopted various computer systems on the management side at an early stage, CCT now began to explore how the latest technology could help with production.

"Because you can't have continuous manufacturing in our industry - the demand isn't big enough - one has to have batch manufacturing," explained Phil Rose. And if you do that, you've got to have a fair amount of sophistication in the planning, even though you are only making relatively small quantities and in a simple format. So we looked very carefully at emerging technologies, and there was no doubt that the two things that took our eye were CAD (computer aided design), so that we could get away from the drawing board to a large extent, and CAM (computer aided manufacture). We took the decision about eight years ago to go in this direction. 1981 saw the installation of our turret press, and 1983 saw our computer-controlled press take its place in the factory."

Moving from the position of a small and intuitive company working on energy and optimism and a few good ideas, to a position where you are an established part of the industry worldwide brings up a different set of problems. I asked Don Hindle how they now approach the business in general and the introduction of new products.

"Basically our business combines two major aspects. One is manufacturing the thing, and the other is selling it. Historically, CCT has never had any problems selling its products. The way we have seen to go forward is to strengthen the distribution aspect first, and being an established company to put a heavy emphasis on making sure that if you put something on the market it's going to work all the time every time and for everybody. And we have to think in terms of all over the world. Part of the philosophy behind the products is that we use high technology to produce low technology products. Anybody can service a CCT lantern with a Phillips screwdriver and a wrench.

"As a major company we cannot afford to 'take a risk' and say 'we'll try it out'. Recently the industry has seen a lot of nice ideas - often ideas we've looked at here - but ideas where effectively we've had to say 'not yet'. And sometimes it's very galling to see someone else try it, even though it may not actually work. It is often very frustrating to be hit over the head with ideas that have been kicked around within this company many times. I think we are very restrained. We have had people copying, people who have knocked our products heavily, and people who have used our product to measure their's against, and told fibs in the process. We have never gone back hammering at



Silhouette side extrusions ready for assembly.

these people. We have said: 'if it works it's a great idea'.

"It's astounding when you really take a look at the number of companies who have taken a swipe at us. Look at LITO - it was effectively a poor man's CCT. There have been companies who have described one of our products in the following way: 'new one kilowatt axial lantern with moving reflector - price to be announced'. That's when they've got round to copying it!

"On more positive issues, I think the lines between theatrical lighting and display and architectural lighting are becoming very blurred, and I think we are looking more and more in this direction. A lot of Minuettes are being used in these areas, hence the 'Lightline' range of architectural versions. They work extremely well. They give people control in shop window or architectural situations, and we are currently working with the Lighting Design Partnership on lighting ef-

fects for the new Whitgift Centre in Croydon where CCT luminaires will be projecting effects for the 'entertainment' of passers-by.

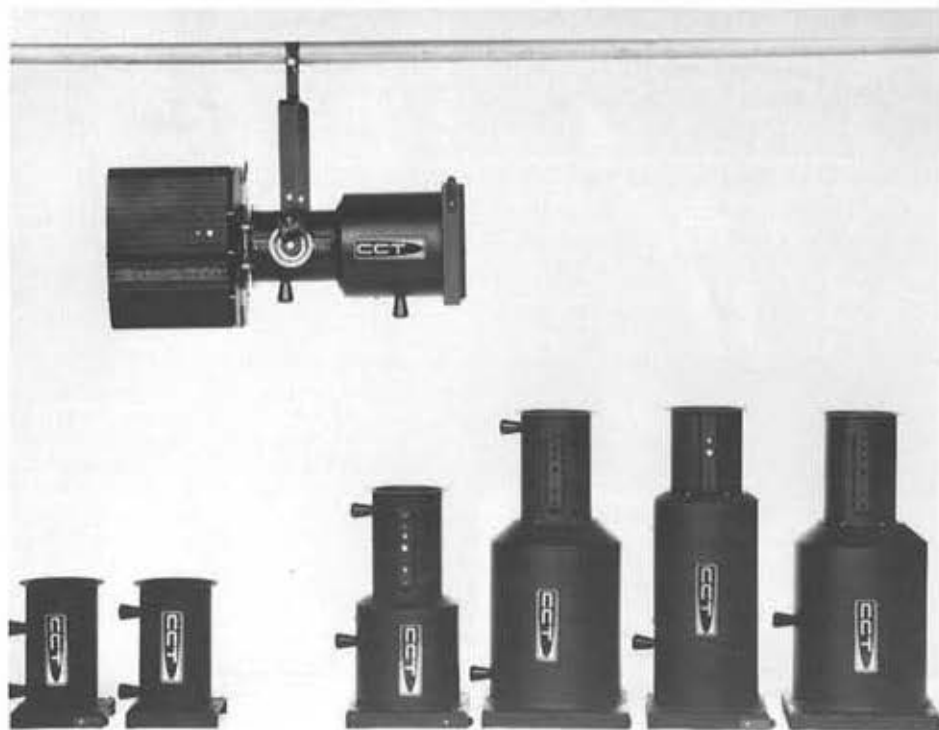
"So there is a broadening of the market, as well as new products. When you are a small company growing fast it's very easy to be inventive. You can take more risks. When you look back on it you can say, 'well we were right, and sometimes we were lucky!' A good example of that was the pebble convex lens, which we were the first to show at an ABTT Trade Show, and which everybody else picked up. We all ended up with the same problems! The original idea was the right one, and we should have stayed with it rather than go on to produce a special lens."

About 60 per cent of CCT manufactures go for export, and with the recent deal with Kliegl Brothers in the United States a full network of sales outlets covers the globe.

"We have made a conscious decision on



CCT equipment in a conference situation.



The new Silhouette 2000 - the latest 2000 watt lamphouse together with range of interchangeable zoom and non-zoom lens tubes.

how to approach the 'long distance' market," said Phil Rose, "and have deliberately encouraged the overseas assembly of our own products. We've not been narrow in our thinking, and we recognise that shipping relatively low cost and bulky product long distances around the world only adds unnecessary cost to the end-user. So we had to look very carefully at how best to encourage the sale of our products in places such as

Australia or North America. This is all part and parcel of our distribution chain, and has been our philosophy for a long time."

"We have had sales in America through direct representation for the last four or five years," explained Don Hindle. "This has always been for fully made product, and we have been reasonably successful, but within two years of the time we first entered the market in the States all other lighting manufacturers had variable beam angle spotlights, which took some of our uniqueness away."

"But all the time we were looking for an improved distribution system. Phil Rose then identified Kliegl Brothers as a possible partner when it became apparent that they were reorganising and moving to new premises in Long Island."

"They were approached in September last year to see if there was any interest, or any grounds on which we might work together. A deal was agreed on 2nd December, and the details of assembly are being worked out at the moment. It looks as if most of the lamp houses will come from the UK, and that lens tubes will probably be manufactured in the United States."

"Kliegl is the oldest company in the business in the United States. It is a dynasty, and they were market leaders in product design and innovation for many years, and slugged it out with Century Lighting before that company became part of the Rank Organisation."

"They had some very bad experiences with early memory systems, and also had possibly become somewhat introspective. In the past two or three years they've realised they've been overtaken. But the thing they have got is the name, the premises, and facilities. They also know the market, and they are very much a part of it."

"In Australia we were selling around 3000 fresnels a year, shipping thousands of fully made products. It became quite obvious that it was much more sense to make the components locally. So Jands CCT found a subcontractor with a turret press very similar to our own, the programmes to make the components were sent out, and they make them



Ancient and modern - CCT spotlights at work in Greece.

to our design, manufacturing under licence.

"More recently we've been exporting specifically-designed product for the Japanese market. They've evaluated the products - and they do evaluate things very carefully - and they are coming back for more."

Annual turnover of the company now exceeds £2m, well over 75 per cent of which is manufactured in CCT's own factory. But there are figures and figures, and the company also has to be able to respond quickly according to pressures of demand.

"We are pretty close to being a nuisance to Strand on their level of luminaire sales," said Phil Rose. "And when you look at our sales figures, an awful lot of that is 'kit' - it in no way represents the final sales figure. If you convert the kit and licence monies into on-the-street prices, we're probably talking much nearer a £4m end price," said Don Hindle."

"The other important thing is the ability to respond very quickly. Nobody ever seems to think about buying lights six months before the show is due to go on. They will suddenly decide three weeks beforehand and we are expected to be able to respond. We have to be able to change our production lines very rapidly to suit requirements. And all in all we have around 60 basic luminaire products with as many as 200 variants for different markets."

And what of the future for the industry in general?

"There is going to be a lot more impact of technology in theatre lighting. In many ways it's a shame, but theatre embraces new technology very happily verbally, but never has the money to back it up," said Don Hindle."

"Theatre has to be a parasite, riding piggy-back on other industries. It can't afford the original research and development," said Phil Rose."

CCT have built up a very solid reputation worldwide, and of their broad range of luminaires, many are industry standards. Right in front of our eyes, but without much noise, they have added and improved and pushed up sales. Now, everywhere you look, there are CCT lanterns.

Not bad when you've only just come of age.

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Turbosound's recently installed TSE system at the Guildhall Portsmouth
(see second feature on cluster sound systems in this issue)

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