

# ADB: Cleared for Take Off

John Offord visited ADB's headquarters at Zaventem, Brussels and talked to theatre division group vice-president Robert Rutten about the company's development plans.

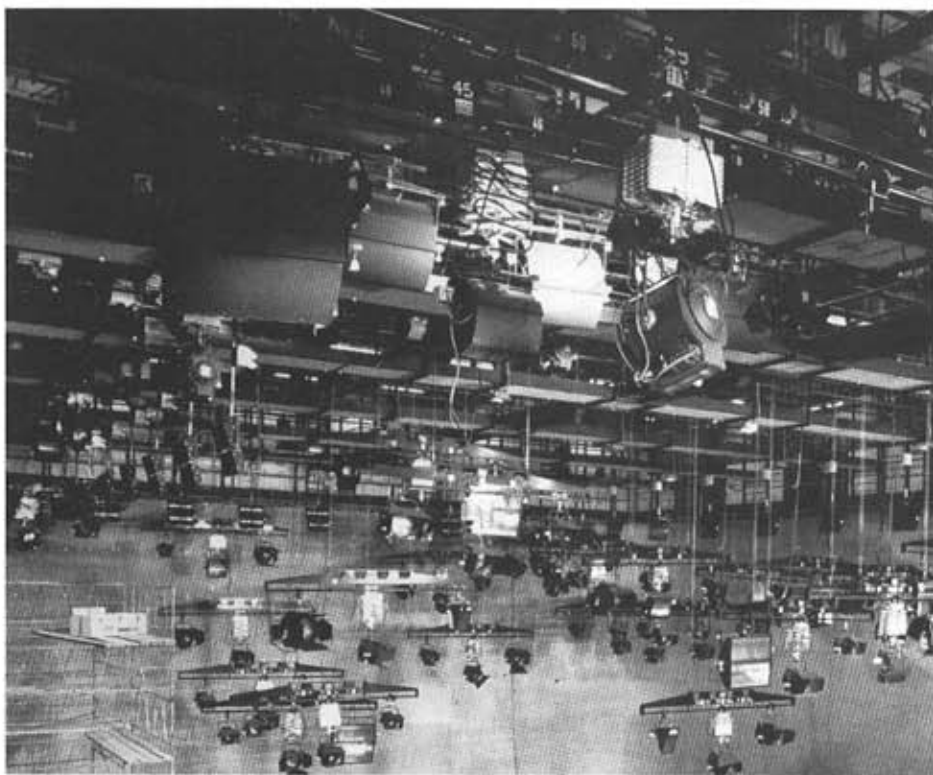
In British theatre lighting circles the 'sleeping giant' of Siemens, the huge West German industrial conglomerate, suddenly awoke when a Sitralux B40 memory lighting control was installed last September at the Royal Opera House in London's Covent Garden. And when Siemens bought the privately owned Belgian company ADB in February this year, it was seen as a sign that the giant was not only well awake, but flexing its muscles too.

Looking at the situation in this way, however, could very easily lead you to under-estimate the inherent strength of ADB in its own right. Long before the Siemens buy-out it had committed finance to upgrading its manufacturing operation and at the same time decided to make a determined attempt to increase its own share of the world market for theatre lighting systems.

What the Siemens involvement will do is dramatically increase the speed of development of ADB, provided of course that the management can produce the right products and come up with the correct marketing packages. As Robert Rutten, group vice-president of the theatre and TV lighting division explained: "There will be financial advantages. We could have had a good idea and not put it on the market. Now we can do it provided we can prove the product is good - and the same can go for marketing. On product development we have access to Siemens technology, and we have already felt the benefit of this. If we need an expert in a particular technique we can call someone in."

The wind of change began blowing down the corridors of ADB's base at Zaventem near Brussels when Philip De Backer took over from his father and became the third generation of his family to lead the company. "A rejuvenation of the management has taken place, and working with Philip has been very good. He has built a team of young managers," said Robert Rutten. The management and structure of the company has remained the same following the involvement of Siemens, with Philip De Backer still heading the operation.

The company was founded in 1920 when Adrien De Backer started manufacturing electrical equipment used by laboratories. It



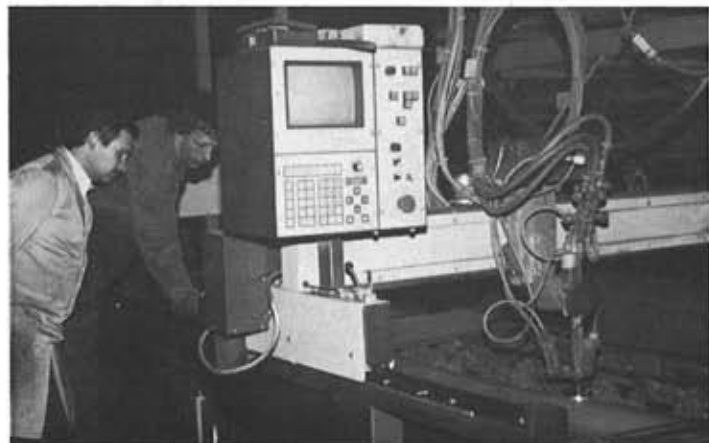
An ADB equipped television studio at RTBF in Brussels.



Robert Rutten.

was the first Belgian company to supply the market with rheostats and wirewound resistors. In 1925 ADB produced their first lighting control desk, to special request from a customer, and it was used for more than forty years before becoming an interesting museum exhibit. In 1932 they commenced the production of variable auto-transformers (trade name Rheotor ADB) and to this day they are still the sole manufacturer of this type of equipment.

By 1938 they had begun to manufacture several types of luminaires, and complete systems were available for specific orders. In 1932 ADB had established a branch in Paris to work round French import quotas and in 1960 it was registered under French law. Their factory in Northern France at Saint Quentin, midway between Brussels and Paris manufactures all luminaires with the exception of television versions which are assembled in Zaventem.



High technology in production - the Zaventem factory.



About to be launched - a MkII version of the S28 control nears completion.

ADB's in-depth strength in electrical technology, built up over three decades, was to branch out into another major area that had an unforeseen growth potential: they became involved with the design and production of airfield landing lights immediately after the Second World War. Now, more than 600 airports in 95 countries have ADB lighting systems installed, and this division of the business now accounts for 60 per cent of the company's turnover. (The remaining 40 per cent is split 35 per cent to theatre and TV lighting, and 5 per cent transformer manufacture.)

Having two strong, although not directly connected divisions, has brought with it some very useful benefits. "We can spread costs of development across two different areas on both electronics and optics," said Robert Rutten. "This division has always been the first to develop micro-processor technology, whereas on the optical side the airfield lighting division takes precedence."

The Zaventem headquarters employs a total of 350 people, the French factory a further 70, and a German subsidiary company another ten. In the USA, ADB has a production unit and sales centre at Columbus in Ohio where airfield equipment is manufactured.

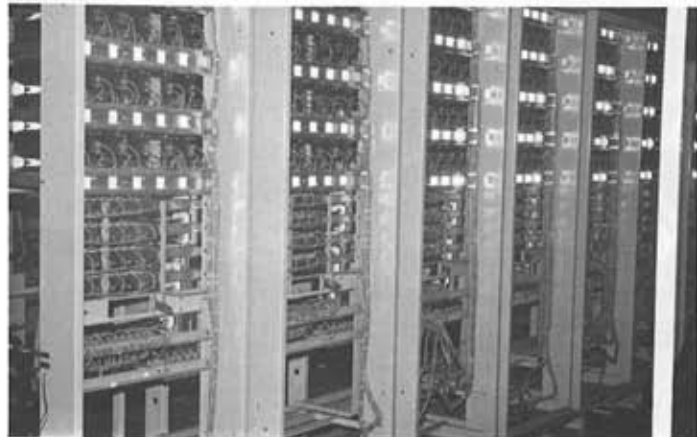
Whether it's with airfield lighting or theatre lighting there is a "systems approach" to each market. In the theatre field it means ADB can offer luminaires, controls and dimmers, and also a range of mechanical equipment and fittings. The company also holds a huge stock of lamps, parts and other general stock such as Rosco colour.



Marketing engineer Alain Collart with the latest Rosco smoke machine.



Wiring rheostats - a long ADB tradition.



A bank of dimmers await final assembly.

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World-wide, 12 per cent of the company's employees are engineers, and 20 per cent are employed in research and development. It is a base strength that allows ADB to offer a total service to the entertainment industry. Turnkey projects and installation work is undertaken, including engineering, and specific designs and layouts can be presented to clients. Technician training on-site is also provided from ADB's own resources.

As a result of coming under the Siemens umbrella, there has been a fresh impetus for the future, now that long-planned projects and ideas can be brought forward, as Robert Rutten explained: "We were very friendly competitors with Siemens for many years, and we have worked with them on projects both jointly and as a sub-contractor. It was something natural - we have always considered them as something of a partner. They respect our individuality, and we are now part of a very strong group. But it has a human face.

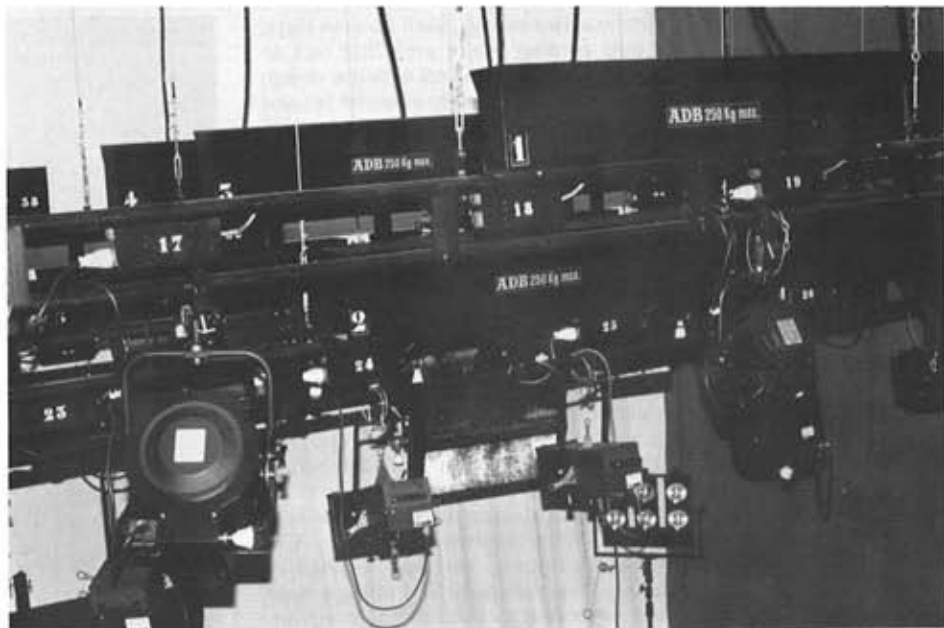
"We have the widest range of approved product for airfield lighting in the world, and we are adopting a more aggressive attitude in the theatre lighting field. We introduced the S28 lighting control two years ago, the S20 last year, and most recently the S25. And now we are already redeveloping the S28. A new range of theatre luminaires is to be launched in September.

"We have a similar philosophy on our marketing, and we plan to modify and brighten our image, and to make our presence felt in some areas where we haven't had much of a presence before - in particular the UK, Spain, the Far East and the United States.

"The UK has always been a tough-nut for us, but it is very important because of the image of British theatre in the world, and to make ourselves known to British theatre consultants. We needed a strong and industrial partner in the UK and that is why we are working with Furse."

In the United States ADB plan to introduce manufacture of luminaires at their Ohio plant. "The US market is the largest market in the world, and we must be present there," said Robert Rutten. "I don't know quite when, but it will be fast. So much innovation is coming out of the United States and we want to participate in that. The policy in this area has been agreed for some time, but because of Siemens we can now act.

"We have very ambitious goals, and we have the resources and people to realise them. Our factories are well equipped and we've made a major investment in com-



Part of the extensive range of equipment in ADB's fully equipped demonstration theatre.

puterised machinery over the past few years. And as a result we've seen a 10-20 per cent growth in our theatre market each year for the past four years."

Looking at ADB ranges in more detail, the three memory lighting controls already mentioned are backed up by the SM22 and SM26 2 pre-set manual lighting control desks. The full range of luminaires is too numerous to list, but suffice it to say that ADB have equipment that covers a complete range in the theatre field to look after anything from the smallest school stage to the largest opera house. And from the smallest photographic studio to the full-blown television studio it is the same situation.

You'll find ADB equipment in the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow and the Paris Opera, and in television studios as far apart as Lagos and Bangkok. Their links across Europe are an obvious strength. "We have a very European approach to our marketing," said Robert Rutten. "In fact the Belgians have a more European approach than any other country on the Continent."

On their home patch, ADB works very closely with the Belgian television service, both RTBF (French) and BRT (Flemish). It is a highly important link for ADB. "They've assisted us in developing major products," explained Robert Rutten. (It goes without saying that Belgian television studios are full of ADB equipment.)



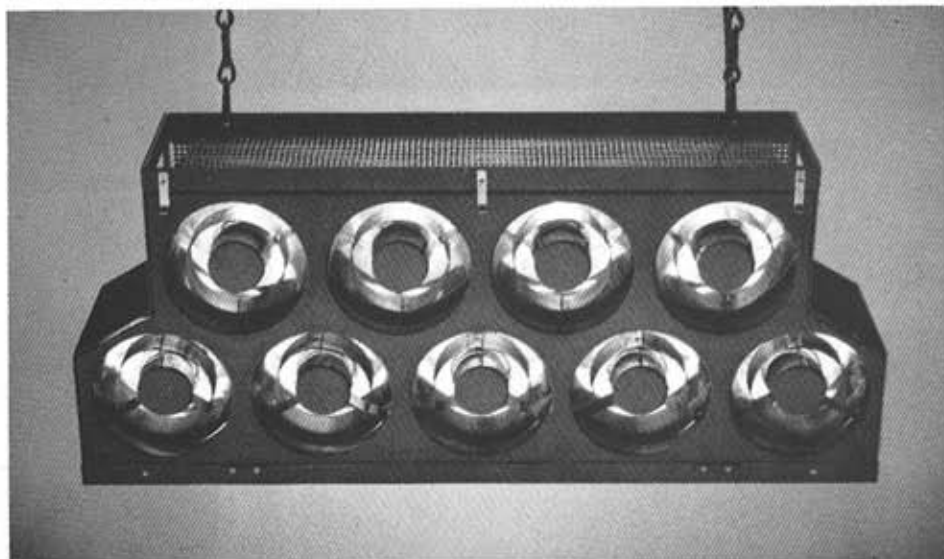
Alain Gillis - sales manager for ADB's theatre and lighting division.

And the link had a natural development when it came to lighting for the 1987 Eurovision Song Contest held in Brussels in May. The vast majority of lighting and control equipment was supplied on a sponsorship basis by ADB.

And that's where we came in . . .



Jean-Pierre Tollenboom, ADB's director of research and development.



ADB's popular and highly effective Svoboda Batten HT2251 - used in the Eurovision Song Contest.

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