



City Theatrical - profiled by Rob Halliday

Every now and again one stumbles across a fact that truly surprises. New York-based company City Theatrical, which has seeped into the British theatrical conscience over the last five years or so with its award-winning range of accessories, dry ice machines and, latterly, the AutoYoke moving light, is actually 15 years old.

Company founder Gary Fails manages to hide his surprise at my surprise, then fills in more historical details. "I started the company while I was working as a Broadway electrician - for the Circle in the Square Theatre. I felt that it would be good to have a back-up plan, to have a company as a base. LDs and rental shops often needed special, one-off items made for shows - so I became the person who made them!"

It is typical of Fails' self-effacing modesty that he underplays the work involved in getting started. Without any background in engineering or metalworking machinery, Fails taught himself about the equipment he'd need, then went out and bought it - the presses, the folding machines: these very machines still form the heart of City Theatrical's operations today. He also found premises for the company in a building in the South Bronx, far enough from the glitz of Manhattan to be affordable, close enough for him to keep in touch and deliver goods quickly. And, in fact, to continue working in both places. "For the first 10 years or so I had a double life, working here during the day and working on the shows at night."

Eventually, he realised that he couldn't continue to do that. "The real aim of the company was that I didn't want to work nights any more; I was never seeing my family. The first stage in that was to decide to stop working as an electrician; that was a tough decision because it meant immediately



Left, company founder Gary Fails. Below, the sales team of James Horie, Brian Byrne and Patrick Eagleton

taking a big pay cut - so the company had to grow from there!"

The early products were often the low-cost, but useful, accessories that lantern manufacturers didn't really want to be bothered with -

particularly top-hats for profile spots. But Fails also has a knack for listening to what people need for particular projects: "I have a notebook full of ideas, and that list is always growing," - and, more importantly, the machinery to react quickly and make those products.

Things like the BeamBender, a mirror that fixes to the front of a profile spot and can usefully fix problems caused by awkward rigging positions, or the sound baffles offered for various moving lights - or, most recently, the profile spot beam splitter, which won the company yet another award at last year's LDI.

The move to more complex, higher-value products began with the Aquafog dry ice machines - made from corrosion-proof moulded plastic rather than the then more common steel - and has continued with the EFX effects projectors and, most recently, the AutoYoke, which turns ETC Source Fours, Source Four Pars or Strand SLs into theatrically-oriented moving lights. Compared to the 'rock and roll' lights, AutoYokes have quite a low feature-count, but they have been snapped up by many

demanding installations including London's Royal Opera House. Over 1,000 have already been sold.

Fails' South Bronx base resembles something of a mad-professor's cave, an eccentric small engineering firm rather than the multi-million dollar company (about \$3million annual turnover, 25-or-so employees) that it has become. But it also charts City Theatrical's history: it still works in the original unit, but broke through the wall to take over the next two units as it expanded. They are now full-to-bursting again, and Fails has further expansion in mind: "We have a five-year plan to get to \$10million annual turnover, with a number of new products due to appear next year and a full schedule of R&D projects."

This expansion will necessitate a move and, though Fails likes the South Bronx and the South Bronx has been good to the company he is

starting to look at industrial parks further afield. One suspects that the spirit of the company is its founder rather than its location: his office hovers next to the front door and has views over his beloved machines (marketing and R&D are hidden away elsewhere in the building), and many of the company's employees were taught their machine skills by

Fails himself. That spirit should be safe, therefore, particularly since Fails is still having fun. "I love being able to figure out what to do next, where to go. There are lots of engineers out there who you can get in to actually create a product. Working out the need for that product is much harder."

And then, as the conversation moves to 'the future of lighting', you can see his ideas list growing longer again - and you can look forward to playing with the results of City Theatrical's work as those ideas come to well-honed, well-built fruition.



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