Graham Walne and Leisureplan

Graham Walne's undiminished 36 year-old love affair with theatre began, he believes, when he was three. His father, a master silversmith with his own successful engraving company, and mother, "an organiser—currently big in the WVS", took him on a trip from their home in Accrington to the Blackpool Tower Circus where he fell not so much for the artistes, but for the mechanics of the show: the circus rings and the fountains. This was compounded by further theatre trips to Blackpool and to Manchester where he watched pantomime, variety shows, and revues from the London Palladium that required the use of the famous revolves. Somehow, the experiences triggered in the boy a desire to create his own theatre. From the age of 7 he began to build a series of models using Meccano, Bako, hardboard and cardboard, which he called "The Palladium". Increasingly, as his knowledge of the London theatre accumulated, the models became more and more like the actual thing. A local newspaper got to hear of what he was doing, and printed a piece that found its way into the hands of Jack Matthews, then Stage Director of the Palladium. In one of those gestures that seem insignificant at the time, Jack Matthews invited Graham, aged 11, down to London to see the dream theatre.

It was a major turning point, for Jack Matthews, sadly now dead, and the then Deputy Chief Electrician, Bill Platt, happily still alive, gave the boy the run of the Palladium. They took his model-making very seriously, always ensuring that he had the right information, plans, pictures, and working out with him how and why things happened or didn't happen. He spent some time at the Palladium during every school holiday over the next three to four years.

The culmination was Graham's final model that measured 41" deep (from the proscenium to the back wall) by 90" wide, was 52" high to the grid, and filled most of a 9' cubic room. It contained of course the working twin revolves, as well as a 48 way switchboard, motorised dimmers, and of course, scaled down lanterns. What had started as a small boy's dream, had become a hobby, then an obsession, and finally the template of a career.

There was no doubt in his mind or indeed in those of his parents or schoolteachers what he was going to do. Jack Matthews had promised him a job at the Palladium, but recommended that he first go to RADA where he could study Stage Management. RADA took him on, accepting fully that while his aim was to work in stage design, he wanted a thorough grounding in stage management. At RADA, he met another major influence in his life: Francis Reid, who was teaching the lighting course. Apart from opening up the fascination of the theory and practise of lighting and lighting design for Graham, Francis ("I taught him everything he knows!") Reid brought to him three keys for survival and success: the importance of retaining a sense of humour even at the worst moments; the importance of remembering that one is lighting for the show and the audience, not for oneself; the importance of not wasting the client's time or money. This last hallmarks Graham Walne's lighting: every lamp does and means something: take it away and there's a hole.

Graham Walne

During the 4 term-course at RADA he joined forces with another student, Geoffrey McNab. Somewhat precociously, in view of their lack of practical experience, in 1966 the two of them set up "Theatreplan"—a company that "offered itself in an advisory capacity to theatres to recommend how they could improve their technical facilities". If "Theatreplan" was short on experience, it was long on careful thought, and provided some of the primary elements that lie behind their present company "Leisureplan". Perhaps the most important of these is the alliance of the simple question: "Why should good advice have to be expensive?" to the equally simple concept that a building is better off having a single day of good professional advice than having none at all. This idea, seemingly so reasonable, has swum against the tide of consultancy philosophy, management and costing which has looked by and large for global projects.

Graham's practical experience, meanwhile, was accumulating. A year was spent with RADA as their lighting designer and chief electrician, lighting some 40 shows in the three theatres. Freelance work began when Frances Reid invited Graham to assist him to light operas. Graham then joined Rank Strand assisting Owen Clark in the sound and projection department, designing systems for cinemas, lecture halls and theatres. Graham remembers Owen Clark as the best salesman he has ever seen, never consciously making a pitch, but always helping the client to solve problems, and thereby selling equipment. Graham also learnt from him cost-awareness, and the importance to the long-term relationship between sales force and customer of having the freedom to recommend other people's products, where this was appropriate to the client's needs.

In 1974 Graham left Rank Strand, and joined Theatre Projects for a brief period as sales manager for their sound equipment section. He opposed the marriage of TP Sound and Rank Strand, and resigned when this took place. However, he counts working with David Collison, whom he regards as having virtually single-handed dragged theatre sound yelling and screaming into the 20th century, as "a permanent and utter delight". In 1975 Graham went freelance.

Since then his work has revolved around four areas of activity: consultancy, through the development of Leisureplan; lighting shows; writing for trade publications; and eventually his book "Sound for Theatres"; and teaching. The relative significance of these areas has varied necessarily from year to year, but the component parts have remained the same.

He finds that people abroad tend to have a very different understanding of the role of the consultant. They are used as expert information banks, libraries of experience to be drawn on again and again, not just for the implementation of a project, but during its life, and most important whenever it is upgraded. This type of positive attitude towards consultancy will lead Leisureplan to more and more work abroad.

With regard to design he feels that there is a philosophy current in this country that physical and budgetary limitations are irrelevant. He cites not only the more obvious targets of the national companies, but tours that have not taken place because the set design concept was too complex for the theatres. This state of mind has crept into lighting and indeed sound design. Although current, it is also self-destructive, and he sees the pendulum beginning to swing the other way.

In the short term, his timetable takes him to Guernsey, Boston, London, and back to Boston for the US premiere of "Taverner". He will be setting up a new in-service training scheme, and keeping his hands firmly on the lighting desk by going out on the road and staying with a major tour. Every year, one hopes, will be a vintage one, but for Graham Walne 1986 looks like being a classic.

Asked to describe what he was like to work with, a production manager said, "when you're up to your eyes in the hairiest get-in with all hell breaking loose around you, you pray Graham will walk in and start lighting, because you know he'll bring peace, sanity, good sense and order to the proceedings." I can find no greater compliment to pay him than to repeat this remark.

Glyn Robbins

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